

**WARNING: Violence / Fatal Injury / Body Horror**

The team thoroughly searched the cliffsides. The fog hid the caves that were not visible from the grounds. As the rain fell the cliff sides were slippery with water. Allowing only emperors to climb them with ease. Using their innate magic to levitate themselves upwards. Many caves showed wyvern activity. Footprints, half-constructed nests, and many eggshells were scattered about. All the eggshells were crushed like the ones at the bottom of the ravine. Many also displayed similar signs of corruption. The purple spider web-like veins on the outsides of their shells. These observations were carefully documented and samples were taken. The caves themselves were dry. Preserving much of the evidence of the scene from the elements.

Persephone and Stera led the group up the cliffside. Opting to split into three groups for exploration, each with four individuals. Persephone argued to take her pet celestial feline instead of two other dragons but was persuaded out of it. The four dragons investigated a crevice-like cave shielded by a boulder in the front. The boulder made the cave barely noticeable until you were standing atop the boulder. The group slipped into the cave with a bit of struggle. Stera paused to pull her journal out of her bag as Persephone wriggled into the cave. The two other dragons, using mage light, investigated deeper into the cave. As the dragons investigated the walls they took note of strange markings on the walls. Gashes, blasts, all with a dark shimmering hue.

“I... I think we’ve got something over here.” A younger emperor called out from within a cave.

Stera floated over to the emperor. Who directed his light up to show the gashes. A clear purple oozing claw rake was visible on the wall. As Stera leaned in to look, the other emperor increased the luminosity of their mage light. Decorated across the walls were dozens of purple gashes and blasts—evidence of a fight, evidence of an Aemon attack. The dragons gasped at the sight.

“Body.” A gruff voice called out from deeper in the cave.

One of the other team members raised their mage light to show the mummified corpse of a wyvern. It was dry like the water had been sucked out of it. Preventing the corpse from rotting, explains the lack of smell to signal the presence of a corpse. The wyvern’s corpse was crumbling, and seemingly twisted in agony. Persephone pushed forth to investigate the corpse. Several moments went by, and the red emperor circled the corpse, investigating it keenly.

“Oh... Uhm...” Persephone began speaking. “She has.... Way too many eyes and two jaws. I don’t this this wyvern was at peak health when she passed.”

“Mutated by corruption.” Stera sighed. “She may have been taken by the illness. Perhaps going insane first. Unable to escape due to the boulder at the entrance.”

“Yes her neck is bent at an odd angle,” Persephone noted. “Perhaps it was broken while ramming into one of the nearby walls. A repeated impact like that could sever the spinal cord.”

“The cave goes deeper.” The gruff warden spoke up again.

The group of dragons looked on into the darkness of the cave. Failing to notice the teeth marks around the mummified dragon’s neck. The cave seemed to continue on past this point. Stera, Persephone, and the two other dragons stopped to take notes. Carefully gathering and collecting samples in paper bags. Notating when and where they were found, and what they seemed to be. Wall scrapings from the gashes, skin, and bones from the corpse, even a few

corrupted-looking eggshells were collected. Feeling all bases had been covered, Stera directed the dragons to continue deeper into the cave.

Deeper into the cave the gashes lessened and lessened. The four explorers kept their magical light shining brightly. To further investigate any additional unusual markings found in the cave. The ground seemed to be covered by dragon sign. There was something strange about it. The paw prints were smaller but much larger than what was possible for a wyvern. Persephone placed her paw in a footprint, to study the size. She took note of the sign in her journal and continued following the group.

Finally, something appeared in the dark cave. Cautiously the group approached.

"Is... This a nest?!" Persephone exclaimed. "So far in the cave?!"

"A creature able to do that would have to be massive." The younger emperor spoke up. "How would it even get in here?"

There was a circle of stones in front of the group. The nest was much larger than the wyvern nests. Its construction was also different from the wyvern nest, which was usually dug into the dirt and lined with straw. This nest was made of large gathered stones. Stuck with mud and decorated with fur and feathers. The nest contained a complete set of black and white eggs. The dragons looked inside and found a sickly purple ooze on the nesting materials where the eggs were. As if it had been used to paste the nest together. Much like a swallow uses its saliva to build a nest. Stera began furiously scrubbing notes in her journal. Drawing the nest and taking notes. Persephone leaned over the nest, inspecting the eggs. She placed a single paw onto an egg.

"It's cold," Persephone spoke.

Persephone picked up the egg and inspected it. Stera stepped beside her, to investigate as well. As she spun the egg in her paws she noticed the purple spiderwebs across the shell, just like many of the other eggs they found. The creator of this egg was likely sick, just like the wyverns of the ravine. Perhaps that is where the purple ooze came from that held the nest together. Using mage light, Persephone began candling the egg. Illuminating the wyrm inside, who gave no signs of life.

"This egg is dead," Persephone spoke.

"We should gather a few samples." Stera took the egg from Persephone and stuffed it into her satchel.

The four dragons each took an egg from the nest. As the dragons noted how oddly shaped many of the eggs were. Many were lumpy, or had large dents in the side of them. As they dug deeper they felt some of them almost seemed warm, as if they had recently been abandoned. As they dug, Persephone laid her eyes upon an egg that had been buried the deepest in the nest. It wasn't just one egg, it was more like two had been fused. One black egg, and one white egg, joined near the point of each egg. Purple ooze coated the joint where the eggs met, and the spiderwebs emanated out of the corruption. Persephone picked up the egg.

*The egg was warm.*

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“What are you holding?” Stera prodded, not recognizing the malformed object as an egg at first.

“Ah! An uhm... I... th-his egg is warm.” Persephone stuttered. “I think it’s still alive.”

Stera stopped investigating the nest and stepped closer to Persephone. She gasped at the sight of the egg Persephone held. Stera placed a paw on the egg.

“*It’s warm,*” Stera spoke.

Persephone directed her mage light, bringing it under the egg to candle it. As she did, the other dragons gathered to witness the discovery. Within the egg seemed to be two wyrms. One egg each fused at the neck, and shared one skull. With the light, they could see obvious signs of life as the wyrms twitched in reaction to the light. The dragons looked on in horror. The wyrms inside were badly deformed. Two chicks were fusing into one, starting at the skull. The corruption of the goo had started the process, and even if it could be stopped, the damage was done. It was not possible to separate the chicks without killing the other, or possibly both.

“We can’t just... leave it here.” The younger emperor said. “They are alive!”

“I doubt that thing would survive if it hatched.” The gruff warden spoke.

“If it survived, what kind of life would it have?” The younger emperor spoke again. “This is like a reverse Cerberus! Instead of one body and two heads, it’s one head and two bodies.”

“You mean Orthos, son.” the gruff warden chided.

“It feels yucky to say but...” Persephone spoke. “We can’t just smash the egg. It should be researched.”

“We don’t even know what type of dragon, or if it was a dragon, that made this nest,” Stera spoke. “It could bring valuable information to our cause. About what happens to aether corrupted eggs. Perhaps it could bring future mothers much peace.”

Persephone felt the egg begin to cool since it was removed from its warm spot at the bottom of the nest. She withdrew a cloth from her satchel and wrapped the egg up. Placing it inside the suitcase would ensure her body heat kept it warm. As the emperor placed it inside, the two other dragons began to argue with Stera. Believing the egg should be left in the nest, to let nature take its course.

“We should just leave it.” The younger emperor argued. “Let nature take its course.”

“This is far from nature,” Persephone argued. “You saw the wyrms inside the egg. Nothing is natural about what is happening to them.”

“It’s no different from gathering samples.” Stera snarled. “At least this time we have a live specimen we could save.”

The sound of arguing echoed down the halls loudly. The voices bounced off the cave and traveled deep into the dark unexplored depths. Persephone took note of the rise in noise the group was producing. The red emperor began to grow nervous.

“Shh! Be quiet!” Persephone piped up. “You are being very loud, and it’s echoing around the cave. We should be concerned about the fact the egg is still warm. Several others had some heat still left to them. Its mother could be deeper in the cave. Recently left the nest. She must be massive to make a nest and eggs like these. They could come b—”

Suddenly, a roar shook the cavern. A purple light flooded the cavern from deeper into the cave. The four looked back into the cave to see what seemed to be a massive glowing dragon charging them. As the cave lit up, they saw what lay beyond the nest. The walls were covered in

thick purple corruption. Similar to the goo that the nest was lined in. It dripped in huge stalactites, hanging from the ceiling. The goo reacted to the roar of the infected dragon and glowed with a dull purple light. Hundreds of hands formed in the goo and began reaching out towards the four dragons. It was a horrific sight sure to inspire nightmares for years.

The dragon itself was badly infected. Glowing corruption oozed from all orifices. It had far too many limbs for one creature to have. It did not help the four discern if it was a wyvern or not. What they could discern, was the dragon had detected them, and it was approaching. Yet its massive size hindered its movement. Unable to extend her legs fully without mashing itself against the top of the cave. It struggled and shrieked, crawling forward after the invaders. The four dragons turn and run. The approaching corrupted dragon roars in response. It breathed in, before launching a ball of radiation down the cave at the four dragons. The ball of death quickly approached the group. Aimed directly at the last in the train of four, Stera.

Stera gasped and put her paws up to protect herself from the blow. The dragon's life flashed before her eyes. Her family before the wars, her celestial feline, meeting Persephone. In her stress, the dragon's latent magic activated. Producing a partial bowl-shaped force field that causes the rancid projectile to splatter outward and backward away from the dragons. She was showered in a shower of toxic goo. Not feeling the impact, the emperor stayed there, waiting. Waiting for the impact to end her existence. The end never came for Stera.

"Stera! Keep running!" Persephone called out.

Stera was broken from her fright and began running. As quickly as possible, the dragons ran. Hearing the roars of the dragon behind them as they fled. Seeing the purple flashes kick up with every frenzied roar. Persephone used her mage light to light the way between the dizzying flashes of purple. Stera ran and kept an eye on the corrupted beast struggling through the cave towards them. Its massive size hindered its forward movement. It seemed to try and summon another ball of radiation to its maw, but choked instead. Emitting another horrible roar in anger.

Eventually, the darkness was cut by the daylight of the cave's entrance. The beautiful sight of salvation met the eyes of the desperate dragons.

*"The entrance! We're nearly out!"*