

The situation in the Floating Isles had gone from bad to worse, the storm rampaging through the once vibrant, peaceful lands. With the air being thick with Corruption, it felt more like The Aether than what Novae could say she was comfortable with. Twigs snapped underneath her feet as she walked cautiously through the winding forest path, the thorny undergrowth scratching at her flanks as she cautiously watched the other two in front of her.

Good gods, she could have chosen any other companions. With the amount of Corruption Sokoninth was afflicted with, she was surprised he even had a semblance of a mind anymore. She had made sure to walk a fair distance away from him, and she hid her celestial feline from view. As far as she was concerned, he was more of a violent, uncontrollable beast than what she would consider a dragon. Yet, somehow, he had still been carrying on conversation, acting like he was actually gentle. It definitely confused her, seeing as the ones she had known with far less Corruption...were much crueler.

And Tec...well, he just cursed like a sailor. She was pretty sure his patience with their current situation was going to snap any second. He kept grumbling about the thorns snagging at his coat, cursing them as he padded alongside what was presumably his friend. They were certainly an odd couple of dragons.

Well, at least these two were a good show. Novae had partially come along to help save baby gryphons from a report where they had been stuck behind a falling tree. But the other reason was just because these two were too *interesting*.

Despite all of Tec's cursing and yelling, he did genuinely seem to care about trying to lead Sokoninth on a good path. As far as Novae was concerned, though, that wasn't an option anymore. Sure, an Aberrant dragon could try to be gentle, but they were unpredictable. The Aether had already corrupted their minds.

She had seen what The Aether could do to dragons, and Aberrant dragons couldn't be trusted. Spending enough time with Mare had shown her that, and he had way less than this one. Novae could feel dread heavy in her chest as she followed them through the dense forest, branches cracking and leaves whirling from the ravaging winds.

As they traveled farther into the forest, the undergrowth growing more and more dense, Novae felt like she could hear the cries of the tiny bird...creatures. She wanted to speed ahead of the two, but Tec beat her to it, dragging Sokoninth along with him. Was that a good idea?

The group broke out into a clearing, a group of tiny gryphons huddling close together. **"Momma?"** The little one that cried out was puffed up, his feathers drenched from the rain. His wide eyes landed on the dragons, particularly Sokoninth. And that only made him start crying more.

This seemed like a recipe for disaster.

Another one of the tiny creatures poked her head out, sniffing and trying to waddle away from the group. **“Have food? I'm hungry!”** She tried to climb over the tree branch, her tiny legs scrabbling against the wood. Either their wings were too wet for them to fly, or they were simply too young.

Sokoninth seemed to smile a bit at such cute creatures, his tail wagging as if he was happy to see them. **“Aren't they so cute?”** He seemed to want to hold them, but Tec eyed him warily. As if he knew what would happen to these poor babies if Sokoninth got a hold of any of them.

There was an air of caution about Tec, and Novae was almost certain they shouldn't have brought Sokoninth along, anyway. She sighed, padding over with her celestial feline purring against her shoulders. The cat reached out to swat Tec in the face playfully, who grunted and huffed in response.

“Should we let Mr. Grumpy around the babies? Just remember, no cursing in front of the children!” Novae teased Tec as she cautiously padded to the baby gryphons.

“Oh, fu-” A look from Sokoninth stopped him, but Tec definitely seemed like he wanted to say a few choice words to Novae.

Tec was surprisingly gentle with kids. He crouched down to be on their level, one of them booping his snout and giggling. **“Puppy!”** One of the baby gryphons stated, as if they had never seen a dragon.

Novae snorted, trying to hold back a laugh. The babies clambered onto Tec's back, one shaking out its feathers and spraying water droplets. **“Look at me! Grr! I've defeated the scary giant!”**

“No, dumb-dumb! I'm stronger than you!”

Tec rolled his eyes as he heaved himself up, carrying a group of puffed up gryphons on his back. **“You all defeated me.”**

This seemed to appease the two arguing. **“Yeah, we're strong!”**

But the tiny, white gryphon didn't seem to be pleased at all. Rather, he was nervously glancing over at Sokoninth, which Novae couldn't really blame him. That guy was dripping...some mysterious red liquid, and the Corruption heavy in the air around him probably hit too close to home.

“Where's Mama? She had the scary goop too. Is she gonna find us soon?”

Sokoninth seemed to go quiet at this, uncomfortably so. Tec interjected, smiling back at the baby gryphons. **“Oh, don't you worry! We'll make sure to find your mom. We just need to get you somewhere safer, first!”**

But there was a certain dread hanging in the air about what the little one had said. Novae knew very well what he had meant, and a shiver went down her spine. Was their mother one of the dragons that they were having to purify?

Would they be able to save his mother? Novae couldn't imagine being separated from her father, even if he was annoying and way too protective. Not to mention, if he had ever become corrupted by The Aether...

She didn't want to think about that. Thus, she just followed behind the other two, unable to shake an uneasy feeling.