

Devil's End

Few words could describe the vortex of emotions spinning inside the mage as she beheld the contents of the white walled and steel furnished chamber. Revulsion was a good word. Appalled also worked. Astounded did not quite cover the yawning depths of her shock upon entering the room. Mystic was a woman of strong words and strong actions. In that moment, caught in a whirlpool of disgust and surprise, she had no words to speak. She raised a hand to cover her mouth, as if that could hide the turmoil vibrating through her body.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" Faust stood off to the side, hands clasped before his chest as if he were a nervous school girl waiting for her to accept a token of his affection. When she failed to respond to his question, he held out a hand to her and beckoned her toward a chair set in the middle of the room. "Come, come. You must get closer and look at them."

The touch of the hairless man's cool fingers on her skin shocked her out of her stupor just enough to allow him to guide her over to the chair. She moved as if in a dream, floating across the floor without seeing anything she passed. Her eyes were glued to the six creeling, stumbling figures gathered about the feet of the chair.

Hatchlings. Draconic in origin, but not of her dragons. She saw evidence of Hathians in the stubby wing-arms they all sported. And evidence of something far worse in the multiple heads and tails born by so many. Each hatchling varied significantly from its sibling. One of them looked almost identical to her precious Hathians with its green scales and hint of eye horns, but there were two heads at the end of its sinuous neck. Beside it lay a hatchling of red and yellow scales that rippled like living fire. Powerful wing-arms kept its wings folded tight to its body, and tiny forearms scrabbled at the ground beneath its chest while it attempted to balance with two short, powerful tails. The next looked like a creature of living rock, all hard angles and canyon colours. The singular wingtines extending from its thick knuckles were laughably small, but at least it did not have the extra limbs of its siblings. Beside it lay a creature clearly suited for the water. It sported fins instead of back legs, and three heads weaved a mesmerizing pattern above its blue and gray chest. The final two were as

opposite to each other as night and day. One, a creature of daylight and radiance, entertained itself by flapping one set of wing-arms, then the other, amusing both of its golden-crowned heads. The other could scarcely count as a living creature at all. Bones wreathed in sourceless smoke made up the tiny, skulking figure, and four tails lashed behind in an endless dance of irritation.

Mystic stepped between the hatchlings, earning a creel of irritation from the red one, and sat on the proffered chair. The steel was cold and unyielding against her back, reinforcing the intense discomfort she felt in this space.

"I know you've been exhausted since you got back from your little ordeal. I was going to wait a while longer to make sure the results were stable, but I thought you might appreciate a treat. This is, after all, everything we've been working toward," Faust said. He fussed about the room, putting away vials of unknown liquid and kicking blankets out of the way. It was clear he'd been tending to the hatchlings for some time. Faust went to extreme lengths to keep his lab clean and organized. The level of disorder she saw in the random chew toys and soft things left out for the younglings struck such a discordant tone that she moved to an instinctive fear response. This place was wrong. These hatchlings were wrong. Everything felt as slimy and sickly as the walls of Sistarrist.

"They're Ancients," Mystic said in a small voice. She scarcely recognized the squeaky whisper as her own. Though her body was still in the process of recovery after being captured and tortured on Sistarrist Drakan, the source of her weak vocal cords was not related to a physical weakness. Her head swam from the level of disconnect she felt between what she saw before her and what she knew to be true.

There were dragons on Tris'Hath long before she began world hopping. They were known these days as the Ancients, but once they had their own orders, their own familial structures, their own governance. Greed turned them into tyrants. The wrath of a god displeased by their arrogance manifested in a plague that killed every last one of them. Only the Hathians remained, and their ancient foe; the hydras.

"Not quite," Faust said, barely able to restrain the girlish giggle from his voice. He clapped his hands together and leaned in close to whisper to the mage as if to let her in on a happy

secret. "They're older. Everything I tried with the Ancient genetics failed. Something in them just kept... dissolving. It's hard to explain. But I dug deeper and I found pre-Ancient DNA. They are built from the genetic remnants of the elemental drakes that gave rise to the Ancients."

"How? Where?"

"In their bones. I know you said never to visit the old bowers, but I thought for this, you would make an allowance. Pretentiouth wouldn't go in, of course, but I got enough samples without needing to expose his precious self to the remains directly."

That feeling of disconnect twisting inside Mystic turned sideways and upended her grasp on reality once more. Mystic pressed one hand to her stomach to calm the contents while the other gripped the edge of her chair as if the cold steel served as her only anchor to the real world.

The ancient bowers were no secret, though their locations were often unknown. They lived on in myths and legends and horror stories told to keep children in line. There were tales of adventurers, strong and fit and capable of taking on hydras single-handedly, venturing into those old tunnels never to emerge again. There were stories of wails heard on windless nights. There were accounts from her own dragons who ventured too near to an old lair and felt a sudden, inescapable urge to flee. She didn't need to mark the bowers as off-limits. The essence of those places was enough to drive away all but the most fool-hardy thrill-seekers. Though she had no proof, Mystic was convinced that the plague that had killed the Ancients lived on in their bones. And Faust had handled them.

"And then you... grew them?" Mystic looked up at the hairless man in the shiny black goggles. The grin on his face sickened her all the more.

"Well, I do consider myself the father of these beautiful little successes, but if you're asking about the incubator, that was Nairyg. She's proven to be good for something after all. I needed access to her hydra and Hathian DNA anyway. It would have been better to have a full-blooded hydra, but that's not an ask even I would make. I got enough from her genetics to work with."

Rider-mine, something is happening out here. I heard... You need to listen. The note of tension in Myrah's typically fluid mental tones set Mystic's pulse to racing. Any more upsets and

she was liable to let her mind fade away to a dark place where it could hide. Mystic struggled to maintain control instead, forcing herself to focus on her surroundings. The chair was sharp and warming to her touch. The hatchlings were loud as they demanded food and attention. The reek of ammonia tickled her nose. Mystic closed her eyes and opened her mind a crack. Just enough to allow the faintest trickle of other thoughts to leak through to her awareness.

We have a problem out here. The nasally quality of Prententiouth's voice gave it a petulant edge even when irritated, as he was then. *She won't stop screaming.*

Take care of it, Faust snapped back, though he never lost his delighted smile in her presence. *The one time we need her to knock herself unconscious and she won't cooperate. Typical. Use force if you have to.*

Mystic's eyes drifted across the six hatchlings at her feet. The water-based one crawled toward her on its belly, dragging itself forward with long, webbed claws. All three heads turned up toward her and creeled pleadingly.

"You created a scylla," the mage said in an awed whisper.

"Yes, yes! Isn't she perfect?" Faust swept down and lifted the gray-blue hatchling in his arms. He cradled it as Mystic did for her own son, tickling a chin with one finger. "I was so disappointed when I heard that you eradicated their species. You didn't even save a sample for me."

"I didn't know they were the last," Mystic replied. She stared at the scientist with his creation, but did not see them. She saw instead bloodied waters, torn ships, and dismembered bodies floating on the waves. The scylla never made it to Sistarrist Drakan with their land-bound brethren. They died beneath those waters and now lay buried in their murky depths.

"That's alright. I understand. The heat of the moment and all that. But I've fixed it now, and we can control their evolution." The simpering tone of Faust's voice set the mage's nerves on edge. He meant to reassure her. He only reinforced her distaste for everything in this room.

She's gotten loose, Pretentiouth snarled.

Get after her!

I am but... Shit. The silver bitch is out here. Nairyg is going straight for her.

"And this," Faust crowed, dipping down to deposit the scylla on the ground next to its siblings and scooping up the green hatchling instead. The two-headed Hathian creature hissed and swiped its claws at Faust's hands. Faust deftly turned the hatchling onto its back in his arms, then laid it across Mystic's lap. "This I am most proud of. Look at him. See here?" Faust stood inches away from the mage, his presence burning against her skin like an acid. She wanted to scrub herself clean. Instead, she sat still while he leaned in closer still and ran a finger from tail to shoulder along the hatchling's side. Tiny, sharp tines rose in response to the backwards stroke. "Scales, my dear monarch. Real, honest to goodness scales. Like what the Ancients had. Not those proto-scales of the Hathians. I did some digging into their DNA structure. Do you know what I found?" Faust did not wait for her response but dove ahead a breath later. "Pernese markers. Alskyrian markers. Icarian markers. The Hathians are not pure descendants of the Ancients. There were world travellers before the Warren. Do you know what that means?"

This time he did pause. Though he waited for a response, Mystic could no longer remember how to speak. The hatchling in her lap had curled up like a feline ready for a nap. A low vibration tickled her fingertips where she stroked them along the youngling's back. She could almost believe this was simply a Hathian. Almost, save for the two heads settled on her knee.

"It means they survived the plague because of their genetic diversity. If I can isolate that, I might be able to see what killed the Ancients a millenia ago. I could develop a vaccine. Mystic, I could make the dragons immune to the wrath of a god!"

Mystic closed her eyes and quelled the bile rising up her throat.

Rider-mine, you need to get out here. Nairyg is... she thinks you wish to kill her hatchlings.

What? Why would she... Mystic let the thought trail off and opened her eyes to see the hatchling in her lap once more. Tiny wing tines tucked up tight to the creature's arms. A long, serpentine tail curled around its legs with the tip resting across one snout. The other emitted quiet sounds of contentment. She looked at the feline-sized creature and saw the hydras. She saw an abomination. Not long ago, she would have erased all six

hatchlings from existence without a second thought. Now she hesitated. Why?

Mystic ran her fingers across one delicate head, and then the other, and felt the happy response of a purr deep in the hatchling's chest. This creature was alive. It had the potential of an entire life in front of it. It did not choose to be born as it was. Like Bane, the newest ward of the Warren, it could make a choice about its future.

"With more time and some other sources, I can rebuild the DNA structure of the Ancients as well. Stronger this time. Invincible. And, of course, loyal only to you. I've already requested volunteers from the drasis. No one has stepped forward, but I'm certain a little pressure from you will have them lining up outside my door. And then just think of the possibilities. The harpenai separated to their great ancestor races again. The gryphons brought back from extinction. With my skills and your power, we can shape this world however we--"

"Get out."

Faust paused, frowned, and turned back to face the mage. "Pardon me," he asked in as polite a tone as he could muster.

"Get out. Before I change my mind."

Mystic looked up at the geneticist at last. The effects of her trauma on Sistarrist were etched into the bags under her eyes and the sharp lines of her cheeks, yet for all the physical strength that had been stripped from her, a stony foundation remained. For all her magic and tactical prowess, the most terrifying thing about her was her determination. In that moment, Faust saw in her eyes the outcome of changing her mind would not end well for him.

"Of course," he said while forcing a smile across his face. He bowed low to the red mage, then backed his way toward the door as quietly as possible. He did not turn until he reached the wall, and all the while Mystic's golden stare remained locked on him. Faust disappeared out the door with little more than a whisper of sound as the lock clicked into place.

Mystic closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself.

We could reshape the world as we pleased. The words whispered across her thoughts, the tone sweet as chocolate and thick as tar. It coated her senses, dragging her back to a world of poisonous air and black flame candles. *We could rule all the Nexus, you and I. Think of the peace a unified rule would bring.*

Every world, every people, brought together by our will. There would never be need for war again.

The words were just a memory, she told herself. Just a nightmare. A seed planted by Toth. A desire. A longing.

Mystic. The call of her name cut through the memory like the first sliver of daylight after a long night. Myrah'Care's silver threads wrapped around her mind and cast away the shadows. *My dearest heart, you must get out here.*

The urgency in Myrah's voice served as the final weight to drag Mystic back to the present. She drew in a deep breath and scrubbed one hand across her eyes, dashing away tears she hadn't felt welling there. The hatchling still lay in her lap and the others gathered about her ankles. Mystic scooped up the slender, green body with one arm and bent to retrieve the scylla in the other. As she stood, she rested the water hatchling against her hip like an infant child and felt oddly pleased as its webbed arms gripped her side. The Hathian-like hatchling twisted around in her arms, hindend resting on her forearm while its wing arms clung to her shoulder. The others creeled and clawed at her ankles, but she had no more arms to carry them with. As she headed toward the door that lead to the exterior of the lab, she paced herself to allow the hatchlings to keep up.

No other den in the Warren had a door such as this place. Faust had taken one of the larger dens to turn into his lab, then outfitted it with all the trimmings of his Barokian tech. A false ceiling covered the stony cave top, and glossy tiles lay over the earthen floor. Even the tunnel leading to the outside had been smoothed and covered over to hide any hint of the true nature of this place. The large, steel doors fitted into the end of the entrance could be locked from the inside with the push of a button to trap the geneticists various projects in his lab. As Mystic approached the doors, she muttered a short incantation and blew them open with a gust of wind.

The sunlight hit her first, burning away the chill that had settled on her skin. The sound hit her next. A constant, high-pitched wailing coming from multiple throats. The hatchlings reacted instantly, each one of them responding with shrieks of their own as they stumbled and tripped their way out of the den.

On the grounds just outside the entrance, a crowd of dragons had gathered. At its center stood Myrah'Care, wings half spread,

as she towered over the fallen heap of limbs and heads that was Nairyg. Myrah kept her attention trained on a squarely-built blue-green dragon crouching off to the side. As Mystic emerged from the opening, Pretentiouth curled his lips back over pointed teeth and slunk back into the crowd. Mystic walked toward the two silvers, her attention now torn between the scene before her and the screaming in her mind.

Please! The plea came through in an echoing shriek. *Please don't kill my babies. Please, I beg of you.*

Mystic let the wave of psychic energy wash over her. The strength of the cry threatened to steal her breath away, but she did not let it take her footing. She kept walking until she stood before the prostrate hathydra. Fifteen heads weaved about in disarray. Some lay unconscious on the ground, some screamed until they ran out of air, then sucked in a breath to scream some more, some struggled to remain conscious and lucid as the cross-breed fought for control of her own body. Panic had stripped her of coordination and her health conditions rendered her helpless and immobile. Still, she stretched her lead head with its golden crown toward the mage, eyes wide with terror.

Please, I have done everything that's ever been asked of me. I accepted my fate. I never ran or fought to get away. I knew my place and I accepted it so no one else would have to! All I ask is that you let my children live. Please, they are all that's good in my life. Please. Please.

The pleading went on, resonating through Mystic's mind. She set the scylla on the ground with great care, then lifted the green hatchlings in her hands and held it out before her. Two heads peered back at her with vibrant blue eyes. The hatchling chirped with one mouth, while the other flicked a thin, pink tongue over its scaled lips.

Do you really believe I would kill them, she asked the prone mother.

Please, was Nairyg's only response.

Mystic set the green hatchling on the ground and stretched out a hand to Nairyg. The way the silver hathydra cringed away from her touch tugged at the mage's stomach. Nairyg feared her.

Mystic knelt down before the dragoness and touched the palm of her hand to Nairyg's snout. As she did, she opened up her mind, letting Nairyg's thoughts flood her mind.

Pain echoed along every nerve, through every memory. Pain of a body designed with imperfections. Pain of a life without love. From the moment she hatched, Nairyg knew her existence was to serve as one of Faust's science experiments. Through all the injections, incisions, tests, and trial runs, she had endured. Her only company came in the form of Pretentiouth and his twisted siblings, Vinylth and Leatheretth. The dragons shunned her as being part hydra. The other hydra cross-breeds, what few there were at the Warren, shunned her for fear of their own freedoms being taken away as hers had been.

All of it, every last second of loneliness and agony in her life, because Mystic had looked at her and seen a hydra, not a hatchling.

"It's my fault," Mystic whispered, her voice inaudible beneath the keening of Nairyg's heads and the crying of the hatchlings. She lay her forehead against the silver dam's nose and let her own thoughts and emotions flow to the hathydra. "I did this to you. I'm so sorry, Nairyg. I'm so sorry."

They stayed that way for several long minutes. Long enough for Myrah'Care to command the other dragons to vacate the area and settle down beside them. The silver queen hovered her head over her bond, surrounding human, hathydra, and hatchlings in a mental net of comfort.

As the shock of the day wore off and Mystic exchanged her regrets with Nairyg, new realizations began to take shape. She didn't need Toth whispering in her head about all the power they could wield together. In her desperate bid to destroy the hydras once and for all, she had sacrificed so many lives and so many morals. She had seen evil in all things related to the hydras and tried to eradicate it. Without intending to, she had made her way down the path of a dictator. No wonder the other princelets feared their rise. It was time for her to reassess who she wanted to be at the end of this war. However it ended. And to that point, it was time for her to put aside her plans to win through brute force. Beginning with a certain geneticist.

Faust returned to his den at a brisk walk. He was not one to pause for idle chatter anyway, but the look in the mage's eyes as he backed out of the room left him with a strange sort of urgency. He didn't know what he had to do, but he had to do it now. As he let himself back into his den, he reminded himself to put a lock on it soon. Wolfgang and Wagner had let themselves in again. At least they'd had the foresight to prepare a pot of tea this time around.

"Did she like it," Wolfgang asked immediately.

"Was she impressed?"

"Which was her favourite?"

"How soon do we start the next batch?"

Faust ignored the questions and their too-eager sources as he pushed past the two blue-haired men to reach the bar against the far wall. He poured himself a shot of elven spirits, allowed the fiery liquid to coat his throat, then addressed the two shadows breathlessly waiting on his response. Some days he delighted in having sycophants ready to throw themselves at his feet and praise his genius. Other days, he really wished he had a peer in this place. He missed Shy terribly on days such as this.

"Her royal highness received the gift with graciousness," he said as he poured himself another shot. He took a little extra time measuring out the liquid filtering into the glass and lifted it to examine it in the light before bringing it to his lips. "But she was not overly pleased."

"What?"

"How is that possible?"

"We made them expressly for her."

He made them. It was always and only ever himself who crafted these pieces of living artwork. Wolfgang and Wagner were simply there to assist, like a trained monkey or a chair.

Faust let the silence drag on, though he could feel their attention like an itch along his spine. He lowered the glass from his lips without ever tasting the second shot and placed it on the counter. The liquid trembled in its small container, ripples dancing across the surface. Cause and effect. The basis of all scientific discovery. He tapped the glass and the ripples danced once more. He'd been tapping on the proverbial glass of Mystic's barely present tolerance of his experiments for some

time. Perhaps he'd finally started a crack. She held the Ancients in such high regard. He had thought bringing them back would delight her. Or at least speak to the side of her that lusted for an end to the hydras. Each day that dragged on in this endless war revealed more and more of the mage's blood thirsty side.

Something had changed on Sistarrist Drakan. Something had flipped her from rampant destruction to regret. Perhaps the boy she'd brought back with her? How he wished he could get his claws into that one, but Mystic and her retinue guarded him as closely as her own son.

Until he knew the source of her new world view and could adjust for it, he needed to stay out of her line of sight. He needed time to work.

"I think it may be time to take a vacation," Faust mused.

"Oh! To the Vella Crean?"

"Are we going to see Shy again?"

"We do love seeing Shy."

An irrational wave of irritation and jealousy swam over Faust's thoughts. Shy was his just as much as the experiments were his.

"I will be going on vacation. You two are going to stay here and monitor the situation."

Faust pushed away from the bar and stalked over to the bed chamber a few feet away. He did not have a great deal of personal space, which was part of the reason he despised having Wolfgang and Wagner invade it without permission. His living area had enough space for a comfortable chair, a table, and the bar. His bed chamber held a bed, a dresser, and a small doorway that led to the private bathroom. It really wasn't a terribly impressive space, but he spent most of his time in the lab anyway. Pretentiouth had insisted on having his own separate quarters, citing a need for privacy.

"Situation?"

"What situation?"

Faust pulled open a drawer of his dresser and hauled out the overnight bag he kept permanently packed and ready to go. It held some clothes, his toiletry needs, a spare set of goggles and his goggle care kit. He turned to the bed and knelt down, ready to pull the chest from beneath the wooden frame. A stirring motion in his blankets gave him pause.

"There you are," he muttered to the little, humanoid figure that popped out from beneath a pillow. Faust held out his hand to the creature and let it wrap around his finger like a squeeze toy. "I need you to run off to your father now. Let him know I'm on my way."

The tiny duplicate of Shy detached from Faust's hand and gave him a quick nod. Of its intelligence, Faust had no doubt. It could follow commands better than his lackies. Yet the creature never spoke, and how it managed to move from one space to the other in a matter of seconds was a science still beyond his grasp. He didn't dare experiment on his little pet though. This was one creation he kept as sacred.

Faust waited while the mini-Shy dove beneath the blankets once more. The covers wriggled, jerked once, then lay flat. Then he proceeded to pull out the chest from beneath the bed and enter the code into the lock on the front.

"Faust," Wolfgang called tentatively from the doorway.

Faust drew in a deep breath, held it for a count of three, then let it out. He had to control his temper. He needed them to play their part.

"Nairyg got out while I was introducing Mystic to the latest project. I believe she caused a bit of a stir. I'll need you two to keep an eye on her and her hatchlings while I'm gone."

At that moment, there came a knock at the door. Faust froze with his hand on the lid of the chest.

"I'll get it," Wagner called in a sing-song tone.

"No wait, you fool," Faust snarled. He lunged to his feet and filled the doorway to his living quarters, hands pressed to the frame.

Too late. Wagner stood in front of the open door. On the other side of it waited Mystic, her hands folded calmly before herself, while two guards in heavy armour flanked her like steel-clad wings.

"I've changed my mind," the mage said.

Chaos erupted in the cramped main room. The guards shoved their way through the door. One clamped his hands around Wagner, throwing the man against the wall and pinning him in place. The other guard moved on Wolfgang, but the blue-haired scientist had slightly more sense than his compatriot. He let out a squeak and dove for cover behind the bar. The guard smashed through the

table, tossing it aside like a toy while making wild grabs for Wolfgang.

Faust did not wait around to see the outcome of his lackeys being captured. He dropped down beside the chest and threw the lid open. A veritable treasure trove of notebooks, computer devices, and delicate bits of machinery lay before him. Faust shoved handfuls of his own decades of work aside, digging to the bottom of the chest until his hands closed around a solid, smooth surface. He yanked the gasmask free and pulled it over his head.

"Faust," Mystic called from the main room. She stalked through the carnage of his shattered living area. "Come quietly now. We don't have to make this difficult."

"Oh, I'm rather fond of difficult," Faust said, his voice distorted by the mask now consuming the lower half of his face. He pulled one more device from the chest, then slung the day bag over his shoulder and stepped back into the doorway. The device, a small, black box with a single button at its center, rested easily in the palm of his hand.

"Don't do this," Mystic pleaded, fatigue dragging at every word. "There's been enough trauma already today. Just put down the device and we can do this with some civility."

"Your cronies broke my table. Civility is already gone." Faust pressed the button.

At first, nothing happened. Mystic shared a glance with her guards, each of them expecting something more explosive than the absolute silence that followed.

Then Wolfgang let out a long, loud string of flatulence.

"Excuse me," the scientist said from beneath the metal gauntlet of the second guard.

Wagner echoed the flatulence, beginning a back and forth duel of musical bowels. As the noxious fumes filled the room, Faust edged through the doorway and began sliding along the wall of the living space.

"Did you know the body naturally produces methane, dear princess," he asked as Mystic lifted an arm to cover her face. Her free hand moved through the complicated beginnings of a spell. Faust tensed against the wall. "Did you also know that methane is flammable?"

Wagner and Wolfgang twisted in the throes of the most painful intestinal movements they'd ever experienced. Sweat beaded their

foreheads and blotches of red coloured their cheeks. Before Mystic could finish the last gesture of her spell, Wolfgang let out a keening cry as his skin burst into flame.

A new level of chaos engulfed the room as both scientists began to flail and burn through their starched, white lab coats. The guards who had overpowered them backed away from the sudden conflagration, allowing the men to throw themselves about a room full of flammable objects. Mystic's spell casting faltered, disrupted by the pandemonium. As Wagner ran at her, his screams broken by pleas for help, she fell back toward the door.

Faust took immediate advantage of the opening.

The bald scientist charged forward, shoving his burning compatriot toward the mage as he ran past. His fingers blistered from the heat, but that was a small sacrifice to get him through and to the door on the opposite wall, which led to Pretentiouth's den.

What in the nine hells is going on, the blue dragon demanded as Faust burst into the plain, precisely organized chamber.

The exit plan.

Three simple words, but they conveyed enough to the dragon that Pretentiouth's confusion and irritation dropped immediately. He bent a shoulder to his rider, waited for Faust to get settled, then slunk toward the tunnel that led toward the flight fields.

How long do we have before they follow, the dragon asked.

Unknown, but she'll take time to get the fire under control first.

Ah, so you finally made use of that little project?

I did. It worked as expected.

Vinlyth and Leatheretth will be going mad then. That'll keep the silver bitch busy.

Evidence of some sort of disturbance met them immediately on the sunny field outside the Warren. Dragons gathered in knots of tense discussion, while somewhere hidden from view, two voices shrieked in agony. Myrah'Care, ever attentive to her fellow dragons, was nowhere to be seen. Yet the moment Pretentiouth emerged into the blinding daylight, the closest trio of dragons turned toward him.

Ah, it seems we have some good Samaritans trying to get in our way, Pretentiouth said.

We don't have time to waste on polite discourse.

Just so. Pretentiouth didn't wait for the boldest of the trio, a dark green named Serrith, to finish her inquiry about what he was up to. The blue-green dragon sucked in a deep breath and spewed forth a stream of acid that began to smoke and burn upon contact with the air. Serrith let out a yelp of surprise and threw herself back from the spray, wings pumping to keep her out of range.

Old World dragons, even those from the Healing Den, were not meant to use any sort of breath weapon attack aside from fire. This was the result of another of Faust's experiments, and Pretentiouth was more than pleased with the results.

Wind whooshed beneath Pretentiouth's wings as he pumped at the air. He charged forward, ignoring the cries of his peers and bellows of warning from across the field. In three leaping strides, he was airborne, Faust clinging to his bare back with all his might. A breath later, the warmth and noise of Tris'Hath vanished, swallowed by the absolute nothingness of *between*.

It took only a few seconds to transition from Tris'Hath to the Vella Crean, but in that time, Faust felt all the warmth in his body sapped away. He hated going *between*, not for the lack of sensation, but for what sense became all too clear.

Since the accident that had burned his eyes, Faust could not see without the aid of his goggles. Just a hint of daylight on his unprotected eyes caused intense pain the likes of which still gave him nightmares. Yet here, in a place without substance, he could see everything. He closed his eyes rather than take in the colours and shapes that had no meaning on solid worlds.

The return of sunlight and heat on his bald head brought a sigh of relief to Faust. He knew the danger was far from past, but at least they were out of that nightmare place.

Pretentiouth dove for the ground and Faust flattened himself to the dragon's neck. Landings were worse than take-offs without a saddle, but he'd had no time to grab his bond's gear.

The moment Pretentiouth impacted with solid ground, Faust detached himself from the blue's back. He leapt toward the ground, stumbling and falling in his haste to reach the tall, imposing building that housed the human population of the Vella Crean. Most importantly; Shy. After years of visits back and forth with his beloved geneticist, Faust knew exactly which door to go to. He made a mad dash for the back entrance to the lab,

hoping and praying that his precious pet had alerted Shy to his imminent arrival.

To his dismay, the door was locked. No amount of yanking on it or jiggling the handle could budge it.

"Shy," Faust bellowed, pounding a fist against the metal surface. He was so close to safety.

Behind him, Pretentiouth stalked as close to the building as possible, his body slunk low to the ground as if that would help disguise him in the open field. A nervous energy ran between rider and dragon. They had escaped the mage's wrath so many times before due to Faust's usefulness to the war effort. This time was different.

Too late, Pretentiouth hissed, his tone tight and quiet in Faust's mind.

A shadow appeared overhead, scarcely a speck before the sun burning high in the sky. Faust looked up to see the speck draw closer, light flashing off silver wings.

He turned back to the door and slammed his fist against it once more.

"Shy, I need you. Sanctuary, please!"

>>

"Change is coming. Be careful Shy, because home may become difficult to seek once it is closed off."

Shy looked up from his perch on the ornate loveseat, a delicate porcelain teacup held in his hands. He had been almost about to take a sip, the glass held against his lips. He paused, lowering the teacup and saucer until it rested on his lap.

"Monique my dear, reflect on your words a little bit and let me know when you know exactly what I need to do." His words were languid. His Oracle always spoke in riddles, but he had tweaked his beloved project enough that she seemed to have some sense to be able to review and reword her prophecy.

He was much too busy to puzzle them out himself.

A small pop in the air, a tug on his skirt and he looked down to find one of his delightful miniatures smiling up at him from the ground. They all looked the same, but in the same way he knew which projects to wake, he knew this came from his delightful partner in crime.

"What message do you bring for me, little one?" He crooned, and tilted his head. His eyes brightened with delight, and then with excitement. Anticipation. "Monique my dear," he purred.

“Ready the guest suite for company, let Naeodin know that we may have visitors soon and” his eyes flashed. “Tell your brothers to be prepared.”

A put upon sigh. “Really Shy, can you not make some friends who won’t cause trouble?”

Shy let out a delighted laugh. “What would be the fun in that?”

—

Above ground of the Vella Crean, there was a silent influx of individuals with eyes that flashed molten gold in the sunlight. Some took to the skies on dragons while others took positions on multiple floors of the main building. They took to tall towers with weapons and magic, and the denizens treated them with blind eyes. Because they recognized the molten gold eyes and knew that their resident scientist was up to his normal tricks.

The doors to the labs underground were locked. Those that tried to force the issue found themselves confused and a little befuddled, walking away from marked and unmarked entrances.

“Shy your guest has arrived” one of his newer projects tilted their head, listening to whispers. “Back entrance of the main tower.” They reported.

Shy sighed. The guest room was far from ready and the tea still needed time to steep. Honestly. When would he train Faust to respect proper etiquette?

He heard the bellow of his name and he smirked. What had his favorite goggles scientist been up to, and how much excitement was he bringing to the Vella Crean?

“Shy, I need you. Sanctuary, please!”

“Just say the word, Shy.” A newer project with bright copper eyes beamed. “We have a lock on his location. The breathing transport too, if you need it?”

Shy waved a dismissive hand. He leaned against the edge of a heavily brocaded chaise, tugged at his embroidered cheongsam and primped his hair a little bit.

He placed one hand on the arm of the chaise, another on his hip and smiled.

“Bring our guest home Ixis.”

And with a pop of magic, they teleported Faust into Shy’s ornate, heavily scented drawing room.

Oh, you bastard, Pretentiouth snarled as his bond disappeared from sight. The blue turned to scan the horizon, looking for safe ground, for allies, for anything to get him out of the war path of the silver queen as she dove toward him. He would have to find another part of the world to hide out on.

The blue-green dragon charged away from the wall, his wings already spread wide to catch the wind. A thump of air overhead warned him that he was already too late. He turned, hissing, as Myrah slammed into him with claws outstretched.

The two dragons skidded across the grassy field, Pretentiouth's backside tearing up swaths of wildflowers. As he came to a rest, he snapped his head around and sucked in a breath to ready a blast of acid.

The sight of Myrah's Care looming over him, her jaws gaping wide to reveal a building silver glow in the back of her throat, drained the fight from him. Pretentiouth lay still as Myrah held the smaller dragon in place.

Mystic, meanwhile, had detached herself from her bond's back in mid-air. She floated toward the ground at a gentle pace, her eyes fixated on the spot where Faust had been moments before. Her own golden eyes glowed bright as she wove her hands through the intricate sigil of a teleportation spell. A breath later, and the sky was empty once more.

Far below in Shy's drawing room, Faust appeared in a pop of confusion and residual panic. He looked behind himself as if expecting the silver dragon to still be hovering over his head. Solid walls and soft lighting reassured him that he had shaken his tail for now.

"Bless you, Shy," Faust said. He moved toward the elegant man stretched out on his ornate throne and leaned down to give him a soft kiss on the forehead. "It won't be long before she follows, so I'll give you the short version for now. I think she's finally lost it for good this time. I presented her with everything she has ever demanded of me for the war effort, and she then ransacked my chamber and forced me to leave Wolfgang and Wagner behind." He left out the part where he'd rendered them extra crispy. "I think she means to end me, and I fear that I'll need a place to hide until she's calmed down again. Whatever you need to do to grant me sanctuary here, please do it. I know she will not cross her precious codes."

The mage's arrival in the room did not come with a bang or a pop or any variety of aesthetic display as Shy's own tricks often did. She materialized from the shadows with little more than a flexing of the light, and a sudden heaviness to the air. Mystic was not here to play this time, and the crackle of energy from her hands as she called forth the slender golden staff that was one of her icons made that point abundantly clear.

"Ah. Well, that was faster than expected," Faust muttered as he edged his way behind Shy's chaise.

>>

Shy tilted his head as he gazed up at the shiny scientist, feeling that same rush of amusement and excitement. He had kept himself somewhat updated as to his compatriots' experiments, but he realized now with delight that maybe he should have kept a closer eye. What thrilling new projects had he created? And how much of it could he use to build out his own pets?

Reaching up to pat Faust's hands gently, his smile deepened as he gazed up at Mystic. The one donor he continuously failed at getting genetic material from. And here she was! In his labs. In his home.

He did not like her golden staff- it sparked the same reaction in him that had him carefully avoid being around Baeris: but he was not at the Healing Den, and he was not at Tris' Hath. This was the Vella Crean and it was his domain.

"Mystic" he purred, rising from the chaise and dipping into a curtsy. "I welcome you to my home, and to the Vella Crean"

He wondered, briefly, if maybe this time Naeodin would not be pleased with him.

"We can skip the pleasantries today, Shy," Mystic stated in a deadpan. Her gaze slipped past the black-haired geneticist in his embroidered robes to the man pretending not to cower in his shadow. "Faust, there's no need to prolong this. Come quietly and you will be treated fairly."

"Fairly," Faust scoffed. "By what system? Your twisted sense of justice? The Barokian courts? After all this time do you intend to just toss me back to them like refuse?"

"I never should have taken you in to begin with. They warned me, but desperation does strange things to us. It's not too late to fix though. You will answer for your crimes." There was a fatigue to Mystic's words that hadn't been there in previous encounters. All her niceties were stripped away, leaving only a steel core with a singular focus. She intended to deal with Faust once and for all.

Faust edged a little further behind Shy's chair.

"I knew it. I knew you would betray me one day. I've given you everything and now that you have your Ancients back, you're going to lock me away under the pretense of justice. I won't have it! I've claimed sanctuary here, mage. You can't touch me."

Mystic drew in a breath and released a low, drawn out sigh. She was tired. The evidence of it screamed from every line of her face, every angle of her pose. The woman who adhered to her etiquette as if it were as necessary to her existence as breathing had no patience to waste on civil discourse anymore. She raised a hand and traced a quick symbol in the air, and behind the chair, Faust made a choking noise. His hands scrabbled at the high, wooden back as his feet began to slide across the floor.

"Shy," Faust cried in a panicked voice. "Don't let her take me!"

>>

For a moment Shy pitied the scientist who did not have as... understandable a relationship with his sponsor as he did with Naeodin. He was half tempted (oh, just maybe a smidge less than half) to send Faust back with Mystic. Get in her good graces. Try to work with her a little bit, and maybe open up the possibilities of being able to visit Tris' Hath in the light.

But. Ancients.

All thoughts of being a good sport, of being diplomatic and of NOT causing Naeodin a headache were promptly squashed as he listened to Faust's words. ANCIENTS. He had done it, then? He had managed to bring them back?

He remembered the half mad calls and conversations where the scientist had known, *known* something older and stronger had been in the bones. He hadn't realized his compatriot had been this close!

There was no way he was letting his shiny headed goggled scientist out of his sight. Not until he learned more.

"Is this how are we are do it, then?" he purred, unmoving. "Enter another's home, skip the pleasantries, and just take back what belongs to us?" he clapped his hands in joy. "I had no idea the Caretaker of the Warren would be accommodating. I am looking forward to my next visit to Tris' Hath, then. I'm sure Roah and I have a lot to catch up on."

His eyes gleamed. Amused. Unaffected. As if the best kind of secrets and projects was not waiting for him behind his back. He had to play. He had to unearth what Faust had discovered, and what this breed of Ancients could mean for his Vella Crean dragons. What could he find in the bones? In the DNA?

As Faust began to slide by Shy's chaise, he reached out and placed a hand with delicately painted nails on his shoulder. He tugged, gently, as if that small action could stop his now favorite scientist's track against his floor.

"Our guest is not ready to leave us just yet, is he?" he said outloud, and behind him, several pairs of molten gold eyes gleamed refracted light.

Faust clung to the chair, his nails scratching long grooves in the ornate wood. No matter how he struggled and fought, the pull of Mystic's magic was simply too strong to resist. And her patience had been nonexistent to begin with.

Mystic made a simple "come hither" motion with her extended hand and Faust flew across the floor. She drew her hand back as if tossing a bit of garbage behind herself. The goggled scientist hit the wall and slid to the ground, still conscious, but now very firmly on the wrong side of this fight. Mystic took a single step forward, her hand once more tracing a pattern through the air.

"Don't do this, Shy. Let us leave in peace and we can consider this altercation done. Roah was not yours from the beginning. Neither is Faust." Mystic had a very particular sense of ownership when it came to the people of her world and their progeny. That was what got her into trouble on Sistarrist in the first place.

As the mage's fingers closed the last link in the symbol traced through the air, a shimmer of violet armour encased her form. Mystic was ready for a fight, though her eyes still begged for a different resolution.

>>

Shy watched Faust make an arc through the air, and his lips tightened just a fraction with distaste as the shiny headed scientist nicked his wallpaper. Really. It had taken him months to track down the exact same wallpaper used by his favorite Sanger, make his home annoyingly familiar when he came to visit.

The shimmer of violet armour had his eyes gleam Now, wasn't that beautiful? He very much hoped one of his projects was keeping track of the complicated symbols being painted in the air.

'Shy' a voice warned in his head. 'We've contacted Naeodin. She laughed. I do not think it was amusement.'

What did the armour do? Was it purely defensive? Would it retract and reflect attacks? He himself had never seen the Red Mage in battle, and he wondered now, if maybe this was the most perfect opportunity to get a close look at what she could do.

'We have locked and located her, Shy'. Ixis' voice rang in his head, and he shook his head.

No. Not now. He was just getting started.

"Faust has come to the Vella Crean seeking Sanctuary, Red Mage." he purred, cajoled. He made an odd tugging motion with his hands and a pair of golden eyes brightened a fraction before clawed hands echoed the movement.

A small tug on Faust. Another. They would reclaim their toy.

"I do not turn away those who seek refuge and sanctuary." did he have a speaking vote on the council? No. But that was besides the point. He had **created** the council. "We are stronger, have made improvements since Rugan's last... visit." a click, ramifications and support structures locking into place.

It would be best not to have the Vella Crean crash into his labs. Naeodin would be most displeased.

To a less trained visitor, those words would be enough to give pause, but Mystic knew. She understood the extent of Shy's reach within the Vella Crean. His word was not enough.

"That is not your call to make," she said. "And I doubt very much that Naeodin will harbour a war criminal."

"War criminal," Faust hissed incredulously. "If you would call me a war criminal then you need to include that as one of your titles as well, your highness. I acted on your orders."

"Against my rules," Mystic shot back. "I told you never to endanger the lives of my people in your experiments. You took samples from a bower. You brought them back to the Warren. You have exposed every single living creature there to a plague that rewrote the world."

"In the pursuit of ending your war," the vehemence that spat from Faust's words resounded through the small space.

Mystic half turned to cast Faust a shrewd look over her shoulder. It was then that she noticed the light twist of the fabric of his clothes. Nearly invisible save for the way the fabric pulled away from his frame. Her eyes snapped back to Shy, then beyond him to the golden-eyed creatures in his service.

The mage's own golden eyes flared with a light and hunger that he had only seen once before. Her hands came up, twisting an intangible cord of magic around herself. As she pulled at the ethereal threads, everything not affixed firmly in place came rushing toward her. Then, a fraction of a second before Shy and his pretty chair impacted with Mystic, she slammed her staff into the ground. The force reversed, booming out with a thunderous voice as it tossed each and every object in his chambers toward the four walls.

>>

Shy's smile turned into a smirk. It was a full on, 'I know better than you do' blood riling smirk at the Red Mage's words. Did she think that by bringing up his sponsor, it would change matters? He knew of the two of them who held more over the aging leader. Who had a direct line to her heart and her ear.

Samples from the bower? How many samples? What kind? What had Faust succeeded with that Shy had been unable to, and when would this Red Mage LEAVE so that he could unearth the secrets?

A plague! That rewrote the world!

Shy's body coursed with excitement and the need to lock himself up in his labs, to break open the secrets inside his shiny headed counterpart and to figure out just what he could do with all this precious information.

It was just at that point when his thoughts, exciting and dizzying started to unravel away from him that he saw the Red Mage's eyes gleam with the same light and hunger of his projects. Some small part of him wondered if he had seen that exact hue a long time ago, and if that was what had inspired his signature molten gold eyes.

The bigger part of him however, decided it was less concerned with who had dreamt up the golden eyes first, and more concerned by the way Shy was flying across the room, first towards the Red Mage, and then back, straight into the wall.

Before his back could have made bone crunching contact with the wall, something soft slipped behind him. Curves, a tickle of laughter, and concerned words.

'Don't you think we should call her now?' one of his projects asked, holding him tight as it absorbed the impact of the throw.

And miss out? Was it the staff that held the power or was it a conduit? If he broke off a shard of that golden staff, would he discover more? His project gently slid him to the ground and tugged at his clothes until he was standing. He brushed down the lining of his cheongsam, and arched a brow.

His face still held the same annoying half smirk, and although he stood on shaky legs and his hair was just a touch out of place, that annoying arched brow was a pure Shy, 'bring it on' expression.

--

Above ground, far from the chaos that was brewing in the lab, probably the furthest point, an aging leader sighed and rubbed at her temples.

"Damage report?" she asked outloud, and a tall, reed like creature standing by her desk hesitated.

"None so far, mistress." it offered, words warbled, molten golden eyes wide and lost.

Naeodin KNEW Shy had made these little communicators sweet and frail looking on purpose, so that she would not take out her frustrations on the messengers.

'Should we help him?' Sasiath's voice was bright, amused.

Naeodin shook her head. She hadn't felt a single rumble from the labs, and as long as there was no damage, well. Maybe it would not hurt to have Shy made a little worse for wear. "Observe. Report back if the situation changes." There was a horrible oil painting of Istabitha's Weyr hanging in one of his private quarters. It would not hurt to have the painting "lost" during this scuffle either.

'Rider-mine.'

The headache was getting worse. 'Tell Myrah'Care, that we are aware. Let's have Mystic take out some of her frustration before we get involved.'

Out in the fields, the two dragons from another world hadn't moved since their initial scuffle. Myrah stood over Pretentiouth, her claws dug into his chest while her maw dripped sizzling silver saliva onto the ground next to his head. With her wings half spread, she encased him in her shadow completely.

The message came through, stealing scarcely a second of the queen's attention. Her strength never wavered, and Pretentiouth made no attempts to break free. The blue-green Denner knew he couldn't hope to match her in a one-on-one fight.

Rider-mine, Sasiath says that they are aware.

Are they coming? Will she defend his claim? The words were curt and quick, but the bond between rider and dragon meant that Myrah heard the thread of fear running underneath. Mystic could not leave Faust at the Crean. She didn't dare subject her friend to that risk.

No, Myrah replied after a moment. *But please, beloved, be careful.*

Mystic drew in a deep breath and held it in her chest. Naeodin would not rescue Shy. Faust had no claim to sanctuary. Relief flooded through her veins.

Relief and something else. Something that had been screaming for release since breaking her chains on Sistarrist Drakan. Shy was not Krent, but he would do.

Mystic opened her eyes and faced the geneticist, now a little ruffled, surrounded by his pets. She had no desire to kill him, but she would give him reason to avoid Tris'Hath and all that she loved from this point on.

Mystic raised her hands, gathering power to her. Words whispered from her lips that had no source in any language that Shy knew. Her hands moved through intricate patterns. Though the light sources remained constant in the chamber, the brightness dimmed. Shadows seeped out from the corners of the floor near Shy and his pets, bubbling and building into a pool of darkness beneath their feet. With a sudden ripping noise, tendrils of shadow burst from the pool and wrapped themselves around every limb within reach.

>>

Well, this was new.

Shy's expression remained calm and collected as the shadow tentacles wrapped around his arms and his legs. He gave a short, experimental tug. Solid then, somehow. But built of thick shadows. He wondered what would happen if someone took a knife to it- would it cut, or would the knife pass through?

A grumble and a growl, a flash of teeth as one of his projects did exactly that with long fangs. A snarl of frustration and what Shy could hear as gnawing. Solid then.

'Maybe we should be worried about how we are going to get out of this mess' a grumpy growl 'rather than being so entertained?'

Oh, but how often was it that Mystic came out to *play* with him?

An irritatingly painful tug on his arm, and Shy frowned. No, it would not do for him to get damaged. He looked over to his goggled scientist. It would not do for *him* to get hurt, a recovery period could delay his precious plans.

Maybe, on second thought, this had gone on long enough.

--

“Mistress?” a trembling, querulous voice and a rapid tug of her trousers. “Shy asks, Shy asks if maybe you might deen to come down and rescue him and the one who has asked for sanctuary?”

Another tug.

“He asks pretty please, please please please please please.”

‘You know you have to’

Sasiath’s voice had no temper, no exasperation. But temper and exasperation fought inside the aging leader. Shy was... special. Maybe she had indulged him for too long, maybe he had wormed his way into her conscious when she had been focused on other tasks, other responsibilities.

‘Myrah Care’ Sasiath reached out, her tone steady and patient. ‘He has asked for sanctuary’.

You don’t know what you ask, Myrah sent back. This man has caused indescribable pain and suffering. He could very well have destroyed the Warren and all who dwell in it. You know I have no desire for conflict, but I must support my rider in this matter. Faust cannot remain. Please just... convince her to wait a bit longer. We will take him and leave. I can convince Mystic to hurry.

As Myrah sent her plea back to Sasiath, she closed her eyes, willing the urgency of her tone to reach the golden queen.

Pretentiouth knew he had no hope of taking Myrah’Care on in a fair fight, but unfair certainly gave him a workable advantage. A quick, hissing breath, a cough, and a glob of acid splattered against the side of the silver queen’s face.

Myrah released a shriek of agony as the viscous fluid ate into her scales. She threw herself backward, clawing at her face to wipe away the acid.

Pretentiouth flipped onto his stomach, his tail whipping through the air to club the queen across the other cheek. While she stood stunned and partially blind, he took off at a loping run, wings already spread for flight. To hell with Faust, he was getting out of there.

Mystic relaxed as her spell took effect, capturing Shy and all his pets in a black mass of writhing shadows. This fight was over before it began. She turned to leave, knowing she would have to drag Faust physically from the lab, but he would go whether he liked it or not.

The blast of psychic pain as Myrah burned on the fields above hit Mystic like a shockwave. She staggered, one hand flying to her head as her mind throbbed in sympathetic agony with the silver queen.

Faust, like his bond, saw the opportunity and took it. Aching and sore from being blasted into the wall twice in a row, he staggered to his feet and bolted past Mystic to reach the other side of the room. To reach Shy and safety. He shoved his way past the red mage on the way, hoping to push her down and render her prone at least for a little while.

His actions had the opposite effect.

The sudden movement yanked Mystic's attention back to the present. Though stars burst before her eyes from the lingering pain, she threw a hand out after Faust and muttered a sibilant phrase.

"Faust," she said, his name booming around the room in an echoing bass.

The goggled scientist slowed, then stopped, his face frozen in terror. As the seconds ticked by, that too faded away, and he stood stock still and blank as a doll waiting to be programmed.

"Turn around," Mystic commanded.

Faust turned.

"Take the elevator upstairs," she said.

Faust moved toward the hall that led out of Shy's lab with robotic footsteps. As he passed her, Mystic fixed her gaze on Shy.

"This is done, Shy."

>>

Sasiath conveyed the message and felt her rider's shoulder slump. Of course. Of course it had to be that bald headed goggled scientist who would ask for sanctuary. She knew had she been younger, more head strong and full of passion and intelligence rather than wisdom it would have been a matter that would have taken little thought.

You sought sanctuary at the Vella Crean? Had something to offer? Of course they would give sanctuary.

Yet enough years had passed, and Naeodin had experienced enough heartache to know better.

And yet.

'Rider-mine?' a gentle prod.

Out in the air dragonriders with eyes flashing molten gold watched the annoying one wrest free from the silver queen. Most circled, far away and more than willing to let events play out- they owed Shy to save the man, not the annoying one.

Two dark court dragons shifted their direction, tightening their wings and speeding down to land in between the annoying sentient transport and the silver queen. One with dark gold hide and gleaming silver horns snarled, her poison tipped tail raised high behind her.

The other, a mottled blue landed besides Pretentiouth. 'Pompous One' they spoke directly to the blue dragon. 'Shy does not want you to be too dead'.

--

Shy tugged, leaning forward with no avail. The tentacles seemed to tighten more around his arms, and yank at his legs so that he could not stand or maintain his balance. He struggled, a

little bit, flailing his limbs with just a little bit too much flair, and could not help but admire the sticky grip the shadows held on him.

"I seem," he observed. "To be in a little bit of a predicament." his tone was a little startled, a little bored. His eyes tracked his new toy's movement, the wooden way Faust marched out of the lab. The footfalls echoed and he heard the *ting* of the elevator being called.

"Done, Red Mage?" his smile was amused, laconic. "My dear Mystic, we have only just started." Another experimental tug. "Naeodin may rule over all above the earth, but my labs exist throughout the Vella Crean. I cannot touch Faust now, but he is not yours yet."

The elevator doors open, a quiet swoosh, allowing Faust to step in. They would close with another quiet swoosh, and maybe, like a glitch in the matrix, Faust may flicker.

A small, tiny movement. Barely perceptible and even with magic, hard to track.

--

"Mistress?" if the quivering little voice had sounded timid and afraid before, now it shook and trembled and the wibbly wobbly golden eyes trembled with unshed tears. "Mistress?"

Naeodin looked down at the continued, frantic tug on her trousers, swiveling her chair fully. Something was wrong. Nothing Sasiath had noticed, but enough so that the little pigeon seemed to vibrate with fear.

"What has happened to our guest?" she asked.

The slim creature swallowed a few times, blinked its large golden eyes, and let out a teary gasp. "Shy said, Shy said." it started, and then let out another wail.

There was a sudden, growing weight on her lap. Something many limbed and too large to be a pet. Naeodin shifted her stance in her seat, spreading her legs just a fraction more to accommodate the large limbed (oh shit, she thought, knowing exactly what that damned scientist had teleported to her office) weight.

"Shy said he is very sorry and he would appreciate it very much if you could clarify and address this teeny tiny little minor problem for him thank you for much for your pardon and your grace" the little creature gasped out.

Oh how nice of him, Pretentiouth spat back at the dark court dragon keeping pace with him. He flapped his wings with all his might, eager to get his weight off the ground. *Please inform Shy that I don't want to be ANY dead!*

With a few more bounding leaps, Pretentiouth took to the air. His shoulders ached from the earlier skid across the ground and his chest hurt from the puncture marks Myrah'Care had

left, but he could tend to his wounded pride later. Just then he needed to focus on lift and speed.

Myrah'Care reared up on her hindlegs, taking her up to an impressive height.

"I don't want to fight you," the silver queen snarled. She could take the dark court dragon. She was quite sure of it, but that tail did not look inviting, and the longer she delayed here, the higher the risk of Pretentiouth's escape. Her eyes tracked the blue-green as he began to lift into the sky. She made her choice, closing her eyes and whispering words she'd heard Mystic speak so many times before.

In the right conditions, with enough training, silver Geperna could learn spellcasting. Myrah had never lacked for the right conditions. Just the right moment.

The silver dragoness blinked out of existence before the dark court gold and reappeared fifty feet away, already airborne. She wheeled her wings in a mad piston motion to steady her position, then turned and dove after Pretentiouth.

Far below the ground, Mystic turned and moved toward the elevators. She was quite finished exchanging barbs with the geneticist. She just wanted to get home and get this over with. As she walked away, the shadows encasing Shy and his pets began to filter away like a fog burned off at sunrise.

And still elsewhere in the Crean, Faust lay still on Naeodin's lap, his expression slack and his body unresponsive to any input. He was awake, based on the way he kept his head from flopping backward in his languid repose, but did not seem at all present in his own mind.

>>

The dark court gold snarled as the silver queen winked out, and then back into existence. This was why she hated the other world dragons! They never fought fairly. Different magic, different skills. She pivoted and launched herself into the sky in a roar of fury. The queen was already *pissed off* at the stupid bossy geneticist her rider was so fond of, but this!

The dark court blue slowed, glancing up at the sky at his queen's warning. His stance shifted, wings angling as he splayed them fully. 'Pompous one!' he warned, angling to get in between the silver dragoness and the cranky blue dragon.

As the shadows around his limbs thinned and eased away, Shy straightened, rubbing at his wrists. That, he thought, had worked better than he had expected. His duplicator needed a little bit more fine tuning, but if it was enough to distract Mystic even for a second, it was a success.

Shy winced, feeling a pull in one of his leg muscles. This would not do.

'Did we get a sample?' he asked out loud, heard a tinkle and a thump, then saw a tube roll across the floor in his direction. The tube rose from the ground until it was eye level, and he plucked it out of thin air.

Perfect. The tentacles would be a most wonderful addition to-

'Sir?' a gentle, discreet cough. 'Isn't there a more urgent matter we should be focusing on?'

Ah yes.

His goggled partner.

Naeodin sighed. Her arm had automatically gone around the man's neck, except he seemed alert enough not to be dead weight. Not quite there, and not responsive to her words and her slightly undignified poke of his ribs.

A minor problem, was this?

Ignoring the small frantic 'sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry' coming from pigeon, Naeodin hoisted Faust a little bit, "This is not the most dignified way to greet the Red Mage." she said idly, and felt a gentle shift of weight as Faust was lifted from her lap and placed...

Right by her feet.

She was sure, so sure there was a slight giggle in the air as Faust was rearranged just so. Naeodin sighed, and did not resist the temptation of kicking the bald scientist while he was down.

Myrah'Care snarled, irritated more than anything by the interference of the dark court dragons. The blue now angled to get between her and Pretentiouth. She didn't have time for these games.

The silver queen tucked her wings in close to her sides and rolled through the air, aiming to get around the dark blue dragon before flaring her wings once more and veering sideways on a collision course with Pretentiouth.

What? Oh, crap! Pretentiouth looked up in time to see the shadow angling around the dark court dragon. Sunlight flashes off silver wings as they spread wide and the queen torpedoed toward him. Pretentiouth veered out of the way, beating his wings in a desperate effort to gain more height, more speed. He really was not built for these bursts of energy. He was a scholar dammit!

Down below, Mystic stepped up to the elevator and pressed the button to call it back. She realized she hadn't given Faust directions regarding what to do once he got upstairs. The mage closed her eyes and sent a quick thought his way.

Go wait for me outside.

In Naeodin's chamber, the half-hearted kick she sent toward the scientist ended with the tip of her boot caught in the palm of his hand. He did not look at her, did not move save for the quick lift of his arm that stopped the kick from landing home. Then, without a word, the bald scientist stood up and marched toward the door.

>>

The silver queen was fast, and she seemed to have more tricks than teleporting in and out of space. The dark court blue let out a bellow of warning as they veered, not quite fast enough to block the silver queen's movements.

A bolt of light speared from above, nothing targeted, merely a flash of warning and to draw attention.

'Enough!' a Light Court snarled impatiently. 'We **will not** make fools of ourselves!'

'Do you think I WANT to get in between the pompous one and the queen?' the dark court blue shot back, growing more irritated. They veered close, closer to the Arrogant One. Close enough to be able to interfere and bodily get in the way.

It was not polished and it was not perfect. But the dark court blue would interfere in whatever means he had to.

The dark court queen started to make ground, catching up as she flew in from below, letting out her own trumpeted screech of annoyance.

'Our leader and the Red Mage will come to an agreement of some sort, Myrah'Care' the Light Court called out. 'Our queen does not want us to interfere, but neither will we let the Pompous One get hurt whilst his rider seeks sanctuary'.

Naeodin started when a hand met her foot. She stared when the scientist suddenly stood up, one fluid motion (and one she did not think he was capable of executing so flexibly), and when he marched towards the door.

She almost, almost found it a little amusing.

The same prideful Weyrwoman who had decided to lead her Weyr off of Pern to inhabit a new planet found this moment terribly interesting. What was wrong with this goggled scientist? Was it Shy's doing, or Mystic's? She stood and moved behind her desk, automatically locking down the doors of her office.

She was... curious, she admitted. It was probably the same nasty streak of curiosity that had her first involve herself with her own scientist.

Would he be aware enough to open the doors? Would he break them down? She wondered, a little bit.

'Rider-mine, this is like... playing with food.' the aging queen observed.

"Where is he trying to go, Sasi?" she asked outloud. "How will he find his way?"

Myrah'Care tilted her head to acknowledge the arrival of the light court dragon. She was torn. This was not at all how she wanted this ordeal to end. Mind you, she had never wanted the situation to get this bad in the first place, but Mystic's mind was... delicate. Even more so since returning from Sistarrist. At least now she seemed to be moving in the right direction. If only they could deal with this cancer first.

The silver queen slowed her flight and angled slightly away from Pretentiouth. Just slightly. Just enough to make it clear that she did not intend to grapple with him or either of the dark court dragons. Still she dogged his shadow, ever just on the edge of his periphery.

Once again, I have no desire to fight, but I must keep Pretentiouth from leaving, Myrah'Care sent the words out in a telepathic blast that would reach all dragons engaged in the little melee. Including the blue-green of her focus.

Your invitation to remain has been heard but I must insist on rejecting it. Now stop getting in my way, Pretentiouth snapped. A low growl rolled down his throat as he once again banked hard in an attempt to get a flight path clear of other dragons.

In Naeodin's chamber, Faust moved mechanically to the door and tried the handle. It didn't move. He pulled on it, pushed it, jiggled it, but nothing worked. There was something very unsettling about a mindless body struggling with the door like a child having a tantrum. Then he took one step back and pitched forward, slamming his shoulder into the door. He did this again and again and again, driving by a single command to reach the outside.

Mystic stepped into the elevator and waited for the doors to close. Though the spell that held Shy and his lackeys had faded, she had no fear of retaliation. In less than a minute, she had completely rearranged his room and tossed his pets about like play things. Only a fool would want for a second round.

>>

Naeodin was...

Fascinated.

Some command, some order then, that had this odd puppet of a man focused on only one task. Either to get away from her, or get out of this environment. The odd, floppish movements wasn't sophisticated or elegant. Faust really looked like some type of odd puppet, purely focused on very elementary movements.

"Oh, don't let him hurt himself." she muttered, and felt an answering purr against her skin.

The first bodily throw into the door, they couldn't stop. The second, and third, whispers of air cushioned his movements.

Naeodin sighed. Rubbing at the ever present headache just behind her eyes.

'No more playing games, Sasi.'

'No more' the queen agreed. 'Myrah Care, we have something we need to discuss.'

Myrah'Care felt the pull of her nature battling with her war-honed instincts. She could not simply let Pretentiouth out of her sight. She could not chase him while having a discussion with Sasiath either.

Please ask your subjects to keep Pretentiouth grounded. I will not engage with him. I will come to you, but first I must ensure he does not leave. With the words, Myrah'Care pushed along a fraction of the fear and desperation that she felt.

This had to be the last time. They could not let Faust roam free with the knowledge he'd gained.

>>

The dark court blue that flew closest to the Pompous One snarled. 'Pompous One' he called out 'Our queen has commanded that we keep you grounded at the Vella Crean'.

The dark court queen finally gained ground, and her poison tipped tail lashed out towards the annoying sentient transport. Really. They had to play catch and release with an Otherworld dragon?

'We will keep watch'. The light court queen announced as a crested green light court joined her. Twin arcs of light shot out from the light court dragons, drawing a wide ring around the Pretentiouth.

'We don't mind the target practice' the light court green laughed as her arc trembled a little bit, narrowing closer to the blue. 'Our queen never lets us practice with live bait'.

'Myrah'Care, we will meet you at our quarters'. The private residence of Naeodin had a wide enough entrance to fit two large boned dragoness, it would be enough space.

The odd transparent hands that kept Faust from damaging himself too much rolled him up until he was floating in the air horizontally. A slight giggle, a tug of clothing here and there as the hands played with their odd somewhat sentient new toy.

'And Shy?' Sasiath asked her rider. 'Do we invite him along, rider-mine?'

'He has done enough damage' Naeodin answered curtly. 'Let us see what we can do to salvage this'.

I mean no disrespect to your queen, though she might remember she hasn't a whit of control over me, but I would much prefer an expeditious retreat, Pretentiouth shot back. He made to turn again, circling round and round as he sought a way out of this cluster of dragons. The dark court gold's pointed tail grazed the air next to his flank, earning a bark of surprise from the blue-green dragon. *Honestly, what is WRONG with the lot of you? Less than a minute ago you were trying to help me escape.*

Myrah'Care, seeing now that the court dragons had Pretentiouth well in hand, peeled away from the conflict. She banked and wheeled, allowing a gust of air to carry her high above the walls of the Crean. As she flew, she ducked her head down and touched a probing claw against the burned side of her face. The exposed skin there stung in the cool wind, and her eye smarted to a degree that gave her a permanent squint. Shalomji would be able to heal it back to normal easily enough once they got home. For now, she could deal with the pain.

It did not take long for the silver queen to find the familiar veranda of Naeodin's private chamber. No one else in the Crean had a balcony quite so grand. As the geperna backwinged her way to a gentle landing on the available space, she dipped her head low in a bow to Sasiath.

"It's good to see you again, old friend," the silver murmured to the gold.

Meanwhile, Mystic listened to the quick flood of information coming from her bond as she rode up to the lab's surface level. Prentiouth was under control. Faust would be waiting for her just outside. Or would he? How long had it been since she cast the spell? In her haste, she'd only worked in the barest amount of energy necessary to make it work. That gave her a minute of control at best. Certainly that would be wearing off by the time she reached the surface. She might have another fight on her hands.

The elevator dinged and Mystic swept through the doors, down the hall, and out through the thick, steel door that shut the lab off from the outside. There stood Faust, patiently waiting for further commands. Mystic frowned.

"Did I miscalculate?" The question was directed more to herself than to the scientist. She stepped close and peered at his eyes. Or rather, the reflection of her own golden eyes in his goggles.

Faust's goggles never gave off a reflection. That light came from within.

Sudden understanding had the mage's heart leaping into her throat once more. She'd lost track of Faust. He could be anywhere. Closing her eyes, she opened her mind and let the voices of the Vella Crean's residents flood into her. Every passing thought assaulted her mind, creating a cacophony that threatened to drown out her own thoughts. She narrowed her focus, relying on years of training to pick out the one mind she needed to hear. There he was. Just waking up. And not far from Myrah'Care either.

Faust was with Naeodin. The mage's fear remained at an all-time high.

With a quick word and gesture, Mystic teleported herself from the grounds of the Crean to Myrah's side on Naeodin's veranda. She could have gone straight into the room, knew it well enough, but that was an overstep she would not allow even with the threat of Faust's presence tugging at her thoughts.

Just beyond the doors, Faust began to wake as if from a dream. He stirred and groggily thought of how nice this bed felt. Maybe he could rest a little longer. Then he'd get back to Shy and... and what? What had he been doing?

Where was he?

And why was he floating?

The goggled scientist began to flail and curse as alertness returned to his mind.

"Put me down," he snarled at... the air? He could not see anything supporting him, but he could feel it. "Put me down this instant!"

>>

Sasiath inclined her head at the silver dragonness. 'Not the best circumstances' she murmured back, gesturing with her tail towards the inner quarters.

At the sudden snarl from the now alert scientist, the air around him tightened a little bit to give the goggled man a few quick shakes. Almost as if the air was wriggling around a new toy it had discovered. A slight giggle in the air, less a sound, more a vibration that rubbed against Naeodin's skin.

"I would be very grateful that Shy sent you to me, scientist." her tone was aloof. "If you prefer, I could have you delivered instead to the Red Mage?"

The air wriggled him again. How impertinent, to be so bossy! It tugged a little bit at Faust's nose.

"Mistress" pigeon squeaked from the corner of the room. "Shy said he is on his way and ready to collect his visitor whom he would very much extremely appreciate if you could keep for him just this time and he will make sure the visitor won't cause any problems please please please?"

The last plaintive plea was long enough that Naeodin had time to walk across the room, open the double doors to the verandah and step outside, bowing deeply to the Red Mage. "Mystic." she greeted.

And double doors clicked shut behind her, keeping Faust out of sight.

Mystic felt a wave of relief upon seeing Naeodin emerge from the inner chambers. She stepped forward, ready to show her gratitude and retrieve Faust so that she could take him far, far away from this place.

And then the doors shut.

Mystic closed her eyes and felt the weight of fatigue weighing on her very soul. Of course Shy had already conveyed his twisted version of events. Naeodin must know of the request for sanctuary, but she wouldn't. She couldn't.

"Naeodin, I am glad to see you safe," the red mage said in a voice that dragged with exhaustion. "Please, allow me to take Faust and end this matter. It shouldn't have involved you and yours to begin with. This is a concern for Tris'Hath and Tris'Hath alone."

Myrah'Care inclined her head to Sasiath, acknowledging her point. Her words switched to a mental thread thrown only to the golden queen. Myrah did not want even her rider to hear her conversation now.

Certainly not the best. This is a delicate situation. I am sorry that it has landed on your doorstep. It was not our intent to let this get out of hand.

Within the chamber, Faust cursed and slapped away the invisible hand tweaking his nose. He was quite done with being carted around against his will, having his mind stolen, and just generally existing in a state of terror. The mage had gone too far. Faust was irked.

"I said put me down!"

>>

Naeodin wished that there was something she could do to alleviate the exhaustion she could hear in her dear friend's voice. Not just her voice- her eyes, the posture. It was more than returning the goggle eyed scientist- and that, she could not do.

She extended one hand towards the Red Mage, reaching for her free hand. "It shouldn't have." she agreed. But it was only the fault of a certain narcissistic scientist who could not leave well enough alone. Who had a singular focus when it came to his projects and his ideas.

If Mystic took her offered hand, Naeodin would clasp it tightly and pat it, trying to communicate through touch what she was having difficulty communicating with words. If Mystic didn't, well- that was just one more slightly fraying thread that made the aging leader wonder if the best course of action was to take the Vella Crean away from it all.

"A good friend once told me-" her words were soft, gentle. "It is her duty, to protect those under her care. Faust has sought sanctuary at the Vella Crean."

'Shy has not shared fully what Faust may have done' Sasiath informed the silver queen privately. 'But he has shared... some interesting arguments that my rider is considering'.

"I said put me down!"

At the words the invisible hands started, letting go immediately at the sharp tone of anger. They dropped him unceremoniously on the ground and the air vibrated with a sniff of an insult, before it gently smacked Faust on the butt.

Myrah'Care shifted uncomfortably, adjusting her wings and tucking them as tight to her sides as she could manage. It was the dragon equivalent of hugging herself. She passed a wary eye over her rider. Mystic was focused on Naeodin. Still, she could not shake the feeling of betraying her beloved bond as she cast a tight mental band out to Sasiath once more.

Long ago, there were other dragons on Tris'Hath. We call them the Ancients now. Back then, they were the Elin'tash'na'tourish. The beloved of Elint. The tale of their fall is a long and complex one that I do not have time to tell, but the ending is simple. The dragon god, Elintraathuar, sent a plague amongst his children. He killed them all. Their bones lie still in the bowers that were their homes, undisturbed for the most part. Mystic believes the plague that eradicated them lives on in those bones. Her connection to Elintraathuar... It is a reasonable thing to believe. Faust stole from the bowers. He took the bones and drew samples from them. As we speak, there is a purge happening at the Warren. All of his experiments, all of his gear, all of it will burn. Even so, we fear that he has unleashed death upon us. If he remains here, it is possible that he may bring death to the Vella Crean as well. Whatever twisted plea Shy has made, please know that we cannot leave without the scientist. We cannot leave that chance of death with you. The guilt would be the end of my dear-heart.

Mystic let her hand be taken by the aging weyrwoman. With a flick of her wrist, her staff vanished, and she moved her free hand to cover Naeodin's. The words hurt her. She who had sworn to defend all people of Tris'Hath, all people of the Nexus, and now she stood on the opposite side of that pledge.

"I beg of you, Naeodin, do not be taken in by his words. I made the mistake of granting him sanctuary years ago. I regret it. Let me deal with this. You have so much to concern yourself with already. Let me take this problem from you and leave."

Beyond the doors, Faust hit the ground with a sound smack and an oath. He continued to curse, in quite colourful language, all of Shy's creations as he pulled himself up to his feet and straightened his lab coat with quick, angry motions. The smack to his behind had him whirling around and lashing out at the empty air with a sharp kick.

"I have had enough of these games. This is ridiculous. I am going to set the record straight and then I am going to have a cup of tea." His proclamation made, Faust marched over to the double doors that led out to the balcony. Part of his mind still gibbered in fear at the anger the red mage had shown thus far that day. He'd never seen her in such a state. Still, this was no way for reasonable people to settle a dispute. And if she refused to be reasonable, well all the more reason for him to take a short vacation. Faust grasped the door handles and pulled.

>>

'Rider-mine, that one could destroy the Vella Crean'

Naeodin made no movement to acknowledge the sudden probing question from her dragon. Her expression remained unchanged, as Sasiath turned fully towards Myrah'Care. What had it taken for the silver queen to share so much information, and what events would transpire if they were to hold on to the other scientist?

'My Rider' the queen said slowly, keeping her thoughts narrowed down and private from her rider. 'Trusts Shy.' It held an apology and frustration. No matter how many times the leader of the Vella Crean would complain and gripe about the resident scientist, for some reason, whenever he needed her, she was there.

Naeodin smiled at Mystic. It was a sad smile, as she shook her head, patting Mystic's hand with her own. Time was funny: they had met both young and with such vigour and passion to lead their worlds, and here she was, aging and losing the battle of mortality, while the golden haired red mage was just as vibrant as their first meeting.

She shook her head. She opened her mouth to speak, and behind her, the doors swung wide open.

The doors slammed against the walls with a resounding boom, and in their midst stood Faust, looking slightly disheveled and more than a little pissed off.

"That is enough!" He drew in a breath after the initial cry and straightened his stance. Though his lips still curled with disgust, he tugged at his sleeves and brushed off his jacket to restore some sense of decorum to his appearance. "You assaulted me in my room, you chased

me to my friend's domain, you trashed his personal chambers, you invaded my mind, and now you are here attempting to deny me sanctuary, no doubt! I am done with this petulant tantrum, Mystic. I thought perhaps you were just having another one of your episodes. Well this is certainly the worst one I've seen yet. Regardless of what you believe, you are not the grand high queen of all the Nexus. I am free to request sanctuary from an ally and clearly I need it!"

Mystic did not respond immediately. Her hands tightened against Naeodin's before she thought to remove herself from her friend's grasp. She drew in a breath, held it, then released it with a slow, calculated motion.

"You cannot threaten the safety and well being of all the Warren and then run off to protect yourself from consequences, Faust. You've run as far as you can. It's time to deal with the effects of your actions."

"Consequences? My actions," Faust scoffed. "Do you even hear yourself right now? You told me to strengthen your army. To give you an advantage against the hydras. Hydras! Beasts that have ruled for over a millenia unchallenged because they have no viable enemies."

"The dragon riders have fared well enough in this war without your influence--"

"You've taken kittens and told them to face down tigers! Your dragon riders would be laughably outmatched without me."

"The dragon riders will prevail and it will not be due to your machinations. You have defiled a sacred site. The wrath of the gods--"

"I am better than your gods!" The bellow boomed out from the depths of Faust's throat. Spittle flecked his lips from the vehemence of his retort. He dragged a sleeve across his mouth to wipe it free and stalked a few feet toward the red mage. "I freed your Old Worlders from reliance on firestone. I gave them supplements to strengthen their hides. I created steroids to give the dragons better endurance in battle. Every advantage you have, every time your wings come back without casualties, it's because of me! And I don't care what I need to do to get you those advantages because believe it or not, mage, I don't want to see Tris'Hath suffer under the rule of hydras any more than you do. It is my home too."

"Not any longer."

The words barely rose above a whisper, and yet the impact of them sucked the air from Faust's lungs. All his rage and bluster disappeared in an instant, and the splotchy red fury colouring his cheeks drained away to white.

"What did you say," he asked in a matching whisper.

"I should have done this when you first came to me, but I was desperate." A sad smile quirked the corner of Mystic's lips. She wondered if Naeodin knew the desperation she spoke of. Probably, but she'd not reached a point to admit it yet. "You will be put on trial, Faust. You will answer for your crimes against my people, against your own people, against everyone you have ever harmed. Then you will be sentenced. This is the end. There is no sanctuary that can protect you from your fate."

Faust spat once, directly at Mystic's feet.

"That is what I think of your fate. You don't own me. I'll stay here, thank you very much."

"Did you forget?" Mystic cocked her head to the side, giving Faust a curious look for a moment. "All those years ago, you came to me in much the same state as you are now. To give you sanctuary, I claimed all responsibility for your actions. I do, in fact, own you."

For a moment, Faust seemed to pause, his mind whirling through indexes of information, possibilities, courses of action. He took one step closer to Naeodin.

"Do you really think your dear friend is just going to turn me over to you? After what you've done here today?"

"She will," Mystic said with confidence. "Once I tell her who you really are."

"Oh yes! Let's start spilling secrets now, shall we? Here, I'll go first. How is it the great Red Mage of the Warren always knows when the hydras are going to attack? How is it she is always aware of when Toth, the infamous king of all hydras, is present on the battlefield? How do you know what will be a skirmish versus a sortee? All the world seems to be in awe of your tactical genius, but I think there's a far, far simpler explanation for that brand of magic."

Mystic froze as the horror unfolded before her. She could lash out, silence him, hit him, do anything! Instead she did nothing but let the tidal wave crash down on her head.

"Mystic Dragon, great leader of the Warren, your first bond wasn't Myrah'Care, was it? You are a hydra rider. And not just any hydra either. You're joined to Toth himself."

>>

Mystic's hand tightened in her own and Naeodin held on. She would not let her dear friend put distance between them, not today.

She listened to the barbs traded, so familiar in tone and content to conversations she had had with Shy-but it had never gotten this far with the two of them. Never this brittle and cruel. But Naeodin did not have a war that she was fighting for her people. Had she had to make the kind of decisions Mystic had, maybe she would instead be viewing her future.

'Rider mine, Shy has arrived. He waits outside your chambers' Sasiath words were gentle in her mind

Naeodin nodded- a small movement of her head.

Do you think your dear friend is just going to turn me over to you?

The Weyrwoman paused. She held back her words and listened, and wondered if this was information she should never have been privy too.

Naeodin gently let go of Mystic's hands, and instead shifted to stand next to the Red Mage. She knew enough of Toth to know that this news must never leave the sanctity of her quarters- and that the scientist waiting patiently on the other side of the walls would have to keep more secrets.

The Weyrwoman made sure she stood side by side with her old friend, watching the scientist with quiet eyes.

What other secrets would be uncovered?

Mystic had tried to pull away, but Naeodin wouldn't let her. She would never say the words, but the relief she felt from her friend's determination to stay in contact with her nearly brought her to tears. The mage's face remained stoic throughout Faust's rant, right to the very end. Naeodin released her hands and fear stabbed through her heart. As Naeodin came to stand beside her instead, the faint tremble that shook her hands quieted.

Faust's expression of malicious delight sagged as the weyrwoman moved, transforming into incredulousness.

"Really," he demanded in a shrill tone. "Really? After all that? What is wrong with you that you don't understand the truth? She is the enemy! Everywhere she goes, the hydras have a direct line to her thoughts."

"You have no proof of that." Mystic's words were quiet, but reinforced by ice.

"I don't need proof beyond your reaction just now."

"On the contrary, Faust, I believe proof is quite necessary. Such as the proof that has been gathered regarding your old experiments from Barok. It took them years to unravel the damage you did, you know. There are still people there whose lives will never be the same."

"So what," Faust screamed, his careful composure now fully unravelled. "Their lives will never be the same. I made them better! All those pompous assholes didn't even care about them until some charity championing the homeless raised enough of a stink. All of a sudden these living garbage heaps of society had families and loved ones and reasons to live beyond sucking down another bottle day after day. I gave them purpose and drive."

"You stole their minds," Mystic hissed. "You stripped away the people they were and turned them into your little army of obedient servants. Dozens, possibly hundreds more who lost their lives under your knife. You twisted their bodies and cared nothing for the pain you left them in."

Wolfgang and Wagner survived, by the way. They are in the infirmary recovering from their wounds, but they will never be fully free of their scars. I've called in assistance from Barok to see if we can restore any part of the people they used to be. Artemis Askander and Alexei Pentas, by the way. I have their files now. I am sad to say I waited this long to do anything about them. I was a fool to think I could persuade you to follow a different path. Because of my hesitation, you took your experiments to dragons. My dragons."

"You're the one who told me to use that idiotic pile of rejected cells and dispose of her when I was finished!"

Myrah'Care closed her eyes, quieting the spike of guilt and shame that threatened to swallow her rider. She too had played a part in that tragedy. She had said nothing the day they handed Nairyg into Faust's care.

"Yes," Mystic said, her voice low once more. "And for that I will never do enough to make amends. I was so focused on destroying the hydras, I didn't see Nairyg as she was. I regret that more than anything. I see the potential she has now though, and I will defend her right to live with the full force of the Order."

>>

The words that Faust hurled were cruel- and Naeodin wondered why this scene was driving so many thoughts of introspection. It was, almost, as if she was learning what might happen to her if she continued down this path.

And yet- she and Shy, they were so different from the Red Mage and her scientist.

A gentle, discreet knock in her mind that was as familiar as her queen's. A channel that had been utilized so many times that it was almost as natural to her as sending a directed thought to her dragon. Despite her completely human nature, she had picked up on a few tricks.

'How much' she asked, her thoughts directed to the one man she allowed such access to her thoughts. 'Do you need this scientist?' she asked.

"Her right to live?! She is an abomination! You said so yourself!" The strangled shriek of Faust's voice carried far over the balcony. No doubt there would be questions about the odd discussion coming from Naeodin's chambers in the days to follow. For the time being, Faust looked between Mystic and Naeodin and felt dread well up within him, coupled with a maniacal sort of disbelief. "Am I the only sane person left here? Can you really not see what's going on?" He took a step toward Naeodin, his hands outstretched, pleading. "She has allied herself with the hydras. Here she is simpering about the right to live for a beast that shouldn't even exist. And this a few days after she gets back from Sistarrist Drakan. Did she tell you that? Did she mention that she spent time with her precious hydra? She would have you believe they tortured her, but she went and came back with the son of Krent. She has turned on Tris'Hath just as she'll turn on you. Why can't you see that?"

>>

Naeodin's expression was somewhat amused, and a little puzzled as she stared at the scientist in front of her. It was detached, and she did not quite understand why this man expected his argument to elicit the appropriate emotion and argument from her. Her dark court was led by a hydra queen- it made little difference to her to hear the rantings of the little man.

'How much of him, you mean?' Shy's voice in her mind was something Naeodin had grown accustomed to. A darker strength that behaved entirely like a conscience - just... not. 'He recreated the Ancients. Imagine what secrets we will be able to uncover of our Vella Crean dragons.'

"The Red Mage" Naeodin answered Faust outloud. "Will not turn on the Vella Crean." Mystic, would not betray Naeodin- she added this thought privately, and Sasiath conveyed them to the silver queen.

But.

'I need his memories. I need to know what he did. But I do not need the man or the scientist.'

Ah, well then. That put her in a slightly different predicament.

Naeodin's expression turned a little bit more speculative. This could, maybe, be considered a compromise.

Myrah'Care sent a wordless reply of warmth back to the smaller gold. The words echoed along her own threads of thought down to Mystic, reinforcing the fragile wall that was her strength in the face of this onslaught. She never intended to expose her friends to this knowledge. She never meant to put them at risk. The words, private as they were, gave her some small hope that Naeodin understood.

Faust, on the other hand, felt reality crumbling around him. He'd always known that he existed on a higher plane of understanding, but did this old wherry really not see what he'd laid out so plainly before her? How could Shy call her his patron when she had the brains of a firelizard?

"It's over, Faust," Mystic said, her tone as tired as if she'd just run a marathon. "Just come quietly now."

"No." The word slipped out before he knew what it meant. No, he did not accept that this was over. No, he did not accept that he would return to Tris'Hath to be punished. For what? For saving the dragon riders? For winning the war? No, he would not be stripped of his freedom after all he had accomplished. Faust stepped sideways, toward the edge of the balcony.

"Faust," Mystic called in a warning tone.

"No, I do not accept this. I gave you everything of me and now you want to cast me into a dungeon to rot? None of your precious dragons would be alive if not for me! And you," he snarled, his goggled eyes turning to Naeodin, "you're not worthy of him. It'll take him time but someday he'll realize I'm doing him a favour."

Faust slipped a hand into the inner pocket of his labcoat and pulled out a small, clear cylinder with a bubbling green liquid sloshing about inside. He pressed his sleeve across his nose and mouth, then spiked the cylinder into the ground. Immediately, a noxious cloud of roiling green clouds exploded from the impact site and began to build and billow across the whole of the balcony.

Far away across the fields, a green and blue dragon fought off the fatigue of his endless flight as his rider's mind pulled at him.

Oh for the love of... This is going to hurt and you're going to hear about it for weeks after this! Pretentiouth banked abruptly, lips peeling back from his pointed teeth as he aimed directly for the dark court blue in his path. A hissing breath echoed up his throat, the pretense to another blast of acid.

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'Rider-mine!' Naeodin heard the warning in her mind before she saw the cylinder hit the ground. The rolling green clouds expanded quickly, burning her throat and her eyes-

'Breath'. A different voice, smooth and with just a little hint of panic that in another occasion would have had the weyrwoman laugh and tease. Cool air hit her lungs, and a soft presence seemed to grow and expand around her, enveloping her face first and giving her a chance to inhale clean, crisp air.

She watched the bubble 'push' the green gas away from her, saw the same envelope Sasiath and the red mage- although she highly doubted Mystic would need help from Shy's projects.

Shy strode through the open doors. He looked, the way he always did, annoyingly formal and pressed in his elegant cheongsam and thickly embroidered shoes. His eyes glinted- not with the usual amount of savoir faire and amusement, or the simpering delight, but with annoyance.

It wasn't safe to say it was anger- more the expression of a man who has found that his pet had piddled on his favorite carpet, or had tried to chew his favorite shoe.

Shy. Was. Not. Pleased.

The dark court blue was TIRED OF FIGHTING. This was going on for too long and he was getting irritated with the laughing taunts of the light court green who found it hilarious that he had not managed to hit the Pompous One.

At the sound of the hissing breath the dark court blue snarled, launching himself with a quick twist of his wings, not with claws and horns, but with a stinger that took advantage of the sudden torque to slash across Pretentiouth's face.

The acid splash went wide, spraying an arc across the ground far below. The grass would not grow there again for some time.

Pretentiouth powered forward, sweeping past the light and dark court dragons as he veered for the interior of the Crean itself. Blood and icor dripped from the long, crescent gash on his face. Faust would pay dearly for earning him that mark.

Fly faster, his bond urged.

I am flying as fast as I can! Don't do anything idiotic.

Idiotic, no. Desperate, yes. As Mystic swept a hand through the air and called forth a gust of wist that cleared the balcony of the noxious fumes, Faust stepped up to the balcony's ledge. He looked back once at the people gathered there. The people who thought themselves worthy of judging him. The woman he had devoted all his genius to, believing she might actually bring an end to the tyranny of the hydras. She'd turned out to be just as bad as them. The old weyrwoman, whom he had no relationship with, and yet she felt it reasonable to toy with his plea for sanctuary as if this were a game. His eyes landed on Shy last of all, and for a moment, all his righteous fury faded away. He had never seen that look on Shy's face before. Not directed at him.

No matter, he told himself. No matter that Shy looked at him like the filth beneath his shoes. He'd thought Shy his equal. Faust should have known better. No one could equal him.

The bald scientist turned and leapt from the balcony.

Mystic charged forward. She did not need to think of the spell required. As she watched the man in the white coat plummet away from her, away from the justice he deserved, power

gathered to her fingertips. She spoke, and the words caught in the air like spiderwebs, spinning and twinning in on each other, building stronger and thicker, while around her the air grew weak, brittle, and cold. The red mage extended a hand, fingers pointed to the falling man, and a single word left her lips; naxi'im.

Die.

The scream that came in the seconds following the spell split the air across the Vella Crean. It was a cry of anguish, of pain, of unearthly rage. A streak of blue and green swept over the rooftops, barely a blur of motion.

Too late.

Pretentiouth watched the body of his bond hit the ground with a resounding smack, but the connection had already been severed, snapped in the span of a single stroke of his wings. Faust was gone. For the first time in his life, his mind felt as empty as the vastness of space. The denner opened his mouth, and the sound that came forth had no place coming from a mortal throat. He slammed into the side of a building, claws tearing chunks from the old stonework, screamed again, and then shot straight upward. A moment later, the dragon had vanished as if swallowed by the sun.

In the silence that followed, Mystic slumped against the railing and stared down at the unmoving body of the man who had been her scientist.

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Shy crouched, one hand on Naeodin's back, the other clasping her hand as he gingerly helped her up. His attention was entirely focused on his sponsor as he steadied her, running his hand over her back in gentle motions as he assessed her, green eyes taking in her expression, the slight grimace of pain and the annoyance.

"We need better defenses." was her wry comment as for a moment she leaned into her scientist for support before straightening. "I can't quite believe that you did not have measures in place for something like- this."

At her words Shy seemed to relax a little bit, and for a moment his eyes softened. "A stupid oversight." he murmured. "Which will be rectified immediately."

She was okay, then. That was all that mattered.

He stood by his sponsor's side, glancing over at the Red Mage who was slumped against the railing. He peered over at the body that had landed so awkwardly below. Well, that was not how he had expected this turn of events to end, and it would be more of a challenge to unearth the secrets he needed from a corpse.

More of a challenge, but not impossible.

"Are you alright, Mystic?" Naeodin's words were gentle as she moved forward, placing a comforting arm around the Red Mage's shoulder.

Shy continued to follow, constantly petting and reassuring himself that his Weyrwoman was still by his side. He did not speak, and instead, stood, a silent and well behaved sentinel.

That spell, why had she prepared it that morning? It seemed so long ago now. Something about a dream and portents and... and always the voices. The ones she trusted, the ones she loved, the ones she scarcely understood but listened to anyway.

She never prepared that spell. One of the strongest in her arsenal, but she hated it with a passion. A desperate, one strike spell to drain all the life from a target. She never wanted to use it. Had used it on occasion. And then today.

Mystic stared at her hand as she straightened.

"I had to do it," she said in a whisper. "He would have escaped. I couldn't let..." She looked up at Naeodin, her eyes wide with fright and shock. "I had to make sure he couldn't hurt anyone else."

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They were compatriots. The red mage had gone through unimaginable events, had made choices that Naeodin could not begin to comprehend.

Yet at this moment, the Weyrwoman felt almost like a mother who wanted to console her child.

She wanted to pull Mystic into a hug- as almost quite tempted to. Instead, she grasped her hands tightly within her own, covering the hand that the Red Mage seemed to be staring at with such shock.

"Mystic. You stopped him." She murmured. "You did what needed to be done."

A subtle, delicate touch in her mind. Not an outright question, or at least not formed with words. A feeling, perhaps?

Naeodin felt the question and sent through her silent assent to the scientist who wanted by her side.

It was a good thing that Naeodin didn't embrace her then. The mage's control of her outward appearance was as fragile as brittle paper. Such a show of affection would have been her undoing.

As it was, the events of the day wore on Mystic's conscience, playing over and over again before her mind's eye as if she could not believe they belonged to reality. The day started out so well. Faust seemed so happy to show her his new project. She needed happiness then. As much as she loved her infant son, the sight of him reminded her of her failure at the Healing Den. And then again on Sistarrist. Every time she tried to defend her allies or fight for what she believed in, she failed, and people suffered.

Nairyg suffered because of her. Faust died because of her.

Mystic closed her eyes as the despair threatened to overwhelm her. Here she stood with a friend who trusted her still, and once again she had failed. Tears warmed the corners of her eyes and she drew in a deep breath to steady herself.

"I can take it away," the mage's voice never rose above a whisper. "I can remove the memories of this horrible event. You never need to worry about keeping this secret any longer."

"Rider-mine, no," the gentle but firm admonishment came from Myrah'Care, who leaned her head down to be closer to her bond. "I understand your pain, but I will not do this thing. You will need my help for such a spell and I won't do it."

And Mystic drooped, head and shoulders sagging as Myrah'Care's words sank in. She squeezed her eyes tighter shut as the first tears leaked out and ran down her cheeks.

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Naeodin gathered Mystic into her arms. It was movement that needed no thought as she tried to gift comfort and support to the friend who was going through so much.

A gentle touch on her elbow, and Naeodin felt more than saw Shy withdraw, pulling himself away.

'We will speak to you later, scientist' Sasiath's words were clear and public as the queen watched the slender reed of a man pull away with a deep bow.

"Mystic" Naeodin murmured, running her hand down the Red Mage's back in the same soothing motions a grandmother might use to a young child. "You did what needed to be done- you do not need to worry about me, I might be getting older but these memories will need to stay with me as I lead the Vella Crean through this."

Repercussions. Just what would the repercussions be for such an event?

Mystic said nothing as she wrapped her arms around Naeodin and let the tears flow freely. All the strife of the past few weeks crashed down on her head all at once. The hatching at the Healing Den, Thayer's birth, the hunt for the lost Geperna, the betrayal and imprisonment on Sistarrist, meeting Bane, the fights with Aaron, Nairyg and her Ancient hatchlings, and now Faust. Mystic strove every day to be strong in the face of hardship. She saw herself as the will that kept the dragon riders marching forward.

She failed to see herself as a woman. As a mother. As a wife. Because of that oversight, she had suffered unimaginable pain and left herself with no outlet for healing. She had pushed Aaron away. She stood to lose all she cared for. For one of the few times in her role as Caretaker of the Warren, Mystic could tolerate the burden no longer and let her misery pour out on Naeodin's shoulder.

As her rider wept, Myrah'Care watched Shy with the attentive gaze of a hunting raptor. She did not trust the scientist. She could not spare a moment's thought to deal with him. He was Naeodin's charge, after all, and Myrah'Care would always respect the domain of her fellow leaders.

Yet if the man so much as twitched in Mystic's direction in that moment, Myrah'Care had every intention of eating him.

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Naeodin's heart broke at the tears. Tugging Mystic away from the rail, she looked back at where the silver and queen's waited. "Let us head in, dear friend." she murmured quietly. "Have something strong to drink. Put this event behind us."

'We will keep watch, rider mine' Sasiath spoke, glancing over at the scientist. 'It would be best for all, if all that transpired is not readily remembered by others'.

Shy bowed deeply at the golden queen. He did not speak lest he draw the Red Mage's attention. He slipped away, silently, bow bent and pose deferential.

Mystic followed the guidance of her friend, for once allowing herself to step back from the iron will that guided all of her actions. For a time, she would be open and vulnerable. She would pour her heart out to Naeodin and confess, to herself and to her friend, that she feared for the future of Tris'Hath, for the end of the war she began in hopes of freeing her world from the grips of chaos.

Naeodin learned of the terrible secret that haunted the mage's every waking moment and crawled across her dreams. The fateful day when a barely teenaged girl with a gift for magic delved into the depths of an old sanctum that should not have been opened. The greedy and cruel man that served as her guide. The monster who lurked in the deepest part of that terrible place and forced his will on both of them. The best friend who tricked the guide and monster alike, saving Mystic's life, but not her mind. On that day, Mystic Joined to Toth, and no spell she worked could ever undo that connection. Of those who knew the truth, only Aaron and Magika were aware of the full story. Aaron for the confession Mystic made before the start of the war, and Magika for her role in getting them both out alive that day.

And now Naeodin.

As the words spilled out and the tears dried, the mantle of absolute personal control returned to the red mage. She swore Naeodin to secrecy, which did not turn out to be a difficult ask given the nature of the discussion, then hugged her friend once more and bid her farewell.

Mystic returned to the Warren several hours after departing, there to have another difficult discussion with Aaron regarding Faust's fate.

Only several hours later would she realize she left the body behind.