Dragon Daddy Diaries

A Girl Grows to Greatness



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Preface

It feels like it was only the other day I thought to write in a diary about all the precious days I'm spending with Olivia, but we've already reached the second volume. Who could've ever imagined a dragon like me raising a small she-human—or rather, a little girl? Yet here I am, enjoying each and every day so much I can barely express it. I never expected time would fly by this briskly. In all honesty, I don't know whether it's been a brief span of time or a really long one. It was only a small while back that my precious little one was three or four years old. And now she's already thirteen. Thirteen!

Indeed, a year has passed since she enrolled in a "prestigious" school called the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. But it feels like it's only been five seconds for me. It went by in a blink! What's strange is that, while that may be the case, Olivia being away for one year also felt just as long as any century from before I knew her. I've done a bit of reading up on humans and society at large, but their curiosities never cease to amaze me.

Everyone's as healthy and spirited as ever. The two ladies who share a home with us, the Dark Queen, Miss Maredia, and the Demonic...or rather, the *Dark-Kin* Knight Captain, Miss Clowria, enjoy everyday life as usual.

Since Florence Academy is a boarding school, we sadly don't get to see each other much when Olivia has class. However, I have no doubt that she's enjoying her days with her best friend Daisy, her buddies in her class, and the school's Founder, Miss Phyllis. The Dark Queen told me that the school life of a girl as cute and enchanting as Olivia is "peak awesomesauce," and I don't disagree. Olivia recounted the fun and delightful things that happened at school to us during the Spring's-Near Festival break that capped off her first year.

Which is why I could never have expected what happened next. I mean, not one of my parenting books touched on a situation like *this*.

Who could have guessed that a dragon like me, the Dark Queen, *and* Miss Clowria—all of whom have lived for over a thousand years—would be spending their days at Olivia's school?

Chapter 1: Mr. Dragon's Cutie's Spring Break

Cheer was in the spring air. The mountain vista was now a faint pink, and the winds were soft and gentle. The wee spreeg flowers that painted the ridge of the Sacred Peak of Olympias white filled the area with their sweet aroma, causing the air in the vicinity to gleam and twinkle. The snow that had blanketed the mountain in winter was totally gone. Looking at the sight of the fresh new season through the window, I found myself smiling. These simple things can even touch the hearts of dragons who have lived since time immemorial. I stretched, now wholly accustomed to my human form. *Spring's here.*

"Wake up, Olivia."

The castle we call home, which was originally the sole domain of the Dark Queen, has two towers. The Western Tower contains the room that the Dark Queen holed herself up in for a long time, and Olivia and I generally aren't permitted entry there. Nevertheless, the Dark Queen gives Olivia permission to come in from time to time for "girls-only get-togethers" with the Dark Queen's attendant, the classy knight Miss Clowria. I do feel a tiny bit left out...but I figure they might be discussing troubles and concerns a dragon like me wouldn't understand.

Incidentally, on girls-only get-together days, I always need to whip up a ton of

the ginger cookies that Olivia and the Dark Queen love. They go through so many that I'm forced to wonder whether the Dark Queen keeps a tiny dragon in her room...

Then, there's the Eastern Tower. It's the first place to be touched by the rays of the morning sun rising from beyond the mountains and also to be hit by the refreshing winds redolent of the scent of the trees. And it's where the room of my cute little daughter, Olivia, is located. The girl who, on one cold, snowy day, came up to a dragon and called him Daddy, was growing up fast in this room.

"Hnn... Mornin', Daddy..."

I burst out laughing at her mumbled greeting as she squirmed in her futon. When she was smaller, she'd get up before me and be full of energy first thing in the morning. But nowadays, she often wakes up late. It could be because it's break for her and she doesn't have to attend class, so she's reading books until late into the night and playing with dolls and the like. Just look at the stuffed animal and books by her pillow. If that's not proof, what is?

"Daddy's real hungry, you know... I might just gobble up *all* of the soup I made. By the way, today's your favorite—milk soup."

"Huh wha!" At those magic words, Olivia sprang up. "*Morning*, Daddy!"

"Morning, Olivia."

"Is there some milk soup left for me?" Still in her pajamas, she got up out of bed and scurried up to me. I held her in my arms and squeezed. She smelled sweet as milk, and her body was as warm as bright Mr. Morning himself. My super cute daughter, everyone!

"Of course there is. Let's go have some together." I descended the Eastern Tower staircase with gusto (while hugging Olivia tight in my arms) and Olivia yelped.

"Eek! A ha ha!"

"Come, let's hurry to the table!"

"Okay!"

The most delicious breakfasts in the world are the ones you eat with loved

ones, after all!

* * *

As we enjoyed our post-meal tea after a leisurely breakfast in the dining hall, we could hear two sets of footsteps approaching.

“Haugh. Good mooorniiiing.”

“Good morning, Sir Dragon, Olivia.”

The lady with the sheep horns poking out of her long black hair and rubbing her moon-like eyes was the Dark Queen.

“Morning, Miss Maredia!” said Olivia.

“Uh-huh. You can fetch me my bread while you greet me, Olivia. The loaf at the top of that basket’s a big one so it will suit your Queen nicely!”

“My beauteous Queen Maredia,” said Miss Clowria, “please, *I* shall fetch you your bread with ardency and devotion! And I shall make fine art with the jam I’ll smear upon it!”

“Heh heh, I’ll hand you some bread too, Miss Clowria!” said Olivia.

“Oh, why thank you kindly.”

“Ahhh! Clowria’s bread is bigger than mine!”

Needless to say, the dining hall gets livelier the second those two stroll in. The sight of the four of us having fun at the breakfast table is always a treat in itself. When Olivia’s at her dorm at the academy, things get so lonesome. Somehow, just removing one person from the equation brings everyone else down.

“Hey, Miss Maredia, once we’re finished eating, wanna go to the library with me?”

“Haugh wha? You’re almost never the one who asks *me* there. Heh heh... I take it you wish for a brush with your Queen’s sheer wisdom after so long doing without?”

“Yeah, there’s something I wanna ask you.”

By “the library,” she meant the Dark Queen’s pride and joy, the Library of Grimoires located within this very castle. It houses both the esoteric and

mysterious magical texts of dark-kind and the Dark Queen's personal favorite books. There are countless items in her collection, from picture books to cookbooks to grimoires that'd cause a stir if brought to the human world. Evidently, Olivia had read heaps of them while pitching in by airing them out. She's my little bookworm.

"The library, huh?" I said. "Is it for your homework?"

"Hm? Ah, uhh..."

"Yes?"

"...Hee hee, it's our secret!" She cracked a smile and cocked her head slightly.

"Wait, now I'm curious!"

The Dark Queen brandished her fork (which was stabbing some carrot glacé) with a smug smile. "Heh heh heh... So you wanna get up to no good, do ya?"

"Say what?!" I replied. "Up to no good?!"

"That's not it, Daddy! I won't be doing anything naughty, promise!"

"O-Of course you won't. Daddy believes in you... Ah, oh no!" In my agitation, I was, for a brief moment, about to revert to dragon form.

It was a downright ruckus. Miss Clowria, who had finished her breakfast before the Dark Queen, straightened up and cleared her throat. "Ahem, Queen Maredia."

"Y-Yes?"

"That was excessive of you, Your Darkness."

"I-I'm sorry... Haugh..."

"Uh, err, I'm sorry too..." said Olivia.

The two of them bowed their heads in apology.

No, wait a sec. I just *read how it's not right to pry into the secrets of a child who's reached a certain age in* Your Child's Privacy and You. *I got too shook and came this close to making a mess of the dining hall, and that's on* me.

I smiled the best smile I could. "You two can have your secrets, but don't do

anything dangerous... Tell me you won't, no matter what!"

Perhaps my draconic pressure was too strong because the Dark Queen shrank in her seat. "Haaauughhh..."

And that's what unfolded on that fair-weather day.

Once spring break came to a close, Olivia would once again return to life in the school dorm.

* * *

Our days with Olivia flew by in the twinkling of an eye. We tried our hands at new recipes, took strolls through the vernal woods, said hello to the birds and squirrels and bears, read stories, and ate sweets together. And we tended to the moonglows we had planted in the medicinal herb section of our garden.

By the way, humans apparently call moonglows "the plant-acea"—the all-purpose remedy. I just thought of it as the plant that grows around these parts, so that came as a surprise to me. When Olivia brought some to school not long ago, it caused quite the hubbub. It also seemed like the bigwigs of human society read the observation journal she'd written during vacation and viewed it as an herbological treatise. Way to go, Olivia! That's really something else.

On that subject, I wonder whether the plant-acea we shared with Olivia's friend Seraphy, the little gardener elf girl who maintains the courtyard of the Florence Academy, is growing nicely? As the daughter of the Elven Philosopher-Queen and Founder of the Academy, Miss Phyllis, she had a fair bit weighing on her mind, but they should be getting along now. I hope she's doing well.

Thanks to Olivia, my world has gotten bigger. If it weren't for her (especially since she started attending the academy), I'd have never, ever met a whole bunch of people like this. I'd have stayed all alone on the mountain.

Who knows how many times faster Olivia's world is expanding compared to mine now that she's spending her days at the school? The thought makes me both happy for her...and a bit forlorn.

"Are you sure you're not forgetting anything, sweetheart?"

"Uh-huh! I'm all good!" I watched as my dependable daughter nodded.

It was the last day of spring break. She would head for the academy by way of the carriage waiting for her near the forest at the foot of the Sacred Peak.

She wore a blazer the color of spring flowers and a beret. In addition, she was wearing her white mantle that proved she was the King's Pupil, a particularly outstanding student selected by the nation her school belongs to. It looked amazing on her, and all the more so now that she's the tiniest bit taller compared to last year. When she was a first-year, her uniform was significantly larger than her body, and she sort of reminded me of a doll.

"From this year onward, I'll be an upperclassman to some of the students."

"An upperclassman?" *Uhh, what's the relationship dynamic there again?*

"Uh-huh. Think of upperclassmen like the big sisters of the school. They're kind and friendly and wonderful people."

"Is that right? An upperclassman, huh..." Humans call each other all sorts of interesting titles and terms.

"There's going to be new students as well. I'm gonna be a wonderful upperclassman to them too!"

"I'm sure if there's anyone who can be one, it's you."

"Yeah huh!"

Clad in that uniform and brimming with confidence, she was already a big sister type in my eyes. She merrily tap-tapped her shoes on the ground, wearing her travel bag on her person. *Wonder what that book in her hand is.*

"All right, Daddy, I'll be seeing you!"

"Yep. Be seeing you, sweetheart." I gave her a hug and stroked her head, her light brown braids swaying. She's able to masterfully braid her own hair now.

The Dark Queen had shut herself into her room that morning, as she had said that seeing Olivia off makes her feel sad and lonesome. Miss Clowria was with the dejected Dark Queen to keep her company.

"...Daddy?"

"Yeah, honey? What is it?"

“Do you feel all lonely when I’m away too?”

It was high time for her to go, and yet my Olivia fired that question my way. *That “too” at the end there must mean... I see. You get lonesome, honey?*

I’d thought she had turned into a young lady, but she’s still just a kid after all.

“Yes, sweety. Of course I do.”

“Really?!” Her face lit up.

“Huh?” *I’m surprised she looks so delighted.* I was a bit bewildered.

“I’m gonna give it my all!” She gave a little self-satisfied snort.

Not sure I get it, but... “See you, Olivia. Do your best at school!”



“Hooooo!”

“Augh!”

As soon as Olivia disappeared through the Olympian woods, I heard a loud fluttering of wings. *What’s all this?*

A slight weight pressed down on my right shoulder. “Mr. Owl!”

That fluffy frame, those big saucer eyes, and a leg bearing the band with the crest of the academy. It was the postal familiar of the academy, with its charming mailbag at its back. It always brings the letters Olivia writes me. During break, it doesn’t fly here often as there aren’t any messages from her to deliver. *It’s nice to make your acquaintance again though.* “Long time no see, Mr. Owl... Wait, a letter? For me?”

Olivia had just left for school a moment ago. *Who’s this letter from?*

“Hoo.”

“Hold on, I’m taking it out now...” I fished the letter out from inside the bag. I broke open the Florence Academy seal and slid out the single sheet of paper within the envelope.

“...Lessee here... ‘Request for a Special Parent-Teacher Meeting’?”

■■■

Mr. Eldraco,

Thank you for your continued support of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Your patronage helps make the education we provide possible.

We are writing you to humbly request your presence at a parent-teacher meeting. Kindly refer to the following schedule and come to the academy at the appointed...

■■■

“Could this be...that ‘school summons’ thing?” *I got one of these last year, didn’t I? But why the Sam Hill are they summoning me before Olivia’s even back at school? Well, guess I should just go and see. I’ll be able to see Olivia in school mode too, so it ought to be fun.*

* * *

Meanwhile, in the Florence Academy Director's Office, a beautiful woman stood by the window overlooking the courtyard. It was Phyllis Florence, Director and Founder of the storied academy. The centuries had done nothing to mar her pretty flowing hair and her comely countenance. She was also an elf, a race possessing high levels of magic power. On top of that, she held the lofty moniker of Elven Philosopher-Queen and was counted as one of the Six Sages of Riaris, the luminaries from history. Only one other member of the Six besides the long-lived elf was still alive. Lastly, she was the keeper of the Gem-Stave of Eternity, one of the Seven Supreme Hallows—relics with gems harboring powerful magic.

All this was to say that Phyllis Florence was such a figure of legend that she drew looks of *respect* (read: envy) whenever she set foot out the door.

And it was that prepossessing wise woman who was currently pulling quite the grim-faced frown. As for why...

"Siiiigh... Spring break's nearly over."

"Miss Phyllis, please, that's enough," said the Headmistress, a woman in her golden years. "Such a brief span must go by in a blink for someone such as you who's lived an eternity, but to the children, this break is almost too long."

"Courié..." Phyllis heaved yet another sigh. "But Courié...once break is over, that girl will return."

"You mean...Olivia Eldraco? Isn't that a good thing? Our academy hosting such an outstanding student is nothing to pout over. She is the King's Pupil, after all."

"She's outstanding, all right. And what's more, well... I know she does nothing out of malice."

"Indeed, her heart is always in the right place... There can be no doubt."

"Siiigh..." Phyllis gazed despondently at the courtyard, the gorgeous garden her daughter maintained. "At any rate, let us do as we ought and inform her guardian of the state of affairs."

At that, Courié, her good confidant despite being a short-lived human, nodded in assent. “Yes, I believe that would be best... Especially before the new students arrive.”

“True. Besides...we’ve something else to worry about this year.” Phyllis heaved another giant sigh.

Chapter 2: Mr. Dragon Receives a Summons (Again) It was the day after Olivia had departed for school and I was in my bedroom, fretting over this, that, and the other thing. “Errm, well first, I guess I need to dress myself appropriately.”

I had been called to attend a special parent-teacher meeting. I usually wear whatever’s comfortable around the house, but whenever I’m to visit Olivia’s school as her father, I feel like it’s best to wear clothes that are a tad on the nicer side. That being said, my wardrobe isn’t exactly extensive, so I figured I’d go with what I wore to the enrollment ceremony. *This ensemble seemed pretty popular. Olivia said I looked the most stylish, after all. All right, what else do I need? Lessee... A box lunch? No, don’t need that. If I fly home in a jiffy, then I won’t be gone that long.*

“Oh right, I need to tell the two ladies.”

Recently, it wasn’t uncommon for us to have dinner together even without Olivia around. *Better give them a heads-up that I’m heading out.* When I’m not there, they typically order tasty food through a delivery site called...what was it again? Goober Eats?

“Miss Dark Queeeen! Miss Clowriaaa!” I called as I headed to the living room, where the two ladies were most likely kicking back. *If I recall correctly, they were drinking tea in the living room a minute ago.* The afternoon snack of the day was one I was proud of, dried fruit cookies, and I seemed to remember them making some strong black tea while eating them. It was around the time of day they typically napped on the sofas.

“Haaaughh?!” came the Dark Queen’s distinctive cutesy yelp.

What the dickens? Could it be one of those black shiny bug things? But I’m scared of those too...

“Goodness, Sir Dragon!” called Miss Clowria. “The cabinet! The dining hall cabinet!”

Huh? What about the cabinet? I dashed into the living room.

The two ladies were in front of the dining hall cabinet, petrified. Miss Clowria had gone so far as to draw her proud Hexblade.

“M-My liege! Please, take cover behind me!”

“I already am!”

“What’s the matter, you two?”

“The cabinet has been invaded!”

“Huh? Invaded?” *Humans throw that word around when they get into those big scuffles, right? But why our cabinet?*

The double-doored cabinet in question held the cups and mugs they always loved using. It also stored cookies, candy, and other snackables. Whenever I bake cookies and put them on the table, Olivia and the Dark Queen eat them up in no time flat, so I’d put the leftovers in a big jar and hide them in the cabinet.

“Oh dear! The cups! They’re all gone... Or rather, the whole inner section of the cabinet’s gone!”

It wasn’t just the cups and the confections. The entire space inside the cabinet had disappeared. It was a void of nothingness. *My gosh!*

“Haaaugh... This warp-space is advanced darkness magic. We dark-kin may have developed it, but there are vanishingly few who can use it! It’s lost tech that’s been shelved!”

“Perhaps some information leaked, and now some knave is using it to wicked ends!” said Miss Clowria.

“Hold on, though,” said the Dark Queen. “I’ve got a feeling that grimoires with the instructions for the spell are only found in my library... Egads!”

“Somebody’s coming!”

The space inside the cabinet bunched and warped. An invader was coming from the mystery zone!

“There can be no doubt!” said Miss Clowria. “This is *Demon’s Gate*—the sorcery that was originally developed to aid in surprise attacks on the main enemy base... This could well be an enemy raid!”

“Haaugh, Clowria! Prepare for battle!”

“Yes, my Queen!” She stood up straight and brandished her sword in gallant fashion. As befitting the Dark-Kin Knight Captain!

I should probably maybe do something too, huh? “For the time being, if somebody’s dropping by, I ought to be safe and make some tea.”

“They’re not some dinner guest!” cried the Dark Queen.

Just then, the invader showed her face from beyond the void. “Daddy!”

“Hyaaaugh! L-Leave at once, invader... Wait, what?”

“Tee hee! Yaayy, I did it!”

“O-Olivia?!”

It wasn’t some home intruder who’d used the Dark Queen’s secret spell! Olivia leapt from inside the cabinet and landed gracefully, smiling from ear to ear.

“But why, Olivia?” asked Miss Clowria.

“...Haugh...” Still behind Miss Clowria, the Dark Queen had an uneasy expression on her face. It seemed she knew something. “Haugh. Olivia, don’t tell me you took a grimoire out of my library?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Maredia.”

“They’re for internal use only!”

Oh, so the book Olivia was holding when she left—the one with the incredibly aesthetically pleasing binding—was one of the Dark Queen’s grimoires.

“You see,” said Olivia, “one of my dorm room drawers is empty. So I thought to myself, gee, it’d be wonderful if I could maybe link it to the castle...and when I asked Miss Maredia about it, she told me there’s a spell for that, and I tried my hand at it!”

“Queen Maredia! How could Your Darkness teach Olivia such arcane sorcery

so thoughtlessly? ’Tis a tremendously dangerous spell if the caster makes a mistake!”

The Dark Queen shrank. “Haaugh! How was I supposed to know she’d actually do it?!”

Her face looked like she’d eaten a gob of sour berries. Clearly, she saw the error of her actions, so Miss Clowria just heaved a sigh, her angry expression fading.

“I should ask, Olivia,” said Miss Clowria to the young girl. “Did you activate the spell using that grimoire? Even among dark-kind, there are almost none who can work it apart from Her Darkness...”

“Haugh, you did beautifully for being my apprentice!”

“Queen Maredia, pray reflect on your lapse of judgment.”

“Haughh...”

I was just relieved no bad guys had come to invade our home. “But why did you do such a thing, honey?”

Olivia seemed embarrassed. “...I just miss you guys too much not to come visit while school’s in session. Teh heh heh...”

So that’s why when she was about to leave, she asked me whether I feel lonesome when she’s away.

“That’s all well and good,” retorted the Dark Queen, “but shortcutting it using *Demon’s Gate* is just yikes city!” And those words were meant to leave a mark.

In any case, the school that used to take half a day to get to by air was now merely a hop, skip, and a jump away. *Come to think of it...* “Olivia, can I use this gate too? I was actually going to drop by school.”

“Wait, you’re coming, Daddy?”

“Uh-huh.”

Thanks to my little one, time was no longer a factor. “Might as well drink some tea before leaving.”

At that, Olivia nodded with a sparkling smile.

* * *

Passing through the cabinet, I found myself in a small room. It was Olivia's dorm room at the Florence Academy. I crawled out of the desk drawer that was connected to our cabinet. The room was cozy and compact, but seemed agreeable to live in. There were two beds and two desks. One side of the room had Olivia's things.

"Welcome, Daddy!"

"Coming through."

Apparently, until last year, Olivia had been sharing a dorm room with a sixth-year student. Since there are only six grades at the academy, that older girl had graduated and a new first-year was to live in this room alongside Olivia now.

I see. So this is where Olivia spends her days. Getting a glimpse of my daughter's otherwise unknown daily life set my heart thumping a bit.

"Thanks to you, I made the trip without a sweat. Thanks!"

"You're welcome!"

I had planned to take up to half a day to get here flying, so I was happy to get it over with by simply popping through the cabinet.

Later on, Olivia (and the Dark Queen with her) would get raked over the coals by Miss Clowria, and Olivia would promise never to use dangerous magic again. However, Miss Clowria also rubbed her temples and said, "Olivia, might it be the case that you're unaware which spells are dangerous to begin with?"

Honestly, the kinds of spells humans use can't be *that* dangerous, can they? It's not as though they'd blow away the ground itself.

"Right, well, I'm headed to the special parent-teacher meeting."

"Huh? Wait, Daddy..."

I stepped outside Olivia's room only to be greeted by a chorus of shrieking girls.

I slammed the door closed in a panic at the shrill screaming. "Wait, huh? What do I do, Olivia?! What was that just now?!"

“Daddy, the dorms of the Florence Academy are off-limits to males. No men or boys are allowed to enter!”

“Really?! Uh, uh-oh!” I may not have known better, but I had still made a mess of things. *That makes sense; of course nobody would expect a man to be around here. I’m sure I spooked the daylights out of them... I’ve really done it now!* I was reeling.

I could hear charged whispering in the hallway.

“Who *was* that gentleman?”

“He looked a dream. Such kind eyes, and that dandy flair...”

“I wonder whether he’s someone’s father or guardian?”

“He came out of Miss Eldraco’s room, did he not?”

They muttered and they chattered. *Eesh... I really did give them quite a start. That aside, I’ll never be able to exit this room at this rate. And my appointment’s fast approaching. I’m in a pickle.* “What do I do, honey?”

“Hmmm...err... Ah!”

“Ah?”

“Eureka moment!” She looked up at me with a glint in her eyes.

Of the three dorm buildings at the academy, Olivia lives in one named Fontaine. Each dorm has an inner courtyard that sports the trees and shrubs, rocks, or fountains that serve as the symbols of that dorm.

I traveled down the hallway of the Fontaine dorm. *The fountains in the courtyard here are certainly very pretty.*

This time, there were no high-pitched cries.

“How do you do, Miss Olivia? Oh, is that a stuffed dragon?”

“How do you do, Miss? It’s cute, isn’t it?”

I had reverted to my dragon form for the first time in a while, but I was now as small as a regular stuffed animal. Changing sizes is no big deal for me, but my heart raced as I worried my secret would come out.

“Yes, quite. It looks strong, but a mite cute too.”

“Tee hee!”

And just like that, Olivia successfully snuck me out of the dorm. *Phew, that was close!*

“Heh heh, you’re cute when you’re tiny, Daddy!” She squeezed me tight.

I couldn’t talk because Olivia’s friends and fellow students were around but I was so grateful. *Thank you, Olivia! Your quick thinking saved my bacon!*

Chapter 3: His Cutie Goes to Meet Him Now

then, on to the parent-teacher meeting. Back in my human form, I was shown into the Director's Office, just like when I was summoned here last year. I was told Olivia was preparing to meet and greet the new students along with the rest of her dorm, so that's where she would be headed. Not that Olivia would have been able to attend the meeting anyway—they made absolutely sure to remind me in the office adjacent to the Director's Office that "parent-teacher meetings are for students' parents and guardians only."

I was gazing at the courtyard, which was as beautiful as ever, when the door opened. In came the Director of the Florence Academy for Girls, Phyllis Florence...but she looked like a very *different* Phyllis Florence.

"Miss Phyllis, err, uhh..."

"Long time no see, Mr. Eldraco."

"Uhh..."

"What is it? Do I have something on my face?"

"No, it's just...you're looking so...gaunt?"

Miss Phyllis looked even more dejected and haggard than the last time we met. I figured she must be exhausted. *Is she eating enough?* I wondered. Elves

are supposed to live fairly long, at least compared to other little-folk races, but she seemed a tad *older* to me. *Hope she's okay.*

"...Yes, I may have lost some weight."

"Did something happen? You can talk to me." Maybe she had gotten into another fight with her only daughter, Seraphy.

"Yes, let's talk...let's talk, yes."

I took my place on the soft sofa and sat up straight. Miss Phyllis dropped feebly into her seat and plopped a sheaf of documents on the table with a THUD.

"What's all this?"

"This is the source of my headaches. And it pertains to you as well, Mr. Eldraco."

"Huh... I see lots of numbers on these pages..."

"Yes, numbers are hardly out of place on *invoices*, after all."

"Invoices?" In that moment, I may or may not have pulled a *what's-an-invoice* expression. There's still so much I don't know about human society.

"To put it simply...these documents contain a list of the school's equipment that Olivia has destroyed."

I was silent for a moment. "...Huh?"

"Again, they show the cost of the damage Olivia has caused!"

"Whaaaaat?!"

I'm super glad I didn't revert to dragon form—that's how shocked I was! I'm certain it would've cost me a pretty penny if I had ended up destroying the room. *But never mind that!*

"Did...did Olivia break something?"

"I'm afraid she broke more than a few 'somethings.' Please, look through the invoices and see for yourself." She slid the papers my way.

Nervously, I scanned the text.

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Twenty evaluation golems.

One hundred and four sets of lesson materials for Spellcasting 101.

Floor repairs for the Spell Workshop.

Ceiling repairs for the Spell Workshop.

Wall repairs for the Spell Workshop (four walls).

___

“Err...what is this?”

“It’s just as you see.”

Man, this is a ton of stuff. Did my Olivia destroy all of it?

“Yikes... I’m really sorry.”

“This is just a fraction of the total damages.”

“What?!”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing the first half of the first grade’s magic lessons are mainly theory.”

I could only sigh.

“As soon as the actual spellcasting started...*this* is what happened...”

I seem to recall that lesson I observed right before the King’s Pupil Exam was the first spellcasting drill Olivia participated in, or at least close to it. I think they said Olivia’s second grade all-star class (also known as Class Two-Zero) has a slightly different curriculum than the other classes. In other words, they do stuff that’s a mite more difficult than the other students do. I also heard that most of Olivia’s classmates studied at cram schools or under private tutors from a young age in order to make it into the Florence Academy. And then there are those like Daisy, the descendant of a famous historical mage.

“Don’t tell me that Olivia levied this much damage by botching her spells?!”

“No, sir—quite the opposite.”

“The opposite?”

“When it comes to all things sorcerous, she’s brilliant to excess!”

Once again, I exhaled in reply.

According to her, the spells that first-years practice are utterly rudimentary, simple, and low-powered. Consequently, they never dreamed there might be any major accidents or damage to the facilities. Miss Phyllis was trembling all over as she explained this to me.

“...Olivia is truly outstanding. So much so that we would be far from embarrassed to send her anywhere as the King’s Pupil selected by this academy.”

“Err...” I was happy to hear Olivia’s praises, but the mood in the air was kind of *unsettling*. Miss Phyllis was on the verge of tears, for one.

“Why, just the other day...!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am?!”

“For the end-of-year examination for promotion, the assignment was the most basic of fire magic, *Incendium*! And in the unlikely event it caused a fire, we conducted the test at the meadowlands outside the school...”

“The meadowlands...”

“Indeed, for Olivia blew up our academy’s Spell Training Area practicing lightning magic the week prior...”

“Whaaaat?!”

“And we’d just remodeled it too!”

“Yeesh, I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, that’s fine. Mr. Eldraco, do you know *Incendium*?”

“Yeah, that’s the one that ignites stuff.” If I recall correctly, it’s the very spell Olivia’s class was practicing during the lesson I observed.

“Yes! It’s the beginner-level flame spell that makes use of the storied and illustrious magic spark incantation...”

“Did something happen?”

“Without even saying the incantation, Olivia fired off the spell...and look at the *state* of things!” Miss Phyllis took out some sort of slab—an incredible magic item they call a “tablet” that allows people to record lots of documents and to show recreations of scenes from faraway places—and showed it to me. “Look!”

“What am I looking at... Whoa! Is...is this...”

“You agree! Horrible, isn’t it?!”

The tablet displayed a wide, gaping hole in the plains. To be more precise, there was an enormous, barren patch in the green grass of the prairie.

“Olivia did this?”

“...Yes, that’s correct. What’s more,” she added, voice quavering, “I *told* her, ‘That was an *Incendium* test, no one told you to whip up a firestorm using *Incendissimo*!’ And, ‘Who told you to bring out the big guns, little missy?!’”

I exhaled. “The big guns...”

“And would you care to know what she said next? With those innocent eyes...and that incredibly cute voice! And without an ounce of malice! Urgh...” She bit her lip. “‘Um, Miss, that wasn’t *Incendissimo*...it was *Incendium*!’”

Miss Phyllis slumped over the table and bawled like a baby.

What do I do? You’ve really backed me in a corner here...

“I know it’s not that big a deal!” she continued. “The children lack experience, and things getting destroyed is part of the job! But...but...but if Olivia keeps destroying equipment at this pace, my academy is going to be stone broke!”

She sobbed loudly, and I was at a loss for words. *This is bad. Don’t tell me... Does this mean she’s going to get* expelled*...?*

“Oh, oh no!!!”

“Mr. Eldraco?”

I couldn’t let that happen. I wanted Olivia to seize this chance to live a happy life in the outside world through her time at this school. If she got expelled, what road would that leave us? No, that was to be avoided at all costs. *I don’t*

know the exact value of those numbers on the invoices, but I might as well pay up.

"Err, Miss Phyllis!"

"What is it?"

"I'll pay for everything on the invoices!"

"...Come again? No, Mr. Eldraco, have you seen the total sum?"

"No ma'am!"

"Tell me that only after you've seen it! A noble's stipend isn't nearly enough to cover all of this! We'll manage using the donations the academy has gathered and my pocket money, so for the time being, we'll be all right."

"No, I insist! I'll pay! In fact, please take as much as you'd like!"

"...I'm sorry?"

I took the wide-eyed Miss Phyllis by the hand and hurried toward Olivia's room in the dorm of springs. I didn't have enough time to change into my stuffed animal form, but I got in thanks to Miss Phyllis's authority as Director. Then I opened Olivia's desk drawer. At the sight of the empty void within it, Miss Phyllis swooned. "No..."

"Whoa! She collapsed!"

I hastily helped her up. I couldn't have her fainting. I needed to take her to my former den—the shrine grotto.

* * *

Several hours later...

Phyllis opened her eyes to unfamiliar environs. Bare rock surrounded her, and a chill was in the air. And there was that kind face staring at her.

"Miss Phyllis, please get up."

"...Urgh..."

That good-natured grin... It was Olivia Eldraco's father. The man of mystery. Most of the parents and guardians of the students at the Florence Academy

were nobility, royalty, or the descendants of mages. But she had no idea what his family line or even vocation was. She couldn't even begin to fathom the man.

"Mr. Eldraco."

"I'm relieved! You've come to."

She was puzzled as to why Eldraco was smiling. Hadn't she just told him at length how his daughter kept wrecking the school's equipment? And then he'd led her to Olivia's dorm room for some reason...

"Wait, what was that vacuum inside that drawer? What on earth has Olivia done *now*?! What is the point of any such space-warping sorcery?!"

"Now, now, please calm down!"

She took a deep breath, and upon growing a little calmer, she took note of the state of her surroundings. The place seemed rather *bright* for being enclosed in stone...

"Err, listen, I'm truly sorry about Olivia! I'm just worried that she'll get expelled from school for destroying so much stuff."

"Hm? Oh, no, she is the King's Pupil. I couldn't possibly expel her after referring her to that scholarship..."

"I'd like to apologize by reimbursing you...so you can take all of it! Over there!"

Eldraco pointed. Phyllis looked. "No...!" she shrieked quietly. "Wh-What is *that*?!"

Riches. That was the only word for it. Gold and silver and gems and jewels and precious stones. Eyebrow-raising wealth stacked in mound after mound. It surpassed the fortunes of the grandest noble houses. It even surpassed the coffers of entire nations!

This did not compute. How could all of this belong to a single man? A man she'd never heard of and who was good-natured to the utmost degree. A truly kind man who thought of little besides his daughter.

"This much ought to be enough to pay for the damages, right?" He smiled.

No.

No, I can't even. I can't even deal.

Dizzy, she held her head in her hands and, mustering the last of her strength, screamed:

"JUST WHAT *ARE* YOU ELDRACOS?!"

Incidentally, Phyllis wasn't too principled to accept the offer once she learned these assets were more than enough to cover all the damages. The treasure trove was so vast that it was merely a drop in the bucket. And it wasn't a bribe if it was offered as compensation.

Thus did Phyllis Florence resolve her present conundrum, though the mystery as to who the Eldracos were only deepened.

Chapter 4: His Cutie Becomes an Upperclassman, Part One Phyllis Florence had finally recovered herself. The Director of the pedigreed Florence Academy felt the spring wind blowing in from the courtyard as she sipped from her teacup.

Mr. Eldraco was sitting in front of her, nonchalantly enjoying some tea.

“Come to think of it, this doesn’t solve anything, does it?!”

“Huh? Wha? Is reimbursing you not enough?”

“That’s not it! Did you really think that would solve all of our woes? Honestly, in hindsight, you’re being awfully *undisguised* about throwing your money around! A lot more so than the parents and guardians that compete with each other through their donations, anyway!”

“Ah, err, sorry...”

“Urgh, so mild-mannered...” *This man definitely just doesn’t get it.* She cleared her throat. She had to sort out this situation. “At any rate, I don’t intend to rock the boat right now. I just wanted to give you a status report. As an academy, we expect great things from Olivia. But that desire is superseded by our desire for her not to cause any trouble.”

Under normal circumstances, the Elven Philosopher-Queen wouldn’t lose her composure even if the King’s Pupil, in her brilliance, caused a problem or two. But the current state of affairs permitted no room for such mischief.

“...You see, one of the new first-years is a tad *pesky*.”

“A pesky first-year? Ah, now that you mention it, Olivia said she’s preparing for the new student welcome party.”

“Yes, tomorrow is an important day for the academy and for the new

students we'll be welcoming. Usually, it would be a joyous occasion, but..." Phyllis gazed at the courtyard with a distant look. Pure white baby's breath and spirea heralded the beginning of spring, swaying as they basked in the rays of the vernal sun. Flowers in an array of colors had blossomed in the shrubs as well, a shining testament to the skill and efforts of the girl who maintained the garden. It was enough to put some pep in anyone's step. And yet there was a shadow looming over Phyllis's heart.

"I should add that the student in question is a perfectly lovely girl. She may be on the ambitious side...but the real trouble is her super mega unreasonable monster of a parent. And as luck would have it, I've known her for over a thousand years..."

"Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes, it's a long story, but she asked me to enroll a young apprentice..."

Ideally, Phyllis would've liked to have the King's Pupil help her out as her right hand. "Her guardian is a forceful woman, so..."

She was about to heave her umpteenth sigh when...

CRASH!

"Huh, what the?!"

"Th-That sound...so they're finally here..."

A peal of thunder reverberated overhead despite the nice and balmy weather just moments ago.

* * *

Meanwhile, in the lounge at the dorm of springs, Daisy Palestria (now a second-year) and her best friend Olivia were preparing for the welcome party for the new students. They were having a great time chatting when thunder suddenly crashed.

Olivia leaped in surprise. "Augh!"

Daisy, who had been crafting decorations for the lounge room, raised her eyes. "Heavens me, Olivia, what could that sound have been?"

“That was crazy loud, wasn’t it, Daisy? So scary!”

At the sight of Olivia trembling, Daisy burst into laughter. Olivia was the girl genius chosen by the Florence Royal Academy for Girls to be the King’s Pupil. That title meant that she was the special scholarship student recognized by the kingdom as having a promising future. As a result, she didn’t have to pay tuition and even received a salary from the state. And yet, somehow, she never acted self-important in any way, shape, or form. Or rather, she’d lived in a superlatively tiny bubble and knew little of the world. Granted, Daisy herself was the scion of the House of Palestria, which ranked next to royalty, and she wasn’t exactly the worldliest of girls either. That being said, Olivia was something else.

“Daisy, the wind’s really picked up, so let’s finish doing the decorations ahead of time. Instead of *crafting* flowers...what do you say we make some bloom for real?”

Pop, pop, pop went Olivia’s magic. Sky-blue flowers blossomed all around her. It was the color of Fontaine, the dorm of springs.

“Oliviaaa! I keep telling you, magic takes more time to set up than that! Incantations and magic circles, that kind of thing!”

This was one thing that painted Olivia as ignorant of the ways of the world. Using magic eats into one’s stores of mana, and, more than anything else, is a pain to do. Only a small handful of people could use powerful magic, and while they were viewed as priceless during times of war, that was not the case during times of peace. In actuality, the magic and sorcery of the House of Palestria, descendants of the mage who battled the Dark Queen, was at best on the level of a family specialty. Using magic to make flowers bloom that quickly and easily was unheard of.

“Oliviaaa.”

“Tee hee... But they’re pretty, aren’t they?”

“Hee hee, heh heh heh...”

To Daisy, who’d been told all her life to polish her magic skills so as not to shame the House of Palestria, the friendly and unassuming way she cast such

head-turning magic took a load off her heart. Though she *was* a bit envious as well.

CRASH!

The sound of thunder rang out once more.

“Argh!” Olivia stared out the window.

“Has something caught your attention?”

“Huh?”

“The window. You’ve been staring outside this whole time.”

“Tee hee, it’s just that my Daddy’s at school today, so I was wondering if he’s okay.”

“Ah, your father...” Daisy recalled the kindly man she’d met when she slept over at Olivia’s home. She’d never known anything besides meals where manners and appearances were everything and warmth was nowhere to be found, so to a sheltered, highborn girl like her, a genial father like Mr. Eldraco had become an icon.

“I’m gonna go search for Daddy. I’ll be back!”

“Ah, Olivia!” To Daisy, it was little wonder why Olivia was such a hopeless daddy’s girl, but still. “It’s a bit rash to be going outside in this rain, don’t you think?”

But Olivia was no longer there. Daisy picked up the sky-blue flowers she’d left in her wake and sighed.

* * *

“...So they’re here.”

I cocked my head. “By they, do you mean the rain clouds?”

It’s certainly true that it was sunny a minute ago... Talk about full tilt rain clouds.

“No, not the weather. It’s the student-mother pair that I can’t get out of my hair!”

CRASH! Another bolt punctuated the patter of the rain on the window, and yet Miss Phyllis threw open the window regardless. It was then I noticed the two silhouettes: a slender adult and a small child.



The adult was female, and her long hair was wet, though I could tell even from afar that her hair was as pretty and smooth as silk. The child, meanwhile, wore the same Florence Academy uniform as Olivia. Her pigtails were swaying in the wind. *Are they mother and daughter?* I asked myself.

Before long, the adult spoke. “Kept ya waiting, huh, Phyllis?!”

“Oh, I wasn’t waiting, Esmeralda.”

From the look of it, she was an acquaintance of Miss Phyllis’s.

“Why are you making it rain again?!”

“Oh? For a dramatic entry, of course. Spring thunder is elegant! Right, Luca?”

“Yes, Milady Esmeralda. You’re always so judic-ious. Consider I, Luca, pro-fundidly moved,” stated the small girl at her side.

“Oh, there’s no reason to be moved, Miss Luca Ioenami!” Miss Phyllis’s shoulders drooped.

It appeared as though I was meeting the “unreasonable monster of a parent” Miss Phyllis had spoken of earlier. She didn’t look like a monster to me. She looked just like an ordinary human. *On second thought, she is a bit different from a human. She seems kind of familiar...like I* know *her, somehow...*

She sighed. “I’m sorry I was so undignified just now. This is Esmeralda Serpentia. She too is called one of the Six Sages of Riaris, but she’s more of a meatheaded, ‘true warrior’ type.”

“I can hear ya, ya know!”

“It’s difficult to believe given her coarse manner, but like me, she has lived for over a thousand years.” She sighed again. “How unbecoming for her age.”

“I said I can hear ya!”

“Is Esmeralda an elf, or...?” I hear that among the little folks, the ones with comparatively long lives are elves or dwarves or the like. They live a lot longer than humans. That said, everybody’s way younger than I am.

“No, she’s a Dracoshaman.”

“A Draco...shaman?”

The fresh tea steamed on the table between us.

Her expression gloomy as ever, Miss Phyllis showed the two into the Director's Office. They weren't wet at all, oddly enough.

Wait, why am I here again? Should I even be butting in like this? I felt somewhat awkward, and a bit antsy.

"Hmph. So you don't even know what a Dracoshaman is?" asked Esmeralda, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

Nope, never heard of it. Even though I'm a dragon.

"The vaunted Dracoshaman is an exalt-inated personage who possesses a dragon for a mother or father," said Luca, the girl sitting up straight next to Miss Esmeralda, in a dignified voice.

"Huh? The child of a dragon and a human?!"

"Correct," said Luca. "And we dragon-kin can trace our storied family line to the original Dracoshamans, who were born to dragon-human couples."

Say what?! I've done nothing of the sort! A child born between dragons and humans?! I've never heard of any such thing! At the very least, it definitely wasn't me. Come to think of it, might this not be the work of that other dragon I met a handful of times way back when?

While I was busy being all flustered, Luca continued. "Nowadays, people call children with dragon levels of mana 'Dracoshamans' and treat them like prodigies, but Milady Esmeralda is a genuine Dracoshaman. She is one of a select few, as her father is a dragon! She is an extra-ceptional lady!"

"Yep, what she said!" said Miss Esmeralda.

"Ah, by the way, I am a dragon-kin who's come from a nation in the far east. I am Luca, scion of the Ioenami Clan, who does bear the blood of the water dragon-born Dracoshaman!"

Puffed up with pride, she threw out her chest.

"Nice to meet you, Luca. I'm Eldraco."

"Hrmm. 'Draco,' you say."

“Um, could you not stare like that? It’s making me nervous.”

Miss Esmeralda was staring holes into me. *Uh-oh. If they find out I’m a dragon, it may come to light that Olivia and I aren’t blood-related.*

Miss Phyllis sighed. “Mr. Eldraco. This is the new first-year I spoke to you about. I forgot to tell you earlier, but... Luca, she’s, well...”

“Yes! I have come to snatch the title of King’s Pupil away from the non-deserving!”

Wait, but that’s the title that belongs to Olivia, isn’t it? Now I understood why this whole affair had anything to do with me. Olivia had decided to keep enjoying her school life alongside her friends, while at the same time managing her duties as the King’s Pupil.

“Luca,” said Miss Phyllis, “this gentleman is the father of the King’s Pupil, Mr. Eldraco.”

“Um, what do you mean, ‘snatch away’...?”

“Hrm! It is as I have spaken. For I hear Olivia Eldraco, the King’s Pupil selected by this academy for the first time in a long while, is being called a Dracoshaman herself!”

“Really?”

Come to think of it, I seem to recall she was called that when her mana levels were measured during the entrance exam...or am I just imagining that?

“I do declare, how utterly scandal-ious. To think such a conceited girl who would *deign* to be called a Dracoshaman attends the school that I, Luca, top disciple of Milady Esmeralda, planned to attend!”

“I mean, I don’t think she’s got a particularly big head about it...” *Although, she basically* is *the child of a dragon. She is my one and only precious daughter, after all. I may be a dragon, and she may be a human, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re father and daughter.*

“Therefore!” Luca pointed at me. “I, Luca, a *veri-torious* dragon-kin, shall prove that I am FAR more capable than that ‘Olivia’ person. And that the title of King’s Pupil, which is determin-ated for one school and one generation, ought

to be mine!”

Err, I mean, you can tell me that, but...how do humans react in times like these?

I glanced at Miss Phyllis for help, but she was watching sugar dissolve in her tea with distant eyes. She sighed. “...I suppose if the master is a meathead, so too is her apprentice.”

“I can *hear* ya, Phyllis.”

What do I do? I just wanna go home.

Just then, I heard a light tap, tap. Someone was knocking on the window.

“Daddy!”

“Olivia!”

My little treasure was standing outside the window. She was using an umbrella and was holding a second one.

I shot to my feet. “What’s the matter, sweety?”

“Err, it’s just, it started raining so suddenly!”

“Huh?”

Olivia handed me the umbrella. “You don’t have an umbrella, right, Daddy?”

I see. So that second umbrella’s for me*! She’s such a sweetheart!* “Thanks, Olivia.”

“Tee hee! I’m glad you’re not soaked, Daddy!”

Delighted, I picked her up in my arms.

“I say unto you, I was NOT finished talking!”

I turned around to find Luca hopping mad. “Oh, sorry. My mistake.” I sat back down on the sofa, Olivia still in my arms.

“Wait, you’re *the* Olivia Eldraco?”

“Huh? Yeah, I’m Olivia. Who are you?”

“I am...Milady Esmeralda Serpentia’s top apprentice and proud descendant of

dragon-kin, Luca Ioenami!”

“So your name’s Luca! Nice to meet you.”

“Why must you two insist on being so buddy-buddy with regard to the calling of my name?! We are NOT friends!”

“Huh? We’re not?”

“NO! I aim to take the King’s Pupil title from you!”

“Luca,” interrupted Miss Esmeralda. “Quit barking. There’s no use arguing about it. Just use your talents and take the title. Don’t the folks in your country say the weaker the dog, the more it barks?”

“Milady... Y-Yes ma’am. Please forgive me.”

“Yep. I know just how excellent you are, after all.”

“Right! I, the top apprentice of Milady Esmeralda, the one and only Luca, will surpass everyone and everything in superi-osity, and I’ll prove I am a disciple unrival-ated!” she speechified, burning with passion.

Olivia and I were lost. Luca’s *energy* had my little one dumbfounded.

Miss Phyllis had been silently stirring her tea for quite some time. I could only assume she was a bit tired.

“Heh heh... Don’t let me down, Luca!”

“I won’t, Milady!” Luca stared at Esmeralda with sparkles in her eyes. She must truly adore her.

Master and disciple. That was their relationship. *The little folks sure create all sorts of bonds between each other!* I was a little impressed. There were classmates, friends, teachers and students—and parents and children. Humans gave various names to the connections that bind people together. And I’m sure they’re all held dear and cherished. Just like the bond between Olivia and me, which just so happens to be named “parent and child.”

I hope Olivia keeps forging bonds of various names with various people. And I hope she lives a blissful life in the human world...

I squeezed Olivia tight in my arms, and a surprised Olivia turned to look at me.

“Daddy?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, sweety.” I flashed her a smile.

I’m always praying for your happiness. Even though I’m lonely when you’re at school.

“Ahem,” said Miss Phyllis, clearing her throat. “Now you know what you must do, Olivia.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Do note that Luca is decidedly not all talk. She is at the top of the first-years, just like you were.”

“We are NOT the same! I exceed-ify her!”

“Settle down, Luca! You must heed your teachers!”

“Urgh, yes ma’am...”

“I view you as an extremely gifted, kindhearted student, Olivia...but just as I told your father, I implore you to be a bit more mindful of the equipment around you.”

“Equipment...” Olivia trailed off.

“It means I’d like you to stop recklessly shooting high-firepower spells during spellcasting drills. I’m a hundred percent aware of your outstanding skill—no, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand percent aware! If you keep this up, I’m going to get a stomach ulcer!”

“Ha ha ha, laying it all out there, huh, Phyllis?”

“You keep quiet, Esmeralda! Always with the taunting remarks... Ahem. In any case, this presents a fine opportunity.” Miss Phyllis straightened her back and held her head up high. “Having a rival is a good thing. You can strive not to lose to Luca, just as Luca strives to catch up to you. In so doing, I trust you’ll both devote yourselves to your studies.”

“Yes ma’am!” said Olivia.

“...Pshaw.”

“Luca, your reply?”

“...Y-Yes ma’am.”

“Good. Now then, Olivia Eldraco.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Miss Phyllis’s voice rang out: “Starting today, you are Luca Ioenami’s upperclassman!”

Chapter 5: The Dopey Dark Queen Looks After the House On the mountainside of Olympias, deep in the woods, up in the Western Tower of the former Dark Queen's Castle which had been (forcefully) transported by a dragon, the leader of the dark-kin who once rocked the human world, the Dark Queen Maredia...

"Hauuuugh, there's nothing to doooo!"

...had a lot of free time on her hands.

"Ahh, my beauteous Dark Queen Maredia. 'Tis fine that you've some spare time, but what's that you've been looking at on your tablet?"

"Haugh, I can't stop browsing Bleater when I have free time. Though it's when I'm so busy I could die that my Bleater browsing gets even worse! Mwa ha ha!"

"Coming out of Your Darkness's mouth, that doesn't sound like a jest... What was the hashtag we used when we invaded the human world again? '#invasionletsgooo,' I believe. Who could have guessed our strategies would be leaked to the human world that way..."

"Hauuugh, I keep telling you to forget about that! I mean, how could we have expected the human world to develop tablets?"

"War is always a driver of invention."

"That's heavy."

Maredia flopped onto her bed and threw down her tablet. "Haugh, now it's not just Olivia who's not here, the Elder Dragon isn't either! And here I am, house-sitting, aka doing *nothing*!"

"Hee hee, to hear you complain about doing nothing."

"Haugh?"

To Clowria, the Dark Queen's foster sister and closest associate, this past millennium had been a fretful one. After her failure commanding the invasion against the human world (said invasion having been set in stone by a Dark Realm prophecy), the Dark Queen had become totally dejected and holed herself up for many an age in her castle. And not once during all of that time had she lamented having nothing to do. It had been as if her heart was left adrift in the flow of time.

"The fact you're lamenting your abundance of free time means that you truly value our new ordinary everyday lives that much."

When the castle had been transferred to the Elder Dragon, who'd appeared out of nowhere, Clowria didn't know what would become of her and the Dark Queen, but she now thought it was a positive thing for Maredia. That is, meeting the Elder Dragon and the small human girl.

Maredia sighed. "The Elder Dragon's gonna do Elder Dragon things, I guess. One second he returns carrying a sparkly elf on his back, and the next he goes back to the school with her. Just 'cause the dining room cabinet's a portal now doesn't mean you can get carried away, you know?"

"Mm-hmm."

Maredia was flailing her arms and legs atop the bed, and Clowria made her some fresh tea. It had a strong honey nut flavor.

"In that case, why don't you use the portal, my Queen?"

"...Haugh?"

"You could frequent the school alongside Olivia."

The way Maredia stared at her in wide-eyed wonderment was incredibly endearing to Clowria, who placed some of the ginger cookies the Elder Dragon had baked to the side of the steaming cup.

"...Because I'm a shut-in."

"But you've free time, haven't you? Besides, you like that genre, don't you? School comedies and the like."

Maredia bit into one of the crunchy cookies and muttered, "It's different

when it’s just fiction...”

Chapter 6: Mr. Dragon's Identity Comes to Light The rain kept pouring down. Miss Esmeralda had created this thunderstorm as part of her "dynamic entry."

"All right," I said, "I'm gonna head back home."

Olivia stood on her tiptoes and put a finger to her lips—the sign that what she was saying stayed between us. I stooped down and put my ear near her tiny mouth.

"Daddy, I'll come visit. Using the drawer," she whispered.

"Ah, err...about that, Olivia..."

"That's right, little missy!" Miss Phyllis was standing with her hands on her hips.

"Huh? Oh, uh, ah..."

"Would you care to explain the dorm drawer to me?"

"Wha huh?!"

Sorry, Olivia. I may've inadvertently clued her in on it...and I should've realized we'd get yelled at as a result...

"What exactly do you plan to do with that senseless translocation drawer?! That's for the Royal Sorcerous Society to administrate, and there are hefty taxes involved..."

Oh no, it's grown-up talk. "Erm... Allow me to apologize as well."

"I bid you be quiet, Mr. Eldraco!"

"Y-Yes ma'am!"

"Not only is she a student here, but she is the King's Pupil whom I endorsed. You *will* allow me to scold her as she ought to be scolded."

"Ah, err, right."

“It’s an educator’s responsibility! And I implore you not to spoil her when she’s home either.” Miss Phyllis had struck a severe expression.

I’m spoiling her? Those words hit me like a bolt from the blue. I’d never *meant* to spoil her, but I realized I might have ended up doing so out of excessive adoration. *I’ve read oodles of human books on parenting up till now, and I’ve studied all things human, but just how does it appear from the viewpoint of those people?*

I decided it was best not to interject while Miss Phyllis was lecturing her. It took the wind out of my sails for sure. And little Luca was surely smiling triumphantly behind us.

“Hee hee! The King’s Pupil, of all people, causing messes and woes on a daily basis! What an inconceiv-imable laughingstock!”

To the side, Miss Esmeralda muttered, “Come to think of it... Phyllis?”

“What is it, Esmeralda? I’m busy at the moment.”

“I just remembered...what ended up happening with the thing?”

“The thing?”

“At this academy, Luca’s special needs will be accounted for, right?”

Luca’s special needs? Miss Phyllis called her “pesky,” and while she may be a tad willful...it’s not to the level I’d call her pesky. Could those “special needs” be the reason?

Olivia and I looked at Miss Phyllis, as did Miss Esmeralda and Luca. Miss Phyllis stiffened and started to sweat.

“.....Ah.”

“Ah?”

“.....I forgot.”

At that, Miss Esmeralda heaved a deep sigh. Then she breathed in and pointed a finger Miss Phyllis’s way.

“...You dumb-elf.”

“‘Dumb-elf’?! Don’t call me thaaaat!”

“Would ya have preferred ‘git-elf’?”

“That’s not the issue!”

“That aside, this ain’t good. If Luca stays here too long...”

If she stays too long, then what? Question marks danced above my head.

“Milady,” said Luca.

“What is it, Luca?”

“I don’t wish to alarm you, but...it’s quite sunny outside.”

* * *

“This is bad... Whatever it is that’s capable of drying up the rain I make is formidable, that’s for sure.”

We were looking up at the clear and sunny skies from the Florence Academy courtyard.

How is this bad? Sunny weather feels so nice.

“...Daddy, something’s coming this way...” Olivia flinched.

I could hear it too. The flapping of many wings.

Just then, the sky shone with incredible force.

“Augh, so bright!”

“More to the point, it’s HOT HOT HOT!” cried Miss Phyllis.

“Phyllis, this is where you use your Gem-Stave of Eternity. Put up some barriers!”

“R-Right!”

“W-Wait, hold on!” I said. “Err, what’s going on?”

“...Sir. You oughta stand back,” said Miss Esmeralda.

“Huh?”

“Look closely—they’re faux-nixes.”

Faux-nixes? I looked up, and amid the dazzling light were dozens, no, thousands of shining birds. “Whoa, what’re those?!”

“Faux-nixes. They’re classified as harmful magical beasts similar to phoenixes. They hibernate in the winter, and come spring, they wake up to search for food —their food being flames.”

I pulled Olivia tight. I didn’t want her to get pecked.

“Faux-nixes are notable for their flame-wreathed feathers, and in order to eat their preferred diet of flames, these pests burn surrounding forests and towns to the ground. The wildfires ya get at the end of winter happen ’cause that’s when they stop hibernating.”

There are birds like that out there? I’ve been holed up on the mountain so long that there’s a whole world of things I’m clueless about.

“But, err, why are those gentle-birds attacking this place?” It wasn’t as though the area was heavily forested.

“And they breed way down south to begin with.”

“So then why?”

It was Miss Phyllis who answered me: “Mr. Eldraco... This is because of Luca’s special needs.”

* * *

Luca Ioenami. Twelve years old. A dragon-kin from an eastern nation, and shaman of the Ioenami Clan. Following the twists and turns of fate, she became the top apprentice of Esmeralda Serpentia, a genuine Dracoshaman born of a dragon and a human.

And due to an idiosyncrasy of hers, Luca attracts monsters in her vicinity to an abnormal degree.

“Y’see, the kid’s got one of the Seven Supreme Hallows inside her.”

Each generation, one heir of the Ioenami Clan inherits the Blade of Bluewater, a long sword that contains an aquamarine housing the power of water. The eldest child of the Clan is born with that Blade inside their body. And so it’s been passed down from parent to child since ages past.

However, a problem arose when Luca inherited the sword. The mana of the Blade and her own mana resonate, causing magical beasts to appear one after

the other to attack her.

“Needless to say, we can’t stay here like sitting ducks... Luca is extremely outstanding, as to be expected of any apprentice of mine, but it’ll still take a few years for her body to grow and for her to master handling her mana. That’s why I want her to live someplace safe until then.”

“And that place is the academy?”

“Yep. Phyllis may be a simple-elf, but her defensive magic skills are nothing to sneeze at. I want her to set up barriers that can conceal Luca’s mana all over the school.”

I gazed up at the sky. Sure enough, it appeared the faux-nixes were swooping down for Luca specifically. However, thanks to the barriers that enveloped the academy, their efforts were being rebuffed.

“I swear...it’s not like I know any other people who can put up barriers that jam mana sensors.”

“I...I truly apologize.” Dejected, Miss Phyllis’s shoulders drooped.

I see... You succumbed to a moment of absentmindedness, Miss Phyllis.

“But at this rate, the barriers covering the vicinity might not last long. I mean, look at how many there are,” grumbled an exasperated Miss Esmeralda. She looked all around and pointed at the top of the academy’s tallest tower, the North Tower. “Yo, Phyllis. I’m borrowing that tower.”

“Huh?”

“C’mon, Luca, let’s go drive off those faux-nixes.”

“Yes, Master!”

“Ah, wait, Esmeralda! I’m the Director of this academy—”

“Then ensure the children are safe. If you use the Gem-Stave of Eternity to the best of your ability to set up barriers, I’m sure no harm will come to the premises.”

At that, Miss Phyllis swallowed her words and glanced my way. “I...I’ll go take the proper measures.”

Last year, Olivia had taken an exam in order to become the King's Pupil, and during that test, Olivia shattered the wall of light Miss Phyllis created using what's called light magic...by punching it.

"It-it's not that I'm insecure now...just because the Elven Philosopher-Queen may or may not have been beaten by a student..."

Clearly, she still wasn't over it.

Luca and Miss Esmeralda hastened for the tower and I scanned our surroundings. No students were left outside. They'd probably all gone inside due to those showers. *Phew. Looks like everybody's safe for now.*

"Daddy?"

"What is it, sweety?"

"Err...that girl. Luca. Is she gonna be all right?"

"Hm?"

Olivia was on pins and needles, her eyes glued to where Miss Esmeralda and Luca had run off to. "Daddy, it's just...I'm an *upperclassman*!" she said, enunciating that last word with vigor. "I've been so, so cared for by you...and by the two ladies...so that's why..."

"Olivia..."

"That's why I have to pay it forward now that I'm somebody's upperclassman and care for them a whole bunch! That's what I've decided!"

Upperclassman and underclassman. Yet another bond that can tie two humans together.

"So let's go save her, Daddy!"

"Right!" I led Olivia by the hand.

Miss Phyllis was laying out a network of dazzling light barriers, the Stave standing at the midpoint of the courtyard. The gleam protecting every nook and cranny of the academy was preventing the faux-nixes from freely entering.

"Ah, hold on, Olivia!" shouted Miss Phyllis, just as we'd broken into a run.

"Yes, ma'am!"

“I order the King’s Pupil to take up the emergency defense of the Academy...but PLEASE refrain from damaging any property! We’re already projecting steep repair expenses just from those two fight fanatics!”

That’d explain why Miss Phyllis’s looking so haggard.

“Okay, ma’am! Let’s go, Daddy!”

“Let’s.”

Together, we dashed for the North Tower.

* * *

“Attention. Attention all students and faculty. A flock of faux-nixes is approaching. Repeat, a flock of faux-nixes has stirred from hibernation and is approaching the school. All students are forbidden to exit the buildings. Attention. Attention.”

That was the announcement we heard as we rushed up the North Tower.

“To hear someone talk when there’s nobody in sight—what strong lungs that person has.”

Olivia explained to me how their voice was piped in through magic circles installed throughout the school.

“Whew,” I said, panting.

“C’mon, Daddy, quick!”

If I could revert to dragon form, I wouldn’t have needed to run like this; I could simply fly up. But it couldn’t be helped in this situation. *I’m Olivia’s Daddy. I can’t let anyone know I’m a dragon. I want Olivia to find her happiness among other humans. That’s the reason she’s going to this school to begin with!*

“...Whew, we...we’re here!”

Some way or other, we’d made it to the top of the North Tower.

“Luca, it’s too dangerous!” said Olivia. “Let’s go back to the courtyard!”

“Olivia Eldraco? Hmph. *I* shall annihil-ize those wretched things!” She snorted as she glared ahead.

The creatures flapping noisily before her eyes were no mere hawks.

“Whoa, they’re so big!”

Just as the name suggests, faux-nixes are the spitting image of the firebirds that soared through the skies long, long ago. While they’re smaller than true phoenixes, they’re still large enough to easily make off with a human adult in their claws.

How many are there? There’s one, two, three, four...yeah, uhh... There’s a lotta them!

A sizable number of faux-nixes came flying for Luca’s hide! I leaped to defend Olivia, but neither Miss Esmeralda nor Luca seemed panicked like I was. Miss Esmeralda unenthusiastically swung her arm, and a spray of red scattered through the air as one of the approaching bird-folks shrieked and turned tail. Apparently, Miss Esmeralda had attacked it.

Was that blood just now? Poor thing... Maybe there’s a way to get them to go home that’s a bit more peaceful?

“They’re being damn ferocious for faux-nixes,” observed Miss Esmeralda. “They might be modified magical beasts developed by the Altia Empire up north in order to expand their territory. Ugh, those bozos... The thing with the Seven Supreme Hallows was a headache, and now this.”

“Milady, please set your mind at ease.”

“Oho, little Luca. Do you mean to protect me?”

“I say unto you with all due respect that you needn’t handle such a tiresome chore. For I, Luca Ioenami, shall rout these chicken chumps!”

“Well said, Luca. A line worthy of the top apprentice of me, who possesses one of the Supreme Hallows, the Twilight Crown. WA HA HA HA!” Miss Esmeralda’s silver hair swayed, and a diadem appeared on her head. A pure black gem graced the silver circlet.

Wow, that’s pretty! I love all things sparkly.

“Oh my gosh!” said Olivia, a shine in her eyes. “That lady looks just like a princess!”

I recalled all the princesses sporting tiaras in the books I had read her when she was a wee one. I remembered she liked to make crowns for herself using the flowers in the garden and play princess.

Upon seeing the newly crowned Miss Esmeralda, Luca sprang up. “Wha heh!”

“What’s the matter, Luca?” asked Olivia worriedly.

“M-Milady, E-Esmeralda? ≡” If Luca’s smile was anything to go by, she was thoroughly enchanted. She was staring vacantly at Miss Esmeralda. Evidently, Esmeralda putting on her game face had her apprentice quite captivated.

“Luca,” said Miss Esmeralda, “we can hardly let the likes of those faux-nixes run and hide, now can we?”

“Of course not!”

“All right then, Luca—show me what you’ve got. Let’s rip a bit of an opening in Phyllis’s light wall.” Miss Esmeralda raised her right arm skyward. “Flames of darkness, reduce them to ashes,” she incanted quietly, swinging her arm back down.

A moment later, KABLOOEY! There was a radiant explosion of light and the barriers Miss Phyllis had set up to cover the skies above the North Tower were no more.

“Eek!” Olivia jumped in fright at the boom.

“Over here, Olivia!” I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tight. Her tiny hand gripped mine back.

We could hear students yelp and shout from all over the school.

“Oh my gosh... Do you think everybody’s okay, Daddy?”

“They are, sweety. Don’t you worry.” I gave her a reassuring smile. She was concerned about her friends.

Miss Esmeralda grinned. “The students’ll be fine... With ol’ Phyllis protecting the courtyard, it ain’t gonna get a scratch. You lot oughta just head back already. Luca, repel all enemies!”

“Yes, Milady!”

“Don’t be afraid you’ll fail. I’m right behind you!”

“Right!” Luca closed her eyes and brought her hands together. Then, she started mumbling an Eastern chant: “*Hi fu mi yo i mu na ya, kokonotari*—sway and shake!”

The next moment, a large and shining pale blue blade appeared in Luca’s hands.

Yikes, even a kitchen knife would be dangerous for someone her size! Isn’t giving a little kid such a big blade a huge safety risk?

“Wow! That’s so COOL!!!”

Luca must have been gratified to see Olivia’s sparkling, expectant eyes, given how she chuckled deviously. Then she gave the sword a swing as she spun. She didn’t slice the faux-nixes directly, but rather danced in circles and cut the air.

“Gyaaah!”

With great force, a whip of water attacked the faux-nixes trying to assault us through the holes opened in the barriers. Now robbed of the flames wreathing their wings, the poor bird-folks squirmed and writhed.

“Heh heh... This is the family secret of the Ioenami Clan: one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, the Bluewater Blade! My power is more than sufficient for the likes of faux-nixes—”

But just then, Luca staggered.

“Ah, Luca!” Olivia leaped out of my embrace and caught Luca in her arms.

The Blade disappeared from Luca’s hands.

“Are you okay, Luca?” asked Olivia.

“Urgh... Ughh!!!”

“Are you in pain, Luca?!” she pressed.

“It-it’s nothing! I simply used the dragon-kin heirloom within me...as the rightful successor. If it’s for Milady Esmeralda’s sake, this much is nothing to me... Urgh...”

“Ah, oh no! You’re sweating like crazy!” said Olivia. “Err, umm, hold on a sec.”

She rummaged inside her mantle. “Found it! This is a moonglow leaf!”

“Huh...? Hrmgh!”

Olivia shoved a moonglow leaf—the all-purpose plant-acea—into Luca’s mouth. Apparently, she had been walking around with a handful of moonglows, the flowers which were being cultivated both at home and at the academy, on hand.

As Luca chewed, the tension in her body melted away.

“Did the pain go away?”

“Uh, uh-huh... I have re-cup-erated.”

“Phew! I’m so glad I’ve been raising lots of moonglows!”

At the sight of Olivia’s beaming smile, Luca burst out crying. “Huh, wha?”

“What’s wrong?” said Olivia, confused.

“I...I must be more superi-ous-er than the likes of *you*! And yet... And yet...”

Miss Esmeralda stared at Luca as the young girl teared up. “...I figured you wouldn’t able to control it just yet. I’ll take charge from here.”

Miss Esmeralda swung her arm slightly, and each time she did, the faux-nixes aiming for Luca were blown away. Little by little, the birds flew away.

“...I feel kinda sorry for them,” murmured Olivia quietly.

Still in Olivia’s arms, Luca protested. “What are you saying? You needn’t show magic beasts any solici-tivity.”

“But...but I still feel kinda bad.”

“You’re right, Olivia.”

Don’t get me wrong, I was worried they’d attack Olivia’s school—and I was worried for Luca as well. But beating them back that violently did evoke a measure of pity.

“Can we try talking to them, maybe...?” muttered Olivia forlornly.

Just as I was about to reply in enthusiastic agreement... “Wait, what the...?”

“What’s the matter, Daddy?”

“Honey... Do you hear that?”

“Huh?” She shook her head. “No, I don’t hear anything...apart from the faux-nixes’ cries, that is.”

That’s odd... I feel like I’m picking up on some *weird noise...*

As I racked my brain, I looked behind me. “Ah?!”

Something was flying toward us from our blind spot. Just like the faux-nixes, they were birdies wreathed in flame—only they were a bit *smaller*.

“Wha?!” shouted Luca, who had finally caught on. “Faux-nix chicks?!”

Indeed. They were smaller and more nimble than the adult birds Miss Esmeralda was driving off.

“Augh! There are so many!”

Before we knew it, they had us surrounded.

“I-I see... Don’t tell me their head-on assault was a diversion?!”

“Daddy, what’re these smaller faux-nixes?”

“Err...good question.”

Luca gnashed her teeth. “That is how they hunt their prey.”

“Huh?”

“The parent birds serve as decoys while the growing chicks attempt to feast on my mana-rich flesh.”

Egads! That’s terrifying!

A flash of light came out of nowhere. “What the?!”

The faux-nixes all breathed out fireballs in unison, which hurtled toward Olivia and Luca. *WATCH OUT!*

“Oh no, Luca—” Miss Esmeralda raised her right arm overhead, but she was a hair too late. She wouldn’t make it in time.

My world turned bright red. *WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO OLIVIA?!*

But the next instant, I saw Olivia smiling before my eyes. Olivia and Luca had

emerged unscathed from within the ball of fire.

“Holey moley, that gave me a fright! Are you okay, Luca?”

“Wha...um, did you...did you just...PUNCH the faux-nix fire away?”

By the looks of it, Olivia had knocked away the fireballs herself. *Boy am I happy she’s okay!*

“Are you all right, Olivia?!”

“I’m a-okay, Daddy! I was a little startled, but...I guess I can chalk it up to Miss Maredia’s special training?”

Olivia was grinning sunnily, and Luca, though frozen in place with her eyes as wide as saucers, was also unhurt.

Man oh man, just the thought of Olivia losing life or limb... My heart was this close to stopping! My head’s swimming—today has been way too eventful!

First, a portal between our house and the school appeared in the cupboard, then I learned Olivia’s been destroying an assortment of school property, then Olivia got an underclassman—and now this! I’d hate to be cruel to the faux-nixes, but I’d also hate for Olivia to come into harm’s way. Argh, I’ve had it!

Before I knew it, I was shouting: “I-I’ll stop the faux-nixes! You two stand back!”

“D-Daddy?”

Olivia didn’t want them to get blasted away, and neither did I. Which meant there was only one avenue left to us. I’d have them go back, and to that end, I needed my voice to reach them. Plus, I’d need them to understand what I was saying. And I knew a way to make that happen. *I am a dragon who has lived since time immemorial. I have no name.*

“STOOOOOP!”

I roared, my voice as commanding as I could make it. Bigger, bigger I grew, as big as possible—I spread my wings and shouted at the faux-nixes.

I was back in my old form. My dragon form. I became the biggest, most imposing, strongest-looking dragon I could be. Changing size is my specialty,

after all, from shrinking to a stuffed animal's size to growing into a towering behemoth.

I addressed the wide-eyed faux-nixes, who were taken aback by the sudden appearance of a dragon. I spoke at a measured pace so as not to spook the easily frightened bird-folks any further, but I made sure to impress upon the nervous things the necessity of taking their leave of this place. "This is my territory. My loved one resides here. Go away." I growled. "Sorry about this, faux-nixes."

In actuality, I was supposed to remain in human form. I figured that since I want Olivia to live a happy life among other humans, it'd spell trouble if her Daddy was found to be a dragon. But if harm is about to befall her, it's a different story. I will always protect her. It's what her Daddy does.

"You eat fire, right?" I asked the birds. "In that case, don't bother attacking Luca. I'll fill your bellies." If the faux-nixes were after Luca's mana in order to satisfy their post-hibernation appetites, then there was something I could do besides simply drive them off. "Eat your fill. Rawr!" I spat my flaming dragon breath skyward.

The faux-nixes began delightedly eating it up. The feeble flames on the wings of the chicks soon flared bright and vivid. Upon eating their fill, the faux-nixes gathered their chicks and flew away. When I saw the last of them leave, I stopped my fire-spewing.

Phew. I'm glad we could work this out peacefully in the end.

Relieved, I checked again to see whether everyone still on the roof was okay.

"What the wha?!" said Luca, her voice quavering. "Wha, huh, you're...you're a REAL DRAGON???"

Oh no, I forgot to revert back to human form! *Guess I gave her a fright...*

Miss Esmeralda sank to the floor. "I'm speechless... I have no words. The sheer *size* of you! Are you one of the elder dragons they say existed in ancient times? To think there's still an elder dragon surviving to this day..."

The two of them were dumbfounded. Then, an excited voice rang out: "My Daddy's super cool, isn't he?!"

Oh my! Olivia just called me cool! Wait, this isn't the time for that, is it? I just scared the wits out of Luca and Miss Esmeralda! How do I smooth this over?

Just then, Miss Phyllis's shriek rang out from the courtyard.

She saw me. She totally saw me. I am pretty extra large, after all. Now there's really no excuse that'll work...is there?

Chapter 7: Mr. Dragon Gets Hired

“So to sum it up, you’re the Elder Dragon who’s said to live on the Sacred Peak of Olympias?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And Olivia is human, and you’ve been raising her all her life.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And just moments ago, when your emotions flared, you ended up turning back into your dragon form... Correct?”

“Yes ma’am...”

I was explaining the situation to Miss Phyllis now that we’d returned unharmed to the Director’s Office after driving off those faux-nixes. It seemed Miss Phyllis had gotten a very good look at my dragon form, and so I decided to tell her our story, and the whole truth with it.

Incidentally, following the faux-nixes’ retreat, Miss Phyllis had hurriedly erected a barrier around the academy called “Reflection.” I was told Luca’s mana leak would no longer attract bad actors. Phew!

“I never *wanted* to lie to you. I just wanted Olivia to live a happy life as a human child...”

I honestly never intended to deceive anyone. And I’m not a scary dragon. I bowed my head deeply. “Please, don’t expel Olivia!”

I’d gotten her admitted to the academy by lying about my identity. Miss Phyllis would be within her rights to expel her, but I wanted to avoid that at all costs. If my being a dragon caused Olivia’s school life to come to an end, that’d be awful.

The Director’s Office was dead silent.

“Daddy...” Olivia murmured, clearly uneasy.

The atmosphere was so unbearable I had half a mind to run away. *But it’ll be okay, Olivia. Daddy will think of something.* Although as things stood, all I could

really do was apologize.

"...Mr. Eldraco."

"Y-Yes ma'am?"

"...Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Huh?"

"Heh, heh heh... I never imagined that Olivia really *is* a Dracoshaman. Ahh... Now everything makes sense!"

I looked up despite myself. Miss Phyllis was laughing so hard her shoulders were shaking. "You... You aren't angry?"

"I'm not angry. It's just that my head is having trouble catching up, so to speak. I knew you were no ordinary man, but I never suspected you're an elder dragon... I've lived for over a thousand years; to think I could still encounter such an intriguing twist!"

You're not angry, Miss Phyllis? So this might not mean expulsion after all! What a relief!

"What can I do but laugh?" continued Miss Phyllis.

"So, err, does this mean that Olivia can continue to go to this school?"

"Of course she can. She may be, well, the doesn't-know-her-own-strength type, but she's still an outstanding student. There's no earthly way I could ever expel the King's Pupil."

"I'm so glad!"

"Besides, I know how dear Olivia is to you, Mr. Eldraco."

That's right. I'd forgotten Miss Phyllis isn't just the Founder and Director of the academy. She's also a mother herself, with a daughter Olivia's age. She has her own utterly mundane, everyday concerns, and she'd even come to me for advice before. What a load off my mind!

"Wait," said Luca, trembling and red in the face, "no one breathed a word of this to me!"

Miss Esmeralda seemed to be mulling something over as she stood right

beside her.

“It-it’s not fair!”

“Huh? Not fair?”

Luca’s explanation could be summed up as follows:

The abilities of humans change in accordance with the quality and amount of mana they’re exposed to from an early age. As such, a human like Olivia, who grew up by a dragon’s side, would naturally have stronger magic power than an ordinary human, or even elves, dwarves, and so on. Apparently, dragons unconsciously emit large amounts of mana. Word of sightings of an elder dragon on Olympias had been passed down for generations, and in addition, people surmised there must be a source of high magic power due to the sheer bounty of resources on the mountain and its flourishing ecosystem.

Come to think of it, I had read a parenting book that claimed a dragon’s voice boosts the intelligence of their children, and Olivia had been able to read advanced-level books without much difficulty.

Luca trembled as she glared at us. “Th-That’s *cheating*!”

“Err, I don’t know what to tell you...”

“I abso-tively, posi-lutely MUST be the superi-ous student, and yet...” Luca was on the verge of tears.

It was Miss Esmeralda who stopped her. “Luca.”

“Milady?”

“She may have grown up surrounded by the mana of an elder dragon, but that’s just fine. The more worthy the rival, the more heated the rivalry!”

“B-But Master...”

“Think about it, Luca.” Miss Esmeralda’s eyes were blazing. “If ya ask me, beating someone who’s naturally stronger than ya is the ULTIMATE proof you’re truly the strong one!”

“Th-That is true...”

“Heh heh...heh heh heh... I need to give Phyllis my thanks. Not only did she

provide Luca with a safe place to be educated, but she arranged the ideal arena for her too! FWA HA HA! Luca, as the top apprentice of me, Esmeralda Serpentia, I expect you to take the King's Pupil position with your own hands!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am! I shalln't let you down, Milady Esmeralda!"

Talk about being pumped up! It looks like Luca is less about having a fun school life and more about taking the King's Pupil position from Olivia.

"Daddy," murmured Olivia, who was sitting beside me, "this is the first time I've seen a master and her apprentice."

"Same here, sweety."

Then, just as Miss Phyllis was heaving a sigh, Olivia and I voiced the same sentiment in unison: "She seems kinda strict."

"...That's meatheads for you," lamented Miss Phyllis. "I swear."

It was dark out, and while I didn't mind their company, I had to head home soon. The special parent-teacher meeting had come to a close, after all. A lot had happened, but the Florence Academy for Girls' Enrollment Ceremony was nevertheless the following day, after which Olivia's life as an upperclassman would officially commence. As far as underclassmen go, the first one she met was honestly pretty intense.

After Olivia said goodbye and left, I was about to exit the Director's Office myself when Miss Phyllis called to me. "Mr. Eldraco? There's something I'd very much like to run by you."

* * *

Several hours later, in the dead of night, in the dining hall of the Former Dark Queen's Castle located at the Sacred Peak of Olympias...

"A security guard?!"

"A security guard," repeated Miss Phyllis, her tea in hand.

That was what Miss Phyllis wanted to ask me. She wanted me to act as security at the Florence Academy.

"At Esmeralda's request, I've decided to take Luca under the academy's wing.

Needless to say, my magic barriers are flawless and impregnable, but...in case something similar to what transpired today should ever occur again, I think it's crucial to have an elder dragon like you at the school. For you see, I must protect the children, no matter what it takes!"

"...So that's what this is about."

"W-Well, will the Elder Dragon do it, or will you not?!"

"Do you even need to ask?"

There was no need to give it any thought. I mean, come on: becoming a security guard means being able to see Olivia every day!

"I'll do it, and I'll start tomorrow!"

* * *

"Say, Esmeralda..."

Back at the Director's Office, Phyllis and Esmeralda were talking over wine glasses full of mead made of moonglows. It was the kind of happy hour that's only for adults.

"Yeah, Phyllis?"

"...What say you dial down the meatheaded behavior?"

"Man, can ya be rude when ya wanna."

"I'm talking about that crazed competitive spirit you're stoking in Luca. Suffice it to say, I find it questionable."

"Is that your opinion as the Director of the prestigious Florence Academy?"

"No. It's my opinion as a friend and a fellow mother. A mom-friend."

"Ah ha ha, a mom-friend, she says! Your daughter...what was her name again?"

"Seraphy do Riphyllia Rozaria Excelia Glorie Caritas-et-Veritas Mariamne Florence."

"That's long as hell!"

"...It is, isn't it?"

She might have gotten carried away when it had come time to name her child. And she might have ended up imposing her own lofty hopes on her.

“I know better now.” She topped up their empty glasses with more mead. “Please, just call her Seraphy.”

“Sure, got it.” Esmeralda gulped it down. “Who woulda ever thought we’d be moms? If you’d asked me a thousand years ago, I’d have called ya nuts.”

“You said it! But you come across as more of a strict mentor than a mother.”

“Well, yeah, I’m not *actually* a mom.”

“Isn’t your position more or less the same, though?”

“Hrm?”

A pause. “Esmeralda. Don’t you think it’d be best not to go so full-bore with the whole ‘master’ thing?”

“Heh heh, I’m pretty convincing as a ‘master’ though, right?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“So I’m good.”

“You’re anything but. You adore the girl, don’t you?”

“Urgh...”

Esmeralda Serpentia did indeed adore her disciple. As far as Phyllis remembered, once Esmeralda had taken the wee monster-attracting girl into her care, she proceeded to quit her position as a vaunted commander in the Royal Order of Knights, embarking on a journey wandering the lands. She’d paid no heed to the voices opining that the girl with the Supreme Hallow inside her ought to be placed under the watch of the Royal Sorcerous Society, opting instead to keep searching for a safe place for her. Once Luca was old enough to attend school, Esmeralda threw aside her towering pride and her pretensions toward Phyllis and did anything she could to get Luca into the academy that Phyllis had founded. If that wasn’t epitome of a doting mother, then what was?

“L-Look, we’re not mother and daughter! I’m keeping things as master and apprentice so that she doesn’t feel indebted to me later on!”

“Tell me the truth. You’d love to give her a hug, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I would!”

“And you want to squish those cheeks.”

“I do!”

“And wear matching outfi—”

“*Obviously* I wanna wear matching outfits!”

“...And yet here you are, digging in your heels.”

“Guh...”

Phyllis sighed with a smile. She had her misgivings about letting Luca attend (mostly regarding having to deal with her meatheaded guardian), but she was relieved for the time being. Now that she could count on the Elder Dragon to guard the place, she didn’t need Esmeralda to stay at the Academy to safeguard Luca as well. She’d never so much as dreamt that the good Mr. Eldraco could be an elder dragon born in time immemorial...but she saw it as a stroke of luck. Now, she just hoped Olivia’s propensity for property destruction would die down and that Luca wouldn’t get too aggressive or argumentative with Olivia.

If she could be said to have a worry regarding that...

“Esmeralda?”

“Yeah?”

Esmeralda and Luca would be staying in an academy guest room that night, but the problem was the day after at the dorm-sorting following the Enrollment Ceremony. There wasn’t any sort of ceremony that decided which dorms the girls would be assigned to then and there; by that point, it was already decided based on a student’s academic competence and magic power at time of enrollment, as well as inter-house relationships. As per tradition, the student at the top of the first-years was sorted into Fontaine, the dorm of springs. In addition, that student would share a room with the top student of a different grade (the rationale being that it provided brilliant learners with a more ideal environment). The year prior, a student who had never once stopped being at the top of her grade since she enrolled had been a resident of the dorm of

springs and Olivia's roommate. That girl had now gone out into the world as a Royal Sorcerous Society researcher.

The previous top student of the first-years had been Olivia Eldraco. And the top student of the first-years this year was none other than Luca Ioenami.

"I'm thinking it may be a bad idea for Olivia and Luca to be living in the same room."

Phyllis swallowed down her unease along with some mead.

Chapter 8: Mr. Dragon Shrinks Down to Size

There I stood, in front of the dining hall cabinet. When it's closed, it's just your run-of-the-mill cupboard. But open its doors, and what you'll find inside isn't tableware—it's a secret portal created by Olivia that connects the castle to the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

"Haugh... Are you really going to go, Elder Dragon?"

"Yep. I made you a sandwich for lunch, so enjoy."

"What's in it?"

"Eggs. The fluffy, filling kind."

"Aw yeaaah!" The Dark Queen hopped up and down.

"Now then, Sir Dragon, do take care," said Miss Clowria, waving goodbye.

I leaped through the cabinet and out the flip side—Olivia's desk drawer.

* * *

Olivia and the other students seemed to be preparing for the Enrollment Ceremony that morning, so the school was brimming with energy and spirit. Adults dressed to the nines and droves of first-years-to-be wearing their brand new uniforms walked down the path to the Grand Auditorium, nervous looks on their faces.

It struck me how a year had passed since I'd walked the same path with Olivia. It had truly flown by in a flash. And it wouldn't be many more years (each of which would no doubt fly by just as quickly) before Olivia matured into an adult. *She'll grow up and be able to live a wonderful life without me...* I started blubbering.

"Wha, err, Mr. Eldraco? Why are you bawling in a place like this?!"

“M-Miss Phyllis!”

“Kindly wipe those tears!”

I dabbed my tears using the handkerchief Miss Phyllis handed me. *I can’t keep getting so weepy when I think about Olivia’s future.* I breathed in and out slowly to calm myself.

Miss Phyllis beckoned to me. “Mr. Eldraco, come this way, please.”

“Huh?”

“I was just looking for you.”

I followed her lead and found myself in the guest room.

“Please put these on.”

“What are these?”

“Ceremonial robes, so to speak. The Florence Academy faculty are required to don formal wear. This school is a storied and pedigreed institution where proud and distinguished girls gather, after all.”

What’s this thing called again? A mannequin?

I was startled when I saw the clothes the doll-like figure (which was around my height) was wearing. For one, I’d never seen such snazzy attire. And second, it felt so nice to the touch. I’d never worn anything like it before... And how could I describe it? The design was just super stylish.

“The idea behind it is ‘stately’ and ‘august.’”

“Stately”... “August”... I don’t really get it, but in any case, it’s snazzy.

When it comes to Olivia’s wardrobe, the two ladies are the ones who pick out cute clothes for her. But when it comes to my own wardrobe, all I have is the robe I always wear and the rather nice outfit I wore for the Enrollment Ceremony.

“The uniform of our academy’s security personnel is a bespoke design based on the classic uniform of the Royal Order of Knights. Usually, I’d have them come made-to-order...but due to the suddenness of my request, I ask you to forgive me and make do with this.”

“You’re really giving me such a fantastic uniform?!”

“I am. I need you to dress in a manner befitting the prestige of being a guard for the Florence Academy.”

“Wow, I’d love to show Olivia as soon as possible!” I wasted no time slipping my arms through the sleeves. It fit perfectly. Perhaps Miss Phyllis has a good eye for sizes.

I stood before the mirror. I was a tad worried: *It looks weird on me, maybe.*

Miss Phyllis had ducked out for the Grand Auditorium before me; she said she had the Enrollment Ceremony to tend to. She also told me that since the Enrollment Ceremony introduces newly appointed staff members, she wanted me there.

Hurry! Gotta hurry! As I walked toward the Grand Auditorium, I passed a lot of students and their guardians. I got the feeling that everyone’s eyes were on me, and I wondered why I get so nervous when I wear new clothes. I had felt just as awkward at Olivia’s Enrollment Ceremony the year before. *Maybe these clothes don’t suit me*, I fretted. *Maybe that’s why everyone’s looking.* I’ve lived for many an eon, but it’s only recently I’ve begun to taste this strange sensation. As a rule, dragons are basically always in the nude.

“What a dreamboat!”

“A fine gentleman like that, here at the Florence Academy?”

“My, that gallant demeanor and that intelligent look...”

“Hey, stop staring like that. His daughter’s here!”

I pretended not to hear their whispers and burst into the Grand Auditorium. I was taken to the faculty seating area and I took a seat. Finally, I could take a breather. The Ceremony was just about to start, and almost all the seats were taken up by the kids’ parents and guardians. I strained my ears a little to pick up the gossip in the crowd (as dragon ears can hear a lot).

“I’m so relieved my daughter managed to pass.”

“Oh? Your daughter did exceptionally well, did she not?”

“Oh no, do go on. If anyone is exceptional, it’s the young scion of the ducal

house, even though she failed."

"The Florence Royal Academy for Girls is a storied institution, but at the same time, it's a meritocracy."

"Well, there are schools specifically for aristocrats in the capital, after all."

"I'd feel too self-conscious. The only children who attend those schools are from good stock."

"The evening soiree is going to be abuzz with all the updates regarding the children."

...I'm kinda having trouble following what they're talking about.

"That reminds me, I hear the King's Pupil was selected by the Florence Academy."

"I heard that too. Looks like she took the test under the common admission category."

"Word has it she's packing some serious magic power. They're even calling her a Dracoshaman."

"She has *that* much?!"

Ah, there we are! That's my *little one you're talking about! I wanna join in on that conversation so badly!*

I was all fidgety, but that was when the bell rang and the ceremony commenced. I clapped my hands as the new students entered in lines. Their parents and guardians cheered with delight. Some of them even shed a few tears.

I nodded my head sympathetically. *I know that feel. Oh how I know it.*

Boy, there's something about enrollment ceremonies that really gets to you. I can sense how Olivia is growing up day by day, and not a day goes by that she doesn't set a new all-time record for cuteness. Seeing her in her uniform and embarking on a new life surrounded by friends despite being separated from me—it filled me with such pride and joy that I couldn't help but tear up a little. Ahh, just thinking back to her Enrollment Ceremony chokes me up.

I held back my tears as I stared at the lines of new students. I then noticed the girl who entered last was a familiar face. “Ah, it’s Luca.” I’d just met Olivia’s new underclassman the day before.

The children took seats in the order they entered, filing in from the back rows in. As such, Luca ended up sitting in the front row. She was wearing a dignified expression, but I could still feel her nervousness from where I was sitting.

There was someone who was watching Luca with enthusiastic zeal. “Ohh, Luca! That’s the top of the class for ya! She’s killing it!”

“Hm?”

She was wearing tinted glasses and a scarf on her head, so I couldn’t get a good look at her face, but... *Wait, that’s Miss Esmeralda, isn’t it?*

“Just look at her! That alert expression, those brisk motions! Your elegant demeanor makes you a cut above the other students, Luca!”

“...What is she doing?” *Is that one of those “disguises” or something? The people around her don’t seem to have caught on... On second thought, maybe she’s being pretty obvious.*

I stole a glance at the woman sitting with oodles of solemn majesty on the stage—the academy’s Founder-*cum*-Director, Miss Phyllis.

“...Mmph, hee heh...”

Hold on, she’s totally stifling a laugh right now. In fact, she’s grinning a little. Miss Phyllis, you’re wearing an even lovelier dress than usual—don’t you know that if you burst out laughing now, you’ll punch a hole in that aura of dignity? Not that I don’t get where she’s coming from!

I wondered whether Luca herself was aware, and I hoped she wasn’t startled. Just the day before, Miss Esmeralda had been rocking that super intense “master” vibe. And now here she was, a bit on the jolly side.

I strained my ears again. I picked up on voices quiet and voices far—if I’m inclined to eavesdrop, then it’ll come in crystal clear. This old dragon may be over the hill, but don’t assume I’m hard of hearing!

“...Sigh... I knew it, Milady won’t be gracing us with her presence...”

Say whaaaaat?! She hasn't *noticed her? Even though she's sticking out like a sore thumb?*

I almost jumped to my feet from the shock, but I just barely managed to restrain that impulse. *I can't. I'm a security guard at this school! I need to look sharp.*

"Ahem." The Headmistress—Miss Phyllis's right-hand woman, Miss Courié—had stepped onto the stage and was clearing her throat. The second she did, a hush fell over the Grand Auditorium. The Enrollment Ceremony was starting.

I banished all thought of the suspicious-looking Miss Esmeralda from my mind and straightened up in my seat. Proper posture is important—I read that in a parenting book named *Stretching with Your Kids*. Apparently, it's a vital part of growing up quickly and healthily...not that I'm really "growing up" anymore. Anyway, I'm working at the Florence Academy as a security guard now. I need to sit up straight.

I have a job now. The first job I've ever had in my life.

"Now then, representing the academy's upperclassmen..."

That was the moment I had to keep my cool. Alas: "...Olivia Eldraco, the King's Pupil selected from this academy, will now address the new first-years."

"O-Olivia!"

My poise crumbled at the sight of Olivia appearing on that stage. Oh well, who could blame me? There's not a dragon out there who wouldn't be overjoyed to see their daughter's shining moment.

Olivia's speech was terrific. Sure, she'd noticed me and waved at me, prompting Miss Courié to pointedly clear her throat, but that doesn't matter one bit. Seeing her in the white King's Pupil mantle she wore over her uniform as she addressed the new students as their upperclassman hit differently than when I'd seen her give the speech as the representative of the new students at the previous year's Enrollment Ceremony. This year, the one to give that particular speech was Luca. It was recited so flawlessly that it was clear she'd rehearsed it over and over again, and she came across as very cool. That said, I did hear stray comments from the seats around me to the effect of "she doesn't

sound like a kid." *Out of curiosity...what does "like a kid" mean, exactly? I thought her speech was quite Luca-like, if anything...*

Lastly, I was introduced as a new member of the staff.

"I'm Eldraco, and I'll be a security guard here. Err, it's a pleasure to meet you."

I kept it brief, but only out of sheer nervousness. Back when I looked like a dragon, I'd sometimes get hundreds of humans coming around to dance and sing. And they'd pray and call me "lord," but I never felt a thing. Yet there I was, my heart thumping in front of all those people.

The Enrollment Ceremony was now over, and I could finally take a breather. "Phew... Olivia's always so impressive." I mean, she hadn't been nervous at all, standing in front of that giant crowd. "I'm gonna try my best as a security guard."

It was time to turn on the work-mode switch inside me...though I didn't really know what I was actually supposed to *do*.

Guess I'll just stroll around near the Grand Auditorium for the time being.

After I'd been walking for a hot minute, Miss Phyllis came along.

"M-M-Mr. Eldraco!"

"What is it? You seem flustered."

"Please take your uniform off!"

"Huh?!" *Take it off? Here? Now? I mean, that's a bit embarrassing. Dragons may be naked all the time, but I'm in human form now, so...*

"O-Okay, but...is this part of the job too?"

"Huh? Ah, no, don't get the wrong idea!"

"The wrong idea?"

"Never mind, let's just go where there are no people around!"

Miss Phyllis took me to the Director's Officer via a less-traveled route.

"Mr. Eldraco," said Headmistress Courié, an elderly human woman with a

dignified air.

“Miss Courié.”

“Phew, safe... For now, Mr. Eldraco, just take that off.”

“Eek!” *I’m really supposed to just lay it bare?*

“Courié, please settle down. The way you’re putting it is misleading.”

But wait, didn’t Miss Phyllis say it more or less the same way before? Also, just what is this about?

“Umm...is there some kind of problem? Ah, did I put it on inside out or something?”

When Olivia was wee, I’d frequently put clothes on her backward and/or upside down. Human clothes are stupid complicated.

“No, that’s not it...”

“Can you not hear the voices outside the window?”

“Voices?”

The Director’s Office is on the first floor of the school building. It has a large window with a good view of the inner courtyard, but the curtains were closed then.

I strained my ears—and I faintly heard Olivia’s voice.

“Tee hee, that’s right! That’s my Daddy!”

“Oh, my!”

“To have such a fine gentleman as our security guard!”

“With that uniform, he looks just like a knight of the Royal Order. It’s so fetching on him...”

“Sighhh...he’s like a prince out of a fairy tale!”

Olivia was surrounded by older girls.

A prince out of a fairy tale, eh? Wonder who he is?

“You’re the talk of the academy, Mr. Eldraco.”

“Huh? It’s *me* they’re talking about?!”

“Mr. Eldraco... No. Elder Dragon.”

“Yes ma’am...”

“A question about that human form of yours: are you aware of just how easy on the eyes it is?”

“Huh?”

No, surely you’re joking...is what I’d like to say, but...

“So, uhh, I really *am* handsome, then...”

I recalled various times in the past, like when I went to the city of Miranda with Olivia, or when I walked alongside her at the Enrollment Ceremony the year before, or my first time coming to the school that same year. It wasn’t at the same level as what I was hearing today, but the people around me had been talking about me too.

“Err, these looks...this face...am I honestly that good-looking?”

“Indeed. It’s not something one typically says to a person’s face, but I believe you could be called quite the hunk.”

“Miss Phyllis,” said Miss Courié.

“Hm?”

“That may not be the term you’re looking for, given Mr. Eldraco’s age. It appears in his case, young girls such as those in our student body are using the informal phrase ‘silver fox.’”

“‘Silver fox’? Oh, because silver foxes have white hair, like an elderly human? Well, it’s true I’ve lived for tens of thousands of years...”

“That’s a bit beyond the level of a silver fox. *Anyway*,” interjected Miss Phyllis, clearing her throat, “Those clothes... That bespoke uniform being reminiscent of those of the Royal Order of Knights isn’t helping matters.”

“I, I see...”

“Stylish uniforms and handsome men are a dangerous combination for our young maidens... I, the Elven Philosopher-Queen, have made quite the careless

oversight.”

I super don’t get it, but I take it wearing this uniform’s a no-go.

“Be that as it may, Miss Phyllis,” said Miss Courié, “seeing as he’s so attractive...”

“I know what you’re saying... It was thoughtless of me. I thought I couldn’t have found a better guard for the job, and yet...” Miss Phyllis rubbed her temples.

I realized where this was going. “Err, the issue is if I remain in human form, right?”

“Well, yes. I suppose you can put it like that.” Miss Courié nodded.

“Umm, well, how about this, then?”

I knew a form I could take that wouldn’t cause the students to pay me as much mind.

POOF.

I was back in dragon form. Only now I was the size of a stuffed animal.

* * *

“Daddy!”

“Hiya, sweetheart.”

The day was over, and when I returned to Olivia’s room in the dorm of springs with the portal back home, Olivia was there to see me. It seemed she’d already taken a bath since her long hair was unbraided and she was in her pajamas. Her light brown hair bounced lightly as she ran toward me. She gave off a completely different vibe than when she’d welcomed the new students during the day’s Enrollment Ceremony; right now, I only saw the cuteness of a thirteen-year-old girl.

Behind her was Luca, her arms folded. “...What, pray tell, *is* that appearition?”

“Well, uhh, I just thought I’d look friendlier this way.”

Though truthfully, it was only because the older students were squealing too much when they saw my human form.

“Hmph. So you’re trying to get me to lower my guard through that adorable form, is that it? I see how manipula-tous an elder dragon can be!”

Looks like little Luca’s kinda up in arms.

Olivia picked me up in her arms. “Tee hee! Luca, you just called him adorable!”

“Aughh! What are you doing, listening in on me like that?!” she replied, embarrassed.

“Thank you, Luca.” I appreciated the compliment.

“You’re such simpletons. Like father, like daughter! You lucky dogs...”

“Huh? We’re not dogs; I’m a dragon, and she’s a human.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Oh.

“Th-That aside, I have no intention of making friends with you, you hear me, Olivia Eldraco? We may live in the same room, but don’t even *think* of starting laid-back conversations with me! Hmph!” And with that, she exited the room and stormed off.

Olivia and I looked at each other.

“You’re in the same room as Luca?”

“Uh-huh. She’s my roommate starting today.”

“Wow. I hope you two can get along...” At this point, I was getting a bit worried. *Before coming to this school, Olivia had had basically no chance to mingle with friends her age. I hope they don’t yell at each other or what have you.* “I...I think I’m getting more tense than you are.”

At any rate, it was time for me to be getting home. I opened Olivia’s portal drawer, and the enigmatic void connecting her room to our castle came into view. As Florence Academy is a boarding school, it would be against the rules for Olivia to stay the night at home as other students couldn’t go home as easily. I’d promised Miss Phyllis we’d use the portal only during free time.

“Phew, I’m a little beat.”

“Tee hee! You deserve a rest, Daddy!”

“Thanks, honey.” After the great work she had put in that day, she deserved one too.

“Daddy, you’re really cute at that size. You’re like a stuffed animal!”

“R-Really?” I had a feeling I wasn’t quite stuffed animal-level cute though. The stuffed animals the Dark Queen collects are fluffier than I.

“Yep. You looked great earlier today too. I was surprised to see you wear a look that’s so different from normal.”

“You were?”

I’d taken a shine to the uniform I’d donned for the Enrollment Ceremony, but it seemed I wouldn’t have an opportunity to put it on again anytime soon.

“At any rate,” I said, “you never cease to amaze me.”

“Hm?”

“I listened to your speech at the ceremony.”

Speaking with such confidence in front of all those new students and their parents, she had done a truly stellar job. I knew how hard it was because afterward, I had only managed to give very brief remarks in the very same place. When I speak in front of such a crowd, it really sets my heart racing and gets my usual manner out of whack.

“I get nervous too,” said Olivia.

“Really?” It hadn’t looked like it, not even a little.

“Well, uhh, Miss Maredia taught me a trick to it, you see.”

“A trick to it?”

“Yeah. You just have to think that everybody else is a pumpkin.”

“Pumpkins...” *Now that just sounds* scary.

“Not that I like pumpkins that much,” she continued.

“You don’t?”

“Pumpkin stew tastes great, but pumpkins look kinda creepy...”

I got where she was coming from. They're so knobbly and gnarled.

"So instead of pumpkins, I just picture you in every seat, Daddy."

"Huh?" *Me in every seat?* I painted the scene in my mind. Clones of me filling every row and every column. A me there, a me there, a me everywhere... *THAT'S what she was picturing?!*

"If I do that, I stop being so nervous."

"That's a neat technique. Pfft..." I nearly burst out laughing.

Olivia was laughing in her own girly way as well.

"A ha ha, so that's what you were thinking about, Olivia!"

"Yep! The whole time!"

For a while, we just stood there laughing, until I finally put my hand on the drawer. All I had to do was pop in through the mysterious pocket of space, and I'd be right back home.

"All right, sweety, good night."

"Good night, Daddy."

I gave her a goodnight kiss on the cheek. *And give my regards to Luca too!*

Chapter 9: His Cutie Is Challenged to a Duel, Part One Being a security guard is even easier than I anticipated. Each morning, right around the time the schoolgirls are done preparing for the day, I pass through the portal and come to school. During the daytime, I bask in the sun in the courtyard, attend classes with Olivia, and fly around above the academy on “patrol.” As a result, I’ve been in dragon form all the time lately, albeit a diminutive one.

My job is to protect the students whenever a bad guy shows up. And yet...to be honest, I’ve got precious little to do. For one, Miss Phyllis’s magic is working like a charm, and it’s been halcyon days since the faux-nix attack on that first day of school.

The younger students must have gotten used to the mini-dragon in their midst because they often stroke and caress me. It actually feels pretty nice. Rumors that I’m an elder dragon and even that I’m Olivia’s Daddy have made the rounds, and now Olivia’s classmates call me “Olivia’s Dad” or “Mister.”

At first, everyone was fairly astonished, but before long, they’d grown accustomed to my presence. Kids sure can adapt on the fly!

“I’ve gotta wonder though—is this even really a job?”

“Of course it is. In the unlikely event you’re needed, we couldn’t ask for a more reassuring security guard.”

At that moment, I was drinking tea with Miss Phyllis in the Director’s Office. Her right-hand woman, Miss Courié, had told me the other day that Miss Phyllis was delighted she’d found a tea-drinking companion.

In any case, I found the job so relaxing and peaceful that I had my doubts I was being enough help.

“Regarding your true identity, I’ve issued a gag order limiting the right-to-know to the guardians who work at the academy... Granted, human nobles love gossip so it’ll all get out eventually, but for the time being, it won’t leak to too great an extent. Heh heh,” she said, pride in her eyes.

Miss Phyllis had gotten pretty gaunt before the school year started, but it seemed to me that she was slowly but surely recovering.

“Am I honestly pitching in at all here?”

“You’re pitching in a great deal! Thanks to you, Mr. Eldraco, not only is Luca’s safety assured, but now that Olivia’s guardian is permanently stationed here, it’s no longer the academy’s responsibility whenever she causes troub—ahem, whenever she gets a tad too enthusiastic.” She chuckled, pleased with herself.

“I’m a dragon, so I’m not sure what humans do, but isn’t that something you don’t really say out loud...?”

“Ah!” Miss Phyllis jumped up.

Eh, since I’m Olivia’s Daddy, it’s only natural that I take responsibility for the things my daughter does, so it’s fine. That said, is it just me or is Miss Phyllis being a little absentminded?

“W-Well, I’m sure this tea will do wonders for this stomachache, so—”

BOOM! Miss Phyllis’s words were suddenly interrupted by an explosion!

“Eek! Oh, oh no!”

This was a job for the security guard!

“...That came from the Training Area, didn’t it?”

“The Training Area!”

“Right now, it’s Class Two-Zero taking a lesson there... Olivia’s class...”

“I’ll go take a look!” I said, rushing out the window of the Director’s Office. *Olivia might be in a pickle!*

“Err, well, I just chanted the spell in the textbook...” said Olivia

downheartedly.

Olivia's classmates were doing their best to cheer her up.

"It's nothing to fret over! My folks said even *they* blew up their oven once!" said Kate, the chef's daughter.

"She's right, Olivia. Besides, you didn't damage the building today!" added Ruby, the girl with the glossy red hair and the scarlet eyes.

"Your father is worried too," said Olivia's best friend, Daisy. "Cheer up, okay? Olivia?"

Iria, whose blonde hair was trimmed short, and Lena, whose lustrous silver hair reached the floor, shot them worried looks as they did the post-lesson cleanup.

As it turned out, the Training Area was unscathed. Since she'd inadvertently destroyed more than a few walls and ceilings the year prior, her homeroom teacher had suggested Olivia practice magic outdoors from then on so the building remained intact. And needless to say, no one was injured. What a relief!

"If you just recited the spell in the textbook, then it can't be helped..." I said.

"It-It *can* be helped, sir!" said the homeroom teacher. "But today removed all doubt. It seems Olivia's internal stores of magic power are abnormally high for a human child...and so she has some difficulty using beginner-level magic."

"Ah, okay..."

Come to think of it, when she created Demon's Gate*—the portal connecting the castle to the school—she did a bang-up job. It's been several days, but it's still working just fine.*

"Surprisingly," said Olivia's teacher, "things don't go so haywire whenever she casts spells without an incantation or uses high-level magic. It only occurs whenever she tries to work beginner-level spells."

This teacher's amazing. She's analyzed exactly when Olivia unleashes these explosions. What an outstanding instructor!

"So, what does Olivia need to do?"

“Beginner-level magic is laid out such that users can cast them consistently even with small stores of mana. Though the current lesson was about memorizing spell incantations and putting that into practice... Hrmm...” She buried her head in her hands. “I’d like to say ‘that’s the King’s Pupil for you,’ but...”

I likewise buried my head in my hands. *What do I do if Olivia can’t participate in lessons anymore?*

Just then:

“Heh heh, keh ha ha ha! How ludi-culous, Olivia Eldraco!”

“Luca!”

“Keh heh heh, I heard a strange boom, and came here to find *this*! Botching beginner-level magic! And you call yourself the King’s Pupil? Whose leg do you think you’re pulling?” she asked, triumph written all over her face.

“...Who’re you?”

“What?!”

“If I remember correctly, she’s a first-year. The top student in her grade, Luca.”

“Oh my, you’re a first-year? Did you get lost?”

“I—I’m not lost!”

Before Luca knew it, the girls of Class Two-Zero had formed a circle around her.

“Ah, do you want some treats? My family made these in the fryer. They’ve got loads of honey and sugar, and they’re super good!”

“Q-Quit treating me like a kid!”

“Now now, we’re all kids here. You and us both!”

“Ugh, you’re right...”

The girls immediately showered her with affection, making Luca flustered. It was Daisy who threw her a life preserver.

“C’mon, girls. Luca might want to talk to Olivia right now. You can’t just smother the poor girl with attention.”

“Huh? Ah, it’s not that I wish to *talk* to her...” said Luca.

“Oh? But weren’t you addressing Olivia just now?”

Luca turned beet red. “Th-That’s...uhh...” Then she puffed up her cheeks and pointed at Olivia. “I-I came here to challenge you to a duel!”

“A duel?!”

Luca undid the scarf of her uniform and threw it at Olivia. The scarf fluttered gently in the air.

“She threw her scarf!”

“That’s in the school rules as the official way to challenge someone to a test of skill!”

“Verily it is so! I challenge you, Olivia Eldraco...with the position of King’s Pupil at stake!”

“Whaaaaa?!”

* * *

Apparently, Florence Academy allows for these things called duels. As Miss Phyllis describes it: “If our girls are otherwise going to get into plain old fights that might leave them injured, then it’s more constructive to make a system of fair and open duels!”

I feel like I know why Miss Phyllis has been on good terms with Miss Esmeralda for so long. I don’t know what she means by the word “meathead,” but Miss Phyllis can be just as quick to make decisions. Duels aren’t something a dragon would ever come up with.

Evidently, duels have a handful of set rules: one, the girls can’t use magic to attack one another; two, no duels can involve harming the opponent; and three, duels must take place in the presence of classmates and/or teachers. So long as those conditions are met, anything goes.

“That being said,” explained Daisy, “there are a few rulesets for duels that are

used regularly.”

The duel would soon take place on the academy grounds, and as it was a match between the King’s Pupil and the girl at the top of the class of first-years, a great big crowd of students had gathered. Miss Phyllis and Miss Courié were among them, wearing worried looks.

“Are you gonna be okay, sweety...?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. I’ll be okay, Daddy.” However, her uneasy and forlorn expression belied her words.

I’m sure she hasn’t shaken off the shock from Luca’s demand for a duel. Olivia had told me before school started back up again that she was determined to be an upperclassman that others could look up to. She must want to be friends with Luca.

“So,” I asked Daisy, “what kinda duel will they be doing?”

“Sir, the challenge Luca issued Olivia is one that’s been passed down through Florence Academy’s history since times of old... It’s the stuffed golem crafting contest!”

“S-Stuffed golem crafting?” *What’s* that*? Humans sure do beggar the imagination every once in a while.*

Stuffed golem crafting is a game that’s popular among the students of the Florence Academy. It seems like one of the sorceries humans have developed over the years involves conjuring animated creatures named golems. The duelists compete to see who can make the cutest, highest-quality golem that resembles a stuffed animal...or so I am told.

“Wow, that’s less violent than I was picturing.” *Phew. I was scared to death, thinking Olivia might get dragged into an actual fight.*

“Duels are for competing in nonviolent ways.”

“I see.”

“When it comes to stuffed golem crafting, there are multiple criteria for judging which is best, including cuteness, quality, size, and the quantity created in one sitting.”

“Is that right?”

“I’m gonna do my best...” murmured Olivia, but she didn’t seem very plucky.

And who can blame her? I searched for what to say to her. “Olivia...”

“...Daddy. It’s okay. It’s not like Luca hates me either.”

“...I’m sure you’re right.”

“I know I’m right!”

But just as Olivia was trying to convince herself, Luca appeared before her.

“...Let’s initia-lize this fight, fair and square!!!”

With those words, the stuffed golem crafting contest was underway. Olivia and Luca stood opposite each other. Luca made the first move, and she retrieved several slips of paper from her pocket as she muttered an incantation. The slips of paper had what looked like spells written on them too.

“Those are *ofuda* talismans from the East,” said Daisy.

“‘*Ofuda*’...”

“Yes, sir. I read about them in *The Sorceries of the World: A Compendium*!”

“I see... Reading that kind of book is fun, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“I like reading parenting books and the like, myself.” *I totally get her love of reading. It’s always a delight.*

While we were watching attentively, Luca made her move.

“Heh... Making puppets is the most basic of basic sorcery in the East!” Luca tossed the *ofuda*s down onto the schoolyard flowers. As soon as they stuck onto the flowers, the ground below them began to rise.

“Making stuffed golems is far too free and easy for yours truly!”

“Are those...cats?”

What had emerged from the soil were cats with flowers blooming on their heads. They were golems—ahem, stuffed golems made of earth. “D’awww!”

“Golems are magical puppets created using materials such as water, earth, or ice. It seems that Luca manipulated the earth and flowers together as one to craft her stuffed golems.”

Luca made six golems in all. There were three black cats sporting white flowers and three white cats with red flowers.

The students and teachers spectating the duel all shot compliments Luca’s way.

“My, that’s the first time I’ve seen stuffed golems move around in so adorable a manner.”

“They’re ever so cute.”

“They look so soft and fluffy for earth golems!”

“That’s the first-years’ top student for you!”

Guess those stuffed golems must be pretty advanced.

“Lo,” said Luca, “for this is only the beginning... Bam!” She threw another *ofuda*.

The ground rose up once again. This time, the single golem that appeared was even bigger.

“Mrawrrr!”

The golem was about the same size as Luca. It looked soft and fluffy too.

“Mrawr!”

“Meow!”

“Mrow!”

The smaller cats all gathered by their bigger cousin.

“Meoowww!”

The seven golems struck poses with the big one in the center. Paw in paw, they made a fan formation. Their stances and expressions were right on the mark!

“Coordinated team gymnastics, I take it?” said Daisy.

“Wow!” There was a round of applause from the audience. Judging by their reactions, the workmanship on display was exquisite.

As the clapping continued, the stuffed golem cats shook as they struggled to remain in their poses. It didn’t take long before they flopped onto the ground. *Nice performance, gentlemen!*

The applause only intensified.

“She moved them with such a steady hand! Bravo! That’s our Luca!” shouted a lady, clapping noticeably louder than everyone else.

“Hm?” *Could that be...* “Miss Esmeralda?”

She was disguised, just like back during the Enrollment Ceremony, but there was no mistaking her. *What’s she doing here? She doesn’t work here, and she’s obviously not a student... Wait, don’t tell me that she actually* is *a student?* I tried to picture her in the academy uniform. *Nah, there’s no way... Right? Maybe I’m just ignorant and that’s totally a thing humans do...*

“Sir, it’s Olivia’s turn next!”

“Ah! Olivia, you can do it!”

I had Daisy put me on top of her head so I could see Olivia better. *Go for it, honey!*

The spectators watched the girl they knew as the King’s Pupil and top of her grade with bated breath. They must have been wondering what sort of stuffed golem she’d create.

“Cute and fluffy and big...”

“Hmph,” huffed Luca, “are you losing your nerve at the sight of my sheer technique and finesse?”

“...I’ve got it.” Olivia opened her eyes and raised her right hand over her head. “Come on out, stuffed golems!”

She swung her hand back down...and nothing happened.

“...Olivia?”

“Heh, keh heh heh...” chortled Luca. “How shocking! I shall be mis-possessing

you of the title of King's Pupil now. To think you can't even make golems!"

"Nope, I'm okay."

The second she said that, something descended from the sky. The spectators were in an uproar.

"It...it's so big!"

It was big. Very big. It was a dragon...but its body was made of water.

"Coo! ♪"

"I used the springs in the Fontaine courtyard!"

"Y-You used water from that far away?"

The dorm of springs lies about fifteen minutes away from the school grounds by foot. The Florence Academy's a spacious place.

"I know it's a dragon, but, but it looks so cute!!!"

"But that face... Doesn't it look sorta *pinchable* for a dragon...?"

The flying water dragon had a very kindly, affable face. It was round and very cute. In other words, a dragon is what comes to Olivia's mind when she thinks "cute and nice."

The stuffed golem dragon flew overhead and then it burst, causing refreshing drops of water to rain down on us.

"Look, a rainbow!"

Thanks to the bright cusp-of-summer sunshine!

"It's so pretty..."

Along with the raindrops, the dragon had divided itself into twenty-four small dragons about the same size as my current form, and they flew over to where Luca's cat golems lay.

"What?! Making the golems fight is a flagrant vio-malation of the rules!"

"They're not gonna fight," came Olivia's calm voice.

The big dragon gave the cat golem a kiss. "Kyoo! ♪"

At that moment... “Meoww. ♪” The cat golem meowed a meow of unmitigated delight. The flowers on their heads sprang back to vibrant life.

“Flowers need watering!”

“Huh? Wha?”

“It’s been sunny for days. Without water, the flowers will go limp!”

The cat golems that moments ago had been dead tired on the ground were now dancing with renewed vitality. The stuffed golem water dragons were happily grooving and swaying alongside them.

“My, how cute!”

“I can’t believe she made stuffed golems using that far-off Fontaine water!”

“It feels both fluffy *and* jelly-ish. I’ve never touched anything like it.”

“A big dragon splitting up into stuffed animal-sized dragons... That’s cute as all get out!”

“Look, they look like Olivia’s father, don’t they?”

“Ah, right, the security guard. They do look like him!”

The spectators were engrossed by the adorable little dragons.

“I think we have our match’s results,” murmured Miss Phyllis, who was watching from within the crowd.

The endearing-ness. The novelty. The technical prowess. The sheer size of the large one, and the sheer number of mini-dragons after it split up.

“The victor can only be Miss Olivia Eldraco!”

Whoa, way to go, sweety! You’re terrific!

A large round of applause. Olivia smiled slightly and walked up to Luca. “Um... Luca. Thank you very much.” She offered the other girl her right hand.

“...Don’t touch me!” Luca slapped her hand away.

“Ah!”

Then Luca promptly turned on her heels and scampered off. I’m sure she was mortified, losing in front of so many people. She does have an “I refuse to be

defeated” vibe to her.

“I haven’t lost yet... Hic...”

Aw, she’s crying... I was really sad she’d slapped Olivia’s hand away, but every parenting book says butting into a feud between kids is the worst thing a parent can do.

That said, there was one thing in my power that I *could* do.

“Sweetheart.”

“...Daddy.”

“You did great. Those were cute golems.”

I flapped my wings over to Olivia and slipped into her arms. She hugged me tightly. Her sadness transmitted into me, and I got a full taste of it.

“I’m sure you’ll be friends one day.” And then, I told her the words I needed to tell her the most. “I’m on your side, through thick and thin.”

“...Daddy.”

This is probably the first time Olivia has ever faced a problem connecting with a potential friend. And I can’t resolve that problem for her. But I *could* tell her that no matter what other people may think, she’ll always find an ally in me. And that I’m always her biggest cheerleader. I’m her Daddy, after all.

“...Thanks, Daddy.” At last, she showed me a smile, though it wasn’t her usual sunny-as-midsummer smile. Still, I was relieved. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect that smile.

Though the excitement precipitated by the stuffed golem crafting duel hadn’t quite abated, the spectators dispersed little by little. These were now after-school hours, and students who were third-years and above had committees and club activities to go to. Meanwhile, first-years and second-years like Olivia mainly studied or hung out in their dorms after classes. From what I could recall, just the other day, Olivia and Daisy had been having a great time chatting about which clubs to join the coming year.

“Daddy, we’re heading back now.”

“Got it.”

The golem cats that Luca created and Olivia’s golem dragons were still dancing together. *I wish Olivia and Luca could get along just as swimmingly.*

“Ahem, could I have a moment of your time?”

“Huh?”

I turned around, and there stood Miss Esmeralda.

“What’s the matter?”

“Well, it’s just... I have a favor to ask.”

“A favor?”

Miss Esmeralda nodded. “Let’s not beat around the bush... Could you please make friends with Luca?”

“With Luca?”

“Yeah.”

Olivia nodded at her vigorously. She wanted to make friends with Luca. But Luca didn’t feel the same way.

“...You know the Seven Supreme Hallows, right?”

“Ah, err, you mean those pretty gems?” The one I was aware of was Miss Phyllis’s Gem-Stave of Eternity. It seems the jewel that’s attached to the stave houses crazy amounts of power. It used to be part of my gem collection too. I used to carry it around because it was so lovely and sparkly, but I inadvertently dropped it at some point... Oh well, it’s not a big deal.

“Pretty gems... I’m a bit fuzzy...”

“Uh, I heard about them from Miss Phyllis!” said Olivia. “They’re incredible, ancient magic items that modern systems of magic and sorcery can’t recreate!”

“Oho, I expected no less of *the* Olivia Eldraco,” said Miss Esmeralda.

“And, and uhh, there are seven of them!”

“Yeah, but that’s kinda in the name.” She smiled wryly.

Does making friends with Luca have something to do with the Seven Supreme

Hallows?

"See, this country's higher-ups have been putting effort into accumulating them."

"You mean they're trying to get them all?"

"Starting with searching for their whereabouts."

So they don't even know where they're located? They seem so highly valued... Well, I guess I did lose one of my favorite gems, and even I *didn't know where it was until I learned it was in Miss Phyllis's possession. One time, when Olivia was younger and she couldn't find the doll I'd hidden inside the castle no matter how hard she looked, she'd cried buckets. In the end, she and the doll were only reunited when she was cleaning up a corridor and it suddenly came out from behind a flower vase. Boy, that takes me back!*

"Sir Eldraco?"

"Ah, sorry. I was reminiscing."

"That so? Well, until recently, the whereabouts of only two of the Supreme Hallows were known. There were definitely seven of them back when we were active and full of energy though."

"Around how long ago was that?"

"A thousand years and change ago."

"Oh, that's pretty recent."

"Huh?"

"What?" I replied, confused.

"...Oh, 'cause from an elder dragon's perspective, it *is* recent. You look so charming at that size that I totally forgot."

Looks like I don't come across like an elder dragon when I'm so small.

"One of the two is the Gem-Stave of Eternity, which Phyllis is managing. The other one I've got, the Twilight Crown. It was only after a long search that I found a third, the Blade of Bluewater. That one is passed down through the generations of the head family among the dragon-kin of an Eastern land."

“That’s Luca, right?”

“Yep.” Esmeralda nodded. “But she doesn’t have a handle on the Blade.”

“She doesn’t...?”

“Yeah. Thanks to a whole bunch of unfortunate circumstances, there was no one left in the Ioenami Clan who could teach her the way to master the Blade by the time she inherited it at a very young age... I figured I’d take her under my care since I’ve got lots of dragon in my blood—”

“And is that helping?”

“...No.” She shook her head. “Given her magic power and her sorcery skills, it wouldn’t have raised any eyebrows if she was already able to master it. But that’s not how it shook out—because she doesn’t believe in herself.”

“She doesn’t? Really?”

“Right. Apparently, she thinks she was expelled from her clan because her strength doesn’t measure up. In reality, I took her from there to protect both her and the Clan from the monsters that are attracted by the magic power of the Blade...”

I see. And here I’d thought she was bursting with confidence.

“Putting up a bold front is all she knows. She can’t picture herself mastering the Blade of Bluewater—she just withdraws into her shell and isolates herself from other people.”

“Then why...?”

“I’m guessing it’s because her desire for me to acknowledge her supersedes everything else. She never got to know her parents, so I’m the adult she feels the closest to.”

I harkened back to when Luca had said she needed to be the best and brightest. She’d been looking at Miss Esmeralda with sparkling, reverent eyes.

“...Even though I don’t particularly *need* her to be so ‘excellent’ or ‘outstanding.’”

“Then why do you stoke such a spirit of competition in her?”

“Oh, that? It’s so she really *faces* Olivia Eldraco.”

“...What do you mean?”

She cocked her head, puzzled. “Hm? I mean just that. People who can’t face another person head-on will never be able to face themselves. Someone who can’t trust another person will never be able to trust themselves... And I want Luca to be able to trust both herself and others. For that to happen, she needs to confront her—*engage* with her—and she needs to mean it.”

“I...I’m not sure I totally understand you, but I suppose it does ring true.” *Wow, so complicated!*

“Well, it’s kind of a chicken-and-egg thing.”

Chicken? Egg? I don’t get it... I guess I prefer eggs, myself. Sunny-side up comes to mind.

“Olivia Eldraco... This may end up giving your daughter a rough time, but I’d appreciate it if she would help me out with this.” Then Miss Esmeralda faced Olivia, who had been hugging me and listening quietly to our conversation and bowed a deep, right-angle bow.

“Oh!” Olivia was in a dither; never before had an adult bowed to her that deeply. “Ah, err... I’ll do my best. I am her upperclassman, after all!”

“Heh heh. You’re such a good kid that it’s almost shocking.”

“Tee hee!”

“I just hope Luca learns to open up to your unguarded sincerity.”

Miss Esmeralda faced me for another deep bow before turning her back to us. “Ah, before I forget, there’s one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Soon enough, you’ll most likely be getting a request to help search for more of the Seven Supreme Hallows. Luca and I have been searching for them for about a year, but it’s been one swing and a miss after another. I’m expecting some progress from you. I’ll be seeing you two.”

Miss Esmeralda bowed her head and quietly said, “Take care of Luca for me.”

And with that, she waved a hand and disappeared, melting into the darkness as soon as she stepped behind the building.

Was that...teleportation, or something?

"...I hope I can make friends with her," muttered Olivia.

"I'm sure it'll all work out fine." Still in my smaller size, I flapped my little wings and stroked Olivia's head.

That's right. I'm sure it'll be okay—if you want it to be that way.

Chapter 10: The Dopey Dark Queen Goes to School

“Sneaky sneaky... I’m being so...”

Sneaky.

The beauty with the sheep horns poking out of her black hair tiptoed across the grounds of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. She could no longer stand “house-sitting” and had used the *Demon’s Gate* in the dining hall cabinet to infiltrate the school.

She wasn’t wearing her usual attire but instead was in a school uniform, albeit not one that was identical to the Florence Academy one. Rather, it was a modified version, so to speak, abounding with frilly lace and embroidered emblems.

Even as she stole across the grounds, she grinned to herself at the thought that she was taking a stroll at the academy in uniform.

On her shoulder sat perched a beautiful, beguilingly elegant falcon.



“Your Darkness, couldn’t you have simply come here with Sir Dragon? Surely you needn’t have *snuck in*.”

“Haugh, what are you talking about, Clowria? Think about it! I’m far too pretty, so the children would flock to me!”

“Ahem, ’tis certainly true... The sight of your beauteous self in uniform is wonderfully endearing; that much is beyond dispute.”

“See, you get it! Mwa ha ha!” she cackled as she pressed forward. “You know I’m a sucker for the school-life genre.”

“You are, aren’t you? Though you were never afforded an everyday school life of your own, busy as you were preparing to conquer the lands of the humans from a tender age.”

“Haugh. It couldn’t be helped.”

“...And afterward, Your Darkness holed up in the castle, recouping your strength and building up your ardor for a second invasion.”

“Even if I’d left the castle, up until a century ago, people were still operating under the nasty and brutish worldview of killing dark-kin on sight!”

“Indeed, for human society is slow to change with the times.” Clowria preened her feathers.

“Hmm. I’ve gotta say, I was expecting more people to be around. I don’t see any students or teachers anywhere.”

“True, my Queen. Perhaps they’re enjoying some kind of event or function somewhere?”

“Really? Oh well, I’m just glad I can rest easy. ♪”

“Yes, the place suits you to a tee, Queen Maredia!”

“Heh heh heh, I wouldn’t mind more compliments, you know?”

“Most unfortunately, I must express my deepest regret...for I should have ordered the latest Eselar-Camra to capture your image!”

“Fwa ha haaa!” Clowria’s flattery was getting her everywhere with a now very cheery Maredia.

“...Wha, what might you be, inter-truder!”

“Ha, haughhh?!”

And so the headstrong shaman and the dopey dark-kin did meet.

The two of them glared at each other wordlessly.

Wh-Who is this*?* thought Maredia. *My sensors are telling me I’m in for a scolding of mythic proportions! Therefore, the only path to victory is running! But, this girl... Is she* crying*...?*

Who or what is this person...? thought Luca. *That un-typical garb, those horns. Could it be? Is she a dark-kin? This is no time for me to be crying!*

Luca sniffled as she wiped away the tears welling in her eyes with both hands. Then she looked up...only to find her gone. “Huh? Wh-Where’d she go...?”

The enigmatic girl wearing a uniform she’d never seen and with a falcon on her shoulder had vanished without a trace.

* * *

“Haughh, Elder Dragon!”

“Miss Dark Queen!”

I’d been walking the academy garden after parting with Miss Esmeralda when I heard a familiar voice.

“Olivia Eldraco! You *know* this suspici-ous individual?!”

“Luca!”

Luca was coming our way, a look of rage on her face. In her hand, a black cat —the Dark Queen’s shapeshifted form. A pretty falcon was flying around her. Apparently, both of the dark-kin ladies could transform into animals, not just the Dark Queen.

“I chased after this suspici-ous impostor student, and she took the form of a cat! Something dubi-al is afoot!”

Luca was holding the Dark Queen by the nape of the neck and the cat’s limbs were stretched out under her. *Cats can get so long!* The Dark Queen was flailing about and an *ofuda* was affixed to her forehead.

“Impostor student...?”

“She was wearing a bizarre uniform, and she was unashame-ously walking the corridors!”

“It—it wasn’t ‘bizarre’! Haughhh!”

“Oh dear...”

“Shapeshifting to try and run away is too suspici-ous for words! And to think she’d transform into such a cute kitty too!”

Ah, so little Luca thought she was cute. She did make cats for her stuffed golems during the duel. Maybe she’s a cat lover?

As the security guard, I was more or less forced to kick the two ladies off the school grounds. No matter how you sliced it, they were trespassing. But I *knew* they weren’t bad people.

Miss Clowria whispered in the Dark Queen’s ear. “My Queen, isn’t a human lass of her caliber a pushover before your might?”

“Haugh... That’s, well... I guess I’m going the pacifist route?” The Dark Queen sighed. She was no longer resisting.

“Shouldn’t you get to be-laboring, Security Guard?”

“Err, well...”

I made eye contact with the Dark Queen. We’d been living in the same castle for years now. I knew what was up. She had “it’s okay, do...do what you will” written all over her face.

The gears in my head turned as I thought. If I wanted to manage this situation correctly, I needed to get Luca on board.

“Err, you see, this person is the Dark Queen.”

“I, I’m sorry? What are you *talking* about? Th-The Dark Queen?”

“She’s really, really strong, so...”

“So...?”

“I...I’d like her to give the security guard some assistance!”

I told Miss Phyllis what had happened and she just sat there speechless, lost in thought for around five minutes. Finally, she sighed. "...*Another* security guard, you say?"

"Yes ma'am! I'll still give it my all as the academy's security guard, but Luca is a frequent target of monsters, isn't she?"

"Yes, that's right..."

"That being the case, I was thinking, it'd give us some peace of mind if a fellow girl sticks close by Luca's side as a security guard. You know, in case of some unforeseen emergency."

"Well...you do make a solid point."

It isn't just monsters that attack in great big droves that might get at her, like those faux-nixes. It seems there are creepies and crawlies that go bump in the night too. Like ghost-types that can possess people.

"I-I'm not so feeble as to need the protection of such a strange individual!"

"I made a promise to Esmeralda that I *will* keep you and the other students safe, come what may."

"...A promise to Milady Esmeralda."

Miss Phyllis nodded.

"...So long as she gets not in my way, then...it's not such a horrif-ical idea..."

"Haughh!"

"Meoww! ♪" At some point in our discussion, the feline stuffed golems Luca created earlier had started clinging playfully to the Dark Queen.

And just like that, I continued my work as the academy's security guard while Miss Maredia and Miss Clowria became Luca's personal bodyguards.

I've got a hunch that Luca and the Dark Queen may just get along. Call it a dragon's intuition! Miss Esmeralda had said she wanted us to make friends with Luca. I just hope this is a start.

"Haugh, come to think of it..."

"What is it, Miss Dark Queen?"

Even as the cat-form Queen was getting mobbed by the stuffed golem cats, she grumbled, “...Doesn’t that girl’s character type kind of overlap with mine?”

Chapter 11: His Cutie Is Challenged to a Duel, Part Two

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls has two semesters. The start of the spring semester is marked by the flowers blooming in profusion in the courtyard, and the start of the autumn semester by the changing colors of the leaves of the academy's various groves. Exams are held two times each semester.

The spring exams were held during flower time and then again during the time of the deepest greens. The fall exams were held during the fall foliage and a second time when there was fresh snow. All in all, exams took place four times a year.

Florence Academy is a prestigious institution attended by the daughters of high-class families, as well as those who were accepted based on merit despite the lofty barrier of entry. Olivia is only one among the many other good and adorable little girls who walk its halls, and they're all earnest and serious about their studies. As such, whenever exam time approaches...

"Maaan, I don't wanna study!"

...They become depressed, as normal.

Before long, the flower-time exams will be upon them, and the closer the exams get, the gloomier the girls get. Or at least, I think that's the reason they come caress me when I'm on patrol. "Little dragons sure are squishy!" they say.

I spent all my years on Olympias, and whenever humans discovered the larger-sized me, they'd typically flee in terror or attack. There were also those who revered me and called me their "lord." The point being, never before had children acted so friendly toward me. To be honest, it's a great feeling, and I have Olivia to thank for my world expanding.

That being said, the Dark Queen's popularity now exceeds even my own. She's started spending her days in the academy as the "security guard's helper." Miss Clowria is also here, but in her normal form.

“It’s so CUTE!”

“And fluffy!”

“Over here, kitty!”

Whenever the Dark Queen idles about, the cat-loving children come in droves. And when she reverts back to her normal form after losing her patience with them...

“My, you are cute. Are those horns real?”

“This is my first time meeting a dark-kin...even though we’re in an age of racial equality!”

“Oh dear, you’re beet red. How precious!”

“H-H-Haughhh!”

For some reason, she’s almost *scary* popular among the older students. And that goes for both her forms. Incidentally, the stuffed golems Luca created also dwell in the academy now. You can spot them basking in the sun fairly often.

The Dark Queen, being as shy as she is, spends a lot of her time in cat form. One time I told her what a waste that is, given how great she looks in that frilly uniform. She went “haugh?!” and blushed bright red.

That’s not to say her cat form isn’t endearing. It seems Luca, for one, isn’t as dissatisfied as she’d like you to think, as she’s often hugging the Dark Queen.

Speaking of Luca, she’s challenged Olivia to duels a number of times, and each one has resulted in a loss by the skin of her teeth. From what I’ve heard, Luca goes and strokes the black cat’s belly after every loss. The Dark Queen may act like she hates it, but she never resists...

The Dark Queen sighed. “Why must I keep suffering?!”

“Heh heh.” Miss Clowria was stroking her head. “Thank you for your hard work, my Queen.”

I’m happy that the number of things we can all discuss, whether at school or back home, has increased. The time absolutely flies by just by talking about things that happen at school or about the kids we’ve come to know. I can feel

my world getting wider and wider.

“I thought exam time would have all the kids studying as a group, like at the house of any given lovely girl protagonist! I’ve never heard about study time having anything to do with stroking cats!” she huffed, even as she pressed her head against Miss Clowria’s palm.

“Miss Dark Queen, you seem to know a fair bit about studying for exams.”

“Hm? Of course I do. It’s super basic!”

From what I’m told, she’d learned about it from her school life...“rom coms,” was it? Sometimes, the Dark Queen uses words I just don’t understand...

Olivia was with a study group in the Study Room, a hall in the main school building. The flower-time exams would start the following day.

“You’re all hanging in there, right?” I asked, drumming up a conversation.

I was in my stuffed animal size, and Olivia took me into her arms. Four people were at the table: Olivia, Daisy, Kate, and myself.

Apparently, Kate’s father is really good at cooking. He’s the “Chef of the Royal Court.” Kate is a little chef herself, and the cookies on the desk were made by her. The kids informed me the cookies are “study aids” and that their presence affects their motivation levels something fierce.

“Iria and Lena said they’d go to the study group at Arbol.”

Arbol was the dorm of trees. The students of Olivia’s Class Two-Zero are distributed evenly throughout the three dorms at the Florence Academy. Olivia and Daisy live in the dorm of springs, Ruby and Kate in the dorm of stones, and Iria and Lena in the dorm of trees.

“Wow,” I said, “so the dorms have their own study groups too.”

“Yep, they all do,” said Olivia.

“Totally,” said Kate. “There are a lotta eccentric girls among the members of Arbol, but they know how to study. You could maybe say they’ve got the spirit of researchers, or maybe the spirit of artisans!”

“And the girls from the dorm of stones are strong-willed and resolute,” said

Daisy.

“Meanwhile, Fontaine’s got a ton of model students!” said Kate.

At that, Olivia nodded. “Uh-huh!”

It seems each of the dorms has its own character.

“Wait, where’s Ruby?” I asked. “Isn’t she in the same dorm as you, Kate?”

“Ruby’s tutoring some first-years. She’s real caring and service-minded.”

At the study group’s feet, the Dark Queen yawned. “Haugh, just looking at a study group makes me all listless.”

As for Miss Clowria, she was patrolling the Study Room in her non-animal form. As serious-minded and brilliant as she is, recently she’s taken to actively helping the students and looking after them.

The Study Room was filled with kids.

“Usually, there are fewer who use the Study Room than not,” said Daisy.

“Tee hee, it sure is fun studying as a group!” said Olivia.

Kate sighed. “I wish they’d make all the exams practical skills exams.”

At Kate’s sigh, Daisy chuckled, nodding. “That is your forte, Kate.”

The three may have grumbled all the while, but they were beavering away at the practice questions all the same. I stuffed my cheeks with Kate’s crunchy, melt-in-your-mouth cookies as I watched them study. They were different from my nut cookies; they had a rich, sweet, buttery flavor that flooded your taste buds with every bite. *Could my recipe be too plain?*

As I was in my little dragon mode, it only took a few cookies for me to get full.

Kate heaved another sigh. “I just wanna cook and bake cookies all day!”

“So you claim,” said Daisy, “but you still always get top marks, don’t you?”

“That’s just the fruits of my efforts! It’s not talent!”

“Hee hee,” giggled Olivia. “You’re such a hard worker!”

“But in the end, I’ll never beat your test scores, Olivia!”

“Olivia, your test-taking style is something else,” said Daisy. “You never show your work; you just write down the answers and they’re always right.”

“Tee hee, I just know the answers...”

“That’s just ridic,” said Kate.

Their chatting was interspersed with silent writing. They were studying a subject called “arithmancy.” I often take the opportunity to sit in on lessons in Olivia’s classroom while I’m on patrol, so I’ve at least come to know the names of her subjects. It was there I learned how humans need to pay attention to all sorts of things in order to use magic, like the amount of mana in the surrounding air, the amount and nature of the mana accumulated in their bodies, and, err...the “output method,” I think? Oh, and “elemental affinity”? In any case, just going, “I’mma breathe some fire! Rawrrr!” isn’t going to cut it. Being human sounds rough! On the other hand, a dragon like me simply can’t do that level of meticulous mage-craft.

“Olivia,” said Daisy, “about tomorrow’s practical skills test... To tell you the truth, I’m a tad worried...”

“You are?”

“Lightning magic isn’t my strong suit.”

“I see.”

“You stole the show during the lightning strike magic lesson the other day... So if you’re inclined, I could use your help.”

“Yeah,” said Kate. “Is there some kinda trick to it?”

“...Hm.”

Daisy and Kate were looking at Olivia with sparkles in their eyes. Even within this class of six honor students (also known as Class Two-Zero), she was always being turned to for help. I felt proud as a peacock!

Olivia looked up from her arithmancy workbook and tilted her head, mulling it over. “Hmm... The lightning goes crackle, crackle, blast!” Her movements agile and skillful, she struck a punching pose. “That’s how I do it, I guess.”

Daisy and Kate huddled together, whispering to each other.

“Right, so, she doesn’t get it,” said Kate.

“...Asking Olivia was a mistake... Forgive me.”

The two returned to their practice books.

Lightning goes crackle, crackle, blast. Olivia, might you be taking after your Daddy? If you’re gonna be among humans, that sounds like a bad thing!

The Dark Queen cackled at the sight of me getting riled up.

“D-Don’t laugh, Miss Dark Queen!”

“Mya ha ha haaaa!”

Just then, I heard the pitter-patter of footsteps approaching. At that familiar sound, the Dark Queen’s ears twitched.

“Olivia Eldraco!”

“Luca!”

“Long have I be-waited the flower-time exams... You and I shall duel!”

“Duel...?”

A perfect score on the exams was the same number of points for each grade at the Florence Academy. So, Luca challenged Olivia to see who would score the highest on their exams.

A pause.

“Heh heh heh,” chuckled Luca. “What’s the matter? This time, I *shall* defeat you, and I *shall* obtain the title of King’s Pupil! And then Milady Esmeralda shall compli-mend me!”

“...Sure,” said Olivia, nodding. But things seemed a tad bit different from usual with her. “And if *I* win, Luca, will you comply with a request from me?”

“Hrm?”

“If you win, I’ll quit being the King’s Pupil. But if I win, you have to do me a favor.”

“Wh-What’s that?”

“Haugh,” said the Dark Queen, “come to think of it, the fact Olivia kept

dueling Luca without setting any conditions for if she won was handing Luca way too big a break."

"That's true," said Daisy.

"Wha!"

The Dark Queen stared at Luca, who silently nodded in assent. And just like that, it seemed the deal was sealed. *Wonder what Olivia is gonna ask of her?*

"Tee hee, I'm looking forward to it!"

Luca had piled up fat stacks of textbooks and reference books and the like in a corner of the Study Room, and Olivia watched as Luca turned away and headed for that spot. Olivia returned to her seat.

"All right, I need to give it my all too!"

Olivia and her friends were studying their hearts out. The more time passed, the more the chatter in the Study Room died down, and the thicker the tension in the air got. Even the Dark Queen curled up and remained silent.

Hmm, everybody's working so hard... Is there anything I can do?

I was seated at Olivia's lap. "Hrmm..."

At last, a wonderful idea sprang to mind. *I know! I'll borrow the kitchen and make everybody tea! Combined with the cookies Kate made, I'm sure they'll love it.*

I dropped down from Olivia's lap and headed for the kitchen.

* * *

"Goodness, the pots and bowls are as big as you'd think." I scanned the kitchen, marveling at their size.

For dinner, one can either eat in the main building's dining hall or bring a boxed meal back to a dorm. For special dinners, however, it seems the students are expected to assemble at the main building. At a hundred students per grade, that makes six hundred students in all at the academy. Add in the teachers and staff members, and that's around seven hundred people in the dining hall all at once. The kitchen needs to be awfully spacious to provide

meals on that level, and the kitchen utensils are also pretty big. The kitchen of our home, formerly the Dark Queen's castle, is naturally no slouch in the size department either, but this kitchen was in a whole different league. Our kitchen doesn't make meals for more than four people anymore, so the pots and frying pans are all normal-sized.

I found myself in awe at it all before I remembered I had come to make tea. *What kind of tea should I make?* "You know what, let's make tea with lots of honey in it." I figure sweet snacks and refreshments go great with reading and studying. Whenever I read my parenting books, I would warm up some sweet tea or honey milk and sip it a little at a time. It's a super enjoyable habit I picked up after I started spending my days in human form.

Right, time to make the tea! "...This is actually maybe kinda hard."

The kids get in a tizzy whenever I'm in human form, so I'm going for it in my little dragon form while I'm pitching in at the academy as a security guard. *I might be able to make tea in this form...but it is a bit difficult.*

"...C'mon, I'm only making tea. It'll be fine."

I assumed my human form. My hair became the same mix of silver and purple as my dragon-form mane. With that, I was all set.

Since starting work at the academy, I often return home after eating at the dining hall. It'd been a while since I'd been in a kitchen.

"All right, might as well make tea for the kids besides Olivia's group while I'm at it!" There were still loads of other children studying in the Study Room, after all. "Err, the cups for this big ol' teapot are here..."

Now that I'd decided to make everyone tea, I needed to boil lots and lots of water. I filled the large kettle with water and put it on a flame. I didn't really get how to turn on the stove, so I used my dragon power. Breathing fire while in human form makes my lips feel a little hot, which conversely gives me the chills.

Next came the teapots. I needed to make as much tea as I could at once so that it didn't cool off. The cupboard had lots of teapots of the same design, and they were all huge to boot. In my human form, just carrying one teapot was a whole armful. *That's the school's kitchen for you! Could an actual human carry*

this? Not that it's a problem for me. I've got the strength of a dragon even in my human form.

I was lost in my work when...

"Eek!" A shrill voice rang out from behind me.

I turned around to find a student wearing the uniform of one of the older grades. Judging by the color of her ribbon, she must have been a fifth-year. I'd learned a whole bunch about how the school functions...but never mind that. I was in a dilly of a pickle—I was still in human form.

"Ah, hello there." I flashed her a smile.

The blushing girl spoke timidly. "By any chance, are you Olivia's father? The elder dragon..."

"Ah! Umm... Sorry about that. Did I startle you?"

"No, no! I just didn't think I'd ever get to meet you in this comely form! You see, I'm in charge of preparing the tea for the study group at the dorm of trees, so I came to the kitchen to get some cups, and..."

"Ahh. That's funny, I was just making some tea myself. Leave it to me!"

"Oh no, I couldn't! I'd hate to be discourteous... I say, you're lifting the largest teapot like it's a feather! Usually pot holders that are enchanted to amplify arm strength are needed to lift it..."

I knew it, actual humans can't lift this unaided. This teapot's incredibly heavy!

The steaming cups were all lined up in rows. The honey tea was ready.

"Heh heh, I'm sure glad I thought to bring honey beforehand."

I'd asked the girl to carry the cups for me. In exchange for making additional tea for the Arbol kids, she was helping me transport the tea to the Study Room.

"Now then..."

Poof. After putting away the pots, I reverted into my little dragon form. Returning to the Study Room, everybody was happily sipping their tea. I'd used heaping helpings of the delicious honey from Olympias—the mountain I call home—and it's a favorite of mine and Olivia's. I was pleased to see everybody

else had taken to it too.

“Whoa... I feel a surge of magic power inside me...!”

“Me too! As soon as I took a sip... How curious! It’s almost like I just drank a mana amplification potion!”

“I think I might just pull off the practical skills exam tomorrow!”

The kids were wide-eyed, and there were smiles all around. *Excellent, I’m glad!*

“Thanks, Daddy! It’s really good!” Olivia wrapped her hands around her cup, blew on it, and enjoyed another sip.

Good, good. Break time’s important too.

Lots of my parenting books talk about parents who provide their kids late-night snacks when they’re staying up studying before a test, and I think parents like that are very cool... Olivia never stayed up studying late into the night when she was at home, so my dream has finally come true.

There was an air of relief in the Study Room now. Luca, too, was in her corner drinking the tea with a much more calm expression. I was relieved to see her drink some too. It put a smile on my face.

That was when somebody I never would have expected dropped in.

“Miss Esmeralda!”

“...In the flesh. Are you lot studying like hell?”

Luca’s master, the tall and slender woman with the sharp face, was here. And she must be a household name here because the students in the Study Room gasped with surprised delight.

“Young ladies, do your best... ’Cause I’m sure if ya do, you’ll do good! Probably!”

“Milady!” Luca whizzed over from her corner of the Study Room. There were sparkles in her eyes, but she seemed a tad flustered and anxious.

“Milady, if I had known you would grace this school with your presence, I would have come to see you!”

“Luca, it’s no big deal. You’ve got your exams tomorrow, don’t ya? Are ya applying yourself?”

“Yes ma’am! So that I may take the title of King’s Pupil for myself, I’m studying without giving myself over to foolish trifles like ‘friendship’!”

“...I see.” Miss Esmeralda looked a mite forlorn.

That aside, Miss Esmeralda, that’s a ton of paper bags you’ve got there. It’s kinda out of step with your witch-out-of-a-picture-book outfit... What’s in them?

Luca didn’t fail to notice them either. “Oh! Milady, what is that you’re holding?! I’m here to assist you once more! You needn’t have gone through the trouble of carrying those yourself... I really must become the King’s Pupil as soon as possible! That way I can be freed from my obligation to attend this school and...!”

“Oh, these... Well...”

Miss Esmeralda seemed reluctant to spill. *Wonder what’s wrong?*

A black cat...which is to say, the Dark Queen, stole up by Miss Esmeralda unnoticed. “Haughh... You cannot fool this nose, woman!”

“Hm? What’s this cat’s deal?”

“I *know* you’re carrying something tasty!”

“Hey!” said Luca. “Do not make light of mine master!”

“Ah... These bags...”

Miss Esmeralda rummaged and took out a small jam-filled bun. There were quite a few of them.

“M-Milady... What is this...?”

Miss Esmeralda hemmed and hawed as Luca stared at her. “Err, well, ya see, uhhh... I thought that maybe, around this time, you’d be studying for the exams together with friends. So I brought enough for everybody to enjoy some...”

“With friends.” So that’s why she was so reluctant to come out with it. Luca did say she refused to “give herself over to foolish trifles like friendship.” Luca was *studying in the Study Room, but she never allowed anyone to get close to*

her. That must be heartbreaking for Miss Esmeralda.

We're talking about someone who was worried enough about her young charge to bow her head to us and ask us to take care of her. She must've been hoping Luca'd have made friends by now, and she'd even brought treats in case that was true. She wanted to provide another opportunity to bond. It was the same sentiment as when I made everyone honey tea.

If, hypothetically, Olivia were studying all by herself at a school with this many kids... Just the thought of it makes me feel miserable.

Her jam-filled buns had nowhere to go. Luca, meanwhile, must not have grasped why Miss Esmeralda was chewing on her words because she was staring at her blankly.

Olivia, who was hugging me in her arms, jogged over. "I'll take them!" She took the buns from out of the bags Miss Esmeralda was holding.

"Ack! What are you doing to Milady?!"

Olivia sank her teeth into one, her squishy cheeks moving about as she chewed. Her eyes gleamed. "Mmmm!" She hopped for joy.

The bun appeared to contain strawberry jam; the sweet-and-sour aroma was starting to waft in the air. The Dark Queen's nose twitched.

"I wonder if it'd taste even better with the tea Daddy made us."

"Haughh! You're a genius, Olivia! I was just thinking the same thing!"

Upon hearing the excitement in Olivia and the Dark Queen's voices, familiar faces—Daisy, Kate, and the other girls—came along to investigate.

"Wh-Wha..." said Luca.

"C'mon Luca, let's eat them together!"

"Wh-Who would eat with the likes of you—"

"Erm..." said Miss Esmeralda. "There's plenty, so don't fight over them. Luca, could ya hand them out for me?"

"Mi-Milady?!"

Miss Esmeralda handed her a big paper bag. Luca seemed bewildered, but she

handed the buns out to the students, however timidly. First to other first-years like herself. And then to second-years like Olivia. And also to the older girls, their upperclassmen.

“Mmm, how scrumptious!”

“The graininess of the sweet-and-sour strawberry jam has a lovely mouthfeel.”

“And the bread is so soft and fluffy... These are first-rate!”

The children kept thanking Luca and telling her how yummy the buns were, along with other friendly conversation starters. Luca replied, even though she seemed lost at sea... Come to think of it, that might be the first time I ever saw Luca even talk to someone else.

Might as well eat one too. Mmm, that really is delish. I took one bite and the jam flooded into my mouth. “What bakery did these come from?”

“Th-These jam buns are one of Milady’s favorites. They’re from a bakery east of the capital.”

“I see! Thanks, Luca!”

“Daddy, I’d love it if you could take me there sometime soon!”

“Sure, let’s go one of these days.”

It sounds like a good idea. I was earning a salary as the security guard, after all. And painting the capital red with Olivia would surely be a grand old time.

It goes without saying that the Dark Queen was blissfully stuffing her cheeks, but even Miss Clowria was doing so! The Dark Queen wagged her tail as she addressed Luca.

“Haugh, what is it, Luca? Do you want us to take you too? Don’t lie, you’re totally jealous, aren’t you?”

“Huh?! I, that’s, no, I’m not!”

With all of us striking up a conversation with her, Luca seemed perplexed. Miss Esmeralda watched us as we mingled, only for Luca to hide behind her.

“M-M-Milady, do not think for a second that I’m slacking off! These people

are attempting to consort with me of their own accord...!” With a panicked expression, she looked up at Miss Esmeralda.

I’m sure Luca wanted to show her how earnestly she was immersing herself in her studies before the big exams. But Miss Esmeralda had something else in mind.

“It’s okay, Luca. I’m relieved to see you’ve made lotsa friends.”

She smiled so faintly you had to squint to see it. As a fellow parent of sorts, I knew where she was coming from. Seeing Olivia spend time with her friends is one of my great joys.

“F-Friends?! I would never waste my time with—”

But Olivia interrupted her. “Umm, Luca?”

“Wh-What do you want?!”

“About what we were saying earlier. If I beat your scores during the flower-time exams that start tomorrow...”

“...Yes?”

“Then be friends with me, Luca.”

“...Wha?” said Luca, gaping open-mouthed.

“Haugh?”

“Olivia?”

Her smile was sunny as could be. She repeated herself. “If you win, I’ll stop being the King’s Pupil. But until now, I didn’t say what I would ask of you if *I* win. So if I win, I want you to be friends with me!”

“That’s... I...”

“You’re down, right?”

“...Of course I am!” Luca nodded vigorously. “I swear I shall not lose...!”

I may have been imagining it, but I think Miss Esmeralda looked a bit happy to hear their back-and-forth.



Miss Esmeralda cares about Luca a great deal, doesn't she?

In an instant, Miss Esmeralda's faint smile vanished.

Aww, that's a shame. When she's not smiling, she looks kinda scary. Though I'm sure she doesn't wanna be told that by a dragon.

"...Ahem. So, right, next thing... I didn't just come to bring you some treats. I'm here on business too."

"Business, Milady?"

"Yep. Luca...and you too, Olivia."

"Yes ma'am!"

"Fweh?"

"Come meet me at the Headmistress's Office once your last exams are over. Phyllis and I have something to tell ya."

"Yes, Milady!"

"Something to tell us...?" *What could that be?*

"Well, I can tell ya it's about the Hallows. We got a formal command from the kingdom to add the King's Pupil to the search."

* * *

It was the final day of exams, and it was just as Miss Esmeralda had said. Miss Phyllis's official message came in. "I order the King's Pupil, Olivia Eldraco, to search for the Seven Supreme Hallows."

It seemed Luca was already a member of the search party as Miss Esmeralda's apprentice, but she was given a new directive from Miss Phyllis: "Search for them together with young Olivia, and get along with her."

According to Miss Phyllis, the Gem-Stave of Eternity, the Twilight Crown, and the Blade of Bluewater already have owners (Miss Phyllis, Miss Esmeralda, and Luca, respectively). The whereabouts of the remaining four—a lance, a bow, a shield, and a ring—are apparently unknown. Their names we do know: the "Blessed Blaze-Lance," the "Leafwind Bow," the "Vastearth Shield," and the "Ring of Mercy's Light." However, we're not sure what powers they possess. Oh

well, I guess that's just how it is. People do lose things, after all.

Our only lead is on what they call the Blessed Blaze-Lance. Legend has it that it disappeared a millennium or so ago...so actually finding it seems like a tall order.

Incidentally, I was told the order came straight from the King. A king's a real huge bigwig in human society.

"I wonder if bigwigs have big bodies... I'm sure they're not as big as a dragon like me, but I'm guessing they're maybe around twice Olivia's size..."

"No, there's no way that could be true," said the Dark Queen, shooting me down.

In any case, the hunt for the Hallows would soon begin. It's kind of exciting. I mean, it's basically a treasure hunt! What's more, the two ladies and I are also going to be coming along as Olivia and Luca's guards. When school's out, we'll be on excursions to all sorts of places, so it'll feel like a long field trip.

A few days later, we left for work in the morning, as usual, only to be greeted by something completely out of the ordinary.

"Whoa, what're those lines for?"

Long lines of students had formed in front of the school building. Going by the color of their ribbons, each line was for a different grade. I could spot Olivia and Daisy in line as well.

"Hey! Oliviaaa!"

"Ah, Daddy, it's you! Morning!"

Olivia was as full of energy as ever that morning. She was jumping in place and waving her hands. I chuckled. *She's so cute.*

"What's this line for?"

"They're giving us back our tests! Once we get our result sheets, we have to go to class."

"There's one line per grade," said Daisy, "so it won't take as long as you might expect."

Obviously, Olivia knows more about the school than I, as she's lived here for a year longer than I have. I'm picking up all sorts of things now that I'm a security guard, but I've still got lots more to learn. It's actually a really refreshing feeling to be learning about stuff from Olivia.

I decided to line up alongside Olivia for the time being. And just as Daisy had said, the queue moved faster than I'd have thought.

"You are Olivia Eldraco from the honor student program...Class Two-Zero, yes?" said the office worker, who fetched an envelope with the words "Olivia Eldraco" on it from a box and handed it to her. "Here you are."

"Thank you very much."

Her test results must be in that envelope. The surname she chose for us... Our family name has really kinda grown on me.

Once they were handed their envelopes, everybody tried to peek inside, barely able to stand the wait. Olivia was no exception. She walked the halls holding the envelope up to the light and peering into the opening, when...

"...Olivia Eldraco!"

"Ah, Luca!"

Luca, who was also holding her envelope, came rushing over. She must have been running around looking for Olivia because she was panting and out of breath. I'd almost forgotten that Olivia and Luca were dueling over their test results. Still lying atop Olivia's head, I gulped. *How'd they score?*

Luca took her result sheet from her envelope, triumph written on her face. "I got perfect marks! Behold, 100 in each subject for an average score of 100! That's an SS rank assess-uation! And pray tell, how could anyone calling herself the King's Pupil have lower grades than myself?"

"Ah. Err..." Olivia rummaged for the sheet in her envelope.

Luca looked on, hope in her eyes. And who could blame her? She'd gotten a perfect 100. Sure, she was a grade lower than Olivia, but the scores were numbers, and as such, they would naturally be compared to one another.

"Haugh, Olivia..." said the Dark Queen.

“Is everything okay, Olivia?” asked Miss Clowria, just as concerned.

“Let’s see here, my score...”

“Stop being so sluggardly! It’s your average score I desire! Your average! Though *my* average is an unbeatable 100!”

“Let’s see, my average is...”

“Yes?!”

“...120.”

“...Come again?” Luca froze.

“Don’t the scores cap at 100 points?” Daisy peeked at Olivia’s results sheet. “Ahh...if I remember correctly, Olivia decoded an ancient spellcasting method that was lost to time for the geometrimancy test.”

“...I’m sorry???”

“Oh, yeah, ’cause it was in a book Daddy read me. That ancient language.”

“Um???”

I remember that. The book I read for her was in the Dark Queen’s library. Who would’ve thought the test would contain the ancient tongue?

“So, I got 200 out of a possible 100 points for the geometrimancy test, and then I got 150 out of a possible 100 points on the Magical Pharmaceutics test ’cause of the report on the moonglows...you know, the plant-acea growing on our mountain. For the rest of the tests, I got 100, same as you...”

“You, you averaged...120? On tests that cap at 100...?”

Luca shook, her face flushed red. Tears were welling in her eyes. It seemed she was in quite some shock.

I stood at Olivia’s feet with the Dark Queen at my side. “Haughh... Oh no...” groaned the black cat.

“Umm... I-I’m sorry, Luca!”

“What?!”

Luca looked so despondent that Olivia couldn’t help but apologize. But that

only caused Luca, who'd been biting her lip until that moment, to open her eyes wide and glower at Olivia.

"Haugh, that wasn't cool, Olivia..." murmured the Dark Queen, cat ears drooping.

"O-O-O-OLIVIA ELDRACO!!! You, you would *apologize*?!"

"Huh?"

"I've had enough of your mockery! If you pull a dejected face like that on me, then where does that leave me?! That'll make me lose face EVEN MORE!"

"Luca?!"

"I CONTEMN kids like you acting all goody-goody!"

She ran off, bawling her eyes out.

"Ah!" Olivia was about to give chase...but she stopped in her tracks. "What do I do? I offended her..."

I flapped my wings and nestled myself in her arms. She hugged me tightly. Being small has its minor inconveniences, but it's perfect for being close to Olivia at all times.

"Haughh... Hark, Olivia," said the Dark Queen.

"Miss Maredia?"

"Haugh... Well...I think that was a blunder on your part."

"...Huh?"

"You and Luca dueled in earnest, didn't you? The girl really put in the effort. I mean, I'm her bodyguard, so I know."

That's right. As Luca's bodyguard, she was often by Luca's side during lessons and after school. Though it seems that most of the time, she was just idling on the floor by her feet.

"She attracts monsters thanks to the Hallow inside her body. She must've been so lonely for such a long time." The Dark Queen was staring in the direction Luca had fled. "That's why she's working as hard as she is. She wants to be acknowledged. I know, 'cause I've been there. When my attack on the

human lands ended in failure, I thought my life as a functioning human being...err, as a functioning dark-kin was over. I *did* lose, but still."

"My Queen..."

"So heed my words, Olivia. Not only did she lose, but then the girl who bested her *apologizes* to her? That dealt a real big blow to her pride."

"Ah..." Her voice a whisper, Olivia was shaking now. "...She just looked so sad..."

"Yep."

"And yet I went and..."

"Yep."

"...I'll go and apologize to her." She looked determined, and started walking.

That expression... She's grown up. She's a regular young lady now.

"Very well!" said the Dark Queen. "Follow me, Olivia. I know where the girl's likely to be like the back of my hand!"

The cat broke into a run, and Olivia followed after her.

"Sir Dragon," said Miss Clowria, "are you sure this is okay by you?"

"...Yeah, it's fine. Is it okay with you?"

"Yes, 'tis fine."

Miss Clowria and I watched as the two ran off. Olivia's world was expanding, and so too was the Dark Queen's. *There's no way things won't work out in the end.* I believed that in my heart, because Olivia was running to fulfill her promise. Her promise to befriend Luca.

Chapter 12: His Cutie Becomes an Upperclassman, Part Two Luca Ioenami found herself in a quiet area of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. She was standing idle in the shade of a tree behind the school building.

She had lost. She had been utterly defeated.

She thought if she could just take the King's Pupil title from Olivia Eldraco, she'd feel satisfied. She yearned to make the master she loved and respected proud of her.

Luca sighed. "I've been annihil-ified."

Not only that, her rival, Olivia, had *apologized* to her. She'd said "sorry," of all things. As if she didn't feel pitiful enough already. If Olivia had said it sarcastically, that would have been preferable.

"...How'd she get to be such a Goody Two-shoes?"

For, indeed, Olivia was nothing if not a good girl. Here Luca was, lashing out at her at every opportunity, and never once had Olivia ever been anything other than nice. In fact, she was always *minding* Luca. Luca knew all that. She was her roommate, after all. Olivia always made sure to tell Luca good morning and good night. Whenever it looked like Luca might oversleep, Olivia casually woke her up. She always gave Luca the biggest of the afternoon snacks that were served on days off. That's just the kind of girl she was.

As of late, a black cat—the shapeshifted form of the girl with the sheep horns—had been tagging alongside her, calling herself the "security guard's assistant." The cat was apparently something of a big sister to Olivia...and from what Maredia had told her, Olivia had always been that way. She wasn't feigning friendliness because she was at school or trying to play the perfect student. She was like that even at home. She literally was just that innocent and kindhearted.

“...I’m so frustrated with myself.”

She wanted to be like her. A good girl who could smile and laugh from the heart.

It seemed that Olivia had been abandoned by her real father and raised by that dragon. Despite that, she had never grown bitter. She was as warm and cheerful a presence as the sun itself.

“Be friends with me!” That’s what Olivia had told Luca.

“...Is it possible? Can I... *Can* I really be friends with her?”

The reason Luca attracted monsters was because she had yet to fully control the Blade of Bluewater within her. Because of that, she caused the academy so much trouble, starting on the very first day of school. And yet Olivia had still said she wanted to be friends with such an inexperienced and immature girl.

“She’s so weird... And yet...”

Maybe, just maybe, if she really was able to be friends with Olivia, she’d be happy. She never had anyone in her life she could call a friend up until now.

“But... But I called her a goody-goody to her face...”

There was no question—Olivia must already be exasperated with her. Not only that, but Luca had flipped out on her after losing their duel. No way she still wanted to be friends with such a prickly underclassman. She was just a rival. There was no reason for her to be sad.

And yet... And yet...

“Luca!”

“...Huh?”

“Haugh! I knew it, you’re here!”

“Olivia Eldraco... And the cat.”

“That’s Maredia to you!”

“But why...” Why was she here, after Luca had said something so horrible to her?

“Heh heh! No one knows where the terminally lonely feel like they belong quite like I do!”

“I’m so relieved, Luca... Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Wha? But...”

“...I said something horrible to a friend!” said Olivia.

“Huh?”

A friend? *Her?* Is that what the girl had said? Luca turned around in surprise. Her eyes locked with the smiling Olivia’s. Maredia had climbed onto her head.

“But, but why?”

“Why? That was the promise, wasn’t it? You agreed to be friends with me.”

Luca was shocked. After how nasty Luca had been to her, she still insisted they were friends.

“I’m sorry I said sorry before. Apologizing to you like that was rude of me... Miss Maredia taught me that, and I think she’s totally right.”

A pause.

“...Luca. I’m sorry I said I’m sorry.”

“...This is complicated.”

“Err, I’m sorry for saying sorry I’m sorry?”

“Pffft! Now it’s even more complicated!”

“Ah, you’re smiling! Nya ha ha!”

“Sh-Shut up!”

Something in Luca’s heart softened...though the soft and fluffy fur of the cat that had clambered into her arms probably had something to do with that as well.

Now that she remembered, this cat was always on her lap when she was all alone in the classroom. They’d even chatted every now and again. Plus, the cat would always let her huff her warm belly fur.

“So, Luca, could you please forgive me?”

“...Okay.” Luca nodded.

“Now we’re friends, right?”

“...B-Because I promised.”

“Tee hee, thanks!”

“B-But know this! I’m only keeping the promise because it would be uncool not to. If you would call that true friendsh—”

“That’s fine.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t mind. So let’s be friends, Luca.”

“O-Olivia Eldraco.”

“We’re friends now, so I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me by my full name.”

“Huh? Err, uhh...” Luca stopped to think. What should she call her? She’d never had a friend before.

Olivia being in the grade above hers, Luca needed to address her respectfully.

“Should I just call you Olivia? Or...Olivia Dearest?”

“Ah, I like the sound of that! Tee hee! I *am* your upperclassman!”

Luca blinked in surprise; how could the girl have a smile that confident, that carefree? Luca would have totally understood if Olivia were at least a little ticked off at her.

“Dearest Olivia, may I ask you a query?”

“Lay it on me!”

“Why are you such a good kid?”

“Huh?”

“Do you never get angry or sulky?”

“I do. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I think my Daddy would be on my side even if I was a bad kid. That’s why I

wanna be a good kid!!!”

“...Aha...”

“Umm, question. Do you think Miss Esmeralda brought you snacks because you’re excelling?”

“I, that’s...” Luca’s black pigtails swayed. “My master... Milady Esmeralda...”

“Uh-huh...”

“...I know not.”

The Dark Queen piped in. “Haugh, c’mon. You don’t know?”

Luca hung her head. She honestly didn’t know. If she weren’t her brilliant apprentice, maybe she wouldn’t have earned those buns. She’d become Esmeralda’s apprentice as the keeper of one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, after all. Of course, she couldn’t actually handle that Hallow to anyone’s satisfaction, so as a matter of fact, she couldn’t even call herself Esmeralda’s brilliant apprentice.

“Luca...”

“...Milady Esmeralda...” But she trailed off there. What *did* her beautiful master think of her? She didn’t think Esmeralda disliked her. Then again, Esmeralda had never said anything affectionate to Luca’s face either.

As Luca racked her mind, a carefree yawn interrupted her thoughts. It seemed that the black cat comfortably curled up on her lap was sleepy.

“...Well, just search for the answer at your leisure,” said the Dark Queen.

“Cat.”

“That’s Maredia to you!”

“...If it looks like a cat and purrs like a cat...”

“But you and I are friends now, aren’t we?! Olivia beat you at that duel!”

“Excuse me? I made that promise with Dearest Olivia! I never promised to be friends with some stalker cat!”

“What’d you say?!”

“If you and I were *really* friends, you would stop assuming that transient form!”

“...Haugh?”

“Tee hee, Luca might have a point there!”

“Wh-Wh-What was that?!”

“A friend would keep another friend’s company in their true form!” stated Luca.

“But...”

“I think I wanna see you in your normal form too, Miss Maredia!”

“...Haugh.”

Poof! The black cat curled up on Luca’s lap reverted into the form of a young lady, complete with sheep horns growing out of a head of black hair, moon-colored eyes, and her modified school uniform full of lace and embroidered badges.

“...I’ll be honest,” said Maredia, “I don’t like leaving the house...but I have to if it’s by a friend’s request!”

Maredia was indeed now wearing the Florence Academy uniform.

“Y-You’re so heavy!”

Maredia (who appeared no more than a few years older than Luca) was still on her lap, leaving Luca flailing.

“D-Don’t call a lady heavy!”

“I’m just speaking the un-garnished truth! Aaggghh!”

“Tee hee! Luca, Miss Maredia... Let’s get outta here! It’s almost first period!” Olivia said, smiling.

They could hear the bell chiming in the distance.

Chapter 13: Mr. Dragon Prepares for an Outing

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls was bustling and lively. The flower-time exams (otherwise known as the midyear exams) were now behind them, and the kids were animated and full of energy. Olivia was clearly having a great time every day, and her roommate Luca was also in high spirits. Following their flower-time exam duel, the two seemed to be on good terms...or at least that's the feeling I got. I was relieved for the time being. I definitely wanted Olivia to have lots of fun every day, especially since her help was now needed in the Hallows Hunt.

After exams were over, we visited a bunch of locales deemed likelier than most to house one or more of the Hallows, but they all turned up empty. I thought for sure I'd find a fire-type Hallow or some such thing in the bubbling vat of a volcano that we visited so I dove inside, but no dice. If I wasn't a dragon, I'd have gotten all burnt up and stuff. Guess the Hallows Hunt is no walk in the park.

In any case, today was a nice, warm, balmy day. Before I knew it, the spring flowers that had been in glorious bloom had been replaced by dazzling new verdure. If that wasn't a big enough hint that summer was right around the corner, the height of the sun in the sky also served as a vivid reminder.

Radiant sunlight bathed the world, and noon recess had just barely begun. I was curled up atop a bench, watching as Olivia chatted cheerily with her friends.

“Hey! Elder Dragon!”

“Miss Dark Queen.”

“I’m on the scene!”

“Hiya. Has class ended already?”

“Yep. Some of the feeble humans in Luca’s class today caught cold and took the day off. It led to a real cruddy sitch where Luca couldn’t form a pair with anybody, so I stepped in and participated in PE with her! Check out these gym clothes! Pretty cute, right?”

“I see... Why the band-aid on your forehead, though?”

“Haughhh, ask not... It’s too sad, too sorrowful.”

“My queen, are you unharmed from that ball Your Darkness sustained to the face?”

“Haughh, Clowria! D-Don’t spill the beans like that!”

Recently, the Dark Queen and Clowria have started taking their human forms more often to participate in academy life. They typically spend their time with Luca’s class.

“I-it’s because Luca threw a wild pitch!”

Lately, the Dark Queen and Luca have made more friends. Nowadays, Luca has been spending more time with other first-year students. Apparently, it takes a surprising amount of courage to talk to a lone kid, so it seems that when human-form Miss Maredia is with Luca, that makes her more approachable in the eyes of the other children.

Of course, it’s not always sunshine and roses. They do get in fights from time to time...or I should say, a lot of the time. But even then, they’re still full of vim and vigor.

“I must be dreaming,” mused Miss Clowria. “I never would have guessed that

Queen Maredia would honestly be leading a normal school life.” The sight of the Dark Queen messing around with Luca and giggling with delight had Miss Clowria tearing up. According to her, that was the first time she’d seen the Dark Queen have that much fun in the thousand-plus years she’d been by her side.

“Ah, there you are. Marie, Luca’s calling you!”

“Haugh. To think she would summon me... Wait just a moment!”

“So they’re calling her ‘Marie,’ huh?”

Poof. The Dark Queen turned into a black cat and ran off in the direction of the voice calling her. Even from behind, she looked happy.

That left me (in stuffed animal size) alone with human-form Clowria.

“Wait... Couldn’t she have gone there while in human form?”

“She could have... From a young age, Queen Maredia did not interact or bond with other girls like this. Instead, she reigned from above as the Dark Queen... She might not be accustomed to it quite yet. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“No, ’tis nothing. I don’t reckon it would happen at this academy... We are dark-kin, after all.”

“Huh?”

Just then, I got picked up in someone’s arms.

“Hey Daddy!”

“Olivia!”

“Oh, hello, Olivia. How do you do?”

“Tee hee, how do you do, Miss Clowria?!”

The phrase is a standard greeting at the Florence Academy for Girls. It’s very posh and refined.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Well, you see...” Olivia took out a piece of paper. On it was a fun-looking illustration and the title “FIELD TRIP LEAFLET.” “We’re going on a joint field trip

with the first-years!”

“A joint field trip?”

“Yep!” Olivia nodded.

“Florence Academy’s ‘field trips’ are a time-honored tradition,” said Daisy.

We sat on a courtyard bench. I listened to Daisy’s explanation and nodded in comprehension as I gazed at the Field Trip Leaflet from Olivia’s lap. Evidently, every student in the two grades would be departing for an outing in three days’ time. Their destination? A place nearby where they could experience a “scenic panorama,” draw pictures, and commune with nature.

“Sounds fun!” I said.

“Heh heh, it will be oodles of fun, sir. Right, Olivia?”

“Uh-huh! Last year we went on a mountain hike!”

A mountain hike, huh?

“Though where we live is more of a mountain than that spot!”

“I imagine so.” Our home *is* halfway up the tallest mountain in these parts.

“But this time, we’ll be going for a swim!”

“A swim, you say!”

“They’re combining the field trip with swimming lessons,” said Daisy.

“Is that right?” *Guess they’ll be headed for the ocean, then.*

“And you’ll never guess where we’re going,” said Daisy. “It’s Tritonis, the Holy Draconic Spring!”

“Tritonis?” *Hmm, where have I heard that name before? Maybe I encountered it in some book? What was it again?*

“I looked it up during research time. Its waters are warm all year round despite being in a nearby cold-weather region. A wondrous lake that never freezes!”

“Tee hee! The lake’s super pretty, and it’s big like the ocean. Lakes are for swimming too! I can hardly wait, Daddy!”

“The Holy...Draconic Lake...” *Man, that sounds familiar. I’ve got a feeling Miss Clowria told me about it way back... Ah.* “Ahhhh!”

A handful of centuries ago, I ended up digging a fairly big hole in the ground while I was still only half-awake. I think I was dreaming that I was a mole digging for yummy veggies. Imagine my surprise when I snapped awake! And now I hear humans are calling that hole-turned-lake the Holy Draconic Spring of Tritonis...

“Oh, oh no, oh my goodness!” I was so embarrassed! That whole lake is a monument to my screw-up!

“Daddy?”

“It...it’s nothing, honey...”

It would be a little...no, more than a little embarrassing if the cute girls learned of my birdbrained goof!

According to legend, a holy dragon brought the spring to humans suffering from a shortage of water supplies. I hope it stays that way! For who knows how long, I’d never felt embarrassed or awkward, but a Daddy wants his daughter to see him as cool. Or am I wrong?

“B-By the way, why are two grades of kids going together?” I asked, changing the subject.

“That’s...” said Daisy, only to be interrupted by a voice from behind.

“It seems it has to do with guarding the children.”

“Miss Clowria!”

Standing tall, slender, with her hair worn up, she was the very picture of a knight. However, she wasn’t wearing her typical knightly outfit. She was wearing...a maid uniform, I think it’s called? She had on the same lovely pinafore as the other teaching staff at the academy.

“...As of late, Queen Maredia has been full of spirit even while here at the academy, so I have taken on this appearance for the sake of thoroughness of assistance. I received permission from the faculty.”

“You don’t know, Mister?” said Daisy. “Since the way Miss Clowria comports

herself has been deemed a model for the students to emulate, the teachers have been talking amongst themselves about it."

"Have they now!" *I see Miss Clowria, too, has totally blended into this new environment.*

Daisy was looking at Miss Clowria with sparkles in her eyes. From what I hear, she's popular with the students as a "Princess Knight" figure. Her open devotion to her queen and her standing posture give off some serious knight vibes.

"The faux-nixes who attacked some time ago were after the mana leaking from Luca...or rather, from her Supreme Hallow. The decision was made that the first-years, of which Luca is part, and the second-years, of which Olivia is part, ought to go on the trip together, lest your and our fighting power becomes diffused, Sir Dragon."

"That makes sense!"

"Exiting the barriers protecting this academy means we must exercise due caution. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"Rumor has it one of the Hallows lies at the bottom of Holy Draconic Lake of Tritonis, the destination of the field trip!"

"Oho!" Olivia and Luca were after those Hallows, which are striking and extraordinary lost treasures that came to be in the human lands.

"I hope we run into at least one of them," said Miss Clowria. "Please allow me, unworthy though I am, to assist!"

"Thanks, Miss Clowria!" said Olivia.

It seemed we would all be allowed to come along on the trip. *I'd better get ready!*

* * *

The snacks for the field trip had to cost three hundred sacules or less.

Olivia's eyes were sparkling at the possibilities. "What should we bring? ♪"

So cute! I had been reflecting on how she'd grown a tad, and how she'd made

more friends, but she was still a child at heart.

At the suggestion of Kate, the Chef of the Royal Court's daughter, we decided to bring some homemade sweets. We gathered three hundred sacules and bought the necessary ingredients. Since we couldn't use the school kitchen, we used the portal in Olivia's room to access the one back home at the castle. Everyone in Olivia's class (and Luca too) made stuff like cookies and cupcakes in our kitchen. Naturally, the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria joined them. We ended up with stacks and stacks of confections!

"I swear," said Luca. "Surely we've made too many?"

"It'll be okay, Luca," I said. "With this many, you can hand them out to your friends too."

"I, I don't have *friends*!" she muttered, pouting.

The Dark Queen laughed. "Oo ha ha, look at you blush! You've made a few friends thanks to yours truly, haven't you?"

"Urgh, quit it!"

While she was slowly growing accustomed to her class, it seemed she was still anxious about the field trip.

"Not that I mind giving Dearest Olivia or Marie the cupcakes I made," said Luca, pouting with her face turned away from them—even though she'd written "Dearest Olivia," "Marie," "Mr. Daddy," and "Ms. Clowria" in chocolate on the cupcakes.

* * *

The field trip was coming up the following day. During their preparatory study time, each of the kids' assigned class subgroups looked into the Holy Draconic Spring's history and geography and the like, and also discussed what they would do on the big day. For us, though, education wouldn't be the sole objective of the trip.

"I hope we find one, Daddy. A Supreme Hallow!"

"I hope so too, Olivia." Rumor had it one of them could be located at Tritonis, after all.

“We shall away to the lakeside so that we may ascertain the truth! Oo ha ha!” said the Dark Queen.

“Hmph, it shall be I, Luca Ioenami, who shall dis-veil the Supreme Hallow! You may be my friend, and you may be like a big sister to me, but on this, I shall not yield!”

“Haughh, there it is.”

“I must needs not shame Milady Esmeralda’s name!”

“Tee hee. All right, let’s both do our best!” said Olivia.

“Hrmm... Reacting that way kinda takes the air out of it...” said Luca, looking sulky.

Daisy suddenly popped up at Luca’s side. “We baked the cookies. The ones you cut into shapes are simply adorable.”

“Haughh.”

“Especially this cat one.”

“Tee hee, it looks just like Miss Maredia!” said Olivia.

“Hrm?! It, it has nothing to do with Marie!” Luca seemed embarrassed. They were bosom buddies by now.

“Now then, we’re getting up early tomorrow,” said Daisy, “so let’s return to the dorms!”

At that, the gang passed through the portal in our dining hall cabinet and headed for their respective dorms. We would bring the cupcakes and cookies and things after they cooled off enough. You can’t wrap up freshly baked stuff; if you do, they’ll get soggy.

“Daddy, we’re gonna have so much fun tomorrow!”

“Yep, we sure will.” I watched as Olivia left for her dorm. *I hope it’s sunny out tomorrow.*

Chapter 14: The Dopey Dark Queen Sneaks In In one of the rooms in the dorm of springs, the peaceful snoring of two schoolgirls was all that could be heard.

All of a sudden, the desk drawer stirred and clattered, and a head peeked out from the mysterious portal. A black cat's head.

Maredia's ears twitched; as a cat, she could pick up even the tiniest sounds.

"Urgh... Uh, ughh..." The groaning was barely audible.

Slowly, the Queen of the Dark-Kin raised herself up by her wee forelimbs. Her moon-colored eyes looked all around for the origin of that voice, and soon she spotted it.

"...It's Luca."

The anguished moaning was coming from the small lass sleeping atop one of the two beds. With her flexible body, the cat clambered from the drawer to the top of the desk.

Is she being attacked by an incubus? Wait, but the Incubus Army was dissolved a few centuries back... thought Maredia absentmindedly as she stared at the girl.

She's so small. Olivia's small too, but Luca's a size smaller.

The arms that so often cradled the black cat were so weak, so thin.

She kept putting on a brave front, firing herself up for action despite her tiny frame. And she acted haughty in order to hide her lack of self-confidence.

...Haugh. It's like I'm looking at a reflection of my own emotional baggage! She was getting riled up, purring as she slipped gently onto the bed.

The Western Tower of the Dark Queen's Castle. The snug bed in the cozy room she'd holed herself in for all those years. That bed was comfy, but...

This girl sleeping by herself had to be feeling lonelier than she. And this bed

had to be feeling colder than hers.

“Haugh... I’ve no other choice. Child, don’t you know if you groan like that, you’ll wake up my precious little sister?”

No one heard Maredia’s words; she was whispering so as not to disrupt the quiet of the night. The black cat’s soft paws took her up on the girl’s—on Luca Ioenami’s—bed without a sound.

Maredia gazed at her face. Luca’s brow was heavily furrowed.

“...Someone as young as you shouldn’t be making a face like that.”

Making sure not to touch Luca’s soft cheeks with her claws, Maredia nuzzled up against her forehead. Then against her cheeks and her chin.

Luca remained asleep, and little by little, her groaning diminished. The wrinkles on her brow gradually disappeared.

Maredia crawled under her sheets. Then she pressed her fur against Luca’s cold feet and shared her warmth.

Unconsciously, she purred. It felt like she was embracing a kitten. She couldn’t tell you why, but it was a lovely sensation. Even though *she* was the cat here.

Within the girl’s body was variable mana, not unlike the mana that flowed inside Olivia—the mana reminiscent of an elder dragon—but it was very unstable and weak.

She’d heard that among humans, dragon blood was an important substance. She seemed to recall one of the members of the Hero’s party that had come to take her down in the distant past had that sort of blood in their possession. Back then, they all came barreling through the castle to attack her. Everyone outside the castle was against her too. If she said she hadn’t felt hopeless and disheartened at that point, she’d be lying. That’s why she put on a brave front, riled herself up for action despite her tiny frame, and acted haughty in order to hide her lack of self-confidence.

Maredia resisted. She did battle. And the results were just as history remembered: a crushing defeat. Dark-kin became reviled—and even now, just being a dark-kin could draw scorn and contempt.

But I've had Clowria with me since I was born... Never did my small body grow numb with cold in that big bed. That might have been a stroke of luck for me...

"Haughhhh," she yawned.

Now that Luca's hands and feet were nice and warm, Maredia admired her work and moved her whiskers.

All right, I've conquered part of this spacious bed! Surely she now knows...the great Dark Queen's...power...

Maredia's eyelids drooped. Her moon-colored eyes closed shut, and she breathed softly. *Tomorrow's the trip*, she thought as she fell asleep. *I can't get up too late...*

The next morning...

"Whaa?!?!"

"H-Haughh?!"

Luca's shriek marked the start of their big day. She trembled all over as she glared at Maredia.

"Wh-What *is* this cat?!"

"It's Maredia, dummy!"

"What are you doing in my bed?!"

Perhaps due to an innate trait of her feline form, Maredia sprang up when startled. Olivia, who had been combing her hair, shouted in surprise. Olivia was already up and about in uniform while Luca was still in her nighties.

"Aaaahhh! Look at the time! I-I've NEVER overslept before! Have you cast some weird spell on me, you fiend malkin?!?!"

"Haugh?! How rude! I was just helping with your nightmares!" Then Maredia clammed up. She knew that to this small girl, the fact she was having nightmares and the fact that that was no longer a secret must be painful.

"Hmph! Your character is kinda like mine in a lot of ways, so I did you a favor and found something that makes us different, that's all!"

"Wh-What was that?!"

Luca puffed up her cheeks and cast a sidelong glance at Maredia. The cat turned away from her in a huff and walked briskly over to Olivia.

“Urgh, and on the day of the trip, of all days...” Depressed as she was, she still hurried to get ready.

“C’mon, you don’t have to fret like that. It’s not that late.”

“I wish to conduct myself with ample time to spare!”

“You’re so stuffy.”

“I shall dis-veil the Hallows! Mark my words!”

“If only fighting spirit was all it took to find them...”

Poof! Maredia reverted to human form, complete with her frilly modified uniform.

“That’s cheating, Marie!”

“Ha ha! Tremble before my might!”

“That’s too lack-bluster to tremble before!”

“I’m at a loss for words...”

This was just one moment in a fun morning. Before long, the drawer rattled once more.

“Daddy!”

“Morning, sweetheart!”

“I was looking for you, my Queen. To think Your Darkness was resting here!”

The little elder dragon had jammed confections into baskets. Clowria, on the other hand, had lots of baggage with her for some reason.

“I packed all of the clothes that Your Darkness said you wanted!”

“Haugh! You’re late, the both of you!”

Clowria couldn’t help but laugh at Maredia’s sheer enthusiasm. She truly seemed to be having fun.

“Now then, let us proceed apace,” said Clowria. “We’ve a trip to enjoy!”

Chapter 15: Mr. Dragon Goes on a Trip

It was time to sally forth. It was field trip time!

Today we were told we could participate in our human forms and we were dressed for the outdoors. The Dark Queen was happy she got to wear her white-dress-and-straw-hat ensemble again.

We had sandwiches for breakfast, but not our usual egg sandwiches. Instead, they were *fruit* sandwiches filled with cream.

“Tee hee, these are really good, aren’t they?” Olivia looked delighted too.

Maybe I should try my hand at making some using the nuts and berries around the Sacred Peak. Picking them with Olivia and fixing sandwiches with them sounds like fun.

Luca bit into her sandwich and tilted her head. “...Were these specially made to order by the jam bun store at the capital...?”

“What’s the matter, Luca?”

“Hrmph, it’s nothing.”

Field trip day was a bit of a special day, and that breakfast was just the beginning. We ate our fill and crossed the drawbridge over the moat surrounding the school. We were to rendezvous right outside the gate. Once we got there, we were greeted by the sight of the neverending grasslands. The early summer morning dew was glittering before us. I took a deep breath, taking in a lungful of the scent of the grass.

“What lovely weather! It’s a perfect day for a trip, isn’t it?”

“It is, Daddy!”

The first-and second-years had formed lines near the gate. They were to travel in small groups by horse-drawn carriage. There were two hundred students, one hundred to each grade. Each carriage could accommodate ten students, so there were twenty carriages in all.

The carriages would travel through the vast meadow and were scheduled to

arrive at the Holy Draconic Spring of Tritonis just before noon.

“This will be my first time in a carriage,” I said.

“Haugh. I can see why, given that an elder dragon like you can get there faster by flying.”

We brought documents on the Spring, lunchboxes, and between-meal snacks with us. We were ready to go, and the carriages were nearly ready too, lined up in front of the gate.

“Wow, my gosh! Such big carriages! And there are so many too!”

“How lucky for us, Sir Dragon. Normally, guardians would not be allowed to accompany them on an event such as this.”

“Miss Clowria! Yep, sure glad we became security for the academy.”

“I am as well.”

That said, why’d they take the trouble to write “No Parents/Guardians Allowed” in the Field Trip Leaflet?

“Evidently, before the ban on parents and guardians accompanying the children, the nobles used to bring large contingents of servants and overwhelm the trip destinations...”

“Really?!”

“Moreover, some would even have first-rate confectioners create the children’s snacks right then and there. It must have been quite the battle of egos.”

“I guess that’s why they implemented the three hundred sacule rule too...” Every once in a while, human nobles do stuff I’d never even imagine... All I could do was laugh.

“Ah, look. Our carriage seems to be that one over there,” said Miss Clowria.

“Whoa, it looks kinda elegant, doesn’t it?”

“Err, you see,” said Olivia, “Miss Phyllis put a barrier on it. That way we won’t get attacked by any nasties, even with Luca aboard.”

Apparently, all those decorations and ornaments on the carriage were part of

Miss Phyllis's barrier.

"Heh heh!" Miss Phyllis had come to see us off, and she was puffed up with pride. "I shall remain at the academy so I won't be able to accompany you, but I have ensured your protection outside its walls, Eldracos!"

Thanks a ton, Miss Phyllis. This is a huge help.

I watched the kids board the carriages one after the other, and then I heard a crashing sound.

"Eek!" yelped Miss Phyllis, jumping with surprise. "Goodness me, what's going on?"

One of the teachers hurried over. "Miss Phyllis! I apologize... One of the carriage wheels has fallen off!"

"What did you say?!"

Sure enough, a wheel had come off of one of the big ten-person carriages. Fortunately, it didn't seem as though any of the kids got hurt. I felt bad for the horses, who were clearly spooked from the way they were neighing, but they were unhurt too. What a relief! And yet...

"What do we do? At this rate, some of the students won't be able to come..."

"Is there no way we can put them on other carriages?"

"Well, we probably could...but I believe they will get quite cramped."

"In that case, we should either get it repaired or arrange for a replacement carriage at once..."

"If we have to wait, we might end up reaching the spring at night."

"You mean tonight?! Then the field trip will be ruined..."

The students gathered by Miss Phyllis, grave looks on their faces as they exchanged worried looks.

The only issue with the carriage seemed to be the wheel. The inside of the carriage appeared to be unscathed.

"Daddy..." Olivia looked at me, uneasy.

“Hm... I wonder if there’s anything we can do for them.”

It was missing a wheel, but the carriage itself was fine. The reins on the horses were also intact. I recalled what the Dark Queen had said to me earlier. *“Haugh. I can see why, given an elder dragon like you can get there faster by flying.”*

Ah, I know a way. It’s a shame I’ll have to revert to my other form, but oh well.

“Err...”

“Yes, Mr. Eldraco, what is it?”

“Shall I fly them there?”

“...Huh?”

“I can fly there—holding the carriage in my mouth!”

* * *

“Whoooa! Wow, Daddy! We’re so high up!”

“I-It’s been a while, so it’s a bit s-scary...” said Miss Clowria, nervous energy emanating from her. “I guess you can say things are different from when *I’m* flying by myself...”

“C-Clowria? Are you okay, Clowria?!?!”

“Th-This is amazing... We’re soaring through the status-sphere!”

The wheels from the carriage that Miss Phyllis had specially made for us had been attached to the broken carriage, and I had taken to the sky holding the carriage housing Olivia and the others. My body size was, of course, on the larger side as I did this. I wooshed through the air, matching the speed of the carriages zooming over the ground, and we all headed for the site of our field trip—the big puddle I inadvertently dug while half asleep, the Holy Draconic Spring of Tritonis!

* * *

“Wow!” said Olivia, excitement clear in her voice.

Before our eyes was the open sea! Or rather, it was a lake, I suppose. The glittering waters stretched as far as the eye could see, and a thick mass of trees stood all around.

It's so mouthwatering...I mean beautiful! I've gotta say, Tritonis is pretty big!

It wasn't just the sparkling surface or the lush, tender vegetation growing on the lakeshore that appealed to me. It was the aroma of the water. I could sense the sheer number of life-forms drawing breath here.

"It turned into a lake this huge?!" The hole I'd dug had sure grown up handsome.

I turned in the air, the carriage still in my mouth, and descended in a downward spiral onto the shore. The carriages behind us arrived one by one, and the shouts and gasps of the thrilled schoolgirls in those carriages filled the air.

"Whoaa!" said Olivia. "I've never seen this much water in one place!"

"Haaaaugh! It... It's so bright!"

"Your Darkness, I brought sunglasses. Do you wish to wear them?"

"Nice! You're the best, Clowria... Well, whaddya think? Do they look good on me?"

"Oh yes, they look phenomenal on you! ≡"

"Mwee hee hee. ≡" The Dark Queen looked pleased, to say the least.

A white dress, a straw hat, and sunglasses. I'm told it's a classic vacation ensemble... Incidentally, I was wearing an outfit that Miss Clowria had laid out for me, and I'm guessing it's the reason people kept saying "aloha" to me. Is that some kind of greeting? It's a mysterious word I'm not familiar with. I wonder if it's from an Eastern land.

"Ah, ahem!" Luca cleared her throat. "H-Hey, people, aren't we being too frivulous?! Our mission is to search for the Hallows... I cannot be wasting my time making merry at some field trip!"

"Haughh?! Luca, quit leaning super far out the window like that! Especially after saying a line like that!"

Everybody was chatting and laughing it up.

"Tee hee!" said Olivia. "I wanna go swim in the water!"

I was happy for her. She'd been looking forward to this. My heart buoyed by the sound of vivacious laughter, I flapped my great big wings and cinched my descent. *Landing complete!*

"We're here!"

I took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. There was the lovely scent of water and vegetation, and the skies were clear. Perfect weather for a field trip.

* * *

"These cookies are so good, Daddy!"

"They really are. And they're not even super fresh since we baked them yesterday... They're crunchy and melt in your mouth."

I was now in my human form for our family snack time. We laid down a sheet and opened up the basket full of cookies and cupcakes we'd made together. They were so good and so ample that you wouldn't think the budget had been three hundred sacules or less.

"How do ya like it? It's my crowd-pleaser recipe!"

Kate, who'd given us the recipe, watched our reactions joyfully.

"They're delectable, these ones especially."

"Heh heh! You've sure got a discerning eye, Mr. Eldraco! That's the crunchy-crunchy cookie dough my Dad developed! His most recent invention!"

"I see!"

"Yessir! My Dad's a famous pâtissier...in fact, that's his forte!"

So that's why these are so good! I wonder if I can make these myself. I remember the recipe for the most part... I've done my best to make food and confections for Olivia, so maybe I'll at least be able to make a decent imitation. If I ask her the ratios of the ingredients, I can make it anytime.

"Could you tell me the recipe for these once more later?"

"Of course I can!" said Kate.

"Oh my gosh, Daddy! You're gonna make me some at home?"

“Yep, sweetheart. Of course.”

“Yayyy! Ah, but Daddy, I love your ginger cookies and nut cookies too!”

“Hee hee, thank you, honey.”

I helped myself to another mouthful of cookies. They really were super delish! “Yep, this is going into our regular rotation!”

“Heh heh, I’m happy to hear that, Mr. Eldraco! I mean, you’re *the* Elder Dragon!”

I don’t think my being an elder dragon has anything to do with it, but that’s gratifying to hear all the same.

“It’s still before noon! Let’s eat loadsa cookies!”

Afterward, we were slated to go for a swim. Today’s agenda was mainly swimming lessons and strolls by the lakeshore. In the evening, we would board the carriages again and return to the academy in the dark of night. Dinner tonight would be a light affair as it would be later than usual. Then, we would hit the hay. That was the plan. A break from the daily routine...it was a bit of a thrill!

“Boy, this feels nice.” I hadn’t walked someplace so vast and open in a long while, and I’d never ventured so far with Olivia before.

“Haugh, are there any cupcakes left? Where are the cupcakes?!”

“My Queen, you already partook of your portion, did you not?”

“I’m still hungry! I got up early this morning!”

“Tee hee, I’m still hungry too!” said Olivia.

“...Ahem!”

“Luca?”

“...If you don’t mind eating some that I made, you can have them.” Luca took out the cupcakes with everyone’s names written on them in chocolate.

“Haugh! I totally forgot about those!”

“W-Well...compared to the cookies of the Chef of the Royal Court, they’re

maybe nothing special, but...”

“Mmm, these are so good!” I said.

“R-Really?!”

“Really truly, Luca!”

They were moist and not overly sweet. Olivia agreed, nodding as she munched away at hers.

“Hey Luca, want another cup of tea?”

“Y-Yes, thank you very much.”

“Ah, I want one too!” said Olivia.

“Me too!” said the Dark Queen.

“Sir,” said Daisy, “would you care to try out the tea leaves we brought with us?”

“That’s a great idea. Thanks, Daisy!”

Before I knew it, a good number of students had gathered around us. Olivia was at the center of the ring with Luca and the Dark Queen right by her side. It was blissful to see a scene like that.

With each crunch and every munch, our fun cookie hour ticked away.

Chapter 16: Mr. Dragon Goes for a Swim

I stretched myself out and basked in the copious sunlight. We'd eaten the snacks, strolled the lakeshore, and cracked open our lunch boxes. The time had come for the swimming lessons.

The Holy Draconic Spring is a lake, but it's so big that people treat it like it might as well be the ocean. So, I guess you could call this our trip to the sea.

I exhaled. "Sure is peaceful 'round here."

At the moment, I was waiting for Olivia and the others who were changing clothes at a residence on the lakeshore. From what I was told, it belongs to a family nobles whose members have attended the Florence Royal Academy for Girls for generations and the institute was borrowing it for the trip. It's a big and imposing estate. Apparently, they don't live there, and they just stay a few days each year. They call it a "villa." Talk about living in luxury.

"If I had some villas, Olivia and I could travel to all sorts of places." *Our home's on the mountain, so it might be a fantastic idea to build a villa on the seashore. The two ladies can tag along too, of course.*

With those fun possibilities running through my mind, I looked up at the sky. The breeze off the lake felt positively divine!

"Daddy!"

"Olivia!"

I looked in the direction of her cute voice and there she was, running my way as she enthusiastically waved a hand. She had changed into her bathing suit for the swimming lessons to come. *Attagirl, honey!*

The navy blue bathing suit, special-made by the academy, was a perfect fit. Apparently, this style of swimwear was called "school swimmers," and they're made out of materials that repel water like a fish's scales in the ocean. Cool, right? On her chest lay a big cloth thingy with her first name on it, kind of like what athletes wear in races. Her hair, which was usually in braids, was done up in round buns and pinned in place by flower-shaped barrettes. She looked

wonderful.

After eating her boxed lunch, the Dark Queen had done Olivia's hair up all cute, saying, "Summer is the season for makeovers!" She's really good at that kind of thing. I'm glad she came... All I know how to do is braids.

"Whaddya think, Daddy? Do I look good?"

"You look amazing, sweetheart. She did a great job."

"Yayyy!" Olivia looked even happier than usual.

Then, another girl in her school swimmers appeared from behind Olivia.

"Keh heh heh... Swimming practice, eh? This shall be a demonstration of my true abilities! The true abilities of me, Luca Ioenami! Mwa ha ha!" She seemed to be brimming with even more confidence than usual.

Luca looked kinda cool as her pigtails fluttered in the wind.


Olivia
Luca

“...Wait. Never mind that! I must find that Supreme Hallow!”

“You need to at least be there for some of the swimming lessons, Missy.”

“Ah, Daisy... Wait, whoa!”

“I’ve swum before; I had to learn as part of the House of Palestria’s culture lessons...but I don’t know how skilled I’ll be.”

“Ack!”

Daisy usually wore her light purple hair down, but she was wearing it up today... But more importantly! All those ladies behind her!

“Wh-Who are those ladies?”

“Ah, them? They’re my house’s servants.”

“Your house’s?”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Anna, and I am a stewardess of the House of Palestria’s villa in Tritonis.”

“I, huh...”

Miss Anna’s blouse was buttoned up to the base of her neck, the early summer sun notwithstanding. She was in long sleeves, and her skirt was long too. Meanwhile, I was simply in shorts and a short sleeve top.

“Forgive me, sir, but might you be Mr. Eldraco?”

“Ah, err, yes, yes I am.”

Miss Anna had a severe expression on her face. *Wonder what’s up with her? She’s gotta be hot in that. And humans get grumpy when they’re hot. A dragon can just take a brief ten-year nap in a cave that’s nice and cool, but humans don’t have that option.*

“...Hmm.”

“Uhh, did I do something, or...?”

Suddenly, her expression melted into a huge smile. “Thank you very much for taking care of Miss Daisy!”

“Ah, no, thank you for taking care of Olivia!”

“She has been telling us about you for a long time. Pardon my impertinence, but might this be Miss Olivia?”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Anna!”

“Goodness, what a sweet girl! It’s a pleasure to meet you as well. It’s true what I was told—you seem like a sharp young lady. If you are the King’s Pupil, then His Majesty the King must think highly of you.”

“Tee hee!

Miss Anna’s words of greeting lasted another five minutes. The staff of nobles sure like to talk at length. Not that I didn’t like Olivia receiving all that praise!

With the appointed meetup time approaching, the students all crowded together wearing their school swimmers. Some of them were dipping their feet in the water. They all looked nervous and excited.

The Holy Draconic Spring is pretty vast and pretty placid. Its shoals stretch fairly far, so it’s ideal for swimming lessons, or so I’m told.

One girl in the class was *particularly* eager to go swimming.

“Heh heh heh... To me, swimming is even more effortless than walking!” said Luca. “While the rest of you are busy playing splish-splash, I shall dis-veil the Supreme Hallow in gallant fashion!”

“Tee hee, I’m gonna do my best too!” said Olivia.

“Hrmm, even here you challenge me!!!”

Luca was giving Olivia a sparks-flying glare, but Olivia simply grinned back amicably.

How does that one human proverb go? “Trying to rile up Olivia is like...trying to squeeze spuds from a scone?”

“Sir... Do you mean ‘squeeze blood from a stone’?”

“Right, that one. Thanks, Daisy.”

“All right, let’s commence the hunt—”

“Haugh! Wait, Luca!”

“Keh heh heh, I shall dis-veil the Supreme Hallow ere anyone else does!”

“It’d be great if one of them actually is here, but...”

Olivia caught up to Luca, and they started walking in lockstep, when...

A teacher stopped them before they could run off toward the lake. “Miss Luca. Miss Olivia.”

“Yes ma’am?”

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

“Tee...hee?”

“Listen, you two. You may have your official duty to search for the Seven Supreme Hallows, but don’t forget that you’re students too! You *will* take part in swimming practice, you hear me?!”

“S-Sorry ma’am...” they said in unison.

I mean, that does make sense.

Before the teacher’s firm intensity, Olivia and Luca deflated. I couldn’t help but laugh at how identical their expressions were.

* * *

The students of the first and second grades of the Florence Academy were lined up on the sandy beach of the Holy Draconic Spring. It was the first time swimming in a lake for the vast majority of them, so they were fidgeting nervously.

I’ve never actually gone swimming myself. It’s not like there was ever a big lake on the mountain. “...Wait, come to think of it...” *This might just be Olivia’s first time swimming too.*

Sure enough, Olivia was wearing an uneasy expression. This was her absolute first experience, after all. *You can do it, honey!*

After the teacher finished roll call, she addressed Luca directly. “Miss Luca Ioenami. Could you show them how it’s done?”

“Keh heh heh, it would be my pleasure!” Jauntily, she stepped forward, confidence written on her face.

Olivia clapped to cheer her on. “You’ve got this, Luca!”

“Heuh? I know I do! You needn’t tell me!”

She advanced, sloshing into the water, never flinching in the least. With a splash, she dove into the rolling waves of the sun-glittery water.

“Wait... Is she sinking?” She wasn’t coming back up. *Is she okay?*

But my worries were unfounded.

“Rahhh!”

She shot into the sky, and the pose she struck when she plunged back into the water with all that momentum—she was moving just like a fish!

“Wh-Whoooa!” Olivia was clapping, eyes open wide.

Luca’s swimming was impeccable. She skipped across the lake’s surface with a fish’s grace. I had to hand it to her; she was just like a mermaid!!!

The students were giving her a big round of applause.

“Wow!”

“That’s the top first-year for you.”

“They say she’s the princess of an Eastern land—a land of waters!”

“She’s got me captivated!”

I clapped enthusiastically for her too.

“Keh heh heh! I am the most super-ious!”

“Wow, that’s really something,” I said. “I wish the two ladies were here to see too.”

Come to think of it... Where did those two go? They were so eager to participate in this trip in human form, so where’ve they been? I haven’t seen them since lunch...

“Wonder what’s up with them?” As I watched Luca come out of the lake and absorb everyone’s praises, I tilted my head, puzzled. I scanned the vicinity. Among the kids in their school swimmers, I couldn’t find the Dark Queen.

“Maybe she’s taking a nap.” She *is* one to take a nice, heavy nap after lunch,

after all. In fact, I feel like she's the one that's always crying out for food three times a day.

"Breakfast time!"

"Lunchtime!"

"Dinner's ready!"

I remember when it was Olivia who'd fall asleep all the time, with the Dark Queen puffing up her cheeks as she carried Olivia on her back... Nowadays, though, I sometimes don't know which one's the older sister. Kids sure grow up fast.

"Heh heh heh..." I found myself smiling.

"WAAAA HAH HA HA! Wipe that grin off your face, Elder Dragon!!!"

"Th-That voice?!"

It was the Dark Queen, and what's more, her voice was crazy loud! The students and I turned to look in the direction of her voice.

"Wah hah hahhh!" The Dark Queen ambled slowly our way.

"Gosh!" I was taken aback—those clothes!

"Oo ha ha ha! School swimmers are for babies! *This* is the swimsuit for someone as super gorgeous as yours truly!" she declared in a pompous voice.

Luca, who'd come back out of the lake, hid her beet-red face. "Goodness, Marie?! Th-That's un-decent!"

"Th-That swimsuit... What is that?!"

Human clothes are so mysterious to me...but the Dark Queen's swimsuit was quite revealing. All that was covered was her bottom and chest! It somehow felt more scandalous than being like a dragon (i.e., totally nude). Yet, the Dark Queen was chuckling to herself with evident pride.

Miss Clowria was standing behind the Dark Queen, holding a parasol to shield her from the sun.

"It looks fetching on you, my liege."

“WAH HAH HAH! Doesn’t it though?!”

Miss Clowria was wearing the same swimsuit as the Dark Queen. It was so much more revealing than the modest swimsuits the kids were wearing that there was no comparison. *Maybe the Dark Queen’s sensitive to the heat... I’ve been living a human’s life for some time now, but I just don’t get it.*

“Wah hah hah! Whaddya think?! It’s summer, and that means sunlight, beaches, and when you factor in a pretty girl like me... Duh duh dunn!” She posed this way and that. “Summer means *sexy swimsuits*!!!”

“You look so winsome, Your Darkness! Ah, but due to this parasol, I’m unable to take a photo using the Eselar-Camra... This is the greatest blunder of my life!”

“Hm hm hm. ♪ You can take plenty of photos of me in the room later, you know?”

“Ahh! ≡ I thank you for giving me such bliss, my liege! ≡”

Their swimsuits matched, but on Miss Clowria, it screamed, “I’m an adult!” However, on the Dark Queen, it looked kind of *cute*. The sight of the two together was an indescribably potent one-two punch.

“Fwa ha ha ha! Well, Elder Dragon?! Your heart would do well to flutter at the radiance of my bikini!”

“Bikini...is that the name of that hat?”

“Haugh? What, no, this is a straw hat. Olivia was wearing one too before. I’m talking about the swimsuit! The swimsuit!!!”

“Ah, so that swimsuit’s called a bikini, huh?” *Maybe it’s from the same language as my “aloha” shirt...*

The Dark Queen kept cycling through poses in her “sexy” “bikini.” Some of the more mature kids among the students had sparkles in their eyes.

“My word, how fantastic!”

“I can’t help but admire it...”

“It’s dazzling!”

“Mweh heh heh...” cackled the Dark Queen. However...

“That’s Miss Clowria for you!”

“Haughh!!! You’re looking at *her*?!?! C-Compliment me too!!!”

...That’s the Dark Queen I know.

In any case, I was struck by the variety of swimsuits that exist.

Olivia ran up to the dejected-looking Dark Queen. “M-Miss Maredia, you look amazing too!”

“Eh! Heh, heh heh heh... As expected of my little sister... You know what’s up!”

“Yes she does!” said Miss Clowria.“’Tis just as Olivia says—the Dark Queen shines brighter than anyone else on this here beach!”

“Yeah, what she said!” agreed Olivia.

“R-Really? Erm, I mean of course I do!!! Oo ha ha ha!!!”

“Marie... Dearest Olivia is backing her up.”

“Goodness, Luca, don’t you know? A Maredia Fan Club is in the works at the academy too.”

“Is, is that so?!”

“Indeed, and I’m Member Number One!”

Judging by the tenor of the buzz of everyone’s voices, they were having fun. That included Luca; try as she might not to let it show on her face, her shoulders were shaking from keeping in her laughter. The way her friend the Dark Queen was larking about must have been very amusing to her.

Some among the servants that had come from Daisy’s estate were grumbling about the impropriety of the dark-kin girl showing their young charge an “immodest display,” but I flashed a smile at them and they zipped their lips. I wanted the good times to roll on, so I just wanted them to quiet down a tad... Guess they picked up on that sentiment?

“Now now, children,” said the teacher. “We’re in the middle of swimming practice.”

“Yes ma’am!” The girls who had been gathered around the Dark Queen

formed lines once again.

Olivia was alongside them, sitting up straight on the sand. *That's it, sweety! So well-mannered!*

The teacher surveyed her surroundings, her eyes stopping on Olivia.

"Now then, as I just had the top first-year, Miss Luca Ioenami, show us an example of how to swim, we might as well follow that up with Miss Olivia, the top second-year student."

"Fweh?!" Surprised, Olivia sprang to her feet.

She's never swum before! I hope it'll go okay!

I watched from under the shade of the parasol provided by the two ladies. Speaking of the Dark Queen, she was now relaxing on a colorful lounge chair, drinking juice with plenty of fruit in it.

"Wait, whoa! Miss Dark Queen, what is that mask?!"

"It's not a *mask*. They're sunglasses! I wore them back in the carriage, remember?"

"I mean, I flew us over here with the carriage in my mouth, so I wouldn't know."

"Haugh. Is that right?"

"All that aside, I wonder whether Olivia will be all right..." said Miss Clowria. "I taught her the martial arts of the Knightly Order of the Dark-Kin Army, but never how to swim..."

"Our navy had water-fiends," explained the Dark Queen. "We didn't personally *need* to swim."

"Indeed, my Queen."

"That's why I can't actually swim myself," said the Dark Queen.

"Huh?" I said. "Then why the swimsuit?"

"For the mood! Haughh, damned Elder Dragon doesn't know about *atmosphere*."

“S-Sorry.”

“At any rate...” said Miss Clowria. “I do worry about Olivia.”

“It’s Olivia, so I’m sure she’ll most likely be fine...most likely!”

“Haugh. So you say, but your teeth are chattering like mad.”

Darn it. I’m so nervous, I’m tense all over...

“Hey, could you not crush my pineapple?!”

“Ack, I’m sorry!”

My hands had inadvertently crushed the dragon-like fruit I was holding that the Dark Queen had handed to me. Its juice came gushing out. *Oopsie woopsie!*

Olivia stepped deeper into the lake. She seemed incredibly nervous. *You can do it!*

“H-Here I go!” Just like Luca before her, she built momentum and dove in.

SPLOSH.

“...Splosh?” *Wasn’t it more of a “splash” when Luca had done it? Maybe that doesn’t bode well...*

Everyone’s eyes were trained on the spot of the lake where Olivia had disappeared. The confidence that “*this is Olivia we’re talking about, she’ll swim as superbly as Luca,”* dueled with the anxiety born by her not reappearing.

Finally, ripples appeared where Olivia had dived in. Then, bubbles...

“O-Olivia?!”

She was clearly in distress! Before I knew it, I found myself bolting for the lake and diving in. I had to save her! I’d also never swum before, but I was sure it’d work out. I *am* a dragon, after all!

...Yet I, too, left only bubbles in my wake. I could not, in fact, swim.

I heard the two ladies’ voices from far away.

“Haughhh?! Olivia?! Elder Dragon?!”

“Th-Th-They’re in trouble! They’re both sinking...” cried Miss Clowria, swooning.

What do I do? Olivia... Olivia! Daddy's gonna save you! But my body won't move...

Maybe due to my distress, my body wasn't listening to me, and I couldn't seem to revert to my dragon form either.

A small, soft hand gripped my frantically outstretched one. It was Olivia. I gripped her hand tightly in mine.

I'll protect you no matter what.

"Dearest Olivia! Sir Elder Dragon!"

The moment we heard that forceful voice, the water swayed with a splish. A figure of surprising strength lifted our drowning forms out of the depths.

Olivia gasped in air, then started panting. "D-Daddy?!"

I coughed. "Olivia!"

Lifted up to the surface, I could breathe again. Bright sunlight glared down at me.

Everyone expressed their relief. "Thank heavens!"

H-Have we been saved? I was on the verge of tears even as I hugged Olivia tight. *I'm so glad Olivia's really okay!*

"Phew... My blood ran cold!" muttered Luca, to whom we now owed our lives.

"Luca!"

"...I'm glad. Good grief, you always need me to rescue you!"

"Luca... Thank you!"

"You owe me one."

We'd been saved by the girl who could move as freely in the water as on land. Olivia glomped her.

"Huh?"

"Luca! Thank you for saving Daddy!"

"Wha, ah, uhh, err..."

“Let me thank you too, Luca. Thank you for saving Olivia...” She really was a brave and kind girl.

Luca’s cheeks flushed red at our words.

“It, it was nothing... I did what was incumbent upon me to do... I simply helped a friend, that’s all.” Those last words were hard to hear from how tongue-tied she was.

Led by Luca, we found our way to the shore.

The Dark Queen was bawling. “I’m so relieved! Olivia, Elder Dragon!”

“It truly is a tremendous relief... Color me surprised. I never would have suspected that Olivia can’t swim...”

“At any rate, you’re unharmed, and that’s what’s important! Do you want some coconut juice?”

“Tee hee, sorry for making you worry.”

“That’s all right, Olivia. All’s well that ends well.”

It’d given me a right shock, but I could now rest assured that she was none the worse for wear. My parenting books had mentioned making sure to pay attention whenever children play on the waterfront...but I never thought I myself might ever come close to drowning.

“I’m gonna take swimming lessons too, not least so I can protect Olivia!”

Chapter 17: Mr. Dragon Obtains a Swimsuit

The hunt for the Hallows was on!

“...But it’s too dangerous for Olivia to go near the lake,” I said.

“I’m telling you,” said Luca, “I, alone, shall be more than sufficient!”

“But Miss Phyllis said not to leave you all by yourself...”

The mana of the Supreme Hallow inside Luca tends to attract all kinds of nasties. We could hardly afford to let her act on her own.

“...Maybe I should breathe fire and dry up the lake?”

“Daddy?!”

“Haugh, how could you even entertain that idea?”

I understood their opposition to the thought, but I was worried about Olivia... What was I going to do if she started drowning again?

The Dark Queen began laughing. “Mweh heh heh! On that note, here! A present from yours truly!”

“A present?”

The Dark Queen was chillaxing in the shade of her parasol, and in response to our conversation, Miss Clowria took out some sort of round, ring-shaped...thing. It was springy to the touch and seemed to be filled with air.

“Here you go, Olivia,” said Miss Clowria, handing it over.

“What is this...?”

It looked just like one of those “donuts” from my various books on sweets, only much bigger.

“Heh heh, this is an arcane magic tool passed down the centuries among us dark-kin... Who could have foreseen the day I would give it to a human? Olivia, put yourself through the hole and see what happens!”

“Okay!” She passed her body through the ring. It was just the right size for a snug fit, and the squishy donut rested around her waist like a skirt. “Like this?”

“Oo wah hah ha, excellent, Olivia! Now enter the lake!”

“Huh? But I might not be able to swim well...”

“’Tis okay,” said Miss Clowria. “Luca will be there with you. Besides, this arcane magic item, the pride of us dark-kin, is all you need. With it, I do believe what happened before won’t happen again.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh!” agreed the Dark Queen. “Thanks go to Luca, for real!”

Spurred on by the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria, Olivia approached the lake. The ring around her waist had a polka dot design on it. Some of the dots had been replaced with cat heads, so it was pretty cute. The cat heads were vaguely reminiscent of the Dark Queen’s cat form.

Timidly, Olivia entered the lake’s waters.

“W-Wow! Look, Daddy! I’m floating! I’m floating!”

She floated on the surface, drifting with the flow of the water. She was already at the point where her feet didn’t touch the bottom, and yet she seemed delighted!



Upon seeing what Olivia was doing, the other students looked at each other and started talking amongst themselves.

“Whoa!”

“I want one!”

“Wah ha ha haaa, behold, ickle human girlies! Behold the magic tool passed down by us dark-kin! Feast your eyes on...the SWIM RING!” The Dark Queen cackled gleefully, chest puffed with pride and a fruity drink in her hand.

“S-Such corruption! Such depravity!” said Luca.

“Oo ha ha ha, I know the look on your face. You want to try it too, don’t you?”

“No, thank you.”

“Haugh, r-really?”

“Marie, I don’t think it’s acceptable to constantly rely on such *cheating*!”

“It’s not *cheating*. It’s the fruit of our wisdom! I don’t think it’s acceptable to call everything ‘cheating’!”

“But it *is* cheating, is it not?!”

“Is *NOT*!”

“Hmph!” they said in tandem, turning away from each other in a huff.

That’s just two friends messing around, though...I think. Even I knew that they’d be back to their back-and-forth banter in no time.

I watched Olivia have fun drifting along between the waves. The Dark Queen pulled at the hem of my aloha shirt.

“...Elder Dragon.”

“Huh? What is it, Miss Dark Queen?”

“Well, I’ve been meaning to tell you, but if you keep just standing there dripping wet like that, you’ll look kind of, you know, *smoking hot*?”

“Smoking?! But I’m not the kind of dragon that spews smoke!”

“Haughh, that’s not what I mean! It’s like... Don’t you notice the precocious

children and the maids of the mansion giving you *the eye*?"

"Huh?"

Some among the maids who'd come from the mansion to tend after the children, as well as some of Olivia's classmates, were casting glances my way and blushing. Then in came the whispers: "It's true what they say about wet shirts..."

"But it isn't ladylike to be so smitten by a gentleman."

"That girl with the horns...she must be a dark-kin... Look at that immodest attire..."

"But it looks great on her! Count me a fan."

It seemed like standing here with wet clothes on was causing me to stand out just a little.

"On that note! Clowria!"

"Yes, my Queen! Now then, Sir Dragon, come this way." She led me away by the hand.

"Huh? Wha?"

"To tell you the truth, Queen Maredia ordered something on Badazon, the shopping service for dark-kin, for this very day—a swimsuit for an elder dragon!"

"Yeah huh!" said the Dark Queen. "Everyone's talking about this design on the dark-kin social network, Bleater!"

"A...a swimsuit for me?!" *I'm allowed to wear one too?*

Wearing swimsuits at a lake in the early summer. Going in the water together with Olivia. It was practically a family vacation. Wait, that sounds like a blast!

I hadn't forgotten Olivia's mission to search for the Hallows, but nobody could blame me for perking up at the idea, right?

* * *

"You look fetching, Sir Dragon!"

“D-Do I?”

The Dark Queen had picked out a pair of bright red swim trunks for me with a cute design, sporting lots of hearts. Whatever they were made out of felt smooth and slick. *Does this really look good on me...?* I returned to the lakeshore, feeling a little bashful, and the Dark Queen clapped her hands and burst out laughing.

“Oo ha ha ha! It looks great on you, Elder Dragon!”

“For real?”

“It sure does!” said Miss Clowria.

“Does it now...” I was afraid it was a bit too flashy for me; I typically wear robes that don’t stand out—though I guess the aloha shirt was pretty loud too. Having nothing to wear on top made me kind of uneasy. I fidgeted nervously. I know, I know, dragons are pretty much naked in our normal forms, but still, I had to wonder whether this whole look truly suited me...

Olivia came back out of the lake. “Ah, Daddy! You’re in swimmers!”

“Olivia!”

“Daddy, those swimmers are super cute. I like them!”

“Miss Dark Queen! Thank you for picking this out for me!!!”

And so the trunks became a new favorite in my wardrobe.

Thanks to the swimmers and flotation ring the Dark Queen gave us, our preparations were complete. It was time to hunt for the Hallows! We walked around in search of clues while Luca taught us some of the tricks to swimming. Neither I nor Olivia was able to swim yet, but we gave the beginner stuff a shot, like learning how to let the water touch your face and how to float. Okay, no, we tried our level best! I’ll be honest, I wasn’t expecting to be doing the same sort of swimming practice as the schoolchildren right nearby, but...

“I’m so lucky!” said Olivia. “I didn’t think I could swim with you, Daddy!”

She sounded so happy... I could hardly complain, could I? Olivia had been drifting in the gaps between the waves in her ring the entire time. It seemed that she had become pretty fond of the thing. She even walked around in it

whenever she got out of the lake. Heh heh, she's so cute!

The Dark Queen and Miss Clowria planned to have fun frittering away their time by the lakeside, so the search party ended up being just me, Luca, and Olivia.

"See ya later!" said the Dark Queen "Do take care!" said Miss Clowria.

They waved us goodbye, even as the Dark Queen kept striking poses and Miss Clowria kept snapping the shutter of a magical item called an Eselar-Camra. It was a small box-shaped thing with a round pane of glass in front, and with every click came a flash of light.

"What is that thing, Miss Clowria?"

"Ah, this? See for yourself. This is how one may reproduce the likeness of my beauteous Queen in portrait form."

"Wow!"

Out from inside the magic tool came a piece of paper depicting the Dark Queen as she was in reality.

"We dark-kin call this mini-portrait a Che-Ki."

"Well, I'll be..." *This is really something else. With this "Eselar-Camra" contraption, I could capture those moments where Olivia is cute as "Che-Ki" pictures... I'm so jealous!*

"Heh heh," chuckled Miss Clowria. "If you so desire, I shall lend it to you later."

"R-Really?!"

"But of course."

"So we can make Che-Kis of Olivia?"

"Verily!"

That's great!

"Come, Sir Elder Dragon," said Luca. "Let us go forth!"

"Let's go, Daddy!"

Hurried along by the two girls, we departed. I suddenly felt a surge of motivation.

“...I really don’t see any Supreme Hallows,” I remarked.

“Rrrrgh... If you ask me,” said Luca, “the fact we haven’t even found any clues means something peculi-ous is afoot! And we came out of our way to search for them!”

So she said, but the notion that one or more of the Hallows was here was never anything more than a rumor, so nothing was all that peculiar about it.

Walking the circumference of the lake took quite some time, and we were getting tired of being on our feet.

“Should we head back soon?” I asked. We did have to return to where the carriages were by dusk.

“Surely you jest! The rumor says the Hallow lies at the bottom of the lake...therefore, I shall simply dive in and investigate!”

“What? All by yourself? It’s too dangerous...”

“You and Olivia Dearest should blame that on your inability to swim, should you not?”

“Err, well, I guess you’ve got a point there.”

Be that as it may, Luca was prone to monster attacks at the best of times. We couldn’t let her go off on her own all of a sudden like that. We promised Miss Phyllis as much, after all.

“I’ll go too!” said Olivia.

“Excuse me?” said Luca. “As if you can go underwater with that swim ring on!”

“But Luca...”

I was stumped as to what to do.

Just then, I heard the tall grass behind me rustle. *Was that just my imagination? Wait... Could that be...?*

“Hm?” said Luca. “Is something the matter?”

“Huh? Oh, no, it’s nothing... In any case, you can’t go it alone!”

“Right!” said Olivia.

Luca was outvoted two-to-one, so that was that.

The girl sighed. “I swear... Don’t you know I’m the only one who can pull off a feat like this?” Luca pulled out a bunch of *ofuda*s from inside the big name tag on her chest.

“Rahhh!”

After throwing the *ofuda*s into the lake, she grabbed us by the arms.

“Whoa!” I said.

“Eek!” said Olivia.

“Off we go. This shall be a golden opportunity for nonswimmers to experience some underwater exploration!”

SPLASH. Water sprayed everywhere upon our jumping into the lake. With the memory of nearly drowning fresh in my mind, I hugged my daughter close. I knew the unpleasant chain of events that would ensue—being unable to breathe and hurting from the water coming into my nose, I’d involuntarily gasp for air, inadvertently swallowing water and making things even worse...

Yet none of that came to pass.

Huh? Why am I able to breathe like normal? I cracked open my screwed-shut eyes.

“Oh my gosh!” I heard Olivia cry.

“We’re in a bubble?!” I said.

The lake was a deep, deep blue. All around us, we could see the shining light from above filtering through the water, the green of the drifting algae, and a variety of fishies both big and small. We were floating underwater in a big ol’ bubble! *I can breathe! I can breathe! This is downright* pleasant! *It’s not even bothering my sinuses!*

“Behold the arcane magic of the Ioenami Clan!” declared Luca, her chest puffed up with pride.

Wow! Luca is a whiz at water magic!

“It’s so pretty...”

The watery expanse stretched on for as far as the eye could see, and beyond the bluest blues lay a stretch of gloomy gray. Even through the barrier of the air bubble Luca made, we could feel the coldness of the water that surrounded us.

“Now then,” said Luca, pointing at the dark depths, “let’s go plumb the bottom of the lake.”

“The bottom...”

“If you’re afraid, then I shalln’t laugh if you’d like to turn back and leave the mission to me!”

“No,” said Olivia, “we can’t leave you alone.”

“Rrrgh... Do not mock me so!”

“I’m not mocking you. I want to help because I’m your friend!”

“That’s what friends are for,” I said.

“I know, Sir Dragon! I don’t need to be told!”

“A ha ha, sorry, sorry.” On that note, I wanted to get something off my chest. “By the way, when you call me ‘Sir Dragon,’ it makes us feel more *distant*.”

“I’m sorry?”

“As Olivia’s Daddy, I’d like you to address me in friendlier terms.”

“...Okay, how about ‘Sir Dearest Olivia’s Daddy’?”

“That’s kind of long.”

“...Sir Daddy.”

“Now we’re talking!”

“What’s the matter, Luca?”

“Rrgh, that rolls off the tongue TOO easily...”

And that was how I became “Sir Daddy.”

As we were speaking, the bubble plunged deeper and deeper toward the

lake’s bottom.

“Hrm. We shall be there shortly, so be careful.” Luca sighed. “If I officially find the Supreme Hallow, I shall become the King’s Pupil... Watch as I stand tall on my own two legs, Milady...”

The thought of Miss Esmeralda praising her was evidently very alluring to her. *She really loves Miss Esmeralda, huh?*

Glub glub. I noticed the sound of bubbles nearby. I’d been sensing some sort of *presence* behind us. The same entity that made the grass rustle earlier... It was probably *her*.

“Daddy?”

“It’s nothing, sweety.”

“Come, let’s sink further still! Once this mission is complete, Milady Esmeralda will praise meeee!”

That line. I got a feeling it was one of those lines that would make the Dark Queen cry out, “Death flag!”

Glub glub, blub blub... Down we sank in our bubble.

Wait... Olivia and I are protected by the bubble, but Luca’s got nothing apart from her school swimmers—that swimsuit with her name tag on her chest. Surely she’s feeling some bodily distress at this depth? I voiced my concern.

“Hm? I can move quite freely in the water, let me assure you.”

“Really?”

“Really! We of the noble Ioenami Clan bear water dragon blood in our veins!”

“Water dragon blood...”

“That’s amazing, Luca!”

“I am referred to as a dragon-kin, the same as Milady Esmeralda. She is a Dracoshaman whose dragon blood is thicker than even mine, as she is a closer descendant to her dragon ancestor. She has aided in the foundation of this land’s development for more than a thousand years now...”

She was always so cheerful whenever it came time to talk up Miss Esmeralda.

“It’s gotten so dark, Daddy,” said Olivia.

Little by little, bit by bit, the light filtering in through the surface grew fainter and the darkness deeper. It was just like a winter’s twilight, except there were no stars and no moon. It was pitch black before us.

“Hmm, it really has gotten super dark.”

“It’s very dark underwater,” said Luca. “And it shall only get darker from here.”

Is that how it is? I’m feeling a tad uneasy. I’m sure Olivia and Luca can’t see well in pitch darkness. If push comes to shove, I’ll have no choice but to protect Olivia by evaporating the lake. I’ll drain the whole thing if I have to!

“Ah, leave this to me!” said Olivia.

“Hm?”

Olivia extended her pointer finger. “Shine,” she murmured.

A bright light emanated from her finger.

“Whoooa!”

Now we could discern our surroundings quite well. In fact, it was super bright. Inside-a-lamp level bright!

“Wow!”

“Tee hee. I learned this one in school!”

“What a convenient spell.”

A ton of what Olivia has learned through the Dark Queen’s Library of Grimoires is magic using stuff like darkness and fire. Yet she was also able to master the magic she learned at school, like light magic, in the blink of an eye. Count me a proud dad!

“We should be safe now, right, Daddy?”

“Yep, thanks, honey.”

I chuckled inwardly. As a dragon, I can see in the darkness relatively well. But it was the sentiment that counted.

“Hmph, i-it’s just a lamp spell...” Luca puffed out her cheeks.

“Heh heh, I’ll have to tell Miss Esmeralda all about the good work you’ve been doing, Luca.” *I’m sure Miss Esmeralda will be overjoyed too.*

“Huh, n-no, that’s not needed!”

Seeing Luca get all embarrassed, I felt warm and fuzzy inside.

Just then, Olivia cocked her head, puzzled. “Wait... The lake bottom, it’s in view!”

“Huh?”

The light extending from Olivia’s fingertip was brightly lighting up the lake’s floor. Only moments before, her light had been illuminating nothing but the water.

“...Huh,” said Luca. “I thought it would take a little longer.”

“Did your bubble speed up, Luca?”

“No. So how did we get here so quickly?”

The three of us exchanged glances, a bevy of question marks above our heads.

Luca was mulling something over as she stared at the lake floor Olivia was illuminating. “Hrmm... Hm? Wait... The floor! It’s moving!”

“Huh?!”

The sands shifted, revealing a strange pattern on the “floor.” *What* is *that?*

The bottom of the lake was slowly, but in no uncertain manner, moving.

“It’s rising?!” shouted Luca. “Oh no! You’re going to collide!”

What’ll happen if our bubble hits the lake floor?

“Wait, don’t tell me it’s gonna pop?!”

“It’s going to pop!”

“WHAAAT?!”

What are we gonna do?! We’re gonna drown! Do I have no choice but to

evaporate the lake?! No, that'll boil all the organisms in the vicinity alive... Do I drink all this water? My belly will get all bloated and bubbly, but that won't stop me. I'm a dragon, and I've lived since time immemorial!

"...Urgh, now that it's come to this..."

Moments before the bubble hit the floor, Luca shouted "BLADE OF BLUEWATER!"

A big sword appeared in Luca's hands. She put her back into the swinging motion, and our protective bubble started to rise, ascending toward the surface.

"Wow! You're incredible, Luca!"

Hold on though. Didn't Luca say she can't use that sword's power to its full potential?

Back on the surface of the lake, the bubble drifted on the water with us inside it. We didn't see her anywhere.

"What do we do? Do you think Luca's okay...? Ah!"

SPLASH! Luca appeared from beneath the waves and gasped for breath.

"Luca!"

"Dearest Olivia, Sir Daddy... I'm glad you're all right." She heaved a sigh. "Ahem! I swear! See, this is why I said you'd only en-hinder me!"

"Hey, Daddy, Luca... What *was* that?"

"You mean the moving lake floor?" said Luca.

"It was pretty weird..." I said. I've lived for a long time, yet I'd never heard of a lake's floor moving. "Hmmm..."

I peered into the lake from within our bubble. *What could that have been?*

"Wait, is it just me, or are the waves getting choppier?"

"You're right... Ah, something's coming out of the lake!"

"Huh?!"

It was rising up from the lake bottom. At first, the silhouette was so small I

thought it was a leaf that had sunk into the water or some such. But as it drew closer and closer, its true size became much clearer. It rivaled my size when I'm in dragon form. So yeah, it was pretty big.

"What's that?"

"A...a turtle?!"

It *was* a big turtle. With a VA-VWOOSH, it emerged from the water. Agitated waves raged toward us.

"Watch out!"

Luca used the magic she was so good at to stand atop the water, which really wowed me. I reverted to dragon form; now that I was out of the water, the world was my oyster. With a poof, I spread my wings and took hold of the air.

"Olivia, grab onto my mane."

"Thanks, Daddy!"

Now that Olivia was on my back, I felt a wave of relief for the time being. "That pattern on his shell... When the bottom of the lake was moving, was it actually him? Uh... Mr. Turtle?"

I observed the unidentified turtle. He slowly opened his eyes and glared right at us.

Olivia pointed at Mr. Turtle's head and shouted. "Daddy, look!"

"Something's stuck into his head?"

"That looks painful..."

A spear was stuck in Mr. Turtle's head. And it was no ordinary spear.

"That spear...is it *burning*?"

Plus, it was releasing crazy amounts of heat too. It was as hot as an oven during bread-baking time. It was on the level of a bath that started boiling after you took your eyes off it for just a second!

"That spear... Is it one of the Supreme Hallows?"

"A lance wreathed in flame... It MUST be!" Luca's eyes were sparkling. "I shall

mis-possess this turtle of the Hallow and bring it to Milady!”

But that very moment, Luca’s body lurched forward.

“Luca!”

The blade shrank to the size of a butter knife and disappeared. I could only assume it had returned to its place inside her.

“Urgh... I once again failed to use it to its full potential...”

“Luca, over here.” Olivia grasped her dizzy friend by the hand and tried pulling her up, but she failed.

“Gwoooooah!” Mr. Turtle stirred as he bayed, that pike still in his head. Its deep, deep roar caused the surface of the lake to quiver, and ripples spread out from the turtle at their center, kicking up crashing waves.

“Ahh!” Olivia’s hand was pulled away from Luca’s.

“You... You brute of a turtle!” Luca was staring at the spear, unflinching before Mr. Turtle’s roar. The heat issuing from Mr. Turtle’s head caused the air to shimmer like a mirage. *Yikes, that looks scorching hot...*

Mr. Turtle glared daggers at us. It slowly lifted a foreleg and brought it down against Luca, who was standing on the water’s surface. I leaped in to protect her, but seconds before Mr. Turtle could stomp— “Too slow!” With a spray of dazzling droplets and a splish-a-splash, Luca up and vanished!

“Whoa!”

“Luca?!”

The next moment, Mr. Turtle’s leg hit the water. SPLOSH. His leg was so big that the spray was a veritable tsunami.

Uh-oh! On the off chance that that wave sweeps me into the lake... Recalling what it felt like to sink like a rock during swimming practice, I shuddered with fear. Olivia can’t swim either. I had to make absolutely sure neither of us fell in. And Luca clearly meant to pick a fight with Mr. Turtle—which sounded way too dangerous. Luca may be in the upper leagues, and she may be a master swimmer, but all the same, I simply couldn’t expose her to such peril.

“...We need to pacify him!” I said. “There must be some way!”

“Right, Daddy!”

Olivia and I were on the same page. Our first order of business was to ensure Luca’s safety! We strained our eyes looking closely at the spot on the water where Luca had disappeared, and Mr. Turtle also noted his own failure to stomp on Luca. His bloodshot eyes were rolling in his head. *Yeesh, what a scary face!*

“Where is she...”

“Behold!”

PUMF! The surface of the lake split open—Luca had jumped up from underwater with great force.

“Hmph! I suppose it’s only natural that a turtle like you is a dimwit!”

“Luca! I’m so relieved!”

Luca was standing a small distance away from Mr. Turtle. She seemed unharmed. It was clear that either in or near a body of water, Luca was a force to be reckoned with.

“Fork over that lance!” She cried as she positioned her fingers into complex seal after complex seal. She was about to cast a spell.

“Rahhh!”

Luca retrieved an *ofuda* from inside her name tag and tossed it at Mr. Turtle’s feet. That instant, his colossal frame lurched. “Gwoooooah!” As he roared dumbly, he was slowly thrown off balance. It appeared the water underneath Mr. Turtle’s belly was shooting up at him like one of the fountains in the school courtyard. It was, of course, Luca’s magic at work.

“In a waterside battle, I do NOT intend to lose, no matter whom I fight!” she shouted, a keen look on her face.

At last, Mr. Turtle was flipped onto his back.

“Ah, he’s getting away!”

He turned a somersault and dove back into the lake, kicking up giant waves. The moment he did so, the lance stuck in his head released some steam.

“Yahh!”

That settles it, that lance is real hot...

“Fwa ha ha ha! You know my power now, do you?! I vanquished the turtle monster that neither the Elder Dragon nor the King’s Pupil could lay a finger on!” Luca stood atop the lake’s surface, cackling gleefully. “Now then, I can hardly let that turtle get away! I shall pull the fiery lance from its head and claim victory!”

But when she made to pursue him, Olivia, who had been at my back watching Luca in blank amazement, suddenly cried out. “Luca, watch out!”

It was then I finally noticed the huge silhouette looming directly below where Luca was standing. Mr. Turtle was closing in. *Is he trying to ram into her?!*

“Watch out!”

But a split second before I cried out that warning, my dearest treasure jumped down from my back.

“O-Olivia!”

Olivia flew toward her; Luca was standing stock still. Olivia hugged her tight.

Mr. Turtle was right on their heels. *DODGE!*

Before I knew it, I was sucking in air. I was about to breathe fire.

But Olivia beat me to the punch. She just glared at Mr. Turtle with a resolute glint in her eyes and shouted at the top of her lungs:

“STOOOOOOOOP!!!”

Mr. Turtle, who’d emerged once again from the deep, leaped back as though he was afraid of her. But that was hardly surprising, given how similar her scream was to the way I had bellowed when I chased off those attacking faux-nixes.

“Don’t pick on Luca!” Olivia stood between Luca and Mr. Turtle with her arms outstretched and a big-sister look on her face.

“Dearest Olivia... You’re protecting me?”

She had unleashed mana, quite powerful mana as far as the little folks are

concerned, by way of her voice. It's my signature move whenever I don't want a fight and just want the other party to retreat.

"Gwoh?!"

In the face of Olivia's power, Mr. Turtle withdrew his head into his shell. But my relief was short-lived, as Mr. Turtle had been thrown off balance again and began to rampage.

"Eek!"

"D-Dearest Olivia!"

In all its panicked flailing, Mr. Turtle had caused the waves to surge once more. Olivia got swallowed up by a wave and the two disappeared into the lake. *But Olivia can't swim!*

"Augh! Oliviaaa!"

I saw white. *I need to save her! Where is she?! I don't see Luca either...* "I need to save her... No one else can!"

But how? Do I breathe fire? Should I drink the whole lake?

I didn't want to risk scaring Olivia by doing something like that. But I couldn't worry about that when her life was in the balance. Once again, I sucked in lots of air for a fireball...and once again, I was beaten to the punch.

SPLISH.

"Dearest Olivia, hang in there!"

Olivia was practically coughing up a lung.

"Olivia! Luca!"

Luca had risen to the surface carrying Olivia in her tiny arms.

"You can't even swim... So why...? Why would you try to protect me...?"

"Tee hee... I *am* your big sister, after all!"

Luca's breath caught in her throat. "You're always such a goody-goody!"

"Only because that's what I've decided I'll be." She flashed her a sweet grin.

Seeing that Olivia was okay, my muscles eased up, the tension in my body

melting away. Still in my dragon form, I sat atop Mr. Turtle's shell and relaxed. It seemed that at some point during his rampaging, he'd tipped over onto his back.

Am I heavy? Sorry about that. Boy am I relieved, though...

"I'm so glad you two are okay!"

"Guh, gwooah..."

"Hm? What was that noise?"

"Gwoah..."

"Daddy, the turtle, he's..."

"Augh!"

I'd completely forgotten that I was sitting on the belly of a turtle that was floating atop the lake. *Sorry, Mr. Turtle!*

I alighted from the flailing turtle and flew up, remembering to give Olivia and Luca a lift as well.

"Fie on this monster. I shall subdue it!" Luca brandished some *ofuda*s for the attack.

"...A 'monster,' huh?"

Mr. Turtle was giant, and Olivia was in danger, that much was true. But what, if anything, set me and Mr. Turtle apart? He was a different life-form from humans and had spent his days living unnoticed by them. I figured there might be a reason he'd run amok. Maybe he wasn't a monster after all.

"...Wait," said Olivia.

"Hrm?"

"Luca... This turtle might not be a *bad* turtle."

"Huh?"

Olivia gave Luca a reassuring smile. "Daddy, could you bring us closer to him?"

"Huh? I don't mind, but how come?"

"This turtle... He seems to be suffering, somehow."

“Suffering, you say?” said Luca.

“Yeah. Like he’s in pain or something...”

It appeared Olivia had an idea in mind. With the two girls on my back, I gently approached Mr. Turtle. I’m not amazing with bodies of water, but as I could fly, that was a nonissue.

“That spear—I think that’s what’s got him hurting.”

“The lance!”

It was certainly true that the lance stuck in Mr. Turtle’s forehead was still sizzling and releasing plenty of heat.

“If he’s only acting so violently ’cause he’s in pain, then maybe we can do something for him.”

“I see!”

And if what Olivia was saying was true, then we had to help Mr. Turtle out!

* * *

Meanwhile, at the lakeshore...

“What the wha?!” said the Dark Queen. “Talk about a great wave! Hauuugh, are Olivia and the others gonna be okay?!”

“Sir Dragon is with them, so I can’t imagine the worst would happen...”

“But that guy sinks like a hammer!”

“I’m sure they’re hale and hearty, him and Olivia both. Calm down, Queen Marie.”

“Haugh, who’re you calling ‘Queen *Marie*’!”

“Hee hee, ’tis what Luca calls you, Your Darkness.”

“Haugh...”

“My liege, I see a giant animal!”

“Is that a *turtle*? Legend does have it that a ‘water dragon’ inhabits this lake...”

“Perhaps that big turtle’s the root of that legend?”

“Haugh?! Maybe we really should go save them...”

Under the shadow of the parasol, Maredia heaved a sigh.

Chapter 18: Mr. Dragon Pulls Out the Blessed Lance Olivia extended her wee hand. “Mr. Turtle, having this stuck into you must hurt, right?”

The heat emanating from the spear in Mr. Turtle’s head was still distorting the air around it. Was this one of the Seven Supreme Hallows?

“Dearest Olivia! My guess is...this is the Blessed Blaze-Lance as recorded in history!”

“‘Blaze-Lance’... Daddy, could you take it out of him?”

“Gwoooh...”

Mr. Turtle was flailing about as he floated on his back on the water’s surface. I was hovering right next to him. Olivia tried reaching for the lance, but she couldn’t touch it; it was scorching hot.

“Urgh...” groaned Luca. “It’s un-feasible for me... If I get any closer, the heat shall make short work of me...”

“Shall I give it a try?”

“Yep! Thanks, Daddy.”

I opened my maw wide and grabbed the tip of the spear with my mouth. Surprisingly, it didn’t feel very hot. My dragon mouth is extremely heatproof, and I guess you could say I can handle hot food! We dragons *do* breathe fire, after all. I tugged on the spear with not inconsiderable might. It was really stuck in there.

“Heave-ho, heave-ho.”

“Gwoooooah!”

“Ack! Sir Daddy, the turtle! It’s going berserk! HOT HOT HOT!!!”

“...Daddy. Keep pulling.”

“Ofifia?!”

Olivia jumped down from my back before I could stop her, floating away from me and toward Mr. Turtle’s cheek area.

“Dearest Olivia... You make levitation magic look so easy...”

“OFIFIA!!!”

“Daddy! It’s okay. Just keep at it!”

Olivia took a deep breath and turned to face Mr. Turtle, who now had tears falling from his eyes. Either extracting the lance was hurting him, or being flipped over was hard for him to bear.

“It’s okay, Mr. Turtle. I’m here for you. And I’m sure Daddy’ll help you with the spear! So I’ll help you handle it until he can get the job done.” Olivia held her hands out, and they began to shine. “O healing light...”

It was healing magic that she’d learned in school. Mr. Turtle’s moans and groans faded and he became calm and docile. *Olivia...you’re so kind!*

She recognized that Mr. Turtle was suffering, and got in close... She’s my little star! Daddy’s gonna do his best!

“You cast *Healglow*, didn’t you?” said Luca. “That such a beginner-level spell should work on a turtle this size... Gahh!”

“...Huh?”

“Yikes, that’s bright!”

Healglow’s light had been gentle at first, but it now flashed into a harsh glare.

“Aaaaaagh!”

Oh yeah! Olivia can’t modulate her power!

Hit by the intense light, Mr. Turtle yelped and his body stiffened.

“Now’s our chance! HEAVE!”

I pulled on the lance. “Urgh!”

“Gwooh!”

“You did it, Daddy!”

The blazing lance was finally extracted from Mr. Turtle's forehead, but the force required to take it out sent it spinning through the air before Luca caught it.

"...Huh? It isn't hot."

"Even though it's burning like crazy?"

"Ah, I know! Maybe the power of the Blade of Bluewater inside you is canceling out the heat?"

A smile broke on Luca's face. "Yesss! I did it! This is a Supreme Hallow!"

"Gwooh. ♪"

Luca skipped with joy, and Mr. Turtle's super scary expression was a thing of the past. In the blink of an eye, Mr. Turtle shrank down in size.

"Waugh, Mr. Turtle?" Olivia caught the turtle, who was now small enough to fit in her hands. It was even a bit cute now.

"...Urgh. Allow me to express my gratitude. My name is Pao Pao. I am a turtle who has lived in this lake for eons."

"H-He can talk?!"

Wait, could Mr. Turtle always *talk?*

* * *

"So the one who dug the hole humans call the Holy Draconic Spring of Tritonis is a force to be reckoned with, eh? There's quite a lot of mana here, so this place has been extremely comfortable, sir, let me tell you."

Mr. Turtle, or rather, Mr. Pao Pao, recounted his story to us. Apparently, he had been living in a hole here since long before the place became a lake. Since I'd slept in the area for a long while, my mana remained in the land, which made it very livable for Mr. Pao Pao. Unfortunately, one day, the fiery lance got lodged in Mr. Pao Pao's head.

"I don't remember how...but I believe the lance fell on me."

"Hm..." said Luca. "From what I heard, the Blessed Blaze-Lance was lost during a conflict with the dark-kin. I believe it was the War of the Dark Realm,

which happened around a thousand years ago, did it not?”

Ah, that spat that the Dark Queen and her friends had with the humans did happen around then.

At Luca’s words, Olivia jumped up in surprise. “Oh no, that spear was in your head for a millennium?!”

Yikes, it hurts just hearing that aloud!

“Indeed, so it was,” said Mr. Pao Pao. “And I can’t tell you how hot it—”

“Wait,” interrupted Luca, “don’t tell me that’s the reason the Holy Draconic Spring never froze, even in winter...!”

“Oh, I remember now, that’s the ‘blessing of the lake’ we learned about before the trip.”

“Yes, Dearest Olivia. It might actually be the influence of the burning mana released by this lance. This is a tremen-dious discovery!”

“And I’m just guessing here, but Mr. Turtle—sorry, Mr. Pao Pao’s size increase might also be because of the Blessed Blaze-Lance, right?”

“The chances are high...I think. It could be mana hyper-abundance-induced gigantification or something like that.”

“Mr. Pao Pao.”

“Ho ho ho! What is it, oh Great Dragon, kind of heart?”

“Have you been sleeping at the bottom of this lake the whole time?”

“Hm?” Mr. Pao Pao blinked.

“Were you by yourself all these years in the lake?”

“...Sleeping *was* the best way to hold the pain at bay, after all. That being said... You there, young lass.”

“D-Do you mean me?” said Luca.

“Indeed. Using the powerful water mana that emits from you, I was able to overcome the fire mana and wake up after slumbering for ages.”

“Hwha?”

“Truly, I thank you.”

“Y-You’re welcome.”

We returned Mr. Pao Pao to the lake. “It’s been a long time since I could enjoy the lake without getting burned by fire,” said Mr. Pao Pao mirthfully. “If I hadn’t been bathed in that intense healing light, I wouldn’t have ever gotten a hold of myself... Ho ho! I must say, though, that light really packed a punch!”

Mr. Pao Pao started swimming gleefully.

“In any case... I guess that case is closed.”

Luca fixed her double-handed grip on the blazing lance. “This is one of the Supreme Hallows...the Blessed Blaze-Lance!”

Yep, that worked out great, didn’t it, Luca?

“All right, what say we go back and join up with everybody?”

The sinking sun was glowing orange; soon it would be evening. Our fun-filled field trip was about to come to an end...but we had to get at least some simple fun in before then! Olivia and Luca got on my back, and we returned to the section of the lakeshore where everybody was waiting.

“Daddy!”

Olivia waved her hands at me from above.

“Heeey!” I waved back.

I had grabbed the big swim ring for myself and was enjoying the lake’s clear water. I was in my human form, and I was having a great time. I was a bit embarrassed—it seems adults don’t really use swim rings—but I’ll take it if it lets me enjoy floating in the lake like this.

“Daddy, look!”

Olivia, who also had a swim ring on, slipped down the glistening ice slide that had appeared at the edge of the lake. “Eeeee! ♪”

Mr. Pao Pao, now our friend and ally, had created a “water slide” and she was enjoying it greatly.

“Wo ho ho, it’s been a thousand years since I was last able to use water mana

this freely. This is making my heart sing!”

Mr. Pao Pao turned out to be a real magical master. One after the other, the children zipped down the slide. He had become the size of a normal turtle that’s slightly on the larger side, so the kids hugged and carried him in their arms, and even went down the slide using his shell!

I wondered whether the Dark Queen would like that kind of thing.

“Haugh... I can’t handle any rides that make you scream...” And so she went on a walk instead.

The hunt for the Hallows ended in a rousing success, and nothing else disturbed the peace during everyone’s field trip. Moreover, we’d even made a new friend in Mr. Pao Pao.

“...There’s just one thing left to do. I think I’d like to have a chat with *her*.”

And that was the person whose presence I’d sensed a whole bunch of times. I had to tell her that she ought to just come out and *tell* the girl who’s important to her that she loves her. Every parenting book says how important that is, and I believe it!

“Daddy, did you see me go on the slide just now?”

Olivia splashed her way over to me in her swim ring.

“Yep, Daddy was watching!”

“Tee hee!”

“...Olivia.”

“What is it, Daddy?”

“I love you, Olivia. I love you so much.” *What a fun field trip this was.*

Olivia blinked in surprise. “Uh-huh! I love you too, Daddy!” She smiled a bright, sunny smile right back at me.

* * *

Aboard the flying carriage, the gentle snores of exhausted children could be heard. Or rather, the snores of one child, as besides Olivia, the ones who were sleeping were actually Maredia and Clowria. For dark-kin who had lived for

more than a millennium, their faces were downright cherubic.

The only one who was awake was the little girl gazing out the window. Luca smiled faintly; she was *happy*. From the bottom of her heart, she was happy. And not just because she'd successfully obtained one of the Supreme Hallows. She was excited that she could finally face her master, Esmeralda, with her head held up high with pride.

She hated herself for not even being able to fully control the Blade of Bluewater that her ancestors had passed down to her. She hated herself for being *broken*. But now, she could finally be of use to Esmeralda. And that's why she was elated.

But that's not all.

She was holding a number of little papers—the automatic mini-portraits called "Che-Kis," reproductions of reality, unlike paintings. They were created by the magic of the "Eselar-Camra," a device passed down through generations among dark-kind. Luca had no idea why dark-kin were so wont to make these kinds of seemingly pointless magic items.

She stared at one particular Che-Ki. It was a photo of the group at the lakeshore in the evening. She had copied Maredia and thrown up a two-fingered "peace" pose. Maredia had her umpteenth glass of fruit juice in one hand and the widest grin on her face. Olivia was also doing the peace sign, smiling happily.

But it was the expression of the person next to those two that had Luca fascinated. It was her own expression. She still looked bashful, but she was *merry*, laughing without a care in the world. The sight of herself like that made her groan and she felt strangely embarrassed.

Not knowing what face to make for the picture was one of the harder aspects of these "Che-Ki" things for Luca. Maredia appeared to be very used to getting her picture taken because she was able to strike a pose in no time.

She started murmuring to herself. She'd thought that she had to do everything on her own. She'd thought it was on her to be able to do everything by herself, to be the most outstanding of all, to live life without relying on anyone else. But now, she realized she'd been mistaken. It gave her a thrill to

hear Olivia call her a friend, and trading quips with the Dark Queen was always stimulating. Plus, when Pao Pao the Turtle smiled and thanked her, she felt warm inside.

All this time, she'd been so anxious to impress her beloved master. She'd always thought she needed to achieve results, to become *accomplished* somehow. But now, it had occurred to her that maybe what would actually make Esmeralda happy was telling her how she felt.

"...I had so much fun today."

She was happy to have acquired the Hallow, sure, but that wasn't the half of it. It was the time she'd spent alongside her friends that she'd enjoyed—beyond measure.

Luca's eyes fell back on the Che-Ki, and she chuckled. "...Heh heh, look at Sir Daddy's face." The Elder Dragon—Olivia's Daddy—was the only one in the picture whose eyes were totally shut. Maybe he blinked at the wrong time. He looked kind of stupid, and she found herself amused.

Luca wondered how Esmeralda would react if she showed her the photo the next time they met. She put away the photo with care. She couldn't wait to get back to the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. She figured she might as well sleep the rest of the way too and closed her eyes.

But just at that moment...

"Luca."

That voice belonged to the woman Luca loved.

"Huh?" Luca looked in the direction of the voice. There she was, her silhouette visible in the window of a carriage bigger than the standard ten-seater. The tall and slender beauty's silver hair was swaying in the wind. It was Luca's master, Esmeralda Serpentia.

"Milady!"

"Shhh. You'll wake 'em all up."

"Why are you...?"

"When the sun's down and the darkness comes, this ain't above my abilities."

Esmeralda was the bearer of the Hallow known as the Twilight Crown, whose jewel contained magic power capable of manipulating darkness. Come nighttime, it granted Esmeralda even more power. She could slip into the darkness and soar through the sky, and she could even perform a technique not far removed from outright teleportation. But that wasn't what Luca was asking, really.

"What brings you here, Milady?"

"Ah, well, about that... Let's just say the person who's flying this carriage gave me an earful."

"This carriage? You mean Sir Daddy?" Luca tilted her head to the side in confusion.

"Ah, err, how do I put it..." Esmeralda stammered a tad. Then she reached out her slender hand—and patted Luca gently on the head. "You did good, Luca."

"...Haugh?!" Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she looked completely flustered. "But Milady, so long as I'm your number one apprentice, then it's a given! A given I say!"

"...Luca, I'm sorry about everything," she murmured, quietly.

Up until now, she'd thought she had to raise Luca with a strict hand. She'd felt she had to raise her not as a "princess from an Eastern land who possesses a magical treasure," but rather as a powerhouse who could beat back all foes. The world expected much of her just because of the dragon blood in her veins. Dragon-kin like Esmeralda who had a high concentration of dragon blood were regarded as protectors of the kingdom whenever a dark lord showed up. And during times of peace, they were placed under state surveillance under the pretext of being living, breathing deterrents against foreign nations. The mere fact she belonged to a lineage of formidable magic power drew people's antipathy.

A princess who not only bore the blood of the water dragons who lived secluded lives in the far-off Orient, but who also housed one of the Seven Supreme Hallows inside her—the movers and shakers of this world would naturally covet her. That's why, when Esmeralda was entrusted with the responsibility of raising her charge, she took pains to raise Luca up strong; not

as a princess, but as the apprentice of the one and only Esmeralda Serpentia. And that meant not babying her as a mother might. She'd vowed to be a worthy master, and that she'd always interact with Luca strictly as master and apprentice.

But that thinking became too ingrained, as she could never show Luca any affection. She never tried to close the distance between them—despite the fact that in truth, she did love Luca as a mother might. She was more than just a cute apprentice to her.

"...Even after you started attending the academy, I've been watching you."

"Huh? I-Is that true?"

She had disguised herself, and during spare moments during her official business (or more accurately, neglecting her business entirely), she'd kept watch over Luca.

Phyllis had been her friend for many years, and now they were fellow mom-friends. "You don't need to disguise yourself like that," she'd said, but Esmeralda was worried about Luca.

"Forgive me, Luca... You mean so much to me."

"Milady..."

"This whole time, I was waiting for you to make friends at this school. I thought that if you could meet people you could relax around, that would make up for the lack of affection from me..." But Esmeralda had realized that such thinking had been self-centered of her. "Instead of watching over you from the sidelines, I ought to suck it up, face you head-on, and support you in a way you can see. That's the truth bomb that super-dad dragon dropped on me."

They were master and apprentice, yes, but she was sure they could build a warmer relationship by some other name, even if that word wasn't "family." She *wanted* to build a warmer, closer them.

"Luca. I've been watching over you from the shadows... But I'm your biggest cheerleader. I've held you near and dear to my heart for so, so long."

"Haugh," said Luca, flustered.

“Seeing you having fun on your field trip with the friends you’ve made... I didn’t think it’d make me *cry*, but it did.”

“...M-Master... Milady...! You’ve been watching me this whole time...” Luca’s eyes sparkled with something different than her usual reverence. “I...I love you too, Milady!”

The sight of Luca looking up at her put a lump in her throat. *She...she’s so cute!*

“...Y-You’re not put off? I was monitoring you. I wouldn’t blame you if you think I’m some kind of stalker lady.”

“Nonsensical-ness! The fact you kept watch over me... It makes me so happy!”

“Is... Is that right? Good, then.”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Oh, right—I bet you want a reward for completing the mission, right? I’ve heard it’s best to have that sorta thing!”

Luca gave it a moment’s thought. “Let’s see... Oh, I’d like to eat the jam buns you brought us again! And, err, well... I want you to keep watching me!”

At that, Esmeralda smiled—and she hugged her wee apprentice tight.

Epilogue

It was just another peaceful day at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. The inner courtyard was filled with pleasantly warm sunshine. I was in my tiny dragon form, passing the time by soaking up the rays of Mr. Morning.

Ding-dong. The bell rang, and the children's voices filled the school's grounds.

"Daddyyy!"

"Sir Daddy!"

"Olivia! Luca!"

I could hear the two's footsteps approaching. My sweetheart held me in her arms. She seemed very excited.

"Listen, Daddy! Luca *did* it!"

"Oh? Did what?"

Luca arrived a bit after Olivia. Just like Olivia, she was wearing a mantle that's not part of the standard Florence Academy uniform. Since she'd found one of the Hallows, the Blessed Blaze-Lance, she had been designated as a King's Pupil herself. Though under normal circumstances a single school wouldn't have two King's Pupils, she was made one as a special case. The day her mantle arrived, Miss Esmeralda came as well, and the school was hyped up. Miss Clowria lent her the Eselar-Camra, and boy did Miss Esmeralda make tons and tons of Che-Kis!

"Keh heh heh, I've finally done it... I have mastered the Blade of Bluewater!"

"Really?!"

Luca took the large, shining azure sword out from within her body. Before, it wouldn't have taken long for her to become light-headed and for the sword to shrink to the size of a butter knife.

"Hah! Toh! Hi-ya!" Luca swung it this way and that, which caused clear water to fly around with each swing, watering the trees in the courtyard.

"Wow, that's so convenient for gardening!"

“Sir Daddy, that’s not what you should be focusing on.”

Sorry, sorry.

“So, what do you think?!”

“You’re sensational!”

The sword itself glowed bright and strong, and Luca looked so full of life. “This is what I can achieve if I believe in myself!”

“Tee hee! Luca, it’s ’cause of that special training you’ve been doing every day, right?”

“Special training?”

“Yeah, Mr. Pao Pao’s been teaching her how to use water mana...”

“Mr. Pao Pao?” *Oh right, that big turtle in Tritonis.*

“Ah, Dearest Olivia! That’s just between us!”

“Ah!”

I know how much time it takes to go see Mr. Pao Pao.

“Err... About that...” said Olivia. “Tee hee. ≡”

You’re trying to dodge the question with that cute smile, aren’t you? I mean, that ploy’s no joke. It just might work!

“Well... If you look here...”

Olivia pointed at a small fountain in the corner of the courtyard.

Peering inside, I saw it. A mysterious pocket of space. It was another *Demon’s Gate*, using the same magic as the portal connecting the desk drawer in Olivia’s dorm room with the cabinet in our home. It could only be Olivia’s handiwork.

“I-I was the one who requested it of her!” said Luca. “I thought if I could just make use of the ancient knowledge of the great turtle that commands water mana, then maybe...”

Mind you, I wasn’t actually going to chew them out. But just think, if somebody haplessly stumbles upon that portal, they’ll be in for quite a shock!

“That aside! I am now able to govern its power! No longer shall this academy

be prone to monster attacks due to my overflowing mana.” Luca threw out her chest with pride, stars in her eyes.

“Nice going, Luca.”

“Thank you! And mark my words, we shall find the remaining three Hallows!”

“Tee hee! Let’s go for it! Wooo!”

“Wooo!”

While Olivia and Luca were being their spirited selves, a voice called out from below.

“Haughh, how carefree,” said the black cat.

“Hello, Miss Dark Queen.”

Whenever she was with Luca, she spent her time in human form. However, she had voiced her opinion that when it came to basking in the sun, nothing beats her feline form. As such, when she dropped by the courtyard, it was often as a cat.

“You may have gotten lucky this time, but we’ve got no clue where the other Hallow things are, right?”

“Rrgh, that is true,” said Luca.

“Then there’s no way you’ll stumble onto them so easily!”

“Well...”

“Now now, my Queen,” chided Miss Clowria.

“...Marie, you’re a cat again.”

“Haugh, what’s it to you?! This is the best form for stuff like waiting in crevices and other dark places!”

“Crevices... Dark places...?”

“You know how important breaks are! There are dark-kin who get tired after spending lots of time in crowded places too, you know? Besides, the fact I report for work every day to begin with is, like, super laudable!”

At that, Miss Clowria nodded vigorously. “The fact that Your Darkness is once

again active outside the castle—your knight can barely hold back her tears!”

“...I’ve been thinking, Lady Clowria,” said Luca. “Aren’t you spoiling Marie rotten?”

“Th-That’s not true. I am her devoted right hand, but I *am* strict with her!”

Chatting like this in the courtyard has now become an everyday occurrence for me. Incidentally, Miss Esmeralda comes to hang out with us in the courtyard every so often too. More often than not, I’ll spot her sitting next to Luca on a bench, enjoying some jam buns and talking. Their chats are still awkward, and I leave them be, often going off to nap under a nice-smelling tree.

Yes, break time at the Florence Academy for Girls is a lively, cheerful affair. The Dark Queen is always smiling and laughing. Miss Clowria too. Everyone is.

Beside her grinned Luca, the girl I hadn’t known until last year.

“Heeey! Oliviaaaa!” came the voices of classmates from off in the distance.

“Tee hee!”

Olivia was smiling at the center of her circle of friends, and that was enough to make me truly, genuinely overjoyed.

Thank you for giving me such a close look at the fun you have every day.

“Th-That aside! We still have three Supreme Hallows to dis-veil! As the King’s Pupils, we must keep searching for them!”

“Right!” Olivia nodded enthusiastically. “Where should we all go on our next trip?”

Spring had passed, giving way to the start of the next season. The height of summer lay right around the corner. Our delightful year had yet to run its course.



Afterword

I have all of you to thank for the release of Volume 2 of *Dragon Daddy Diaries*! You truly have my gratitude. I'd also like to specifically thank the following people, from the bottom of my heart: Sencha-Sensei for once again providing such warm and wonderful illustrations, Kajiya-Sensei for adapting the story into manga form, my editor (I-san) for dependably giving me just the right direction, and all of you readers!

Now, the dopey dark-kin magic tool known as an "Eselar-Camra" is a product not dissimilar to F*jifilm's Inst*x M*ni 8 (redacted). And the mini-portraits that slide out of it, called Che-Kis, are a great way to record fun memories! It seems Miss Dark Queen purchased it through a shopping site for dark-kin called eBad. Physical photographs have become a thing of the past, haven't they? I'm not knocking digital smartphone pictures, but might I suggest that printable photos serve as superb mementos.....?

When it comes to the memories Olivia and her Daddy are making, some are memorialized in physical form, and some aren't, but either way, it would make me quite happy if you continue soaking up their journey together. And I hope that you make your own warm and wonderful memories as well. Until next time!


Congratulations on releasing Volume 2
—Kajiya


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DRAGON
Daddy Diaries
A Girl Grows to Greatness
AUTHOR Ameko Kaeruda
ILLUSTRATOR Sencha





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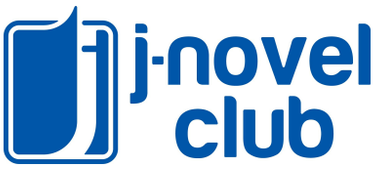
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Dragon Daddy Diaries: A Girl Grows to Greatness Volume 2

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