

Early in the evening though it was, the ballroom was already full of the buzz of chatter. Men and women, young and old, dragons and others: people of all sorts were gathered in the vast chamber with more arriving with every passing moment; the only requirement for their presence being that they had an invitation (and perhaps a little gift) to present at the door.

Souple, the hostess and organiser of the gathering, watched the crowd swelling from a balcony perched above the polished tiled floor – mostly a pale golden brown but patterned with a large intertwining ribbon of a darker brown, almost black, with thinner such vines marking the boundary of the room proper, beyond which were the white and gold pillars which left doors to the kitchens and other such utilities in shadow. The balcony itself was largely concealed from the gaze of any guest who may have deigned to look in its direction, the bulge in the upper part of the wall the only clue that there was anything other than what appeared to be an ancient tapestry. The dragoness, however, could see into virtually every corner of the ballroom from her vantage point, for the woven fabric was but a hologram to preserve the privacy of this refuge for the nobility.

She leaned forward a little to peer down at what was hidden beneath the floor of the balcony, her hands on the balustrade which dug into the large expanse of regal flesh covered by her gown: tables, around twenty of them and each capable of accommodating a dozen guests, were poised to roll out onto the floor, already laid with gilded tablecloths, cutlery to suit every type of dextrous appendage, side plates, and drinking vessels. Behind them were chairs, varying in size but all of the same design: seat and back of black velvet, the legs decorated in helical gold and silver.

Ah, yes...the glorious high life: where Souple belonged.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew the dragoness' attention away from the invitees still entering from the far side of the ballroom: a small robot had just appeared at the top of the carpeted stairs.

"Chef says that the first course is being plated up now," he said, peering up at the dragoness. His body was pale grey, interrupted only by the millimetre-wide uniformly straight cracks where his joints were; the only break in his monochrome aesthetic was his face: a vaguely conical thing of toughened glass, pointed forward in what could have been an imitation of a muzzle, coloured teal with darker green mapping out his somewhat feline facial features.

Souple nodded, smoothing her gown across her large, protruding belly. "Make the announcement, then. I shall address the guests momentarily."

"Yes, Highness," the robot replied, "There is another matter I must discuss with you this evening, however."

"If it's not urgent, it can wait until later," she said dismissively, stepping towards a waiting elevator, her gait masking all but the smallest hint of a waddle.

"Of course, Highness," he submitted deferentially.

The representation of a headset microphone appeared on his facial display and he began to speak to the assembled crowd as the elevator doors slid smoothly closed: "My lords, ladies, gentlemen, and honoured guests, may I please ask you to step back to the edge of the ballroom: dinner is about to be served."

The elevator arrived at the ballroom floor as the tables and chairs were trooping past, gliding along a few inches above the tiles. Several of them paused upon detecting Souple's royal presence nearby;

she simply raised an elegantly pudgy hand and waved them onwards, happy to wait until the room was decked appropriately before speaking to her guests.

The seating arrangements were, as per her instructions, for the tables to be arranged in concentric circles: the outer layer for people of lesser social standing as well as those she had felt obligated, though reluctant to invite; the inner for important dignitaries and a few accorded 'honoured' status – meaning those from whom she required some personal or diplomatic service; and a single table in the very centre of the room where she, her family, and her close friends would dine. The furniture did exactly as instructed, as Souple could see from her own large, thronelike seat stationing itself at the centre table, facing the entrance.

With all in readiness, the dragoness stepped out of the shadows that shrouded the outskirts of the ballroom, emerging into the brightness through the gap the onlookers had left for the furniture. The moment they caught sight of her, the assembled guests broke into applause that echoed off the high, frescoed ceiling. She bowed graciously, her gown dimpling into her side and belly rolls as she did so, then held up a hand to recall everyone to silence.

"Welcome, my dear friends," she called to the two hundred or so eagerly watching faces, her voice carrying almost as well as had her robot's announcement before, though she did not need anything but her own lungs to generate the volume, "I do hope that you all have a most enjoyable evening. You should all have been provided with a small device in exchange for your invitations. Pressing the button upon them will activate a hologram highlighting where you will be seated."

There was an immediate outbreak of rustling and clicking but Souple saw no holograms: the locators had been designed to be visible to their user alone.

She smiled in dignified amusement before concluding her instructions, "If you would be so kind as to allow those allocated places at inner tables to take their seats first."

A handful of familiar faces – mostly dragons like herself - stepped out of the crowd lining the edge of the floor and picked their way to the centre table, Souple doing likewise a moment later. Once every one of the twelve most esteemed seats had a rump upon it, the next wave of guests found their places; when those destined for the outer ring of tables had seated themselves, waiters emerged seemingly from nowhere all around the ballroom, serving up the first course of the meal from the high table outwards.

As ever in this most regal of residences, the food was extravagant in flavour, presentation, and proportion. Each guest had selected their choices of dishes beforehand from a menu provided with their invitation and had indicated the rough quantity they would require – this, of course, would be at least somewhat exceeded.

The first course was a selection of soups and breads; Souple had opted for an ancient family recipe whose ingredients she had never thought to discover: all that mattered was that it tasted sublime. Her serving was a veritable vat of thick, light brown liquid into which she regularly dunked slice after slice of bread fresh from the oven

She and her fellows of greatest importance chatted amicably as the dishes were quickly emptied despite their size, then replaced with the second course; this plate was stacked elegantly high with a variety of vegetables and meats marinated in a reddish-brown sauce and would have been more than enough for most of that night's guests' whole meal, yet Souple polished it off comfortably and sat waiting for more.

Course number three was also comprised of meat and vegetables, only this time in the form of the filling for dozens of not insubstantial carb-heavy parcels. Once again, this plate of food was a veritable feast in itself, its scale drawing surreptitious glances from those guests at nearby tables who had never dined with Souple before; they could now see how the dragoness had gained her legendary proportions, and why her personalised dining chair shared a passing resemblance with a park bench.

Every guest had been regularly plied with wines from the palace's own vineyard throughout the first three courses, each dish accompanied with its own vintage. The central table in particular had consumed a great deal of red, white, and rosé: the wait staff had delivered, not a glass with each plate of food, but half-bottles to each of the dozen royals and their closest acquaintances who were almost, but not quite, as vast as Souple.

Dessert rounded off the meal, requiring many to engage the use of their mythical 'dessert stomachs' to be able to partake in the delectable sweets. A wide assortment of cakes and puddings were presented to each attendee in numerous large, glass-fronted carts for their perusal, each person typically selecting one, perhaps two of the provided options; Souple and her mighty associates, as one might have expected, gathered up to half a dozen chocolate and fruit-based treats about them to complete what, as far as the hostess was concerned, was the highlight of the evening.

A collective sigh filled the ballroom as all sat back in their chairs, their bellies satisfyingly full of the finest cuisine available on the entire planet. Though her belt was as long as many of her guests were tall, Souple could feel that it had become uncomfortably tight after an evening of what many would have called 'gluttony', but what was to her simply a good, hearty meal. She fumbled for the glinting golden buckle which, along with the leather strap that made up the rest of the accessory, was cutting inches deep into the fat of her belly, sides, and even back, causing the pliable flesh to bulge around it, drooping down to partially conceal it in places. Her gut sagged forward in her lap as she at last released it from its bindings, free to slosh further towards her knees than perhaps it ever had done before.

If this gathering had been for Souple and Souple alone, it would have more or less ceased at the conclusion of the meal, but she knew that her invitees expected rather more than just to be fed from such an evening. She allowed the babble of talk around her to meander on for ten minutes or so, occasionally joining in with the conversations of her neighbours, before pushing herself laboriously to her feet to speak to the gathering once more.

"I do hope you enjoyed your meals, ladies and gentlemen," she said loudly and clearly, the last few mumblings dying out as she spoke, "I would now like to ask you, again, to move to the outside of the ballroom to allow the room to be set up for the remainder of the evening."

Chairs glided silently back from their tables as everyone rose and retreated behind the line of darker tiles at the edge of the floor, Souple doing so likewise in a rather plodding fashion, the golden patterns around the hems of her gown curling, swirling, and shimmering as she walked.

The furniture glided back from whence it had come to be replaced with a gilt-edged stage at one end, a collection of smaller tables and chairs at the other, with a black soundproofing wall extending between the two, cutting the room roughly in half. The royal robotic band ascended the steps to the platform with its instruments, awaiting the signal to begin playing.

"Coffee and liquors will be available at the southern end of the ballroom," Souple called, indicating the side populated by the less elaborate furniture, "Feel free to flit between the two halves of the room at your leisure." She gave a small wave of her chubby hand, and the band began to play.

Rather fewer guests chose the quieter end of the room once all was prepared, Souple among this minority: she had no inclination to dance or otherwise exert herself, especially when she was so full.

Barely had she acquired a dainty glass of her favourite digestif when she was accosted by a group of those whom she had invited by virtue of their influence: in this case diplomats from a neighbouring star system who had been seeking to deepen ties with her rather more powerful kingdom. Much as she would have preferred to find a seat (or two) to wile away the evening in a state of deepest relaxation, she *had* invited them for a reason; hitching her well-practiced fake smile onto her face, she engaged in their intended avenues of discussion as best she could.

Fortunately, rescue wasn't long in arriving. Little more than five minutes into the serious diplomatic talks on which this group, dressed in identical, oddly rigid-looking suits, were so intent, Souple felt a light tap on her broad hip. Looking down, she saw her robot peering up at her.

"Begging your pardon, Highness, but would we be able to discuss the matter I mentioned earlier?" he asked, shooting apologetic looks around at the assembled diplomats.

"Ah, yes," the dragoness said with a nod, attempting to appear as if this were a subject about which she was already knowledgeable. She looked to the envoys, trying not to seem too relieved by the interruption, "My apologies, this is a matter I have already postponed dealing with. If you'll excuse me, we can continue our talks later."

The group all bowed to each other, then Souple lumbered away towards the elevator in the robot's wake.

"So, what is it?" Souple questioned as she lowered herself onto one of the couches attached to the wall of the balcony, hidden from public view once more.

The robot stood dutifully beside her, clutching something she recognised to be a holographic informational card in front of him. "It's the latest round of alien assimilations, Highness."

"Oh, excellent!" she said with genuine eagerness this time, clapping her hands together and causing her upper arms to wobble from side to side for a moment, "Go on."

"It's mostly business as usual," the robot explained, using a finger to scroll through the information before him, "Three thousand one hundred and forty eight individuals have signed up and have been greenlit for processing, Bucol has voted to join us as a semi-autonomous province, the United Planets of Tarvin have applied but haven't yet met our requirements..."

"The people you rescued me from are Tarvid envoys, seems one of the four planets voted against joining us in their referendum," Souple interjected. As she was free from prying eyes, she was rubbing her hands over the surface of her belly, focusing particularly on where her belt had cut into it.

"In that case I'll instruct the Ministry of Admission to defer the Tarvids until the next round," he said, writing out an annotation with that same finger.

The dragoness nodded in agreement, looking far more relaxed now. "We can't be taking in systems with significant dissidence."

"That isn't what I wished to discuss with you, however, Highness," the robot continued distractedly. He had scrolled right down to the bottom of the holographic notes and was presenting the card to Souple, "This alien has applied. Our intelligence knows nothing about it. We don't know what it is, where it comes from, what its intentions are, and nor do any of the other galactic empires we have contacted. All we know is what it looks like and what we assume is its name, Varalens."

Souple peered at the holographic display which was showing her a picture of possibly the most bizarre and sinister-looking alien on which she had ever laid her eyes. Its entire body was dark grey, almost black and vaguely like that of a taur in shape, except its bulkier lower body seemed to be completely limbless. Its torso was thin and frail in appearance, as were its four arms which ended in small hands with three long, spidery digits. Upon its short, curved neck sat a head that looked far too large for it to support: though narrow, it was also pill-shaped with the back half pointing upwards, the front towards the floor; there was no trace of any eyes, ears, and only a pair of slits that could have been nostrils, but it did possess a mouth at the bottom of its head, slightly agape and visibly lined with small, viciously pointed teeth.

"Not the prettiest thing I've ever seen," Souple commented, pushing the card back towards the robot.

"Indeed not, Highness," he agreed, looking at her expectantly, "Should I deny its application?"

"Their," the dragoness amended, "We may not know anything much about this Varalens, but any sentient creature deserves to be placed above being an 'it'."

The robot lowered his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, Highness. Should I deny *their* application?"

"Have they shown any signs of malintent?"

"No, Highness, they just...applied."

"Then we accept. If there would be any danger in us assimilating them into our society, the process will find out."

The robot nodded, tapping his finger on the display again. "It is done, Highness. That is all I needed to discuss with you."

"Very well," Souple said, glancing down into the ballroom where she could see the Tarvid delegation loitering and keeping watch over the spot at which she had disappeared from their view. She sighed, smoothed away the creases of the deep violet fabric covering her paunch, then heaved herself to her feet. "I suppose I had better return to the festivities."

Several weeks had now passed: all of the approved assimilation applicants had been put through a rigorous screening process checking their suitability to become part of the Draconic Empire, the benefits they could bring to society, and any potential dangers they might pose to it; the Tarvids had withdrawn to negotiate with their dissenters. Now it was time for Souple to formally and personally welcome those who had been granted entry to her confederation of worlds who were of particular note: alien dignitaries were an obligatory inclusion on the ceremony's list of invitees, but she also felt compelled to extend the same honour to members of new species joining her realm; this would, of course, mean that Varalens would be in attendance.

Indeed, Varalens had been given the green light by the Ministry of Admission despite the mysterious alien's sinister appearance. Those who had interviewed and examined them had reported feeling

uneasy around them: Varalens appeared to be a being of significant intelligence, but few words and an unnerving propensity to appear suddenly and silently in areas they did not belong. Nevertheless, Varalens displayed no tendency towards aggression or any ulterior motives as far as the Ministry could tell, so was granted entry despite the misgivings of its officials.

The ceremony itself was to take place in the palace auditorium: though not the largest theatre on the planet, it was certainly the most lavish with an elaborately adaptable stage, curtains of crimson velvet, and seats that could be adjusted to suit its occupant – no small expense given that the venue could seat four thousand.

Souple, of course, watched the proceedings from the royal box which, like her ballroom balcony, was obscured from public view except for when she wished to make her presence known. She lounged comfortably on a chaise longue, built according to her specifications to be sturdy but nevertheless regal. Her attention towards the ceremony was of idle interest; as far as she was concerned, the main event was the private meeting with the new arrivals of import in a couple of hours' time. She wiled away the rather dull, tedious, repetitive spectacle of the master of ceremonies – in this case her Foreign Minister – inviting each group of migrants onto the stage to accept a welcoming gift with quiet chat with the friends she had invited to keep her company and enjoying the snacks she had ordered for the occasion.

As the president of what was now the Province of Bucol departed the stage to polite applause from the audience, the Foreign Minister invited Varalens to the stage. A hush fell over the assembled peoples: though different and alien they may have been to one another, none were as strange as Varalens who came slithering out into the spotlight on the main portion of their body, finding their apparently blind way to the slightly apprehensive-looking politician.

For every other new arrival, the Minister had given the audience some account of their background and why they came to be joining their new society; as so little was known of Varalens' origins and motives, his speech was filled with far more waffle than most. The alien said nothing at its conclusion: they accepted the wrapped rectangular gift, clutched in their four hands, then slithered silently from the stage; this round of applause was particularly muted.

The conclusion of the ceremony followed not long after this: the Minister delivered one final welcome to all those gathered before him, then received a round of applause from the audience. The lights on the stage dimmed while those over the thousands of seats rose, illuminating the paths to the exits; those who were to be meeting with Souple were pointed out of a discrete door on the right hand side, while the rest left via the main entrance at the back of the theatre.

Souple rose, told her friends that she would see them for dinner later, then followed her robot down to the long gallery where she would be making her introductions.

She waited in a private chamber adjacent to the gallery, watching the invitees file into the next room covertly through the back of a one-way painting. There were a little over a hundred beings of note on the list her robot had read out to her on the way down, each of whom took up a position next to the other to create a line that stretched from the public entrance at one end of the gallery all the way to the locked doors at the other which led into the more private portions of the palace.

Once it was confirmed that everyone on the guest list was present and there were no gate-crashers, Souple emerged from her waiting room with her robot dutifully by her side to introduce her to each of the dignitaries. She bowed to some, shook others' hands, smiled at most: it all depended on their culture of origin, on which she had received instruction with regards methods of greeting at the very

least. She conversed with each individual for a few moments before her robot ushered her on, excusing herself with flawless politesse on each occasion. Each was quite different in appearance to the next, a scant few were in fact a little taller than she was, but none could compete with her rotundity.

At the very end of the line-up, being given a wide berth by their nearest neighbour, was Varalens. As nothing was known of their origin, Souple had no information about their conduct; as a master of diplomacy, however, she could make educated guesses.

"And this is Varalens," the robot said superfluously as they reached the final stop on their tour of new friends.

Souple smiled and bowed in respectful greeting, though kept her hands to herself: more often than not it was safest not to assume a handshake was appropriate.

"A great pleasure to meet you, Varalens. I am Queen Souple," she said graciously, watching for the creature's reaction.

Varalens did...nothing. They merely stood there, yet they did not seem to be inattentive: shorter than Souple, their head was tilted back as if to make eye-contact, though, as it had seemed in the picture she had examined weeks ago, there were no visible eyes with which to initiate such contact.

"Souple?" they muttered suddenly, the voice a low growl.

"Queen Souple, yes," she corrected gently, still with her dignified smile upon her face.

The strange creature remained motionless for a few moments more, almost as if they were considering the large royal before them. Then, quite unexpectedly, legs sprang from their taur-like body: six insectoid legs that pushed them up a few inches from the richly carpeted floor on what resembled sharp, pointed blades. With these they crept forward, closer to the dragoness, drawing in a deep breath through their nostrils when they were little more than a foot away.

Souple had not moved, trusting in both the screening process to have detected any malice Varalens might have for her and in her robotic assistant's hidden weaponry.

Another breath, more like a sniff this time, the alien's head far closer to the dragoness that would be considered seemly.

And then they spoke again: "Beautiful. Want more. More beautiful."

Doing her best not to appear perturbed by this unusual behaviour, Souple merely smiled once more. "Very good of you to say. Now, if you will excuse me."

She stepped back, made another bow, then returned to the side chamber while her aides ushered the assembly from the gallery.

Varalens had not moved nor made any sign of complaint when Souple had withdrawn from their presence, except for their head turning towards her as she departed. Their legs soon retracted into their body, then followed compliantly as the rest of the guests exited.

As enjoyable large-scale feasts were for Souple, they would never compare to a hearty meal in the company of a handful of friends. The group settled to dinner in the dining room of the dragoness' private wing of the palace, chatting and laughing while tucking into three personalised courses. With

sunlight still pouring in through the floor-to-ceiling window next to which the table was set, it would have been the perfect conclusion to the stresses of the day.

Yet Souple felt a strange sense of unease. Even as her companions cackled at story being relayed by her favourite cousin, she found herself compelled to glance around the room, at the recently refurbished elaborate scrolls of gold spreading themselves over the otherwise white ceiling, the portraits of her antecedents adorning the ruby wallpaper, and final out of the window where the tops of the gardens' trees were just visible. Nothing appeared amiss, but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone observing her, someone who hadn't been invited to join her at the table.

"Are you okay, Soup?" one of her friends inquired upon noticing her apparent disquiet.

The royal dragoness continued to peer into the corners of the room for a few seconds before she realised someone was speaking to her. "What? Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Is everyone ready for dessert?"

Everyone was feeling decidedly full after dinner – though relatively low on courses, Chef had more than compensated with the quantities piled onto the plates – so the next hour was passed in sleepy conversation, each of them sprawled on a couch or slumped in an armchair in the neighbouring parlour. They would occasionally sip at a beverage but were otherwise quite immobile while their stomachs went to work.

Eventually, as the distant sun began to be enfolded in the arms of the horizon, it was agreed that it was probably time to part ways: each had their own business to which to attend the following day, making all-night socialising unwise. Souple accompanied her friends down to the private gate at the back of the palace grounds where one could come and go without being under the gaze of the public; though most assured in the efficacy of the security measures surrounding the palace, she still could not shake the sense of something being wrong.

She waved them off as they all departed in their respective transports, but did not immediately return down the long, secluded path back to the palace: she motioned one of the two guards stationed discretely by this exit and requested that he accompany her on the return journey.

It was only once they had emerged from the shade of the trees to cross a stretch of lawn that she finally spotted what was bothering her: standing between two decorative bushes to their left was the unmistakable figure of Varalens. Souple stopped in her tracks to stare at the alien, who stared sightlessly right back at her.

"We have an intruder," Souple said, drawing the guard's attention to the shadow countenance, "If you could instruct them to leave. Firm but fair, please. Tell them that they aren't allowed to enter uninvited."

The guard strode away, leaving Souple to watch as Varalens had the situation explained to them. Though they seemed not to communicate or respond in any way, they nevertheless performed an about turn and disappeared from view.

The chief of security was summoned moments after the Queen had returned to the safety of the palace interior: though she assured the old general that no one was being reprimanded, she requested greater vigilance from all those manning the boundaries. Despite the profuse apologies for the slip-up and assurances of tighter security from that moment onwards, Souple still retired to bed that night feeling uneasy.

Souple was standing in the long gallery, halfway between the doors at either end. Sensing another presence, she slowly turned her head towards the public-access doors: there stood, silent and still, Varalens.

"You're not supposed to be here," she admonished.

Varalens did nothing, standing there like a black stone statue.

"I must ask you to leave!" she called down the room, her voice rising nervously.

Still, Varalens remained motionless.

Souple turned, hurrying down the gallery, away from the alien. Her progress was slow, impeded by thighs thicker and even more gelatinous than those to which she was accustomed.

She barrelled through the door and found herself in the ballroom. Her rapid, shuffling footsteps echoed around the empty chamber as she raced for the presumed safety of the elevator. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Varalens standing in the doorway through which she had come, still quite unmoving.

Panting heavily, she stumbled into the waiting lift, thrusting her chubby hand wildly at the panel of buttons.

She shrieked! When she had turned, falling against the back wall of the elevator, she caught sight of Varalens standing just beyond the doors as they slid closed, though making no effort to force their way in to join her.

When the doors opened again, she was outside on the private lawn at the back of the palace. Her rest at an end, she ran as best she could for the shelter of the trees, hoping to alert the guards she knew would be at the end of the path. Laboured step after laboured step she took, her whole body shuddering with the effort, yet the foliage was growing no closer.

Varalens was standing just inside the palace now, just discernible within the shadowy interior. She redoubled her efforts, forcing her legs on and on but for no visible gain.

She looked back: the alien was closer, yet still stationary.

Faster! Her strides were becoming more strenuous by the second as her belly was slapping around by her knees now.

The trees remained just as distant as ever, but Varalens was mere feet behind her now.

Must go faster! Yet it was near impossible now, her entire body enveloped in a layer of fat so thick as to render her practically immovable.

She turned her head again, fighting against the rolls enfolding her neck, determined to keep even that small part of her in one position.

Varalens was right behind her! Mere inches separated their faces.

"Beautiful."

Souple awoke with a scream. She was laying in her vast four-poster bed, the dark velvet hangings drawn around it, encasing her in near complete blackness.

Panting as if she really had been fleeing for her life, she struggled across to the edge of the bed, pushing the soft fabric aside and pressing a teal button on her nightstand.

"I need you in my bedroom, now. And...bring ice cream."

"Ice cream, Highness?" answered the voice of her faithful robot assistant, sounding startled by the request.

"Ice cream," she confirmed, trying to calm herself with deep breaths, "Just a big tub of ice cream and a spoon."

Within ten minutes the hangings had been drawn back, light was flooding the room, and the little robot was perched on the edge of the royal mattress, watching his Queen gorge herself on a two-litre container of the finest ice cream.

"Are you sure you don't want to some kind of restraining order on Varalens, Highness?" he asked, smoothing the surface of the blankets around him, "None of our new citizens has ever gained access to private areas of the palace before, after all."

Souple shook her head, extricating the spoon from her mouth and plunging it back into the container for more edible comfort. "I'm sure they won't try it again. And it was only a dream," she said as firmly as she could, though it felt like she was trying to convince herself as much as the robot.

"It wasn't a dream earlier in the evening, Highness."

"They won't try it again," she repeated, some of her latest spoonful slipping off to land on her chest. The collar of her nightdress was speckled with drips from her midnight feast, though as no one was around but her trusty robot to see her she felt no embarrassment.

His electronic eyes watched her without judgement: one of the reasons why she had requested his company rather than anyone else's. "What is it you wish me to do, Highness, if not keep Varalens away from you?" he questioned, catching the lid of the container as it slid towards the edge of the bed.

Souple thought over her response for a moment, setting her spoon down: its grip on the lip of the tub wasn't firm and it soon fell into the remaining ice cream; she could just lick the handle clean, it was no bother. "I just need not to be alone tonight, that's all," she said, picking the implement out of the sticky mess and giving it the tongue bath it required, "And you're just as equipped for my protection as anyone else, my friend."

She smiled fondly at the little robot whose facial display lit up cheerfully at the praise.

Once there was nothing left inside the container but streaks of molten confectionary, Souple settled down beneath the covers once more.

"What's tomorrow's itinerary?" she inquired with a wide yawn, her head resting upon a plump pillow.

The information was in the robot's mind within half a second: "A general policy meeting with the ministers in the morning," Souple groaned, "and a lunch banquet at the new Bucol High Commission. They want to thank you for granting them entry to the Empire and making the transition so smooth."

The dragoness chuckled sleepily. "I might not have let them join if their food wasn't so good."

The robot gave a soft laugh too, then peered at the monarch knowingly. "Time for sleep, Highness?"

She nodded, yawning again. With his assistance, the covers were dragged up to her chin and the hangings drawn around her bed once more.

"I will be sitting by the door if you need me. Good night, Highness."

"Good night," she murmured drowsily as the last of the drapes was pulled closed.

The worst part about governmental meetings wasn't the invariably dull subjects on the agenda, nor the bickering that erupted between her ministers, nor trying to keep all the proposed policies in line with existing legislation: it was the centuries-old tradition of wearing sombre, 'serious' clothing, which meant that Souple's favourite elaborate gowns were deeply frowned upon in such an atmosphere. So, for that reason, she arrived in the palace's meeting room wearing a black and white dress trimmed with blue that was barely any less dour than the suits, blouses, and skirts adorning the politicians.

"Good morning, everyone," she said, giving the room a smile that came far from willingly to her face, "Shall we begin?"

They all took their seats once she had done so, the arms of her chair digging into her hips slightly despite having been designed to accommodate someone of quite extreme girth.

"Firstly, I would like to congratulate the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Admission for their excellent work bringing another set of new peoples into the fold," she said the moment everyone was settled; her words were greeted by a smattering of applause and a pair of identically smug expressions on the two relevant ministers.

"And we must, of course, welcome the ex-President and now Governor of Bucol, who has so graciously invited us all to lunch at the High Commission later today."

The applause this time was far more enthusiastic, not least because of the promise of free food. The Governor herself beamed around the table in response, seated among the other representatives of the Empire's autonomous regions.

Souple smiled too, but quickly returned to business: in her opinion, a good meeting was a short one. "Now, to the first matter on the agenda," she said, glancing down at the screen built into the table in front of her, then looking in the direction of the Financial Minister, "How is this year's budget look- "

Her words caught in her throat as her mouth turned dry: standing silently in the corner behind the smarmy former banker was the very figure that had haunted her dreams the night before.

The rest of the people seated around the table stared at Souple for a few seconds with growing concern before they followed her gaze. Several let out cries of shock at the sight of the sinister alien, the Foreign Minister leapt to his feet to shout, "You're not supposed to be in here! Guards!"

Varalens seemed completely oblivious to the reception they were receiving: they remained standing there quite still, facing Souple as if she were the only other thing in the room.

Four guards burst into the room at the Foreign Minister's summons, two of them approaching Varalens to escort them out. But the alien didn't move, instead simply continuing to stare at the immense dragoness as if they could see her perfectly despite their lack of eyes. Souple stared right back, getting the impression that Varalens would not move unless she personally told them to do so.

"I'll...I'll speak to them," she said hesitantly, slowly rising to her feet.

"Are you sure that's wise, Highness?" the Foreign Minister asked, seeming to have taken great exception to the intrusion.

"I think so."

Souple rounded the table and headed for the only doors in the room: those which led out to the hallway beyond. The guards followed, as did Varalens.

Once away from the meeting, Souple drew the alien a short distance from the guards and spoke quietly, "I realise that you wish to see me, but you must understand that you cannot do so without invitation. The next time you want to meet with me, contact the palace and arrange an appointment, understand?"

Varalens merely stood there, their head once again inclined upwards to face the taller dragoness' gaze.

Souple sighed in exasperation, rubbing a pudgy hand over her face. "Do you have a place to live? Any kind of accommodation?"

Silence; she took this to be a negative.

Another sigh. "If you wait out here, I will find you lodgings when the meeting is over. But you must. Wait. Here. If you disrupt the meeting again I will have to consider deporting you."

There was no reaction from Varalens who continued to stand there, silently 'looking' up at the monarch about whom they seemed so very inquisitive.

But then, at last, came the alien's low growl: "Yes."

"Good," Souple said firmly. She turned back towards the doors, ordering two of the guards to remain where they were to keep an eye on Varalens, while the other two were brought back into the room to be stationed by the doors.

When the meeting concluded some two hours later, Souple was quick to corner the House Minister before he could get to the door. "If you have a moment, there's a matter I need to discuss with you," she said as she impeded his path.

"O-Of course, Highness. What is it?" As he was a particularly diminutive member of their species, he never failed to break into stuttering nervousness as he peered up at her from below her bosom.

She guided him to a corner of the room, out of the way of the other ministers departing. "Are there any places left in that new development? The one designed to accommodate any species?"

He pondered this for a second, then nodded. "I-I think so..."

"Good. I want one reserved today for immediate occupancy."

"Very...very well," the minister complied with some degree of uncertainty.

He skirted round Souple the moment she dismissed him, scurrying out of the room. The vast dragoness lumbered along behind, the last to leave.

When she stepped out into the hallway her eyes immediately fell upon Varalens, stood exactly where she had left them. A few paces away from the alien and glancing at them with great suspicion was her robot, dutifully waiting for her now that the meeting was over.

"All is well, I trust, Highness," he said as she approached him.

"Quite well, yes," she replied, also peering in Varalens' direction briefly, "If you could, I would like a guide summoned here to take Varalens to their new accommodation.

The robot complied without question while the Queen moved past him to address the alien. "I have arranged somewhere for you to live. I trust that you'll be comfortable there, and we will meet again if you make an appointment with the palace."

Once again, Varalens neither did nor said anything in response to these instructions; in fact, they didn't move at all except for their face which followed Souple wherever she was within the hallway until the guide arrived to take them to their new residence.

When Varalens had finally departed, the dragoness let out a long breath of relief. "That should be that," she said to no one in particular, then looked down at the robot, "Lunch at the high commission now, is it?"

The brand new Bucol High Commission was, indeed, a most magnificent building. Constructed on the bank of the expansive lake which marked one edge of the capital, its designer had included all the very best of Bucol architecture: the main building was a rounded pyramid with a cylindrical turret protruding from where one might have found corners; the bluish stone that comprised the bulk of the construction had been imported from Bucol itself – some may have called such extravagance excessive, yet nothing but the best would suffice for such an important edifice – with purplish glinting at regular intervals along its walls; a fountain of water pumped from the lake gushed over a sculpture depicting Souple and the great founder of modern Bucol grasping hands, the image shimmering as the crystalline liquid poured between it and its observer.

The royal transporter drew up at the grand entrance shortly after noon and Souple herself climbed from it, flanked by a bodyguard and her ever-present robot. She glanced at the fountain, an amused smirk forming briefly upon her face: as far as she was concerned, the sculpture was awfully garish. She was soon ushered inside, meeting the Governor and High Commissioner at the top of the steps which she had ascended with a little difficulty.

The introductions were brief, for the monarch had arrived mere moments before the scheduled commencement of the banquet – and deliberately so. The High Commissioner led the way down a long hallway, slowing occasionally so as not to draw too far ahead of her new queen who was finding navigation of the building a challenge.

The people of Bucol had a reputation of being small and slight, the very reverse of how one would describe Souple, and so the High Commission had been designed with them in mind: as the hallway was broken up by doorways every so many metres – ostensibly to assist with this section's modularity – the large dragoness was forced to all but stop for each of them, bending low to pass below their lintels and shuffling sideways through them as her hips were much too broad for them to accommodate. Profuse apologies followed each of these incidents, apologies which were waved away by a tiring Souple.

At last, however, they reached the banquet hall and Souple was able to seat herself; once the arms of her chair had been removed, of course.

All of the difficulties and indignities of her arrival were soon forgotten as the banquet began. Rather than a series of courses as was traditional among her own people, Bucol tradition was followed: wait staff flitted from table to table with a cart laden with numerous different dishes from which the diners could choose; once their stock was depleted, the carts were returned to the kitchens to be replenished. Bucol cuisine was as excellent as Souple remembered and it was naturally she who kept the waiters busiest as she selected dish after dish from the carts, quite oblivious to how her rump was sagging over either side of her chair.

“Beautiful.”

The sudden murmur of that familiar voice in her ear caused Souple to jump in alarm.

Unbeknownst to her, the pale blue gown she had chosen for the occasion – in honour of Bucol’s national colour – fit her rather more snugly than other items in her wardrobe, a fact no one had chosen to point out to her. The violent movement of the hefty frame it was already struggling to contain was too much for the woven silk: with a loud sound of ripping, a large tear formed down the left-hand side of her belly, exposing the red scales beneath.

Turning in her seat, the movement accompanied by the noise of more strands of silk parting company with one another, she found herself face-to-face with Varalens.

Her initial fright subsiding, she fixed a sternly disapproving expression upon her face and began to admonish the uninvited guest, “I have already told you that you can only see me if and when you make an appointment. This is unacceptable behaviour, so I will be having you placed into confinement pending expulsion from the Empire.”

The alien, as so often was the case, did not react to this threat in the slightest for several long seconds.

But then it spoke, the tone of its growl the same as ever: “Varalens stay.”

“No. You are no longer welcome in the Empire,” Souple said in her firmest voice.

Another silence, but the alien seemed insistent despite their monotone, “Varalens stay. Beautiful queen. More beautiful.”

Souple sighed in frustration. “I am very flattered that you think me beautiful, but you must leave now.”

Still they didn’t move. Still they remained intent on making their point. “Beautiful,” they said, reaching out with two of their hands to grip a pair of the dragoness’ side rolls, “Varalens make more beautiful.”

Souple stared in bewilderment, surprised at herself that she was not swiping the alien’s hands away for deigning to touch her without permission.

Seeming to be aware that they were still yet to make themselves clear, Varalens picked up Souple’s half-finished plate of food in one of their free hands. For a moment or two nothing happened but for the alien holding the dish and two handfuls of dragon fat, but then, out of nowhere, a second identical plate with identical contents materialised in their remaining free hand.

As Souple gasped in surprised, the new plate and its doppelganger were offered to her while the alien spoke again, "Varalens help queen. Varalens make queen more beautiful."

At last understanding, the dragoness looked away from the proffered dishes and to Varalens' eyeless face. "That's why you want to be close to me? To give me food? To help me get fatter?" she asked, keen for final clarification.

"Yes. More beautiful."

Souple fell into contemplative silence for several minutes. Varalens, whose arms appeared not to be strong, soon set the two plates down upon the table, though only to use those hands to touch more of her weighty frame; one even began delicately stroking her bare scales through the rip in her gown.

Her answer was bubbling up inside her, but there was one test she needed to perform before she could even think of accepting this offer. Picking up her cutlery again, she took a bite of one of the plates of food, not knowing whether it was the original or the copy; the flavour and texture were exactly as her mouth remembered. A mouthful from the other plate followed quickly: this was just as identical in taste as it was in appearance to the first.

As she thought, she felt something bump against her cheek. She jerked away from it, looking around to see that Varalens had moved closer, sniffing her once more and trying to nuzzle her. She calmed, though still kept her distance from the attempted affection until she had made her decision.

Placing her implements down, she looked to Varalens again, this time smiling in a fashion she hoped disguised her eagerness to agree. "Yes. More beautiful."

"Do we have anything else to look forward to today?" Souple asked as she drifted lazily down the stairs, descending beneath even the palace's basement.

As always, her trusty robot was by her side, keeping pace with her as the steps transitioned from plush carpet to rough stone. "Nothing too special, Highness," he answered, his light footfalls starting to echo in their new surroundings, "Varalens is overseeing your remaining meals as usual, in fact they're quite excited to show you what they've concocted for today. Tomorrow, however, you will be meeting the leaders of our new provinces."

As far as the dragoness was concerned, this was an event to both anticipate and dread: the tedious pleasantries were fortunately compensated for by the ample quantities of food with which she would be plied.

"How many do we have this time?"

"Fourteen," the robot replied promptly, "including the Tarvids. It seems your new image has gone down very well with the dissenters, in fact assimilation is even more population there than within the planets that wanted to join us originally."

Many a month had now passed since the batch of new arrivals brought the most significant ever change to both Souple's private and public life. Varalens' fervent desire to increase the Queen's 'beauty' had been reaping its rewards: gone was large but elegant dragoness who had been adding two or three new systems per year to her empire; in her place was a monarch who hardly went a day without receiving a request from at least one other nation to become part of her borders as foreign leaders, often at the behest of their populaces, tripped over one another in their eagerness

to earn the right to pay homage to a queen whose personal dimensions were increasing as rapidly as her political ones.

Souple now often laughed at the memory of peering down at her paunch when she sat, curious to see how far along it was to reaching her knees: it was a long time since she had so much as *seen* her knees. These days, her belly was threatening her ankles when she sat; how far down it hung when standing was a mystery to all, for the ability to support her own weight had disappeared several hundred pounds ago. It was for this reason that she was making her way down to the hot springs above which the palace had been built on a mobility device designed specifically for her, employing much the same technology as the mobile seating famed of her ballroom that saw her floating several inches above the rocky floor of the underground cavern she and her robot had now reached.

She floated her way over to a gently bubbling pool while her robot, after helping her out of the loose robe she wore, walked on past to a side chamber. Her mobility device tipped slowly forwards when it reached the edge of the water, allowing its immense occupant to slide off it and into the warm embrace of the natural spring. She smiled blissfully as she settled her back against the rocky wall, her belly being jostled lightly by the streams of bubbles jetting up from the floor as it rolled out towards the opposite side of the pool.

A moment later, a quiet whirring heralded the arrival of half a dozen tiny robots with her own mechanical assistant bringing up the rear: these little machines were designed and programmed solely for pampering the hot springs' visitors and, on this occasion, were being directed by her helper who would know exactly how best to please his mistress.

"Comfortable, Highness?" he asked as he knelt behind her, placing his well-practiced hands upon the shoulders that were becoming wider and more cushioned by the day and starting to massage.

A soft, pleasurable noise escaped her lips as the assembled robots began their work. Entirely waterproof as they were, the other six came to no harm whatsoever as they sank beneath the surface: two began to rub and caress their way over that vast gut, while another two squeezed themselves beneath it to soothe its underside; the last two were nestled between her back and the wall, massaging the latter just as their commander was doing with her shoulders.

"Very," Souple answered faintly, her eyes closing in bliss.

The bubbles billowed around her as she soaked, both physically and metaphorically, those jets trapped beneath her incredible bulk acting as extra masseurs as they pummelled against her legs. The six little robots were scooting around among these, applying their soothing touches to every inch of her submerged girth. Above the water, her assistant had now raised those dextrous fingers to her head, rubbing and pressing against her scalp and around the bases of her horns. How could life be any better than this?

The answer to that announced itself with a familiar, but now extremely welcome low growl: "Beautiful queen."

Souple allowed her eyes to crack open to see Varalens stationed by the edge of the pool, a tray of pastries clutched in each pair of hands.

"Angels. You're all angels," she muttered, her lips parting to permit the alien to place a dainty fruit tart upon her tongue. She chewed, the berries perched atop the fluffy pastry and creamy filling bursting instantly, releasing their fresh, bountiful flavours in which her taste buds could glory.

"Good?" the alien asked, already preparing a second offering.

The dragoness nodded, her jaw squashing into her supplementary chin as she did.

As they fed Souple, Varalens moved closer. Just as they had done many month ago, they leaned their head in to nuzzle at the dragoness' increasingly pliable cheek; this time, however, she did not withdraw. As she turned each pastry to an unrecognisable paste, the alien rubbed their snout up and down the side of her face, every now and then opening their own mouth to allow their immensely long, ribbon-like tongue to unfurl and lick tenderly around the queen's face; the first time Varalens had done this Souple had protested, but she had since come to enjoy all of the alien's affections, even if they did sometimes leave her face slippery with saliva.

Though Varalens' origins were just as much a mystery as they ever had been, their wants and intents were made perfectly clear every single day: to make their queen as fat and as happy as possible. Judging by the contentment upon her face, the ease with which she consumed all two dozen sweet, calorific treats, and the necessity of a small crane to lift her back onto her mobility device, their overwhelming success must have made them just as satisfied as the lady whom they worshipped.

Ever since Souple's ancestors established the first off-world colony – the beginnings of the Draconic Empire – their home planet of Kamore had served as capital of the Craex system, before spreading its influence and importance to neighbouring systems, often expanding while other galactic empires declined. Now, however, with the Draconic Empire governing all but a few remnants of its former galactic rivals and a handful of independent systems, the seat of government had been moved to a new location.

Orbiting in what had once been a large void between Craex's fifth and sixth planets was what the ignorant called an artificial planet: indeed, it was certainly large enough to count as such for it sported a diameter more than half that of Kamore and was bigger than two of the star's other major satellites; yet it was nothing more or less than the largest space station in the entire galaxy.

Though the palace back on Kamore was as grand as it ever had been, its function was now a joint one: that of a museum to the history of the Draconic Empire and its ruling family, and as the most exclusive hotel anywhere. Yes, it was still home to many minor royals, but its days as the location of political gatherings and the residence of the monarch were over.

These days the politicians debated and legislated aboard that incredible space station. The governors of the empire's many thousands of provinces were all accommodated there when the time came for them to make official visits, some travelling from systems hundreds of lightyears distant to the centre of the galaxy's power. The few dignitaries who remained foreign to the empire travelled to the station also, many of whom arrived to reluctantly lodge applications to become part of the dragons' sphere of influence.

Souple too lived aboard the space station, reigning over the largest empire history had ever seen as the most powerful being in the known universe. Despite this power, despite her name being known to every sentient creature in the galaxy and beyond, her public appearances now numbered zero. These days she kept to her own quarters, permitting only a select group to visit her.

Varalens was another resident of the station and was one of the lucky few to whom the privilege of an audience with the queen was extended. They were making their way along an otherwise empty hallway that led directly from the kitchens to Souple's own chamber; curiously, their own quarters were accessible via this passage too.

The door at the very end of the hallway opened automatically as Varalens approached it, allowing them to step out onto a long platform that extended out to overlook the reason for the station's scale: the Queen herself.

Souple was not only the most powerful being in existence, she was now the largest too. Her bulk was beyond comprehension, beyond imagining for some: her shoulders spread thousands of kilometres across, curving smoothly downwards and blending imperceptibly into the rest of her body; no limbs were possible to make out, nor were her hands or feet as they were enveloped in layers of fat thicker than many worlds were wide.

Varalens climbed aboard a small, enclosed carriage which set off immediately, whisking them along the platform at great speed. Had one looked down at the floor, the vast curve of Souple's belly would have spread out before them, floating in the centre of this truly gigantic room, the numerous folds and creases in the monarch's flesh forming some of the deepest known caverns.

The carriage slowed to a halt at the end of the platform and Varalens exited, standing at the edge and surveying the scene before them, though nobody yet knew how, or even if they could see. A few metres below them was Souple's head: entirely indistinguishable from the rest of her body now but for the comparatively miniscule face peering out from between immensely plump cheeks. A familiar, mostly grey robot was seated upon one of those cheeks, speaking quietly to the blob of a dragoness whose voice was muffled by the adipose that violently wobbled every time she spoke.

From Varalens' left a conveyor was extending from the wall so distant as to be all but imperceptible: this was now how Souple received the bulk of her sustenance, though Varalens still deeply enjoyed feeding her by hand most days. Though this space station was the centre of the galaxy's governance, the vast majority of its staff and resources were dedicated to food preparation; in fact, most of the planets within Souple's considerable influence had economies entirely centred around production of raw ingredients and pre-prepared foods with which to feed their ruler.

Varalens surveyed all this and spoke to the planet-sized dragon they had created, "Most beautiful."