

ON THE NATURE OF DRAGONS

III. Greed

“Ten sar. Eight if your friend lets me see what he’s hiding under that cloak.”

“Ten sar then,” Braun replied. He dropped the coins into the innkeeper's waiting hands. The innkeep seemed a very well-fed man. His loose purple vest sparkled in the warm lights of the chandelier which hung in the center of the lobby, though the silk met its match in the man's baldness. From inside his veil Leof looked down and silently gave thanks to the gods that the curse had spared his hair, if nothing else.

Leof's eyes flicked about nervously. His back burned with the stares of every sailor, sellsword, and serf in the room. He couldn't blame them. They made for a strange couple to be sure. Braun was just another weary and road-worn mercenary from the squabbling kingdoms of the far east-- a common enough sight in the ports of Tarmuth. Less common was to see those mercenaries accompanied by a seven-foot mute shrouded in black.

They had learned their lesson the hard way. After ranging through the wilds for almost half a year, the sight of fresh masonry and paved roads proved a joyful moment. Until they entered town for supplies, that is. Braun and Leof had grown so comfortable with each other that they underestimated the response common men might have to a man with claws and slitted eyes. It proved a convenient chance to brush up on their swordplay. Unfortunately, swordplay makes for poor supper, and Braun insisted Leof help him gather supplies at the next village. So, the cloak it was.

Leof found it amusing that the most prominent of his draconic features, his horns, turned out to be the easiest to hide. Braun found a blacksmith and used some of their remaining warlock's gold to have Leof's armet customized. Six inch horns weren't meant to fit inside a man's helmet, but horned helms were common enough. With their concave slant, it took some effort to slip both horns at once through the newly fashioned ports. Thankfully, the results proved well worth the effort. Between his fire-blackened armor and the wicked dragon horns curling from his head, Leof made for quite a sight. Nobody dared venture near enough to notice his horns sprouting from not metal, but flesh.

The rest of him proved far trickier to hide. He could still bind his chest tightly enough to slip some of his armor on; the breastplate was a tight fit but not so bad that any onlooker might notice. His hips, on the other hand, had widened to the point where he couldn't even fasten

his faulds or culet properly. They could only hang awkwardly at his waist, barely masking the bulge of his stomach through his mail and plackart.

In the privacy of his cloak Leof began rubbing over his belly, wincing. By the time he had first set out on this journey, he'd already developed a soft paunch thanks to the curse. Since that first night with Braun, however... it had swelled far larger. Leof and Braun both knew. Ever since that first new warmth the morning after, Leof felt it. He was powerless to stop it. All he could do was watch as those tender skyblue scales climbed further up his abdomen, bringing more roundness and sensitivity with every day, every centimeter.

Such an oddity could not be masked with armor alone. Neither could reptilian claws and paws, nor heavy tails that hung between the thighs. So here he found himself, a horned helmet atop a mummy swaddled in black. A mysterious figure that one might take for an assassin, or a cultist, or a silence-sworn knight... but one whose money was welcome enough to deflect unwelcome curiosity.

"Besides," Leof thought, "*It's actually quite pleasant under here.*" Even after years in full plate he always found the stuffiness of heavy clothing intolerable, but now the heat made him feel cozy. Drowsy, even. Perhaps it was simply his body anticipating the first feathered pillows it had seen in months.

"This way, please," the innkeep whistled. He pulled a ring of keys from the counter as he stepped out from behind. "You'll be on the third floor." Braun winked at Leof with a smile playing at his lips. Leof blushed. His hand slipped momentarily down the front of his pants before he coughed silently and shifted his legs, then folded his arms and followed after.

"Are you sure you don't want- uuuf- two separate rooms?" asked the innkeep. "It would be- hfff- no trouble at all to find you a second," he huffed as they hauled up the second flight of stairs. Leof watched each step carefully to make sure he didn't lose his balance. His two outer toes had started merging into one and his heels didn't seem all too keen on staying flat against the ground.

Braun shook his head. "No, thank you, but the one room is fine. We are used to sharing a--" he caught himself. "We're used to sharing. Cheaper, safer."

"If you insist," the innkeep wheezed as he pulled the keyring from his belt and struggled with the lock on a large oak door. "All yours until supertime tomorrow. Rest well, you fellows look like you've earned it," he said, turning back the way they came. Leof followed

Braun inside, but not before catching one last nervous glance from the innkeep as he disappeared down the stairs.

“Is he gone?” Braun mouthed, pointing out to the hall with one hand while hanging up his bow and quiver with the other. Leof leaned his sword into the nearest corner and shook off his cloak, then ducked his head out the doorway both ways. The hall was filled with nothing but the lonely glow of whale oil lamps over red-trimmed tapestries. Leof leaned in and turned back to Braun with a nod.

The men stared at each other.

In a flash they entangled. Braun fumbled with the clasps of Leof’s armet, lifting the cheek piece and visor and shimmying the entire thing up over his horns.

“Raaaagh- ouch!” Leof snarled as he tore into the wrappings at his wrists. “Watch the ears, take it slower,” he complained with half-lidded eyes.

“Sorry,” muttered Braun as he finally worked the helm free and blindly set it on the table behind him, already feeling for the latches of Leof’s pauldrons. “Just relax, Leof, let me,” he whispered, nibbling at Leof’s ear. The knight shuddered and closed his eyes, the long tapered cups of his ears twitching much to Braun’s delight. Leof always loved the ear nibble.

The two somehow made their way over to the bed, leaving a trail of armor pieces and clothing in their wake. Leof gripped Braun’s ass tightly and collapsed backwards onto the covers, pulling Braun over with him. He gazed up at his friend with painted yellow irises. Under the electrifying influence of the curse his eyes had cast off all memory of blue and indigo and inverted entirely. As Braun freed his shapely legs with a quick tug, Leof wondered whether he had gotten used to staring into a dragon’s eyes, or whether he was just that good at hiding his disgust.

Braun leaned in to plant a kiss on Leof’s flush lips. As they sank into each other’s breaths, he began playing with the wrappings around Leof’s breast. Leof opened one eye and slapped Braun’s hand away.

“No,” he said. “No, leave them alone.”

Braun sighed. “Isn’t it painful? Keeping them bound up like that?” He gestured down towards the squished lumps.. Faint nubs outlined where his nipples peaked. And even flattened, the swell of Leof’s cleavage from his rib cage was unmistakable.

Leof bared his fangs and growled.

“Fine, fine.” Braun raised his hands in mock submission. “Sorry.” He scrunched up his freshly-removed shirt and tossed it at the wall, then slowly snuck his hands towards the inside of Leof’s thighs.

Leof giggled as his friend carefully spread him. The scales at his thighs were soft, skyblue diamonds like those on his belly, arranged in neat horizontal ridges that tickled when Braun brushed against them. A soft moan left his lips as he felt himself opening fully to Braun, his puffy slit exposed and dripping eagerly.

He whimpered as Braun leaned in with a smirk, stealing a sly glance at Leof’s excited gasps before moving in for a taste of his sweetness. Leof squirmed as Braun ate him out, caressing his pussy with kisses and lingering over his clit with a long, slow lick.

“AAHHHmmm, ooooooh,” Leof moaned as Braun dug in deeper. He raked at the back of Braun’s head, desperate for some sort of anchor to hold him in place as his body spasmed. His four-fingered claws clutched bunches of Braun’s sleek hair and his legs kicked into the air. Braun had only recently discovered his natural talent for cunnilingus, a talent that Leof’s drooling need found immensely useful and always welcome.

“Braaaaun,” he gasped. “OHH, stop, stop! It’s too much, they’ll hear us through the walls.” Leof grunted and clenched his legs involuntarily, hugging Braun’s head tight to his crotch. Muffled cries of alarm vibrated through Leof’s hips while his tail thumped against Braun’s chest, trying its best to curl around him.

Leof blushed and pried his legs apart, releasing Braun to sit back up and gasp for air. “Sorry, sorry!” he squealed, turning his eyes away.

“It’s fine, Leof,” Braun coughed. “You seem perfectly ready down there. Do you want...?”

“Yes!” Leof pleaded. “Spirits, please. I’ve needed this since the moment we walked into this damned city.”

Braun smiled and worked his way backwards off the bed, dragging Leof closer to the edge of the bed. “Alright,” he said. “Just... you’re right. Let’s try to keep it quiet.”

Leof nodded.

“Okay then, ready?”

Leof nodded emphatically.

“Here goes,” Braun declared as he lined himself up, hoisting Leof’s legs into the air by his anklets. Leof took a deep breath then bit his cheek as Braun slowly inserted himself.

“MmmmpHHHHHMFMMMMM!!” Leof sputtered as he tried to muffle his delight. It was heaven, the sensation of Braun’s cock sliding against his lips and into his cavernous depths. Absolutely heaven. Each time he felt more familiar with the topography of Braun’s swollen head, the bumps of his veins and the thickness of his plug. And with each thrust, he could feel his heat at once cooling and flaring into an inferno.

Braun grit his teeth and steadily worked into a moderate rhythm, grunting softly each time he thrust forward. He shifted his stance and moved his hands back down to Leof’s thighs, where he pulled him more tightly into his hips.

Leof finally lost control. “Yes,” he mewled. “YES,” he screamed. “OHHHH, Braun!” The archer hushed Leof’s lips, pointing at the floor as he continued to thrust.

“Ohh... ooohhhh,” Leof’s cries calmed. “Braun, keep going. Unnnnfh...”

“Are you sure?” Braun whispered. “I mean. I understand if you want me to pull out...”

“Fuck no,” Leof leaned his head back and practically sobbed with ecstasy. “Fill me up, for the love of the gods. It’s not as if, well... you know...”

Both men looked down at Leof’s belly. His swollen, pregnant belly. The belly they hoped might go away if they didn’t mention it outright.

“Okay,” Braun gasped. “You’re right. I’m coming, and when I come... I’m gonna come deep inside until it spills out.”

“God, you’re hot,” Leof spoke as they shared eye contact once more. “I’m so lucky...”

“And you’re so beautiful,” Braun growled as he leaned in closer to kiss Leof once more. “My own little dragoness...”

Leof went to protest that last phrase but his jaw went slack as he felt his muscles twitching, his insides burning and building. He loved it. He loved the feeling of balls slapping against his scaly thighs, of his mate digging his hands deep into his muscles and groaning. He was getting close. So close. Closer. Almost there. Almost. There.

“I’m coming,” he moaned. “I’m coming Braun I’m coming I’m... aaahghhHHHoooOOHH!!” He breathed in sharply and bit his tongue as he felt his world exploding. His tail slammed against the side of the bed and froze there, contorted and trembling.

“Fuck,” Braun muttered. “Fuck, I’m coming too. I’m- OOF!” The archer seized up then threw himself down over Leof’s spasming form and drove in deep. He sighed as he felt himself emptying, soaking in the dampness of the payload delivered into Leof’s quivering passage. The two relished in the delightful squish that accompanied his spent manhood as it withdrew from its velvet sheath. Leof’s claws curled helplessly in the air.

Still in the throes of his climax, Leof faintly felt a weight on his chest smothering him. He tried to wriggle out from under it. The weight suddenly lifted and he found himself returned to the waking world, blinking at the ceiling with heat dissipating through his pores. He turned his head to see Braun sprawled to his side, recovering his breath himself.

“This curse is the best thing that ever happened to me,” Braun murmured with a tired smile.

Leof scowled.

“We need to talk about this.”

“About what?”

“About...” Leof motioned towards his belly, then his groin. “This.”

Braun swallowed and closed his eyes. “Alright, so, let’s talk.”

“Back there. You called me ‘your little dragoness.’ What the hell does that mean?”

Braun shrugged. “I don’t... I don’t know, it just sounded sexy at the time.”

“Is that how you think of me now?” Leof raised his voice. “I’m some slut beast you own?”

Braun turned to Leof, his brow furrowed.

“Of course not. You’re...” he hesitated.

“I’m what?”

“Well, you’re my partner. And someone I... I think I loved for a long time. But you were a man before, so it wasn’t possible... but now you’re a woman, and-”

“I AM NOT A WOMAN!” hissed Leof. “Not a woman, nor a dragon, nor your lover.”

Braun blinked. “What do you mean? Not a woman? Look at you, for spirit’s wisdom. You have tits! You have a vagina! And,” he exclaimed, pointing at Leof’s belly, “You’re pregnant.”

At the mention of the p-word Leof scrunched up his face and turned away. “No, no no, no no no NO Braun. This is just a curse. It’s temporary. Don’t call me your dragoness, don’t think of me as your woman. I am Leof. I’m still a man, still a dragon-slayer. And I’m still JUST your friend.”

“I’m not sure, Leof,” Braun sighed. “If it’s what you want, fine, I’ll call you ‘he’ and ‘him’. But we can’t deny the reality of things... I mean...”

He yawned and sat up. “You know what, it’s not important. Let’s go to bed.”

Leof pouted. “No. I want to hear what you were going to say. Please.”

Braun groaned and fashioned a backrest with a couple spare pillows. “I mean... I just finished plowing you. Literally every day, we fuck. On your terms.”

“It’s the curse...” Leof murmured.

“I don’t think it is, Leof,” he said, shaking his head. “The anklets can’t talk. They’re not the ones begging me to ‘fill you up.’ You’re the one choosing those words. It’s you. You who constantly teases, who keeps trying to feel yourself up when I’m not looking. You don’t seem to really *mind* having girl parts most of the time. At least, you don’t act like it. You’re the one who forced us into this, right? For half a year you got by without the sex. But after one *single* time in the middle of a desert, a memory that I’m still not sure *wasn’t* a dream... suddenly you need me every night? The curse doesn’t work like that, it’s slower. So don’t pretend here. We make love because you like it. Because WE like it. Our relationship has moved way beyond friendship.”

Leof buried his face in a pillow and groaned. “I swear it’s the curse. The curse makes me say those things, feel these things. I can’t help it. Not that I don’t enjoy it... but...”

“But it’s just a means to an end,” Braun finished for him. “But it’s not. You and I both know it. We know we can’t go back. This doesn’t end when we lift the curse. We’ve crossed a line here and neither of us will want to cross back. This is so much more than mere relief.”

Leof rubbed his temples. “But...It...it just... it just feels so wrong. I feel like I’m losing control, I’m not myself. I can’t be Leof anymore, I’m just some confused lusty lizard-thing that stole a suit of armor and pretends its a knight. I don’t know...”

Tears began to well up in Leof’s eyes. He dug his face into Braun’s chest and curled into a ball. Braun frowned but hugged him tightly, nonetheless.

“Am I a monster, Braun? Am I turning into a monster? How can you feel anything but disgust towards someone who is becoming something you’ve spent your entire life fearing or hating? Something you’ve made a career out of hunting? Everything is all upside-down.”

Braun was silent.

Leof grew more distraught. “I’m really getting ugly now, aren’t I? All scaly and spiny. Nobody would recognize me anymore. It’s a wonder they’ve not killed me yet.”

“You’re wrong, Leof,” he answered after a few moments. “You’re beautiful. This curse is changing you but you always were beautiful and always will be. The scales and the claws and the tail, they don’t belong to a dragon, they belong to *you*. And seeing them on you makes me admit there’s a certain quality to dragonishness. You’re vibrant, and exotic and... well, incredible, really.”

The purple-blue scales on Leof’s cheeks burned bright red, and his yellow eyes sparkled, though he quickly hid his face under the blankets.

“Gah, stop it. enough of this nonsense. I’m tired,” he grumbled. “Talk later. Let’s sleep.”

“We still need to talk about your preg--”

“Tomorrow, Braun. We’ll worry about it tomorrow.”

Leof turned on his side and grabbed a pillow, hugging it tightly as he scooted in closer to Braun. He smiled as he felt his friend snuggle into him, wrapping his arm around his waist and pulling the covers over them. Sex felt nice, but it was nothing like the comfort Leof felt in having someone to spoon against in the night, someone to keep him warm. As he drifted off, Leof decided that once the curse lifted, he would still allow Braun to sleep with him like this. It would save them money on their sleeping equipment. Yes, that was the reason.

With a cute yawn, he was out like a light. No dreams would disturb him tonight. The curse always seemed satisfied as long as Leof went to bed with seed still oozing from his slit.

Just as his mind began to stretch its muscles, basking in the morning warmth of springtime, Leof's peaceful awakening was interrupted by the shattering of earthenware. He sat up and, still blinking the fog of sleep away in the sunlight, reached for his dagger on the table. He brought it in close and leaned into Braun's chest as the archer raised his arms with a yawn.

“Leof? What's- oh.”

He and Leof stared at the man standing in their open door. The innkeep. His left hand was stuck open, his right supporting a platter filled with roasted fish and eggs that were slowly sliding down its slope. At his feet lay a shattered pot, the floor and shoes around it splattered with honey. The innkeep boggled at Leof.

Leof set his jaw and waited. When the innkeep's eyes roamed southwards, he realized he was flashing the man his scaly bits. He snatched the covers upwards to his shoulders with a sheepish grin.

The innkeep's wide eyes slowly narrowed as he curled his left hand into a fist.

“What is this?” he accused, pointing shaking fingers at Leof. He turned to Braun.

“WHAT is this? Why is there a... a filthy.... why is this monster-girl here? Is this your friend?”

Braun glared back. “Why are you in our room? Is there no privacy here?”

“Privacy!” the innkeep bellowed. “This is the finest inn in Tarmuth. Of course you get privacy. Just like you get a traditional Tarman breakfast brought straight to your room. I

knocked, no one answered, I slipped in planning on setting your food on the table for you,” he rambled. “And thank the spirits I did. I swore you two seemed funny.”



Leof’s knuckles turned white against his dagger handle.

“We’ve done nothing wrong,” Braun said.

“You’ve only broken the law,” the Innkeeper shouted. “I don’t know what you barbarian easternfolk know of the Coastlands, but these magic-spawn and their ilk are a menace. Banned from the city, all of them.” He tossed his head in mock amusement. “And here you’ve brought one into MY business expecting no problems. Well, let me make this clear. We don’t serve monster-girls here. Get out. Now.”

Leof leapt from the bed angrily and grabbed his sword.

“What do you mean you don’t serve monster-girls?! rawrggrrrrawrll” he snarled.

The innkeeper backed away into the hallway, hands raised.

Braun cringed. Leof was still mostly naked, his tail swaying from side to side as he coiled to spring. The remnants of the previous night were still dripping from his exposed pussy. His eyes were glowing like fire and his fangs were flashing in the light.

“Now you’ve done it,” he muttered to the innkeep. “He hates being called a...”

“I am neither a MONSTER nor a GIRL!” Leof yelled, sounding more like an angry dragon with each guttural growl.

“grrrrrrwoLLLL THIS IS JUST A SIMPLE CURSE THAT’LL BE REMOVED SOON! raAWWRGGG-”

The innkeeper blinked as Leof slowly padded towards him, cornering against the far wall of the hallway. “Uhm, hah, I- hey now, look, I’ll give you your money back, that’s fai-”

“A KNIGHT SHOULDN’T HAVE TO TAKE THIS ABUSE! GRRRRRRRRRR...” By now, the spectacle had heads poking cautiously out of other rooms down the length of the hall.

Braun hastily donned his clothing and shouldered his bow. He dashed to Leof and grabbed his arm softly.

“Leave him be, let’s just get out of here Leof. We’re drawing a lot of attention. If there really is a law then we don’t have much time.”

Leof turned to him, then shot back to the terrified innkeeper. He narrowed his eyes, lowered his sword, and spat at the man’s feet.

“I don’t want my damn money back. If it hasn’t melted in the reflection of your scalp then it’s tainted by your awful courtesy anyways. Buy yourself a wig with it you crab-fucker.”

Leof stomped back into the room and threw together his things, not even bothering to put on clothes before he slipped on his breastplate. He holstered his sword and tied his helmet to his bag with a sloppy knot then slung it all over his back.

“You’re lucky,” he sneered at the innkeep as he passed him on the way to the stairs. “A real monster-girl would’ve torn you to shreds for such rudeness.” Braun hurried after him, mumbling apologies to the man as he jogged past.

“Leof, wait up, wait!” Braun called as he caught up. “You left behind-”

Leof tripped as he rounded the corner of the stairs, tumbling down a few steps with a grunt. Braun gasped and rushed to his side. Leof pushed him away and stood, shaking out his arm and continuing on with a limp.

“Hey.” Braun sniffed. “HEY.” Leof looked back, eyes still drawn tightly.

“WHAT,” he growled.

“Are you okay? Godssmite, Leof, calm down a little.”

Leof sighed. “Fuck off, I’m fine. Let’s get out of this stupid city.” He took off through the lobby, ignoring the flabbergasted looks of the other patrons.

“Leof!” Braun shook his head and followed. His cheeks burned as he passed by the others.

“Leof,” he continued as he finally came side to side with the mostly nude knight, marching doggedly through the cobblestone streets of the still-slumbering city. “You left behind your hauberk. And your faulds.”

“Yes,” Leof rolled his eyes. “And my plackart. And my culet too. Yeah, I left them. What’s the point? They’ll never fit again anyways. Dead weight. Now shut up and walk with me.”

Braun sighed and fell in line with his partner. He tried to ignore the trail of dark splotches they left on the pavement behind them. Leof’s stomach rumbled. Maybe they should’ve grabbed some of that fish on their way out.

“Why do you still wear it?”

Leof took deep, slow breaths as he searched for better footing on the steep mountain face. The night wind whistled through his horns. Tiny, shriveled wings fluttered against the plate on his back. Having dragon’s wings might’ve been useful for this climb, but the curse wasn’t there to be helpful.

“What’s that now?” he responded, looking down to check whether he was kicking any ash into Braun’s face.

“You’ve already tossed most of it away. It’s slowing us down. But you’re still wearing it.”

Leof focused on the rocks above him. He tested one of the obsidian shards that stuck out near his head, but it snapped off and tumbled into the abyss below..

“I don’t know. Why not wear it? Armor is armor. The firelands are a dangerous place and we’re right at its gate.”

“You look ridiculous,” Braun countered. “You’re walking around with a half a suit of armor for no reason. The one place needing the most protection is sticking out like these mountains stick out from the horizon.”

“Fine, I’ll toss it if you toss your bow.”

Braun squinted up at Leof. “What?”

“Toss your bow. Dead weight.”

Braun shook his head. “You’re not making any sense.” The two stopped as the ground and rock began to rumble. They grabbed the rockpicks from their belt and slammed them into the earth, clinging to their reins with as much strength as their tired hands could muster.

“Dammit,” whispered Leof, scanning the path above. He could see the twin summits stretching far into the foggy sky. Their jagged silhouettes seemed to set the stars ablaze wherever they met with the atmosphere. An eerie saffron glow ebbed from the valley hidden there, tainting the landscape and any traveler who might venture near. Leof could only guess at the source of that light. He supposed they would find out soon enough.

Every tavern and castle seemed to house at least one retiree who had tried the Gate to the Firelands. Each and every one of them grew reticent as their stories approached the summit. Most returned. Very few gained passage.

“Are we clear?” asked Braun.

“Think so,” Leof answered. “Where were we... oh, right. Your bow, my armor...”

“I’m not tossing my bow.”

Leof shook his head.

“Of course not, I was just- *gahhhr... Look. Maybe it’s a little silly, but... the armor helps me. It helps me remember who I used to be, I think? It’s an identity thing.*”

Braun didn’t seem to hear. “Oh, I get it.” Braun’s eyes lit up after a few moments. “You’re trying to explain your armor is a part of your identity. Like my bow is a part of me.”

“*Exactly! Though, uh, you’re just repeating things I’ve already said.*” Braun gave him a funny look. Leof took another breath then sprang up to catch the next foothold. Got it.

Braun clambered beneath him, following the same route. “Uhm. Leof,” he began. “I can’t help but wonder if you’re still thinking of yourself as a man. Sometimes you seem downright.. Er... dragony. And the armor thing seems desperate.”

Leof cursed under his breath. Braun continued.

“Are you sure you’ve not started to see yourself as a-”

“It’s not important,” Leof cut him off. Braun heaved a sigh of relief for some reason.

I wish it weren’t true, he thought to herself. It’s harder and harder, thinking of myself as a man. It must be starting to bleed out of the dreams, she reasoned. Dammit, there it went again. His mind wandered. Maybe she wouldn’t feel... he wouldn’t feel so conflicted if his physical body wasn’t so outwardly motherly. *Why does it have to be so heavy?* He cooed softly and stuck her butt out to lean over and examine her tummy.

“You’re still... you, though. In there. You’re still Leof. Right?” Braun studied Leof closely.

“Yes. Still Leof.”

“I’m just worried. The curse isn’t slowing. You’re growing wings, the scales are covering your entire body,” he noted, watching Leof’s tail sway with trepidation. “What if it starts getting into your head?”

Leof grit her teeth. The final ledge was only a few meters away. The two continued climbing.

“Braun, one way or another, we’re almost there. We’re just a few feet from the gate to the Firelands. We’ve been traveling for a year and we’re finally here. We’ve made it this far, we WILL beat this curse. We MUST. I need you with me. To trust me. Please.”

“...To the end,” Braun assured her. “Can you see over yet? What’s there?”

Leof swung her arms over that final edge and pulled herself up. She rolled onto that sweet flat earth and finally let her muscles loosen, rebelling in their soreness.

A dragon’s tongue flopped out of her mouth, still panting as Braun’s head appeared over the dropoff. Sweaty and relieved he collapsed to all fours, thanking the spirits that he wouldn’t have to fear looking down any longer.

Leof swiveled her head to stare at the gate.

“Is... is that all real?” Braun marvelled.

The mountain pass before them carved deeply into the belly of the two-pronged summit. A massive reservoir of magma filled the far end of the valley, save for a long arch of stone which began a few yards in front of them and disappeared into a wall of lava that stretched across the entirety of the pass. The molten stone flowed endlessly from thin air- clearly magical in nature. But that was only the least impressive feature of the valley: the rest of it was buried in massive piles of sparkling gold and silver, peppered with rubies, emeralds, sapphires and ivory. It was larger and shinier than any of the hoards Braun and Leof had ever plundered combined.

Leof shrugged. “We’re here to pass through, not collect. Looks like we’ve got another bridge to figure out.”

“Right,” Braun nodded, shielding his eyes from the sparkling gold. “How do we get through the lava?”

Leof laid back again and mulled over the strange gate.

“Clearly enchanted,” she— he murmured. “Probably the entire hoard is enchanted or cursed. Wonder if we’re supposed to dig through it to find something that’ll make us fire-immune.”

“What about that pit, there?” Braun pointed at a circular well which sat right in front of the arch, the magma within almost glowing white with heat. “That can’t be for decoration.”

Leof looked at the well and smiled. “You’re right, I think. And there’s clearly some sort of riddle carved into the stone.”

Braun looked at Leof, his brow raised. “What? I don’t see any words carved at all. You can see something all the way from here?”

Leof frowned. “You mean you can’t see it? It’s clear as daylight. What are you, blind?”

“Nothing,” Braun said. “I’m just tired, let’s get closer.”

The duo walked slowly down into the valley towards the well. With each step nearer, Leof endured hotter and hotter waves of shimmering air crashing against her- his face and armor.

Braun skipped forwards through the last few feet and stopped at a kneel in front of the well.

“Is it close enough yet? You can read it?” Leof asked.

Braun scowled. “Leof, there’s nothing on here. Just some faded scribbles. It’s not any language we know.”

“I don’t understand,” Leof said. “It’s right there, I can read it to you right now.”

“Then what does it say?”

“Uh... it says.. *The Burning Earth abides no weakness.*” Leof read deliberately, crouching and circling the well as she traced the words. “*Those who seek to walk in ash must cast aside the sweetness of the rose, the sorrow of the waters, and the jealousies of the heart.*”

She looked expectantly at Braun. Braun threw his hands in the air.

“You’re messing with me,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Leof cocked her- *his* head.

“That wasn’t a riddle. You just... roared at me for ten seconds.”

Leof scratched behind his horns. “No, I... I did not! You couldn’t understand that? But... I..”

Braun shushed him. “Hold on. I think I know what’s going on here. The riddle, it’s probably-”

“*Written in draconic.*” they finished in unison.

“So the curse,” Leof said. “Of course it’s the curse.”

Braun pursed his lips. “I didn’t want to say anything. But in recent days you just... randomly become incoherent. You don’t seem to realize it. But you stop talking Common and slip into these odd growls and roars. Sometimes I can barely follow our conversations.

Leof seemed uncharacteristically calm.

“Whatever,” she... *he* laughed. “These anklets can’t surprise me anymore. It’s a good thing, anyways, we’d have a much harder time with this were it not for my spontaneous literacy.”

“True!” Braun smiled, losing himself in the reflection of Leof’s blue arms against her brilliant yellow eyes. Even in the darkest of times, Leof always found reason to laugh.

“So,” Leof continued. “The gist of it is ‘trash the sweet rose, sorrowful water, and jealous heart.’ Obvious enough I think. We need to find treasure representing those three ideas.”

“That’s gotta be... Ruby, Sapphire, and.... Ruby again?” Braun pondered.

“Hmmm. No, jealousy is green. Emerald, probably.”

“Alright. So we find ruby flowers, sapphire... teardrops? Rain? A goblet? Something like that, then an emerald heart.”

“Bingo,” Leof clicked his tongue and pointed at Braun. “You go right. I’ll go left.” With a nod, Braun was off, knee deep in dragon’s gold as he had so often found himself in life.

Leof almost stumbled as he... she.. uh-- he walked over to where the leftmost piles of gold met the obsidian floor. *Ruby flower, sapphire water, emerald heart*, she thought. *Ruby flower, sapphire water, emerald heart. Ruby flower...*

She groaned. It was far too close to the sea of magma for comfort, now. Waves of hot air roiled over her breastplate till she felt as if she were baking from the inside out. Her skin felt dry and she desperately wished she was still capable of sweating. Her chest felt as if it had caught fire, throbbing painfully against the confines of the armor.

Ruby flower, sapphire water.... “Godsmite, *what is happening?*” she sobbed. She dragged her heavy feet through the dunes of jewels, idly sifting through the wealth with her claws. Her skin felt too tight. Especially her belly. It felt like her muscles were turning to stone and sinking down into her legs, making her vision swim with nauseous spots of purple and black.

Something was wrong. Very very wrong.

“...Braun... ugh...” she cried weakly, dropping to her knees. The gold around her suddenly looked so warm and comfortable. She wanted nothing more than to curl up, sink into it...

“You’re just a little tired,” she encouraged herself. “Keep going. *Ruby, sapphire...*”

Leof saw a flash of green. She jerked her head and there it was, just a few yards away. A massive heart-shaped emerald suspended on a gold-encrusted necklace. The Jealous Heart.

Leof gasped for air and began crawling towards the artifact. It was so hot, though. So hot. *Why was it so hot?* She felt like she was suffocating. Still crawling, she felt wild panic spark in her thoughts. She couldn't breathe. Too hot, too tight. She had to get free.

Wait, no. He had to get free. *He, dammit, he!*

It was a meter away now. Beyond the mound in which it lay she could see the boiling surface of the molten lake. Too. Damn. Hot. Hissing, Leof threw her hands to her shoulders and hooked her fingers around the latches of her breastplate and pauldrons. She couldn't breathe, they had to go. She wrenched them loose, wriggled her way out of them.

Sweet relief. She gasped for air as if she'd just surfaced from diving for pearls. The heat seemed bearable suddenly, though her chest still suffered against its bondage. Leof lunged for the emerald necklace and snatched it up as she hurled her breastplate away. She couldn't bear to walk around in that prison anymore. It was forty pounds of useless baggage- as likely to save her from a sword or claw as the necklace she now clutched to her breast.

SPLOOSH

The last of Leof's plate sank without so much as a farewell wave from its former owner.

The weight in Leof's belly kept growing. She sucked in and massaged at the tender scales with his twitching claws. Rising to her knees once more she tore her armet free and let it roll down the slopes of gold. She could feel her pussy throbbing and leaking and she knew it had to be free too. Soon after, her greaves knocked into her armet as they too came to rest in a pit of metal far more valuable than their own steel.

"Hnnnnnnhhhhhh," the naked monstergirl grunted as she felt something snap inside her. All the weight in her belly shifted southwards and she whimpered in pain. Panting, she looked around frantically for Braun. There was nothing around but gold. Warm, soft, comfy gold. Gold she felt a sudden urge to dig into and squat and *push*. She needed to be warm. She needed to push that pain out of her.

Leof tried to rise to her feet so she could find Braun, but her muscles gave out halfway. She collapsed to her knees and *pushed*. The wrappings around her breasts frayed and tore, the soft flesh underneath straining to finally free itself from months of oppression. Leof opened her mouth to cry out in alarm but no sound came. All her breath was spent already, pushed from her throat by her shuddering diaphragm. The former dragon slayer closed her eyes and

with a final *RIIIIIIIPP!* the chest bindings burst open, leaving her aching breasts to bounce freely in the volcano's heat.

She fell backwards onto her hands, mouth agape at the size of her new endowments. Her black undershirt bunched uselessly at their crest. The same rows of soft blue scutes that lined her belly continued up her breasts, framing her erect nipples and climbing upwards to her neck in concentric rings.

For the first time, Leof's cursed form was totally exposed to the elements. They seemed to revel in the open air, soaking in the heat around them. Leof was horrified to feel her breasts expanding further, growing stiff as they filled out and her nipples began to glisten with droplets of milk.

"W-what the hell?!" she stuttered. As she spoke she felt her tongue poke out of her mouth, thickening, growing pointier. It felt too cramped in her throat. There was suddenly too much there. It was too long to hold in whatsoever.

Leof's ears twitched as her mouth and nose pushed out ever so slightly, giving her a dragonish muzzle with more room for her fangs to grow and lengthen to full points. None of this went noticed by Leof, however; at this point all that occupied her thoughts was the intense need to *push*. To get it out of her?

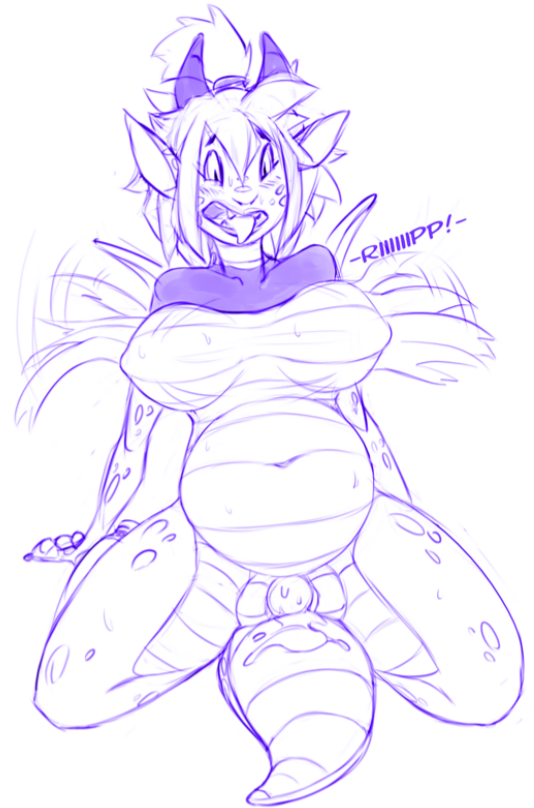
She thrust her hips forward with a long moan and watched with wide eyes as something round and hard was coaxed through the cramped tunnels of her hips. Finally, Leof felt it reach her lips. Round, hard, and the color of dusk. It poked wetly out of her throbbing sex.

"What is this thing?" she gasped. *Wait*.

No. No no no. NO. She knew this, she'd done this before. She had done this in her dreams.

Leof was laying her first clutch.

She clenched her eyes shut and pushed again. The egg, *her first egg* stretched her lips before snapping back inside with a trickle of birthing fluid. *C'mon, Leof, PUSH*, she thought. *HARD!!* Again, her thighs spasmed and her tail thrashed against the floor as she tried to force the



egg out. This time her efforts were rewarded. With a *PLOP* it slipped free and rolled down her tail, all the way to Leof's armet and greaves below. Leof threw her head back and spouted a jet of smoke and flame as it rolled away. The sensation of sudden relaxation after all that pushing and tension... . Simply divine.

Suddenly her anklets seared around her shins and she felt another weight dropping from her belly. Leof put one hand to her leaking breasts and tweaked the nipple. She stared at the trail of sticky juice that ran from her pussy to where the egg nestled against the remnants of her life as a knight.

That was the last thing she remembered before her consciousness snapped and she fell into a trance of clenching and laying and clenching and laying, always another to lay, then another, then another... a drake clad in black and red holding her...

Leof felt warm and cozy and proud as the fuzziness of sleep lifted. Someone was calling her name. She rose with a yawn and slowly opened her eyes.

An armed man stood in front of her, pointing at her threateningly. Leof sensed danger. *Her nest! This man found her nest!* She reared back and roared, then dove to her eggs and scooped them up, hissing and backing away with one clutched to her chest. He'd never get her eggs, *she'd kill him before... before...*

Leof blinked. Suddenly she realized the man in front of her was her friend. Her Braun. She looked down in horror and yelped, dropping the eggs and scrambling away. She gawked at her breasts. Stared down at her now-flattened belly. Then looked to the pile of eggs, then back at Braun.

He stared back, dumbfounded. Leof noticed the tent in his pants.

Her entire being burned with shame as she rose to her feet, the necklace still tangled around her right claw. She strode to Braun, looking him in the eye only once before grabbing the ruby-crowned sceptre and sapphire-encrusted goblet held in his outstretched hands. She turned away and walked straight to the well. The three objects promptly disappeared with a splash into the magma below.

Braun coughed as the lava gates yawned wide. Leof didn't say a word, nor did she look back as she disappeared over the passage and into the Firelands. Braun glanced over to the eggs.

With a sigh, he walked over and grabbed Leof's forgotten armet and gauntlets. He rose to leave but stopped, shaking his head. He pulled out his knife. He had to know.

At times the legendary Gate to the Firelands is known as the "Gate of Greed." If one presses hard enough, eventually the truth about the Gate can be extracted from any of the countless adventurers who have failed its trial. They might tell you of the wall of fire, how the heat burned. How easily they turned from their plans for adventure. Why bother? Why continue when they could turn homewards carrying treasure beyond their wildest dreams?

Of course, all the wealth they gathered melted into puddles the moment they left the valley. And when they turned back, the gate was gone. Flooded. Submerged forever under the fires of the mountain.

The enchantment was supposed to be a challenge. And yet, every once in awhile, the Gate met its match in those who saw the hoard as little more than a pleasant landscape, or people so preoccupied in their infatuation with *something else* that their hearts hardly had time for gold. For such individuals, the gate and its riddle were quickly forgotten.

The morning sun beat on the hunched backs of two figures, sitting cross legged on a tall outcropping of rock. Sprawled beneath them lay spires of black and rivers of orange, as far as the eye could see. From their perch they could see where the glowing horizon disappeared into the blue curvature of the planet.

Tears fell from the eyes of the larger one. Where they landed on her scaly knees, they puffed into clouds of steam and drifted away with the breeze.

"I don't know what I expected," Leof wept. "I got it in my head that I just had to reach the Firelands, that it'd be okay then. I was convinced I'd step through that gate and suddenly I'd be back to my old self." She twirled her claws inside the holes of her helmet, tossing it back and forth in her lap.

Braun leaned his head against her shoulder and put his arm around her back.

"But we're not even close, are we?" she sniveled. "All this way and I bet we're not even halfway there. The world is so much bigger than I ever imagined it could be, Braun. How could I have known..."

“Shh, shhh. It’s okay. We’ve made it this far. We’ll find him. Zenir. We’ll get this curse removed. I don’t care how long it takes.”

“You don’t get it,” Leof said. “I don’t think I’ve got much time left. I don’t know if you noticed, but I just laid eggs. EGGS, Braun. I’ve just laid nine dragon eggs. And I’m losing my speech...”

“They weren’t really dragon eggs,” Braun mumbled. “They were unfertilized, I checked. Just uncooked omelettes really.”

Leof snorted smoke from her nostrils. “Maybe. The worst part, though... is that I loved it. Braun. I think... I want to do it again. It felt so right to nest in that warm gold with the heat of the valley on my belly.... And my belly. It feels empty. By the spirits, it feels so empty! I can barely keep my head straight right now. I have to actively restrain myself from jumping you and milking the seed right from your dick. It’s getting to me Braun. I’m slipping away.”

Braun grabbed Leof’s cheeks and stared straight into his soul.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I don’t care what this curse makes you feel or do. I love you and I’m staying with you. We’ll find a way. I’ll do whatever it takes. Fill you with omelettes as many times as you need me to. Carry you across this blasted wasteland on my back. For however long you need before you feel yourself again.

The archer pulled the dragon-girl in for a long kiss. Leof tasted like roasted apples and spice and fire and he never wanted to stop tasting her. Nor she him. Sometimes a curse is needed to show someone who they are blessed with.

Leof smiled through her tears and pulled away from Braun’s half-lidded eyes. With a wink she turned around and leaned over, flicking her tail at Braun’s nose.

“We should get moving, then. But before we go,” she blushed. “Let’s make breakfast.”

Braun eyed her swaying breasts and began removing his shirt. “Duty calls,” he sang.

“Mmmh. To be clear, you’re not going to cook my eggs.” Leof’s tail slithered down to prod at Braun’s length. She surprised Braun with her eager grip.

“No, of course not,” he relented. “Whatever you say.”

“Good,” she sang, hooking her tail underneath Braun and dragging him closer. “Continue.”

