

Chapter 5 - Prayers

The temple was large. It had to be, to accommodate a crowd of dragons wishing to give thanks to their creator. Even so, the seating arrangements only provided for double digits. Perhaps because of this, those attending the temple typically did so on their own schedule, rather than descending on the temple *en mass* every tenday.

Humans and Furies had their own respective deities - Anah and Arbar - but since all three were part of the same pantheon there was nothing unusual about the small races serving the temple. Someone had to do the fine work which a dragon could not, after all. Praying was another matter, however, and each race would generally make offerings in their own temple unless they had specific reason to pray to one of the other divines. To do otherwise would be the spiritual equivalent of phoning the wrong department in a large organisation - even if your message was passed on to the correct authority, the inconvenience alone would make them rather less likely to listen.

Fardon stepped into the atrium with Mermul in tow, and made his way towards the priest, a grey frost dragon with a robe draped across his back. Fisk kept a respectful distance and watched from the doorway.

"Ah," the priest said. "Sir Fardon. I have heard the news. The chapel is free, my son, and I shall pray for your spiritual atonement. Who are your companions, if I may ask? Do they also seek guidance from our Father?"

"This is Mermul, a refugee new to our realm. I am escorting him for the present. And..." he hesitated. "There is also a stranger from the disputed lands. He has unusual beliefs, Father. Perhaps he should not be here," he added, glancing at Fiskul with a warning expression.

"All of us are children of Alkrash," the priest said. "If they seek His mercy, and salvation from the Devourer, they are welcome here."

"Uh, about that," Fiskul said, poking a spiny black head around the door. The priest looked startled and ruffled his wings.

"My child, that is an... unfortunate appearance you have," he said. "If that is cosmetic, then it is in poor taste."

"I've always looked like this," Fiskul protested. "May I enter? I wish to pray to the Great One."

Fardon looked awkward, dropped a coin in the offering dish from the pouch on his collar, and scurried towards the chapel with unseemly haste.

Mermul glanced at the black dragon with an increasingly unhappy expression. "Uh.. This is the house of the Great One. Can you actually *enter* here? Wouldn't it turn you to dust or something?"

"Of *course* I can," Fiskul said, and did so. "I don't know how most of this got started. Some of the Scriptures have taken off on *completely* the wrong feet. They think I'm a guy, for instance..."

Mermul threw back his head like a wolf baying at the moon, and emitted a keening noise. The blue-grey fur around his face was tinged with purple and he quickly hid it behind his wings, shrivelling with embarrassment.

"*Oh!*" Fiskul said. "Of course you don't know! I'm agender. Physically sexless. Can't have the Destroyer producing kids, right? One of them might throw a tantrum and end the world ahead of schedule."

"*You!*" the priest gasped, tail going rigid as he made a sign of protection.

"I feel such an idiot," Mermul wailed.

"Shush, shush... It's okay," Fiskul said, patting him reassuringly with a foreleg. "As the good Father here can tell us, the Scriptures always call me a guy. Honestly, 'he' is perfectly fine. I did present as a dragoness at one point but honestly, I think I prefer being a bit more masculine. Works better with the black," they added, studying an elegantly manicured claw. "But, if you were hoping for a night of passion, some options are off the table..."

"We're in a *temple!*" Mermul shrieked. "Stop talking about that stuff!"

"Oh!" Fiskul put a hand to their muzzle and looked around sheepishly. "So sorry! I don't get out much..."

"My child, if you have made a pact with the Dark One..." the priest warned. "Your

very soul is at risk! I will pray for your salvation, but it may already be too late!"

"I... didn't mean to?" Mermul said, looking flustered and upset. "Hunters tried to kill me... I guess... I *did* wish that... the Devourer would take them... But it was just a throwaway curse, right...?"

"Your words have summoned the Evil One!" the priest hissed, appalled. "And how he seeks your soul..."

"Technically that's slander," Fiskul said, staring at the priest with an offended expression.

The priest drew up his head imposingly and looked down at Fiskul. "Begone, foul one!" he declared said in a commanding voice, pointing at the door. "Leave this place... And trouble us no more!"

Fiskul glowered back at him irritably. "No," they said stubbornly.

"What is going on here?" Fardon demanded irritably. "I leave you for five minutes..."

"It is an outbreak of *evil*!" the priest protested, looking alarmed. "The Devourer Himself walks among us! Alkrash protect us all!"

"Fisk, stop annoying the clergy," Fardon snapped. "I am not in the mood for this. I came here to seek forgiveness, not cause mass hysteria."

"*He* started it!"

"You know, for someone who claims to be thousands of years old, you're being a little childish," Fardon remarked. "He asked you to leave."

"Growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional," Fiskul retorted. "And I'm not leaving. Not yet, anyway."

"Well, I can't force you to do anything," Fardon said, throwing up his forelegs. "I don't believe you're the Evil One, but whatever you *are*, you're a power beyond me. But please, you're upsetting people! For my and Mermul's sake, it might be better if you left, before we're all arrested or excommunicated or something."

"I agree completely," Fiskul said. "Unfortunately you're all missing an important point. He's a priest of D... Uh, the Great One. If I leave when he tells me to, that means *I'm obeying him*. Have you considered the spiritual ramifications of that?"

"Oh," Mermul said. "Because I wished for your help and you saved me, he thinks I owe you a favour... And that you're following me around to collect it?"

"Exactly," Fiskul grinned toothily at the priest. "They have some silly rumour that when I befriend someone, it's because I want their soul. That by asking me to slay your enemies and save you, you've entered into a pact with the forces of darkness, in exchange for your own immortal soul.

"But if *that's* true, commanding me to leave is *also* a pact with the forces of darkness, right? That'll be one soul, please," he added, thrusting out a clawed hand towards the priest and opening it and closing it expectantly. "Gimme!"

"Stop that, Fisk," Mermul pleaded, as the priest shrank away making an ancient sign of protection. "You keep whining about your bad reputation... this isn't *helping*."

"I'm just kidding," the black dragon said. "Look, if it makes everyone more comfortable, I'll wait outside, but there *is* something I have to do first."

As the priest and his assistants watched in horror, the sinister black dragon trotted to the high altar and knelt before it reverently. Shortly afterwards, they lifted their head, eyeing the golden figure of Alkrash the Dragon God with an affectionate expression.

"Hi, Dad," Fiskul began, "Sorry I haven't called you lately. Hope you're doing okay!"

There was a gasp of horror from the clerics, and many made protective gestures.

"Thanks so much for sending me a new friend, and showing him Your light. I'll do my best to keep him safe. Oh yeah, and say 'hi' to Verthyr from me. Hope she's keeping well. Gotta go, the priests are getting irritable again. Can't you have them update the Scriptures or something? Anyway, talk later. Love you. Bye!"

A shocked silence fell, until one of the temple guards arrived with a clink of armour.

"Blasphemer," he said, lips curling into a snarl. "Leave immediately, or face the wrath of the Great One!"

"No," Fiskul snarled back. "I don't like bullies - especially not in the house of my Father. Show Him some *respect*!"

"I am a servant of the Great One," the guard growled. "A protector of this temple!"

"By splashing my blood over it? Defiling it with violence?" Fiskul shook their head. "I think you need to read the Scriptures again. Specifically, the Book of Arwen..."

The guard drew back, horrified. Raising their head proudly, the Devourer strode directly towards the offering plate, punctuating the shocked silence with the clink of many gold coins.

"I'll be outside," they said, and left.

Mermul was curled up on the floor, cringing with embarrassment. "I am so, so sorry..." he babbled.

"May the Great One protect your soul," the priest told him, horrified.

"He probably has," Fardon interjected. The priest craned his neck and looked at him sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm serious, Father. I can't believe that this 'Fisk' is truly the Devourer of legend," Fardon said slowly. "Not as the Scriptures describe them, at least. But whatever they are, I *do* believe they were sent by the Great One. And, rightly or wrongly, they seem to believe they are carrying out His will."

"But-" the priest looked scandalised.

"You are perceptive as always, Fardon," a new voice said.

"Your grace," the priest grovelled, as a pale, ancient dragon approached them. "There was an intruder..."

"I saw," the high priest said. "And I have seen this Fiskul creature before, long, long ago. They are a strange one, fey and unpredictable. The Scriptures are ancient texts, handed down over many generations. As a guide, they are not perfect, and both word and meaning have shifted down the aeons.

"Much of what is said and written about the Devourer comes from man, furre and

dragon, not the gods themselves. What I am saying is, you can't always go by the book," he summarised.

The high priest sighed. "Yes, this being may herald the end of the world. But they did not end it before, and they may not end it now. That - as always - is in the claws of the Great One."

"Then what does their presence mean, your grace?" the priest asked, looking shocked.

"I believe Sir Fardon is right. That on this occasion, they are trying to do good, as we would understand it. After all, Our Father moves in mysterious ways."

"I pray you are right, your grace," the priest said unhappily. "I can only pray you are right."

Chapter 6 - Interview

"Who's Verthyr?" Fardon asked, as the three dragons landed at the the mountainous capital of Taria.

"She was one of my friends," Fiskul said. "The Hunters got her. Cultists, not the run-of-the-mill opportunists like the ones who attacked us. The type who believe that we're all too dangerous to live. The ones who are sworn to kill dragons because... Well, because a dragon is supposed to be the one to end the world."

"I'm sorry," Fardon said quietly.

"So was I. I think that was when I started eating the mountain. Didn't make very good comfort food."

Fardon looked troubled.

"This may be a personal question," Mermul interrupted, "But what you were saying about your friends... That's not *true*, is it? You're not marking people to devour their souls?"

"Course not," Fiskul said. "That's just a stupid myth. But I do understand where they're coming from, though. I'm the one chosen to end the world. By most definitions that makes me the bad guy, right?"

"But at the end of the day, I'm still a dragon... Or close enough to one as makes no difference. We're social creatures, we need to have company. And who would want to hang out with the Evil One?"

"So when someone *can* see past that... it's a precious thing I don't want to lose. And maybe I come over a bit too pushy..."

"You're doing fine," Mermul said.

Fiskul gave an embarrassed smile.

Mermul glanced around and saw that Fardon had been approached by the staff managing the landing area. He was given an ornate scroll, which he scanned through and then arched his neck to face the other two dragons.

"Mermul," he called. "Lord Varl wishes to meet you at the palace, to discuss your citizenship application. I can escort you there, but Fisk...? If you could wait for us in North Plateau Park..? Meaning no disrespect, Mermul's interview would go a lot more smoothly if you are not present."

Fiskul slumped a little.

"I don't like it," he said finally. "But given how things went at the temple... Maybe you're right."

* * *

Lord Varl's hall was spacious, about the size of an Olympic swimming pool. The roof above was designed to open up, allowing the Dragon King to enter or leave directly, though this was generally only used in exceptional situations, such as emergencies. The hall was eerily quiet and empty. A large, muscular orange dragon lay sprawled upon a massive golden throne, which looked a lot like a bed or couch, dragons tending to lay flat where they could.

"Well met, Mermul," the dragon said, craning his neck to look at Mermul more closely as the blue-grey dragon approached. "I am Lord Varl, ruler of this land."

Mermul gazed up at the Dragon King in surprise. He was a large, muscular creature with red-orange scales, a pale orange belly and a dark red mane flowing down his back. He wore jewellery, an emerald disc on his forehead, and gold bands on one horn and one of his forelegs. Beside him sat two advisors, representing the human and furre citizens of the realm. A pair of dragon knights in their ceremonial armour and tail-blades stood watchfully to the sides.

"These are my chief advisors... Lord Olson," he glanced at the human, "And Lord Farar," he glanced at the maned wolf. "Between the three of us, we try to ensure that the realm of Taria remains a fair place for our respective races."

"Well met, milords," Mermul said at last, bowing his head respectfully.

Lord Varl pressed something on a large keyboard attached to his throne, and a projector flickered into life behind Mermul. Craning his neck slightly he saw a screenful of text and a photograph of himself.

"Just relax, and answer my questions as best you can," Varl said. "Let's quickly run over your file... You hatched in Arkwright, correct?"

"So I'm told," the blue dragon answered nervously. "I was a foundling... Lost my parents during one of Lord Thurr's attacks when I was young, so I'm not quite sure where or when. The hatchday I give people is the 3rd of Naruary, 1735. Which would make me 247."

"I see," Lord Varl said, editing some of the details. "And you are a snow dragon, or largely of that heritage. Frost breath, I take it?"

"Yes, Majesty," Mermul said. "I can demonstrate, but I'd rather not. I've seen enough violence. I don't want to cause more."

"Ah, indeed. From Sir Fardon's notes, I see that you were being pursued by Hunters."

"They found me while I was trying to reach your lands from Arcaia," Mermul admitted, looking upset. "And... And I'm afraid Lord Thurr's mob are after me as well. Being a dragon around their parts... It's not great if you're opposed to him. You tend to die. The Elders of Arcaia suggested I come here to plead for your aid. I had help... I was saved from the Hunters by another dragon who lives in the disputed lands."

"Fardon also reported that a band of Hunters were attacked and burned, along with a civilian vehicle," Lord Varl pointed out. "Disputed territory or not, it's a serious matter. We have enough racial tensions as it is, without some maniac cremating innocent settlers."

"They were like that when we found them, milord," Mermul protested, looking horrified.

"That may be, but... Well, if you can demonstrate that you are a frost-dragon, it would greatly help to clear you of suspicion in that affair," Lord Varl pointed out. "Though we will also have to ask questions of this 'Fisk' you were travelling with."

"Very well, milord," Mermul looked unhappy. He picked a spot on the tiled marble floor, breathed in, and neatly drew a ring of ice over it.

"Excellent," Lord Varl said, looking pleased. "So... What do you hope to do now you

are here?"

"I was a courier at Arcaia," the fluff dragon said eagerly. "I can do that right away. I've also... well, wondered about becoming a medic. Though I worry I might be too squeamish for that. But, it would be nice to help save lives..."

"I see," Lord Varl said, and typed a few words into the keyboard. "And where do you see yourself in five years time...? What do you want out of life in Taria...?"

"What does anyone want, your Majesty?" Mermul shrugged his wings. "A place to live, earn enough money to get by, find a partner, start a hoard... But that's longer-term stuff. My immediate plans are to... Well... not get murdered by Lord Thurr."

"Very good," Lord Varl said again. "I must confer with my advisors. If you can return at the tenth hour tomorrow morning, I will let you know how things stand."

"Thank you, my lords," the blue-grey dragon said, bowing his head respectfully.

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"Well, it seems we're going to need somewhere to lair overnight," Mermul said, meeting up with the other two in North Plateau Park. "Any suggestions? And how much is it likely to cost?"

"I do have a place in Eastcrag," Fardon said. "My main residence is in Tarnover, but I have to report in to my Lord regularly, so I need a home from home. You are welcome to stop over until you have found your wings in Taria. However, you will have to share a den unless Fisk has some kind of lair here as well."

"Not anymore," the Devourer said. "Once, centuries ago... Until it was destroyed as a blasphemous temple of darkness. Those *bastards*... I was still *inside it* at the time! Nowadays, when I visit the capital I don't usually stop over. Sometimes I'll stay in a hostel, but my resemblance to the Evil One isn't looked upon kindly and I often get turned away. Sometimes I have to sleep rough in the park."

* * *

Fardon's lair was set into one of the cliffs, one of numerous circular openings bored into the rock with some kind of tunnelling machine. The landing porches were all decorated to tell them apart, and were large enough to accommodate two regularly-sized dragons, but since Fiskul was unusually small, all three of them just about managed to squeeze in. Fardon put his hand to a raised pedestal and the door opened up like the iris in a camera aperture.

"Neat," Mermul said, looking impressed.

"Saves space," the dragon knight explained. "A bulkhead door would be more secure, but the whole thing would have to slide into the ceiling or walls and there's other properties above and beside mine. Space is at a premium unfortunately, and to be honest this place is a bachelor apartment really. Nice, but... Well, I prefer the villa in Tarnover."

The tunnel widened into a fork. Flying was out of the question, but a dragon with their wings tucked in could trot quite quickly on all fours, an adaptation to their tendency to lair in caves and tunnels. There was a living space with a projection screen on one wall, a kitchen, a bathroom and then the two dens.

"Do you need a hoard to sleep on?" Fardon asked. "There's some roll-up clutter in the cupboard if you need to make a pile of something."

"Thanks. I think just the mattress will be fine," Mermul said. "I can sleep on the floor," Fiskul added. "Better than the park, at least."

* * *

Fardon slept uneasily. He dreamed that he was a wyvern - his hands were gone, fused into his wings and forcing him to lumber painfully along the ground, too weak and injured to fly away. Dragon-slayers in their leather armour and armed guardsmen crowded around him, baying for his death like a pack of animals... Condemning him to die for attacking a watchtower, even as he tried to explain that it was another brown dragon who looked like him...

Meanwhile, Lord Thurr's elites circled above him, massing for the kill. Flames seared down from one of them, swathing the ground beside him with fire and setting alight the collar around his neck along with one of the guardsmen's shields.

As he watched, one of the enemy dragons swooped low with claw-blades outstretched, cackling evilly, while another followed, eager to watch the brown dragon's death close up. He realised with horror that they had become the Devourer, tendrils of void escaping from a gaping maw, and they were making excitable yelps at the prospect of seeing Fardon die. Eager to consume his powerful dragon soul, destroying his life utterly just so they could use his precious life energies to perform some cheap magic trick. He reached desperately for the protection enchantment, a pair of gauntlets, and the only thing that could save his life, but without hands, he couldn't understand how to put them on...

Fardon woke up with a gasp, heart pounding, and craned his neck to the dim light of the clock. It was still some an ungodly hour, but his eyes narrowed with puzzlement. Parts of the nightmare still lingered and he could distinctly hear the excited yelps of his would-be killers. He uncurled suspiciously to investigate, wondering groggily how intruders had breached the wards around his sanctum - and then suddenly remembered that he had guests in the spare room.

Oho, he thought, and a terrifying grin spread across his features as he curled back up to sleep. *Fiskul's friend now appears to be a friend-with-benefits.*

Chapter 7 - Verdict

After checking his messages, Fardon woke Mermul early and they made their way to the palace ahead of the appointment. Fisk had been told to wait in the park again, and was obviously displeased, but had complied reluctantly.

Mermul had painted his claws red and bounded along happily, but Fardon seemed preoccupied and distant, and it gradually dawned on the frost-dragon that his protector had once again been ordered to perform some duty for Lord Varl, one that he had misgivings about.

"Wait here, please," Fardon said, and disappeared into a nearby building, the guards outside keeping an eye on the newcomer. Mermul wondered what would happen if he wandered off, and decided against taking the chance.

When Fardon returned, he was in ceremonial platemail again, complete with tail-blade. Mermul looked at the keen-edged weapon and gulped.

He became increasingly nervous as he was led to the palace courtyard, where a crowd of smaller races and a number of dragons had formed. Mermul's heart sank and he let out a low moan as he saw that this was, indeed, going to be an execution.

Lord Varl presided, flanked by his advisors, Lord Olson, Lord Farar and the local Bishop as well. A teal-coloured dragoness stood at one end of the courtyard, wings bound around her waist. She was the same species as Mermul, a fact that was not lost on him.

"Oh no, no," he murmured, and glanced at Fardon for reassurance, only to find that the knight had gone, replaced by an unfamiliar red dragon in similar attire, who was watching him suspiciously.

Mermul looked back at the dragoness, and saw that Fardon was in the centre of the courtyard, standing beside a large guillotine with multiple lunettes that was clearly designed for the sole purpose of beheading a dragon. Tears began to well in his eyes.

"Fercia," Fardon announced, "You have been found guilty of violating the Pax Draconica through an act of terrorism that has taken dozens of innocent lives. You have been found to be an agent of Lord Thurr, and for these foul deeds, you must pay with your head. What say you?"

"That I regret I have but one head to give for my Lord!" the teal dragoness retorted loudly. "What I did, in his service, I did for the good of dragonkind, and I would gladly do it a hundred times over that we may once again reign supreme... As is our birthright! What is my death compared to that future?"

"The sentence is confirmed," Lord Varl decreed. "Let justice be done."

The dragoness struggled and clawed as Fardon and one of the other knights forced her into position, snorting as she tried in vain to use a breath weapon, dampened as it was by the magical wards around the courtyard. They closed the lunette closest to her body first and locked it down, before wrestling her meters-long neck into the other restraints and finally pinning her head into place. As the last lunette finally dropped down around her neck, she opened her mouth wide for one defiant yell.

"Devourer take you all!" She screamed. "**Long Live Lord Thurr!**" Mermul shut his eyes and sobbed, but it didn't block out the sounds of her death, nor the smell of blood and fresh meat.

There was not a sound from the crowd.

"Justice is done," Lord Varl intoned. "May the Great One forgive her. And us."

The blue fluff-dragon opened his eyes, swaying slightly in shock. He stared fixedly at a small patch of ground until he realised Fardon was waving a gauntleted paw under his face.

"Mermul... Mermul...? Lord Varl wishes to see you now," he said. The blue fluff-dragon stared back at him, uncomprehending.

"Why...?" he whimpered. "Why did you make me *watch* this...? Isn't it bad enough that you had to *kill* her? Why make me *see it*?"

"I think you *know* why, Mermul," Fardon said grimly. "...Or should I say, Mirmjolnar the Slayer?"

* * *

The hall had taken an ominous look as Mermul was led into it by Fardon and the other dragon knight, who turned out to be Sir Darving. Guards stood at every exit, watching the fluff-dragon suspiciously, and there was no mistaking Fardon's grim look and reluctance about the whole affair.

"Mermul," Lord Varl began, "You stand accused of being Mirmjolnar the Slayer, a known war-criminal, violator of the Pax Draconica and loyal general to Lord Thurr."

"N-No!" Mermul squeaked. "Why would you even think that?!"

"You went to pray in the Temple of the Great One in Tarnover," Lord Varl said in a matter-of-fact voice. "There, you left a coin in the offering plate. A coin *with Lord Thurr's head on it.*"

"Ohhhhhh...." Mermul keened, deflating. He collapsed to the tiled floor, sobbing profusely.

Fardon broke away from his position and inspected the prone dragon. "He is not acting like a war criminal," he pointed out.

"Is it a feint?" Lord Olson asked. "Is he faking this?"

"No," Fardon said, glancing at the human advisor. "I can smell his terror... And... he hasn't denied it," he added sadly.

"See?" Sir Darving said. "He *is* Mirmjolnar. And now... He must pay for his crimes!"

"**No**," Fiskul interjected defiantly, landing in front of Mermul.

Fardon gave a croak of dismay at the small dragon's sudden intrusion. "Devourer take all this," he muttered, before realising the absurdity of the statement.

"No," Fiskul continued. "Mermul is *not* Mirmjolnar. He may have been once, but he isn't *now*. People change... Usually for the better. Mermul came here seeking sanctuary, and you are going to *give* it to him. *Or else.*"

"Who are you to defy Lord Varl, child?" Sir Darving snarled.

"I am the Dark Destroyer," Fiskul said. "And I *do not like bullies.*"

"Now, I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to listen to Mermul explain himself, something which you have just made a lot harder by reducing him into a blubbering mess," they added with a snarl.

"Once you have heard his story, then you are going to come to a sensible decision. And if you decide that my friend, my lover, is to be put to death, then we are going to have a bit of a *problem* on our claws."

"If he's in league with the *Evil One*, it stands to reason that he's guilty!" Bishop Ferdinand said. "If nothing else, he is a heretic and must pay with his neck!"

"Don't be a fool," Fiskul growled. "That is not the law in these parts."

"It is an old law, but it is still on the books," the kangaroo retorted smugly. "Those who have had intercourse with the Evil One must die."

"Seize the intruder!" Sir Darving yelled.

Fiskul threw up their head and roared, tendrils of interstellar void flickering around their gaping maw.

"*Stop it!*" Fardon roared. He looked particularly strained.

"Sirs, please tread carefully around this creature. We have enough problems already. Do you really wish to provoke the ire of one who could destroy the world if they chose? Let us listen to Mermul's story and then decide what must be done."

"We will listen," Lord Varl promised. "Stand down, Sir Darving."

"It is true," Mermul said dazedly. "I... I was hatched in Lord Thurr's domain. I *did* lose my parents in Lord Thurr's attacks... but they fought on *his* side. I was taught - indoctrinated - to believe that we dragons should reign supreme and that all who opposed us were traitors to our race and must be crushed."

Fardon shook his head sadly.

"I lived by that code for centuries," Mermul added distractedly. "I am not heavily-built like Fardon, so I was trained to be an assassin. Mirmjolnar the Slayer, people named me. I killed people who my Lord felt posed a threat, dragon and small race

alike, and I thought nothing of it. No remorse, no empathy. Lord Thurr considered such emotions to be weakness, and I believed him. Killing and dominating... those were the emotions he encouraged. And I did not know better. It was all I knew."

"See? A spy for Lord Thurr!" Sir Darving crowed. "Another saboteur... Like Fercia!"

"Quiet!" Fiskul snapped. "Let him finish!"

Mermul did not seem to notice, and continued speaking in a trance-like voice. "One day, not so long ago, my orders were to attack an outpost bordering Arcaia," he said. "I was to kill all within, to demonstrate Lord Thurr's ire at some perceived slight. This I did, but they had the modern weapons of the Hunters and I was hit. I remember falling... Feeling fear for the first time... Crashing to the earth near the ruined tower, and then..."

"And then what, Mermul?" Lord Varl asked quietly.

"Then I was somewhere else," Mermul said vaguely. Fardon and Sir Darving looked at each other uncertainly.

"I remember... the sky," the blue dragon continued, eyes widening. "It was like dawn. It was beautiful. I was flying so high I couldn't even see the ground below. But then someone flew alongside me, and looked me over. A golden dragon, like Alkrash in the temples. It was like he was staring deep into my soul, and he looked sad.

"And I knew that I had failed. That I would face damnation and torment. But then another dragon, a silver one, drew up and said that... that I couldn't help it. That my mind was addled by Lord Thurr's conditioning... and I deserved another chance.

"They argued, and then the golden one relented. And I woke up.

"I was inside a large white building, bound up and there were people doing things to me. I panicked and tried to fight back but they calmed me down. They had been healing me. Later they told me that my heart had stopped after the crash..." he lapsed into silence.

"A near-death experience," Fardon said. "I have heard of these."

"No, this was an *actual* death experience," Fiskul said, looking impressed. "You're very lucky, Mermul. Dad isn't easily swayed.... not many get another chance. But if you want my opinion, you'd probably pass the bar next time. You've learned from your mistakes. And as long as you can keep to that path, your soul should be safe."

Fardon cocked his head questioningly and his eyes narrowed.

"What are you saying...? *You've* been to the dawn land too...?"

"You may recall that I got a new piercing recently," the black dragon reminded them. "A brain piercing. Think that was my first death...? Hah! I've lost count. But I have a job to do, so I keep getting sent back."

"We are digressing," Lord Varl said. "Pray continue, Mermul."

"Once they had healed my body, they tried to heal my mind," Mermul said, looking more animated. "I had killed their men, but they... They showed me that Lord Thurr's creed was flawed. And... I began to feel remorse. Empathy. Guilt and regret. I couldn't control it. I still can't..." he sobbed.

"And beside all that, I knew that Lord Thurr would discover my betrayal. I can't change my past, but I could change my future! I took an alias, and I tried... I tried to start over, and help people. And I *did*, I really did!

"I helped rebuild the tower I had destroyed, and new buildings as well. I did train as a courier, flying messages and small goods between Arcaia and Forwyn. I really did want to become a medic to try and save lives instead of taking them. I was happy there, but I knew that Lord Thurr would eventually send others to find me. I really *am* fleeing from Lord Thurr... but as a defector. The Elders concurred and sent me to Taria, believing that I could find sanctuary here.

"I guess... I was wrong..." the blue dragon sobbed.

"There!" Fiskul said defensively. "Happy now? Mermul has had a chequered past, but he's on your side now. He hasn't strictly violated the Pax Draconica, because Lord Thurr never agreed to it. Mermul has tried his best to start over and do what is right, *with the help and support of the people he wronged*. So he committed atrocities in his youth... Well, *he's already paid the death penalty for them*. What more do you *want?!'*"

"Normally I would accept this," Lord Varl sighed. "Unfortunately, we also have the problem of his association with *you*, Dark One. If Mermul is one of your so-called 'friends'..."

"What are you saying?!" Fardon and Fiskul asked in unison.

"Mermul," Lord Varl intoned, "You have had commerce with the Devourer. I find you guilty of the crime of heresy. The sentence for which is death by beheading."

The blue fluff-dragon made a strange noise and flopped to the ground, unconscious.

Chapter 8 - Guillotine

"No!" Fiskul snarled, eyes wide with rage. "You're *not* having Mermul! *He's my friend!*" The small dragon raised a claw defiantly, and thumped their tail against the ground. A dart punctured their neck and they staggered.

"May Alkrash forgive you all," Fiskul gurgled and collapsed beside the unconscious fluff-dragon.

"Remove the Dark One!" Lord Varl demanded urgently. "Bind them and tranquilise them! They cannot be allowed to interfere!"

"My Lord," Fardon protested miserably, as the guards hurried to subdue Fiskul. "Do you truly mean to proceed with this!? I had hoped it was merely a *test!*"

"He must face justice," Lord Varl said heavily, looking at the floor.

"But Mermul...!" Fardon looked appalled. "He seemed so *nice!*"

"They always do," Lord Varl sighed. "Erekul was a model citizen before he went on a rampage in North Plateau. And Fercia was a well-loved teacher at the dragon-creche... Until she blew up a nursery full of furies and humans."

"My liege, I do not believe his tale of redemption," Sir Darving said bluntly. "He is an agent of Lord Thurr, and he must be eliminated."

"And if you eliminate the wrong person?" Sir Fardon demanded, looking the other knight in the eye defiantly.

"Then may Alkrash forgive us all," Lord Varl said. "But the capital charge is for heresy, for consorting with the Evil One. You cannot deny that this Fiskul creature, who may well be the Devourer, clearly has a big interest in Mermul's continued existence. Just now, they claimed Mermul for their own and he has apparently *slept* with them. We cannot be seen to be obeying the wishes of the Dark One!"

"...I understand," Sir Fardon replied sadly. "I... will do this. But, Milord... Remember the repercussions with Fiskul - for they will land on your head too."

* * *

"Mirmjolnar," Lord Varl stated, "You have been found guilty of causing death in the service of Lord Thurr, and of consorting with the Devourer..."

A low murmur broke out in the crowd.

"...And consorting with the Devourer!" the orange-red dragon repeated. "For these crimes against the state, you are hereby sentenced to death by beheading, and may Alkrash have mercy on your soul..."

...Again, Fardon added mentally, glancing sadly at Mermul, who lay on a trolley, wings bound, the orange guest collar removed from his neck. Fardon did not trust the fluff-dragon to be able to make his final walk unaided, and had arranged a cart to spare him the indignity of stumbling or having to be carried. The blue-grey dragon's eyes were blindfolded and Fardon could see damp patches where they had been crying again.

"Forgive me, my friend," he whispered. "It will be over soon..."

"Mirmjolnar," Lord Varl began. "Have you any final words before the death sentence is executed upon you?"

"I... I'm sorry," Mermul managed. "I have done evil things. I cannot give back the lives I have taken. But I did try... I tried to prevent *more* lives from *being* taken. I hoped this would be enough... But if I am to pay with my own life... I hope those... The families of those who I slew... I hope they find peace through my death!" he sobbed, and began crying again. "Tell Arcaia... that I'm sorry..." he finished.

"...The sentence is confirmed," Lord Varl sighed. "May the Great One forgive you. And us."

Fardon looked at the helpless blue-grey dragon, tears starting to well in his own eyes. "Be brave, Mermul," he said quietly.

Can I do this...? Fardon wondered, appalled. I swore to protect him... but now he's a war criminal! Mirmjolnar the Slayer! But he's... still Mermul... Please, milord, don't make me do this...

"Fardon, I'm scared... I don't want to die," Mermul whimpered softly, as the lunettes were locked down around his unresisting neck.

"I know," Fardon said. "And I don't want to kill you either. Listen, there's something I should tell you," he said, speaking quickly to distract his victim while he reached for the release lever.

Fardon's hand trembled as he touched the handle and he blinked away tears.

"No..." he whispered. "No! I can't do it!" He looked at Lord Varl helplessly, unable to comply, but unable to speak out either. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

At that moment there was a sudden crash and a scream. A hole melted in the wall of the castle and a small, black-and-red dragon flew out.

"Naughty!" Fiskul snapped, and landed on the top of the guillotine. Perching there unsteadily, he looked down and opened his maw. The void flooded out and consumed the gleaming metal blade like hot water melting snow.

"Huh," Fardon said, gawking with astonishment. "That's gonna make things awkward."

"What's happening?!" Mermul yelped. "Is that Fiskul?! Don't let him hurt anyone!"

"Begone, Foul One!" the Bishop yelled, making a sign of protection. "Return to the pit that is your lair..."

"Shut it, boomer," Fiskul growled. "The execution is over! No more guillotine, no more beheading! Just go home, and we'll say no more about this. Mermul is coming with me!"

"This is *not* over!" Lord Varl insisted angrily. "Use the block! Mirmjolnar shall lose his head to Sir Fardon's tail! And you shall pay for this insolence, intruder!"

A chopping block was swiftly brought in and Mermul's trolley moved into position. A stocks acted to hold his head in position, while the block was placed just behind his head. Fiskul struggled as the large guards overwhelmed them, and their wings were pinned back with the same thick restraints that held Mermul down.

"You worthless bastards," the Devourer snapped. "Oh, you are going to be so *very* sorry... And *you*, Fardon! Do you mean to go along with this... This *travesty*?!"

"I am sworn to obey my liege," Fardon said wretchedly.

"And that's exactly why Mermul is in this predicament!" Fiskul snapped. "What good is an oath to a tyrant?! Mermul swore to obey Lord Thurr, but he escaped, he came here, hoping to join with *you* and make amends for his past sins. And *this* is how you plan to reward him? By chopping his head off?!"

"By Alkrash's bones, Fardon! *You promised to protect him!* You can't do this! You cannot obey your Lord if he is *wrong!*"

"At last, we see the temptations of the Dark One!" the bishop crowed. "Do *not* listen to it, Sir Fardon! Its words are *evil!*"

"*You* are conspiring to rob the life of a vulnerable person who came here seeking your help!" Fiskul roared. "If *that* is not evil, you've lost the meaning of the word!"

"Dark One," Bishop Ferdinand called, "Mermul has been sentenced, not for assassination, but for heresy. For defying the gods! For making a diabolical pact with *you* and sealing it with his flesh!"

"*Seriously?!*" Fiskul looked furious. "You're killing him for witchcraft?! Have you all gone *crazy?!*"

"It's an old law, but apparently it's still on the books," Fardon said miserably. "If I do not do this, another will!"

"If he dies, I'll *get* you," Fiskul roared. "All of you! Do you hear me?! For I *am* the Devourer of legend - and you are about to kill my *friend!*"

"Why do you claim to care, Evil One?" The Bishop sneered. "After all... When he dies, you will receive his soul!"

Fiskul stared at him, open-mouthed. "You know, you're absolutely right!" the small dragon gasped. Then they grinned menacingly "You are doing me a *service*, and as we have just established, *that* is heresy. A capital crime!"

"Death to the Bishop!" the small dragon screamed, pointing at the astonished kangaroo. "You heard him! By his own admission, he is a *heretic!* A heresiarch! He just made a diabolical pact with *me!* *Off with his head!*"

"No!" Mermul wailed. "No more death! Fardon... If you must kill me, do it *now* and end it all! But don't kill anyone else... not for *my* sake!"

Fardon raised his tail blade and gritted his teeth into a snarl of frustration. The axe-head slammed down hard into a pile of logs with a hefty thunk, cleaving the first few effortlessly. Mermul twitched, wondering if he was dead yet.

"No!" Fardon roared. "I swore to protect Mermul! I cannot kill him over a stupid, unjust law, and I will not kill the Bishop either! And if this costs me my life, then so be it!" he finished, looking at Lord Varl defiantly. "But you risk *all* our lives and the wrath of the Devourer themselves if you proceed with this *abject folly*!"

The orange dragon stared at him for a few moments, and then grinned wickedly. He clapped his hands together.

"The sentence of death is hereby suspended," Lord Varl decreed. "The execution is cancelled for today. Sir Darving... Sir Narfus... bring the three of them to me."

* * *

Fardon and Mermul were led into the King's hall by the two red dragon knights. The blue-grey fluff-dragon's wings were still bound around his middle, though his blindfold had been removed. Fardon too, stripped of his gleaming armour, was similarly restrained. Fiskul had disappeared in the confusion.

Lord Varl crouched upon his throne, wings spread out imposingly as he gazed down at the two prisoners with an inscrutable expression.

"Well, Fardon..." the king said. "You have convinced me."

"I... I have?" the disgraced knight looked confused, and then closed his eyes, bowing his head with a brave expression. "...I see. I have convinced you that I am a traitor," he said. "Then if I must die, I will at least die with a clear conscience. I pledged to use my strength and power to protect the weak, not *murder* them by enforcing an unjust law. And such will be my last words when you claim my head."

"Actually you've convinced me that Mermul should be spared," the king said. "You have often been perceptive, Sir Fardon. And if you are convinced of this dragon's

essential goodness, even to the point where you would defy your lords, then you have surely seen something in him, and I will trust your judgement."

Fardon sat down heavily with a crash, a look of shock in his eyes as the weight of the king's words sunk in.

"You *have* been testing us after all?" he asked. "That was a... morally questionable thing to do, my liege."

"Very true. And I am sorry, but as you know... our kind love to dominate others. I pray you forgive an old dragon his weaknesses. For I have been testing myself also. "Fardon, I apologise for putting you through this. But it would have ruined the test if you had known. Mermul would most likely have realised."

The dragon king clapped his hands again. "Sir Narfus, Sir Darving... release the prisoners. Sir Fardon is to have his armour returned to him."

"At once, milord," the red dragons chorused, and set about their task.

"Mermul, you have my most sincere apologies," the King added, arching his neck towards the blue-grey fluff-dragon.

"A-apologies...?" he gurgled as Sir Narfus released the bindings around his wings.

"For threatening your life," the king said, bowing his head. "I have been studying your reactions under stress. Whenever we have caught agents from Lord Thurr before, they have cracked at the end, and their last words were curses and promises of vengeance from their liege. As you have seen yourself, just before this unhappy incident occurred."

"Fercia was my aunt," Mermul said softly. "Estranged, but nonetheless... I did not wish to see that."

"I am sorry for your loss, Mermul. Yet that admission strengthens your case, for you could easily have denounced us for killing your kinswoman. Instead, you begged for the Bishop to be spared, despite *his* calling for your death. I am convinced now, that you are no longer in service to Lord Thurr.

"As such, it would be far better to have you on my side going forwards, than to slay you for your wicked past and discourage others from defecting. And finally, we have

the matter of this Fiskul creature, who is clearly not to be trifled with and very protective of their friends."

Lord Varl jumped from his throne and faced the blue-grey dragon. "Mermul..." he proclaimed, "Your application to become a Tarian citizen is hereby approved."

"...But I nearly *died*!" Mermul sobbed, as Sir Narfus fitted a dark blue collar around his neck.

"Shh," Fardon said, his own voice quavering slightly. "Shh... It's over now. And it will never happen again, not while I breathe. I swore to protect you. I nearly broke that promise, but it will never happen again. I... I love you, Mermul..." he confessed. "And I... I made a terrible, terrible mistake... I don't know how you can ever forgive me... For what I nearly did... I nearly..."

"Gentlemen," Lord Varl interjected. "While I appreciate that this is a bad time, there are still pressing matters to discuss. And Sir Fardon, do not blame yourself unduly. Mermul was in less danger than you knew."

"*What?*" the dragons asked.

"Mermul, you have a powerful friend in this Fiskul creature," Lord Varl continued. "Whether that is good or bad, I cannot say - but he would not easily have let you die. And more to the point, I have been testing you both, as Sir Fardon has realised. "But for an accurate result, the danger had to seem real, so I had the guillotine sabotaged. Perhaps the most dangerous part was ordering Sir Fardon to use his tail-blade... But I could see his resolve cracking. To be completely honest, I was about to order him to stand down, but he got there first. His defiant refusal to slay you, at the last, was most commendable."

Fardon looked away, blinking rapidly.

"What if you'd decided Mermul *had* been a spy?" Fiskul demanded angrily, hanging from the rafters like some kind of colossal bat.

Lord Varl craned his neck to look up at the interloper.

"If Mermul had proven false and pledged himself to Lord Thurr at the last - as his late aunt had done - then Sir Fardon would have been much more inclined to execute him.

Not least because our hypothetical Evil Mermul had deceived him, and he had fallen for those deceptions. We would then have had the embarrassing spectacle of the guillotine jamming, followed by a traitor's death from Sir Fardon's tail-blade."

"But it is true there was a risk," Lord Varl admitted. "Much relied on Sir Fardon's reluctance to slay the undeserving for an apparent tyrant. Had he proved over-eager and taken your life, we would have been in trouble - but that would have been very out-of-character for him. Had this happened indeed... Well, the Devourer would likely have sent us both to follow you, if that is any consolation."

"Not really, milord," Mermul said miserably. "I thank you for offering to allow me to stay... But after this, why *would* I? I came here seeking *safety*, and instead I got a *mock execution*!"

"I can understand that," Lord Varl sighed. "And again, I can only apologise and offer compensation. Please try to understand... we have had problems with Thurr's agents infiltrating the realm and perpetrating acts of terror. I had to be satisfied that you were not likely to do the same, and since we cannot read minds, I have had to resort to an extreme and regrettable form of interrogation."

"If you wish to leave the realm in disgust at my actions, I can hardly blame you. But I would urge you to wait a few days before making that decision as there are good reasons for you to stay."

"But what about the Bishop?" Fiskul demanded. "Mermul has been sentenced to death for *heresy* over an act of love! Why should he risk being burned at the stake or something?!"

"Actually you were right the first time," the King said, glancing up at Fiskul again. "Heresy is *not* a capital crime. Indeed, I fear that Taria as a whole may need the aid of the Devourer, whatever the Bishop may think."

"Huh," Fiskul replied, looking skeptical.

"Mermul, citizen of Taria... I hereby give you a full pardon," the Dragon King began. "Naturally, this decree only extends to my realm. If others come seeking retribution for your past misdeeds... Well, I'll protect you as best I can. It might be better if you stay in proximity to Sir Fardon for the time being."

"And Sir Fardon...? This has been a trying experience for us all. I suggest you take the next few days off. And... thank you."

"Thank you, Sire...?" Fardon looked confused.

"For showing compassion to Mermul."

"He is like the son I never had," Fardon said, and looked embarrassed.