

Maria tried to comfort Julie, but had great difficulty doing so. Julie did not eat or sleep for two days straight. Eventually, Julie passed from exhaustion. When Julie awoke, her hunger returned. Julie stayed close to Maria, and was much more cautious than usual. Julie asked Maria when they were likely to know something about Dick's condition. Maria had no idea. The elder dragon Ruth had gone to care for Dick. The dragons took turns so that no one dragon would deplete too much energy and risk either catching what Dick had or becoming ill through exhaustion.

About two weeks after Dick became ill, the elder dragon Jason went to care for Dick. A few hours later, Joseph returned with some news. Dick was stabilized but still quite weak. Joseph predicted a full recovery but said that it was likely to take a while, and that the coming of winter might make things worse. He expressed concern that Rose might also become ill. Dick had confessed to the transformation episode that led to his illness. Joseph said that he was upset about this but also felt that Dick was paying dearly. He said that a healer's duty was to care for the sick and injured, regardless of how they came to be sick or injured. Not all of the dragons were so forgiving.

"SO DICK DID THIS TO HIMSELF!" Thomas exclaimed. "WHEN WILL WE STOP MAKING EXCUSES FOR HIM? I'M JUST GLAD THIS TIME HE HURT HIMSELF RATHER THAN SOMEONE ELSE! YOU OPPOSED LETTING HIM IN, AND NOW YOU MAKE EXCUSES FOR HIM! WHAT HAS HE DONE TO MERIT SPECIAL TREATMENT?"

"THOMAS, HAVE YOU NO SHAME!" Joseph responded. "WOULD YOU LET HIM DIE FOR A MISTAKE?" Thomas was silent. He seemed to have a talent for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

After this episode, Julie's caution dissipated. She realized that the healers felt duty bound to heal any injury, even if self-inflicted. She also knew that the dragons would not harm her even if she provoked them, and sometimes she would do so just to show that she could. Julie deliberately put herself in danger to see how the dragons would react. Most were genuinely concerned for her, though Thomas was angry with her and made sure she knew it. About two weeks later, Julie was nearly eaten by a crocodile like animal. She had gone swimming against the advice of several dragons. Maria quickly healed Julie, while Thomas watched seething.

"Julie, you know that we are duty bound to protect you, but that does not give you license to do whatever you want," Thomas said. "You were brought here in hope that you would be fit to become a dragon. The elders' council takes a vote to determine who is allowed to join us. As it stands, I believe you would fail the vote by a wide margin. I do not trust you with the sort of power that becoming a

dragon entails, and neither do a lot of the other dragons. They won't tell you, but I just did. I know that a lot of the other dragons don't like me because they think I am too blunt. I don't care. You need to stop thinking only about yourself."

"I don't think only about myself," Julie replied. "You are cruel and vindictive. You hate Dick, and you hate me for supporting him. I am aware that I must gain the support of the elder dragons to have a future here. I know that I do not have your support. I also know that the vote does not have to be unanimous. The other dragons don't like you for good reason. Some of them will vote to keep me precisely because you won't."

"You have a problem with authority," Thomas replied. "You like Dick because he lets you do whatever you want. What are you going to do if he doesn't recover? Who will you turn to?"

"Thomas," Joseph interjected. "You make empty threats. Do you not remember why we kicked you off the elders' council?"

"I spoke my mind. You did too, and for longer than I have been alive."

"When was I ever as brash as you?"

"I took an impartial stance toward letting Dick in. You vehemently opposed it. After the vote, he was nice to you to win your favor, and he treated me like shit. My only regret is that I did not see him for what he was from the beginning."

"No, you got angry because you saw him having sex with Maria. You couldn't bring yourself to be angry at her, so you picked a fight with him. You then acted like a child because you lost the fight. Ever since then, you have been trying to find ways to get back at him without getting yourself in trouble."

"No one understands me. What makes it worse is that everyone thinks they understand me, and when I try to correct them, they just persist in their ignorant beliefs."

"If we don't understand you, it is your own fault. You are one of the oldest dragons alive, yet the older you get, the younger you act." Once again, Thomas was reduced to silence. "Once confronted with the truth, you have nothing to say."

"Has Thomas always been like this," Julie asked.

"No," Maria said. "For most of his life, he saw himself as a mediator. When we were deciding whether to let Dick into our community; Thomas strove to be just and impartial. This was how he had done things for thousands of years. He didn't really warm up to Dick, but he tried to be understanding. Dick saw Thomas as cold. I tried to explain that Thomas had good motives and just didn't want to get too close to anyone. That is what all of us believed. Thomas was never warm and affectionate, but neither did he show anger or contempt for anyone. Then Thomas saw me having sex with Dick. He said that Dick had probably seduced nearly everyone on the elders' council and that is how he was let into our community. He claimed that every female on the council voted to accept Dick, though he knew this to be false. I told him this was bullshit and that Dick was quite friendly and had learned to control his temper.

"Dick did not want a fight. He said he understood Thomas's concern, but that he had neither lied nor offered any of us anything to sway our vote. He said that he knew he had issues with his anger and that I was helping him to become kinder and more compassionate. Thomas kept swearing and threatened to have me removed from the elders' council. I knew that Thomas was bluffing, but Dick did not. Dick said that if Thomas wanted to hurt me, he would have to come through him. Thomas charged at Dick, and Dick knocked him to the ground. Thomas's leg was injured, and he said that he had just shown why we should never have allowed Dick into our community. Several other dragons witnessed all of this, and reported everything to the elders' council. Thomas was suspended from the elder's council for ten years. A few months later, Thomas started trouble with another dragon. He was then permanently banned from the council."

"Why do you all hate me," Thomas asked.

"Do you not pay attention to anything we say," Maria asked. "If you would only listen, then you would understand. You complain that we do not understand you, yet you make no attempt to understand any of us. It has been 9000 years, and you have yet to learn your lesson." Thomas then took flight, without telling anyone where he was going. He returned six days later with no explanation.

The next day, the elder dragon Sarah left to see how Dick was doing. A few hours later, Ruth returned exhausted. She told the dragons that Rose had fallen ill three days earlier. Rose awoke in the night unable to breathe. Ruth said more healers would be needed to keep the illness from spreading. Maria departed with the elder dragons Paul and Michael. Joseph stayed with Ruth to make sure that she was ok. Ruth was fine after a few hours' rest. Another elder dragon, Diana, kept an eye on Julie.

A week later, Diana flew out to check on Dick, and Jason returned. He reported that Rose had stabilized, and Dick was noticeably better but not yet well. He said he could not explain Rose's illness but did not think it was contagious because none of the other dragons had shown any symptoms. He noted that Dick had said he felt very guilty for having caused all this trouble.

Another two weeks passed. Joseph flew out to check on Dick and Rose, leaving Jason to keep an eye on Julie. Michael returned and reported that Dick and Rose were both getting better and should be able to rejoin the rest of the dragons in a few weeks.

A week later, Maria also returned. Maria was quite exhausted. She said she was confident that Dick and Rose would recover soon. Maria noted that she was the second oldest dragon in the community, behind only Joseph. She said she had been blessed to live more than 110,000 years (roughly 190,000 earth years), and that she would always be with them in some form. Only about one in a million dragons lived this long. Jason asked if she meant to suggest that she was about to die. Maria simply responded, "None of us knows how long we have. Joseph is the only dragon I have known who has lived this long, though he seems to be healthier than I am."

Two days later, Dick and Rose returned, along with the remaining healer. Although she had not seen them in over three months, Julie instantly recognized them. She was elated by their return, though Dick and Rose were more somber. Dick called out to Maria, who answered incoherently. Dick asked the other dragons what was wrong with Maria. Jason mentioned her remarks, and noted that she had barely moved in the last two days and had declined offers of food.

"I can't shake the feeling that I am to blame for all of this," Dick said. "She saved my life. I'm afraid that in doing so she may have given her own. I've been so selfish and so arrogant." He turned to Julie: "I'm afraid I've set a very bad example for you. We dragons have great power and we also have great responsibility. I neglected my duties to satisfy my baser urges, and I believe that my illness was my punishment."

"Maybe it is different here, but in the world I came from, illness struck at random. People dreamed up things like karma to keep us in line, but it was a bunch of bullshit."

"Do you not remember what I did? I get horny and I stop thinking. I nearly died because of a stupid trick. I would love to save you, but first I must save myself. No one else can do it for me."

"Save yourself from what?"

"I am only beginning to understand it myself. I don't think I can explain it to you. We both have growing up to do. You must learn not to depend on me so much. You must realize that I am fallible, and that my motives are not pure, and that though I love you very much, there is only so much I can do for you. Pay attention to what the others say. As for myself, I have to learn to let others be and not manipulate their desires to align with my own. And you are probably the one I have hurt the most. I turned you into a sex fiend. I played tricks with your mind, and implanted desires only I could fulfill. I made you dependent on me, and when I fell ill, you were not prepared to get along without me."

"What are you talking about? You showed me pleasure I could never have imagined. I spent twenty years with a man who hated me. You didn't hurt me; he did. Do not blame yourself for being ill. It happens to all of us. And you told me repeatedly that your powers were limited. It is not your fault I didn't believe you. Don't go."

"I'm not leaving you. But we must talk. We must have serious conversations, and not about what sexual fantasies of yours I have left unfulfilled."

"I want to see your power again. You can tell me your shortcomings later. Your power is what I love most about you."

"I only seem powerful because you are so frail. You look like you have lost a lot of weight since I last saw you."

"I have. I guess now that I am away from human society I am beginning to live up to their standards of beauty."

"Well, we don't expect you to be thin. Say, aren't those the berries you used to love." She looks where he is pointing.

"Yes."

"Eat all you want."

"I thought eating too much was bad."

"Fuck that. Do you still fantasize about getting eaten?"

"Of course I do. You are the only one I would trust to do it, though."

"Maybe someday I will. But you'd better fatten yourself up first." She proceeded to eat a large number of the bright red berries. As she was eating, he began to lick her ass. She telepathically communicated her desire to be eaten. Dick was caught by surprise, as he did not know that she had mastered telepathy in his absence. "You can communicate telepathically now," he said.

"Maria taught me how. I hope she is alright."

"Me too." He proceeded to put her in his mouth and forced his tongue deep inside her pussy. Within seconds, she had multiple orgasms. She telepathically communicated her desire that he swallow her. Once again, he refused, instead setting her down gently. "What, are you too scared to eat me?"

"You are quite daring, but when I swallow, there is no turning back."

“WUSS!”

“What, do you think that I’ll do it if you piss me off? You ought to know me better than that.”

“Well, it was worth a try.”

“Dick,” Rose said, “If she doesn’t really want it, then she is faking it so hard that I’ll laugh my head off when her fear sets in.”

“KNOCK IT OFF! WE NEED YOUR HELP! MARIA STOPPED BREATHING!” Joseph screamed. All of the dragons channeled their powers to help Maria. Julie watched in shock, not sure what to do. It soon became clear that their efforts were futile. Even Thomas wept. No one has seen him show any real compassion in a long time. The dragons huddled together. Julie cuddled Maria’s lifeless body. She did not yet understand many of the dragons’ customs, but she understood death.

Julie asked how she could ever live up the dragons’ standards. Joseph responded: “You do not become one of us overnight, but I will give you guidance. There will be several days of mourning, and you will have some time with Dick and Rose. There is no rush. Once you are ready, your training will begin. It is not an easy path, but you have the rest of your human life to complete the training. Do not let anyone convince you that you are not welcome here. The elders’ council unanimously approved bringing you to our world. No one is to blame for Maria’s death. She was very old. Yes, I am even older, and I may not have much time left either, but there are plenty of caring dragons here to watch out for you. Everyone on the elders’ council knows how to do the training. There are currently 14 of us, and a new member will be appointed soon.”