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7
The DO-OVER DAMSEL CONQUERS the DRAGON EMPEROR

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The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor Vol.7

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CHARACTERS
NATALIE TEOS RAVE
Hadis's younger sister. Trying to marry Gerald.
ROGER BROODER (REAL NAME: RUDGAR TEOS RAVE):
Hadis's oldest brother and principal of a military academy.
VISSEL TEOS RAVE
Hadis's older brother and the crown prince of the Rave Empire.
ROLF DE LEHRSATZ
Knight of the Dragon Consort.
ZEKE
Knight of the Dragon Consort. Uses a greatsword.
CAMILA (REAL NAME: CAMILO)
Knight of the Dragon Consort. Master archer.
LAWRENCE MARTON
From the Kratos Kingdom and Crown Prince Gerald's subordinate.
FARIS DER KRATOS
Queen of the Kratos Kingdom. Gerald's younger sister.
GERALD DER KRATOS
The crown prince of the Kratos Kingdom. In the original timeline, he was Jill's fiancé.
~THE LEGEND OF THE CONTINENT OF PLATY~
Kratos, the goddess of love and the earth, and Rave, the Dragon God of logic and the sky, bestowed their divine blessings onto their respective lands. The Kratos Kingdom, with which the Goddess shared her power, and the Rave Empire, with which the Dragon God shared his power, have been embroiled in a long-standing rivalry.
RAVE
The Dragon God. He is only visible to those who possess strong magic power.
HADIS TEOS RAVE
The young emperor of the Rave Empire. He is the reincarnation of the Dragon God Rave and is called the Dragon Emperor.
JILL CERVEL
Daughter of the House of Cervel in the Kratos Kingdom. Currently redoing her second life.
the DO-OVER DAMSEL CONQUERS the DRAGON EMPEROR
7

Prologue

THE continent of Platy resembled the outstretched wings of a butterfly. Around 1,300 years ago, the Gods descended upon the land. Dragon God Rave and Goddess Kratos were supposed to rule over the area as a married couple, but the two deities split. That formed the Rakia mountains, which divided the continent into two nations. To the east was the Rave Empire—protected by Dragon God Rave, the deity of logic and the skies—where dragons soared through the air. To the west was Kratos Kingdom, ruled over by Goddess Kratos—the goddess of love and the earth—where the soil was rich with nutrients.

The two nations continued the feud of the gods and clashed several times via wars and skirmishes. Over the next millennium, the Dragon God and Goddess lost their divine rank, and the power and influence they enjoyed during the age of mythos faded away. However, even after the gods were gone, the two nations continued their strife—the reasons may have shifted over time, but they opposed each other.

During the spring of the year of the divine calendar, 1312, Kratos Crown Prince Gerald der Kratos went to study abroad in the Rave Empire in hopes of negotiating peace. He later became the primary suspect in the murder of the previous emperor, Meruonis, and was on the run. Neither the Rave Empire nor the Kratos Kingdom could understand the crown prince's actions.

"We still haven't received any word from my brother, have we?" a young princess asked. A mantle far too heavy for a nine-year-old girl's body was wrapped around her shoulders.

Her attendant, Lawrence Marton, put her wheelchair away as he answered, "So it seems. Perhaps he's wary of the Rave Empire

detecting him."

"You don't have to be so considerate of me. I'm sure that my brother is furious. He's angry that I became queen without his permission."

The ladies-in-waiting obediently began their final adjustments for the princess's outfit. This was an unprecedented ceremony and, thus, didn't allow the reuse of any prior garments or accessories. Everything was brand new and had been prepared solely for the first queen of Kratos to accede to the throne.

"I'm not trying to be overly considerate," Lawrence replied. "That's not the kind of relationship we have. And if Crown Prince Gerald were to express his ire, surely it would be toward the king."

"I do hope so," the princess replied.

"Oh dear, Faris!" the king cried as he entered the waiting room in bespoke attire with graceful steps. "You're a bit too cold toward your father, aren't you?"

With a wave of his hand, Rufus, the current king of Kratos, sent the ladies-in-waiting away after they finished their work. When everyone had left the large room, it felt spacious and chilly.

"To be fair, I only do things that anger Gerald!" Rufus proclaimed. "But I do wonder why my son killed the previous Rave emperor. It's a horrible move to play, and very unlike him."

"According to Chancellor Minerd, it was to save Princess Natalie," Faris replied.

"But did you see his phony grin as he thanked us for sparing his sister?" Lawrence asked. "Perhaps he's plotting something by giving us such advantageous information. He once took the initiative and fanned the flames of discourse between the Rave Empire and the Kratos Kingdom, didn't he?"

Faris smiled. "Ah, but this is different from the past. And my brother, who lent a hand to Chancellor Minerd, isn't here."

"Is it a good thing that our present differs so much from our past?" Rufus asked.

"It shall certainly be a problem if we follow the same path. Else, the same future shall only await us," Faris said.

"What shall we do about *him*, Princess Faris?" Lawrence asked.

The girl smiled back. “I’m not quite sure.”

He sighed and averted his gaze diagonally above. “Very well. I shall think of a plan.”

“Thank you. That will be a huge help,” Faris replied.

“I think I’m starting to understand the Goddess’s approach. Minerd Teos Rave is difficult to handle. I’m sure he’s suspicious of the dragon that managed to infiltrate the Rave Empire, but he shows no sign of wanting more information. I’m not even sure how credible his information about Crown Prince Gerald is.”

“There’s no evidence that my brother committed the murder. Why don’t we claim as much to the Rave Empire?” Faris asked.

“But I’m rather certain that your brother saved the younger sister of the Dragon Emperor,” Rufus said happily. His current situation also differed from the past timeline.

“If that much is true, the Rave Empire will owe us one,” Lawrence replied. “While they cannot be public about their true feelings, I’m certain keeping the previous emperor alive served no value. But His Highness isn’t here to defend himself. I wonder what he’s thinking.”

“I think he’s angry with me,” Rufus answered. “He must be mad that I’m making Faris the queen. Maybe he’s plotting my assassination.”

“If that was his plan, he would’ve done so already. Unless… you’re planning on dying within the next five minutes.”

“Hahaha! You’re so casually insolent! I’m still the king, I’ll have you know. And you’ve also earned the ire of my son. I suggest you watch your back when you’re walking the streets at night.”

“Please don’t say that. Even the mere suggestion of His Highness trying to assassinate me is hardly funny.”

“In any case, my first, rather imposing job shall be to have a meeting with the Rave Empire,” Faris said. “And I must soon decide what shall happen to my brother.”

It was a fitting job for her. Before now, she’d left everything to her older brother, and she had to make up for that.

“Let’s leave the difficult matters for another time,” Rufus said. “First, you must be able to wear the queen’s crown on your head.

It's very heavy." He innocently winked as he wore the very crown on his head. "Speaking of which, where's the Sacred Spear? Shall we use an imitation as usual?"

"No, I shall carry the real spear," Faris replied.

"I see. I suppose you need that intensity. It's the coronation of Kratos's first queen, after all. And where is our main character, Goddess Kratos? The ceremony shall begin soon."

"I know. I shall call her right—"

As Faris opened her right hand, the tip of the black spear peeked in from the open door. She snapped her mouth shut when she noticed it.

"Oh, Faris! I'm so glad I finally found you!" the spear cried. It hopped toward the princess. **"I thought that I was hopelessly lost! I left the treasury, but I had no idea where to go! I wanted to ask for directions, but everyone seemed so busy, and they all looked so terrifying! Oh dear! I was afraid I wouldn't make it in time for the coronation!"**

The goddess noticed the girl's silence.

"Faris? Why're you so quiet? Oops! Um, did I actually not make it in time?"

The princess grabbed the jumping black spear and tried her best to snap it in two with both hands.

"Ack! Heeey! Stop it, Faris! You'll snap me! I'll be in two!"

"King Rufus, perhaps we should take our leave and head to our positions," Lawrence said. "It's time."

"You're right. Let's go," Rufus replied. "And Faris, don't be too harsh on her."

"Why's she so mad?! I did my best to come here, you know! I tried so hard!"

"How many times must I tell you to keep your mouth shut to hide your stupidity, you useless goddess?" Faris snapped.

"I'm not useless! I'm Kratos, a bona fide goddess!"

The cheeky spear hopped up and down in retaliation. Faris threw the weapon onto the ground and stomped on it.

"Didn't I ask you to sit still until I called for you?" Faris demanded. "How can you hop around the royal palace, and on the day of the coronation, no less? Are you an idiot? Oh, you must be."

"B-Because no one came to fetch me! I was so anxious!"

"I told you that we'd be busy today. And if you truly cannot sit still, you could've teleported yourself to me. Surely, you can do that since it's such a short distance."

"Oooh! You're right! You're so smart, Faris!"

The princess kept her foot on the spear as she lifted it by the hilt. Needless to say, the spear bent in an impossible direction.

"Hey, stop that! The area where the Dragon Consort snapped me is still weak! You'll break me!"

"Truly, it's a pity," Faris said. "Had it not been today, I would've been able to snap you in half."

Obviously, it'd be a huge problem if the princess attended her coronation with a broken spear. She clicked her tongue with annoyance and released the handle from her grip. The Sacred Spear's long handle wilted as though it were depressed.

"You're so mean. I did my best, but you always bully me, Faris! My older brother did the same! He always mocked me."

"I believe Dragon God Rave was right to do so," Faris replied.

"Why?! Sure, he was smart and strong and handsome! Oh yeah, a long time ago, a large army that used humans as a shield tried to invade the sacred land. My brother convinced the enemies all by himself and saved all the hostages! Oh, he was so splendid back then… That made him into the God of Logic. Isn't that amazing?"

"And we must win against such a formidable foe. You understand that, don't you?"

"…Right."

Faris was tempted to bend the spear again, but she didn't have time. She picked up the spear and readjusted her grip.

"But, hey, I'm not actually trying to win against him, you know. I just want him to understand! Besides, it's *his*

fault for being so short-tempered! He quickly made fun of me and said I couldn't handle it! I don't think he's totally wrong, but still!"

"Could you just shut up already?" Faris asked. "You're giving me a headache."

"Huh? Are you okay? Should I call for someone?"

"It'll get better if you remain quiet. Just don't make a peep or do a single thing."

"All righty! I'll keep my nonexistent lips sealed!"

At once, the spear froze in place, and as Faris gave a deep sigh, she was told it was time. The double doors opened and rainbow-colored light from the stained glass above the throne spilled into the room.

"But while I know my brother's strong, he's a very lonely guy."

"Please, just be quiet," Faris muttered. "I'll really snap you in half. The coronation is starting."

"I know him. He can't disappear while feeling all lonely like that."

As the goddess's kind voice filled Faris's ears, she snapped her mouth shut and strode forward. The mantle that dragged behind her felt incredibly heavy, even with the aid of her hem holders. It felt like the mantle was trying to prevent her from reaching the throne. But her father, who waited for her at the throne, was undoubtedly wearing a crown that was far too heavy as well.

Her brother, who had chosen to claim the Parrying Dagger to fight against the Dragon Emperor who swore to destroy all, must've also shouldered a very heavy burden.

"Only I can save him, you know."

The goddess spoke firmly, her tone filled with boundless benevolence and love. *Only we can save them,* Faris thought. The outline of the spear melted away as the smell of flowers filled the air. The goddess, who wore a crown of flowers, manifested in front of the girl. She was a deity of love and benevolence who refused to forsake anyone. She chose not to abandon even Rave, the God of Logic, who held zero understanding of love. For the first time in

several centuries, Goddess Kratos emerged for all the world to see and rang the bell to commemorate the first tiny queen of the kingdom. The solemn ringing echoed throughout the royal capital.

Only the goddess and the new queen recalled that the same bell had rung on that blizzard day when the Sacred Spear had been thrown as she'd steeled herself for a do-over.

Chapter 1: Meeting With the Dragon Consort and the Queen

"PLEASE, Your Majesty," Jill pleaded as she gazed up, her husband's hand clasped in hers. "Don't just make me bait without telling me."

The Dragon Emperor walked down the spacious stone corridor that led to the Dragon Consort's Palace. The empty corridor was so wide, the shafts of light didn't reach them. Only the conversation of the married couple and their footsteps echoed around them.

"Don't rush into enemy territory all by yourself," Jill pressed. Her husband, who matched her stride, glanced down at her, but his expression was difficult to read. Jill only tightened her grip on his hand. "Don't change occupations without consulting others, and don't test me! And don't go wandering off with strangers!"

"Okay," the Dragon Emperor replied.

"And don't knowingly drink poison, okay?"

"Got it."

"Do you really?!"

Jill had been duped once and found it hard to believe he wouldn't do it again. As she stood in place, her husband, Hadis, did as well, right where the light trickled in. His cheeks were tinged pink with embarrassment, but Jill still doubted her husband.

"Stop acting all cute! You're trying to lie to me, aren't you?" Jill demanded.

"I'm not," Hadis replied.

"Then why do you look so happy?!"

"Because I realized that you don't trust me at all." Hadis cupped his reddening cheeks and gave an enchanted sigh. "You understand me so, *so* well, and that makes me really happy."

"That bit shouldn't make you happy."

The Dragon Emperor paid no heed to his wife's exasperation as he smiled with elation. Jill stomped her foot angrily.

"Let's review what I just said!" she cried. "First, don't just make me your bait—"

"Save your breath, Missy," Dragon God Rave interjected. "You can't stop him once he sets his mind on something. Emperors are all like that; in fact, it'd be problematic if he *didn't* have that attitude as the Dragon Emperor."

The deity climbed atop Hadis's head and rested his chin there. Jill glared at her husband's carefree adoptive father.

"Then it's your fault that His Majesty is like this, I take it?" she accused.

"W-Well, when you say it like that…" Rave stammered.

"Yep, it's all Rave's fault," Hadis chimed in.

"*You* shut up!" Jill and Rave shouted simultaneously.

The Dragon Emperor pouted. "Why am I the only one getting a scolding?"

"Because you're always up to no good the moment I look away, Your Majesty!" Jill replied before she turned angrily to the deity. "And Rave, not once have you tried to stop him."

Rave cleared his throat loudly. "C-Come on, you only take your eyes off him for a few moments. Besides, with a meeting with Kratos on the horizon, he won't do anything stupid. Despite all he's done, he can stay behind like a good Dragon Emperor. Can't you, Hadis?"

"Yeah, I can," Hadis replied with a straight face.

A moment of silence settled in between the trio. Jill and Rave let out a sigh.

"Am I the only one who can't believe a word he says?" the Dragon Consort muttered.

"Sorry, Missy. I'm beginning to lose confidence, too," Rave mumbled. He turned to Hadis, "Why are you so obedient this time around? Usually, you'd make a huge fuss about how you'd hate to be apart from Missy."

Hadis puffed out his cheeks angrily as he received a scolding from his wife and his father. "Of course I hate it! I hate to be apart

from Jill for even a second! But when she doesn't trust me at all, her mind is filled with thoughts about me even when we're apart, worried to death that I'll be up to no good. And I kind of like the thought of that too."

"Why did you raise him to become like this?" Jill asked Rave.

"Kids sometimes don't grow up as you want them to. It's all very logical," Rave replied.

"I see… That logic seems to be a very convenient tool for you, Rave."

"Besides, I'm not some one-trick pony that can only make a fuss. I can mature too, you know!" Hadis declared as he puffed out his chest.

Sadly, no one could place even an iota of trust in him. He scooped Jill up in his arms and walked ahead.

"You'll be late, Jill," he said. "Vissel will be angry at me for not better planning out my schedule."

"Everything you do is so suspect, Your Majesty," Jill grumbled.

"Really?! You can't trust anything I do or say?!"

"Ugh, stop sounding so excited by that!"

"Let's give it up, Missy," Rave said. The solemn Dragon God flew to meet Jill's line of sight. "Even if you're around, he'll act when necessary."

Jill couldn't find it in her to retort as Hadis stepped outside the corridor with her cradled in his arms. The bright sunlight and the dazzling white flowers blinded her for a split second. The front yard of the Dragon Consort's Palace, laid with a path of stone tiles, had rowdy people preparing to depart. The palace was in a corner of the Empress's Palace and had been off-limits to men, except for the Knights of the Dragon Consort. However, things had changed. The servants of the imperial castle often visited, along with the Dragon Knights of the imperial army. They ran around to check their belongings and prepare the carriages.

The flora had cast aside the beginnings of spring and turned a vibrant verdure as the air felt crisp and clean. The white flowers that bloomed in the front garden glittered under the sun as the droplets of rain from the previous night rolled off their petals. Wispy clouds

dotted the sky as a sliver of rainbow shimmered across the azure canvas of the heavens. It was a refreshing day for departure. The dragons were all lined up, waiting for the Dragon Consort to give her signal.

"No! Why must *I* head to Lehrsatz?!" an old man cried.

"Come on, Grandpa. You're a Knight of the Dragon Consort, aren't you? You've got no choice," Camila said.

"I only accepted the role from the lass because she said I could stay in the library of the Dragon Consort's Palace!" Rolf shouted. "Now I'm being ordered to leave the palace and ride on the back of a dragon, no less?! I've been scammed! Scammed, I say! It's oppression with the abuse of power!"

"Aw, c'mon, Li'l Raw's by your side too," Zeke said. "He may not look like much, but he's the Dragon King."

"I'm tired of that squealing squirt of a dragon!" Rolf snapped.

"Hey, don't be so casually rude to Raw, you two," Camila scolded.

"No means no!" Rolf shouted. "I swore on me life that I'd never ride a dragon again!"

"Listen, we don't want to ride a dragon either!" Zeke replied. "Let's just tie him to the saddle."

"Sounds like a plan," Camila agreed. "With Raw on our side, this old man will be fine even if he faints."

Even from a distance, Jill could tell that her subordinates were arguing, which only gave her a headache.

"It's the end of the world if Knights of the Dragon Consort all refuse to ride a dragon," Rave cackled.

"It's no laughing matter," Jill replied. "I've got three knights, but none have their own dragons!"

"You've learned to talk the talk, Missy."

"Of course! I've now got a dragon of my own!"

As Jill gazed proudly upon her dragon, the red beast with a saddle on its back turned around. Unlike the others, some ornate décor adorned this dragon's face and chest, and its saddle flap contained embroidery of a shield and a flower—the crest of the Dragon Consort.

The Dragon Consort's personal mount was a red dragon with gold eyes, the highest-ranking beast possible aside from the white Dragon God Rave and the inky black Dragon King and Queen. A red dragon with gold eyes was the best a human could ever obtain.

"Raw was sulking, you know," Rave said. "Because you kept gloating about how you got a personal dragon."

"But this dragon is mine! Mine and mine alone!" Jill cried.

She was released from Hadis's hold and stood before her dragon with her arms held wide to gesture to its glory. The red dragon huffed proudly behind her. The two had met in the Grand Duchy of Laika. Two weeks ago, the red dragon had finished training and challenged Jill to a rematch. Ultimately, Jill had won the match, but as she watched the magnificent scarlet dragon spitting fire while it glided through the air and charged at her with all its might, Jill was impressed. She no longer wished to beat it into submission and instead requested the dragon to become hers. The great beast bowed in acceptance.

While the two couldn't communicate perfectly with each other like Hadis, both the red dragon and Jill were united in their drive for greater power.

"Well, I don't mind if you're happy, but…" Hadis trailed off.

"Rar," Raw chimed in.

He popped out beside Hadis's legs, having fled from the quarreling Knights of the Dragon Consort. The baby dragon was tiny and could roll into a ball, but his black scales and gold eyes marked him as the Dragon King. The red dragon behind Jill also bowed its head with respect.

"Are you sure about this, Raw?" Rave asked. "Your favorite Missy has been stolen away. At first, she kept talking about how she wished to ride upon a gold-eyed, black dragon."

"It's fine," Hadis replied. "Raw doesn't try to fly one bit, after all."

"Rawr!" Raw chirped grumpily. He slapped his tail against Hadis's legs.

"Hey, don't take it out on me."

"Rawr!"

The two began to bicker, but the Dragon King matured as he used Hadis's spirit as nutrition. The Dragon Emperor was partially to blame, as Raw remained the same as the day he hatched and refused to fly.

I know that you can grow and fly if you want, Jill thought. Just recently, she had seen a gold-eyed black dragon fly around with Hadis on his back. She was certain that the dragon was Raw. *If he chooses to hide the fact that he can fly, I've got plans of my own, too.*

"Just stay small forever and ever," Jill said. "I don't care. I'm sure that Rare will abandon you one day."

"Rawr! Rar! Rar rar rawr!"

"'Rare won't do that,' he says," Hadis translated.

"Is that so?" Jill replied. "But Raw, you also don't like that I call out Rare and fly on her back, do you?"

"…Rawr." Raw sulked by Hadis's feet and kicked the ground.

"You don't want me to ride on your back, and you don't want me to ride on Rare. Then I require a personal dragon of my own, don't I? Am I wrong?"

"Raaawr…"

"Now, now, Missy," Rave said. "He's got his pride as a black dragon. He doesn't want his wife to be used so easily, and you gotta sympathize with—"

"Chirp!"

A sharp cry echoed from behind them as a cloth bag was placed over Raw's head. A beak skillfully tied the bag, and Sauté, the game fowl, dragged the dragon toward the knights. Sauté, whom Jill had ordered to watch over Raw and a plushie called Hadis Bear, was very loyal to its mission and well aware that there wasn't much time until departure. The Dragon King struggled within the bag and only emitted the saddest cry in the world.

"Does he…really have his pride as a black dragon?" Jill asked.

"I'm sure he does," Rave replied. "Just trust him."

"Raw's just selfish," Hadis said. "He doesn't want you to take the lead, but he also doesn't want his wife to pay attention to

anyone other than him. What? Why're you two looking at me funny?"

You're one to talk, Rave and Jill's gaze seemed to imply, but they stayed silent.

"But I don't think Raw will do anything mean to your dragon just because it's loyal to you," Hadis said. "Speaking of, did you think of a name?"

"Yes, I finally came up with one yesterday!" Jill replied.

"I have to ask, just in case, but you received the dragon's consent, right? You didn't name it 'Steak' or anything, did you?"

"I got its consent, of course! Right?" Jill turned to the red dragon behind her, and the beast nodded.

Rave and Hadis exchanged an inexplicable glance.

"Uh, I hope you didn't name it after a cooking method or how you want your meat cooked…" Hadis said.

"I considered it, but this dragon is mine," Jill replied. "I decided to separate this dragon from food!"

"*You*?! You can separate food from your matters?!"

"This is the dragon of the Dragon Consort! I've been studying up on the Rave Empire's history recently, and I've tried my best to learn the words of the Rave Empire. I drew inspiration from that for this name."

"Wow! That sounds promising. What's its name?"

Jill realized this was her first time introducing her dragon's name. She puffed out her chest proudly. "Meinestellekustgoltflugel!"

There was a moment of silence before Hadis opened his mouth. "Sorry? Uh, Meinestelle…what, now?"

"Meinestellekustgoltflugel! Sounds cool, right? But I know it's a long name, so Meine for short." Jill turned to her dragon. "You like that, Meine?"

The dragon proudly puffed out its chest, and Rave peeked out from beside Hadis.

"Are you really…" Rave started. "All right, guess you're fine with it. It sounds cool to you, huh?"

"W-Well, it's better than Steak, for sure," Hadis added.

“Apologies for disturbing your conversation, Your Majesty!” an energetic voice called out.

A shadow from the skies fell over the Dragon Emperor as a girl around the same age as Jill gracefully landed. The girl was a bit taller than Jill and was actually thirteen years old. Her golden braids, tied up on either side of her head to form hoops, fluttered behind her as she loudly clacked her heels and saluted Hadis.

“I’ve patrolled the skies, and it’s all clear!” the girl reported. “I’ve also carried the items that you’ve requested.”

“Ah, right, that,” Hadis replied. “Thank you, Millay. Could you give me a bit, Jill?”

The Dragon Consort nodded, and Hadis turned on his heel to leave. As she gazed at her husband’s back and saw him step away, Millay, the new lady-in-waiting-in-training, whirled around to face Jill.

“Your Highness, Dragon Consort, do you need anything, or have you forgotten any of your belongings?” Millay asked.

“Oh, uh, no, I’m fine,” Jill replied awkwardly. “You don’t need to be so concerned about me.”

Millay gave a forced smile. “I heard this is your first time riding alone on a dragon. Are you perhaps nervous?”

“W-Well, it’s not like I’ve had any practice.”

Jill’s voice grew smaller as she was worried about anyone eavesdropping on their conversation, but Millay spoke loudly and confidently.

“Had we been given a bit more time, I would’ve loved to teach you,” Millay said. “I’m sure it’s rather worrisome to leave His Majesty behind as well. I’m very sorry. Had I been more reliable, I may have been able to wipe your worries away.”

“Th-That’s not true,” Jill replied. “You protected His Majesty last time.”

“That was all just luck. But thanks to that, I can stand by His Majesty’s side and have been graciously bestowed with the position of protecting him. I know that I’m very lucky. My parents, who died in Radia, must be smiling down on me from Heaven. I shall never forget the valor of His Majesty, who fought against the King of South Kratos.”

Jill was well aware that her clumsy responses made her sound childish. She knew that best, yet she found herself fumbling over her words. Recently, new ladies-in-waiting had been scouted within the imperial castle, and many apprentices were hired. The highest-ranking nobles, the Three Dukes, had arranged for a majority of the new employees to support Hadis, and Millay was but one of these people. *Well, if that's all, I guess I don't mind…*

Jill was most worried that Millay's position was eerily similar to hers. And Millay wasn't alone—if one ignored minute details such as the ladies' hair, eyes, and skin color, it was clear that several ladies very similar in appearance and age to Jill had been gathered around the emperor.

Hadis refused to have ladies older than fourteen near him, fearing the Goddess's possible manipulation tactics. It was no surprise that women around Jill's age had been hired, but it was disturbing that they all resembled her in some way and were confident in their skills. Above all, it was abundantly plain that some hoped to get lucky and attract the attention of the emperor.

In short, these ladies were possible candidates for future empresses, gathered at the imperial castle under the guise of being ladies-in-waiting-in-training. Millay, in particular, stood out with skills that put her far above her peers despite being hired rather recently. She was well regarded within the castle as well; when the ladies-in-waiting-in-training had lined up to meet Hadis for the first time, it was Millay who had caught an assassin who had snuck in. Her swordsmanship was excellent, and she held unusually high amounts of magical energy, a rare occurrence in the Rave Empire. She was even well-versed in magic theory.

Millay's spectacular feat caught Hadis's attention, and she was treated with far more respect than her peers. As a reward of sorts, her requests were often heard, and she was even provided with a special set of clothes resembling a knight's uniform. Furthermore, she was one of the few allowed to be armed, which only provided further evidence of the respect she commanded.

All the while, Hadis had gone out of his way to see Jill and firmly expressed that he had no need for other empresses. The First

Consort, Jill's head attendant, had warned the Dragon Consort not to trust those words. Empress Cassandra had claimed that ultimately, the Dragon Emperor would claim that the Dragon Consort was his one true love, but that she must be more understanding of his need for other consorts. Yet, Jill found herself trusting Hadis's words—perhaps love had blinded her just a little.

Even if she had faith in her husband, she still had her own thoughts on the matter. Millay was strong, had high amounts of magical energy, studied various languages, was well-educated, and exhibited perfect etiquette. She was excellent in almost every facet, making her seem like a strict upgrade from Jill. People around the Dragon Consort had begun to murmur these rumors while Jill could barely do her embroidery for her wedding gloves. And now, she was set to depart on a journey while leaving her upgrade to protect Hadis. Jill's maiden heart wasn't sturdy enough to maintain composure in this scenario.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Hadis said. He returned carrying items for the trip in his arms. He found himself inexplicably met by his wife's glare. "Jill? What's wrong?"

"Hmph, nothing!" Jill pouted.

"Your Majesty, shall I carry those items for you?" Millay offered.

In contrast to her childish reply, Millay showed consideration for the emperor with his hands full, much to the Dragon Consort's dismay.

"No, I'm fine," Hadis said.

The most concerning bit for Jill was that the Dragon Emperor's tone was warm and kind toward Millay. But as he crouched down to tie the mantle around his beloved, his hands were kinder still.

"I guess it's almost time. I still don't like this," Hadis said as he gazed up at Jill with pleading eyes. "I don't want to be apart from you for even a second."

Damn it. As Jill had expected, her maiden heart was fickle and fragile. One look was all it took to blow away all her doubts.

"I'm so lonely, Jill. I want to be with you," Hadis whispered.

His tone was warm and enticing, tickling her ears. During times like these, Hadis became incredibly neat and tidy. He grabbed Jill's

hands and tried to fit her with leather gloves.

"I-I can wear gloves myself," Jill said. "Huh? Your Majesty, did you embroider this for me?"

The gloves, meant to grip the reins, had a small crest embroidered on the wrist. There was an emblem of a sword with a dragon that outstretched its wings, and another crest of a shield with the empire's flower. The two resembled the insignias of the Dragon Emperor and the Dragon Consort.

Hadis planted a kiss on the gloves that Jill had slipped her hands into.



He reached into his chest pocket and took out another pair of gloves with a different hue before fitting them onto his hands.

"We're matching," he said with a mischievous smirk. He showed off the same crests embroidered in his own gloves. Jill felt her chest grow warm and fuzzy. "Come on," Hadis murmured gently.

And so, Jill paid extra attention to her surroundings—Millay in particular—and kissed her husband's wrist. She couldn't hide her embarrassment, and her face turned a shade of bright red as she restlessly fidgeted. Hadis smiled broadly. *Y-You always act like an adult during times like these!* She pinched her husband's cheeks in an effort to hide her emotions. And then her knights, tasked with guarding her, announced that they were ready to leave. Hadis stood, rubbing his sore cheeks.

"I guess it's time for you to go," Hadis said.

"You sound awfully obedient this time around, Your Majesty," Jill replied.

Jill would leave Hadis behind in the imperial capital and head to the Lehrsatz duchy. The new Kratos queen, Faris, was waiting to hold a meeting with the Dragon Consort. To allow the vessel of the Goddess to meet with the Dragon Emperor, the man she pursued, would be like placing prey in front of a predator. So, Jill was determined to leave her husband behind, but Hadis had a questionable track record of doing as he pleased.

"Are you sure that you aren't planning anything?" Jill asked. "Now's your chance to confess."

"Nope, I'm not planning anything at all," Hadis replied.

"Are you sure? While I'm gone, you can't—"

"I can't use you as bait without permission, I can't rush into enemy lines, I won't change occupations, I won't test you, and I won't ingest poison. I know."

"I-If you say so…"

"Then how about this?" He scooped Jill up to share the same line of sight and touched the tip of his nose to hers. "If I can stay here and be good until you return, will you invite me to your tea party?" Hadis asked.

"Huh?" Jill replied.

He frowned. “In preparation for the meeting, you’ve been practicing having tea parties by inviting Frida, Natalie, and even Lutiya. Yet, not once have I received an invite. It’s not fair at all.”

Jill had good reason for that—she wanted to be perfect before she invited Hadis to a tea party. In fact, she was even treating the meeting with Faris as a practice run for tea with Hadis. But before the Dragon Consort could offer an excuse, she clung to her husband. She knew he’d pout even more if she dared to call him “cute,” and the corners of her mouth tugged upward as she promised him.

“All right,” Jill said. “I shall invite you to a splendid tea party, Your Majesty! So I ask that you please prepare plenty of snacks for me!”

“Hmm… This doesn’t feel any different from our usual spots of tea…” Hadis muttered.

“But if you’re naughty, I’ll have to punish you!” She gently knocked her forehead against his and intently glared when Hadis cracked a forced smile.

“I know,” he said. “You’ll be punished if you’re naughty too.”

“I don’t mind that. Unlike you, I’m always very good!”

“You think so? I find you unexpectedly quite naughty.”

As Jill tilted her head to one side quizzically, Hadis gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“I wish you safe travels, my bride,” Hadis said. He lowered his voice to the faintest of whispers. “Come back soon.”

His breath tickled Jill’s earlobe, and she was reaching her limit, but Jill mustered the last of her courage to kiss Hadis back on his cheek and squeeze him into a tight embrace.

“I’m off, Your Majesty,” she said. “Stay behind and be good, okay?”

Jill stepped away from Hadis and climbed atop Meine’s saddle. She whirled around to warn Hadis one last time, and the emperor stepped back as the dragon outstretched its crimson wings.

“Listen to everyone, okay?” Jill called. “I’ll bring home souvenirs!”

“Got it,” Hadis replied.

"Oh, and you have to eat, okay? Make sure to take hearty meals, keep yourself warm, and don't catch a cold!"

Jill wondered if she sounded too anxious, but in her haste, she couldn't say much more. All the while, the ground below her grew farther away, and Hadis, who looked up at her, grew smaller and smaller by the second. She could see Millay standing behind the Dragon Emperor.

"And no cheating! I'll hang you upside down if you attempt it!" Jill shouted.

"The same could be said for you," Hadis replied. "I'm a very jealous man."

Just as he flashed a mischievous smirk, the crimson dragon flew high into the sky. Jill could barely make out her husband waving at her, and the Dragon Consort's Palace quickly turned into a tiny dot. The Knights of the Dragon Consort took formation around the Dragon Consort.

"Oh, Your Majesty…" Jill mumbled.

She was headed for a meeting with Kratos. First and foremost, she had to handle the murder of the previous emperor, Meruonis, and the disappearance of Gerald, the crown prince of Kratos. This was an excellent opportunity to have the Kratos Kingdom indebted to the Rave Empire, but this also implied how important this meeting was. It would decide the fate of the two nations. *And yet, how imprudent it is for His Majesty to worry about me having a potential affair. Not that I'm one to talk, though.* Jill gazed down at her gloves and spotted the small, embroidered crests.

The insignias of the Dragon Emperor and the Dragon Consort were lined up next to each other in harmony, and the emperor had a matching set of gloves. It wasn't a stretch to assume that Hadis had wanted to imply that he was always with Jill. The Dragon Consort couldn't help but smile before she soon shook her head to face forward. Her destination was beyond the horizon, where the carpet of lush verdure touched the azure skies—Lehrsatz, the city of trade.



"AND she's gone," Hadis said. He gazed up at the sky, his voice containing a tinge of loneliness.

Rave nodded from his perch on the emperor's shoulder. "Yeah. Is this the first time you'll be left alone for so long?"

"Nope. I was once abandoned for two months in Laika," Hadis replied.

"You love to bear grudges, huh?"

"I'll never forget it."

"Your Majesty, Crown Prince Vissel awaits," Millay called from behind.

Hadis turned on his heel to leave. Everyone noticed his presence and bowed their heads as they made way for their emperor. Among the crowd was Cassandra, the head attendant of the Dragon Consort's Palace.

"I entrust the Dragon Consort's Palace to you while Jill's gone," Hadis said. "And if you find anyone interesting, introduce them to me."

"Most certainly," Cassandra replied. "But Your Majesty, one must remember that a Dragon Emperor shall enchant any lady, even if you don't raise a single finger. I beg that you show a touch more prudence."

As the warning reached Hadis's ears, he froze in place. Cassandra maintained her youth as though she hadn't aged a single day, contrary to what her real age must've been. The former First Consort had been relieved of her role when the previous emperor was killed, and the Empress's Palace was dismantled, but Cassandra was competent, and her network allowed her to manage the palace for many years. Naturally, she was aware of Hadis's schedule as well.

"A Dragon Emperor must never love, for he is not the Dragon Consort. This is but a cautionary line from a consort who lives in the era of a Dragon Emperor," Cassandra said. She cast a meaningful glance at Millay, who stood behind Hadis, and went on, "I implore that you exercise vigilance so that you may be spared from the scolding of the Dragon Consort."

"Then I suppose it'd do you well if you told everyone around you," Hadis replied. "No one should be allowed near me."

Cassandra raised a bemused eyebrow as Hadis walked past her. He had no idea what he'd done to receive her glare, but no doubt the former consort had her own complicated thoughts. Millay walked up to Hadis's back.

"I'm terribly sorry," she whispered. "It seems those of the Dragon Consort's Palace are very wary of me."

"You've got nothing to apologize for," Hadis replied. "Oh, and how are your clothes? Do they fit you well?"

"Th-They do. Thank you very much for listening to my selfish requests…"

"Don't mention it. It's my job to ensure that the workplace and its environment allow you to work well. Sorry, but could you go back and help clean up the Empress's Palace? If anything odd occurs, please report it to me."

"Even if it's regarding the Dragon Consort's Palace, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. I'll head back with Vissel to the office."

As Hadis stepped out of the Empress's Palace, Vissel was waiting for him. Once Millay saw that, she voiced her assent, bowed, and turned to leave.

"How is she?" Vissel asked as the two men watched her head back to the palace. "Is she useful?"

"I'm surprised by how excellent she is," Hadis replied. "Kids these days are terrifying. The same goes for Jill, really."

"Hmph. Then, we ought to finish our work before the Dragon Consort returns." Vissel carried a thick stack of papers in front of his chest and rearranged the heavy bundle as Hadis looked on with exhaustion.

"You narrowed it down, and you *still* have that much?" Hadis asked.

"This is too little, quite frankly," Vissel replied. "There is no end to the women who want to be by your side, but unlike the ladies-in-waiting-in-training, who required no backing, this time around, it should be a lot harder to get through. Relatives from the house of Marquess Beil are also allowed to be sent over, following a recommendation from Miss Sphere."

"Makes sense. If anyone comes from Brother Risteard, I can see how people would be wary."

"It was Risteard's suggestion to have Miss Sphere act as the intermediary. With Consort Fione standing at the helm, the other former consorts have also sent recommendations so that they can be hired again. And, for some reason, we've also received a recommendation from Kratos's Ambassador of Friendship."

"Brother Minerd?"

Minerd's affiliation aside, it was crystal clear that he planned to dispatch a group of spies.

"On the contrary, if we don't sense anything suspicious, it's safe to assume that *someone* has already snuck inside, and it'd be a great way to test us," Vissel said. "And Hadis, there's no need to refer to him as a 'brother.'"

"I think I can see him as my brother as long as Natalie's around," Hadis replied. "Why don't you stop searching for her fiancé as a way to thank her?"

"Both you and Lutiya need to stop spoiling her. In any case, I'm quite sure that Minerd considers this the perfect opportunity since the Dragon Consort is gone. And it may be crass to ask, but are you sure about this, Hadis?"

The two proceeded along the walkway that connected the Empress's Palace to the outer court as Hadis chuckled. After all was said and done, it was Vissel who tended to spoil those around him.

A couple of months ago, the previous emperor, Meruonis, had utilized an enigmatic dragon using sorcery. Even the Dragon God couldn't control or manage this beast, but Meruonis hadn't set foot outside the imperial castle in recent years. Chances were high that the very person who taught him sorcery had snuck into the Empress's Palace, but the dismantled building left no traces of a crime.

"Rave said that I should be fine as long as I remain smiling," Hadis said. "The Empress's Palace has never been peaceful with a Dragon Emperor, apparently."

"I see," Vissel said with a nod, his voice weary. "That's very useful information to hear, and it only makes sense."

Hadis glanced at Rave, who sat atop his head. "I don't really get why, since I've got a Dragon Consort and all…"

"I don't get it either," Rave replied. "But that's just how it's always been with the Empress's Palace."

The God of Logic was confused by it all. The Empress's Palace was a flurry of love and hate and well out of his realm of understanding. Needless to say, Hadis also held no interest in the Empress's Palace, a place where the Goddess of Love would've thrived. However, should she catch wind of Dragon Emperor Hadis trying to create a new Empress's Palace, she would undoubtedly try to sneak inside. And Hadis couldn't just neglect the issue that there was a dragon that even the Dragon God failed to control.

The stack of papers Vissel had provided contained many girls of a similar age to Jill. The one saving grace was that there wasn't much room for the Goddess to interfere.



WHEN one traveled via dragon, its speed was vital. Generally, the higher the dragon's rank was, the faster it would be, but in truth, the dragon's weight, the shape and size of its wings, the skill of the rider, and the amount of luggage it carried were all determining factors as well. When a group of merchants transported goods via dragon from the imperial capital of Rahelm to Lehrsatz, the city of trade, it took around five days. Since Jill was traveling with a selected group of elite Dragon Knights in the imperial army, her trip would be much faster, but this was Meine's first time flying in formation.

Crimson dragons were highly intelligent, but as Meine hadn't received any training, it was the same as any wild dragon that one could find. It was unknown whether Meine could fly with the rest of the flight. Plus, Jill was on her first long-distance flight by herself. Along with some potential days to train, she was given a schedule of ten days, allowing plenty of wiggle room for time should things go awry.

Some had claimed that perhaps a trained dragon should head to Lehrsatz instead of Meine, but Jill had stubbornly pushed her selfish request through. The Dragon Consort insisted on heading to the meeting with Kratos on her own dragon. She may have been dense when it came to politics, but even she was aware of how vital bluffing could be. She didn't want it to be just a bluff—Jill had wanted to expertly control her dragon on the way to the Lehrsatz duchy, but…

"No, Meine!" she shouted. "You're going the wrong way!"

The dragon cried out grumpily, confused as to why it couldn't fly as it pleased. Or perhaps being surrounded by so many other dragons annoyed it. At first, Jill's anxiety had been conveyed to Meine, and the beast had obediently flown with the rest, but after lunch, it began to fly more erratically. Meine was short-tempered enough to challenge Jill to a duel, after all. The dragon felt frustrated and raised its altitude.

"No, Meine," Jill scolded. "Keep the altitude as is. You can do that, can't you?"

"Grr…" Meine grumbled.

"Your Highness, perhaps it's best if we follow Meine," one of the dragon knights flying nearby called. "We've got a good breeze coming our way."

He was called Finn, and the young man was in charge of training new dragon knights for the imperial army. His light-brown hair fluttered in the wind, and he spoke gently without batting an eye at Meine's glare.

"I'm sure Meine wants to fly with the wind," Finn said. "We'll go faster that way, too."

"All right," Jill relented. "Meine, you can fly up higher— Huh?! Hey! Stop trying to fly lower! I'll punch you!"

"Grar!" Meine roared back violently.

Try it if you dare! the dragon seemed to imply. Jill cracked the knuckles of one of her hands.

"You've got courage, I'll give you that," she rumbled. "Do you really think I'd be scared of fighting you this high up?"

“Your Highness, you can’t be the one to get swept away by your dragon,” Finn said. “Just watch.”

Finn expertly controlled his reins and had his dragon fly higher up. The others followed suit and flew faster, leaving Meine behind. The red dragon frowned angrily and flapped its wings to raise its altitude and speed. In a flash, it caught up to the rest and tried to fly ahead of the formation—no longer did it want to be restrained by Jill’s reins.

“Meine!” Jill called.

But the dragon ignored her orders, and with resignation, Jill considered using Raw to scold her steed. Just then, the rest of the dragons that flew in formation caught up, and the annoyed Meine outstretched its wings in hopes of increasing its speed. Its golden eyes glimmered with determination. The strong gust of wind that it created caused Finn’s green dragon to lose its sense of balance. Jill turned pale, and Meine also froze in place as it immediately stopped.

Finn’s green dragon regained its balance as it flew to the ground, but it soon raised its neck and flapped its wings with all its might. The green dragon tried its best to match everyone’s altitude, and suddenly, Meine decreased its speed. The rest of the dragons followed suit and slowed down. Jill gazed at Meine with astonishment, but the dragon remained expressionless as it allowed the green dragon to catch up with the rest of the group easily.

When the Dragon Consort glanced at Finn, he winked and placed an index finger over his lips. For the rest of the day, the dragons flew as they maintained formation, and they flew further than planned before they found a dragon lodge where they would rest for the night.

A dragon lodge was an inn for dragon riders. It was equipped with dragon stables for the beasts to rest, and had rooms where the riders could relax. Quite a few of them dotted the areas around the streets of the Rave Empire, or near bodies of water where many dragons gathered. From traveling troupes of entertainers to caravans, people from all walks of life mingled, and during busy seasons, some had to stay the night outside in a tent. It was no different from camping outside, but they had free access to fire and

water and could enjoy meals indoors. Above all, everyone enjoyed a sense of security from the numbers gathered around a fire.

This dragon lodge, located in a mountain clearing and easily spotted from the skies, had open rooms, much to Jill's luck. The owner of the lodge happily welcomed the Dragon Consort and her knights as he prepared rooms for them. When she went to the dragon stables to allow Meine to rest, the stableman opened his mouth in shock at the sight of a crimson dragon, but he soon got to work and helped Jill remove the saddle. Once it was removed, Meine immediately flew away. The stableman mentioned that there was a watering hole nearby that was popular with dragons.

While Jill received a detailed explanation about where she'd stay for the night, an orange dragon suddenly popped its head out, much to her surprise. The beast belonged to the inn's owner, and Jill struggled to imagine the large inn owner riding on the dragon's back, but the beast had apparently always claimed this area as a part of its territory. The orange dragon wasn't meant to be ridden. It served more as a guard of the inn. This symbiotic relationship had started with the inn owner's predecessor, and they shared a healthy, helpful bond. When Jill mentioned that she'd never seen an orange dragon before, the stableman laughed and noted that it was much rarer to see a crimson dragon.

Just then, Finn arrived to entrust his dragon to the stableman, and Jill hastily made her way toward him.

"Um, are you injured anywhere?" she asked. "Are you and your dragon doing all right after what happened earlier?"

Finn had just finished removing his dragon's saddle, and he patted its neck before it flew off to the same watering hole as Meine. "I'm fine, as you can see," he said as he turned around. "I only pretended to lose my balance back there."

Jill was shocked to hear that. Finn encouraged her to take a seat atop some wooden boxes.

"Are you aware that higher-ranking dragons rarely fly in a group?" he asked.

"Yes," Jill nodded. "The lectures by the dragon knights in Neutrahl have mentioned that green dragons are the highest rank

that tends to form a flight."

"Then why do you think the dragon knights have dragons that are lower in rank than green dragons?"

Jill sat down primly with her knees together as she crossed her arms pensively. "Hmm, I believe one of the factors is their abundance in numbers, as well as how relatively easy they are to capture. Though admittedly, I've seen quite a few crimson dragons."

"No doubt it's because you're surrounded by the Rave imperial family, Your Highness."

"When I said that I'd never seen an orange dragon before, the stableman laughed at me."

Finn let out a strained chuckle. "The fact that there's only one orange dragon at the lodge is a huge hint."

"Thinking back, when I consulted about my personal dragon, General South recommended a green dragon for me. Could it be that higher-ranking dragons aren't suited for flying in groups?"

"That's right. I myself know a senior who chose a green dragon as their personal beast despite receiving a greeting from a yellow dragon. Green dragons are most adept at flying with others and adjusting to a group. Even out in the wild, you may often see them hunting in a flight. Hence, many ace riders tend to be atop green dragons."

Finn sat on some sacks across from Jill. "Of course, higher-ranking dragons show consideration toward lower ranks, and you can teach yellow and orange dragons to fly together to protect a flight. But flying in formation, for example, is but one of the customs created for the convenience of humans, and is meaningless to do for dragons in the wild. And the higher the rank, the smarter the dragons are—they'll inevitably question why they're doing any of this in the first place, making it more difficult for them to follow orders."

"Then, should yellow or orange dragons be used for solo missions?" Jill inquired.

"You've got a very flexible mind, and I can only be impressed, Your Highness. You're exactly right. That's precisely why there's only one orange dragon guarding the lodge. As long as there's one orange dragon, the others will generally show their obedience.

Yellow and orange dragons are also generally used to guard a fleet of ships. There isn't much room on a ship to house numerous dragons anyway."



“So, red dragons are suited for solo missions. But I saw Princess Elentzia’s Rosa and Prince Risteard’s Brynhild properly taking charge of the Dragon Knights,” Jill pointed out.

“Why don’t we change our way of thinking for a bit? Red dragons can only be leaders, and nothing else.”

Jill raised her head with realization. Finn smiled back.

“You cannot force Meine to act similarly to other dragons,” he continued. “There may be some outliers because of personalities, but in general, it doesn’t suit the natures of red dragons. Then what can you do?”

“Have Meine defend the flight,” Jill answered.

“Precisely. Usually, lower-ranking dragons will defer to those of higher rank. In turn, higher-ranking dragons will be considerate toward those below them. It’s the logic of the strong and the weak, and you must utilize this aspect cunningly.”

Before Jill knew it, a small crowd of soldiers had gathered around, and it had turned into a lesson of sorts.

“Now then, why don’t I reveal my trick?” Finn said. “We purposefully raised our altitude and left Meine behind. Meine had wanted to use the wind and fly higher anyway, and when it spotted the dragons of lower rank soaring higher above, a fire was lit in its rebellious spirit. Meine chased after us and tried to surpass our formation. Then I acted like I’d lost my balance because of the wind from the red dragon’s wings.”

“The green dragon swiftly changed its position to keep you in the air,” Jill said.

“These dragons have undergone strict training. Usually, they’ll wait until I regain my balance or follow their rider’s orders. But this time, none of us gave a single order, and the Dragon King graciously watched on as well. Inevitably, the other dragons have no choice but to follow Meine, the highest-ranking dragon present. Red dragons are smart. It’ll quickly realize that its own actions would cause the downfall of the flight of green dragons.”

“Some yellow dragons don’t even notice that the green dragons are flying to their cue,” a soldier remarked. “Red dragons are smart.”

"The red dragon probably also noticed that the other dragons were desperately trying to catch up to it," another added.

"Which is why Meine became considerate and flew in formation after that incident," Jill muttered.

Finn, who had helped Meine realize that it was the leader and a higher-ranking dragon, nodded. "Meine found the dragons flying all around it to be nothing more than a nuisance that blocked its path. The red dragon was probably also annoyed at you, Dragon Consort, and wondered why you weren't flying at the helm. Even so, Meine was obedient at first because the Dragon King was in front."

Once again, ranks proved important. If the Dragon King was in the mix, the red dragon had to swallow its pride and act obediently.

"Is that why you had Zeke, who had Raw, fly in front?" Jill asked.

"That's right," Finn replied. "But during our trip, Meine likely realized that the Dragon King wasn't taking command. The red dragon had agreed to carry you to Lehrsatz, and it probably knows the way. Meine wanted to take the shortest route and fly as quickly as possible."

"And the green dragons would try to follow."

"Exactly. Meine isn't aware of the specifics, but it intuited that the green dragons received orders from humans to follow it. If the red dragon pushed its limits, the green dragons would be troubled. Meine swiftly decided that it should follow formation for now. That kind of quick thinking is difficult to do unless you're a red dragon. Meine questioned its situation, analyzed its circumstances, and carefully decided to keep its decision on hold. Only higher-ranking dragons have such mental leeway and dignity."

Jill sighed and gazed up. Amid the reddening sky, she spotted shadows of dragons flying to their hearts' content. *Meine flapped its wings as it liked and flew off the moment its saddle was removed. Is it among the other dragons?*

"When Meine returns, I have to praise it to bits," Jill said.

"Please do so," Finn replied.

"I'm still amazed. You thought so far ahead and purposefully almost fell."

Unlike Jill, Finn would surely die if he fell from such a high altitude. He couldn't have done such a courageous act had he not understood and trusted his dragon and the others, including Meine.

"I heard that Meine challenged you to a battle to protect the other dragons, Your Highness," Finn said. "I knew that it would be considerate toward others, and above all, my dragon will never allow me to fall."

This is what it means to be the Rave Empire's Dragon Knight. Jill couldn't help but give a round of applause.

"You just sounded so cool!" she cried.

"Thank you," Finn replied. "But it's a bit embarrassing to hear such praise from you, Dragon Consort. You looked very cool when you fought in Radia."

"You were there?"

"To tell you the truth, we fought with the baker."

Hadis had personally selected this squad of soldiers to guard Jill. The Dragon Consort had found this curious; Hadis normally hated anyone who attempted to get close to his wife. Jill smiled.

"So you're His Majesty's comrade in arms from Radia," she said. "He trusts you all very much."

"I'm not sure about that," Finn replied. "He probably thinks that he can kill us without holding back should anything happen to you, Your Highness. We'd once thrown our lives away in Radia anyway."

"I'm so sad! I can't choose any of you to become my knights, then."

Since these soldiers had fought with Hadis during the internal conflict of Radia, they likely wouldn't direct their loyalty toward Jill. The Dragon Emperor, who controlled the military, glimmered brighter than the stars in the night sky. Even enemies would gaze on with awe and wonder, entranced by the spectacle.

"Please don't say that," Finn said. "Should His Majesty hear your words, he'd shoot daggers at us."

Some of the soldiers gave a forced chuckle while others frowned. But each soldier seemed to understand Hadis, which only made Jill feel even more pitiful. As her gaze shifted to the ground, her gloves entered her field of view. The insignias of the Dragon

Emperor and Dragon Consort were embroidered alongside each other.

"I want to be able to control dragons better," she mumbled. "I *am* the Dragon Consort, after all." She recalled Millay gallantly soaring through the skies and her spirits sank. "If I remain this way, I'd feel bad for Meine, too."

"Until now, Meine was allowed to fly wherever and whenever it wanted, and flew as fast as it pleased. It threw away its freedom to carry you, Your Highness," Finn said. He kneeled and gazed up at Jill before he gently slapped her knee. "First, you must trust Meine. It's *your* personal dragon, isn't it?"

Don't ever forget that a dragon is allowing *you to ride on its back.* Jill had heard that phrase many times before, but those words were finally sinking in.

"You're right. I want to study more about dragons!" Jill declared. "I want to be able to welcome His Majesty while riding my dragon as if it were effortless!"

"We'll help you out, of course," Finn replied. "But please don't tell Meine that I purposefully lost my balance. As I've said before, red dragons are very smart. It might become infuriated with me if it learns that it was tricked."

"You got it!"

Jill hopped off her box and struck a neat salute. Finn and the other soldiers saluted beautifully in response.



THE Knights of the Dragon Consort had just dropped off their dragons at the stables. Rolf gazed down at Camila and Zeke, who sat on the ground, looking completely exhausted. They wouldn't budge an inch and were left behind by the bear plush and bird that carried the Dragon King in a sack on its back.

"Pathetic," Rolf snorted. "How can the Knights of the Dragon Consort be spent after riding a dragon?"

"Hey, Grandpa, you also whined about how you hated riding dragons, didn't you?" Camila replied.

"I said that I didn't like riding 'em. Didn't say that I couldn't."

"That's what I call being scammed," Zeke muttered. "Ugh, my world's still spinning."

Zeke leaned his back against a fence that surrounded the square as he drank some water. Camila placed her weight against a wooden box and couldn't raise her head.

"The Dragon Consort's o'er there receivin' a lesson on how to control a dragon from the imperial army," Rolf said. "Why don't ye both get one too?"

"Her Highness Elentzia hammered that stuff into us, so we're good," Zeke muttered.

"Yeah," Camila added. "Knowledge isn't enough to dispel our sense of dislike anymore. In fact, you should praise us for being able to ride dragons by ourselves, Grandpa. We don't think dragons should be ridden—if we need transportation, we use horses. Jill's so quick to adapt! I suppose she's the Dragon Consort, through and through."

Rolf suddenly sat beside them with a loud thud. "Youse guys are from the Rave Empire, yeah?"

"Yep. Wait, are you the type who can't forgive Rave citizens for disliking dragons, Grandpa?"

"In the Rave Empire, horses are the main form of transportation in the mountains between the Verrat and Lehrsatz duchies. I reckon youse guys are from the Hohboe region or somewhere close to there. That area's got a lotta plateaus, but not many mountains that the dragons claim as their home. It's a region that's devoid of dragons. Ye don't have the luxury of a port, and railroads don't pass by either. It's way out in the boonies and has a terrible transportation system. There're so many nomads there."

"You're absolutely right, and that pisses me off," Zeke grumbled.

"But all the more reason for dragons to be highly prized," Rolf continued. "I'm willin' to bet that ye had a beasty or two called a 'guardian dragon.' They're usually yellow or orange, or if you're really lucky, red."

"Oh yeah… There totally was! We had an elderly orange dragon," Camila nodded. "When I was a kid, I approached it and received a harsh scolding from my parents!"

"Ah, so you *were* familiar with dragons since you were young'uns," Rolf said, the tone and mannerism of his speech shifting. "So then why have you grown to dislike them?"

Zeke and Camila looked up in surprise, and they exchanged a glance. Whenever Rolf became so solemn, Camila always spoke up to break the silence.

"We left our hometown because of a few…disagreements," Camila divulged. "Dragons were usually the property of someone important in our village, and so, we grew to dislike them."

"Even so, surely, controlling dragons was hammered into yer heads," Rolf went on simply. "It's the kids' job to take care of 'em, yeah? Precisely because villages are so small, they ensure to educate each and every single one of youse so that ye can all ride a dragon if needed. Dukes Verrat and Lehrsatz are keepin' close watch so these villages don't get their hands on more of those dragons. If a village gets enough of 'em dragons, they'd turn into a group of elite Dragon Knights, wouldn't ye think?"

"Yeah… We *did* take care of dragons when we were kids…" Camila admitted.

"I'd imagine so. Youse guys held yer reins splendidly, befitting of a Dragon Knight. And the dragons soarin' through the skies happily's proof of that. And yet, ye claim to dislike dragons. Ain't that a bit odd?"

"How so? We dislike them, and that bit's true," Zeke replied.

"Argh! You're both denser than a brick!" Rolf exclaimed. "Why don't I change my question? *What* exactly triggered ye to dislike dragons?"

Zeke and Camila exchanged another look as Rolf clicked his tongue with annoyance.

"Youse guys took care of the dragons before ye left the village, right?" Rolf pressed.

"Well…yeah," Camila replied. "We took turns doing so. But we never rode one before."

"When did ye leave your village? If there was any trigger, it was probably after ye left."

"Uhh…six years ago, I think? We became mercenaries for a year or two before we entered the Northern Division."

"Beilburg, huh? The current Dragon Emperor made the Northern Division, didn't he? Must've been a few of 'em dragons stationed there."

For a man who'd been holed up within the Dragon Consort's Palace for the past two decades, Rolf was awfully knowledgeable about current events and affairs.

"We just became mercenaries," Zeke said. "We weren't given dragons to ride or anything. Besides, the Northern Division was a mess since everyone was subservient to Marquess Beil. We didn't even catch a glimpse of a dragon."

Rolf fell silent for a few moments. "So, while you were away from your hometown, you lost touch with dragons and grew to dislike 'em. I suppose…it all adds up."

"What gives?" Camila asked. "Is it something to be so bothered about? I get that it might not be ideal for Knights of a Dragon Consort to dislike dragons, but…"

"When ye both saw the enigmatic dragon that the previous emperor called, ye knew that ye couldn't win, but ye never said that ye couldn't fight against it. Hmm, so ye don't like to be near dragons, but ye can *fight* 'em, eh? Sounds to me like you were once mercenaries in Kratos or somethin'."

"We don't have any ties or relations to the Kratos Kingdom," she said.

Rolf had grown suspicious of the other two knights. Camila hastily refuted those claims; she didn't expect to be suspected of such a thing.

"Yeah, Hohboe is isolated even within Rave," Rolf easily agreed. It seemed he'd already thought so himself. "But ye gotta be aware that the Dragon Consort is from Kratos. And from House Cervel, no less. Since she's only got a few knights right now, ye should be more wary of how ye act."

"How kind of you to point it out," Zeke replied. "You're all fired up and ready to work, huh, fellow Knight of the Dragon Consort?"

"I just don't like troublesome quarrels," Rolf grunted. "C'mon, young'uns shouldn't be loafin' around. Stand up!" Rolf kicked the ground to encourage the other two knights to stand, and Zeke frowned as dirt was kicked onto him.

"What gives?" Zeke grumbled. "All we have left today is to eat and sleep. Taking care of my body is part of my work."

"I heard some rumors from the innkeeper," Rolf said. "Apparently, there's been some sightings of Crown Prince Gerald around this neck o' the woods."

"What?!"

"Ask around, just to be safe. I'm guessin' it's a trap, but worth a shot. I'll head back and get some rest." Rolf didn't wait for a reply. He patted off the dirt from his pants as he turned around and walked into the inn. Camila and Zeke swiftly looked at each other.

"Crown Prince Gerald was spotted around here?!" Camila cried. "He should tell us important stuff like that first!"

"What's that geezer up to?" Zeke mumbled. "He kept asking about when we began to dislike dragons and other nonsense like that…"

The two fell silent. They couldn't change the fact that they weren't fond of the beasts, and they'd never been Kratos mercenaries before.

"Let's go ask around," Zeke said.

"It's the order of our old strategist, after all," Camila replied.

They knew it'd do them no good to dwell upon these questions and set them aside as they stood up. The setting sun dyed the mountain ridge a bright scarlet, and it was soon time for the cafeteria to become crowded with people.



"PRINCE Gerald was spotted?!" Jill cried after she heard the report from her subordinates.

She was just about to enjoy some breakfast in the dining area when she stopped her hands. Camila hastily pressed her index finger against her lips to shush Jill, and the Dragon Consort quickly clapped her hands over her mouth.

Jill had been allowed to rest well last night in her private room and felt better than ever. She'd finished her morning exercise and was about to satisfy her rumbling belly. Raw was fast asleep in a bag beside the foot of her chair, but Sauté was awake and pecking away at some neatly plated wheat. Camila sat beside them and unfolded a map to show Jill the spots in question.

"Yep," Camila said. "If we consolidate these rumors, he went past Lake Lalatika, which is a bit away from here, and went in the direction of the former city street. It seems like a lot of people claim to have seen Prince Gerald here."

"It's a way aways from our flying route," Jill observed.

"That's in the Nebula region, the former Zaza Village," Finn muttered as he sat beside them. "Makes me suspicious."

Camila frowned. "That's the famous Haunted Village, right? The villagers all disappeared in one night, turning it into a deserted village."

Jill almost choked on her bread, and Finn hastily tried to calm her down as he patted her back.

"A-Are you all right, Your Highness?" he asked.

"I-I-I-I'm fine," Jill stammered. "I-I was just… A h-h-haunted village?"

"They're just rumors of a haunting," Finn replied. "But a different rumor actually swirls around this village. Your Highness, are you aware of the Order of the Ark?"

Jill blinked at his serious expression. "The Order… Oh, you mean the Arks," she replied.

Finn nodded. Camila leaned forward.

"I know about them. They're a cult of conspiracy theorists in Platy that resist the idea of the Dragon God Rave and Goddess Kratos, right?" Camila said. "During the Millennium Festival, the Arks did some suicide bombing as an act of domestic terrorism, and

Kratos and Rave had to form a temporary truce to work together and corner the Arks into ruin."

"House Cervel also taught me that I was allowed to absolutely annihilate the Order of the Ark without going through any troublesome processes!" Jill exclaimed. "If I find them, I'll crush them!" As she raised her fist in the air, she noticed that everyone shook their heads slightly. "What?" she asked.

Zeke had been quietly eating breakfast when he piped up. "And? What does this whatever Order have to do with that village?"

"It's been rumored that the people of Zaza Village vanished because of the Arks," Finn said, steering the conversation back on topic. "Truth be told, the Arks are always accused of being the masterminds of these kinds of mysteries, but recently, we've received reports that dragons refuse to fly around this area. We suspect someone has created a powerful dragon repellent to chase them away."

"Are there dragon repellents that cover such a wide range?" Camila asked. "I've never heard of it."

"Me neither, but dragon and magic seals are the specialty of the Arks."

Jill had also been taught that the Order of the Ark had developed a new type of magic theory that differed from the teachings of Kratos. They were known to use peculiar kinds of sorcery.

"But it's not like there were any actual incidents," Finn said. "And since the dragons refuse to go there, these kinds of investigations tend to be placed on the back burner. Still, if Prince Gerald was spotted nearby…"

"He might've formed ties with the Arks," Camila ventured.

Finn neither agreed nor disagreed with this comment as he raised his head. "We do have some extra time in our schedule, so we can make some small detours. What would you like to do, Your Highness?"

"Nah, don't do it," Rolf interjected. He sat alone at a small, round table next to them, reading the newspaper. "I reckon it's a lie," he said. "If he could be found so easily, no one would be strugglin'

right now. The Three Dukes and the imperial army would only sacrifice their reputation."

"Aw, come on, Grandpa…" Camila said. "You can't force us to work to confirm rumors and stop us now."

"I told ye to confirm if there are any rumors, not to be manipulated by 'em. No doubt, the Kratos prince, who got his throne stolen by his younger sister, is a prime target for the Arks. But I can't imagine that stupidly earnest prince gettin' sweet-talked so easily, and if the Arks really had a base there, there should be some sort of sightings within those rumors."

Could this have been a trap or a way to throw Jill and the others into a state of confusion? She couldn't deny those possibilities.

"I can't imagine this side trip bein' more valuable than our peaceful negotiations at Lehrsatz," Rolf continued. "This meetin' can easily sway our decision on how to deal with that prince anyway. Don't get yer priorities all screwed up. What's most important right now is to safely end the meetin' and ensure that the Rave Empire can agree to the best conditions possible, hopefully in our favor."

Rolf had a point. Zeke, who was eating a steamed potato, set his fork down.

"Then why don't we send a message to the imperial capital, at the very least?" Zeke suggested. "They can act if they deem it truly necessary."

"Good call," Finn said. "If we ask the dragon stables, they can dispatch a dragon and send our letter as soon as possible. Or perhaps His Majesty may know of it already thanks to King Raw."

"Yeah? That clueless, baby dragon was doin' some origami with that map," Rolf said. "You think he can tell the emperor the exact location?"

Everyone awkwardly turned to the Dragon King, who was still fast asleep by Jill's feet.

Finn gave a strained smile. "I'll send a letter with details about the precise location."

Camila poked at her salad with a fork. "If we're up against the Arks and Prince Gerald, I wonder if the troops will be mobilized."

"We don't have any concrete proof yet, and these are just rumors. I'd imagine a small group of trusted scouts will be sent to search the area."

"The Dragon Emperor will use *her*," Rolf said. "That apprentice. What was the lass's name again? Millay?"

Jill tried to reach for the bread in the basket in the middle of the table, but she immediately froze when she heard Millay's name. Zeke took the bread that the Dragon Consort was after.

"You're right," Camila said as she turned to the old man, chair and all. "I heard she's strong, but can she take on such an important mission? She's a lady-in-waiting-in-training, isn't she?"

"Hmph, training or not, all the women in the imperial castle are possible candidates for the Dragon Emperor's empress, ain't they?" Rolf replied. As the air in the room turned icy, Rolf kept his eyes on the paper and gruffly went on, "If the lass claims to be good at magic, this mission'll be the perfect opportunity to test her skills. And if she produces good results here, she'll be even more favored to become the future empress and— Hmmgh!"

"Geezer, have some bread," Zeke said. "It's really good."

"Um, Jill?" Camila said gingerly. "This fruit was super delicious! Why don't you have a bite?"

"Let's investigate this village," Jill said.

Everyone in the room froze. Rolf, who had his face stuffed with bread, was freed from this torture and coughed to catch his breath.

"We can notify the imperial castle after that," Jill continued.

"Wh-What troublesome thing are you saying, lass?!" Rolf cried. "You whippersnapper, your role is to—"

"You geezer, this is *your* fault!" Zeke interrupted.

"That's right!" Camila added. "You had to go and run your stupid mouth! Um, Jill, this might be a trap, remember?"

"Are there any issues if I go and investigate?" Jill asked icily, silencing the room.

"Er…" Finn said awkwardly. "Then, I…will tell everyone our plans."

"Please do."

"Apologize to her, Grandpa! Do something!" Camila screeched.

"Yeah, and now we gotta fly on dragons more than usual!" Zeke yelled.

Rolf frowned as the two knights cornered him, and he pointed to a small bag that hung behind Jill's backrest. "The Dragon Emperor gave ye those leather gloves, didn't he? Ain't that good enough?" he asked.

"What are you suddenly on about?" Jill asked.

"I'm talkin' about the Dragon Emperor's crest on those gloves. It's incredibly rare, can't be given to others so easily, and above all, it's unheard of for the Dragon Emperor to personally embroider that for ye. Don't ye know that?"

Jill widened her eyes and turned to the gloves peeking out from her bag. "I-Is this insignia that precious?!"

"Well, it's rumored that the Dragon Emperor's crest most closely resembles the divine crest that Dragon God Rave brought from the sacred land. And that Dragon Emperor is extremely vigilant, as ye know. I'm shocked that he dared to show that symbol to others, even his Dragon Consort."

"Huh…" Camila mused. "But it's not like it has any sort of function—ow! What gives, you violent bear?"

"Stop needlessly competing with His Majesty and making this conversation more complicated," Zeke scolded.

"Hmph, ignorant nitwits," Rolf started. "Listen…"

Jill, Camila, and Zeke gave an awkward gasp as they realized it all too late. Rolf launched into his long spiel.

"Indeed, while the divine crest might be replicated by humans, they cannot draw out its true power, ye see," Rolf prattled on. "First, if ye don't have enough magical energy, the crest won't function magically. But truth be told, neither Dragon God Rave's crest nor Goddess Kratos's crest has remained in this world. In other words, no one really knows its precise shape.

"If ye pay close attention, with every generation, the shape changes ever so slightly. But if both deities have manifested through their vessels, is it not curious that their precise shape is still unknown? Some theories state that only gods can portray the precise shape. Some have theorized that human eyes can't see the

crest, and some believe that the crest was fractured when the deities left the sacred land and roamed our soil, never to be seen whole by humans. There're no end to these theories, but ye see, *my* theory is that both Rave and Kratos have their reasons for hidin' their crests from human eyes— Hey! I'm not done 'ere!"

"All right, Grandpa, let's get you to bed," Camila said. "I'll be sure to listen to your *terribly* long rambling."

"That geezer really loves to talk on and on…" Zeke said.

He watched Camila drag the old man away as he stacked the remaining plates. He grabbed the bag containing Raw and Hadis Bear by his feet and slung it across his shoulder.

"We're gonna go investigate, right?" Zeke asked.

"Do you think I'm being childish?" Jill inquired.

Raw, shaken awake from being slung, blearily poked his face out of the bag.

Zeke scratched his cheek and said, "Nah, it's fine, I think. Besides, I'd be lying if I said I *wasn't* curious about Prince Gerald's whereabouts."

"Rawr?" Raw asked. He blinked his large, golden eyes curiously, perplexed by the conversation as Zeke violently tousled the king's head.

"Even if dragons don't wanna fly in that area, I'm sure we can figure something out with Li'l Raw on our side," Zeke said. "Right?"

"Rar?!"

"Right. Raw, I'm counting on you!" Jill said.

The Dragon King glanced between Zeke and Jill before he trembled and hid back inside his sack. Truly, this Dragon King was a handful. Zeke and Jill looked at each other and chuckled.



MEINE gracefully soared through the skies in the very back of the formation. Last night, Jill and her dragon had spoken about how they could become stronger as they gazed up at the moon, and this conversation seemed to have increased Meine's trust in the Dragon Consort.

They were already off course as they were initially scheduled to travel down a route alongside the city street, and they entered the skies over the old highway. At the front flew Rolf, who was against this mission until the very end. He claimed that he had wanted to at least decide where they would land and stole the spot at the helm. Jill was worried that the lazy old man might miss any curious cues, but this mission wasn't according to plan anyway. She couldn't complain too much.

She couldn't help but imagine the scene. *Millay, who'd expertly controlled her squad and gallantly soared through the skies, would produce excellent results, and Hadis would…*

"Arghhh!" Jill cried.

"Y-Your Highness? Is anything the matter?" a soldier asked.

"N-Nothing at all… Huh?"

Jill blinked when she saw smoke billowing out of the corner of her eye. She thought it came from a city, but it was much smaller—a village, perhaps. In the depths of the former city street, she crossed a weathered bridge and saw a few roofs peeking out from between the trees. It seemed like smoke had risen from that area. When she cast a sidelong glance, the dragons flying in the front suddenly changed directions. They dropped their altitude and headed for the village.

Jill hastily turned to Finn. "Are we descending here? The area that dragons don't wish to fly in is a little farther up ahead, isn't it?"

"You're right, but it's the perfect timing to get some rest," Finn said. His tone was gentle, but his expression was stern, and the nerves got to Jill, who gripped her reins tightly.

"Meine, we need to protect Raw and everyone else," Jill murmured to her dragon. "Let's act carefully."

The red dragon pulled its chin back as though to nod, and it obediently followed the others as they slowly descended near a river, a short distance away from the village. As Jill dismounted, Zeke approached. Camila and Rolf were nowhere to be seen.

"They went to the village," Zeke explained. "They're gonna go with 'Old Man Rolf threw out his back and needs some help.'"

"Got it," Jill replied. "But why is Rolf so wary of this place?"

At a glance, it just looked like any old tiny village.

"He said that this village isn't on the map," Zeke said as he adjusted his greatsword on his back.

It wasn't odd for a map to be inaccurate at times. There may be spots on the map that had disappeared, and vice versa. Natural disasters could destroy mountains, and floods from rivers could wash away an entire village. These inaccuracies were even more frequent when it came to places people rarely visited. Over time, the land would change, and the map would fail to catch that.

Rolf, who exaggerated his pain, was greeted by kind villagers. They were shocked to hear that the Dragon Consort had come all this way, but they were friendly and even shared some ointment to soothe inflammation. The villagers also helped Jill set up a tent to rest in the village. Raw received plenty of fruit to eat and took a nap in the tent. Sauté, who was tasked with watching over the dragon, relaxed as it preened its feathers. Zeke stood on guard outside.

"They're apparently a troupe of travelers," Camila explained. She unfurled a map to file her report as she was with Jill in the largest tent. "This place used to be a large dragon lodge, and they reused some of the large buildings left behind to stay here for a few days."

"There's a town a short distance away, along the highway," Jill said, purposefully voicing her concerns. "Why did they land here instead of visiting that town?"

"Apparently, one of their kids has a fever. They're worried it might be some sort of plague, and the kid is isolated in one of the buildings in the back. Their friends have gone to the town to get some medicine. I guess it takes time since they don't have any dragons."

"Is it normal for these troupes to have no dragons?" Jill asked.

"If they have animals, they'll cower in the presence of dragons and become fussy. It's not particularly suspicious."

"So, for now, their story lines up."

"Our guards suspect we might've stumbled upon a hidden village where the people evade taxes. There're signs of a field, but it

doesn’t seem tilled. They’ve got three large carriages, including one for cargo, and at the very least, I believe they do plan on moving.”

“What’s Rolf up to?”

“He’s so rowdy, screeching that he wants to sleep in a bed. He’s totally a troublesome grandpa who only causes trouble.”

Rolf indeed was a man who made selfish remarks, but he never was one to aggressively act on his own. Clearly, he was trying to stay because something bothered him. The issue was that he only acted when he was personally interested in something.

“He shouted to call for the Dragon Consort if the villagers had any sort of complaint,” Camila said. “What a fussy old man…” She gave a meaningful wink, and Jill immediately picked up on what she needed to do with a nod.

“Then I suppose we should go to him as a token of our apology,” Jill said.

She did her utmost best to act as normally as possible, in hopes of not raising any red flags. Jill took Camila and Zeke and left the tent. The village wasn’t large, and the troupe only contained around twenty people. It was rather quiet. The troupe members were likely told about Jill’s identity, and they all bowed their heads respectfully when she passed by. *There’s nothing totally odd…* Jill thought.

She walked toward the tent where Rolf was receiving treatment. Just then, a large carriage of four horses passed by Jill, along the wide, straight path that stretched out from the village entrance. As the carriage left her behind, Jill stopped where she stood.

“Jill? What’s wrong?” Camila asked.

“That carriage…” Jill murmured. “It’s the same one that tried to carry His Majesty back to the imperial capital a while ago.”

“Huh? His Majesty doesn’t travel by ca—” Camila stopped herself and snapped her mouth shut.

Zeke also furrowed his brows. The two knights recalled the past. Hadis was a Dragon Emperor, and he generally traveled via dragon, but there was one time when he was almost dragged back to the imperial capital in a carriage. During the Riot of the False Emperor, he was carried back to the capital to be executed.

The carriage was headed for a half-crumbled bell tower, and its steeple peeked through the trees. Since this area used to be a dragon lodge, perhaps a church nearby prayed for safe travels. *Is the sick child kept there?*

Jill changed directions and headed toward the carriage. Camila and Zeke quietly followed. But a few paces later, a couple of people suddenly appeared and barred her path.

"You must be Her Highness, the Dragon Consort," a man said. He had a friendly, slender face. "The tent where your friend is located is over there." He pointed with his chin toward a tent in a different direction. He was likely a leader of sorts in this troupe. "There's a sick child beyond here, and I wouldn't want you to catch the disease."

"I appreciate your kindness, but I was just a bit curious about that carriage," Jill replied.

The man carried no weapons, and he held no magical energy. Everyone else remained calm as they maintained a smile plastered on their faces.

"That's the carriage that must've brought back medicine," the man said. "We can finally depart from this area."

"Oh? You use a carriage with an iron box, meant to carry criminals who've committed serious offenses?" Jill asked.

The man kept his smile and didn't answer. He raised one arm and snapped his fingers loudly. Several explosive noises rang out from behind him, and smoke and fire rose in the air. As Jill tried to whirl around, the ground crackled and glued her into place as a magic circle appeared. The magic circle wasn't nearly strong enough to be called a restraining device, and could barely buy a small amount of time. Jill channeled her magic into her feet and shattered the circle.

But every second she lost was a second gained for her enemies. The sound of a flute echoed throughout the area, and the dragons began to roar. The dragons belonging to Jill's entourage writhed as they rampaged, knocking over trees and tents. The horses tried to flee, and the carriages were swept away by the

dragons' tails, causing them to catch fire as well. In a flash, a sea of scarlet flames rose up to greedily swallow the village whole.

"What are you—" Jill roared.

"The airship was shot down by the Dragon God," the man said in a low voice. The smile vanished from his face. "The blessings of the earth were defiled by the Goddess."

The people around him began to chant as a chorus as they matched his intensity and his voice. Jill was familiar with the famous verses that they sang. They had been hammered into her head ever since she was young.

"You wicked witch who commits adultery with dragons. May you be punished," they chanted.

The Order of the Ark! The teachings of House Cervel had been carved into Jill's body. *Annihilate them upon sight!* Jill showed no signs of hesitation or holding back, but her fist passed through the man's body. *A mirage? No, this is teleportation! Isn't he just a mere sorcerer?!* Even in Kratos, the land of magic and sorcery, teleportation could only be done in carefully maintained facilities with the help of magical energy. It was akin to the work of the gods, and it was unheard of for someone to use such magic, even if it was only for short distances.

"Captain!" Zeke yelled.

Jill regained her composure as a flaming carriage fell between her and Zeke. The men around her had vanished, and Jill clicked her tongue angrily. At this rate, she'd allow them all to escape.

"Are you all right?!" she roared. "Any enemies?"

"None!" Zeke shouted back. "But everyone's confused, and the dragons are going wild!"

"Where's Raw?! He can probably…"

Jill stopped herself and gasped. Would the Order of the Ark fail to notice Raw's true identity? Perhaps this mess broke out because the Dragon King was gone.

"I'll go find him!" Camila yelled.

"I'm counting on you!" Jill replied.

"Captain, who were those people?!" Zeke asked.

Jill sensed the presence of magical energy and whirled around. The large carriage that she'd seen earlier rushed forward. Perhaps an item that large couldn't be teleported, but it was fishy to see it left behind in plain sight. *Is it some kind of trap or… No, I can't hesitate right now.*

"I'll chase after them!" Jill shouted. "I'll leave the rest to you! Prioritize rescuing everyone and ensuring their safety!"

"Roger! Be careful!" Zeke replied.

As Jill ran ahead, she heard a loud whoosh chasing after her. When she gazed up at the shadow looming overhead, she smiled.

"Meine!" Jill cried. "Are you still safe?!"

In lieu of a reply, the dragon descended in front of its rider, and Jill hopped on without a saddle. As Meine again took to the skies, Jill frantically glanced around with her dragon in search of that carriage. It was the only clue that they could get their hands on now. *If Prince Gerald is actually being protected by the Order of the Ark, then…*

Meine let out a ferocious roar. Jill, in her shock, turned in the direction her dragon indicated and immediately found the cause. The carriage she was searching for was clattering ahead at frightening speed, likely with the aid of some spell. On the roof of that carriage was Raw, all tied up like some sort of cargo.

"Raw!" Jill cried.

"Rawr…" Raw cried out with tears in his eyes.

The bumpy, uneven roads had made him dizzy, and Meine's body trembled with fury as it gave chase with incredible speed. A flash of light came from the roof of the carriage—anti-flight magic circles. The entire carriage was covered with them, but Meine paid no heed and charged headfirst.

"Meine, no! Dodge it!" Jill shouted.

She had no way to quickly stop her dragon and could only shout out her warnings, but she didn't make it in time. Meine received the full brunt of the magical rays, and it lost its balance as it fell to the ground. But right before it hit the dirt, it regained some of its composure and landed—red dragons were truly impressive.

"Meine, are you okay?" Jill asked. "Can you still fight on?"

Several shadows flew above them as Meine raised its head. Jill blinked and spotted several wild dragons gathering to save Raw, their Dragon King. Blood drained from her face. Dragon Knights and dragons could only dodge anti-flight magic circles thanks to their rigorous training and the fact that they knew of their existence. There was a good chance that wild dragons had no idea that such magic existed. Meine only stayed safe because it was a red dragon, but lower-ranking dragons would fall in one shot—Jill had seen such grisly battles with her own eyes.

Meine once again flew up as more dragons gave chase. With their Dragon King in danger, they risked their lives to save him, like soldiers headed for war. When Jill looked down at Meine, she noticed it had also completely lost its cool.

"Raw! Raw!" Jill screamed. "You have to stop them! Raw!"

Even from afar, it was clear that the Dragon King couldn't respond—he had been knocked out. A green dragon flashed its talons to scratch the carriage when the vehicle began to glow. An incredible amount of magical energy burst forth, and the anti-flight magic circles fired their rays in all directions. Dragons roared in pain as some fell to the ground. Meine, finally noticing that danger was ahead, slowed down. Jill gritted her teeth and stood up to leap from her dragon's back when a small shadow shot out from above her.

"Chiiirp!"

Sauté was like a bullet. It whizzed through the air and dodged all the rays of light before it kicked Raw awake.

"Raaaa?!" Raw cried.

That kick was enough to wake the Dragon King. He cried out and flew in circles before he was blown back in a different direction. The carriage, dragged by the rope that tied Raw, fell to the ground on its side. Even Meine blinked in utter astonishment as it saw Sauté saving the Dragon King. Jill leaped off her dragon's back.

"Raw! Sauté!" Jill ordered. "Retreat right now! Something else is coming!"

The fallen carriage glowed again as the game fowl looked up at its master.

"Protect Raw and return to Camila and the others! I promise to return, so I'll leave the rest to you!" Jill commanded.

"Chirp!"

Sauté stuffed Raw into a bag and hopped atop Meine. The dragon finally snapped back to its senses and shot into the skies. As Jill tried to leap on the carriage from above, the vehicle emitted a pillar of light in an attempt to fight back. The Dragon Consort transformed her golden ring into a sword and received the explosion of magical energy head-on.

Fortified with several layers of magic, the carriage turned into a cannon that fired energy above—golden energy, the same color as the Dragon Consort's. If left alone, it would surely cause explosions that would drag others in. Jill's mission was to stop that. Pushed by the intense magical energy, she couldn't see ahead. But just as the carriage was about to run out of energy, a tendril shot out and wrapped around Jill's ankle as she floated in the sky. The magical chain dragged her ankle down, and her Sacred Treasure faded away. Only then did the realization hit her. *My magical energy…is being sapped away!*

The chain dragged her down, and tried to suck her into a magic circle that she'd never seen before as she crashed to the ground. Meanwhile, the pillar of light that emerged from the carriage formed an arc and rained upon her—she couldn't stop it anymore. The Order of the Ark excelled in sneak attacks and guerrilla warfare. Precisely because they used mysterious tools, Jill had been constantly told to be very careful if she was going to challenge them. She mustered the magic she had to create a barrier, protecting her from the rays of light that rained down. *I'll be okay! It can't take all of my magic!*

Luckily for Jill, the carriage had depleted much of its energy from the magical rays and the explosions it expelled, weakening its moves. In exchange, Jill had used up all of the magic power she had, but she was alive, and that was all that mattered. She had to remain positive, even if people cloaked in black mantles surrounded her as the clouds of dust began to settle.

"She's the Dragon Consort," one said. "What do we do?"

"We have to bring her," another replied. "Where's the Dragon King? I want to collect him too."

"The Goddess's vessel should be prioritized. She's alive, isn't she? I can't believe the carriage itself exploded. The Moechia faction plans so poorly."

Jill cracked her eyes open as she turned toward the carriage. From the battered vehicle emerged a girl. A collar was around her neck as she was dragged out, and Jill only gasped in surprise. *Why is she here?!* Jill had been told that the queen had departed Basileia, but she should've just crossed the border. The queen was headed for the Lehrsatz duchy to meet with Jill.

"Oh, Dragon Consort, I didn't think that you'd be all the way out here too," the girl said. Her eyes widened ever so slightly as she smiled, her face pale. "Or perhaps, is this where the meeting is to be held?"

Faris der Kratos was in chains as she gracefully gazed down at Jill, her tone sarcastic as dirt sullied her cheeks.



"NOW then, let us meet again," the emperor said.

That was all it took to finally end the afternoon tea party. The sunny sky, which had appeared after a long period of rain, was the perfect time for an afternoon nap. The noisy ladies had made Hadis alert, but another wave of drowsiness washed over him. He stifled a yawn while Millay stood behind him.

"Why don't you take a rest, Your Majesty?" she asked worriedly. "You must be tired."

"I'm fine," Hadis replied. "It must be tough for you to receive all those glares."

Millay had received special treatment amongst her peers and was rumored to be the favorite to become an empress. But she was a commoner and had no one to back her; the ladies invited to today's tea party boasted high status and powerful backing. While there wasn't any sort of fuss, it was clear that many ladies had blatantly directed their gauche animosities at Millay.

"I'm fine. This is my job," Millay replied. "Frankly, it makes my job easier when they're so open with their hostility. Did any of the ladies catch your eye, Your Majesty?"

"Unfortunately, no one is as good as you," Hadis said.

"I-I see."

It was unusual for Millay to fumble over her words, but before their conversation could continue, a screech rang out from beyond the entrance to the rose garden. The ladies, who had just eased their nerves, had broken out into some sort of quarrel.

"Can you go take a look?" Hadis asked.

Imperial soldiers escorted the ladies, but it was better to be safe than sorry. A red-faced Millay rushed out. *I guess I can't catch them so easily…* Hadis thought. As the light trickled through the foliage and onto the now-empty table and chairs prepared for people to enjoy tea while they gazed upon the roses, it looked as though a storm had just passed through. Hadis fell upon a table, certain he wouldn't get into too much trouble for his lack of etiquette.

"Ugh, what a pain," Hadis groaned. "I don't wanna do anything. I don't have enough of Jill."

"You said you were gonna work hard while Missy's away, right? Keep it together," Rave said as he languidly popped out. Since no one was around, the Dragon God began to polish off the leftover cakes, cookies, and fruits on the table.

"But I'm so tired," Hadis whined. "I hate this. I'm bored. I just want to efficiently go through this."

"Don't try to take the easy way out," Rave scolded. "You gotta diligently do each one, and with great care. There're a lot of suspicious factors. Especially in that place where dragons refuse to fly. What are you gonna do? Will you dispatch that kid, Millay, and have her investigate?"

"Argh, it's such a pain! The dragons should take care of their own crap! What use is the Dragon King for?!"

"You *do* know it'll all come back to you, right?" Rave sassed.

"Brother? Are you tired?" Hadis's adorable younger sister showed up.

Hadis swept the noisy Dragon God off the table and swiftly prepared a chair beside him. "I'm fine," Hadis assured. "How about you, Frida? Are you okay? There's some cake left. Want a bite?"

"Thank you," Frida said. "Brother Lutiya, over here."

The princess gestured for the young boy to join them, and Hadis's not-so-adorable youngest brother came over with a look of resignation. Hadis narrowed his eyes as he grabbed another plate and cut Lutiya's share.

"Today will be an exception," Hadis said. "I'll give you your share, too. Here."

"I can't believe you can act so high and mighty by just slicing up some cake," Lutiya replied.

"I'm feeling very benevolent right now. Jill's going to invite me to a tea party, I'll have you know!"

"Whoa, *that's* what goes on in your head? You're so lame."

Hadis closed his eyes for a moment before he smiled, his knife still in his hand. "You shitty brat!" he rumbled.

"Fighting is bad," Frida butt in.

"But…" Hadis started.

When his younger sister glared at him, he found himself powerless and reluctantly fell silent. Frida reached for a teapot that kept drinks warm, and Lutiya laid out three cups.

"So?" Lutiya asked as he reached for his slice of cake with his bare hands. "Seems like you came up with zilch, but what now?"

Hadis frowned. "That's bad manners. Use your fork."

"If you can't catch them soon, our info's gonna keep leaking. Even if you hold another tea party, I doubt they'd get caught. You should change your strategy."

"Ah, then, why don't we announce that you're searching for a fiancée, Lutiya?"

"Huh?!"

"Brother Hadis, don't be mean," Frida said.

"I know," Hadis replied. "I'm just j—"

Just then, a voice filled the Dragon Emperor's mind, and he scrunched his nose. Rave, who was devouring all the leftovers on the table, looked up.

"Huh? You're lost? Why should I care?" Hadis grumbled.

Frida stared back blankly.

"He's probably talking to Raw," Lutiya remarked.

The young boy was right, but Hadis was miffed that Lutiya called the name of the Dragon King—the important soul of an older brother who should be respected—so casually.

"'Where am I?' How should I know?" Hadis mumbled. "Huh?! You're under attack? Have that bird take care of you. Oh, do you want me to contact your wife? If you don't want that, solve it yourself. It's got nothing to do with— Wait, where's Jill? What?! You got separated from her?! Why are you… A detour? She tried to search for Prince Gerald?"

Frida quietly placed the plate of cake and the cup of tea away from Hadis's hands.

"Wh-Why? Why's Jill trying to find Prince Gerald?" Hadis stammered. "A-And what're you planning on doing? You'd better return to Jill's side. What?! She might not return?! How can you say that?! Explain yourself! Where is— Hey! Hey!"

"How should I know, you idiot!" the Dragon King snapped before he cut off communication. Hadis was in a state of shock.

"R-Rave! What kind of upbringing has he had?!" Hadis cried.

"I'm sad to say that he reflects your soul," Rave replied.

The Dragon Emperor ignored those words as he placed a hand over his forehead to calm himself and think of a plan.

"Did something happen to Miss Jill?" Lutiya asked.

"Sh-She went searching for Prince Gerald and got wrapped up in some kind of problem…" Hadis replied. "She got separated from Raw, and he doesn't know where she went. Wh-Why was she searching for him anyway? Could it be? Could she be with him right now instead of me?!"

Hadis clutched his chest. Rave flew off his shoulder.

"Hey, Rare!" Rave called out. "Can you hear me? Yeah, so the other dragons are troubled. Raw ordered the others to never tell you, so watch over him, will you? He said he'll try to work things out himself. But keep your eyes peeled. Missy's currently gone missing, and I'm not sure what Hadis will do right now."

"Calm down," Lutiya said. "Prince Gerald's whereabouts will be an excellent tool for negotiations. I'm sure Miss Jill just—"

"I don't care about that!" Hadis shouted. "J-Jill's always like this! She always tells me I'm the most important to her, yet she always keeps me on the sidelines! I'm taller than that stupid prince, and I'm stronger, and I've got the Heavenly Sword! I'm an emperor, and I can even cook! I doubt that prince will *ever* wear an apron, you know!"

"I thought you just liked to wear aprons, Brother," Lutiya said dryly.

"I'm doing it for Jill's sake!"

Lutiya shrugged his shoulders at Hadis's shouting and turned to Frida. "He's a lost cause," Lutiya mumbled.

"Um, Sister Jill once sided with Prince Gerald," Frida said, trying to explain to Lutiya. "So, I think…that traumatized Brother Hadis…"

"Huh, I didn't know that happened. Serves you right, Brother."

"Shut up!" Hadis cried. "Jill doesn't even see you as a potential partner!"

"E-Excuse me for intruding on this conversation, Your Majesty," Millay said as she jogged back. "Um, I'd like to hear your thoughts about something."

As Millay glanced around worriedly, Frida immediately stood up and tugged on Lutiya's sleeve.

"Brother Lutiya…we should go," Frida said. "I think we're a nuisance here."

"Not one bit, Princess Frida!" Millay gasped. "Er, but I'm terribly sorry…"

"I don't mind, as long as it's of use to Brother Hadis," Frida replied. "Isn't that right, Brother?"

She expertly flashed an intimidating smile at Hadis before she dragged Lutiya away. The young prince cast an icy glare at his brother before following his sister.

"I thought I should tell you about this as soon as possible," Millay said. "It's about the fuss we heard earlier. It was because a bunch of these were scattered around the castle." She handed Hadis a piece of paper.

"We've got the Dragon Consort. If you want her back safe, the Dragon Emperor must obey Goddess Kratos," the note read. Hadis was glad that his siblings weren't here, for fear that he would strike terror in them. Rave scowled as he returned to Hadis's shoulder.

"Whoa… You're thinking of something crazy again," Rave muttered.

Not true, Hadis thought. *We finally caught a hold of them.*

It hadn't been too long since Raw was separated from Jill. And yet, almost immediately, Jill's kidnappers had slipped in this note. That implied that her kidnappers had already snuck into the imperial castle. As Hadis thought about how one could get into contact with others so swiftly and slide this paper into the depths of the castle, he began to draw his own conclusions and smiled. *Obey the Goddess?*

That was likely to cast doubt upon Kratos. It likely held no deeper meaning, but the audacity was palpable. Rave picked up on Hadis's wicked smile, sighed, and slithered into the Dragon Emperor.

"Any chaos within the castle?" Hadis asked.

"N-None," Millay replied. "I found this paper with the imperial soldiers, but they seem to find this kidnapping as some kind of joke and refuse to believe it."

"Makes sense. No one would believe the Dragon Consort was kidnapped."

"B-But the Dragon Consort is younger than me and is just a normal little girl. Kratos likely laid some sort of despicable trap for their meeting. We should presume that Kratos abducted Her Highness, and form a squad to investigate just in case."

Millay's logic was sound, but as Hadis disregarded her, a gruff voice entered his ear.

"Y-Your Majesty!" Despite having lost his right arm, General South ran fast enough to kick up clouds of dust. "I-I heard all about it!" he gasped. "Her Highness feigned her travels to the meeting and ran away from home after being infuriated with you, Your Majesty!"

"Huh?" Hadis asked.

"What did you do, Your Majesty? Please tell me. The imperial army shall do its utmost best to find Her Highness and apologize on

your behalf! We swear to bring her back, so if you have any sort of leads at all, please let me know!"

"How did you come to *that* conclusion?"

South blinked, snapped back to his senses, and straightened. "I understand that a mysterious document regarding the Dragon Consort's kidnapping has made its rounds in the castle, causing a bit of a stir. His Highness Lutiya confirmed that the Dragon Consort was missing, and mentioned that her love for you had waned…"

That brat… This is his way of getting back at me, huh? Hadis felt a vein pop on his temple. Rave cackled with delight.

"Are these rumors all false?" South asked.

"Do I look like a man Jill would abandon?" Hadis asked.

"No. Her Highness is a very generous lady, but I understand you always go against expectations, Your Majesty. I believe her love for you waning isn't off the table," South solemnly replied.

Hadis closed his eyes and opened them again, a smile painted on his face. "I see. Well, then, why not? Let's just go with that."

"Aw, crap, you're mad," Rave said. *"C'mon, Missy won't desert you after all this time."* After Rave had his fair share of laughs, he tried to calm Hadis down, but it was too late.

"Yep, Jill deserted me," Hadis said. "She went in search of Prince Gerald and disappeared. She might be having an affair." As Hadis thought back, puzzlingly enough, the pieces fit together well.

"Prince Gerald?" South asked. "Then the Dragon Consort commenced her search for your sake. I'm relieved to—"

"I didn't ask for it, though!" Hadis shouted. "You don't have to go searching for her."

"Huh?!" Millay gasped in astonishment.

Hadis ignored her and gave his order to South. "Call for my older brother. I'll cancel all my future plans and head for Lehrsatz."

Millay and South felt compelled to refute, but they snapped their mouths shut. Hadis turned toward his trusted lady-in-waiting-in-training.

"Millay, I'll have you tag along with me," Hadis said.

"O-Of course. I shall gladly do so," Millay stammered. "But how can we rescue the Dragon Consort?"

"It'd trouble me to have the Dragon Consort rely on me so much."

"Huh? What do you—"

Hadis grabbed a confused Millay's hands and tried to smile as gently as possible. "As my future empress candidate, I'd like you to focus on making this meeting a success," Hadis said.

Millay and South were at a loss for words.

"I can't believe you can think of so many ways to make Missy mad at you…" Rave said wearily.

I don't care. Hadis just wanted the women who gathered around him to crush each other of their own volition. It was an act of self-defense. Paying no heed to etiquette, he grabbed a slice of cake with his bare hand and devoured it in one bite. He neatly licked off a bit of cream that was on his thumb.

Chapter 2: The Passengers of the Ark

AS she made it through the thicket, Camila stopped her galloping horse. She had come upon a clearing and saw a destroyed, overturned carriage. The ground was charred, and many holes were gouged in the dirt. Nearby trees had been shattered, hinting that a grisly battle had occurred here. Those who followed Camila dismounted from their horses and looked around.

The dragons were left behind in the village where the fire had been extinguished; they were restless and still a bit unreliable. Since there still could've been some clues left in that village, their unit split into two teams. Camila, the other Dragon Knights, and Finn, who served as Jill's dragon teacher of sorts, chased after the Dragon Consort. The other team remained in the village. If Camila's team didn't return by evening, the village team would contact the imperial capital.

Rolf tossed aside a chunk of debris from the destroyed carriage and muttered, "This is where their trail ends. No wheel tracks either. They either used dragons or…maybe teleportation. But unlike the teleportation devices that the Kratos Kingdom uses, attemptin' this feat means that they couldn't have gone very far."

Finn, perhaps feeling responsible for this whole mess, turned pale. "Will the Dragon Consort and the Dragon King be all right?"

"Don't worry," Zeke said as he clapped Finn's shoulder. "Based on past experiences, it's their enemies who should watch out."

"Er, but…how can you be sure? I'm well aware of the Dragon Consort's strength, but the Dragon King is so small and round and puny…" Finn trailed off.

"If anyone so much as raises a finger against Raw, the dragons won't stay quiet," Camila said. "And above all—"

A loud explosion cut her off. Smoke and light rose from the forest along with a gust of powerful wind. The light clearly came from magic, and the fire spread, causing dragons and birds to scatter to the skies.

"Those whippersnappers…" Rolf grumbled.

"W-Wait, that's, uh, you know who…right?" Camila mumbled.

"Y-Yeah," Zeke agreed.

"We should head out!" Finn shouted.

Skilled with horseback riding as well, Finn gracefully mounted his steed and rushed ahead. A few moments later, a truly hellish scene, straight from the maws of the underworld, greeted Camila and the others. The forest was on fire, and a plushie bear stood there with glowing eyes. A bird grabbed a tree trunk with its legs and swung it around to defeat nearby enemies, and a red dragon breathed fire at the sky above.

"Have I finally gone to Hell?" Rolf muttered.

"H-Hey, don't say that, Grandpa," Camila said. "This is the power of the Knights of the Dragon Consort, and you're one of us now!"

"This is worse than the last time," Zeke murmured. "Did the weakening spell get lifted from His Majesty Bear?"

"Wh-Why is a stuffed animal…standing? And that bird… It's fighting," Finn stammered.

"Chiiirp!"

Blown back by the tree trunk, the enemies in black hoods blasted off into the distance.

Rolf gasped and shouted, "Hey, capture 'em alive! We can milk some info outta 'em!"

The group in black hoods noticed Rolf and vanished instantly—their enemies had teleported away. Sauté tossed the tree trunk aside and let out a cry of victory. Hadis Bear quickly fell on its side.

"Rawr!" Raw cried as he popped out from his hiding place on Meine's back.

Camila, who'd dismounted and outstretched her arms, caught Raw as he flew back down.

"Raw! I'm so glad you're safe!" Camila cried. "Where's Jill?"

"Rawr! Rar! Rar rar rar! Raaaawr! Rawr!"

"The hell is he sayin'?" Rolf asked.

Raw froze and thought pensively in Camila's arms for a while before he jumped down. He turned around to explain himself to Sauté, who was collecting Hadis Bear, and Meine. With that, Raw carried Hadis Bear on his back and gestured between himself and the stuffed toy.

"His Majesty Bear is…you?" Camila asked.

"Rawr!" Raw nodded happily as he swung the bear around and walked ahead. "Raaawr! Rawr! Rar rar!"

The Dragon King seemed to be calling for help. "Jill! Jill! Help me!" he seemingly cried out, and Meine, who carried Sauté on its back, slowly walked forward.

"Graaar…" Meine roared gently.

"Y-You're being chased!" Camila surmised. "Jill gave chase to save you!"

"Rawr!"

"Then what?" Zeke asked.

"Chiiirp!"

Sauté gave a proud cry as it jumped from Meine's back. The bird twirled as it kicked His Majesty Bear—a standin for Raw—and the plush went flying.

"Raaawr," Raw cried rather emotionlessly.

The bear plopped to the ground a good distance away, and Sauté went to fetch it with Meine in tow. Raw turned to everyone and proudly puffed out his chest.

"Rawr, rawr!"

"The end!" the Dragon King seemed to say.

"Crap, I don't get it at all," Zeke groaned.

"Rar?!"

"I-I can't believe it…" Finn murmured. "This is amazing! Black and red dragons can even perform a play together! They're so smart!"

"Earth to Finn," Camila said. "Come on back down to reality. Uh, Grandpa?"

Rolf had already given up on trying to understand the situation as he crouched down and fiddled with the dirt.

"Did you find anything?" Camila asked.

"The heat rays and the dragons' flames have burned everythin' up," Rolf replied. "Hey, ain't that a dragon's flower burning over there?! Are ye guys only good at destroyin' stuff? Use your little brains!"

"Chirp?"

Sauté's eyes glimmered menacingly. Camila hastily interjected herself into the conversation.

"I know, Sauté," she said. "You went through your fair share of troubles. If you screwed up, you guys would've turned into dinner dishes."

"Credit where credit's due," Rolf added. "Had the Dragon King been abducted, things woulda gotten more complicated."

"Was Li'l Raw their target, then?" Zeke asked.

"Probably thought they could get him if they got lucky. Else, they wouldn't be so lightly dressed against our quirky squad of slaughter, yeah?"

"In any case, we should search for Jill," Camila said. "Or this situation will—"

"Chirp!" Sauté outstretched its wings and cut her off. After commanding everyone's attention, the bird shook its head.

"You don't want us to search for Captain? Why not?" Zeke asked.

Sauté glanced at Raw.

Camila sighed. "You received orders to protect Raw and not to worry about her, huh? Good grief, Jill… But it'd be a problem if she doesn't return since we've got that meeting."

Kratos was sending their queen for this meeting, after all. Only members of the imperial family could replace Jill, or, in the worst case, Hadis himself. Zeke cast a sweeping glance at his surroundings.

"Let's search this area once more," he suggested. "We can start from that carriage— Hey! Sauté! Don't peck me!"

"Chirp chirp! Chiiirp!"

The bird firmly pointed toward Lehrsatz and braced itself with Hadis Bear. Camila and Zeke slowly inched back a short distance away and did a small huddle.

"What's our plan?" Zeke whispered. "It's gonna kill us if we don't head for Lehrsatz."

"But what use is there to attend without Jill?" Camila hissed back. "We're Jill's guards, aren't we?"

A strong gust of wind from above interrupted their huddle. As a shadow flew past them, Camila looked up in astonishment. She thought she heard a faint melody carried by the wind.

"Hey! That dragon… Isn't that the one from the Dragon Flower Crown Festival?!" she gasped.

The backlight made it hard for her to see, but she could make out the dark fog that enveloped the beast. She couldn't even see the color of its scales, and most importantly, this dragon hardly paid Raw any attention. Atop this mysterious beast were the assailants who had teleported away from them.

"That birdy's right," Rolf said. "There's nothin' we can do. We should head for Lehrsatz."

"And leave that dragon be, too?!" Camila cried. "We got nothing from this! Nothing!"

"Not exactly."

Rolf patted the dust from his clothes and stood up. He tossed a burned bit of cloth at Camila. She gently peeled off a white petal that was burned onto it and saw the black embroidery, which was difficult to make out against the charred cloth. She could make out a serpent and an apple pierced by a cross.

Finn, a member of the imperial army, was the first to react to this symbol with a pale face. "It's the insignia of the Order of the Ark," he murmured. "Which means that dragon was a messenger of the Arks!"

"Wait, what?" Zeke replied. "I thought that thing came from Kratos."

"Must be a different one," Rolf replied. "The one that the poisonous herb lad rode on didn't make any sort of magical energy sound."

He paid no heed to Camila and the others as he unfurled a map, scribbled something down, and quickly mounted his horse. "C'mon, don't dillydally!" Rolf called. "Duke Lehrsatz is strict when it comes to tardiness. I wouldn't want to get a scoldin'!"

"Grandpa, wait, explain your thoughts—" Camila argued.

"I know nothin'! I hate troublesome matters!"

Before he could be questioned further, he kicked the sides of his horse and rushed ahead. Camila and the others hastily collected Sauté, Hadis Bear, and Raw and mounted their horses.



JILL was in cuffs. She'd been shoved into a carriage covered in a magic seal. She remained obedient, noticing that the seal wasn't anything serious, but as time passed, she realized that she'd horribly misunderstood its purpose. She didn't feel her magical energy regenerating at all. Her magical energy was depleted; the magic seal was weak, but it came with an effect to greatly delay her regeneration speed. She didn't know such an effect existed until now. Jill had tried several times to use brute force and tear the handcuffs apart, but to no avail.

"It's most unwise to use your stamina without a proper plan in mind," the girl across from Jill warned.

The carriage clattered and shook something fierce as it carried them to its intended destination.

"They're experts when it comes to dragons and magic seals," Faris said. "They haven't gone up against the Dragon God and Goddess for a millennium for nothing."

"You seem rather laid back, Queen Faris," Jill observed.

"Do I seem that way?"

The queen tilted her head to one side, her frighteningly pale skin filthy with dirt. Every limb she had was locked in heavy chains. She was even more tightly secured than Jill. The Dragon Consort recalled a memory of the young queen always in bed as she forlornly awaited her older brother's return.

"What happened?" Jill asked.

"We were attacked by the border," Faris replied. "Judging by the attire, they must be the Order of the Ark."

Jill was surprised Faris had divulged information so easily.

"That's basically what happened to me, too," Jill told her. "But wasn't House Cervel assigned as your guard detail? And you were still abducted?"

"Oh, Lady Jill, how ironic to hear you say that when you've been abducted as well," Faris replied.

Jill couldn't refute. Faris smiled faintly.

"If House Cervel was abruptly teleported away, even they have no means to fight against that," the queen said. "Perhaps they were teleported by utilizing the magnetic field of magic near the border. But teleportation is seen as the work of the gods, so they couldn't have gone far. I'm sure that your family is safe."

"Talking about my family won't fool me anymore," Jill replied, one of her fears abating. "But Prince Gerald isn't here. You'd never be put in such danger if he was around."

Faris widened her eyes with surprise before she smiled. "Do you think so? Personally, I haven't discounted the probability that my brother is cooperating with the Arks."

"…Are you sure you should divulge that to me?" Jill asked.

"I was hoping to hear your thoughts, for you have memories of the past and present." As Faris smiled, she seemed awfully willowy. "What do you think? Do you believe my brother will aim for the throne? Will he be willing to form ties with even the Arks? Will he desert me as he'd once done to you?"

Jill frowned and raised her voice. "I wouldn't be surprised if he does form ties! He once meticulously planned to corner his own father and started a war!"

"You're right."

"But he did so to save his kingdom and you." Jill faced the ground, the words falling out of her mouth. "He isn't one to mistake his methods and goals. He was like that in the past, and he hasn't changed even now. So, I'm positive that Prince Gerald isn't here. Please don't make me say these things."

"Lady Jill, you're very kind, as you always have been."

The Dragon Consort wasn't happy to hear those words, and her expression made that clear, causing Faris to giggle.

"As a way of thanks, why don't I tell you something?" the queen offered.

"No need after all this time," Jill replied. "You're sending chills down my spine."

"My brother didn't want you, and only you, to find out his truth. Back then, I was a child and failed to understand the meaning of those words, but when I finally did, it was all too late."

"I told you that you don't have to speak of such things. It's not enjoyable for either of us." Jill turned away.

Faris finally looked up. "Hee hee, you're right. But I'd like to speak with you precisely because all this time has passed. I *want* to believe that turning back time and becoming queen was the correct path, but that's my weakness. I feel like a fool who's been using the Dragon God as a shield. And just because this is the correct path doesn't justify doing whatever I'd like."

"Let's just think about escaping for now."

This sort of talk should be saved for their meeting.

"The seal is suppressing your magic and mine," Jill said. "It shouldn't last long. There will definitely be a moment when they must create another seal, and we should aim for that opening."

"The magic seal on these cuffs was made using the Sacred Spear," Faris replied. "I'd imagine that it's quite strong."

"What?" Jill half-closed her eyes.

Faris tilted her head to one side. "She may not be much, but she *is* still a Goddess. It's dangerous to underestimate her."

"Say stuff like that sooner! Wait, why was the Sacred Spear used? Did… Did you stage this entire thing and kidnap yourself?!"

"I'll have you know that I don't have such a fetish, and don't wish to put myself through this hardship."

"Then how in the world was the Sacred Spear used to seal your magic?! I can hardly believe it!" Jill cried in disbelief.

Faris's composed face turned dark. "I agree. It's hardly believable, that useless Goddess…"

"Useless Goddess?" Jill parroted.

Faris flashed an adorable smile. “The Sacred Spear—the Goddess—has been taken by the Order of the Ark.”

“And I’m saying that a Goddess can’t be taken so easily! She’s a Goddess, for crying out loud!”

“But she’s a *useless* Goddess.” Faris’s tone was firm. “And I cannot return home until I take that spear back.”

“How can I believe you?! Even if there was a chance that Goddess Kratos was taken, why can’t she escape? She might have an excuse if she’s up against the Dragon God or the Dragon Emperor, but this is absurd!”

“Please calm down, Lady Jill. Have the Dragon God and Dragon Emperor shown themselves to be dignified deities? Do they act noble and omnipotent? Can you truly, from the bottom of your heart, believe that these deities cannot be abducted due to pathetic reasons and be confined, unable to move?”

Jill, who rose slightly, flopped back down as various memories flashed across her mind. “Right, you do have a point. Of course it’s possible…” the Dragon Consort mumbled.

“I’m happy to hear you understand,” Faris replied with a smile.

Is she not setting me up for a trap somehow? Jill wondered. She couldn’t help but intently observe the young queen from the corner of her eye, when the girl suddenly had a coughing fit. Jill rushed to her side and rubbed the little girl’s back. Faris had a frail constitution, and she was now trapped in a cold, iron box filled with filthy air and no access to sunlight. Faris’s body could hold on for only so long.

“Hey, at least let the queen rest a little!” Jill barked. “She’s your precious hostage, isn’t she?”

No answer came. Jill clicked her tongue with annoyance as she tried to undo the mantle around her. Her wrists were restrained with chains, making this a clumsy and difficult ordeal, and as she struggled, Faris burst out giggling.

“Were you faking it?!” Jill asked.

“Lady Jill, why don’t we work together until we get the spear back?” Faris offered. “I haven’t the faintest clue what the motives of the Arks are, but at this rate, we certainly can’t hold a meeting. My

power and dignity as queen shall be suspected, and the same should go for you as Dragon Consort. We don't want to create more unnecessary work for ourselves, do we?"

"Well, we do have the same goal…for now," Jill conceded, growing contemplative.

Faris accepted the mantle from her. The queen wrapped it around her small body. "As you can see, I'm not suited for fighting and shall only be a nuisance," she said. "I ask that you find any opening you can and make your escape. Since I can trace the presence of the Sacred Spear, they won't let me go so easily, but you seem to be an unexpected hostage. I doubt they'd pursue you very far."

"Are you telling me to leave you behind?" Jill asked. "That's far too dangerous."

"I'm very much aware of that. It's the Calvariae faction that's transporting us right now. They must know my value as the vessel of the Goddess, and they likely won't kill me." As Jill cocked her head quizzically, Faris sat up straight. "The Order of the Ark is a group comprised of two factions. One has a base in Rave, as they deny the existence of the Dragon God, and the other is based in Kratos, as they deny the existence of the Goddess. Each faction, cornered by the respective deity, had no choice but to merge and form one group. But these factions still remain—the Moechia faction of Kratos, and the Calvariae faction of Rave."

"By Moechia, do you mean the Moechia Prison on the Aegle Peninsula?" Jill asked.

That was a prison where noble criminals were kept within the Kratos Kingdom. Faris smiled faintly.

"Any abhorrent place of tragedy for the Goddess and the Dragon God is sacred land to the Arks. Speaking of which, the Calvariae Valley of the Rave Empire is where the Dragon God was killed in the First Holy Battle of Rakia. Now you see where they took their namesakes from?"

Jill recalled learning about these locations in history books, but her memories were fuzzy. At the very least, she learned that the

Order of the Arks was divided into two factions: the Moechia and the Calvariae factions.

"So, did the Moechia faction abduct you, Queen Faris?" Jill inquired.

"I believe so," Faris replied. "Since the Moechia faction came from Kratos, they're very adept at magic. They're likely the ones who stole the Sacred Spear."

"Huh? But isn't the other faction transporting us right now? I mean, they mentioned…" Jill's kidnappers had insulted the Moechia faction, which meant that the ones handling them were of the Calvariae faction.

"Perhaps the plan was for the Moechia faction to secure the Sacred Spear, and the Calvariae faction to kidnap me," Faris surmised. "This would inevitably split the search teams into two and create confusion. And it won't be so easy for Kratos to dispatch a search team to the Rave Empire."

"We might have a pact, but it's still cause for strife," Jill agreed.

"And since you're here, I don't doubt it'll cause a delay in making a decision. I trust that Lawrence can skillfully conduct negotiations, but…"

"Pardon? *We've* got very skilled subjects too."

Jill knew just how excellent Lawrence was, but she was miffed to hear how underestimated the people of Rave were. Faris blinked for a few moments before she smiled.

"Oh, I do pray that that's the case," the queen said.

"What's with you? You sound so condescending," Jill replied. "Besides, if needed, we've got His Majesty."

"Frankly, I'm worried about him the most. My bet is that he'll never cooperate with a search for the Sacred Spear."

Jill struggled to find a response but managed to eke out a retort. "H-His Majesty will act befitting for the Dragon Emperor when the time calls for it… I think!"

"No matter the case, I don't know what will happen with my stolen spear. Since it was pried from me, I'm certain the enemy plans to use it for no good."

"Use…the Sacred Spear? Frankly, I still can hardly believe your story. Even Rave isn't *that* stupid." Jill glared at her, intent on not getting fooled so easily, but Faris smiled wider than ever before.

"I understand completely," Faris agreed. "I couldn't believe it when I saw the Goddess tearfully part ways with me because she was told I'd be safe if she listened to their whims."

"Huh?!" Jill gasped. "There's no way the enemy's flimsy lies would so easily fool the Goddess!"

"Lady Jill, next time, I do ask that you create a signpost that says, 'Dragon God, this way.' Please place it in front of that idiot." Faris ended up calling the Goddess simply an 'idiot.' "She'll get caught in a flash."

"W-Will she?"

"Words alone might not be enough, but if you add a board with the silhouette of the Dragon God, I'm certain she won't even question it. Someone who claimed to be the Dragon God fooled her before. Truly, the Goddess of Love is pure and innocent, isn't she?"

Faris smiled darkly, implying that there was no need for further explanation. Frankly, Dragon God Rave didn't exude radiance and dignity that could be spotted from miles away, but Goddess Kratos seemed to be even worse than that. Jill became afraid of this insight and couldn't stop herself from sympathizing.

"Y-You've sure got it tough…" the Dragon Consort muttered.

Faris's smile grew ever brighter as she was annoyed by the sympathy that she received. "I'm sure the Goddess will rush in if you mention that the Dragon Emperor is present. She can hardly hold onto any sort of reason when it comes to the Dragon God and Dragon Emperor."

Did I battle with a Goddess who lost her reason back in Beilburg? No matter the case, she's only trouble.

"I-In any case, you're saying that the Sacred Spear is unreliable," Jill stammered.

"I'm not saying that she's unreliable," Faris replied. "I'm saying that you *cannot* rely on her. In fact, she may be more of a nuisance than anything else."

"Are you going to insult her that much?!"

"She's being used to seal our magic, isn't she? She's an utter idiot."

Why am I *the one defending the Goddess anyway? I need to calm myself down.*

Jill looked up. "Once the Sacred Spear is found, should I tell her you're safe?"

"I doubt she'd believe the words of a Dragon Consort," Faris replied.

"Oh, so *now* she's wary?! What a pain!"

"It's better if I snap—I mean, if I tell her, I think it'd be the most surefire way."

She just tried to say that she wanted to snap the spear, didn't she? Jill's cheek twitched. Faris fell into contemplative silence for a few moments.

"The biggest issue is the Sacred Spear's condition," Faris said. "I've never been separated from her like this before…"

"Just for reference, how have you been attacked until now?" Jill asked gingerly.

"A rather trite act of savagery that those scum would think of to snatch the power of the Goddess for themselves," Faris spoke softly, but the corners of her lips were filled with scorn. "I won't be killed so easily, and we still have some time. Lady Jill, you must first think about escaping and saving yourself. Or do you still find yourself unable to trust me?"

"Of course. Your past actions are proof enough that I shouldn't."

"But I will never forgive the Order of the Ark. Please commit that to memory. And I'm sure that the Dragon Emperor feels the same."

Jill frowned at the mention of Hadis, but she snapped her mouth shut when she glanced at Faris's profile. The queen's eyes, which gazed into the distance with pure wrath, so closely resembled Hadis's, the Dragon Emperor who had once stood alone to burn everything in his path. *Now's not the time to think about stuff like that.*

"I understand your situation. I'll cooperate with you," Jill said. "Whether the Goddess was captured for the most pathetic reason you gave or not, I can't just leave her be."

"Are you worried about the Goddess?" Faris asked. "You're so kind, Lady Jill."

"I couldn't care less about what happens to the Sacred Spear."

However, if there was some sort of spell out there that could temporarily seal the Sacred Spear, it could also seal the Heavenly Sword. *And if that happens, Rave and His Majesty will…* But Jill felt no need to express her concerns.

"If you try anything funny, I won't hold back," Jill warned. "And don't hate me if you find that to be a betrayal of sorts. You're my enemy, after all."

Faris slowly blinked and smiled beautifully. "I don't mind. The merciful and benevolent Goddess shall forgive betrayals."

When the carriage clattered and slowed down, their conversation stopped. The vehicle came to a halt, and a few moments later, a loud creak outside indicated that the heavy door was being opened. Even without magical energy, Jill was the better fighter, and she placed Faris firmly behind her and glared at the opening door. Light filled the dark carriage.

"My, oh my," a man said. "What a wretched sight. We shall prepare a bath and a meal immediately. Can you two move? Ah, you require shoes and a blanket. Make preparations for them immediately, and don't be insolent."

The man ordered the servants nearby as the two ladies maintained their silence. He whirled around with an elegant bow.

"Forgive my late introduction. My name is Canis, and I ask that you not be so wary, though that's probably an impossible request. I'm aware that the Moechians were rather rough with you two."

"You're also part of the Order of the Arks, aren't you?" Jill asked.

Canis shrugged. "We Calvariaens aren't violent like them. We should first hope for peaceful negotiations as intelligent human beings."

Faris giggled softly behind Jill. Canis tried to take a good look at the queen, but she was hidden from view.

"Ah, so you claim to be intelligent humans," Faris snickered. "Can you do anything other than shake your hips?"

But her enigmatic eyes, which glowed ominously like Hadis's, were difficult to miss.

"Please look forward to it, dear queen who has received a mission to destroy Dragon God Rave," Canis said. "We Calvariaens shall be very good friends to you."

He respectfully bowed to Faris like a dutiful subject, but his smarmy gaze told a different story, filled with mockery.

"Now then, Dragon Consort, what shall you do?" Canis asked. "Would you like to head back home?"

"You'd let me do that after dragging me out here?" Jill inquired.

"Of course. You've got a meeting to attend, don't you? If the queen and the Dragon Consort both go missing, each nation will suspect the other and quarrel. I wouldn't want your bonds to become irreparable before the meeting."

"Then free me along with Queen Faris," Jill demanded.

"Unfortunately, Her Majesty must stay with us."

"Lady Jill," Faris whispered, implying that the Dragon Consort should make her escape.

"Sorry, but my magical energy hasn't returned yet," Jill replied. Faris furrowed her brows, but Jill paid her no heed and stared at Canis. "Let me rest here for a little while longer," she said. "Or will I be a nuisance when you and the queen engage in some secret conversations?"

She was sure that Camila and the others were headed for Lehrsatz. *Don't worry, it's not like a war will start by the time I return.*

"Not at all; not one bit," Canis replied. "I've always dreamed of having the opportunity to speak with you, Your Highness. You shall never be a nuisance at this point in time." He outstretched his arms as he laughed. "I shall welcome you, harlots who sold humans to the gods. Welcome to the Order of the Ark!"

Meetings were meant to form bonds behind the scenes, and negotiations were bluffs. Jill and Faris's meeting had already begun.



LEHRSATZ, the city of trade, was the first and largest gateway to the Kratos Kingdom. It boasted the largest station and railroad in the Rave Empire, connecting the Neutrahl and Verrat duchies. Lehrsatz was more akin to a resort town, where people mingled and enjoyed their wealth. Camila had expected the city to be flashy with opulent décor, and she stared down curiously from the sky to see the city was rich in history.

A large statue of a dragon, built in the likeness of Dragon God Rave, stood in the central square. Beautiful, large buildings exuding historical significance surrounded it. The river that flowed into the ocean had sturdy bridges erected over it, and even the outskirts of the city were well-maintained.

As you got closer to the ends of the city and the port, the buildings became more modernized, showcasing technological advancements over the years. Several resort hotels dotted the white beaches. Beyond the estuary, where the white sands ended, was a clearing with a small hill—this was where the estate of Duke Lehrsatz stood.

Even from high above, one would marvel at the sheer size of the estate. A vast courtyard garden stretched from the gates all the way to a water fountain. Several bell towers with steeples dotted the grounds, and the manor itself resembled a fortified castle. An arbor and a tiny stream within a well-maintained garden surrounded it. There was even a wide space for dragons to land and large dragon stables.

The residence of Duke Neutrahl utilized Dragon Knights, which bolstered their defenses for greater efficiency. It practically blended in with the fortress city of Neutrahl, but Lehrsatz's mansion stood loud and proud as the city's lord.

The splendid interior of the mansion blew a commoner like Camila away. It didn't look tacky, but she could easily see how

expensive and gorgeous it was. Every piece of furniture emanated elegance and sturdiness. The bright, inviting colors hinted at the mindset of Duke Lehrsatz. But if he was told that the Dragon Consort went missing, Camila wasn't sure how the duke would react. *And Grandpa disappeared before I knew it!* Camila thought. *Arghhh!*

Rolf was the biological younger brother of Igor, the current Duke Lehrsatz. Camila had hoped that the old man had an excuse or two prepared, but he'd vanished almost immediately.

"How do we explain ourselves?" Zeke asked while they were being guided through the manor.

"What else can we do than to tell the truth? It's not like we can lie," Camila replied.

She turned defiant, and Zeke agreed with her decision as he also gave up on doing anything else. The meeting room they were shown to had a large, glass window that allowed ample sunlight to fill the room—it was bright, and the cool breeze made it a rather comfortable space. A box of clothes was in the corner of the room, piled high with other gifts to the Dragon Consort, which gave a menacing aura, but the Knights of the Dragon Consort took deep breaths. Just as they tried to bow to the people waiting in the back of the room, they froze when they spotted a very familiar face.

"Hey there, short time no see, Knights of the Dragon Consort," said the emperor. He smiled as he relaxed on the sofa with his legs crossed. "It sure took you long. Where's the other knight? Did he run?"

"Y-Your Majesty?!" Camila gasped. "Wh-Why are you—"

"You know why, don't you? Where's Jill?"

Pressured by the emperor's gleaming, golden eyes, the two knights immediately pivoted right to flee, but Duke Igor Lehrsatz barred the entrance as though he awaited them.

"Welcome, Knights of the Dragon Consort," Igor said. "Oh? Why do you two look so pale? Are you tired from your long journey? Please, do take a seat."

The elderly duke was slender and had a cane, but his intensity made it apparent that the knights wouldn't be allowed to flee. Camila, who was ready to bolt, mustered a response.

"D-Don't mind us…" she murmured.

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of doing that," Igor replied. "My foolish younger brother is also in your care, isn't he? Now, where is he?"

"No clue," Zeke said gruffly, having resigned himself to his fate. "He disappeared before we knew it."

"Ah. And is it true that the Dragon Consort is missing? His Majesty informed me of this and suddenly teleported here with a herald. As you can see, I'm utterly confused and came to welcome you all."

It seemed Hadis had teleported here with the herald, and he likely caused quite a bit of trouble for Igor. A vein was throbbing on the duke's temple, further illustrating his anger.

"I'd hoped that you could provide me with an adequate explanation," the duke said.

"H-His Majesty has been informed by Raw already, right? Right?" Camila said, turning to the emperor behind the duke.

Hadis gave an exaggerated look of surprise. "That stupid dragon only told me that Jill went missing because she went searching for Prince Gerald."

"That's such a malicious way of cherry-picking information!" Camila cried.

"I'd expect no less from His Majesty's spirit," Zeke muttered. "Not to mention that he's not totally off about how we got here."

"Ah, I knew it. So, Jill *did* go searching for Prince Gerald," Hadis said. His eyes were glazed over as he chuckled maniacally. "Heh. Heh heh heh heh!"

Camila and Zeke inched back, only to be pushed forward by Igor's cane. Hadis noticed his subjects secretly fighting and turned to them.

"Ah, sorry, I'm fine," he said. "Can you give me your report, just in case it differs?"

Camila gently nudged Zeke, and he sighed as he stepped forward.

"We wanted to confirm the rumored sighting of Prince Gerald when we were attacked by a weird group," Zeke said. "Li'l Raw was abducted, and Captain chased after him. We got him back safe, but

she disappeared. Grandpa Rolf suspects that a shady group called the Arks is involved."

Igor furrowed his brows. "The Arks? They kidnapped Her Highness?"

"What I can tell you is that they were a curious group wearing black hoods. I'm not sure if this is directly related to the Arks, but we also spotted that weird dragon that appeared during the Dragon Flower Crown Festival."

Hadis remained calm, likely having heard it all from Raw.

"But Captain ordered us to head to Lehrsatz after she saved Raw," Zeke went on. "So, we all decided to head here and leave her behind. I don't know much about the Arks, but I doubt she'd get done in so easily."

"I wonder if Jill really did go after Prince Gerald…all by herself," Hadis muttered.

That was a taboo topic for him. Igor sighed and stepped in front of the stiff knights.

"We should consider it a possibility, but that isn't the main issue here, Your Majesty," the duke said. He was the only one who dared to approach Hadis, which was worthy of respect. "The Kratos delegation, who arrived around the same time as Your Majesty, are requesting aid. The queen and her Sacred Spear were apparently abducted within the Rave Empire. They suspect that the Arks are behind it as well."

Camila and Zeke looked on in shock, but Igor paid them no heed as he sat diagonally across from Hadis.

"At least they don't suspect us, and that's good enough," Igor continued. "But to mobilize a search party for the Kratos queen within the Rave Empire, they require our permission. I'd kept this decision on hold until Her Highness, the Dragon Consort, arrived, but…"

"A search party? You mean mobilize their military," Zeke replied. "They want to search the Rave Empire in this situation? How certain are we that this isn't a plan to somehow collect Prince Gerald?"

"If the queen were truly abducted, they could just return home first, but they're cunning," Camila said. "Who's leading the Kratos

delegation?"

"Lawrence Marton."

Camila and Zeke fidgeted.

"W-Wait, that Raccoon Boy?! I knew he was coming, but he's leading the delegation?" Camila asked.

"Huh… He's the one who fell in love with another man's wife… He's as audacious as always, isn't he?" Hadis said.

Crap, His Majesty's eyes are losing their light.

"We do have a pact when it comes to the Arks," Igor said. "There won't be any political issues to allow search parties to enter our land. But can we just believe their words and allow them in? I don't mean to doubt the queen's abduction, but the Dragon Consort has gone missing as well. And we have that enigmatic dragon to worry about. Perhaps we should carefully contemplate how to handle this situation and decide whether this is simply a series of unfortunate coincidences."

The duke was calm—perhaps this was a benefit that came with age. Thanks to that, Camila was able to snap back to her senses.

"It's incredibly unlikely for both leaders set to meet to go missing at the same time," Camila said. "There's a chance that the queen and Jill are together. Maybe Jill spotted Her Majesty and gave chase. Wait, that *actually* sounds plausible. I could see Jill doing that."

"Then it'll be more efficient to cooperate with Kratos and form a search party," Zeke said. "That raccoon… I bet he has a trick up his sleeve and will unleash it under the guise of cooperation."

"Agreed. It's a bit difficult to maintain that balance. I don't think we can trick him, but at the very least, we shouldn't get tricked. I wonder if there's a good plan…" It was then that Camila noticed Igor staring at them. "What?" she asked.

"I was just surprised to see that the Knights of the Dragon Consort are rather proper," Igor replied.

"Isn't that a *bit* rude?!"

"Can't deny that we've got a weird bird and stuffed bear on our side. And we've even got an odd dragon to boot," Zeke said.

"I see. You guys are good reins for the Dragon Consort," Igor murmured.

Camila didn't feel praised at all, but Igor stared at them quietly.

"My foolish younger brother is closer in kind to that bird and the plush," the duke said. "I ask that you please hold him back if needed."

"Er, yes, um, we're not talking about nursing him when he gets older, right?" Camila asked.

"Now then, Your Majesty, what shall we do?" Igor asked as he turned to Hadis. "You seem much more of a loose cannon than either the bird or the plush, if you ask me."

Camila quickly snapped back to reality, and the quietly mulling Hadis finally opened his mouth.

"I understand the situation now," he said. "I'm glad that we ultimately came, Rave. I'm a bit relieved." Hadis smiled, his expression revealing that he was anything but. "Whether a trap will be laid or not, the Arks probably want this meeting to be broken off. If I were to go a step further, they likely want us to quarrel with Kratos, and once a battle breaks out, leading both sides to exhaustion, they plan to attack and wipe us all out. And if that's the case, we should prioritize making this meeting a success. Let's carefully talk it over with the Kratos delegation. Am I clear?"

"Noted," Zeke replied. "But what do we do? Do we dispatch a search party?"

"That depends on the attitude of the man who tried to steal my wife," Hadis replied.

An icy air surrounded him, causing Camila to rub both arms for warmth. "What do we do about the search for Jill?" she asked.

"I'm sure Jill can return before the time of the meeting. I have faith in her," Hadis replied. He stood up. Camila didn't find his expression to match his words. "I'll leave all the little details to you. When we get the opportunity to negotiate with their delegation, let me know. Oh, and deliver all Jill's belongings to my room, including those stupid dragons."

"Your wish is my command," Igor replied. "And what about the replenishment of soldiers from the imperial capital?"

"I'm having Millay rush over with them."

Camila had a bad feeling about the girl who kept tagging along recently. Igor also looked perplexed, but Hadis gazed meaningfully out the window as though he didn't notice the confusion on his subjects' faces.

"It was a long process, but I handled it all in advance," Hadis said. "She should be rushing here by dragon, going as fast as she can. I decided to make her my future empress candidate, you see."

"What?!" Igor and the Knights of the Dragon Consort yelped in unison.

Did my ears deceive me? I thought I just heard something about an empress candidate… Uh, that means one of the Dragon Emperor's wives, right? And since Hadis was the emperor, it meant that he was looking for a wife aside from the Dragon Consort.

"Your Majesty!" Igor cried. "Do you plan on destroying Lehrsatz?!"

The duke sounded as though he was overly anxious, but his concerns were valid as he predicted a grisly future.

"Of course not. I'm the emperor who protects this empire," Hadis replied.

Yet, a man in such a position would never smile so joyfully with a hint of an ominous flare.

"You may be Jill's knights, but don't bully my empress candidate too much," Hadis added. "You'd best treat her carefully."

"Are you trying to split us up by dragging us into Captain's wrath?!" Zeke shouted.

"If the Dragon Consort doesn't return in time, my empress candidate shall conduct the meeting. This is under my imperial order," Hadis said. "It allows you to put more faith in the Dragon Consort, don't you think? She'll definitely return in time."

That was no way to put faith in someone, but perhaps this was the right way to go. Everyone could easily imagine the Dragon Consort cracking her knuckles as she went on the search for Hadis.

"Oh, Lehrsatz…" Igor groaned sadly. He could see his beloved city up in flames, and the knights took pity on him.



JILL was escorted into an old manor that had once belonged to a noble. Trees surrounded it, and she could see a spattering of houses through the foliage, but that was all. Even the road was unpaved, and it was eerily quiet. Under the shade of the tall conifers, it was difficult for light to shine through. It had rained in the morning, and the area was dimly lit despite it being afternoon.

Probably hard to spot from above, Jill thought. Every now and then, the breeze carried the faint melody of a flute, perhaps used to ward away dragons. She stepped away from the drawing-room window and sat back down on the sofa. Her handcuffs had been removed, and she was given more freedom. She couldn't leave the room, but all her needs and comforts had been accounted for. Jill took a bath safely, and the food wasn't poisoned either. No alarming incidents had occurred.

If Jill continued to be left to her own devices, she felt tempted to cause a scene, but Canis had invited her for a spot of tea a short while ago. *I can probably escape by myself, but…I'm not sure if I can leave Faris behind. I have to gauge my options carefully.*

Jill had been slowly regenerating her magical energy, but she'd been separated from Faris, and they hadn't met since. The queen had said that she'd try to find the location of the Sacred Spear, but Jill couldn't imagine her negotiating her way out of this situation. Faris possessed an enormous amount of magical energy as the vessel of the Goddess, but she had no experience in combat and was just a little girl. She didn't have her Sacred Spear, and she'd quickly fall ill if she tried to use her magic. That cruel fact hadn't changed even to this day.

Jill ate the macarons and cookies lined up on the snack table as she tried to think of a plan. She removed the heat-retaining cover from the pot and poured tea into her cup. The nagging of Sphere

and Cassandra filled her head, but in this emergency situation, it was vital for the Dragon Consort to replenish her sugar levels.

Among the various sweets, the muffin containing cheese was quite good. *Maybe I'll have His Majesty bake it for me one day. I hope he doesn't get any twisted thoughts now that I'm gone. No, he's probably already let his imagination run wild. I'm sure of it. That's the kind of husband he is.* Jill had to act with all that in mind —it wasn't easy being a Dragon Consort.

"If he *doesn't* get any messed-up ideas, I'll invite him out on a date," Jill muttered.

A bell rang, and Jill placed the spoon used to scoop jelly back onto the table. She was finally going to have some tea with another person.

"I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting," Canis said. He glanced at the empty tray of snacks and told a fellow cultist to fetch seconds before he sat in front of her. "I've been told that you aren't gravely injured, Your Highness, but those Moechians tend to use rather violent magic. Do you feel ill, or do you feel any sort of pain?"

"None, thank you," Jill replied. "My magical energy is regenerating quite well, too. And? What do you want?"

"Oh, what a funny thing to say." Canis chuckled as he placed his hands on top of his knees, his legs crossed. "Surely, *you're* the one who has some business with me. What kind of story will you tell me? If it's a conversation you desire, I shall humor you for as long as you wish."

Jill pulled her chin back at his testing gaze. "Give Queen Faris's Sacred Spear to me this instant," she commanded. "If you do so, I'll give you some time to flee before I destroy this entire place."

"Oh dear, what a dangerous thing to say!" Canis replied. "The queen requires some rest right now, and above all, she wants to know the Sacred Spear's location. She claimed she'd like to stay here until she learns of its whereabouts."

"Then I'll be frank with you. Where is the Sacred Spear?"

"We're earnestly searching for it."

Jill narrowed her eyes, but Canis shook his head.

"I'm not lying, I promise you that," he said. "It's the Moechia faction who seized the spear."

"And you're telling me to just trust your words?" Jill asked. "You guys are confining the queen as we speak."

"What a poor choice of words. We're *sheltering* her. The Moechians have always yearned to snatch the Goddess's power for themselves and tried to steal her vessel, only to fail miserably. They decided they no longer needed the vessel and used the Dragon King as bait while they set up a trap on that carriage. If they were lucky, this plan would allow them to kill both the Dragon Consort and the queen in one go."

Jill was merely exasperated when she realized that the carriage's explosion had had such dangerous intentions.

"Then why did you guys save the queen?" she asked.

"I'm sure you know why," Canis replied. "Should the vessel of the Goddess lose her Sacred Spear, she cannot fight against the Dragon Emperor and his Heavenly Sword. It's quite an issue, you see, if only the Dragon Emperor and the Dragon God remain."

The corners of his lips curled up to form a smile, and his eyes were focused and sane, making him even more terrifying.

"Those two monsters act as though they're deities—it's most efficient if they crush each other," Canis explained. "Yes, we're quite close. Just a little more. We've come so far."

He stifled a laugh, the golden cross on his chest bouncing with his mirth. The insignia had a snake and an apple pierced by a crossed blade and a spear. He didn't even try to hide the symbol that represented the death of the gods. Jill felt a bead of cold sweat roll down her back.

"If their plan was to steal the Sacred Spear and weaken the queen's standing, it's a decent scheme," Canis said. "But if their aim is to kill her, then they're being far too reckless. From an academic standpoint, should the queen be killed, I'm genuinely curious about what the Goddess would do as she searches for a new vessel. But if I think about the future that'll go from there, I cannot let them do as they please."

"For example, would Prince Gerald be unable to wield the Parrying Dagger?" Jill asked. Her question was meant to be a trick to gauge just how much Canis knew about the situation.

He looked disappointed. "Or the Kratos royal family would be completely destroyed."

"That sounds like a bit of an exaggeration."

"There's an old rumor that the Kratos royal family can only give birth to more children through the union of siblings." Jill gulped as Canis shrugged. "Or the Moechia faction has a very active imagination."

"People can imagine stuff as they please, but that's far too insolent!"

"Insolence? How funny of you to say that to *us*."

Canis chuckled, and Jill found herself unable to refute. She leaned back, straightened her posture, and took some deep breaths. *Calm down. They're the type of people who mix truths with lies. I can't take anything they say at face value.* As more cake was brought in, Canis coolly pushed the plate of treats toward Jill before he brought his cup of tea to his lips and took a sip.

"I can understand their point of view," Canis said. "The vessel of the Goddess has constantly used the king of Kratos as her shield as she irresponsibly gives others her benevolence while she plays the victim. And now, she shamelessly calls herself the queen—I can see why the other faction couldn't sit still anymore. But if you ask us, they're late to the game. For many, many years now, we've been enduring a rule under two monsters: the Dragon God and Dragon Emperor."

"I'm surprised that you've shown so much hospitality to me," Jill replied. She chose her words carefully, ensuring that she wouldn't be swayed.

Canis clutched the cross by his chest. "The Dragon Consort is the shield of the Dragon Emperor. You're a victim who fails to realize it. We believe we can have peaceful discussions with you—we aren't your enemy, Lady Jill. We just want independence from the gods."

Jill frowned as Canis averted his gaze to the ground.

"The power of the Dragon God allows us to soar through the skies, while praying to the Goddess nourishes the land. But long ago, humans had tools to fly through the air and the wisdom to make the land rich with nutrients. They were just humans with no magical energy whatsoever."

"That mindset still exists," Jill said. "People try their best to harvest fruits and grains in Rave. And in Kratos, people fly through the air with magical energy."

"Only a select few who've satisfied the standards for the Dragon God and Goddess are given that luxury. In Rave, any logic that goes against the Dragon God is rewritten, and in Kratos, children without love aren't given any magical energy."

Jill had, in fact, seen the former claim with her own very eyes. The wisdom that humans had accumulated to control dragons for many years was wiped clean and nullified in a flash by Rave. She wanted to claim that the Dragon God's actions were right to protect the dragons, but she couldn't speak for the researchers who'd spent perhaps centuries looking into dragons.

The latter of Canis's claims made Jill think of her former adjutant. In Kratos, those who weren't born with ample magical energy had depressingly few choices in the future. First and foremost, they were taught that humans without magical energy were utterly useless. That cunning raccoon adjutant likely went through his fair share of unnecessary struggles and troubles, even being vastly underestimated at times, simply because he lacked magical energy.

"I'm sure that your family wouldn't have seen the other nation as their enemy had they not been threatened by the Goddess's rewards," Canis said. "In fact, the very notion of enemies may not have existed at all. The continent was split into two only because it served the needs of the deities. The gods sowed the seeds of discourse and strife to have humans fight against one another."

"So, you want Platy to be freed from the shackles of gods and become one?" Jill asked.

Jill had heard that this ideology had gained popularity long ago and led to a large political movement. To this day, it was quite

popular to graffiti these notions in alleys.

"Precisely," Canis said. "We cannot be exploited by the Goddess and Dragon God anymore. Humans should escape the rule of deities. You, and the queen and the Dragon Emperor, who serve as the vessels of the deities, are all equal victims."

Jill's mind raced to Hadis in her former timeline as he vowed to burn everything in his path.

"You are the Dragon Consort," Canis said. "You love the Dragon Emperor as a person."

Jill clenched her fists atop her knees.

"Have you never pitied the Dragon Emperor?" Canis asked. "Don't you want to free him from his heavy burden?"

As Jill faced the ground, he bent down and peered into her face, his tone low.

"You can free the Dragon Emperor from the curse of the Dragon God," he said. "You may be able to turn him back into his true form."

"Is that how you convinced the Dragon Consorts until now?" Jill asked.

As she locked eyes with Canis, he widened his eyes in surprise. She smiled as she saw herself reflected in his shocked pupils. Despite everything he'd been through, Hadis never felt any sort of hatred toward Dragon God Rave. And Jill wasn't arrogant enough to deny her husband his adoptive parent.

"Your invitation is tempting, but I like every bit of His Majesty, including the side of him that acts erratically."

Canis sat up and let out a strained chuckle. "Your words are filled with bottomless love. Is it because you're a Dragon Consort, I wonder?"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"I see, I see… The Dragon Consort of this generation is tougher than I thought. Still, I find that you're greatly misunderstanding something. We speak from a place of goodwill."

"Goodwill, you say?" Jill knitted her brows.

Canis nodded. "That's right. We always just wanted to save you all, including the Dragon Consort who had lost her purpose during

the truce, the crown prince who aimed for a revolution, the princess who yearned to escape from her father and brother, the twin older brother who couldn't become the Dragon Emperor, and the captured princess who wished to become a Goddess!"

His voice grew louder, culminating in a smile, and he hid his smirk.

"Among them all, the twin Dragon Emperor who had his head thrown into Calvariae Valley as Dragon God Rave also fell was the perfect stage!" Canis cried. "It's a tale that's been passed down among us with great joy!"

"I understand now," Jill said slowly. She quietly stood up and looked down on Canis, who met her icy gaze. "I know why I have to wipe you all out upon sight!"

Magical energy coursed through her body, and Canis instantly snapped his fingers. A magic circle activated at Jill's feet—a powerful magic seal guarded the entire manor. It was no wonder that Jill's hands were freed. Her feet were glued to the magic circle and locked her into place. Canis grabbed the bell on the table and rang it. A group of people wearing black mantles burst through the door and surrounded Jill, their blades pointed at her.

"It's also got an effect of sapping away magical energy," Canis said. "The more you struggle, the less likely you are to move. Don't worry. As long as you remain obedient, we won't harm you. Unlike the Dragon God, we're pacifists, though I don't know if the Dragon Emperor will accept you."

"What…do you mean by that?" Jill demanded.

"A Dragon Consort who works for the enemy is a classic tale, and I quite like it, but a Dragon Consort who's been defiled since her youth and lost all will to fight is a tragedy that I wouldn't wish to abandon. Which will the Dragon Emperor like best, I wonder?"

"You lowlife!"

Jill let out a loud roar as she punched the floor. A crack ran through the ground as it crumbled away. Canis watched in astonishment as she fell, and for a moment, the power of the magic seal weakened. Jill honed her five senses; she only had a few seconds, but it was more than enough time to find a hole in the

opening of the sturdily placed barrier. It was powerful enough to restrain people who had as much, if not more, magical energy as she did. *It's that tower over there!*

She transformed her Sacred Treasure into a whip and repelled everything around her. She launched herself up off a wall and ran across a roof that was slippery from the rain. Her legs felt heavier than usual, a sign that some sort of seal enveloped this entire area. *But I can move more nimbly than during the Riot of the False Emperor!*

Jill leaped off the edge of the roof and onto the window of the stone tower. The moment she wriggled inside, the magic seal barrier grew even more intense. She was aware of that as she landed on the staircase and rushed up. It only took a few moments before she reached the prison on the highest floor.

"Queen Faris!" Jill cried.

"Lady…Jill?" Faris asked.

The young girl was lying on the cold, stone floor. Only a single ragged cloth covered her body, and nearby was a small bowl of water as though a dog was being fed. Faris enjoyed no bed and had no lights, much less a fireplace for warmth.

"Are you okay?!" Jill cried. "They didn't do anything to you, did they? I won't forgive you if you were done in so easily!"

"I-I'm fine…" Faris murmured.

She sat up, wearing the same exact clothes as the day she'd parted ways with Jill.

"Good," the Dragon Consort said as she grabbed the iron bars.

"Lady, Jill, leave me be," Faris spoke up feebly. "Please make your escape while you still can."

"I don't want to feel any sympathy toward you!" Jill shouted. She could usually tie iron bars into a pretty bow, but they refused to budge an inch. "Why can't the Dragon God and the Goddess's vessels just obediently ask for help? Ugh, dammit! These bars are tough! They're cheeky for simple iron bars!"

"Lady Jill, you'll really get caught at this rate," Faris warned.

Jill could hear some people shouting on the staircase below, and a pale-faced Faris approached the bars nearest to her.

“Retreat for now, Dragon Consort,” the queen ordered. “That is your role—”

“Shut up! Don’t decide my role for me!” Jill snapped back. “Hey, you’re in there, aren’t you, Dragon Consorts?!”

Faris froze in shock when her hand was suddenly grabbed.

“You guys felt sympathy for the Goddess and betrayed the Dragon God, didn’t you?!” Jill shouted. “Help us out here, then!”

Before Faris could speak, golden magical energy coursed from Jill’s hand, which held onto the queen’s, and magical energy rushed through the Dragon Consort’s body. When Jill tried to pry the iron grate open again, it bent easily under her grip. Faris staggered and almost fainted—she’d only been able to last this long thanks to the magical energy of the other Dragon Consorts.

Jill grabbed Faris’s arm and slung the queen across her back. The Dragon Consort took the easy way out and kicked a hole through the wall. Then she leaped out into the rain. As she landed, golden particles of light dissipated into the air; it seemed this was all the support the Dragon Consorts could provide. Jill clicked her tongue and ran ahead. The muddy terrain prevented her from running as fast as she liked, but worst of all, her footsteps remained in the dirt.

As she’d expected, she soon heard voices searching in her direction. Faris was light, but Jill couldn’t run as fast as she pleased with her, and her rain-soaked clothes weighed her down. The loud rain only obstructed her senses, and she’d failed to notice an object by her feet—a tree stump. She stumbled and crashed to the ground.

When Jill jumped back to her feet, a tall man leaped out from the trees and pointed his blade at the unconscious Faris.

“Don’t move. This is the end of the road for you,” the man said.

Jill, crouched low and ready to launch an attack, froze at the familiar voice.

The man turned to her pursuers. “Bring me two pairs of cuffs and chains with magic seals. I’ll keep watch over them here.”

“Roger,” the pursuers said. The footsteps grew farther away, soon drowned out by the sound of the rain.

“Now then, how can we escape and throw them off our scent?” the man muttered as though he was complaining.

Jill felt her strength leave her as she chuckled. “Why don’t I beat you up? It’d be a good cover for how you let us flee, Mr. Brooder.”

“Give me a break,” Roger replied. “I could feign my injuries and that’d do the trick, Miss Jill.”

Her hooded former coworker gave a playful wink. Rudgar Teos Rave went by the name Roger Brooder, and he was the oldest living brother among Hadis’s siblings. Tired of the constant wars spurred on by the slew of crown imperial princes’ deaths, he abdicated his claim to the throne and left the Rave imperial family. But only he had thought that he was no longer a royal.

“You promised to be the principal of the military academy in Radia,” Jill complained.

“Now, now, we still have some time until that happens,” Roger replied. “The academy’s still being built, and this is the only place where I can flee from the watchful eye of Elentzia.”

“And that’s why you snuck into the Arks?”

Roger headed into a small watchtower cabin a good distance away from the Arks’ manor. He seemed to know his way around the place. The majority of Ark members all slept together in a room in the basement of the manor, but Roger’s competence earned him some freedom—he was allowed to use the watchtower cabin as he pleased.

Once Faris was carried to the bedroom and the doors were properly locked, Roger turned toward the fireplace and lit a fire for a small pot. He placed a small chair in front of the fire and encouraged Jill to sit down. Summer was just around the corner, but it was dark, and she was wet from the rain. Admittedly, she was a bit cold.

Roger flapped the dark mantle he’d wrapped Faris in and flung the water droplets away. It seemed the clothing had some sort of waterproof spell on it, and the fabric wasn’t drenched. Roger smiled as he noticed Jill’s face.

“This mantle’s amazing, isn’t it?” he asked. “It’s not only waterproof but resistant to the cold and heat, too. They use this

surprising piece of technology as a hook to invite new members, telling everyone that the gods took away these advancements from humanity."

"And that's why you joined, too?" Jill asked.

"Don't get me wrong. Their dangerous ways have been hammered into me since I was a kid. But it's the best way to efficiently gather info on Kratos and Rave, ironically. It allows me to keep tabs on Minerd's movements."

"When His Highness Minerd came to the imperial capital, you didn't show up."

Roger scratched his nose and grinned—he was an excellent fighter with the courage and skills to sneak into enemy territory all by himself. In the Grand Duchy of Laika, he'd infiltrated La Baier Military Academy in hopes of stopping the revolt as soon as possible. He even became a spy in the Liberation Army. Jill knew of his capabilities and had him graciously accept the position of principal at her military academy in Radia.

"I couldn't make it in time," Roger said. "I decided to trust Hadis and you, Miss Jill. And with Natalie around, I knew that Minerd wouldn't do anything too nefarious."

"He plotted an assassination of the previous emperor," Jill said.

Roger was grabbing some rye bread and cheese from the small kitchen when he jerked his head toward Jill in surprise. "That idiot…" he groaned. "Wait, so it *was* Minerd who killed Father, not Prince Gerald?!"



"No, it was Prince Gerald…" Jill replied.

"Right. Whew. That's good…"

"Is it? I don't really have any sympathy for the previous emperor, since he tried to kill His Majesty, but still…"

The previous emperor was Roger's biological father.

Roger gave a strained smile. "It might be cruel to say, but Father wasn't suited to be the emperor the moment he tried to cozy up to Kratos. Had he been more reliable when the imperial crown princes died, he wouldn't have died amid all that fuss. So, I'm glad Minerd wasn't left to do the dirty work… Or I guess it's not all good. That event caused this meeting and this ordeal."

Roger glanced at the fireplace by the window, the only source of light, and sighed.

"I'm only here in search of the Draco Flute," Roger confessed. "They covered their tracks well, but I found that the Arks had funded Gunther's research. That isn't too shocking in and of itself, but among the list of donors was Cornelia."

Cornelia was Minerd and Natalie's mother, and the very person who'd offered Natalie to the previous emperor in hopes of the young lady giving birth to a Dragon Emperor. Jill scowled as Roger handed her a wooden plate of bread and cheese.

"Looks like you know who she is," Roger said. "I thought that there's gotta be more to this, and was gathering info. Former Empress Cornelia left the imperial castle with Minerd, and they received support from the Arks to survive. I'm sure that's where Minerd learned about all sorts of things…"

"What's going on with former empress Cornelia?" Jill asked. "I heard that she passed away."

"Yeah. I don't have any proof, but it looks like Minerd killed her. She planned on stealing Natalie from the imperial castle and forcing her to have a child with Minerd."

Jill was at a loss for words as Roger continued, "Former Empress Cornelia was at her wit's end. The fact that the current Rave imperial family and the former emperor are not descendants of the Dragon God was publicized, and that cut her off from the Arks' aid. Minerd probably held her back until…"

Jill placed the wooden plate on her lap and sighed. “What a mess… I can’t tell Princess Natalie the truth.”

“I think Minerd feels the same.”

Roger took the pot and poured the hot water into two cups. He handed one to Jill and sat down on a small dining chair with the other cup in his hand.

“He plotted all sorts of schemes in Laika so that he’d have a gift to offer to Kratos when he proudly stormed into the imperial castle,” Roger surmised. “Since he’s got a claim to the throne, simply seeking refuge would allow him to be welcomed by the enemy with open arms, but he went so far because he…probably felt sympathy for Lutiya. Minerd may not look it, but he’s pretty compassionate.”

“I still can’t forgive him,” Jill said. “He went way too far—many lives were sacrificed in Laika.”

“Well, he doesn’t plan on returning alive. So, I think the best punishment for him is to prevent his death in Kratos and drag him in front of Risteard, but then I heard that there was a plan to steal the Sacred Spear from the queen, who was headed for a meeting in Lehrsatz.”

Jill placed the cheese atop the tough rye bread and opened her mouth wide to take a big bite. It wasn’t very good, but she couldn’t complain.

“The Moechia faction spearheaded the plan, so I was a few steps behind when I started collecting information, and that’s when you ran into me, Miss Jill,” Roger said. “And what about you? Why in the world are you trying to flee with the queen?” He used his thumb to point at the door to the room where Faris was sleeping.

“I don’t know what they’d do to her if I left her behind,” Jill said. “That’s my only reason. I need to search for the Sacred Spear anyway.”

“Hey now, don’t tell me you’re going off on some grand adventure with the queen to search for the Sacred Spear.”

“Mr. Brooder, we’re in for some trouble!”

Just then, a group of people burst into the room, cutting off their conversation.

“It might be bad if we let Miss Jill return to Lehrsatz— Ack!”

Jill was stunned. The group all wore the attire of the Arks—black mantles with white borders. But the faces underneath the hoods were very familiar to her. They were the students of the Azure Dragon Class from La Baier Military Academy. She had personally trained every single one of them.

"Why are you guys here?!" she yelped.

"Mr. Brooder asked if we wanted to do some part-time work until the new military academy opened. Right?" a student replied.

"Part-time work?! Where do you think you are…" She turned to Roger. "Mr. Brooder!"

"I thought I should learn a thing or two from your teaching techniques," Roger replied. "I called out to a few who were good at spying. A super long time ago, the Arks tried to vehemently propagate their beliefs in Laika, so it's easy to get accepted from there."

"Even so, how can you place your students in such danger?!" Jill jumped to her feet and kicked her chair behind her, but it was the students who looked perplexed.

"It's more dangerous to fight a red dragon, isn't it?" one asked.

"Yeah, and we were kicked by Instructor Sauté and beaten to a pulp by Mr. Bear…" another added.

"That was all training! It's very different from actual combat," Jill retorted.

"But Miss Jill, you were the one who told us to drop dead if we couldn't handle it," a student countered.

Everyone else voiced their agreement.

"I-In any case, leave here at once!" Jill cried. "You wouldn't want this to affect your futures and careers!"

"So, we just can't get caught," a student replied.

"Besides, with Principal Brooder and you here, you lack persuasion," another added.

"We're the Sewer Rats, remember?" said a third. "We don't care about tarnishing our careers and futures and stuff like that."

The students all nodded in agreement.

"I trained you to become splendid soldiers for the Rave Empire!" Jill shouted.

"Let's leave that to the Gold Dragons," a student replied. "Have you seen Class President Noyn? He's totally suited to climbing up the ranks. But we *do* have a few Gold Dragons, though. They feel a sense of rivalry toward us! Isn't that hilarious?"

Even those snooty elites are in on this?! No… Jill groaned as the oldest member of the Azure Dragons approached her to calm her down.

"Now, now, Miss Jill," he said. "I think espionage is fine. Why don't you turn it the other way around and consider it a trial period to see if we're suited for stuff like this? Plus, we even get some money! Isn't that great?"

"B-But… You guys might get killed, worst case!" Jill cried.

"Nah, we're fine. We're amazing at running!" One of them dared to wink at her!

"And we can use Lutiya and your name! He's the emperor's younger brother, and you're the Dragon Consort!" another student said.

"When Class President Noyn gets strong and rich, let's have him take care of us," a third chimed in.

The other students laughed along when Roger clapped his hands together.

"All right, enough yammering," he said. "Do you have any reports? What happened?"

"Canis has ordered us to leave this place," a student replied.

There was a chance that Jill would escape with Faris and bring the military down on them. Canis was quick at decision-making.

"The cult members were divided into groups and given teleportation devices to flee to different spots," a student reported. "Canis already left, but we don't know where he went. He seems to have headed to Lehrsatz, but that could just be a bluff or feint."

"In any case, we've got no reason to stay here," Roger said. "And why is it bad if Miss Jill returns to Lehrsatz?"

Oh yeah, they did say something like that. When Jill turned to the students, they quickly fell silent and froze.

"What? Am I not allowed to head there?" she asked.

In fact, Jill should've headed to Lehrsatz as soon as she could. Her students exchanged a glance as they nudged each other, asking one of them to speak up in their stead. Jill cast an unamused look at them.

"Didn't I tell you to report in a clear voice and make it easy to understand?" she egged.

"R-Right, yes ma'am, but our superior right now is Mr. Brooder…" a student said. "Right?"

"Is it about His Majesty?" Jill asked.

There was no answer, and that was telling enough. Her eyes flashed as her students hastily scurried about.

"U-Uh, Miss Jill, are you hungry?" one asked.

"It's almost time for lunch!" another said.

"What did His Majesty do this time?" Jill asked. "Answer me. Or else…" She cracked her knuckles menacingly, and the students huddled together to form one lump as they trembled.

"I-I'll report!" a student cried. "His Majesty headed to Lehrsatz, the city of trade! That's all!"

"Did I not educate you all well enough?" Jill asked. "Did you think that *that* measly report could fool me?"

"Mr. Brooder! Help!" a student cried.

"I employ a laissez-faire attitude. I'll just melt into the background," Roger replied.

"You useless assistant instructor!"

Jill slammed her foot on the chair she'd been sitting on, silencing the room. She quietly stared at her students and slowly opened her mouth.

"Your report? Continue," she rumbled.

"I, uh, heard that an empress candidate left as well!" a student replied. The unfortunate student who was forced to speak desperately tried to inch back. "H-Her name is Millay! The emperor ordered her to take control of the meeting in your stead!"

"Sh-She's still just a candidate," another hastily added. "It hasn't been set in stone! Please don't kill us!"

"The Gold Dragon students said that the emperor must have some sort of plan in mind!" another chimed in.

"But it was highly publicized," another said. "And Millay's really cute, strong, smart, and has an amazing reputation. I mean…the chance is there, right? At the end of the day, His Majesty's just a simple man."

"I-I sort of see the appeal for meeker people, but uh…" A student stopped themself. "Uh, I-I'm just kidding!"

"Y-Yeah, we're on your side, Miss Jill!" another kid said. "If you're going to fight His Majesty, um, we'll sit on the sidelines and watch. We don't want to get in your way!"

"I see now," Jill said quietly, silencing the frantic students.

I must be smiling right now. She felt oddly refreshed by it all.

"His Majesty really is impressive," she said. "He didn't use me as bait, nor did he rush by himself into enemy territory. He didn't even change jobs, so he hasn't broken any of our rules. Which means he isn't cheating on me. I trust him."

She moved her foot away and grabbed the backrest of her chair, but she couldn't control her strength and crushed it into pieces.

"Oh, I trust him all right," Jill growled. "I trust that he's confident that he won't get killed by me!"

"Wow, what a trusting married couple you two are. It's wholesome," Roger quipped.

"Mr. Brooder, come back to reality!" a student cried. "Isn't His Majesty your younger brother?!"

"Now, I've got a goal in mind," Jill said.

Because her chair had turned into smithereens, she sat atop the table, crossed her legs, and glanced at her students.

"First, we've got the queen," she said. "We'll send her back to Lehrsatz, allowing us to deny any requests to search for the queen. They won't be able to mobilize their military in the Rave Empire under the guise of a search."

"M-Miss Jill?" a student called out gingerly.

"And we'll destroy this place."

The students gulped nervously.

"Espionage…" Roger said sadly, but Jill ignored him.

"Next, we'll destroy their bases," she continued. "If they're all going to different bases via their teleportation device, there's a good

chance that the Calvariae bases are connected to these devices. We'll chase them as far as we can and destroy every base they've got."

"Are you gonna keep searching until you find the Sacred Spear?" Roger asked. "That'll take too much time."

"I've got that covered. If the queen returns, Kratos will inevitably search for the Sacred Spear. The Arks will panic and might take action. The meeting might start. Besides, since I've got an excellent representative of my own, if I rush back, I might only be a nuisance for His Majesty. Don't you agree?"

She smiled as everyone backed away, stifling their shrieks.

"As a Dragon Consort, I'll just do my job," she said.

"Uh, so, you're gonna fight the Order of the Ark?" Roger asked. "It might be a way to threaten our enemies, but have you got any future prospects or plans?"

"Fight? Threaten? Do you hear yourself? I'm not gonna go easy on them."

Who do you think I am?

"I'll eradicate everything they've ever built and yank them out by their roots," Jill declared.

No one could voice their dissent. Some had mentioned that she was taking her anger out on others, but she ignored her students' murmurs.

Chapter 3: The Lehrsatz Meeting Incident

THE meeting room prepared for the Kratos delegate was simple; it included a long table in the center with the bare minimum amount of furniture. Usability was prioritized above all. The Kratos side had Lawrence Marton as their representative and Margrave Billy Cervel as his guard. The rest of the delegate was sent back to Kratos to report on what had happened to the queen and commence an investigation. Only Lawrence and Billy stayed at Lehrsatz's manor.

The guts it took to dive straight into enemy territory with only a single guard was almost impressive. Even if this guard could single-handedly destroy the entirety of Lehrsatz's Dragon Knights, in terms of diplomacy, he only acted as a deterrent. Lawrence's decisions alone would determine the fate of his queen and the direction of his kingdom. Camila would never take on such an important role. But that wasn't all that was making this particular meeting unusual.

"It's truly nice to meet you, Sir Marton. My name is Millay, and the emperor has ordered me to take charge of this meeting as his empress candidate."

Lawrence's cheek twitched slightly at the sudden appearance of this lady dressed in knightly clothes, but he kept a smile plastered on his face. After a brief pause, he spoke. "An empress candidate, is it? I hadn't heard the news."

"It was only decided very recently," Millay replied. "I shall act in lieu of the Dragon Consort. I hope you'll go easy on me."

Billy, who stood behind Lawrence, loudly cleared his throat. "I heard that the Dragon Emperor is here as well. May I ask where he is?"

His eyes flared wide, his gaze filled with murderous intent. And who could blame him? As Jill's biological father, he'd personally fought against Hadis to win his daughter back. Billy could hardly allow Jill to marry Hadis, but for the emperor to accept an empress candidate, implying that he'd have a wife other than Jill? That was absolutely unforgivable.

"As an in-law, I'd like to have a duel—I mean, a chat with him," Billy said.

"His Majesty isn't feeling well right now and is resting," Millay replied.

"That shitty brat fled, didn't he?! I'll destroy the entirety of Lehrsatz!" Billy roared.

"Is that the consensus of Kratos?"

At once, Billy's rage dissipated. Millay remained smiling. *Oh?* Camila thought as she observed the scene. Millay had a good head on her shoulders, but she was still only thirteen. She wasn't like the raccoon boy in front of her, and her sudden standing as an empress candidate surely made her nervous. She wasn't even given Duke Lehrsatz as an assistant in this negotiation, and she was thrown in front of Lawrence with just Camila and Zeke as guards. Camila found Hadis to be merciless, but it seemed her worries were unnecessary. *No, that's not it.*

While it wasn't made clear in front of Jill, all ladies-in-waiting-in-training were empress candidates. Precisely because they were excellent, they were constantly mindful of their actions to become the empress. *It's a bit mean even for me to assume that they were all just gunning for the spot with nothing to show for it.*

"Do pardon my attendant, Lady Millay. I hope we can have a fruitful meeting," Lawrence said.

He smiled and extended a hand for a handshake, accepting her as his negotiation partner. Billy clearly looked dissatisfied, but he quelled his anger toward Hadis. The meeting went surprisingly smoothly. Both sides agreed that the Arks were behind the disappearance of the queen and her Sacred Spear; it was only natural for them to come to an agreement because of the accord. But when Millay acquiesced to allow a Kratos search group to be

dispatched, she also offered the Lehrsatz Dragon Knights cooperation with the investigation.

"It'd be a real ordeal for Kratos to search through Rave with no help," she said.

"I'm happy to receive that help, but are you sure?" Lawrence asked.

His question also inquired whether Millay could use the knights at her discretion. Camila hadn't heard of such a plan beforehand either, but Millay smiled back.

"Of course," she replied. "We should help each other during times of need. When you also require aid for investigations within Kratos, please allow us to offer our support then as well."

Camila felt compelled to click her tongue, as she found herself impressed by Millay's quick thinking. Lawrence narrowed his eyes before he calmly nodded back. It was all he could do for now.

"I appreciate your assistance," he said. "And who will be leading the Rave's search party? Will it be the Dragon Consort?"

Here it comes. Camila went stiff as she braced herself. Zeke remained as grumpy as ever. For some inexplicable reason, Hadis had ordered everyone to hide Jill's whereabouts. He reasoned that he didn't want to hand over information about Jill to a guy who lusted after her—or his nosy father-in-law. But even Camila wasn't sure just how serious Hadis was about his claims—the Arks were likely behind everything, making Jill as much of a victim as the queen. It made more sense to search for both of them.

"I cannot divulge any information about the Dragon Consort," Millay replied. She wasn't aware of Hadis's intentions either, and her expression tensed.

Lawrence wasn't one to miss this opening in her façade. "Please think about Margrave Cervel's feelings. He worries about his precious, young daughter. Or perhaps there's a reason behind your silence? Even though the Dragon Consort may also be one of the Ark's kidnap victims?"

Millay instantly paled. Lawrence smiled.

"It's been rumored all around the city," he said. "The Dragon Consort has apparently gone missing. It seems a bit coincidental for

her to disappear exactly when our queen has also vanished—I feel like the Arks are involved. I expected you to ask us for assistance searching for the Dragon Consort."

Camila gritted her teeth—Lawrence was very much aware of the situation, and his question was meant to trick Millay. He had executed his plan expertly, and Camila couldn't help but think about what Jill would do in this situation. *I know I'm just being annoyingly nitpicky with Millay now.*

"I also heard rumors that His Majesty was so enamored with you, empress candidate, that the Dragon Consort was deserted and left to her fate," Lawrence continued.

"Rumors just can't be trusted," Camila interjected. No one reprimanded her. "It's more probable that Jill left after she was exasperated by His Majesty's antics."

Zeke received a glance from her. He sighed and said, "I don't think Captain would ever do that. I understand her father's worried, but we've got a job to do. We're not gonna leak the Dragon Consort's info."

"Aren't you the Knights of the Dragon Consort? Aren't you worried about your master?" Billy joined in on the conversation.

"Sorry, but there's nothing we can worry about," Zeke replied casually.

"After all, we're here precisely because of her orders," Camila added.

Billy's purple eyes, the same color as Jill's, flickered with murderous intent, but he managed to calm himself. The knights couldn't possibly win against a Cervel, but they had pride in carrying out the orders in accordance with Jill's wishes.

"I understand. I suppose prying further will do neither of us any good," Lawrence said, backing down.

Millay slumped her shoulders with relief. "I shall hand you papers detailing the search party at a later date," she said.

"I'll be waiting for it," Lawrence replied. He stood and turned to the knights. "Camila, Zeke, why don't we have a little chat? It's a perfect time to have some tea."

Camila and Zeke stared back blankly, and Millay and Billy looked on with surprise.

"Oh? Are we being invited out on a date? Since when were we so chummy?" Camila joked.

"We escaped through the mountains together, didn't we?" Lawrence replied. "Margrave Cervel, please hash out details about the search party with Miss Millay."

"Sure, I don't mind that…" Billy replied.

He gasped and straightened up as Millay gave a strained smile and bowed her head. *It's not that Lawrence wants to speak with us. He wants to leave Billy and Millay alone.*

"It'll be my treat," Lawrence said. "My salary went up now that I'm Her Majesty's aide."

How nice. We just managed to move into the house of the Dragon Consort's Palace and save some money… Camila huffed angrily.

"I want meat," Zeke said from beside her.



LAWRENCE guided the duo through the city—he seemed quite familiar with the area as he led them to a large café in the central district. Camila glanced around the restaurant and selected some seats in the back instead of the brightly lit seats on the terrace. Lawrence sat by the wall, and Camila and Zeke sat next to each other.

"Hey, I don't see any meat," Zeke grumbled.

"This place is famous for its roast beef sandwiches," Lawrence said.

"Three of those, then," Zeke replied.

He handed the menu over, implying that he was going to eat the three helpings alone. Camila ordered a parfait, and surprisingly, Lawrence ordered the same thing.

"I need some sugar," he replied simply.

"Same," Zeke said inexplicably as he added a parfait to his order.

The tea set was adorned with a cute floral pattern, and napkins were also elegantly prepared. Women and couples filled nearby seats. Their table was far too small for three people to share. *This is awkward… How did it come to this?* Camila rested her elbows on the table as she waited for her order.

"I heard that the Dragon Consort went missing after running into the Arks," Lawrence said.

"Who knows?" Zeke replied curtly.

"The Dragon Emperor ordered you to stay quiet, huh? I wonder why."

"It's rude to continue the conversation all by yourself," Camila said.

"You're not gonna give me a straight answer even if I ask," Lawrence replied. "Hmm… What reason is there to hide that the Dragon Consort has gone missing? No, he doesn't want to hide that, but… Just *who* is that empress candidate?"

As Lawrence mumbled to himself and posed his question, Camila, who secretly wanted to know Lawrence's answer, suppressed her disappointment and forced a smile.

"Unfortunately, we don't really know either," she said. "It was already decided by the time we reached Lehrsatz."

"Which means the Dragon Consort doesn't know about it either," Lawrence guessed.

Camila's silence implied her agreement. *But that's okay. We weren't ordered to stay quiet about her or anything.*

"Maybe we should retreat from Lehrsatz…" Lawrence mumbled.

"What?! Hey, don't jinx us like that!" Zeke exclaimed.

"We're definitely going to drag you into our mess!" Camila added.

"I actually thought we'd get some pushback about dispatching a search party," Lawrence admitted. "I didn't expect the Dragon Emperor to allow our military to search for the queen and the Sacred Spear."

Indeed, it was possible he wouldn't, considering Hadis's clear hatred for the Goddess. Lawrence clinked the ice in his glass of lemon water.

"I'm grateful that we didn't have to waste time on that matter, but something doesn't sit right," he muttered. "Besides, that empress candidate is the polar opposite of the Dragon Emperor's type, isn't she?"

"How should we know what his type is?" Camila grunted.

"He probably doesn't like someone who'd leak information to Margrave Cervel after feeling sympathy for his fatherly bond. He didn't even let the Dragon Consort do that when she visited her home."

"I knew it. You created that situation to trick her," Camila said. "You're the worst."

"Why did he suddenly get an empress candidate?" Lawrence pressed. "Besides, if the Dragon Emperor's here, we can continue our negotiations even without a standin."

"He probably just wants to piss Captain off," Zeke said flatly.

Lawrence placed both elbows on the table and let out a deep sigh. "That's an actual possibility. That might be all there is to it."

"Keep agonizing, Raccoon Boy," Camila jeered.

The roast beef sandwiches arrived, and each of them received a plate. Camila pushed the plates toward Zeke after she stole a slice for herself with a grin. Lawrence did the same.

"What's going on with Prince Minerd?" Camila asked.

"He's doing well, just as we reported," Lawrence replied. "He's gracefully staying with us, and I want you to drag him back soon."

"Why don't you also give us the dragon he rode on as a freebie?" Zeke asked.

"I don't have the power to decide that by myself," Lawrence answered coolly.

It was likely impossible to extract any sort of information from him. Camila didn't expect much, but she was still disappointed.

"Men who invite others out without providing even a speck of information aren't popular with the ladies," Camila pointed out.

"Thank you for your warning. But I might be able to provide you with a new source."

Zeke had polished off the sandwiches in a flash, immediately looking up. "So you noticed," he said.

"I sort of just inferred it," Lawrence replied. "The two of you stopped me from trying to get the seats out on the terrace. If you know anything, may I ask about the details? Is it a friend of yours?"

"Nah, we've been tailed ever since we left the duke's manor," Zeke said. "Everyone who leaves there is probably put under watch."

"They're taking turns, too; there're multiple of them after us," Camila remarked. "This isn't the act of a novice."

"Am I their aim?" Lawrence asked.

Camila wasn't sure, but there was very little reason for her and Zeke to be under attack. The only one of value here was Lawrence, who was the leader of the Kratos delegation and could negotiate about the search party.

"You can't wander around outside so easily without Jill's dad," Camila whispered.

"I thought I could provoke some sort of reaction if I left without Margrave Cervel, but I didn't think it'd happen so quickly," Lawrence replied. He spoke brazenly as he ate the parfait that was brought to him.

Zeke frowned as he shoveled his dessert into his mouth. "You did this on purpose, huh?" he said. "What do we do? Should we catch them?"

"Can you?" Lawrence asked. "We can call for Margrave Cervel."

"They might run before he even arrives," Camila replied. "We'll have to suffice as their opponents."

"I guess the Knights of the Dragon Consort are still rather unknown," Lawrence observed.

"I'll beat ya," Zeke and Camila threatened.

Lawrence chuckled and apologized. He coolly finished his parfait, showing his nerves of steel—his life was on the line. After a quick meeting, they left the café with Lawrence footing the bill, of course.

"I didn't get enough meat," Zeke grumbled. "Let's go for another round. How about some drinks? Can you handle your liquor?"

"I'm not fond of alcohol, so I'll pass on that offer," Lawrence replied.

"We'll make you come with us one day," Camila replied. "I promise to get you blackout drunk."

The three had their arms around the others' shoulders as they laughed. But all too soon, Lawrence's smile faded away.

"Will it happen…someday?" he muttered.

As the trio entered a sparsely populated alleyway, Zeke turned to face the Kratos strategist. The sun was still high in the sky when they left the Lehrsatz manor, but the star had begun to set, and the reddening sunset was almost blinding. It hid Lawrence's expression well.

"When did we become like this?" Lawrence asked quietly.

When? When did they grow to dislike dragons? For some reason, it felt like the question had several layers that overlapped with what Rolf had asked the knights before.

"We're the force of justice, the Azure Gold Dragon Wings!"

The voice came from above. The trio didn't expect the enemy to name themselves.

"Huh?" the three said.

A flurry of arrows rained from above, and Zeke knocked them all away with his greatsword. Camila prepared her bow, and the three stood back-to-back, ready to face the small assailants surrounding them. *Wait… They're so tiny.*

"Are they kids?" Camila muttered.

"But they're wearing the uniform of the Arks," Lawrence pointed out.

The kids all wore black mantles with borders, and there were around a dozen of them. A child heard Lawrence's observation and stepped forward.

"We're the Gold Azure Dragon Wings," a little girl said. "Please don't lump us together with the Arks."

A child behind her clicked her tongue. "We already called ourselves the Azure Gold."

"We won the game of rock, paper, scissors. Don't try to overturn that decision."

As the two kids argued, Camila fired an arrow as a warning, and the kids easily dodged it.

“Oh?” Camila smiled. “You’ve got some fast reflexes. But I won’t miss next time.”

“Please stop,” a child replied. “We can’t show you our identity, but we’re on the side of justice. We have no intention of fighting.”

“Yeah? But no idiot in the world will take your words at face value,” Zeke replied.

“As proof of our goodwill, we’ll return the queen to you. She’s in that wooden box.”

Camila again pulled her bow back, and Zeke crouched low. Neither Lawrence nor the knights gave even a passing glance at the box, and some of the kids visibly panicked. Perhaps they expected a bit of an opening with that box, or at the very least, assumed that the trio would let their guards down.

Lawrence drew his chin back and gave a low chuckle. “You’re either the same age as me or a touch younger. Why don’t I give you a special lesson? From our point of view, we can receive far more concrete evidence if we catch you and force you to speak.”

“Huh? But check the box!” one of the kids cried. “The queen’s really—”

“And we can check that later, after we destroy you guys!” Camila roared.

She fired another precise shot, but the kids dodged it again. It was clear that they were trained very well. They weren’t ordinary kids.

“I told you! We should’ve just left it and run!” a kid shrieked. “Ugh, this is why you elites are a lost cause!”

“I-I-I-I thought that the Knights of the Dragon Consort would understand!” another replied.

“Oh? You know of us? Quite adept at gathering information, I see,” Camila said.

As another of her arrows made the kids lose their balance, Zeke’s greatsword followed it up. But the kids were nimble and scattered, fleeing for their lives.

Lawrence clicked his tongue. “We’ll focus on one of them! Get that girl!”

“What a coincidence! I’m aiming for her, too!” Camila replied.

The girl dodged Zeke's greatsword with the slightest movements, but Camila didn't aim for the child's body. The knight targeted the girl's hem. Camila's aim was true, and the arrow glued the girl's mantle to a wall, stopping her movement for just a few moments. Lawrence threw his dagger, but another child parried the attack. The girl ripped her mantle and fled, but Zeke already swung his greatsword—his aim was to capture her uninjured. Just then…

"Chiiirp!"

Everyone froze at the powerful roar of a bird; even the air around them trembled. The kids were the first to snap back to their senses, unfazed by the bird that appeared in the alleyway with the sunset behind it. The kids then jumped up on the roof.

"Don't let them run, Zeke, Cami—" Lawrence started.

He was soon interrupted by a powerful gust of wind from above. A red dragon gloriously flapped its wings.

"Hey, tell the Dragon Emperor he's next!" a kid shouted.

When the powerful wind died down, the kids had already vanished.

"Wasn't that Meine and Sauté?" Camila wondered. "What's going on? And where's Raw?"

"Chirp."

"Yeah, I don't understand you. I get that you're acting with purpose, though."

The bird was famous for doing its work well, and with Meine's appearance, it was as though the two had emerged to allow the kids to escape. *I can think of a few possibilities…*

"Camila, Zeke," Lawrence called, snapping Camila out of her thoughts.

He opened the wooden box, and Zeke peered inside with an inexplicable expression. Camila pursed her lips as she gazed inside. The box was very simply furnished, but a blanket and a few pillows allowed more comfort. The small queen was quietly snoozing away, a sleeping beauty.



HADIS was dozing off with a book in hand, sitting on a sunny terrace. His moment of peace was interrupted by Igor's report: the Ark's base had been destroyed.

"What did you just say?" Hadis asked.

"I have just confirmed that one of the Ark's bases was destroyed," Igor replied.

Destroyed… Hadis thought. It took a few moments for the word to sink in. Then he gazed back up at the sky. No doubt Jill was behind it. *That's her move… Is she* really *angry at me?*

"You thought you wouldn't *get in trouble?"* Rave replied. *"You acted precisely because you hoped you'd get on her nerves."*

Rave wasn't wrong, but as reality closed in on Hadis, he couldn't help but feel dread. That was human instinct. *I have to think of a way to defend myself pretty soon…*

"The Ark members were tied up and left on the ground," Igor said. "His Highness Risteard is investigating as we speak, but the Arks simply mentioned that demonic kids rained down from the sky. We might not get much information."

"That's just Jill…" Hadis said before he stopped himself. "Wait. *Kids*? Plural?"

The emperor sat up and blinked. Rave, inside Hadis's body, and Raw, who had been snoozing away on the emperor's lap for once, directed their sleepy eyes at the duke with surprise. They were saving their stamina for the battle to come. *Speaking of which, that bird that was supposed to guard Raw's gone. Did it go training on some steep cliff?*

"That's what the report says," Igor replied. "The Dragon Consort is still missing."

The Arks went back several generations, meaning that it wasn't unusual to have child members. They were born and raised with the teachings of the Arks hammered into them, making them genuine members who truly had faith in their religion. When Rave and Kratos formed a pact to eradicate the Arks, the religion had grown smaller and weaker. *Did it become difficult for the newer generations to follow? Did the younger members end up revolting?*

“Has a new faction been created in the Arks?” Hadis wondered. “Any other news?”

“They did leave some graffiti of their name,” Igor said. “It could be some sort of code, but—”

“Your Majesty! Are you here?!” Camila called.

Things were getting rowdier by the second. Hadis was about to drink the remainder of his diluted juice—the ice had already melted—when he stopped at Camila’s voice. Igor scowled at the Knights of the Dragon Consort, who entered without providing even the courtesy of a knock, but the duke wasn’t going to discuss etiquette.

“Now what? What is it?” Hadis asked.

“We found the queen!” Camila shouted.

Igor was clearly surprised, and even Hadis couldn’t hide his shock.

“I brought her here and then handed her to Kratos,” Zeke said. “She’s not injured, but she’s not conscious either. I was told that she’s simply been drained of her magical energy, but we don’t know when she’ll wake up.”

“We shall ready a doctor immediately,” Igor said. “Dragon Emperor, may I?”

“After we receive Kratos’s agreement,” Hadis replied. “I wouldn’t want to receive complaints like poisoning and stuff. And where’s the Goddess—the Sacred Spear?”

“I don’t know,” Camila replied. “A weird group appeared in the city and left the queen. We only grabbed her. They called themselves the Gold Azure Dragon Wings, but does that ring a bell, Your Majesty?”

Hadis stared back blankly.

“You mean the Azure Gold,” Zeke corrected. “That’s what they said first.”

“The Azure Gold Dragon Wings?!” Igor cried suddenly as he approached Camila. “Did you catch any of them?!”

“S-Sauté showed up, and they all ended up fleeing,” Camila replied. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“I received a report that the ones who destroyed one of the Arks’ bases called themselves such.”

"What?! Th-The ones who attacked us looked like kids to me. They were trained well, though."

"Aren't the Arks armed too?" Zeke wondered. "They got beat up by kids? What kind of stupid joke is this?"

Only now did Hadis's mind begin to function. *Kids that could destroy a base—I even mistook them for Jill at first… Gold and azure…* Hadis's eldest brother, who was adept at espionage, planned to become the principal of Radia's military academy, set to open this fall. He would be a teacher for those kids.

The game fowl innocently tagged along behind Camila, and when Hadis cast it a glance, the bird used its splendid wings to give a bird version of a thumbs-up. *Skillful fellow.*

"I've never heard of such a group before," Igor said. "I'm not sure if they're called the Gold Azure or the Azure Gold, but…"

"They're the Gold Azure," Hadis corrected.

He almost burst out laughing—it was too easy to imagine the kids bickering about what to call their group. *Since I'll watch over them as the Dragon Emperor, I'll have that as their public name. That's how this world works.* For a brief moment, Hadis had been involved with the kids when he came for Jill. The emperor had spent more time with the Gold Dragon students, and their eyes had sparkled with joy when he showed them the Heavenly Sword. Not once did they cast doubt on the Dragon God that they couldn't see, and they all drew a picture of Rave, using their imagination to envision the deity.

"Any other information?" Hadis asked. "I'm all ears."

"They said you were next, Your Majesty," Camila replied awkwardly.

"A threat to His Majesty?" Igor wondered earnestly. "But then why would they return the queen? I don't understand."

Hadis felt bad for everyone's serious demeanor, but he burst out laughing.

"Your Majesty, you know something, don't you?" Camila accused.

"Nothing at all," Hadis replied. "I've never heard of them before. All I know is…"

Clearly, Jill was using the kids to crush every single one of the Arks she could find. She must've been crushing the enemies in her path, her eyes gleaming. Hadis found himself enchanted by her when he imagined her whirling around to face him.

"*You're next,"* she said.

"…That Jill's absolutely livid with me," Hadis finished. "Wh-What do I do?!"

"You didn't have a plan there?!" Camila shouted.

"When the Dragon Consort returns, I demand an opportunity to defend myself and insist on Lehrsatz's innocence on the matter!" Igor declared.

"D-Don't worry," Camila said. "I'm sure Jill will— Ugh, now I feel so anxious! I'm gonna throw up!"

"Someone fetch us a basin!" Zeke hastily yelled. "Drink some water! Here!"

As he rubbed Camila's back, she slowly caught her breath. Then an idea hit her. "Hey, why don't you get sick?" she said. "Maybe she'll go easy on you then."

"Yeah, go for it," Zeke replied. "But only if you've got the resolve to eat Captain's homemade nutrient regimen."

"Nah, that's not good. Let's not do that plan," Hadis decided almost immediately as he sat up.

What's important to her is for me to be her cool emperor and exquisite cook. Don't worry, I'll be fine. I just need to start preparing this instant. With that, Hadis got up and grabbed a pen.

"Prepare the ingredients that I'll write down," Hadis said. "I need to borrow the kitchen later. Where did I leave that apron…"

"*That's* the order you'll be giving us, Your Majesty?" Igor asked.

"Do you want Lehrsatz to be destroyed?"

"And whose fault is that?! Your Majesty, why did you even get an empress candidate? Speaking of which, where is the young lady?"

"She said that she wanted to see the dragons of the Lehrsatz Dragon Knights and went to the stables. But Raw said that she wasn't there. I wonder where she went."

All three made different expressions; Hadis was grateful to have such excellent subjects. The emperor set the pen down and handed

the list of ingredients to Igor.

"Gather these all for me," Hadis ordered. "And make sure to praise the Gold Azure Dragon Wings properly. Since they have no relation to me or the Dragon Consort, we can't be so loud and public about it, but…"

Igor sighed with a grimace as he took the list. "A righteous group for the people, making them popular with the public. I understand how to use them now."

Hadis felt it was a good experience for the kids to be used by a cunning adult. But perhaps the kids were utilizing the adults as they liked. *I hope they've grown up to be that strong.*

"Now, it's a race against time," Hadis said. "Will the panicking Arks try to do something, or can we crush them before that?"

Everyone turned solemn as they quickly scattered to fulfill their role.

"I shall tighten the security for the queen and our surroundings," Igor said. "There's a good chance that they might aim for the Kratos queen, who may have some sort of information. It would be rather troublesome if an incident occurred in my manor."

"I'll think of a plan with the Raccoon Boy," Camila said.

"Hey, Your Majesty, I'll be on standby outside your room," Zeke said. "Call me if anything happens."

"I'm headed for the kitchen," Hadis said as he searched for his apron.

The other three turned pale.

"I'll guard you so that no one will get in your way," Zeke said.

"Good luck!" Camila said. "And good luck, Your Majesty! Jill's stomach relies on you!"

"I shall have all the ingredients carried to the kitchen immediately," Igor added. "I'll ensure that this is prioritized before anything else."

"Thank you! I'll do my best!" Hadis cried.

"This is where everyone comes together?" Rave grumbled. He was as fussy as usual in Hadis's body. *"I guess whatever works… I wonder what Missy's up to. I hope she's doing well."*

Personally, I want the Arks to shave off Jill's stamina as much as possible. That would make her hungrier. Hadis spotted his usual apron, put it on, and rolled his sleeves as he headed for the kitchen.



JILL gasped as she looked up. "I thought I just smelled the aroma of a delicious feast for me!"

"Like hell you did in this smoky area," Roger replied. "Did you find anything?"

He waved his hands in front of him to dispel the smoke as he stepped into the building. This plain structure only had one square window, and the moment Jill and Roger set foot inside, fire arose to greet them—a trap laid out for intruders.

A bit of magical energy was all it took to extinguish the flames, but the powerful fire had burned the entire building to the ground. Almost all the furniture and wooden boxes were broken, and any documents they managed to pull out had been charred to a crisp.

"Nothing useful," Jill replied. "Didn't find anyone either. Did they sense our arrival?"

"This *is* our fourth base, after all," Roger agreed. "But they still seem far too careless…"

The first base, where Jill and Faris had been trapped, served solely as living quarters for the members of the Arks. Jill couldn't extract any useful information, and when she arrived at the second base, it was more of the same.

"This place is pretty close to Lehrsatz, isn't it?" Roger asked. "If they wanted to obstruct the meeting, this was the best location to serve as a base for some planning. What shall we do, Miss Jill? Should we meet up with Hadis first and go from there?"

Jill smiled as she dug through her pocket and took out a list of all the ladies invited to Hadis's tea party, along with an invitation to it. She'd retrieved these documents at the third base.

"Sounds like a plan," she said. "I've gathered more than enough proof to beat His Majesty into the ground. This is an empress

selection meeting disguised as a tea party! I haven't been informed of such a thing!"

"Uh, we're not looking for proof to hit Hadis," Roger replied. "We're searching for the location of the Sacred Spear and the Arks' reasoning for stealing it. I didn't think we'd find any proof so easily, but…"

"Miss Jill! Mr. Brooder!" a student called. They'd been searching inside as well, and they gestured for their two teachers to come. "Over here! I think I found a hidden floor!"

Jill quickly headed over as the student pointed to a burnt rug. When she peeled it away, a spotless floor emerged.

"I thought it was weird since this is the only spot that's not burnt," the student explained. "As I thought, there's some kind of safekeeping spell on it, but it's complex and I can't undo it."

"Let me see… Ah, yeah, this requires a bit of practice to undo," Roger said. "It's like a puzzle, and there's a proper way to unlock it. Why don't I teach you—"

"No, just do this instead," Jill said.

She clenched her fist and filled it with magical energy before she slammed the ground. There was a loud shatter, and the floor was destroyed, giving way to a dent about the size of a wooden box. Stacks of paper and the like were haphazardly tossed inside, indicating that this spot served as a storage space of sorts.

After a few beats of silence, Roger smiled. "Personally, I'm not sure if you should leave everything to brute force. It sets a bad example to our students, and isn't the most logical method."

"Well, I'm a Dragon Consort accepted by the Dragon God of Logic," Jill replied. "What is this? A magic circle?" She grabbed a bundle of papers tied together with a string. Each sheet was inscribed with a magic circle, and some mistakenly scribbled circles were strewn around.

"This looks similar to the one I've seen engraved in the base of the statue of Dragon God Rave," Roger muttered. "I've seen it at the imperial castle."

Jill gasped and turned to her glove. "It also resembles this crest! His Majesty embroidered the symbol of the Dragon Emperor

for me."

"But neither is a perfect match to this magic circle… And this one over here's totally different. It looks like an analysis or reference guide for the circle."

Roger thumbed through a different stack of papers as Jill peered in and got a better look.

"Hey, I've seen this in Kratos's royal castle," she remarked. "And I feel like I saw a magic circle similar to this when I was captured by the Arks."

"Are they trying to replicate the divine crests of the Dragon God and the Goddess?" Roger wondered.

His voice instantly turned stern, and Jill pursed her lips. The student who also observed the papers tilted their head to one side with confusion.

"But what's the use in replicating them?" the student asked. "Even if we knew the exact shape of the divine crests, I thought only the deities could wield them. It's something about us lacking magical powers, right?"

"That's the story, but all magic circles and spells are derived from divine crests," Roger replied. "Even if the Arks created their own kind of magic theory, they still originate from the divine crests. Research on divine crests isn't unusual in and of itself, and all researchers dream of one day replicating the crest, but…"

"Then what's the issue?"

"Haven't you heard that these crests serve as a base for a special kind of sealing magic? Dragon God Rave's divine crest can seal dragons, and Goddess Kratos's crest can seal magic. And the Arks are trying to replicate that. It's a bit concerning, isn't it?"

"Do you think the Sacred Spear's currently trapped because of that divine crest?" Jill asked.

Roger neither agreed with nor denied that query, and Jill felt like mentioning any further concerns wouldn't help. She grabbed the only thick envelope remaining in the box. "Destroy" was written across it in red letters. This space under the floor seemed to be a temporary storage spot for documents that were meant to be destroyed. These past actions connected to the present, and Jill

opened the envelope to pull out some dirty pieces of paper. She couldn't hide her astonishment at the first words she read.

"'Plan to attack Kratos using the Draco Flute?!'" she read.

"Sounds like they wanted to frame the attack on Rave and start a war," Roger observed.

The plan detailed using the Draco Flute to mobilize the dragons as far as they would go. The beasts would go past the defensive line of House Cervel, and it meticulously noted their point of attack. There were even plans to infiltrate the Lehrsatz and Neutrahl Dragon Knights to steal away as many dragons as they could.

"Without the Draco Flute, this whole plan falls apart," Roger noted. "I can see why they wanted to destroy these papers."

Jill pointed to the large letters noted at the top of the page. "Look. It doesn't say that this plan will be 'canceled,' but 'revised.'"

There was a good chance that another plan was concocted to take its place. Roger violently ran his hand through his hair.

"I'd rather have them change the motive of their attack, but if they have some sort of replacement for the Draco Flute, that'll be the worst scenario," he said.

"Even worse would be if the Sacred Spear was involved somehow," Jill added. "We're practically in Lehrsatz territory, aren't we? I'll go report back to His Majesty."

"Report? You're not gonna attack him?"

"Miss Jill!" a student cried.

The students were supposed to have been searching the premises, but a group of them jumped into the building. Jill was surprised to see more students than she thought, and quickly realized that the team delivering Faris to Lehrsatz had also returned.

"What's going on?" Jill asked. "Wasn't the plan for you guys to stay in Lehrsatz after sending the queen over?"

"Now's not the time!" a student cried. "The city of Lehrsatz has been taken over by the Arks!"

"There're even rumors that the empress candidate will storm into Kratos," another added. "What will we do?"

Jill jumped up and Roger scowled.

“What’s going on?” he demanded. “What about the meeting?! We returned the queen!”

“I-I don’t know,” a student replied. “The rail station suddenly exploded, and the entire city was blockaded, calling the explosion an act of terrorism.”

“And all the while, a magic circle’s glowing atop Duke Lehrsatz’s manor,” another added. “A black spear made a barrier. I think it’s the Sacred Spear!”

“Damn it!” Jill growled. “This base was deserted because the Arks left to enact their plan!”

“We managed to flee because we were outside the city, but the Gold Dragons are still trapped inside!” a student of the Azure Dragons said.

The class vice president stepped forward. “I tried to stop them, but they said they were worried about Mr. Hadis and decided to stay. So we split into two teams.”

The student struggled to get their words out, regretting that they left their friends behind, but they never vocalized their thoughts. They knew they’d ultimately made the right decision, so Jill’s question was straight to the point.

“Is His Majesty in the duke’s manor, within that barrier?” she inquired.

“Probably,” the student replied.

“I see. I leave him to his own devices for just a moment, and he takes the entire city hostage. What a troublesome husband he is,” she growled.

As the student gazed at the ground, she patted their shoulder and glanced around the room at the others.

“All right, little birds!” she shouted. “This is the moment we’ve all been waiting for—when a murderer transforms into a hero! Are you mentally prepared to save the trapped princess?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the students replied as they energetically saluted.

She couldn’t stop a smile from tugging the corners of her mouth upward.



THINGS progressed faster than he expected, but it was still within the realms of expectations. Hadis removed the cloth around his head and his apron before proudly sitting on the sofa. How benevolent they were for providing everyone with enough blankets and pillows to go around.

Duke Igor Lehrsatz’s personal quarters prioritized efficiency. It was connected to the drawing room and the study. If the walls of the bedroom, which housed a large bed, and the partitions that required water were removed, it could easily transform into a large hall.

But the ones gathered there were Igor, Zeke, Camila, Lawrence, and Billy, the main cast for this ordeal. It mattered not just how large the room was; it’d always feel stuffy and cramped. The mere thought of them all locked in the same room filled them with dread.

“Please bear with it for only two days, Dragon Emperor,” an elderly man with a red mantle said with a smile. It was as though he read Hadis’s mind.

Several people wearing black mantles stood behind him, hiding their faces and pointing their guns at the emperor and everyone else in the room.

The Kratos queen had returned two days ago. Just yesterday, the Rave side had hashed out some details with the Kratos delegation, hoping to start the meeting soon after she’d awoken. This morning, the moment the station exploded, a spear fell upon the manor of Duke Lehrsatz and created a magic circle. Then a group of people, their faces hidden under dark hoods, appeared and surrounded Hadis, who was baking some bread in the kitchen early in the morning. And now, the Dragon Emperor had been taken hostage.

“I just need you all to silently watch on as the empress candidate launches a strike at Kratos,” the elderly man said. “I want

you to then engage in the grisliest of wars, so we won't harm you. Though I doubt that you can offer any sort of resistance."

"Because you have the magic seal, using the Sacred Spear as your medium," Hadis muttered as he glanced out the window.

The spear floating in the air created the transparent dome barrier surrounding the entirety of the Lehrsatz manor. Anyone inside the barrier was restricted from using magic, hence even Billy, who could single-handedly destroy an entire squad of Dragon Knights, was restrained in the room.

"But that's not all," the man said. "Surely, you've already realized that much. The Dragon King must be in agony."

The man glanced at the tiny dragon cradled in Hadis's arms. Raw lay lifeless with no signs of waking up. The moment he saw the magic circle in the sky, the baby dragon fainted.

"This magic circle acts not only as a magic seal, but as a dragon killer too," the man explained. "Green dragons and lower should die instantly, but the beasts of the Dragon Knights are simply asleep. Good grief, that Dragon King cannot be underestimated. He can't be killed, and he personally took the brunt of the spell. You can still use the Heavenly Sword, can't you?"

"Wanna see?" Hadis asked.

"Oh, I'd love to! But if I die and the barrier in the sky vanishes, it won't be just the station that'll explode. It'll be your citizens. We always have bombs strapped to us, eagerly waiting for the moment we become heroes who can kill gods! I believe our history is proof enough to show that my words aren't just the ramblings of a madman, but if you'd like to see it with your very eyes, we'll happily comply."

"I've known since long ago that none of you are sane," Igor spat under his breath. "You're all fools who fear not even the gods."

The man glanced at the duke and smiled. "No, there isn't anyone in the world who fears the Dragon God more than us, the Arks—the Calvariae faction, to be precise. We're very much aware of the might and influence he possesses. When he lost his divinity, we thought he vanished, but he merely fell into a slumber. Because he lost his power, he might have changed forms, but he will awaken

one day, and the vessel born precisely at that moment will undoubtedly become the Dragon Emperor of Rave. Is that not so, sixth-generation Dragon Emperor?"

Hadis didn't answer, but the elderly man, called Canis, didn't seem to mind as he continued rambling.

"Some doubted you of being the true Dragon Emperor, but that's all very silly. You wield the Heavenly Sword; you aren't anything but the Dragon Emperor! And because you exist, the Dragon God does as well. He hasn't vanished. Heh heh… We're lucky that he lost so much power that he can't be seen, but it matters not just how much knowledge humans amass—we cannot kill the Dragon God. He touts how death is logical, yet his actions contradict himself."

"Enough of your spiel, Cardinal Canis," a person in the back with a purple mantle said.

Canis whirled around to face them. "Young ones these days are rather hasty, aren't they?" Canis said. "We've waited three centuries for a Dragon Emperor. How can you blame me for wanting to speak with him? I'm sure you'll be just as excited when you get to personally meet the vessel of the Goddess."

"No, I've grown tired of seeing princesses," the purple-cloaked person replied.

"Aw… Goddess Kratos's vessel is always present, no matter the generation, I suppose. But Dragon God Rave's vessel won't appear so easily once he's been lost. We of the Calvariae faction have waited many long years for this."

"Hurry up and get to work. We don't have time. This is an order from the commander of the Arks."

"Are you short on time because of the Dragon Consort?" Hadis asked.

The girl wearing the purple mantle tried to turn to leave, but she stopped in her tracks. The shade complemented her slender frame very well.

Hadis cracked a wry smile. "I thought we'd have more time, Millay."

“My decision won’t change, no matter how much time we have. As the archbishop of the Moechia faction and the commander of the Arks, your attempts to woo me are appallingly insolent. You gravely misunderstand your situation.”

Hadis was surprised to hear such words and couldn’t respond. Millay laughed through her nose as she quickly left.

Hadis blinked a few times before he finally spoke. “Woo her? When did I do that?”

Lawrence burst out laughing, and everyone around him sighed loudly.

“Your Majesty, please don’t say that. I’ll start to pity her,” Camila said.

“But I don’t ever remember trying to woo her,” Hadis replied. “Is it because I was being careful so she wouldn’t notice that I was suspicious of her? Huh? But I was so blatantly wary of her.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha! You’re hilarious, Your Majesty!” Canis laughed as he wiped tears from his eyes, much to everyone’s surprise. “You remind me of your real father. The air around you differs greatly from his, but you resemble him so much. A young girl who knows nothing of society won’t stand a chance against you. But your father seemed more aware of his charm that could seduce men and women of all ages. I liked him very much. I helped him become a part of the army commanded by the late George, the younger brother of the previous emperor. Would you like to hear the tale?”

“I’m not interested,” Hadis replied.

“Oh, what a shame.” Canis shrugged his shoulders and stepped back. “Then I shall leave without saying a word. But could you kindly keep your thoughts a secret and allow Lady Millay to maintain her misunderstanding? Even a Dragon Emperor can surely spare the feelings of an adorably self-conscious girl in the middle of her adolescence, can’t you?”

“Is she really your commander?”

“Quite so. She’s a genius in magic theory, enough to replicate the divine crest.”

Canis sneered before respectfully bowing and leaving. When the double doors closed behind him, an unusual magic circle glowed

and vanished. Likely, a spell for eavesdropping or some kind of surveillance had been cast.

"If we break the seal on the door, I assume that the suicide bombing terrorism of Lehrsatz will begin," Lawrence said as he stood from his spot on the floor. The rope around his wrists fell to the ground. "We were only tied for show, and they barely patted us down," he said. "The Dragon Emperor isn't even tied up."

"But that doesn't mean we can do as we like," Igor warned. "If anyone tries to leave, they'll use their bombs and rush into Lehrsatz. That's the kind of people they are."

"And as long as we're confined here, the Lehrsatz Dragon Knights can't be mobilized. The Kratos side can just go, 'to hell with Lehrsatz' and act as we like."

Camila and Zeke flashed their murderous intent. Igor, who'd remained seated on the long sofa, smiled calmly.

"Oh, I doubt you can," the duke said. "I don't see the queen anywhere."

"That's right," Lawrence replied. "She still won't awaken. I've got a sneaky suspicion that her condition might be linked to the Sacred Spear somehow." Lawrence glanced at Hadis, who turned the other way.

"I don't have the answer," the Dragon Emperor replied. "You guys know more about her than I do."

"They mentioned that you can still use the Heavenly Sword," Lawrence pointed out. "Is this true?"

"I don't see the need to tell you."

"Well, I expected as much. We were barely restrained and all locked into the same room because they knew that we didn't actually plan on cooperating. In fact, they probably want us to grab our weapons and fight among ourselves. War would break out that way, and they won't even need to go through the trouble of having the empress candidate attack Kratos. So, why don't we have a peaceful diplomatic exchange?"

"Diplomacy? What are you thinking?" Camila asked.

"Negotiations on how this will unfold and how that will be dealt with in the future, I presume," Igor said calmly.

Lawrence sat across from the duke before he spoke. “Before the other regions can react and defend themselves, the Arks need to act and proclaim that the empress candidate declares war. But the Arks aren’t nearly convincing enough to disguise themselves as a part of the Rave imperial army. They must have something else as their main source of power.”

“Dragons,” Igor replied. “I don’t know how they’ll gather them, but a flight of dragons is the easiest way to signal Rave’s attack against Kratos.”

“Agreed. And the moment the flight crosses the borders, House Cervel will attack them. Our side will react to that and treat it as the start of a war. Is that clear?”

“I suppose we have no other choice.”

“Hey!” Camila butt in. “You’ve got to be kidding me! Are we starting a war so easily?! And you, Kratos side! You know we don’t intend to invade, so do something about it!”

“However, if the flight doesn’t cross our borders, we’ll act like we never heard the empress candidate declaring war,” Lawrence added.

“That’s probably best for your sake, too,” Igor replied.

Zeke tapped Camila’s shoulder, and she let out an exhausted sigh.

“This is why I hate conversations between higher-ranking officials,” she muttered. “They’re so tedious.”

“Does this sound fine with you, Dragon Emperor?” Lawrence asked as he turned to face Hadis.

But the loud tap of a cane against the floor stopped the Kratos official.

“You must be tired, Sir Marton,” Igor said. “The Dragon Emperor isn’t in the room with us.” His wrinkly face formed a smile, causing everyone to fall silent. “I can only promise you based on the decisions that I, Duke Lehrsatz, have made. This ordeal and the rampage of the empress candidate are all due to my lack of virtue. In fact, the Dragon Emperor, who isn’t in the room with us, can cut me off and invade your nation, thereby going against my word.”

“That sort of logic can’t fly here!” Billy shouted, unable to hold back.

But Igor paid him no heed and maintained his gaze on Lawrence with a smile.

“If you choose to disagree, I might try to break that magic seal and destroy the entirety of Lehrsatz while taking the queen down with me,” Igor said. “Don’t think you can consult the Dragon Emperor and foist him with the responsibility for this trivial matter, you brat. Don’t you dare underestimate Lehrsatz and the dukes.”

“I see,” Lawrence said. “So even if the empress candidate crosses borders, it’s all because of your decision and your mistakes.” He pulled his chin back and glanced at Hadis. “What a fine subject you have. I could hardly believe that you were the head chef in Neutrahl—it just sounds like a bad dream.”

“And? What now?” Zeke asked. “You guys keep yapping, but isn’t there a way to stop the empress candidate? That’s the best outcome for both of us, right?”

Everyone stared back at the knight as Lawrence burst into a fit of laughter.

“Ah, yes, you’re right. That’s exactly so,” Lawrence said.

“You’re smart, but you’re dumb,” Zeke said. “Same goes for you, gramps. Think of that first.”

“It’s the job of the elderly to clean up messes,” Igor replied. “You young ones should be in charge of the hard labor.”

“I can hardly believe that those words came from Lehrsatz, a house adept at fleeing,” Billy said with a huff. He smoothed out the hems of his clothes and sat up straight. “I shall be in charge of the rough work. I believe I’m best suited for the role.”

“Ah, so you plan on persistently chasing after an army that you cannot catch, as you’ve once done before,” Igor remarked. “I see you haven’t learned a thing from the Anthos War.”

“Hahaha! Speaking of, I haven’t seen your younger brother around! Is he doing well? I was eager to meet him again, but it seems he’s quick to flee as usual!”

Hidden beneath Billy and Igor’s smiles were fiery glares.

“Musclehead!”

"Cheap shots!"

One could hardly believe that these childish insults came from an argument between two adults. They had once clashed at Anthos, the former royal capital of Kratos. Camila and the others watched the old men as they put some distance between them.

"Shouldn't we pry those two away from each other?" Camila asked.

"Leave 'em be," Zeke replied. "They're adults. As long as they don't get violent."

"I doubt anyone can stop Margrave Cervel once he gets violent," Lawrence muttered. "Let's do what we can. I've already made the preparations anyway."

"What?!" Zeke yelped.

"I mean, that empress candidate was clearly suspect."

Lawrence smiled brightly, taking Camila and Zeke aback.

"Don't take that attitude with me," the Kratos strategist said. "Your bird and that bear plush are gone, too."

"I thought they were with His Majesty," Camila replied. "We don't know anything about them, right?"

The two knights and Lawrence stared at Hadis, and the Raccoon Boy was the first to shrug his shoulders.

"There's nothing to worry about," Lawrence said. "They're trying to instigate a fight, but the ones fighting are all amateurs. Plus, they've already made a fatal mistake—they've allowed the Dragon Consort to do as she pleases. It's no wonder you stubbornly refused to mention that the Dragon Consort has gone missing, Dragon Emperor."

Lawrence spoke loudly, but Hadis quietly averted his gaze.

"If he admitted that she went missing, you'd have to conduct a search," Lawrence went on. "Not only would you needlessly lose personnel, but there was also the danger of information getting lost. Above all, if the Dragon Consort manages to escape, you'd end up notifying the empress candidate of the whereabouts and actions of the consort. That would end up shackling the Dragon Consort, so you hid her from the empress candidate. Am I wrong?"

Hadis had no reason to answer. He didn't care if Lawrence stated that the empress candidate had misunderstood these actions as the Dragon Consort being deserted. The Dragon Emperor sat by the window, staring at the magic circle that loomed beyond the thin, lace curtains and the black spear that stood in the center. *Rave, how much can you do?* Hadis asked.

"It's a bit tough," Rave admitted. *"But that thing's weird. I don't sense the Goddess in it at all."*

Hadis sighed and closed the curtains. Perhaps the best answer was to sacrifice Lehrsatz to flee, make preparations, and defeat the Arks. Igor had personally declared he'd take full responsibility precisely to imply that he had the resolve to be cut off if needed.

"Is it a trap?" Rave wondered. *"Tread carefully. I hope Missy notices."*

I'm sure Jill will be fine.

Hadis could still sit back and wait until his wife arrived for him.

Chapter 4: The Obliviousness of the Gods

"AS long as ye can move as ye wish, the Dragon Emperor'll keep watchin' until the last minute," Rolf said. "And Kratos can't move either. The queen's still snoozin' away, and the Sacred Spear is no help. They can't be reckless."

"Right…" Jill said as she nodded back.

"Both sides are probably confined in a room in the manor by the Arks. I reckon the goal is to provoke both sides into instigatin' a fight. No doubt they're currently talkin' things out and decidin' what exactly'll signal the start of a war. If I were a bettin' man, the safest choice is to declare war when the empress candidate crosses the border and clashes with the Cervels."

An owl hooted from above. The dense foliage of the mountains made it an ideal hiding place, but when the sun set, only their lanterns and the moonlight could be used as light sources. This was an unpaved path, away from the main trail, and it was imperative to be careful when traversing the area. Everyone was quiet, likely due to nerves and the need to focus on where they stepped.

"The goal of the Arks is to convince Kratos that the Rave Empire's tryin' to attack," Rolf went on. "And if so, a nighttime raid won't be as effective. They don't have the skills to fight in the night anyway—they're total amateurs when it comes to fightin'. In other words, at the soonest, they won't head out until dawn breaks. We've got some time until then, lass."

"Rolf, could you first tell me where we're headed?" Jill asked. "And why are you here anyway?"

Rolf frowned as he led the way with a lantern. “No need to explain myself, is there?”

“There’s a huge need! We’re with the students who remained in the city, and the entire place is blockaded, right? Where are we headed, abandoning the city and His Majesty?!”

Jill had taken the remainder of her students and rode a carriage for a few hours from the Arks’ base. When they began to see the city walls, it was already evening. They found an old warehouse by the tracks and decided to stay there to think of a plan when the floor tile opened, and the students who were in the city peeked out. They were overjoyed to see her. The students had mentioned that they met an odd old man who told them about the underground escape route, and Jill’s hunch was soon proven correct when she spotted Rolf waiting for her as her guide. She was immediately told to climb a mountain under the night sky.

“When did you become acquainted with those kids anyway?” Jill asked.

“I spotted ’em around the duke’s manor, discussin’ how to save the Dragon Emperor, so I thought I’d step in and tell ’em not to do anything unnecessary,” Rolf replied. “I didn’t know what these young’uns would do after returning the queen…”

“We were also surprised to see you jump out of the brush…” a student replied.

“The underground routes of Lehrsatz form a massive labyrinth,” another chimed in. “This grandpa memorized all the routes, apparently.”

“Miss Jill, you should’ve told us that the third Knight of the Dragon Consort was an old man,” a third said. “We almost mistook him for an enemy.”

While Jill had no idea what the students had learned during their journey to the warehouse, most of them viewed Rolf favorably. Jill sighed, relieved that they were all safe and sound.

“Then did everyone escape using the underground route?” she asked.

“Long ago, that place used to have a ruin, or so I’ve heard,” Rolf said. “Lehrsatz was built atop it, ye see. A part of it became an

underground waterway and the rest has also been reused somehow, ensurin' that the citizens could flee underground and outside if necessary."

"I had no idea," Jill replied.

In the past, Jill had once been on the side attacking Lehrsatz. Duke Igor Lehrsatz had holed himself up in his manor before he ultimately chose to explode and destroy the entire city. *Was that used as a diversion to allow his citizens to flee?* Jill wondered.

"I had no idea either, Grandpa Rolf," Roger grumbled as he protected the rear. "Isn't it a bit of a problem that not even the Rave imperial family is informed of this?"

Rolf huffed angrily. "It's the largest defense for Lehrsatz. If youse guys were told of it all willy-nilly, it wouldn't serve its purpose, would it? Even in the city, only the elderly know of it from word of mouth, along with a small fraction of people who manage the underground waterways. I'm probably the only one who precisely knows the way, too. Used to always give my rowdy pursuers the slip when I was a kid."

The trials of an adult having to chase after a cackling child like Rolf easily came to mind.

"In any case, ye don't need to worry about the citizens bein' evacuated," Rolf said.

He continued walking ahead, twirling a stick with a large leaf he picked up along the way.

"The station was bombed today," Rolf said firmly. "The city's been blockaded to find the culprit. For safety, the manor of Duke Lehrsatz is cloaked in a barrier. The citizens'll nod their heads up to this point. But then they see unfamiliar people proudly walkin' around instead of the Lehrsatz Dragon Knights. Coupled with that black spear above the manor, there're too many questionable things goin' on. Above all, the black spear resembles the Sacred Spear, an omen of misfortune."

When Jill glanced to her side, she could spot the lights of Lehrsatz's city in the distance, between the dense foliage. Even during the night, the magic circle in the sky and the black spear that served as the core glowed brightly.

"What's more, there was a diplomatic meetin', wasn't there?" Rolf continued. "And now the new empress candidate is tryin' to attack Kratos. It's not the Dragon Emperor or Duke Lehrsatz, but the orders of a young lass. The Lehrsatz citizens aren't so stupid as to obediently follow her orders and place their faith in her."

"You don't mean… They're not going to fight, are they?" Jill asked.

"Yeah, I don't mean that. Serves 'em no purpose. They're probably just idly sittin' back and buyin' some time as they prepare to flee. They're waitin' on Neutrahl. Usually, only Neutrahl or Lehrsatz can attack Kratos, meanin' they've got ways to communicate during emergencies."

Jill recalled a time when the Kratos forces stayed in the Lehrsatz duchy, leading Duke Neutrahl to sense that and make needless assumptions. That was an unfortunate use of their close communication, but in truth, it was meant to be utilized during times like these, when enemies had infiltrated.

"The Three Dukes are awesome!" Jill cried. "House Cervel didn't have anything like that."

"Well, that's 'cause no one can match the mobility and fightin' prowess of House Cervel," Rolf replied. "In any case, the city can wait until later. The Arks won't stay in the city for long. Once the empress candidate crosses the border, their goal will have been reached, and they'll retreat before the other dukes and the imperial army arrive. But we can't let the lass cross that border."

Rolf tossed a map to Jill. It was a small copy that detailed the roads and trails of Lehrsatz all the way to the edge of the border. A few X's marked the map, but she had no idea what they represented.

"We're headed to the X closest to Lehrsatz," Rolf said. "Our enemies will depart from there."

"They aren't running from the city?" Jill asked.

"The magic circle from that spear prevents the dragons in the city from movin'. And since that whippersnapper of a Dragon King will order all the beasties to target the Arks, they can't undo the seal until they retreat."

Shrubs became more abundant around the winding, rugged path. That indicated their higher elevation. When Jill looked up from the map, she noticed she could now gaze down at the city.

She stopped when she noticed the black spear once more. It possessed enough magical power to maintain a magic circle on such a grand scale for long hours. Rolf and the others had mentioned that a magic seal and a dragon killer seal had been applied. Thanks to Raw, the dragons only slumbered under the dragon killer seal, but that also meant he couldn't suppress the seal entirely.

It likely affected Dragon Emperor Hadis and Dragon God Rave as well; only Goddess Kratos should've been capable of such a destructive feat. That black spear stood in the center of the massive magic circle and emanated magical energy unlike anything Jill had ever felt before—she could only attribute it to some sort of divine power at play. And yet, something felt…off. The spear felt devoid of life.

"What's wrong, whippersnapper?" Rolf asked. "We're short on time, better walk as fast as your legs can take ye."

"S-Sorry," Jill stammered as she folded the map up and returned it to him. "We have to prioritize protecting the border, don't we? But will we be enough to prevent their attack?"

Rolf shoved the map back into his chest pocket, faced forward, and marched ahead. The trail up the mountain was a bit of a detour, and the city quickly receded into the distance.

"The Arks had no choice but to enact this plan quick because a *certain* young lass went around destroyin' their bases one after another," Rolf said. "I reckon their security's full of holes, and they don't have many they can mobilize. Or maybe this plan itself is a big experiment."

"An experiment? Is the spear and the magic circle a part of it too?" Jill asked.

"And the dragons. Come, take a look. Bullseye."

Rolf turned off the light and stopped atop a tiny hill. Beyond the steep hill was a rolling plain, illuminated by moonlight. White petals danced beneath, indicating that a field of flowers may have been there. But the delicate flora had been violently stomped by a

dragon surrounded in black mist, making it a wretched sight. The students clapped their hands over their mouths, and some even inched back.

Jill clenched her fist as she muttered, "That's the…"

It was the dragon that had appeared during the Dragon Flower Crown Festival. The beast didn't obey the orders of the Dragon God and emanated thick miasma.

Rolf chuckled. "Bingo. What an absurd sight."

"Did the Arks make that dragon?" Jill asked.

"Hell if I know."

Rolf didn't seem at all surprised. He crouched as he gazed down at the flight of fake dragons cloaked in dark mist.

"I'm guessin' that the Draco Flute and the magic theory of Kratos to call forth beasts were meshed together," he said. "If ye ask *who* exactly made it, I'm sure it's via collective intelligence. The Arks probably got the idea when Minerd arrived on a dragon. The only thing I'm sure of is that it's made from Kratos, that is, it's made from magic. The Sacred Spear was stolen to create these dragons that won't listen to Dragon God Rave."

"U-Um, can we defeat them?" a student asked gingerly.

Rolf smiled. "I told ye, they're made from magic. We can burn 'em away with the fire of dragons." He stood up with a grunt. "So, if we've got a real dragon on our side, victory should be easy to attain. Prepare 'em for me."

"Wait, you don't have any?!" Jill yelped. "I didn't expect you to suddenly become so reckless!"

"You're a Dragon Consort, ain't ye? Don't sound so pathetic! If all's lost, we've got this." Rolf swiftly pulled out a scale around the size of a thumbnail from the bag on his waist. "This is the scale of that whippersnapper dragon," he said.

When did he get something like that? Jill was slightly taken aback, but Rolf didn't seem to feel guilty as he snickered and took out a match.

"Light this fella on fire and throw it into the enemies," he cackled. "That barrier has isolated the Dragon King's thoughts from the dragons of the empire. If those beasties can sense the smell of

the Dragon King's scale burnin', they'll misunderstand the situation and angrily rain fire upon the enemy! It'll be the dragon brawl of the ages!"

"That's pure chaos! Pandemonium!" Jill cried.

"Ye won't get to see such a sight so easily. Now then, we don't have time. Let's split into teams. Hey, former imperial prince!" Rolf pointed to Roger, who sternly gazed down the cliff. He looked up as Rolf said, "Wear the mantle of the Arks. Jump off the cliff and mosey on down to them. Grab the one in charge of the teleportation device and communication, then take the kids who can't ride on dragons alone to head back to the city. Tell everyone that the commander of the Arks has left as planned, so they'll willingly retreat from the city. Are we clear, lad?"

"You tell me to jump off a cliff like it's so easy. How unreasonable," Roger said. "Will the ones in the city trust my words?"

"Of course. Only the Arks have a teleportation device in Rave, and they probably know where their communicator will be. Besides, they likely believe that their location here ain't leaked to outsiders—take a good look, lad. No one's really guardin' the area."

The Arks could be seen between the dragons and had weapons, but they were laughing around a bonfire. None of them seemed tense or vigilant, and the guard who stood outside the largest tent even let out a wide yawn.

"The Arks are adept at workin' behind the scenes," Rolf said. "It's very rare for them to face enemies head-on, meanin' that with the change of generation, they changed their tactics, too. But that doesn't mean the Arks can magically turn into refined soldiers in a day."

Roger sighed and turned to the students. "All right, let's get ready. Those who can ride dragons will stay behind, and those who can't will slide down the cliff while wearing the Arks' uniform. It'll be fun."

"Whippersnapper, *there's* your target," Rolf said as he sat cross-legged atop the cliff. He left the planning to Roger.

Jill stood next to her knight and stared at the enemies who left the tent. One was wearing a scarlet mantle—Canis. Another was a girl with braided hair affixed to either side of her head to form loops. She was none other than Millay, the empress candidate.

"That man I know," Jill said. "But is there any chance the girl is being threatened?"

Rolf let out a low chuckle. "None. The lass is wearing a purple mantle, proof that she's the commander of the Arks."

Jill widened her eyes with surprise when she saw Millay grip the black spear in her hand. The Dragon Consort didn't feel any magical energy from it, and the lifeless spear looked completely normal, but she never forgot an opponent she had once faced.

"I see… This is a bit of a problem," Jill mumbled.

The promise was to never use her as bait, never rush into the enemies alone, never change jobs, never test Jill, never ingest poison, and never cheat on her.

"If he was suspicious of her from the start and set up a plan to trap her, it makes it harder for me to hit His Majesty," Jill lamented.

"Best of luck to ye, Dragon Consort," Rolf replied. He smiled as he glanced down at the ring on her left hand. "It'd be a pain to destroy the Kratos royal capital again."

The small, black scale fluttered to the ground as it joined the bonfire. The fire didn't transfer over to the petals that the magical dragons had destroyed and smoldered for a few minutes, smoke rising into the air. If this had no effect, Jill and the others would need to storm in without the help of dragons. The silence was deafening, and as Jill steeled herself under the night sky, a furious roar rang out. Rolf laughed at the fuss that was breaking out below.

"Attack!" he shouted gleefully. "Don't get stomped on by them dragons, you brats!"

They slid down the cliff, the soles of their shoes creating tracks in the dirt, but their enemies were too stunned by the wild dragons that appeared out of nowhere to notice. One of the dragons expelled a powerful flame. The Arks managed to dodge it, but the dragon enveloped in dark mist was too slow. As it burned to death, it let out

a metallic shriek before it quickly evaporated away. Just like that, one was down.

"Retaliate!" an Ark shouted. "Prepare the anti-flight magic circles!"

Three members stepped forward and began to write the magic circle, but students punched them from behind, halting the attempt. As more wild dragons appeared, confusion broke out within the Arks.

"Our liaison with Lehrsatz is down!" a member cried.

"The fire will burn our dragons! Have them fly up!" another ordered.

An odd sound echoed through the area, and the dragons emanating black mist took to the sky. The Ark members leaped on top of them—it was true that they were good at fleeing. They made no attempt to fight.

"Our target is in front of the tent! Whoa!" a student cried out.

"Head to assist the others! Anyone who can keep up with me, follow my lead!" Jill roared.

She aimed straight for the tent and thought she saw Millay turn around at the entrance. When Jill leapt forward, a weapon swung down from her side. With a grunt, she just managed to twist her body and change directions as the tip of the staff sank into the ground as though some sort of gravitational force was at play. Jill looked up at the wielder of the staff.

"I'm surprised you found us, Dragon Consort," Canis said.

Millay stood behind Canis and jumped onto a dragon shrouded in black mist as it flew higher. Jill tried to give chase, but the staff barred her path.

"Fighting against the Dragon Consort?! I can't possibly undertake such a responsibility!" Canis cried. "I'm better at negotiating!"

He dodged the students' attacks aimed at his blind spots and pushed them all away. He was far more adept at fighting than he appeared, and perhaps the students required some help. That moment of hesitation was all it took. Canis muttered under his breath and twirled around as he wielded his staff.

With a *vwoom,* the ground around Jill sank. *The pressure is pushing it down—no! It's the opposite! The magic circle is dragging the ground upward and sapping up magical energy!* The students within the circle fell to their knees.

"Truly, a genius of spells is terrifying," Canis said. "I haven't used much magical energy and only rearranged the magic circle just a little to get this effect. But…" Canis let out a strained laugh as he dodged Jill's kick. "I suppose it's not enough for you, Dragon Consort," he said. "If you can still move, just how much magical energy do you have?"

"I'm trained differently from you guys!" Jill roared.

She simply needed to move without the aid of magic, but that slowed her down considerably. Canis teleported to and fro, and she was always a step too slow, unable to land a blow.

"Miss Jill, chase after her!" a student gasped.

"Oh, I can't have you doing that," Canis replied. "If you leave, I shall reduce those kids into mummies. Your students are so precious to you, aren't they? I'm a teacher myself, so I very much understand that feeling."

He pressed the point of his staff against one of the students as he chuckled in the back of his throat.

"Why don't we talk for a while, Dragon Consort?" Canis suggested. "Ah, how about we discuss the Dragon Emperor's mother? She couldn't understand the value of the Dragon Emperor and blamed him for the death of her beloved husband. She punched and kicked him, shoving all the blame on him! Just how much of a fool was she? I can only assume that the Dragon God made it so the Dragon Emperor would never feel close to his mother. I can find no other explanation."

"Don't listen to him," Jill warned her students. "He's known for using this method to sway the tide."

Some of the kids looked up in shock, but Canis wouldn't stop.

"I think the current Dragon God wants to use the Dragon Emperor as his puppet," he said. "Why else would the Dragon Emperor be shunned by his mother and the rest of the imperial family, only to be sent to the frontiers in his youth? Only when the

situation was dire, and the imperial princes died one after another, was the emperor brought back! Why would the Dragon God allow this? The deity surely could've done something and spared the Dragon Emperor, but he did nothing! It's pure indolence—"

Suddenly, a breath of fire silenced the chatty Canis and his annoying mouth. Jill was shocked to learn that they were all in the line of fire, but she quickly realized she didn't feel the warmth at all. Her clothes and her students were all safe. Only Canis rolled on the ground, consumed by fire. It was all thanks to the protection of the dragons.

"Meine! How did you…" Jill started.

As the dragon burned away the magic circle, another powerful cry echoed from above—the unmistakable chirp of a bird that caused the students to leap to their feet.

"Instructor Sauté!" a student cried. "And…"

"Crap! It's Mr. Bear! Retreat, everyone!" another shouted.

"Chiiirp!"

Sauté flung Hadis Bear in front of Canis. He'd managed to extinguish the flames and grab his staff, then he furrowed his brows.

"What is this stuffed animal—" he began.

"Miss Jill, leave the rest to us!" a student declared.

"Grandpa Rolf, you should stay back! Go! You'll die!" another warned.

Hadis Bear stood up with glowing eyes. Jill ran in the opposite direction as Meine outstretched its wings and flew alongside her. She jumped on top and climbed into the saddle. Something brushed against her finger. A tiny magic circle was on the saddle, and upon closer inspection, she saw a tiny piece of paper inside. The handwriting was rushed, but she was very familiar with it.

"I wish you the best of luck."

This was the urgent scribbling of Lawrence. *Now I see why Meine and the others were able to leave the city. This is probably one of his plans, but for now, I'll gratefully accept the offer of these reins.* With a large flap of its wings, Meine increased speed. Jill wasn't sure just what kind of dragon those magically concocted beasts were, but she was atop a gold-eyed, red dragon, and it was

her personal dragon, to boot. There was no reason that she couldn't catch up with them.

Soon enough, she spotted the end of the dragon flight, flying under the dark sky. It was an impressive army, and Jill and Meine had no other support. Still, neither of them faltered.

"Go forth, my strong golden wings!" Jill shouted.

Meine expelled a breath of fire that tore through the night sky. A dark-misted dragon evaporated in a flash, and one of the Arks fell. They all flew in a vertical line without assuming formation, so Meine continued to expel fire straight ahead, taking down as many as it could. The panicking Arks began to disperse in a horizontal line, leaving the center wide open. Jill aimed straight for Millay at the front. Some of the Arks with backbones regained their balance and pointed their guns at Jill.

The Dragon Consort kicked the saddle and soared through the sky. She transformed her Sacred Treasure into a whip and aimed for the black spear in Millay's hand, but her attack was easily parried. Millay locked eyes with Jill above her.

"Dragon Consort…" Millay mumbled with a troubled expression.

"If you surrender, I'll spare your life," Jill said.

Meine flew right below Jill's feet, and the Dragon Consort landed as the pair barred Millay's path.

"Or do you think you're stronger than me, Millay, commander of the Arks?" Jill asked.

Millay narrowed her blue eyes and drew her chin back. She could see the Rakia mountains in the distance, and the sky was turning a light purple hue. Dawn was about to break, and she was still nowhere near the border.

"My parents were taken by the Arks," Millay said.

Jill stared back blankly.

"The Arks saw my talent with spells, and had me infiltrate the imperial castle to get closer to His Majesty," Millay said sadly. "But His Majesty was just so nice to me… He told me to flee so that my life would be spared, at the very least."

"You're saying that His Majesty agreed to this plan?" Jill asked.

"That's right. This will allow us to make the first move against Kratos."

Millay stared right at Jill, and the Dragon Consort didn't avert her gaze as she let out a hearty chuckle.

"You don't believe me?" Millay asked.

"How can I?" Jill replied. "You've got the Sacred Spear in your hand."

Millay widened her eyes with surprise.

"A person who can wield the Goddess like that, being threatened?" Jill laughed. "Oh, that's too funny."

"Ah, I see you're more wary than the Dragon Emperor, Dragon Consort," Millay replied.

"Pardon? Do you think that His Majesty lacks vigilance?"

"Why else would he make me into an empress candidate?" Millay adamantly mocked. She sounded triumphant and like she pitied Jill. "He made no effort to search for you and relied on me as he wooed me. I was so disappointed to see the Dragon Emperor just being a normal guy."

Woo? Jill could easily imagine Hadis going, "W-Woo you?! You're too young for that, you pervert!" His face would be red as he mumbled sheepishly. *How could wooing be perverted anyway? Wait, now's not the time for that.*

"I understand that the Dragon Consort serves as the Dragon Emperor's shield, but I sympathize," Millay continued. "You didn't even get a search team sent out for you. Move, Dragon Consort. You can't overturn the difference in numbers."

Jill sighed. It seemed the two ladies differed greatly in their understanding of Hadis; perhaps it would be kind to allow Millay to keep misunderstanding the situation.

"His Majesty didn't search for me because he wanted to hide me from you," Jill said.

"You sound like a sore loser," Millay replied.

"You're happy, aren't you? I get it. His Majesty is so handsome. But he doesn't care about you one bit." Jill couldn't take the high road—she couldn't be so mature. "You've misread all the signals. And for that, I apologize in my husband's stead."

A ball of magical energy came flying, and Jill jumped from Meine to leap into the air. She transformed her Sacred Treasure into a sword and attacked Millay from above. The Ark commander thrust out the spear to parry the blow.

"Misread?! That's impossible!" Millay declared.

It wasn't the tip of the spear that made contact with the sword, but the magic circle that appeared from it. Jill didn't feel threatened by Millay's magical energy, implying that the Sacred Spear was the main force. The Ark commander used a spell to siphon up magical energy, absorbed the energy from the Sacred Spear, and converted it into new spells. This entire process had two or three layers to it, and under normal circumstances, this sort of conversion was nigh impossible. It seemed calling Millay a genius wasn't an overestimation of her skills.

"How dare you say such careless words just because you're a child with no charm!" Millay shouted. "Apologize!"

The magic circle shattered as though it had caused a tantrum of its own, and Jill was blown back. Meine soared through the air to catch the Dragon Consort's body from the side while getting rid of the enemies shrouded in black mist. The red dragon glided around Millay, searching for an opening to seize.

"You think he doesn't care about me?! That's impossible!" Millay roared. "I even sealed up the Goddess!"

Yeah, that Sacred Spear's the problem here. As long as she continues to use that, I'll be needlessly wasting my magical energy.

"I'm even winning against the Dragon Consort!" Millay shouted. "It's no wonder the Dragon Emperor tries to woo me!"

I feel like I stepped on a sore spot somehow… Did I trigger something?

"I'm really sorry about my Dragon Emperor," Jill hastily said. "Um, I do advise you to forget about him soon."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Millay screeched.

"Maybe he's just too much for you…"

"I told you to shut up!"

Meine flew above, dodging all the anti-flight magic circles. Several tiny magic circles appeared, all aimed squarely at Jill above

the Arks' heads.

"Die, Dragon Consort," Millay rumbled. "I never had any business with you in the first place."

But spells were of little use if they never made contact with their opponent. Jill channeled her magical energy into the soles of her shoes and kicked the saddle to fly as fast as she could go. Before the magic circle could explode, she landed behind Millay and swung down her sword. The Sacred Spear seemed to pull Millay along as it defended her against the attack.

"Damn it! Why didn't you die from that?!" Millay cried with frustration.

She didn't react to that attack. The Sacred Spear had sensed a sliver of Jill's magical energy and moved to protect its wielder. *Is the Sacred Spear mistaking Millay for Faris?*

"I'm the commander of the Arks!" Millay shouted. "I'll never lose to you!"

"Freaking snap out of it, Goddess Kratos!" Jill roared as loud as she could.

Millay shut her mouth in surprise.

"How much longer will you be used by this pathetic *child*?!" Jill shouted. "You want me to snap you in half again? Are you sure you're fine with that?"

"Wh-What are you…" Millay stammered. "The Goddess is just a source of magical energy and nothing more! She exists so that I can use her—"

"And you, cut it out!"

Jill used sheer might to push Millay away with her sword. The Ark commander was blown away, and Jill swung her blade down from above. Millay immediately used a spell to create a barrier of protection, and Jill shattered it almost instantly. The Dragon Consort saw herself reflected in Millay's surprised eyes.

"Did you really think that you could beat me?" Jill asked.

An explosion of magical energy akin to the morning sun illuminated the sky, and snow began to fall, painting the surrounding land white. Once Jill landed, she found herself under the snow. Silence fell over the area, and moments later, her face peeked out from the specks of white. She shook her head and crawled out when she saw that Millay was unconscious in the middle of the gouged ground.

The Ark commander had no external injuries and seemed to have just had the wind knocked out of her. She must've instinctively activated a barrier to protect herself. Jill held herself back, but she was still almost impressed by Millay's talents, who basically didn't have a scratch on her. *Or maybe it's because of the almost infinite energy from the Sacred Spear…* Only then did Jill gasp.

"The Sacred Spear!" she cried.

She glanced around and saw the tip of a black spear glittering under the early morning sun. It had been blown away and rolled onto the ground. Jill rushed over to it and tried to grab the spear when it rolled to one side.

"M-Mm… I don't get it…" the spear groaned.

Jill froze in place, stopping her arm from reaching out to the spear.

"Th-Three plus seven is…e-eleven? I-If I give Brother three, then I'll have…eight left?"

"It's seven," Jill said. "Do you really need to calculate that?"

"I-I'm short! Ack!"

The spear suddenly jumped up, and Jill flinched as she inched back.

The tip of the spear swiveled back and forth as though it were the head.

"Wh-Where am I? Where's Faris? Faris? Oh, I get it now!" The spear hopped above the snow and turned to Jill. **"She must be lost! Or maybe she's playing hide and seek. Hee hee, she's still got a childish side."**

Jill quietly watched on.

"Eeeeep! Dragon Consort!"

The Sacred Spear slid back into the snow like a scared rabbit, and Jill, who snapped back to her senses, chased after it.

"Wait! Hey, Kratos! Damn it! You're Kratos, aren't you?!" she cried.

"I'm not! You've got the wrong Goddess! Waaah! Why're you here, Dragon Consort?! Faris! Oh, Faris!"

"D-Dragon God Rave's over there!"

"Wait, really?! Where?!"

The Sacred Spear stood in place, eager to see the Dragon God, and Jill took her chance to pounce. She and the spear rolled around in the snow as the Goddess began to flail.

"Nooo! You're gonna snap me! You'll snap me again!"

It seemed the spear hadn't recovered its magical energy yet, and frantically flailed on the ground like a lively fish. Jill restrained the spear as she transformed her Sacred Treasure into a whip.

"Stay quiet! I'll return you to the queen!" Jill huffed.

"You're a liar! I won't believe you! I'm not *that* stupid!"

"Whoa! Is that the Dragon Emperor over there?"

"Where?!"

The moment the spear froze, Jill punched it, and it went limp. She quickly and tightly tied up the spear. Her shoulders sagged afterward. *I-I didn't think she'd actually fall for that trick. And this is* the *Goddess? The world's coming to an end.*

"No, don't let your guard down, Jill Cervel," Jill muttered under her breath. "Remember the incident of Beilburg. She isn't just stupid. She's a deity who can turn back time. I can't throw her out and pretend I've never seen her. I can't bury her."

Meine descended from above. Jill petted its back as she gazed up at the purple sky. The dragons shrouded in black mist had vanished—they could only be manifested with Millay's spell and the spear's ample magical energy. The situation in Lehrsatz had also likely changed when the magic circle above it vanished. She still had to deal with the aftermath. Jill grabbed the Sacred Spear, tied it up with her whip, and stood atop the snow. The sky behind her suddenly began to glimmer brighter than the sun. It came from Lehrsatz. *His Majesty?!*

When Jill turned around, a shadow loomed over her. Canis was riding atop one of the dragons, enveloped in the dark mist. She braced herself, wondering if he had come to fetch Millay, and the two parties locked eyes.

"You should head over to Lehrsatz soon," Canis said. "That item is our work of art, made from storing energy from the Sacred Spear. It may be a fake, but it's got about the same energy as the real thing, and once it runs dry, it's set to activate a certain spell." He cackled before he continued, "As you know, our signature move is suicide bombing. I wonder what the fate of the city and the Dragon Emperor will be!"

"Let's go, Meine!" Jill shouted.

She clicked her tongue as she jumped on her dragon and flew in the opposite direction of Canis. She knew she'd be letting Millay go, but there was nothing she could do. Hadis's safety was Jill's top priority. Her role wasn't to crush the Arks—it was to protect her Dragon Emperor.



BILLY flipped a playing card over. "It's far too quiet."

"They arrived to patrol the area before midnight, and it's been around five hours since, right?" Zeke asked.

Outside the window, they could see the city still enveloped in a dark blue. Three men were playing a game of memory under the light of a single lantern, but if people didn't know any better, it felt like they were engaged in some sort of dark ritual.

"They might be monitoring us, but they could still have a guard on standby," Billy said. He flipped over the wrong pair. "It's your turn."

Zeke flipped some cards over. "Maybe they were being considerate not to disturb our sleep? Or something happened outside."

Hadis took the sofa by the window, Igor was in the bedroom at the back, and Camila lay in the chair by the entrance. They couldn't rest easy, but sleep was important.

"It's hard to tell," Lawrence said. "Since the Arks can't use the dragons to fight at night, the empress candidate will head for Kratos around daybreak. This is around the time when they begin their retreat."

"But it's still too early for us to act," Billy said. "Personally, I'd like to avoid a pathetic scenario where I'm saved by my daughter… unlike a *certain* Dragon Emperor over there!"

"We hear you, so stop shouting, old man," Zeke grumbled.

"And what about you? Don't you feel pathetic as Jill's subordinate?"

"Captain's way stronger than us. That bit's true. I don't think we can catch up to her either. The important thing is not to drag her down and save her when needed. We can't let His Majesty push his limits." As Zeke flipped over two random cards, they formed a pair, and he continued his turn. "And we gotta watch over you guys. You're all enemies…" he said. "Tsk, wrong pair. You're next."

Lawrence tried to reach out and flip the cards over when he paused. He sensed a presence from beyond the door, and Zeke reached for his greatsword. Camila, who was asleep under a blanket, opened one eye. Only Billy lazily placed a hand on his chin.

"They don't seem like huge threats," he said. "Oh?"

A piece of paper slid between the gap of the door—the visitors made no attempt to knock or open it. Lawrence quickly flipped over all the cards and formed pairs before he stood up. Zeke tossed his cards on the ground with a groan, signaling that the Kratos strategist had won.

"You went easy on us, didn't you?" Zeke accused.

"It's no fun to end a match quickly," Lawrence replied.

"It's from the Gold Azure Dragon Wings," Camila said as she picked up the paper. "'We confirmed the Arks have retreated from the city. May the Dragon Emperor be victorious,' it says."

"They were involved with the queen, too," Billy said. "Just what are they? Can we trust this group?"

"At the very least, I don't think anyone would benefit from leaking false info to us," Lawrence replied as he checked the paper.

Billy slapped his knees as he stood. “Then let’s blow this entire area up for now.” He began to do some stretches to warm up.

“Screw you!” Igor roared angrily as he opened his bedroom curtains. “I don’t know where my servants and Dragon Knights are being kept! Are you planning to blow them all away?! You musclehead buffoon! We should only destroy the spell on the door and confirm our situation first!”

“You’re always so nitpicky,” Billy replied. “Ugh, you Lehrsatzes are all the same…”

Suddenly, a powerful burst of light flooded through the gap in the curtains. Hadis immediately sat up. The light died down quickly, but Zeke grabbed his weapon and opened the curtain wide. The sky was turning lighter, but it was still quite dark outside.

“That must be Jill’s magical energy,” Billy observed. “It’s still a good distance away, though.”

“Which means the invasion of Kratos must’ve failed,” Lawrence said. “Then the Arks retreating must be true. Now then, where shall we go from—”

Hadis quietly stood up and warned, “Brace yourselves.”

Almost instantly, the manor contorted and tilted. It twisted and bent as Camila supported Igor, who was about to trip, and crouched low. Billy, on the other hand, seemed completely fine as he suddenly punched a nearby wall. The blow was angled upward and ripped through the walls and ceilings before tearing through the sky. As debris fell from above, Igor almost shrieked.

“Y-Youuuuu!” he cried.

“Guess that didn’t stop it,” Billy muttered sternly.

Everyone, including Hadis, looked up. The spear was still there, glimmering as brightly as the sun. It crackled and enveloped the entire manor in a barrier, absorbing more energy as it vibrated. The spear had absorbed Billy’s attack as well.

“The Sacred Spear? Will the Goddess appear in front of us?!” Zeke asked.

“That’s not the Sacred Spear,” Lawrence said wearily. “I don’t sense the presence of the Goddess.”

"Is that a fake spear that the Arks have forged, then?" Igor asked. "Good grief, they're doing one bad act after another."

"But that's not a normal spear," Camila pointed out. "It's glowing so brightly, and I feel like it's about to move at any moment!"

"It's a spear meant to imitate the Sacred Spear as it uses energy from the Goddess," Billy observed.

"Isn't that just a Goddess already?" Zeke asked.

"Rar…" a tiny dragon groaned softly.

Everyone fell silent as Raw curled himself up into a tight ball. Hadis wrapped an arm around the Dragon King.

"Don't worry," Hadis said. "Just hold on for a little longer. Jill will come for us soon. Hang in there."

"Your Majesty, we shall protect the Dragon King," Igor said as he stepped forward. He raised the cushions on the sofa with his hands, and the Knights of the Dragon Consort stepped up behind him. "Please leave the rest to us. I wish you luck."

Hadis couldn't bring Raw along. He placed the tiny Dragon King onto a small pillow and stepped into the hole in the wall that Billy had created. Margrave Cervel stood beside the Dragon Emperor, earning Hadis's glare.

"Are you planning on getting in my way?" Hadis asked.

"Oh, this is just part of my work," Billy replied. "I wouldn't want the people of the city to blame Kratos for this mess. Is that not so, Sir Lawrence?"

"Quite right," Lawrence replied. "We'll search for the queen. If that spear's using energy from the Goddess, maybe we can think of a plan when the queen wakes up."

"Do as you like. Just don't drag me down," Hadis said.

Billy laughed loudly. "Do you really think an item snapped by my daughter can't be broken by her father?"

"You lost to me. Plus, your energy hasn't fully returned. I can already tell that you'll be useless."

"Will you never speak to your father-in-law with respect?!"

Another flash of light illuminated the sky, cutting the exchange short. The vibrating spear slowly split into two, one wrapped in red

and the other in blue light. Everyone had assumed the spear was black, but perhaps it was a shade of deep purple. Both spears held as much magic as the Sacred Spear, implying that there were now two Sacred Spears above them.

Rave, can you do it? Hadis asked. *How much magic do you have left?*

"About half. Yeah, this is gonna be a bit tough."

This was a battle that didn't involve love or logic—it was purely a battle of attrition. The two spears let off a golden light as they danced around together and aimed straight for Hadis. The Dragon Emperor gripped his Heavenly Sword and kicked the wall.



"SPEAR kidnapper!" a pathetic voice echoed in the sky. **"Where are you taking meee? I haven't done anything! I've got no magic left, and...wait, what was I doing again? Right, headed for the Rave Empire! I was supposed to be with Faris! I promised I wouldn't talk, move, or struggle without her permission, and we even pinky swore!"**

Meine scowled as the Sacred Spear hung from its neck; like with Dragon God Rave, the average person couldn't hear Kratos's voice. This rule applied to *people*. Animals and dragons were an exception. Jill gently petted Meine's neck, encouraging the dragon to ignore the cries of the Goddess as they headed for Lehrsatz.

"And then a group shrouded in black mantles threatened me! They said they'd bully Faris if I didn't listen to them, and I knew I had to protect her, so I parted ways with her. I-I was sad, but she's my friend!"

Jill stayed silent as her cheek twitched, hoping not to say anything unnecessary.

"And because of that promise, I stayed still! And then, uh...and then what happened again? They cast all sorts of spells on me. I-It hurt a lot, but I did my best and endured it all! Did I do good?"

"Not at all!" Jill roared back, unable to stop herself. "Why didn't you fight back? Are you stupid?! I know you're the victim, but your obedience has its limits. Thanks to you, a huge fuss ensued to search for your whereabouts!"

"Wh-What?! Did I screw up again?"

"Just shut up already. I'll return you to Queen Faris safe and sound!"

"Really?! That's a promise!"

Jill was so surprised the Goddess fell silent, she ended up breaking the silence. "You get along with Queen Faris, don't you?"

"Yep! We're friends!"

The spear that hung from Meine's neck jumped to the side of the saddle. It could still move even under the Sacred Treasure's restraints, implying that the Goddess was regenerating her magical energy.

"Faris said that she'd save me! She said that I'm not at fault at all; it's the world that's wrong. She said that we should both have a do-over. I was so happy to hear those words. Faris was still only fourteen, and yet, on her birthday, she…"

Jill already knew which birthday the goddess was referring to—it was on that fated day when she turned fourteen.

"I didn't want to do it anymore and was having a tough time, but I thought about trying my best one more time. That's why I turned time back." The Goddess paused before she innocently said, **"You understand this feeling, don't you? I'm just worried. When I turned back time, Faris did her best to study tons and change the future, even though she's so frail… Ever since she became queen, she's been pushing herself. And even Prince Gerald is— Oops."**

The Sacred Spear suddenly went stiff. Jill stared at it.

"I-I probably shouldn't have blabbed, right?"

"You didn't think that far ahead?!" Jill cried.

The spear wilted as it groaned that Faris would scold it. The Goddess was clearly feeling gloomy. *Damn,* Jill thought as she internally swore. *I can't have any unnecessary feelings. Or else, I'll*

be a repeat of the other Dragon Consorts who took the Goddess's side. Jill faced forward, intent on reaching her destination, when a flash of magical energy dyed the scenery in front of her.

"H-Huh? What? What's going on?"

"Your fake is wreaking havoc in Lehrsatz, I think," Jill replied. "His Majesty must be fighting back."

"My fake? Why?"

"The Arks used the energy they sapped away from you to create a fake Sacred Spear."

"W-Wait, am I to blame?! No! No! I'll get in trouble—"

The Goddess stopped blabbing as she gazed at the sky above Lehrsatz. Two spears glided through the air as silver and gold light clashed against each other. A deafening boom rang as a silver ray shot out. A blue spear unleashed a magic circle to absorb the attack.

"Huh? Is that my divine crest, but backwards?"

"His Majesty!" Jill cried. "Meine, hurry!"

A red spear flew behind Hadis, and the Dragon Emperor was blown back, unable to push the weapon away. The most beautiful divine sword in the world slipped out of his hands.

"Rave!" Hadis shouted in the distance.

The red and blue spears surrounded the Heavenly Sword and unleashed a magic circle. The shape looked all too familiar. Jill wasn't sure if it was the real deal, but Roger's voice echoed in her head.

"Are they trying to replicate the divine crests of the Dragon God and the Goddess?"

No. No, no, no! The Arks aimed to eradicate the gods. *But humans could never kill a god!*

"Brother!"

The Goddess of Love shot out. Jill transformed her Sacred Treasure into a sword and jumped off Meine's saddle.



HADIS felt like something was off the moment he engaged in battle. He expected his magical energy to be sapped away, but he felt like he couldn't use his powers as he wanted. He only noticed

that the red spear was to blame when he saw its magic circle right in front of him. *That's Rave's divine crest!* Hadis thought. He'd never seen it before, yet he recognized the shape all too well—was it because he was a Dragon Emperor and the Dragon God's vessel? His body also intuitively fled from the magic circle.

"Aw, crap," Rave muttered.

He sounded calm, but his tone was tinged with panic. The Dragon God had never sounded so unreliable during combat.

"What is that? What'll happen?" Hadis asked.

"No clue. The shape's a bit off, but it's pretty darn close… I can't believe they replicated it so well."

"Don't sound impressed. Think about what might happen."

"The divine crest is a door I used when I manifested in this world. It's supposed to be used when we go to and from the sacred land. It's not supposed to have any effect when humans use it, but…"

Hadis fired another ray at the blue spear he parried, but it was quickly absorbed.

"Isn't that a flipped divine crest of Kratos? Then they've become awfully close to replicating the real thing. If my crest is the door, her divine crest is the key to go to and from the sacred land. This is bad…"

"What is?" Hadis asked.

"If we just get forcibly returned to the sacred land, that's the best-case scenario. We can't return there anyway. But if the two crests actually align, it becomes a spell to kill deities."

A red spear launched an attack and scratched Hadis's cheek.

"Can you rewrite it using logic?" he asked.

"That crest isn't an exact replica. And because it's not the same thing, it doesn't affect logic. And its effect won't be as potent either—I'm guessing it'll throw us down into a space between this world and the sacred land. It's a deity seal. No matter the case, we have to do something. And killing deities is the right of humans if their logic and love have grown to an absurd degree."

A sliver of blood ran down Hadis's cheek to his jaw.

"Listen, Hadis. Worst case, let go of me. You're human. The real divine crest shouldn't affect you, but I'm not sure right now. If I'm alone, only I'd get sealed."

"No," Hadis replied

"Don't be so selfish. You might be a Dragon Emperor, but you're still human. If you fall into the gap between the sacred land and this world, your body won't last. I don't know how long it'll take until you can return."

"No."

"Hadis!"

Rave roared angrily—he rarely got genuinely furious, and that alone attested to just how serious he was. Even so, Hadis continued to shake his head stubbornly as he tightened his grip around the Heavenly Sword.

"No means no!" he shouted. "Why do I have to let go of you? I don't even know if you'll actually fall there yet!"

"Hadis…"

"It shouldn't work on humans, right? When Jill comes, I'm sure we can…"

"Why the hell are you in a daze in the middle of battle?!" Billy bellowed.

Hadis was kicked down to the roof, and Margrave Cervel was blown into the walls of Lehrsatz manor by the blue spear instead. It flew through the air and again launched itself straight for the Heavenly Sword. That was the spears' goal from the start—to seal Dragon God Rave.

They took the magical energy from the Goddess's Sacred Spear, stored it, researched the divine crest that had no precise shape known to man, and created a spell that only deities could use. This obsession was a product of love, and the research was a form of logic, but Hadis refused to admit it.

The right of humans? Logic and love growing? Hadis had never been spared by any of these, and the first bit of warmth that he'd ever felt in his life was the scales of his beautiful adoptive father. The deity's golden gaze had first advised and admonished Hadis. The Dragon Emperor unleashed another ray of magic, but the red

spear absorbed it. His breathing grew haggard, and it was now a battle of stamina.

"Hadis!"

The red spear went behind Hadis as it attacked from below. The blue spear was waiting for him to launch another blow. Rave had acted before Hadis could. As the guardian and weapon of the Dragon Emperor, the deity usually never moved on his own, but the god soon slipped from Hadis's blood-soaked hand.

"Rave!" Hadis shouted.



"I'll be fine. Don't worry."

The two spears activated their magic circles and surrounded the Heavenly Sword, changing the deity's form. The familiar shape of a fat snake with wings emerged. People called him a god. They laughed at him because they couldn't see him. They mocked him because they couldn't hear him. Hadis reached out.

"No!" he cried.

A black spear and golden light rained down from the sky. The tears that had formed in the Dragon Emperor's eyes were blown away as a fiery wind of magical energy blew through the area. The blinding light obscured his vision, but it was clear that Rave was within the sphere, trapped by the magic circles. The Sacred Spear swung its tip down from above. Jill immediately followed with her sword from the Sacred Treasure and used all her might to crack the orb.

"lET...GOOOO!" the Goddess furiously roared.

Hadis recalled Faris mentioning that the Goddess would transform at the sight of her brother.

"yOU LoWlY hUMaN sCUUUm!"

Magic circles glowed in the air, reminiscent of the ones the Arks had used. Jill was surprised, but she showed no signs of her magical energy being sapped away. The magical sphere began to transfer to the black spear.

"You guys always, aLWays ruin my bROthEr! You don't even bat an eye as you try to eAt me aLiVe, too! aGHHH!"

A loud crack rang out from the magic circle. In a last-ditch effort, an explosive gust of magic blew toward them. Jill could barely hang onto her sword, but Kratos didn't even flinch.

"eVEN IF My BrOTHeR OffERS FORGiVEnESS, i'LL *NEvER* fORgIVE YoUUU!"

The Goddess of Love used the tip of her blade to pierce through all that barred her path. Jill reached out and grabbed the adoptive father of her beloved. The two spears began to glow, and the magic circles exploded, blowing her back. Hadis caught her.

"Rave! Jill!" he shouted.

"Your Majesty, take Rave!" Jill ordered.

She placed Rave and Hadis behind her as she turned to the Goddess. A lady stood there, her slender shoulders rising and falling as she caught her breath, her hair glimmering under the morning sunrise. The Goddess no longer took the shape of the spear since the magical shield of the Rakia mountains had been shattered.

The Goddess looked as though she stepped straight out of a myth. Her slender limbs were pale and beautiful, her skin smooth as porcelain. She looked as evanescent as a flower petal flying away in the breeze, yet the sunlight couldn't outshine her beauty. Only a flower crown adorned her head.

"Missy, I troubled you, didn't I? I'm sorry," Rave said.

He told Hadis, who was on the brink of tears as he called out the deity's name, that he was all right. The deity slithered onto the Dragon Emperor's shoulder, assuming his usual position.

"Long time no see, Kratos," Rave said calmly.

Hadis didn't seem as vigilant as usual; in fact, he seemed troubled when he realized that Kratos had saved him this time. But Jill kept a firm grip on her Sacred Treasure and pointed the blade at Kratos. She felt an inexplicable sense of unease.

"I'll thank you for saving me," Rave said.

"Who…are you?" Kratos asked.

Rave blinked, and Hadis furrowed his brows. Jill tightly held onto her blade. Alarm bells rang loudly in her head—she'd experienced the same scene on that snowy night. The Goddess's glassy eyes reflected the Dragon God as she spoke like a dazed child.

"WhO aRe yOu?" she asked.

The sound of a bell that moved time rang out. It was Rave who spoke first, perplexed.

"You don't know who I am?" he asked.

"You're… Are you Rave? Dragon God Rave?" she asked.

"Did your memories get all scrambled?" Hadis laughed.

But the Goddess was still in a daze as she shook her head, her eyes wide with confusion.

"No… Why… How? Dragon Consort, this isn't right, right?" The Goddess desperately turned to Jill. "He wasn't like this, was he?"

"I first saw Rave at Prince Gerald's birthday party," Jill said quietly, telling the truth.

That day, when Kratos turned back time, changed Jill's life. In her first life, the Dragon Consort had never seen Rave.

Kratos looked astonished. "That can't be… I… I decided on a do-over!"

"Kratos, what are you on about? What did you do now?" Rave asked.

"Why aren't you in the same form as the past?!" Kratos cried.

Hadis and Rave stiffened behind Jill.



Jill kept her eyes on the Goddess as she said, "Your Majesty, you can't listen to her."

"I know that, but…" Hadis started.

"Why? I turned back time to before my brother and I lost our divinity!" Kratos shrieked. "Where did I go wrong? No, I did well! Before the war got serious, I turned Kratos back as much as I could! I decided it with Faris, and I couldn't have made a mistake on such an important matter! I know I turned everything back as it once was!"

One thing came to Jill's mind. When Rave rewrote logic in Laika, he had turned Hadis into the Dragon Emperor of the previous generation. The Dragon Emperor of three centuries ago, before Rave had lost his divinity, was supposed to appear. And yet, the one that manifested was Hadis from six years ago. *And if that was the previous generation…* Jill thought.

Time hadn't been turned back. Time, which was supposed to have ended when the Sacred Spear pierced Jill and she reverted to a ten-year-old, had continued to tick by.

"I was only able to do it because I wasn't tied by logic!" Kratos cried. "I-Is it because B-Brother lost his divinity and…disappeared?"

Kratos glared at Hadis and Rave.

"A-Are you bRoTheR?" she asked.

Both Rave and Hadis frowned as they fell silent. Kratos began to laugh as her eyes, glossed over, gazed into the far distance.

"You must be! You can't be anyone else! Of course not! No, no, no!" Kratos shouted. "Don't you remember? Oh, I don't mind if you don't! Even if that's logical!"

Kratos vanished and took the form of a spear of the darkest black—the Sacred Spear of the Goddess. Jill braced herself.

"That vessel, that Dragon Emperor, isn't the one!" Kratos shouted. **"If time has truly continued since then, nothing has become null and void!"**

"Your Majesty, stand back!" Jill shouted.

"Move, Dragon ConsOOOOOrt!"

The furious Goddess flew forward, and Jill parried the attack with her sword, but she could barely defend herself. *Damn, she's got*

her magic back! The Goddess had absorbed the magical energy from the red and blue spears.

“yOU CaN’t WiN, dRAgON cONsOrT!”

“Don’t screw with me! I’ll protect His Majesty!” Jill roared back. “That’s why I’m the Dragon Consort!”

When the Goddess was pushed back, she regained her balance in the air and split into pieces, just as she’d done in Beilburg. But this time, she didn’t aim for the city—she focused it all on Jill and Hadis behind her. The shrill laughs of the Goddess echoed through the bright sky. The pieces of the Goddess around Jill began to jeer with glee.

“yOU THInK YoU CaN WiN wItH LoVe? nOT A CHaNcE! zErO! zILcH! yOU’Ve GoT nO HOpE! dON’T YoU WAnT To KnOw?”

“dOES hE REaLlY NoT REmEmBEr?”

“dON’t YoU WaNT tO kNOw WHaT HAppENeD To ThE mAN yOU lOvE?”

I can’t lend an ear to her words! This is what the Arks tried to do to me! But…

“You want to know, don’t you? That’s what it means to love another.”

The Sacred Spear glided by Jill’s side as though to take advantage of the Dragon Consort’s hesitance. Hadis gripped his Heavenly Sword, but Rave was exhausted, and there was no telling how long he could last. Kratos laughed loudly.

“This is love! Logic can’t defend against it! You, who has no love, cannot protect yourself!”

The Heavenly Sword and the Sacred Spear clashed, but the former clearly had a fainter glow.

“Your Majesty!” Jill cried.

No, I can’t have him remember! I can’t have him revert! Jill didn’t want Hadis to become the frightful emperor who cursed the world and smiled as he killed his siblings, burned the people, destroyed the villages, and lost even his adoptive father again.

“Recall your past, Dragon Emperor! Back then, you were truly—”

Just then, a clear sound cut her off. It sounded like a bell or a ringer. It purified all evil and made one want to stand up straight and be on the side of justice. A blast of wind blew the Sacred Spear back, and it slammed against a spire and fell. A magic circle glimmered in the sky. It was difficult to see amid the bright, azure sky and the sunlight, but it was awfully similar to the magic circle that had appeared earlier. Anyone could instinctively tell what it was by its sheer aura—it was the divine crest of Dragon God Rave.

"Cut it out, Kratos," a voice said. The God of Dragons descended from the sky, his small form manifesting properly. He sternly arrived to show the right path. "If we fight here, another war will break out."

"Why… Why do you always… What did you do?!"

The Goddess of Love refused to agree, knowing there may be no love on the correct path.

"What did you do back then, dRAGON gOD rAAAVE?!"

"Kratos," a small voice rang out.

The Goddess gasped and saw the tiny queen. She was standing atop a half-destroyed castle wall, supported by Lawrence as the breeze blew against her.

"Stop. We promised, didn't we?" Faris asked.

"F-Faris…"

"You're not alone anymore."

Strength and murderous intent left the Sacred Spear.

"I apologize for the inconvenience caused, everyone," Faris said. "Goddess Kratos is simply a touch confused after being abducted by the Arks."

Under the sunny, blue sky, the queen smiled brightly.

"Now then, we can finally begin our meeting."

Epilogue

SHE walked along the hallway, her footsteps echoing loudly. When she turned around, she spotted some pale-faced servants, but her hands were full. Many shook their heads as the Dragon Consort walked past. Jill took deep breaths as she stared at the double doors in front of her.

She'd overcome countless obstacles getting here. For starters, the most important person would always faint like some sort of trope. He kept his guard up even while he was being nursed back to health, and all the while, Jill had to frantically clean up the aftermath of the battle and prepare for the meeting.

Her father would go, "No need to nurse a man like that! Let's train together!"

And Jill couldn't stop herself from taking him up on that and going all-out on him. Before she knew it, the day was gone. Raw was preciously kept safe in the back of the dragon stables by the other dragons and showed no signs of leaving. Jill claimed that she just wanted to check on his condition, but the dragons only pleaded with tears in their eyes, and when she asked Meine to act as a middleman, the dragon pretended not to hear the request. But Jill already knew that her target could already get up. *He can't run from our fight,* she thought. *This'll affect our future life as a married couple, too.*

"Good morrow! Your Majesty, have you steeled yourself for the beating of your life?" she bellowed.

"I was waiting for you, Jill!" Hadis exclaimed, decked out in his favorite apron.

He promptly removed the cloth from the round table between them and revealed an array of glittering dishes. A hamburger with a

juicy, meaty patty, a perfectly soft-boiled egg, crunchy bacon atop toast, sandwiches stuffed with sweet fruit, baked custard pudding, and a large cream puff sat atop the table. *Is there potage in that pot?* She gulped eagerly when she saw the mille-feuille stuffed with strawberries. Jill's eyes twinkled with excitement, but she soon snapped back to reality.

Hadis couldn't have just randomly decided upon making these dishes. This was his elaborate and skilled plan to quell Jill's anger.

"I-I won't be fooled," Jill said.

Hadis placed a few dishes on a tray and approached her as Jill did her best to look away. He crouched in front of her and said, "Inside this cream puff is strawberry cream. It's my first attempt."

"Don't think you've won!" Jill cried.

"Say 'ahhh.'"

"Ahhh!"

For the past few days, Jill had eaten nothing but preserved food. The soft and sweet bite that filled her mouth was pure bliss.

"Yuuum!" she moaned. "I can really taste the strawberry in this cream! Does this one use a mix of custard cream and fresh cream?"

Hadis led her by the hand to the table. She eagerly jumped onto the chair that he pulled out for her.

"Don't eat in a rush," Hadis said. "Have some tea. Don't spill any, all right?"

"Okay!" Jill replied. "Oooh! This one's chocolate!"

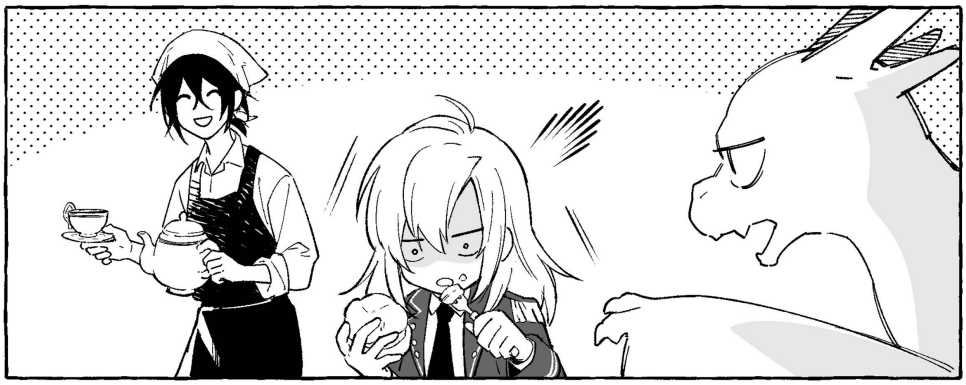
"Missy…" Rave said.

"Hi, Rave. Do you feel better?" Jill asked. "This is delicious!"

"I'm not one to talk, but couldn't you have resisted the temptation for a bit longer?"

Jill's cheeks were stuffed with pure happiness as she gasped. "Your Majesty, I'm angry with you!" she exclaimed.





"You have zero persuasion when your hands are filled with cream puffs."

"Can it, Rave," Hadis said. "Jill won't divorce me anyway."

Jill swallowed a strawberry cream puff whole. *That's a decent response.* She was secretly delighted that Hadis no longer easily believed she would betray him. Hadis sat on his bed, and Jill piled her tray high with food before she moved to the bed, too. She shook off her shoes and climbed up.

"It's bad manners to eat in bed," Hadis scolded.

"It's fine," Jill said. "I have to build up my strength for tomorrow's meeting, and you have to eat too, to regain your energy as soon as you can! Say, 'ahhh!'"

"Will you forgive me?" Hadis tilted his head cutely to one side.

Jill cleared her throat. "You acted by putting faith in me this time, it seems," she said. "But you made Millay your empress candidate and— *Mmph*!"

A fruit sandwich was pushed into her mouth.

"I'm proud of this one," Hadis said. "Nothing went on between us."

"But she said she was *wooed*." When Hadis tried to push a beef sandwich into Jill's mouth, she stopped him. "Stop trying to change the subject!"

"Huh? I'm not. Not one bit. This is really good, you know."

"I know that you're not cheating on me, but I'm sure you made her misunderstand the situation!"

"I didn't do anything, I promise you! I made her the empress candidate so that others would take notice of her to gather information. And I thought it'd be troublesome for her since she wouldn't be able to act so easily!"

"How true is this, Rave?" Jill turned to the Dragon God.

"It's all true," Rave replied. "In fact, he took her hand and begged her to become his empress candidate."

"Owwwie!" Hadis cried.

Jill grabbed his arm and twisted it, but she also ensured to toss the beef sandwich into her mouth.

"Which hand was it? Is it this one? Or that one?" she asked.

"Stop! I-I really didn't mean to…" Hadis gasped. "I didn't do anything! Honest!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure! I bet you didn't do anything, but still *did*!"

"I don't even understand what you just said! Rave, explain the entire thing!"

"I guess she drew her own weird conclusions since we didn't go searching for you, Missy…" Rave said.

Jill frowned as she loosened her grip on Hadis.

Rave took a few bites of the fruit sandwich as he languidly said, "I didn't think that a little girl like her was the commander of the Arks… Our plan was to restrain her when she received an order. I didn't expect her to be the one giving orders, so we were a step behind. Well, Hadis, you may have been a bit stubborn, but aren't you glad you held yourself back from searching for Missy here?"

"You held yourself back?" Jill asked.

"Of course I was! You went missing, for god's sake!" Hadis cried. "Everyone said that you grew tired of me and left me! A-And if you really *were* with Prince Gerald, I don't know what I would've done!"

"Ah…" Jill said rather wearily. "Why don't we stop being bothered about that point?"

"I am and always will be! For the rest of my life! *You* might not care, but I do!"

Hadis frowned and tried to turn away. Jill pinched his cheek.

"You're not acting cute again, Your Majesty!" she declared.

"Fine! I'm…noff cute anyway! Jill! Shtop! Leff go!" Hadis shouted.

Her husband's smooth cheek was surprisingly malleable. As she stretched and squished his cheek over and over again, she felt silly for being so stubborn. *Oh, fine.* She knelt on the bed and hugged his head to her chest.

"I was holding myself back, too," Jill confessed. "I wanted to steal you away."

As Hadis rubbed his cheek, he blinked and gazed up at his wife.

"Millay's more mature, isn't she?" Jill asked. "Even though she's only a year older than me."

"Huh?" Hadis asked.

"She's good at her studies and excellent at pouring tea. She's got perfect etiquette, and she's so reliable, and she can control dragons well, and is adept with the sword and magic… And she's got a fuller chest than me, doesn't she?!"

"J-J-Jill! I can't b-breathe! U-Um, I—"

"But I endured it all since I know that I'm the one who can tie you up and hang you from the roof! I know that I'm the real winner!"

Jill puffed out her chest proudly in front of Hadis, who sat upright. After a few moments of silence, Hadis gazed diagonally at the ground.

"I see… Under those standards, I doubt there's much chance you'd lose…" he muttered.

"Exactly!" Jill declared. "You're mine no matter what, Your Majesty!"

As Hadis stared back, she cupped his face in her hands and peered into his eyes. He still looked a bit pale, likely because he'd been tense this entire time. When would the Goddess appear and take advantage of an opening? When would the enemies slip up? Even now, he was likely nervous.

"I'm sure it scared you," Jill said. "But you're all right now."

Hadis's desperate cry as the Heavenly Sword slipped from his hand still remained a vivid memory in Jill's mind, along with the moment the Sacred Spear flew beside her.

"I won't hand you over to anyone, Your Majesty," Jill said. "And I won't be a step behind another woman ever again."

A beat later, and the sound of Hadis's soul leaving his body rang out. His strength left him as he weakly fell onto the bed.

"M-My wife is…" he gasped.

Jill was used to it. As he groaned in agony, she placed his head on her lap.

"Argh! Why are you so cool?!" Hadis shouted.

"I think I'm just being normal," Jill replied.

"Not at all! That's not normal! Arghhh!" He covered his eyes with an arm as Jill smiled, her fingers running through his silky locks.

"I was terrified," he whispered weakly.

"Very good. You're so honest," she said. "I'll treat you kindly."

"K-Kind?!" Hadis gasped. "Rave, say something! I'll lose at this rate!"

"You've already lost," Rave pointed out.

The Dragon God and Jill chuckled as Hadis pouted. He curled into a ball like a child and turned away. They discussed the meeting for a short while; both countries had already agreed that this ordeal wouldn't start a war. Based on negotiations, the peace treaty might be made in the empire's favor.

"Duke Lehrsatz said that the main topic might be on how to handle the Arks," Jill said.

"Hmm, well, yeah, I can see that," Hadis replied.

"We let the commander leave and couldn't catch Canis. Rolf mentioned that there'll always be others to take their place, so it's an endless battle, apparently. By the way, Your Majesty…" Jill needed to muster her courage to pose her question here. "What do you think of the Goddess who seemed to be so fixated with Rave?"

"It's the Goddess. We can't trust her… And if I…was…"

"Was what? Your Majesty? Your Majesty?"

He didn't reply, and Jill soon heard his steady breathing as he was fast asleep. Rave peered into Hadis's face and flashed a strained smile.

"He probably feels relieved," the Dragon God said. "He'd been desperately reading up on recipes for the past few days…"

"Isn't his anxiety and hard work going in the wrong direction?" Jill asked.

"So, what about the Goddess? She mentioned something about me losing my divinity." He mischievously looked up at Jill, fully aware she knew how the future would unfold. Perhaps it was technically the past now.

"Does any of it ring a bell, Rave?" Jill asked.

"Unfortunately, nope," he replied. "I don't really recall why I lost my divinity. Those are the rules. Kratos is the opposite, and she remembers everything."

"What a troublesome rule…"

"Because even if the God of Logic doesn't remember, he shouldn't be one to repeat his mistakes. And even if the God of Love remembers, she should be able to forgive it all."

It was an almost impossible set of restraints a human couldn't possibly endure. But such reasoning didn't apply to deities.

"Well, who cares about the matter of the gods?" Rave said. "And judging from your reaction, Missy, it's nothing good."

"Do you want to hear it?" Jill asked.

"Nah. I can't. If I do, I'd have to take care of it somehow."

When asked whether turning back time went against logic or not, the answer was certainly the former.

"It's an impossible story. In fact, it can't be possible," Rave said. "So, I won't ask."

"Thank you," Jill replied, realizing that Rave had purposefully never brought it up.

He sighed. "But I'm not sure if Kratos will just retreat. She doesn't give much thought about the future."

"She was different from what I imagined. And she called you her 'brother.'"

"Yeah, she's my younger sister. Gods tend to be related, but did that bit shock you?"

Jill shook her head. She had an inkling of the situation. It was no wonder that the guardian of the Goddess was a replacement for the Dragon Emperor, and the process of how to be bestowed with the Parrying Dagger was telling. Combined with the rumors surrounding the bloodline of the Kratos royal family and the number of issues between siblings, it all made sense.

"She never thinks ahead," Rave said. "Her train of thought is simple, like getting rid of the crown imperial princes so that Hadis can return to the imperial castle."

"Didn't she plan that to isolate His Majesty?!" Jill asked, her surprise causing her voice to raise an octave.

"She couldn't forgive those of the imperial castle who treated Hadis so poorly. And yet, she doesn't even understand why he despises her, since she thinks she helped him. Hadis should never

become a person who revels in the death of those before him, but that thought doesn't cross her mind."

Rave gazed at Hadis's slumbering face. The deity closed his golden eyes before opening them. Jill was reflected in his eyes.

"I'm counting on you, Missy," he said. "Don't let the Goddess approach Hadis. Don't let him drown in love." No longer was he relaxed; his eyes filled with the serenity of a god. "He's not a god. He's human."

Jill pursed her lips and nodded, her husband peacefully sleeping on her lap. *I hope that your peaceful slumber won't ever be obstructed.* She kissed his forehead.



ROLF stroked the dragon's saddle as he ate some snacks. It was the very one that Meine had used, and as the Dragon Consort had mentioned, a magic circle was written on it. It didn't have much of an effect, merely strengthening the Dragon King's protection and filling one with courage. Meine could only escape back then because the Dragon King had taken the brunt of the dragon killer spell, and the gold-eyed, red dragon used brute force.

Currently, Rolf couldn't feel anything from the magic circle, and the one who inscribed it must've made sure of that. But perhaps the creator had slipped, let his guard down, or made some sort of wish. Rolf chuckled in the back of his throat as he traced the magic circle with his finger.

"As I thought… The lad's done somethin'," he muttered.

"Oh? What does *that* mean?" Camila's voice echoed behind him.

Rolf was a moment too late to react to the lantern light. A man with enough strength to wield a greatsword put the elderly man in a Nelson hold.

"We finally caught you, geezer!" Zeke growled. "What were you doing until now?!"

"Damn it! Let go!" Rolf shouted. "Why in blazes are ye here anyway?!"

"We were searching for you, of course! Grandpa Igor told us all about the secret exits of the Lehrsatz manor, along with all the places related to dragons!" Zeke said.

"Hey, these are His Majesty's handmade snacks!" Camila cried. "There isn't a secret passageway to His Majesty's room, is there?" Camila picked up the bag of sweets and taunted Rolf as she took a snack and ate it.

"That's mine!" Rolf cried.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Camila replied. "If you tell me what you've been up to, I'll give them back to you."

"Hah! Who'll ever tell youse— Aghhh! Stop! You're hurtin' me, brawns for brains lad!"

"I heard that you let the Arks' cardinal go," Zeke said.

"He got away from me, lad. Don't misunderstand," Rolf replied.

"That's what our Captain claims, but *we* have a hard time believing that, you see," Zeke pressed.

"Grandpa, you resemble the raccoon of Kratos quite a bit," Camila said. "I feel like you'd trick even your allies."

"Oh? Is that the name of the one who inscribed the magic circle on this saddle?" Rolf asked.

The other two Knights of the Dragon Consort furrowed their brows.

"Now, now, no need to scowl at me," Rolf said. "I admit, I let that darned Arks' cardinal flee. But only because I wanted to see the spell and magic circle to control those beasties. I've memorized it all in 'ere." He tapped the side of his head, prompting Zeke's release of his neck.

"What's the point in memorizing that?" Zeke muttered.

"Why, to win in the war, of course," Rolf replied.

"Don't say something so ominous," Camila huffed. "You know that the meeting's tomorrow."

"Wake up and smell the roses! Ye both truly believe that Kratos won't try to do somethin' to us and cause a war?! Yeesh! Ye both must be blind as a bat!"

"You don't deserve to talk to us like that, Grandpa! You were mostly gone for this entire ordeal!"

“Your reasoning?” Zeke asked. He sat on a wooden box in the corner of the storage shed with a loud thud.

Rolf huffed with a bit of annoyance. “Can’t ye tell? The magic circle on this saddle should be proof enough.”

“I heard that that was placed so that Jill’s dragon could at least make its escape should anything happen,” Camila replied. “There was something fishy about the empress candidate.”

“The dragon killer spell is unique to the Arks,” Rold explained. “To repel it, ye need a special magic circle, or, if all ye need is for it to work for a moment, just flip the magic circle itself. So, I ask, why can that danged raccoon write such a magic circle so precisely? It’s not every day you see the Arks’ magic circles, yeah?”

Camila sighed as she placed a hand over her forehead and tousled her bangs.

“I knew it, that raccoon was up to something…” Zeke muttered. “He was connected to the Arks in the background, wasn’t he?”

“I don’t think the two shared a bond of total cooperation,” Rolf said. “They just used each other as they saw fit. They both have common enemies—the Dragon God and the Dragon Emperor. It ain’t hard to imagine them becomin’ allies.”

“Gramps, please. Lend us your help,” Zeke said as he bowed his head.

Rolf looked surprised. “Boy, that came outta nowhere. Got some sort of personal grudge? I say ye kill ’im and get it over with before he casually burns a city to the ground just because he can.”

“To be honest, we can only reach him after the city burns down. But if you’re here, Gramps, I think the outcome will change.”

“Oh yeah, it’d burn a lot better if I’m ’ere.”

“But Grandpa, you actually want to extinguish the flames, don’t you?” Camila asked.

They were two sides of the same coin. They could only put out the flames swiftly because they understood the mind of the arsonist.

“We can’t keep going like this,” Camila pleaded. “When I saw him with the queen who stopped the Sacred Spear, I got this weird feeling of déjà vu—that we’d be repeating the same mistakes.”

Rolf silently stroked his chin as he stared at the other two knights. They were excellent soldiers, but mediocre at best. Perhaps that would've been fine if the Knights of the Dragon Consort had a large army at their back, but he found it odd that Jill had specifically selected these two as her only guards. On the other hand, the raccoon that they spoke of was brimming with talent and could even move the wheels of history. And the two knights didn't want to destroy that talent, but simply to stop his plans. *What a strange twist of fate,* Rolf thought.

"And Gramps, you're already a fellow Knight of the Dragon Consort," the man with a greatsword said, cheekily staring right back at Rolf.

The one with the bow didn't avert her gaze either. "Please don't run. This is your job."

I guess there's some truth to that. Rolf couldn't help but crack a faint smile. He grabbed the paper bag of snacks from Camila and sat on the ground.

"All right, then," he said. "Tell me all ye know about that lad. Oh, and tell me your names again."

"Wait, you don't remember our names?!" the archer yelped. "But you've got a great memory!"

"And ye both better listen to my orders! They're absolute!" Rolf added.

"I thought you'd say that…" the greatsword-wielder muttered.

Rolf took a snack and popped it into his mouth. As he chewed carefully, he knew he was about to undertake his first great task in a long while.



HE burned so many things and killed so many people, so much so that slaughtering became but a boring task. And all he gained from that was a mere twenty years. He'd led quite a wretched life.

Would he continue to struggle in a desperate attempt for a better future, or would he give up all hope here? Humans had the right to decide that for themselves. And he had just pulled the last

chance of his lifetime. Was he lucky or unlucky—or was this fated to be?

Lawrence gazed up at the tiniest sliver of the moon that remained in the night sky as he stopped at a dead end in a deserted alleyway. Before he knew it, a quiet presence had appeared behind him.

"I knew you'd come, Prince Gerald," Lawrence whispered.

The security of Lehrsatz couldn't be overcome so easily. One needed to craft an elaborate plan to lead them away and take advantage of that opening while preparing many complicated spells, just as the commander of the Arks had done. Only then could infiltration become possible. No doubt he felt restless for being unable to do such a thing alone.

After the Arks attacked the city, more people began to leave and enter in hopes of aiding the restoration efforts. Finally, the crown prince had found his chance to sneak in. Lawrence turned around to find his former master.

The crown prince was a wretched sight. His mantle was so filthy and stained that one couldn't tell its original color, and the yellowing cloth had frayed ends. His boots were caked with mud, and a tear ran along one side. His beautiful face, which once enchanted all the ladies, was coated with dust, and his silky, golden hair was matted with grease and dirt. There was a crack in one of his glasses' lenses, and the frame was bent. Yet, his dark eyes remained as noble as ever.

"Give me an explanation," the prince demanded.

"What is there to explain?" Lawrence replied. "Former king Rufus yielded the throne to Queen Faris, and a new reign has begun. I'm just helping out and plan to do my utmost best."

"You let Faris get abducted by the Arks, yet you brazenly—Enough chatter. What did the King of South Kratos say to fool her? What is he trying to force her to do?!"

"You see, I apparently died after I betrayed you and my comrades," Lawrence said softly.

Gerald furrowed his brows.

“When I heard about it, I oddly found myself nodding along,” Lawrence continued. “If Lady Jill Cervel got engaged to you and they became my friends, I would’ve misjudged myself. But I know that I must’ve done my utmost best. No matter the result, they were choices I made—even I’ve got a scrap of dignity for my decisions. But the gods are arrogant. They told me that I was wrong and to redo it all.”

“What are you on about?” Gerald asked. “I’m not here to listen to your story.”

“Even now, I’m grateful that you took notice of me.” Lawrence gave a genuine bow, displaying utmost respect from the bottom of his heart. “Perhaps I have the choice of going with you and my former comrades to evade the past tragedy, but unfortunately, I’ve got a few screws loose.”

Gerald took a step back and placed a hand over his hip.

“So, I ask that you also lead a different life this time,” Lawrence went on. “Not as the crown prince of Kratos, or the guardian of the Goddess. The queen herself wishes for that.”

When Gerald tried to unsheathe his dagger, he whirled around midway. A tiny shadow had teleported under the cloak of darkness, and a black spear pierced through the crown prince’s body.

“If only you had fled somewhere, Brother,” the young queen said.

Her older brother called her name, his raspy voice mixed with his own blood.

“Farewell, yoke of love. You’ve continued to violate me,” the queen said. “You cannot save anything.”



She drew her spear back, her cheek splattered with her brother's blood. His glasses fell upon the cobblestone with a clatter, and Gerald fell beside them. Blood gradually pooled around his body. Faris stepped in the puddle.

"I'm fine, Kratos," she murmured. "Please don't cry. That goes for you, too, Lawrence."

Upon hearing his name called, the Kratos strategist gazed down in silent prayer, his lips moving faintly.

May the arrogant gods and his shameless self, spared by these deities, vanish from the face of this world.

Never shall they be able to nullify the choices of humans again.



FARIS was no longer wheelchair-bound. She strode into the meeting room on steady legs, calm as ever. There, she faced the overwhelming aura of the Lehrsatz Dragon Knights, all lined up in rows to guard Igor. She gracefully glided down the red carpet and took the seat at the very back.

In her tiny hand, the Sacred Spear seemed far too large for her. The lavish chair, used for audiences with the emperor, was a bit too high up for her, but she firmly sat down, though her legs must've been dangling in the air. The Sacred Spear still in her hand, she placed an arm on the armrest.

Igor was the one pushing the meeting along. After some formalities, they sat at the needlessly long table while the scribes jotted down some meeting notes.

"Now then, let us first discuss the whereabouts of Crown Prince Gerald…" Igor started.

"If I may, Duke Lehrsatz?" Faris interrupted as she gently raised a hand in the air. "I'd like to first discuss the ordeal regarding the Order of the Arks."

Igor glanced at Jill, who nodded back.

"Very well, you may continue," Igor relented.

"First and foremost, I'd like to apologize," Faris said. "Dragon Consort, I'm deeply indebted to you. You spared me and the Sacred

Spear—I cannot thank you enough for that. And I apologize to those of Lehrsatz who were dragged into this battle. Please be assured that Kratos will fully cooperate in aiding the restoration efforts."

Those around her were confused by the queen's laudable words, but this was a mere formality.

"I understand that we've formed a pact against the Arks, but I've become convinced that we require even more cooperation. Kratos and Rave must work together harder than ever, and I'm sure our citizens will be understanding of this issue," Faris said.

The queen and the Sacred Spear had been stolen, and no one would dispute that it was vital to eradicate the Arks.

"I find it imperative that the Rave Empire and Kratos Kingdom unite to fight against the Arks, but that shall be a separate matter entirely," Igor replied. "I don't intend to muddy the waters about Crown Prince Gerald and the allegations of murdering our previous emperor."

"Rest assured that this is all connected," Faris replied. "When the Arks abducted me, I happened to see my brother—I mean, the former crown prince of Kratos."

Everyone murmured in confusion, but only Jill furrowed her brows, unable to read the queen's mind.

"With all due respect, when was this?" Jill asked. "I haven't seen him at all, and none of the Arks' bases showed any signs of Prince Gerald. In fact, there weren't any traces of him anywhere."

"Oh, dear Dragon Consort, are you protecting my older brother?" Faris asked.

"That's not my intention."

"But may I remind you that you likely only got in contact with the Arks because witness accounts claimed that my brother was sniffing around the Arks' base? Is that not so?" Faris smiled as she firmly declared, "My brother—no, Gerald the Rebel, sided with the Arks."

Jill didn't know what to say as the people across from her murmured louder.

"The reason is clear. It's because I took the throne instead of him," Faris said.

"Do you *truly* believe Prince Gerald would do something like that?!" Jill shouted.

"Why don't I answer your question with one of my own, Dragon Consort? Why don't you doubt my brother, even a little?"

You deserted my brother, after all, Faris's eyes seemed to imply.

"Rebel Gerald was so ambitious that he tried to quickly kick the previous king, Rufus, off his throne," the queen said. "When he heard of my ascension, he must've panicked. After killing the previous Rave emperor, Rave's anger became focused on Kratos, and he likely thought he could garner support since he's so adept at military and political affairs. Hence, he killed the previous emperor, seduced by the Arks—no, he must've cooperated with them."

Her words were all half-truths. Indeed, Gerald had killed the previous Rave emperor, but it was to save Natalie.

"It's an act of sheer folly, showing full contempt for the Goddess," Faris explained. "And we of the Kratos Kingdom shall never forgive such an act."

From the corner of her eye, Jill noticed that Igor had glanced at a high-ranking official, signaling them to swiftly leave to fetch Hadis. The Dragon Consort's gaze wandered to Lawrence, who stood diagonally behind the queen. The strategist, noticing Jill's gaze, flashed a liar's smile back—it looked so horribly cold.

"Rebel Gerald is hiding away with the Arks," Faris said. "We also know where that location is."

"Where did you get that information?!" Jill yelped. "When I searched the Arks' bases, I didn't find anything like that!"

"Kratos has already started efforts to destroy the Arks, after all."

Jill looked at Billy, who assumed a position on the opposite side of Lawrence, behind the queen. Margrave Cervel knitted his brows, narrowed his eyes with pity, and gazed at the ground. It became crystal clear to Jill.

Faris, Lawrence, House Cervel, and the entirety of Kratos had decided to cut Gerald loose.

"Gerald is lurking in the floating city of Beilburg," Faris explained. "That city is filled with people under his influence.

Marquess Beil once stood at the helm, didn't he? I believe Prince Risteard is trying to form an engagement with the daughter of Marquess Beil."

"What are you getting at?!" Jill replied.

"Please be at ease. I don't plan on accusing her of being influenced by the Arks, yet. But before matters become too late, I've sent former king Rufus to get rid of the rebel."

Just then, a soldier burst into the meeting room. They asked Igor whether the duke wanted a status report, and Igor clenched his fist atop the table as he encouraged the soldier to continue.

"I received a message from the floating city of Beilburg!" the soldier reported. "They've spotted many Kratos forces crossing the border! Under the command of Prince Risteard Teos Rave, the Northern Division has been dispatched!"

"Oh dear, has there been a miscommunication of sorts?" Faris wondered.

"That seems to be the case, Your Majesty," Lawrence replied. "We had military forces on standby near the border to search for you, so we must've acted too quickly."

Jill almost leaped out of her chair when she heard the audacious conversation, but hands on both of her shoulders locked her in place. Camila and Zeke, her knights, had pushed her down. Jill tried to order them to let her go, but she reconsidered her words when she noticed them gritting their teeth with frustration.

"Please quickly tell them we are not enemies," Faris said. "Our actions are based on the pact to eradicate the Arks, and our goal is them, and only them. We promise not to lay a finger on the beloved citizens of the Rave Empire."

Jill dug her nails into her palms. *Where did this start? From when did they commence this plan?* she thought. *Did they plan it from the start? Were the dragons just a coincidence? Then what about the stolen Sacred Spear?* Jill hadn't the faintest clue. She had no idea but forced a smile onto her face—she couldn't act afraid before the battle had even begun.

"The promise was not to go to war, wasn't it?" Jill asked.

"Indeed. Quite right," Faris replied, her smile growing as she maintained her friendly attitude. "We have no intention of going to war. This is the purge of the Goddess."

Faris quietly moved her lips, making them easy to read without uttering a word, "*The Dragon Emperor had once done the same, drowning the continent in a sea of flames.*" Her eyes were icy to their cores.



"AH," he said as he gazed up at the sky.

He couldn't remember—that was logic. But he could easily imagine what his past self must've done. He could think of all sorts of hypotheticals, much like how humans dreamed.

If Hadis didn't get a Dragon Consort and couldn't clear up any misunderstandings with his siblings, he'd be forced to live alone. And beyond that is only…

"What did I do?" he muttered.

Things were getting noisy behind him. He heard his vessel call for him, and with every flap of his tiny wings, silvery particles of magic scattered about. He could see the tips of his wings turning translucent, but surely, it was just a trick of the light.

Afterword

HELLO, Sarasa Nagase here. Thank you for picking up the seventh volume! The volume contains a lot of tweaks and additions from the WEB version, and love and logic are finally turning the wheels of this tale.

Don't worry. No matter what anyone says, this is a romantic comedy. Please continue to look forward to a game of chicken and see how far this genre can endure.

Also, the serialization of a WEB series that I call the "official history" has been published as a book as well. Some tales may not be for the faint of heart, but I'd love it if you could enjoy them with the main story! Don't worry. No matter what anyone says, this is a romantic comedy…

By the time this volume is out, the anime should be well underway! And the manga version has reached its third installment (the third volume of the original story)! Please enjoy both!

Now for some acknowledgments. As always, thank you to Mitsuya Fuji. Despite your busy schedule, you made beautiful illustrations and completely new designs for Hadis and Jill's clothes. They were all so wonderful, and I agonized over what to choose! Ultimately, I suggested some unreasonable stuff, like including the other designs in the official history book… I'm so sorry for the trouble. Please continue to bear with me. Thank you to Anko Yuzu for the wonderful manga version! Every month, I look forward to the illustrations of the cute and cool sides of Jill. I leave the third installment in your trusty hands.

Thank you to the anime staff—I'm always so excited to see Jill move and talk. I'd also like to deeply thank my editors and their department for managing my schedule. Thank you to the designers, proofreaders, and everyone involved in making this book.

Above all, thank you to those who decided to pick up this volume. Thank you so much for continuing to support Jill. This series seems to always have a climax, only for the story to go on, and I

know I might not be the most reliable author, but I'll do my best so that you can continue to enjoy this series.

I hope we can meet again soon.

Sarasa Nagase



I Want to Be a Saint, But I Can Only Use Attack Magic!

By Fuyu Aoki Illust Bodax

In a world where gender determines the type of magic someone can use, Yuffie is defying the norm by using male-only attack magic!



Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing

By Sachi Konzome Illust Harenochihareta

Scarred and broken, but not defeated. Meet Miss Sophie, a girl with limited healing magic on a mission to mend hearts & skin-deep issues in this heartwarming isekai fantasy series!



The Hired Heroine Wants the Villainess to Gloat

By Hanami Nishine Illust Rin Hagiwara

Nina gets hired by a cat to play the role of heroine with the sole purpose of helping the villainess relish her downfall! Nina must work hard to make sure the villainess gets a satisfying triumph or she won't get her payment, but can she pull it off?



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