

## The day he met the Empress

Within the room, Onesto let out a long held breath and finally edged his way close enough to his patient to begin checking her eyes and temperature. He knew already that she had come through the spell just fine, but it made him feel better to do all the checks they were taught in their first year of studies.

"I have a friend back home. A dragon rider. Every morning we meet for breakfast. He tells me about his plans for the day, which often involve routing out a band of bandits or chasing down an errant hydra. I tell him that I may read a new book or study a new spell. Then he asks if I want to trade places with him and we laugh." A fond smile spread across the man's gentle features. He sat back on the edge of the bed and looked down at Naeodin. "I think, had I known what today had in store, I would have agreed to his request this morning."

Naeodin chuckled. It was a weak old lady sound, and she hated it.

"Thank you for waking me."

It was a weak, old lady voice, and she hated it.

Clearing her throat, raising her left hand, then her right, she frowned.

"How long will it take for me to recover my strength?" voices. She could hear the murmurs and the controlled spite from outside. "I would prefer." she started. "To ignore the children outside, and let them resolve their differences." she sighed.

Maramia had clear eyes, clarity and sanity she had not seen in years. Mystic and Shy- her oldest friend and her scientist had been at odds for so long.

"Is there a way we could listen in on their words?" she asked her cleric full of surprises.

"A few months. Longer if you insist on fidgeting all the time." Onesto hit Naeodin with another warm smile as he went about collecting the tools of his trade and neatly fitting them back into his satchel. He was not fond of messes.

"As to listening in," he continued while moving over to the side of the bed, "I get the sense that we won't need a spell to assist us soon. Although I have one if you'd like a bit of a boost." He sat down on the edge of the bed and the mattress sagged beneath his bulk. "I am not much of one for politics, but I take it there's some history between the people who care for you."

Naeodin suspected that the cleric used his warm smiles as a weapon. She sighed. A few months? She did not have a few months. "What can we fix in the next week?" she asked.

One week. She would give herself one week to take meetings and make decisions in her formal living room. But she needed to see the destruction done to her city in person: she needed to meet the riders, the dragons. A peace delegation.

Her daughter, bless her heart, would never have thought towards peace.

Naeodin sighed.

At the shift of her mattress, Naeodin smiled at the gentle giant. "A little bit of bad blood." she answered sadly. "My daughter's consort died in the Tris Hath wars- it has been years since I have seen her so in control of her emotions."

Naeodin paused. Right. The other bad blood. "Mystic and Shy- have never seen eye to eye." she answered. The boy driven by his pursuit of knowledge, who sometimes needed to be reined in.

The heart of so many of her problems.

"Ah, I see," Onesto said as a cry of "*I was not banished*" filtered through the closed door. His smile brightened. "Regardless of how they feel for each other, it seems they all care very much for you. As to what we can accomplish in a week, with enough rest and proper care, you'll be able to start physical therapy. How long your recovery takes is entirely dependent on you, Your Eminence. I have seen patients recover in a month what should have taken six, and I have seen patients cripple themselves for years when a few weeks of proper care would have set them right. So, I have to ask you, how long would you like your recovery to take?"

"One week." Naeodin answered, her eyes bright. "We have one week, to get me well enough that I can remind my children how to behave appropriately in front of guests."

She stared at her hands.

"Or at least strong enough that I can move my arms of my own free will." she frowned. "I need a chair. That moves around. A...weapon."

Naeodin briefly imagined stabbing her friends with a blunt spear into submission.

Snorted.

The five years had done work on her mind.

She sighed. "Listen to them, Onesto."

"It's difficult not to," he admitted. He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and drawing in a deep breath as he let his senses pull in every minute detail of the room. He felt the voices more

than heard them. The low, urgent whisper from a monarch he respected. The imperious tone of the man she opposed. "This Shy of your's. He's not very... shy. Is he?"

Onesto opened his eyes and smiled at Naeodin again.

"I'm certain Her Grace will have much to discuss with Adon when she returns home. It's not my place to judge her words here though. Based on the little I can understand, it sounds as if they are arguing about the value of a life."

Naeodin shook her head. "My children never learn." the scientist had been her equal, her contemporary once a long time ago. When had their relationship changed, where she felt that he was a child of hers, rather than a contemporary?

The voices rose, one rising in pitches she had not heard in a very, very long time.

"Is there anything you could do to calm them?" she asked her new cleric. "They cannot see eye to eye on the best of days. Today-" she looked down at the hands that were too small, the bones that stood out too sharply. "My friends have rescued me from an endless sleep. My daughter's eyes are clearer than I have seen them in years. My scientist has returned." a small, sad quirk of her lips. "I do not want to lose any of them so soon."

"I do not think you are at risk of losing them. They have travelled across worlds to bring you back. They all clearly care for you a great deal." Onesto paused as something in the corner of the room caught his eye. It had been buried by furniture when Mystic cleared the floor earlier. "Ah, perfect."

He stood and moved over to the corner of the room, putting his shoulder to a shelf to shove it aside, then bending over a small mess of books, blankets, vases, and chairs. For a few moments he said nothing as he rearranged furniture and accessories. Something scraped on the floor, and something squeaked, and then the large man grunted as he lifted a chair up and out of the mess, and set it down on the ground facing Naeodin.

The chair looked rather unassuming for the most part. A few blankets covered the seat, but the back was bare wood and there were no arms. The most interesting thing about it, though, was the fact that someone had nailed platforms with wheels on the bottom to the legs.

"It would seem someone was prepared for your eventual return to wakefulness. It is... simple as far as designs go, but it will function." Onesto pushed the chair up to Naeodin's bedside then stepped around to sit down on the edge again. The mattress sank under his weight. "Now, I understand you are concerned for the well being of your friends, but sometimes a wound must be reopened before it can be cleaned. Let's leave them a little while longer, hmm? I can braid your hair and help you dress in something more suitable for a returning Empress. And then, if they have not settled, I will calm them as you asked."

Naeodin stared at the odd looking contraption, her expression a mix of amusement and exasperation. Really. What a foolish idea, a chair with silly little wheels. The least her daughter could have done was to create something as highly functional as the odd entertainment reels they had watched.

She smiled wryly at the gentle man's words. How innocent and naive they seemed. Maybe he did not realize just how destructive and toxic her friends could be. The volatility of her scientist who had been allowed to run wild for so long. But there was strength in the cleric's eyes, and an unflappable confidence that he would be able to calm them, should the need arise.

This Onesto was an interesting and quite delightful surprise.

Her eyes narrowed. "I would appreciate your help in braiding my hair, and something warmer to cover myself with." As delightful as the cleric was, she would need to figure out how to change, and bathe.

Later.

"As you wish, Your Eminence." Onesto bowed his head in a short nod, then scooted up toward the head of the bed until he sat beside her. From one of his many pockets, he pulled out a length of leather and laid it across one knee, then gathered her hair gently between his wide hands.

"I had many sisters growing up," the large man said as he began to finger comb through the tangles and knots of her long untended hair. His touch was as gentle as a kitten, almost mesmerizing in the way he combed and gathered, combed and gathered. "I learned very early in my life how to work with long hair. I can do Traxan braids or a single braid, or multiple braids. Whatever you wish."

Naeodin found herself relaxing, forgetting the conflict outside, lulled by the steady words and the hands that were so careful with her hair. Her cleric (for she had decided that he was hers, and she would not be returning him to Tris Hath) had gentle hands, and she felt soothed.

"A single braid, please." she requested. "Thank you."

She paused.

"Why did you decide to help us?" she asked.

"Ah, well, that's simple. I was informed that someone was in need of aid. I would hardly be a good cleric if I ignored such a call, hmm?" With her hair now smoothed out, he gathered it into three sections and began winding the long strands into a loose braid. Never did he tug. Never did a knot catch. Every action moved with the smooth, gentle grace of a masseuse. "But that's not what you were really asking, is it? You want to know why me in particular. I have always

been something of a wanderer. I was one of Adon's early followers, and I enjoyed travelling the lands with him, learning and healing wherever we went. The Warren is the first place I settled in many years, and I did so only because the Order needed my help. I have never been quiet about my desire to see more places and experience everything that life has to offer. Learning of the Nexus and all the worlds it holds, well it naturally captivated my attention. My friends are so used to hearing me speak of it, they have a name for me. The dragon rider that missed his chance." He added a short laugh to the end of his sentence. "All said in good fun, of course. But it did not surprise me that when Her Grace required someone to offer their services on another world, my name came up. It was not a difficult choice after that."

Naeodin smiled. His words were calming, so easy to listen to. His hands were gentle. What a gift Mystic had brought with her to the Vella Crean.

A dragonrider who had missed his chance.

The Weyrwoman inside of her perked up at the words, considering.

"I thank you for your aide, Onesto." Naeodin murmured, and winced as she heard the rise in pitch from her scientist.

The look in his eyes, the rage- she had made the best decision she could, at that time. For how could she lock away the scientist from the rest of the Nexus? But their absence from the Nexus had been followed by events the Empress could never have predicted.

"We were at war, Onesto- with a court of dragons and a leader who has crowned himself King." her words were quiet. "His rider came to us, seeking sanctuary. But I-" had caused this all. "Had refused." the Healing Den dragon with so much pain and anger. "He is so angry." Had the anger been tempered with time, or had it gotten worse?

She would need to see what her daughter had been up to, what the courts had been doing.

"Do you believe we could have peace with a court of dragons whom we have been at war with for so long?"

Naeodin needed to reach peace. An alliance. An understanding.

Onesto did not respond immediately. His hands worked, weaving hair in and around itself. At the end, he paused and collected the remainder in one hand while the other retrieved the leather strap and began to wind it around the tail of the braid.

"I have lived through war," he said at last, his tone quiet and sad. "I remember the fury of the hydras and the hatred in their eyes. Our world existed in a state of war with them for millennia beyond counting, though we never acknowledged it until the Red Mage on her Silver Queen stood and said 'no more.' Many would tell you that there was no hope for the hydras. That they

have war in their blood and anger in their souls. But I have also seen the hydra offspring at the Warren. I see how they act like dragons. How they live and love just as we do. I do not believe any creature is beyond redemption. And if alliance is out of the question, then why not peaceful ignorance? There is always another answer.”

Onesto tied the end of the leather in a bow and sat back, satisfied with his handiwork.

“There. Now we simply need to find you something warm to cover your shoulders.”

Naeodin smiled. What a beautiful answer. Why could her children not think the same way, have the same response? Worry gnawed her gut at what Maramia could have unleashed- and continued to gnaw as she thought of what her scientist could do.

No. She was awake, she was back, and-

A very high pitched voice, controlled words that seemed to be forced from his lips- Naeodin frowned.

“Onesto” she said gently. “I think our guests might need help.”

Onesto sighed as he pushed himself to his feet. He had hoped that some time to work out their feelings would see calmer heads prevail, but that did not seem to be the case.

“A moment,” he said as he moved over to the dresser shoved up against the far wall. He would have liked to take some time to pick out a favoured outfit with Naeodin, to make her feel more like herself, but this was also not going to be the case. So he simply selected the first shawl he came across, brought it back to the bed, then went to stand at the foot of the bed facing the door.

The large man breathed out steadily, centering himself. He brought his hands up and guided them through slow, graceful arcs in the air, murmuring soft words as he moved. The air in the bedroom seemed to warm and fill with a reassuring presence. As the spell came together, a hint of lilac and lavender scented the air.

Onesto paused, feeling out the extent of his casting. Then he nodded to some unseen sign that all had gone according to plan, and turned back to the bed. He stepped around to the side with the chair on wheels, turned the contraption to face Naeodin, then held out his hands toward her.

“May I?”

Naeodin let out a slow sigh. What a beautiful gift. She felt her tension and worry about her friends melt away, felt at peace. She smiled, offered her hand to Onesto.

This cleric. He had so many surprises.

He would help her bring peace back to the Vella Crean. She was sure of it.

*From the Imperial Court RP*

*The doors opened, and Naeodin and Onesto emerged. Naeodin, sitting on what seemed to be a chair with wheels that had been haphazardly hammered into the four legs, a delicate blanket over her knees, her hair braided neatly away from her face.*

*Her blue eyes sparkled. Much too amused by this situation.*

*"Thank you Onesto, I believe now we will be able to have a proper discussion." she murmured, reaching back to pat the man's hand fondly.*

*"Of course, Your Eminence," Onesto murmured. He stood behind the chair, bowed forward in order to be able to guide it forward without dumping Naeodin to the floor. As they entered the room, his eyes met Mystic's briefly and he gave her a sheepish smile.*

*Mystic smiled in return. She had definitely made the right choice in him. If for no other reason than it gave Naeodin an entirely new arsenal to play with.*

*"I do apologize if we were being loud," Mystic murmured. "But I believe this discussion was long overdue."*

*Her eyes slid to Shy again. She no longer felt rage at the sight of him. She had also lost the smug, gleeful joy in his suffering. She had not lost sight of her hatred of him though. Tempered as it was in that moment, she took comfort in the knowledge that he'd done more damage to himself this day than anything she could have hoped to do on her own.*

*Naeodin smiled. She knew she would be crashing in deep sleep in a few hours, but she was alert now, and knew there were difficult choices that would need to be made.*

*"Thank you, my friend." she said. "I am glad to see you and Aaron are doing well, and I wish it was in better circumstances that I could greet you." she looked to the High Prince, nodded her greetings. "Onesto and I have been talking, and I will appreciate his help for the next while." she reached out again and patted the hand of the man who had so much untapped power. This was no simple aide.*

*Maramia moved immediately to her mothers side, hovering, not quite sure what she was to do, where she was to stand. "Mother-"*

*"We will talk-" Naeodin said. "Of the decisions you made during my... absence." she shook her head. "Of what we need to do now. But we are not experienced in the art of war. They are." she looked towards Mystic and Aaron. "I don't remember the dragon, before." she admitted. "But the*

*creature I saw five years ago- he has so much anger. A specific world view on how things are supposed to be. He styles himself a king, a god- almost.” she said, echoing Mystic’s words.*

*“I don’t know how he has changed since my... absence.” again, that word. Painful to utter. “But Mystic, you saw him. What are your thoughts? Can he be saved? Can he be reasoned with?”*

*Shy did not speak, but he stepped forward.*

*Ever so aware of her scientist, Naeodin turned for the barest moment to glance at him.*

*Their eyes met.*

*She shook her head.*

*A moment of anxiety broke her calm. Mystic felt it flutter in her chest before being smothered again. She’d explained their stance to Maramia, but she forgot that she would have to go over the same painful refusal again for Naeodin.*

*“Pretentiouth was always an extremely intelligent creature. The rage he clings to now... It’s very much like Faust. They were an arrogant pair together and now... Now I believe that arrogance has warped into something far darker. But I would be remiss if I said I didn’t believe he had any chance of redemption. As I said, he’s intelligent. He’s also likely hurting. We need to find out what he wants and see if we can find a compromise.”*

*And by “we” she primarily meant “they”. Until she could bludgeon the council into seeing the value in having other worlds as allies, they would not be able to offer anything more valuable than words.*

*Naeodin nodded. Frowning. “Do we know where their den is?”*

*Maramia shook her head.*

*“Good. Let them have that, at least. Put together a team, Maramia. Dark, Light, Blood- dragons who have links to the Death Court, who have demonstrated loyalty to us. We will send out a peace missive. Work with Mwvayan and Pii- I will make the final decisions.”*

*Naeodin’s gaze was soft as she looked at the family who had gathered around her. “We will try an attempt at peace.”*

*“If it does not work?” Maramia asked. She flicked a glance towards Shy, towards Mystic. “If-”*

*“We will try an attempt at peace.” Naeodin repeated, her words harder. “If it does not work we will look into other options. But we will not decimate the Death Court.” her eyes pinned Shy. “If we have no choice but to depose the leader, so be it. But our efforts will be to turn the Death*



*Court to our side, not to obliterate a new line. They style themselves as a court. That makes them part of the Vella Crean. They are mine."*

*Shy held Naeodin's gaze.*

*The green cast of his eyes seemed to flatten, and minutely, he nodded.*

*Mystic watched Shy carefully. The spell reigned in her reaction, kept her calm. Still, she couldn't help feeling a sense of relief at seeing the barest hint of movement from his head. Only Naeodin could command him in such a way. It was good to have her back for more than one reason.*

*"We will do what we can to help." There it was again. The promise to try. Mystic longed for the days where she could boldly declare her support of Naeodin without fear of reprisal. She knew better these days. "At this time, that isn't much. Aaron and I will speak to the council, but it's likely they'll want some guarantee of recompense or offers of trade before they even entertain the idea of offering otherworldly support."*

*Naeodin nodded. "We will appreciate any support you can give us, Mystic. The Vella Crean has reconnected to the nexus- we will re-establish and strengthen any diplomatic ties we used to hold, and forge new ones." she patted Onesto's hand again. "I will make the trip out myself."*

*"The damn dragon-" Maramia started. "He wanted us to connect to the Nexus- he has plans. We need to get a warning out, let the other worlds know so that they don't experience the same events we have." she shook her head. "He won over dragons and broke bonds- no one should experience that." she slid a glance towards Shy, who remained unruffled.*

*"I will be able to assist, with diplomatic ties." Shy offered. Smooth. Calm. In his element, now that the Red Mage wasn't trying to elicit a reaction. "Empress, the first of the Imperial Court-"*

*"Imperial Court?" Naeodin frowned.*

*"A new line." he interrupted. "Bringing together the best features of the Light, the Dark, the Blood- the Imperial Court has hatched, and has bonded to nobility across the Nexus" he turned and smirked at Mystic, thinking of Sabrilla and her [rainbow froofroo pretzel covered hatchling].*

*Imperial. Thayer had said something about Imperials. When Alessio brought up his children as potential bonders for the Sudland warren, Thayer had said he knew just the clutch. Asked for permission to act as a diplomatic envoy to...*

*Mystic's eyes flew wide as the pieces came together, then narrowed into a hard line directed at Shy. The effects of Onesto's spell had faded already, and even if it hadn't, nothing would soothe the fury now burning up inside her.*

*Thayer had disobeyed her again. Shy was infecting her son's mind with his poisoned words.*

*"That sounds familiar..." Aaron muttered. His brows came together in thought, and a moment later he shook his head. "Regardless, we'll need to handle these first negotiations ourselves. The council is leery of other worlds still." He paused, casting Naeodin a quick glance. "And they won't be easily won over by offers from a world that can shut itself off from us without warning. This will be delicate work."*

*Naeodin nodded her head. "Thank you, Aaron. Mystic." she looked down at her body so delicately draped in soft and feminine blankets. "Thank you for coming all this way, for waking me, and for advocating for us. We will keep you apprised of our talks with the Death Court with-" she paused. "Naxi'im."*

*Maramia snorted.*

*Naeodin ignored the noise, patted Onesto's hand. "As soon as I am well, we will discuss a visit, yes?" she turned a beatific smile towards her cleric. "Two weeks, I think?"*

*"If that is how long Your Eminence wishes to delay her recovery by," Onesto replied with all too chipper a tone for the admonishment delivered.*

*"Nae..." Mystic moved toward her friend. She hadn't wanted to intrude while Maramia rejoiced in her mother's return. Now though, she knelt by the Empress' chair and brought the frail, delicate woman into her arms for a hug. She hated the way Naeodin felt so breakable. She trusted in Onesto's abilities.*

*As she pulled away, she took up Naeodin's hand in hers and smiled up at her friend. It was a sad smile. An aged smile. Ten years had passed on Vella Crean. Tris'Hath had been shut away for longer, and though Mystic knew that time passed more swiftly here, it had still taken a toll on the Red Mage. Silver highlighted her hair and stress lines marred her skin. Not so old as Naeodin though. Not so far away from the young, vibrant leaders they'd once been.*

*"I am glad we could help. After what happened... After everything, it feels like the least I could do." Her eyes flicked up to Onesto. "I will return in a week to check on you. If you have made any decisions in that time..."*

*"I think I will be just fine here," Onesto replied, his characteristic smile in place. "But I do appreciate Your Grace's offer. I will take the time to consider my options carefully, but I believe I may have already made my decision."*

*"Good," Mystic said as she stood again. "If you have need of anything else, have someone send a flit with a message. I will take care of everything on our end."*

*"Your Grace is too kind," Onesto said with a respectful incline of his head.*

*"Aaron," Mystic said while casting her husband a glance, "I believe it's time we head back. We have a lot of work ahead of us."*

*"Maybe we'll get lucky. Maybe they'll all be in uncharacteristically good moods for the next year," the high prince quipped.*

*"Maybe Achille will drop dead," Mystic muttered under her breath.*

*Aaron scowled and the Red Mage turned back to Naeodin.*

*"I am truly happy to see you again, my friend. I wish we had more time to talk but... Well, I will return in a week and we can talk then." She lifted one of Naeodin's hands in her own and gave it a gentle squeeze. Then Mystic released her friend and fixed Onesto with one last look. No words were exchanged, but her eyes told volumes. Take care of them. Take care of yourself. Be wary.*

*Mystic turned and moved with Aaron toward the balcony. Myrah'Care and Blakoreth waited for them already. As they moved toward the dragons, out of earshot of the people gathered within the suite, Aaron dropped his voice to a whisper.*

*"What was that look back there? In the bed chamber. You looked at Shy like he'd just given you the world's greatest gift."*

*Mystic cast her husband a confused look for a moment before understanding dawned. She flicked a quick glance over her shoulder, half expecting Shy to be breathing down her neck. The geneticist was focused on Naeodin though.*

*"I can't explain it here," Mystic whispered back. "I learned something though. A missing piece I've been after for years. Suffice it to say once we get home, we're going hunting."*

*The Red Mage pulled herself up to Myrah'Care's shoulders after delivering her cryptic message. She could see the confusion still evident on Aaron's face, but they didn't have far to go before they were home safe. She could explain everything then.*

*The two dragons took off from Naeodin's balcony less than a minute later. Blue chased silver through the air, soaring over the ruined, smouldering streets of the Vella Crean. War had come to this place. While they'd won a victory that day, the worst was not yet past. There would be many more battles ahead of them, though Mystic prayed that the return of their beloved Empress would see calmer heads prevail. Maybe, if they were lucky, she could keep them occupied long enough for Mystic and Aaron to talk the council over to their side. Then she could offer support.*

*Then she could enact her own plans to show the Vella Crean what real freedom looked like.*

## The day the cleric set up his nest

There was hope at the Vella Crean.

A shy, fragile feeling that started in the deep recesses of the residents' hearts. Too new to be talked of openly, too dangerous, as the scarred and weathered riders and survivors waited for the proverbial other shoe to drop.

The Empress was awake. People had seen her in the central tower, heard her voice. Felt her orders ripple through the courts.

The scientist was back. Creatures with eyes of molten gold guarded the streets, weapons that protected the weak and the vulnerable from magpies and other dark and spiky creatures. Winged beasts and tentacles that watched the air.

The tide was turning, a little bit. But the Empress and the Scientist did not attack the Death Court. They watched, they defended, they protected, but they did not attack.

Instead, most of the efforts seemed to be spent on repairing what had been damaged.

Stone and marble, concrete and metal groaned as they moved sluggishly across the Vella Crean. The central tower was starting to shine again, patches filled with vines and flowers as the tower started to rebuild itself from the ground up.

There were changes, adjustments. Stronger walls and arches, protective turrets. The smart and the sharp eyed would notice, others would simply be content that the city was rebuilding itself.

The floors below the Empress' changed, adapted. A wide terrace emerged on the other side of the Empress' quarters, too wide and deep to be called a balcony, moreso as if half the rooms had been converted into an outdoor living space. Small, young tufts of flora sprouted, ferns trailed over the ledge, a garden that was just beginning to grow and show signs of life.

Half of the entire floor below the Empress' had been redesigned for "The Cleric". Imraan the Architect and Larsen the Horticulturalist working through the nights to rebuilt private rooms that could provide sunlight and outdoor space, gardens and fountains emerging within the space. The quarters were specifically designed to provide direct access to the Empress- but with thought and care being put into the layout to provide each with privacy should they require it.

The newly established quarters smelled of fresh flowers and a hint of wet grass. Furniture had been carefully ordered and customized for the Cleric's use, and flora continued to arrive.

Amongst the flora, amongst the crates of soil and rolls of grass, a small slender blue hatchling wriggled, enjoying their stealthy exploration of the unknown.

Onesto was not a man of material things. He had brought with him exactly one bag of his own possessions, and most of those were changes of clothes and a spare pair of shoes. He found excess possessions to be wasteful and cluttering. Yet as the people of the Vella Crean swarmed over his assigned room like artistic ants, he had to admit that he was a little awed by the materials they provided.

Couches, chairs, tables, desks, all the trappings that his room could require. Given that his chamber back in Castle Drakmor included exactly one bed that just fit him and one desk that was just wide enough for him to work at, this was a significant upgrade in style. The bed alone was twice as large as anything he had ever slept in, and so soft that he feared losing himself in the mattress if he lay there too long.

Best of all though was the garden. He had wanted just a little space for him to tend to some greenery. Perhaps a few herbs or some plants for tea. Instead, he received an extravagant courtyard instantly accessorized with flowing pools of water, lush plant life, and muted, pastel coloured stones creating a walkway around the central dias. So much of the work required to decorate the space was done for him overnight. It was at once astounding and overwhelming, and it left the large man feeling humbled and embarrassed that his request had produced such grandiose results.

Secretly, he was pleased they hadn't finished all of the set up over that first night. He still had so many thoughts to work through given how quickly his transition to the Vella Crean had happened, and a little bit of gardening always helped him focus. So it was late one afternoon that he stood in the garden, bare from the waist up and ankles down, and sorted through the crates and potted flora while humming quietly to himself. The sun baked his back, warm as a spring day back home, and the smell of heated earth soothed his soul. He was so focused on his work that he didn't immediately notice the small, wriggling blue creature stalking him between the boxes.

This man smelled different.

Odd. Strange. Weird. Not home. But like home. Weak. But Strong. Young. But Old. Happy. But Sad.

This man smelled of so many different, entirely new things, so different from the gold eyed people and the ones that had fear and sadness, that Shiqinth could not help himself.

The blue hatchling with little nubs that had slowly started to length and fuzz crouched low, tail swinging side to side, paws silent on the ground as he kneaded at the soft earth. The man smelled like growing things and was making strange noises that was fun to listen to.

Wiggling his rear just a little bit as he prepared for the pounce, the blue hatching tightened his muscles and

Pounced.

Onesto turned with a box of small flowers in his arms and watched a small, blue body hurtle toward him. He let out a surprised yell and nearly dropped the box on reflex. Fear of damaging the delicate plants froze his arms at the last second, one raised to deflect the dragon and the other clutching the corner of the box.

Shiqinth hit his target squarely in the chest, and the impact upset the tenuous hold Onesto still had on balance. He toppled to the ground, flailing to balance box and dragon without injuring either.

The large man landed with a sound thud on his back. The box of flowers landed beside him, its contents little more than rattled. The dragon landed atop his chest. Onesto groaned, feeling a twinge in his back that hadn't been there a moment ago. A small trickle of healing magic would set that to rights though.

He raised his head, peering at his attacker, and grinned from ear to ear.

"Well done, little one. I am well and truly vanquished."

The blue hatchling *liked* this one! Look how he played with him! The golden eyed people below were faster and smarter and enjoyed escaping. The people who smelled of fear and sadness were slow, or hurt, and did not enjoy play as much as he did. The other hatchlings- Shiqinth's mind shied away.

He was different.

Shiqinth let out a chortle, or a dragon equivalent, his paws kneading the cleric's chest with affection. Leaning over to peer down at the face that was usually too high for him to examine, Shiqinth's mouth widened in a toothy grin.

"I did, didn't I? I did vanquish you!" he claimed proudly. He looked around him, at the flowers and the greenery. "What are you doing? Is this your work?" he did not think so. "Did you have fun?" he eyed at the plants that had survived this one's fall. "What is that?"

Onesto grimaced at the tiny claws pricking at his bare skin. No damage done, but they were sharp nonetheless. Then a wall of questions distracted him from the pain.

"You did, I'm gardening, it is my hobby, that was fun, those are daisies." Onesto beamed after finishing his list of answers. He knew how to play this game too.

Daisies! What were daisies? Shiqinth's tail waved lazily behind him as he looked towards the flowers, but he was much too comfortable sitting on top of his vanquished foe to move.

"Daisies!" he exclaimed. "Are they delicious? Do you eat them?" They did not look like they would taste good, but maybe people like this man needed to eat them. It had been a while since he had eaten. When had he last eaten? He was getting hungry. "What is a hobby?" The man with green eyes was always busy, was it because he had hobbies also?

Craning his head to look at the small forest that was growing around him, the hatchling let out a chuff of laughter. "This is a nice place. I like it. Do you like it? Is it going to grow more?"

This would be a nice home for him, Shiqinth decided.

"You have many questions," Onesto said with a laugh. As amused as he was by the ease with which this dragon settled in atop him, he did want to finish arranging his flowers still. "I will tell you what. I will answer all of your questions, but then you have to answer all of mine and," Onesto paused, raising a finger in the air, "you have to let me keep working in my garden too. Now then..."

The big man wrapped one arm gently around Shiqinth, holding the little blue to his chest as he sat up. He made a move to encourage Shiqinth to jump down, but did not dump the dragon off his lap. He was not so rude.

"That's better. Ah... your questions..." Onesto trailed off as he reviewed the list of them in his mind. Once he was sure he had them in order, he nodded. "Daisies can make delightful tea, a hobby is an activity you do for fun, I do like it here, and it will most certainly grow more. My turn. What is your name? Where did you come from? Do you often throw yourself at strangers? Do you want to learn how to garden?"

WHEEEEEEE! Shiqinth's tail waved as the big man who smelled different sat upright. Turning his head left and right, he bounced off the man's chest, deciding the daisies required a more thorough investigation.

Oh. This man knew how to play the game well. Sniffing at the flowers, he let out a chuff and a sneeze.

"I am Shiqinth." he proclaimed. "I come from below. It is nice there, but I like it here better. We have green things too, but this is nice and high. I like the breeze." he reached out and nibbled on a flower.

No. It was not tasty. What was tea? Would tea make it tastier? Shiqinth did not think so. But maybe for this man he would try.

"Stranger danger." Shiqinth answered primly. Strangers were not good. The larger dragons warned him that there were bad dragons out there, that he had to be safe. Not to talk to strangers. Not to go off with another dragon, especially if it was not one he knew.

Shiqinth knew this.

The man who smelled different was not a stranger, obviously.

Garden. "I can help garden!"

*The boy is in the cleric's quarters*

How the boy had managed to escape from the Labs and into the tower, up the stairs (had he taken the elevator?) and into the private quarters of the new Tris Hath arrival was a mystery. The scientist was not upset- the hatchling was showing skills that would be useful in the future, and he had been considering the best way to approach the new cleric himself.

Their first meeting... had not gone well.

Stepping out in front of the main doors, Shy paused. He adjusted the sleeves of his qipao, gazed at the door that was slightly ajar.

"Shiqinth?" he called out. "I know you are in there."

At the voice, the hatchling stilled. He tucked himself low on the ground, crawling forwards towards the plants as if he could be camouflaged by the greenery. "Shhhh." he whispered to the different man.

This little dragon had so much energy. It lifted Onesto's spirits just to watch the wonderment at life pour out of him. He pushed himself to his feet, brushing off his pants and stretching his back as words tumbled out of the little blue's mouth.

Ah, so even this little one had reason to fear the unknown. Stranger danger indeed.

"I am-" he began to introduce himself, quickly silenced by Shiqinth. The hatchling flattened to the ground like a stalking cat, and Onesto crouched down again instinctively. He dropped his voice to a whisper as he glanced about for the perceived threat. "What? Are we hiding from something?"

Shiqinth nodded his head. The different man was good. Look at how he ducked down. No one would see them out here in the wilderness!

His tail wiggled. Lashing left and right.

"We are invisible." he whispered. "Uncle Shy cannot see us if we are hiding."



Shy stood his ground. The Vella Crean belonged to him. He could walk into any room, any quarters. But the Vella Crean had gone through change, and the look of careful reproach in Naeodin's eyes was not to his liking. He sighed.

Instinct told him to walk into the rooms and claim his hatchling. After all, the cleric worked for Naeodin, he worked for Naeodin- they were on the same side.

But it was the same instinct that told him the answer to their problems was to wipe out the Death Court. And Naeodin did not approve of his instinct.

"Cleric?" he called out. "It is I."

Uncle Shy, the hatchling said. And the voice at the door, it was very familiar. Though last time he'd heard it, there was a certain unhinged edge to his words. Shy sounded far more calm now.

Onesto thought quickly. He needed to figure out the purpose of this game. Was there real danger to the hatchling, or simply a desire to avoid responsibility? Shiqinth did not seem legitimately afraid, but Onesto never judged too quickly.

The large man popped his head up over the crates, spotting the scientist in the doorway.

"One moment," he called out.

Then he ducked down again and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Little one, are you hiding for fun or because you are avoiding something?"

Shiqinth tilted his head. The way the different man asked the question was strange. Shiqinth was hiding to avoid missing fun. Uncle might take him away, make him to lessons, learn his powers, meet with other dragons. It was boring. It was not fun.

"I want to play." his butt wriggled as he crouched low on the ground. Uncle Shy would not take him back!

He was invisible. And different man was going to protect him. The hatchling knew this with the same certainty that he knew he had found his new home.

Good. This was a game. The thin thread of unease in Onesto's mind evaporated.

"Very well. Ah-" An idea struck Onesto abruptly. He didn't know much of this Shy character, but if the man cared for this little bundle of energy, then there had to be more to him than the anger and anxiety he'd seen at that first meeting. "We should include Uncle Shy in your game, hmm? I will distract him. You are very good at sneaking. I have seen that already. You sneak up and show him how good you are at pouncing. Like you showed me."

THIS MAN UNDERSTOOD HIM!

'A trap for Uncle Shy!' Shiqinth's mental voice vibrated with excitement as he looked towards the door, dropping closer to the ground. An almost comical 'heh. Heh. heh. Heh. heh.' followed as he crabwalked backwards, into the foliage.

"Cleric?" Shy called out at the door.

He had heard Shiqinth. He was positive the little one was in here.

What could he be doing with the cleric to occupy his time?

Shy frowned. The man had managed to wake Naeodin (which, Shy was sure, he would have managed to do. Eventually. In time), and the Empress seemed delighted with his presence. He was from Tris Hath, a connection to the Red Mage that was interesting in itself.

Shy was not sure what to make of the man who seemed gentle but had *power*.

Onesto waited until the hatchling had blended into the shadows, then stood up from his own hiding spot. He hadn't been concealed very well in truth, but rising to his feet gave Shy a proper look at the man.

The cleric was built on the large end of the scale. Tall, broad across the shoulders, with thick, muscular arms and a bit of a paunch to his gut. Wiry black hair curled across his chest and along his arms, blending well with the deep bronze of his skin. His long, black beard was tied up in a small braid, accessorized with a bit of metallic beading at the end. A matching strap of beaded leather held his long hair back from his face. Though he wore only a pair of loose, white pants to cover himself, he seemed not at all bothered by his attire, and beamed at Shy with a brilliant smile.

"Ah! You are the scientist, Shy, are you not? Come in, please. I was just tending to my garden."

Onesto bent to retrieve the (slightly chewed) box of daisies. Getting Shy into the garden would give Shiqinth his best chance of ambush, and no reason he couldn't get a little bit more work done at the same time. Multitasking was a talent.

The hatchling continued to giggle, a mental laugh towards Onesto that purred through. Shy, in the meanwhile, was not amused.

But he was surprised.

Stepping in at the invitation and casting an assessing glance at his surroundings, he caught Onesto's eyes, nodded his head with a polite smile.

He would not embarrass his Empress by taking his gaze up and down the cleric's surprisingly well built form. (Had he taken in the half naked man when he rose? Maybe. Was he maybe enjoying the fact that the weather was warm enough to provide such entertainment? Definitely)

"Cleric," he greeted.

Shy was uncomfortable. The scientist, shaken by the humiliation of the Imperial Hatching, uneasy with the lack of warmth in his Empress' welcome, was trying to behave.

"I hope your quarters are to your liking?"

Shy was not used to being uncomfortable.

"Very much so," Onesto said enthusiastically. He walked toward the back of the garden with the box of flowers, expecting Shy to follow. He'd already heard the little hatchling giggling in his mind. Surly if this was not good positioning, he would let him know.

Onesto crouched by a bare patch of soil within the raised bed of the garden and picked up the small spade stuck blade down in the dirt. He began to dig holes for his daisies as he spoke over his shoulder.

"I understand I have you to thank in part for this space. You and your people work true wonders. Ah, and please call me Onesto. I am a cleric, yes, but I am many other things as well. I prefer to be defined by all of those things."

Taking a few careful steps into the 'does not belong to me' domain, Shy looked around him. "They were more than delighted to help create a space you might call home." he said outloud, seeing the touches of Imraan and Larsen, and even (what were they doing here?) Monique and Ari.

He followed Onesto into the gardens, watched as he turned his back, knelt to actually garden. What an amusing fellow. He knew many riders and projects who would not feel so comfortable with him, and such a mundane task for a cleric assigned directly to the Empress.

"My empress, seems to enjoy your company."

Something green rustled. Shy ignored it, perfectly content knowing that nothing in this tower could prove to be a threat. The wind, maybe. (Or a new plant species that Larsen should not have rehomed.)

"That's good, isn't it?" Onesto chuckled, throwing Shy a quick smile over his shoulder. "I am to be her constant companion while she recovers, so it's best if she enjoys my company."

He turned back to the garden momentarily, beginning to place each daisy in its new home in the garden.

“Ah, but I suspect that statement wasn’t simply about Her Eminence’s preferences for company. She is fond of me, so that is a point in my favour, but you have yet to make up your mind, have you, Master Geneticist?”

Shy’s lips curved into a smile. So polite, so gentle with his words, and insightful. He wondered what the Empress spoke to this man about, how he entertained her, what stories he shared. Did Naeodin laugh with the cleric the same way she had with him? Did they speak of the future? For they had no past in common. Did they discuss dragons, and the courts?

“Shy, please.” he answered. He was not like this man- being a geneticist defined him, drove him. But the title gave him distance with the man who held the Empress’ ears, who spent as much time with her as he had in the past.

“Your gifts helped her wake, for which I am grateful.” he murmured. “They also... helped calm a situation that could have gotten out of hand.” his tone was wry.

The Vella Crean was back. His Empress was alive, and healing. Maramia was still undecided- which was a point in his favor. His new projects were settling in, and his old projects- well. He had promised his Empress to watch his temper.

Things were not perfect, but the rage was gone, banked by progress.

“Ah, yes. I apologize for interfering, but it was a request from Her Eminence and it seemed the least invasive way to bring about cooler heads.” Onesto paused and sat back on his ankles, half-turning to face Shy. “I promise I will not use my gifts on you without prior approval again.”

“You should not make such promises so easily to me.” he answered immediately. Shy was undecided with this man, but he was far too careful and respectful.

Really. The Empress will always require Shy to be around, to protect her and to mitigate the weaknesses of her people.

Something green rustled again, stopping abruptly. The scientist’s smile deepened. Ah.

“I apologize, I am here actually looking for a charge of mine.” Shy’s voice was loud, loud enough to cover up the sounds of rustles, the barely perceptible sound of paws. “I seem to have a little adventurer who enjoys exploring his new home.”

“Oh?” Onesto affected a wide-eyed, innocent expression. He kept facing Shy as he waited for Shiqinth to make his move, but his eyes darted past the man once, just quickly, to see if he

could spot where the little one had gone off to. Judging by Shy's expression, Onesto believed this to be a regular game of their's. That was good. This man clearly cared for the little dragon.

*Heh. hehehhe. Hehehh. HAHAAHAHAH*

"Yes. I have still yet figured how he gets so high up the towers, when he cannot fly yet." Shy answered. "He must be a ghost, of sorts, able to-"

Shiqinth jumped out from above, wings extended widely enough to buffet his sudden landing on top of the scientist, paws out- a child clearly comfortable throwing himself into harms way under supervision. Letting out a high pitched (and perhaps to him) ferocious roar, he landed with sudden impact straight into Shy's chest.

"I CAUGHT YOU!" he yelled out triumphantly.

The scientist took a step back, balance thrown off by the weight of the blue dragon. Letting out an undignified "oof", one hand automatically curled under the hatchling's lower legs. But the spider monkey seemed to have no problem hanging on, front paws kneading at Shy's chest, scratching at the smooth silk and catching on beads and embroidery.

"What a surprise." Shy responded drolly. "I am. SO surprised."

The hatchling giggled, chuffing with laughter as he craned his head to look at the different man. "We did it! I did it. I am a ninja master."

Onesto moved with the silent fluidity of wind. He stood, extending a hand toward Shy's back in case the man started to fall. He did not touch though. Yet if Shy looked over his shoulder then, he would find the large man suddenly a lot closer than he had been a moment before.

A wide grin spread across Onesto's face.

"You are indeed, little one. A true master of stealth."

Shiqinth let out a crow of triumph. He had won the game! The most difficult of games. He beat the different man AND his uncle. No other dragon was sneakier than he!

The cleric's voice was too close. Shy looked back, surprised to find Onesto behind him, startled to know he had not tracked the movement. He was fast on his feet- which was. *Interesting*. Shy mused. How interesting.

"Time to go home, Shiqinth." Shy said to the hatchling, he scrabbled at his chest with his paws.

"I am home!" the hatchling chirped. His back legs caught on silk and beads as he moved on top, over, and decided it would do quite nicely to reach with his front paws towards the different man. Come here you. Come closer! "I like it here."

"We have gardens." And if the gardens were not satisfactory, he would replicate this one below.

"I like this one." Shiqinth sniffed. "I like this different smell." Sniff. Sniff sniff sniff.

Onesto chuckled and held out his arms to the blue dragon. If he simply wanted to crawl, he would allow him to crawl. If he wanted to jump, Onesto would catch him. He found this hatchling very amusing. Most unlike the dragons he knew back at the Warren. Though they had their young as well, those young never came near the castle, and he rarely had reason to go into New Warren to interact with them. He wondered at all the years of fun he'd missed out on.

"He is welcome to visit whenever he likes. You are both welcome to visit. I would appreciate the company as I come to settle in. If I am to be here a while, then I believe it prudent to make as many friends as possible."

Shiqinth wiggled backwards slightly, unlatching his claws from the silk and the beads, and half hopped, half bounced, jumping towards Onesto's arms, wings flaring just a little bit to catch his speed.

"This is my home." Shiqinth informed Shy proudly. "You can visit me here." he said, deciding that this would do quite nicely.

Shy smiled. An interesting choice for his Imperial- and a way for the scientist to get to know the cleric better. "Thank you." Shy responded, his words soft, slow. "We appreciate your invitation."

How long would it last? He wondered idly.

"I have forgotten my manners, Onesto. Let me bring you a welcome gift, in thanks- and in advance of the many visits I believe Shiqinth will be making." the hatchling was quite happily kneading at Onesto's chest, claws tucked in. "What could I bring you?"

Onesto caught the hatchling with a laugh, tucking him close to his chest with his hind end supported while the little dragon made dent marks in his chest. At least this time he put the claws away.

His mind suffered a momentary hiccup as he realized that Shiqinth intended to stay, but Shy's comment made it clear that the hatchling still had his primary home elsewhere in the Crean. He didn't quite know how to deal with young dragons as of yet.

“Ah, I don’t need any gifts. This garden is gift enough. It is truly magnificent. Although…”  
Onesto paused, giving Shy a considering look. “You wouldn’t happen to know where to get good tea around here, would you? I didn’t think to pack my supply from home, and now I am afraid I will be in dire straights very soon.”

Shy’s lips curved. His glance turned considering, the green depths glinting. Hmm. Tea, was it?

“I knew where to get the best tea on the Vella Crean.” his words were soft, silky. “Let me bring some with me, the next time I visit”.

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The day the cleric attended his first council meeting

“Mother-” Maramia’s voice was quiet, hushed despite there being only three people in the council room. Naeodin sat on a newly built wheelchair, her hair in a soft crown of braids around her head, dressed in silky, gauzy material more appropriate for a quiet day indoors.

Maramia paced in front of her, hands clasped behind her back, features drawn together in a scowl. Her boots were scuffed, her shift dusted with ash and maybe a little bit of gore, and her hair clasped tightly away from her face. Maramia seemed less the leader of court, more a general anxiously waiting to return to war.

“Maramia.” Naeodin’s tone was placid. Gentle. “Peace would-”

“There cannot be any peace!” she let out an aggrieved noise, half scream, half snarl. “Not with them. Not with him.”

“The Death Court are descendents of our descendents, Mia.” Naeodin sighed. “You cannot fault an entire line of dragons.”

“Maybe not them.” she growled. “But him, him I can.” she paced, refusing to meet her mother’s eyes. “I will destroy that low life blue serpent of a -”

“Mia. Language.”

Maramia’s eyes slid towards the passive and gentle giant who spoke in soft tones and mild manners. “Onesto doesn’t mind, does he?”

She was itching for a fight. If not with her mom, maybe with the gentle giant.

This was not Onesto’s first time in a council chamber. His total experience of sitting through hours of important people bickering with each other could still be counted on one hand, but this was not his first time.

This was also not his first time caring for someone in a position of power. Never quite as long as his tenure with Naeodin seemed to be shaping up to be, but he knew the routine. He knew that after walking her chair to the chamber, his job was to blend in with the wall and be as inconspicuous as possible until she summoned him for one task or another.

So it was with some surprise that Onesto found himself roped into this argument between mother and daughter. He shot Naeodin a questioning look before switching his focus to Maramia.



“Ah... well... I believe any point that needs to be made can be made with eloquence and grace,” he said in a soft voice. Then he bowed his head and hoped she would allow him to blend back into the wallpaper.

Naeodin smiled, pleased with the diplomatic answer from Onesto. She arched a brow in Maramia’s direction, to which she scowled.

“I don’t have time for this.”

“You will make time.”

Naeodin’s tone was hard- surprising from the slight and frail looking old woman. “When the council gathers, I will hear of the war you started with the Death Court, and we will put together a peace delegation.”

“I? START it?” Shock, annoyance, hurt. The expressions flashed across her features. “I told you what happened. Mwvayan told you what happened. I did not start this ridiculous war with this ridiculous reptile!”

“But you did not try to end it.”

Maramia threw her arms in the air, and then pointed again at the giant. “Do I look like someone who did not try to end a war?” she asked. “Mother- do you think it was easy? That beast does not listen to reason, he attacks from the skies and the grounds, it took everything I had to just to-”

“And now, we will try a different tactic.”

“ARGGGH!” Maramia ran a hand down her face. “Onesto!”

Onesto once again looked askance of Naeodin, but the aged Empress seemed to be enjoying this exchange too much.

“I... am not familiar with the history of your war,” he began carefully. “I can speak only as one who is new to this world. I have the history of the hydra war behind me, yes, but I am not what you would call a popular philosopher on that subject.” He paused, drawing in a breath to gather his thoughts. “We faced a foe that sought our death for centuries. Some would say hydras are beings of pure hate, unable to seek redemption. And yet, when it came time to end the war, they were not slaughtered outright. Banished yes, but they live still. I believe this was the best solution that could possibly have been found. Any attempt to destroy them, to eradicate their race, would have made us no better than they.”

Maramia’s eyes narrowed. This gentle giant had lived through war, had he?

The mention of the Hydra wars had a familiar pain start low in her chest. A flare of old scar tissue and trauma that had her stop and clench her fists. And yet-

It did not hurt as much as it should have.

Shoving away the thought for another day, she frowned.

"The leader of the hydras?" she asked. "Were they banished too? What happened to the one who started it all?" she took one step, then another, stalking the gentle giant.

Onesto stared down at Maramia, willing his face not to reveal the hint of panic crawling beneath the surface. He had noted her passion upon their first meeting and the few times he'd run into her since then, but never had it been directed at him. In that moment, he felt quite trapped between the wall at his back and the firestorm stalking his way.

"Well..." he drew out the word, buying himself time. "Yes, the leaders of the hydra empire were banished as well. As far as I am aware, they still live on Sistarrist Drakan. As for the one who started it all... the conflict with the hydras is older than recorded memory. They ruled for a millennia unchallenged. Until the dragon riders. So... you could say that Their Graces are the ones who started the war and I'm sure you are quite familiar with their living situation now."

Maramia vaguely remembered Mystic before Vaero. Hazy memories of rage, hatred, fire that burned. It was hard to distinguish the memories lost in hazy fog, and the happier times- well, it seemed an entire lifetime before this one.

"We can banish them." her eyes lit up. Maybe there are casualties along the way. Maybe the blue one loses another horn. A matching pair of daggers, for mother and daughter.

"And let another world in the Nexus suffer out pain, our loss?" Naeodin countered. "We can try to broker for peace."

"Peace?" Maramia scoffed at the idea. She did not stop walking towards the giant who had faced war and still seemed to speak for peace. "He will kill us all and dance on our graves. The courts have lost too much to broker for peace- they do not trust us, and we do not trust them."

What an interesting man.

"How could we broker for peace when neither one trusts the other? I would sooner jump into a bit of hydras than trust a Death Court to keep their word." she stood in front of Onesto, speaking to her mother. "Who would be able to broker peace for us?" she demanded.

Peace. HAH!

Onesto stood, steadfast as the wall behind him. A little part of his mind wanted to run screaming from the fury burning in Maramia's eyes. Such strong emotions in this one. Such painful emotions. He wondered at what she must have suffered to darken her heart so thoroughly.

Mystic's words came back to him, hinting that Naeodin was not the only one in need of support. He saw it now, the rage in Maramia that pulsed like an open wound. He wondered if she would even accept his help if he offered. The panic dissipated, and Onesto faced Maramia with a calm expression.

"Have you made a previous attempt at peace? Have you offered to speak as equals? As I said before, I am new to your world and your politics, but I believe that all people deserve a chance to prove their true character. To claim that no chance exists is to admit defeat before ever rising to the challenge."

Maramia froze.

First the rage smashed through. Such a familiar friend. Outrage at the man who did not know of the war and the devastation they had faced. Who did he think he was to speak of peace? What did he know? Fury - how dare he speak out loud? How dare he question what she had been working so hard for, for years! All he had done was heal-

Mother.

The anger was doused just as abruptly by the memory of relief and joy when mother had opened her eyes. Five years. *Five Years*. Nothing else had worked, none of the healers had answers or plans. But this man had arrived at the Vella Crean, and he had managed the impossible.

It stilled the gut reaction to rage and scream, a habit that was so engrained into her that the act of controlling her rage felt foreign, unnatural.

"Every meeting-" her words were stilted. She did not look towards her mother- she could not bear to see what expression crossed her face. "Has been met with the act of bloodshed. We-" she hesitated. "I- stole a fledgling, it started the first battle." she admitted. "But they hurt my mother, and they continued their attacks. How can I send a mission seeking peace, when I cannot trust them to listen? They kill and attach any dragon and rider on sight- they launch blitz attacks so my people are never safe. Sending a mission of peace to the Death Court is an act of suicide. I will not harm my riders."

Onesto did not break eye contact. He did not waver. Every time she spoke, he learned a little more about the walls she built to defend herself. He still saw that fire in her eyes wanting to burn him to cinders, but he didn't fear it as much.

"Ah, I see," he said, once again drawing out his words to give him time to think. He refused to give her half thought out answers. "So then, you have spent all this time on the defensive, waiting for the next attack, waiting for their moves. It seems to me that you are like the child who fears the storm. When thunder crashes and rain pours, the child hides. They shut their eyes and turn their face away. So long as they remain like this, the storm will never end for them. It will always be in their mind."

"A CHILD?!" Maramia raged.. "You dare?" Her eyes narrowed. "I am a leader who defended a city inexperienced in the art of war, dragons and riders picked off day and night from attacks. My people had to watch their loved ones burn in blue fire. My dragons -" she let out a shuddering breath. "Do you know how long it took to convince them to fight the Death Court? To have clutch mates, children, sires and dams they had grown up with abandon them, take up the cause of a madman, and RELISH the death and destruction they caused? They laughed, they crowed, they enjoyed their victories, while I had to deal with courts destroyed from the inside, riders who had their bonds ripped from them, the nightmare and screams of blue fire."

Maramia stalked forward until they were nose to nose.

"I am not a child who fears the storm. I am a mother who had to shelter her children from the thunder and the rain, who had to fight battles and make hard decisions- who understands, better than anyone else in this room the destruction the storm can cause. This storm will not end with pretty words and demonstrations of peace. It will wipe us all out."

Such pain. Such deep rooted agony in this one's soul. He'd seen the like before. He'd seen the results. How it twisted fear into anger and hate. How it made its bearer think they wielded strength against a foe, when in truth they were consumed by their own inability to deal with the hurt. He understood now why the Red Mage had chosen the Order of Adon for this task.

"And what then," he asked in a voice as soft as hers was passionate. "Say you rage against the storm. Say that you win. You beat back the clouds and the blue fire, and you eradicate them down to the last egg. What happens to the children raised in the storm? The ones you have sworn to protect with fury and anger of your own. They grow up understanding that the only resolution to conflict is to fight. That peace is an illusion, for there is always another storm on the horizon. Another enemy that they must rage against. What happens when the storm is no longer your own to face, and now your children stand up to protect their children? Will you say that their storm is as just a cause to fight? When does the fighting end?"

Maramia leaned in, so she could stare into the eyes of the man whose words were so soft and gentle.

"The children will learn that you must fight to protect your family." her words were low, muttered with quiet intensity. "They will know when it showers you can enjoy the feel of water on your skin. When it rains you take shelter. And when a storm rages, you do what you can to protect

those you love.” her eyes narrowed. “Peace **is** just an illusion. I lost my consort to the Tris’ Hath wars. I almost lost my mother to the Death Court wars. If this storm passes and another one comes, we will continue to fight it.”

Onesto closed his eyes, briefly acknowledging the pang in his own heart at the mention of that war. He’d brought it up himself, but it was always painful to hear of another who had suffered loss. There were so many. His eyes opened again, and he met Mia’s glare unflinchingly.

“I am sorry for your loss. There are so many who have lost so much. I, for one, would prefer to see the cycle of pain and loss end. That is not a thing that can be done by visiting more pain and loss on others.”

The fury, the rage, the *knowing* that she was right and this gentle man was wrong, that her mother and her cleric were foolish to believe peace could be a viable option: it flooded through her senses until all she wanted to do was scream, to throw her riders and now the new arsenal she had at the Death Court. Shy was here. His projects were here. The scientist would not waver, he would support her decision to launch a final, devastating attack on the blue snake and his kin.

But his words, so compassionate, so quiet. Why did he continue to meet her eyes! Why did he not flinch and look away? Look down, look anywhere but at her?

Why did he not surrender?

The emotions faltered, sank, and she found herself standing with her face too close to a man she did not quite understand, her hands trembling to regain control.

Maramia hesitated.

“We can try, peace.” she said, responding to her mother. “We can try an act of peace. But if that fails, if he betrays our trust.” Ah. Familiar ground now. The fury and the rage wrested back control, and Maramia felt comfort of her most familiar emotions.

“When it fails.” she repeated, conviction strengthening her words. “I will bring in the Scientist and his projects.”

Onesto smiled, heartened by the willingness to compromise. So she wasn’t entirely lost to the rage yet. Maybe he could help her. If she would let him.

“I think peace would be a welcome change. For both sides.”

Maramia nodded her head. A short, awkward, stilted nod as she stepped away, giving herself room to breath. She turned quickly, catching her mother’s face- a look of approval and relief quickly masked by serene indifference.

Before she had time to respond, to ask, she heard a not so delicate cough by the door.

"Your Grace?" the man coughed again, peering in. "May we come in?"

"We could barely catch your words, Mia" came the loud, languid tones of Mwvayan. Arrogant, confident, and more at ease with her Light Courtpart than they had ever been. "Stop your infighting so that we can end this meeting quickly. We all have work to do."

Before the wars, it would have been a harsh jab. With the wars- Maramia and Mwvayan had reached an uneasy detente, which had soon evolved into a friendship, of sorts.

Of sorts.

"The council is in session." Maramia spoke out loud, taking her seat by her mother's side.

The council assembled.

Gentle, affectionate words at first. Gratitude towards the cleric and their friends at Tris' Hath, relief at knowing that the Empress was awake, and recovering. The Dark Court leader and her pale consort speaking of what limited war strategy they had learned, of the off world dragons who had led the main wings for war, the new requirements they had. The Light Court of the defenses, of the city being rebuilt with the help of the Scientist, the residents who needed support, the growing number seeking permanent residence off planet- and the resolute few looking for new avenues to support this unending war. The Blood Court, quiet in introspection, seeking answers, alternatives. They were tired of this war, tired of the infighting- tired of quelling the unease that never ended.

The conversation shifted from updates on the fighting wings, status on the recovery of the city, and the new projects Shy was building in his labs, ready to defend the city. The conversation stilted into an argument, Maramia raising a question of brokering peace. The Light Court lead the cry for war- for absolute, complete destruction of the Death Court, to bring an age of peace that would allow time for the city to recover.

The Dark Court cried for allies at arms. For war strategy, for weapons, for dragons: to defend and barricade their city against the Death Court.

The Blood- exhausted. Focusing only on the minutae, leaving the decision up to the warring factions.

An hour- two passed. The Empress from her chair listening to the discussions, giving little input. Trying to understand the undercurrents, keeping her words and thoughts private.

At the end of it all, no decision was reached.

'We will convene again, tomorrow.' Maramia glanced towards her mother. 'If your health-'

'We will convene again tomorrow.' The Empress repeated, and watched the council members leave, one by one, until only her daughter was left.

'Mother.' she started.

Naeodin shook her head. 'I am tired, child.' she answered quietly. 'Onesto will help me to my rooms. Go. Rest. See to your other duties. I will-' she smiled slightly. 'Enjoy this respite, catch my breath, and head to my rooms.'

Maramia nodded her head, murmuring short, stilted greetings to the cleric who had remained by her mother's side throughout this session. She strode towards the doors, stepping out and ensuring the double doors remained closed behind her.

Naeodin waited until the door shut fully- and she sighed. Her shoulders slumped, her eyes closed. She frowned, rubbing at her temples.

'This is a bigger mess than I had expected.' she said outloud.

Onesto did his best to remain invisible throughout the meeting. He acknowledged the thanks with grace and decorum, but otherwise did not participate in the meeting. He was not unaware of it though.

The words processed through his mind with the steady pace of a river. Absolute eradication from the Light Court, defense from the Dark, and exhausted compromise from the Blood Court. Three equally valid sides of the same coin. And it sounded to him as if this discussion was not new. This was their existence; a perpetual stalemate while the Death Court harassed them day and night.

He understood a bit better now, and by the end of it, he came to stand by Naeodin's chair feeling as exhausted as if he'd been in the center of the debate.

First he tended to his charge, laying a gentle hand against Naeodin's forehead and muttering a soft word. Cool healing magic flowed into the Empress, soothing her throbbing brain and easing the aches from her body. It was a temporary fix, but it would help.

Then Onesto sat down across from her with a long, drawn out sigh. A look of deep sympathy etched lines into his brow.

'This is most certainly a complicated situation. I do not envy you the task of organizing...' he gestured vaguely at the empty table, 'this.'

Naeodin sighed at the cool rush of magic- how weak had the coma left her? Or was she just too old to handle her duties?

"What do you think?" she asked her cleric. The man who had actually accomplished the impossible: have Maramia reach a compromise. "I wish to try for peace- Naxi'im may not care for me, but as a leader he must realize an unending war is not the answer. I cannot appease all the Courts: but they will listen to reason."

Naeodin leaned forwards, steepled her hands. "To send a delegation with no protection will be sending lambs to a slaughter. But who do I send? The courts who have caused their own destruction? Dragon riders, who represent everything Naxi'im despises? Unbonded dragons?" Naeodin shook her head. "There are few left on this world who wish for peace- and I cannot send someone like my daughter."

"Things cannot remain as they are. You have three helmsmen in one boat. They all seek to steer the boat out of the storm, but each one paddles against the other. They move nowhere." Onesto shook his head and thought on the request a moment. "Perhaps the question is not who you send, but who would be willing to go. There must be others among these Courts who seek a chance for peace. I sense that their voices have not been heard while the council leaders argue amongst each other."

Naeodin frowned, listened to his words. How astute this cleric was. She nodded her head. "Three helmsmen- that is exactly it." This argument would just endlessly repeat itself unless she was able to break them free from this cycle. "Other voices-" she said slowly. "You are right. There are others, who must seek peace. Who might not have had a chance to voice their thoughts, their ideas. Not with the leaders being so adamantly opposed."

Her lips curved into a smile. "What I would need to do is identify these voices. Put together a peace delegation. Maybe a mix of dragons bonded and unbonded, humans, other creatures. A project?" Naeodin discarded the thought immediately. None of Shy's brood in her peace delegation.

Her scientist would not be able to resist the temptation.

"Mia will agree to overseeing this, but I cannot be seen to give too much power to one Court." her smile deepened. "If there was an individual, who understood war, who has experience with peace, to give insight and mediate a new delegation...."

Onesto nodded, his eyes on the ground as he mulled over the issue. Naeodin needed someone impartial, but if he understood the Courts correctly, everyone in the Vella Crean belonged to one or the other. There would be cries of bias no matter where she looked. She needed someone from outside-

His head shot up and a momentary look of shock and fright filled his expression.



“Oh. No. No, I have barely been here for a day. I could not... No one would trust my word. I am an outsider to them.”

Naeodin would have laughed had this not been an issue of importance. But her smile was joyful. “An outsider?” She shook her head. “You are a hero to the city, Onesto. The cleric who returned their Empress” her expression was gentle. “You are not an outsider. You are a neutral party who does not report to a court. Maramia-“ Naeodin sighed. “She listens to you.” Her tone was surprised. Awed. “She does not listen even to me.”

She leaned forward, reached for his hands with her own.

“If you could support her, help her a little bit” her face softened. “Provide the neutrality my city needs. I am sure peace will be possible. And I would be able to focus on my recovery knowing this critical issue is under your watch” she cajoled.

Onesto was prepared to decline the request, politely of course. He was ready to give a hundred reasons why he was the worst choice. Not the least of which was he’d had exactly one conversation with Maramia thus far and she’d looked ready to tear his face off. He didn’t consider that “listening.”

And then Naeodin had to mention her recovery. The cunning old woman refused to rest even when he told her delaying it would harm her in the long run. She seemed intent on doing everything he didn’t want her to do at this stage.

The gentle look of bewilderment and apology on his face froze, morphed into wry amusement.

“That is not fair,” he chided her.

Naeodin laughed. “An old woman must do what she must.” She answered. “But, it will provide comfort, and I will be able to rest more, knowing that my efforts for peace will be seen through.”

If Maramia could strive for peace- if she could put aside the thoughts of war and destruction, it would mean more, not only for this war, but for her daughter’s overall recovery.

Her smile faded. “The Tris Hath wars stole my daughter from me. The Death Court wars brought her back, partially. But I would like to have my daughter back completely.”

Her gaze was steady, somber. “I think you could help bring her back.”

Onesto heaved a heavy sigh and patted Naeodin’s hand.

“You and Her Grace of Lanutha are cut from the same cloth. You have learned my weaknesses too quickly.” He fell silent a moment, mulling over the request once more. He would be putting

himself forward as a mediator for a world gripped by war for years. He brought them solutions that would be unpopular just because they did not advance the idea of further warfare.

No, he corrected himself, he would not be putting himself forward. Naeodin would. She would establish his purpose among the Courts. They would listen to her, and then all he had to do was make sure they listened to him. Easy, right?

Onesto let out another short sigh and shook his head.

“Alright. I cannot promise miracles, but I will do my best.”

The day the cleric argued morals and ethics with the scientist

The labs were almost completely refurbished.

It had taken time and power, a major allocation of projects- the underhanded tactic of the blue snake, the explosion of his labs, the trash Pretentiouth (for that snake would always by Pretentiouth in his mind) had mutated from his beloved Pigeons: it had given him an excuse to eradicate the entire central labs with fire.

Shy had no regrets for the complete destruction of what remained in his labs- an unfitting reminder of the humiliation he had faced. The loss of lives- well, Shy did not count them among the living. Trash created by the snake from his beloved projects. It was better that they were destroyed: and they were not lives that would be missed by the Empress.

“Are you sure you would like to invite the cleric down here?” Monique mused from her perch on what could only be described as a human sized cat tower. She sat at the very top, holding a mug of hot chocolate piled high in marshmallows.

“Why not?” Shy looked around the ‘outdoor’ drawing room. Located on the terrace of his greenhouse, overlooking an assortment of plants and flora from around the Nexus. Soft rustling came from below, raptors ready to be relocated above ground, the occasional chirp and hiss as they communicated.

The terrace itself was spacious, zen themed. A low top table with an assortment of delicacies and hot tea, a slender, golden eyed project sitting demurely by the tea set. Shy, standing over the railing, dressed in a light and much more simplified qipao in cotton and linen.

“The Fool will not appreciate this.”

Shy frowned. “I don’t see why that matters.”

Monique sighed. “You kept the truth of his nature secret from him, you do not let him help with the new projects. You spend your time with the Empress or with this cleric. You do not have time for him, and the anger and jealousy will fester and sore.”

Shy looked up blankly at the project whose words were a soft morning.

“What could he do to me?” he murmured. “He is just the Fool.”

Onesto stared up at the white walls and minimalistic but refined decorations. He gaped at the recessed lights with their delicate silver webbing around the edges. He glimpsed at each room he passed on the way down to Shy’s terrace, always in awe of the wonders he saw there.

Onesto had never seen a place quite like Shy's labs. He knew of the Barokians and their futuristic designs, but he'd never seen them up close. Now he walked through halls of wonder and oggled machines out of a dream world. And that wasn't even the most impressive part!

This Shy also had attendants of such incredible alien beauty. And all of them so polite! The one who led him down the halls was a tiny creature, child-like in its innocence and appearance. Golden curls topped its round head, and fluffy golden wings sprouted from its back. It hummed as it walked, and Onesto found himself delighting in the jaunty little tune.

As they neared the end of the hall, Onesto first smelled the sweet aroma of exotic flowers and plants, and then spotted the light filtering in from an unknown source atop leafy green treetops.

The little creature escorting him disappeared with a pop, only to reemerge beside Shy a few feet away.

"Master! Your guest is here," the pigeon chirped excitedly.

Shy smiled, petting the pigeon on the head. "Thank you my dear." His smile transformed into a brighter beam as he walked towards Onesto, hands extended. "Thank you for accepting my invitation," he greeted. "I was hoping for us to have some time together, away from the politics and the" he shrugged. "Chores."

Shy enjoyed his time with this tall and gentle giant. Shiqinth adored the "different man", and the Imperial was not the only hatchling who liked to sneak into the cleric's quarters. The Imperial was not the only *creature* who liked to sneak into the cleric's quarters.

Above on the human sized cat tower, Monique curled up until she was barely visible, the top half of her head peeking out over the edge, her golden eyes wide. She waved one small hand, wriggling her fingers in greeting before tucking herself away.

It was second nature to Shy to make his way to Onesto's side, slipping one thin arm through his, tugging him closer and escorting him onto the terrace. "This is a new space, to enjoy the gardens, and area for respite and peace. What do you think?"

Shy had taken care to ensure the space quietly mimicked the gardens Onesto was working on in his quarters. Taking complementary botany, flora and vegetation offered by his landscaper to flatter the cleric's taste.

Shy wanted the cleric to visit often, after all.

Onesto entered the terrace with the same look of wonderment on his face. He paused briefly to wave up at Monique.

"Hello Monique. It is good to see you again." Then he found his arm wrapped up with Shy's. He took the man's attachment in stride, smiling at Shy as he patted his arm. His eyes continued to rove over the gardens and all their splendors.

"You have created a truly marvellous space. I am in awe of the beauty of this place," he said.

Shy preened at his words. The residents of Vella Crean thanked him and admired his work, Faust- Faust as an ardent fan. But he was pleased at Onesto's compliments. It mattered, didn't it? To know he was still appreciated, to know that his work was still admired.

"I am delighted that you think so." he patted the arm, tugged him towards the low standing table and the thick cushions that were seats. "Should you ever require a break from your duties, and need a quiet place to reflect, please, know that there are areas of my domain that will always be open to you." he beamed. "Let my pigeons know, and they will escort you to where you would like to go."

Monique's head popped out completely over the top of her cat tower. "He won't be happy with this." she said out loud in a sing song voice.

Onesto moved with Shy toward the seats, easing himself down onto the low cushion with practiced ease. This was his preferred style of sitting anyway.

The large man's awed expression morphed into a concerned frown at Monique's words. He looked from the sneaky young woman peering down from her high perch to Shy.

"Who will not be happy? Have I interrupted something?"

Shy tilted his head up, narrowed his eyes. Monique let out a playful 'eep' before hiding.

"Just a companion who can get a bit over protective." Shy smiled, taking his seat across from Onesto. "Some of us do not know how to share." he responded serenely.

The project took her cue and slowly, methodically began a tea ceremony, using a set of teapots lacquered in red that seemed to have darkened with age and love.

"The situation with the Death Courts has been worrisome, I have heard that there will be a peace delegation?" he asked, tilting his head slightly. "I have been working on a few prototypes myself, dragons to better defend the city. If you need any support, or strong weapons to take with you."

"Weapons? No, no," Onesto said quickly. He smiled at the project pouring out the tea and put his hands together in a formal bow of thanks. He'd asked only if Shy knew where to get tea leaves, and here he had a proper appreciation of the drink! This Shy was a curious character indeed. "We'll have no need of weapons or armour. Such things invite defensiveness. Hostility.

No, we will go with the intent to offer discourse. If they accept, they accept. If they reject, then we will know that we must seek other methods. None of which," he added quickly, giving Shy a sidelong glance, "will begin with violence."

Shy nodded his head. He was not surprised, this man who spoke of peace. An interesting man. "No armour?" he asked. "Do you not worry that they might attack?" his expression was pure curiosity.

Did this man have other talents?

"I have seen the blue flame burn myself. If no armour-" he paused, frowned. "Would you like to take dragons who might be better equipped to defend against the blue flame?"

He sighed. "I understand the order to strive for peace." He understood, that powers that be, had given an order and he would not disobey (yet).

"Peace does not begin with a sword extended. It does not begin from behind a wall of defense. Peace must begin with openness and vulnerability. We will make the first offer and see if they respond in kind. Should they choose to attack, we will withdraw. Right now, I choose not to let my thoughts be dominated by fear. I choose to believe they will meet with us freely."

Shy smiled.

What a sweet, innocent boy giant.

What an entirely different point of view. How naive. This man must have lived through the Tris' Hath wars, or had he been cloistered away?

Shy would find out the truth.

"You have a very... interesting perspective." Shy answered. The tea making project held out a small cup towards Onesto with two hands, bobbing her head.

Onesto was entirely different from the Fool. It was refreshing. Maybe, he would be able to provide different insight.

"I actually, have a project I am working on, that might improve with your perspective." Shy started slowly. "Dragons better equipped to defend and protect-" for war and battle strategy. He decided it would not do him good to mention the latter points.

Onesto paused in his focus on Shy a moment to give his full attention to the project. He accepted the cup with a gracious nod, then cradled it in his hands a moment to savour the smell and warmth. When he took a sip, several seconds later, he held the mouthful a moment, swallowed, then gave the project another respectful smile and nod.

"Excellent," he murmured. "Thank you."

With etiquette taken care of, he returned his attention to Shy.

"I have heard a little of your projects. Rumours of your gifts are quite prosaic. You create... people? Is that right?"

The tea making project nodded her head at Onesto's response, poured another small cup and offered it towards Shy. He took it with a smile, a small murmur of thanks.

Shy arched a brow. "Prosaic?" that was not the word he would use to describe his many projects. He paused, shaking his head. "I create-" life. He wanted to say. But would this man judge him for his arrogance?

Maybe. The gentle giant had strong beliefs.

"Opportunities" he completed. Shy shrugged. "Sometimes, I breathe new life into the impossible, the forgotten. Other times, I adjust what exists, optimizing the base. Like-" he paused, looking for a better way to explain. "Allowing plants to adapt to a new climate, flowers to bloom in new colors."

He took a small, slow sip of his tea. "Before the closure of the Vella Crean and my brief departure, I used to work exclusively for the Empress." Closer. Departure. That was what had happened, after all.

He had not been banished.

Onesto frowned over his teacup. As he understood it, the person who poured their tea was one of Shy's "projects." Did that make them an opportunity? Was that how he saw the life he created? Such thoughts did not sit comfortably with the cleric.

"Aiding life, nurturing growth, these are noble causes. But I wonder, does the flower need to bloom in different colours? Can it not survive in its own climate? Why do these things if not for our own selfish enjoyment of the results? Ah, but I should not pass judgement. I know so little of this place still. And it is clear that your... "opportunities" are well loved here."

He paused to smile again at the tea-pouring project, and his eyes flicked briefly to Monique's perch high above.

Shy nodded his head, serene. The gentle giant did not surprise him with his response. Not enough people understood what he did, why he did things- this, he was not surprised about. But this man was gentle in the way he expressed his opinions, and so the scientist let the words pass over him, the same way water might flow over a duck's back.

Above in her cat perch, Monique let out a delighted laugh.

"You are a funny one, little man." said the little girl, peeking over the edge again, her golden eyes bright with merriment. "What changes will you bring to our home? Big ones, I think." the merriment died in her eyes, and they brightened, the molten gold shade more vivid. "The cleric who brings hope, balance to the Vella Crean. The cleric who will bring change, but I hope, not at the expense of our Shy. You will break our hearts."

Shy ignored the prophecy of the Oracle. Did the cleric understand the importance when the Oracle spoke instead of Monique? Maybe.

Onesto squinted up at Monique. Something in her... changed. He didn't quite know what, but her words had a strange heaviness to them. At the end of her prophecy, as silence crept into the room again, Onesto let out a short chuckle.

"You are funny as well," he said to Monique. "Your words speak of the future as if you know it already. But I assure you, I have no intention to harm anyone. My purpose here is to heal."

Monique laughed. A delighted peal of laughter. "I am funny?" she laughed again. "Yes, I suppose I am funny." she hid back in her cat tower, chuckling. "I know of possible futures, little man. Your purpose is true and straight, I hope it does not hurt us."

Shy shook his head. "The Oracle speaks in riddles, and she enjoys dropping enough hints to be trouble." his tone was apologetic. He did not know where Monique got her playful, mischievous nature from.

Not from him, of course.

Taking another small sip of his tea, the plants below rustled, reminding him of his original question.

"I could use your insight, Onesto." he said slowly. "The Imperial Court was a success, and I look forward to watching Shiqinth grow into his gifts, of seeing how the other hatchlings fair. There is a new project I am working on. Not a court, so much a..." he hesitated. "Guard?"

The Imperial Guard. The words fit, sounded right.

"Dragons to augment the abilities of the Imperial Court, and provide a line of defense for the Vella Crean."

Onesto's frown remained as he puzzled over Monique's words. Was she a true oracle? Did Shy have the ability to impart such gifts? That was truly an amazing skill. But then Shy spoke of other projects and Onesto's attention shifted.



“That sounds like a worthy goal. The people here could use the comfort of defenses. Though there is a notable difference between defense and offense that many do not understand.” He paused to take another sip of tea. “But I am confused as to how I might be of assistance. I do not possess the talents that you have. Unless you count the traditional method.” Onesto chuckled at his own joke.

Shy’s smile was playful, coy. He smirked a little bit, hiding it behind the teeny tiny cup.

“You have the Empress’ ear.” his smile faded a little bit. “It was a position I used to have, but since my return, there has been...” he hesitated. “Distance, between us.”

The scientist knew eventually he would bridge that gap and one day, he and the Empress would be as close as they had been in the past. But it was taking much longer than he had expected.

“There are many in the Nexus who do not approve of what I do. I would like to present her with a gift, the Imperial Guard to protect the city. But.” he hesitated again.

Shy hated being so unsure of himself.

“I am concerned... that there are traits of my Guard that will not be appreciated.” he said carefully.

Onesto sipped his tea while Shy talked. It gave him time to digest the words. To study the scientist.

This man was in pain. He was grieving. His connection to the Empress? Maybe. But there was more to this story that Onesto didn’t know. He could read it on Shy’s face. This man would require a gentle touch.

“What sort of traits,” Onesto asked innocently. “Certainly if you are capable of making those capable of predicting the future, you can create those capable of defending their home.”

Shy gently set his teacup onto the table.

“I helped engineer the court dragons.” It had been a beautiful project. “Added to the Pernese genetics to create the Light Courts. The dark- not a creation I had intended. The Blood Court: I needed a faction that would allow the Light and the Dark to exist peacefully. I thought, that was enough. They are entities capable of thought, freedom of choice, they are more than just a counterpart to their riders.”

That was the mistake, wasn’t it?

Shy knew he had made a mistake. Was it the freedom of choice? Making them more than just a counterpart?

"But they betrayed the city. Dragons convinced by the word of another to cut their ties. Riders died due to their choices- and they returned to kill clutchmates, children, parents..."

Shy did not understand.

Shy did not understand how his beasts could make such a terrible choice.

"If they were loyal, if they are obedient- maybe we could have avoided the wars entirely."

The Death Court at least, would not have so many in their numbers.

Onesto set down his teacup as the nature of Shy's conundrum took shape in his mind. This was not his specialty. This was not a subject he had experience in. And yet he had strong opinions on it regardless.

"I see... then your question to me is should you create life, or should you create machines."

Shy tilted his head.

"My machines have life." he responded, mystified. He looked at his hands, stretched out his fingers, the delicate nail ornaments tinkling against the surface of the table. Shy's expression was carefully blank. "I do not want to make the same mistake. Create life and have them betray or harm my Empress."

"You seem intent on that word; betrayal. But if I understand the situation correctly, did those who left for the Death Court not feel betrayed? Do you now respond to their hurt by reinforcing their pain? I understand that you wish to protect those you care about. This is as pure a cause as ever existed and proves the goodness of your heart, but one thing all parents must one day acknowledge is that their children are their own entities. They must be allowed to express their own thoughts and desires, or else the soul withers and the spirit dies. What you propose, absolute obedience, is not a creation of life. It is control. It is fear. It is a machine that will follow commands to the letter and never act out of love. As you do."

Goodness in his heart?

Shy blinked.

When was the last time someone had uttered words as pure, to him?

Even the Empress would laugh and shake her head at the thought of goodness.

"I had a thought. Swords and shields for the city, dragons capable of defending and protecting my Empress. Without the ability to betray, unable to cause harm to the city or the courts, to join the Death Court faction."

Onesto's earlier words had the scientist pause again. "Why would the Death Court feel betrayed?" he asked. "Did they not do the betrayal themselves?"

The scientist did not understand how his dragons could have left the city, their riders, their cause.

It was interesting to see the scientist's mind at work. He parcelled out Onesto's words, processing the meaning one bite at a time. Onesto hid a smile behind another sip of tea.

"Why did they leave? One who is happy does not seek to hurt those they love. Have you asked after the start of the war? What message these Death Court bring to their brethren? I have heard they are not shy about their hurt."

Shy shrugged.

"They listened to a charismatic leader who can spin events into a romantic storyline," he answered quickly, a gut instinct. "They fell for the lies and view the world through a fractured lens"

Ah. If he had said the same words to his Empress, would he not disappoint her?

Shy tapped the edge of the teacup. "They cry for the freedom of choice. To remain bondless, if they desire. Of riders enforcing a will and decree they do not care for." Shy shook his head. "But dragons choose their bond, they seek their riders. The ancestors of the Light Court could not survive without a bond, I changed that. A hatchling seeking a human as their bond, versus seeking another dragon- is it not the same? It is still a bond. I do not force the pairings." his lips quirked. "Despite what others may think."

The Imperials had been customized, hadn't they? But he had not forced the pairings.

"To seek a choice, a flawed one, based on incorrect information, to push the blame to their compatriots and to" his lips pressed into a thin line. "To blame my Empress, that, is flawed."

Onesto's smile remained. Still hidden. Still secret.

"Why? Because you do not approve?"

Shy frowned. A mou in the center of his forehead. He tapped the glass. Tap tap tap tap tap.

"Because they hurt *her*."

"And in doing so, hurt you, their creator. Their parent," he said with emphasis on the last word. "But having children is, as I said, a lesson in humility. Though they may act in ways that hurt us, they must be free to make those choices. Otherwise you risk stripping them of all that makes them- them. A child who is compelled to obedience is one who cannot feel remorse or regret. It is one who cannot be redeemed."

Did it all come back down to him?

Shy quietly digested Onesto's words, and Monique from her cat tower peered down, fascinated that the scientist was taking in the 'little man's' words so seriously. Where were the declarations of godhood? The conviction that his intent, his choices were the only *correct* choices? She grinned, delighted at the thought of informing the Fool that there was someone Shy would listen to, a man whose words the scientist was taking to heart.

Oh, wouldn't that be *fun*?

"You are somewhat right."

Monique clasped her hands over her mouth like a child and lay back down. Oh. She was terribly excited to inform the fool that the scientist had admitted such a thing *to someone else*.

"But also wrong."

Shy picked up the tiny teacup, handed it to the teamaking project. "They hurt her, and I will not let anyone hurt her." It was more than hurting him, it was more than betraying him. "If they had made a different choice for an enemy, I would not involve myself as much." he would certainly not be working to create the Imperial Guard.

If the blue dragon had only decided upon the Red Mage as his enemy, maybe, perhaps, than they could have had a partnership of sorts.

"Maybe a child who is compelled to obedience cannot be redeemed." he agreed slowly. He imagined Shiqinth being entirely obedient, and he could not.

Then Shiqinth would not be Shiqinth.

"But a trait, a strong... misgiving, towards certain choices? Would that allow them to still be redeemable?"

Onesto tilted his head, considering. He paused to give the tea making project a smile and a polite incline of his head as it refilled his cup.

"A misgiving is guilt. It is a sense of morals. These too should be allowed to develop by the individual, like a seed encouraged to grow in a particular direction, but ultimately allowed the freedom to change." Onesto inclined his head to Shy, making a gesture of allowance. "But I believe you know the answer to your own question already. Otherwise you would not have asked me."

Shy shook his head. The tea making project handed him another cup of tea, and he took it, taking a slow sip.

Blind obedience- it would make it easier, wouldn't it? Better, for him. But this Onesto did not believe in blind obedience, and, Shy was realizing this Onesto would be a good indicator of what his Empress would require.

"I wonder about you, dear Onesto." he purred. He looked up, smiled. "I hope you are able to keep to your sense of ethics and morality. I think, it would be interesting, for me to try to meet you half way."

"I think," Onesto said, drawing out the words as he sipped his renewed cup of tea, "that you are not meeting me anywhere. You are instead seeing your own development. So I will agree with you that the future will be interesting. I have heard stories of you, master geneticist, and I look forward to seeing how your own senses grow over time."

Onesto lifts the cup in faint salute to Shy.

"But please, keep the tea the same. This is excellent."

*Monique found the entire exchange hilarious. It was delightful to see her Shy speak of obedience and misgivings, as if he had ever taken into account the needs and opinions of someone else.*

*Clients, yes. Oh, Shy was always so careful to make sure his sponsors were happy with his work, creating projects to their requirements. But times like this?*

*She laughed, skipping through the halls, hand holding a stick of cotton candy that she pulled feathered pieces off of to gobble.*

*“Are you in there?” she called out in a sing song voice, peering into the Fool’s quarters. “Are you here, busy at work?”*

*He was different. Changed, somehow. Monique did not know exactly how, but the Oracle knew this would not be good for her Shy.*

*Still. She did not know exactly how, and so far, her words did not speak of Shy’s death.*

*“I had the most delightful meeting today.” she called out again. “Would you like to hear about it? About the man that Shy listens to, the one he obeys and apologizes to?”*

*Faust’s lip twitched at the familiar, grating voice of the Oracle. He disliked this one more than others. Not more than the irritating, superior Aide though. That one thought herself better than him.*

*Him! Shy’s partner. Shy’s equal.*

*Or so he saw himself. So he knew now that Shy never would.*

*Shy’s little pet project.*

*The bald man remained at his work table as Monique let herself into his labs. He kept his goggles on more often than not these days specifically for situations such as this. Shy’s projects had no concerns for his well being.*

*It was the last few words that caught his attention. Obeys. Apologizes. These were not traits that Shy entertained.*

*Faust put down his tools and turned slowly to face the diminutive Oracle.*

*“Tell me, Monique. What have you learned?”*

## The day the cleric's friend comes to visit

The day was warm. Too warm to be doing manual labour. Even here at the Vella Crean, which was significantly cooler than the Warren. The massive dark violet dragon who stood outside the apartments of the Empress' tower made it known to his bond for the hundredth time that it was too hot for this sort of work, and he would require all the baths once they got back home.

"Alright, alright. I'm almost..." The man working the straps on the dragon's harness grunted as the final one gave way. A metal-edged chest thudded to the ground with the force of a boulder. The dragon heaved a dramatic sigh, straightening up now that he was free of his burden.

"There, see? The hard part is done," the man said. The dragon gave him a baleful eye, then spread his wings and took off for the coast without another word.

Words would come later. So many words.

The man shook his head and ran a hand through the tight nest of curls atop his head. He was on the young side of forty. The attractive side. His skin had the bronzed quality of one who spent all their days in the sun, but the creases by his eyes and the silver at his temples gave him a distinguished air. He bent to the chest and wrapped his hands through one of the handles, then heaved with all his might.

The chest did not move.

"Genan, my friend." Onesto's voice boomed out across the manicured thoroughfare that led to the Empress' apartment. The large man wore his standard white and gray attire and the widest grin as he approached the rider. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Onesto," Genan said. He abandoned his work and met Onesto with a hug as the large man engulfed him in his broad arms.

"Here, let me get that." Onesto moved fluidly from the hug to a swoop toward the chest.

"No, I-" Genan's protests fell away as Onesto gripped the handles on either side and lifted the chest as if it were made of feathers. Genan sighed. "Once again, you leave me feeling like a damsel in distress."

"Hah," Onesto boomed, turning to carry the chest toward the apartment doors. "You have never been a damsel, my friend. In distress, yes. Ah, but now you can redeem your manliness. Get the door for me, would you?"

Genan ran ahead, pulling the door open as Onesto paraded through with the chest. He fell into step behind the cleric as they made their way up to his rooms. Meanwhile, other dragons from the Warren wheeled and turned overhead. Some came with bags and crates of the cleric's

things in need of delivery. Some came to visit long lost friends. One in particular, sleek and silver as a streak of moonlight, glided toward the Empress' own balcony, eager to greet the aging gold queen who once again resided there.

*Rider mine, what are you doing?* Sasiath's voice was cool, curious as she felt the amusement and excitement thrum through their bond.

"Testing out my new transport, Sasi"

The Empress was dressed in pale trousers and a high necked creamy blouse, her hair braided into a neat and stately bun, her hands shaking just a little bit as they finagled a remote device she held on her lap.

The wheelchair zoomed forwards, coming to a screeching halt. If it wasn't for the seat belt Naeodin had strapped herself into, she might have fallen out.

The wheelchair zoomed back, knocking into the back of a chair.

"Oof."

*Rider mine, Onesto is more than happy to take you where you need to go. There are also other aides in the tower..*

Naeodin let out a snort. "I can do this, Sasi. I can't rely on them forever"

*A week is not forever.*

Naeodin pressed another lever, watched as the wheelchair eeked forward at a frustratingly slow pace. "This is ridiculous I cannot go where I want to go I cannot do what I want to do-"

*Patience? Ridermine?*

The Empress grumbled.

*You know you can't despair how stubborn your children are,* the aging queen's tone was amused. *I can see exactly where they get it from,* her eyes whirled with amusement as the queen paused, looking up into the air. She let out a cry of greeting. *We have visitors.*

*Sasiath,* Mryah'Care called out, her threads glittering with joy as she settled to a landing beside the old queen. The silver dame rumbled a greeting and nuzzled her dear friend. *It is good to see you up and about again.*



Mystic slipped from her bond's back as the dragons spoke. She smiled up at Sasiath, warmed by Myrah'Care's thoughts as much as her own. So much had changed in such a short time, but they were good changes. It was like seeing the Vella Crean wake from a long nightmare.

She left the dragons to catch up and moved toward the balcony doors.

"Naeodin," she called out, rapping at the open arch that separated the balcony from the front room. "Are you in?"

Sasiath let out a delighted creel, nuzzling the silver dragon and letting out a chuff of laughter, *it is good to be awake and stretch my wings* - her tone was laughing, *although I do not remember having been so old before I went to sleep.*

The sound of a motor wheel whirling, a slight thunk, followed by another. A shout of triumph as Naeodin zoomed over forwards towards the balcony, skidding to a stop in front of her dearest friend.

"This is harder than when I had to learn how to ride a dragon," she grouched, but her expression was open, joyous as she spread her arms "it is good to see you," she greeted.

Her feet fidgeted, as if habit wanted her to push herself out of the chair into the arms of Mystic. But they stilled.

"I am afraid I can't get up to greet you, I have promised Onesto to rest and recover in this sharding chair."

Mystic's eyes widened in surprise as the metal contraption on wheels shot her friend in her direction. She brought her arms up in an instinctive defensive pose, a shielding spell springing to mind, but she didn't cast it. She didn't want to risk hurting Naeodin.

The chair skidded to a stop a scant foot away from her, and Naeodin's chipper complaints paired with her bright smile broke through the shock holding Mystic captive. She laughed, unable to escape the mirthful sound, and bent down to hug her friend.

"Blessed Gods, you startled me with that thing. Onesto must have a true gift with words if he's managed to convince you to rest."

On the balcony, Myrah'Care rumbled in amusement at her rider's surprise. It was good to see both of them showing such vitality. A far cry from their first visit back.

*Speaking of stretching our wings, would you like to go for a flight? It seems so much of the Vella Crean has changed already since our last visit and I would like to see it.*

Sasiath spread her wings, and nodded. *Yes. Let us see what has become of my city, and tell me how you have been doing*

Naeodin laughed, a delighted peel of laughter. "He is a wiley one, your Onesto. I adore him. Thank you for bringing him to the Vella Crean." her smile turned smug. "We have a deal. I will rest and recuperate, and he will help me with some of my worries."

First, peace delegation. Second, her daughter.

Naeodin had never been so hopeful.

Hugging Mystic close, she let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, my dear friend." She let go. "And you! How are you? How is Tris' Hath?" her expression sombered. "I hope Naxi'im did not cause too much damage."

Mystic stood up, but kept hold of Naeodin's hands. It was so good to feel warmth in them again.

"What little trouble Naxi'im caused us has already been tended to. Honestly, Drakmor was in need of a new roof in some areas anyway. We're into monsoon season now so... Tris'Hath is wet. And I am well. My sons cause me no end of headaches, but one is of the age where that is expected, and the other is just trying to keep him out of the worst kind of trouble."

With Naeodin's questions answered, Mystic narrowed her eyes and gave her friend a good-natured look of suspicion.

"What have you got planned for Onesto? Should I be worried for his health now that yours appears to be recovered?"

Naeodin grinned. "Come inside, sit with me, let us enjoy some tea" she made a slightly sad face, although her eyes continued to sparkle. "I have been advised against wine for now, but we can speak. I could use your insight, dear friend." she shook her head. "I am only an old Weyrwoman who fought thread, I could learn from you."

"Hm. I wonder how many believe the "old Weyrwoman" line still," Mystic mused, a light teasing note in her voice. She stepped back from Naeodin's chair, then walked beside her into the apartments. "I would be happy to offer you whatever advice I can. Though I am only a strange old woman who lives in a cave with too many pets."

Naeodin smiled. Fiddling with the remote and zooming backwards (this was *fun*), she kept to a stop in front of the main seating area, looked towards the table that had already been laid out discreetly with iced tea, two slices of pound cake, and a small bowl of berries.

“Onesto is helping me put together a peace delegation.” she started, nudging her chair so that it would move closer to the table. “The Death Court- no one has tried asking for peace, to understand the needs of the dragons who heard truth in Naxi’im’s words.” she sighed.

“The power of choice- it seems foolish now, looking back at it all. Of course all beings should be given the chance to choose. To impress, if they desired, or to remain without a bond. To seek them out later in life.” she shook her head. “That is a thought that was so engrained in me through tradition, it is my fault for not realizing how dragons could see this as slavery.”

“It is not your fault,” Mystic responded quickly. She’d had the exact same discussion with Doctor Schroeder not long ago, and she could not deny that the thoughts still weighed heavily on her as well.

Mystic slid into a seat across from her friend and released a pensive sigh.

“Think of all the worlds and all the places where bonding at hatching is the norm. It’s not just a trait of Pern, though so many can trace their ancestry back there. Thinking on it now, it is alarming to me that we put such pressure on young dragons to make a lifelong selection, but can you imagine your life without Sasiath? I certainly could not think of being without Myrah’Care.

That these dragons demand a change now shows signs of evolution, not oppression. We have encouraged their growth and development all across the Nexus, and now we are seeing the fruits of it. These ones happen to be... slightly sour.”

Mystic paused again, mulling over her thoughts as she picked up one of the glasses of iced tea and took a sip.

“If blame is to be laid at anyone’s feet, it’s mine. This could have been a natural, positive development for the Courts. Clearly the sentiments existed already. By leaving Pretentiouth here, I gave them a drive forged out of hate and vengeance. I should have dealt with him.” The last part she said quietly, more to herself than her friend. It pained her even now to think back on that day and imagine chasing down a grieving dragon. It pained her more to know that she caused his pain, and by leaving him here, so much more.

Naeodin shook her head. “No one could have predicted the events, or Pretentiouth’s return as Naxi’im.” She reached forward to pick up a glass, brought it to her lips. “It is unfortunate for my children that they had to wake to this knowledge through Naxi’im’s words, that it took such hatred to bring to light such sentiments. What I can offer my children is the ability to choose moving forwards.” she sighed. “With the Death Court-” she paused.

“They are quite beautiful, Mystic. The queens who make up his court. Each so distinct, their original court forms enhanced. They are proud, loyal, full of such fire.”

"They are something to behold," Mystic admitted. She had only glimpsed the queens, and mostly the black one. Still, she could recognize beauty when she saw it. "Like wild cats. Beautiful from a distance, but deadly. They must be treated with the respect they have earned." She paused a moment to take another sip. "It never occurred to me that Pretentiouth could be learning from Faust. I knew they shared a disdain for those they considered less than them, but he's proven more capable than I ever imagined. Do you know how he's managed to enhance himself and his Court as he has?"

Naeodin winced.

"We are still looking into the specifics, but it seems it has to do with Shy's labs." her words were careful. "We might not have done as clean a job as we could have, when we removed his residences from the Vella Crean."

Shy.

Another one of her children who was giving her a headache.

"He is not as terrible as he seems to be." she murmured quietly. "Misguided definitely, but not beyond redemption."

Mystic's demeanour closed off abruptly at the mention of Shy. Only around Naeodin did she feel conflicted about her absolute hatred of the man, but her position remained unchanged.

"He hurt my people, Naeodin," the mage said quietly. She sat with the cup of iced tea held between her hands, her gaze fixed on the ice floating on the surface. "He has been obsessed with me for years. Demands access to my very blood as if he believes I am just another of his play things. I was polite in my refusal at first, but then he crossed a line. He took advantage of a friend's grief to strike a bargain he had no right to make. He tried to steal from me what I refused to give him. When my friend acted to defend me, he ripped away the thing she loved most. She has her daughter back, but nothing will restore the years he stole from them."

Her lip twitched involuntarily as old emotions roiled within. Those events were more than two decades old now, but still made her guts wrench with a deep seated sense of violation at what he had tried to do. Mystic raised her eyes to meet Naeodin's.

"I understand that he is dear to you, my friend. I have my own people who I defend against those who see them as nothing more than a threat. But I will never forgive him for what he did and what he continues to do."

Mystic drew in a deep breath and took a sip of the tea to refocus herself. Talk of Shy raised her fury too easily. She knew it was a sore subject and she needed to find a better way to deal with it. Perhaps it would be good to talk to Adon when she returned home.

“At any rate, I know he cares deeply for you. I just hope you’re not making a mistake by letting him come back here.”

Naeodin watched her old friend with eyes touched with sadness. Maybe, if she had made different decisions in the past, if she had been a bit a little more controlling- maybe her boy and her friend could be friends.

“We are both being quite careful with each other recently.” she answered.

Bringing the tea to her lips, she smiled. “My Onesto.” she started easily, eyes brightening. “Has been a balm for my soul- and for the Vella Crean. His advice and insight to the Courts, the way he is helping my Mia with the Peace Delegation: I have hope, Mystic. That maybe we will be able to find peace with Naxi’im.”

Mystic chuckled at the way Nae lit up when speaking of Onesto. It had taken her far longer to warm up to Adon when he’d first arrived at Castle Drakmor with the intention of “helping” her. She had been furious at the thought, and then reluctant to open up. When she finally did, the impact his quiet, patient demeanour had on her soul was a shocking salve to wounds she didn’t even know she had. It would seem Onesto had the same effect, and she was glad for it.

“Speaking of our dear maester,” Mystic said, setting her glass down for a moment as she reached for one of the pouches hanging off her belt. She fished around in the small, leather bag a moment, then produced two earrings in the palm of her hand.

The earrings were small, delicate things woven out of fine, golden loops and adorned with a single droplet of red gemstone. She held them out toward Naeodin.

“These are enchanted. One for you and one for Onesto. When you are both wearing them and either one of you touches the gemstone, you will be able to send a short message to the other. Only they will hear it. No matter where either of you are in the Vella Crean. Though any further than an hour away from each other and the magic may not work.”

Naeodin peered at the beautiful earrings, taking them from her friend with a murmur of thanks. Lifting one up to the light, she listened, and let out a delighted laugh.

“These are beautiful, Mystic.” she exclaimed. And how useful! She would be able to call on her cleric easily- and he would be...

He would be able to check in and reprimand her if he heard she was working. Letting out a chuckle (oh, she would one day get it into his head that work was *good* for her) she beamed. “These are absolutely beautiful, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It feels like the least I could do after...” After bringing a psychopath to her doorstep. After killing him on her balcony. After breaking down and burdening her with a secret

that could ruin both of them if given to the wrong person. After inadvertently unleashing a homicidal dragon on her people. After being unable to promise aid to fix the problem she created. "After everything."

Naeodin smiled, clutching the earring in her palms. "Come, let me tell you some stories of what I have planned...."

Mystic let the moment of grief and regret pass without further comment. Naeodin had a way of glossing over the bad things to find the good. The Red Mage found herself giving in whole-heartedly to her friend's positive nature as the aging Empress began to detail her grand plans for the peace talks and the future of the Vella Crean. It was good to have Naeodin back.

Maramia looked down at the long, loooooong report in her hand. She grimaced. No thank you. This was a ridiculous job that required too much patience and detail oriented planning. She was neither patient, nor detail oriented.

Striding through the hallways towards the cleric's apartment, she looked out at the archways, watched the dragons dance in the air. Unfamiliar dragons. Some part of her smiled, wistful and happy with the knowledge that visitors were arriving at the Vella Crean again- friends and family reconnecting.

Some small part of her raged, knowing that they were spies, members of the Death Court: they just didn't know it yet.

The small part flared up at night, when she was alone, but in the daylight, with the sound of dragons calling to other dragons, it simmered, a dark little ball that did not dominate her thoughts.

Maramia was dressed as she always was- boots, trousers, shirt and jacket: traditional riderwear that had proved durable and flexible in battle. Everything was *clean*, which (and the small dark part of her enjoyed this feeling of discomfort) felt odd. There was no blood, no gore on her clothing, no smoke.

The city was tentatively in its longest run of peace: and Maramia was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Rapping her knocks on the door, she called out.

"Are you in?"

Sounds came through from the other side of the door. Laughter. Animated discussion. Then silence when she knocked. Someone with heavy steps moved toward the door, and then the entrance opened to reveal a smiling wall of soft, gray and white robes and genial demeanour.

"Your Grace, please come in. I was just catching up with an old friend. You are welcome to join us. May I offer you a drink?"

As Onesto stepped aside to admit Maramia into his chambers, she was greeted with the sight of an unfamiliar dragon rider situated on the couch in the cleric's living space. Tight, black curls covered his head, silvering at the temples. Weather worn brown skin wrinkled at the edges of his eyes, giving the man permanent smile lines. The man wore riding leathers, but they were adorned with pins and straps unlike those of the Vella Crean's riders. A silver dragon on a background of red, blue and gold affixed to his shoulder declared him a rider of the Warren. The man raised a glass in salute to Maramia, but did not stand to greet her.

"Ah, Your Grace, may I introduce my friend, Genan. Genan, this is Her Grace Maramia, leader of the Light Court of the Vella Crean," Onesto said by way of introduction.

"A pleasure, Your Grace," Genan said, his voice warm and welcoming.

The sound of noise and laughter did not surprise her. People seemed to gravitate towards the cleric, and she had not missed the way council members seemed to relax more when he was present during their meetings.

But this was not one of her riders, not one of *them*. The dark and angry ball perked up in interest, sensing a spy, an enemy. A stranger who was invading their territory.

Maramia's features blanked, the scowl and irritated grimace at the work she had in front of her smoothing over into a polite and socially acceptable mask. She smiled a perfectly acceptable smile, and nodded her head.

"Genan." Mystic's rider. Not a spy, not an enemy. "Welcome to the Vella Crean."

She rolled up the report, affixed the clasp, held it out towards her mother's healer.

"This is yours."

"Ah, thank you. Perhaps we can go over it a bit later," Onesto said as he took the report. He unrolled the top half, gave it a quick glimpse, then rolled it up again and smiled at Maramia. "Would you care to join us for a bit? I was just getting out the tea and cakes."

"A cunning ploy to distract me from changing the subject. Onesto was waxing poetic about the first day we met again," Genan chided, his voice holding back a light laugh.

"Ah. It's a good story to tell. You tumbling from the sky. Me rushing to your aid."

"You manhandling me off the field of battle. How many hydras were chasing us in your story this time?"

"Three. And they each had ten heads," Onesto stated as if this were irrefutable fact.

"Last time it was two."

"Ah. A small lie to spare your feelings." Onesto turned back to Maramia and then swept a hand toward the couch where Genan sat. "Please. I'm certain you could use a break. And I found some marvelous cakes in the kitchens."



