

Chapter 9 - Reparation

"Well, that was something I never want to have happen again," Fardon said angrily. He had painted his claws black and was trotting through the parkland with Mermul, glancing at the pale blue dragon with concern.

"I really thought that was it," Mermul whimpered, staring into space. "That I was going to die by someone I thought was my *friend*... or at least a protector..."

"Lord Varl screwed up," Fardon said bluntly. "*I* screwed up. I can't expect you to forgive us," the brown dragon added. "But please try to understand. You know dragons love dominance, we can't help it. But we're also *used* to it.

"When a known murderer from Lord Thurr's pack of hardened psychopaths turns up, we expect a tough nut and we applied the appropriate pressure for a depraved maniac pretending to be a harmless innocent. We didn't expect to reduce them to a babbling wreck!"

"You bullied him," Fiskul said curtly. "I don't like that."

"*We thought he was a serial killer!*" Fardon returned sharply. "Thurr's agents are masters of deceit. In all the centuries this city has been around, we've had *two* genuine refugees from them. It almost never happens." Snarling with frustration, he blew a small gob of fire towards the sky and watched it dissipate.

"When I realised Mermul *was* genuine, but sentenced to die... Well, if it's any consolation, I wanted to follow him," he added finally.

"*What?!*"

"If the Devourer didn't devour me first, I planned to follow Mermul," Fardon repeated defensively. "Reset the guillotine for another neck... my own. And seek forgiveness from the Great One himself, for having murdered a vulnerable person when I promised to protect them."

Mermul stopped walking and stared at him, appalled. His mouth opened but he could think of nothing to say.

"Are you just saying this to try and make Mermul feel better?" Fiskul asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "After all this... I don't know if I can trust you, *or* your king!"

You might have orders to stab Mermul in the back of the neck the moment his defences are down!"

"It's *not* making me feel better anyway," Mermul whimpered. "I didn't want anyone else to die, if giving my own life would set things right!"

"But it *wouldn't*!" Fiskul snapped. "Stop *thinking* like that, Mermul! Your death would solve *nothing*! It wouldn't bring your victims back... It would just waste a *lot* of hard work rehabilitating you, and give me another ex-friend to pray for at the temple!"

"Maybe you're right," the fluff-dragon said sadly. "They seemed to genuinely care for me in Arcaia... and they could have put me to death at any time."

"I am not an assassin, Fisk," Fardon said stiffly, looking very offended. "That is not how things happen here. If Mermul suddenly snaps and goes on a killing spree, then yes, he'll pay the price for that. And I might too for my misjudgment in sparing a traitor... but *nobody* will be randomly attacked by the state! Arrested and tried, maybe. Stabbed in a back-alley, *never*!"

"You say that, but I've been in Taria for two days and there's already been *three* public executions, including my own!" Mermul wailed.

"We're *dragons*," Fardon reminded him. "We are attracted to violence, and harsh punishment is called *draconian* for a reason!"

"The executions are a necessary evil... We have to sate our blood-lust somehow, and watching a criminal pay a just and lawful penalty helps tame it. Yes, I know yours was *not* just *or* lawful, but such things are vanishingly rare. I repeat, *we screwed up* by letting things get that far."

"So who was in on it...?" Fiskul demanded, craning his neck to face Fardon. "And who wasn't? Who does Mermul have to fear will kill him if it's politically expedient?"

"Lord Varl, his advisors, and the Bishop," Fardon said. "Those I can be sure were in on the plan. Bishop Ferdinand isn't usually this bloodthirsty, and that *did* make me suspicious, but for all I knew he was off his medications. Sir Narfus is a loyal servant of Lord Varl, and a noble dragon. *He* can be trusted. I don't believe he was part of this deception, though he may have suspected that Mermul's death sentence was a test."

"And the other knight? Sir Darving, wasn't it?"

"Well," Fardon said reluctantly, "We all have our faults. He's a bit reckless and over-eager to please his king. He means well, but at the same time... He has a big grudge against Lord Thurr. Lost some of his family in one of Thurr's attempts to invade his neighbours.

"Sir Darving is *not* going to be your friend, Mermul, especially given the recent outrage that Fercia has perpetrated. He will be hell-bent on preventing that from happening again, and it will take a lot to convince him of your good intentions in the city. However, he *won't* try to take matters into his own claws either, he'll just remain watchful unless you give him a really good reason.

"Like I said, we do not stoop to random killings here, and you will be given due notice if you are felt to be stepping out of line. But honestly, don't worry too much. Just keep your snout clean and it'll be fine... "

"What do you think I've been doing?!" the fluff-dragon wailed. "And that still wasn't enough!"

"But it *will* be in the long term," Fardon soothed. "Look. We're all stressed about this, and for a very good reason. So let's go and do something fun. My treat."

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Happy dragons are less likely to go on any kind of rampage, so there were a number of amusement areas in North Plateau.

Dragons soared in the distance, launching themselves off the cliff to ride the thermals, while on the ground, sweet foods such as ice-cream were sold in abundance. There were race-tracks where dragons could run freely and trampolines which some of the visitors were bouncing on like foxes might do, and shooting ranges for practicing breath attacks.

A large building contained a ball-pit which Fardon entered, writhing around inside it to scratch his back. Mermul had never seen one before and wasn't sure if it would work quite as well for him as for a scaled dragon, but soon he was having the time of his life, burrowing, wriggling and flicking some of the balls into the air with his wings and tail. Fiskul had collected some of the balls into a heap to one side and was curled up around them, purring happily.

As they left, a sign reminded them "No hoarding" and Fardon's collar-bag was searched in case he had attempted to remove any of the balls, something which dragons were habitually prone to doing.

Finally, they did the hoop race. This was a test of skill, a circuit for dragons to fly where they had to pass through a number of large rubber hoops in order. Fiskul missed one and Mermul clipped the edge, the top of the hoop parting with the sound of a buzzer to avoid tangling him.

As they compared scores, Fardon was pleased to note that Mermul was looking a lot cheerier, but he knew that the healing would take far longer, and far more effort than an afternoon in an amusement arcade.

Once they had eaten and slept through their food-comas, Fardon knew that he would have to address the burden that lay upon his heart.

"I would like to visit the temple later," he said softly. "To atone for what I have done this morning... and what I nearly did."

"I understand," Mermul said nervously. "I would like to pray also. Though this time I will be more careful about the offerings dish."

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Fiskul waited outside the temple, not wanting to cause trouble again, but also reluctant to leave Mermul alone with the dragon knight. As they waited, a messenger approached, asking for Fardon.

Shortly afterwards, the two dragons emerged, and the courier signed it off on a chunky hand-held computer before riding off into the early evening.

Fardon examined the scroll briefly, and held it out to Mermul. "It's for you," he said. "Care of Sir Fardon, but *you're* the intended recipient."

The feathery dragon shuddered before cautiously accepting the ornate scroll with a haunted expression.

"It's okay," Fiskul reassured him. "It'll be okay. And if it's not, I'll *make* it okay."

"I'm sorry," the fluff-dragon said, "But the last time I got one of these, I was *sentenced to beheading!*"

"Fisk is right," the knight told him. "I wouldn't worry. It's probably a formal document of your pardon. If it was urgent or... unpleasant... they'd either have addressed it 'my eyes only', or sent an escort."

"I guess so," Mermul broke the seal and two smaller rolls of paper fell out. He retrieved them, and his eyes widened as he skimmed over the contents.

"Oh," he said, looking a little bewildered. "Oh..."

"What's the matter?!" Fiskul looked anxious. "If they're hassling you, they'll have *me* on their claws!"

"No, no, no," Mermul said. "But it's a lot to take in." He sat down like a dog and read the scroll again, more closely.

"It's three documents," he said slowly. "A written confirmation of the pardon, and of my citizenship. But the other thing... Well... to tell the truth, I was worried about where to stay..."

"Yes," Fardon said, looking downcast. "I don't blame you if you want to lair somewhere else tonight, after what happened..."

"You're supposed to be my minder anyway," Mermul shrugged his wings. "And I have Fisk to guard me. But really, I was thinking longer term. Capital cities are expensive, even to rent in, but now..."

"...Oh!" Fardon's mouth opened, as a thought occurred to him. Something the King had hinted at about Mermul wanting to stay...

"You killed my aunt," Mermul said quietly. "I mean... that's not... I'm not blaming you..." he looked flustered and upset. "She committed an atrocity far worse than any of mine! She'd probably have murdered *me* if she'd known where to look! But the bottom line is, she's dead now... *And I've just inherited her estate.*"

"What?! How does that work...?" Fiskul frowned. "She couldn't have known you were here, and from what you just said, you're probably written out of her will. Even

if she forgot and left you in, Thurr's realm is in a cold war with Taria... Bequeathing her all to someone in enemy territory is *nonsense!* It just wouldn't work politically!"

"It's compensation," Mermul said. "Normally her property and possessions would default to the state, and, well... I guess they did. But Lord Varl has bestowed them to me, since I'm the closest she has to an heir, and also to serve as reparations for my poor treatment."

"Well, congratulations," Fardon said. "That will be helpful for your new start... Though my condolences on the manner in which you have achieved it, and my own part in this." he bowed his head.

"It's an ill wind that none can ride," Mermul said, looking at the sky. "I suppose I should go and see what I've just... acquired."