

It was dark inside the cave. Too dark, in fact — walking without bumping into the uneven stone floor was nearly impossible. Lifting his head, Taijin peered into the darkness, searching for any sign of light, a landmark — anything.

It had been three days. Three days since he'd left the guild, three days since he'd set out in search of the *Mystery of Gaya*.

The name of that mountain had been on everyone's lips lately. It had seized the world's attention like a beacon cutting through a moonless night. Yet, for all the talk, no one truly knew what lay within. Only a few strange rumors floated around — most spread by drunkards in the late hours of taverns across the city. Rumors of unimaginable riches hidden deep inside the mountain... and of people who never came back.

At first, those whispers went unnoticed, but soon every adventurer had turned an ear. And, inevitably, the guilds followed.

Focusing again on his steps, Taijin slowed his pace, planting each boot carefully to avoid brushing against the cold stone walls. Then — he stopped. There. A faint bluish glow was seeping out from behind a rocky bend.

He advanced, the only sound being the echo of his boots tapping against the tunnel floor. As he drew closer to the dim light, he leaned forward, trying to confirm his hunch.

The blue glow, clinging to the rock, came from several slug-like creatures. *Gayan slugs*, as they were called. They crawled slowly along the wall, leaving behind a trail of shimmering slime — the very source of the light.

Cautiously, Taijin rummaged through the large pack on his back and pulled out a thin piece of cloth, translucent enough to see through. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves and avoid startling the creatures, he extended the fabric toward the glowing slime and, with a smooth flick of his wrist, scooped a portion of it up. The slugs didn't even react, which brought a small smile to his lips. Stepping back carefully, he tied up the makeshift pouch, making sure not to spill a drop of the strange liquid.

A perfect bundle — a lantern of sorts.

Holding it out in front of him, pleased to see it lighting up his path, Taijin continued forward, smiling faintly. The light was dim, but it would at least keep him from tripping in this kingdom of darkness.

As he walked, his mind wandered back to the guilds...

They had followed the craze like everyone else, but only because it might benefit them.

That's how *The Quest of Gaya* was born: guilds sent waves of young adventurers into the mountain to uncover its so-called "wonders," in exchange for half of whatever they brought back. Fifty percent.

Taijin could never accept that.

So, he left his guild — the Guild of Warriors — behind.

Why bother joining a guild when I can explore that mountain on my own?

He mulled over the thought, descending deeper into the mountain.

The Mountain of Gaya... towering at nearly eighteen hundred meters, its snowy peaks looked like sugar dusted over a cake. The region itself was cold, harsh, and unforgiving. Until recently, it had been considered impassable, and only a few elite adventurers had ever claimed to reach the summit. But a few weeks ago, an entrance had been discovered — a gaping mouth along the mountain's side that, according to rumors, led to immeasurable

treasure.

And thus, *The Mystery of Gaya* was born.

Fifty adventurers went in.

None came back.

The mystery remained — and Taijin intended to solve it.

Lantern in hand, he kept descending. The interior of the mountain unfolded in layers: the first was a massive sloping cavern leading to an underground lake. From there, one had to squeeze through a narrow split between two walls, emerging into a low-ceilinged chamber that forced travelers to crawl. Then came a narrow passage whose walls radiated warmth. And finally — the level Taijin now found himself in — a spiral corridor carved of stone, filled with stalactites and stalagmites that tore through the path like jagged teeth.

He could only hope this descent would end soon; it had already taken him more than two days, and he didn't know how long his supplies would last.

For now, though... nothing dangerous.

No swarms of killer insects, no giant spiders, no bandits lurking in the shadows. Still, one thought nagged at him.

If it's all so calm... why has no one ever returned?

Aside from the thick darkness, nothing here felt hostile. Maybe the others had simply gotten lost? Wandering endlessly until exhaustion took them? But there were no corpses, no gear, not even a single bloodstain. Just emptiness.

As Taijin ventured further in, his improvised lantern began to fade, its glow weakening until his pace slowed to a crawl. Weariness started to seep into his limbs. Down here, where there was no day or night, it was impossible to tell how much time had passed.

Then, after yet another bend in the rocky corridor, he saw it — a light.
A bright one.

He quickened his pace, nearly tripping as hope surged through him. The light spilled across the stone walls like the reflection of a sunset on the rooftops of his distant city. As he ran, it grew stronger. It wasn't just a torch — it was an entire passage glowing with brilliance.

Turning a corner, scraping his shoulder against the rock, Taijin had to shield his eyes as a blinding light washed over him. For a few moments, he could barely see. Then, blinking rapidly, he opened his eyes — and gasped.

Before him stretched a marble staircase leading down to a polished floor. The railing gleamed, carved from the same marble. Beyond that lay an enormous cavern, its ceiling upheld by four massive pillars — each over three meters wide and towering tens of meters high.

And in that vast chamber...

Gold.

Gold beyond imagination.

More gold than Taijin had ever dreamed of — more, perhaps, than the king of his city possessed.

Coins, necklaces, rings, pure gold nuggets, diamonds — the treasure was piled so high he couldn't even see the bases of the pillars. The floor below the staircase was covered in polished tiles that vanished beneath heaps of glittering wealth. Candles burned atop ornate chandeliers suspended by thick chains, bathing the chamber in a warm, heavenly glow.

Taijin began descending the stairs, one hand tracing the smooth railing.

Enough to feed the entire city for a hundred years...

At the bottom, he dropped his pack, stretching his sore back. Then, carefully, he picked up one of the coins lying near his feet. It was heavy — solid — the texture unmistakably real under his fingertips. Rubbing it, he smiled at the pure, clean ring it made. And, to be sure, he bit it gently. Solid.

Laughing like a child given a sweet, Taijin leapt to his feet.

It was real.

All of it.

Pure gold.

Looking around anew, he felt dizzy with awe. This wasn't an illusion. It was real.

Pocketing the coin, he climbed onto the golden mound, slipping slightly as he ascended, until he reached the top and looked out over the shimmering expanse. Gold in every direction — to the left, right, and far beyond. The chamber seemed endless, overflowing with riches.

He started running, half-sliding on the jewels, laughing as coins clinked and rattled beneath his boots, the sound echoing through the vast dome. It was madness, joy, disbelief — pure euphoria.

He was going to be rich.

He would live in comfort for the rest of his life.

Finally stopping, he bent forward, panting, his brown hair falling over his eyes. Then, grinning, a laugh bubbled from his chest.

The old men were right. The Mountain of Gaya truly hides the greatest treasure imaginable.

Stretching, Taijin's smile softened into curiosity. He hadn't seen any trace of the previous adventurers. Had no one made it this far? Or had they... stayed here?

Climbing onto the highest pile he could find, he scanned the chamber. Nothing.
Not a soul.

The cavern seemed the sole guardian of its treasure.

Exhausted, Taijin sat down, his hands brushing across jewels and crowns and diamonds beneath him. Lying back, he closed his eyes, letting himself dream. Soon, he'd live the life he'd always wanted. Surely this all belonged to him now.

A smile tugged at his lips — if he could have purred, he would have. The thought made him chuckle... until he felt the gold beneath him begin to tremble.

At first, it was faint. Then stronger.

The marble pillars began to quiver too.

Something was wrong.

Leaping to his feet, Taijin braced himself as the floor shook harder and harder. The mountain roared. Coins clattered and treasures rang out in a metallic storm. He stumbled toward one of the pillars, searching for something — anything — to hold on to.

It was then that a mass began to form, right in the middle of the four marble pillars. The mountain of gold seemed to swell, rising, as a huge figure emerged from beneath the treasures. Taijin gripped the pillar even tighter, his eyes widening in disbelief at the spectacle unfolding before him.

From beneath the pile of gold, a being of impressive size revealed itself, stretching nearly ten meters long in the young man's estimation. Two enormous wings unfurled, sending showers of gold coins and jewels tumbling all around the creature. Mouth agape, Taijin stared as a massive reptile lifted its head, swinging it from side to side, sending waves of wealth scattering in its wake.

Molten gold appeared to flow from the beast's scales, and it now fixed its gaze on the intruder, its reptilian eyes locked on him.

Taijin was the intruder. Understanding this sent a shiver down the young adventurer's spine. A dragon. He had, of course, heard of them before, but he would never, ever have imagined that one could be nearby—and so close.

The creature flicked its tongue, its gaze unwavering. Its eyes bore a slight resemblance to human ones, with narrow, feline-like pupils. Its body was massive. It stood on four limbs, its scales a reddish hue, like glowing embers in the night. Its wings spread wide, dark red with black striations, giving it an imposing appearance, probably to intimidate any newcomers. And it worked.

Taijin swallowed hard, struggling to keep his whole body from shaking. He knew that the being in front of him could crush him with a single swipe of its enormous claws. Just as this thought crossed his mind, the massive dragon began to move, heading toward the young man. Each step shook the ground, and its clawed feet lifted tons of gold in their path. Still clinging to the pillar, Taijin shook his head, trying to regain his composure. If he were going to be eaten, he would do so with honor.

Another tremor made the young adventurer stumble, catching his foot on a golden crown and falling backward. Taijin rolled several meters to the side before pushing himself upright, facing the dragon. Drawing the knife he always kept at his belt and brandishing it, he lifted his head to look the dragon in the eyes.

"Come closer, and I'll gut you!" he shouted, in the firmest voice he could muster. The blade of his knife caught the flame of one of the surrounding candles and gleamed in the dragon's eye.

Fffffrrr

The dragon had stopped, now staring at Taijin with an odd glimmer in its draconic pupils.

Fffffrrrr

The boy kept his weapon pointed at the dragon, unsure of what to do. He was no match for a dragon. And the only stories he had heard of heroes slaying dragons involved enchanted swords or bows forged by sacred gods.

“Fffrrr”

But what was that sound? Taijin felt as if the reptile’s gaze was intensifying, and he had the eerie sensation that it...was reading him.

“Brrrr...braaaaave littleeee one”

The voice echoed in his mind as loudly as a gong on a winter’s day. The dragon hadn’t moved, and its mouth remained closed. Frightened, Taijin stepped back. A talking dragon? How was that even possible...?

His hands began to shake, making the knife wobble as he tried to hold it menacingly. Okay. A ten-meter dragon that talks. By thought, no less. Nothing impressive. Really. A low rumble rose from the beast, and the adventurer felt his bones vibrate.

“You’reeee afraid,” the voice seemed to chant again, echoing in Taijin’s head as clearly as crystal.

Standing his ground, he finally managed to open his mouth:

“Who are you? What do you want?”

Another deep, jerky rumble came from the dragon. Its entire body shuddered. The dragon...seemed to be laughing?

“You dare ask me what I WAAAANT?”

Taijin tightened his grip on the knife. An animal with a sense of humor. Really.

“I should rrrather ask you what YOU WAAAANT...” the voice boomed.

Hearing the sound was strange, almost like a snake slithering inside his head, slipping in where only his own thoughts had been before. Shivering, Taijin replied in a calm voice:

“I mean you no harm. I didn’t know you were here. I thought this place was deserted.”

The dragon lowered its head closer to Taijin’s. He could feel the hot air it exhaled. It smelled like wood smoke, forest, and a hint of roasted caribou.

“Deserted? This is far from deserted.”

To emphasize its point, the reptile elegantly swept its tail across the golden piles, triggering a mini tidal wave of coins.

“I...I didn’t expect all this...nor that it would belong to anyone,” Taijin tried to defend himself. And he was telling the truth. He had never imagined that the mountain held such wealth. He had hoped for treasure, yes, but nothing could have prepared him for this, and certainly not a dragon.

The dragon lay down, tail curled around its flank, front legs folded beneath it. It showed no sign of fear toward the man standing before it.

"Humm...humans are all the same. As for me, I am Vvvvina," the beast continued. It blinked, and the young man noticed its eyelids, seemingly working independently, closing from the sides like a reptile's.

"Vina of the Celestial-Mountains, as humans once called me. But I prefer Vina," the dragon concluded.

Taijin, still in a defensive stance, relaxed slightly. If the dragon didn't seem scared of him at all, it didn't seem hostile either. For now. Raising an inquisitive brow, he asked, his voice echoing across the immense cavern:

"You...you live here?" His question sounded silly and awkward. He immediately corrected himself. "I mean...have you been in this mountain for long?"

The giant lizard exhaled a few sparks from its nostrils.

"Yes. For far too long now."

A spark nearly singed Taijin's hair, and he leapt aside. Before he could protest, the dragon continued:

"One of your kind decided to trap me here. Since then, I've waited."

The young man found it strangely hard to believe.

A dragon, trapped here for probably hundreds of years? And no one would know?

Taijin knew he must not get too confident or let his guard down. He decided to tread carefully:

"I am truly sorry to hear that."

And in truth, he was. It took just a second to imagine the life of an intelligent creature trapped in this place. All the wealth within reach, yet no freedom.

A bead of sweat ran down Taijin's forehead. It was very hot, and the dragon's fiery breath did nothing to ease the atmosphere.

Once the shock of seeing the creature passed, the young man realized the danger of the situation. He needed to escape. If the dragon didn't seem like it would eat him now, it could easily change its mind once hungry. He had to find a way out without arousing suspicion. And since the dragon seemed to enjoy talking, he would use this to his advantage.

"If I may, how could a man manage to trap you under a mountain all by himself? I mean, you seem formidable, and I doubt any human would dare confront you."

The dragon's strange laugh rose again, its sparkling eyes never leaving the adventurer.

"Humans are not sane. They like to fight. And many of you have tried to kill me when I was up there," the voice resonated in Taijin's mind. The dragon had raised its head on these last words, looking toward the ceiling, a melancholy expression on its snout. Freedom seemed painfully absent.

The dragon then let a brief silence hang, as if imprinting its words in the air. Then its voice seemed to whisper into Taijin's mind:

"Elior. That is who did this."

Elior...this name rang a bell for the young man. It was known to all guilds, all of them. A man from ancient times who had slain massive monsters and trained young recruits to create an order benefiting everyone: the guilds. Every adventurer knew the name, and his feats were still told today.

But if Elior had died long ago, the dragon before him seemed very much alive.

"But that was...a long time ago. Almost three..."

"I do not want to know!" the voice thundered in his head. The giant reptile advanced its head, curling its lips back to reveal a row of sharp teeth. Black smoke rose from its nostrils, coiling around its horns.

Taijin clutched his head with both hands, feeling the voice rumble through his mind.

"That Elior paid the price, so don't you dare think this is a victory for you!"

The dragon's tongue darted between its lips, as if sensing the young man's fear. Taijin shivered all over, shocked by the creature's temper.

"Sorry!" he regained control. "I didn't mean... I mean I didn't think..."

Swallowing hard, Taijin thought fast. He couldn't run; the dragon would be faster than him. Reaching the staircase would take five... no, ten seconds. Impossible. He had to calm things down.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I simply didn't know dragons lived...for so long."

Lowering her head to Taijin's level, the dragon seemed to calm slightly, her crystalline voice echoing once again in his mind:

"You don't know much about dragons, do you?"

"No, I admit it." The young adventurer tried to sound casual, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. Slowly, he began to take small steps backward, edging toward the exit.

The dragon let out a sigh, glancing at him sideways:

“Not surprising. Your kind cares little for those they tread upon.”

“And it seems you’ve forgotten that dragons know how to think for themselves.” The young man froze. “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice your little scheme? You’re as stealthy as a penguin in the middle of a sheep field.”

With a sharp flick, the beast swished her tail beside him, sending a cascade of coins and gold scattering around. Struggling to stand, Taijin felt her tail coil around him, pulling him a few steps closer to her maw.

Having lost all composure—and his knife—in the maneuver, Taijin feared the worst and shouted:

“Please, don’t eat me! I’ll do whatever you want!”

He could feel the dragon’s scales pressing into his ribs, hard enough to hurt, but not enough to break them. He knew struggling was useless, yet his instincts compelled him to try.

Meanwhile, his predator studied him, a faint smile on her snout. Then, after a moment, she lifted her eyes to the ceiling and declared:

“I won’t eat you, little human. I won’t even kill you.”

“Huh?” Taijin froze, staring at the dragon in disbelief, trembling. “R...Really?”

“Yes...” The reptile exhaled a small ring of smoke from her nostrils.

“Not that I’d want to. Only males can eat humans. Our digestive systems can’t handle it, and our fire weakens for several weeks after consuming one of your kind.” Her gaze wandered across her treasure as she continued, “And who would want blood stains on gold? I bet you have no idea how long it takes to clean it...” Leaning her massive head closer, the dragoness fixed him with her emerald eyes.

“Still, I cannot let you leave.”

Taijin’s hope vanished as he tried to loosen her tail’s grip around his torso.

“W...why?” he stammered as the dragoness tightened her hold, making him yelp softly as a scale dug into his ribs.

She exhaled a sharp, acrid puff over him, making him cough.

“Because it would be cruel. If you returned to the surface, the image of my treasure would haunt you forever. You would think every day of your life about the wealth you could not claim, so close at hand. I know humans’ greed. You are as avaricious as we dragons. And the thought of the treasure you might have had would never leave you. I may not like humans, but I understand what it is to dwell on the same thoughts for years. Truly, I do. Believe me,” she concluded wearily.

For the next few minutes, Taijin said nothing. The dragoness' tail still held him, though less tightly. He now grasped the depth of her intelligence and spirit. She had turned her head, letting him see only one side of her snout. A long silence passed, during which the young man did not speak, leaving the dragoness to her thoughts. A low rumble escaped her, like an internal engine. Was it the fire boiling in her belly? Or could a dragon hum? Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she turned back to him, and her voice resonated in his mind, as if her thoughts were speaking directly:

"...and I cannot send you back to the surface. Let's say my treasure's images do not drive you mad—you couldn't keep my presence here a secret forever. Humans don't have the tongue for that. And don't you dare tell me otherwise!" she concluded, noticing the adventurer about to argue.

Another pause followed.

"So...?" Taijin ventured.

"So I will have to resort to it. I promise myself each time I won't do it again, but the spell does not seem to heed my vows," the dragoness' thought came clearly.

Taijin shivered, pressing his palms against her rough scales. He had a bad feeling.

"Resort to wha..."

He didn't have time to finish his sentence before the dragoness moved her snout close to his face. Her glowing eyes sparkled in the light around them.

"You must have wondered where your little human companions went when they entered the cave, haven't you? You'll understand soon."

Then, with a swift movement, the dragoness brought her jaws to Taijin and licked him.

The young man raised his arms in defense, thinking he might be devoured anyway, and felt the dragoness's enormous rough tongue brush over his entire body. She left traces of saliva on his clothes, and warm filaments on the skin of his bare arms. The female ran her tongue over him three more times, making sure every part of the man's body had been in contact with her mouth. He held his breath, feeling uneasy about the act. Was she marking him as hers? Or was it a way to mark him for predators nearby? The smell of smoke emanating from her mouth enveloped Taijin, who now had his eyes closed and endured the treatment. He felt the saliva seep under his clothes, dripping along his skin. The touch was warm, sticky, and he felt sullied.

After giving the adventurer another swipe of her tongue, the dragoness drew her mouth away, flicking her tongue like a snake.

"Ugh!" spat Taijin, dripping with saliva. "What got into you?"

The reptile stretched out, its tail still holding the man hostage. A transparent thread, a remnant of saliva, fell from her lips to land on a diamond-studded necklace as he looked at her handiwork, eyes sparkling.

"I couldn't let you leave. So I'm doing everything I can to make sure you don't want to leave."

The dragoness's voice now resonated louder, as if she had moved closer. He blinked and looked at her directly, arms glistening with drool.

"Huh? What do you mean?" The young man didn't understand at all where she was going with this. Her words made no sense. "You mentioned the others... you saw them?"

The colors around Taijin seemed slightly more vivid. Just a little. And his vision appeared a bit clearer.

"I... made sure they would want to stay. And I can tell you they're having fun, from what I've seen. Ah, look..."

The dragoness left her sentence hanging, turning her snout toward a pile of coins that was moving a few steps away. Immediately, she loosened her grip on the young man, who fell onto the heap of golden coins.

Thinking the female had been distracted, Taijin got to his feet and ran as fast as he could, trying to reach his bag at the bottom of the stairs. And he managed to run. For about... two seconds. Then the tip of one of the dragoness's wings struck his heel, and he fell backward. A rumble rose from the enormous dragon.

"Don't be rude, little man. Say hello."

Following the female's gaze, Taijin saw a head emerging from under the pile of coins. Or rather, a snout. Followed by a pair of horns, diamond-colored eyes, bluish wings... a whole dragon was emerging. That said, it looked much smaller than Vina. In fact, it was about Taijin's size. Looking at the newcomer, the young adventurer noticed it sniffed the air, as if searching for something in particular. Suddenly, the "small" dragon turned its snout toward him.

Ho ho... that's me, the "something in particular."

The dragon hurried toward him, wagging its adorable tail behind. Even its wings seemed to float cutely behind its back, like two waves ready to wash over him.

Cute ? It's just a smaller dragon, nothing really striking.

"This is Daya," Vina's voice informed him, resonating as purely as steel in Taijin's mind. Her voice was now so clear, so precise that it became almost unsettling. "She's going to show you what it means to want to stay here."

Daya reached Taijin, her blue eyes seeming to devour him completely. She had the same eyes as the great dragoness: a sleek, feline shape, yet strangely resembling human eyes.

And the curves of her body appeared... oddly perfect. Her scales were ocean blue, with darker streaks marking her body like abyssal veins. Her hind legs, slender and agile, perfectly supported her sleek, confident frame.

Who would have thought a dragon could be so... beautiful?

Reaching the adventurer, the new dragon rubbed against his knee. The touch of her scales against his knee made him shiver, as if the creature were trying to communicate through this contact. Rising quickly, the young man looked at the great dragoness.

"What does all this mean? Weren't you alone here?"

The one he questioned replied in a smooth, whispering voice into his mind, which was very strange given she was speaking directly to him.

"I felt lonely. So when I realized people had found me, I didn't want to miss this chance... to have company."

This nonsense made no sense to Taijin. He tried to piece together the puzzle with the information he had, but something tugged at him. A sensation seemed to come from her mind and spread through his body. A distant call, barely audible, but gradually growing. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, the young man wanted to question her.

"But..."

Daya had pressed against his knee, rubbing against his leg. Taijin shook her off, uneasy at the presence of this creature. A question suddenly came to him.

"But... this dragon can't speak, right? You're the only one who can communicate with humans?"

The question seemed silly to him, however. Dragons were still animals, simple beasts. Few could speak or think elaborately. A sensation rose in Taijin's head. It was so strong he had to close his eyes for a moment, planting his feet firmly on the golden floor. The feeling was soft, relaxing... but also violent and intense. It felt like his brain was being pulled by a magnet, something trying to draw him in. A stronger smell. A sharper sound. His mind felt like it was opening, inviting new sensations. Opening his eyes, Taijin saw Daya now rubbing against his thigh. Disturbed, he pushed her away with both hands, listening to Vina's response with one ear.

"She can speak. Well, she can, more precisely. But she's less used to speaking through thought, so she'll have to wait a little before addressing you. Also, I advise against considering us as animals, or any other beasts. We're far more intelligent than that."

Taijin was bewildered. Feeling Daya lift her neck to reach his and nudge him lightly with her snout, he gently turned his head away and continued, troubled.

"You... you read my thoughts? You hear what I'm thinking?"

This idea had never crossed his mind. Certainly, the great dragoness was addressing his mind directly, but he hadn't imagined she could also... hear his thoughts.

"Calm down, human." The dragoness's crystalline voice was now extremely clear. Too clear. As if it filled his mind, and the dragon was inside his head. The sensation at the back of his mind seemed to migrate, gradually filling his entire brain. The feeling made him want... to drop to all fours. To stop thinking, and lie down on the gold. But also... something very unsettling. He felt his mind react to Daya's presence, wanting to get closer to her. A part of him... found her truly adorable. Taijin shook violently, trying to clear his mind. The dragoness continued, as if waiting for the flood of sensations in the young man to subside. "I understand the overall meaning of your thoughts. And what you feel. By the way, something is happening inside you, isn't it?" she continued, with a hint of laughter.

How... How can I get out of here? I need to find... a way.

Taijin felt his mind tire a little. As if the call was too strong. Something was drawing him, trying to pull him in...

Daya continued rubbing against Taijin. The air was hot, almost suffocating around the young man. The outside seemed hotter, but his body also felt warmer. He tried to think of an exit, but everything was stronger, sharper around him, and imperceptibly, his body felt more relaxed, safer.

Daya lowered to all fours. Taijin noticed her size: her withers reached his waist, and when she raised her head at the end of her long neck, it almost reached the height of the young man. The little dragon thrust her snout into Taijin's stomach, cutting his breath slightly. Then she coiled her tail around his ankles, preventing him from escaping.

Caught off guard, Taijin tried to push her away, but he felt as if he had less strength. Or at least, that his strength was focused on something else. Preparing him for... what his body was about to go through. Seeing the dragoness tighten her grip around his legs, he turned his head toward Vina:

"S...stop her! What does she want?" Taijin shouted in an unrecognizable voice. His throat felt tighter, and he felt as if something inside him was changing.

The great dragoness had her eyes half-closed, watching the scene unfold before her. She seemed to hum lightly, as if savoring what was happening.

"To make it so that those who come here don't want to leave, I had to teach them the pleasure of... changing. Of experiencing something different."

The dragoness's voice sounded clear, but something else seemed to be taking more and more space. Or maybe it was her placing thoughts directly in his mind?

"Let yourself gooooo. Stop resisssting."

Taijin felt something changing inside him. His body seemed different. His head felt lighter, yet he sensed something pushing above him. His entire body was almost burning, and he felt

tingling across his flesh, as if thousands of diamonds were trying to emerge from under his skin. He watched in disbelief as scales emerged from his pores and rapidly covered his body. His hands, which he tried to use to push Daya away, looked different. More suited for hunting. Less suited for... human tools.

I... I have to fight. I feel it, this... thing infiltrating me, I must resist...

He felt his entire body trembling under a wave of changes. Suddenly, he heard the ripping of fabric—"frriipp"—as his new scales tore his clothes. Taijin tried to hold the scraps of his garments in place with his hands, then let out a scream. He had felt sensations in his body, but... he hadn't thought he could actually transform.

His hands no longer looked like hands. His thumbs were different, pressed against his wrists, barely graspable. His phalanges were covered in scales, and he could no longer move his fingers. Mouth open, Taijin felt his jaw changing, elongating. Everything in his mouth changed: his tongue grew heavier, thicker, his teeth sharper, and he could clearly feel a very thin new layer forming inside, an extra layer of skin covering everything, inflammable.

A dragon. It was obvious. He was turning into a dragon.

He felt his balance shift as well. It became harder to stand on his legs, his body seeming to demand he drop to all fours. But he could not. He must not.

If... if I fall onto my paws, I won't be human anymore. I must not. I will control myself.

But his mind began to change too. He felt the strange sensation taking over him. Thinking became complex: it was as if a labyrinth had formed between him and his thoughts. Formulating one became difficult, and everything urged him to focus his energy elsewhere. On...

Daya stood on her hind legs, front paws on the shoulders of the almost-semi-dragon, staring into Taijin's eyes. Unable to do anything else, he locked his gaze with the female's brown eyes. She looked at him not as she wished to see him, but as he truly was. A flash seemed to pass through the semi-human's mind, as if a key had opened a door. Smiling in a dragon-like manner, her eyes promised everything he had ever dreamed of: safety, warmth, comfort. He wanted to give life to these desires. Perhaps being a dragon wasn't so bad after all?

"Let her show you..." Vina's voice whispered as well. The great dragoness did not miss a single moment of the spectacle.

L...let me go! Taijin thought mentally, trying to push them away with the force of his mind. *You... uh...*

Daya moved closer, and Taijin could feel a vibration emanating from her. She seemed... purring? Or something like that. It made him want to... curl up. To snuggle against Daya and rest. To enjoy her warmth, to stay here, to...

Thinking became too complex. Taijin was drowning in a flood of sensations, stimulation, and

thoughts. He couldn't think clearly, everything was happening so fast.

Daya leaned down and passed a paw over the semi-dragon's chest. It sent an electric shiver through his body, making him feel like he was losing control. A scaly tail now wagged behind him, and he could feel wings growing on his back.

All these new sensations made him want to be a dragon. To want more. And he no longer saw how to resist any of it.

Vina's voice resonated louder than ever in his mind:

"You are one of us now."

Tai... the... young dragon no longer wanted to struggle. He still felt Daya's tail around his ankles. She wanted him to feel good. Safe. And he wanted that too.

Then, in one last surge, he released the tension. He wanted to enjoy this... this new body.

Taijin fell to all fours, unable to stand on his two legs any longer. As he landed, his mind swirled.

All the draconic sensations took over. He felt the fire in his belly swell, reaching the scale of an internal dragon furnace. His paws struck the ground violently, fully transformed. The sensations from his new limbs sent vibrations through his entire body, also spreading to his wings. His wings... which would allow him to fly in the sky. Free.

Daya came close to him, rubbing her snout against his ribs.

"So... better?" her voice murmured in the mind of the new dragon.

Her voice was strange, new, reassuring.

Unable to speak and too early to use his mind fully, he nodded. He felt good.

The female pressed against him. The friction of their scales together made their bodies vibrate. Without having been taught, the young male now knew instinctively: this marked the proof of unconditional love. He rubbed against her in return, letting out a sigh. He was free.

Gently, he moved away from Daya. Then the male turned to Vina, who had never taken her reptilian eyes off him. He leaned forward, front paws folded under him in respect.

"Thaa...nk yooouuu," he let resonate in the mind of the great dragoness, trying to articulate his feelings as precisely as possible.

Tilting her huge snout in return and releasing a cloud of smoke, Vina of Mont-Céleste touched the small dragon's forehead, responding to such a high sign of respect. Then, Taijin, now a magnificent white dragon with bluish highlights, returned to Daya, who had half-burrowed herself into a pile of gold coins. Nestling against her, he exhaled a warm stream of air through his nostrils, soothed. He had found his place. Being a dragon was... far

more than he had ever imagined. Daya nestled against his chest as he gently held her in his claws. His new dragon mind was different, but incredible. He saw life differently, thought differently. He now had to figure out how to protect his companion, and all the other dragons in the cave. Because yes, he understood. All the other adventurers had undergone the same transformation. The same stage. And now that he had looked carefully, he could see snouts, wings, and horns half-buried under the countless piles of gold. Everyone here. In this cave. Safe.

One last thought crossed the young male's mind as he fell asleep, holding his dragoness close.

I will protect you all. And with Vina, we will find a way out of this cave... and put an end to the humans' reign that trapped us here.