

Chapter 10 - Secrets

Mermul looked at the villa with astonishment.

"That can't be right," he said. "She worked in a crèche, didn't she? Raising young dragons is an important job, but I didn't think it would let her afford *this*!"

"Fercia didn't come to Taria as a penniless refugee, mind," Fardon said. "She brought a hoard with her when she immigrated. Actual precious items, I mean... not just a comfort pile. Even so, this is bigger than I had expected. You've done well for yourself, Mermul."

"I guess so," the fluff-dragon said, and shivered. Fardon patted him on the shoulder.

"Where is she now?" Mermul pondered, looking at the sky as he trotted down the path. "Fiskul, that's not something *you* do, is it? Tormenting sinners?"

"Not my department," the small dragon said. "Akirion handles that, unless there's been a reshuffle. Also, it's not quite as bad as you imagine."

"What?! Eternal damnation?"

"No, no, no!" Fiskul sounded insulted. "What kind of god do you think Dad is? What kind of maniac would torture their own flawed creations forever over a problem He contributed to Himself?"

"No... Hell is like any other penitentiary. You serve your time there, and if they decide you're suitably reformed, you go before Dad again. If He turns you down, you go through the wash again until He is convinced you're ready for the afterlife proper. You'd have to be *really* stubborn and unrepentant to stay there forever... And that would mean there's something deeply wrong and requiring treatment."

"Is Akirion one of your friends?" Fardon asked.

"Mermul has met him," Fiskul said. "He's the silver guy. I don't think the Bishop would have been any happier at Mermul's trial if I said that the ruler of Hell had vouched for him, so I didn't want to make a big thing of it."

Fardon rolled his eyes and flapped his wings dismissively. "To be frank, I find your claims about the afterlife a little hard to swallow, Fisk," he admitted. "No offence.

I know you're a powerful force, but I can't help but question your sanity sometimes."

"None taken," the small dragon said. "Besides, if you live long enough, you'll find out anyway."

Fardon looked at him strangely.

At the villa entrance, a brown dragon was perched on the roof, and his long neck arched as he watched the trio approach.

"Sir Fardon," he hailed. "Is the snow-dragon Mermul...?"

"I am Mermul," the fluff-dragon called. "Are you guarding this place? Did the King really grant me... All *this*...?"

"He did," the dragon said, and jumped into the air to land beside them. "I am a little jealous to be honest. I was intending to bid when the estate was auctioned off. You can call me 'Vinny'. I have been looking after this place during the trial of... the late owner. Making sure the gardeners and cleaning staff are still paid and given access."

"Am I going to be able to afford to run this...?" Mermul looked horrified. "What about the property taxes?! You might get a chance at the auction yet."

"You'll be inheriting her wealth as well," Vinny pointed out. "There's enough to keep the place ticking over for a few decades at least. I've been administering that too - you'll find the receipts in order."

"It sounds like she had a lot to live for," Fiskul sighed. "Why did she do it...?"

"I wish I knew," Vinny sighed. "I can't help but blame myself for not spotting it... Anyway, let's go inside. I'll get you the keys and update the wards."

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Mermul's heart sank as he saw the parlour wall lined with photographs. Fercia and a couple of other adult dragons in group shots with a large crowd of hatchlings and juveniles.

"Ohh..." he said, shaking his head sadly.

"Yes," Vinny sighed. "She did genuinely love her fellow dragons as far as I can tell. It's the small races that she hated so. I was her friend, you know... But if I had only known what she was capable of... I wish I could have stopped her..."

"Five dens," he said, gesturing at a scroll containing the floor plan. "Swimming pool in the grounds. Footholds on the roof in case you want to sun yourself there. There's a library, study, music room and various other rooms as well. Most of her paperwork has been placed in storage for the investigation, mind... We can return those to you if you wish. However, there's a few anomalies in the cellar."

"Secret rooms?" Fardon asked, looking puzzled. "Surely that was investigated as part of her trial? Wouldn't that have been valuable evidence?"

"They already had more than enough evidence to take her head off," Vinny sighed. "Breaking wards is really tough and I guess it wasn't a priority after she pleaded guilty. Besides, if there was something in there that could have saved her neck, she'd have mentioned it, right...? So I'd guess, anything else would only have made things *worse*." the dragon sighed and shook his head. "You think you know someone..."

"So, you think the wards were keyed to her and her close kin?"

"Yeah. There's a plate we think is a hand-print sensor, but nobody's been able to open it. Worth trying Mermul's hand, though. It might allow access to her kin. Though I don't know that you're going to find anything *pretty*."

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"The cellars," Vinny said. "Used to be for storing meat before refrigeration was really a thing. 'Course, with her being a frost-dragon she didn't need that much either. There's a hoard room to the left, done up like a treasury. Flame-effect lighting and all, it's really nice," he added dreamily.

"Anyway, the suspicious part is here," he said, pointing at an unusual tile set into the wall. The other wall, adjacent to it, was strangely blank.

Mermul hesitantly pressed his hand against the tile. There was a whirring sound and a hidden door opened. Fluorescent tubes flickered reluctantly to life with metallic pinging noises to reveal a small hidden room. A shrine stood at one end with a large

portrait of Lord Thurr. Mermul whimpered at the sight of it.

"Well, you're definitely her kin," Vinny said. "And that wouldn't have helped her at the trial. Not at all! But still... I was expecting something more dramatic, I guess..." he shrugged his wings.

"I agree," Fardon said. "Mermul, there's another possible plate on the other wall."

The fluff-dragon touched it, and a second wall ground open, revealing a narrow and dimly-lit tunnel.

"Now *that's* more like it!" Vinny said enthusiastically. At the end of it was an ancient-looking pair of metal doors. The switch to open them was more obvious this time, and didn't seem to be as tightly protected. Vinny pressed it himself, and the doors swung open. He gasped.

"Oh gods..." Mermul whimpered. "Oh *no no no*..."

The spacious, brick-walled room was clearly a dungeon. A dragonslayer's sword and lance, an executioner's axe and various other implements of torture and death were placed on racks along one the walls. The collection included several armour-piercing sniper rifles and large-bore assault weapons of the kind used by Hunters.

Two prison cells - each large enough to accommodate a dragon - were set into one of the walls, and in the centre of the room, lit by dim electric light, a massive guillotine stood beside an equally-proportioned set of stocks. A chopping block stood nearby, and on the far wall a row of trophy mounts held large, draconic skulls.

Fardon stared at the scene in shock. His eyes went distant for a moment, as if recalling a bad memory, and then his expression hardened. He padded over to examine the stocks, sniffing at them cautiously and then the dark-stained chopping block.

"Interesting," he said.

"*Is that all you can say?!'*" Mermul whimpered. "We knew Aunt Fercia was a maniac, but *this?!'*"

"The guillotine," Fardon said. "Examine it, would you, Mermul?"

"*Cruel!*" Fiskul snapped. "Given that Mermul was *put* in one recently, by a certain someone..."

"Well, now I'm the proud owner of one too, apparently..." Mermul said, looking at the blade and swallowing. He cautiously approached the grim device and sniffed at the lunettes, then the restraining straps on the execution table. His eyes widened.

"That's *her* scent," he said. "From her fur. And the blade... it's *dull!*"

Fardon grinned, and poked his head into one of the prison cells. It had been used for storage, and reaching in, he retrieved a number of unusual items of clothing. An executioner's hood, some blindfolds for a condemned dragon, and an assortment of shiny black wing-restraints and tight-fitting outfits.

"Your aunt clearly had an interesting sex life," he said. "There's a set of leather adventuring armour for the small races, modern Hunter outfits in various size and sex, and a fake dragon's head in a basket. No... two. One scaled, and the other looks a lot like her."

"Woah! I didn't see her being into *that*," Vinny said, looking amazed. "I wonder who she was roleplaying with...? Maybe she hired a specialist! 'I'm Miss Delphine and I'll be your dragonslayer for tonight!'"

"Huh," Fiskul said, looking utterly confused. "I guess some dragons *do* enjoy being bullied."

Mermul sat down heavily, relieved. "If this is just some kind of... playroom..." he sighed. "I'm so glad. Not just because of the implications, but... Well, we'd have had to call in the guards. They'd turn my new home into a *crime scene* and we'd have to find somewhere else to sleep." He glanced up at the skulls, suspiciously. "Those *are* casts, right?"

Fardon stretched up his neck and studied them, sniffing at the gruesome trophies.

"I'm not sure about the middle one," Fardon said. "We'll have to get an expert in. But the others are definitely mass-produced."

"So we *will* have to bring in the guards after all," Mermul sighed.

"Yes, but not immediately. If that skull *was* from a real dragon, they've been dead a

long time. And it doesn't necessarily mean foul play either," Fardon pointed out. "It could be one of her friends or relatives."

"I really don't know what I'm going to do with this," Mermul shook his head. "I might just leave it. Partly because it's too embarrassing to have to get someone to dispose of this stuff... People will ask questions! Sir Darving would have a field day!"

"It's not *that* unusual," Fardon said, and craned his head at the other dragon.

"Mermul, if I may say so, you do have a rather... *human* mindset for all that you were brought up by dragon supremacists. Down to your rehabilitation in Arcaia, perhaps...?"

"While I presume you've seen a lot of savagery in your time before that, you must remember that we *are* still apex predators and not all of our... brutality can be blamed on Lord Thurr, although he *definitely* encourages that.

"Though our minds do have a lot in common with humans and furies, we *are* different in a lot of ways. We have a lot of dark urges, we are prone to bloodthirst, we're just good at keeping that stuff in check. But we still need to satisfy them somehow. Hence the public executions, though they are mercifully rare.

"What I'm saying is... There's a market for this kind of role-playing. As Vinny said earlier, you can find people willing to help act out your dark fantasies for the right money. And you can buy fake execution gear by mail-order if you know where to look."

"I guess so..." Mermul sighed. "I'm not sure that's my scene... But still... Well, she *was* still my aunt. She did evil things, but... I don't feel comfortable airbrushing her out of my life either. She did good things too, at the crèche..."

"You could store some of her personal effects in here," Fiskul suggested. "Leave it as some kind of memorial. Even a dragon as wicked as her deserves that much. Though... You *would* look good in some of those shiny clothes," he added hopefully.

Mermul looked embarrassed. "We'll have to see," he said.

Vinny was looking at the weapons rack thoughtfully. "There's one missing," he noted.

Mermul looked at it and saw that the brickwork there was loose. He pressed it experimentally, and there was a click, followed by a grinding noise from outside.

"Secrets within secrets," Fardon said uneasily. "If this is so embarrassing that it needs to be concealed inside a *sex dungeon*, I dread to think..."

Back in the corridor that had led them to the dungeon, the wall had opened on one side to reveal another short stretch of corridor. At the end, a bulkhead door sealed it off. The switch wasn't even hidden and it slid open easily.

Inside was another dungeon, this time with much smaller cells, a smaller guillotine and a noose that dangled ominously from a hook in the ceiling. In one corner was a pile of skulls, human and various species of furre. And a rank smell wafted through the doorway.

"Shit, shit, *shit*," Fardon said, closing the door hastily. "Vinny, fetch Sir Darving. This one's *real*!"