

« In my time, like in every period of time I guess, there were people obsessed with the end of the world, apocalyptic scenarios. They made all kinds of crazy plans to survive a catastrophe of huge scale. They were sometimes just deranged people but their words held a bit of truth in the end...”

He had radically changed from the moment she took the lead. Just like he said... back to his former self after only minutes spent in the deepest darkness. It was a bit impressive, but mostly scary. She didn't know why, but the thought that he could so easily move on and bury his emotions had something... creepy, insane to the dragoness.

It simply didn't feel natural.

But then again, she was more comfortable around him when he got back to his enthusiasm rather than facing his breakdowns. This human had something fascinating when he spoke about his obsessions. A bit like with the old one. The dragoness felt like she discovered wonders, learnt new things that she wouldn't have suspected.

“So, let's assume my civilization or another saw it coming, and decided to leave a legacy behind. Eighty-eight point eighteen percent, that's big. We might only find what they judge useful in their time. Like a big amount of seeds, or even... I don't know, a collection of geeky goodies. What matters, is that we have big chances to find something these humans never saw. And that, my scaly friend, is the big hope I dare holding onto.”

“So you basically mean... that whatever you'd find in there could be useful to some extent?” she tried to summarize.

“Exactly, I do love your sharp mind.” He chuckled happily. It was really odd to see him with such a childish joy on the face when minutes earlier, he looked like all the problems of the island had fallen on his shoulders. “Remember what I said to Helios earlier. Surprise can overcome a more powerful enemy. Assuming humans haven't changed on this point in one million years, what they don't understand will be scary to them. I just hope I can find something in there that can be frightening enough. A big object, or a flashy effect, something intimidating.”

“I... really hope so too.” Nimeria blew when they arrived to the main cave.

The entrance, funnily, was huge and yet quite hidden by the shape of the rocks to anyone who didn't know it was there. Most humans didn't know it even existed; those who knew barely care about the old stories. The rest of the island had stopped caring long ago about this vault no one could open.

As for dragons, this place simply had no interest, a human trace at best. And everything that had the slightest relation with humans was generally avoided.

Nimera herself felt a bit nervous. She knew her predecessors had never come here, not because it was a sacred place, but because they saw no interest in it, like everyone else. The dragoness felt uneasy with the idea that she could be the one witnessing these big shaped rocks finally moving. However, if it actually was the way this human relied on for their situation, she was ready to help in opening it. Desperate times...

Arrived in front of the rocks though, she felt hesitant.

“Tell me, in the stories... There isn’t a warning of any sort to whomever would open it?” the human asked, looking up to see the relief of the big doors

“I... don’t think so... it just says it contains everything someone might need. Why?”

“Pandora’s box, the ark of the covenant, the pharaoh’s tombs... Humans have kind of a thing with traps directed toward intruders. Generally they warn about it.” He replied, a bit uneasy. “But I guess I have no reason to hesitate in the present case.

Nimera hadn’t thought of it. Many dragons had met their end because of traps set in the woods by human hunters. All a sudden she felt less inspired with opening the entrance. Fortunately, it probably wouldn’t open whatever the efforts.

“You said something was written on it, but I don’t see any inscription carved.” He commented, still looking up.

Humans... Nimera wondered sometimes if their vision wasn’t faulty. Because they could miss the most obvious details, those sitting right under their nose... The dragoness lifted a paw and pointed at the lower area, where the message was hung.

“Are all humans that inattentive?” She tried to tease him friendly, to try and ease the atmosphere. She sensed his obsessional side taking a bit too much place.

“Just the men. That why we need women to take good care of us, we’re lost by ourselves.” He replied with a little giggle, then looked at her with a sad smile. “I used to say that to my wife when she exposed

how stupid I could be. That would never fail at making her laugh. I think she never realized how sincere I was when I said this to her..."

He suddenly stopped talking, and turned a bit morose as he reported his attention on the wooden plate hung on a metallic nail thanks to a rope. The sign that kept teasing about the content of the vault, promising wonders in time. Nimera couldn't tell if it was frustration, or something else.

"What is a... wife?"

He threw her a hesitant look, like he realized that he gave away something he would have rather kept secret. He never answered it either, instead reporting his interest on the plate.

"How long has this thing been here?" he asked, pointing at the inscription.

"It's always been here, like the vault."

"And you said no one ever managed to enter it?"

"Some humans even tried quite hard, never with success..."

"But has everyone tried?" he inspected the rocks with his hands, before turning to her. "Have you?"

"Me? No I... never saw any interest in it. Why would I manage to do what humans failed at?"

"Because of something you said. The responsibility of the matriarch... I have the feeling it will open for you. Could you touch it? Just put your paw on the rock so we can see..."

Nimera felt a bit lost. Of course it was what she said. But it was tales, probably not to be taken literally. Besides, this was one of these times where she perfectly envisioned the term 'responsibility'. She had the feeling even this human didn't know what to expect if it worked.

Still, nothing could go wrong with touching a rock... A bit unsure, the dragoness stepped forward, and put her right forepaw on the wall. There was a big cracking noise. As the big rocky door began to move, the human immediately pulled her away. And he curiously buried his nose into his clothes.

She wondered what this was for, it was like he expected something to get out. Something smelly, maybe? She didn't resist, thinking he probably had a good reason to pull her away from the entrance, and remained silent as she saw him removing the clothes that covered his top half. He took the extremities and tied them together, then stepped toward her to put it on her muzzle. The dragoness was too confused to even protest.

Extremely uneasy with the fabric installed on her, with the biggest part falling just before her mouth, her nostrils were invaded by his scent and it only made the situation more uncomfortable. But even stranger, he plunged his hand into the hole of his lower clothes, and pulled back a white fabric that he ripped to stick it against his nose.

"This place hasn't been opened in a long while, possibly a million year. The air in there might be toxic due to fungi or other bacteria that develop in the dark. Make sure you breath through the fabric, and as little as you can. This isn't optimal protection, but that should do if we don't stay."

He really didn't help with her nervousness, giving birth to worries she would have never thought of by herself. She sometimes thought it was better to not know some things... But still, when the human began to step into the dark opening, she followed.

It was dark on the inside. Of course, she knew he couldn't distinguish things as well as she could, and it became obvious when she noticed his hand searching the walls. Probably was it why the humans were so afraid of the dark...

"I think I feel a torch here..." he said as his fingers touched a strange thing attached to the wall. "I wonder if it can still be lit up. If only I had something to set it on fire, I really chose the worst moment of my life to quit smoking..."

Fire? Was that what he wanted? That sounded like a stupid thing to block about... and easy to solve. Taking a deep breath, the dragoness lifted the fabric to spit a flame on the tip of the thing... that seemed to capture the fire and feed it.

Now she got it... The light the fire projected was not equal to the outside, but probably enough to a human eye. A bit like what the old one did with the mushrooms in his cave. He looked at her, smiled and nodded like he was impressed by her yet simple trick. Taking the torch into one hand, he first approached it to the ground and let out a surprised sound before turning to face the room.

Before them were stairs. She had heard of these by the old one, it was a special carving in the stone to ease access to different depths, since they didn't have wings for that. These ones went deeper and

deeper, and the walls around seemed to have been carved as well, surprisingly to allow a large passage. Wasn't it odd, if built by humans, that it was large enough to let in big things? Wouldn't they built it to fit their size?

Unless it was to let something out in case of need, something that could be found down here. If she hadn't been intimidated by the place, Nimera would have voiced it to reinforce his hopes in finding something big and scary. But she personally held on that hope to justify her own presence here. Because she had that persistent feeling that this place wasn't made for her...

"Tell me, being a matriarch, how does this work for your kind?" he asked her as he moved the torch from left to right in their careful descent. "Have you been taught by the previous, did she pass something on to you?"

"Not really, I barely even knew her. I told you, this has no real significance for dragons beside being the oldest alive..."

"Yet it has a meaning for this place, obviously... It didn't open for me, and I can't imagine that none of your species ever touched the stone, even by mistake. It's in the center of your living place, it's unthinkable." He commented, like the topic was a deep enigma to him. "And yet, it recognized you. If the previous one didn't pass on something to you, how did it recognize you were the matriarch?"

"I... don't know..." the dragoness replied honestly.

True that reaching the title of matriarch could be felt like an achievement for some. But she never felt any special because of it. One day, someone had just made her realize that there was no female older than her... and she hadn't even been aware she had technically been the matriarch for a while.

If this human believed it granted special abilities, then he'd be disappointed. Nimera wouldn't have even guessed that these eternal doors would open for her.

Eventually, the stairs ended on a large cave room, and this time both dragoness and human had the same expression of awe on the face. The roof was illuminated by glowing rocks, drawing beautiful shapes on the ceiling. And at the center of the room, there was another carved rock... a huge one. Round. With relief on it.

When they approached, it hit the dragoness. She instantly recognized the view she had under the muzzle. It was a view she had... when up in the air. She had the whole island, reduced to the size of this carved rock before the eyes. It was truly amazing.

She was about to share this with the human, but by the way he approached the torch to the rock carving, she understood that he already figured it out as well.

“This is a map... beautiful work...” he whispered, visibly impressed, touching carefully the details of the carving with a finger. “I recognize the beach where I woke up... there are the woods we crossed, the plain is here... so we are... here.”

His finger and the light of the torch followed the tracks, until they arrived on a bigger relief with an overall circular shape, representing a mountain formation with the details of the caves' entrances. But more surprising even, was the presence of a weird material just resting on top of it. The dragoness recognized human words written on it, but hadn't the time to read it before the human grabbed it.

“A place for you to feel home. A place for you to think. A place for you to rule. Win, lots.” He read out loud. “I don't know how wrote this, but it was a person who probably read too many fantasy books...”

“Isn't it a weird message? It sounds cryptic; it starts nice to end up aggressive.”

As he turned it, Nimera could read other words saying 'it's safe to breath here'. As his eyes read it too, the human removed the tissue he kept against his nose. The dragoness concluded it was safe to remove the clothe he put on her muzzle as well.

“You miss the most important, it's not the message that concerns me... it's what it's written on. Has someone entered this place?”

“I'm pretty sure no one ever did... Why? What is that thing anyway? Never seen it before...”

“That is paper. And it's impossible that it's been here for one so long and still be in such good state. At least not according to my knowledge. Same for the floor, not a single speck of dust. I doubt this place was kept sterile all this time... As efficiently, it would be a miracle. The paper hasn't even turned yellowish, it's like it's been written yesterday. That doesn't quite fit.”

“So you think someone entered this place yesterday?”

“I don't have anything more believable for now...” he replied, thoughtful, standing straight again and turning around to illuminate the surroundings. “What is that?”

In the corner, in the back of the room, there was another huge opening in the rocky walls, with other stairs seemingly leading deeper. The human looked at her, then walked toward the unknown. So this place went deeper...

The dragoness felt more and more uneasy following him. She was only led by the enthusiasm she felt boiling in him. Once again he contained it, but he was undoubtedly excited.

"This is amazing, it goes well below ground level..." he commented, admiring the walls as they progressed. "It must have taken years to build this! That could be a sign that we could find something very valuable down here!"

They finally arrived to the end of the stairs, to be welcomed by two large rocks like Nimera pushed earlier. Except these ones were... not made of rocks. It was smoother, of a different color. It even had a strange smell, a bit similar to humans' usual weapons... metal?

The face of the human turned a bit less happy when he noticed something in the light of the torch. Another paper, stuck on the smooth surface.

"When the time is right..." he read and sighed, obviously disappointed. "Please no, not this riddle again, not now, I don't have time for this... What does it mean, when the time is right? Just open, you freaking door. Or at least give me a clue!"

He pushed against the massive door, to no success. Nimera tried to join him but even their combined strength wasn't enough to make it move. Not a single millimeter.

She could understand his frustration... Truth was, she was disappointed too. He had seemed so enthusiastic earlier that she burnt in a desire to have a glimpse of this human treasure. But the way was blocked, with the wonders probably waiting just on the other side. Touching it didn't unlock. All they were left with, was the question of which time it referred to.

"I can't believe it..." he sighed and sat against the door, frustrated. "The solution, right there, and they felt the need to test the guy who comes here in despair. How stupid did they have to be?!"

"We still have time to figure this out..." she tried to comfort him. "Maybe you can find a way to force it? You're a smart human after all."

“Oh I see many ways to do this, blowing up the door, asking you to try and melt it with your fire... But I don’t exactly have explosives, and what’s valuable could be right behind. Not forgetting that there could be a kind of security destroying it in case of break in. That would be a classic stupid human trait too, destroying something so others couldn’t have it...” He rambled, turning to put a hand on the smooth surface. “Open, pleaaaaase?”

Obviously, begging something that wasn’t even alive wouldn’t make much of a difference, but the dragoness said nothing in front of his despair. She didn’t know what to say; she couldn’t do more. And even if it got him out of his depression for a while, it wasn’t enough. She felt so helpless.

Fortunately, fate sent someone to her rescue there, even if not the most wanted way. A voice that echoed in the cave, calling for them. A familiar voice.

“Nimera? Human? Please it’s an emergency!”

“We’re down here, Helios.” The human shouted casually. It was impressive how he learnt to recognize his voice too, or maybe was it just because Helios would have been the only one to search for him.

The young dragon arrived a few seconds later, panting and alarmed.

“I’m... sorry... The others didn’t dare to come to you, so, I came...”

“Calm down, what’s happening?”

“Two humans are approaching. They are slow, but they are coming straight at us.”

“Well that will be a nice break, only two?” the human asked for confirmation, then smiled at the young dragon. “I just need to fetch a sword and...”

“I left one just outside. I thought you might need it.” Helios cut the sentence in haste.

“You’re amazing.” The human laughed and put a hand on Helios’ shoulder. He smiled, but it wasn’t his usual masking smile. It felt sincere, and... strangely warm. “It will be okay. I’ll handle it. Just one more thing before I go...”



“Y-Yes?”

“I try hard to not call you reptile... Do the same for me and use my name next time. Okay?”

“Alright...” Helios replied a bit sheepishly.

“Good, now you both stay safe.” He already climbed the stairs back up, leaving the two dragons alone.

“This I can deal with.”