

Chapter 17 - Artifact

The pointed wooden container stood on the workbench. It was about the size of a barrel. Inside it, dimly visible through a tinted window in the ornate casing, an orb glowed with mystic energies.

"Zeelah," Sir Darving said, by way of introduction. "Enchantress to Lord Varl. Vinny you already know, but this is Mermul."

"Charmed," the enchantress said, holding out a white and purple scaled hand which the fluff-dragon took. "And I presume you would like my opinion on... this? Well, well! I haven't seen one of *these* for a while! I'd ask where you even *got* this thing from, but I'm not sure I want to know."

"I found it," Mermul said. "I inherited a house and this was in one of the basements. What is it?"

"It is a Xebulon," the dragoness said. "A necromantic artifact used in the stealing of souls. Terminally illegal to possess under Tarian law, I might add."

"B-But..." Mermul protested, appalled.

"You *don't* possess it," Sir Darving said, glancing at the stricken frost-dragon. "It is now property of the state. And... While we do not always see eye-to-eye, I am not so stupid as to want to execute the person who retrieved it for us.

"We would never have found this thing without your help. And Fercia's too, I guess. If you dream of her again, Mermul... give her our thanks."

"Thanks... but what does it do?" Mermul asked nervously. "Is it going to steal *our* souls...?"

"No. It's harmless to *us*," Zeelah said. "But for whoever created it... well, they won't want it falling into the wrong claws."

"You mean... It's a phylactery?" Mermul asked, wide-eyed. "Like the old fantasy stories?"

"Not exactly. A phylactery is where you put your own soul into a separate object and hide it away, so you can't be killed without that soul-jar being destroyed first. Incidentally, that is pure bullshit and does not work," she added.

"What *this* is..." the enchantress continued, "Well... It's complicated. In order to steal a soul, you must first create a device like this and attune it to yourself. Without that step, the spells simply won't work. You should only need to do this once. I'm not even sure what happens if you try to create a second one - probably something bad. Necromancy is extremely dangerous, after all.

"The snag is, once you've created it, it can act like an undo button for soul-stealing. So you have to keep the object far away, and preferably well-hidden. If it gets too close, it negates the binding and the souls you've taken will be freed."

"Presumably that also happens if the object is destroyed?" Mermul asked. "Which is why it was hidden away instead of removed from existence?"

"Precisely. If they destroyed it, they'd be back to square one and have to start over."

"Couldn't he have thrown it in the sea, though...?" Sir Darving asked. "Lose the thing forever?"

"Generally, the necromancer doesn't want it outside of their control, so it's usually entrusted to an exceptionally loyal underling," Zeelah said. "But, at the same time, they *may* need to access the thing again, using suitable protective wards. For example, they might *want* to release a specific soul in future, and they will need the device to do that."

"So if *we* destroy it..." the knight began, eyeing the spiky wooden box triumphantly.

"Sadly, we can't. Not without killing its creator, anyway."

"Fine by me," Sir Darving said. "Creating it at all was a monstrous act, so let's just smash it and end their evil!"

"You misunderstand," the enchantress said, cradling the wooden object in her hands and peering into the glowing orb within. "To destroy a Xebulon, you generally have to kill its creator *first*... or bring it back into their presence. We do not have the means to destroy it here, and even if we somehow managed to do so, that would not kill the necromancer - though it would seriously weaken them, if they have been using souls to strengthen themselves.

"Who do you suspect has created this one, if I may ask?" she added, craning her neck to look at the dragon-knight.

"Lord Thurr," Sir Darving said. Zeelah almost dropped the artifact. Her head jerked back as if she was about to start keening like Mermul, but she managed to stop herself by an effort of will, letting out only a brief whimper.

"...That's... that's *bad*," she said shakily, putting the thing gently down on the worktop. "If he realises it's been disturbed, he'll stop at nothing to get control of this... It could mean a war."

Mermul broke down and began keening himself. "What have I done...?" he howled. "Auntie... What have we *done*?!"

"Don't blame yourself," Sir Darving said, looking awkward and embarrassed as he tried to comfort Mermul. "This would have happened anyway. Thurr would have found out about Fercia's execution and the sale of her estate eventually... But thanks to you, we *know* there will be a problem. Otherwise this would have just hit us out of the blue with no warning. You've done us a fine service."

"What worries me is the cameras," Vinny said. "We cut the connection, just in case. But we don't know if they're going to a local videotape recorder... Or to Lord Thurr. If it's all going down a satellite link to *him*..."

"He'll *see*! He'll *know*!" Mermul whimpered.

"You said that you don't have the means to destroy this thing," Darving pointed out. "Do you know someone who *might*?"

"Well..." Zeelah said thoughtfully, "You might want to try consulting a witch. One of the problems of being full of ancient wisdom is that sometimes you fall behind the cutting edge... I'd try Madame Featherstone. I'll give you her address."

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"A witch...?" Mermul looked puzzled as they approached the district they had been given. It was a no-fly area, so the three of them trotted along the path. "Are witches actually real? Like, out of the fairy stories...?"

"*We're* magical creatures," Vinny reminded him. "Most of us know a few healing spells. The Small Races... they're not so good at it, hence technology. But sometimes... Well, you get part-dragons. Someone with our blood in them, they'll have the gift. Longer lives in which to learn, as well."

Mermul looked horrified.

"You're not *racist*, are you...?" Sir Darving frowned.

"Certainly not!" the fluff-dragon squeaked indignantly. "I just... I'm trying not to think about how they'd be *conceived*!"

"While the dragon parent is shapeshifted," Vinny smirked. Mermul looked a bit relieved.

Madame Featherstone's secluded house was surrounded by tall bushes, and being forbidden to fly, Mermul's view was obscured until they reached the entrance to her property. Mermul gasped as the driveway came into view. Through ornate bars of a gate, lush gardens were visible, in the same style as his own new home.

"This can't be right," he said. "It's a *villa*! There's... a h-helicopter on a pad," he swallowed, thinking of the Hunters who had shot him down. "This is no witch's cottage... we must have the wrong address."

"No," Vinny said. "That's her name on the sign."

Sir Darving pushed a button on the intercom, and after a brief conversation, the gates slid open to admit the three dragons. The front door opened, and an opossum emerged, dressed in a business suit.

"Well met," she said. "I am Madame Featherstone. Usually I would require an appointment, but since you are here on state business..." she smiled at Mermul's bewildered expression as he looked around the sumptuous grounds.

"Not what you expected for a witch?" she smirked. "Turns out, being a sorceress pays very well. Yes, dragons like Zeelah are better at it, but there's a lot of places out there where you need someone powerful, yet small enough to fit into places a dragon can't."

"What about shapeshifting?" Vinny asked. "That would help, right...?"

"Not as much as you might think. Not all dragons can do that, and it puts you at a disadvantage when you can. You don't have full power when shifted, or so I hear. It's also very dangerous when dispelling things - if you accidentally kill the shapeshifting spell, you'll suddenly turn back into a full-size dragon."

"Madame," Sir Darving began. "We have here a forbidden artifact, which Zeelah identified as a Xebulon. She was wondering if you knew of a way to destroy it."

"Oof," the furre said, looking disturbed. "Throwing it into a volcano *might* work... but if it *doesn't*, good luck fishing it out again for another try. Your best bet would be to bring it into contact with the thing's creator. Once it becomes inert, you can probably just crush the thing. Otherwise the only sure way is to... Well, nuclear fusion would probably give you enough energy, if you can fling it into the sun..."

"Shit," Vinny moaned. "I'd hoped we could destroy it before Thurr comes looking to get it back!"

"Yeeg," the opossum said, looking horrified. "If his spies come looking for that, I don't want it *here*, thank you!"

"We'll have to decide how to handle this," Sir Darving said. "Thank you for confirming our fears, Madame, and apologies for disturbing you. We shall take our leave."

"If it's alright, I would like a word with your fluffy companion first," the opossum said.

"Me?" Mermul looked surprised.

"I've seen you in the news," the witch said. Mermul uttered a low moan. "Don't worry," she added quickly. "I'm not going to ask about that. But I would like to hear, from a new face, from someone who was once associated with Lord Thurr, what your thoughts are about power."

"Power?" the fluff-dragon looked surprised.

"Political, and/or physical power," the witch said, pulling out a voice recorder. "As you may know, there is some dragon blood in me. But I have never been clear on how much, and how much it affects me... How much of me is normal furre psychology, and how much of me is draconic. Your thoughts on the matter may help, since it's rare to hear from someone close to Thurr."

Mermul shrugged his wings, flustered.

"Well, we're dragons," Mermul said. "Dragons seek power. Some feel the call more than others, but very few are immune to its siren song."

"If you become more powerful, you can defend yourself more. Hunt bigger prey, get better territory - better food - in the olden days. Intuitively, it makes sense.

"But the flipside is that the more powerful you are, the more the Small Races feel threatened and the harder they try to kill you, hence the wars.

"And now there are lots of ways to do that, to kill a mighty dragon so easily... Seeking to become the biggest and baddest dragon... These days, it's more of a liability than a survival trait."

"Besides you can't all be Top Dragon," the opossum pointed out. "Dragon society seems to gravitate to having a ruler, and dragons who serve under them."

"Yeah," Mermul said. "Most of us we want to be powerful, but being in service to someone even *more* powerful, that kind of short-circuits it because we're social creatures. So we think we've got more powerful, by being part of a more powerful *group*. Probably a safety feature to stop us just slaughtering each other for territory, I guess, given that we're so slow to reproduce...

"Also the dominance thing... 'submit or die' tends to naturally form hierarchies. Though that attitude is a thing we try to suppress in modern societies. And there are ways to work around it, too," he added.

"Oh?" the opossum asked.

"In Arcaia, dragons sometimes just land on public buildings, and just perch there looking menacing. Don't do much, maybe just glower at people passing by. I've seen it here too. Done it myself, sometimes..." he added, looking embarrassed.

"Interesting. Why do you do that?"

"Well... if you can land on a property and nobody stops you, the primitive part of your dragon-brain believes you've conquered the territory," Mermul said. "It's silly, but it does help short-circuit the urges. It becomes more awkward if it's someone's house, though. They tend not to like that.

"There are medications available to dampen power cravings as well," he added. "For extreme cases, that can be useful. I mean, the Small Races have some people who need chemical help to remain sane, right? It's not like dragons are immune to such disorders. The invention of video games also helps, since you can conquer virtual worlds."

"Thank you, Mr. Mermul, that has been very insightful," the witch said.