

Draco Domina Magi, High Princess and High Mage of Lanutha, Master of the Red Robes, Caretaker of the Warren, rider of Dragon Queen Myrah'Care, Mystic Dragon sat before a desk piled high with paperwork. Through her fifty odd years of life, she had battled hydras, drasis, godlings, and monsters of all sorts. No foe had ever left her feeling as defeated as much as paperwork.

An organizer shelf had been added to the top of the stately wooden desk some years ago in an attempt to give her back some control over the desk space. Scrolls, notes, folded letters, and certificates in need of attention had soon filled the organizer and turned it into something more like a chaos generator. As the papers spread out across the desk like a growing cancer once more, Mystic had fought back with cubbies, nooks, and even a trash bin for the worst days. Nothing helped. Now she simply tolerated the flood of constant cries for attention that was her life and relied on the age-old method of chronological order for her organization methods.

That particular day, the most urgent stack of files had resolved itself into requests from the dragon riders. Repairs to this den, expansion of that one, upgrade due to family growth, upgrade due to dragon bonding, upgrade due to want. Mystic flipped a few pages forward. Furnishing requests, saddle requests, blacksmithing supplies, weaving supplies. All of these

requests had been compiled by the various heads of departments weeks ago and deposited for her approval. She could have assigned the treasurer to deal with such matters, should have, in fact, but Mystic remained stubbornly, determinedly in control of the running of her Warren. It left very little time to assist in the running of the princelet. Not that it mattered anyway. High mages were a status symbol meant to look intimidating at a prince's side. They were not required to speak in such positions. Neither were high princesses.

Mystic let out an explosive sigh and buried her face in her hands.

*Gods save me from paperwork,* she thought to no one in particular. Myrah'Care, being forever attached to her rider's mental threads, responded.

*The gods have saved you from plenty enough already. Give them a rest and sign the documents. You know everything is in order already. You could speed this right along if you would just relax a little.*

Mystic propped her head up on her hands, fingers curled beneath her chin, and glowered at the silven dame reclining at the far end of the den.

*You sound like Myia,* she said.

*Hm, isn't that interesting. One of your advisers attempting to give you advice. Good advice, I might add. You wouldn't have half the paperwork you so bemoan if you delegated.*

Myrah'Care preened as she spoke, raising one glittering wing to nip at the scales beneath the joint. She looked as beautiful that day as she had the day of her hatching in Mystic's eyes. A being of pure grace and power. And smugness. A coo of delight replied to the passing string of thoughts.

*You may be right, dear-heart, but there are some documents that I would prefer come directly to me.* She was still the caretaker of this place. So long as she held that title, she would ensure things ran the way she designed.

*Hm, like a certain formal request that you've been avoiding,* Myrah'Care replied.

Mystic did not respond immediately. She knew the document Myrah spoke of without needing to see it. She flipped through the papers before her anyway. There, at the bottom of her current pile, lay a single stiff scroll with a title picked out in swirling black ink.

A Formal Request by the Lead Riders of the Order of Lanutha for Resolution to the Matter of Sistarrist Drakan.

Mystic drew in a deep breath, held it for a beat, then let it out in a sigh that carried all her joy for the day with it. She

let the papers fall back into place and buried her face in her hands again.

Sistarrist Drakan, world of the hydras. Second world of the hydras, really. They used to be the all-powerful masters of Tris'Hath until the dragon riders ousted them and built a special prison world all for their own. That whole plan had issues from the start, but she'd insisted on a solution that didn't involve exterminating an entire species. The hydras would never willingly back down. It had to be permanent in one way or another.

Yet it wasn't enough. Even now, years after Lanutha declared victory over the hydras and reduced their presence on Tris'Hath to a scattering of sightings, they remained a threat. Their long standing subjugation of the world left many believing they were the rightful overlords and nothing short of a return to servitude would do. It was a mess of a situation, compounded by the insistence of her best and brightest that out of sight and out of mind was not good enough. Now that they had them all gathered up in a single location, they should proceed to the next logical step.

*Extermination*, the word slipped from Myrah'Care's thoughts. Even the delicate, silver strands of her bond's mental voice could not suck the poison from that word. *I am no more fond of*

*the hydras than you, rider-mine, but can we really condone complete eradication?*

*No, of course not. They're still living beings. They even have bonds. There are so many more lives at stake than just the hydras,* Mystic replied. Once, not long ago, her response would have been very different. She had even prepared, eagerly so, for the obliteration of that world.

And if she had erased Sistarrist Drakan from existence when they'd first corralled the hydras there, then she never would have met Bane. Myrah'Care never would have lost an egg. Thayer would never have gained an older brother. Positives and negatives forever struggling to balance, but nothing could weigh as much as the cost of a life.

*But something must be done,* Myrah said.

Mystic scrubbed at her face, then stood up with enough force to drive her chair back with an audible grinding of wood on stone.

"Let's go for a flight," she said, glaring down at the stack of papers one last time, as if daring it to prevent her from taking a much needed break.

Myrah replied with a warm touch to her thoughts and uncoiled herself from her restful pose with all the elegance of a waking cat. She stretched and flexed her limbs, shivering her wings

along her sides, then ducked her head low and stalked out the long tunnel to the flight fields beyond.

Mystic followed in the wake of her silver bond, using the short walk to calm her frazzled nerves. The further from her magically sealed den they strode, the warmer the air became. Soon, it clung to her skin and cooled, sweet and fragrant, against her face.

Out on the field, the rising sun bathed the world in brilliant daylight. Emerald grasses bent and shivered in an unseen breeze. Dragons lounged about like large, multi-coloured boulders all across the flat expanse, wings spread and necks arched up to the sky, already drinking in the day's heat. Toward the center of the field, around the solitary barn that dared to stand in the flight path of dragons, a middle-aged man worked several horses around a corral.

Mystic took a moment to drink in the serenity of the scene before striding over to Myrah's side and hoisting herself up to the dragon's back. She had long ago abandoned any pretense of sitting like a lady and instead cut a slit up the side of a large number of her dresses so that they didn't bunch around her knees.

Not wearing dresses was also an option, but she didn't like the way most pants fit about her waist.

Myrah'Care crouched low to the ground, wings extended. The pull and tense of muscle beneath Mystic's thighs was as familiar a language as the spidery strands of Myrah's mental touch. The mage leaned forward, hands wrapped around one of the thin sails marching down the silver's back. Myrah shifted her weight to her hindlegs and Mystic braced.

The silver dame took off in three long, bounding strides, her wings gathering up greedy swaths of air beneath the stretched membranes. On the third leap, she aimed skyward and slammed her wings down.

Wind whipped at Mystic's long hair and tugged at her cloak as they rose higher. Still pressed to Myrah's back, she worked one hand free and traced a sigil in the air. The wind died down to a tolerable level and she sat up straight to enjoy the view of the ground peeling away from them.

*Blakoreth is flying as well. It seems you were not the only restless one,* Myrah said.

*Let's go meet them, then. Maybe a quick jaunt around the cliffs would do us all some good.*

Myrah replied with a rumble that vibrated through Mystic's legs. With a flex and twist of her wings, she banked toward the dark speck of blue soaring overhead.

A wall of green mountainside rose beside them, interrupted here and there by dark passages and flat ledges. The dragon dens

of New Warren riddled this side of the Dragon Tooth Mountains. Once they had been difficult to spot, nestled back amongst the vines and trees as they were. Now, with so many dragons calling this place home, they seemed almost to outnumber the stars in the sky. Above them all, roosting on the edge of a cliff and overlooking the ocean far below, sat Castle Drakmor; a place she only called home when the local nobility came calling.

So much had changed in this place since she originally stumbled across the Warren. It hadn't known any sort of activity since before the Cataclysm, when a powerful mage had called it home. Now, thanks to years of effort and fighting and sometimes blind luck, an entire pricelet sprawled out beneath her. And she, a princess of all things. How that news must have given her parents strokes.

That was years ago though. Now, gliding effortlessly alongside the mountain range she called home, Mystic looked ahead to the wide blue wings and powerful stretch of muscle that was her husband's bondmate.

Myrah reached out to Blakoreth's thoughts first, directing the blue's attention down to them. The wash of warm, welcoming feelings that came back trickled through their shared connection. Mystic smiled, extending her own telepathic band to the dragon.



*Blakoreth, interrupting important royal business for a quick flight? I'm surprised at you.*

A bark of laughter rolled out from the dragon's throat, sounding more like a cough to her ears. The mirth of it translated through his mental tones.

*You know very well this was your partner's doing, dear princess. The same complaints, day after day, get tiring quickly.* Blakoreth went silent for a moment, his head tilting an inch toward the dark-haired man seated on his back. *Aaron says he would like to trade places.*

*Certainly, Mystic scoffed. Would he like to requisition mining materials for the third time this month? Or perhaps respond to the requests from the riders for new saddles. Again.*

*Aaron recants his request.* A rumble of amusement followed the blue dragon's words.

At last, Myrah'Care rose to be at a level with Blakoreth. The two dipped close for a moment, blue and silver wings overshadowing their riders as they touched muzzles in a brief display of affection. Then Myrah banked and slipped a few feet away and below her mate to give herself room to stretch her wings.

*In truth, I don't envy him the task of dealing with the supplicants. I have heard some of their demands. More protection, more land, but never any cost. You would think after*

*a time they would be satisfied, but they never are,* Blakoreth said, his tones turned dark as oncoming midnight as they spread throughout the group thought.

The dragons were natural telepaths, as was Mystic. Aaron had never and would never develop such an ability, but they were mindful to include him in all of their discussions.

*The princelet is growing in a way it never could have before. All of the princelets are. Without the threat of hydra rampages every day, they can expand, grow crops, raise sheep and cattle. For the first time, the people are fat and rich and happy. It's a glorious feeling. Easy to become addicted to,* Mystic replied. She'd heard the same argument parroted back at her many a time. As true as the words were, it didn't make the behaviour of the tithers any easier to stomach.

*Yes, well, now they only have to fear the presence of dragons darkening the skies.*

Silence fell across the shared connection. Not one of the lot of them could deny that a new field of problems had risen to fill the void left by the hydras. The growth and development of Lanutha fed those problems, making them fatter and louder with each passing month. It was enough to make one long for the simpler times of war.

*Is that Baaki'Virh up there?* Myrah's soft threads broke the brooding silence and directed all four members of the group to a

speck of violet growing against the horizon. The red dot that followed confirmed the first figure to be Baaki'Virh. She never went anywhere without her brother. It took longer to pick out the slate blue figure gliding along in their wake, his wings the same colour as the sky.

*And that would be Stacurik. Aaron has some... words.* Blakoreth left the high princes' actual verbiage a mystery as he powered ahead toward the approaching trio.

*One of these days, my son will accept his future as High Prince of Lanutha. He will put away his childish behaviours and rule over the people with all the grace and dignity that we have instilled in him.*

Myrah'Care turned her head, one glittering blue eye finding the woman perched on her back. No words needed to be spoken to convey the incredulousness of the silver queen. Mystic let out a sigh.

*We had better catch up to them,* she said.

It did not take long for Blakoreth and Myrah'Care to coast into range of the trio of returning dragons. They each bugled greetings at each other, and within seconds, the mental web of interconnected minds expanded to include five more.

*Thayer,* Blakoreth intoned, keeping his threads as calm and level as possible, *your father would like you to know that you're late.*

*Good morning, Blake! Myrah, mom.* The brilliant, golden threads of Thayer's thoughts cast out among the group, and he paired each greeting with a nod to to the recipient. He, like his mother had the gift of telepathy. With five dragons and two telepaths among the group, the absence of Bane or Aaron's voices felt far more noticeable. At last, Thayer settled a sunny smile on his father and waved. *Morning, dad. I thought I'd pop down for some coffee before the supplicants arrived.*

*They've already started,* Blakoreth stated.

*Oh really? Early bunch. Anything fun today?*

A new sound rolled up from the depths of Blakoreth's chest. His eyes whirled through shades of violet, red, and finally settled on orange.

*This is irritating. I'm not playing messenger while the two of you have a spat. We need to land.*

Without waiting for a response, the blue dragon banked and circled around to face New Warren once more. Myrah followed, and after a moment's hesitation, Baaki, Baneo, and Stacurik came after.

There were many entrances to New Warren. Most of them lead to individual dens. For access to the halls, one had to go to one of the plateaus. These grassy flat ledges jutted out from yawning openings in the mountainside. Though carved from the stone of the mountain itself, the plant life of the region had

wasted no time in reclaiming the new landscape. Vines dripped from the mouths of the tunnels like shaggy teeth and hung off the wide, flat ledges, adding a beard around the mountain maws. The grass that had crept its way across the ledges stubbornly clung to life, despite the repeated trampling of hundreds of draconic and humanoid feet. The nearest of these entrances even sported a small, decorative waterfall that split into two just above the entrance, pattered down in steps to either side, then joined again for the last leg of the journey toward the river rushing to meet the ocean.

Blakoreth landed on the ledge, displacing several colourful birds who took to the air with offended squawks. He dropped one shoulder to the ground and all but spilled his rider off his back. Based on the glowers exchanged between the two, part of the argument appeared to be ongoing. At least Aaron had learned how to silence his thoughts when needed.

Mystic had long ago grown accustomed to the constant buzz of noise in her head. As her magical prowess developed, so too did her control, and eventually she learned how to block out all but the loudest of errant thoughts from those around her. Aaron, in those first few years of fumbling friendship, did not learn the tricks to telepathy quite as quickly. She'd overheard many an interesting thought from him before he figured out how to clamp down on the most embarrassing ones.

Myrah'Care alighted to the ledge beside Blakoreth as the large blue huffed and sat down forcefully. Baaki'Virh, Baneo'Mybl, and Stacurik found their own perches, the latter two bending shoulders to let their bonds step down. Mystic took her time climbing down, thanking Myrah for her care and attention as her husband stalked toward her son. She'd heard this argument almost as often as she heard the saddle requisitions.

"Thayer, I asked you to be on time today," Aaron said, his tones kept under such tight control, an errant breeze might be enough to cause him to snap.

"And, roughly speaking, I am," Thayer retorted. "Honestly though, do you really need me to hear all of the tithers droning on about how they don't have enough of this or that or the days are too short or the monsoons last too long--"

"They are your tithers, remember. One day, their concerns will be your concerns. You need to hear them. See them. And they need to see you just as much. As it is, I may as well be asking S'ron to place a puppet on the throne after I'm gone since it'll be just as effective."

"Oh, now that's harsh, dad. Especially given you've told me yourself how repetitive they get. If it's going to be the same request every time, I don't see why we can't just have them write a letter and be done with it."

Thayer stalked past his father, his good mood clearly soured judging by the expression on his face. As he marched into the mouth of the central passage, Aaron stalked up beside him.

"The point is to show them you are willing to listen to them," Aaron countered. He had more to say, ever determined to make the heir apparent aware of his future responsibilities, but Mystic tuned the argument out. She drew in a deep breath, tasting the sweet fragrance of ripe fruit in the air, then turned and held a hand out to Bane.

The towering, dark-haired figure bowed to the high princess and offered her the crook of his arm. This she took, laying her fingertips against the cool shell of his black armour as they trailed after the father and son arguing their way toward the mess hall.

"Where did you pick him up from today," Mystic asked as they strolled.

"A little town near the border. Yortown? Yorfolk? One of those. He found himself a herbalist."

"Hm. Likely the one who helped provide the flowers for last night's celebration. There seem to be so many of them these days."

"Herbalists or celebrations?"

A short laugh broke through Mystic's morose reflections. She looked up at Bane with a smile.

"Celebrations. Always a new one it seems."

"The people have much to celebrate. The war's only been over for a decade."

"Hm," Mystic said, her tone becoming pensive. "This world has been enslaved to the hydras for so long, it doesn't seem to know what to do with freedom. All they can do is drink and expand. We've essentially created a new world."

"A young world." Bane nodded to the pair rapidly pulling ahead of them. Thayer had his hands splayed wide, making some grand point to his father, who looked as exasperated as ever. "One that's still experiencing all the joys life has to offer."

"Point," Mystic conceded, the smile softening and hiding in the corner of her mouth. "It needs guidance."

"It needs to enjoy that freedom." Bane's mouth twitched in the hint of a frown. "Though I'd prefer it if it happened closer to home. Where it's safe."

Mystic let out another short laugh and patted Bane's armour plating.

"You're a good brother to him, Bane. I can't imagine anyone who could match your patience for his antics."

"He's my best friend." The words came easily to Bane's lips, followed by a grimace. Though he was quick to smooth out his features as soon as the thought crossed his mind, Mystic was quicker.



A thick, black bar of script snaked its way across her thoughts again. A Formal Request by the Lead Riders of the Order of Lanutha for Resolution to the Matter of Sistarrist Drakan. What if she had destroyed the world earlier? What if she'd never met Bane? She had come so close. The thought set a chill in her guts that refused to move.

Up ahead, Thayer turned a corner and disappeared into the mess hall, Aaron tripping over his shadow. The hall itself was a massive, domed cavern outfitted with dozens upon dozens of long tables and benches. A hearth large enough to roast a horse blazed against the far wall, though its heat did not translate far. A feature of the ruins carved into the thick, slate stones arching around the fireplace. Pillows and couches and soft, cushioned surfaces surrounded the hearth, and a wooden stage just off to the side stood empty, though last night that area had been more lively than any of the tables. Crushed flowers and abandoned cups still littered the nearby tables. Young kitchen hands in stained white aprons moved among the tables, absently sweeping the refuse into bins carried under one arm. Within a few hours, the place would be pristine again. And a few more after that, it would be full of life as riders and workers alike trickled in for their midday meal. A long, snaking bar claimed one quarter of the far wall, and behind it lay several doors in and out of the kitchen that was the heart of this place. The

smells and bright lighting of the mess hall, no matter the time of day, always reminded Mystic of a warm welcome home.

Aaron chased Thayer to the bar, where the beleaguered heir reached over the wooden surface to pull up a carafe of coffee. He practically lived in this chamber. No wonder he knew where the bar staff stored everything.

"Dad, I'm just saying, it's inefficient." Four mugs followed the carafe to the bar's surface. Thayer began pouring out piping hot black liquid without waiting for the others to catch up.

"It's not about efficiency. It's about taking care of your people."

"Which I can do far better if I'm not bogged down listening to their Lords whine about how their coffers didn't get fat enough this year."

Thayer passed a mug to his father, then one each to Mystic and Bane. None among them asked for sugar or cream, though Mystic desperately wanted the former. Thayer and Bane had both learned the value of black coffee first thing in the morning from the Lanathan monarchs.

"It's the people who pay into those coffers," Aaron countered.

"Right. Which is why I should be spending my time finding out if they really need that much extra coin or not."

"We should go on a holiday," Mystic stated abruptly. She hadn't even been thinking of leaving, but now that the words were out, she rather liked the idea. The war had required so much attention and man power that it had whittled away her ability to focus on anything else until nothing remained. Even the visits off-world ceased. She told herself it was to keep the peace with the princes who feared more dragon riders, but the truth was there was no room for flights and hatchings when people were dying at home.

Now though, hydra attacks were infrequent at worst, and though the demands of paperwork weighed on her thoughts, she knew it would still be there when she returned home. It was time for her to put a little faith in her advisers and give them the responsibility they asked for.

Aaron and Thayer stared at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"Did... Did my mom just say she wants to... stop working for a time?" Thayer looked at Bane, one hand out-stretched to his friend as if begging for the physical form of a reason for this madness to be handed to him. Bane, for his part, merely shrugged.

"All of you have been telling me to pass off some of these responsibilities. Aaron, you're clearly in need of a break. And Thayer..." Mystic paused to sigh. "Well I suppose sometimes you need a vacation from your every day vacation, hmm?"

Thayer rolled his eyes.

"It would be nice to have a trip as a family." Again Mystic paused, this time to lightly touch Bane's arm. "All four of us. No threat of hydra attacks. No war planning to come home to. No concerns but the mountain of paperwork that will be waiting for us. I miss seeing my friends. We haven't toured the other worlds in years."

"The other princes would have a fit if we bring back more dragons. We signed a treaty," Aaron muttered.

"Then we don't. We keep to the riders we have and monitor the Hathian bondings, as we've sworn to. This is a trip just for us. No business."

"Can you really put it away for a couple days to enjoy yourself?" Thayer took a sip of the dark, scalding liquid in his mug, grimaced as it touched his tongue, then played it off as if the coffee were little warmer than bathwater. Sometimes Mystic wondered if her child had been raised more by the resident cats than the dragons and their riders.

Mystic tilted her head up in a haughty gesture.

"I'll have you know I used to be well versed in the concept of fun."

"Oh gods," Thayer groaned into his mug.

"I used to have fun on a regular basis."

"Mom."

"Why, I can remember having fun long before you were ever born."

"Mom, stop."

"I bet I know manners of fun you've never heard of before."

Aaron's inability to keep a straight face put an end to Mystic's teasing. As he chortled into his mug, she broke out in a grin.

"But in all honesty, I think we deserve a break. Everyone else has been celebrating non-stop. Why shouldn't we? We can even go visit Magika and Taern for a spell."

"It's been a while since we've seen Zydelle." Thayer looked to Bane, who shrugged again.

"She's been busy learning the trade from her mother. Like the heir she is," Bane said.

Thayer's expression turned to a scowl.

"It would be nice to take a trip without any strings attached." Aaron set his coffee cup on the bar, then stepped toward Mystic and pulled her close with both arms locking around her waist. "You and I haven't been on an adventure in decades."

"Mom! Dad! Gross."

"You're not thirteen anymore, Thayer. You don't need to use a thirteen-year-old's vocabulary." Mystic slid her arms up and around Aaron's shoulders, taking a moment to revel in the rarely expressed affection. They were often too exhausted by the end of

the day to do anything but sleep. Just the thought of having some peace and quiet with her husband filled her with a giddy sort of excitement. She tilted her head toward him as he rested his forehead against hers.

"Mother, father, your public display of affection is unbecoming of two monarchs who have attained the prestigious rank of high prince and high princess. It behooves you to control yourselves in situations where you may encounter your courtly subjects." Thayer finished with a flourishing bow, then straightened up and sipped his coffee once more.

The look exchanged between Mystic and Aaron was equal parts irritation and amusement. Aaron broke the stare first, planting a light kiss on Mystic's forehead before releasing his hold on her.

"Alright, your highness, we'll stop. For now," Aaron said.

"Well, what do you think? Shall we pack up and announce a short leave?" Mystic looked from her husband to her son, to her adopted son. All three seemed to be considering the reactions of each other just as carefully.

"Sure. Why not?" Thayer said. "How long will it take for you two to disentangle yourselves from your obligations?"

"We can leave tomorrow morning, I think. Myia and Ren have been pressuring me to pass off some duties. I'm sure they'll jump at this opportunity."

"I can make arrangements at court," Aaron said. "S'ron won't be happy, but he does love telling the tithers to come back another day."

"It's settled then. Everyone go pack. We'll drop in on Magika first and go from there."

"How long are we going for," Aaron asked.

"Oh, I think a week to start should suffice. We'll see how we feel after that." A bright, energetic grin split across Mystic's face. "Oh, I am looking forward to this now. Let's get packed."

Mystic waited for Aaron, Thayer and Bane to lead the way out of the mess hall. Thayer pulled ahead, already talking excitedly about the worlds he wanted to visit and parties he wanted to crash. Aaron seemed more reserved, but smiled nonetheless. When had the silver hairs crept in at his temples? When had he exchanged worn tunics and battle gear for fine blue and silver silks? It seemed as if they had spent just the other day exploring a lost cavern somewhere, and yet so many years had gone by since their first adventure together. And Thayer, her sweet, golden-haired child who could charm a room with his smile. When had he grown into a man? Bane as well, for that matter. A fine man. A strong, powerful man who brought no memory of his father to her mind anymore. Her little family had grown so much over the years. She loved them fiercely. She feared for them daily.

*You can't put it off forever. Myrah's slender, silver thread wove its way across her thoughts.*

*I know, my heart. I know. But it will keep for a little while at least. And maybe, with some luck, I will find a solution out there that cannot be found here.*

The responding twist of colours from Myrah's mindscape mirrored and reflected Mystic's hopefulness. Myrah did not agree with this desperate grasp for outside help, but she would go along with it. As Mystic said, the problem would keep for a while still.

The hydras would always keep. Always wait. They were, if nothing else, the most patient of hunters.