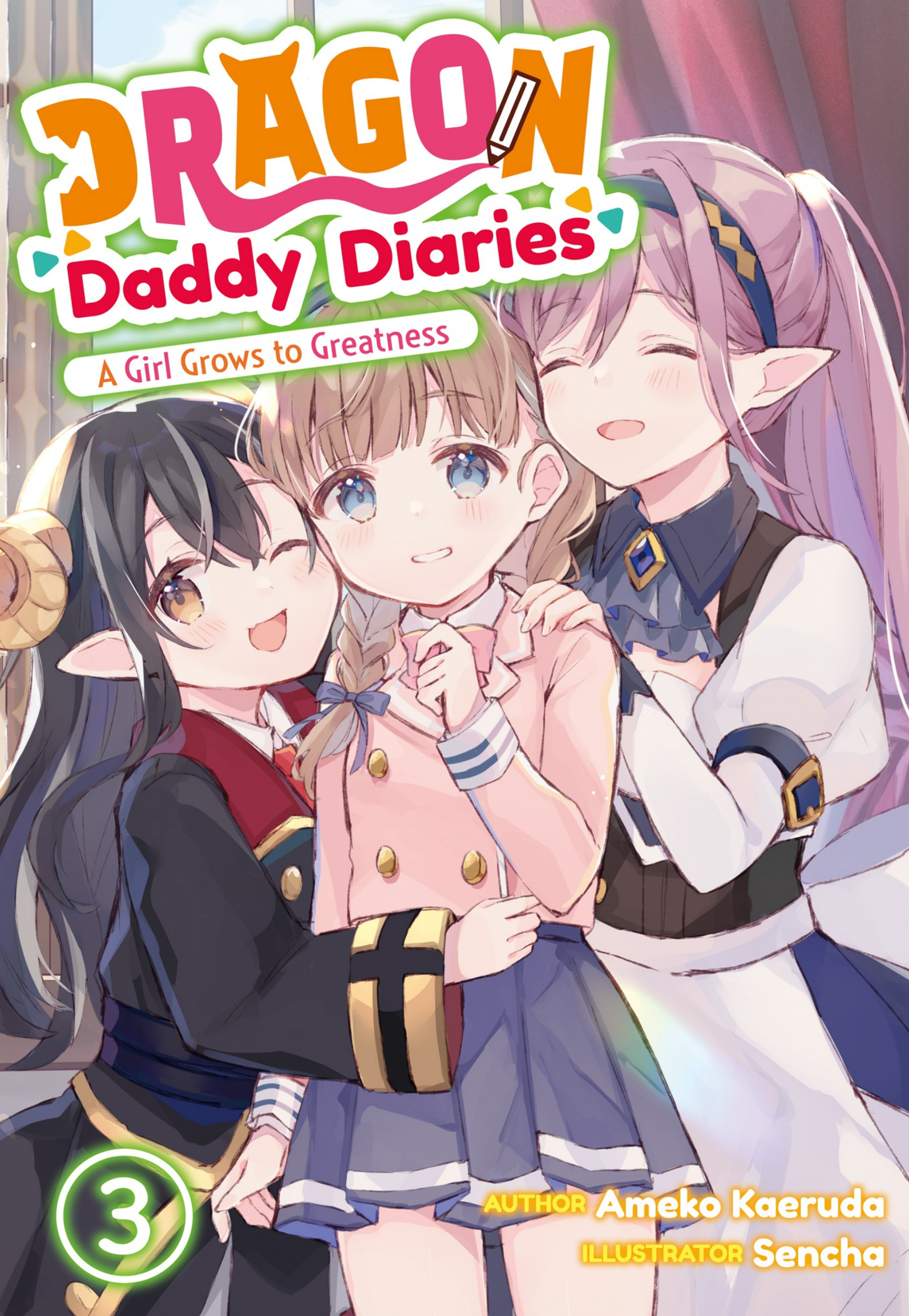
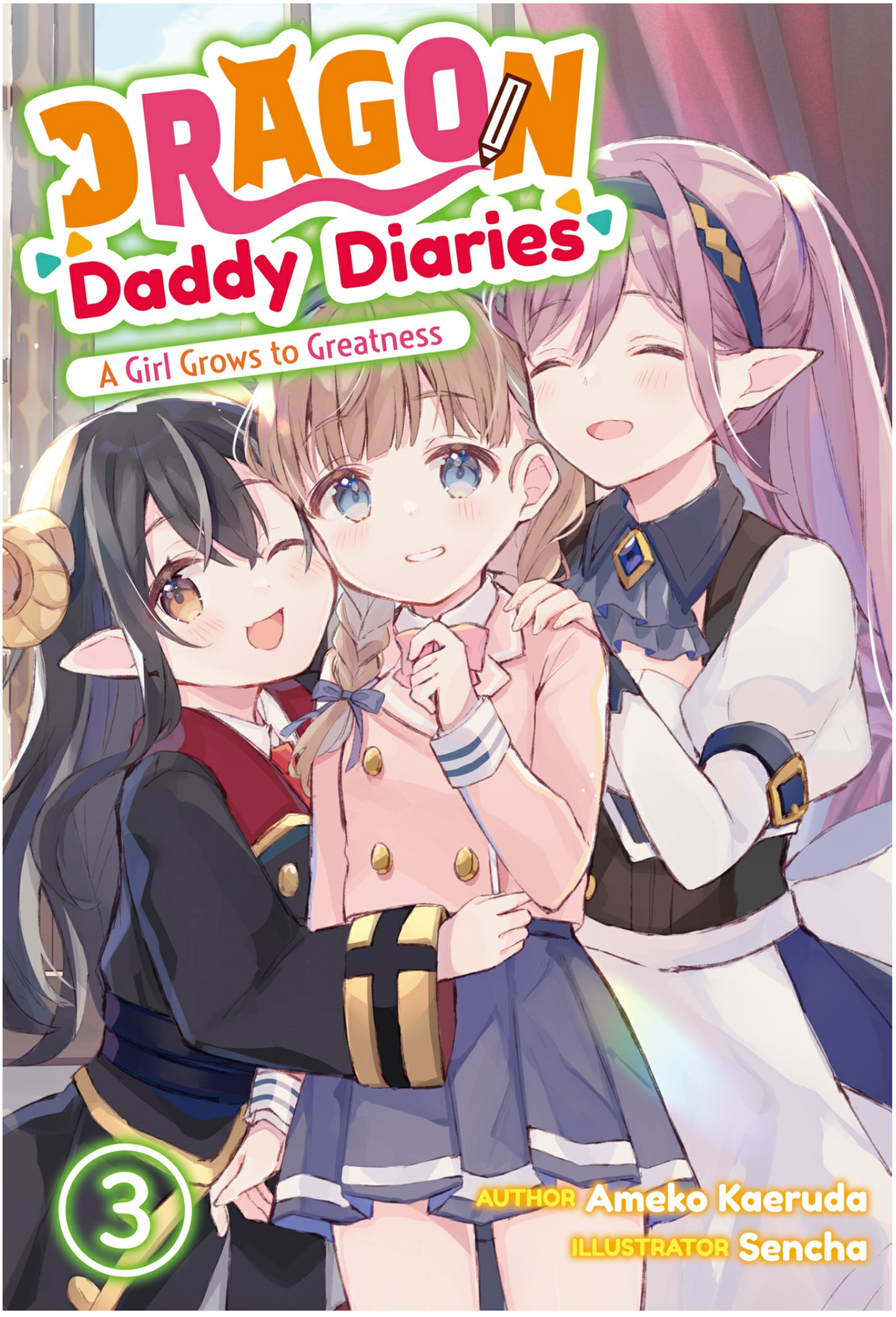

DRAGON
Daddy Diaries
A Girl Grows to Greatness
3
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Preface

Summer is the best. The bright, glittering sun warms up your whole body. As a dragon, I really don't like being cold, so the super bright sun feels fantastic!

Today was the closing ceremony for the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, which Olivia attended. The spring semester ended without issue, making way for summer vacation.

Florence Academy sat atop a small hill overlooking a grassy plain that seemed to stretch on forever. The school buildings were enclosed within high walls, with a moat winding around the perimeter that glittered in the light of the sun. The bridge that usually was pulled up to prevent people from coming and going across the moat was now down. Even the area outside the gates of the school was lively, as numerous carriages had arrived to take the students back to their hometowns.

"What's taking Olivia so long?" For the first time in a while, I was in my dragon form, literally stretching my wings. The hot sunlight warmed them through and through, and the breeze across the meadow carried the scent of grass as it ruffled my mane. Making myself small was easy enough, and I didn't mind taking on a human form so much either...but being transformed like that was kind of exhausting. My original form felt the best.

Finally, the gates of the school opened, and the students burst outside in high spirits.

"Daddy!"

"Olivia!"

Under the brilliant sunlight, wearing the summer uniform of the esteemed Florence Royal Academy for Girls, Olivia came running towards me. With the sight of the verdant grassland around us, the brilliant sun in the sky, and Olivia's dazzling smile, the Eselar-Camra in my heart snapped a picture immediately. She was just too cute!

“You’re so big today!” Without slowing down a bit, Olivia ran straight towards me and grabbed one of my forelegs in a big hug. I looked up into the sky. *My daughter is just too cute today!*

“Daddy?”

“It’s nothing, Olivia.” Seeing her look at me with upturned eyes like that, I felt my chest grow tight... She was just too darn precious. *Come on, Daddy, calm down.*

“Whoa?!”

“An earthquake?!”

“Everyone find cover!”

The humans around me...er, the *people* around me suddenly started to panic.

“Oops.” That was my bad. Olivia’s cuteness was too much for me to bear, so I started slapping the ground with my tail without realizing it. I quickly used that same tail to smooth over the small cracks that had opened up in the ground. *Sorry, horses, I didn’t mean to startle you!* With the evidence thoroughly destroyed, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Haugh... That’s a bit much.” I looked towards those full-moon eyes staring up at me. That black hair, falling around sheep-like horns. And those bright, puffy cheeks.

“Miss Dark Queen!”

It was the Dark Queen, Maredia. She was lending us her castle as a place to stay. In human terms, she’d be our, uhh...landlady. She spent her days with Olivia at Florence Academy, and with her personally crafted school uniform, she stood out everywhere she went.

“Sorry, I’ll be careful...”

“No, I understand how her adorableness could bring that out of you.”

“Your Darkness, you will get a sunburn like this. Please, use this parasol!”

“How thoughtful, Clowria!” The one holding out a parasol to her without a moment’s hesitation was the dark-kin knight, Miss Clowria. As a close friend of

the Dark Queen, she was much like an older sister to Olivia. Recently I had just begun to notice that Miss Clowria spoiled the Dark Queen an awful lot.

“Here, I have prepared a drink for you as well. Would you prefer watermelon juice or grapefruit juice, my beautiful Dark Queen?”

“Haugh... I’m more in the mood for something tropical, I think.”

“M-My sincerest apologies! I will prepare something right away!”

Yeah, something like that. But things were more fun with the two ladies around, so I didn’t mind so much.

Realizing that something was missing, I looked around. “Where’s Luca?”

“I think she’s still in the classroom,” the Dark Queen said.

“Yes, recently Miss Luca has made a good number of friends,” Clowria explained. “After the closing ceremony, they all congregated in the classroom, not wanting to say goodbye quite yet.”

“Heh heh, the first-years are always like that. I was the same way.”

“Ah, that reminds me. Olivia, when you were a first-year, you brought Daisy home with you for a sleepover, didn’t you?” It had been a full year now since last summer vacation where she had brought home a friend for the first time. I was so happy to see it.

“It doesn’t look like they’ll be coming out anytime soon, does it? Those girls were comparing their grades and everything.”

“Are you jealous, Miss Maredia?”

“Haugh?! No way! I get along just fine with the human children! It’s not like I’m jealous she has so many friends!”

So she is *jealous*, I couldn’t help but think to myself. “Okay then, let’s wait until Luca comes out.”

“Okay! I can’t wait to spend our vacation with her.”

“Me too, Olivia.”

Luca was one of Olivia’s underclassmen. Hailing from a country in the east, she was from a family that had dragon blood running through their veins. She

was quite adept at water magic and was rather powerful compared to other humans. Unfortunately, her mana attracted all sorts of monsters. Moreover, she inherited a powerful magical artifact from her family, one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, and held it within her body, making her a target for people with ill intentions. That led me and the Dark Queen to take on work as security for Florence Academy.

It had been decided that Luca would join us at our home for summer vacation this year. Apparently, her guardian, Miss Esmeralda, was a little busy this year. The woman seemed really bummed out about it. She really loves Luca a lot, doesn't she? Since Luca entered Florence Academy in the spring, she had snuck into the school again and again to watch over her. As I recalled all the times that happened, I heard a familiar voice.

"Goodbye, Olivia! See you next semester!"

"See you, Daisy!"

"See you later, Olivia's father!"

"Goodbye!"

"Whoa, Olivia's dad is so much bigger today!"

One by one, Olivia's five classmates boarded their carriages back home. Daisy, Iria, Ruby, Kate, and Lena. They were all members of the specially designated "Class Zero," limited to six students per year. The girls all got along great, and I had enjoyed watching them play together.

They had held a tea party after finishing their exams. It had been a really fun time. Olivia had a few small hiccups in the past, like destroying a wall or two during an exam and discovering a lost piece of ancient magic... But for the most part, I was glad the semester ended without any serious problems!

"Haugh... Wait, why are we taking the long way back when it's so hot out?"

"Huh?"

"We've got the *Demon's Gate* that Olivia made, right? We can just use that to go back to the castle in seconds! Right?!" As the Dark Queen whined about the heat, Miss Clowria began to fan her.

“The weather is great today, so I thought it would be more fun to fly back. And Olivia’s been wanting to ride on my back for a while now.” As the Dark Queen had said, we could use the *Demon’s Gate* in Olivia’s dorm room to reach the cupboard in the castle instantly. We’d been using it every day to travel to and from the academy for our work as security guards, but today was the closing ceremony. Emphasizing turning points in your child’s life was very important for their growth, according to a book I had been reading called *Raising Your Child From Season to Season*. It was a great book, filled with wonderful pictures. And also, cutting through the wind while soaring through a deep blue summer sky felt great.

“That’s no fair!”

“Your Darkness, I fear that if you complain like that, you’ll just feel even hotter.”

“Urgh, stop with the good arguments!”

“Miss Maredia, if you’re hot, I can help you cool down,” Olivia offered.

“Haugh?”

“*Icicle Wind!*”

“Ha wha?!”

“My Queen, look out!”

The moment Olivia laid a hand on her, one of the Dark Queen’s horns froze solid with a high-pitched ping. If Clowria hadn’t pulled her away as fast as she did, her whole face would have been frozen.

“Hauuuugh! What was that for?!”

“Huh? Sh-She froze?”

“Are you trying to turn me into a Popsicle, Olivia?!”

“S-Sorry... Uhh, it’s supposed to be a spell to help you cool off...” Olivia was in total shock. She had a bit of a habit of going way overboard when trying to use very simple spells. Apparently, it’s because she grew up on a sacred mountain raised by a dragon, so she had a tremendous amount of magical energy. *I’m sorry, Olivia... It’s my fault...*

“I-I’m sorry, Miss Maredia...”

“Hauuuugh... When you make a face like that, how can I not forgive you?!”

I get it. I totally get where you’re coming from, Miss Dark Queen!

As I stood nodding in agreement with her, I heard the pitter-patter of Luca’s footsteps from far away. She was a little smaller than Olivia, and her hair was tied in pigtails that bounced along as she ran.

“My Dearest Olivia!”

“Ah, Luca!”

“My apologies for the delay!”

“It’s fine! Good work this semester, Luca!”

“Wh-What do you mean?! Such a semester was hardly any work for me at all!” Luca puffed out her cheeks as she pouted. She was as competitive as ever...but with her face like that, she looked so much like our own Dark Queen that I couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“Waaah?!”

“Hauugh?!”

“Ah, I’m sorry!”

My sudden burst of laughter struck Luca and the Dark Queen head-on with enough force to send them sprawling.

“My Queen?! My sincerest apologies! For something like this to happen while I was right beside you—!”

“Luca, are you okay?” Olivia and Miss Clowria rushed to help the two fallen girls back to their feet. Luckily, it didn’t seem like they were hurt. Since it was my first time being so large in so long, I had kind of lost my sense of the scale of my actions. I vowed to reflect on my negligence.

Clowria helped brush the dirt from the clothes of the teary-eyed Dark Queen as she got back up to her feet. “Now then, shall we get started on our way home?”

“Okay!” Following Olivia’s energetic reply, everyone climbed onto my back.

Now, all we had to do was fly home. I spread my wings out wide. A single wingbeat from me would grab hold of the vibrant summer sky and send us on our way.

“Haugh... I just want to go home and lock myself inside...”

“I swear I shall dis-veil the secret behind Olivia Dearest’s strength before this summer vacation is through!”

“Ehe heh, I’m looking forward to summer vacation too, Luca!”

“Your Darkness, I have some fruit jelly ready and waiting for everyone when we get back.”

“Yay!” A chorus of excited voices sounded from my back.

“Okay then, let’s go home!”

“Wait!” Just before I took off, a strong, clear voice called out from above us. The person descending from the sky was none other than...

“Milady Esmeralda!” It was a woman with glittering silver hair and a slender frame who was also Luca’s guardian and master—Esmeralda Serpentia.

“Luca!” Seeing Luca atop my back, Esmeralda’s face broke into a wide smile. Luca immediately slid off my back and ran over to her. At first, it seemed like the two weren’t able to express their feelings for each other very well...but it looked like that wasn’t a problem at all for them anymore. Yes, things were just fine between them now.

“I am most gratty-fied to see you, Milady!”

“Me too, Luca! Well done this semester!”

“Thank you! Ah, err, allow me to present my report card.”

“Ohhh! As expected of my disciple! Your grades are incredible! And on top of that, it looks like you’ve made quite a few friends!”

“Y-Yes!”

“Heh heh, I expected nothing less.”

“I ex-pounded every effort!”

The two of them were practically fawning over each other. Esmeralda seemed happy, looking over Luca's report card with a big smile, but...didn't she have some urgent business or something?

"Haugh... I hate to interrupt, but I would like to leave as soon as possible. Do you have some business with us, Esmeralda?"

"Th-That is correct! Were you not busy, Master?"

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"Oh..." Esmeralda was suddenly at a loss for words, her face flushing. Slowly, she stood from where she had crouched down to meet Luca's gaze, clearing her throat. "M-My apologies. There has been a bit of an emergency. I am here to give a message to the King's Pupil, Olivia Eldraco." She pulled out a piece of paper. "This is a royal edict, from Her Majesty the Queen of Shutora herself."

"Edict?" *What's that?*

"It's an order directly from the queen," Clowria quietly explained, seeing my confusion. She really is quite helpful to have around.

"Uhh...what does the queen want? Wait, before that, there's a queen?"

"Of course. This *is* the kingdom of Shutora, after all."

"...Is my home also in the kingdom?"

"You mean the Sacred Peak of Olympias? Of course."

"I-I never knew!" Before meeting Olivia, I had spent my days walking around the mountain and taking naps. Without me even realizing it, someone had come along and made the mountain into part of their kingdom. Humans really are something else.

"I am sure there are legends of someone heading to the top of the mountain to seek permission from the legendary elder dragon that lives there...but that's not important right now." Esmeralda turned an expression of renewed focus on us. "You have been summoned, Olivia Eldraco! An official mission has been assigned to you regarding the Seven Supreme Hallows. Head together with Luca Ioenami to the royal castle at once!"

“O-Of course!” Luca nodded with sparkling eyes at Esmeralda’s words.

But what about Olivia herself?

“Uhh...” She looked back and forth between Esmeralda and me, a bit taken aback. “I-If Daddy is coming too, then...” she mumbled.

“Hm?”

“Umm... I was planning on having a fun summer vacation with Daddy, so...” Though I was working at the same school she attended, we still spent our days mostly apart. It seemed that she was looking forward to spending summer with me as much as I was with her. “If Daddy can come too, then I’ll go!”

“Of course I’ll go!”

“I’m sure that’ll be no issue,” Esmeralda nodded, though looking a little surprised.

“Hurray!” Olivia and I both shouted for joy. If we’re together, I’m sure we’ll have fun wherever we are!

“But what does the queen want with me?”

“Who knows?”

This would be Olivia and my...and also...

“Haugh... I just want to go home...”

“My liege, if you would prefer, shall we return home through the *Demon’s Gate*? If...if we go back now, it will be just the two of us.”

“Fantastic idea, Clowria!”

It was the beginning of a great summer adventure for Olivia and me, and a great summer vacation for our two great friends, the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria.

Chapter 1: Mr. Dragon Heads to the Capital *The Tiny Royal Chef, Kate Flachette*

The capital city of Shutora was about half a day's flight south from the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Well, actually, we were going by carriage. Once again in my human form, I felt the school carriage shake underneath me. Apparently it would take about a day to get there. Esmeralda thought that it would cause a bit of a ruckus if a dragon ended up flying to the capital, so we decided on traveling this way instead. I didn't mind going slow like this, but a ruckus? It's not like I'd do anything... Maybe it's just because I can look a little scary.

Esmeralda had said she'd return to the capital ahead of us and had disappeared after she stepped behind the school building. She had the ability to warp between shadows. Apparently she could only go to places she is familiar with, but it's still a very convenient ability. That was a power of the Twilight Crown that she possessed, which was one of the Seven Supreme Hallows.

"I'm excited we get to ride in the same carriage as you, Kate!"

"Seriously! Even though we're classmates, we barely get to relax together since we're in different dorms!"

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls was split into three dorms. Olivia lived in the Dorm of Springs, Fontaine, and if I recalled correctly, Kate lived in the Dorm of Trees, Arbor.

"Oh, I'm glad to have you along too, Luca!"

"Y-Yeah, me too..."

I was sitting alongside Olivia and Luca in the rocking carriage. Across from us was Kate, a girl with a radiant face and deep red hair, who was Olivia's classmate. Her father was a fantastic cook called a royal chef, and Kate herself would make snacks and food for the students' tea parties at school. She was always bright and cheerful. Even now she was pulling cookies she had made

herself out of her basket to share with Luca. The younger girl seemed a bit bewildered as she received the snack, but mimicked the way Olivia ate it with both hands.

"They're so good, aren't they?"

"Indeed, quite scrump-icious."

Munch munch, munch munch. The two of them eating side by side reminded me of a pair of squirrels.

"Oh, would you like some too, mister?"

"Thank you, Kate." I accepted a cookie from her. Yes, they *were* quite good! As somewhat of a cook myself, I was deeply impressed. Though it was just a simple butter cookie, it had a rich, sweet, melt-in-your-mouth quality about it. They really were fantastic. Now I just needed some tea to go with it!

"Ah, that's right. If you're coming to the capital, wanna stay at my place?" Kate offered with a bright smile.

"Can we?!" Olivia responded instantly. So, in short...

"It's a sleepover!"

Olivia's expression broke into a bright smile. *It's really starting to feel like summer vacation, isn't it?*

* * *

"Welcome, King's Pupil Olivia Eldraco."

Shutora's royal castle was even bigger and more spacious than the Dark Queen's castle that we were borrowing as our home. It was really like something you'd see in a picture book. And deep, deep inside, waiting in the throne room were Esmeralda and the queen of the Kingdom of Shutora. A white cloth hung in front of the throne so we couldn't see the queen sitting on it. I suppose with my eyes I could see through the cloth fairly easily, but I decided not to. I wasn't into that sort of thing.

The queen spoke slowly, welcoming us to the castle. "And welcome to you, student of the head of the Royal Court's Magic Division's Esmeralda Serpentia and daughter of the eastern dragon-kin, Luca Ioenami."

“Th-Thank you! It is a great honor to re-ceipt your invitation, your majesty!”

“No need to be so formal,” the queen chuckled. She seemed to find Luca’s response a bit funny. She had quite a pleasant laugh, with not even a shred of scorn behind it. “And...my apologies, but who might this gentleman be?”

Gentleman?

“She is speaking of you, Sir Daddy,” Luca explained to me in a whisper.

“Ah!” *Thanks, Luca!* “I’m Olivia’s Daddy!” I introduced myself.

“I-I see... If you are Olivia Eldraco’s father, then...”

“Yes, your majesty,” Esmeralda interjected. “He is the Mr. Eldraco I spoke of.”

“So, you are that large dragon...”

“Oh, you already know.” I may have been in my human form right now, but I was actually a dragon.

“There is much I would like to ask you, but...there can be no other reason for me to have called you here than the search for the Seven Supreme Hallows. In that regard, there has been some unsettling news...”

“Is there a problem?”

“Esmeralda.”

“Yes, your majesty.” At the queen’s beckoning, Esmeralda stepped forward. “I believe you are all aware of the Seven Supreme Hallows, passed down in the Kingdom of Shutora since long ago. They are artifacts crafted from gems that contain great power.”

“Powerful gems...”

“Yes. Though they are all unique, they each possess a nature that allows them to store additional magical energy over time. To put it simply, the more time passes, the stronger they become. Similar to how an elder dragon possesses much greater magic than a human ever could due to its lengthy lifespan.” Esmeralda wrote some letters in the air using her magic.

The Gem of Light, used in the Gem-Stave of Eternity.

The Gem of Darkness, used in the Twilight Crown.

The Gem of Water, used in the Blade of Bluewater.

The Gem of Fire, used in the Blessed Blaze-Lance.

The Gem of Wind, used in the Leafwind Bow.

The Gem of Earth, used in the Vastearth Shield.

"Light, darkness, water, fire, wind, and earth...as you know, these are the six great elements that make up the world we live in. Luca, can you explain why it is so important for us to collect the Seven Supreme Hallows?"

"Yes, Master!" As Esmeralda pointed her out, Luca's hand shot up into the air. "In the past, the Seven Supreme Hallows would release their magical energy at a fixed time, once every thirty years. In so doing, they would grant the wishes of the people in an event known as the 'Shooting Star Ritual.' However, it has been over three hundred years since the Hallows were lost, so they have been collecting power ever since."

"Indeed," Esmeralda nodded. "Phyllis has the Gem of Light, I have the Gem of Darkness, and Luca has the Gem of Water. But we didn't know where the others were."

"Uhh, if they're so important, how did they get lost?" Olivia asked.

"Time is a cruel mistress," Esmeralda answered. "The first was lost a thousand years ago, when the Vastearth Shield vanished during the war with the invading dark-kin. As of three hundred years ago, all seven had gone missing."

"Oh my..." Humans did always seem to be having scuffles over something or other. Whenever I happened to look down from my mountain to see what they were doing over the years, they almost always had been fighting with each other. That was one of the reasons I had held no interest in the human world at all until I met Olivia.

"Some of the Hallows have been collecting energy for more than a thousand years now. According to my calculations, they should be reaching a critical mass of energy soon. Before that happens, we need to find them all and perform the

Shooting Star Ritual."

"The Shooting Star Ritual is an event which un-leases the tremendous energy contained within the Seven Supreme Hallows, and uses that energy to make any wish come true," Luca explained.

"Any wish?!" *Isn't that kind of a big deal?* Olivia and I glanced at each other in surprise.

"For that reason, we must keep them out of the hands of those who would use them for evil," Esmeralda continued.

"Evil?!" *Were there really people out there who would do that?*

Seeing my shock, the queen spoke up. "Our neighbor, the Machine-Empire of Gerakias, has long watched for an opportunity to attack our lands."

"M-More squabbling?!" She must have been talking about the common human practice of setting up camps across from each other when they had an argument.

"Actually, we have learned that one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, the Leafwind Bow, has fallen into the hands of Gerakias," the queen continued. "They must also be attempting to gather the Seven Supreme Hallows."

"As such, we must work quickly to collect the remaining Hallows and release their built-up energy in the Shooting Star Ritual...so her majesty has decided."

"The mages and soldiers of the kingdom are expending every effort in the search, but we have yet to unearth so much as a single clue. Since you were able to locate the Blessed Blaze-Lance, we would like to request that you spend your summer vacations helping us locate the other Hallows."

Olivia was listening intently to the queen's speech. She understood how big of a deal this request was.

"I am aware that the summer vacations of one's childhood are an irreplaceable asset... But even so, I must ask for your help."

Olivia gave a small nod. "Umm, can Daddy come with us?"

"Well...as long as you don't mind, Elder Dragon, I have no issue with it..."

“Okay. As long as Daddy’s with us, then we’ll have fun!” As Olivia said that, she turned to look up at me with a bright smile. “Right, Daddy?”



Even in a serious situation like this, seeing Olivia's smile just makes my heart melt! She's too cute! No matter how you look at it, it's just too much! Every year, she sets a new cuteness record!

"...Sir Daddy?"

"I-I'm sorry, Luca. I didn't mean to flail about like that, ha ha ha." That was dangerous. It's a good thing I wasn't in my dragon form, or else this beautiful castle would have been reduced to rubble!

"For now, let's start by getting our information in order." For a moment I thought Esmeralda's gaze was a little cold as she looked at me, but I'm pretty sure it was just my imagination. "We want you to search for the Vastearth Shield, which is currently missing."

The Gem of Light was in the care of the headmaster of the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, the Elven Philosopher-Queen Phyllis. The Gem of Darkness was being carried by Esmeralda, a royal mage and genuine dracoshaman with the power of a water dragon. The Gem of Water had been under the protection of Luca's family for generations. Putting aside the stolen Gem of Wind, all that remained was the Gem of Earth, which gave power to the Vastearth Shield. Our summer adventure would involve searching for that.

"Someday, we also intend to reclaim the Leafwind Bow, and ultimately perform the Shooting Star Ritual," the queen declared. "When that day comes, Olivia...we will allow you to make any wish you want."

"Wait, me?!" Olivia jumped in surprise. "A wish, huh...?" Her head tilted to the side. Apparently, she didn't have anything that immediately came to mind. "What about you, Daddy?"

"Let me see..." I stopped to think as the question was suddenly passed off to me. *A wish... A wish...* "Well, recently some of your friends have been coming over to play, so I kind of want a new oven. Oh, and maybe a bigger garden?"

"Come on, Elder Dragon, you're thinking way too small."

"What about you, Olivia?"

"Umm...I want to stay with Daddy forever... How about that?" Even her

wishes were just a bundle of cuteness!

“S-Sir Daddy! Please, re-train yourself!” Luca admonished me. Oops! I had ended up flailing around again...

“If everyone was as carefree as you two, the world would be so peaceful,” Esmeralda said with a sigh. “We don’t know what their motive was to steal the Leafwind Bow, so for the sake of protecting the everyday peace of your school and the kingdom at large, we need to get serious about this...”

“Wait...” A thought suddenly occurred to me. “Uhh...they’re called the *Seven* Supreme Hallows, right?”

“Yes?” Esmeralda replied, unsure of what I was getting at.

“I mean...light, darkness, water, fire, wind, and earth...that’s only six, right?” I thought there would have been seven of them, considering their name. I seemed to remember there being another one when we talked about them earlier.

“So ya noticed...” Esmeralda said, eyes shining as she pointed at me. “Well done!”

“As expected, a dragon *would* notice!”

“Ah, that makes sense. Even a dragon would catch on!”

“A dragon *would* realize.”

I don’t know what they think dragons are...

Esmeralda cleared her throat. “Among the Seven Supreme Hallows, there is one gem whose nature we have yet to ascertain.”

“‘Ascertain’?” Olivia repeated, confused.

“We don’t know anything about it,” Esmeralda explained. “The seventh of the Supreme Hallows, the Ring of Mercy’s Light, is also known as the Lost Origin. It barely exists in the historical records, but it is said that its gem has the power to control the other Supreme Hallows.”

The Lost Origin. That sounded kind of cool.

“Either way, I doubt we’ll be able to find that one.” The queen finished

Esmeralda's explanation. "If we can find the other six, the danger currently facing us will pass. First, please look for the Vastearth Shield. I have high hopes for you."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Okay!"

Olivia and Luca responded to her in unison. It sounded like kind of a serious task, but a treasure hunt *did* sound exciting!

* * *

The capital city, Shutora, was apparently the largest city on the continent. It was hard to tell from within the carriage, but now that we were walking around, it was pretty obvious. There were so many people!

"Wow, there's such a big crowd here!" There were so many people walking around we could barely see the city. Men and women, adults and children, and grandpas and grandmas. Olivia, who was born in a small village and raised in the mountains, stared at it all with wide eyes. We thought the city near the academy that we had visited to go shopping was big, but it didn't even compare to this. I thought there were a lot of humans at the academy's entrance ceremony, but this was on a whole new level. There were many times, ten times, hundreds of times more people than I'd ever seen before! Olivia and I were totally floored.

"Wow..."

"Whoa..."

"Daddy, look at all the people!"

"Y-Yeah, there's a ton of them!"

"Wow..." Olivia was clinging tightly to me. Seeing her wide-eyed shock as she looked around, I held her back just as tight.

"Olivia, m-m-make sure you don't let go of my hand!"

"Okay! Okay!"

"If we get separated here, we may never see each other again!"

Well, if we *did* get separated, I'd definitely find her.

What should we do? We were supposed to stay at Kate's house tonight, but could we make it there through all these people? *Oh, if I just turned into a dragon...no, oh no no no!* That wasn't allowed. I wanted Olivia to be able to live happily with other humans. Me turning into a dragon anytime I had a problem would be too much of a power play. I wanted Olivia to be comfortable walking around in a place like this too. I needed to overcome these difficulties as a human with her!

"Olivia!"

"Daddy!"

I squeezed her hand even tighter. *Olivia! This situation might be difficult, but your Daddy's here! I'll definitely keep you safe!*

"...Umm, Dearest Olivia? Sir Daddy?"

"Luca, you grab on too!"

"What on the earth are you two doing...?" Luca stared at us, unimpressed. Esmeralda still had business at the castle, so Luca had come along to guide us to Kate's house.

"I-I-I-I-I mean, look at all the people...!"

"Such a thing is absolutely commonplace. Such is the vivac-ity of Shutora's capital." Luca seemed a bit exasperated with us.

"What do we do?! I'm gonna get lost!" Olivia wailed.

"No, you won't," Luca said, holding out a hand to her. "Heh heh. Ever since the day I, Luca Ioenami, was taken on as Lady Esmeralda's disciple, I was raised in this very city! Such con-junction is not even enough to give me pause!" Luca puffed up proudly as she spoke. With the way the sun was shining behind her, she seemed extremely reliable. And in this tidal wave of people, no less, Luca was definitely more reliable than us. "Let us depart, Dearest Olivia, Sir Daddy!"

"Luca...!"

"Follow me!"

Olivia grabbed Luca's hand. "O-Okay!" Being pulled by the hand, we followed her through the crowd. Thank you, Luca!

We arrived at a mansion fairly close to the castle. This was Kate's house. Kate was standing outside waiting for us, so when she saw us...

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha?!"

She screamed.

"Oh, hi, Kate. We made it!" Olivia waved to her...from up on my back.

"Wh-Wh-What happened, mister?!"

"Well, uhh...we ended up getting lost."

That's right. Though I was still small enough to walk through the streets, I had returned to my dragon form. We had made it fairly far following Luca through the streets, but at some point, the jostling of the crowd had separated us. In such a huge crowd of people, there was no way for us to find someone as small as Luca. As we stumbled around trying to find out what to do, Olivia had started to cry.

Yeah... If she was going to cry, I didn't have a choice. I'm her Daddy, after all. I had to do whatever I could to make her stop. And look, by getting to a higher vantage point, it would be easier to find Luca. Maybe she couldn't find us either in the crowd of people—but there was no way she would miss a dragon.

So, I ended up transforming into a midsize dragon, smaller than my usual form. I felt like I should have apologized to the people around us though. They were really surprised.

"Urgh... It's not like I was lost..." Luca protested.

"Tee hee, come on, Luca, don't cry..."

"I'M NOT CRYING!"

"Well, thanks to Luca, we've made it safely to Kate's house, so everything is fine." Letting the two down off my back, I slipped back into my human form. Tonight, we'd be having a sleepover at Kate's house!

* * *

Kate's house was a mansion with a huge dining hall. Judging by the size of the hall itself, I thought her family must have had more than fifty people, but apparently, they had just built such a large dining hall because they often invited many guests over.

"My dad is a royal chef, after all! People from the royal family come visit all the time. Sometimes even really important people from other countries sneak in too," Kate explained proudly. Even at school, she was always talking about her father's work. She was also passionate about cooking and baking herself.

Kate served us some tea and snacks in the reception room. "Once again, welcome to my home, Olivia!" The tea gave off a strong, refreshing aroma. The snacks were madeleine cakes, fluffy and bright.

"Tee hee, these look delicious!"

"Sorry for imposing on you so suddenly, Kate."

"Not at all! Good work with your audience with the queen. You must really be the King's Pupil, getting an audience with her directly. It makes me proud to be your friend!" Luca's cheeks started to puff up. "I'm proud of you too, Luca!"

"O-Of course!" she looked away with a huff, but not before taking one of the madeleine cakes for herself.

"This tea smells so nice," Olivia said, nose twitching as she took in the scent. The way she carefully held the cup up in both hands was absolutely adorable. "And it tastes so good!"

"Heh heh, it's my family's secret premeal tea blend! It's not a black tea, but a herbal tea made from lemongrass!"

"Lemongrass?"

Apparently it was a kind of medicinal herb.

"It helps stimulate your appetite. Normally, you'd serve some Lemoncello mixed with ice water before a meal...but Olivia's still a kid!"

I'm pretty sure you're still a kid too, Kate...

“You mean alcohol?” Olivia asked.

“Yes!” Kate declared proudly. “You three are very important guests tonight! The Flachette family will do everything in our power to make your stay comfortable! As the saying goes, ‘be our guest’!”

Kate’s idea of hospitality was phenomenal. A fantastic meal, better than anything I’d seen in any picture or recipe book, was lined up before us. There was a bright green soup, a colorful salad, fantastic smelling roast fish, crunchy yet fluffy bread, and a huge fruit cake!

“My dad is at the castle for a dinner party, so I’ve gone ahead and made dinner for everyone! Don’t worry about manners, just enjoy yourself!”

“This is incredible...”

The feast covered every inch of the table. Olivia, Luca, and I would never be able to finish it all. And every single dish tasted fantastic! It was almost as much fun watching the new dishes being carted out as it was to eat them.

“It’s all so delicious!” Olivia smiled brightly as she stuffed her face. Luca silently munched away, apparently quite taken with the seafood dishes. I, however, was moved by the green soup.

How did she do it? It’s chilly! But the flavor is so good!

“That’s amazing. How did you make this soup? Even though it’s cold, its flavor is so rich!” As a person, or rather a dragon, who spent so much time in the kitchen, I couldn’t help but be moved. I thought that all soup had to be hot, like Olivia’s favorite milk soup. But this one was cold. And delicious. A whole new sensation! And the small crumbs floating in it gave a very pleasant sensation as you ate it. Were they bits of cracker? It was the first time I’d had anything like it...!

“That’s a cold mung bean potage. We pound the beans into a fine mush before enhancing them with the Flachette family’s special consomme. And then using the *Icicle Wind* spell we learned at school, I cooled it right down!”

“Oh, so there are recipes like that out there?” I thought I had read quite a few recipe books, but I had never heard of something like this. As I thoroughly

enjoyed the soup, Kate kept staring at me, the shy look on her face making it seem like she wanted to say more.

“What’s wrong, Kate?” It didn’t take long for Olivia to notice and ask her. Tilting her head to the side with knife and fork in hand, she looked as precious as ever.

“Well, actually...this isn’t my dad’s recipe.”

“Huh?”

“The cold mung bean potage is something I thought up myself...”

Olivia and I shared a look. Luca had also been eyeing the soup suspiciously, muttering something about how green it was, and hadn’t tasted it yet. Finally, she hesitantly tried a spoonful, and her eyes immediately lit up.

“S-Sorry. I guess a cold soup is kind of weird, isn’t it? I was trying to come up with something that my dad...that my father wouldn’t think of, but...”

“That’s incredible!” Before Kate could finish talking, both Olivia and I shouted together.

“...Huh?”

“That’s amazing, Kate! No one would ever think to try making a cold soup!” Olivia continued to shower her with praise.

“Y-You think so...?!”

“I feel the same way,” I said with a big nod. That must be what they call being creative.

“I-Is that right? Actually, this is the first time I’ve tried serving one of my personal recipes to a guest... I’m glad you like it.”

“It’s all super, super delicious!”

“Yeah, and with how fast you got this all ready for us, even though we showed up with such short notice... I really want to come eat here again!”

“M-Me too! ...Er, I as well!” Luca hastily added, still holding a piece of bread with both hands. She seemed quite happy with the food Kate had prepared for us.

“I’m glad my first guests were you guys!” Kate laughed, relieved.

We continued to enjoy the meal she had prepared for us late into the night.

* * *

The next morning, before sunrise, Kate stepped into the kitchen with her mouth open in a wide yawn.

“Good morning, Kate.”

As I greeted her, she jumped in surprise. “Whaaa?!”

“Sorry, did I startle you?”

Though it was still dark outside, Kate was wearing the white uniform of a cook. Blinking in surprise, she blurted out an “oh” as she saw what I was doing.

“Mister, are you...?”

“Sorry for using your kitchen without permission. I wanted to make something as thanks for last night.” In a single pot was four people’s worth of milk porridge. To start, I had cooked some onions and added the leftover consomme soup from last night. I then mixed it all together with the boiled barley and rice to continue cooking. Once the rice had turned to mush, I melted some cheese on top for the finishing touch. This was always what I made the day after a big meal. Olivia would eat anything and everything, and in any amount, so she sometimes ate a bit too much. The next day, she’d be sleepy because she was still full...so I would always make this milk porridge for her since it’s good for digestion. The ingredients were basically the same as the milk soup I always made too.

“Milk porridge...”

“Do you not eat this type of thing much?”

“No, it’s the first time I’ve seen it.”

“I see. I *did* find it in a really old recipe book. Maybe it’s a recipe from a long time ago?” If I recalled correctly, the book this recipe was from may have been written in the ancient script. It was one I had found in the corner of the Dark Queen’s Library of Grimoires.

“I’m a bit nervous to have someone who could make such a wonderful meal as you did for us last night try it, but please. This is my thanks for how hard you worked for us last night.” I served some into a bowl and handed it to her. “Olivia and Luca aren’t awake yet, but here, you can have yours now.”

“But that’s no good,” Kate said with a moan. “That’s no good at all. I can’t force my guests to make their own breakfast!”

“I made it because I wanted to, so don’t worry,” I said with a smile. At the same time, her stomach gave a nice rumble.

“Oh no...”

“Ah ha ha, sounds like you’re hungry!”

“A-Actually, I didn’t end up eating anything last night...”

“What?!”

“I got so focused on taking care of you guys, I forgot to make dinner for myself.” Kate hung her head, embarrassed. “My dad always does the same thing. He gets so wrapped up in watching people enjoy his food that he forgets to eat too.”

“Wow.” I think I understood how they felt. Watching Olivia enjoy the food I made for her was better than the taste of anything I would eat myself.

“I love seeing my dad so proud after coming home from a successful dinner party.”

“And I’m sure he loves you just the same.”

“Of course!” Kate replied with a laugh. Blowing on the porridge to cool it down, she tried a bite. “...It’s delicious.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it!” I was quite relieved to hear praise from a cook as skilled as she was.

“Really, it’s great. It’s not sparkly or colorful like my dad’s cooking, but...”

“Y-Yeah, it does look a little plain, doesn’t it?” I’d never thought about the color. When we used the seasonal ingredients we found on the mountainside, it kind of always turned out colorful on its own.

“But...” She tried another bite. “This is the flavor Olivia grew up on, huh? I totally get it. When I heard you were a dragon, I was really surprised...and uh, a little bit scared.”

“...Yeah, I get that.” That was understandable. When people came up the mountain, they’d always jump in surprise or fall down in fear of me. At first, I thought that was a kind of greeting. A long time ago, I went to visit a village with Olivia in my human form and I dropped to the ground with a shout of surprise to greet the people there. They just gave me weird looks. Thinking back on it now, it was quite embarrassing!

“But this milk porridge tastes so, so...gentle,” Kate said while eating. “I know *all* about cooking. I mean, I’m the daughter of the best royal chef ever! So I can tell from this milk porridge just how much you care about Olivia...”

“Kate...”

“Heh heh, thanks for breakfast!”

She must have been trying to make me feel better about yesterday. I *did* end up turning into a dragon in the middle of the street and scaring everyone. She was so considerate and worked so hard for her guests. I was sure she would grow up and be a fantastic cook someday.

Olivia and Luca eventually woke up, and breakfast got lively.

“I love the milk porridge you make!”

“I never would have thought adding milk to porridge would be bearable...but this is not so bad.” Luca seemed delighted.

Now then! Today marked the first day of our hunt for the rest of the Seven Supreme Hallows. But where should we start?

“I know!” Olivia shouted as she jumped to her feet. “It *is* summer vacation, so I was thinking we should make sure we have fun, right?!”

Olivia came up with a great suggestion!

Interlude: Meanwhile, the Dark Queen... Part One

The Sacred Peak of Olympias. Home of a dragon, and the current location of the Dark Queen's Castle.

"Haugh... I'm hungry..." The Dark Queen Maredia wandered about the kitchen. The freeloading dragon and his daughter, Maredia's friend Olivia, weren't home, even though they had planned on coming home for the summer break.

"My Queen Maredia, if you would like, shall we have dinner early?"

"Absolutely, yes!"

Clowria pulled some bread and cheese from a basket. She was Maredia's close friend, a foster sister who had been raised together with her.

"Oh, sandwiches? Good, good. I just started a new series, so food I can eat with one hand while reading is exactly what I need!" Maredia gave a full-faced smile. "You really get me, Clowria!"

"I'm happy to hear that. Would you like some honey in your hot milk?"

"Of course!"

Putting the quickly constructed meal on a tray, she brought it to Maredia's room at the top of the Western Tower.

"Thanks for dinner!"

"Please enjoy, Your Darkness."

For the first time in a while, it was just the two of them alone at home. As she ate her cheese sandwich, Maredia stared at Clowria. She was her close partner who had been with her since they were young. She was always at Maredia's side, always thinking of her.

A thousand years ago, when they had launched their attack on the Human Realm, she fought ferociously as the captain of the dark-kin guard until the last. When Maredia was defeated by the human heroes and her beloved library was

sealed, there was no way she could go back to the Dark Realm, yet Clowria never left her side. When she fell into a deep depression and refused to leave her castle, Clowria was still always there for her.

She was her beloved other half. That's how Maredia felt.

...She's far too good a woman for someone like me.

The fact she was always there to hold her hand, swearing allegiance to an idiot Dark Queen like herself, it made Maredia want to indulge in her kindness forever.

"Is something the matter, my beautiful Queen?" Clowria asked with a smile, noticing her gaze.

"Hau, n-nothing!" She kept munching away at her sandwich. Dry bread and dry cheese. Despite how he looked, that elder dragon was quite the cook, and this meal was almost sad in comparison to what he could make.

But still. It was delicious. While it may not have filled her stomach like their usual fare, it filled her heart just as well.

Her life had changed completely when the elder dragon had come for that first visit with Olivia, but Maredia had no regrets about that. In fact, she found her new lifestyle quite fun. She never thought someone like herself would get the chance to attend an ordinary school! But in the end, her true place was at Clowria's side. She felt that with all her heart.

"My lady?"

"Haugh...nothing. Though I wouldn't mind some tea once I've finished eating." Paying no mind to her manners, she held her new book in one hand as she nibbled at her sandwich.

Clowria smiled just like always. "Very well, my Dark Queen."

She knew she was being totally spoiled by Clowria's kindness—but still, she loved just being here with her.

Chapter 2: His Cutie Sets Out to Find the Seven Supreme Hallows, Part One *A Miraculous Night at the Palestria Estate*

In the Kingdom of Shutora, there was a summer resort area known as Ruiza. It had deep forests and beautiful waterfalls, expansive plains, and a large city. Villas owned by the rich and noble lined the streets. In one such district was the summer home of the illustrious Palestria family.

“Daisy, what are these grades?” In the garden of their mansion, a woman sat at a tea table surrounded by roses, scolding her daughter. Looking over her daughter’s report card, she gave an exaggerated sigh. “When will you finally reach the top of your class?”

“My apologies, ma’am...” Daisy Palestria, one of Olivia’s classmates, uttered yet another of what was becoming an expansive list of apologies for the day. The woman plainly showing her irritation was Daisy’s mother.

“Daisy, you are a descendant of Palestria, a great wizard who even defeated the Dark Queen. Being the top student at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls should be a matter of course for you.”

“...I understand.” *But*, Daisy thought, *one of my classmates is Olivia.* She was kind to everyone, as bright as the sun, and her best friend. When Daisy dreaded returning home last summer, Olivia didn’t hesitate a moment in inviting her back to her own place where they had a secret sleepover.

Olivia was incredibly talented. She was raised by an ancient dragon and was a true dracoshaman. One of their underclassmen, Luca, seemed to view Olivia as her rival, but Daisy couldn’t imagine Olivia ever fighting with the younger girl.

Daisy’s mother paused. “Well, against the King’s Pupil, and a dracoshaman no less, I suppose it is not *entirely* your fault.”

That was right. That was *exactly* right. Her mother knew that full well, but

even so, she never stopped reprimanding her daughter and never stopped being irritated with her. “Ever since you were small, you lacked a competitive spirit...” She made it sound like that was a terrible flaw. “But you *do* get along well with the King’s Pupil, yes? Oh ho ho, as expected of my daughter,” the mistress of the Palestria family laughed heartily. “Make sure you keep close with her, no matter what.”

“...Y-Yes, ma’am.”

“Apparently, she and her guardian have gone to have a direct audience with the queen. I imagine the two of them could become quite influential in the future...so make sure you get in her good graces while you can! That is the whole purpose of sending you to the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, Daisy! To build those kinds of connections!” Her mother kept emphasizing that over and over. Daisy had long grown tired of the conversation, and just wanted to go and do her homework, but doing anything to make her mother upset would not end well for her.

Once her mother became upset, she was likely to sulk for days. Daisy couldn’t help but think she was childish, but in the style of nobles, that was simply called “being innocent.” Either way, that was the kind of woman she was. A true noblewoman from birth. That’s what everyone called her, but honestly, Daisy didn’t like her very much.

“Mother, please don’t talk about her like that.”

“To think that gentleman was an elder dragon! How could this be? If I had known, I could have earned his favor from the start...”

“...You’re not listening at all, are you?” Daisy sighed...and as she did...

“Well, well, if it isn’t my beautiful wife and my charming daughter!”

“Father!”

With a bright, friendly smile and a plump figure, the head of the Palestria family arrived—Jacques De Palestria. As the head of a distinguished family, he shouldered the burdens passed down through the generations of a family of wizards and was the honorary president of the Royal Sorcerous Society. His work kept him so busy that he rarely made it home. For the first time in quite a

while, he had come along with the rest of his family to their summer resort.

“Ah, Jacques.”

“Ohh, my beautiful Rosa, and Daisy too!” With a large hand, he patted Daisy on the head. He was just as softhearted as his benevolent demeanor suggested, and in stark contrast to his wife Rosa, he possessed virtually no ambition at all. Perhaps that was the luxury of being born into a family where his place as heir was guaranteed. Exhausted by the trickery and schemes of the nobles in the capital, he had intended to fully enjoy his time at their summer home.

“Oh look, it’s just about time for tea. Allow me to join you.”

“You can’t be so carefree, dear... I was having a serious conversation with Daisy about her future!”

“Ah ha ha, come now. Daisy is still so young, there is no need to be so intense. Right, Daisy?” Turning so her mother couldn’t see, her father gave her a wink. Daisy realized that he had sensed the stormy atmosphere earlier and stepped in to intervene. Jacques’s presence alone was enough to clear up the strained atmosphere of the Palestria household. The fact he was too busy to make that happen very often was a point of sadness for her.

“Anyways, dear. What exactly happened?” Rosa asked with an unreadable expression.

“Hm? O-Oh, that...” Jacques spoke haltingly, piquing Daisy’s curiosity. Apparently, something was going on. “A carriage came here from the capital.”

“I see. Did something happen? Or has someone wrapped themselves up in another scandal?” Rosa’s eyes began to shine.

“No, nothing like that,” Jacques replied, stroking his ample stomach. “It appears the King’s Pupil and her father, along with Lady Esmeralda’s disciple, have requested to stay here. I hear her father is a dragon of all things? As a wizard, I must say I am quite looking forward to meeting an *actual* dragon.”

The King’s Pupil and her companions. Daisy blinked as the realization set in. That meant...

“Olivia is coming?!” Her best friend was coming to visit. Daisy immediately felt

restless. Their sleepover last year had been wonderful. Being able to spend her vacation with Olivia again was like a dream come true. But would things be okay if Olivia visited her where her parents...where her *mother* was? She hoped someone as purehearted and straightforward as Olivia wouldn't cross her somehow.

"Her Majesty the queen has directed them to spend their summer vacation searching for the remaining Seven Supreme Hallows... I was personally more than happy to offer our residence to them," Jacques said to his wife, his request for permission implied.

The corners of Rosa's crimson-lined lips immediately shot upwards into a smile. "This is a great chance!"

"A chance...?" Daisy echoed, gripping the hem of her skirt. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Jacques, give them an answer as soon as possible. Let us invite all the nobility in Ruiza and hold a great banquet. We shall welcome the King's Pupil into our own faction!" The nobility of Shutora had divided themselves up into numerous factions that vied for control of the Noble Congress. "Oh ho ho, this is perfect."

Daisy and her father shared a look, while Rosa was totally over the moon.

The next day...

Despite being a little anxious, Daisy waited eagerly for Olivia's arrival and a certain familiar voice reached her ears.

"Daddy, hurry up! Hurry up!"

"Wow, that's quite the house!"

"Dearest Olivia, this is a noble's residents! You mustn't run!"

An entertaining back-and-forth, just like when they were at school. Daisy emerged from the entrance hall with a smile on her face.

"Olivia!"

"Eh heh, Daisy!" It hadn't even been a week since the closing ceremony, but

they were just as excited to see each other as if they hadn't met for years.

"Welcome, Olivia, Luca. And you too, Mr. Eldraco."

"Thank you for having us, Daisy."

A summer searching for the remaining Seven Supreme Hallows. Olivia's suggestion had been to travel around the country, staying at each of her classmates' houses while they looked for clues. If they were going to be traveling anyway, they might as well enjoy themselves!

"So you stayed at Kate's house in the capital, then?"

"Yeah! And she made dinner for us! It was sooo good!"

"It's no wonder. She *is* the daughter of a royal chef," Daisy said with a chuckle. As Olivia and Daisy walked hand in hand, Luca stared at them from behind, clearly unhappy.

"Come on, Luca. Let's go!" Olivia turned and held out her other hand to her.

"Hmph! What a childish thing to do..." Despite her complaints, she timidly accepted, taking Olivia's hand, and the three of them walked off together. Behind them was the smiling dragon, in his human form, of course. The bright sunlight filling the rose garden felt great on everyone's skin.

"Olivia, the three of us should all sleep together tonight!" Daisy suggested.

"That won't do at all, Daisy."

"Mother..."

"We have prepared first-class accommodations for our guests, you know? Please refrain from bringing shame on the Palestria family." Rosa shut her down immediately.

"Uhh... Who is that?" Olivia asked bluntly.

Rosa all but collapsed. She paused to collect herself. "I am Rosa Palestria. I have heard you have been getting along quite well with my daughter Daisy, Olivia Eldraco."

"Oh, you're Daisy's mom! Hello! I'm Olivia!"

Rosa gave an ostentatious sigh at Olivia's greeting. "Olivia, for being the King's

Pupil, you are quite lacking in etiquette, aren't you? Please refer to me as Madam Palestria."

"Huh? Uhh... Are you *not* Daisy's mom?" Olivia was taken aback, confused by Rosa's request.

"Oh ho ho, I suppose you will have to learn etiquette a little at a time. Now then, please come this way. The maid will guide you to your room." Rosa called for one of her servants.

The dragon immediately spoke up as well. "Um, I'm Olivia's Daddy. N-Nice to meet you."

"Hwa!"

"Huh?"

"So *you* are that rumored dragon? To think you would take such a lovely form..."

"Uh...?"

"Please enjoy your stay here to the fullest, Mr. Dragon. ≡" Rosa winked at him, which was a very popular, flirtatious move in high society.

"Oof." The dragon was totally overwhelmed. He didn't quite know why, but he felt a chill run down his spine. Perhaps it was his instincts as a dragon. Just who *was* this woman?

"Let's go, Olivia. You too, Luca."

"Daisy?"

"Mother, I will guide our guests inside." With that, Daisy pulled Olivia and Luca by the hand into the house.

"Wha...? Wait, Daisy!"

"Please follow me, sir," Daisy said to the dragon before the three little girls ran off into the depths of the mansion.

* * *

"I'm sorry, Olivia..."

Olivia and I shared a look as Daisy apologized, her eyes downcast. I'd never seen her like this before.

"Hmph. Nobility truly are possessed with appearances, aren't they?" Luca snorted, folding her arms.

Appearances? That means decorating yourself so that you will look good to others, right? I guess I've done similar things, working hard to make myself look cool in front of Olivia. But the word seemed somehow unpleasant out of Luca's mouth like that.

Daisy shrugged sadly while she took a sip of tea. "It's just as Luca says," she said with a forlorn expression. "Even though we finally have a chance to have a sleepover, my mother doesn't see you as guests, but more like her prey or something."

"No matter! As long as we are able to perform our search for the Seven Supreme Hallows, it is of no consequence," Luca continued. "This morning we searched all around Ruiza Canyon. To be honest, it was all for naught. We found no trace of the Hallows, not even a hint of a legend!"

"Tee hee, but the waterfalls were so pretty, weren't they?"

"And being able to walk on the water with Luca's magic was really fun," I added. Luca was quite skilled in water magic. It was the first time I had ever walked behind a waterfall!

"S-Such a thing was but a trifle for me!" Luca suddenly coughed to clear her throat as her face flushed. "But once we have concluded our search in the canyon, I shall be parting ways with Dearest Olivia and Sir Daddy."

That was right. Soon, she would leave us to go search on her own with Esmeralda. We were splitting up to cover more ground...but really, it was because Esmeralda was desperate for some face time with the girl. Her friend and the headmaster of Florence Academy, Miss Phyllis, had secretly sent us a letter to tell us just that. Actually, Luca had been crying out in her sleep and calling her master's name recently, so it was good timing for both of them.

"So if it were not for Dearest Olivia's desire to stay here, I would have much preferred to move on to the next location in our search!"

“Yes, I guess you would.”

Seeing Daisy deflate even more, Luca hurriedly continued. “Uh, so...that’s why! We’re not here to play, so do not fret over your mother’s behavior!”

Oh, she was trying to console Daisy. She was a bit harsh with her words, but Luca really was a kind girl at heart.

Her clumsy attempt at being gentle made Daisy burst out laughing. “Thank you, Luca. You’re such a nice girl,” Daisy said. But her smile still seemed somewhat sad.

“My apologies for bringing up such a strange subject.” Daisy changed the topic. “However, dinner is going to be a big feast. Our chef is doing his best to put on a great welcome party for you.”

“A feast?” Luca gulped.

“Umm... I think it will be a very busy party, and maybe not as good as what Kate made for you, but...please look forward to it.”

“Okay!” Olivia nodded with a big smile.

The evening finally came. We had been idling away in our room when Daisy came calling for us.

“Um, it is time for the party, so...could you all please get changed?” Daisy said.

“We need to change?” *A dinner party just means eating dinner together, right? Did people normally change clothes to eat dinner?* I wasn’t sure why, but we did as we were told anyway.

Esmeralda had said something like, “If you’re going to be traveling to your friends’ houses, make sure you add these clothes to your luggage. You’ll probably meet plenty of distinguished people.” *Thanks, Esmeralda. These clothes are already coming in handy!*

I changed into my ceremonial uniform given to me for being a security guard at the academy. I was quite happy with how much praise I got the last time I wore it.

As for Luca...

“This is a dress that Milady Esmeralda handpicked for me herself!” she declared proudly, showing off her blue dress. She also had a large ribbon on her head, made from a pretty fabric I had never seen before. “This cloth is from my hometown, and is known as *chirimen*! Fantasti-cal, is it not?”

“Wow, it’s gorgeous!” Olivia’s eyes were sparkling. And speaking of Olivia...

“Olivia, you look gorgeous too!” Her dress was pure white and designed to leave her shoulders bare. Though she was still small, the gloves she wore gave her arms a slender look. Her usual braids were tied together behind her head, making her look much more mature than usual. By the way, that was my handiwork. I was very glad I got around to reading *The Kids’ Hairdressing Dictionary*! Olivia looked so grown-up in her dress.



“Eh heh, I haven’t worn this since that time at school.” Now that she mentioned it, I did remember buying her a dress when she first started attending the academy. I think we got it in the city of Miranda, which was the closest one to our home.

“You wore it for class?”

“Yeah, we had a dance party at the end of the semester.”

“It was also an event to teach proper etiquette. Since the daughters of such respec-tionable families as these would attend the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, it is not sufficient just to learn magic and study!”

“Really?” I guess they would have classes like that.

“But I don’t really know etiquette very well,” Olivia said with an embarrassed laugh.

“Yeah, me either.” I didn’t know the first thing about it. Among the child-raising books I had were ones called *Manners for Mom and Dad* and *The Top 100 New Manners*, but I didn’t really understand them. I read a hundred years’ worth of books talking about manners, but even the books published only ten years apart totally contradicted each other.

There was also some strange advice in those books, like “when hitting your superiors with the wine bottle at a banquet, etiquette dictates the label should be facing upwards.” But...hit them? At a banquet? Hit *people*? A banquet was a kind of party, right?

Wait...is it possible this dinner party we were going to was one where people hit each other with wine bottles?! Did we have to get dressed up so that we wouldn’t spill wine all over our ordinary clothes? That’s right, when humans quarrel, they often wear those shiny silver clothes that look like scales. Is that another kind of dress?!

What...wh-wh-wh-what should I do?! My beloved daughter was going to be thrown into the middle of that violence...? No, no matter what. No matter what!

“I’ll keep you safe, Olivia!!!” *Yes, no matter what!*

“Hey...Olivia? What’s wrong with your father?”

“Tee hee, don’t worry about it. He gets like that sometimes.”

“Uhh... Sir Daddy, your back is on fire.”

“Oh, uh, sorry. I was just practicing and got a bit carried away.”

I vowed to do my best at this dinner party!

* * *

The nobles enjoying their summer stays at the Ruiza summer resort appeared one by one at the Palestria residence for tonight’s dinner party. Normally, preparations for a dinner party put on by nobility would take months. From the selection of the guests, to consideration and arrangement for drinks to be served, to organizing the colors of the curtains and tablecloths so that they didn’t conflict with the colors of the guests’ coats and formal wear...there was a lot of groundwork that needed to be done. Anyhow, it all seemed rather tiresome.

However, there wasn’t a single member of Shutora’s nobility that was unaware of Rosa Palestria’s fickle nature. So upon receipt of their sudden invitations...

“Well, it *is* her, so I guess this is to be expected...”

No one was particularly surprised.

“For how sudden the invitation was, so many people showed up! Isn’t it great, Rosa?” His plump face even rounder than usual, Jacques De Palestria looked out over the grounds. They had decided on a garden party for that night. However, it wasn’t a standing party, as a number of tables and chairs had been set up throughout the garden for the guests. The plan was that guests could enjoy the cool breeze of the resort with food and drinks made from summertime ingredients.

“We have spared no effort in preparing the food, so our display of hospitality should be perfect! With this, the King’s Pupil and her father, that fetching dragon, will definitely feel closer to us!”

“I don’t know, Rosa. She already gets along quite well with Daisy, right? If this

is supposed to be a thank you for that, did you really need to go so far?”

“And *that* is why you are called the airheaded wizard!”

“Wait, people call me that?!” Jacques De Palestria was the proper head of an ancient line of great wizards and even held an important position in the Royal Sorcerous Society. However, his jolly attitude and gentle nature were ill-suited to high society, and given his somewhat childish tendency to play the fool, he had been given the derogatory nickname. Of course, with his hesitant wait-and-see attitude, the stronger and more assertive Rosa tended to dominate more often.

“That’s kind of mean...”

“My, and here I thought it was a perfectly fitting, clever name for you,” Rosa said. The woman had no mercy, not even for her husband.

“Hey, Rosa. That dragon fellow seems like a nice gentleman. Are we sure he’s actually a dragon?”

“Who knows? However, it is certain that he is quite handsome, *and* the guardian of the King’s Pupil.”

“Hmmm... Ever since I was little, my dream was to ride on a dragon’s back. Do you think I could ask him?”

“Of course not!”

“But he *is* a dragon, right? Anyone would want to try riding him too, don’t you think?”

“We need to make sure we flatter him sufficiently so he feels well received here!”

It was just a small argument between husband and wife. Whenever a new guest would arrive, Rosa’s angry demeanor would flash back to a smile in an instant. It was like she was trading one mask for another.

“Father, Mother.” Daisy slowly approached them, wearing her dress for the evening’s party. Her movements were perfect and graceful in every way.

“Daisy! My, it’s been so long. You’ve grown into quite the young lady, haven’t you?” Jacques was almost lovestruck seeing how his beloved daughter had

grown.

But her mother was a different matter. “Daisy!” she barked.

“Y-Yes?”

“As a lady of the Palestria family, your behavior is unacceptable!”

“O-Oh...?”

“Even if we are your parents, you cannot simply speak up like that. A lady should be silent, waiting for when she is called upon. If you need something, signal to us with your eyes.” Rosa demonstrated what she meant to her with a wink.

You’re so absorbed in your conversation, if I waited for you to call on me, I’d be left here forever... Daisy thought. As she did, Rosa demonstrated the wink again and again.

“Now you try.”

“Umm...” Daisy attempted to wink herself...but ended up closing both eyes.

Rosa gave a deep sigh. “Very well. Tonight shall be special training for you.”

“Is there such a thing as training for winking?” Jacques said, surprised. “Also, I’ve always wanted to say this, but we’re a family of wizards. Daisy’s magical talent is pretty incredible, you know?” He continued on as if to admonish his wife. He attempted to improve her mood by pointing out that at Daisy’s age, he couldn’t even use the magic that their daughter had already mastered.

Rosa sighed. “You really don’t understand anything, do you?” Her husband’s words had the opposite effect. “Daisy is a *girl*. She’s not the same as you. Even at tonight’s dinner party, look at all the gentlemen whom we have gathered. She should be getting close with them!” Rosa pulled out a long list of names.

“Hey now, Daisy is still only fourteen years old...”

“This conversation is over. We must go and greet the guests. And you, Daisy! Go and mark the King’s Pupil!”

“Mark...?” Daisy sighed, careful to do so in a way her mother wouldn’t notice, as she made her way over to find Olivia.

Everything went exactly according to Rosa's plans. That was just how things worked every day in the Palestria family.

* * *

"Over here, Olivia."

Daisy led us out of the mansion. We had to walk slower than usual so the girls wouldn't fall in their fancy dresses, which was a fresh experience for me. The lively sounds of music and chatter could be heard from the garden as we approached.

"Whoa..." It was quite a shocking sight. I had heard there would only be nobles at this gathering, and though their clothes were all sparkling, everything seemed somehow stiff. Even the well-pruned roses filling the garden seemed that way. The plants and trees around my mountain grew quite large, but I noticed that for some reason, these flower bushes had been cut rather short.

"Wow... So this is a party." As I stared wide-eyed at what was in front of me, I heard the other guests talking among themselves.

"So that's the King's Pupil and her father?"

"She's supposed to be a dracoshaman, but...she looks more normal than I thought."

"She's so young too. How adorable."

"I feel like I've seen that Eastern girl a few times as well. Is she Esmeralda's disciple?"

People glanced at us intermittently. I would expect as much if I was in my dragon form, but even my human form was getting a lot of attention. *This is weird...* I didn't feel great about it.

"Let's hurry up and eat so we can get ready for our pajama party with Daisy..." Olivia was very much looking forward to talking with Daisy tonight. I had decided I'd get her favorite pajamas out for her to change into later. I was starting to be really glad that I packed so many things!

"Hey, Daddy?"

"Yes? What is it, Olivia?" Turning around, I saw her and Luca standing still.

Aren't they going to sit down? As I tilted my head in confusion...

"Umm, we learned this at school," Olivia said, staring at me excitedly.

"Yeah?"

"When we are wearing our dresses, we're supposed to have an 'escort.'" She then held her hand out towards me.

"Ess-court?"

"Yeah!"

What exactly does that mean? Seeing my momentary confusion...

"Sir Daddy, an escort is—"

"When a gentleman takes a lady by the hand to guide her to her seat."

Luca and Daisy explained it while Olivia held her hand out to me with a bright smile.

"Ah!" I suddenly remembered. *An escort...wasn't there something like that in that one picture book Olivia loved? A prince took a princess by the hand and led her to a dance party.* "Uhh, okay then..." *If that's all there is to it, I know what to do!* Dropping to one knee, I offered her my hand. "Please take my hand, princess."

Taking my hand, Olivia put on a refined smile. It looked incredibly mature.

"Oh, Olivia!!!" Without thinking, I grabbed her in a hug.

"Wha?! Daddy?!"

I lifted her into the air and spun her around. The way her dress fluttered in the wind made her look like a real princess. She was still small enough that I could pick her up like this in my human form, but little by little, I knew she was growing up. While I was of course happy about that, it was also a little sad.

"Eh he heh! You're so strong!" Olivia laughed.

"You two really get along well, don't you?" Daisy chuckled.

"Like idiot father, like idiot daughter, I suppose..." Luca sighed. The adults around us were also making quite a bit of noise.

And then...

“Daisy!” A shrill voice cut through the commotion.

“Wha?!” Turning around in surprise, I found Daisy’s mother standing there. It was the same woman who had been beside me at the entrance ceremony. She was wearing a dress made from beautiful fabric and held something like a large fan in her hand. She looked furious.

“Uhh... What?” I unconsciously moved between her and Olivia as Daisy’s mother walked briskly towards us.

“For goodness sake, Daisy. How could you shame our guests like this?”

Daisy bit back a cry as her mother struck her hand with her fan. I froze in shock. *Why would she hit her?*

“For those who are unaware of the proper manners of high society, it is obvious they would follow the examples set by others. Perhaps if it was later in the evening such a thing would be understandable, but to say nothing at such a rude escort before even the first toast...” Though she spoke quietly, her scolding words were no less harsh. “Act like the member of this household that you are! Goodness... You are such a disappointment.”

“I-It won’t happen again, Mother...” Daisy shrunk back as she apologized.

Something felt wrong. Daisy always had fun with all of us. She kindly taught me all sorts of things about human life that I didn’t know. But never once did she make fun of us for doing something strange.

“Daisy...” Olivia looked at her friend with an uneasy expression. Luca was looking away, clearly uncomfortable.

...This didn’t feel good.

“Daddy?” Olivia called to me again. I remembered what happened last summer and what Daisy had said during that first breakfast when she had secretly come to stay at our home.

“I only ever eat together with my parents at dinner parties and social events.”

“This is the first time I’ve had such a friendly meal.”

“I had a lot of fun, sir.”

I finally understood what Daisy had been saying back then. *I see. For Daisy, “dinner” meant something like this.* I thought back to the first day I met my precious Olivia. It was a bitterly cold winter’s day. I remembered the man sitting in a rundown shack, laughing about how he had abandoned his own daughter to the mountain. That squalid table was what “dinner” meant to the tiny Olivia—that cold house was her home.

Daisy’s house was well-kept and had all sorts of delicious food... But for some reason, it made me just as sad to see it as it did to see Olivia’s home back then.

“D-Daddy?” Olivia called me again.

It was sad. Painful. Infuriating. Unable to keep those emotions under control, I found myself unable to answer her.

* * *

Without really knowing why, Rosa De Palestria found herself screaming.

She was instructing her daughter on the proper etiquette for participating in the upper echelons of society—or, she was supposed to be doing that. And yet she found herself sitting on her rear, in a manner totally unbefitting a member of the upper class.

“Wh-Wh-What?” An icy chill gripped her back. Turning around slowly, she saw the King’s Pupil and her father staring at her.

She was terrified. Absolutely scared out of her mind. Their faces weren’t particularly angry or grim, but those looks—especially that of the father, Mr. Eldraco—were terrifying.

Rosa gave another shrill cry. He had been the man she had sat beside at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls’ entrance ceremony. She had never thought he would be the father of the head of the class...nor that his daughter would eventually earn a scholarship as the King’s Pupil, an honor bestowed on only a precious few throughout the entire kingdom. She had pegged him as a careless, ignorant fool—but according to the rumors, he was an elder dragon in disguise. To put it honestly...

I-I underestimated you... Wh-What a terrifying aura...

Rosa had married into the Palestria family. As a former Florence Academy student, she possessed some knowledge of magic and sorcery. As a result, she couldn't help but understand just how powerful the man who was staring expressionlessly at her was. Just how incredible a being he was.

Oh... I need to stand up, the banquet is... My Palestria family's dignity is... Rosa rushed back to her feet, noticing the attention of the guests beginning to focus on her. *Ahh, what a failure!* She always endeavored to carry herself in a way that wouldn't shame her place as a high-level aristocrat. She always played the role of the beautiful, dignified, and quick-witted wife of the Palestria family who deserved nothing but special treatment. And yet here she was, sitting on her rear in front of so many guests.

"Ugh..." This wasn't a person who could be persuaded by human norms, let alone those of high society. Rosa understood that instinctively. Not once since she had been born had she realized that such a person might exist. In her head, she of course knew they must, but she had never experienced it herself. She had assumed everything would go just as she had planned that evening. So at this point, she had no idea how to proceed.

"M-Mother..."

Rosa could do little more than cling to the daughter she had been lecturing on how to act like a proper lady in noble society only moments before.

The guests seemed to have noticed that something was wrong and were watching uneasily. What should she do? This dinner party was a mess. But just as Rosa was about to give in to her tears...

"Daddy!" A dignified voice, clear as a bell, filled the air. All at once, the horrifying pressure crushing her vanished.

"Huh...?" Rosa looked to the source. It was the King's Pupil—Olivia.

* * *

"Daddy... Daddy!"

I suddenly snapped back to reality. Olivia was pulling at my sleeve.

“Daddy, stop... You’re scaring her!”

I finally met Olivia’s gaze. My adorable daughter was staring directly at me. *Oh no... Remembering the old Olivia, and thinking of what Daisy was going through now... I guess my face started to look a little unpleasant.*

“Sorry, Olivia.”

Seeing my expression soften, Olivia returned a smile of her own. *That’s right. I love it when Olivia smiles like that. If I make scary faces, Olivia won’t be able to relax and smile. She’s the one who taught me that.*

“Sorry, Olivia...and thank you.” I hugged her again.

“What... What an incredible atmosphere,” Luca remarked with a sigh.

I grabbed Luca’s hand as well.

“Sir Daddy?”

“I’m sorry, Luca.”

“Do not concern yourself over it,” Luca muttered. “I, uhh, also was unhappy to see her yelling at Daisy like that, so...I was re-liefed to see you were angry too, Sir Daddy.”

I see. Luca’s words made me realize just what had happened. That scene—I didn’t want Olivia to have to see Daisy being scolded like that. Patting Olivia on the head, I rose back to my feet. I turned back to Daisy’s mother and started walking slowly towards her. The woman gave another nervous cry and her eyes were filled with fear. They looked extremely familiar. Ever since long ago, people had always looked at me like that.

* * *

Olivia watched uneasily as her father stepped away.

“Excuse me, my lady?” A man called out to her.

“Huh? Uhh...” As Olivia turned to him, the man asked her a question.

“Actually, I really just can’t help myself, but...about your father...” With a gentle expression and glittering eyes, the plump man leaned over and asked her something, making Olivia immediately break out into a smile.

“Tee hee, I’m sure he’ll say ‘no problem!’”

Seeing Olivia’s carefree smile, the man stood back up and ran after the little girl’s father.

* * *

“Umm...”

Rosa screamed again. “Stay away from meeee!”

“Wait! Uhh, I just wanted to apologize...”

“I’m gonna get eaten!!!”

It was no good. I couldn’t get through to her at all. As I tried to think of what to do, I noticed Daisy looking at me, her eyes blinking in surprise. No, to be more accurate, she was looking at something behind me.

“What’s wrong, Dais—”

“M-Mr. Eldraco!”

“What?”

Boing! Something incredibly soft struck my back. *What was that?!*

“I apologize for my wife’s behavior... Ah, I am the current head of the Palestria family, currently serving the royal court as a wizard, Jacques De Palestria.”

“I-I see.” Apparently, the man that had bumped into me was Daisy’s father. *So his name is Jacques?*

“U-Uhh, sorry... I think I frightened Daisy’s mother because I was making a scary face, so I wanted to apologize...”

“Of course! I mean, not at all! *We* should be apologizing, trying to scold Daisy like that in front of so many people, but, umm!” Daisy’s father’s eyes sparkled as sweat dripped off his forehead. *What? What’s going on?* The heavy atmosphere from before was totally changing. “Could you let me ride on your back?!”

I paused before I could answer him. “What?”

Jacques was staring at me, his eyes shining. My mouth was agape in surprise. He wasn't even slightly afraid of me.

"Ever since I was young, it was my dream to ride on the back of an elder dragon, an ancient sage that one could only meet in legends...!"

"F-Father..."

"Daisy, would you like to ride as well? Even for someone born to a household like ours where you've been learning magic and sorcery since childhood, the chance to ride an *actual* dragon is an opportunity that doesn't even come once in a lifetime!" Grabbing Daisy's hand, Jacques turned back to me.

"Uhhh..." Not sure what to do, I looked to Olivia, who was nodding vigorously. Apparently, she thought giving them a ride was a good idea. I thought about it for a bit.

"Okay."

"Ohhh! Thank you so much!" Daisy's father grabbed my hand, shaking it vigorously. I guess that was supposed to be a handshake?

"If you want, we could even soar around for a little while."

"Ohh, really?!"

"But!" I couldn't just let them ride me for nothing. There was something important that all my child-rearing books had taught me while I was studying how to raise Olivia. I wanted to teach that to Daisy's family as well. "I have one request I'd like granted in return."

"Hm? Some sort of monetary compensation? Or assistance in searching for the Seven Supreme Hallows...? In that case, I could pull some strings with the Royal Sorcerous Society..."

"No!" I shook my head. "I just want all three of you to ride together."

"Huh?"

"What? But, sir..."

"Now, let's go!" With a sound like a balloon inflating, I returned to my original form and size. I heard a number of shocked voices coming from the garden, but

I didn't care. After all...

"Eh heh heh, look! My Daddy's huge isn't he?!"

I could also hear Olivia's laughter.

"Oh no, Sir Daddy! Look up, look up!"

Up? At Luca's suggestion, I took a glance above.

"Oh!"

Wreaths and garlands had been hung up between the windows of the mansion above us to serve as decorations for the dinner party...and they were now caught on my head. I tried to shake them off, but I only ended up getting even more tangled up in them. It looked like I was wearing one of those flower crowns Olivia had made for me on the mountain when she was small.

"Oh no!"

Seeing my panic, the previously frozen guests started to burst out laughing. Others turned to each other and giggled. Ugh, I really wanted to show off my cool side for Olivia, but...I guess this was fine.

"And up you go." I grabbed Daisy's family members with my mouth and placed them on my back, one by one.

"Wooooo!"

"Whoa!"

Daisy and her father gave excited cries.

And finally...

"Kyaaaaaaah! He's gonna eat me!!!" Daisy's mother wailed as I moved her. "Noooooooo!"

"Ah ha ha, Rosa, open your eyes! This is amazing... You can feel his nature just from sitting on his back. I've never seen magic as powerful as this. So large and so kind... He must have been lonely for so long," Daisy's father whispered as he sat atop my back.

With a flap of my wings, I lifted off into the night sky. Olivia waved at us as we took off. A young girl in a pure white dress and a brilliant smile called my name

over and over. “Daddy, Daddy!” She was so cute! Now that I think about it, I let Olivia ride on me like this a lot over the years. However, this was the first time I had seen her waving at me from the ground.

As I got farther and farther away, Olivia alone continued to sparkle among the crowd of people. No matter how far away we got, she still shone more than anyone else. And no matter how much farther we went, I’d always be able to find her. I learned that for the first time that day.

“This is the first time I’ve ridden on your back as well,” Daisy murmured. She was no longer hesitant and apologetic and was back to her usual self.

“Daisy, remember this well. This experience will no doubt be invaluable to your future in magic!” Jacques seemed ecstatic.

“Okay, now we’re going to turn and fly around for a little while!” My voice filled the night sky. “So while I do this, please talk amongst yourselves. You should take this opportunity to say everything you can’t normally say to each other.”

“Sir...?”

“Putting your feelings in words...everything I read about raising children said that that’s incredibly important in a family!” Now it was time for those three to try it out. Spreading my wings wide, I soared through the night sky.

Daisy’s family talked about all sorts of things together.

Her father spoke about how much he loved magic and showed some regret about how he would get wrapped up in his work. While he was apologetic about it, he was more sorry about the fact that he never tried to change that about himself.

Her mother discussed how that made her feel lonely. When Jacques wasn’t home, she did everything she could to raise Daisy right. She had once loved magic herself, but since she was a woman, she knew she could never become a wizard like him. She had been jealous of her husband for that and had treated him poorly as a result. Somehow, she was still screaming as she said all that.

And as for Daisy... She talked about how she wanted her mother and father to

get along. That she wanted to eat dinner together with them as a loving family. And about how she had been wishing for that ever since she had come to stay at our place last summer.

Jacques took a moment before he could say anything. “That’s the first time I’ve heard something like that from you, Daisy,” Daisy’s father replied, finding himself at a loss for words.

By the time their journey through the night sky reached its end, it felt like things were starting to move in the right direction.

* * *

Back on solid ground, the party guests cheered as they watched the dragon gliding over the gardens of the Palestria estate.

“Wow... Lord Jacques really is something else.” With the man in question up in the sky, a number of others nodded in agreement when someone brought up the Palestria family’s head.

“Though anyone would want to try riding on the back of a dragon, most people wouldn’t be able to come out and simply ask like that... While he’s certainly been called a bit of a dunce, that itself is pretty impressive.”

“And it’s a *dragon*, of all things. Wouldn’t you be, like, too scared to hold on?”

“That dragon seems unexpectedly easygoing...and also...”

Everyone’s gazes gathered in one spot: on the young girl staring up at the dragon still in the sky—Olivia. She gazed up at her father like someone watching the night sky for a glimpse of a shooting star.

“You can really tell how kind he is by looking at his daughter, can’t you?”

A warm household. A healthy upbringing. The dragon had tackled a problem head-on that even ordinary humans found a challenge. For the nobles gathered in the garden, even if it was a seemingly small thing, they were very impressed.

A little while later...

The hosts of the dinner party, the Palestria family, dismounted from the dragon’s back and returned to the rose garden.

“Daddy!”

“I’m back, Olivia!” With a poof, the dragon returned to his human form and ran straight to wrap Olivia up in a big hug. The three members of the Palestria family all wore relaxed expressions. After a round of applause, the music started up again.

Though the schedule had gone a little off the rails, the dinner party was a resounding success. Afterwards, the kids changed into their pajamas and enjoyed a long night with each other.

Furthermore, after having so much wine pressed onto him, the dragon became a happy drunk, telling story after story of his pride and joy—his daughter. Throughout the night, he shifted back and forth between his dragon and human forms. By the end of the evening, some mysterious power had made each and every flower in the garden grow to full bloom, even those that were out of season. That night would come to be called the “Miracle of Ruiza.”

After that day, the workaholic Jacques started making it home much more regularly.

Rosa, famous for her haughty and arrogant demeanor, had become much more thoughtful of her husband and daughter—though she was still sometimes prone to going out of control—and even began to teach magic to the neighborhood children of her own accord.

As for Daisy Palestria, she came to enjoy spending time at home. After they had delivered her that miracle of a night, she loved her best friend Olivia and her father the dragon more than ever.

Interlude: Meanwhile, the Dark Queen... Part Two

At the castle formerly belonging only to the Dark Queen that was now also home to a dragon, at the top of the Western Tower...

“I’m booooooooooooooored!”

The Dark Queen Maredia was starting to wane. She had finished reading the new comics that had come from the Dark Realm and had watched all the anime she had fallen behind on while working at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls.

That was it. She had run out of things to do.

“Cloooowriaaaaaa, I’m bored bored bored bored bored!”

“I see. Perhaps then we should practice some fencing? It has been quite a while, my liege.”

“O-Oh, would you look at the time! I guess I’m just too busy!”

This was an everyday scene at the castle.

“Umm, my Dark Queen? I know you have been gathering energy in this castle for about a thousand years, but...”

“Hm?”

Clowria was strangely faltering. She was once the leader of Dark-Kin Knighthood and Maredia’s own right arm. She never hesitated to advise Maredia no matter how much the Dark Queen didn’t want to hear it, and was more than happy to take the initiative if she thought it might be of aid to her. What could possibly have her struggling to speak?

“My Queen, recently, umm... Yah!”

“Whaaaaaa?!”

Squeeze.

Rolling up the hem of her pajama top, Clowria pinched at Maredia’s belly with a shout.

“Wh-Wh-Wha?!”

“Your Darkness! It pains me to say this, but you have expanded!”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

Squish squish. Clowria’s fingers massaged Maredia’s stomach.

“Please, think back to how you lived when you plotted your invasion of the Human Realm,” Clowria said. “Every morning you would train for three hours, and after two more hours of war council, you would finally partake in breakfast. You would be so busy with your inspections that you would skip lunch, and at night you would eat the same meal as the common soldiery as you drafted new plans for the war effort.”

“Haugh, true, I was quite stoic back then.”

“And now—at the hands of that elder dragon, you have awakened to a love of food, and you are...building mass...”

“U-Urgh...”

“P-Please, do not misunderstand! Even plump, my beauteous liege is no less enthralling! B-But!” Clowria spoke fervently.

It’s worth mentioning that as Clowria still did the same daily training now as she had when she led the Dark-kin Knighthood, she still maintained a flawless figure free of any excess flesh.

“But...?”

“Erm, I cannot help but be concerned for your future health! I...I am truly worried!”

“Clowria... You care that much about me?”

“My Queen...”

“Cloooowriaaaaaa!” Maredia took her knight’s hands in her own. Her pudgy torso, which had turned a little red from Clowria’s harassment, disappeared from their world.

“So...” Clowria continued. “I would like to ask that my Dark Queen be more assertive in leaving the castle.”

“No.”

“Cut down with a single word...” Clowria sighed.

However, being active and going outside were two completely different issues in Maredia’s mind. “Starting tomorrow, I shall begin a diet!” With a vow that definitely wouldn’t be kept, the Dark Queen leaped into bed for a nap.

The windows were open wide, allowing a refreshing breeze to flow into the room. Queen Maredia mumbled from underneath her summer sheets. “Going back to the Dark Realm to work and getting along with humans here... Both are no good.”

Having returned with an ice pillow to help her sleep, Clowria gave a small sigh. “My liege...”

“Things must be difficult for Olivia. Even though it’s her summer vacation, she has to go out on a journey like that. She’s probably getting all tangled up with some nobles somewhere.”

“I am sure Olivia will be fine... As for the elder dragon, well, I don’t know about that.”

“Hmm. He does seem to lack some common sense.” He *was* a dragon, after all. Maredia continued, rubbing her eyes, “Well, humans aren’t the only ones who get sick of dealing with self-important types.”

“...That is certainly true, my Queen.”

“All I need is you, Clowria, then I can live in self-indulgence forever!” Maredia then stared at Clowria, who looked like she wanted to say something. The Dark Queen then continued, “If we went back to the Dark Realm, they’d probably just throw rocks at us.”

“That’s...true, my liege.”

“And thanks to my failure, you know how dark-kin are treated in the Human Realm, yes?”

“...Yes, I do.”

“I don’t want to witness that myself,” Maredia said with a big yawn, her large,

moonlike eyes beginning to droop. “Well, the kids at school are okay, since they’re Olivia’s friends.”

“Yes, that is true as well.”

They had been here for a thousand years. They had lived together like this for so long. Even so, the Dark Queen Maredia’s heart had not yet begun to heal. She didn’t want to go outside because she was afraid of getting hurt again. Clowria couldn’t help but wonder just how deep the wound to her heart had been.

Chapter 3: His Cutie Sets Out to Find the Seven Supreme Hallows, Part Two *Iria the Little Warrior and the Shield*

After leaving Daisy's house, we flew for a while before coming across a fork in the road.

There was a sign posted there with arrows pointing in two different directions. One way led to Kenrou Fortress, and the other to Lakeside Town Viwa.

We landed and I stretched as I returned back to my human form.

"Thanks for the ride, Daddy," Olivia said as she shared some candy with me.

"Of course, honey." The candies were raspberry flavored, a souvenir from Ruiza.

Shifting the weight of the bags on her back, Luca gave us a smart bow. "Well then, Dearest Olivia. It is here that I am afraid we must part ways." Apparently, this was where she was going to meet up with Esmeralda. She was so anxious yesterday she could barely sleep. She now stood there rubbing her tired eyes. She must have really been looking forward to seeing Esmeralda again.

"Luca, are you really going to carry all that?"

"Naturally! Milady Esmeralda re-quisites only the best souvenirs!"

Getting a bit caught up in the moment, Luca had bought a veritable mountain of souvenirs. She had jars of jam, candy, and even a "Little Ruiza" doll. Since it was our first time traveling, Olivia and I had learned all about souvenirs. Picking something out was a lot of fun! Thinking of how happy someone would be when they saw what you got them while browsing for something that would fit that person just right... It made you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. We bought some things for the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria too. I do hope they like them!

"I'm sure Esmeralda will love it."

“Y-You think so?”

“Tee hee, I’m totally sure!” Olivia and I nodded together. It was Esmeralda we were talking about, after all. There was no way she wouldn’t be ecstatic to see anything Luca had bought for her!

“R-Really...?” Luca’s face flushed red.



She must have really, truly been looking forward to looking for the Hallows with Esmeralda.

“See you later, Luca!”

“See you at school!”

“I-I will definitely be the one to dis-veil the Vastearth Shield!”

“Yeah, let’s do our best!” With a wave, we parted ways with Luca.

However, Olivia and my journey would continue a little longer. We had heard stories of a forest where the ground seemed to groan so loudly it made the earth shake, so we wanted to investigate if it had anything to do with the Vastearth Shield. So, we were now heading to a place called the Chirin Forest.

“If we’re heading to that forest, then...” I opened up the map that Esmeralda had marked for us.

“Hmm... It should be that way, right?” Olivia said, poking her head in. “Huh? No, maybe it’s that way... Wait...”

“I actually don’t know either... Maybe over there? No, over here?”

Placing the map on the ground, we walked in circles around it. We didn’t really know which way to orient the map itself. Up until now, Luca had read the map for us, so I just had had to focus on flying.

“So, Olivia...”

“Yes, Daddy.”

We nodded to each other. That’s right. As father and daughter, we were of one mind.

“It’s probably that way!” We both said in unison as we pointed in exactly opposite directions.

* * *

“We’re under attack! An unidentified flying creature is approaching!”

“No way... It’s a dragon?”

“Use the magicannons!”

“What?! It’s no use, they’re not even scratching it!”

“What are we supposed to do? At this rate the city, no, the whole kingdom will be...”

“Wait. Look, there’s someone riding it!”

“No way, a dracoknight?!”

“No... It’s, uhh, a young girl?!”

“What?! Did the dragon take her hostage? Is she okay?!”

“Okay... Uhh... Well...”

“What is it?”

“She...she’s smiling...and waving at us!”

“WHAT?!”

* * *

Kenrou Fortress. Long ago there was a war against the dark-kin, and this city had served as an important point of defense for the humans. It was now a town used to train Shutora’s military.

We found ourselves in the military dining hall.

“Olivia, I’m really impressed.”

Iria Mera Durandal—daughter of the general of Shutora’s army, and a second-year student at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. The girl’s blonde hair was cut short, and though she was a bit on the expressionless side, she was now holding hands with her friend and classmate Olivia.

“You’re the first one who’s ever cleared the training regimen set by my father in one day.”

She truly had a soldier’s attitude—she was a student with a strong sense of order and propriety. Another member of Olivia’s “Class Two-Zero,” she had intended to spend her summer vacation training for her future. Since her father was in charge of the base at Kenrou Fortress, she had come here for her school

break.

“You really helped us out, Iria.” The lost father and daughter had stumbled upon Kenrou during the soldiers’ training exercises. Noticing the approach of an enormous dragon, the soldiers answered with a hail of fire from their state-of-the-art magicannons, but the projectiles were blown away in an instant. All it took was one puff of wind from the dragon to knock them off course.

“You two really are a pair to be feared...” If Iria hadn’t noticed that it was her classmate and her guardian approaching, the fortress would have fallen into a total panic.

“I never would have thought we would get lost...” The dragon, who was currently sipping tea in his human form, scratched at his face in embarrassment.

“Don’t be concerned, Mr. Eldraco. Anyone can make a mistake,” Iria said, shaking her head. She popped another candy that Olivia had given her into her mouth.

“But I’m glad we got to see you, Iria!” Olivia exclaimed.

“That’s right! We knew you were busy, so we thought we wouldn’t get the chance.”

And by the way, Chirin Forest and Kenrou Fortress were in totally opposite directions.

“Olivia, I can take you there if you like,” Iria suggested.

“Huh?”

“We were just about to do a marching exercise, and we have work to do out near Chirin Forest. Also, I’m worried you’re just going to get lost again...so we’ll go with you.”

The father and daughter pair jumped for joy at Iria’s offer.

* * *

Olivia and I happily took Iria up on her offer to bring us to the Chirin Forest. There apparently was a highway that led straight to it!

Iria walked at the back of a long column of adults marching in single file, carrying an impressive amount of luggage. Olivia and I decided to walk behind her. If I were walking in my dragon form I'd pass them all in only a few steps, so I was in my human form instead. Olivia, on the other hand, was in a great mood thanks to the horse she had been given to ride. She had grown very fond of the kind-eyed animal.

But there was something that I was a little—okay, *very*—curious about.

"Hey, Iria?"

"What is it, Mr. Eldraco?"

"Uhh... Aren't you getting tired like this?!"

Iria turned to look at me with a confused expression.

"I mean, you've been walking like this for hours." I was in human form, but I was still a dragon. No matter how far I walked, I would never get tired. I thought humans were a lot weaker than that. They got tired really easily, took naps all the time, and couldn't even sleep for very long. Humans needed to eat and sleep every day to take care of their health. So walking from dawn until dusk like this...

"And in a line like this too!"

"This *is* a marching training exercise."

"Really now... What exactly does an army *do*...?" I tilted my head at Iria's unwavering response. Armies were like teams humans made when they fought...right? I remembered that when that man had come to take Olivia back, he had brought people called "mercenaries" with him. Iria was very serious about her training, but I couldn't help but wonder if it was really necessary.

"...Mr. Eldraco, please look over there."

"Hm?"

Iria pointed to the head of the column of soldiers. A number of large cows were sleeping in the middle of the road.

"Oh, there are cows!"

“Quiet, Olivia!” Iria quickly shushed her excited friend. “Those are crimson cows. They are extremely ferocious animals. If they were to wake, they could go on a rampage, and many people could get injured.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really. Their milk is sweet and fizzy, and if you drink it, it gives you a lot of energy. You could say it almost feels like you’ve grown wings! But they are very dangerous animals.”

“Crimson cows, huh?”

“Very, very dangerous.”

The sleepy cows were, in fact, red. But they didn’t seem that dangerous to me...

“Mr. Eldraco, they don’t seem fearsome to you at all, do they?” Iria continued. “That is because you are so powerful. Olivia is also quite strong, so she likely isn’t afraid of them either.”

“Oh?”

“Strong creatures are fine to live on their own. But humans are weak, so we live in groups. Being in a group protects everyone. That’s what a military is.” Iria’s eyes were fixed on the head of the column as she spoke.

Humans acted in groups. I knew that from watching them for so long. That’s why I wanted Olivia to go to school in the first place—I wanted her to be able to live in the human world. She definitely needed friends and allies. While humans lived together to protect each other, I had lived alone my entire life. We were complete opposites. I was starting to think Iria was right.

At the head of the group, people wearing serious faces surrounded the sleeping cows. Some of them were holding large blankets.

“By covering them with those blankets, we can trick the cows into thinking it’s nighttime. We’ll then quietly march past,” Iria explained. “Soldiers with shields will also surround the cows so if they do wake up, we won’t be caught by surprise.”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered that the Hallow we were looking

for was a shield. I wondered what exactly the Vastearth Shield was. There weren't many records of it, so we didn't know much about it.

"I like shields," Iria said.

"Oh really? Why?"

"Because they exist to protect people."

To protect people...

"My father has been in the military all his life to protect the Kingdom of Shutora. I really admire him for that."

"Are you going to join the army too, Iria?"

"That is my plan. My father often says, 'A country is its people. People are life. Life is a treasure. So soldiers train day and night to protect the countless treasures of the kingdom.'"

Treasure, huh? My treasure was none other than Olivia. My heart would always warm up just thinking about her.

"I see. Protection..." For hundreds, thousands, no, tens of thousands of years, I had watched from atop my mountain as the elves, dwarves, and eventually, humans appeared and carried out their lives. Humans really did quarrel all the time. That's what I had thought...but were they actually fighting so hard all that time to protect something? If that were true, that would be very sad.

"Daddy, we're moving again," Olivia piped up from nearby.

With the blankets draped over them, the cows were totally calm. The clip-clop of Olivia's horse's hooves on the ground resumed.

"This is how we humans protect each other," Iria said, before taking a long pause to think. "That's why I really want to support your search for the Seven Supreme Hallows."

"Huh? Why?" Though she had quietly listened to our conversation up until that point, Olivia finally spoke up.

"They are incredibly powerful treasures. If they fall into the hands of another country, that could start a war." Iria's face was deadly serious. "Great power

can become a deterrent. It would be for the best if all our training was for nothing. It's better if we never have to fight or go to war...that's what my father always says."

"Okay! We'll do our best to find them!"

At Olivia's words, the usually expressionless Iria gave a faint smile. "And you too, Mr. Eldraco. Please use your powerful wings to guard this country," Iria said, bowing her head.

"Okay... Oh." I realized something.

That's right. Long, long ago, the small people had come to visit my mountain over and over. As I had pretended to sleep, they had bowed down in front of me, as if they were praying to some god or other. Now that I thought about it, I think the Dark Queen also came and demanded that I "bow before her great army" or something at first as well. Now that I've learned this, I felt a little bad for ignoring all of them... Anyway, those people were probably all coming to pray to me. A dragon *would* be a lot stronger than all those tiny people. They had wanted me to protect them.

"I guess there are some things you don't understand until way after the fact..." Though to be honest, even if I *had* understood what they had wanted, my answer still would have been no. My only wish was to see Olivia lead a happy life. I didn't have an interest in anything else. But now that I understood what they wanted from me...I couldn't help but feel a little happy.

"Hey, Iria?"

"What is it, Mr. Eldraco?"

"I think I'd like to talk with your dad sometime." It was pretty rare for me to think of something like that, but I was really interested in the things she had told me he said.

"Okay. I will let him know."

"Thanks."

I liked reading because it helped me learn a lot about humans. However, I was starting to realize that there were some things you couldn't learn from books

and that you had to learn them from talking to people yourself.

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the soft sound of someone snoring.

“Hm?”

“Oh, Olivia is asleep...” At some point, Olivia had dozed off. Maybe her ride on the horse’s back was just that comfortable. “It would be dangerous if she fell,” Iria said, pulling Olivia’s horse to a stop.

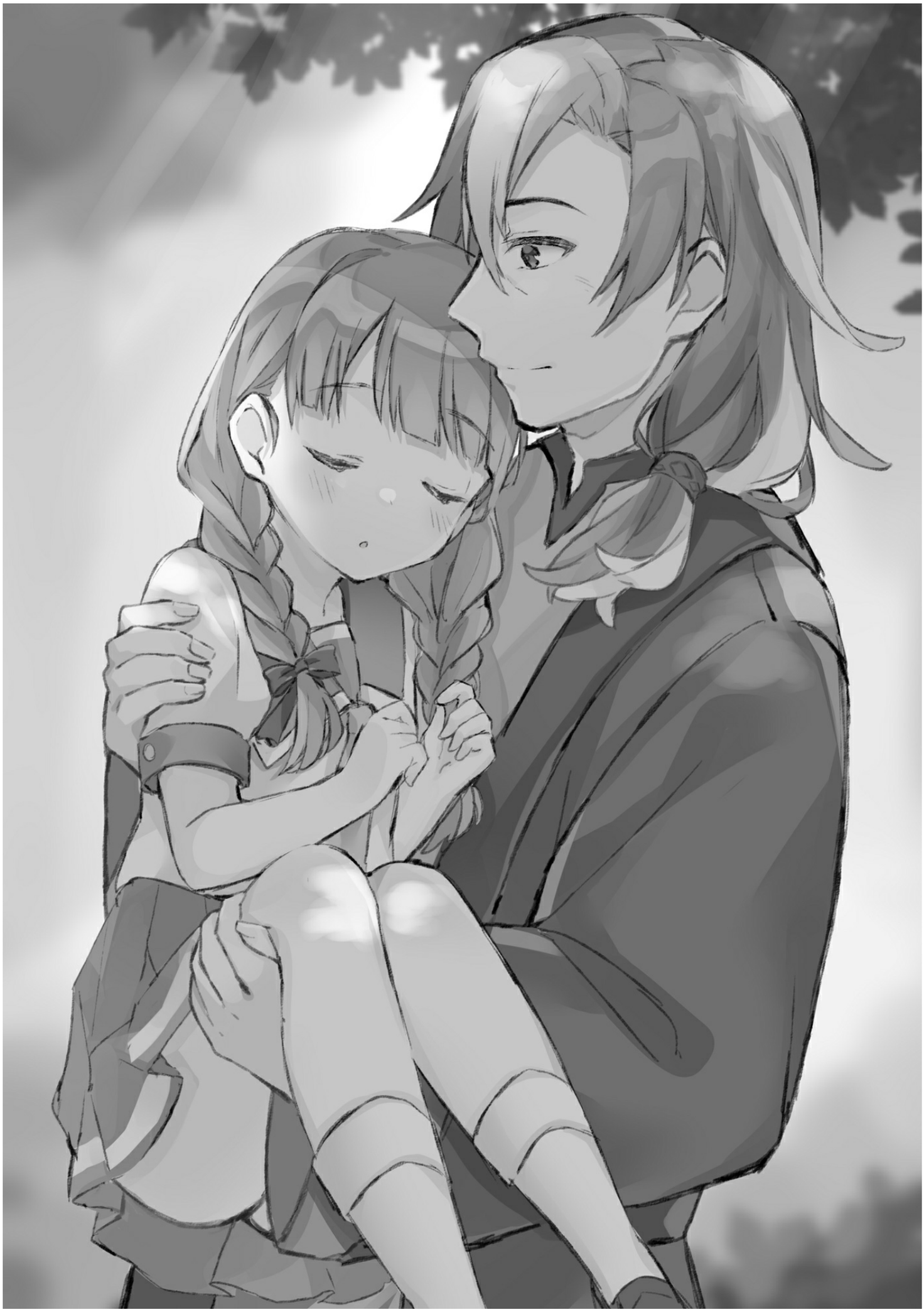
That’s right, it would probably hurt a lot to fall off a horse.

“She could even die.”

“What?!” *That was way too dangerous!* That reminded me just how fragile humans really were. “I-I’ll carry her.”

“Hm... That should be fine.”

I hurriedly lifted the sleeping Olivia off the horse.



Thanks for your hard work, Mr. Horse.

“Hmm... She’s not that heavy, but it’s kind of hard to walk like this.”

“Mr. Eldraco, I don’t think anyone would mind if you wanted to...” Iria said, still keeping a brisk pace.

She wouldn’t mind? Ah. “Okay then, if it’s not a problem.” Putting Olivia on my back, I returned to my dragon form. My fluffy mane became a blanket for her. Just because it was summer, that didn’t mean she couldn’t catch a chill while sleeping. Naps were the most dangerous time for that, after all.

I walked along behind the procession of soldiers. The humans marching along looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Whoa, he’s a lot bigger up close!”

“What amazing scales...”

“He has a lot more fluff than I would have expected.”

“That girl on his back is so cute.”

I beamed. *I really get what you mean!*

“Whoa, the dragon is smiling!”

At that moment, we heard a loud moo coming from behind us.

“That’s not good. The crimson cows woke up...” Iria’s voice sounded nervous.

“Prepare to evacuate! Shieldsmen, hold the line!”

Orders resounded across the column. Everyone began getting ready to protect each other. With a growl, the cows turned their large horns towards us, but...

“Moo?”

“Hi there.”

“Mooooo?!”

Our eyes met.

I calmly spoke to the cow. “We’re just passing through, so please go ahead

and sleep a bit longer.”

“Moo!” The crimson cows dropped to the ground, pretending to sleep.

I was glad they were reasonable animals. Well, most animals would cooperate if you just talk things out!

All the while, Olivia kept snoring from my back. I was glad all the commotion wasn’t enough to wake her.

“So, *that* is a deterrent. It seems I’ve seen one face-to-face now,” Iria murmured to herself.

Olivia snuggled into my mane.

We walked under the bright summer sunlight. Our destination was the Chirin Forest. I sure hoped we could find the Vastearth Shield. If it was a shield, it would be nice to pass it on to someone who wanted to protect someone.

“Oh, that’s right,” Iria murmured, her short blonde hair shining in the summer sun. “Olivia, did you hear that the descendants of the dark-kin live in the Chirin Forest?”

“Really? No, I didn’t know that.”

Dark-kin...so, the Dark Queen’s friends?

That was encouraging. Or at least, so I thought.

“Some dark-kin treat humans very poorly. Please be careful,” Iria said as if explaining something obvious to us. “Your friends seem to be good people, but in general, you should use caution. I feel I should warn you, as a member of Shutora’s military.”

Humans and dark-kin. About a thousand years ago, they had a big fight. Were they still not on good terms?

Interlude: Meanwhile, the Dark Queen... Part Three

It was a bright and clear morning at the Dark Queen's castle, now also home to Olivia and her father. Right now, the Dark Queen Maredia and her knight, the dark-kin Clowria, were watching over the house, but...

"Haugh! No no no! Let me sleeeeep!"

"My Dark Queen, you made me a promise just last night! You said you would join me for morning exercises by training in my personal martial arts!"

"I don't remember ever saying that!"

"You cannot use that excuse three days in a row!"

"It's not fair that you're keeping track!"

"Now, Your Darkness! Please change into these perfectly adorable workout clothes that I have hand selected for you!"

"Noooo!"

"They will definitely look wonderful! I will even take a picture and put it up on Bleater!"

"Wait! Let me take my glasses off first! My morning face without makeup is super embarrassing!"

"I shall also put your hair up into a ponytail, for a more sporty look!"

"Haugh, you better put some good filters on it!"

"Naturally, my liege!"

A few minutes later, Maredia emerged clad in her workout gear and with her hair tied up in a ponytail. "Haugh... I feel like I'm being tricked into something here."

"'Tis only your imagination, my Queen! ♪" Clowria's face was beaming. "Now! Let us begin my own personalized training regimen!"

"Haugh..."

“I think you mean, ‘Yes, ma’am!’”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

Clowria had switched straight into drill sergeant mode. The clear, refreshing morning was filled with zealous, sweat-inducing exercise for the Dark Queen.

An hour later, Maredia fell flat on the ground of the sunny garden.

“Ha...ugh... Th-That was...too...much...!” she managed between gasps for air.

Clowria cleared her throat. “As rude as it is for me to say it... Your Darkness, your abilities have blunted significantly.”

“You are just a stamina monster, no, a stamina demon!”

Clowria chuckled. “I was responsible for handling the drills for the entire dark-kin army alone, after all!”

“Haugh... Anyway, I gave it everything I had!”

While doing the same exercises—or rather, while doing significantly more difficult variations—Clowria had nevertheless managed to find countless opportunities to take photos of her. She even rolled on the ground or held squats to get the perfect angle.

“I’m so jealous! How are you not sweating at all?!” It was far from the first time the Dark Queen’s eyes had teared up that day.

“While my Queen spent each day indulging in indolence, I maintained my daily exercise routine...”

“Haugh! You just called me indolent, didn’t you?!”

“Ahem.”

“Why are you so merciless lately?!”

“Now, now. Please, have a drink, my liege.”

Maredia accepted the drink with a pout. “Didn’t you...get *bored* doing these exercises every day for a thousand years?”

“Not at all. I would never tire of my duty to protect you, Your Darkness.”

“Not that there is much to protect me from anymore. That stupid war is long over.”

“That stupid war” could only have referred to their failed invasion of the Human Realm.

“I never really wanted to do it in the first place...”

“Yes, I am well aware, my liege.”

“Haugh... If it hadn’t been for that weird prophecy of me tying together the Dark Realm and the Human Realm, I could be living a life of glorious indulgence right now...”

“Well... As you are the daughter of the Dark Emperor Thanatos, I cannot imagine your father would have allowed you to live such a life.”

“Hmph! After I lost to the Hero and his party, he’s ignored me for the past thousand years, hasn’t he?” Maredia pouted again. “He couldn’t care less about me. All he wanted was the ‘child of prophecy,’” she spat under her breath.

Clowria wiped Maredia’s damp cheeks with a towel.

For a time, they were quiet. The one to finally break the silence was Maredia, still holding on tightly to the towel and Clowria’s hand underneath it.

“Wow... I really worked up a sweat, didn’t I?”

“So it appears, my beautiful Queen Maredia.” Clowria gave her a soft smile. Relieved to hear Clowria’s voice the same as always, Maredia gave a bright smile of her own.

“Haugh... Would you like to join me in taking a bath?”

“Ha-wha?! ’Tis an honor I hardly deserve...but absolutely!” Clowria’s eyes were shining.

Maredia gave a satisfied sigh. “On that note, what happened to Olivia anyway? Shouldn’t she be home by now? I’m getting super bored here.”

Bored. When she said that, Maredia almost certainly meant “lonely,” but Clowria wouldn’t dare say that out loud. She was her loyal retainer, so of course

she couldn’t. And, in some way, Clowria wanted to enjoy this rare time of the two of them being alone together as well, but she couldn’t say that out loud either.

“It appears they are traveling all about the kingdom, searching for the Seven Supreme Hallows.”

“Haugh... Maybe we should have gone with them after all... Wait, what am I saying?! Get a hold of yourself, Maredia! The shut-in life is the best!”

But no matter how you looked at it, it was obvious the Dark Queen’s words were just empty bravado.

“Hmm...with Sir Elder Dragon’s enormous presence, it would not be impossible to track them down...” Clowria murmured, looking up into the clear blue sky.

Chapter 4: Mr. Dragon Meets a Fairy

The Chirin Forest had a bit of a nostalgic feel to it. I walked hand in hand with Olivia over the soft ground. The wind carried the scent of the earth to our noses, blowing between the densely growing trees and mixing with the scent of rain from the soft moss growing all around us. Tall trees with spiky leaves towered over old withered trunks and the young shrubs that grew between them. Fresh air filled our lungs with each breath.

“This place looks a lot like home, doesn’t it?” Olivia’s words echoed what I had just been thinking. It *was* very similar to the Sacred Peak of Olympias. There was perfectly clean air, the thick scent of mana, and many animals that called this place home.

And also...there was the presence of something pure and powerful.

“It kind of makes you feel energetic, doesn’t it?”

“Tee hee! I feel the same way!” Olivia puffed herself up into a strong pose. Though no matter how powerful she tried to look, she was always cute as a button.

“But where could the Vastearth Shield be?”

We had visited the Ruiza Canyon, the tunnel near Kenrou, and a number of other power spots that Esmeralda had discovered for us. Sadly, we hadn’t found so much as a single clue. Since we were looking for a shield, I would have thought it would be large enough to be easy to spot.

“Twee. ♪”

...What?

“Olivia, did you say something?”

“No.”

“Twee. ♪”

Whatever it was sounded like a small bird, but where was it?

“Is that a bird chirping...?” Olivia asked.

“Uhh... It sounds like it’s coming from too low, though.” I tilted my head to the side, looking at Olivia— “Wait, Olivia!”

“Huh?”

Olivia’s brown hair was tied into three braids, and she was also wearing a straw hat that had accompanied us on many a journey. But on top of that hat was...

“Twee twee! ♪”

A tiny little person.

“Whaaaaa?!” Shocked by its sudden appearance, I accidentally reverted into my dragon form.

The tiny person gave a shrill cry, jumping off of Olivia’s hat in fright and into her arms.

“Oh no, don’t worry! Daddy is really kind; he’s not scary at all.” Olivia tried to comfort it. In terms of height, it only came up to Olivia’s knees. It must have been light enough so Olivia hadn’t noticed it sitting on her head. With green hair, puffy cheeks, and big round eyes, it was actually quite cute.

“Oh, is it a little lost fairy?”

“A fairy?”

“Yeah, we learned about them at school. Fairies are sometimes born in forests that have a lot of magical energy.”

“Really? I wonder why I never see them around our mountain.”

“Uhh, I think the requirements are a forest with lots of magical energy and no guardian spirit.”

“Guardian spirit?”

“Yeah, an animal like Mr. Pao Pao.”

The largest and most powerful animal in an area was called a guardian spirit, apparently. Mr. Pao Pao was the large turtle we had met on our excursion to the Holy Draconic Spring of Tritonis. He was certainly the biggest, strongest

thing in that lake. So if we're talking about our mountain, the Sacred Peak of Olympias...

Ah. That must be me!

"I suppose that explains why I've never seen one before."

"Tee hee, so fairies are real after all." Olivia patted the fairy on the head.

"Twee twee! ♪" It seemed happy.

Olivia had taught me something I hadn't known. It was a very new—and very pleasing—experience.

"Okay now, don't be scared." Olivia hugged the fairy in her arms tightly.

"Twee. ♪" The fairy in turn hugged her right back.

Looking at the adorable Olivia beside the cute little fairy... This was exactly what the Dark Queen meant when she said something was "violently cute"!

"Daddy?" Interpreting my expression as distress, Olivia looked up at me with worry.

"I-It's nothing, sweety..."

"Twee?" The little fairy stared at me.

"What is it? Is there something on my face?"

"T-Twee?" The fairy tilted its head, then put a hand to its mouth, as if puzzling over something. And then it took a deep breath.

"Tweeeeeeeeeeee!!! ♪♪♪" It shouted up into the sky. As it did, a strong wind blew through the forest.

"Whoa?!" At the sudden gust of wind, I instinctively covered Olivia with my wings. I couldn't have her be blown away! Thanks to my large size, it was easy to protect her from the wind. Being a dragon was really convenient!

"Twee. ♪" The fairy finally stopped shouting. The wind died down, and a quiet stillness settled over the forest.

"Are you okay, Daddy?"

"Wh-What was that about?"

As we turned to stare intently at the fairy in her arms— “A dragon?!”

A female voice called out from within the forest. Turning to look, we spotted a woman with black hair. On top of her head were a set of large horns, just like the Dark Queen’s, except one of them had been broken off at the base.

“Twee! ♪”

“Whoa!” Olivia exclaimed as the fairy jumped out of her arms and flew towards the woman. Yes, it literally flew through the air. Looking closely, I could just barely spot little translucent wings on its back. The way it floated away from us, despite looking like a little human baby, was tremendously cute.

“Uhh... Who might you be?” I asked.

“I-It talked?!” The woman shrunk back.

And then, an entirely unexpected figure emerged from the woman’s shadow.

“...”

With a quiet aura, long silver hair, and a sleepy expression, a girl appeared who was about the same height as Olivia.

“Huh...?” Olivia blurted out. Her eyes went wide at the unexpectedly familiar face. “Lena?!”

Standing behind the horned woman without saying a word was indeed her quiet, mysterious classmate, Lena.

* * *

No one ever visited this forest. Any humans that came here were driven off by the small wind fairies, the sylph. As time passed, foolish humans stopped coming here altogether. After all, this forest was a hiding place for rogue dark-kin.

Interlude: Meanwhile, the Dark Queen... Part Four

At the foot of the Sacred Peak of Olympias, the Dark Queen Maredia was wearing her favorite stylish white dress and was basking in the summer sun. With a straw hat in hand, she spoke to her loyal follower.

“Haugh... Clowria, are you *super* sure this dress doesn’t look weird?”

“Of course, my liege! It looks phenomenal on you!”

“...Haugh. Can we give up on going outside? I mean, it’s *so* hot.”

“That is because it is summer, my Dark Queen,” Clowria replied, wearing a weather-appropriate, lightweight shirt of her own. She held a basket in one hand, smiling gently at her queen. She seemed absolutely angelic, despite being a dark-kin, and totally unlike the drill sergeant from hell that had reduced the Dark Queen to tears earlier.

“But Olivia is probably having fun on her trip... Won’t we be a bother if we suddenly showed up out of nowhere?”

“My liege, how prudent! How compassionate...! However, there is no need to be so negative.” Clowria declared. “After all, Sir Elder Dragon and Olivia like you quite a lot.”

“Haugh...”

“Now, let us depart.” Clowria held out a hand to the other woman.

Being bored for so long, Maredia had finally broken down and started saying she wanted to go and meet up with Olivia. Of course, she changed her mind back and forth two or three times. She kept flip-flopping between the positions of “I’m so bored!” and “But staying home is the best...”

“You have already finished reading all of your books, no?”

“Haugh...”

“And you’ve read that one book you borrowed so many times...”

“Haugh, you mean Lena’s picture book? I won’t be able to read the next one until the new semester starts...” Maredia fretted for a minute, thinking. “Bah! Fine. At this rate, I’ll die of boredom.”

Making a resolute face, Maredia transformed into a cat with a poof! For someone like the Dark Queen, transformation magic was as easy as breathing. The black cat queen snuggled her way into the basket Clowria was carrying.

“Okay then, Your Darkness, please hold tight!”

With a louder boom, Clowria vanished. In the next instant, the sound of strong yet lightweight wingbeats filled the air. She had transformed herself into a hawk. With the basket (and the Dark Queen it contained) in her talons, she flew off into the sky.

“Ha-Hauuuugh! We’re too high!”

“Fear not. Our flight shall be a safe one, my liege!”

“Urgh... I think I can feel the Elder Dragon over in that direction.”

“As expected of my beauteous queen. Very well, let us depart!” The hawk flapped its wings under the brilliant sunlight.

And so, the now fluffy Dark Queen and her attendant set off in search of Olivia.

Chapter 5: His Cutie Sets Out to Find the Seven Supreme Hallows, Part Three *Lena's Secret and the Chirin Forest*

In the Chirin Forest, where Olivia and I thought we might find the Vastearth Shield, we were met by a small fairy and one of Olivia's classmates: the silent and mysterious, yet peerless in her own field, Lena.

And...

"Th-The dragon talked! What is going on?! The only kinds of dragons that should be surviving today are the smaller ones and demidragons, and neither of those are capable of understanding language. But wait...an elder dragon? An *elder* dragon? What on earth is going on? And why is it *here*? Why didn't the sylph warning network catch it? And there's a human child with it too. A dragon with a human child? What is that about? Hey, Lena, what do you think?"

The horned woman's black hair rested on her shoulders. She had deep wrinkles on her forehead. And boy, she could talk *a lot.*

"Class...mate."

"Wait! Maybe this dragon kidnapped her? I know they like gold and jewels, but I've never heard of a dragon kidnapping a child... Has the thousand years I've spent away from both humans and the Dark Realm messed with my common sense? Wait, did you say something, Lena?"

"Olivia. Classmate." Lena slowly lifted a hand to point at Olivia. Then she slowly moved her hand to point at me. "Dragon. Dad. Olivia dad."

That's right! I'm Olivia's Daddy.

"..."

"....."

The woman with the broken horn looked back and forth between Lena, Olivia,

and me a number of times. “Whaaaaaat?! This is one of your classmates?! And her guardian?!”

She jumped in surprise.

＊ ＊ ＊

The horned woman’s name was Martell. Deep in the forest was a clearing with a small log cabin, a garden, and a tiny brook. The cabin was apparently Martell’s home. And Lena’s, as well.

“Here you are. This tea cost me quite a sum back when I was forced to go into town and it’s made with clear stream water. Accept it with thanks. It is quite unusual to have one of Lena’s classmates and her parent come to visit, so take this as a sign of me going all out to welcome you.”

“Wow, thank you!”

“Thanks! Tee hee, it’s so warm!”

I took a sip of tea. It was hot, delicious, and had a fantastic aroma.

Lena also gave a satisfied nod and a thumbs up. She seemed to like it as well.

“No, actually,” Martell continued, “she’s saying ‘please enjoy.’”

“Oh! I see.”

“...”

“We have bread and muffins too.”

“Wow! Thank you...uhh...Lena’s mother?”

“No, no. I’m just her caretaker. Her guardian.”

“...”

“Oh, you want more, Lena? Please help yourself.”

It was incredible. Her ability to tell exactly what Lena wanted without a word from the girl really spoke to the quality of her as a caretaker!

We continued our tea time.

“Hmm... But which is the real you? The dragon or the human?” Martell

scrutinized my human form from top to bottom.

Oh, is my tail still out?

“You’re incredibly attractive too.”

“Uhh... My true form is a dragon. But to raise Olivia, I figured a human form was better, so I’m like this an awful lot.”

Martell seemed quite surprised by my words. “You can transform so easily into such a different shape...? Aside from some special cases like incubi, even among dark-kin such transformations are only possible by the elite. Elder dragons are truly something to be feared.”

“Uh, are you a dark-kin, Miss Martell?” I asked.

“That’s right. As you can tell by my horns, I’m the real deal! I’m a survivor of the invasion a thousand years ago. Some humans bonked me on the head, and while I was knocked out, I lost my means of getting back to the Dark Realm. I’ve been hiding in this corner of the Human Realm ever since.”

“I-I see.” Martell really liked to talk a lot. *Wait, was she a shut-in too?* “Do dark-kin really enjoy being shut-ins or something?”

“Hm? Oh, are you friends with another dark-kin?”

“Yeah, we live together.”

“Oh? So there are some of us out there strange enough to live with a dragon? Normally we are super on guard against others. Most don’t like dealing with other races at all. Despite how I look, I’m extremely sociable for a dark-kin,” Martell said, looking somehow proud of herself.

“Oh, really?” I was really curious about what dark-kin were like besides the Dark Queen and Miss Clowria.

Martell looked at me and paused. “So?”

“So?” I echoed.

“What are you here for? There’s nothing in this forest at all!” Martell said, striking a pose as she pointed a finger at us.

* * *

“I see, the Seven Supreme Hallows... I heard about them a lot during the invasion.” Martell had provided us with dried fruit, bread, and numerous refills of tea. “It must be rough to lose your summer vacation because of something like that.” Martell shrugged, hearing our explanation.

“Apparently they’ve gathered a lot of power over the years, so they can be dangerous to people.”

“Oh yeah? But why would an elder dragon lend a hand in this search?”

“Uhh... Because I’m Olivia’s Daddy?”

“That’s not really a great answer,” Martell said, unsatisfied. “Loving her doesn’t mean doing everything for her, you know?”

“Maybe...but I want Olivia to be able to live happily in the human world.” If there was a chance at that world being put in danger, I thought it only made sense that I’d help search for the Hallows too.

“Living happily, huh?” Martell stared at me. “Then you never should have shown your dragon form to people.”

“Well...”

“Humans thoroughly fear anyone different from themselves. You’re incredibly powerful, so for *you*, they might just be afraid, but for anyone weaker...”

Lena stood up, as if to cut off Martell. “O...li...via...” She grabbed Olivia’s hand, who was staring at Martell with a confused expression.

Martell turned, giving a surprised look to the two girls. “What’s wrong, Lena?”

“Let’s go. I...made...new one.”

“Wait, really?!” Olivia turned her shining eyes on me.

“Ha ha, it’s fine. Go ahead.”

“Okay!” Olivia rose to her feet and started to run off with Lena. “Ah!” Olivia stopped herself for a moment, looking back at us.

“Hm?”

“Thank you very much for the tea, Miss Martell!”

“O-Oh, no problem.”

Lena’s room was on the second floor of the cabin. The cute sound of their perfectly synced footsteps running up the stairs followed behind them. Meanwhile, Martell tilted her head in confusion at me. “Hey, Dragon?”

“What is it?”

“What is this ‘new one’ she’s talking about?”

My eyes went wide at the question. *Wait, do you mean...?*

“Miss Martell, you didn’t know?”

“Know what? I don’t have any interest in humans—”

“No, it has nothing to do with that.” Even *I* knew about it. Lena’s works were shared not just among the students of Class Two-Zero, but also with the Dark Queen and the other students at the academy. Lena was super quiet and almost never spoke, but—

“Lena makes picture books.”

“...B-Books?”

That was right. She was quite the popular author!

* * *

A few weeks ago, at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls, everyone had gathered after school in Daisy’s room in the Fontaine dorms. The Dark Queen and I were in agony.

“Ah ha ha ha, what the heck is this? I-It’s hilarious! Ah ha ha ha ha!”

“Haugh, m-my stomach! It hurts! Nya ha ha ha, these jokes are too much!”

We were laughing so hard, we clutched our sides in pain.

It hurts so much... Too funny!

It was all Lena’s fault. She almost never spoke, but she was quite funny and made picture books as a hobby. They were really, really hilarious! If you asked me what was funny about them...no, I can’t say! I’ll just start laughing again!

“Nya ha ha, oh come on! Even a literature snob like me has to admit you’re a

genius, Lena! Clowria! She's totally a genius, right?!" The Dark Queen was in tears laughing. Seeing the other woman in such high spirits after how upset she had been the day before, Clowria was awash with relief.

"...Thanks." Lena's silver, floor-length hair framed her blushing face. She was as quiet as always.

"Tee hee, your stories are so good! I love them too!" Olivia said, puffing up as proudly as if they were her own.

Lena's pen skated across the page of her "everything book," the large leather-bound tome she carried everywhere. She then turned it towards us. The words, "Thank you, that makes me happy," were written there, next to a picture of the main character from her book. Just seeing the character's expression made us burst out laughing again.

Even just thinking about that story had us in fits of laughter. At this rate, we were never going to calm down!

"Haugh, Lena! When will you finish the next one? I really like these books!"

Lena was silent, but her face turned bright red. Sliding her bag off her shoulders, she rummaged around a little before pulling out another book. *Wow, there's already another one!* The Dark Queen and I lined up in front of her in excitement.

"Ohh...!"

"I, the Dark Queen, get to read it before anyone else?!"

"What an honor! There are hundreds of people waiting to see it!"

Everyone at the Florence Royal Academy for Girls was eagerly awaiting the next volume, but we'd get to see it first!

* * *

"...so the books she writes are extremely popular at school."

Martell blinked in shock at my story. It was all true. Olivia, the Dark Queen, and I all thoroughly enjoyed the books she wrote. Even Luca did! Recently, she had pretended not to care at all and had said, "Hmph! I am much too busy with the consumpt-ing of textbooks and ancient literature!" However, I had caught

Luca reading them in secret too.

“Really...”

“Even I’m one of her fans.”

“I see.” Though her expression had been stern and wrinkled before, Martell’s expression softened and even looked a little cuter. “Hey, dragon. Does it look like she...enjoys school?”

“Hmm...” I thought back to how Lena acted at the academy. She was always expressionless and silent. The young girl was very different from all the children in the child-raising books I read. However, there were always people around her and she always seemed to enjoy listening to the conversations of the people with her.

“Yeah, I think she does.”

Martell responded to my words with a relieved smile. “Really? Yeah... I’m glad to hear that.”

“Do you not talk with Lena about school at all?”

“No. As you can tell, she doesn’t talk much.”

“And you don’t read her books?”

“No, I don’t have the right.”

“The...right?”

Sounds more complicated than I thought.

“I’m just her guardian. If she doesn’t want to show them to me, I can’t invade her privacy like that.”

“Showing them, huh...” I sank into thought. That was a problem I’d never faced before. No matter what Olivia saw or experienced, she would always come to me like, “Hey Daddy, did you know...?” Or, “Hey Daddy, look at this!” She was always bubbling over with excitement to share things with me. Of course, she was on the verge of a terrifying point in her life the books told me was called “puberty,” so that might change...but I couldn’t even imagine her asking me to wash my underwear separate from the rest of the laundry like my

books had mentioned! I had never really thought of the kind of problem Martell was facing before.

Speaking of which...

"How did you end up as Lena's guardian?"

"Hm?"

"Olivia stumbled upon my shrine one day... After a lot of things happened, I ended up becoming her Daddy." *But how did Martell, a dark-kin living deep in the forest, end up raising a human child?*

"Why am I acting as her guardian?" The wrinkle in Martell's brow returned with full force. "Isn't it obvious? I've been raising children in this forest for hundreds of years."

"Huh?"

"I've always raised the children of dark-kin who are persecuted by humans here."

"Wh-Whaaaat?!" *The children of dark-kin?!* "Are you saying Lena is...?" *A dark-kin, like the Dark Queen?*

I never noticed!

Martell's brow furrowed deeper seeing my surprise. "Why are you so surprised? You really didn't know? That long, silver hair is full of magical energy and is very common for people with dark-kin blood... Well, I did tell her to try and hide the fact she was one, and I *did* teach her how to hide her magical energy, so maybe this is just a sign of her training going well..."

"Wait, wait!"

"Hm?"

"Why would you have her hide the fact that she's a dark-kin?"

Martell's brow furrowed even deeper at that. It was like a valley opened right up on her face. She stared at me without speaking for several moments. "Huh. I guess a dragon wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't know about what?"

Seeing the question mark above my head, Martell chuckled. “About how humans discriminate against dark-kin, of course.”

* * *

About a thousand years ago, led by the Dark Queen Maredia, the dark-kin invaded the Human Realm. The war between the two races continued until Maredia’s final defeat at the hands of the party of heroes, and it left a great divide between the humans and the dark-kin.

“But, of course, you know *that* much.”

“Hmmm...”

“That war lasted for over a hundred years.” Martell continued her history lesson. It was a story she had told to the children she had raised here—the dark-kin children who had the misfortune of being born among humans—many times over the years.

“Long ago, the Dark Realm and the Human Realm were more connected. Traveling between them was easy enough, and relations were good. Back then, at least. Even I was friendly with some humans before the war.”

“I see...”

“However, ever since the dark-kin invasion failed, those left behind here in the Human Realm were always spoken ill of. But that wasn’t all. They’d throw rocks at us, chase us from our homes, and treat us as evil just because we were born as dark-kin.” Martell bit her lip. “They turned their scorn towards us because the ruler of the Dark Realm, a Dark King among Dark Kings named the Dark Emperor Thanatos had declared a war against this realm, with his own daughter leading the invasion.”

“Why would he do that?”

“An underling like me wasn’t told anything, but it seemed like the Dark Realm didn’t have enough energy... It was running out of mana.”

“Really??”

“The magical energy that hangs in the air is actually a limited resource. The problem was mana had begun to leak from the Dark Realm into here,” Martell

shrugged. “At any rate, thanks to that stupid war, the world was turned upside down...”

The century-long war was brought to an end with the human heroes’ victory. Following their defeat, the dark-kin closed the countless gates connecting the two realms. It wasn’t widely known how they did it, but however they did, all of the gates were closed within a few days of the Dark Queen Maredia’s defeat. Maybe they were afraid the heroes would turn their sights on the Dark Realm itself. Or maybe they were just afraid of even more mana leaking from the Dark Realm into the Human Realm. Either way, the two realms were cut off from each other.

And not just the humans, but the dark-kin soldiers who had been used as pawns and those who had been living among humans were all unable to return home. Sadly, the hatred of dark-kin that had been building up over the hundred years of war was all pushed on them. It had become something like a tradition. Dark-kin were treated as inferior to humans in every way, and it became okay to openly oppress them. They were seen as totally different from humans.

Recently, lip service had been paid to the notion that humans and dark-kin were equal in an effort to reconcile the two races, but that was just for show.

Dark-kin still couldn’t hope to get along with others.

Driven out of society, many dark-kin turned to violent and wicked lifestyles. Children with dark-kin blood were still treated with disdain.

There was a great divide between the nobility and the common people, but the chasm between humans and dark-kin was something else, seeming as deep as hell itself.

“That’s the rotten world we live in today.”

Martell forcefully placed her teacup on the table. Across from her, the gentle dragon was in shock. “That’s...that’s terrible. I just don’t understand,” he murmured, voice heavy with sadness.

I never imagined something so sad could exist in my beloved daughter's world.

It was truly heart-wrenching.

"So, as a result, I raise dark-kin children here in the Chirin Forest. They all have been run out of their homes and abandoned by their parents. Recently, they've been fewer and fewer in number, but I picked up Lena about ten years ago. With nowhere else to go in this world, a leftover from that war a thousand years ago like me is their guardian. Us dark-kin have to stick together, you know?"

Martell went on and on as I listened.

* * *

On the second floor of Martell's home, Lena was very happy. A friend had come to visit her at home. Olivia had shown up out of nowhere. It was the first time it had ever happened, and she had never expected it would. Martell didn't like letting anyone else come into their home.

Lena loved Martell. She was kind, smart, and reliable. When she was little, when the people she lived with found out that Lena had dark-kin blood, she was run out of her village. The humans who had raised her until then wanted nothing to do with her. If Martell hadn't saved her, she likely would have died.

When Martell realized Lena's talent for magic, she strongly recommended that she apply for the Florence Royal Academy for Girls. Martell thought that if she were to graduate from such a prestigious institution, Lena might be able to live something close to an ordinary life, despite her heritage. They had considered other schools as well, but the others had made it clear they only accepted humans. At that moment, Lena's future school was decided. The academy was founded by the Elven Philosopher-Queen Phyllis Florence, so it specifically accepted people of all races.

That being said, there were basically no dark-kin who attended. There were few vocations even available to dark-kin. That made it extremely difficult to afford such a high level of education.

The Florence Royal Academy for Girls offered scholarships to just six students

per year. Those six students had all of their expenses paid and were part of a special class. Lena had aimed to be one of those students. Martell had told her, “Don’t worry about the money; who do you think I am?!” But Lena knew how hard the woman would have to work to afford her tuition.

Luckily, Lena was able to put the talent born from her dark-kin blood to full use. From the beginning, she had loved reading and writing—or more specifically, just writing, so she had always carried a pen and paper with her wherever she went.

And so, she had managed to keep her heritage a secret and pass the school’s entrance exam. When they found out she had been accepted, Martell had made a huge cake for her to celebrate! She was really happy. When she was a first-year student, she would constantly get letters from Martell asking if she had been discovered as a dark-kin, if she was getting bullied, or if she was having a hard time. That’s why she loved Martell.

But Martell had made it explicitly clear that Lena couldn’t go anywhere outside the forest except for school, and that she couldn’t bring humans into the forest no matter what, and that had meant she would have to spend summer vacation without seeing any of her friends. That made her a little sad.

“Here. The new one.” Lena pulled out the book she had been working on since the moment she got home for her friend.

“Hurray! Tee hee, you know, I’ve been looking forward to reading this for a long time!”

Just seeing Olivia smile like that made Lena’s heart dance.

Lena watched her silently.

Ever since she was little, she had no friends. There was no one that she could share the funny stories and images that filled her head with. So, instead, she had drawn them. First, on small scraps of paper, and later on pieces cut out of a small notebook. Martell realized that Lena was writing, but didn’t intrude any further.

“I’m just your guardian, after all.” That was the woman’s excuse, and Lena had been fine with that. She continued to draw, not for anyone’s sake but for

her own, and that hadn't changed when she entered the academy.

She found talking with others difficult. When she talked with people, they teased her about her hair, or they would make fun of her for being quiet, and once they found out she was a dark-kin, they would throw rocks at her. No one would talk to her then.

So, instead, Lena drew. She didn't need to talk to anyone. She just needed a pen and paper—or so she thought. But it didn't end that way.

"Hey, Lena, what are you drawing?"

"...?"

"That's a book...right? A picture book?"

Sometime after entering the academy, a girl had called out to her. She was at the top of the class, had a brilliant smile, and was totally different from Lena—Olivia Eldraco. She was the first one to come to talk to her as she sat in the back corner of the classroom, sketching away by herself.

A picture book. Lena's notebook had been covered in drawings and words, but Olivia had called it a picture book. For some reason, Lena had nodded.

So I guess this is a picture book, she had thought. It was the first time she had a name for the thing she was making.

"Ooh, it *is* one!"

Lena nodded over and over as she looked up at Olivia. *She's so...dazzling*, thought Lena.

"Tee hee! You know, I really love books, so I was always curious what you were doing."

Lena immediately held her notebook out to the girl. If it was Olivia, she didn't mind if she read the story she had created.

It went perfectly. Seeing how Olivia was dying with laughter, the other students in the class started to get over their apprehension towards Lena. They would come to talk to her during breaks, wanting to read her book. They would be brought to tears with laughter—and demand that she write more.

So Lena continued to draw. This time, not for herself, but for her friends. Her picture books became popular with the whole class, then the whole grade, and before long she was a sensation throughout the whole school!

It felt like a dream. She could put the fun things she thought of in her head down on paper, and bring smiles out of everyone else. She was really happy. She learned what it was like to have someone read what she had written.

And then, Lena started to wish a certain person would also read her stories.

And now, she silently stared at Olivia, who was lost deep in another book.

Olivia giggled away as she read.

“U-Umm...”

“Huh? What is it, Lena?”

The book she had just barely finished writing was being read right in front of her. It made her feel extremely restless.

“U-Umm...” She began to play with her hair, fidgeting back and forth.

Olivia gave her a wide smile. “This one is super funny too!” she declared.

Lena’s happiness tinted her face red despite her silence. Olivia’s words never failed to encourage her.

“Eh heh, I really want everyone else to read this too. If only Luca was still with us on this trip.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“And Miss Maredia is always looking forward to them. Oh, do you mind if I show it to Daddy too? He really loves these books too—”

“O-Olivia!”

“Yeah?”

Lena hesitated, her mouth working soundlessly. Olivia’s dad was downstairs, talking with Martell. So if they went now...

“Lena.” Olivia clapped the book shut. “Do you want Martell to read it too?”

Nod nod nod nod nod! She nodded vigorously, sending her long hair fluttering up and down.

“Has she never read one of your books before?”

Another storm of silver hair flew by, this time shaking from side to side.

“In that case!” Olivia grabbed Lena’s hand. Her hand was so much softer than Lena’s own, calloused as it was from all her writing. “Let’s have her read it right now!”

“...?!”

Something Lena had worried about all along was blown away by Olivia in an instant. It was just like the time she had called Lena’s work a picture book, back then in the corner of their classroom.

“Let’s go!” The moment Olivia had an idea, she always put it into action. Pulling Lena by the hand, she ran down the stairs. But before they reached the bottom...

“About how humans discriminate against dark-kin, of course.”

...they heard Martell’s serious voice.

* * *

“Waaaaaah!”

“Wha?! What’s wrong, Dragon?!”

I was bawling. I never realized there was something so sad going on in this world. I remembered how my adorable Olivia was treated when I first found her. Because she was born to that awful man, she was treated like an object, like a slave. For ridiculous reasons like where they were born or what they looked like, there were more children in the world who had suffered through so much hardship. Just because they were dark-kin, they had to live life in hiding. Even though from my perspective, humans and dark-kin, nobles and peasants, city folk and villagers all looked the same!

“Waaaaaah!”

“Stop crying, come on!”

“You are such a good person, Miss Martell... I never knew how hard things were for Lena...”

“O-Oh? Well, yes, Lena did suffer quite a bit due to her dark-kin blood, but I’m not that great a person. I just did what came naturally to me.”

“I-If there’s anything I can do, I’ll do anything!”

“What? Help from an elder dragon? That’s basically cheating.”

I wailed.

Martell was getting flustered.

At the same time, we heard two sets of little footsteps approach.

“Daddy.”

“O-Olivia.”

Olivia came up to me, tears streaming down her face.

“Did you...hear my story just now?”

Olivia nodded to Martell’s question. I stood up and gave her a big hug. For someone like her, who was always thinking of her friends, it must have been a big shock.

“Daddy...” Olivia squeezed back.

“You’re...crying?” I heard a small voice. Lena was staring at us.

“...Lena!” Without thinking I reached out to her. Her soft, silver hair felt just like Olivia’s.

“I’ve never seen someone cry over discrimination against dark-kin... Well, not like that changes anything,” Martell shrugged.

I shook my head. “Th-That’s not right.”

“Hmm?”

“...at the academy, they treat dark-kin just like everyone else, I think.”

I recalled the Dark Queen. She was obviously a dark-kin, with her prominent

horns. When she started walking around the academy to watch over Luca, she had taken the form of a black cat. Thinking back, the children always looked at her with a bit of confusion. But, there were *always* children around her.

“So, something sad like this...!”

“Hey!” Olivia spoke up. “We’re searching for the Seven Supreme Hallows. If we get all seven, we can make a wish. If we get them all...”

“Ohhh? You would wish for people to stop discriminating against dark-kin? No matter what kind of powerful magic you use, that’s impossible. If you tried, it would grant your wish in a really twisted way. Something like all humans and dark-kin being annihilated,” Martell said with a laugh. Well, she laughed, but she had a sad look in her eyes. “And besides, what’ll change about that now? I’ve always raised children who lost their homes and families just because they were dark-kin. I was abandoned by the Dark Queen’s army, so I’m here. And then Lena’s here because she was abandoned by the human world, right?”

Lena watched silently.

Olivia stared up at Martell.

“I’m sure Lena hates this world.”

At Martell’s words...

“No!” Olivia and I shouted back in unison.

“What? You think you understand her better than I do?” Martell’s expression turned sour, the furrow in her brow growing even deeper.

“I mean, Lena...” Olivia turned to Lena, looking at her hands through her tears. In her hands was her first ever picture book.

“...Here...” Hesitantly, Lena stepped forward and handed her book to Martell.

“This notebook...” Martell must have noticed Lena working in it before.

Olivia spoke up first. “Umm, Lena wanted you to read this... She’s been thinking that for a long time. And this book...”

Martell stared down at Lena with a gentle expression. “...Really, Lena?”

“...Yes,” Lena nodded, her beautiful silver hair shaking as she moved.

“A picture book, huh?” Martell took the book from her. It was a very old notebook. “Hm? Wait, is this that first notebook I bought for you back then...?”

“...Yes...”

Martell hesitantly opened to the first page. It was the first picture book Lena had completed, which had been so popular at the academy. The title was—

“*The Gentle Dark-kin*?”

It was a fun story, with cute and funny pictures. All of it was drawn by Lena herself.

“...”

I felt like I could hear Lena’s heart pounding in her chest. The person she had always wanted to show her book to now had it in her hands. The girl was so nervous that it was probably making her dizzy...but also extremely happy.

By the end of the book, Martell’s smile had broken down into a hearty laugh and she was clutching her stomach... And at the same time, I could see tears at the corners of her eyes.

“This book... I see, Lena.”

The young girl watched her silently.

“To think you were writing stuff like this. I get it.” She wiped her eyes.

That’s right. The contents of Lena’s books—

“There’s more of them, you know!”

“...!”

Olivia ran upstairs and returned with an armful of notebooks. They had been passed around the students in the school so much that their covers had all but fallen apart. Whenever that happened, their classmates would fix them up, making them bright and pretty again. It looked like they were using the bookbinding magic they had learned in their Grimoires class. I was really happy to see the things that Olivia and the other girls were learning at school being used in such a way.

Thud, thud, thud. The colorful books were slapped down on the table one after another in front of Martell.

“They’re all super funny, you know! So please read them all!” Olivia insisted.

“I really like the main character Rinana and her mom, Maple!”

The main character in Lena’s books was named Rinana. She was a very shy dark-kin girl who always imagined very amusing things. One time, she got lost on a walk and met the kind witch, Maple. After that, they started to live together.

“The latest one was super funny! You should read it so we can talk about it!” Olivia said.

“P-Please, read it... Mom...” Lena handed Martell the second book.

“...Ah ha ha, like I said...I’m just your guardian...” The furrow in her brow instantly vanished as tears started to pour from her eyes.

The second book, the third book... By the fifth book, the main character Rinana had started attending school. That was when she finally made friends that weren’t dark-kin. She even made friends with a kind but scatterbrained human. The story was filled with jokes that made you laugh until your stomach hurt. Rinana loved the world she lived in, and it was the world that Lena had created.

As she read book after book, tears flowed freely from Martell’s eyes much like an opened dam.

“...Are they...funny?”

In response to Lena’s nervous question, Martell nodded over and over.

“Yeah... Yeah!”

Of course, Lena.

“I’ve never read something as funny as these!”

Martell continued to laugh with an unbelievably brilliant smile.

＊ ＊ ＊

“Twee, twee! ♪”

A number of sylphs flew in through the window, hovering around our heads and wiping the tears from our faces.

“Ah ha ha, that tickles!”

“Tee hee, thank you, fairies!”

The sylphs brought the clean air of the Chirin Forest flowing into the room with them.

“To think the sylphs would treat a human so well when they’ve been ordered to stand guard against them... I’m honestly surprised.” Martell’s eyes went wide once more. “...Dragon, seeing you two laugh like that, you really do look like father and daughter.”

“Huh?”

“You may not be related by blood, but your hearts look exactly the same,” she said with a laugh, squeezing Lena tight in her arms.

I was sure she understood now. Lena didn’t hate this world at all. Thanks to Martell, the young girl had met so many precious friends.

Interlude: Meanwhile, the Dark Queen... Part Five

Maredia stood with a frown at the entrance of the forest.

“This is...the Chirin Forest?”

“Yes, Your Darkness... It surely is.”

“Olivia and the elder dragon are clearly inside.”

“Yes, it does appear that way...”

Unable to bear the boredom of summer vacation alone, the ardent believer in being a shut-in had betrayed her own philosophy to chase after Olivia.

“It appears there are sylphs patrolling here,” Clowria observed. “If we take but a single step inside, they will catch us immediately.”

“Hauugh... The Chirin Forest, sylph familiars... Has it been like this for a thousand years?”

Long, long ago, before the invasion, the Chirin Forest had been known as the Silverbranch Woods. The forest was a place that had connected the Dark Realm and the Human Realm. A thousand years ago, there were a number of similar places. However, after the Dark Queen Maredia’s defeat at the hands of the heroes, all of the gates between the realms—the Chirin Forest included—had been shut.

As a result, many of the dark-kin that had come to the Human Realm as part of the invasion had been trapped. Their children born here were unable to return to the Dark Realm. So a long era of hardship had begun for the dark-kin.

Brushing the large horns sticking out from her long black hair with a hand, the proof of her heritage as a dark-kin...

“...I’m going home,” Maredia said, returning to her cat form with a poof.

“...Are you sure, my liege?”

“Haugh?”

“*She* should still be living here...”

“Who, Martell? I can’t imagine she thinks that well of me.” The feline Dark Queen turned her back on the forest, and Clowria set off after the depressed cat.

Maredia jumped into the basket they had left on the ground. A book she had taken a real liking to—one of Lena’s picture books—was inside.

“...You noticed Lena’s magical energy, right, Clowria? Even though she can make such amazing books, she must have had a hard time. And things will still be difficult for her,” Maredia murmured. “And it’s all my fault.”

“My Queen...”

“Right now, I’m a useless Dark Queen who can’t even go home! It’s not even worth thinking about it! If I butted in now, the dark-kin would just be more upset!” Maredia lamented with a hollow laugh.

“...”

Clowria had no idea what to say to the other woman. Maredia had spent a thousand years holed up in her castle, being crushed by her own guilty conscience. Defeated by the heroes and with her beloved library sealed, she was heartbroken. But the fact that she couldn’t face her own people—*that* feeling was what had kept her trapped inside for a thousand years.

Even though Maredia would certainly deny it out loud.

“If only I hadn’t been born with a prophecy about me,” Maredia said with a laugh, curled up in the basket.

Without a word, Clowria returned to her hawk form. She grabbed the basket and began their long journey back to the castle.

Chapter 6: His Cutie Sets Out to Find the Seven Supreme Hallows, Part 4 *Ruby Liliant and the Fantastic Souvenirs*

Liliant Jewelers was the home of Olivia's classmate Ruby and also the highest-class jeweler in Miranda's business district.

"We never did find that shield, did we?"

Over half of Olivia's summer vacation had passed us by, and we had searched almost every spot on Esmeralda's map. Unfortunately, the Vastearth Shield had still eluded us.

"I'm still happy we got to see everyone!" Olivia said.

The city of Miranda was the closest market to our home on the Sacred Peak of Olympias, and that also happened to be where Olivia's classmate Ruby's parents had their jewelry store.

"Let's buy some souvenirs for Maredia and Clowria!"

We had decided to head home for a bit, so we were going to stop by Ruby's place on our way.

"Hello!" Olivia called out as we stepped into the store, greeted by a pleasant, clean smell filling the air.

"Welcome. Oh!" A girl with red hair stood in front of us with flawless posture. She was about the same age as Olivia and wore a refined uniform. Her eyes were like crimson jewels. It was, of course, Ruby.

Olivia waved to her. "Ruby!"

"Heh heh. Welcome, my honored customer. You have been working quite hard on your search for the Hallows, haven't you?" Her prim and proper demeanor relaxing only slightly, Ruby greeted Olivia with a smile. She seemed incredibly mature.

She's really taking her job helping around the store here seriously, isn't she?

The men and women working in the store all wore stylish black formal attire. *What were those jackets called again? I think they're called "tailcoats." I read about them in* Attending Important Ceremonies With Your Child*!*

After the two had greeted each other, I spoke up too. "Hello, Ruby."

"My, if it isn't Olivia's father as well!" Ruby's face flushed. Last year, when I had been invited to the students' tea parties at the academy, Ruby had done a fantastic job at arranging my hair. Every once in a while, even while I was guarding the academy in my tiny dragon form, she would style my beard and mane. She was an incredibly skilled and fashionable girl! "Welcome, Olivia's father. My name is Ruby Liliant, and I am in charge of this establishment today."

Holding the hem of her skirt, she gave us a proper curtsy.

She was so elegant!

"Wow, you look so cool, Ruby!" Olivia clapped happily.

"Heh heh, please wait a moment." After giving some instructions to the other staff, she came to personally guide us around the store.

Ruby took us around the shop, showing us the numerous display cases.

"If you are looking for some souvenirs from your journey, perhaps these would be of interest to you."

"Wow... They're so pretty," Olivia said, staring in wonder at the cases' contents. Though the actual jewels were rather small, they were no less breathtaking as the glittering stones had been set in masterfully crafted gold and silver pieces.

"Since you were instructed to search for the Seven Supreme Hallows, I may just be lecturing a Sage here, but..." Ruby began her well-rehearsed routine of explaining the properties of the various jewels. "Gems and jewels are special kinds of stones. For example, besides the decorative jewelry we sell here, gems of a particularly large size and purity can be used for magical purposes. A form of magic known as Jewelmancy uses precious stones in place of incantations

and magic circles."

"Oh really?" I also liked gems, but I just collected them because they were shiny and pretty.

That's amazing that humans can use jewels for all sorts of things.

On top of that, to be able to make such beautifully intricate ornaments... Humans really were quite skilled.

Carried along by Ruby's explanation, we walked around the shop. Her lecture was easy to listen to and simple to understand. She must have given this exact speech countless times.

"The Liliant family originally belonged to the Metalworking Guild. My great grandfather was particularly skilled, and so his ornaments were used by the royal family on numerous occasions. At first, we were only a small jewelry store, but my great grandfather honed his skills with the Metalworking Guild, my grandfather excelled in shop management and administration, and the current head of the family, my father, has worked to tirelessly refine our delicate and beautiful designs. As of now, we have five establishments across the continent and even make regular business trips to neighboring countries. Liliant Jewelers has truly become a first-class institution!"

Olivia and I listened intently to her summary.

"Wow... Your dad is so amazing, Ruby!"

"Yes, naturally! In the future, I will also inherit this establishment from him, so I will make every effort to teach others the wonders of jewels and gems," Ruby said, puffing up proudly.

I looked around the store. The stones here were all much smaller than the ones in my collection, but each of them shone with an entrancing brilliance. Despite being so small, with just a bit of processing, they were made to be so beautiful. *I wonder if I brought the stones from my collection here, could they make them just as nice?*

Olivia's eyes glittered as she looked into one of the cases. "Daddy, can I take a look around?"

“Of course, Olivia.” Sending Olivia off, I turned to Ruby. “Hey, if I brought some gems here, could you process them for me?”

“Of course, sir. We would gladly take on such a request!” Ruby responded. “Out of curiosity, about how large a gem did you have in mind? The size determines the price and who would work on it.”

“Uhhh...” Looking around the store, I found a one-of-a-kind necklace being prominently displayed. I pointed at the red jewel in the center of it. “Most of them are a bit larger than this one, I think.”

“What?!” Ruby jumped in surprise.

Oh, is that no good? The only ones I had that seemed small enough to be made into accessories of some sort were about that size... I didn’t think a stone larger than Olivia’s face would make a good ring, after all.

“Th-That ruby is the largest one on the continent. There should hardly be any bigger than that. Anything of more substantial size would be on the level of the Seven Supreme Hallows.” Ruby seemed totally perplexed.

I guess my gems are a lot bigger than normal?

“Hey, Daddy,” Olivia pulled on the sleeve of my jacket.

“What is it, honey?”

“Umm... I want to make a ring.”

“Oh?”

Olivia pointed to a pair of rings in one of the display cases. “Like these. And I want to use these in them.” Olivia pulled two small stones from her pocket.

“Ah...these aren’t proper gems per se, but they are quite pretty, aren’t they?” Ruby scrutinized the pair of stones. One was a deep yellow, while the other was a bright pink. As they hadn’t been polished they were fairly dull, but still quite pretty. “You would like a pair of rings, then? Do you have a fiancé or something?”

“What?! Sh-She doesn’t have someone like that!” I shouted. *A fiancé would be someone she was going to marry, right? No, no way! I’d never heard of anyone like that!*

“S-Sir, please keep your voice down inside the store.”

“S-Sorry...” *Calm down, Daddy!*

Olivia was shaking with laughter as she watched me get all flustered. “I want to give them away as souvenirs!”

“To who, sweety?”

“To Maredia and Clowria, of course! They’ve been stuck at home this whole time. Is that okay?” Olivia asked.

“You want to give rings as souvenirs?”

“Ah, is that so?” Ruby said. “I think that is a great idea. These rings you pointed out have a small bit of magic placed on them to make them automatically match the size of the wearer’s finger. And I can specially process those stones for you... Here we are.” In a smooth, flowing motion, she pulled the rings Olivia had chosen from their pedestal in the display case. “The design is quite cute and they’re rather high-quality, so they should match just about anyone. As far as the price, they are rather affordable in comparison to our other options.” As she spoke, she showed me the price tag.

Price, huh...

I still hadn’t gotten a good grasp on money yet. I did have my salary as a security guard for the academy, but that was my only experience with it.

“Uhh, Ruby?”

“What is it, sir?”

“Umm... Would this be enough?” Just in case, I had brought some of the gold I kept in my shrine. I pulled out the smallest piece and showed it to her. It was about the same size as the tip of Olivia’s little finger.

Upon seeing it, Ruby’s eyes went wide. “That is a fine piece of gold! Yes, sir, that is more than enough for a pair of rings... Actually, it’s quite a bit more. Why don’t you choose a brooch to go along with them?”

Oh good, it’s enough! Thankfully, the small piece of gold was more than enough for what Olivia wanted.

“Which one would you like, Olivia?”

As Ruby lined up a large number of brooches for us, I sank into thought. *I really need to learn how to properly use human money...* The parenting books I read hadn’t said much about money at all. Martell had told me that she had taught Lena all about money. I didn’t have many chances to speak with other guardians like that, so talking to her had been a very useful experience for me. *I really am still quite lacking as a father!*

As I mumbled to myself, Olivia studied the array of brooches before her. “I have no idea,” she said softly to herself. The pearls and silver on each one glittered in the light. Unable to decide between them, Olivia clapped herself on the cheeks, psyching herself up and her expression turning serious. It was adorable!

“Pick any one you like, dear.”

“Hey, Daddy?” Olivia pulled on my sleeve again.

“What is it, sweety?”

“You choose!” The yellow ribbon in her pigtails shook as she moved. It was the same color as the sun, and one I had picked out for her.

“Are you sure? This is a brooch for you, after all.”

“Yeah, I want you to decide!” Olivia beamed. “As a memory for our trip! We couldn’t find the Vastearth Shield, but I had a lot of fun anyway!”

Mulling over the options for a bit, I selected two that I liked the best. One had a stone that shone a brilliant yellow, while the other was a deep red, the color of sunrise.

“My, you certainly did pick the best of this lot.” Ruby seemed impressed with my decision.

Well, I am *pretty familiar with gems.*

“Which do you prefer, Olivia?”

“Uhh...”

“I think both suit you very well.”

After staring at the two brooches for a while, Olivia finally reached out for the red one. She picked it up, staring into it as it glittered in the light of the shop. “Okay, I want this one.”

“Then allow me to package it for you,” Ruby offered. “Or would you like to wear it home? I think it suits you fantastically!”

At Ruby’s praise, Olivia gave an embarrassed nod. “Can you help me, Daddy?” she said, holding it out to me. I fastened the brooch to her top, earning a big smile. “This jewel is pretty and bright red, just like your eyes!” she said energetically, staring directly into my eyes. Eyes dyed red with the intense magical power of a dragon.

Ahh, so that was how she did it.

I stared at the red jewel in her brooch and my chest grew tight as I felt overwhelmed by emotion.

“Your stones have been processed and the rings have been made. I’m sure your friends will be ecstatic to receive these.”

Taking the beautifully packaged pair of rings, we waved goodbye to Ruby.

Unfortunately, our search for the Seven Supreme Hallows here turned up nothing. But we still had a lot of fun, didn’t we?

That’s what I had thought at the time, but I never would have imagined those souvenirs would end up being just the hint we needed...

Chapter 7: Mr. Dragon Discusses Souvenirs

When we got home, the Dark Queen and Clowria came out to meet us.

Apparently, they had slept all day as they were still in their pajamas. Seeing the two ladies get along so well made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Olivia wasted no time before she started sharing stories of our adventures. The colorful memories poured out from her nonstop.

“And then she said that Daddy and I looked the same!”

Olivia’s eyes were shining as she spoke.

Wow, this is a lot of fun! Getting to tell others about all the fun and happy things that had happened to us felt like reliving those experiences all over again.

The two homebodies listened intently to her story. Until— “And then when we were at Daisy’s house, Daddy turned into a dragon and flew around. It was super cool!” Olivia puffed up proudly, while her audience froze.

The Dark Queen and Clowria shared a look. Her full-moon eyes darting around, the Dark Queen started to mumble. “Haugh? In his elder dragon form? All of the sudden? Isn’t that enough to trigger a D6 Sanity check?”

A dee-what? Sometimes, I just couldn’t understand what the Dark Queen was saying. Maybe she was speaking in the dark-kin language.

“Oh, Olivia,” I poked at Olivia’s elbow. “What about the souvenirs?”

“Oh! Right!”

Her souvenirs. The pair of rings Olivia had bought for them were memories of our adventure. One was set with a stone to match the Dark Queen’s golden eyes, and the other had a cherry-pink stone that matched Clowria’s hair. Olivia pulled out the small box and opened it for them.

“Haugh?” The Dark Queen tilted her head in confusion.

“These are the souvenirs I got for you!” Olivia exclaimed.

“Uhh...souvenirs?” Clowria echoed.

“That’s right! We had the rings made at Ruby’s family’s shop, and we bought the stones near Daisy’s place.”

The two stared at the glittering rings with dumbfounded expressions. Judging by their shock, they had never imagined we would come back with gifts for them.

“Hauugh... Olivia! Wh-Wh-What a good girl!!!”

“I guess this is the first time my liege has ever received a souvenir from someone.”

“Haugh... That’s right...”

“Tee hee, I picked these colors just for you two! They’re super pretty, right?!”

The Dark Queen timidly reached out to the rings. Before she touched one though, she looked back to Olivia. “So this one is for Clowria, then? Hey, Olivia?”

“What is it, Maredia?”

“Umm... Do you mind if I take this one?”

“Huh? The pink one?”

What was that about?

“My Queen, I was just thinking that I might like the yellow one for myself as well.”

“You want the yellow one, Clowria?” Olivia asked.

The Dark Queen and Clowria each put on the rings of the other’s color. Thanks to the size-matching enchantment, the rings fit them perfectly. The Dark Queen stared adoringly at the ring glittering on her finger.

“Thank you, Olivia... I’ll treasure this forever.”

“Yes, allow me to offer you my thanks as well, Olivia.”

Olivia stared back confused for a moment. “Well, if you’re happy, then I’m

happy too!” They had ended up taking the opposite rings, but with how happily they were smiling, Olivia was more than satisfied.

“To receive a present like this... It feels much like those birthdays that humans celebrate, doesn’t it?” Clowria said, sipping from her cup of tea.

After a bit more conversation, Olivia let out a huge yawn. Noticing her fatigue, the Dark Queen poked at her cheeks. “Haugh, are you already sleepy?”

“But I still want to talk...”

“We can talk all you’d like tomorrow, Olivia,” Clowria offered.

“Ugh...” Her eyelids fluttered shut. Dozing off in her seat, she couldn’t keep her head up straight. The young girl was totally exhausted. Picking her up from her chair, I decided to carry her to her room.

“Mmm... Good night, Daddy...”

“Good night, Olivia.”

Our trip had been a lot of fun. As I whispered to her, Olivia’s face took on a gentle smile.

“It was...a lot of fun...”

Hearing her half-asleep response, I couldn’t help but feel happy. I decided to stay by her side until she was well and truly asleep. Her sleeping face looked just like an angel’s.

Chapter 8: Mr. Dragon Heads to the Dark Realm

Over breakfast the next morning, we continued discussing our journey and how we never ended up finding the shield.

"...The Vastearth Shield?" The Dark Queen froze. She pondered for a minute before continuing. "Is it possible that it's...not *actually* a shield?"

"Huh?" *A shield is like a board made from metal like the one Iria had, right?*

"If you're looking for something holding a tremendous amount of magical energy and that manipulates earth, I *might* have an idea."

"What?!"

"Please tell us!" Olivia and I exclaimed together. Who would have thought that the Dark Queen would have a clue to find the shield we had already spent half of the summer vacation looking for!

"Hmm... A thousand years ago, the gates connecting the Human Realm and the Dark Realm were all sealed shut. Someone had an item powerful enough to close them all and keep them closed, even today."

"Your Darkness, you don't possibly mean..."

"Yes..." The Dark Queen nodded deeply. She had an awfully unpleasant expression on her face. "The Dark Emperor Thanatos. King of the dark-kin, and ruler of the Dark Realm. A thousand years ago, he obtained a ring during the invasion. It allowed him to move boulders, create ramparts of stone, and close off paths in the earth," she explained with a frown. "It *is* just a ring, but those powers sound a lot like a shield—and like the Hallow you're searching for, no?"

"R-Really?!"

"So if we go to the Dark Realm, we can find it?!" Olivia and I high-fived each other.

But the Dark Queen shook her head. "Give it up, Olivia."

"Huh?"

“You’re gathering the Seven Supreme Hallows to keep them from the hands of other nations, correct? If it is in the Dark Realm, that should be good enough. Humans cannot get there, and dark-kin have no desire to interact with humans anymore. It’s not such a big deal if only one is missing, right?”

Olivia and I shared a look.

“I guess that’s true...”

“And you don’t have a way of getting to the Dark Realm anyway. And I definitely wouldn’t guide you around if you did! Definitely not!” the Dark Queen said, more forcefully than usual.

I wonder what that’s about?

“Is there really no way for us to meet the Dark Emperor Thanatos?” I asked. Esmeralda and the queen’s goal was to release the energy built up in the Seven Supreme Hallows over a long period of time. Maybe he’d let us borrow it and then return it right after. If we explained ourselves, we might be able to get him to cooperate. “We would just be borrowing it for a bit. Once we released the magical energy from it, I could ask the queen to give it right back to him...”

“Haugh. There’s no way that gloomy blockhead would agree to that!”

“Couldn’t we try to convince him?”

“No! No way! He’s the one who closed the gates connecting the Human Realm and the Dark Realm. The only thing that can move between them now is mail, deliveries, and takeout!” the Dark Queen said, pointing a finger at me. “Checkmate!”

“You can get mail from there?”

“Of course, there *is* technically a path, but I would never show it to you.”

“...Sir Elder Dragon...”

“What is it, Miss Clowria?”

“...I too know of a way into the Dark Realm.”

“What?!”

“C-Clowria?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What is this betrayal?!” The Dark Queen

immediately lost her composure. She was right, though. Clowria normally did anything and everything the Dark Queen told her to, so something like this was unprecedented.

“If my liege refuses to take you, I will guide you in her stead.”

“Why?!” The Dark Queen whirled around to face Clowria.

“If a great war were to break out in the Human Realm, you would no longer be able to live like this.”

“Haugh? How would a war affect *me*?!”

“You see, this castle may be beyond the struggles of human conflict, but what about the Florence Royal Academy for Girls?”

“Haugh...?” The Dark Queen stopped for a moment. That was also what I was most worried about. I was afraid that Olivia’s fun daily life might someday come to an end.

“For the first time in a thousand years, you’ve taken an interest in the outside world. From my perspective, you’ve been more lively than ever, my Queen. From your quarrels with the dragon-kin girl...”

“Those were all Luca’s fault!”

“...to snatching food from the dining hall...”

“Hauugh, that was because Kate asked me to try her food!”

“...to running down the hallways shouting angrily...”

“Haugh?! That was because those human children were chasing me! There’s no excuse for that, no matter how fluffy my cat form is!”

“I was very happy to see all of that,” Clowria murmured. On her finger was Olivia’s souvenir, a ring that shone the same color as the Dark Queen’s eyes.

“...Haugh?”

“Though slowly, over the past thousand years, relations between humans and dark-kin have begun to soften little by little. So if there was anything that could threaten that, I want to help Olivia in her search for the Hallows... That’s how I feel.”

Clowria's words had the Dark Queen at a loss.

"And that will also help protect Olivia's happy everyday life as well. Right, Sir Elder Dragon?" the knight added.

"Yeah." I nodded vigorously at Clowria's words. She was exactly right. The Seven Supreme Hallows held a tremendous amount of magical energy. They were incredible jewels, and if one had all seven, they could release that energy to grant a wish. But I didn't really care about that at all. "I want a world where Olivia can live happily." That was all.

The Dark Queen groaned, looking pleadingly at Clowria.

"My liege, I am sure that if Miss Luca were to see you now, she would say something like, 'Jeez! I have truly dis-judged you, Marie!'"

The Dark Queen's closest friend at the academy was Olivia's underclassman, Luca Ioenami. The Dark Queen treated her like her own little sister. Hearing her name, the black-haired woman began to grumble, sinking into thought.

After a while, she lifted her head once more. "I'm not going to help you at all though, okay? I'm only going to show you the shortcut."

"My Queen!" Clowria exclaimed with a smile, overcome with relief.

"So there *is* a shortcut!"

"Indeed. Ever since the gates to the Dark Realm were closed, we in the Human Realm were left outside of delivery range, so I messed with the area under the castle a little."

"As expected of my beauteous queen!"

"Ha! I *am* the Dark Queen Maredia, remember? This was all necessary to create a comfortable shut-in lifestyle for yours truly!"

"Your Darkness, that is not something to be especially proud of..."

"Haugh~ Clowriaaaa!" The Dark Queen immediately got angry.

Who would have thought that our very own basement might have a connection to finding the Vastearth Shield!

"Tee hee, traveling together with you two sounds like fun!" Olivia laughed.

The next day...

“Haugh... Are we really going? Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

As the Dark Queen tried to stop us again, Clowria consoled her.

“My liege, I will be with you the whole time. And your transformation is perfect, you will not be discovered.”

“Are you sure...?” The Dark Queen wore a large hood and glasses to cover her horns and face.

She must be really famous in the Dark Realm, huh?

We packed our bags, and (well, mostly the Dark Queen) steeled ourselves for the journey.

“Let’s go!” Together with Olivia’s energetic declaration, we set off for the Dark Realm.

* * *

Underneath our castle was a fountain.

“This is connected to the Dark Realm?”

“Yes. It was built to only allow goods to pass through in one direction, but...” the Dark Queen answered the young girl. “Haugh. Olivia, open a *Demon’s Gate* here. This fountain is matched to coordinates in the Dark Realm, so it should be sufficient to open a gate.”

Demon’s Gate was a piece of magic that enabled travel between two distant points in no time at all. It was a spell Olivia had learned from reading one of the Dark Queen’s books, and she had previously used it to connect the academy to our castle.

“*Wander into a path darker than darkness. Open,* Demon’s Gate*!*”

Olivia chanted the spell. Space inside the fountain warped and twisted, proving that her cast had been successful.

We leaped in, holding our eyes shut tight to avoid getting water in them. Though I didn't know how to swim at all, for some reason I seemed to be okay and was able to breathe fine. Suddenly I was beset by the sensation of my body being flipped over. And then...

"We have arrived, Elder Dragon." I opened my eyes at the Dark Queen's words.

"Whoa!"

"Daddy, this is amazing!"

Still holding Olivia in my arms, I looked around.

"So this is the Dark Realm!" Olivia and I said at the same time.

It was totally different from the world that we lived in. The ground was covered in a smooth stone with some sort of letters written on it, while carriages with no horses ran by us. Large signboards spread throughout the city shone with light. Girls wearing frilly clothes similar to the Dark Queen's custom uniform walked by laughing, drinks with little black balls in them in their hands. Of course, the people walking by were all dark-kin with the horns, tails, and wings to prove it. They all had small magical tablets about the size of their hands, and they were even using them to take pictures!

"Haugh... I guess things would change after a thousand years... It's so crowded..." The Dark Queen shrank, hiding behind Clowria.

Different? Things weren't even slightly the same! A long, long time ago, I had come to the Dark Realm on a whim. Back then it had looked only a little different from the Human Realm. *What had happened here over the past thousand years?!*

"Well, I'm sure this is the only place that has changed so much. This part of the Dark City Abika was like a theme park even back then." The Dark Queen shrugged.

"Oooh, as expected of the Dark Queen! She's already proving to be a reliable

guide!”

“Yeah!” For Olivia and me, who didn’t know right from left here, she seemed quite impressive. Encouraged by our adoring gazes, the Dark Queen puffed up with pride.

“First, let’s head to Tigernoana, Watermelon Books, Onimate, Gamagamers, and Daradarake to search for the latest merchandise! We can talk after that!” The Dark Queen suddenly seemed very energetic. Maybe she was just excited to be back in the Dark Realm for the first time in a while.

“My Queen is rather fond of the cultures of both the Dark Realm and the Human Realm,” Clowria explained. “There is a limit to what can be shipped to us, so it would be nice if traveling back and forth between realms was easier...” she murmured through gritted teeth.

Though she led us from the front, the Dark Queen left her hood and glasses on. I guess she must have had some reason for that.

“Once my liege has finished shopping, we will head to the palace. Why don’t we find someplace we can sit and have some tea while we wait for her?”

“Okay!” Olivia happily agreed.

“Here, Olivia. Try some of the sweets native to the Dark Realm. And here, these drinks are popular nowadays.”

“Wow!”

“I kind of want to try some too...” I added.

“By all means, Sir Elder Dragon. Here you are... Oh.”

I felt the gazes of the others around us. Clowria seemed to notice as well.

“My apologies, Olivia. Just in case, please put these on.”

“Huh? Ears?” Clowria had pulled out a headband with cat ears on it. When she put them on, she transformed into a dizzyingly cute Olivi-nya.

I was floored. Cat ears are amazing! She was already adorable, but her cuteness levels went up a million times!

“Tee hee, meow!” Olivia acting like a cat on top of that knocked me out

completely.

“They look great on you,” Clowria said with a chuckle. “Humans naturally stand out here, so please wear those as long as you are in the Dark Realm.”

“Okay! ♪” Olivia replied happily.

In case you were wondering, since I already exuded the aura of a dragon from my whole body, I didn’t need a headband.

* * *

In the Dark Realm, the Dark Emperor’s citadel sat in the depths of the abyss. Even deeper down, a single man sat, staring ahead into the void with lightless, bloodshot eyes. Sharp horns sprouted from his head.

“...What?” The Dark Emperor Thanatos, before whom even the most powerful of dark-kin knelt, widened his eyes slightly. “My beloved daughter... Maredia has returned?”

“Yes, Father. I am sure of it.” The light glinted off the glasses of the tall man who replied. It was Thanatos’s eldest son, Chel.

“Hoo! Hah! Father! Allow me to go out and punish that ungrateful child at once!” said Massura, the twenty-second son of Thanatos, a man so well chiseled he looked like a piece of art. As he spoke, he lifted a pair of dumbbells with enormous iron weights on them. Apparently, his training regimen this month focused on his obliques.

“Hee hee, she was caught instantly by the surveillance network I set up~” giggled Jinia, the thirteenth princess. She appeared to be a young girl with her hair tied up in buns, but in truth, she had lived for over fifteen hundred years in the Dark Realm. She was also a renowned inventor.

The Four Great Kings of the Dark Realm all had sheep-like horns growing from their heads. The fact that there were only three of them in the room didn’t seem to concern them in the slightest. In truth, the missing fourth member was Maredia herself.

Chel pushed up the glasses on his face wearing a bold smile. “Fear not, Father. The Dark Queen Maredia—”

“Maredia is the weakest of the Four Great Kings!” Massura cut him off. “Even if she were to turn against you, you have nothing to fear! Hoo! Hah!”

“Y-You... Massura, how dare you...!”

“Hm? Is something the matter, eldest brother?!”

“Hee hee, let it be, Chel. You’ve been waiting a thousand years to say that, haven’t you? Too bad~”

“Be quiet, Jinia!”

As his children around them argued with serious expressions, Thanatos murmured to himself, “Maredia...”

Almost a thousand years ago, the secret grimoire passed down in the royal family entitled *The Dark Realm Management Plan (Confidential)* had contained a great prophecy that named her as the leader for a massive invasion into the Human Realm. Born in the 666th year of the Dark Emperor Thanatos’s reign, she was the child of prophecy—saddled with the fate of leading an invasion into the Human Realm from the moment she was born and a Dark Queen from the moment she took her first breath. That was the Dark Queen Maredia.

The prophecy had said, “That child will become a stairway to connect the Human and Dark Realms as one.”

With the hopes and dreams of the entire Dark Realm on her shoulders, Maredia’s invasion of the Human Realm had ended in failure. The dark-kin were disappointed and all blamed Maredia. With the mana present in their realm drying up and leaking out, they had no choice but to close the gates between realms. Many of the dark-kin in the Human Realm, including Maredia herself, had been left behind, and the Dark Realm had entered a long period of silence.

“Chel. What is she doing?”

“Sir, she is traveling together with her confidant Clowria, the former captain of the Dark-Kin Knighthood, and a human child of strong magical potential. Also... Umm...”

“What is it? Speak up.”

“Yes sir. Uhh... She is also accompanied by another being of tremendous power.”

“Hoo! Hah! How suspicious!”

“Oh...? Tremendous power, is it?” the emperor replied. “I’m impressed you can say something like that before the might of The Ring that I possess.”

The Dark Emperor Thanatos lifted his left hand, showing off a ring with a sparkling golden jewel.



That small jewel held power that dominated the entire room. No, it wasn't just that. In fact, the entire citadel had been fashioned through The Ring's power to manipulate earth. The Ring's magical power covered the entire Dark Realm like a range of mountains guarding against the Human Realm itself.

You could even say that it was exactly like an enormous shield.

"I always thought Maredia would be able to make it back here without using a gate..." With a grinding sound, he chewed on the nail of his thumb, long and sharp as a beast's talon. "That girl!" The intensity behind his words sent a shiver down the spines of (three of) the Four Great Kings.

The Dark Emperor Thanatos was a wise ruler, willing to make any cruel or coldhearted decision if it was necessary for the prosperity of the dark-kin and their world. His true strength was something all dark-kin knew— "If she was going to come home, she should have told me ahead of time. That's just common sense... If I had known, I could have prepared Marie's favorite sukiyaki for dinner...!"

"...Father?"

"...Forget I said anything."

"Yes sir!"

"Also, tonight we will be eating curry for dinner. Be sure to enjoy it."

—and the fact that he was super indulgent of his children was kind of an open secret.

"Hoo! Hah! In that case, Father! Let us get our bothersome work out of the way before dinner!"

* * *

We passed through the Dark City of Abika. The bright lights seemed to only shine from the center of the city, so after walking away from it for a little while, things started to look more familiar to us. The crowds started to thin, and the danger of us getting separated passed.

"Haugh, this is bad," the Dark Queen muttered, fiddling with the magical tablet in her hands.

“What’s wrong, Maredia?” Olivia asked.

“Haugh... It looks like someone’s been taking pictures of us.” She turned her tablet so we could see the screen. There were a large number of pictures and lots of text.

“Wait, are these Che-Kis?” I asked. I knew that a Che-Ki was an image that could be created with just a press of a button. They were wonderful pictures made by the dark-kin tool known as an Eselar-Camra.

“Indeed. Recently, people have been taking them with their tablets and uploading them to Bleater too.” *Was this collection of pictures and words she was showing us that Bleater thing?*

“Oh, it’s all written in ancient Erial!” Olivia shouted as she peeked at the screen.

“Haugh? No, it’s similar, but not the same. It’s Evilese, the language spoken by dark-kin.” The Dark Queen flipped through a number of screens. “Look, see for yourselves.”

We could see a number of Che-Kis on the screen.

“It’s Olivia?!”

Pictures of Olivia with her cat ears were on the tablet. Underneath it was written “*Super cute!* ♥” in Evilese. *I totally get it. She is definitely super cute! But I don’t know if I like strangers taking pictures of my precious daughter without permission...*

“It’s getting a lot of re-bleats. And also, look.”

“Huh?”

“Read the replies. ‘*Wait, am I seeing things? Is that the Dark Queen?*’ ‘*It is!*’ ‘*I totally agree!*’ Haugh, I was too careless... I’m showing up in the pictures people are taking of Olivia.”

The Dark Queen tapped on one of the Che-Kis. Just as she said, she could be seen in the background. But she was really tiny, and her hood covered most of her face.

“Does that mean you’ve been discovered?”

“Haugh. That’s what it looks like. Doxxers are scary,” the Dark Queen said with a big sigh.

I stared in shock as more even words showed up on the screen.

“No way, isn’t that Maredia?”

“How dare she?”

“Is it really her? That’s kind of a gross idea for a cosplay.”

“My relatives got stranded in the Human Realm because of her!”

I immediately covered Olivia’s eyes. There was a lot more written there about the Dark Queen, which she read silently.

“My Queen.”

“...Haugh.”

At that moment, Clowria grabbed the tablet out of her hands. “My Queen, there is no need for you to pay any mind to the thoughts of those who know nothing of you.”

“...Indeed.”

As we walked along, some of the passersby would occasionally glance in the Dark Queen’s direction. I was starting to understand why she hadn’t wanted to come here, and why she had holed herself up in the castle for so long. She would occasionally come with us to town or come visit the school, but this explained why she was always so nervous when she did.

“Even though I’m a dark-kin, the children at Olivia’s school never said a word about it. I had the same name as the infamous Dark Queen, but they acted like it had nothing to do with me. That’s the new generation for you.” The Dark Queen kept walking. She refused to look back at us. *I wonder if she’s crying.* “However... That doesn’t change the fact that I *am* hated here in the Dark Realm as a failure. I guess coming back here every once in a while to see that nothing’s changed isn’t so bad!”

“Miss Maredia...”

“Come on, let’s keep going. We’re busting into the palace, right? I can take

you there. Even if I'm terrible at it, I'm still a Dark Queen."

"B-Bust in?!" *I didn't think we were doing anything so violent!*

"Yes, it's a raid. The Dark Emperor Thanatos is a total blockhead, you know?"

"Really?"

"Yes. He's the kind of guy to put more weight on a prophecy than on what's actually in front of his eyes. He works all night, never comes home, and mumbles so much you can't even understand what he's saying."

"...Huh?"

"He ignored me when I was holed up in the castle in the Human Realm, and _"

"Wait, wait, is the Dark Emperor your...?"

"Yes, that is correct, Sir Elder Dragon," Clowria answered in the Dark Queen's stead. "The Dark Emperor Thanatos whom we are heading to meet with is in fact the Dark Queen's father."

"Maredia's daddy?" Olivia echoed.

"...Yes. Though I haven't seen him for a thousand years, so... Ack, haugh?!"

As the Dark Queen shrugged, Olivia grabbed her from behind.

"Hi-yah!"

"Geh!" Losing her balance, the Dark Queen fell to the ground. "Hauuuuugh! Surprise attacks are for cowards, Olivia!" The Dark Queen struggled on the ground.

"Olivia, what are you doing?!"

"That was a fundamental technique of the martial arts taught among the Dark-Kin Knighthood," Clowria observed proudly. "I have been instructing her in it since she was a child. Your form was excellent, Olivia!"

"Now's not the time for that! Help me, Clowriaaaaa!"

I was caught totally off guard by Olivia's sudden behavior.

Olivia whispered to the Dark Queen. "You know I love you, right, Maredia?"

“...Haugh?”

Olivia hugged her tight as if she was trying to calm her down.

“You read with me, and we talk about Lena’s books together, and we always sneak into the kitchen to steal cookies together...”

“Olivia! That last one was supposed to be a secret!”

“You’re always going to be my big sister, okay? Okay?”

“Olivia...”

Olivia must have thought long and hard about what she wanted to say.

She really grew up into a kind girl, didn’t she?

As I called Olivia’s name...

“Hoo! Hah! I heard what you said! What insolence is this, planning to raid the palace?!”

...I heard someone calling out from above us.

“Huh?”

“Haugh, that voice...”

“Sir Elder Dragon, Olivia. Please step back. Things have taken an unfortunate turn,” Clowria whispered.

Looking up, we saw a number of dark-kin riding large birds hovering in the air above us. They were holding spears and swords. In the middle of them was a dark-kin man who was extremely muscular. He held a stick with large metal balls on each end—a dumbbell, I think it’s called? As he looked down on us, he was lifting it over and over. I had seen a number of small dumbbells lying around the castle that belonged to the Dark Queen, but since I’d never seen them moved, I figured they were probably some sort of decoration. I had heard they were for training one’s body, but this was my first time seeing how you were supposed to use them.

“Whoa, he’s so big!” Olivia’s eyes went wide. He certainly was large. His arms

were about as thick as my thighs when I was in human form. They were so fat! “D-Daddy... Why isn’t that man wearing any clothes?” Olivia was in shock. As she said, he wasn’t wearing anything above the waist. His muscles were totally visible!

“I have no idea...”

“Huh? You don’t know...?”

“Hoo! Hah! Shudder in terror, human girl. I am Massura, one of the Dark Realm’s Four Great Kings!”

“...M-Macchoda?”

“NO!!!”

“Wah!” Olivia hid behind me as he shouted. *That was awfully mean of him!*

“Hey, you! Please don’t yell at her!”

“Hm? And just who are you?”

“Haugh. Hold it, Elder Dragon. This is my brother, Massura.”

“Huh? Your brother?”

“Indeed.”

He *did* seem to have the same horns on his head as the Dark Queen, though one of them was broken.

“Hmm, I see... So you’re the powerful being my brother spoke of... Hoo! Hah!” Massura stared directly at me.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Very well, it has been decided. I shall begin by adding your defeat to my deeds of legend!”

“What?”

“Hoo!” Massura tossed away the dumbbell in his hand. “I shall punish all those who trespass into the Dark Realm without permission! Behold my power and despair!”

“Whoa!”

“Sir Elder Dragon!” Clowria shouted.

Bonk. Massura’s fist hit me. I was so surprised that I couldn’t dodge in time...

“Gaaaaaah!” But in the next moment, Massura was rolling on the ground.

“Oh no, are you okay?”

I’d done it again. Even if I was in human form, I was still a bit of a blockhead. After living for tens of thousands of years, a dragon’s head is very, very solid.

“My fists had no effect...?!”

“Hey, mister?” Olivia tugged on the edge of his clothes.

“Hm?”

“You dropped this.”

She held the dumbbell he had thrown away out to him.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaaaat?!” Massura shouted, his eyes open wide. “The dumbbell belonging to me, the most powerful man in all of the Dark Realm...is being lifted by an innocent little human girl?” Trembling, he retrieved the dumbbell from Olivia’s hand. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What is going on here?!”

“Wah, stop shouting!” Surprised by his sudden outburst, Olivia ran back behind me again.

“Are you okay, Olivia?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“Olivia must have used a spell to turn magical energy directly into strength,” Clowria explained. “Though it is a high-level technique among dark-kin, she has been training in such arts since a young age. It’s not something difficult for her.”

“Whoooooa! What immense shame!” Massura howled. “My first attack was turned aside so deftly, and then I was brought down by a single human girl!!!” As he shouted, he began lifting the dumbbell again and again at an incredible pace. *Maybe that’s some kind of self-soothing technique?*

“Haugh... I see my brother is as boorish as ever,” the Dark Queen sighed.

And then...

“All hands! Apprehend them!”

“Yes, sir!” The dark-kin still in the air all leveled their weapons at us.

Oh no! Was this going to become a fight?!

If I change back to my dragon form, then—

“Hold it, elder dragon!” the Dark Queen shouted.

“Huh?”

“I have a good idea. Let’s do as these men say.”

Ah, she has a plan.

Staying in my human form, I stood between them and Olivia. The Dark Queen explained the plan to us with a grave expression on her face.

“Your large form has considerable power on its own. If we do as they say, they will likely throw us in the dungeon.”

But...?

“Hoo! Hah! So you surrender!” Massura said, still working on his dumbbell. “How noble of you, Dark Queen Maredia. Father has summoned you!”

“Huh?”

“Uhh, if it’s her father, then...”

That meant the Dark Emperor Thanatos—the man who had the Vastearth Shield—was calling for her?

Chapter 9: The Foolish Dark Queen Goes Home

“Welcome to the Dark Emperor’s citadel.”

At the heart of the Dark Realm, a single, gloomy man had been waiting for them in the citadel, a castle even larger than Maredia’s. He was a skinny man with a sharp gaze. He was the Dark Emperor Thanatos—the ruler of the Dark Realm, and father of the Dark Queen Maredia.

“...Father.”

“Yo, Maredia. You’re supposed to warn me first when you plan on coming back.”

“...Haugh.” Maredia looked away at the emperor’s words.

“Oh my, don’t you feel like this rebellious phase has gone on for long enough? If you want to come home and cool off, you’re more than welcome.”

Maredia clicked her tongue at his slow, forceful words. “What kind of welcome is this? You just think I’m a failure anyway.”

“Of *course*, Maredia,” a new voice called out.

“...Chel.”

“Hee hee, long time no see, Maredia, Clowria,” said another. “Still playing around like low-tech losers?”

“...Jinia.”

“Umm, Miss Dark Queen, are these people...?”

“Yes, they’re my siblings.”

“Hah! Being related to someone as ignorant, powerless, and lacking in skill as you makes my skin crawl,” Chel spat. “You think the same, do you not, Father?”

Thanatos responded slowly to his son’s question. “...I suppose. I never expected the prophecy to be wrong.” Even though Maredia had been prophesied to be the child that would unite the Dark and Human Realms, her

invasion had ended in failure. “The child born in the 666th year of my reign... It matched perfectly with the words of the prophecy, so I had hoped for a lot. But if you failed, then that’s that.”

As Maredia stood silent, a nonchalant voice began speaking from beside her. It was the dragon.

“So you’re Mr. Thanatos?”

“...And who are you? You have an unfamiliar magical energy about you, and... Wait, you’re acting awfully casually for someone talking to the Dark Emperor.”

As the emperor frowned, a second cheerful voice called out to him.

“Hello! My name is Olivia Eldraco.”

“A human child...?”

“Tee hee, pleased to meet you!”

“P-Pleased to meet you as well.” Thanatos nodded in response to Olivia’s polite bow. “...No one saw that.” Clearing his throat, Thanatos resettled himself on the throne.

He really does *seem like the Dark Queen’s dad, doesn’t he?* the dragon thought to himself.

The emperor turned back to face Maredia. “Maredia, what is the meaning of this?” The furrow in his brow made his expression seem rather intense. “Following your defeat, I cut off all ties between the Dark and Human Realms. While you’ve been holed up in your castle, I have been doing everything in my power to restore the mana-deprived Dark Realm.”

“...”

“For you to show up here now—and with a human child no less—I have no idea what you’re thinking.” A burning aura emanated from the emperor’s right hand. The ring he wore there held tremendous magical energy.

“Daddy, is that ring...?” Olivia whispered.

“Yeah, that looks like one of the Hallows.” The ring had a beautiful jewel that held an intense power. The dragon had felt the same aura from it as the other

Hallows he had seen. The Gem-Stave of Eternity, the Twilight Crown, the Blade of Bluewater, and the Blessed Blaze-Lance all held similar powers.

Maredia still held her tongue.

“Maredia. Are you unable to speak?”

In her place, Clowria spoke up. “Excuse me—Lord Emperor, you have my deepest apologies.”

“Hm? You are...Maredia’s right hand, is it? I seem to remember you being a knight of some skill.”

“My name is Clowria, a servant of my liege, the Dark Queen Maredia. Lord Thanatos, we have come here on this occasion to make a request of you!”

“What? A request?”

“We have returned to the Dark Realm in order to guide these two, Olivia and her father, to you.”

“Oh? And what business does a human child have with me?”

“They wish to borrow your ring.”

“...What?” Thanatos stiffened at Clowria’s words.

“In the Human Realm, that ring is known as one of the Seven Supreme Hallows.” Clowria summarized the situation. “As such, Olivia would like to request to borrow your ring temporarily, my lord.”

Thanatos listened quietly until she was done explaining the situation. “Hmm... The Vastearth Shield, was it? It is true, this gem was originally found in a shield. I suppose someone in the Human Realm must have dropped it.”

“Yes, sir. It was once a possession of the humans. We would like to humbly request that you be willing to lend it to us for a brief time.”

In response to Clowria’s words...

“Obviously, that’s not something I can do.” Thanatos bluntly refused. “The magical power of this ring has supported the mana-starved Dark Realm for a thousand years. Thanks to it, even though Maredia’s invasion ended in failure, the Dark Realm has continued to sustain itself.” Thanatos held up the ring on his

finger. “The only one who can bear this ring is the ruler of the Dark Realm.”

“No way...”

“Which means...” Thanatos stood from the throne, stepping forward. “Maredia. If you were able to pass the Trial of the Dark Emperor, I would have no choice but to surrender this ring to you.”

“...Huh?” Maredia, who had been silent since her father arrived, finally lifted her head.

“The Emperor’s Trial?”

“What’s that?” Olivia and the dragon asked in unison.

“Ha ha... Ah ha ha ha ha!”

“Hoo! Hah! Father! You are being quite ridiculous!”

“Hee hee, of all things, asking her to do *that*?”

Maredia bit her lip at the jeers from her siblings.

“There’s no way that a failure like her could pass the Trial when the three of us couldn’t,” Chel declared.

“Haugh...”

“Uhh, Miss Dark Queen? Clowria? What is this ‘trial’?” the dragon asked, but before anyone could answer...

“Th-Th-That’s...totally impossible!!!” Maredia screamed.

* * *

The Trial of the Dark Emperor was a ritual to prove that a Dark King or Queen was worthy to rule the Dark Realm. One needed to enter a cave and endure a number of harsh obstacles. Since Thanatos ascended to the throne, no one had been able to pass it. Being a daughter of the current ruler of the Dark Realm, Maredia was of course qualified to take the Trial, but...

“No! No way, no chance, it’s totally impossible!”

“M-Miss Dark Queen...”

“We’re going home! I never should have come back here!” Even though she

was perfectly qualified, she couldn't bear the thought of adding to her failures. Maredia couldn't care less about the Seven Supreme Hallows. Of course, she did want to avoid a war in the Human Realm if at all possible, and if gathering the Hallows would accomplish that, she didn't mind helping out. However, undergoing the Trial of the Dark Emperor was totally out of the question.

"Maredia," the Dark Emperor Thanatos spoke from in front of his daughter. "You have betrayed the expectations of everyone around you. If you don't have the resolve to make up for that, then you have no right to ask anything of me."

"Haugh..."

"And, more than that, what are you doing, letting your servant speak in your stead? I don't remember raising you like that."

He was exactly right. That's the kind of father he had always been. As the emperor, he had treated Maredia more like a subordinate than as his daughter. She could understand his reasoning because as the ruler of the Dark Realm, he needed to treat everyone equally. But it was hard for Maredia to bear...

"If you've disappointed everyone, you'll need to accomplish something even greater to make up for it."

...because it was only natural to cut off a subordinate who had failed.

"Did you have to say it like that?!" the elder dragon complained.

But before the Dark Emperor could reply, Clowria's voice cut through.

"Lord Thanatos!"

"...What is it, former Knight-Captain?"

"Please take back what you just said."

"Hm?"

"The Dark Queen is not a disappointment in the least!" Clowria stood as if to cover for Maredia. "My liege has borne those wounds for a thousand years...no, for even longer. I will not permit anyone to speak of her in such a way."

"Oh?"

"I must request you refrain from making such unreasonable demands of her.

E-Even if you are the emperor!”

Maredia’s eyes went wide. This was the Clowria that always spoiled her, that always put up with any selfishness or laziness from her. It seemed Clowria really was her only ally.

“...I couldn’t care less about the Hallows.”

There was no wish that Maredia wanted to be granted. She didn’t care about wars between humans. She had no desire to live with a bunch of people who hated her just for being dark-kin. And living in the Dark Realm where she’d be ridiculed by her siblings nonstop was just as bad. If she could live together with Clowria, just the two of them for the rest of her life, she’d be happy with that.

No way, Maredia thought. *I can’t do anything, and I don’t* want *to do anything. That’s who I’m supposed to be, right?* She had enjoyed her time living with the elder dragon and Olivia, but she had started acting out of character.

“Sorry, but don’t get your hopes up,” mumbled the Dark Queen Maredia, who had once been defeated by the humans.

“Miss Dark Queen...”

“Then it’s decided. We’re done talking,” Thanatos spat.



Looking down coldly at her were (three of) the Four Great Kings of the Dark Realm.

“Hey, Maredia. I won’t give you the ring. And there’s no place for you here in the Dark Realm. Why don’t you go back to relaxing in the Human Realm for a while?”

“Maredia...” Olivia called out to her friend. Seeing her disappointed expression didn’t help.

Maredia was just a useless, good-for-nothing Dark Queen anyway.

* * *

Immediately after Maredia’s group had left the citadel, in the throne room...

“Okay then, I’m going to go ahead and get started on the curry. Make sure you’re all home in time for dinner.”

“Yes, sir!”

Thanatos left the throne room behind, and the atmosphere in the room immediately relaxed.

“Father is being rather harsh on her, is he not? Hoo! Hah!”

“Massura, can you stop with all that grunting?”

“No need to be so bitter, Jinia!”

“If you don’t quiet down, I won’t help you with your training machines anymore!”

“That is unacceptable!”

Massura continued to work constantly on training his body as Jinia restlessly fidgeted with the tablet in her hand. They were total opposites, yet got along perfectly.

The eldest brother, Chel, pushed his glasses up on his face with a sigh. “Jeez, trying to get Maredia to do the Trial... Even just going there would be a waste of time for her. If it hadn’t been for that absurd prophecy, *I* would have led the invasion into the Human Realm—and things would have ended totally differently.”

“Indeed. We would have never let Martell and our brothers get stranded in the Human Realm like that!”

“Exactly. Rather, using them as a foothold, we could turn them to our advantage in starting a new invasion.”

“Hee hee, and here we go again. Chel’s on about how strong he would have been!” Chel glared at the shrugging Jinia, and the woman continued. “If we started another invasion, we’d have to go out and do all kinds of things, right? Honestly, I was just as happy that Maredia gave up and let the humans win.”

“Hoo! Hah! You could say that again! The invasion cut into my training time quite a bit!”

“Hee hee, exactly! Losing precious time to work on my inventions was the worst.”

“Hah. You two have no ambition at all.”

“You use your days off to stay at home and play your strategy games, right? Don’t push yourself so hard.”

“Grr...”

“Either way, thanks to The Ring that we got from the Human Realm, our mana problem was solved, and we’ve got plenty of energy saved up. I feel like the invasion was plenty successful!”

At Jinia’s words, (three of) the Four Great Kings nodded quietly.

Those of the Dark Emperor’s bloodline were fundamentally shut-ins.

Chapter 10: Mr. Dragon Holds a Party

The morning sun was slowly rising over the Sacred Peak of Olympias. I was preparing breakfast as usual in the dining hall of the former Dark Queen's castle. Olivia had gotten up early and had just come in from tending the herb garden outside.

Today's breakfast was pancakes with fruit jam. I concentrated on making them into perfect circles. It was supposed to be a fun morning, but for some reason, I was troubled.

"Hmm... At this rate, we won't be able to get the Seven Supreme Hallows..." Lots of people had cheered us on as we spent our summer vacation looking for them. We had finally found the Vastearth Shield—or perhaps more appropriately, the Vastearth Ring—but we were closed in on all sides.

By the way, the phrase "closed in on all sides" is a metaphor that means that you can't go forward, backward, to the sides, or diagonally. At first, I thought, couldn't you just fly away? But people can't fly. How inconvenient.

In a corner of the kitchen, Olivia gave a big sigh as she read her book.

"Do you think Maredia is okay?"

"Hm. She's been stuck in her room for five days now, hasn't she?" It was hard not to sympathize with her. As a father myself, the way Thanatos and her siblings had treated her had upset me a little.

But there was one more thing I was curious about...

"I kind of want to talk to Miss Clowria too."

The Dark Queen had barely talked to anyone when we were in the Dark Realm. Whenever there was a situation where she would have had to speak, Clowria would step in and speak for her. I hadn't thought about it until now, but if Clowria hadn't been there, Maredia wouldn't have been able to do anything. Well, even if that wasn't the case, she'd probably think that she couldn't do anything on her own. And I was starting to think the Dark Queen thought that

because of Clowria.

“Independence, huh?”

It was a word I had seen countless times in the parenting books I read. Even if I had understood how important it was, teaching independence and self-reliance to a child was really hard. I couldn’t let something terrible happen to Olivia and would protect her with all my strength. But...I couldn’t do that forever. Olivia couldn’t live the rest of her life under my wings. She was a human, and I wanted her to grow up to be able to live happily in the human world.

“Hmm, what a problem.” I turned the problem over in my mind as I flipped the batter in the pan. I finished plating the pancakes with plenty of butter, honey, and just a touch of fruit jam. “Okay, Olivia, let’s eat!” I gave the perfectly formed pancakes to Olivia, while I took the slightly misshapen and burnt ones for myself.

“Okay, just let me finish reading this page.” Olivia was tracing the page with her finger as she read.

“What are you reading?”

“Uhh, it’s an old folk tale from Luca’s country.”

“Luca’s country? Oh, in the east?”

“Yeah. It’s a story about the gods from that country. It’s about how they created it... Huh?”

“‘Huh?’”

“Oh, wow!” Olivia slammed the book shut.

“What’s up, Olivia?” Her previously downcast eyes were now sparkling.

“Daddy!” She was very much wearing her “I have an idea” face. “After breakfast, I’m going out for a bit!”

“Where are you going, sweety?”

“Tee hee, to a lot of places!”

“Oh?”

Olivia whispered into my ear. “I’m going to go get everybody, and then...”

“I see, I see.” She had a fantastic idea to help the heartbroken Dark Queen! “Well, in that case, she might just come out of her room...”

“Right?!” Olivia laughed. “I love those two, so I want to do something for them.”

H-How thoughtful!

I gave Olivia a big hug. “Then I’m going to have to help too.”

“Okay! Thanks, Daddy!”

Olivia’s plan would need a lot of delicious food. *Just leave the cooking to me, Olivia!*

* * *

“Okay, uhh, if I do this, then...” Olivia drew a magic circle, looking at the grimoire in her hand. She worked quickly and it was a perfect copy of the one in the book. However, she hadn’t made just one...

“*Wander into a path darker than darkness. Open,* Demon’s Gate*!*”

Together with Olivia’s voice, the magic circle warped and twisted, opening a path.

“Okay, I’m going now!”

“Come back safe,” I answered.

Olivia leaped into the *Demon’s Gate.*

“Now then...” I had a lot of work to do myself. I had to gather herbs from the garden, buy some eggs from town, and I needed flour, potatoes, and vegetables... It was going to be a busy day!

“I sure hope the Dark Queen enjoys it.”

Popping into my dragon form, I headed off to town.

* * *

“Daddy, I’m back!”

“Welcome home, Olivia!” Just as I had finished arraying all the ingredients I

had gathered, Olivia made it home.

“Excuse us!”

“Oh, good day, Mr. Eldraco.”

“Here, I have a present from my father.”

Kate, Daisy, and Iria had come along with her. I felt like they were all a bit taller than the last time I had seen them.

Kids really grow up fast, don’t they?

“Oh, if you’re cooking, let me help! I showed my dad that milk porridge you made, and it got really popular! They’re even serving it in the royal court now!”

“What? Really?!”

“Yep! I brought some gifts as a thank you.”

“That’s amazing, Mr. Eldraco!”

“Seeing a dragon really improved the morale of the soldiers at Kenrou. My father sends his thanks.”

Oh, really? I’m glad I was able to help!

“All right then, let’s all pitch in!” Kate said. “With these ingredients, we’re making a cake with fresh fruit, right?” Kate wasted no time in washing her hands and putting on an apron.

“We can help too. After all, we don’t get a party like this very often!” Daisy said.

“Understood. I will begin arranging the equipment.”

“It’s not equipment, it’s cutlery, Iria,” Daisy corrected her.

“I’m heading out again!” Olivia said.

“Okay, see you later.”

“I’m bringing everyone else, so wait for us!” Olivia ran out of the room, leaving the pitter-patter of her footsteps behind.

At this rate, it looked like Olivia’s plan was going to turn out well!

As her Daddy, I was quite impressed. Olivia's classmates had all gathered in the garden outside. I worked together with Kate to make her special cake. We also made a bread gratin loaded with cheese, a pasta dish with a tomato and herb sauce, and a brightly colored omelet filled with all sorts of vegetables. Kate's special dishes and desserts were all lined up on the table.

On top of that, the chatter in our garden was quite lively.

"Milady, would you perchance req-uisite more tea?!"

"If you're having more, Luca, then sure."

"Then I shall bring enough for everyone!"

"Who would have thought we'd be invited to one of Daisy's friend's houses. It's great, isn't it, Rosa?"

"H-Hm. Just what about this is a proper party? Well, I suppose this sort of down-to-earth get-together is fun in its own way."

"Twee, twee. ♪"

"Wah! Wh-What is it with this fairy?!"

"Oh, sorry about the sylphs. They just wouldn't shut up until I said they could come too. What's that look for, madame? Ah, are dark-kin like me so rare? I suppose you wouldn't have a chance to meet many of us, being nobles... But no, I have no intention of fighting with you. I'm Martell. I'm Lena's guardian...err, uhh...I guess like her mother. Nice to meet you."

"My apologies for my wife Rosa's behavior. May I ask why you are wearing a hood, Martell?"

"Hm? Ah, I have a bit of an injury on my head I need to cover... Please don't mind my clothes."

That's right; even the adults we met on our journey had come to our home!

"Welcome to the Eldraco residence!" Everyone cheered as I welcomed them.

Now the preparations for the party were complete. All that was left was...

“Do you think Maredia will come out?”

The party in the garden was in direct line of sight of a window in the Western Tower—leading directly into the Dark Queen’s room. She definitely would have been able to see us. Olivia was watching the window the whole time.

“Don’t worry, Olivia.”

“Daddy...”

I’m sure your plan will go just fine.

Chapter 11: The Foolish Dark Queen Emerges from Her Room

Even five days after returning from the Dark Realm, the Dark Queen Maredia had still yet to leave her room.

“The Trial of the Dark Emperor, huh?” She knew it was something she should do. Her brothers and sisters had all taken it and failed long ago. Someone could only attempt the Trial once. Neither her siblings nor her father thought she had any chance of passing, and if she failed, the Trial would then be opened to those outside of Thanatos’s own children.

If she wanted to reclaim the trust of the dark-kin that she had lost because of the failed invasion of the Human Realm, passing the Trial would be the easiest way to do it. Even if she failed, those with plans to take the throne for themselves would rejoice that their last obstacle was finally out of their way. And if by some miracle she passed, maybe she’d be forgiven just a little for her previous failures.

On top of that, if she did pass the Trial, she would obtain The Ring, the most prized treasure of the Dark Realm which also possessed the Gem of Earth. That would make Olivia’s summer homework assignment a resounding success and would allow her to open the gates between the Human Realm and the Dark Realm once again. This would also allow her to do something about the dark-kin that had been stranded in the Human Realm since the war. If she could do that, then maybe, just maybe, the hatred directed at her would weaken.

“Haugh... But it’s impossible.”

There was no way she could pass.

She was scared. Scared of failing, scared of being mocked when she inevitably did. She was terrified of the jeering that would inevitably come if she tried her best and failed once more.

No one had any faith in her at all. In that case, it was better not to even try. If

she never took the Trial, she couldn't fail it. Those feelings were tormenting her.

"After all, dark-kin are hated because of me. I'm sure everyone hates me."

Even if a war broke out in the Human Realm over the Seven Supreme Hallows, she was confident she could protect this castle, and with Olivia around, the castle wasn't at risk at all. Even if she didn't realize it herself, Olivia was terrifyingly powerful. She was absurdly strong. They also had an elder dragon on their side, so they could ignore any squabbles between humans. Wouldn't that be enough?

Maredia sat, curled up on her bed. On her right hand was a ring, set with a jewel the same color as Clowria's hair. Thinking back on the smile of the girl who had given it to her caused a kind of pain to well up in her chest.

Maybe I should take it off... she began to think, totally lost within her own negative feelings.

"Umm, my Queen?" Clowria called out to her from beside her bed. She had been staying there since they had come back five days ago.

"Haugh? What is it, Clowria? I'm not feeling well."

"No, umm, outside the window..."

"The window? Haugh, it's just the ordinary seasonal scenery, is it not?"

"No, look lower. Down there."

"Down...?"

Maredia slowly picked herself up from her bed and opened the window. For the first time in five days, a fresh breeze made its way into her room.

"Wow, the solid sugar on this cake adds so much texture!"

"Amazing, the cheese on this pizza still seems freshly melted..."

"This wild peach juice is positively delect-icious."

"Hey, Olivia, what's with that headband?"

"It's so cute! A cat...hmm, I'll put that in my next book."

Boisterous voices floated in from the courtyard below the window.

They belonged to children from the Florence Royal Academy for Girls and several adults that Maredia had never met.

“I apologize for the wait, everyone. A mother’s work is never done.”

“Oh, Phyllis is here... That dress is incredible!”

“I heard it was a party, so I felt the need to represent the dignity of the elves... Esmeralda! Just how much food are you planning to eat?!”

“Ha ha ha! In a situation like this, whoever has the most fun wins! Hic!”

“*And* you’ve been drinking?!”

Maredia blinked in shock. *What is going on?*

“So many partygoers?! Outside *my* sweet home?!”

“My liege, are you not interested in joining them?”

“Haugh?! O-O-Of course not!” she replied as she dove back into her bed, occasionally sneaking a glance out the window.

The sounds of people having fun.

The smells of many delicious foods.

And also—

“Olivia Dearest, is Marie not going to join us?”

Luca’s voice. The girl was her very first honorary sister aside from Olivia, and incredibly important to her.

“...Urgh...”

“My Queen, well... As rude as it is for me to say, I must admit to being incredibly curious as to what is occurring in the garden. I would very much like to go investigate for myself...”

Maredia’s only reply was an unhappy grunt.

“Might I have your permission to go?”

Guessing at what Clowria was trying to say, Maredia jumped out of her bed. “Fine! Fine!”

In short, what Clowria was trying to say was: if her servant wanted to go take a look, Maredia herself would have to go too.

“Let us go take a look together then.” Clowria extended her hand towards her, adorned with a single ring that glittered in the light of the room. Maredia took her hand in hers, her own ring completing the pair of beautiful, shining stones.

* * *

“Miss Maredia!”

The moment the Dark Queen stepped outside, Olivia ran to her side and pulled her into the middle of all the other kids. The way she was so serious about having fun with them made the Dark Queen quite popular among the girls. A slightly older girl (in appearance, at least) who was willing to play with them on their level was always popular.

“Thank goodness...” Clowria murmured before someone poked at her shoulder.

“Miss Clowria?” It was the dragon.

“Was this banquet your idea, Sir Elder Dragon?”

“No, it was Olivia’s.”

“What was the occasion?”

“There’s a folk tale from Luca’s home country about a god who hid within a stone for a long time after something bad happened. In order to draw them out of hiding, the people held a party. The god was curious about all the music, and so it started to peek outside again.” Olivia had based her plan on that story.

Clowria was totally impressed. “Olivia thought of something like that...”

“Yes. Everyone was worried about Miss Dark Queen,” the dragon said, handing Clowria a hot cup of tea. A piece of cream-covered fruit cake was laid on the saucer alongside it. “Um, if it’s okay, could I ask you something about the Dark Queen?”

“What would you like to know, Sir Elder Dragon?”

“Umm... I was thinking about it, and really I don’t know anything about her...”

Clowria nodded as she took a sip of tea, gazing out at the Dark Queen, who was smiling for the first time in five days. “She spent the last thousand years not seeing anyone by choice, but in reality, my liege truly gets very lonely,” she began slowly.

* * *

“Since the moment she was born, the Dark Queen Maredia was special...”

She had been deemed the “child of prophecy.” In short, she’d been born with the fate of leading an invasion of the Human Realm. Because of that, her siblings—and her eldest brother Chel in particular—had distanced themselves from her from the start.

In order to dispel that envy, that doubt, and those high expectations, my Queen had made many sacrifices. But in truth, she had always been a kind girl. She loved the stories of the Human Realm and the humans who appeared in them. In reality, she never truly wanted to fight them.

As her foster sister, I had supported her since the moment she was born. Ah, I say “foster sister” because my mother was Maredia’s wet nurse. Though we still were technically master and servant, we lived like true sisters.

Ever since she was young, the Dark Queen had always been somewhat weak-willed. She had wanted to avoid fighting with the humans if at all possible. She told me that every day. Unfortunately, the prophecy was absolute. Her father, the Dark Emperor Thanatos, was especially strict with his own family members.

He would always say, “It sets a bad example for me to treat my family better than others.” He had ruled over the Dark Realm since he was at a young age, and I am sure his life was nothing if not full of hardships, but even so, he was exceptionally hard on my liege. He wouldn’t allow even a single word of resistance from her.

In the end, the invasion of the Human Realm began. For the entire duration of the campaign, she played the role of a merciless, calculating, powerful Dark Queen. But in truth, the experience had broken her heart.

So, I decided that I would protect her at all costs. However, after one hundred years of war, I failed to defend her against the Hero's party. My Queen would have easily been able to escape back to the Dark Realm if she had been alone. In that case, her loss would not have been recognized as a total defeat, and perhaps history would have recorded the result of the invasion as being a draw. However, she lost against them because she stayed to cover for me. Her library of grimoires, filled with books and precious tomes that she had secretly collected during the war, had been sealed up by them as well.

While I was unconscious, the gates connecting the Human Realm and the Dark Realm were shut, as you have already heard. The dark-kin stranded in the Human Realm began to be oppressed by the humans, and seeing that broke my liege's heart even further. For a thousand years, she would not so much as step foot outside of the castle.

So from my perspective, this has seemed like a miracle. To see her go outside because she was "bored," or to see her talk with Olivia's friends...

Clowria drained the rest of her now cold tea. "So, I regretted it. I should not have brought her back to the Dark Realm. The dark-kin still view her with hostility..."

"So that's how it is..."

"I hate to see anything or anyone hurt my liege."

"I understand how you feel," the dragon said, stuffing a piece of cake into his mouth before continuing his thought. "I could never forgive someone that hurt Olivia, and I would never want to... But you know, Clowria..."

"Yes?"

"I don't think I can protect Olivia forever. I'm not the one who gets to decide what hurts her and what makes her happy, right?"

"Well..."

"There's a difference between loving her and spoiling her," he said clearly and with conviction. "I love Olivia with everything I have. So I am always worried that my desire to protect her might end up spoiling her."

“Sir Elder Dragon...”

“I’m a dragon, so I don’t understand people very well. And even if I were a human, I doubt I’d understand Olivia perfectly either.” As he spoke, his gentle gaze turned to his daughter. “We’re still family...but we’re different people.”

“I suppose you are right...”

“What do you think, Clowria?”

“About?”

“About that ‘trial’ thing?”

“Ah, the Trial of the Dark Emperor?” Clowria pondered for a moment. “I believe that if she were to take the Trial, it would serve to bolster her self-confidence. If it would alleviate some of the hostility she faces from those around her, it would be worth trying.”

“Yeah.”

“And if the Seven Supreme Hallows that Olivia is trying to gather could spark a war in the Human Realm if they’re used incorrectly—” Clowria paused, seemingly having made a decision. “I wish my Queen would stand in the way of that.”

After the long conversation, Clowria stuck a fork into her cake. The cake covered in fruit and cream was soft yet solid, sweet yet tart. The gentle flavor cheered Clowria right up.

“If you don’t mind, would you share some with Miss Dark Queen? This cake was really popular, so this is all that’s left.” A cute array of fruit cake slices sat on the plate the dragon offered to her.

“Thank you,” Clowria said, rising to her feet.

* * *

“Your Darkness, umm, I have something to discuss with you.”

Maredia turned at the sound of a familiar voice calling for her. Clowria was staring at her, a plate of fruit cake and a cup of tea in her hands. Stepping away from the group of students, she went and sat down with her retainer.

“It is about the Trial of the Dark Emperor.”

Maredia’s expression immediately dropped. “That kind of thing is impossible for me.” Before Clowria could say anything else, she refused. She understood, even if only faintly, that if she ran away from the Trial, she would never be able to escape her misery. But it was still terrifying. The thought of failing any more than she already had. The thought of betraying everyone’s expectations again.

“I don’t want to take the Trial,” she said, balling her hands into fists. “I mean, most dark-kin already hate me. The humans hate me too...and I finally have...f...f...”

“Uhh...my liege?”

“F-F-F-Friends!” Maredia looked over to where Olivia and Luca still chatted happily. Noticing her gaze, Olivia waved to her, but Maredia could only reply with a listless wave of her own. “...I have friends now. I don’t want to betray their expectations again.”

“But, my Queen...”

“Haugh, there’s no ‘but’! I can’t do it! I just can’t!”

“But *I* believe in you.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t expect anything from you. But I believe that you can do it.” Clowria reached out towards her, taking Maredia’s balled-up hand in her own. “I believe that you, my beautiful, kindhearted Dark Queen, have the power to break the deadlock of this situation.”

“Wha...?” Maredia met Clowria’s determined gaze, finding herself at a loss for words. Ever since she was young, she always had wanted to live up to the expectations of those around her. The invasion that was demanded of her had gone totally against her personality, so there had been nothing for her to do but play the role of the dread-inspiring Dark Queen. From her grueling training at a young age to her defeat at the hands of the Hero’s party, not a single thing she had done was what she had wanted to do.

Maredia dropped her gaze. “I thought you were supposed to be my ally,

Clowria.”

“I am!”

“Haugh?”

“Even if you were to fail the Trial, I would not be disappointed. Instead, I would be proud that you were brave enough to challenge it in the first place.”

Maredia stopped to think, feeling the warmth of Clowria’s hand. Was passing the Trial of the Dark Emperor even possible? If she somehow managed to do it, maybe she would deserve a little praise. She chased the thought in circles around in her head.

“Maredia!” Olivia called out to her.

Looking up, she saw Olivia—and a dark-kin woman.

“Yo, Maredia. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? I suppose about a thousand years at this point. Do you remember me?”

“Haugh... Martell!”

“Oh, looks like you do remember your sister after all.”

Martell, the dark-kin living in the Chirin Forest, was another daughter of the Dark Emperor Thanatos and Maredia’s older sister.

“Are you here to insult me as well?”

“Ah ha ha ha. I guess I did get stuck in the Human Realm, and I can’t say I haven’t suffered for it. And as you can see, I have to hide my horns with this hood. Even though the kids don’t mind them, there are plenty of old-timers that give me trouble. I’ve got some complaints, but none for you. Today I’m just here as Lena’s guardian.”

“Haugh?”

Lena? She realized she meant one of Olivia’s classmates, the one who made those hilarious picture books. Maredia had known the silver-haired, quiet girl had dark-kin blood, but she never would have guessed that Martell was her guardian.

“Ha...ugh...?”

“I’ve started reading Lena’s picture books recently thanks to Olivia. Actually, Lena just wrote this one during summer vacation...but it felt kind of nostalgic for some reason.”

Maredia looked over the book Martell handed her. It showed a character modeled after Maredia, living happily in a school clearly modeled after the academy. The main character’s name was “Maru.”

“Thinking about Lena and the relationship between humans and dark-kin, I’ve lived a long time being quite angry. But it seems like Lena’s really took a liking to you.”

She flipped through the book. Maru was smiling brightly on page after page.

“I heard from Olivia that you were worried about the Trial of the Dark Emperor. Well, you already know that I failed it,” Martell said, pointing to the broken horn on her head. If one failed the Trial, the consequence was that one of their horns would be broken. The only one of Thanatos’s children that had yet to take the Trial was Maredia herself.

“Well... You can look forward to finding out what the Trial is once you’ve started it, but just getting it over with is a lot easier than worrying about it all the time, don’t you think?” Martell shrugged. “Anyway, I only came here to thank you because of that book, so I won’t bother you about the Trial anymore.”

“To thank me?”

“Yeah. I wanted to say thanks for getting along with Lena. Thanks to you, she’s been able to learn to love humans and dark-kin just the same.”

“That had nothing to do with me...” Maredia mumbled, not sure what to say. She realized Lena was looking at her from a distance.

“That’s not true at all, Maredia.”

“Olivia?”

“I remember that you were the one who recommended Lena’s books to Luca, right?”

“Hm? Was I...?”

“You made them sound so fun to read and anyone who heard you talk about them wanted to read them too. That’s what everyone said.”

“...Everyone?”

Maredia suddenly realized all of the children had started gathering around her. The friends that Olivia had traveled everywhere to gather for this party.

“Jeez, you always become deep-pressed so quickly!” Luca spoke as harshly as always.

“Everyone was worried about you,” Olivia said. “Because we all care about you so much.”

Tears started to form in the Dark Queen’s eyes.

Everyone around her was smiling. She could feel Clowria squeeze her hand as she started to tremble.

“I... Haugh...”

Maredia finally realized it. She really loved everyone’s smiles. She loved the bright, warm world that Olivia had drawn her into.

“I’ll...try a little!”

So, Maredia made up her mind. She could try and be a little brave. In order to protect this life she had found, she would take on the Trial of the Dark Emperor.

“Hah! I will have to get that Hallow for you after all!”

Chapter 12: Mr. Dragon Heads to the Dark Realm (Again)

The Dark Queen looked at me with a serious expression.

“Elder Dragon, your time has come!”

“Huh? Me?”

In order to encourage the Dark Queen, who had decided to take the Trial of the Dark Emperor after all, I had created a breakfast menu full of her favorites. Ginger cookies, cupcakes, omelets over rice, jam-smothered crepes, and spaghetti with red sauce. According to *Delicious Recipes Children Will Love*, this was basically all junk food and absolutely not acceptable for breakfast, but the Dark Queen and Olivia were so happy to see the spread on the table. I couldn’t help but feel like something like this wasn’t so bad once in a while.

The Dark Queen continued talking as she munched on a cookie. “Going back to that blockhead father of mine and saying, ‘Actually, I changed my mind, please let me take the test’ would make me look like a fool!”

“I see.”

“So, Elder Dragon, I need you to turn into the biggest dragon you can be!”

“...I don’t get it.” I had no idea what she was getting at. As I sat confused, I started on my omelet on which Olivia had written “I ❤ Daddy” in ketchup. It tasted incredible!

“Haugh. That blockhead would definitely try and stop me if I tried to take the Trial after saying that I wouldn’t once before. I can’t have him look down on me like that.”

“Oh?”

“So, I’ll make a magnificent entrance on the back of an elder dragon! Then, I’ll declare that I’ll take the Trial! It’ll look cool enough that there won’t be any issues!”

“Is that how it works?”

“That is exactly how it works! My father puts a lot of emphasis on appearances, you know!”

“You know, Sir Elder Dragon, the plan to invite you to join the dark-kin army a thousand years ago was hatched by Lord Thanatos himself.”

“Wait, really?!”

“That was why I ended up on the Sacred Peak back then, teeth chattering all the way.” I guess that was why the Dark Queen had come to see me way back then.

“This plan is flawless. Please, lend me your strength!” the Dark Queen begged.

I wasn’t sure what to do.

“You look really cool when you’re big!” Olivia said.

If that’s the case... I decided immediately. “All right, let’s do it!”

* * *

At the Dark Emperor’s Citadel, a sneeze echoed throughout Thanatos’s throne room.

He had spent the last few days depressed, mulling over how his treatment of his youngest daughter after she finally came to see him had *definitely* made her hate him.

“Ugh... I don’t want people to think I’m mixing my personal affairs with business, so I made sure to act as a Dark Emperor should...but now that’s exactly what I’m doing, isn’t it?” he sighed.

It was only natural that she would hate him. Even in the beginning, he had prioritized the prophecy handed down in the Dark Realm over the thoughts and feelings of his own child. After Maredia’s defeat, he had lost to the top brass and public’s opinion and ended up sealing the gates to the Human Realm right away. Putting the lives of his compatriots still in the Human Realm against the constant loss of magical energy on a scale to weigh his options, he had chosen in favor of the latter. If his only concern was for the future of the Dark Realm,

that had been the correct choice.

But, of course, that ended up wounding Maredia.

A thousand years ago, Thanatos had been a lot younger and a lot less experienced than he was now.

“I really failed as a father, didn’t I?” If not for his position as the Dark Emperor, he would have spoiled Maredia totally rotten...but there was no way to change what he had done in the past. “I can’t just tell her to come back home out of nowhere, can I? Even if we can’t live together, is there really no way we can get along?”

Thanatos sighed again, rubbing his eyes. The pressure of his regular duties combined with the stress of Maredia’s sudden return had him in disarray and he had hardly been able to sleep for the past five days.

Rumble rumble rumble.

“Gah... So depressing... I just want to lock myself in my room...”

Rumble rumble rumble.

“...? What’s that?” Thanatos frowned at the strange sound.

“Lord Thanatos! Something terrible has happened!”

“Calm yourself. What’s wrong?” As the guard rushed into the room, Thanatos hurriedly recovered his dignified, imperial persona. Seeing his rigid expression, the guard immediately straightened up.

“Sir! Uhh... A dragon has entered the Dark Realm!”

“A dragon? Is a demi dragon or something going wild? Dispatch a subjugation detail immediately.”

“It’s not a demi dragon! Err...judging by its size and magical power, it seems to be an elder dragon!”

“What?!”

Elder dragons were beings that lived long ago in the Human Realm. Compared to the tiny races that lived in that realm now, the intensity of an elder dragon’s magical energy and presence were magnitudes apart.

There were rumors of one such dragon sleeping on the Sacred Peak of Olympias. Thanatos had sent Maredia there a thousand years ago to try and recruit it, knowing full well it was hopeless.

But were there still some elder dragons alive in the present day?

“This rumbling...is because of the elder dragon?!” Hiding his shock, he turned back to the guard. “Why is it in the Dark Realm of all places? Tell me what it’s doing.”

“Y-Yes, sir...uhh...”

“Speak.”

“Sir! Umm, the Dark Queen Maredia is riding on the dragon’s head!”

“...What?” *Maredia* was riding an *elder dragon*? “What are you talking about? I was told that the plan to recruit the elder dragon during the invasion a thousand years ago had failed!”

“M-My apologies! I don’t know anything more!”

Thanatos clicked his tongue. “Fine. I’ll go see for myself.”

With a flourish of his cloak, the Dark Emperor Thanatos stepped out of the throne room.

* * *

“R-Rooooaaaar!”

I tried to make as scary a face as possible as I walked carefully through the Dark Realm. In order to avoid stepping on any of the dark-kin or their buildings, I had to walk on my tiptoes. It was honestly hard work. Back in Shutora, the people had done everything they could to get out of my way, but here the dark-kin were crowding around with their magic tablets, trying to take Che-Kis of me. Crowds were tough no matter what form I was in!

“Wah ha ha ha ha! The Dark Queen Maredia has returned!” the Dark Queen declared from atop my head, her cloak billowing behind her as she struck an imposing stance. It looked like she was having fun.

“Good luck, Daddy!” Olivia cheered me on from where she was hiding in my

mane.

Do you realize how difficult this is, Olivia? Walking on my toes like this is really hard!

I thought it would be fine to fly through the Dark Realm, but the Dark Queen insisted we go as slowly as possible in order to draw as much attention to her as we could.

“My liege has put on this grand performance so that she has no option of backing out,” Clowria explained. She was concerned but still chose to believe in her queen.

“O-Oh, is that it?”

“Yes. That is her intention.”

I see. But since the Dark Queen was standing on my head, I could tell that her legs were shaking. She was clearly still afraid. Despite her fears, she had decided to come back to the Dark Realm and take the Trial of the Dark Emperor for the sake of Olivia and the peace of the Human Realm.

You really are a kind person, Miss Dark Queen.

As we approached the castle...

“What are you doing in my Dark Realm?!” Thanatos came out to greet us. He was riding an animal with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion. I think it’s called a “griffin”? It looked really cool.

“...Father.”

“Maredia, what are you doing here?”

“I-I...I haven’t spent the past thousand years just sitting in my castle doing nothing! I came here to prove that.”

“Hm?”

“I have deepened my relationship with this elder dragon, and spent countless nights analyzing the lore and culture of the Human Realm!”

Ah, I see.

She *had* spent the whole time in her castle reading, hadn’t she?

“I know how our two realms differ. I know where the Human Realm has surpassed us, and where it has fallen behind!”

“...Hmph. I already know that you have secretly been ordering things from the Dark Realm. So, what of it?”

“Haugh! S-So!” The Dark Queen glanced back at Clowria. And then she declared in a loud voice, striking a daring pose. “I have decided to take the Trial of the Dark Emperor! And once I have completed it, I will take the Gem of Earth that sits on your finger for myself!”



＊ ＊ ＊

The Dark Emperor Thanatos was in shock.

Riding a dragon, and striking her signature pose?! How is my daughter so cool?!

That's right. Thanatos was totally taken in by Maredia's performance.

On the other hand...

E-Everyone is staring at me...! This is so embarrassing! the elder dragon thought to himself.

The entire Dark Realm was in an uproar. The dragon wasn't used to having so much attention on himself.

＊ ＊ ＊

Apparently, our performance had been a success because we were invited into the throne room immediately.

"Father! What is the meaning of this? There is no mention in the prophecy of an elder dragon appearing in the Dark Realm!"

"Hee hee, Bleater is down. Everyone's in a panic!"

"Hoo! Hah! Striking down such a dragon in a single blow will be a fine workout for me!"

The Dark Queen's siblings sat around Thanatos. Chel was holding up his glasses with one hand, Massura was working out with his dumbbell, and Jinia was fiddling with some sort of device.

These dark-kin were just too laid-back, I thought. Though, I realized that Phyllis often got mad at me for the same kind of thing.

"I see; you have decided to take the Trial."

"Indeed! With an elder dragon behind me, I have no blind spots!" the Dark Queen said, striking a pose again.

“Hee hee, you’re really getting into it, aren’t you Maredia? You don’t *have* to take the Trial, so you shouldn’t bother. You’re just going to fail anyway.”

“Haugh... W-We won’t know that until I try...”

“Even my magical tools couldn’t defeat that trial. For someone like you, who has nothing but a prophecy behind you, it’s totally impossible.”

“Haugh...”

“Hoo! Hah! Even my muscles were not able to break through! I strongly recommend you reconsider, Maredia!”

“You be quiet, Massura!”

“What can a frail body such as yours accomplish?!”

“B-Being small has nothing to do with it!”

“I am not speaking of your figure!” Massura said, flexing. I quietly tried taking on the same pose as him, but my muscles didn’t bulge like his did. Maybe dragons just didn’t have that much muscle. *I still think I’m plenty strong though...*

“...I am in favor of her taking the Trial,” Chel said, pushing his glasses up again. “It appears you did not realize how much of a failure you are from your defeat a thousand years ago. So go ahead, prove the foolishness of that prophecy, and show us that you are below even the rabble outside!”

“Hmph, lower than the rabble?” the Dark Queen said, crossing her arms as she glared back at him. “I am already well aware of that! I am an ordinary Dark Queen, after all.”

“...Hm?”

“I have a tendency to sulk and lose my temper. I spend all my time alone indoors, but still get happy when my friends come to visit. I am *totally* ordinary.” The Dark Queen gave a fearless smile. It didn’t seem like the false bravado she had been putting up earlier, or like she was forcing herself. The Dark Queen seemed really cool today for some reason.

“So, you truly intend to take the Trial of the Dark Emperor?” Thanatos made a grim expression as he looked at Maredia. I thought that was strange since he

was the one who had suggested it in the first place. There must have been something more to it.

“Yes. I have made up my mind, Father!”

“I see...”

“My apologies, Lord Thanatos,” Clowria called out as Thanatos seemed to be at a loss for words. “But if I recall, the law states that one cannot be denied the right to take the Trial if they wish for it, not even by you.” As she spoke, she pulled out a piece of paper covered in extremely difficult language. Was that the “law” thing people always talk about? I tried to read a book called *Trouble With Children and Lawsuits*, but it had been a frustrating experience. Why were rules written in such difficult language?

“Wha?! There’s a law...?!”

“Ohh? I guess you’re right. I’m impressed, you even managed to dig out a law that Chel didn’t know about,” Thanatos said.

“Hah, do not underestimate my Clowria!”

“Hmm...” Thanatos seemed distraught. I could understand why he was troubled, but...

“Daddy... That guy looks really scary...!” Olivia clung to my mane, still wearing the cat ear headband to disguise herself in the Dark Realm.

I get what you mean. His expression is super scary right now!

I remembered back at Daisy’s house, what Daisy’s mom had looked like when she was scared of me. I really needed to be careful of that sort of thing as well.

“...Very well.” After mulling over it for a long few minutes, the Dark Emperor finally nodded. “Dark Queen Maredia, the last of my line to challenge the Trial of the Dark Emperor. By the name of the Dark Emperor Thanatos, I accept your challenge.”

Chapter 13: The Foolish Dark Queen Takes the Trial

The Trial of the Dark Emperor was divided into two phases. The first was to clear the Tower of the Key, which would then open the Cave of Trials. The second was to pass through the Cave of Trials itself. Anyone who could pass both phases of the Trial would then be qualified to rule the Dark Realm.

The Tower of the Key was some distance away from the Dark Citadel. At first glance, it looked rather small, no bigger than an ordinary house.

"The inside has been expanded with magic—so many people were ruined by the Cave of Trials, both physically and mentally, so we set up a preliminary obstacle to weed out the weaker challengers," Chel explained in a bored voice. "If all of the Dark Emperor Thanatos's hundreds of children were injured beyond recovery by the Trial, it would negatively impact the functioning of the Dark Realm." The Trial was that brutal.

"To clear the Tower of the Key," Chel continued, "you must pass through the traps set on each floor and defeat us Four Great Kings."

Well, three of the Four Great Kings—Chel, Massura, and Jinia. In order to take the Trial, Maredia would have to overcome all of them.

"Haugh, sounds easy," Maredia glared back at him.

"Hah, fine then. I'll be waiting for you at the top! Not that I expect I'll see you there."

Chel snapped his fingers and disappeared.

* * *

Chel had teleported away instantly, in front of our very eyes.

Olivia yelped in surprise. "H-He disappeared!"

"That's amazing!" We had seen Esmeralda's Twilight Crown give her the ability to teleport from shadow to shadow before, but—

“That was so cool!” we both said in unison. *Teleporting with just a snap of his fingers looked awesome!* Olivia was already trying to snap her fingers as he had, but she wasn’t able to make a clean snapping sound.

“Huh?”

“Heh.”

Olivia tilted her head in confusion.

I guess we’ll have to practice snapping our fingers later.

The Dark Queen lifted a confident fist into the air. “Okay, let’s go!”

“Good luck, my liege!”

The Dark Queen marched towards the entrance of the Tower.

Good luck!

Olivia and I watched as she walked inside—or we were going to, but...

“Hey, what are you doing? Hurry up!” The Dark Queen beckoned us forward.

“Huh?”

“There’s nothing in the law that says you have to pass the Tower of the Key on your own.”

“What?”

The Dark Queen smiled. “My confidence in my ability to clear this Trial lies with the three of you!”

“Whaaaaat?!”

We’re going to help?!

* * *

“Hoo! Hah!”

Massura was the guardian of the first floor of the Tower of the Key.

A perfectly refined body with a flawlessly honed technique. In physical combat, no one in the Dark Realm could compare to him. Even now, he was

working with his dumbbell to refine his body even further. Just the other day, he thought he saw a tiny human child lift the dumbbell like it was nothing, but that must have been some sort of mistake.

He had spent hundreds, no, more than a thousand years perfecting his physique. He couldn't imagine any way in which he could lose. However, Massura was only able to stop about half of the challengers in the Tower of the Key. That was because he was a little—well, honestly speaking, incredibly—reckless.

In short, he was—

"Hey, meathead!" Maredia's voice echoed from the depths of the first floor. "Wa hah hah, my apologies for the wait, Massura!"

"Hah! So you have arrived, Maredi...aaaaaaah?!"

Turning around, Massura let out a surprised shout at the sight before him.

"H-Hello..."

"A dragon?!" A dragon, so large it barely fit inside the room, stood before him. "Wh-What is this?! Maredia, did you not come alone?!"

"There is no rule stating that I have to!"

"But this is a trial!"

"Who cares?! Thanks to the elder dragon, those traps were no obstacle at all!"

Maredia had a secret weapon up her sleeve for passing the Tower of the Key. That was to set loose the elder dragon and have him knock out all the traps for her.

The plan had worked perfectly. With his ability to change his size at will, the dragon crushed everything blocking their progress while Maredia nonchalantly brought up the rear with her obedient retainer and her adorable younger sister.

"My muscle traps! No way!"

"Haugh? Is that what those traps were? I didn't even notice what they did!" Maredia puffed up proudly.

“Your ingenuity astounds me, my Dark Queen!”

“Hah, of course, of course!” Maredia basked in Clowria’s praise.

Massura, meanwhile, gritted his teeth in frustration. “Each of my traps required the challenger to train a specific muscle to pass. If one of sufficient strength were to complete them all and pass through, the exercise would be a perfect warm-up for our fight. And if one lacking in physical training attempted them, they’d be exhausted before our confrontation. I had put some serious thought into those traps! Hoo!”

“They looked pretty shoddy to me!”

In short, his intention was to exhaust the opponent with his traps before they even arrived. In contrast to his refined physique, it seemed that Massura was somewhat lacking in sportsmanship.

“That is absurd! A trial should be about accomplishing such things yourself!” Massura threw away his dumbbell and posed. Striking a cool pose while speaking seemed to be a characteristic of dark-kin—or maybe just of the Dark Emperor’s family.

“Oh, you dropped this again, mister.”

“You don’t have to pick it up for him, Olivia,” Clowria stopped her.

“Okay!” Olivia responded energetically from atop the dragon’s head.

Massura bellowed with laughter. “Hah hah hah! Come, Dark Queen Maredia! Bow down before my perfectly honed physique—guh!”

“S-Sorry!” With a smack from the dragon’s foot, Massura was knocked to the floor.

“Gaaaah?!” Massura groaned as he exerted himself, struggling to lift the dragon’s foot off of himself. He couldn’t get it to so much as budge. Even though the dragon didn’t seem particularly macho, that was a dragon’s power for you. Massura had no chance against him in a battle of strength.

“M-M-Maredia! The winning condition for this trial is to land one clean blow on me by your own power! Using a dragon like this...”

“Haugh? But I’m super weak. I’m a frail, adorable, beautiful kind of Dark

Queen, remember?” Maredia flashed a smile. “I don’t know what the issue is with me relying on my companions. ☆”

Smack!

Maredia delivered a swift chop to Massura’s shaved head. The moment she struck him, the wall behind him moved to reveal a stairway.

“Wah ha ha ha ha! A resounding victory!”

“As expected of my liege!”

“M-M-Miss Dark Queen? Can I move my foot now?”

After all that had happened, Massura went quiet. He had lost in a clear competition of strength.

“U-Unbelievable!!!”

Massura began to cry manly tears.

* * *

“That was scary,” I sighed, returning to my human form and flexing my hands repeatedly. The Dark Queen had asked me to hold him down, but I had to be extremely careful that I didn’t actually crush him. *I’m glad it went well.*

“Wa hah hah, that was perfect, wasn’t it, Elder Dragon?!” The Dark Queen was beaming.

At her side, Clowria seemed to be distracted by something.

“Miss Clowria?”

“Oh, yes?”

“What’s wrong? Does your stomach hurt?”

“No, not at all,” she said with a wry smile before leaning in to whisper. “I never expected that my Queen would come to rely on someone besides myself. I am a little...no, I am extremely happy to see it finally happen.” Ever since she was little, the Dark Queen had always put up a front, refusing to show any weakness to anyone other than Clowria. “She must have been truly happy

about the party Olivia set up for her.”

“Tee hee, that was fun, wasn’t it?” Olivia skipped along with a smile.

I wonder what will be waiting for us on the second floor? “We should be careful.”

The Dark Queen responded to my warning with a sly smile. It was the face of someone with a scheme up her sleeve. In fact, it was the exact same face she would make when she and Olivia were planning some sort of massive prank. It seemed like she was in high spirits.

“‘Be careful’? Wa ha ha ha, how naive of you, elder dragon!”

“Huh?”

“Jinia’s traps are nothing to be concerned about. The key to our victory is right here!”

“Huh? Me?” Olivia tilted her head in confusion as the Dark Queen pointed at her.

“Indeed!” The Dark Queen poked at the cat-ear headband sitting on Olivia’s head. “Your specialty right here is our secret weapon! ☆”

* * *

At the far end of the second floor of the Tower of the Key, Jinia, daughter of the Dark Emperor and genius inventor of magical devices, was waiting in the Duel Room. She was on the verge of tears. Though she was in fact older, she appeared to be significantly younger than Maredia, and her passion for her inventions was unrivaled. The traps filling the second floor of the Tower of the Key were works of art, all having been crafted and fine-tuned by her own hands.

“Hwaaaaa! Wh-Why is this happening?!” Jinia was now bawling on the floor. Growing impatient when news of Maredia’s failure on the first floor never came, she poked her head out of the room just in time to see that all of her traps had been smashed to pieces. All sorts of traps—restraints, interference, and direct attacks—had been set up with careful planning. They were perfectly designed to capture and eliminate any dark-kin. But—

“Wah ha ha, it seems curiosity turned the cat into a killer this time, Jinia!”

Maredia stood, posing proudly. Behind her was Olivia, smiling brightly as her cat-type golems swatted happily at Jinia's broken traps.

"Tee hee, I normally use these to play with Luca, but maybe I made too many this time."

There were cat-type golems all around, and there were many more than usual.

Over the past half year, Olivia had taken a liking to making golems with her roommate Luca and playing with them like dolls. The same kind of cute and powerful cat golems that she had made during her duel with Luca the previous year were now all over the room, made from the plentiful magic-laden stones used to build the Tower itself. They had been made by a girl who had been raised from a young age with the magic of an elder dragon.

Olivia had always made them to be particularly accurate, but after she'd continued making them every day for so long, her creations had become very much like real cats.

Yes, like real cats—which meant that if there was anything that absolutely should not have been knocked over, they would immediately attempt to do so. If there were important documents lying around, they would play around on top of them. And if you wanted to keep something clean, they would absolutely try to get it dirty. Flawlessly beautiful, yet hopelessly insolent.

That was what it meant to be a cat.

"My devices... They all lost...to *cats*?!"

"That's not it, Jinia." With a poof, Maredia turned into a black cat herself. "Your finely tuned devices lost *because* they were up against cats!"

And then...

"Meow!!!" The kitty Dark Queen jumped at Jinia.

"Meow!"

"Mow!"

“Eow!”

“Mew!”

The cat golems pounced right after her, piling onto Jinia impulsively. Jinia’s only interest was in her magical devices, so her combat skill was next to nothing. Helpless to fight back, she was buried in a storm of kitty paw punches. It was surprising how much those punches could hurt with just a little bit of claw.

“Heeee! I give, I give!” Jinia immediately surrendered.

But...the look on her face, buried under fluffy cat golems, seemed ecstatic.

Knocking things over. Sleeping on important documents. Dirtying things with their paws. They were flawlessly beautiful, yet hopelessly insolent.

But being so cute, all would be forgiven.

Unmatched by all in the animal kingdom and on equal footing with dragons themselves—they were cats.

* * *

“Wah ha ha ha! Pathetic! That was far too easy!”

The Dark Queen was in a fantastic mood, walking triumphantly through the Tower with a train of Olivia’s cat golems following behind her. All that awaited her was the third floor, where her eldest brother Chel was. If she could defeat him, she would be able to challenge the most difficult part of the Trial of the Dark Emperor. And if she could overcome *that*, she would obtain one of the Seven Supreme Hallows. Once called the Vastearth Shield, the one the Dark Emperor Thanatos had was now known simply as The Ring.

Everything had gone well so far, so the Dark Queen felt great. At this rate, it seemed like she’d obtain The Ring with little difficulty.

Or so she thought.

“So you’ve finally arrived.”

“Whoa!”

A slender man, wearing glasses, and with a smart voice. As they got to the top of the stairs, Chel was already standing in front of them.

“Haugh?! Where are all the traps?!” The Dark Queen looked around in a panic. The previous two floors had started with a labyrinth of obstacles, but this time, the duel room was right at the entrance of the floor.

“Hah. I myself am the trap,” Chel said, his glasses flashing.

How did he make them do that? I really liked his glasses and started thinking about trying a pair out myself. As a dragon, my eyes could see perfectly fine, but I couldn’t help but be impressed by the look. *I bet Olivia would love the way they’d look on me!*

“Haugh... Attempting to catch me off guard is quite cowardly, but I suppose that is to be expected from you.” The Dark Queen lifted her right hand and began to chant. “*Guardian of Wisdom, bequeath unto me your power.*”

An aura like black mud swirled around her hand. It looked like something incredible was happening.

“M-My liege?”

“Heh heh... Victory is already within my grasp, Clowria!”

“Th-That line...?” Clowria sank into thought. *It sounded like something I’ve heard before too...*

“Oh,” Olivia blurted out. “That was a line from Lena’s book.”

“Ah!” That’s what it was. It was Papan’s signature line from *Floral Girls’ Academy VS Papan the Phantom Thief*. After finding out that the handsome Papan was a good guy after all, he used that line as he teamed up with the main character, Rinana. While Papan held the villain’s attention, Rinana boldly rushed forward and stole the treasure. It was a gripping tale, but was I the only one who thought Papan looked a little bit like my human form...?

Chel looked down at the Dark Queen with a cold gaze.

“Hah. Do you really think your shoddy magic can defeat me, Maredia?”

“I won’t know until I try, will I?!” That was also one of Papan’s lines. As Olivia and I shared a look, something appeared in the Dark Queen’s hand.

“*Equip*!”

“Oh!” She had pulled out a pair of glasses. Unlike the glasses she usually wore at home, this pair had round, silver frames.

“Ta-da!” *Whoa, she suddenly looks so much smarter!*

“That’s amazing! Maredia looks like a professor!” Olivia’s eyes were sparkling.

“She really does!”

“Professor!”

Oh, that’s right! All of the smart professors from the books Olivia had read when she was younger wore round glasses like that.

* * *

“...Is this a joke?” Chel was obviously angry. “Maredia! Are you making fun of my glasses? You think you can outsmart me just by trying to *look* smart?”

“Haugh...? Did you think these glasses are just for appearances?”

“What else could they be?”

“Heh heh heh...” Maredia chuckled. “Elder Dragon, Olivia, please stand back. Chel is a total coward, mistaking his cowardice for intelligence, so I won’t need your help this time.”

“What?”

“I am right, aren’t I? Aren’t I? Back during the invasion, you had all kinds of things to say, but you never left the safety of the Dark Realm, not even once. Did you come to the front lines a single time?”

“Urgh...”

“If our braver siblings like Martell hadn’t been stranded in the Human Realm, you would never have ended up as one of the Four Great Kings, would you?”

“Just so you know! I was the Dark Emperor’s right-hand man and was involved in all of the strategizing! That’s what it means to be a strategist!”

“No decent person is willing to call themselves *just* a strategist!!!” Maredia declared, pointing dramatically at Chel, causing his anger to boil over.

“You...!”

Turning around, he threw a magic spell behind him: an enormous ball of black fire.

“Guh!”

The attack struck Clowria, who had been creeping towards him from the rear.

“As you tried to distract me with your stupid conversation, your retainer was sneaking around behind me. Is that what you consider ingenuity? Just which one of us is the coward here, Maredia?!”

He attacked again. Without even giving her time to breathe, he launched another flurry of black flames at Clowria, who in turn dodged deftly around them and intercepted them with her sword.

“Take this! Ah ha ha!”

Clowria grunted as she was forced back up against the wall.

“Hah ha ha ha! Just where do you think you are going, oh proud, former Knight-Captain?!” Chel smiled, victorious.

But Clowria only replied with a smile of her own.

“Wah ha ha ha, you’ve set your own flag, Chel!”

“Wh-What?!”

“Now, my Queen!”

“Leave it to me!!!”

“No—!”

Chel had assumed that Maredia’s goal had been to distract him so that Clowria could strike him from behind. Chel was far more ingenious than Maredia, but he had a bad habit of assuming that he was smarter than

everyone else. Maredia had used that to her advantage. There was no way he would see her provocation as anything more than a distraction.

“Haugh, here I go! Elder Dragon, Olivia, cover your eyes!” Maredia’s glasses had suddenly become sunglasses. Darker lenses had been mounted on top of the normal clear glass.

“*Light!*” At Maredia’s command, a brilliant light filled the room.

“Gaaaaah?!” Unprepared for the sudden flash, Chel collapsed to the ground, covering his eyes. “Gah, my eyes! My eyeeeeesssss!”

It was the perfect move for a villain on the edge of defeat. His arrogance had lulled him into a false sense of security and created the perfect opening.

“Take him down, Clowria!”

“Understood!”

“There! Ya ya ya ya ya yah!”

A cold sensation ran across Chel’s face and he heard a high-pitched squeaking sound. When he could finally see again, he slowly rose to his feet.

“Wh-What did you do?”

Suddenly, the sound of laughter filled the room. Olivia, sitting in the corner of the room, finally lost control and burst out into a giggling fit.

“What happened...?” Chel was confused.

Maredia pulled out a mirror for him. Reflected back in it was of course himself—covered in all sorts of graffiti. Nose hairs, thick eyebrows, and letters appeared all over his face. Maredia had spared no effort. The more Chel tried to look serious, the more comical his appearance became. The kind father and daughter pair in the corner doubled over with laughter, but what hurt Chel the most was how they seemed so honestly apologetic about it.

“Grr...!”

“Wah ha ha ha! And now I have defeated Chel! It’s all thanks to Lena’s books!”

“Yes, the theme of the Phantom Thief Papan arc—relying on one’s friends—

was truly great, was it not?” Clowria said.

“Dammit... Dammit...” He had been totally outdone. The attack was only about humiliating him. For someone who painted himself as the cool, calculating genius, this situation was too much for him. They could practically hear Chel’s heart breaking. “D-Dammit!!!”

Folding at the knees, he collapsed to the ground. At that moment, a light glowed in Maredia’s hand.

“Haugh?”

“’Tis a key!”

A key had appeared in the Dark Queen’s hand. “With this, I can take the Trial of the Dark Emperor?”

Maredia and Clowria shared a look and nodded at the same time.

Maredia knew she was weak. She got depressed easily and sulked a lot. She was good at magic and had experience with plenty of grimoires—at least so she thought. But she had neither the intelligence nor the strength nor the craftiness to compensate for where she was lacking. No matter what the prophecy said, being led by someone like her caused nothing but negative feelings for the dark-kin. It was embarrassing. A weakling like her had no right to be in charge.

But...

“Congratulations, Miss Maredia!”

“Good job, Miss Dark Queen.”

If she had stayed in hiding forever, she never would have known this feeling. But luckily, she had friends.

“Congratulations, my Queen.”

“Heh heh heh! A resounding victory once again!”

There were smiles all around.

The Trial ahead still terrified her, but Maredia decided to believe in her friends. They trusted her, so she wanted to return that trust.

Chapter 14: The Foolish Dark Queen Pulls Through

“I never thought she’d defeat all three of you,” the Dark Emperor Thanatos muttered in the throne room of the Dark Citadel.

“My sincerest apologies, Father!”

“Hoo... Hah... This is the greatest failure of my life...”

“Hee hee, I can’t think of anything but cats now...”

In the throne room, (three of) the Four Great Kings hung their heads in shame.

Thanatos continued, “Oh, by the way, are any of you hurt?”

“No, sir. Neither we, nor Maredia, suffered any injuries.”

“Nor did any of her friends.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it.”

Thanatos looked a little relieved. Despite his gloomy aura and harsh voice, he really cared about his children deeply.

“That was quite impressive, though.” Thanatos had heard the reports from the Four Great Kings. “She overpowered Massura with ‘strength,’ Jinia with ‘technology,’ and Chel with ‘ingenuity.’ Aside from her bringing friends along with her, she challenged you all head-on.”

If they had been defeated through any other method, the Kings would have had fair excuses. For example, if Maredia had used technology to overpower Massura, he could simply say, “I would have won in a contest of strength!” to spare his own feelings.

But Maredia didn’t do that. She had faced each of them where they were strongest.

“Hee hee, my pride is in shambles.” Jinia shrugged, though she didn’t look all that unhappy.

“Maredia has really grown, hasn’t she?” Thanatos murmured. No one had passed the Trial within the Tower of the Key for hundreds of years. The combination of Chel, Jinia, and Massura had just been too much for them. “But the final trial... The Cave of Trials will be different.”

The Tower of the Key was little more than a safety net to keep people from challenging the Trial of the Dark Emperor. The Trial itself would lock her away in a cave and force her to face herself at length. Maredia would be under constant assault from her own weaknesses. No one else in their family had been able to bear that experience. Even the Four Great Kings themselves had been defeated by it, each having had one of their horns broken, and they had vanished from the public eye for hundreds of years.

“The last person to return sane from the Trial of the Dark Emperor was Martell, wasn’t it?” Thanatos remembered well the name of his daughter, who had been stranded in the Human Realm at his own command. Cutting the dark-kin off had not been an easy task for him. For Thanatos, closing the gates to the Human Realm had been a desperate last resort.

“I guess my siblings all failed the Trial as well,” Thanatos said with a heavy sigh.

The Dark Emperor had once been burning with idealism. He had been passionate about uniting the Human and Dark Realms and expanding the world. That strong conviction was what had given him the strength to make it through the Trial. Now that he was the leader of the Dark Realm, the constant fatigue engendered by the bureaucratic process had sapped that passion away.

Did Maredia have a similar ideal that could see her through it?

Was she strong enough to face her own weaknesses?

Thanatos grumbled as those questions plagued him.

Even though he hadn’t seen her for a thousand years, there was no way he wouldn’t be worried for her.

* * *

We stood in front of a large cave located in a lonely forest on the outskirts of the Dark Realm. The cave entrance seemed to have a sinister aura about it.

“This is the cave of the final trial...” the Dark Queen gulped. The final trial—she would have to face this one on her own. No one else was allowed to go with her into the cave.

Clowria called out to her from behind. “My liege, I have faith in you. You will surely succeed.”

“...Indeed,” the Dark Queen nodded quietly as if all her previous energy had been a lie. However, she still looked really cool somehow. She called out once more. “Clowria.”

“Yes, your Darkness?”

The Dark Queen handed something to her retainer. “Hold this for me.”

“Huh? But this is...” She had handed Clowria a ring. It was the souvenir Olivia had given her, with a sparkling gem the same color as Clowria’s hair, and one of a pair. “My Queen?!”

“Haugh, don’t make such a fuss, Clowria.”

“But such an ill omen—”

“I’ll be back. Until then, I want you to hold on to this. I don’t want to get it dirty or to lose it.”

Clowria gave a deep nod. “Very well. Best of luck, my beauteous Dark Queen.”

“See you later, Miss Dark Queen.”

“Be careful, Miss Maredia!”

“Wah ha ha! There is no need for you to worry, Olivia. As your teacher in the mystical arts, I will perform flawlessly!” The Dark Queen gave her usual smile in response to Olivia’s worried voice.

We quietly watched as she stepped into the cave.

A few hours had passed and the Dark Queen had yet to return. I was starting to feel a bit restless. Clowria stared into the mouth of the cave, not having

moved an inch. To help Olivia keep warm, I had returned to my larger dragon form and curled up around her.

“Hmm... She’s taking a long time, isn’t she?”

“The Trial of the Dark Emperor can take upwards of several months—though in those cases, it typically means they have failed.”

“Several *months*?!”

“Such is the brutal nature of the Trial. Since Lord Thanatos has assumed the throne, not one person has been able to pass it.”

At Clowria’s request, Olivia and I headed off to give her some time alone. She must have been really struggling with her anxiety and probably didn’t want us to see her like that.

I couldn’t help but worry about the Dark Queen myself. It hadn’t really sunk in for me earlier, so now I was starting to get nervous. I couldn’t calm down at all.

“Hmm...”

The fact that someone was lurking in the forest nearby wasn’t doing my nerves any favors. *Who are they?* They wouldn’t approach us, but they wouldn’t leave either.

I don’t know if I should call out to them, though... I wouldn’t want to scare them.

As I was pondering what to do, Olivia sat up from where she had been dozing in my mane.

“Daddy, who’s that?” she asked.

Oh, you noticed them too?

“Hmm... That’s probably Mister Thanatos.”

The figure was staring directly at us. It was hard to see through the thick foliage of the forest, but the pair of horns I occasionally caught glimpses of looked just like his.

“*Shine*.” Olivia pointed a finger towards him and chanted a simple spell.

An intense light exploded forward.

“Whoa?! Wh-What was that?! Wasn’t that elementary-level magic?! Gah, my eyes!”

A man rolled out from behind a tree.

“Ah, it *was* Mister Thanatos.”

“Guh, Elder Dragon...!”

“Hi, Maredia’s dad!”

“...I am most impressed, human child...to think you could bring the Dark Emperor Thanatos to his knees!”

Olivia had a bad tendency to use elementary-level magic with tremendous output by accident.

Sorry, Mister Thanatos.

“Umm, why are you here, Mister Thanatos?” He didn’t seem like he had much interest in what the Dark Queen was doing. He actually seemed really hesitant to let her take the Trial in the first place.

“Hmm... Well, that is...” Thanatos awkwardly scratched at his cheek. “I was worried about Maredia...so...I left all my work behind.”

“...Huh?” *He was worried?* It hadn’t seemed like that from the way he acted before at all. “Really?”

“Really! In order to avoid being accused of giving her special treatment for being family, I have treated her rather harshly over the years. Being the Dark Emperor is hard work. I’m not as tough as I look, so maintaining the dignity of the position is a full-time job!”

“I see...”

He was the exact opposite of me. I usually turned into a human to look less imposing.

“By the way, Mister Thanatos...”

“Hm? What is it, Elder Dragon?”

“I’ve wondered about this for a long time but... Why don’t you tell the Dark Queen how you feel yourself?”

“...What?”

His actions seemed similar somehow to how Esmeralda watched Luca from the shadows. And like Rosa, who had expected so much out of Daisy for whatever reasons adults had. And also Martell, who thought that since she was only Lena’s guardian, she didn’t have the right to read the young girl’s books...

Why did adults have so much difficulty telling their kids how they felt? They were worried. They loved their children. They wanted to protect them from the whole world.

“Why don’t you just tell her directly?”

“Hm? Well... That’s something that shouldn’t need to be said, isn’t it? We’re parent and child, after all.”

“Are you so sure?”

“Uhh...”

Apparently, humans had a proverb that said something like, “The hearts of adults are unknown to children.” But that’s just because adults don’t tell their children how they feel, right? There are plenty of things that kids won’t understand if you don’t tell them.

I’m a dragon, and Olivia is a human. I’ve always thought that I had to tell her how much I loved her as often as I could.

“...It’s embarrassing.”

Thanatos’s words made me doubt my ears. “What?”

“I said that it’s embarrassing! I’m doing my best to be a good Dark Emperor. I have to pretend to be strong and say things I never would otherwise! So being, uhh, *honest* with my words feels really embarrassing!”

“I-I see...”

“Surely you understand, Elder Dragon?!”

“No, not at all.”

“Wha—?! Girls always start finding their fathers annoying once they turn ten years old or so, don’t they? How can you directly say that you care about them

or how important they are to you once that happens...?”

“I love my Daddy, though!” Olivia interjected.

“Wh-What?!”

“By the way, I’m turning fourteen this year.”

“Wh-Wh-What?!” Thanatos began to groan. I couldn’t help but feel he looked a lot like the Dark Queen right then.

“Hey, Mister Thanatos.” I stepped over to his side. “Childhood is over before you know it.” When I had stopped and looked back on it all, it seemed like my days with Olivia had passed by in an instant. “If you hurt your children, you can’t go back in time and fix it. All of the books say that.”

That’s why I had always wanted to be honest and straightforward with Olivia. Compared to the time I had been alive as a dragon, her childhood was no more than the blink of an eye to me. But for her, it was an absolutely irreplaceable time of her life. I wanted the time we spent together to be a treasure for her—fantastic and unrivaled memories that wouldn’t even lose to the likes of the Seven Supreme Hallows! That’s what I wished for.

Thanatos dropped his gaze. Maybe I had gone too far.

Oh, that’s no good.

I had read about how delicate you had to be with things like that in *We’re Not Mom Friends, We’re Guardians!* The book said that commenting on how someone else raised their children was a surefire way to start trouble.

O-Oh no, what have I done?! I wasn’t thinking at all!

As I started to get flustered, Thanatos looked back up at me. “...Elder Dragon.”

“Y-Yes?”

“That may have been the first time someone has said that to me.”

“Huh?”

“I’m the Dark Emperor, so even when I do something wrong, there are few who would dare to tell me their opinion. And when it comes to such personal

matters as this...” Thanatos fidgeted restlessly. “So, uhh... How do I put it? Thanks.” He bowed his head slightly.

Phew. Thank goodness. It seemed he wasn’t such a bad guy after all, even though I still didn’t approve of him picking a fight with the Human Realm.

I held out a dragon-sized hand to him.

“Gah!”

“Oh, oh no! I’m sorry! I wasn’t trying to attack you with my claws or anything!”

“O-Oh, really?”

“Yes, I was just thinking we could shake hands...” Apparently humans did that when they got along.

“I see. Then that never happened. A Dark Emperor can’t act so surprised like that.” Thanatos took my claw in his hand.

A handshake. *Now we’re friends.*

“Do you not have any friends, mister?”

“Guh?!”

Olivia’s simple question had dealt a fatal blow to the Dark Emperor.

“O-Olivia?!”

“Ugh...human child... Do you hate me that much?” Thanatos replied, his voice shaking.

“Not at all,” she answered, shaking her head. “I just thought it was nice that you and Daddy became friends.”

Thanatos’s eyes went wide. “We’re...friends?”

“Olivia?! Don’t say something so embarrassing...”

“I see...friends, huh? You are friends of Maredia, correct?”

Olivia and I shared a look.

I started off, “Well, I guess we’re friends...but...”

“We’re family!”

Olivia’s answer had Thanatos at a loss for words.

“...I...see. Family, is it?”

“Yeah!”

“So she ended up with a family of her own, even outside of Clowria.”

At that moment, the earth below us shook with a roar. The sealed entrance of the cave slowly opened.

“The Trial of the Dark Emperor has concluded!” Thanatos said.

“Really?!”

“Miss Maredia!”

Was she okay?

“If she passed the Trial, then she’s probably fine. If she failed, then...it may be a few years before she is herself again.”

“What?!”

“That is how difficult the Trial is. While wandering within that cave, you’re faced with your own weakness and ugliness. There have been some cases where people never came back from it at all.” Thanatos gritted his teeth. “That’s why I didn’t want Maredia to take it!”

“What?”

“You saw how I was acting. I thought if I made it sound that awful, she would never do it!”

“That’s why *I’m* saying you just need to be honest with her...” It seemed to me that all adults were like this.

We ran over to the cave’s entrance. We couldn’t see the Dark Queen yet.

“My Queen...!” Clowria whispered as if in prayer, clutching the ring Maredia had left in her care in her hands.

A single wavering figure stepped out of the cave—and fell.

“M-My liege!” Clowria ran to her side.

No, she wasn’t just running. She leaped off the ground, closing the distance between her and the Dark Queen in an instant when it looked like Maredia might fall down. I wondered if that was some dark-kin martial arts secret technique. She managed to catch the Dark Queen moments before she hit the ground.

“Ugh...” Though it had only been a few hours, Maredia seemed as if she had been wandering in the wilderness for months.

“Does that mean...?” *Did she fail?* We watched the pair quietly, hearts pounding.

Still in Clowria’s arms, the Dark Queen’s eyes weakly fluttered open.

“Y-Your Darkness!” Clowria was on the verge of tears. We were all holding our breath. It was a trial so harsh that if one failed, it could take years for them to return to their ordinary self. If she had failed, then...would it take years before we could hear her energetic voice again?

For me, a few years was little different than a few seconds, but how would that make Olivia feel? That thought and similar concerns raced around my head.

“...Gah! I thought I was gonna die!!!”

In the next instant, the Dark Queen’s familiar, perky voice filled the air.

“Haugh~ Why was it so mean?! It just brought up my past failures over and over and over and over! No one told me it was going to be a mental attack! Actually, wait, maybe I did hear that...but still! It was the worst!”

“M-My Queen...”

“Hm? What is it, Clowria?”

“My Queen! I-I’m so glad!!!” Tears rolled down the knight’s face as she squeezed the Dark Queen tight in her arms.

“Haugh, haugh?! Th-That hurts, Clowria!”

“P-Please...allow me this one moment... I believed in you. I knew you would definitely be okay, but I was still so worried...”

“Clowria...”

“I’m so glad you are okay...”

“Haugh, of course I’m okay. I promised I’d be back.”

“Yes, I know you are a beautiful, powerful Dark Queen... But after supporting you for so long, I have also seen your weak, kind side.” Clowria’s voice dropped in volume, whispering into the Dark Queen’s ear. “I was so worried...worried that I had spoiled you too much... That all your infinite possibilities had been cut down because of me...”

I heard Thanatos’s breath catch beside me. He must have had the exact same fear.

“But...you were much stronger than I had ever thought.”

“Hah. Of course I am, Clowria!” the Dark Queen laughed. “That Trial was a piece of cake! I spent the last thousand years facing my own weaknesses, haven’t I? Something like this was no problem for me at all!”

“Ha ha, of course, my liege!”

“...Though I’m never doing something like that again.” The Dark Queen laughed just like she always did. No, that wasn’t quite right. Her smile shone much brighter than I’d ever seen it before.

“Miss Maredia!”

“Oh, Olivia! Hah, I did it!”

“Tee hee, you’re amazing!”

Olivia ran up and wrapped her in a hug, looping her arms over the top of Clowria’s.

Man, Olivia and the two ladies were so cute! Seeing them all like that warmed my heart right up, like eating a piping-hot bowl of soup. After all, the Dark Queen and Clowria were also our precious family.

“...Ugh.”

“Mister Thanatos?”

Without a word, Thanatos stepped over to the Dark Queen’s side.

“Maredia.”

“Father.”

“I hear that you have found a family for yourself in the Human Realm.”

“Haugh?”

“Well, uh... I’ve always thought of you as my precious daughter. But I was so obsessed with my work as the Dark Emperor...that I ended up doing terrible things to you. I forced you to lead the invasion, and then I abandoned you in the Human Realm...”

The Dark Queen stared back at him silently.

“I won’t ask you to forgive me,” Thanatos managed to squeeze out. “But, umm... I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

“Huh?”

Thanatos gave a deep bow. “Actually... I’ve always wanted to apologize to you. For choosing the prophecy over your feelings, and all sorts of other things.”

“Father...”

“I’m not asking for your forgiveness,” he went on. “Whether you decide to forgive me is up to you. I have always loved you in my own way, but I wasn’t able to express that properly, and I ended up acting exactly the opposite way of how I felt. So, I’m sorry. Truly.” His speech was direct and to the point, not giving even the tiniest impression that he was the most important person in the Dark Realm at all. “Though I guess even this apology is just to make myself feel better.”

“Haugh, well, if you want to apologize, feel free.”

“Honestly speaking, I didn’t think you’d ever be able to pass the Trial of the Dark Emperor.” Thanatos put a hand on his daughter’s head.

“Father...”

“The position of Emperor is yours now, Maredia.” Thanatos took the ring from his finger, which carried one of the Seven Supreme Hallows, and held it out to her. “This is yours too. This ring is proof that you are fit to rule the Dark Realm, so—”

“Haugh? No thanks.” The Dark Queen interrupted him. “I’m not gonna be the Dark Emperor now or anything.”

“...What?”

“Huh?” All of us blurted out.

“All I wanted was the gem in that ring, the Vastearth Shield.”

“Whaaaat?!”

The Dark Queen grabbed the ring from her father and slipped it onto her finger. Instantly, magical light wrapped around her body. I could tell that there was no doubt about it; it was definitely one of the Seven Supreme Hallows. I could feel an incredibly powerful, pure magic energy coming from it. The Dark Queen proudly displayed the ring on her middle finger.

“M-M-M-Maredia?!”

“I said so from the very beginning, didn’t I? I just wanted to borrow the ring, and once Olivia’s errand was complete, I would return it. So good luck with your work as Emperor, father~”

“Wh-Wh-What?!”

“I have no intentions of leaving the Human Realm behind for a long while.”

“Really?!”

“Indeed.” The Dark Queen flashed a smile. “I have two cute little sisters to take care of! And...lots of friends. The human kids, a dark-kin child, and that audacious dragon-blooded girl...they’re all my friends. I’ve taken quite a liking to the Human Realm, I’ll have you know!”

“I see. So you’ve made friends there.” Thanatos smiled, the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

“By the way, I am not forgiving you at all!”

“Guh?!”

“Don’t act all surprised! I don’t want you to think I’d forgive you for hurting me like that so easily.”

I gulped. I guess she was right. It’s not like she would forgive anything he did just because he was her father. There were still things she couldn’t forgive. And some things would take time to heal. That was obvious, but I had forgotten it somehow.

“Though if you *really* want me to, I *guess* I can come and visit sometimes.”

Thanatos immediately nodded. “Please, come back anytime you want to! I...your father will always be waiting!”

“Heh heh heh...” Hearing her father’s response, the Dark Queen flashed another smile. “In that case, there is work that must be done.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not the only one who wishes to visit their old home, after all,” she said with a wink.

* * *

The Chirin Forest was once a place that connected the Human Realm and the Dark Realm.

Lena’s quill hovered over the page as she looked up. An unfamiliar wind was blowing through the forest.

“...”

“Twee?” The sylphs, the small spirits that controlled the wind there, also seemed confused.

Martell took a step outside of their cabin. “This feeling...no way.”

A small sound filled the air as the wind blew through the forest. Before she had realized it, the silver, bell-like fruit hanging from the trees had begun to ring. It was almost as if the chiming of countless tiny bells were calling out the name of the forest itself.

It was like a scene from a fairy tale.

“...The door to the Dark Realm is opening!” The chorus of silver bells was once the sign that the gate to the dark Realm was opening. For the first time in over a thousand years, the Chirin Forest—once known as the Silverbranch Woods—raised its voice in song.

“Hah, looks like Maredia did it!” Martell gave a satisfied smile.

* * *

“...The gates to the Human Realm are opening.”

“Hoo! Hah! So Maredia succeeded, then.”

“Hee hee, I never would have thought that she, of all people, would become the Dark Emperor.”

In Abika, the greatest city in the realm, were (three of) the Four Great Kings of the Dark Realm. Reports of the results of the Trial went out throughout the Dark Realm. They had gone there to help keep the panicked and excited crowds under control following the aftermath of the announcement of a new Emperor.

After Maredia had overcome their challenges, they believed that there was a one-in-a-million chance that she might pass the Trial. If they had truly believed she would fail, they wouldn’t have come out at all and would still be holed up in the Dark Citadel.

“She truly is the strongest of the four of us, isn’t she?” Chel murmured. He had never imagined she would bring companions like that into the Trial. Not just her retainer, but a human child and an elder dragon too!

“Hee hee, so it seems. I guess we need to apologize to her.”

“Hoo! Hah! That is a good idea! However!”

The siblings all shared a look.

They were all thinking exactly the same thing.

“Going to the Human Realm is too much of a pain!”

Dark-kin, in the end, all tended to be shut-ins.

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Using the power of the Vastearth Ring, the gates between the Human Realm and the Dark Realm were thrown open once more. The Dark Queen smiled in satisfaction.

“B-But! Our mana will now leak out into the Human Realm!” her father protested.

“Haugh. It seems to me that the Dark Realm has plenty of magical energy to spare.”

“But no matter how much we’ve accumulated, it will never be enough...”

“Father,” the Dark Queen said, turning to face him. “Rather than closing the gates and hiding, I believe it is best to interact with the Human Realm directly.”

“...But...”

“I have two human sisters of my own now. One day, an elder dragon came out of nowhere and visited my castle. Ever since then, I have made all kinds of friends...and I’ve ended up doing many things just because I wanted to do them. I’ve played pranks on the other kids, read picture books, all sorts of things. I think...that is probably fun.”

Thanatos went quiet.

“The outside world... It’s not as bad as I first thought.”

“M-My Queen!” Clowria teared up at Maredia’s words. She had always been worried about the Dark Queen. To hear the Dark Queen herself say that the outside world “wasn’t that bad,” it was no wonder she would cry.

“Haugh, Clowria!”

“...Yes, my Queen?”

After using the power of the ring, the Dark Queen stepped over to her retainer and held out her left hand. The Vastearth Shield shone brilliantly on her finger.

“Umm... I’m missing a ring, aren’t I?”

Clowria gasped at the Dark Queen’s words. “My beautiful Dark Queen.” Just

like a knight from a fairy tale, Clowria dropped to one knee before her.



She then reached out and offered her another ring—Olivia's souvenir, glittering with a stone the same color as Clowria's hair—sliding it onto the Dark Queen's finger.

"I pledge my allegiance to you forever, as a powerful, kind...and as the best Dark Queen in all the realms."

"Perfect." Two rings now glittered on her left hand.

"Miss Maredia!"

"Olivia!"

The Dark Queen showed off the rings on her hand with a smile. She thought proudly to herself, *I did it! I got the Hallow for you!*

Olivia's summer adventure was a resounding success.

The three of them danced for joy. I watched them with a smile of my own, but...

"So she brought a human child and a dragon to the Dark Realm..."

I turned as I heard Thanatos murmur. As our eyes met, he smiled back.

"The child of prophecy, said to unite the Dark and Human Realms... Maybe she'll succeed in doing that after all."

Two worlds would become linked together as one. A thousand years ago, the dark-kin tried to accomplish that through fighting. But that wasn't the only way, was it? I looked back to the three girls still dancing together happily. A human child, a Dark Queen, and a dark-kin knight. Though their standings and ages were totally different, they got along like real sisters.

I hope you can keep getting along this well with each other forever.

Epilogue

We went to hand the Vastearth Shield—now the Vastearth Ring—over to the queen of Shutora.

The Dark Queen and Clowria accompanied Olivia and me there. In order to accommodate the space, I was in my human form again. Just like last time, the queen was hidden behind a curtain. As she looked over the ring bearing the Gem of Earth that the Dark Queen had handed over, Esmeralda groaned at her side.

“I never imagined that the shield would have become a ring... And that it would be in the hands of the emperor of the Dark Realm...”

By the way, when asked why he had turned it into a ring, Thanatos had just said, *“It looks cooler that way, don’t you think?”*

I couldn’t help but feel that he really was the Dark Queen’s father.

“I guess it would have been impossible for anyone but you to find it, Olivia.” the queen chuckled.

“I did my best as well, you know.” Luca puffed up indignantly. Judging by the tans she and Esmeralda now sported, it looked like they had really enjoyed their summer vacation too!

“Luca Ioenami. You exerted yourself greatly in this search too, did you not?”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Yes. If Luca had not arrived at the party for me, I may never have been motivated enough to go get it,” the Dark Queen added.

“M-Marie!”

“My, what a fantastic friendship you share.” After a pleasant laugh, the queen’s voice turned serious again.

“Now then—with this, the majority of the Seven Supreme Hallows are in our

hands.”

Light and protection in the Gem-Stave of Supremacy.

Darkness and secrecy in the Twilight Crown.

Control of water in the Blade of Bluewater.

Control of fire in the Blessed Blaze-Lance.

And control of the earth in the newly renamed Vastearth Ring.

“We have yet to discover who made off with the Leafwind Bow, but we should be able to move forward with this many.”

“Then shall we hold the Shooting Star Ritual?”

“Yes. Of course, we don’t have the legendary Lost Origin, but even without the Leafwind Bow, we should be able to release the magical power within them.”

“Is that enough to grant a wish?” Olivia asked, to which Esmeralda shook her head.

“No, that would only be possible if we had at least six of them. The Shooting Star Ritual is the same, but all we’ll be able to do is release the energy inside them.”

Olivia dropped her shoulders, disappointed. “Oh...”

“That being said,” Esmeralda gave her a playful wink, “You and Luca worked so hard this summer, I think it’s only appropriate to prepare some sort of reward for you.”

“Truly?!”

“Hurray!”

The two girls’ eyes immediately sparkled with excitement.

“Haugh. I tried my best too...” The Dark Queen scowled unhappily, earning a chuckle from the queen.

“It is truly hard to believe that you are the Dark Queen Maredia of legend.”

“Haugh?! What is that supposed to mean?! Are you insulting me?!”

“No, not at all. I was just taken aback by how charming you are,” the queen said. “The discrimination faced by dark-kin everywhere pains my heart as well. I hope that we humans can walk hand in hand with you dark-kin into the future.”

The curtain in front of the queen began to shake, the fabric parting to reveal a young girl in a white dress.

“Haugh?! You’re so young!”

“Yes, I am,” said the small queen. Her way of speaking was so calm and gentle that I had thought for sure she was an adult. I was taken totally by surprise!

“As the ruler of the Kingdom of Shutora, I would like to directly give you my thanks. Thank you for giving up your summer vacation for our search.” The queen gave an elegant bow. “I hope you will help me to protect the peace of this realm for a long time to come. As a reward, I have prepared the royal resort to accept you for a retreat. Please, enjoy yourselves.”

“Haugh! How thoughtful!”

“A retreat?!”

“M-My sincerest grati-fication!”

“...What’s a retreat?”

The Dark Queen made an exaggerated show of collapsing at my question.

Clowria then quietly informed me of what it meant. “It means going somewhere quiet, like the lake we visited before, and taking a long rest.”

Oh, that sounds nice. That sounds like a lot of fun!

“The preparations for the Shooting Star Ritual will take some time, so please enjoy yourselves and relax until then.”

“Make sure you show your gratitude to the queen,” Esmeralda added. “Even people like Phyllis and me rarely get to go to the royal family’s private resort.”

“Hey, Olivia! That school swimsuit of yours is no good! We need to go buy a real one for you!”

“Okay, Miss Maredia. Let’s all go shopping together.”

“The waterfront is my special-ity!”

“Umm, I’m sorry, but the royal resort is in the mountains...”

“Hauuuugh?!”

I nodded happily. This was great, seeing everyone smiling and so energetic!

“Daddy!”

“What is it, sweety?”

Olivia grabbed me in a hug, the brooch she had picked for matching my eyes shining bright on her chest.

“Summer vacation was super fun!”

“Yeah, I enjoyed it a lot too.”

Summer is the best. We typically spent all our time at home or school, but thanks to Olivia’s summer vacation, we were able to go to all kinds of places and meet all sorts of people. I learned something from all our travels as well. No matter where we were, and no matter when it was, if I was with Olivia, I would have fun.

“I love you, Olivia.” I made sure to tell her directly.

“Yeah, I love you too! ♪”

Olivia’s smile was as bright as the sun.

There was only a little bit of her summer vacation left, but I was sure we’d have tons of fun.

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In the Empire of Gerakias, in the deepest part of the underground labyrinth, a man stood alone, clad in a robe that covered him from head to toe. The bare stone floor below him in the otherwise empty room was covered in magic circles and formulas. A peculiar miasma, unique to those known as Mad Magi, hung around the man. Far exceeding the lifespan of an ordinary human, his magical energy had grown thick over the ages.

“My my... How fortuitous for the people of Shutora,” the man muttered. In his hands were three jewels.

“The Elven Queen is the same as always, I guess. The fact that she didn’t notice we replaced her jewel with a fake is ridiculous. We were unable to locate that dragon-blooded woman or her disciple, but that is fine.”

A white opal, the Gem of Light.

A red ruby, the Gem of Fire.

A green emerald, the Gem of Wind.

The power sources for three of the Seven Supreme Hallows lay in his palm.

“Three remain. If the Lost Origin can also be located, then my life’s wish will finally be accomplished.”

The man took off his hood. He looked nothing like the old man one might have expected. In contrast to his wizened, crafty tone and behavior, his appearance was still of a boy barely into manhood.

“Heh heh, ha ha ha ha ha!”

The laughing man’s name was Vandilsen. Once known as one of the Six Sages of Riaris, he was a great wizard who was thought to have died long ago.


Congratulations on
Volume 3's release!!!
By Kajiya


DRAGON
Daddy Diaries
A Girl Grows to Greatness
3
AUTHOR Ameko Kaeruda
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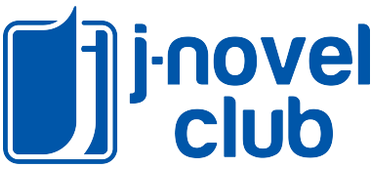
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by Ameko Kaeruda

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