

## Chapter 23 - The Prophecy is Fulfilled

The passageway was wide enough to let Terry and Fardon walk together, without the dragon-lord having to assume his humanoid guise. It was dimly lit by electric bulbs on portable stands, giving it the look of an archaeological dig.

"Well, Maarvyn isn't here," Terry said, sniffing the air. "But he *has* been."

"How do you know it's him?" Fardon asked. "Come to that, I don't think you ever told us who Maarvyn is."

"He's my brother," Terry said. "Last I knew, he had a rather lower opinion of the Small Races than I do. Though I will admit it is a big coincidence if he has also wound up in this realm." He paused. "Or maybe not. I came here because I had heard rumours that the realm would be a good place for dragons to live if the fool in charge could be removed. Perhaps he had similar thoughts..."

"Hmm," Fardon said. "I see signs that someone left in a hurry. Tracks... someone has moved a cart. Which is an interesting coincidence, as the family I spoke to regarding the egg thefts mentioned cart tracks as well."

"*Gah*," Terry said. "That *also* needs my attention. Since I am apparently touring the North of my realm for the next day or two, I feel obliged to offer them my condolences and reassure them that I am taking the matter seriously."

"You don't suppose it could be Maarvyn doing that?!" Fardon looked alarmed.

"For his own sake, I sincerely hope not," Terry growled. "But I suspect that is a coincidence. I know you can buy lair storage furniture that is wheeled to allow for a swift evacuation in the event that the lair is raided by Hunters or other trespassers."

"See?" he added as they entered the main chamber. "The hoard is disturbed, nearly everything else of value has been removed. He has fled."

"I'm not sure what else we can do," Fardon sighed. "You could station a watch in case he returns, and if your troops have brought an imager you can check for secret passages. But to me, it looks like the important stuff went out the front entrance."

"I concur," Terry said. "Even the lighting is all portable stuff. This doesn't look like his primary residence, so much as a temporary base." He glanced at Fardon, who had

gone very still. "What is it...?"

"I'm not sure yet," Fardon said slowly. "This corner of the cave has strange marks. Claw-marks, but deep..."

"Curious," Terry said, craning his neck to get a closer look. "I see what you mean. These aren't normal claw-marks... Gauntlets, probably. I must remember to order some for Zarnak."

"Perhaps," Fardon said doubtfully. "But usually when someone has that kind of gear, they look after it. It was drilled into us *never* to have the tines in place when casually walking around on stone, as it'll blunt them and leave you defenceless when you need it most. Also, we don't usually bother with tines on the back - the hands are generally the most useful place to have them. More dexterity."

Terry craned his neck around the other way. "Curious... the marks lead out the front."

"Maybe he tooled up before leaving," Fardon pondered.

"I think he had an accomplice," Terry said, eyes narrowing. "Look there - two sets of prints, side by side. One barefoot, the other with gauntlets. I doubt Sedrak was his only mook, after all - maybe this was a bodyguard, if they spent so much time in that corner. What troubles me is that I can't catch any scent of them."

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Sir Fardon landed in the square, and Terry alighted from his back. "Don't get too used to this," Fardon said. "You have wings too, after all."

"It *is* ungracious of me as a host to ask that of you," Terry admitted. "Hopefully I will not need to do that again for a while. Any news on the drought?" he added, glancing at Mermul and one of the military engineers.

"Once, I could have made you some blocks of ice and left them to melt," Mermul said sadly. "But I traded that power for healing. If the drought has left anyone sick or dying, I can probably fix that, but what I can't do is provide you a source of water."

"I think we can probably fix this, milord," the engineer said. "Hadrovar's primary source of fresh water is fed from an underground river," the panther continued. "It would seem that an earthquake has blocked it - likely the same one that severed the

communications trunk. Now that we know that, we can see about blasting the obstruction clear, and hopefully that will solve the water shortages. Otherwise we'll have to look at diverting it..."

"Very good," Lord Terror replied. "Very good indeed! Hopefully I will be returning to the capital soon, but do keep me updated. We have seen what happens when my citizens are not properly cared for, and such neglect must not happen again. Where is Sir Zarnak...?"

"He's with the mayor," Mermul said, glancing sadly across the square. "They have removed Sedrak's body, but digging a grave for a dragon is not something anyone here has had to deal with in living memory. Some of the engineers have been helping with that, but Zarnak has offered to start work on it himself, dragons being capable diggers, after all.

"While the water problem is important, the first tankers should be arriving this afternoon, so that can be managed. But the risk of having a giant, rotting corpse left here carries rather more urgency."

"Sensible," Terry said. "And that is good news about the water crisis. Is there anything else I should know? Did you explore Sedrak's cave?"

"Fisk and I went there," Mermul said. "We found his hoards."

"He had *several* hoards...?" the engineer broke in. "That would certainly help repay the damage he has done."

"That was considered," Terry said. "But as for the value of them, I don't hold out much hope. If Sedrak was motivated by wealth, he'd probably have demanded tributes of gold instead of... food."

"I hope he wasn't addled by malnourishment," Mermul put in sadly. "That can happen - that dragons who eat nothing but meat become aggressive and even murderous where they would not otherwise be."

"Sedrak did not want for food," Terry pointed out. "If he was on a meat-only diet, that was his choice - and he has paid for it. Sometimes dragons are just... bad."

"It's in the claws of the Great One now," Mermul sighed. "As for the hoard, there's a common misconception," he added. "When someone talks about a hoard, most non-dragons tend to think of a massive pile of gold or something and get all excited - no

offence intended.

"But for most dragons, a hoard is just a pile of comfortable objects to sleep on. I'm quite partial to marbles. Those who don't use a modern banking system, may indeed have a large collection of valuables. Sometimes it is what they sleep on, sometimes it's in a vault. But most hoards are worthless because they're just comfort piles."

"It doesn't help that we tend to use the same word for both," Fardon said. "But like his lordship, I am curious if you found anything of interest?"

"There were a lot of bones," Mermul said, looking troubled. "Human and furre. I may attempt to revive some of them later, but I can't make any promises. And we'd have to figure out how to transport them back - alive or dead. I'll have to liase with the mayor and/or Zarnak because mass graves and resurrections get really awkward, legally and politically."

"Milord," one of the engineers interrupted. "I have a radio message. The first of the tankers is just arriving."

"Excellent!" Terry said. "Inform the mayor, and have someone arrange the distribution."

"Rejoice!" a loud voice called. Terry and the others turned to see a bearded old man standing on a box, with a megaphone in one hand. "*The prophecy is true, just as I foretold!*" he shouted. "*A year ago I saw the drought in a dream, and I knew that dragons would come to end it! But only if men were offered as sacrifice to their kin! Rejoice, for their deaths were not in vain! The drought is ending!*"

Lord Terror gave the old prophet a look of sheer loathing and stormed into the city hall.

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Not long afterwards, Terry, Fardon and Mermul were soaring through the air, high above the fields around the valley.

"I feel much better now," the white dragon admitted. "Being able to stretch my wings and feel the wind beneath them... Oh, I rarely get to do that back in the capital. This was just what I needed to calm down."

"It wasn't the prophet's fault," Fardon reassured him. "He only saw it. It was Sedrak who actually *demand*ed sacrifices."

"Even so," Terry said, "If they had just asked *me*, all this could have been avoided. They'd have had the tankers weeks ago!"

"I wonder what else he saw," Mermul put in thoughtfully. "Maybe he knows Lord Terror isn't one of the Small Races!"

"Dammit, Mermul!" Terry grouched. "I came here to try and *relax*, not to get brand new worries!"

"Sorry!" the snow-dragon muttered.

"I don't think it's a problem," Fardon mused. "If he saw it, he'd probably also have seen that the time is not yet right for people to know that, and that you'd come down hard on him for revealing it."

Just then, the distant roar of a jet engine caused the three dragons to glance behind them, craning their necks to take in the mysterious flier.

"Oh, I'm bloody sick of this," Terry scowled. "Let's follow him."

"There's no way we can catch up with *that*," Fardon protested. "He's several times faster than us and that might not even be his top speed! Or hers, or whatever..."

"I know," Terry said, veering towards the swift shape's flight path. "But we know their heading. Let's at least take a look and see if there's anything interesting that way. That way, we might find out where they're coming from, or at least what they're doing. All of the sightings have been coming or going from that rough area, so we may as well give it a look-over."

"Ah, why not...?" Fardon agreed. "We might run into a dragon or two who needs to be told the Good News of their Lord's coming!"

Terry snorted. "Don't push it, Fardon!" he warned, struggling to keep a straight face.

Some time later, they came across a gorge cut into the land by some ancient river. There was no water there now, but a tarmac road led to a large concrete building that merged into the rocky cliff-side. A satellite dish was aimed upwards, clearly designed to track a subsynchronous orbit.

"Hmm," Terry said. "I don't like the look of that. If our mysterious friend is a spy, this would be high on the list of things for them to be interested in."

"I don't like it either," Fardon said. "This looks very militarised. We should land and observe it from a distance before deciding what to do."

"I am king," Terry growled. "Spying on my own facilities seems a little ridiculous. But since my subjects only know me as a furre, it seems a prudent course of action."

"It's also just possible," Fardon said, "That this is *not* one of yours."