

## Chapter 21 - Close Encounter

What seemed like an eternity passed, and just as Fardon had begun to fear that he would remain in limbo forever, the Dawn Place began to fade, ebbing away to black, and then a brilliant light which dazzled his eyes. Fardon gave a gasp and looked around blearily. Mermul's face came into focus.

"Thanks," Fardon gurgled, and attempted to stand before collapsing back into a heap. Mermul helped the larger dragon up, and he wobbled unsteadily.

Terry was staring at them, eyes watering slightly, and the brown dragon realised that the overlord of the realm was fighting back tears.

"I had a choice," Mermul said. "Go for your head, or your body. I guess either one would have worked, but your *body* has your possessions on it. Your neck-satchel."

"What do you-" Fardon started, and then saw it. He gave a yelp of horror at the battered brown face, dead eyes staring glassily into the distance and dried blood on his nostrils and mouth, horns broken on one side. Trembling, he picked it up. Mermul waited awkwardly, patting him on the back as the big dragon cradled his own severed head, sobbing profusely.

"There, there..." he said comfortingly. "It's quite a shock, isn't it? There's no shame in going to pieces, Fardon. Take your time. I'd probably have done the same in Lord Thurr's throne room if it hadn't been so vital to throw him off balance."

"I don't even know what we do in cases like this," the fluff dragon added eventually. "Do we bury it? Mount it on a wall? People will ask questions."

"I d-don't know either..." Fardon said shakily. "But we'll need a sack or a bag, something to conceal the identity. P-People will then assume it's a bounty."

Lord Terror was still watching with a stunned expression. "I..." he croaked. "I did not fully believe this when I was told earlier, that you had such a mighty gift."

"It cost me dear, your lordship," Mermul said. "But I wanted to help make the world a better place. I wanted to help pay back for the lives I took under Thurr. I had hoped I would not need to use it on Fardon, though..."

"I am forever in your debt," Terry said. "I do not know how I would have explained

the murder of a knight to Lord Varl..."

"Now that Fardon is not longer dead, do you still need to guillotine the dragon responsible for his murder?" Fiskul asked suddenly.

"Yes," Terry said viciously. "Even with Fardon's miraculous survival, Sedrak's actions could be seen as an act of war against Taria. Even now, this is a big setback to my dragon integration programme - and it makes him a traitor who has actively worked to undermine his own rightful lord. These are high crimes, and together they spell his death."

"What is Mermul even doing here...?" Fardon asked, looking around in confusion. "I am still in Hadrovar, so it can't be that long... Can't be long enough for him to have flown from Taria."

"Oh, I arrived at Arstrom some hours ago," Mermul said. "On business. Fiskul told me what happened, so of course I came at once."

"Oh, no..." the mayor groaned, emerging from the City Hall to find three dragons in the square. "We don't have any more people to sacrifice! Please, show us mercy!"

"I'm not a god!" Mermul protested. "I keep saying that! I don't want any more cultists worshipping me! It's not proper! And sacrificing people is just *evil!*"

Terry looked at him strangely for a moment, then snarled at the mayor. "I warned you about this, Mayor Tomlinson," he growled. "No more sacrifices! That monster, Sedrak, will pay dearly for his crimes. That, I promise you."

"But if he returns..."

"My troops will protect the city," Terry said. "In case there are others. But I shall deal with Sedrak personally," he added. "Right now. He may have given Sir Fardon a taste of death, but he shall find *me* a lot tougher to get the drop on. No offence," he added to the brown dragon.

"I will come with you," Mermul said. "I hope you don't need any more resurrections, but just in case..."

"And I want a rematch," Fardon snarled.

\* \* \*

Sedrak dozed lightly in his cave when a noise suddenly woke him. Suspiciously, he got up and padded to the entrance. As he did so, a heavy object was thrown into it.

Flicking on one of the lights, he saw that it was the head of a dragon. The impudent, interfering brown dragon he had killed earlier.

"What...?" he started.

"*Surprise, you little shit!*" a voice yelled.

The grey dragon poked his head out of the cave, and goggled for a moment, before taking flight.

"YOU!" he roared as Fardon circled. "How.... What... ..Ah! A brother... A *twin!*" he crowed. "Thank you indeed for providing his head. I shall put yours next to it!"

"You're welcome to it," Fardon sneered. "After all, you'll be needing a new head after his lordship is finished with you!"

"That jumped-up *food*...?"

Fardon's tail slammed into the grey dragon's head. Sedrak hissed with anger, and he launched himself towards Fardon.

"You shall all pay for violating my territory! This time I shall destroy you forever," he boasted. "And then I shall eat your overlord!" Fardon circled and bit the other dragon's tail, seizing the tail-blade that had claimed his life before. His claws lashed out again and again, until the bindings were cut and the weapon dropped away to the ground below.

"The Great One gave me new life," Fardon said. "But I doubt He will be so forgiving to you, Sedrak. Yet we can still be merciful. Leave this realm, and come here no more. Then you will live to see tomorrow."

"You won't live to see sunset," the grey dragon sneered. "You were a fool to come alone, without backup..."

"You were a fool to think he did," Lord Terror crowed, dropping from his hiding-place above the cliff. A vast shadow descending, steel gauntlets that ended with razor claws outstretched, slicing into the grey dragon's flank.

Sedrak cried out in pain, struggled, thrashed, and fell as the other two dragons piled onto him, dragging him to Eyrth where he slammed into the ground heavily.

Terry's foreleg seized his throat, and began to squeeze.

"I am Lord Terror," the dragon roared. "Sovereign lord of all Arstrom! I am not violating *your* territory, *you* are trespassing in *mine*! You killed a visiting diplomat, ate my loyal subjects, and attempted to wrest Hadrovar from my rule! For this and other acts of treachery, you must *die*!"

"Not here," Mermul said. Terry looked at him, puzzled.

"I am no fan of public executions," Mermul said sadly. "But sometimes you need to make an example. Show the people proof that the villain has met his end."

"I had intended to place his head in the square," Terry admitted. "But perhaps you are right, and he should meet his end there instead. But you are forgetting one thing, friend. I am trying to *hide* my true nature until dragons are better established here. Something the traitor has just made a lot harder."

"But we won't be able to wrestle him back there with Terry in his small form!" Fardon protested, drawing an evil grin from Sedrak.

"It took two of you to best me," he snarled triumphantly. "One-on-one, I shall win and I shall not show mercy!"

"We could always cut his wings off," Mermul said quietly. "I used to be an assassin for Lord Thurr, and I know more than most about subduing an enemy dragon."

Sedrak's eyes widened and for the first time, he showed fear. "Take my life," he said. "I am resigned to it. I have failed. But do not torture me! Even *I* did not do that to the mortals!"

"I hate to be part of this," Mermul said, "But you must be stopped. I am sorry," he added and made a gesture. A beam of brilliant green light flared and Sedrak fell lifeless to the ground.

"D-did you..." Terry looked horrified. "A *death* spell?!"

"Certainly not!" Mermul said, looking insulted. "Father Alkrash chose me to be an agent of healing and life. This Sedrak is merely stunned. We can carry him to the City

and there, do what must be done."

"Tell me," Mermul added. "Who is Maarvyn...? You mentioned that name earlier, as if you knew them... and it sounded like Sedrak was just one of his thugs. But we still don't know where he is, and I don't suppose Sedrak will tell us if he's going to lose his head either way."

"A fair question," Terry sighed. "He is..." The white dragon froze, glancing around with a worried expression. A loud roaring noise came from the South, and he craned his large head to try and spot the source. It was flying low, and was powered by twin jet engines. The three dragons watched it zoom past, astonished.

"What the hell was *that*?!" Mermul asked, looking shocked. The shape, clearly draconic in appearance, receded into the distance at a shockingly fast pace, the roar of their engines fading with an audible Doppler effect.

"A dragon with a jet-pack?" Fardon asked, worriedly. "But what that speed would do to their wings, I really don't know..."

"I do not know either," Terry admitted. "We have been getting a lot of sightings of unidentified aircraft, but we don't know who or what is behind them. I think this is the closest encounter on record."

"Whoever or whatever that was, they were using technology from the Small Races," Mermul said slowly. "And we all know that Atlantia has the most advanced aerotechnology, because they can't hire dragons to help them, and worse, they want aircraft that can out-fly dragons to hunt us down.

"But whoever did this... they *can't* be Hunters, surely? They'd never have assisted a dragon, and they would have attacked us for sure!"

"Prosthetics?" Fardon wondered. "If a dragon lost their wings in an accident or through torture, could they be given artificial wings, and a drive system to match? As the Hunters are well aware, it's easier to build a fixed wing and some kind of thruster, than to engineer something that can flap like a living dragon or a bird."

"Quite possibly," Mermul conceded. "Though I'd have thought they'd have done something with the bones, like how the Hunters use their anti-gravity properties to make drones."

"It's just a guess," Fardon admitted. "Not all of it adds up. But *I* think I saw a dragon with jet engines just go by at a good fraction of the speed of sound."

"That's some small comfort," Mermul said brightly. "It implies they're a mixed society like Taria. Though if a dragon supremacist like the old Lord Thurr had been given the option to turn his dragons into cyborg super-soldiers, I dread to think what could have happened."