In The Company of Dragons

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Dedication
For Nita. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities, but hiding away in the dark, quiet spaces of this one with you is by far my favorite.

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Qwilion of Questhaven

Your assistance in the safeguarding of my young is a debt I cannot quickly repay. Let this missive be a downpayment on that debt. May it nourish your appetite for hidden knowledge, and provide better relations between your kind and mine. The time has come for ephemerals to have insight into the ways of dragons, to understand what motivates us and how best to avoid provoking our wrath. There are dangers and threats in this world that take precedence over any conflicts between our cultures, and it is time both dragons and ephemerals realized that fact.

You will, of course, pardon me for omitting certain details of our lairing and breeding habits. This missive will inevitably fall into the foolish hands of soon-to-be meals that consider themselves dragon hunters. I will not attempt to deter them from their path to destruction at the claws of a fully-grown dragon, but most ephemerals called to their doom in this manner are cowards who would think nothing of stealing or destroying our young.

Thunders in Defiance

Introduction

When the world was first formed, the various energies and divine entities interested in shaping it battled for their own interpretation of reality. Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales sprang from the nexus of these conflicting powers like a diamond formed from coal. In her infinite wisdom, she could see every new thing that was good and proper. Coveting them, she reached out her talons to snatch the greatest of creation to create her own personal realm, a chain of islands containing everything pure and proper. Every imaginable ideal environment could be found on Ryoquetza’s islands, each in just the right proportion.

In time, the other deities took notice of Our Lady’s paradise. So enthralled were they by the perfection of what she had created that they decided to seize it for their own. Numerous opportunistic deities descended upon Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales in an effort to drive her from her lair, and in the process awakened the very first dragon wrath. Our modern territoriality stems from this very first incursion against Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales. Outnumbered and lacking the experience of her adversaries, Our Sovereign of Dragons was grievously wounded but victorious. Every single divine thief was forced from her paradise, bearing permanent scars to mark the encounter. Unable to take Our Mistress of Wyrm’s paradise by force, the petulant deities erected a barrier between it and the rest of the world, turning the paradise into what is now the Lost Isles. They then set about pretending the entire incident never happened, working on populating their world with imperfect and ephemeral creations.

Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales flew back to her lair to recover from the titanic battle, her blood, grief and frustration spilling freely across her paradise. As she regained her strength, Our Many-Headed Mother watched through the barrier as the other deities played in the muck of their world and selectively ignored her. She awakened the first dragon roar and let out a tremendous bellow in defiance of the other deities, full of every facet of her being. Each such facet took hold where her blood had pooled across her island paradise, and from all but one rose a perfect creature — the first dragons, the taninim. Each embodied a tiny fragment of their mother; such is the grandeur and depth of Our Empress of Eternity.
Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales bequeathed her paradise to her children, commanding them to go forth and claim the right to rule. My kind settled the Lost Isles, some carving out personal territories while the most adventurous turned their talons outward. Our eldest and most powerful tore through the barrier isolating the Lost Isles and dragons became known to the world. Those first explorers carved great fiefdoms among the ephemeral races, but the differences between worlds caused an ossification of being among the first dragons’ descendants. The taninim felt the gulf of difference with their children, and many retreated back to the comfort of the Lost Isles. Left to their own devices, the dragons of the ephemeral world fell to squabbling among themselves and lost interest in directly ruling over the ephemerals.

When Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales created her progeny, one pool of her blood lay dark. All that had arisen from it was a twisted, stillborn creature that went unnoticed at first by Our Mistress of Wyrm and her children. When Our Many-Headed Mother finally noticed the creature, she flew to investigate but the body had vanished, replaced by a cancer of blackness that ate into the fabric of her creation. What caused the aberration and what initially masked it from Our Empress of Eternity’s all-seeing view was not clear. Our traditional belief is that Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales was dealt a cursed wound by one of the other gods that tainted her creation of one of our kind. Regardless of the cause, the threat this blight caused to the Lost Isles was real and tangible as it continued to unravel our home land. The first of Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales’ children to investigate it was quickly swallowed, and then spat back out as mockeries of their former selves that resembled the stillborn creature Our Many-Headed Mother first noticed. Horrified, Our Empress of Eternity did battle with the fell naught, but its endurance eventually forced her to commit the first dragon sacrifice and give up her physical form. She bound herself to the land around the blight in a dedicated effort to save her children.

The cancer was halted but not removed, and is what we now call the Well of Oblivion. The most powerful of Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales’ children reinforced the barrier separating the Lost Isles from the rest of the world in an effort to contain the undragons that crawled forth from oblivion, should Our Sovereign of Wyrm one day fail. To this day our lands lay hidden from most ephemerals.

**Physical Description**

You are somewhat familiar with our form already. We have made such a mark on your world that we are an iconic symbol of power, of royalty, of destruction and majesty. The classical dragon form is that of a four-legged athletic reptile with wings that are a fully functional third set of limbs, an elongated neck and tail. The taninim share an appearance with our cousins born in your world, with all the variety of color and shape
they exhibit. During our years in egg, we are in communion with Our Many-Headed Mother and dream of her in all her glory. We are inevitably attracted to one particular part of her personality, one that resonates inside of us. The exemplars of our kind call this their draconic essence, and it strongly shapes the way they act and perceive the world. They tend to look more like a particular type of dragon from your world than taninim who follow other paths. As creatures of primal spirit, our outward appearance mirrors what is inside. If one of my brothers and sisters looks to you like a red dragon, chances are very good they are every bit the malicious, violence- and devastation-loving creature as one of our red cousins.

By the time we have hatched and matured, a process that spans approximately 50 of your years, the average taninim (if any of my grand brothers can be called average) weighs around 80 lbs and is about three feet in length, with a neck and tail each nearly as long. As we become more accomplished and gain a deeper understanding of our individual place in the world, we grow substantially in size. The greatest among us are truly awesome in presence, stretching nearly 300 feet from nose to the tip of their tail and massing hundreds of tons.

It should be noted that we breed true with our cousins from the material plane. Eggs which are raised and hatched in the Lost Isles under the auspice of Our Lady of the Rainbow Scales will emerge as a taninim, while an egg which develops in the world of the ephemerals will be one of our cousins that you refer to as “true” dragons.

There are two exceptions among us taninim. The first is the Organizers, a particular bloodline of my people with unique physical appearance and worldview. Even the most chaotic and unfettered member of this bloodline views everything as having a unique place and purpose in the world to them, and it is unnerving to them to see a creature acting against what they see as its place in reality or an item perverted from its purpose. The Organizers, also called Lung from an ephemeral title given to the first of the bloodline that explored your world, are wingless creatures whose bodies are more serpentine than the rest of us. As they gain in power, they grow elaborate horns and feathery hair around their muzzle and joints. Some even grow a luminescent pearl-like structure on their foreheads the Lung call a third eye. Legend claims the bloodline came about when one of the first taninim, in a fit of hunger, attacked a great spirit clam. This was a taboo act, as the spirit clam was one of a handful of sage spirits that anchored meaning to reality. The taninim eventually tore open and consumed the clam, but not before having both his wings ripped off in the struggle. A curse settled upon the taninim after his meal, for he had consumed the spirit clam’s magical pearl that was the core of its power. He was forever after obligated to carry out the spirit clam’s mandate of organizing the world.

The second exception is the Feykin. I do not like Feykin. They are frivolous, annoying, purposeless runts of our kind. They have been touched by the Primal World of the fey, and have been given a mandate to be the Lost Isles’ emissaries to Auberyon, the flighty lord of that realm. Some of their kind spend their lives with the fey, and a good number of them have spread their mischief-loving progeny through the material plane. Feykin are stunted in size from the moment they hatch, never growing above the size of a large cat. Instead of proper wings, they grow ridiculous, gossamer contraptions like a butterfly or moth that many of you ephemerals find beautiful for some reason. Their scales are frequently a clash of varying colors tinted with iridescent markings. The origin of the Feykin is a mystery to our kind, but they are accepted among the Lost Isles. They claim that the secrets of how and why they came into being were stolen from the taninim’s memories by Auberyon, as if some mere creature of dream could affect our unmatched power.
Taninim society in the Lost Isles resembles a collection of feudal landholdings. A taninim is considered master of whatever territory he is powerful enough to hold, with lesser taninim claiming fealty to him in return for the right to lair and hunt in the master’s territory, and to assist him in defense of the territory when commanded. The relationship between feudal lord and vassal is not always a friendly one, as taninim with conflicting personalities are willing to serve and be served as long as dominance is clearly established. Small settlements of a variety of ephemeral races live in some territories, tending food and crafting items of convenience or aesthetic value for their masters.

All taninim pay heed to the Elder Voices, a council of the five greatest taninim. The Elder Voices do not govern daily taninim life, but intercede to make judgments on disputes and dangers that threaten to disrupt the Lost Isles. They interpret taninim tradition, and preside over important rites. They also control the barrier that exists between the Lost Isles and the material plane, allowing them to grant or deny egress.

The rites performed at a conclave of dragons are the only time most taninim prefer to come together in significant numbers for any length of time. Gathering a group of apex predators peacefully into close confines is a delicate task. The rites are varied and exhaustive in number, but I’ll detail a few of the more important to be performed at a conclave.

The Rite of Renewal takes place when one of my sisters is prepared to lay a clutch of eggs. The rite blesses her and ordains a Warden to guard the eggs. This is commonly the mother or mate, but just as frequently a separate taninim of renown is chosen. There are rare taninim who have been Warden to many clutches, earning great renown among our society and granting as much prestige to the hatchlings as would having auspicious parents.

The Rite of Rejoining is performed to usher the energy of a taninim’s spirit back to Our Empress of Eternity. Regardless of how one of my brothers or sisters has
fallen and the deed that led to their end, their life and essence is honored. Their physical remains are consumed by the conclave, and the spirit is freed in the process.

The Rite of Naming is used by the Elder Voice to confer a name or title (or epithet) upon a taninim. Those in attendance at the conclave are permitted to challenge the name, but only through a stylized verbal argument presenting their opposition to the name to the Elder Voices. No show of aggression is tolerated during this ritual. It is rare for the Elder Voices to be convinced to modify the name being granted in the rite, but happens on occasion when a speaker gives a particularly compelling argument.

**Relations**

The most important and perhaps the most complicated relationship taninim have is with our cousins born in your world. We do not look on them as inferior, as they become powerful and regal creatures in their own right. We also share many similarities in personality, habit and form. Dragons born outside the Lost Isles even visit and occasionally live among the taninim. A certain distance exists among the taninim and our cousins, however. The fact that we do not fit completely into their structures of color and subspecies, with our capability of even shifting our draconic essence through the ages, makes our cousins uncomfortable. Most also do not honor the Elder Voices and their rule, explaining why so few settle in the Lost Isles. Those of us taninim who leave our home for the material plane find a similar struggle fitting in with our cousins. The cautious neutrality many of them have for us limit the bonds of kinship and alliance we can form, leaving most expatriates to wander alone without being strong enough to defend a claim to a territory.

Our relationships with the ephemeral races in the Lost Isles are of master and serf. No ephemeral culture that we imported as servants has a population large enough to think of revolt, nor have they been allowed to gain the technological or magical prowess to challenge even a single taninim master (and most have a retinue of lesser dragons granting the master fealty). Most of the settlements of ephemeral servants in the Lost Isles are treated better than your slave-owning cultures treat their own, and they rely on their master for protection against other taninim, the wild elemental energies that can spring up in the Lost Isles, the ever-lurking danger of oblivion’s undragons, and the wild giants hiding in our mountain ranges. Because of this, challenges to taninim rule in the Lost Isles are extremely rare.

In the material plane, dragons are seen as forces of destruction and hoarders of wealth by most ephemerals. I will not disagree with this assessment, but it is a very narrow view of our kind. There are exceptions to the rule, as a whole ephemeral societies avoid rousing the anger of dragonkind and we have little to do with your settlements unless they encroach upon our territory (or possess something we covet).

Giants tend to have little love lost for us, and the feeling is mutual. They are one of the few ephemerals with physical might that can hope to challenge a dragon, and when we come into contact both dragons and giants seek dominance over the other. Giants have even enslaved the occasional dragon, an unforgivable crime of the highest order. I have been told that many giants harbor a burning hatred of dragons for a similar reason in one of the few conversations I’ve had with one of their kind (right before I eviscerated the talkative brute). The Lost Isles have a hidden colony of giants lairing within our mountain ranges, the result of a foolish effort long ago to subjugate giants as servants. Numerous attempts have been made to exterminate them, but the giants remain despite our best efforts and plague our territories in periodic raids.

Lastly, I must mention the undragon. In the center of the Lost Isles a barren islet rises from the water. A gaping maw in the rock descends into an impenetrable blackness. This is the Well of Oblivion. It is from this the white worm comes, seeding and corrupting my kind with its touch. We watch this fissure diligently but from a safe distance, and it is expressly forbidden by the Elder Voices to walk upon the islet. All who have directly researched the Well of Oblivion to better understand its threat or learn its secrets have been lost to it. The twisted creatures we call undragon are what remain of