

Chapter 16 - Sanctum

Vinny landed in front of Mermul as he approached the entrance.

"Hello, Mermul," the brown dragon said, looking a little surprised. "I thought you were in Tarnover. I'm afraid we're still investigating, so the house and grounds are off-limits. You'll have to leave, but if there's something you want from the house, I may be able to get it for you."

"It's not that..." Mermul said, looking a little flustered. "I may have some information, and it might be important to the investigation. But... it'll sound crazy."

"You don't sound too sure," Vinny shrugged his wings. "But okay. What do you know?"

"It might be nothing, but I might know where one of the secret rooms is. I'd like to try an experiment. If it doesn't work, you can kick me off the premises. But... I figured it's worth a shot."

"There's a lot of 'mays' and 'mights' there," the other dragon admitted. "If Darving hears it, he'd get suspicious."

"Okay," Mermul said, looking embarrassed. "This is a silly question, but... Uh... Is your name Vinter...?"

The other dragon did a double-take. "Only my closest friends ever call me that," he admitted. "I had a wild past... Tried to leave it behind, along with that name."

"That goes for many of us," Mermul admitted. "And I don't *want* to bring it up, but it's part of the message I got. If that's part's true, then maybe the rest is. Can you take me to Sir Darving...?"

"Message?! Gods, Mermul... Who have you been talking to...?" Vinny asked, horrified.

Mermul just stared back at him for a while. "You wouldn't believe me," he said at last, glancing fixedly at the ground between them.

Vinny arched his neck back, pulling his head away from Mermul. He looked scared. "Go on,"

"Listen, I know how crazy this sounds," the fluff-dragon began awkwardly, "But I had a dream about Aunt Fercia. She wanted to apologise for what she'd done. She told me a secret, to try and help make up for her crimes. And... and she told me to tell Vinter she's so very sorry, and that he can have the black trunk..."

The other dragon blinked rapidly. "Holy gods," he said. "I think you'd better come in."

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"I don't *believe* this," Sir Darving said, looking pained. "You flew all the way from Tarnover, *without Fardon* because you had a bad dream...? What are you up to, Mermul...? What's your game?"

"I left him a message," the fluff dragon protested. "And it's not like I left Taria entirely! And yes, I *know* this sounds ridiculous... but I promised her I'd try. "Look at it this way - if it's *real*, it's important to all of us. If I'm just going crazy, then... Well, I apologise for wasting everyone's time. But there's only one way to find out, and little to lose in trying, right..?"

"That's true," the red dragon conceded. "I'll be honest, we haven't found much more. If you truly know of a new secret room then... Well, it would be helpful. See what you can do."

"She said there were two statues," Mermul said. "And that I should stand between them and think of my hatchday. And that inside there's something that will help us defeat Lord Thurr."

Sir Darving made a pitying expression. "That sounds the most dreamlike of it all, Mermul," he sighed. "Surely you don't believe you're some kind of Chosen One? Besides, why would she *want* to take down Lord Thurr at all?"

"Of course I don't," Mermul glowered. "And I'm not kidding myself into believing that there's anything here that would protect me from his wrath. But... If it helps defend this realm in any way, it's worth it. Vinny, what *is* the black trunk Fercia mentioned?"

"It's... a trunk in one of the dens," the dragon admitted, looking embarrassed. "It has her coin collection in it. I collect them too, we've traded a few in our time. She had an

unusual amount of currency from Thurr's realm... and maybe I should have spotted that, but she also had a lot of Hunter money as well.

"If the estate was auctioned... I did hope it would at least go to someone who appreciates it."

"Well, if the dream message is real, she wants you to have it," Mermul said. "If it's not, you may as well take it anyway, as far as I'm concerned."

"If she gave you a message that Vinny understood and you didn't..." Sir Darving admitted. "Well, maybe there's something in it after all. But I still don't understand why she would want to aid us against Lord Thurr? She's got a *shrine* to him!"

"Because he got her killed," Mermul said. "Not that it's completely his fault - we all have our dark sides - but he encouraged it. In death, she's had a change of perspective. She's seen the stupidity of his doctrine, and she wants to stop it. To help atone for the awful things she did. Like with me... just too late for her to benefit from it."

"It sounds like you're defending her," Darving frowned. "Though... Hell, I don't know. Like you say, there's nothing to lose. Let's try it."

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"There are more than two statues in the garden," Darving pointed out. "But... well, the two large dragons facing each other. If there is anything in this, that's where I'd try."

Mermul awkwardly strode to the centre-point between the two large dragon statues, feeling like an idiot.

Like birds, dragons have an internal compass, so Mermul had little difficulty orienting himself to the west. Having done so, he closed his eyes and thought of his hatchday, as commanded. Nothing happened.

He tried again, using both the standard and Lord Thurr versions of the date. Nothing.

"Well, that was a wash," Vinny said, looking disappointed. Sir Darving watched expressionlessly.

"It seemed so real," Mermul sighed, looking crushed. "It... Look, nevermind. I promised I'd try and I did. I'm sorry for wasting your time..."

The red dragon ignored this. He looked at Mermul, lowered the visor of his helmet for a moment, and then grinned wickedly. "One O'Clock, Mermul," he said.

Mermul blinked for a second, before realising he was being given an angle.

"Oh," he said, and tried again. This time there was a loud clunk, and a section of path swung down to reveal an entrance, just large enough for a frost-dragon to enter.

"Well, *shit*," Sir Darving said. "You realise, Mermul, that this isn't going to get the villa back to you any sooner, right? We're going to have to search this place as well."

"She said it was a panic room," Mermul shrugged. "So there's probably not going to be a huge amount of stuff down there. Though what there is, might well be of interest."

Vinny tried to squeeze himself into the narrow passage, only to get stuck. Sir Darving and Mermul had to pull him out, and the larger knight had no hope of fitting down there himself.

"Okay, Mermul," Sir Darving said, returning with a small camera unit that he fitted to the frost-dragon's collar. "I guess you'll have to go down there. After all, it's your property now."

"But why didn't it open the first time?" the frost-dragon asked.

"Oh... the Dizzy Mountains!" Vinny exclaimed suddenly.

"Yes. There's a local magnetic flux," Sir Darving explained, placing a small video screen on the ground. "Iron and stuff in the nearby hills. It throws everyone off a few degrees if you're not expecting it."

"The mountains make your head spin if you fly too close and too fast," Vinny added.

"Indeed. However, the mountains *don't* affect the GPS in my helmet - or whatever opens the secret door. "

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"Can you hear me?" the collar asked.

"Loud and clear," Mermul replied. "Fercia didn't say anything about traps. If she really wants to help against Lord Thurr, she'd probably have warned me if there was anything dangerous."

"If it's really a panic room, she'd want to be able to get there fast," Sir Darving's voice pointed out. "That said, it might be trapped - but with a safe mode for those of her kin."

Mermul found the lights and saw that he was standing in a large, squared off bunker with rough, unpainted walls. There was a ventilation system, a store room full of dried and tinned meat, a small shower and toilet, and a den with a pile of large pebbles on it.

Mermul sniffed at the hoard. "She's slept on this at least once," he reported. "Either she got spooked and hunkered down here for a bit, or she's been regularly visiting and took a nap."

"It's in pretty good repair," Sir Darving barked over the collar. "I'd guess she's been here regularly."

Mermul entered one of the larger rooms, and immediately noticed a number of lights glowing faintly in the darkness. There was the sound of a fan, and other machinery as well.

"Ohhh," he said, hitting the lights. It was a computer room, with a large CRT projection display on one wall, which slowly kicked into life.

"Are you getting this?" he asked the collar.

"Well, shit!" Sir Darving's voice said. "If that's what I think it is... It solves the problem of the spy. She has a direct link to Lord Thurr."

"Is that what she meant?" Vinny's voice intruded over the collar. "That we could break into Lord Thurr's mainframe?"

"I don't think so," Mermul frowned. "She said it was an artifact. If she meant computers, she'd probably have said so. She'd have given me a password."

"You could try your hatchday again," Vinny replied.

"Not yet," Sir Darving said. "If it really is linking to Thurr's computer systems, they'll spot the failed login. I'd leave this to us, when we can find someone the right size."

"Small races?" Mermul asked.

"They'll struggle with the stairs," Sir Darving pointed out. "To say nothing of the keyboard. No, we'll need a smaller dragon who is also a security expert. I'd look to see what else is around."

The next room was empty apart from a large pedestal. In the centre of this was a beautifully-constructed wooden container, with ornate spikes upon it. Mermul gingerly touched the case, found the latch and opened it a crack. Pale violet light glowed faintly within, from some kind of crystal sphere. He quickly shut it.

"I've found the artifact," he said quietly.

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"Milord, I bring news," the dragon said nervously.

"What?" Thurr demanded irritably. He lay sprawled across a pile of smooth obsidian rocks, and opened one eye.

"Lady Fercia has fallen," the dragon informed him, looking worried. "The cameras in her bunker... We spotted an intruder... a dragon exploring her inner sanctum. She would never, *ever* have allowed this to happen while alive."

The red dragon's head perked up and he stared at the underling, eyes narrowing.

"Someone did Fercia?" he snapped. "And reached her *sanctum*?! Varl's lackeys could never have opened the protection without help... They shouldn't even be able to *find* it with the obscenely expensive wards she bought. There must be a traitor. Find what happened. *Now!*"

"We do have a theory, milord... The intruder is Mirmjolnar. The assassin who defected to Arcaia..."

Lord Thurr snarled, showing a row of deadly teeth, and a small wisp of flames shot between them. "Of course... That treacherous little **shit!** He's killed her and conquered her territory! The wards wouldn't stop *him*..."

"It appears so, Lord. Our agent in Tarnover has sighted him prior, and reports that he has been lairing there recently. If Mirmjolnar has truly won her estate by right of conquest, he will probably need to fetch his possessions there from Tarnover."

"Activate agent Sarkir. Mirmjolnar must be taken before he can do more damage. I want him alive for interrogation. And then..." the Dragon Lord grinned evilly, showing rows of deadly fangs. "...Entertainment."

The other dragon gulped and looked at the ground. "It... It may be past that point, Lord. There is a complication. Lady Fercia..."

"*Shit*," Thurr whispered. "Who has the Xebulon?! It was *her*, wasn't it! *Where is it?! Is it safe?!*"

"He took it, Lord," the dragon croaked. "Mirmjolnar removed it from the sanctum... That was the last thing we saw before he left. The cameras went dead shortly after that... he must have seen them and cut the link."

The dragon-lord's eyes widened with horror.

"*Kill him*," he hissed. "**Kill him right now!** I want his head... and his heart!"