

Chapter 12 - Fame

While Tarian society took great pains to try and integrate dragons and the smaller races, taverns tended to be the exception. Partly because a dragon and a humanoid needed different quantities of drink, and consequently slightly different infrastructure, but also to avoid accidents. A tipsy dragon is both clumsier, and also less likely to be aware of their surroundings. Combined, it greatly increases the risk of a smaller creature being stepped upon.

"I missed the executions," the green dragoness sighed, joining her friend at the bar.

"They're always filmed," the orange dragon replied. "You can watch a replay later."

"It's not the same," she sighed. "You don't get the smells, the atmosphere of the crowd, and they always cut away at the moment of death!"

"Because that bit squicks the kids and the small races," the other dragon pointed out. "Well, most of them anyway."

"See? It's not the same as being there! And it's not like a play... they can't exactly put on a repeat performance!"

Sat a few tables away, Mermul had no visible ears to prick up, but his expression darkened and he let out a small sigh. Fiskul also looked up from their tankard of lemonade.

"Well, you only missed one of them," the orange dragon pointed out. "The second one was postponed. There was a disturbance... they arrested the executioner afterwards as well!"

"Any idea when they'll reschedule?" the dragoness asked eagerly. "I heard they were sentenced to death for banging the Evil One himself!"

"Do you *mind*...?" Fiskul asked loudly. "You're talking about someone's very *life* here! And who humps who isn't really your business, I might add."

"I guess... But haven't you ever wondered what it'd feel like if it was *you* strapped to the table, unable to escape? What your last thoughts would be before..." the orange dragon stopped abruptly as Mermul emitted a keening noise, head thrown back at the

ceiling.

"*Holy gods!*" he said, suddenly recognising Mermul with a double-take that nearly knocked over the huge tankard of beer.

"Funnily enough, Mermul no longer has to *wonder* what it's like to be strapped to a guillotine," Fiskul snarled, patting Mermul on the back to try and calm him. "And as for the execution, it's not *going* to be rescheduled if I have any say in the matter."

The other two dragons looked at each other with embarrassment, wondering what to do, and the bartender became tense, anticipating trouble.

Just then, Fardon entered the establishment and went up to Mermul's table. "Is there a problem?" he asked, looking at Mermul in concern.

"Yes," Mermul whimpered. "Apparently, while my d-death sentence has been on the news, the fact that I've been pardoned has *not!*," he sobbed. "So now people think I'm an escaped m-murderer or something! That's *all* I need right now!"

"He's *not* an escaped murderer, is he...?" the bartender asked.

"I escaped from Lord Thurr," Mermul wailed. "He made me murder people! I came here because I don't want to do that stuff anymore!"

"*Mermul..!*" Fiskul protested. "That's not what they wanted to hear!"

"But it's true!" the fluff-dragon protested. "Technically I *am* an escaped murderer, just not the way they meant! Besides, they'll find out soon enough anyway! Better they hear it from me..."

"Enough," Fardon said firmly, glancing from the two patrons to the bartender.

"Mermul is not a threat to anyone here. He has had a chequered past, but he is now a full citizen of Taria. He's had a very difficult last few days, and as a knight of the realm I would appreciate it if you did not make today any harder for him."

"So..." the green dragoness asked, wide-eyed and eager, "What was it like working for Lord Th-" she cut off abruptly as her companion rapped her on the snout.

"Shush!" the orange dragon said. "They're right. It's none of our business."

"Meat," Mermul said.

The other dragons stared at him in silent confusion. Fiskul and Fardon glanced at each other nervously, worried that the fluff-dragon's mind had broken.

"We had a meat-rich diet," the blue-grey dragon continued after a pause. "I don't want to think about where that meat came from. But we didn't get much else. Meat... and death. Killing others for Lord Thurr. And being executed if you anger him..."

Mermul fixed the dragoness with a haunted stare. "I thought all that was normal. That that's what dragons were *for*... to serve a powerful Lord, and to get beheaded if we step out of line somehow. We were told *this* was freedom, that as the Master Race, the world was our birthright. But really... *he* got the freedom... We got to be his pawns, with the thrill of slaying and dominating his enemies as a token gesture... The false freedom of being let off the leash for a bit.

"But now..." Mermul said, "Now I've seen another life where you actually *can* be free to choose your own path... Why the hell would I *ever* want to go back to *that* madman?"

"And if he catches you?" the dragoness asked, looking genuinely appalled.

"If you upset him enough, he bites your head off," Mermul said, eyes staring into the distance for a moment. "But I suspect I'm beneath his attention... they'd probably just put me in DragonSplitter..." he gave a choked sob and fell silent.

"I hope you're happy," Fiskul said coldly.

"Be reasonable," the bartender said, patting Mermul on the back. "You made the news, caused a lot of excitement. Naturally that's going to attract attention. If this is going to be a problem for your friend, maybe they should lie low for a bit?"

"Perhaps we should," Fardon said, nodding respectfully as the three of them left the bar.

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Mermul looked calmer by the time they had got back to the park.

"That was brave of you to answer them," Fardon said. "You didn't have to, you know..."

"The bartender was right," Mermul said sadly. "Now we've all been seen on the news, people will be curious. I had to *try*... because they weren't going to be the last."

"You did well," Fardon said. "Though your description of life under Thurr raises more questions about Fercia... And on that note, I do have some bad news for you."

"They're kicking me out of the villa, aren't they...?" Mermul sighed. "I knew it..."

"Just for a few tendays," Fardon reassured him. "And you've still got her money. But after you found her murder-room... they're re-opening the investigation. You'll be allowed back once the bodies have been removed and identified. Incidentally, Sir Darving asked me to thank you."

"He did?" Mermul looked worried.

"For finding Fercia's journal in the book room. We know more about why she blew up the nursery."

"Woah!" Fiskul gasped. "What did she say?!"

"Well, she was a bit unhinged," Fardon said. "What Mermul was saying earlier about meat... That's given me an idea and I've asked them to check her larder, shopping lists and stuff. Kind of curious whether she was getting enough vegetables."

Fiskul looked confused. "Come again...?"

"We need a mixed diet," Mermul said. "They told me so at Arcaia. An all-meat diet messes with your hormones and makes you more violent and less rational. Maybe that's what we're *supposed* to be like, maybe eating plant matter is the unnatural part... But the short version is, if you want to live like a civilised creature among other races, you need an omnivorous diet."

"Lord Thurr *wants* his warriors to be aggressive and unpredictably violent, so he enforced an unbalanced diet. Even outside of his influence, Aunt Fercia might have been keeping to a meat-rich regime out of loyalty for his ideals, or out of habit..."

"I see," Fiskul said. "I'm designed to eat the *world* so the usual nutritional concepts don't really apply to me. There's a lot of common-sense stuff that I'm missing..."

"For what it's worth, I think the omnivorous diet really *is* our natural state," Fardon said. "We enjoy sweet foods - and the ability to taste sweetness is a trait pure carnivores usually lose."

"Makes sense," Mermul said, sounding relieved. "Anyway, what did Fercia put in the diary?"

"Like I said, she was a little nuts," Fardon said. "The short version is, that she was getting paranoid. She occasionally kidnapped humans and furies for her little 'murdertorium' or 'murdertory' as she called it in the journal... and she was convinced we'd found out and were closing in on her. She figured we'd be taking her to the guillotine at any moment... So she decided to go out with a bang, commit one last act of wickedness before we took her."

"Oh dear," Mermul shook his head sadly. "And I take it you hadn't...?"

"Not at all," Fardon growled. "We hadn't seen a pattern. We hadn't figured the disappearances were down to one person, and we certainly had no idea it was *her*!"

"Heavy," Mermul said. "So not only did she do that out of sheer paranoia... But she might have been driven crazy by her diet."

"Insane or not, a serial killer would still not be allowed to roam free," Fardon pointed out. "Had she been found criminally insane, she would have been confined, probably for a century or more. Would that have been better than the swift release of death? Given the stuff in her playroom, I think she died the way she always wanted to go."

"What do we do now?" Mermul wanted to know. "It's a bit too short a delay to rent a place, but a bit too long for a hotel! I don't want to impose on you for that long, either - even if we all fit comfortably in your lair, which to be honest, we don't."

"Well, you could just claim back the hotel costs," Fardon said. "After all, you are being inconvenienced by the state. But since you're worried about notoriety in the capital, we *could* just go back to Tarnover. My villa is a lot more spacious, and I will need to return there at some point anyway, as that's where my role is based."

"Does that mean that someone else will be assigned as my... protector?" Mermul asked, looking worried.

"Eventually, yes," Fardon said. "I am a Knight of Taria, and my skills are needed for other things than keeping a refugee safe. So eventually they will have to find someone else, but it won't be Sir Darving, if that's what you're worried about. I'll suggest Vinny, since he was guarding your villa.

"But the short version is, that I should probably return to Tarnover... and when you return to the capital, I won't be coming with you. But we can stay in touch... If you want to, of course."

Mermul sighed and then brightened. "Yes. You've been good to me, Fardon... even when the King was testing us, you were trying to make it easier for me..."

Fardon looked away with embarrassment.

"If we do go back to Tarnover, I'd like to check my lair in the Disputed Territories," Fiskul put in. "I want to grab a few things, and lock it down for a long-term absence in case someone tries to squat there."

"Then I guess we're agreed," Mermul said. "Tarnover it is. I just hope they don't need me to open any more of Fercia's secrets in the villa while I'm away."