

Thick wafts of smoke floated soundlessly across a war-torn courtyard, suffocating what little life remained. The scraping of talons across the blood stained stone resounded throughout the still night air. A battered creature with a simple, yet tattered, tunic warily traveled to the meeting place. His leathery wings fluttered anxiously, and he felt a defensive flame begin to form in the depths of his bowels. The young dragon was on a mission for his king, and he could not suppress the thrill of excitement that ran through him, notwithstanding the grim situation.

As he sidestepped cluttered debris and ruined architecture, he unconsciously reached over for the leather satchel strapped to his side. He could feel the warmth of the tiny creature from within struggling to escape its confines. As he came to a stop at the courtyard's edge, or what used to be its center for the other half had been completely demolished, he absentmindedly stroked the egg. He hoped to soothe the tiny *puer*, for it would not be part of the living world for much longer.

The dragon frowned as he thought of how this hatchling would be put to rest, and he struggled to ignore the fact that the babe was mere days away from his Awakening. *The king wanted it done and the king's word is law*, he thought dutifully. Before he could debate with himself further on the matter, wild and thundering hoofbeats sounded off to the side. The dragon barely shoved himself out of their unrestrained path as their owners skidded to a halt in front of him.

Two unicorns, one white and the other dappled grey, glanced down at him with utter disdain. The white was ensconced in a suit of chain link armor, cruel amber orbs gleaming outward through the eye slits. The dappled grey was adorned in what looked like traditional militaristic garb, the bulky armor a gleaming blue with the Circonian royal crest stamped on the breastplate. The young dragon gulped as he shakily bowed, for he knew he was in the presence of the unicorn king.

"Y-Your majesty Brannon of the Northshire Province, H-High Lord of the unicorns of Circion, I-I bow to you and make your acquaintance." The unicorn knight snickered at the dragon's bumbling greeting, but the king silenced him with a flick of his tail. "Bite your tongue lest I feed it to the crows Charmles. At least the boy knows when his country has lost a war." The knight sobered up quickly, but the malignant glint had not departed from his gaze.

The king turned back to the dragon, a frown gracing his countenance when he realized what he was searching for was not present. "Where is your king boy?" The young one gulped, for he knew exactly where his king was. The once noble Draconicus was broken and weeping by the body of his *sodalis*. He hadn't had the strength to make the negotiations necessary to bring a temporary truce between the two nations, for the Ragonian dragons had lost heavily and were expected to make war payments.

"He is preparing a burial ceremony for Queen Caeruleum as we speak." The king's expression faltered, and a look of pain flooded his eyes before vanishing in an instant. The dragon allowed himself a small moment of satisfaction, for he felt these stupid equestrian bastards should at

least feel some compunction towards what they'd done. He knew the acknowledgement of their guilt was all the dragons managed to gain out of the bloody fighting. Even the odious knight allowed himself a moment of commiserating respite.

"The Queen is truly dead?" The dragon nodded, understanding the shock, as he had barely been able to keep his own at bay. The king bowed his head in respect, slightly cowed by the news. Yet when he raised his muzzle he had the look of one about to conduct business. "And that means you are?" "I am his emissary. He sent me in his place." The king nodded and let his eyes roam, as if processing this information. When he turned back to the messenger, he seemed reluctant to start the dealings. "You'll have to do then. Name your requests."

The dragon reached for his bag and tried not to shudder as both unicorns locked their gazes upon the round bulge inside. He skillfully ignored the egg and reached for the piece of parchment that the king had sent with him. He pulled it out and gripped the paper tightly, all the while struggling to hide the tremble in his claws. "In light of the recent war events, King Draconicus Larion the IV of the Ragonian kingdom of dragons establishes the following decrees concerning territorial negotiations. The king wishes that the dragons should continue to occupy the Edessan strait given to us by the Nulantican sea serpents."

Before the emissary could take a breath to continue, the unicorn knight lunged forward and the dragon stumbled backward. "You filthy low-lying *nothus*! That lore-damned strait was promised to us millennia ago in the event that you pompous fools would lose to us!" The knight snorted angrily as he advanced on the petrified messenger, his horn glowing an angry hue of vermilion. "You simpering cowards couldn't even be bothered to send your own damn king to face the consequences of his actions! You talk about valor, but it's gone to the grave along with that wrinkled old queen of yours!" Just as the knight raised his horn to strike, he was intercepted by a magical blast from the king.

His knight was neutralized immediately, and the king didn't spare his potentially dead warrior a second thought. The dragon struggled to keep down his last meal as the king reached up with an armored hoof to clean his bloodied horn. "W-Will he be okay," the dragon stammered nervously. The king glanced down at him, and the dragon felt he would melt into a molten puddle if he were on the receiving end of that glance one more time. "Possibly. I'll have to be sure once we're done here. If he is, he will suffer greatly for his insolence. I warned him once, and I do not like to repeat myself." The king sighed in utter irritation. "I'm terribly sorry about that. Of course you may continue to withhold rights of the strait, especially taking into consideration the events that just took place." The emissary's relief was palpable, and could almost be considered a tangible thing.

"Continue," the king commanded. "The king wishes to maintain all current territorial claims, and does not feel that boundaries need to be redrawn. He has offered in place of this two-thirds of the jewels in the royal coffers, low tariffs concerning the diamond trade between our two countries for one thousand consecutive years, and the promise to minimize exactly three-fourths

of our military.” The king nodded in contemplation, yet the slight frown on his muzzle concerned the messenger. “Are you sure you are giving the unicorns what they rightfully deserve?” The dragon shuddered at the steely tint the king's voice had adopted. “My armies fought fiercely to win this war, and my citizens sacrificed much to ensure our victory. Do not insult my people by giving them less than they deserve.”

The messenger felt his anger rise to a precarious simmer just below its boiling point. The entire Ragonian kingdom was in shambles, their queen was dead, and their king was entrapped by a dangerous state of grieving. *The unicorns talk about sacrifice, but they don't have the faintest idea of what that really means*, he thought murderously. However, the dragon schooled his features into a mask of supplication, for now, was not the time to adopt a sudden idea of patriotism. “We would never insinuate such a thing as that dear king. We simply offer you something that possesses a far greater value than any territorial or monetary compensation.”

The emissary reached into his satchel to offer up the final bartering piece. He shuddered as the tiny life inside the fragile shell seemed to roar with a might that was not his own. The unicorn king seemed to have a similar reaction, for a sheen of sweat alighted atop the monarch's brow. “Is that what I believe it to be?” An eerie quiet had seeped into his tone, and the thickest tension permeated the atmosphere with its heavy demeanor. The young dragon squeaked out a tremulous, “Yes.”

The egg in question seemed to writhe and twist at the very mention of its existence, and the messenger just wished to be rid of the innocent thing once and for all. The unicorn's eyes were two malevolent storms of memory, and the dragon could barely fathom what sort of horrors the king was reliving. The king shook his head suddenly, as if chasing away a fly, and turned his attention back the dragon. “How will giving us the youngest heir to the Ragonian throne make up for the territory you refuse to give us?” The emissary gulped as he struggled to explain. “The king has sworn by Phoenix's blood that he will never seek out another *sodalis*, or have any type of intercourse with a female.”

“So the old son of a bitch is serious,” the king mumbled under his breath. He cleared his throat. “What of Merius? He still has the opportunity to take the throne by force, or if his father passes.” “He's not nearly as strong as his forefathers, or his younger brother. He also is very near-sighted and prone to violent outbursts. The king would rather let our country remain leaderless than to be trapped under Merius' talons. We'll be extremely vulnerable in either case.”

The dragon winced at the information he was willingly let slip, but the king had requested this of him. *The king wanted it done and the king's word is law*, he reminded himself. “Dracon is sure of this?” The use of the informal nickname only magnified the situations severity, rather than lightening it. “He is.” The king paused. “Why is he so adamant about sacrificing his son this way? Does he not regret himself?” The dragon felt his own heart sink with the weight of his next words.

“Caeruleum gave up her life to protect the child. My lord refuses to forgive him.” This time, the unicorn did not even bother to hide his wince of pain. He swallowed painfully as he said, “Give the egg to me.” The messenger handed the young one away, desperately shutting out its movements and wild implications of life. A stifling silence prevailed until the unicorn king spoke.

“Dracon realizes I cannot allow his son to live, correct?” The dragon fought the bile rising up in his throat as he choked out a strangled, “Yes.” The Circonian king dipped his head somberly as he made to take his leave of the island. The emissary watched him go, when he stopped to look back. “For what it is worth, you but a child yourself, I do not take pleasure in these things. Remember that.”

This only furthered the dragons nausea, and he heaved over the side of the courtyard the minute the king was gone. He collapsed to the ground and curled in on himself, sobbing wretchedly at the murder he’d just authorized. As he screamed himself hoarse with guilt, he did not even heed the unicorn knight he’d fallen beside, who turned out to be dead after all. At this juncture, he considered that dragon and unicorn were one in the same.