

Chapter 21 - Good News

Vinny had been brought into the throne room, and watched in barely-concealed terror as Lord Thurr argued with Sir Fardon.

"Don't you understand?" the dragon lord protested. "Lord Varl and others have their cities where they *claim* to have won 'peace' with the Small Races. But they had to *compromise their own nature* to do so! To live with mere humans, they have become more *like* humans.

"Lord Varl hasn't *won* against humanity - he and his followers have *lost!* They have suppressed their draconic nature and instincts! The *humans* have won - by *domesticating* Varl and his ilk!

"You are glorified *pets!* When your human masters speak, you obey like whipped dogs - afraid to bite the hand that punishes you, in case your so-called allies tear up your precious Pax Draconica and resume the exterminations from before! You remember it, don't you, Fardon...?"

"I remember," Fardon snarled. "I was only young, but still... I remember. And I remember all too well that this treaty was the one thing *that stopped the slaughter and saved our race!*"

"...So you gave up your ferocity, gave up the glory and the thrill of the hunt! You were the perfect predator, but you threw all that away, giving up your liberty to purchase temporary safety," Lord Thurr said, staring at the knight intently.

"Two thousand years is an odd definition of 'temporary'," Fardon retorted. "Generations have been born in the peace that it has provided."

"Perhaps," Lord Thurr said. "But that's still within our lifetimes. Will it last another two thousand years? Another two hundred...?"

"But we are digressing. However long or short this peace will last, you gave up your *birthright* as a dragon to achieve it," he said. "You, and all your compatriots under Lord Varl's banner. And all the settlers in Arcaia and the other places who have taken the humans' bait.

"All of you *gave up your freedom for peace*. Tell me, Fardon... What did the *humans* give up?"

Fardon looked back at the dragon-lord defiantly, but said nothing.

"You see?!" Lord Thurr's eyes gleamed. "*They* won the war!

"You gave up your very *nature*, your deepest desires to rend flesh and taste blood, while they gave up *nothing*!

"But it doesn't have to *stay* like this, Fardon. You are on the losing side, but I admire you as a strong and capable fighter. What you could achieve if you were unfettered... Free to be a dragon once more, and revel in the deaths of the puny two-legs... I know you remember that, and I can sense your longing for it. And I can make that happen, old friend... You can be Fardon the Destroyer once more..."

"...Their secrets," Fardon said suddenly.

"What...?" Lord Thurr looked nonplussed.

"We gave up rampaging like mindless animals," Fardon said, looking pleased with himself. "We gave that up to find *peace*. The Small Races have their technology, their ability to manufacture precision machinery that a big dragon like you or me simply doesn't have the dexterity to achieve - not without shapeshifting, at least.

"That was the key to their success," Fardon continued. "Their weapons, their devices, jealously guarded. We gave up our baser instincts, but *they* gave up their most prized secrets, Lord Thurr!

"Agreeing to the Pax Draconica meant them sharing that technology with Taria. Maybe, if you have a small enough species of dragon, you can reverse engineer it and make your own, or smuggle computers from a third party like you did, but it will still be based on *their* designs. I, a dragon, can use human-built armour and weapons beyond *anything* we had before. The Pax Draconica *is* a two-way street!"

"Enough," Lord Thurr snarled. "Dragons can personify wisdom as well as strength. We would get there eventually!"

Fardon opened his mouth to reply, but shut it as the dragon-lord bared his teeth.

"We will continue this later, Fardon," Lord Thurr said. "I must check up on... your friend. Guard them," he added, glancing at his enforcers. "They must remain here. Restrain them if necessary, but try not to do anything... fatal. I am not done with them yet, and I would prefer Fardon still be able to speak when he is returned to Taria."

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"...And that's why I am here," Marshall said, voice soothing and hypnotic as he drew the blade across Mermul's flank.

"For me, it was never about the money, or putting your ilk in your place. For me, it's about dominance. Victory over a far more powerful foe. Dragons can become like humans, but humans can also become more like dragons. The *thrill* of slaying your enemy... that is something both our races can feel. Lord Thurr *understands* such dominance, and as his executioner... Well, I'd never get *this* many kills in the field."

Mermul gritted his teeth, stifling a whimper. At first he'd been afraid, terrified. But the dragonslayer's attentions had gradually driven away all other thoughts and feelings except for the pain. Cuts and injuries were all across his body now, and his injured wing hung brokenly to his side. The manacles had been released, and even the neck restraint had been taken away as his strength failed him. As it had become clearer and clearer that he would never this room alive, the fear had given way to resignation as he accepted his fate.

"Yes," the Hunter sighed, slapping the wounded dragon's side. "It'll be over soon. DragonSplitter awaits."

As if on cue, the black curtain at the front of the room parted, to reveal a guillotine. It looked identical to the one in Fercia's dungeon, except this one *worked*. The blade gleamed menacingly and two of Lord Thurr's enforcers chuckled to themselves as they helped lift the stricken frost-dragon into position.

Mermul's terror returned, not because of the lunette opening to receive his neck, not because of the enforcers sending him to his fate, but because of the voice calling his name.

"Mermul, as you call yourself now," Lord Thurr announced loudly. "Once, you were the pride of my assassins. Now... Oh dear, oh dear." The red dragon shook his head, sounding like a disappointed parent. "I had a speech all prepared for this, you know. But now I see you, I don't want to waste my breath on something so *pathetic* as a pacifist assassin. You barely count as a dragon at all," he sighed.

"How the mighty are fallen, Mermul," he said, voice becoming slightly husky with anticipation. "And now it is time for you to fall again, one last time." He locked eyes with the terrified frost-dragon. "Behead him."

Mermul closed his eyes tightly, and felt his throat constricting as the wooden mass of the lunettes snapped home around his neck, pinning him down in a deadly embrace. In his mind's eye, he saw Fardon preparing the guillotine for him in Taria, and then Fercia's execution, and finally the guillotine she had in the dungeon. How she had

roleplayed her own decapitation as a way of facing her inner guilt, and how Mermul himself had been tempted to do the same.

Yes... I do deserve this, he thought. There was a short, sharp, shock and his head plopped wetly into the basket.

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Lord Thurr returned to the throne room with a triumphant expression.

"Well, Sir Fardon... Vinter..." he said, "I have some good news for you!"

"Good news?" the knight asked, staring at the red dragon suspiciously. "Be more specific."

"You no longer have to worry about protecting Mermul," he grinned. As he spoke, one of the enforcers arrived, bearing the frost-dragon's severed head, which had been stuck upon a spear. The other dragon fitted this skewer into a purpose-built hole in the floor, and then left, grinning widely.

Fardon stared at the grim trophy, his eyes watering slightly. Vinny looked at the floor.

"No comments?" Thurr asked nonchalantly. "Not even Vinter...? You may get a chance at buying Fercia's villa, now.... And all thanks to *me*!"

"I don't know *how* we're going to break this to Fiskul," Fardon admitted, voice cracking. "You realise you may just have ended the world, right...?"

"We'll see," Thurr shrugged his wings. "Remember that list of the Devourer's other friends, the one that inspired you to surrender the late Mirmjolnar? Well, he'll get to keep *them*. My men have stood down now.

"Of course, I may have taken Fiskul's place as the Devourer before today is out, but I would not be proved faithless.

"And now," he continued, walking towards a large table, "It is time to discuss the terms of your safe return to Taria."

Lord Thurr unfolded a large map of the region, and weighed it down with a number of dragon figurines. Fardon looked at the document and hissed softly.

The red area of Thurr's realm had been expanded, covering the whole of the Disputed Territories, and Arcaia as well.

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The dawn world was achingly beautiful, and the blue-grey dragon sobbed at the sight of it.

"Mirmjolnar," a voice said, and he saw the golden form of Alkrash gliding beside him once again.

"I prefer Mermul, O Great One," the blue dragon replied nervously.

"That is more of a disguise than a name, to hide your sins from others. I am not so easily fooled, child... still, Mermul it can be, if that helps.

"Tell me, Mermul... Do you cry because of the beauty of the dawn, or because of the way your life has ended?"

"I'm not sure," the dragon replied. "Both, I guess. I tried... I really tried... I gave up violence... I wanted to try and stop Thurr... Stop him killing more innocents like I had done... But in the end... I failed."

"Ah, how many times I have heard that story," the golden one sighed. "I am sorry, I really am. Life is not fair, but my claws are tied by the other two gods. If I were to help you... I would have to justify it."

"Then it really is over this time," Mermul sighed. "I'm sorry, your holiness... Sorry about everything..."

"It happens," the dragon god said. "Now... You are dead, Mermul, but where will you go next? It seems you are a friend of the Devourer," the golden dragon god said, raising a scaled eyebrow. "You *know* what the scriptures say about that... Those who make a pact with the world-eater... their soul shall be forfeit."

"But that's not really true, is it, sir?" Mermul asked worriedly. "Fiskul isn't *that* evil! But if it *is*... What does it mean for me me? Does that mean I shouldn't be here?" Mermul asked worriedly. "Are you going to send me to... the punishment place...?"

"No," the golden one replied. "But you may not enter My realm either. You are an unusual case, child. Anah and Arbar are expressing strong opinions as to your

ultimate fate. We cannot accept you in the afterworld."

Mermul looked stricken. "Then what will become of me? Do I stay in the dawn land forever? Will I... cease to exist...?"

"In a sense," the dragon god said, and flexed a gleaming claw. "We have decided, Mirmjolnar. Prepare yourself for what will come. This... may hurt."

Mermul screamed as the dragon god's talons pierced his heart. His form flickered and died, and the dragon god flew away into the eternal sunrise.