

Namira remembered stories her mother used to tell, stories warning her of the danger of dragons, their powerful and terrible nature. Shadows of dragons would haunt her nightmares, wake her from restless sleeps, which made her current career choice an odd one. She was an adventurer by trade, but that tended to devolve into being a bounty hunter, dealing with marks that troubled the local magistrates. Monster after monster had fell to her traps, fell to her sword or fell to her looks. She was a bit of a triple threat when it came to monster hunting, able to take the biggest and the smallest of bounties. Even dragons had shattered against her prowess; it only made her fitful nights seem funny in retrospect. Waking up in a cold sweat was a thing of the past, and waking up in some inn bed was the thing of now.

Namira wasn't your average adventurer; she was an arachne, a race of people that were half spider and half human. When she fixed her raven hair in the morning, it was three pairs of sleepy eyes that stared back at her in the mirror. Along with silky, smooth skin was hard and black chitin, bits of nature-made armor that turned her legs into sharply pointed fangs attached to a lumbering body. The bulky spider half below her was an armored wagon, a steed and body in one. She just bemoaned the cost of armoring herself and how hard it was to maneuver such a body in spaces not designed for it. Scuttling about her inn room for the week, she worked carefully to avoid any crashes or broken furniture; a light coin purse and furniture replacement were not eager bedfellows. That light coin purse is why Namira had made her way to Rasperia, the nation in the woods. It was a land of the evergreens, a place where the woods could not be kept at bay; settlements were rare, but valuable, and a nation with a problem. A dragon had been besieging the sleepy settlements of Rasperia, hoarding goods and demanding tribute like she was collecting taxes. Villages that didn't, had half their population gulped up in a single gulp, or that's how the story went. With people scared, it would be some easy coin; she donned her half-plate and stowed her gear on her back before walking down.

The tavern down below was fairly scarce, bereft of people in the early morning, the few there were nursing a hangover or stopping by for some breakfast. It was an old place, gray wood worn down by decades of trodding; the bartender, a portly orc woman who looked like she'd mothered a litter in her days. Namira scuttled her way across the room, beelining for the wanted board and the bounties it held, her eyes fixed on a single one. The bounty for the dragoness, the only image, was a crude illustration of a green dragon. Namira reached a hand out to snatch it from the board, only to be met with resistance; holding onto the other side of the paper was a hand, and attached to that hand, a familiar face.

"Ooooooh, looks like webhead finally beat me to a bounty." A cocky voice called to Namira.

"Hands off, Lucian, this is mine. Go be a vulture somewhere else." Namira scowled as she tried to yank the poster from his hands.

"Heh, as if you could handle this dragon. I hear she's as tall as the castle back home." Lucian tugged at the edge of the paper, pulling it back towards him.

Lucian was Namira's oldest friend and rival, the one she had grown up with, and the biggest pain in her sizable ass. He was the roguish type, a dexterous fighter with a greatsword and padded armor. Sporting flowing brown hair that stopped just above his neck, he fashioned himself the suave hero type. People in town loved to see his antics, but he was a lazy glory hog that stole Namira's thunder. Any time they ended up on a quest together, it was a huge hassle and not something Namira desired to repeat.

"I think I can handle her quite fine; I slew that giant at the coast. He was just as tall." Namira scowled, pulling the post back towards her.

"Yeah, but that giant didn't breathe fire. Last I heard, your hide is crushproof, not fireproof." Lucian smirked, pulling it back towards himself.

"Not like you're any more fireproof than I am." Namira's face scrunched in annoyance.

"I'm faster." Lucian never dropped his smug expression.

Their little contest of wills continued for a while, pulling the paper back and forth as they exchanged barbs. The image of the dragon stretched on the parchment as its fibers stretched, the surprisingly sturdy post crinkling in their arguing hands.

"Quiet, the both of ye!" The barkeep shouted, her bellowing roar bristling the duo's hair as their arguing ceased.

"She started it." Lucian let go of the paper, pointing an accusatory finger towards Namira.

"What?" Namira was shocked and a little hurt, looking between Lucian and the innkeep.

"I don't care who started it, I'll finish the both of you. Now are ye going to take that bounty or not? Can't have you tearing my only poster." The innkeep shook her head in annoyance.

"Fine, we're both taking this job. We'll be leaving immediately." Namira huffed, planting the poster on the bar in frustration.

Her legs were splayed out, smacking Lucian any time he tried to say something stupid, which was anything he said. The normal formalities came about; the innkeeper brought down her stamp, while Lucian and Namira brought down theirs. With the paper signed and folded, the bounty was theirs until they or the bounty perished.

"I'll be back within four days, so keep my room available." Namira held her hand up as she started for the door.

"I'll get my own when I get back." Lucian gave the orc a salute as he jogged after Namira.

"Damn kids, should have just gotten a room together and been done with it. Gonna take 'em decades to figure each other out." The orc shook her head as she went back to polishing glasses.

Outside of the Inn, Namira was already making her way across town, picking up the supplies she procured the day prior. Every step of the way Lucian was next to her, picking up supplies from the same shop. Dried bread and meats for rations, purified water, and wine for the road and adequate sleeping rolls for the both of them. Namira's eyes twitched in frustration as she left town; she knew this bounty was going to shave years off her life.

"How can it be so hard to find a dragon? Usually they are flying overhead, and we can trace them back to a den or something." Lucian bemoaned the situation as he inspected the underbrush for breakage.

"Well, maybe it wouldn't be so hard if you'd shut your mouth for more than an hour. The dragon can probably hear us." Namira shouted back down from the treetops, scuttling through the branches for any signs of disturbance.

They had spent three days on the road, three agonizing days in each other's company, scouring the forest for any signs of a dragon. Normally, dragons weren't the cautious type; they were apex beings and confident to a fault. A dragon on their own was often older than the land that surrounded it, and that was likely true for this one, which was impressive for Rasperia. The chirping woods around them were ancient, filled to the brim with old life and dark as the night. Towering trees stretched far above them, branches mingling into a canopy that light didn't penetrate. Their trunks rang with age, large enough that an ogre would think it easier to move around them. All around them the sounds of nature flitted about, magical creatures just out of their sight, fae just out of their vision. Fae creatures were always present in these ancient woods; the older they were, the more prevalent. Little tricksters that would give you a pie with a happy face, only for it to turn you into a blueberry when you took the first bite.

Ubbbuub

glluullr

Nnnnffff hnnnnnnggg

Odd noises filled the forest as they traversed through, sounds normally associated with a swamp. A heavy gurgling followed by the sound of flitting wings and struggles; they were faint sounds at first, hard to hear among the snapping branches. As Namira and Lucian delved

further into the woods, the sound became more obvious, practically right next to them until Namira heard a branch break and Lucian's voice called out.

"Ha, look at this Namira." Lucian held a wriggling creature between his fingers.

It was a small winged pixie, but her body was too rotund to fly; she looked like she'd been plucked from the branches like a berry.

"This could lead to something." Namira secured a web to her branch as she lowered down the forest floor. "Why is she so fat?"

"I am not fat you, monstrous cow; I am simply *urb*..." The pixies' struggles were interrupted by her belch.

"Not fat, eh?" Lucian snickered, poking the pixie in her gut before getting a sharp bite in his finger.

"The audacity to think you could touch my body so freely! Why, I *rllllll* oooh. You have angered my stomach." The pixie clutched her hands to her stomach as it let out a low howl.

Pbbfftttt

hhooorrrrp

For such a small creature to release such a loud gust was fairly impressive, her tiny body trembling as a multicolored spray of fumes blew from her backside. Her stomach was distended, a whitish well of blue flesh that was almost larger than her body. She swayed in Lucian's grasp as her expulsion fluttered past her tiny cheeks, the force enough to send her swinging. Swaying back and forth as Lucian struggled to hold onto her slick wings, her body slipping further each time as her eruptions petered out. Namira noticed this was on purpose, while Lucian looked befuddled at the whole thing, Namira could see the pixie's devilish grin. There was little time to act, Namira quickly rummaged through her pack, looking for the first container she could get ahold of.

"So what do you make of this? I think she's...woah!" Lucian leapt back in surprise as the Pixie freed herself from Lucian's grip.

"Aahahaha You impudent fool! It was an act! I only appeared to be helplessly bloated; now you shall..." The pixie's declarations of supremacy were muffled by a sudden imprisonment in a clear cloth Namira wrapped around her.

The cloth was something Namira had acquired in her adventure to save the Alchemists of Farrarune, it was the makeshift flask. A small bit of cloth that could harden into a glass container at a moment's notice, then be returned to its prior shape with a single snap of the

finger. Its wrinkled surface hardened as soon as Namira had secured the top, stiffening into a flask large enough to contain the pixie. Namira watched her pound against the glass in frustration, her bloated stomach pressing into the surface with her anger. The pressure against her stomach caused a muffled outburst as the flask filled with her own radiant gas.

"Good reflexes. I don't know why, but I feel like this fairy can lead us to the dragon." Lucian chuckled as he poked the side of the glass, only to see the pixie rage against his impact.

"She's not a fairy, she's a pixie, and of course she can. That dragon is likely why she's so miserably stuffed." Namira brought the flask to eye level, her red eyes reflecting off the glass as the pixie taunted her with rude gestures.

"Explain." Lucian was confused by Namira's response; she wasn't the type to go off of a hunch like he did.

"If you put your head in a book instead of some maiden's dress, you would know. The Pixies of Rasperia feast on treasure and coin. It helps their magic in some way, which is why our friend here is so noisy. She's digesting that coin into the arcane." Namira paused, feeling an odd kinship with their little friend. "I have an idea. Get ready to catch her if I mess this up."

"Aye aye, captain." Lucian smiled, his nonchalant demeanor turning to a steeled focus.

Namira needed to be quick with this; she likely wouldn't get a second chance: with a swift snap of her fingers, the glass softened into cloth. The shroud collapsed around their prisoner as she bolted from the top, arms outstretched and ready for vengeance.

Snap

Namira snapped her fingers again, turning the flask back into a hardened shape. The lip of the decanter was wrapped firmly around the Pixie's midriff, a glass bubble that encircled her gut. She was trapped from the chest down, her petite breasts brushing against the glass as she kicked her legs, wings half tucked into the flask.

"You, nasty, nasty spider! You dare trap me in glass!? I'll show you! bring the rain to wash you away." The pixie lunged and snapped against the glass, trying to gnaw away at the lid.

"You're not in much of a position to make threats like that; you're just lucky I'm in a good mood today. I see you've been eating good today; tell me where you found the feast." Namira narrowed her eyes, channeling her annoyance into something more fierce.

"I will not help such wretches; I would rather...ooooh!" The pixie's eyes went wide as a coin hovered over her head.

"If you help us, there will be plenty more of these in store." Namira placed the coin in the pixie's arms.

"You offer a good deal. I might consider." The pixie grinned happily as she bit chunks from the coin.

"One coin for one question. That's my offer." Namira pulled a coin from Lucina's purse, holding it up in front of the small creature. "My first question. Can you tell us your name?"

"I am called Listin, the great and terrible, ruler of the *ompph*." Namira shoved a coin between Listin's lips before she went on a further tangent.

"Good. Hey, Listin, can you lead us to the coins you ate to get so big?" Namira held out another coin, this time from her sack.

"You have a deal, spider, but only if you keep giving me your treasures. I hunger and your gold tastes...good." Listin stacked another coin atop of the others, snacking on them like a sandwich.