

As ordered, M'Kya had taken her down to the valley, setting down on the low bank of the river. She staggered a little when he released her, as if she were weak from the coupling. He could see some of his essence and hers running down her legs, rinsing the light, reddish dust that covered her and allowing the darker colour of her smooth brown skin to show. He could still smell her, and she was intoxicating, like nothing else he had ever experienced. Even the experiments with the herbs used by the dragon's for their mind magic, had not prepared him for the reality of seeing through the barrier of past and future. For that's what he had realized, finally. That's what she had done to him, given him this power to see forward and backward. And the wind, she let him see the wind.

"What is a dragon?"

The question shocked M'Kya. Brought him back to the present, to the scrubby, dry mud bank of the river, where the vegetation was sparse, and the T'err'an female stood naked and unafraid, not two spans from him. And yet, he could not find the words to answer. How was he supposed to explain the dragons? How could he explain that the dragons had once ruled here, that this was their world long before her people existed as a species? How could he explain to her that a species she had never seen, possibly the most dangerous species that had ever lived, was coming back? And then he saw, with the utmost clarity, what it would really mean to her kind. In all likelihood, he knew the dragons would view them as nothing more than prey. And he also realized, that he could not allow that to happen.

"The dragons can fly, they belch fire, and they are coming to reclaim this world," he finally said, finding his voice, and surprising himself with its honesty. "They are technologically advanced, robust, and very adaptable to a wide range of climates. The dragons will love it here, but I fear they will not love you. Unless, they like the way you taste when they break fast."

She seemed to stand up straighter after he said it, like she had been challenged and was signalling that it was she, and not he, that was the predator in this arrangement.

"Animals do not kill us, we kill them. We are the people. They will serve us, or sustain us. It is our way."

It was said with such blissful confidence, that for a moment, he could almost believe it was true. But she had never seen a dragon eat someone, as he once had, when a captured dragon suddenly regained consciousness and swallowed one of the Masters whole. Using the corpse as fuel, which he then used to bring the fire that nearly killed all of them present, before he was put down by another of the Masters, who neatly removed the dragon's head with a single sweep of his long blade. M'Kya could still remember the smell of the dragon's blood that had covered him from throat to thigh. Like brimstone, mixed with the sweet fragrance of ripe fruit.

D'aana didn't even know what iron was, while the dragons were smiths of rare skill, knowing both fire and steel with an intimacy that was hard to fathom. It was that skill with metal that allowed them to escape catastrophe the first time. It was their skill with edged weapons, curved and deadly, welded on wing, and with all four appendages equipped, that allowed so small a number of them to defeat legions of his forebears in the first great war. Able to seize and hold so large a part of E'denn, that they became its de facto masters for long centuries of rotas before an equilibrium between the two was reached, and peace between the two species became possible.

Dragon culture, an odd mix of advanced technology, ancient custom, and long tradition, was hard to fathom even for someone like M'Kya who had been around dragons since finishing his training as an acolyte. There were even some dragons he considered friends, although friendship was a concept that most of the E'Lohiim would believe dragons incapable of understanding. But how would a T'err'an possibly relate to the ritual a clan of the A'Rach exercised with nearly every breath taken by their respective Matriarch's. As he looked at her, M'Kya could not imagine this small T'err'an female speaking to one of those imposing beasts with anything other than fear in her heart. Fear that would be obvious to a dragon, with their special gifts of magic and fire.

And then he saw something that was equally obvious. She was not afraid of him, even though she certainly had reason to be. Was the T'err'an magic and personality powerful enough to snare a dragon as easily as it had captivated him? Serve or sustain? Isn't that what the dragons themselves demanded of lesser species? Isn't that what the Elders were always warning them about, dragons seeking to enslave them, just because they weren't dragons?

Among the younger generations of E'Lohiim, the prospect of another war was impossible to justify, but the Elders were a different matter entirely. They were always planning the next war, plotting to counter any perceived advantage the dragon matriarchs might gain. Sifting through everything the matriarchs said, trying to separate the truth from the lies. Even when the dragons gave them access to the Sister, the Elders used it as a resource to exploit, rather than an opportunity to forge real relationships with the dragons they were working alongside. Even though the dragons resolved to speak the "true-tongue" in their technical briefings, the elders never really believed them because of the perceived absurdity, at least in their minds, of constructing an entire language devoted to speaking the truth.

Not telling the unvarnished truth was most definitely a dragon trait. There was no getting around that fundamental difference between their species. But, as it was once explained to him by a dragon he did consider a friend, in the truest sense of the word. "To assume that anyone would tell you the absolute truth without warning you beforehand that the truth was coming, was idiotic. Dragons," she explained, as if speaking to a dullard, "simply recognized an elemental truth. And the truth is, everyone lies, without exception, so of course it was up to you to decipher the lies from the truth, how else was a dragon to tell how worthy you were to know the truth."

Which is why they had developed an entire language devoted to telling nothing but the truth, once they deemed you worthy enough to handle the truths they were about to divulge to you! It was convoluted reasoning, but to a dragon it made perfect sense. The Great Hall of the A'Rach, located in the fortress of O'lymm'pi, was no place for the stupid, or the slow. A matriarch must be swift, charismatic, and deadly with a blade, if she hoped her clan to survive, let alone prosper.

The "true-tongue" allowed important business to be conducted amongst them with the expectation that everyone at the table would be privy to the unvarnished truth. This was so fundamental to the dragon hierarchy, that only members of the matriarchal lineage were even taught to speak the true-tongue. Males, and lesser females were restricted to the ordinary speech of the lower caste, the assumption being that the truths they would tell, would be for their convenience, not necessarily an accurate representation of anything they might be

describing. The only males who would be privy to the true-tongue, would be the consorts to the matriarchs. They would be required to speak only the true-tongue when in the presence of their matriarch, or any other higher caste female. To do otherwise, would be a grave insult, and liable to invite instant execution. To the dragons, it was a matter of honour that those privileged enough to be taught the true-tongue, were worthy of its use.

According to D'Ryas, it was a rare male that was consulted on anything of importance, and they were treated more like jewelry than anything else. If a matriarch's males were beautiful, and passingly intelligent, it reflected well on the matriarch, nothing more. The males chosen to be sires, usually, but not always, the first consort a female took became part of a different caste, more respected, and more likely to have some sort of increased responsibility, particularly, over the progeny of any union. But they were always treated as a reflection of their mistress, nothing more.

Dragon females were said to have rapacious sexual appetites, and so needed enough males around them to satisfy any hungers they might develop, often mounting male after male in a kind of sexual frenzy. Or so he had been told. No one really knew if any of it were true, or if it were all just prurient speculation by elders no longer able to exercise their own organs to the degree they wished. The so-called "tangle of dragons" tales of debauchery might be just that, tales told to titillate rather than inform. No one outside the A'Rach had ever been witness to a dragon mating, although some of the elders claimed that previous generations of E'Lohiim had seen such things when the dragons first arrived on E'denn.

In the days when dragons ate E'Lohiim, the dark days after they first descended from the black skies caused by the Sister's arrival, cold and starving, most of them unable to produce the fire, many myths were invented about the interlopers. The savagery of a starving dragon could not be denied, he knew that, but the tales told by some of the elders tasked with being keepers of history were so outrageous, that they could scarce be believed. Tales of huge females, who were so strong as to be able to kill a hundred E'Lohiim with a single belch of fire, and slice to death another hundred before being driven off by the Host. But if even half the stories were something approaching the truth, M'Kya doubted that the T'err'an population could put up much resistance, in spite of her boast.

The thing that could save them was the fact that there were so few of them, and so many of everything else. There was no shortage of meat on this world. Most of the animals he had catalogued in the one rota he had spent here were much more plentiful and larger than the average T'err'an, of which he had seen only a few hundred specimens. They would not be a perceived threat to the Matriarchs, and the very logical dragons would calculate the best kill to meat ratio for the food they would need to harvest, but they also took into account the taste of the food, and assigned a calculated value to use in their deliberations. That could be the T'err'an undoing. That some dragon would sample one of them and decide they were the best thing she had ever tasted.

And if his own experience were any way to judge, they were very tasty indeed. And magical as well. Something that he knew would intrigue the dragons, particularly the matriarchs, who considered magic to be their own sacred realm. And the dragons would adapt, of that there could be no doubt. After a few century of rota, they would develop larger musculature to overcome the increase in gravity. But for the first few months, or perhaps years, they would be

relatively weak. If the humans had any hope of avoiding them, they must develop a strategy to do so in the first rota after the arrival. Otherwise, the dragons might harvest them.

The plan was to slowly increase the spin of the Sister, until the centrifugally induced gravity closely matched the actual gravity of the destination. In this way, both dragons and E’Lohiim, would have time to accumulate enough muscle mass to make the increased gravity of the destination manageable. Otherwise, neither species would be able to move upon arrival, or possibly even be able to suck enough air into their lungs to survive. Although, that too was more abundant on the new world, where they wouldn’t need to worry about clouds of unbreathable air, like the polar regions of E’denn.

There was also less background radiation, due to the robust magnetic field. So the recovery from the voyage should be accelerated, but who knew, really, what condition they would all be in when the Sister arrived. Also, who knew what the Sister’s arrival might do to T’err’a? It could very well induce the same type of wobble that many of the elders thought caused the collapse on E’denn. And when the dragons arrived on E’denn, they were ravenous, so there was no reason to suppose that the same wouldn’t hold true when they arrived here.

They had been preparing for more than a century of rota for the migration, so they had amassed vast stockpiles of what the dragon’s called “flying meat”. The kind that dragons on E’denn carried in hardened leather pockets strapped to their breast plates, so they could eat on wing without having to hunt. It was said that some of the matriarchs had spent months on wing in this manner. Never having to land to feed, even sleeping on wing. Able to cover vast distances, the food tailored to each dragons tastes, and nutritional requirements, depending on the nature of the journey. It was said that the dragons also flew for the sheer joy of it, much like the E’Lohiim themselves, but that wasn’t something that had ever brought them together. Flights of dragons and E’Lohiim without bloodshed had been historically rare, so they tended to avoid each other, until the necessity of the migration had forced them to work together. The dragons were shrewd beasts, and knew the E’Lohiim had technology that would make resurrecting the Sister possible.

They also had their magic, which gave them some sort of insight into the future, although what that insight might be was hard to say. “Can you see the future?” he asked. “Is that why you asked me about dragons?”

D’aana considered her reply. It was not quite so simple as “seeing” the future, it was more like flashes of the future. Almost a taste of the future, would be the easiest way to describe it. She could see the flat trails, but not how they would come to be built. She could see tall dwellings that would make their own smooth cliffs, but not fathom why they were built, or who built them. All these things would come to pass, or so she had been taught, but the exact circumstances of why they would come to pass was beyond her imagination, in spite of the sacred plants that split open the worlds between past and future. She saw a shadow looming over her people, and the word that came to her was “dragon”. She did not know why, or even what an actual dragon looked like, but she knew that the shadows would become life, and she would see a real dragon soon enough. According to this creature from another world the dragons were coming. They would be a threat to the people, or an opportunity, only the future would tell.

The fact that there were other worlds, and creatures that occupied them was not in the least surprising. The Sensu'aa had been walking through the doors between worlds for as long as the people had been walking this one, but this was the first time one of the creatures from those worlds had stepped through a door into this one. It was a mystery of sorts, but not really surprising. That the beings in the other worlds, would go on their own spirit walks, to gain the same types of insights that the Sensu'aa themselves gained, was perfectly logical and should have been expected. She would remember to warn the next of her calling what the spirit dream might manifest.

But this was the essence of her calling, to find the things that the people did not know and use that knowledge for the good of all. How or why, out of all the Sensu'aa who had lived, she would be the only one to actually meet, and mount, someone from the spirit world, she did not know. And even though the effects of the sacred plants were beginning to wane just a little, and she needed to get back to the camp to share the sacred water, she was loathe to leave him here alone.

"When the doors between worlds open," she finally said in reply to his question, "roads to the future and the past become visible, but they are only possible roads, not always the true road. Not always the road the people will choose to follow."

"Are you sure the choice is yours?" the creature replied, in the strange hissing language that she had come to understand by way of their intimate contact.

D'aana laughed, causing the beast to take a step backward. "The choice is always ours," she stated matter of factly. "To run, to fight, to live, to die, the choice is always ours! We are the people, and this is our world. Your dragons will service us, or sustain us! As will you, and your kind, should you stay here. Go now! The people must drink the sacred water, and see what I've seen."

And with that, the T'err'an turned on her heel and began walking away from him, away from the river, and out into the scrubby brush that stretched away to the horizon on the low side of the river. He thought of following her, but decided not to, finally realizing how vulnerable he was on the ground. It was a long walk, and a longer climb on the other side of the river to his observation pod. Out of reach to the T'err'an fauna, and reinforced with the best of dragon metal. He would be safe there until the full effects of the T'err'an magic had worn off.