

Danger

V.1.3.0, Journeys #2

Parthiizaax never really liked Humans. They were prejudiced, greedy, and he knew what atrocities they were capable of, even to their own kind. Indeed, he didn't know a single Human's name despite it being a handful of years since he settled so close to Ashencross. But they didn't like him either, nor did they know his name. At most the townsfolk tolerated him, only acknowledging Parthiizaax's presence when they needed healing for injuries that their precious Teachings of the Five Pillars shouldn't know about. Or when he sold them fireblossoms so they could easily start their ovens and furnaces. Still, though, no one had turned him in to the Templars yet. That he had to give to the Humans.

He rarely went into town for those reasons. It was only when he absolutely needed something or to study the rituals at the large Temple of the Five Pillars. Parthiizaax found religion immensely fascinating. The followers of such dogmas seemed to share a strong bond even if what was preached seemed rather illogical to a Dragon.

However, the massive explosion coming from Ashencross was something he simply could not ignore.

It had been late in the afternoon when Parthiizaax was watering the sweet-smelling, deep orange fireblossoms, a little belated from his usual routine, and the sound of violent thunder had come crashing. As a curious Parthiizaax turned his head, the shockwave followed.

The force caught his webbed and leather-like wings and moved him a surprising amount, leaving deep claw marks in the stamped ground as proof. Parthiizaax' wings had gone unused for such a long time that the meeting with the shockwave actually left them a little sore where they joined his body, all the way from wrist to ankle.

And finally, after Parthiizaax had managed to gather himself ever so slightly, the rain and dirt came falling from what had been an otherwise clear summer's day.

But what had truly brought astonishment and fear to the Dragon's rosy, amaranth eyes, enough to make his vertical slit pupils almost look like those of the Humans he despised so much, was the large column of fire rushing to the skies. Something faint yellow and ghostly had been circling the otherwise perfectly vibrant orange fire which gave Parthiizaax a chill down his spine. And then there was the *feeling*. Barely noticeable, but still one of dread, almost as if something had tugged on his very soul. He simply had to see for himself what had happened in the Human town.

Parthiizaax pulled the hood of his dark fur cloak over his off-white horns, a feat that wasn't easy with their pointy ends. He also tried to hide as much as possible of his matt amber snout without obscuring his vision too much. It wasn't a long way to Ashencross from his cottage so Parthiizaax expected to arrive before the suns started to go down. And there was no need to scare potential travellers with his looks, or the townsfolk for that matter, hence the large hooded cloak even if the weather didn't invite its use.

It was dusk when Parthiizaax made his way over the grand river bridge, decorated with beautifully ornamented large stone flowers, and into the rather small town of Ashencross. He had always found it strange how a town of this size would be home of such monuments as the Ashencross Bridge and the Great Temple of the Five Pillars. Parthiizaax had even heard rumours that The Grand Temple of Ashencross was larger than those of the Humans' so

called capital cities. It was definitely the biggest in the kingdom of Equilisfal, though still inferior to The Blessed Temple of Havenbring if the very same rumours were to be believed.

The air is strange this evening, Parthiizaax thought as he walked around the empty streets. There were no city walls or gates to go through to get into the town. Instead, one simply walked over the bridge and the town was just... there. *It must be the town's small size. Yes, that's the most logical reason for the lack of city walls*, Parthiizaax argued with himself. He had the same argument every time he visited Ashencross.

It was the same feeling from earlier that turned the otherwise now slightly damp air strange, and forced his mind away from the missing walls and oddly placed monuments of Humankind. The feeling came and went as he moved further into the town towards the loud voices that told him his direction. It was the same dread feeling that he had felt back at his cottage; like a slight tugging on his soul. And it became stronger still the more he walked towards the Human cries.

As Parthiizaax turned the corner of the blacksmith he had sold so many fireblossoms to, he finally saw the devastation that the explosion had left on the small town of Ashencross.

Looking over the temple square he saw panicked townsfolk, scrambling together to deal with the aftermath. There were groups of males, or "men" as the Humans preferred, something Parthiizaax still had a little trouble with, trying to find survivors in the collapsed wooden homes. So many houses looked as if they had been torn apart in a storm the likes of which no one had ever seen. Other groups of men were trying to extinguish flames on the houses that were still more or less standing.

Parthiizaax noticed a band of older boys awkwardly moving to and from the middle of a small pond that he had never seen before in the now torn up cobbled square. Then the boys picked up the pace, ran with their filled water buckets to the men by the flames, and back to the pond where they once again started their awkward movement.

It took a few good seconds before Parthiizaax realised that there used to be a well where the pond now lived. And after a couple of more seconds, he noticed that the boys were actually sliding on frozen water. The boys tried desperately to move as fast as possible to a hastily carved hole before filling their buckets and going the other way once again. It didn't seem to matter though. When the ice cold water doused the flames, it almost seemed to spur them on instead.

The Dragon walked carefully around the square in order to not interfere with the other Humans racing the injured survivors to the temple. Parthiizaax didn't want to get in the way of those with the gruesome task to collect the dead, and the body parts scattered across the square itself, either. The stench of death and burned wood was almost unbearable.

He finally saw the big crater right next to the massive Temple of the Five Pillars as he got closer. Or rather, "of the Three Pillars" as the explosion had laid waste to two of the great, whitewashed stone columns of the normally pentagonal building, taking the corresponding wall and some of the roof down as well. *Curious how none of their divine Angels have come to aid*, Parthiizaax thought before dismissing it. Now wasn't the time.

Even more curious was what the explosion had revealed when it tore down the columns and walls of the mighty temple. Inside looked to be another large stone structure, this one fairly unharmed, with old walls in the shape of... *is that petals?* The more Parthiizaax studied the newfound architecture, the more the strangely shaped walls started to look like the water lilies that usually floated in abundance on the river right next to the Temple. Many of those flowers, which were usually tended to by an old female of the temple,

now laid across the temple square, either flat on the ground with their long roots in every direction or in their newfound homes in the large puddles.

Deep in his studious thoughts, Parthiizaax suddenly bumped into a Human kneeling on the ground in front of him.

'I'm sorry.' He had been around Humans long enough to learn their tongue, albeit he still carried an accent from his own.

No one answered. When the Dragon looked down, the Human was sitting on his knees, half buried in the ground, with arms completely still by its side. This Human male wasn't even looking at Parthiizaax but directly at the sky through wide open, soulless eyes. With his mouth imitating the eyes, it was as if life had simply left him, leaving only a husk behind.

And now, having noticed one, Parthiizaax saw many more lifeless Humans sitting with their knees buried, spread out all over the square, not unlike the water lilies from the river but much more macabre. And along with his realisation came that dreaded feeling again. This time it nearly knocked the air out of Parthiizaax's lungs as the tug on his soul felt to last just a little bit longer than the other times.

Feeling the cold ice on his clawed toes, Parthiizaax suddenly became aware that he had walked right into the middle of the temple square. He didn't like being this exposed in the Human town, so he turned around to slip back into the shadows of the nearest house still upright.

While doing his best to avoid hitting the kneeling corpses with his jagged and finned tail, he almost bumped into a female, or woman, crying her eyes out.

'I'm sorry.'

'My baby, my poor, sweet baby boy!' The woman didn't seem to take much notice of the Dragon, though Parthiizaax guessed that he could be mistaken for a very large male of their kind if she didn't give him a proper look.

The crying woman was walking with all her focus on the dead Human whelping in her arms. "*Child*" *not whelping*, he thought, *Humans don't like it when you call their young that*. Paying further attention to the weeping woman, he realised that she was only carrying parts of what had once been her child. The woman had only been able to find a small, burned head attached to a charred half of a torso and a leg. It was a gruesome sight, one that hit Parthiizaax more than seeing the overall destruction and panic.

As he managed to move into the shadows, and a little away from the scene of horror, Parthiizaax noticed the noisy sounds of a riled up crowd coming from the tavern. Given the fact that the building had the only lit windows around, Parthiizaax figured that he would find out what had happened in the large, half-timbered building.

Walking in through the open door, Parthiizaax was met by an uncomfortably thick atmosphere of beer, stew, and sweat. This one also carried the same strangeness as the air outside, though much more intense. *It's probably because almost the entire town is gathered here*, he reckoned.

In another attempt to hide his Dragon features, and avoid drawing any attention to himself, Parthiizaax pulled on the hood on his fur cloak. Once again, hiding those characteristics was no easy feat. The long, dark grey, cloak might have done a good job at concealing his matt amber and white scales, as well as his webbed wings, but less so when it came to his tail or the large dark claws at the end of the strong toes he walked on. It was the same case with the claws on Parthiizaax's four fingered hands but at least those were retractable, making them much less threatening. And the hood didn't do his snout any

favours, nor his long, grey, whiskers that swayed from just below the nostrils as he walked. In the end, Parthiizaax decided to proceed with caution and keep to the more dim corners.

As it turned out, many of Parthiizaax's concerns were indeed just that. No one noticed him entering the large tavern room where the townspeople normally drank and ate when they didn't engage in the occasional gathering or brawl. Well, almost no one. An old woman, also dressed in a large hooded cloak, turned to the Dragon immediately as he walked in. However, instead of saying anything she calmly kept eating what appeared to be a bit of jerky.

He gestured for her to keep quiet, to which the old woman nodded in reply and turned back to the crowd. *Strange*, Parthiizaax thought as people usually flinched or let out a little shriek when they saw him even after all these years. There also seemed to be something peculiar about the old woman but Parthiizaax couldn't quite put his claw on it. Was it something about her eyes? He didn't manage to get a good look because of her hood but he had definitely seen her before.

Parthiizaax turned his attention back to what he had actually come for; finding the cause of the explosion. For a Human, it would have been impossible to see anything in a tight crowd of this size but the Dragon's long neck gave him a distinct height advantage in comparison.

The old woman won't be able to gather much from way back here, Parthiizaax thought. As he peered over the mass of people that had filled the tavern to the brim, he tried to make sense of what was being said. Or yelled, rather.

'Why is that *THING* still here?' someone from the crowd loudly exclaimed as others chimed in their agreements. 'We know it's the one that did it, the Devil has probably planned this for years!'

'Yah, I always knew something was wrong with that thing,' another one proclaimed. 'It were the eyes, they were not natural!'

The riled up crowd agreed once more and the atmosphere of the taproom got a little more intense.

'Now, now, let's not jump to conclusions,' an elderly male said at the town council's long table that had been built for the occasion over by the hearth. In case Parthiizaax couldn't recognise the temple's Chapter, the bland grey robes with a hemp rope belt, and the corresponding colourless, long, greasy beard and hair, gave him away.

Most of the town council seemed to be here. In addition to the Chapter, Parthiizaax recognised the local Liege's representative Knight, the baker, the leader of the town militia, and the only merchant of Ashencross, who so often travelled to and from Cinderhold, and even Havenbring, with wares. Only the blacksmith seemed to be missing but Parthiizaax remembered seeing him on the temple square leading those going through the rubble.

'There's no need to assume that the Devil himself is involved,' the Chapter continued in a futile effort to calm down the crowd.

'But it attacked the Temple!' someone countered.

'And it did it with sorcery! No one but the Devil uses that! Him and those heretics he's in league with!' another one yelled, this time a female.

'And what about all those it killed? Many were our poor, beloved children!' This statement seemed to set off the crowd even more.

'If it's not the Devil, then it's the Ill Omen itself!'

A sudden shocked silence fell over the crowd. Everyone looked to an old farmer, who, like Parthiizaax, initially had gone into the town out of curiosity.

'I know it, You all know it,' the farmer continued. 'The Day of Judgement is soon here. The Ill Omen will burn the lands to the ground and clear the soil from our feet to reveal Gehella so we can all be tormented in the cursed city!'

'Again, let us not be hasty,' the poor Chapter argued. Parthiizaax had no desire to be in his simple grey robes right now. 'I have my doubts that we're seeing the Day of Judgement upon us-'

'We all saw this Ill Omen send fire into the air as high as the birds can fly, did we not? And did it not also try to remove the Temple and its square already, and the ground under it?'

The Chapter beheld the old farmer with a terrified look in his eyes as if he couldn't deny the evidence put forth.

'You forget the water of the well that is now frozen and our brave boys so expertly manoeuvre,' the Chapter finally said with a solemn yet triumphant poise. 'And the souls of our beloved that got sent to Haven much too soon. Those deeds do not bear the mark of the Ill Omen.' He held the insides of his arms together and lowered his head to touch the clenched fists in a prayer of the Five Pillars but didn't say anything.

The old farmer seemed disgruntled over being challenged.

'Maybe the Devil possessed it,' someone suggested from the crowd. 'I've heard stories of the Devil doing that.'

'Well, possessed or not, no one can deny the evil,' the old farmer grumbled. 'And evil can only be expelled by killing, so I say we *need* to kill it!'

The silence ignited once again, and the crowd erupted following the old farmer's raised pitchfork.

'Kill it with fire and send it back to Gehella where it came from!'

It didn't matter whether or not this thing was the Ill Omen, in league with their Devil, or just an evil to be exorcised. Gehella was always the destination for the damned.

'Boil it alive and then burn it to make sure the evil is exorcised!'

'Chop off its head and an arm so it matches what it did to our temple's Pillars!'

'Bury it alive!'

'Cut off all of its limbs and slowly burn and bury them by each Pillar to make sure that the evil is begging for forgiveness!'

There is no shortage of ways to dispose of this so-called "Devil," Parthiizaax thought. When it came to killing, Humans always seemed to be masterfully creative. But he still didn't actually know what this "thing" was or how it could have set off such a forceful explosion. It being their Devil seemed highly unlikely.

Parthiizaax attempted to get a little closer without making himself known. Stretching his neck a little more, he could see it. That, which was so horrible it caused the tight and rowdy gathering to form a perfect half circle around it. That, which was so powerful that it had laid waste to everything around the temple square. And much to the Dragon's surprise, the "Devil" that this bloodthirsty crowd was so keen on killing in the most colourful ways was... a Human child? And a small female one at that, or a little girl as the Humans would call it.

Right there, in front of the Town Council's long, makeshift table, a very little, pale girl was on her hands and knees listening to the townspeople claim that she was their Devil incarnate and how she could best be killed. Her white hair shielded her face but small pools of tears had gathered on the beaten-earth floor beneath.

It dawned on Parthiizaax that he was in fact witnessing a trial. A twisted sort at that given how no one seemed to be on the side of the poor girl. Her only defence were streams of tears and a sobbing so low that no one could notice it in the loud tavern. Parthiizaax didn't

like it one bit, though he didn't say anything. He was still curious about how such a small and young being could be capable of so much devastation.

'SILENCE!' The leader of the town militia yelled with enough volume to bring the rowdiness to a halt, something the Chapter had failed to do thus far. 'It is without doubt the... girl that is the culprit of forbidden sorcery. She was the only one alive after the destruction and was found right at the centre of the crater by the Templars...'

'So, kill it then!' one of the townspeople responded. 'Kill the devil witch!'

'...but we will not be the ones to pass the judgement,' the town militia's leader continued ignoring the shout from the crowd. 'In cases of witchcraft and sorcery, the Templars will have final say and execution.'

The crowd turned silent for a moment. A moment that surprisingly easy could be construed as if disappointment filled the room. The only thing heard was the irregular sobbing from the little, white haired girl.

'MOMMAAA!'

The silence was broken by the little girl herself who suddenly turned around and reached for a woman. Looking at the woman's small stature, light-brown linen clothing, greasy brown hair, and dirty skin, Parthiizaax guessed her to be quite poor. The woman and the people around her let out an audible gasp as they all took a step back from the girl's stretched arm. Time froze and one could practically feel how everyone braced themselves for another disaster.

'You- you are n...' the woman, whom the little girl had called "mother," clearly had trouble handling all the attention. 'That *t-thing* is not my daughter!' she finally stammered as she looked at the other townspeople with fear drowning her eyes. Eyes coloured as the sad clouds of autumn. And with them she avoided the hopeless gaze of the little girl who so very clearly did not understand what was going on. Parthiizaax couldn't help but feel sorry for the little Human.

'Mom... ma?'

'Not even the Devil's mother will take it, that should be proof enough! This is no child anymore so why wait for the Templars?' a voice in the cramped crowd yelled.

'Yeah, let's remove the head from its body and be done with it!' It was time to chime in again it seemed, and multiple loud voices agreed.

The little girl was still on her knees and frantically looking around at the crowd, which was getting their unruliness back, with her snow white eyes.

White eyes? Parthiizaax suddenly became more aware of the girl's features when her crying had stopped. *Just like... could it be?*

His thoughts got interrupted as he lost his breath for a moment. He felt that tug on his soul again, stronger than ever this time. And somehow strangely nearer even though it didn't make much sense and no one else seemed to notice.

'If I may interject?' said the local Liege Knight without actually asking but loud enough to gain the crowd's attention. 'The Templars will have been on their way from Cinderhold ever since the explosion, which I am certain that no one in all of Equilisfal could have missed. And given the damage that has been caused to our Temple, I'm not so sure they will take too kindly to us regardless.'

The tavern crowd suddenly looked around with nervousness painted on everyone's faces.

'And what if this Devil manages to escape before the Templars arrive?' the Liege Knight continued. 'How do you think the Templars' righteous flame will look at us then?'

It didn't come as a surprise to Parthiizaax that the local Liege's Knight would be the one encouraging the matter to be settled right away. If the rumours were true, he had sought his own baptism of fire to become a Templar himself. Being able to show his conviction and ability to pass swift judgement would therefore serve him well. The hidden, or attempted hidden, scorch mark on his neck supported the gossip.

The old woman caught the Dragon's eyes as she was leaving the tavern. Parthiizaax was hit by guilt as she stopped in the frame of the door and gave him a look, to which he immediately turned his own towards the floor. He had never had such a feeling when dealing with Humans and their affairs. This time was different, however, and Parthiizaax did not have to search long for the reason of his guilt. Was he, as an outsider, really the only one who could see wrong in this farce taking place inside the tavern?

Parthiizaax tried to lead his thoughts elsewhere in an attempt to escape what he knew had to be done. There seemed to be a strange, dark tinge in the old woman's stare, but on second thought it was probably just the shadow from her hood. And the old woman had already disappeared into the night before he could examine her further.

'The Templars' judgement will be swift and relentless...' said the fat council merchant in his purple silken garments. He stared into nothing with terror in his voice.

'They might even make an example of us and condemn us all to the Broken Pillars,' the now pale-faced Chapter continued as if he and the merchant shared the same thought.

A nervous chatter quickly spread throughout the gathering like a wildfire during a dry summer. It didn't help that the Chapter was now on his knees, arms and hands together with his prayer running loudly through the tavern. 'Havenum forunea Collonetas!'

'Maybe we're lucky and the King sends Paladins instead?' the grey-blue eyed baker said with an unconvincing hope in his voice.

'The Paladin Order would still pass judgement, even if their reputation isn't as fiery as the Templars. But their order doesn't deal with heretic sorcery or witchcraft, in any case,' the Liege Knight said in answer to the baker's fragile optimism. He waited a few seconds, as if in deep thought, before continuing. 'No, our venerable council member and good Chapter are both right, we cannot risk raining the Templars' wrath down upon ourselves. We must take care of this problem right here and right now!'

'I agree,' the militia leader concurred after another few seconds of silence.

It didn't take more than that. Between all the cheering, the quickly riled up crowd went back to yelling different and increasingly creative ways to execute the little girl.

No one except Parthiizaax actually paid much attention to the little girl, who was lying on all fours again with her back to the crowd. This time, however, she wasn't crying. Instead, her entire body had started to shake uncontrollably. And the atmosphere in the tavern grew ever more intense, and not just from the violent townspeople.

And there it was once again. The feeling of one's soul being pulled on. This time the pull was so strong that it felt as if Parthiizaax's soul itself separated from his body, just for a moment. And this time, he definitely wasn't the only one who felt it, as all the people gathered in the tavern had stopped their excited yelling, looking at each other with confusion. In that moment it finally dawned on Parthiizaax what was happening. Or, more exactly, what was about to happen.

Without much thought for once, the Dragon moved out of the shadows, ripping off his long fur cloak and throwing it to the ground behind him in a single motion.

'THEERE WILL BE NOO KILLING THIS NIGHT!' Parthiizaax shouted with a booming voice, enhanced by his mastery of the winds. *I guess I am interfering with the affairs of these Humans after all*, the Dragon remarked to himself.

As he moved forward through the stunned and completely silent crowd, all who were unable to take their eyes off of him, Parthiizaax made sure to stand up as straight as he could. He may have been old, even for Dragon standards, but his scaly body was still muscular beneath the sleeveless and brown woollen tabard, open on either side and held tight by an ornamented belt with a pouch hanging off to the left. The belt itself made its way around Parthiizaax's waist through two scarred holes at the hip where his body and grey wings met. He was not as impressive in size as his Wyrms brothers and sisters but he was still a Dragon, and even a Drake standing fully up was still towering the tallest of Humans.

Parthiizaax had certainly done a great job at drawing attention to himself, the attention he always tried so hard to avoid. But he was nonetheless so successful that even the little girl had stopped shaking. Instead, she watched nervously as Parthiizaax walked towards her and the crowd moving warily out of his way. The tense atmosphere had been lifted and was replaced by one of slight fear mixed with confusion.

The little girl herself had that same fear in her watery eyes as Parthiizaax knelt down in front of her and offered his hand.

'Coom with me,' he tried to say in the most comforting tone he knew. Her snow white eyes looked from the scaly hand and to the Dragon's face, still fearful of what was going on. Parthiizaax suddenly realised that the offered hand still had his large claws extended. 'I mean you noo harm, I proomise,' he added as he calmly retracted them so as to not scare the little girl further.

Without expressing any words, Parthiizaax kept his hand in a welcoming waiting for the little girl. The tavern slowly found enough courage to engage in their nervous chatter, so as the long seconds went past he hoped that the fearful little girl would accept his invitation. And that it would be sooner rather than later.

Luckily, Parthiizaax didn't have to wait long. As the little girl cautiously put her hand into his, they stood up together and started the walk towards the tavern door. Parthiizaax made sure to put one of his wings around the little girl, shielding her from the nasty looks of the townspeople. Looks of anger woven in between the fear and awe. Looks that Parthiizaax knew all too well and had spent so much time trying to avoid. Looks screaming that there was no turning back now.

One brave farmer's boy took a step out in front of the Dragon and the little girl in order to block their path towards the door. He raised his pitchfork but quickly changed his mind, as Parthiizaax once again presented the large, dark claws slowly extended from the fingers of his one hand. With the path cleared once more, the Dragon and the little girl steadily made their way out of the tavern.

Parthiizaax noticed that it took a solid few minutes for the crowd to start talking again after the odd pair had left them. He purposefully took a longer route towards the Ashencross Bridge so as to not walk past the temple square. *She doesn't need to see that*, he thought.

When they were almost at the monumental bridge, the little girl's hand tensed.

'W-where....' the little girl soon followed, 'where are we going?'

Parthiizaax didn't want to lie. The little girl had already been through so much, and he felt that she deserved to know the truth of his plans, however few they may be.

'Wee are goeing to my hooose foor food and soome basic things. Theen we are goeing to leave befoore the Templars arrive.'

They made it halfway across the bridge before the next question came.

'W-what will the Templars do when they ar- arri... get here?' the little girl finally managed to ask.

'I do noot know,' Parthiizaax answered after brief thought. 'Buut I do know that it will noot be pleasant if the toownspeople do noot think oof a good explanation foor what happened here today.'

The unusual duo walked the rest of the way to Parthiizaax's cottage in silence, but still hand in hand.

As they approached the cottage, Partiizaax was mentally going over the things they would need, weighing them against what they, or he, could physically carry. Deep in those thoughts he almost didn't notice the little girl stopping in the middle of the path. It was only because her hand slipped out of his that he was ripped out of his calculations. Then the little girl started to cry uncontrollably.

'Stoop that,' Parthiizaax managed to say rather harshly, much more than he meant it to be. He had been living alone for so long that it was the first approach he thought of. 'Wee doon't have time foor that, we must get goeing as soon as poossible!'

Much to Parthiizaax's surprise, the little white-haired girl didn't heed his words but instead started to cry even harder.

'I- I- I didn't mean for it to happen!' the little girl whimpered at last between the tears. 'They- they tricked me and started to laugh at me again, and I d-didn't like that, and then I don't know what ha- ha- haaaappened!'

'Whoo tricked you?' Parthiizaax asked and kneeled down in front of the little girl, having deemed that a better approach to get her to stop crying.

'The- the o-other ki-iids...'

'Hoow did they trick you?'

'They-', the little girl had some trouble getting the words through the tears. 'They s-said I could play with them behind the-the temple but instead they a-all made fun of me-eeee!'

'Whaat did they say?'

'They-they m-made fun of my-my eye-eeeees!'

'Beecause they are white?' Parthiizaax said thinking he might as well inquire about them. The little girl abruptly stopped crying and instead looked at him with bewilderment behind the water still occupying her snow white eyes.

'M-my eyes aren't white?' she finally said with a snivel. 'The-the others made f-fun of me because I'm the only one with a p-purple eye and a ye-yellow eye. And then my t-tummy started to h-hurt again, and they- and they...' The little girl's crying came flooding back as if a dam had burst.

Purple and yellow? For a moment Parthiizaax almost ignored the wailing little girl in front of him. The little girl who so clearly had white eyes.

'I-I- I didn't mean to hurt them,' the little girl began once again. 'I d-don't know what ha-happened! I-I just wanted to-to-to be f-friends and then they m-made f-fun of me and c-called me m-mean th-things, and started push-pushing me, and h-hitting me, and my- and my-' She was having trouble getting words across again. 'A-and my tummy hurts again and I want my mo-momma-aaaa!'

'Youur moother will noot coome,' Parthiizaax told the little girl in what he again meant to be a much more comforting tone of voice than what came out. Despite his age, this wasn't an area that he had much practice in. 'I am soorry,' he added.

'B-but I didn't m-mean to do it!' the little girl repeated. 'I d-don't want to be b-bad, I want to- to go to H-Haven with m-momma and the others, I just want it all to go awa-aay!'

That last sentence was more scream than crying, and Parthiizaax could sense the tensing of the atmosphere as the little girl got more and more upset. He had to calm her down somehow, and fast!

Parthiizaax reached for the little girl's shoulder.

'DON'T TOUCH ME!' she shrieked as the air around them now also grew hotter. Parthiizaax also thought he felt that all too familiar tug on his soul again, however brief it was.

In a desperate attempt to distract the crying, and now also shaking, child, Parthiizaax pulled out a fireblossom from the pouch on his belt and ignited it with a snap of his fingers. He then extended the flame to make it dance in front of the little girl. And much to his surprise, it seemed to work.

'*Eiansaaenth yio Doolasia*, the Dance oof Fire. It was oone oof the first things I taught when I was a Learner, teaching the fires and winds foor the whelpings,' Parthiizaax revealed to the little girl. She had almost stopped crying and instead couldn't take her eyes off the rythmically moving fires between the Dragon's hands. 'Thee things you can do are extraordinary but you can learn to master them with time. Ii will teach you everything I knoow, as well as the discipline needed to make sure that what happened in the toown will never happen again.'

'So... there's nothing wrong with m-me?'

'Noo, little whelping,' Parthiizaax chuckled as he extinguished the fire with an elegant hand gesture. 'Ii can assure you that there is noot anything wroong with you. Iin fact, I think that you are a moost special oone indeed, even foor my kind. Thee woorst thing that you can do right noow is to be afraid oof what is happening, do you understand?'

The little girl nodded with her mouth slightly open. The tears on her cheeks were starting to dry. Parthiizaax placed his hand on her shoulder, this time without any trouble.

'Coome, little whelping, let us get to my dwelling then we can take a look at yooour stooma-' Parthiizaax stopped abruptly before finishing his sentence. Light was coming from the windows of his cottage further down the path.

The Dragon pushed the little girl behind himself, almost as a reflex. Then they quietly approached the small home.

Are the Templars already here? Parthiizaax thought with fear rising in his heart. *No, it wasn't their way of doing things. They won't rummage a place without an accused or other witnesses present. The Templars don't have a reputation for working in secret all things considered.*

There was also the fact that nothing seemed to be ruined and Parthiizaax couldn't see any horses. Furthermore, it didn't make much sense that the Templars would come to this remote cottage before going to Ashencross and see the destruction or question the townspeople first. That rational chain of thought calmed Parthiizaax down a little. But who then had lit the fire that shone through his windows?

'Hiide oover there to the left,' Parthiizaax said to the little girl and nodded to a couple of large barrels by the end of the wall. The little girl ran opposite of where the Dragon gestured and hid behind the other corner of the small cottage. Parthiizaax couldn't help but shake his head slightly. At least the little girl partially did what she was told without trouble.

Clinging to the wall on the side of the door opposite the little girl, Parthiizaax drew his claws on both hands, ready to fight whatever would meet them. Slowly opening the unlocked door, ever so quietly, the Dragon peeked inside.

Scouting his humble dwellings from beyond the door, nothing immediately stood out as broken or stolen here. There weren't any other signs of intruders either, besides the door

not being locked of course. Indeed, the only thing different from when he left earlier was a stew slowly cooking in the fireplace.

A stew slowly cooking in the fireplace? The delicious sensations hit Parthiizaax's nostrils at about the same time as he noticed his large cast iron pot hanging over the fire. And someone had put out three wooden bowls and spoons on his table.

Confused more than anything, Parthiizaax entered his cottage and seemingly forgot that someone was most likely still there. As he stood right inside the doorway, examining the bizarre scene in front of him, Parthiizaax noticed that the fire was blazing with an almost impossibly perfect mix of vibrant orange, red, and yellow. And what was even more strange, it did so without any wood in the fireplace. The flames clinged to the large iron cooking pot out of thin air.

'Oh haha, wonderful!' The sound of a Human's voice tore a startled Parthiizaax, who quickly readied his claws for combat, out of his examination of the fires. 'You arrived just at the perfect time, dinner is ready!'

The Dragon looked to his modest storage room and saw a small, old woman in a grey, woollen temple robe, with a hemp rope around the waist. On top of the robe she wore a black linen vest and a beautiful gold necklace in the shape of a blooming flower with a shadowy black gemstone in the middle. Her dark cloak was hanging from the back of one of the chairs, with a pair of brown leather gloves on the table.

A wrinkled face topped with curls of silver greeted Parthiizaax with a big smile and happy eyes. Even though a couple of teeth were missing, which was standard for elderly Humans, the laugh and smile gave Parthiizaax a feeling of warmth and of being safe. A feeling that he didn't care for in the slightest coming from a Human.

It was the woman from the tavern, the only one who noticed him before he had made a scene and left with the little girl. All of a sudden, Parthiizaax realised where he knew the old woman from; she was the one who worked at the Temple of the Five Pillars in Ashencross, always tending the water lilies in the river, and usually with something to eat in one of her hands. This time was no different as she had come out of Parthiizaax's storage room devouring an apple and carrying a loaf of dark bread.

'Fancy having a pantry in a home like this, haha,' the old woman remarked as she made her way to the table. 'Come inside so we can begin. And by the fires and waters combined bring the girl! You do have the girl with you, do you not?'

The old woman gave Parthiizaax an inquisitorial and stern stare, the warmth suddenly leaving her demeanour entirely. Her eyes were differently coloured, he noticed, one red as a rose in bloom and the other like the deepest ocean blue. For a second Parthiizaax thought that he saw a hint of black shine again. He quickly put it out of his mind, though, as he was still trying to make sense of everything.

'li, uh... hoow did-'

'The girl, please.' The old woman's tone had changed too, now like a sharp knife matching the swift temper change.

It almost startled Parthiizaax when he felt two small hands on him, one grabbing the back of his tabard, the other his webbed wing, and the little girl showed her face from behind.

'Oh haha, there you are!' The old woman was back to warm and cheerful laughter. 'Come in, little flower, no need to be shy. You must be hungry?'

The little girl took a step inside but Parthiizaax stopped her with his hand.

'Whaat are you doing here?' he asked, having finally regained some composure. 'Aand hoow did you get here soo quickly?'

'Don't worry about how I got here, haha. Though it was awfully nice of you to settle down in a cottage right next to the river. And why am I here? I figured that the two of you could use a good warm meal before your journey.'

'Wee doon't have time foor that,' Parthiizaax interjected.

'Besides,' the old woman said as if she didn't hear him, 'I can help with the little girl's powers.'

The dinner went by quietly. Both Parthiizaax and the little girl were exceedingly hungry from a long and eventful day. Parthiizaax himself hadn't eaten since the suns had dawned. He figured it was the same case for the little girl. In fact, their impressive appetite was only matched by that of the old woman but luckily she had found enough ingredients in the small home for plenty to go around. Normally Parthiizaax would have objected to this overuse of his resources, but these were special circumstances after all.

After dinner the old woman and the little girl kept talking by the table as Parthiizaax walked around the cottage. He put supplies for their journey into a wicker basket intended to go on the back. A journey he wasn't even sure where would take them, much less how long it would last.

Having found and packed something to eat and drink, his coin reserve, a few extra tabards, and a handful of freshly bloomed fireblossoms, Parthiizaax was only missing one thing. And not just any one thing it seemed since he thoroughly started searching every nook and cranny for it.

'Do you know what it means to be brave, little flower?' the old woman asked the little girl with the long, matted, white hair who was just now finishing the last of her meal. The little girl looked at the old woman and shook her head in small, slow movements without a word.

'Oh haha, but I think you do,' the old woman responded with her happy and warm eyes of different colours. 'And if you want a little help, I have something to give you. Would you like to see it?'

The little girl nodded this time, still slowly and wordless, but her eyes were now filled with anticipation.

The old woman took out what looked to be a small bottle from a pocket in her black vest. Inside the bottle, a tiny flame burned from thin air, much like those in the fireplace.

'This is the Courage of the Flame,' the old woman said, 'or a small part of it at least. Whoever holds it will not be afraid of that which they do not know, nor will they turn away in the face of peril. Would you like to hold it?'

The little girl's white eyes grew large, and her mouth followed suit. She slowly held out her hands and fixated on nothing else than the small bottle with the tiny flame.

'Oh haha, no, no, little flower. Courage goes into the heart.'

The old woman popped the small cork and poured the flame into her right hand. A wrinkly hand tattooed with strange symbols and what looked to be depictions of fires that licked up her old wrist and under the sleeve of her robe. In the middle of her palm was another tattoo of a flowering water lily, and as the tiny flame from the bottle sank into the petals, they lit up. A moment after, the orange tinged light travelled to the old woman's gnarled index finger, which looked to make the little girl's mouth open up even more, as if that was possible.

'May I?' the old woman asked, to which the little girl nodded in astonishment of the lit up fingertip.

The old woman pressed her finger on the little girl's shirt, atop the heart, after which the light seemed to travel to the little girl's chest before disappearing.

'Wonderful. Can you feel it? You now hold some of the Courage of the Flame, and you must promise me to take good care of it.'

'I-, ' the little girl had some trouble getting her thoughts into words. 'I-I feel it, it feels warm!'

'Good, haha, that's what bravery is supposed to feel like,' the old woman responded with her distinct smile.

'It felt warm but-'

'Theere it is!' Parthiizaax proclaimed loudly, having found his book under the humble bedding in one of the corners of the small home. 'li was afraid I had loost this oone.'

'Is that a book? Can you teach me to read?' the little girl asked with a manner that was much more confident than she had been all day.

'Oof coourse it is a book, yes,' Parthiizaax answered rather harshly, 'but noot oone foor little Human whelpings to see. Youu should foocus oon getting ready to leave instead oof indulging that oold wooman in her magical trickery.'

The little girl immediately lost some of her newfound sparkle as she sank down on the bench by the table. Parthiizaax promptly felt bad and opened his mouth to apologise.

'Where are your manners?' the old woman reprimanded before the Dragon managed to form a word. 'It wouldn't kill your lizard brain to be more considerate of the poor girl!'

An insult like that was not something that Parthiizaax usually left unchallenged but in this case it seemed fair. The old woman continued still before anything could slip his tongue.

'What were you about to say, little flower?'

'I was... I...' it looked like the little girl was uncertain about what she was going to say. 'I felt the fire courage,' she finally gained enough composure to say, 'but my tummy still feels bad.'

'Are you hungry? Do you want some more food?'

'No,' the little girl replied with very little hesitation. 'Thank you, it was the best food I can remember!'

'Oh, you're most welcome, little flower, haha. When did your stomach start hurting?'

The little girl gave that question a few more thoughts. Parthiizaax packed his book into the wicker basket and afterwards he packed it again.

'I remember telling momma before she said good night to me and she went to work. She always works both night and day ever since we lost daddy. Then momma told me I was just hungry. But it hurt again even after momma gave me bread when I woke up. Then it went away. Then it came back when... when...'

'Shee alsoo coomplained about her stoomach just befoore we arrived here,' Parthiizaax interjected and then quickly looked back into the basket.

'That doesn't sound good, now does it?' the old woman said in a comforting voice. 'Do you mind if I take a look, little flower?'

'Mhm...' was the only sound the little girl produced as she stood up from the table bench.

'Lift up your shirt,' the old woman told the little girl as she rolled up her temple robe sleeve, this time on her left arm, revealing another series of intricate tattoos on the aged skin. 'Oh haha, sleeves can be so annoying sometimes!'

The newly revealed tattoos on the old woman's arm seemed to be depicting water and waves amongst more strange symbols. The symbols looked to be signs or letters of some kind, but not of the Human language that Parthiizaax had come to learn. Even though he was done, the Dragon continued to feign his packing.

The old woman laid the inside of both her arms and hands together and, after a brief moment, withdrew the right one. Parthiizaax noticed another tattoo, this one of large leaves in the middle of the old woman's left palm with a long stem ending in what looked to be a root down at her elbow. Then, a small ball of water started swirling from nothing on top of the large leaves. Moving her right hand in choreographed gestures, the old woman expertly controlled the expanding water until the leaf tattooed hand was completely enveloped. When moving her fingers, the water naturally stuck to the old woman as if it was a perfectly fitted glove. Parthiizaax, who couldn't take his eyes off what was happening, didn't notice that his own hands were only packing thin air.

'This might feel a little cold,' the old woman said, to which the little girl responded with an apprehensive nod. The old woman placed her water covered hand on the little girl's stomach and started to move it around in circles, making the water rhythmically swirl as she performed the monotonous motion.

'Oh haha!' the old woman laughed rather enthusiastically, as her expression turned from focus and concern to surprise.

'Is something the matter?' Parthiizaax asked, unable to fake indifference anymore.

'Nothing is wrong, I assure you, haha,' the old woman said as she removed her hand from the little girl's exposed stomach. The water slowly disappeared into the nothing where it had come from.

'Are you sure? Wee cannot afford to slow down once we get going,' Parthiizaax remarked, suddenly feeling that he had overplayed his hand by showing too much interest in the little Human girl and tried to correct it.

'Yes, I'm sure. In fact, it should be celebrated when a girl blooms and enters into adulthood.' The old woman gave the little girl another warm smile while placing a hand on her cheek. Parthiizaax looked just as confused, if not more, as the little girl.

'You know, for someone as old and knowledgeable as you, not much water flows under your bridge from time to time, haha,' the old woman said to the Dragon. 'I believe that our little flower has bled for the first time.'

'Ooh...' It still took Parthiizaax a good few seconds to realise what the old woman was saying.

'Ooh!' He had heard of females amongst Humans, Elves, and other species going through such cycles when they matured enough to carry their eggless whelpings. However, Parthiizaax didn't have much more experience than that. 'Does that mean that she..?'

'It does,' the old woman answered Parthiizaax's question without him needing to find the last parts of it.

'But isn't she a little young?'

'How old are you, little flower?'

The little girl thought for a moment or two before answering.

'Mamma said that we should celebrate my tenth spring before she gave me a bun. It was warm and I liked it because we never get warm buns!'

'Thank you,' the old woman said and turned back to Parthiizaax. 'She's certainly a little young, but it's different for everyone. Now, go and find some strips of fresh linen to take with you on Your journey. We want our little flower to be as comfortable as possible during this time and fresh linen is a start if nothing else.'

Still a little uneasy, but happy enough to not have to ask more questions on the bizarreness of Human anatomy and reproduction, Parthiizaax obliged and went back into his small storage to look.

Parthiizaax came back with a big stack of linen strips, just as the old woman seemed to have finished instructing the little girl on what to do for future occurrences. He had been unsure of how much was needed so he had torn up three newly washed tabards of differing colours. Parthiizaax debated with himself for a moment whether or not he should be included in the topic at hand but decided that it was a much too private matter. Besides, he wouldn't be able to contribute much anyway. The ways of Dragon procreation seemed infinitely much simpler.

'Wee should leave if she is ready,' he said. 'Youu talked about being able to help us oon our joourney?'

'That I agree to. It is time for the two of you to get going and for me to leave.' The old woman gave the little girl another smile before standing up and facing the Dragon. 'You wouldn't happen to have any more apples, would you?'

'Ii, uh...' Parthiizaax was more than taken by surprise as the old woman walked past him and into the small storage room.

'Oh haha, wonderful!' The words were exclaimed from the side room and out came the old woman with a red apple already in her mouth and another one in her hand. 'There were just two left, I assume you don't mind?'

'Noo, but... wee really must be goeing and if all you can do to help is eating apples-'

'And making the stew, haha.' The old woman winked at the little girl who responded by trying to hide a giggle behind her hands.

'...aand making the stew,' Parthiizaax corrected himself rather annoyed, 'I think we will be goeing noow.'

'But I also know of a place not far from here that the two of you should seek out.'

'Iif it is to shoow us hoow to eat apples, we already know.' Parthiizaax rarely attempted humour but he still looked to the little girl to see her reaction. There was none.

'No, I'm sure you already got that covered,' the old woman answered dryly. 'I'm talking about a place where The Equilibrium is still practised.'

'Thee Equilibrium?'

'Yes, it was our faith before the Teachings of the Five Pillars came burning through these lands.'

Parthiizaax was stunned. *The Humans have another religion?* He had only ever seen them practising their Five Pillars.

'Hoow coome I have never heard oof this religioon?'

'The Equilibrium celebrates balance in all things. The river flowing outside was once a central part of a flourishing civilisation, people seeking to live a life in absolute harmony.'

'Yees, but I asked-'

'When the Teachings of the Five Pillars came,' the old woman continued, ignoring Parthiizaax in the process, 'we didn't think much of it and welcomed another way of living. But as they gained followers and their influence rapidly grew, they started branding those in tune with the elements of water and fire as heretics. Then came the Templars and their Blessed Crusade...'

Parthiizaax noticed how the old woman paused to close her eyes and take a deep breath. He had heard of this "Blessed Crusade" but had calculated the dates to be much before he was even hatched. The old woman, however, acted as if she was reliving terrible memories all over again.

'From their seat in Havenbring, The Five Entablatures may have succeeded in banning all use of the elements to the public eyes. But there are still some faithful practitioners left, however small our groups may be. And we help whoever we can. Guiding

the lost and weakened. All the while seeing to it that neither The Ash nor The Flood will come to pass!

Parthiizaax's confusion still hadn't quite settled over all this new knowledge but he could see the look of pride and burden in the old woman's red and blue eyes.

'Seek them out. My followers can provide shelter for the two of you and help our little flower on how to control her newfound powers.'

Now it was Parthiizaax's turn to be prideful.

'I can teach her the flight oof the flames better than any oof Your kind. Aand if she shoows an inclination foor the winds, I will teach her to coontrol thoose as well.'

'I'm sure you can, haha,' the old woman humoured him. 'And what of the waters? You've seen how our little flower is quite capable with that element as well, can you teach her to control that also?'

Parthiizaax didn't answer the question since he didn't have any answer to give.

'The Equilibrium tells us that fire and water are the two most powerful elements in this world,' the old woman went on, hardly noticing the Dragon's now slightly bruised pride. 'She must be taught balance between the two and I can think of no one better to do so than my people.'

'You're not coming with us?' the little girl asked with a frown.

'Oh, I am afraid not, little flower. I must stay at my temple helping others like you whenever I can.'

'I... I understand.'

'Aand where might we find yoor people?'

'They are safely hiding in a hidden cave near lake Fortheart, a cave that can't be found except by those who already know where it is.'

'Aand is this "Lake Foortheart" far away? I thought you said it would be cloose by?'

'I am sorry, haha! You know it as Lake Ashencross and not by its olden name.'

Parthiizaax had indeed never heard the lake being called "Fortheart", nor had any map referred to it by that name. But Lake Ashencross was close and that was good news. It meant that they didn't have to travel too far from the start of their journey.

'Aand hoow will we find this cave if it is hidden?' he asked, dismissing the name of the lake as it wasn't of immediate importance.

'Oh haha, don't you worry about that. You won't even come near the place.'

'Thaat almoost soounds like a threat?' Parthiizaax interjected with a hint of mistrust. This was another new tone of voice coming from the old woman.

'When you live a life of persecution, you have to take precautions. I'm sure that *you* know about that.'

How does she know? That single sentence almost sent Parthiizaax into a spiral. *The last Dragon Fight was so far away and so long ago, how could she know about that? Maybe the old woman knows about the history between us and the Elves? But that was much, much longer ago and she would have to be one of very few Humans to potentially have that knowledge around these parts. The chances of that should be exceedingly low. Maybe she's simply referring to Humans and other species hunting Wyyrm Dragons for the trophy? Yes, that must be it-*

Before Parthiizaax could finish his thoughts, and inquire the old woman about her knowledge, she continued as if it was nothing.

'Follow the lake's western coast. When You get near enough to the cave, my people will apprehend both of You. But don't worry, haha. They won't harm or rob You, or worse. If you prove to them that I sent You.'

‘Aand what proof might that be to coonvince your people oof our alliance?’ Parthiizaax had an amazing ability to focus up when he felt a thought spiral not going anywhere.

The old woman pulled out a beautiful purple water lily from a pocket in her grey temple robe. The pocket was clearly much deeper and bigger than it looked from the outside. The flower that appeared from it was complete with large, round leaves, long stem, and the roots themselves. Come to think of it, Parthiizaax had never seen a temple robe with pockets before. And did the old woman always carry one of her precious water lilies with her?

The old woman proceeded to snap off most of the flower, leaving only the blooming petals and a small piece of stem. She put the rest back into the deceptively deep pocket.

Placing the beautiful purple flower in the palm of her left hand, the old woman gently placed the right one on top. You could see the heat rising in tandem with the orange glow that emanated from between the old woman’s fingers as she firmly pressed her hands together. When she opened them again, a perfectly dried water lily was presented.

‘There,’ the old woman said to the unlikely pair. ‘Show them this and my kin will know that I sent you.’

Parthiizaax gulped a lump in his throat at the uttering of the word “kin.”

‘Aand hoow do we knoow that we can actually trust you?’ the Dragon asked while suppressing the sensation.

‘Oh haha, but I think you already do trust me,’ the old woman replied as she gave the little girl the dried flower. ‘You hold on to this, little flower, we don’t want fireblossoms to accidentally burn it, do we?’ A little wink followed the last remark.

‘Why do you think I already trust you?’

‘Because, as much as you think you know us, I know of your kind as well. And if you didn’t trust me in a situation like this, one of us wouldn’t still be here, haha.’ The warmth and tone of her laugh did not match the words that the old woman spoke.

‘But it is indeed time to leave, for both the two of You, and for me. There are only so many water lilies that one can tend to at night, especially with half of them now lying on the temple square, haha. Besides, the Templars can arrive at Ashencross at any time tomorrow and there is no reason to feed their natural distrust.’

The old woman got up and walked towards the door. She stopped and turned around before going through.

‘Yees?’

‘Take good care of our little flower. She’ll need plenty of guidance, and while I know you’ll be up for it, please be gentle. She’s special but delicate.’ The old woman gave the little girl one of her warm smiles.

‘Ii knoow hoow special she is,’ Parthiizaax replied, clearly noticing the bond that had already formed between the two Humans. ‘Buut fragile? Ii am noot sure.’

‘Good, haha. That is good. Now, do you think you’re ready?’ the old woman asked the little girl with a gleeful question that was somehow also sombre.

‘I am!’ the little girl answered without any hesitation this time around.

‘Oh haha, then it is indeed time for me to leave, haha.’ The old woman turned back to Parthiizaax. ‘Best of luck on Your journey, and thank you for what you did today. You saved a precious life, and maybe even many more, and that debt is rarely ever repaid.’

Parthiizaax was a little stunned by the sincerity in the old woman’s eyes as the dark of the night shone in them, only snapping out of it when she bit into her apple.

'Theere will be noo mentioon oof it. Aand there will be noo debt,' he answered. 'I did noot do it foor my oown gain.'

'Even more so, then. Whether you like it or not, haha.' The old woman sent both of them warm smiles. She lingered on the little girl, like she was stalling for time and didn't want to leave.

'May your Equilibrium remain. Both of You,' she said and finally broke the silence.

Parthiizaax turned and crouched for the little girl.

'Aare you sure that you are ready?'

'I *am* ready!' the little girl replied once again filled with determination. 'I really am!'

'Good. Then say farewell, and we will be oon our way.'

Parthiizaax turned back to the doorway.

'I would suggest you foolloow the river but be careful as it can be difficult to manoeuvre at this time oof-' The Dragon stopped abruptly in the middle of his sentence. Suddenly the old woman was nowhere to be found. Only some puddles of water, shining in the light from the cottage, were left where the old woman had been standing.

Strange, Parthiizaax thought as the only water that had poured that day came from the explosion, and he would have thought those puddles to be gone by now.

The suns had slowly started to rise as the pair closed in on Lake Ashencross in silence.

'Aare you tired?' Parthiizaax asked the little girl. No answer came. As he looked to her, the little girl was still staring intensely at the dried water lily she was clutching ever so gently. If Parthiizaax were to guess, it looked as if the little girl was in deep thought. And probably also afraid which was understandable.

'Youu remind me oof an oold student oof mine,' the Dragon continued in an attempt to break the silence that was slowly crawling back. 'Shee was alsoo a little bit afraid and felt that she was in the wroong place in the woorld. Iin fact, she-'

'Are you a monster?' the little girl suddenly interrupted.

So, there it is, Parthiizaax thought. He couldn't help but smile a little.

'Noo, I am afraid noot,' he replied to the little girl's inquiring face. 'I am a Dragoon.'

The little girl thought about that answer for a couple of seconds.

'I don't believe that,' she finally countered.

'Aand why is that?'

'Because Dragons in the stories are big and scary and bad, and can fly with big wings and can breathe fire!'

'Youu are thinking oof Wyyrms. Ii am a Drake, but we are booth Dragoons. Aand Wyyrms spew fire, actually, noot "breathe" it.'

'Can you breathe fire?'

Parthiizaax frowned a bit since the little girl didn't take his correction to heart.

'Noo, but I can coontrool and wield the element, and I will learn you to do the same.'

'I will learn to breathe fire?' the little girl asked with astonishment and excitement painted in her white eyes.

'Ii am afraid noot,' Parthiizaax chuckled, happy to hear the little girl's spirit rise with the suns. 'Weell, maybe. Iif you woork hard and listen to what I tell you.' There was no reason to tell the little girl what she could and could not do. At least for the moment.

The little girl didn't look down at the flower in her hands anymore as they walked. Instead, she was deep in thought with wide open eyes after what she had just learned.

'Doo you like stoories abooout Dragoons?' Parthiizaax asked.

The little girl looked at him and nodded.

'Good. I have a whole book full oof great stoories that I think you will enjooy then.'

'Are they about Dragons like you?'

'Theey are, soome oof them. Aand oothers are about Wyyrms, and soome are noot. Soome are even about Dragoons like you.'

'Like me?' the little girl said with a curious expression, looking down at herself. 'But I'm not a Dragon...'

'Noo, but you look a little like oone,' Parthiizaax studyingly said. 'Youu knoow, this book was my favourite student's favourite oone to read even though she was noot meant to-'

'Will you be my friend?' the little girl abruptly asked. 'Like Nanna?'

'Aand whoo is Nanna?' Parthiizaax inquired.

'Nanna is the nice old lady with eyes like mine. She gave us this!' The little girl showed Parthiizaax the dried purple water lily as if he had somehow already forgotten about it.

Nanna? Parthiizaax suddenly realised that he had never asked the old woman for her name. He also thought about how he should tell the little girl about the change of colours in her eyes.

And then, another realisation popped into the Dragon's head; he didn't know the little girl's name either, nor did she know his.

'Yees, I think I will,' Parthiizaax said to answer the little girl's question while considering the old woman's, Nanna's, parting words. 'Aand I believe that friends knoow each oothers' names, do they noot? Ii, Parthiizaax oof Toopaz, will be your friend.'

'Par- Par...' even though the little girl struggled to say the Dragon's name, her face lit up so much that one would think the suns need not to rise.

'Parthiizaax. Thaat is my name. Aand what is yoours?'