

## Draken Lore (a.k.a. Water Weight and Fruit Juice Part 1.5)

A Story in Arvos

by Cerine Hero

Mito was woken up by her back feeling like it was being roasted. It was weird for her to wake up in the middle of the night, long before dawn. In just a few hours, she'd be perfectly rested and ready to tackle another day, but for right now she was groggy and confused. Warm light flickered off the stones hanging overhead or arching along the carved-out wall above the terrace where she and the others were sleeping.

Speaking of others, she still had a chubby, pink fox in her arms, snoring softly as she lay on her side. Mito tipped her head up just slightly and mostly moved her eyes to see if Cerine was still asleep. She was. But there was no sign of Zaress in their little cuddle pile. The marten craned her neck around and saw the shadow of the bulky drake dancing across the stones behind her. Stretching just a little bit more, she saw Zaress sitting cross-legged at the campfire, which was now once again crackling gaily. The drake was dressed again in her black wrapping garments.

Mito untangled from Cerine as gently and dexterously as she could so she wouldn't wake her, and then scooped up some of her dry clothes. Zaress watched silently as she pulled them on and then sat down on the other side of the fire. Mito shook out her medium-length hair and tried running her fingers through it in attempt to comb some of the tangles out after the swim. Out of all the things she *didn't* have to worry about, her hair wasn't one of them. If she left it a mess, it would stay a mess. On the upside, the dye Cerine had put in her hair was still there, if a bit faded and grown out at the root now.

"Couldn't sleep?" Mito asked, gathering up her hair over one shoulder and peering at the drake through her damp bangs.

"I could ask you the same," Zaress replied. She leaned in a bit and puffed some more dragon's fire onto the campfire, swelling the intensity of the flames a little. Then she tossed on a couple more sticks left over from her makeshift cooking rack. "You've got a few more hours to go yet before you're supposed to be annoying."

"Very funny." The marten made a fake show of pouting. "It's not something I can control, you know. I just *wake up*. And I'm also really hungry when it happens, too, so I'm not staying in bed." She sighed and turned sideways, looking off into the forest just beyond the reach of their small shelter. "I don't know why I'm awake. I think I'm afraid of that dragon coming to get us. Is that why you're up? To keep watch for the dragon?"

Zaress nodded. "That and other things."

"Like what?"

"If any come, I'll ask them."

Mito sighed and looked back at the trees. The glow from the campfire barely reflected from the trunks, making them stand out against the complete darkness behind them. Past those first few trees, nothing at all seemed to exist. She remembered how, earlier, Zaress mentioned that she could see her and Cerine despite the camouflage potion, and so could the dragon. There was also that time back in the waterways under the city, when they first met.

"I haven't had a chance to ask you yet," Mito said, "but you can see in the dark, right?"

"I can."

"What's that like? I can see a little; I think that's a mustelo thing. I know felis can, too, to a point, but canins and uncols are useless in the dark. You figure this stuff out as a thief."

Zaress snorted sharply at the mention of 'thief,' but she straightened up her back and placed her hands on top of her crossed legs. Her eyes were narrow black slits set in emerald as the firelight flickered in them. "I'm not an expert on how *you* see things, but from what I understand, I can see light just like you can. I can only see colors if it's daytime, or there's a light like this fire. Otherwise, I see in

black and white, and I see things that are warm.” She gestured towards Cerine, sleeping on the rock nearby. Mito looked over her shoulder in that direction. The vixen was at the edge of the light, snoring peacefully. “I can barely see the pink in her fur right now. But she's as bright as day in my eyes, because she's warm. The rocks are barely visible at all, and the waterfall and pool are black spots. You – I can see you just fine, because you're lit up by the fire. But if you were out there, in the woods, you wouldn't be able to hide. I'd be able to see your pawprints for a while after you touch something.”

Mito blinked. She had no idea the drake's vision was *that* good. No wonder she was able to beat up an entire patrol of city guardsmen in the waterways – her incredible strength helped, too, for sure.

“I know pretty much nothing about drakes,” Mito admitted. “My friend Vela was shocked to hear I was running with one of you now-”

“What do you mean, running?” Zaress interrupted, squinting.

“Oh, uh... that's our lingo. It means to team up and do jobs with. I guess it's still technically true, right? Except our jobs are a little... different. But we still go out someplace and get something, so it's not *that* different.” Mito shrugged her shoulders. “I'd never met a drake before you. There's lots of people in the city. Canins, felis, mustelo, uncols... whatever the arbitrators are... but not drakes.”

“The clans don't like the city,” Zaress explained, throwing another piece of wood onto the fire. “Not because of the Veiled Way, though that hardly helps. Drakes don't like living under anyone's rule.”

Mito's ears perked up. “How come?”

The drake squared her shoulders and tilted up her head. The firelight rolled upwards along her face, making her snaggletoothed fangs glisten slightly. “My race was born into servitude. Our legends tell that the dragons, at the height of their power, created the drakes to be their claws. They wanted warriors who could enact their will, and midwives to raise their young. But dragons were powerful and greedy. They wanted to control everything, and needed many claws to do all of their bidding. Soon we were many. So many, in fact, that we realized that the dragons were not so powerful that they could rule over us all.

“Four champions among the drakes were the first to stand up and fight. Dargress, Ijuno, Katazon, and Yma. They rallied others to the banner of freedom and together they cast down the dragons. They took the dragons' strength from them.”

Mito raised an eyebrow. “Literally? Is that why you're strong?”

Zaress shook her head. “No. Not literally. They convinced the drakes to stop worshiping the dragons. Worship gave the dragons great power, just like Gray's god. The dragons used it to shape the land in their image and create life in magical rituals. But the champions stole their mantle, and with it they slew the dragons or drove them into hiding – like the one we met. The legends also say that the champions, once they were done with the great power, gave it back to the land, seas, and sky from where it had been stolen.” She snorted. “I don't think that's true.

“But once they lost the power that they relied too greatly upon, the dragons lost much of themselves. Anyone who relies on magic is weakened for it, I say. So it is with the dragons – their bodies were so tied together with the force of worship that taking it away crippled them. The ones that are left are the cold embers of a once roaring fire.”

Mito was enraptured by the story, resting her muzzle on top of her crossed arms stacked on her knees. “That dragon still looked plenty strong to me.”

“Yes,” Zaress agreed. “They don't lack in physical strength, but they lack in life force. Dragons used to be immortal, but now they barely have enough will to remain awake for longer than a few hours. Lethargy strikes them, and it takes a long time for them to awaken from their slumber. When roused, they can be dangerous-” Zaress glared at the marten “-but it's hard to do. They spend most of their time now in their hiding places, keeping watch over and sleeping on what treasures they have left. They can't even bear young anymore. So they are just waiting out what days they have left.”

“That's kinda sad,” Mito said.

“Perhaps, but the drakes have no sympathy for them,” Zaress explained. “All of the dragons

who still live are the last generation – including the one we saw. It is not their ancestors' folly that doomed them, but their own. And if they could regain their place over all creation once more, they would. But let them dwell in their holes. They're harmless to anyone now, unless they try to steal their treasure.”

Mito rolled her eyes. “That point is very well made, thank you.” She sat up. “So what did the drakes – the, uh, the champions – do after they freed everyone from the dragons?”

“According to the legends,” the drake told her, “the four gathered together to discuss the fate of the drakes. Ijumo of the water clan wanted the drakes to join with the other races, but Dargress of the earth clan and Katazon of the air clan argued that we would be yoked by the wishes of others once again if we did. They could find no common ground. Dargress agreed with neither Ijumo nor Katazon. She did not wish the drakes to be beholden to others but also did not see wisdom in total isolation. The argument raged for seven days, but Yma of the fire clan offered no words at all. It is said that during those days, the oceans roiled, the earth shook, and the wind howled incredibly.” Zares snorted again. “Also probably an exaggeration. But in time, they came to realize that there could be no agreement between them. On the eighth day, they finally fell silent. Only then did they noticed that while they were distracted with arguing, Yma had slipped away and taken her followers with her, disappearing in the night. So, with sadness, the others each did the same. Each of the champions took what followers would go with them and went their separate ways, each to live according to their own custom.”

Mito tilted her head. “And which clan are you from?”

“I will give you one guess,” Zares replied, her voice flat.

“...You breathe fire?”

“Earth.”

“Damn.” Mito shrugged. “I was going to say water next because you like fish.”

“I like fish because it's something I never grew up with,” Zares explained. “The earth clan lives in the steppes and desert lands far to the south and west. Either because we follow Dargress's example, or because the Dargress in the stories represents what we believe, we have limited contact with outsiders. We meet once a year in order to trade and then travel on our way. My people are nomadic, but we remain in the steppes. On rare occasions there would be smoked fish among the provisions of the traders we met.” The drake smiled uncharacteristically. “Those were good days. Though I prefer it fresh-cooked now.” She pat her stomach, still full of grilled tema.

Mito nodded along. The tema had been delicious, if needing a little proper kitchen preparation to be truly divine. But they were in the woods and she was never one to be picky about food. “So where do the other clans live? Are they nomadic, too?”

“No. The water clan mostly live along the coastlines, building villages out over the water. It is their wish to build their homes as far out from the shore as they can without being adrift. I have heard other groups live upon raft-towns, and others on islands. But I have only met a water drake once, and even then, only for a short time. Most of what I know is from old stories or things I heard from travelers.” Zares shrugged. “The clans rarely meet, though earth and water are most likely to ever do so.”

“Isn't building your home out on the water dangerous?” Mito asked. “I remember when the tsunami hit the city years ago and flooded the quay.”

“The drakes know,” Zares told her, “and they do it anyways. If their village is destroyed by the sea, they build it again. For them, it is a labor of love. And the water clan is most welcoming to outsiders, like Ijumo was. But they do not live with outsiders. And, as I've heard, people have attempted to take advantage of the water clan's hospitality and friendliness. It does not go well. They may be kind-hearted, but they are still drakes, and they won't submit to someone else's rule.

“The air clan lives high up in the mountains to the west and north. They are... unkind but fair, and value their isolation. I do not know much about them. No one does. Outsiders attempting to travel near to their homes are treated to a single warning and no more. Travelers either heed it or... won't be

telling any stories. I have never met an air drake, but one year when I was young, my kin journeyed to the northern reaches of the steppes, to the foothills of the mountains high above us. On one morning, colorful, enormous kites were flying upon the wind halfway down the mountain were there were none before. I believe it was their way of saying they saw us and were offering their greetings. But it was not an invitation.”

“That sounds amazing,” Mito said. “So what about Yma's people? The fire clan, right? They were the ones who left the meeting in the story. Do they live in a volcano or something?”

Zaress shrugged. “I don't know. Fire drakes have not been seen in hundreds of years.”

“Do what? They just... disappeared?”

“That's right. As I've said, the stories our clan tells are part truth and part justification for things that happened later. Maybe Yma did not really leave the meeting without a word; maybe it's just a poetic way of telling the history. The meeting may never have happened. It's very convenient, story-wise. But that's what stories are. Ask Gray about his god sometime. It'll keep you busy a few hours.”

“I can imagine,” Mito replied, shaking her head. “So how come you don't live with your clan anymore? Do you have family?”

Zaress leaned back somewhat. Her muscles tensed and her eyes drifted off to someplace else for a moment. Breathing in deeply, the drake looked down into the fire, watching it crackle and dance. A long silence stretched out between her and the marten, and Mito began to feel uncomfortable.

“Er... bad question?” she asked, hiding her face somewhat between her arms.

“Yes.”

“Sorry. I was just curious.” The silence continued on for a bit, and Mito shifted her weight around. “But... if it's bad, you don't have to hold it in, you know? I can help you bear it. Things haven't been easy for me, either.”

Zaress's eyes flicked up from the fire and narrowed. She was quiet for another moment, her face a mask licked by firelight. The drake held Mito's gaze solidly before finally exhaling and letting her muscular shoulders slump. She tossed another stick on the fire.

“I would rather you spend your concern on her,” she muttered, tilting her head in the direction of the sleeping fox. “She likes you, and she does not take to hardship nearly as well. If anyone needs your shoulders, it's her.”

“Doesn't have to be just-”

“Enough.”

“Alright. I won't push.” Mito pulled in her knees and wrapped her arms around them, laying her head onto her forearms. She was quiet for a while, listening to the fire crackle and the wind occasionally rustle the treetops. “I never knew my family. My earliest memory is being taken in by a felis because I was small and good at climbing and could take things without anyone really noticing. He's not, like... a parent or anything, though. I wouldn't even say he kept me alive, because as it turns out, that's a really low bar to meet, and he still didn't. So I ditched him, and I fell in with Vela and them later on. When the Veiled Way took over, we split up in order to keep safe. That was when it got hard. I've only seen Vela a couple times since then. And then, I mean, you know the rest of it; I ran into Cerine that day and now here we are.”

Zaress listened, her large ears focused forward while her eyes stared into the fire. Once Mito was done talking, there was a long pause from the both of them. “Drake clans are loathe to accept outsiders,” Zaress rumbled. “Even from members of another kinship within the clan. At least, earth drakes are.”

“Yeah?” Mito looked up. “What's that got to do with it? They didn't... want you? Oh... wait. I think I know.”

The drake simply shrugged. “I left the steppes and wandered. I found roads and saw where they led. Here, all roads lead to the city. It was a strange place to me, and many saw a drake as a useful tool, or a gold mine waiting to be dug. Even if not useful for labor, I am made of expensive reagents in

craftmaking.”

Mito glanced sideways and cleared her throat awkwardly. Yeah, Cerine definitely had a few potions made of... drake squeezings. “So then you found Cerine?”

She looked over at the sleeping fox. “Not at first. It was Sarelma who brought me in, after I had an incident with the guards, and took me to Cerine and Gray. From there... like you said, you know the rest of it.”

“You love her, don't you.”

Zaress tensed again, her shoulders flexing as she inhaled. Damn, but she was easy to read, Mito thought. The drake's eyes did not drift away from the fox. Her jaw worked as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't find the right words. Mito narrowed her mismatched eyes slightly.

“Oh... you see us as your family now, don't you?” she asked. “Cerine, Sarelma, Gray, and me-”

“Do not get ahead of yourself.”

“Pfft. You just gave me an entire history lesson on draken lore. Come on.”

Zaress rankled even further, crossing her arms. “No. I just have not had an opportunity to tell campfire stories in years. It is a thing that...” She stopped mid-sentence and inhaled. She let her breath out in a long, slow, defeated growl. “That kin do. Still. It is not my way to be accepting of outsiders.”

“Not with words, anyways.”

“Yes.” Zaress looked back at Cerine. “What you say is right. She and the others are my kin.”

“Is that why you always look like you want to bite me? Because I'm an outsider?”

“It's because you're annoying. But Cerine accepts you, so I am... working on it.”

“Hah.” Mito grinned, but then she let it drop, looking at the drake's face. “You've got a weird way of showing love, if I can say so.”

Zaress shook her head. “It makes sense to me. Being kin and being romantic, they're not allowed, even if not... siblings. That's not the right word, but close enough. Partnerings form outside kinships, during meetings between kinships, and are brief affairs. No earth drake hatchling has two parents, and it matters little whose mother is whose. The entire kinship raises the young. Every member is equal family.” Her eyes grew distant again. “Cerine and Gray don't-... that is not their way.”

“I'm starting to see. That does sound really confusing.” Mito shrugged. “You think of her as like a family member, but also like a lover. And you want to reciprocate in... our way. Just having fun.”

“I do.”

“Should I... back off? Or...?”

Zaress shook her head. “That is between you and her. It's not my business.”

“Fair enough.” The marten stretched and leaned back, looking at the sky. A subtle glow was starting to tint the sky over the tops of the trees behind her. “It'll be sunrise pretty soon. I don't need to sleep. When the sun peeks up, I'll be wide awake anyways.” She crossed her legs and grinned, tilting her head towards the sleeping fox. “Why don't you go get some rest while I keep watch?”

Zaress looked at her, and then glanced in Cerine's direction. The fox had curled up with her tail to help keep warm while the others were over by the fire. “I don't want to wake her.”

“I saw you two cuddling when I was up on top of the cliff,” Mito told her. “I really don't think she'll be unhappy if she gets woken up by you pulling her into those big arms of yours.”

The drake eyed Mito for a while. When she apparently decided that the marten really was being sincere, she pushed herself up to her feet and walked over to where the vixen was sleeping on the makeshift alchemical padding. Zaress laid down beside her and put her arms around her soft frame, tugging her in close against her body. Cerine whimpered groggily and the tip of her tail flicked against her cheek.

“Mmmph... you're warm,” the fox murmured, grabbing Zaress's arm and pulling it against her face like a pillow. Zaress smiled and brushed back some of the fox's long hair before resting her head against hers.

Mito rest her chin on her palm and watched them, smirking, while she waited for the sun to

come up.

\* \* \* \* \*

A big thank you to all my Patreon subscribers! You guys are making this possible!

### **Bronze Supporters**

Cobalt Dilly Elana Shuly  
ElCid Fenris Freere Firefang Foxxel  
Gideon Havenchaser mikefoxtrot  
Nedak Peppermint RMDIII sgtblaino  
Spreeuzaki Teres TheWickerMan zahnelia

### **Silver Supporters**

ChocEnd Ghost Fox Gonkulous HerrFleischer JT  
MothThePanda Rogue Wolf

### **Foxyfriends**

Indigo Jack Mrben277