

Isra's time as keeper of the egg was coming to an end.

The egg lived in its little glass jar, kept at exactly the right warmth by the ectads, breathing by virtue of the ectads, in conditions far more perfect than it would get in the wild. There were certain things that needed to be done as well, things that only Isra knew. In the hands of the Liberfell battlekeeper, it would likely have died, but she'd given him instructions, and hoped that he would follow them correctly. The egg needed to be turned every now and then, not to ensure proper heating, but because it would grow wrong if it were pointed in the same direction for too long. The day before it was to hatch, she picked some fresh herbs from the garden, mostly mint, and placed them around the egg so that it could smell them.

It was the evening, following their communal lunch, which itself followed the dungeon escape. That was when the creature in the egg chose its time.

"It's going to hatch soon," said Isra.

"Neat!" said Mizuki. "So I'll just have to chew up some herbs and spit them out? Like a momma bird?"

Isra nodded. "With lots of spit."

"Oh I can do slobber," said Mizuki. "You wouldn't believe how sloppy I can be." She snuck a glance at Alfric.

"First off, don't be crude," he said. "Second, I'm not sure that Isra would get that joke, if you want to call it that."

"I wasn't being crude," said Mizuki. "*You're* the one making it crude."

"I understood the joke," said Isra. She *liked* jokes, especially the dirty ones, at least when she understood them, because they seemed to be one of the only places where people would talk about certain things. Sex, especially, seemed a very funny thing to Isra, which made the jokes all the more funny. However, she was, she had found, terrible at telling jokes. "I like jokes."

"Including crude ones?" asked Alfric.

Isra nodded. "Especially crude ones," she said.

"Huh," said Mizuki. "I wouldn't have figured you for it."

"Why?" asked Isra. The nice thing about being with these people was that she could simply ask why, and they would respond, rather than acting weird about things.

"Well, I don't know," said Mizuki. "You're usually reserved, and you dress with what around here is a kind of extreme modesty."

"The headscarf?" asked Isra.

Mizuki nodded.

“And it makes you think that I have no sense of humor about the body?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Mizuki. “That would be traditional, for Tarbin.”

“And you think I’m traditional, for Tarbin?” asked Isra.

“I guess not,” said Mizuki.

Alfric cleared his throat. “Even if someone thinks that modesty is a virtue, it doesn’t mean that they can’t find humor in transgression,” he said. “In fact ... I mean, I’m just guessing, but maybe they’d find *more* humor in it, if it’s more transgressive?”

“See, this is why you’re not funny,” said Mizuki. “Too much thinking.”

“I’ve seen you laugh at my jokes,” said Alfric.

“I take pity on the less fortunate,” said Mizuki.

“Well, that explains your love life,” said Alfric.

Mizuki frowned for a moment, then laughed. “Alright, fair play.” She moved over to the jar the egg was in. “When you say that it’s going to hatch soon, how soon do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “It depends on the dragon.”

“It’s not a dragon,” said Alfric. “And we probably shouldn’t call it that.”

“What *is* a proper dragon?” asked Isra. People spoke of them in hushed tones, but she’d never actually asked what they were. She’d seen a few pictures of them, giant reptiles with enormous wingspans, but that didn’t explain how people spoke of them.

“Dragons have been around as long as the hills,” said Alfric. “The oldest of them are thousands of years old, maybe tens of thousands of years old. When they’re young, they ravage the lands, and when they’re old, which most of them are, they hide away.”

“In demiplanes,” said Mizuki.

“Well,” said Alfric. “There’s been a lot written about dragons, but precious few actual conversations with them, so there’s more speculation than there is evidence, and people talk a lot when there’s no way to disprove what they’re saying.”

“You never believe me,” said Mizuki with a frown. “Why is that?”

“With respect,” said Alfric, which seemed to Isra the start of something dangerous. “Dondrian is a place of learning, and I had access to some of the most knowledgeable tutors and teachers that money could buy. If I don’t believe your account of things, it’s because I was taught by people who are in a position to know. If dragons *did* go to live in demiplanes, how would they acquire them? And more to the point, how would you know?”

“You think I’m wrong,” said Mizuki, folding her arms across her chest.

"I don't *know* if you're wrong," said Alfric. "But ... how the world is, and what we know about the world, is *important*. People make things up, they've made things up for most of human history, and we're sitting on top of a pile of knowledge where some things are made up and other things that aren't. So yeah, it's important to know how we know things, to not just have it all be hearsay or worse."

"Well for your information, I heard it from my grandfather," said Mizuki. "And whatever else, he was a man who knew things."

"Okay," said Alfric. "So, maybe it's something that's common knowledge in Kiromo, or even specialized knowledge, or speculated on. I can accept that. It's just not something that I had heard, and it seemed like if dragons really did retreat into extremely rare and valuable demiplanes, it was something I would have heard about."

"What's a demiplane?" asked Isra. She wasn't entirely sure what they were fighting about, if they were fighting. Their posture and tone seemed to indicate a fight, and she was curious about it. It seemed to have come from nowhere.

"A demiplane is a created reality, like a dungeon," said Alfric. "But stable, larger, and you can go in and out of it at will. The kind that people usually imagine is as wide as a hex, with its own artificial sun that's a part of the demiplane, but they come in smaller sizes."

"And larger," said Mizuki. "There are some the size of a whole province."

Alfric frowned at her. "Hundreds of hexes across?" he asked.

Mizuki nodded. "According to my grandfather, yes. You could fit a whole country inside of a demiplane, if you really wanted to."

"I'm having trouble with the concept," said Isra, frowning. "Nature has a balance to it, cycles that don't seem like they would be present. With a world only a hex across, how would you have rain?"

"I've been in a few," said Alfric. "There are different solutions. Some places will hire a wizard or two to set up something long-term, or there are entad solutions, though an entad that can produce weather, at scale, from nothing, would be pretty costly. Of course, if you can afford a demiplane, you can probably afford the other stuff as well."

"It sounds lonely," said Isra. "And small."

"Does it?" asked Mizuki. "It sounds great to me, cozy."

"There's no world beyond," said Isra. "Don't you feel the same way about dungeons? That they're horribly small? And ... not cozy?"

"Dungeons are scary though," said Mizuki. "I mean, if I could stuff this house and the woods around it into a demiplane, I'd do it."

"We'd need to be extremely wealthy to do that," said Alfric. "*Extremely* wealthy. I think what I heard was that the number of known demiplanes is in the hundreds."

"And your family doesn't own one?" asked Mizuki. "And here I thought you were rich."

"Depends on what you mean by family," said Alfric. "There are a number of them in the chrononaut clan, yes, but none of my immediate family. My dad considers them a waste of time and money, given how much available land there is in Inter. You're paying a huge markup per acre."

"Alright," said Mizuki. "I will say that on this *one* particular thing, it's *possible* you know more than me. But I still do think that there are giant demiplanes."

"Legendary ones, maybe," said Alfric. "Province-sized, with a hundred hexes or more ... I don't know, I guess."

Isra didn't like the idea of demiplanes. It seemed like they'd be too sterile, too small, too much like a toy world. She kept her thoughts to herself though, in part because she thought she might still be misunderstanding a demiplane. She also had more questions about what these things *were*, how they looked when you were inside them, how you entered them, and all kinds of other things, but if there were only two hundred in the world, it seemed unlikely that any of it would actually matter. Like ley lines, it seemed like her questions could wait until it was actually relevant, if ever.

"There," said Isra. "The first crack."

They both came over to see.

"Where?" asked Mizuki.

"There," said Isra, pointing. The claw of the dragon tapped against the internal wall of the egg again, harder this time, and the crack became more noticeable.

"Oh," said Mizuki. "So it's hatching *today* then, that's great. Do we need to do something?"

"No," said Isra. "It will get stronger as the day goes on, make more cracks, then pull itself out, looking ugly."

"Ugly?" asked Mizuki. "Nah, she'll be cute."

"Not when she's freshly hatched," said Isra. "You'll see. Newborn animals are gross. Once they're cleaned up, they look much better."

They had already placed herbs all around the egg, which Isra thought was the only thing that needed to be done. It was hard to say what the egg's mother would have done, if anything. Isra somewhat suspected that in the wild, the creature would simply lay eggs where the herbs were, and the young would be born in a patch of mint or similar, but it was difficult to say.

She was more aware of the gaps in her knowing, of late. She knew things that others didn't, but there were things she *didn't* know that she somehow felt she should. Cooking with Mizuki had been eye-opening in that regard. Isra had never understood the importance of getting everything to be of the same thickness, but Mizuki had explained that different thicknesses would take different amounts of time to cook through, and it was so *obvious* after the fact, but apparently not something that was simply Known to a druid. It was also difficult to know how long to cook something until it had what Mizuki described as a 'perfect toothsome quality', and Isra had been a bit confused about the concept until they took a half hour to cook pieces of broccoli to varying levels of doneness, ranging from raw to mush.

There were all kinds of things that Isra simply Knew without knowing *how* she knew. The conversation between Mizuki and Alfric, the fight, if she wanted to call it that, had been a bit befuddling, because most of the things that Isra knew were simply apparent to her without having an original source. They were both claiming to have knowledge about demiplanes and dragons, and both of them had been told something by other people, who in turn had probably heard it from somewhere, or as Alfric had said, had made things up.

It didn't feel like the way knowledge should be, teetering piles of inference and trust, but she could understand that not everything could be experienced firsthand. There were enormous questions remaining though, questions of who to trust and how they knew things, and she didn't imagine that anyone could give her guidance, because they themselves might not be trustworthy. At least on the topic of dragons and demiplanes, it seemed that one of the two was wrong. *At least* one of the two.

Isra had only vague ideas about what the egg would become. She knew what its needs were, what would help it to hatch, things like that, and she knew some details of its body, but she didn't know what it would *become*, and she had no idea what it would be useful for, if anything. As she was discovering with cooking, she wasn't terribly good at guessing whether or not things would taste good, and while she knew whether things would be good or bad for her, she couldn't tell whether oil had gone rancid except by smell.

They were all looking at the jar together when Mizuki's fat cat, Tabbins, put his paws up on the end table and looked in too.

"The egg isn't food," said Isra.

Tabbins lowered himself back to the floor and sauntered off through the house, likely going to one of his several sleeping spots. He hadn't been terribly happy with people moving in, and had spent a few nights in the woods until Isra explained things to him.

"It boggles the mind," said Mizuki.

"So you've said," replied Isra. There was something nice about how impressive Mizuki seemed to find someone giving instructions to her cat.

"How long are we talking?" asked Mizuki, returning her attention to the egg. "An hour?"

“Roughly,” said Isra.

“I am so excited,” said Mizuki. She turned to Alfric. “But I’m going to continue to call it a dragon, just to warn you.”

“Can you call it an herb dragon?” asked Alfric. “Just so there’s no confusion.”

“Sure,” smiled Mizuki. “So what do you think it could be used for?” She directed this question at both of them.

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “What do people use animals for?”

“It’s unlikely it’ll be used for anything,” said Alfric. “Animals and plants are — well, high variance. But in terms of what we’ll be looking for, the biggest things are some kind of material, whether that’s skin, scales, claws, or horns, maybe milk if we’re *really* lucky, and productive labor of some kind is a distant possibility. Beyond that, I guess we’ll monitor growth rates and domesticability and see whether or not it will make for a good pet. The fact that it looks a bit like a dragon is actually pretty good for us, since it means that if it *does* make a good pet, it would sell for more.”

“And we’d breed them up?” asked Mizuki.

“Ideally,” said Alfric. “Isra, you think that would be possible?”

“I don’t know,” said Isra. “They’re not sexually mature.”

“Well, when you know, let me know,” said Alfric. “Ideally they lay eggs in clutches rather than just one or two at a time, but we found these three all together, so ... I don’t know. There’s potentially a fair bit of money here, if they’re good for something.”

“And if not, then we have a team mascot, right?” asked Mizuki.

They stood, chattering with a few interjections or bits of ‘expert’ input from Isra, until the herb dragon had finally made its way out of the egg, pushing the bits and pieces aside to lay down on the bed of herbs they’d prepared for her. By that time, Verity and Hannah had come downstairs.

“You were right,” said Mizuki. “This is pretty gross.” It was covered in what was left of the glair, which it was already weakly licking up.

“Give her an hour,” said Isra. “She will clean herself. From there, she will start to move around, and not long after, be ready for her first meal.”

The herb dragon became the center of attention, and by proxy, so did Isra, who was able to tell them all when it was ready to be touched, how it should be held, and what it needed. It was a bit of a useless creature, incapable of taking care of itself, but that was nice for them, since it meant that it wasn’t immediately attempting escape, destruction, or anything else.

The herb dragon was thin and bony, but it would fill out in time. Its neck was long and thin, barely supporting its head, but it already had horns, which had a look similar to driftwood. The

scales were nearly white, but would have more color with time. The claws were long, largely defensive, she thought, retracted like a cat's in normal circumstances with the same little toes like beans. It was a creature that was to be stroked rather than petted, and it would grow thicker and fuller from the chewed-up herbs it would eat in the coming days. For all that Isra knew about it, she was excited to know more. The egg had revealed itself to her slowly, and there was more knowledge of this creature yet to come.

"Like I said, a few days in the jar will suit it well," said Isra. "And we have a week to build an enclosure for it, if we still want to do that."

"I really don't think we can justify letting it go free, even if you give it instructions," said Alfric. "It's a violation of law."

"They don't make exceptions for druids?" asked Verity.

"Not that I'm aware of," said Alfric. "Though I guess they might."

"I could keep this creature from escaping," said Isra. "It seems cruel to limit it if there's no need to. It will mostly eat herbs."

"In the winter too?" asked Verity. "Because we should get a little greenhouse going, if that's the case, or ... I don't know, use the growthstones, if we're going to be taking a few from Besc." Verity touched Isra's elbow. "You can let me know what I should be planting in order to feed it?"

"Of course," nodded Isra.

"And tomorrow we go to Dondrian," said Alfric. "We'll bring the jar with us, and hope that the herb dragon is fine in there, which I'm sure she will be, given that Isra would be able to tell us long before something went wrong."

"Whoa," said Mizuki. "You're saying that like we're done here, but we haven't even done the most important thing."

"Which is?" asked Alfric.

"Giving her a name," Mizuki smiled.

"I would like to propose either Lerial or Marsc," said Verity. "That's the opera we're going to, and we'll be bringing the herb dragon to it."

"We will?" asked Alfric.

"It's a private box, isn't it?" asked Verity. "And the opera lasts long enough that I wouldn't want to leave our baby herb dragon alone somewhere." She looked at Isra, and Isra nodded. It was unlikely that something would happen in the four hours they would be there, but Isra would feel better if they were able to respond quickly.

"I think that would probably be fine, so long as we're not carrying the jar with us through the opera hall," said Alfric. "And so long as it's not making any noise."

"What is *Lerial and Marsc*?" asked Mizuki. "Like, what's the plot? I don't want to name our herb dragon after some horrible tragic character."

"It *is* a bit of a tragedy," said Verity with a frown. "*Lerial and Marsc* are childhood friends who are separated by circumstances, then reconnect later in life, whereupon they go through some tribulations. They do get together in the end, but it's with pain in their past and a sense that things could have gone differently."

"And which of those is a girl's name?" asked Mizuki.

"Both of them," said Verity.

"Ah," said Mizuki. "And that's why you like it?"

Verity shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know. Seeing it was ... formative for me."

"So you're saying there are pretty girls," said Hannah.

"Pretty girls aren't really the point of the opera," said Alfric.

"And the story isn't really about that either," said Verity. "It's about love, named and unnamed."

"So there *aren't* pretty girls," said Hannah.

"Well," said Alfric. "It really is more about the music and the emotion. We can probably go backstage after the show, if you'd like, but they also come out to mingle and accept their plaudits. Their attractiveness is kind of beside the point."

"Well I didn't *mean* anything by it," said Hannah. "That was just my understandin' of why people came to these things, and, you know," she waved a hand. "Actors."

"Actors?" asked Isra.

"They've a reputation for promiscuity," said Hannah.

"Well, that's true," said Alfric. "But I don't think that you should go into the opera thinking about things like that. You come for the music and the emotional story it tells you."

"Okay, so Lerial?" asked Mizuki. "I think that's a fine name for a dragon."

"Herb dragon," said Alfric.

"It might be a bit classical," said Verity. "And I worry about what kinds of nicknames Mizuki will come up with."

"My days of nicknaming pets are over," said Mizuki. "It is true, in the past, I used to call Tabbins 'Tabby' or 'Bins' or other childish things, but no more."

"You were doing it earlier this morning," said Verity.

“And this morning was the past, wasn’t it?” asked Mizuki. She wagged a finger. “Woe to you, if you seek to engage in a battle of wits with the likes of me.”

“Well, I’m fine with Lerial if you are,” said Verity, rolling her eyes. She looked around. “Any other suggestions or vetos?”

“This is going to be a party pet?” asked Alfric. “I think ‘pet’ is a bit, well ... there’s a chance that our best course of action will be to sell it, or kill it.”

“How dare you say that about Larry,” said Mizuki, moving to put herself between Alfric and the herb dragon. She was only half joking, by Isra’s reckoning.

“If it grows too fast, shows signs of breeding by itself, becomes violent,” said Alfric. “There are lots of cases where we might be forced to put it down. That’s all I’m saying.”

“But you also think there’s a chance we might eat it for its meat,” said Isra.

“Well,” said Alfric. “No, because we want to breed them if they’re useful. But there’s a big difference between a pet and a commercial animal.”

“Fine,” said Mizuki. “But given it’s going to take some time to grow up, no harm treating it like a pet, right?”

“Two years to reach maturity, I think,” said Isra.

Alfric whistled. “Is that new information?”

“Yes,” said Isra. “And it’s also a guess. I’m not sure what shape it will have then, but it will be bigger.” She looked at Mizuki. “Time to spit out some herbs.”

“For little Lerial,” said Mizuki. She took some of the herbs they had picked, mostly mint, and stuffed them in her mouth, chewing on them.

“This is gross, I’m going to go practice,” said Verity, making a face.

“You’ll need to chew thoroughly,” said Isra. “And use lots of spit. It’s not what Lerial’s mother would have produced, but I think it will be close.”

Mizuki, whose mouth was full, nodded, and spent quite a bit of time chewing until she spat out, in one gob, something that was a slobbery paste. It was gross, Verity had been right about that.

Their little herb dragon saw this addition to its jar though, and lifted its head on a thin neck to sniff the air, then slowly made its way over and began to eat the spit-up herbs.

“She likes it!” said Mizuki. She peered in close at the dragon. “We’re going to bond, right?”

“No,” said Isra. “But an animal knows where its food comes from, and will seek out more, which is its own kind of affection.”

“Ah, so like what I’m doing with the four of you,” said Mizuki, nodding.

“You’re going to have to spit up herbs for her five times a day,” said Isra. “And it can’t all be mint, it will need to be chives, sage, and whatever else we can get. *Not* dried, as fresh as possible.”

“Joy,” said Mizuki with a frown. “Why did I volunteer for this?”

“Because you have a big heart,” said Alfric. “Now, herb dragon aside, we need to get packed and ready. My father will be coming early in the morning to fetch us, and I’d like for him to not be wandering around Pucklechurch for too long.”

Isra was still waiting to see whether the day would be undone, and they had some extended and fruitless conversations on the subject during dinner, but while that hung over them like a cloud, there was still work to be done. She packed, using a spare bag of Mizuzki’s, a pitiful amount of clothing and what felt like not enough for a trip across Inter.

And in the morning, it was, in fact, a new day, one that promised Dondrian, whenever Alfric’s father showed up.