

Chapter 18 - Attack

"Mermul!" Fiskul exclaimed, landing beside him. "What the heck are you doing back in the capital?!"

"I left you a note!" The fluff-dragon protested. "I had to return to the villa to try something!"

"It didn't make sense!" Fiskul said. "Something about getting a message from your strange aunt..."

"*Estranged*," Mermul corrected. "And... maybe not anymore. We've made up our differences."

Fardon looked horrified as he landed between them.

"You reconciled with *Fercia*?!" he gurgled. "After what she did to the nursery? And... Well, you know she's *dead*, Mermul...?"

"She came to me in a dream," the fluff-dragon said. "She wanted to say she realised she was wrong, and was really sorry, and that she had an artifact that might help against Lord Thurr. She gave me very specific instructions, and I had to try them."

Fardon shook his head. "I don't *believe* this..."

"Exactly," Mermul said defensively. "You wouldn't have let me go. But this was *important*! I had to know if it was *real*!"

"It sounded ridiculous," Sir Darving admitted. "I feared some kind of treachery from Mermul. And yet... the artifact is now in our custody. Mermul, and apparently Fercia, have done Lord Varl a great service, though Lord Thurr is likely to react *very* badly when he learns of this."

"It wasn't my part to forgive her for an act of terrorism," Mermul said. "That's between her and her victims. But she has seen the error of her ways, and found her path to redemption. That has to deserve *something*, surely? She has to know that it's the right thing to do."

"I guess so," Fardon shook himself and looked at the sky. "Well," he said, "Unless you want to sleep in Eastcrag, we'd best to get you back to my villa. If we leave soon, we can still arrive before dark."

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The sun was just beginning to touch the mountains by the time the trio made it back to Tarnover.

As they came in to land, Mermul suddenly screamed and fell from the sky. Fiskul grew until he was bigger than Fardon and landed over the stricken dragon, shielding him with his wings.

A shot rang out, striking Fiskul, who gave a yelp of pain, and blasted a thin stream of void breath in the rough direction of the shooter, consuming half of a tree. Fardon swooped down into the woodland, trying to get at the sniper before they could reload.

"Halt!" he snarled. "Surrender, or die!"

Fiskul shrank to something more like Mermul's size and began examining the stricken dragon. "Mermul...?" they asked worriedly. "Can you hear me...?"

"Hurts," the fluff-dragon whimpered. "My wing... bleeding heavily..."

"*Shit*," the Devourer said, craning their neck to see. "I can fix the bleeding, but broken bones... that will take longer."

"Put that down, and we'll let you live..." Fardon snarled, wrestling with an unseen opponent in the trees. "Put that DOWN!"

Fiskul's magic had sealed the ugly wound in Mermul's wing, and the bleeding had mostly stopped, when there was another loud crack. Blood and brain matter splashed from the black-red dragon's skull and they collapsed, twitching.

Mermul whimpered in a mixture of fear and pain.

Angrily, Fardon crushed the weapon with his claws and seized the assassin. Turning around, he took in the scene of Mermul and Fiskul lying prone on the ground next to each other and his eyes blazed with anger.

"We do not usually hang people," he said slowly. "It is considered cruel. But if they are both dead, I shall request an exemption, just for you."

"I'm not dead!" Mermul yelped quickly. "Do not kill them! But Fiskul..."

Fardon scowled at the assassin. "If it was anyone else, you would die for violating the Pax Draconica," he said. "But fortunately for you, you have killed the Devourer."

"Praise Anah!" the human said ecstatically, choking off as Fardon squeezed him.

"Oh, a cultist," the dragon sighed. "I hate having to execute people, but... You might be too dangerous to live."

"So are you," the cultist wheezed. "Your kind was destined to destroy the world... but now I have slain the Devourer... I will go to Anah... Knowing that I have saved my kind..."

"It's not that easy," Fardon said. "He'll just respawn, and that is why you may avoid execution. Because if we wait until then, nobody has to know about it, right...?"

"...Oh."

* * *

The cultist sat in the interview room, hands cuffed as a couple of guards and a lawyer watched over him. The interrogator was a furre, and on a video screen set to one side, Fardon's face was visible.

"You're in a lot of trouble, son," the furre said. "Multiple attempted murders. Fortunate that you had the good sense not to fire at one of the King's deputies, or there'd be no hope for you. Now, I'll save time and start with what we already know. "You are one Mr. Stevens of Cragmire, a mechanic, and apparently also an anti-dragon cultist, an acolyte of the Eye of Harkness.

"You got the weapon by mail order from a sex shop catering to exotic tastes, a deactivated rifle intended as a prop for the dragonslayer kink. You managed to fix it up and got it working. Then, you attacked three dragons returning to Tarnover just before sunset."

"Like you say, you already know that," the human sighed.

"While we're not sure where you got the ammunition from, the most important question is why," the official said.

"Because the dragon race will destroy the world," Stevens said. "You know that. It's *prophesied* in all the major religions. All we're trying to do is stop that from

happening. No more dragons, no more threat to the world. Yes, that's harsh, but it's better that some should suffer than the world end entirely, right...?"

"There are two problems with that," Fardon pointed out. "Firstly, the Devourer cannot die. You blew their head open, and they were already up and about before we even left. So even if you make the rest of us extinct, *they* will remain, and it is *they* who will destroy the world, if the prophecy ever comes to pass. So, much as I hate to disrespect religion, your plan isn't going to work.

"Secondly, you are missing a key part of the prophecy. The Devourer makes friends... all the religions say so, though they have a garbled interpretation of *why*.

"I have spoken to the Devourer, and I know that their friends are actually just that, people they like and can talk to when they feel lonely. And this is the most important thing - so long as the Devourer has friends, they remain *happy*.

"But if all those friends die, the Devourer will grieve their loss. And if they become depressed enough that they decide they have nothing left to live for, *that* is when the world will end."

The cultist paled. "N-no! He... He draws his strength from his friends! Once they're all dead, we'll be able to kill him forever!"

"Do you want to ask the Devourer that? Do you want to see the interview tapes? They ate *Mount Arthon* after losing a friend called Verthyr... Do you want to risk them eating a province? A continent?!

"If your theory is true, *explain where that mountain went!* And, for your information, the Devourer sometimes makes *human* friends as well, so I guess you'd better start exterminating yourselves, too..."

"Y-you're lying!"

"I wish," Fardon said, looking harassed. "I live in the world as well, and I don't want it to end any more than you do. The *King* is terrified of the Devourer, and with them having settled in his realm, we are treating them with kid gloves. And more importantly, we are trying to protect the Devourer's *friends* to avoid the World-Eater going into some kind of apocalyptic funk. I'm afraid that sooner or later, you'll have to come to terms with it - you've got the whole thing ass-backwards."

"Also, you deliberately targeted one of the Devourer's friends," the furre said, eyes narrowing. "You had a clear shot at the Devourer - the one you claim to be targeting - and instead you shot someone else. *Why?*"

"He... he was a bigger target..."

"Bullshit!" Fardon said. "I was bigger than both of them!"

"Someone put you up to this," the furre said. "You were sat in a tree, waiting for a specific dragon to come past so you could shoot them. And you disabled them - there is no way you were aiming for anything vital. You wanted to do something first. Admit it, and we'll go easy on you."

The cultist glanced at his lawyer, who nodded back.

"There's a bounty on Mermul," he said, sinking back into his chair. "But they want information first. About an artifact. After that... he had to die. I didn't think he'd have an escort, and normally I wouldn't even have tried, but for *that* kind of money..."

Fardon's face slid gently off-shot as he sat down like a dog, and when he reappeared, he was covering his eyes with his hands. "Shit," he said. "Shit, shit, shit."

"Mr. Stevens," he said at last. "You are part of a cult that seeks to kill dragons, so I don't suppose you have a very high opinion of my kind. Would that be a fair assessment?"

"Maybe you're right," the cultist sighed. "Maybe we did get it wrong, and in seeking to save the world, we're actually threatening it. I need to think about this some more..." he glanced at the handcuffs. "I guess I'll have a while to do that in..."

"Please answer the question," Fardon said. "What do you, personally, think about dragons?"

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" the cultist replied stubbornly. "A lot of fellow Eye members wouldn't. Well, it's nothing personal. I just wanted to try and stop the apocalypse. And if that means sacrificing one of the other races, it's a shame, but you have to look out for number one..."

"Okay," Fardon said. "Close enough, I suppose. So, how would you feel if I told you that that bounty was put out by Lord Thurr, the dragon supremacist...?"

"...Fuck."

"While we know Thurr wants an artifact Mermul took, we do not know who his agent is," Fardon said. "And to be frank, a reformed cultist would be a valuable asset. Let's talk about plea bargains."

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"Well, the good news is that you should make a full recovery," the dragoness said. "Your friend did a good job healing the cut, but the damage to the wing was severe. We heal quickly, but you'll not be able to fly for several weeks. And please try to avoid moving it too much."

Mermul looked scared, glancing at the splint on his wing, which pinned it in an awkward position.

"It's not that bad," Fiskul said reassuringly. "Your legs are only bruised, you can still walk. Fardon's villa is at ground level, so you won't have problems there either."

"I..." Mermul said, looking upset. "Thurr sometimes *killed* dragons who could no longer fly... Called them weak and a liability. And when I first came here... Fardon's apartment in Eastcrag... the skyscrapers being built... All designed to be reached from the air, and I figured... maybe it was the same here..."

"Oh!" the dragoness sounded shocked. "No, no, no! Our job is to heal the injured! Would we have performed surgery on your wing if our aim was to take your life? "Look - wing injuries are not uncommon. People make mistakes, have accidents. And the Hunters often aim for the wing, as happened here. Even an otherwise healthy dragon may overexert themselves and pull a muscle. While I can't speak for Eastcrag, modern buildings always have lift access for those who can't fly for some reason. It just that obviously, most people *prefer* to fly given the choice."

Mermul brightened slightly. "Thank you, ma'am. Earlier I worried that Taria was just going to be like Thurr's realm under the surface... I am glad to be proven wrong."