It was a day so perfect that, though words could have conjured up a facsimile in the minds of the reader, they would have failed to do justice to any single aspect of it. In the (*somewhat inaccurately quoted*) words of Chaucer - *the birds were singing, the grass was green, and there were flowers everywhere*. It was as bright and warm a summer's day as any member of the peasantry could have possibly wished for, the air filled with the sweet (*and some less-than-sweet*) scents of nature and the pastel blue sky dotted with a loose scattering of clouds, such that the heat was content to stay *comfortable* instead of venturing into *unbearable.* The perfection of the weather and the sky was echoed by the world below - the farmers and their animals alike worked the fields without complaint, the windmills' sails wound round and round with a comfortable regularity, and the streets and market alike were kept at a level of activity that never quite made the jump between busy and hectic.

In other words, it was the sort of day that could have been looked back on fondly and wistfully in later years without any need for false memories or misguided nostalgia; the sort of day that, upon waking the next day, one immediately wishes, and regrets that it couldn't have stretched on forever.

The sort of day that nothing could possibly spoil... And which, unfortunately, *is* too-often spoiled by something unpredictable and unavoidable, like a natural disaster.

Not that the small mountain of blood-red scales hurtling through the sky faster than an arrow would have appreciated being compared to a natural disaster, of course, other than in the fear she could strike into the hearts of men and the destruction she could have caused to peasant and king alike, and... Well - then again, on second thought she probably *would* have liked being compared to a natural disaster - though only after a good period of thinking it over and a lethal amount of initial offense.

At first she appeared as nothing more than a dot, and then a speck, seeming to grow in size as she flapped closer with every passing moment. With the bright blue sky she was seen from a mile away - *literally* - and when the cry of "Dragon!" went up from one of the villagers, the happy perfection of the summer's day was shattered in an instant, replaced instead with pure panic. Mothers grabbed their children and ran for their houses; farmers sprinted for their barns, so filled with fear that they didn't even realise that they and everything inside of them were flammable. What passed as the town's militia ran for the storehouse, grabbing billhooks and spears, and a young messenger was sent atop a horse galloping to the nearby capital of the realm to beg for the King's aid - and, more importantly, the King's *army's* aid.

When she arrived, so soon and yet after such an achingly long time, the great red dragon slammed down into the town square like a scaly red missile - *not that she or anyone else would have known what a missile was, as they wouldn't be invented until several centuries later* - a few moments after the remaining townsfolk had finished hurriedly covering up the statue of Saint George.

"***TINY VILLAGERS! HEAR ME AND LISTEN!***" the dragon boomed, wings flaring so wide they blocked out the sky, tail-tip sharper than a sword's point as it lashed through the air.

"Oh my God, we're doomed!" someone screamed in response. "Please, eat me instead of my children!" a woman sobbed. "It's a sign of the Apocalypse!" the vicar screamed hysterically as he peeked his head out from one of the church's windows, not sounding particularly happy that his firebrand sermons seemed to have finally come true, "The Book of Revelation foretells of a great dragon-!"

"***BE QUIET!***" the dragon once more boomed, tail accidentally smashing an abandoned market stall into pieces of wood thinner than matchsticks (*though the townspeople would have been more familiar with rushlights and candlesticks*).

"She's destroying the town!" the mayor - dressed in notably more expensive and colourful fabrics than everyone else - wept from the balcony of his mansion. "All I've worked for, everything I've earned, gone!" His sentiments were widely shared among the population, if in less materialistic terms. "Please, great and mighty dragon!" a young farm boy stammered as he crawled out from under a cart, as the dragoness reared her muzzle back, half-choking on the various smells that clung to him, his clothes, and the burlap sack of *entirely-natural* fertiliser he had been ordered to take to mayor for the benefit of his rose-garden, "Take me as your slave and leave everyone else alone! I may be young, but I'm as fit as any of the oxen that work the fields, and-"

"***WILL ALL OF YOU IDIOTS PLEASE SHUT UP!?***"

"She's already giving us commands!" one of the farmers wept, half-peeking out of the barn. "She really is going to take us all as slaves - or as cattle! Quick, set all of the animals free so that at least they might have a chance to escape-"

"***ALL OF YOU SHUT UP AND LET - ME - SPEAK!***" the dragon roared, spitting out a handful of sparks with every word. Her eyes blazed, glowing like lamps, and as she snorted angrily flames leapt from her nostrils. Finally, silence descended - though it was quickly broken as the great fire lizard continued. "***GET ME THE MAYOR OR WHOEVER ELSE RUNS THIS LITTLE PISSANT HAMLET OF YOURS BEFORE I BURN THE ENTIRE THING TO THE GROUND!***"

Though many instinctively wanted to disagree with the idea of their beautiful village being a 'little pissant hamlet', few were willing to actually voice such an opinion within earshot of a dragon whose toes were longer than most men were tall, and whose claws dug into the cobbled streets beneath her with enough strength to crack entire streets open. The mayor was hurriedly fetched and, after a quick change of underwear, flung himself to the ground in front of the dragon, whose temper visibly smouldered like the sparks still spitting whenever she drew breath. Ordinarily a rather self-assured sort of man, with rich clothes and rich tastes, the mayor found himself terrified into complete and utter silence, every muscle in his body quivering horribly as he stared up into those glowing eyes and snorting nostrils and the great maw filled with too many, too-sharp teeth.

"*Now,*" the dragon thundered, her voice so much more terrible and booming up close even after being lowered to a less deafening level, "*I don't know about you, but* ***I*** *don't think this is an acceptable way to treat a guest. Do* ***you?***" She snorted again, peppering the mayor's clothes with quickly-cooling embers. "*I was intending to ask for the aid of a stonemason; or, at the very least recommendations for those found in the nearby city. And I was intending to pay with a portion of my hoard. But after such a* ***warm*** *welcome I think I am entitled to being* ***compensated.***"

"A s-s-stonemason?" the mayor babbled, finding his voice. Or part of it. The dragon nodded. "*A stonemason,*" she rumbled. "*A mason who works with stone.*"

"W-why?!" the mayor half-wailed, having to pat at his clothes to extinguish another handful of dragonbreath sparks; horrible images of whatever the evil lizard had planned already flashing through his mind. Perhaps her foul mountain lair was crumbling and needed to be rebuilt - or perhaps she meant to expand it, to hold all of her new slaves after she carried the entire village off in her paws!?

"*A wandering knight-*" the dragoness began, before shaking her head. "*No, that's too grand of a title. A* ***wandering adventurer-***" Again, she reconsidered. She hummed, the sound so curiously *normal* when coming from something so huge. "***An idiot, who is now a pile of fine ash,*** *blundered into my lair intending to* ***slay the evil and mighty dragon.*** *He poked at my eyelid with his sword and woke me up, and I breathed on him to make him go away. Unfortunately, I failed to realise that he was standing directly in front of my chess set. And now I need a replacement in time for my bicentennial chess match.*"

"B-buh-bi-"

"*Bicentennial. Every two hundred years, I awake from my slumber in preparation for a chess match with a dear friend, and to make sure that my hoard has remained unmolested. Dragons tend to become* ***very angry*** *when being woken up at swordpoint and when finding that their hoards have been molested.*"

The mayor swallowed, face gone bone-white, nodding and eager to agree with everything the dragoness said despite his terror. Or perhaps because of it.

"*Under other circumstances, I would have waited for my dear friend to arrive, explained the situation, and postponed our chess match for a decade or two while I awaited the creation of my new chess set. But given the...* ***warm welcome****... I received at you and your village's hands, I have something entirely different in mind.*"

With that, the dragon reared up ever so slightly - given that she and the entire town weren't too far off each other in terms of size, it didn't take much effort at all to tower over the entire thing. Her gaze swept this way and that until she spied the great wheat fields that surrounded it, and she took in a breath, fires raging in her throat. She blew out, and in an instant an entire swathe of land was incinerated, crops and earth alike burned to the finest ash, which she swept away with a paw greater than an entire street to reveal the unburned soil underneath. She extended a claw as long as a house was tall, and dragged it through the earth. Then again, and again, carving lines into the ground whose purpose no man could guess.

Then, with her other paw she did the same, adding another set of lines - with each motion it became clearer and clearer that she was creating some sort of grid in the very earth, at least for those who were at the right sort of angle or distance to see it. Along one end, and as gracefully as she could manage, the dragon began to write letters - *A, B, C,* and so on; and along the other face numbers - *1, 2, 3...* Her eyes closed to mere slits and she snorted, blowing out a focused breath of flame that charred the soil black - but only here and there, the fire much more selective than ought to have been possible!

And then, the dragoness turned back to the tiny, quivering mayor who still lay prostrating himself at her paws. She sneered wickedly. "*I no longer* ***need*** *a stonemason to create a new chess set,*" she rumbled. "*At least, not for another two hundred years. You, and your entire village, seem* ***just*** *about the right size to serve as a replacement!* ***You*** *shall be my king; and fetch your wife, if you have one, for* ***she*** *shall be my* ***queen!*** *And-*" Despite a moment before sounding as if she had been on the edge of triumphantly cackling, something very quickly took the wind out of the dragon's sails. "*-And fetch yourself a new set of underwear. Sun above, humans really* ***are*** *disgusting, filthy vermin...*"

These things the mayor did, with a slowness that could only have been called deliberate, and which a fearsome giant dragon likely would have called 'intensely amusing', were she in the mood to do anything other than rumble orders (*and, indeed, to rumble barely-veiled threats through the thin, flammable wooden walls of the mayor's mansion over how long he was taking*).

Indeed, by the time the mayor and his wife were finally ready to leave the house - *and to do much of anything other than be hysterical, terrified wrecks* - it had been long enough the young messenger who had been sent to request the King's aid had delivered his message, and returned with the monarch and his military in tow, who now stood uncomfortably and awkwardly milling about without much to do or say, and with several fresh, suspiciously man-sized piles of ash and a (*literal*) heap of broken axes and bent swords for their efforts. "*Excellent,*" the dragon sneered - effortlessly plucking first the mayor and then his wife up between her great digits and setting them down onto their appropriate spots on the impromptu chessboard. "*If you two had taken any longer I would have burned the house down around you and suggested you get a move on. It is an awful pity that the King doesn't bring his queen or princess with him on dangerous, dragon-slaying missions, but I suppose one of his soldiers can fill in as my dear friend's queen for the game. I'd go and kidnap one of the two girls, but he should be getting here in, oh...*"

The giant reptile stuck one of her claws straight down into the ground, and peered closely at the shadow it cast. "*Oh, right about now,*" she rumbled.

With that, there was a sound like a great clap of thunder, and where previously there had been the open, empty remnants of the poor farmers; wheat field there was instead another giant - one every bit as immense as the red-scaled dragon, though one much less scaly, and much more furry and feathery. There was a pair of lion's paws bigger than houses, and a great long tail tipped with a tuft of dark brown fur - further afield (*in a very literal manner*), there were another pair of paws; not a lion's, but an eagle's, coloured a dull yellow. There was plumage the colour of snow on a cold winter's day, and brown feathers that seamlessly melded with fur of much the same colour. The gryphon stretched his gigantic wings and cast a shadow over all present save the dragon, arching his back and, for a moment, clawing at the earth like a cat.

"*Infera,*" the giant said, voice male and even deeper than the dragon's, "*You really must stop bothering the little people so much.*"

Infera the dragoness huffed, nostrils spitting embers. "*They bothered* ***me*** *first,*" she said, "*And then they* ***bothered*** *me again. And then a third time. All* ***I'm*** *doing is extracting compensation for the wrongs done to me.*"

The gryphon simply rolled his eyes, in a manner that suggested he had experienced many such conversations before and that he knew his opposite number was never going to budge. Spying the King he made the same motions he had as when he had arched his back, though in reverse - his beak dipped close to the ground in what was likely the quadruped giant's equivalent of a bow. "*My apologies on behalf of my friend, Your Majesty,*" he rumbled. "*You would be angry too, if you had a fire in your belly. I'm sure you understand.*"

"Ah, y-yes," stammered the king, even though he very much did *not* understand. "Quite."

As the King watched, the gigantic gryphon laid out a front paw, pads facing up to the sky, one of his digits beckoning. After several very long moments the monarch accepted, and was carried over to his assigned spot on the impromptu chess board in a much more gentle manner than the mayor and his wife had been. "*Boreas,*" Infera snorted, "*Please stop coddling the things. We have a game of chess to play, if you had forgotten.*"

Infera waved a mighty paw, indicating her half of the 'board', which was already set up. Her king was the mayor; her queen the mayor's wife. Her pawns were peasants and her bishops were the vicar and a scarecrow dressed in a set of spare vestments. Her rooks were a pair of chimneys she had pulled off of nearby houses.

(*She had attempted to use a pair of horses as her knights, only to find them much less cooperative than the local peasantry; in their place were a pair of farmers, both holding a hobby horse pilfered from somewhere in the village.*)

"*This time,*" Infera boomed, as Boreas picked out his own 'pieces' from among the King's army, ushering knights and men-at-arms and bowmen onto the board with motions of his head and waves of his hand, "*I shall play black, as I played white in our previous game.*" Infera's tone suggested that she was very much the sort of chess player who preferred to play white *every* game, and indeed *would* have if her opponent wasn't equally as powerful and gigantic as herself.

"*Then this time,*" Boreas rumbled, "*I shall play as white. I believe my side of the board is set up... Are you ready, Infera?*"

Infera snorted, spitting sparks. "*Please* ***hurry up,***" she said. "*I've been waiting two hundred years for this.*"

Boreas cocked his head to one side, raising an eyebrow. Even to those down below, he was recognisably smirking. "*Two hundred years that you spent mostly asleep.*"

Infera snorted again. "*It's* ***still*** *two hundred years.*"

Boreas shrugged, conceding. "*In that case... Hrmmm...*" For a few long moments he studied the board, seeming to not quite care that it was made out of a burned wheat field, tapping at his chin with a talon that could have killed an entire score of men with a single stroke. "*E2 to E4.*"

There was a ripple of confusion among Boreas' assorted pieces, the soldiers all turning to one another to try and figure out which letter and number they all stood on. It did little to help Infera's already thunderous fury, the dragon's reptilian muzzle creasing in something beyond mere anger - at least until one of the men in the front rank, a spearman serving as a pawn, moved two spaces forward.

"*E7 to E5,*" Infera rumbled almost immediately. Again, there was the same ripple of confusion as her assorted peasants did their best to figure out who occupied what square on the board, though this was much quicker than the one before it - and it especially sped up after a growl from the mighty dragon shook the earth beneath everyone's feet! One of the farmers moved two spaces down the board, standing awkwardly in front of his opposite, awkwardly holding a pitchfork in his hands. "Do I, uh-" the man stammered, having never been exposed to the game of chess before. "Do you want me to stab him, or-"

There was another growl from the dragoness, the man made the wise decision to stop talking.

"*F2 to F4,*" Boreas rumbled, and another pawn took his place immediately to the side of the first. Infera simply licked her lips. "*E5 to E4,*" she boomed, but the farmer hesitated.

"A-ah - I know he's got armour on, but should I attack him, or-"

"***JUST. MOVE.***"

With a nervous swallow and shaking legs - *and after a great deal of clapping his hands over his ears and cursing under his breath* - the farmer did as he was told. The footman who had been standing there a moment before simply shrugged, walking off the side of the board and taking a seat on the ground, chin on his fist. Boreas tapped a talon at his beak, the sound echoing throughout the village. "*F1 to... C4,*" he rumbled, and an armoured knight - representing a bishop, rather than his own profession - clattered his way across the board, armour clanking and rattling as if someone was banging a dozen pots and pans together.

For her part, Infera seemed *very* happy at this new development - though the smile on her face was anything but reassuring to those below. It was the sort of smile that said, '*I am going to eat you and everyone and everything you love, and I am going to do it* ***slowly****.*'

This time, Infera didn't announce her move - she simply grabbed the mayor's wife, picked her up between a pair of digits that could have crushed houses between them, and set her down into a new spot so roughly that the moment Infera released her grip the woman lost her footing. The dragoness silently sneered at the gryphon, who likewise remained silent - ruffling his plumage. "*Oh. D8 to H4,*" Infera snorted wickedly, and for those who were able to see there was no confusion as to why. Boreas' moves had opened up a gap in his frontline, and now Infera's 'queen' was poised to attack his king on the very next turn. "*Check,*" the dragoness boomed.

"*Your Majesty,*" Boreas rumbled, "*I would appreciate it if you could take a step to you right.*" he cleared his throat politely, yet deafeningly loudly. "*E1 to F1.*" The monarch did so with nary a complaint, taking him out of danger of Infera's queen. For a moment, the dragon deflated... Before she drew herself right back up, as big and angry as ever! "*You!*" Infera snorted. "*B7 to B5!*"

The farmer rushed to obey, positioning himself right next to Boreas' 'bishop'. "*C4 to B5,*" the gryphon said. The farmer all but sprinted off of the side of the board, and the gryphon turned to Infera. He simply shrugged at her, in the specific sort of way that suggests one is enjoying themselves immensely.

The dragon grit her teeth and snarled under her breath. She grabbed a knight (*actually one of the farmers, who let out a shriek and dropped his hobby horse the moment her paw drew near*) and positioned it to the front of her lines. Boreas mirrored her move with a knight of his own, though *his* knight was much closer to the real thing than Infera's.

There was a quick pause as the dragoness' 'knight' took the opportunity to sprint back to the edge of the board to grab the hobby horse he had dropped, and Infera took the opportunity to move her queen back a couple of spaces - the mayor's poor wife had barely got to her feet before she was roughly moved by a pair of red-scaled digits. Move by move, Infera and Boreas jockeyed for position on the right half of the board, and even the permanently-enraged dragoness fell silent aside for the occasional snort and shower of sparks or grinding of teeth.

That is, at least until Boreas moved his own queen up the field. If the board had been an actual battlefield, instead of - *whatever it could reasonably be called, given how it was made* - it would have been the most confused, confusing mess of a battlefield since the Romans had thought '*surely nothing bad can ever happen in Teutoburg Forest*'. Boreas had strung his pawns out in a rough line, so that no matter which piece it took - the pawn to its right, the knight to its left, the bishop down and to the left that had just swept away one of the dragon's own pawns with a gryphony rumble of "*C1 to F4,*" - there would be something waiting to take it in turn.

Angry, Infera might have been - but she certainly wasn't stupid. She drew her queen back, eyes spying for weaknesses in Boreas' moves like a hunting hawk's. Or maybe like those of a dragon hunting for tiny villagers to eat. "*F6 to B2,*" she announced, lips curling in smugness - smugness that only grew the move after when one of her bishops shot down the board, taking out one of the gryphon's two rooks. '*That,*' she must have thought to herself, in a much angrier and harsher voice, '*Might as well be a game-ending move.*' Something that seemed even more true the following turn when Boreas' other rook was taken, leaving his king - or rather, *the* King - in a rather perilous position. Not that Infera's king was faring any better, after the gryphon moved a knight up into position, nestling comfortably in between a pair of pawns and with a rook top its upper right and another night right above it. The dragon quickly scooted the mayor out of harm's way - that is, as much as 'out of harm's way' as one can be when they're behind held between the digits of a dragon who has already threatened to burn down your entire village. "*F3 to F6,*" Boreas rumbled, nudging his queen up the board.

Infera made a short, sharp sound that probably counted as her equivalent of a victorious laugh. "*G8 to F6!*" she said, snorting with glee as her knight squirmed past several other men to take his new position, and the queen - *actually one of the King's trusted lieutenants* - trudged his way off the field, joining the worryingly-large amount of men sitting, standing, and generally milling about off the side of the board. "*You're running out of pieces, Boreas! At this rate, the game won't be lasting much longer!*" the dragoness crowed, feeling her oats (*in an almost literal fashion, given her body was covering a good portion of the town's farmland*) and entirely unnoticing of the visible wave of relief that swept over every single person present. "*You've barely got anything left that isn't a peasant, I don't think you can even-*"

"*D6 to E7,*" boreas rumbled, gently sliding his remaining bishop - which had been steadily creeping up the board the entire time, going all but unnoticed by the aggressively-playing, taunting dragoness - right next to Infera's king. "*Checkmate.*"

Infera looked as if she was about to say something, or perhaps simply roar over being interrupted. Then she actually looked down at the chess board she had made, and tilted her muzzle to one side. Then she blinked, and tilted it the other way. There was indeed a bishop, standing awkwardly next to the mayor, who quailed as if upon realising she had just lost, might decide to make good on her threat to burn the town to the ground. Or, more importantly, her threats to *him.*

Slowly, the dragon's muzzle contorted - her lips quivering, peeling back to reveal more and more of her awful, huge teeth, her nostrils flaring, embers spitting in time with her breathing, a great and terrible anger seeming to take hold of her; one even greater than ever! Her eyes glowed like the sun and her entire body shook, the ground under her shuddering like in an earthquake, and then-!

"*Ugh.*" Infera snorted, sulking, placing her paw on one side of the board and sweeping it through to the other, bulldozing every single one of the remaining pieces into an awkward human pile. "*Fine. You win, Boreas. I suppose I'll have to make my way to the city and commission a* ***proper*** *chess set before I can hibernate, and we'll have the next rematch in another two hundred-****ish*** *years' time, and- exactly* ***what*** *are you doing?*"

Almost as if he hadn't heard a single word that the dragoness had said, the gargantuan gryphon was sorting through the tangle of very much *alive* yet very much *uncomfortable* people, already restocking Infera's side of the board - popping the chimney-rooks and scarecrow-bishop and 'actual[' bishop back into position, delicately hoisting the mayor into the air and giving him a gently patting down with a talon larger than the man's own house.

"*Boreas?*"

Already, the gryphon had fully reset Infera's side of the board, and now he turned to his own. He gently picked a footman, and then another, and another... Stocking his entire *back line* with them, instead of with things like rooks and bishops and knights and a king! "*I think we have time for one more game,*" he rumbled, an ever so slightly sly note to his voice as he completed one row of pawns. Then another. And then another still, his paws moving back and forth so much and so quickly that they almost blurred.

Before too long the board was set up for another game... If a very strange one. Infera's black side of the board was set up as it should have been, and then there was a no-man's-land of two rows of empty space... And then a massive, solid block of pawns, taken from the King's army, as everyone who had any knowledge of chess whatsoever - both the King and Infera included - watched on in undisguised confusion. Even the red-scaled dragoness had fallen silent, muzzle tilted to one side as if begging for an answer as to exactly *what* the gryphon was trying *now.*

Boreas simply grinned, as much as his beak would let him.

"*How about a match of Dunsany's chess?*"