

Part 4

The trees gave way suddenly to the sprawling fields and rolling hills that spanned most of the dominion that the humans liked to call 'home'. Little wooden farm houses were scattered here and there and gradually grey more and more numerous towards the bottom of the first valley where, nucleated inside a natural dip in the landscape was Askolov. Here was the town that had caused Katal so much trouble recently. It did seem fairly harmless right now, little wisps of smoke rose gently from the roof tops and left a calm haze that rested on the horizon where the sun was beginning to set on another day for the little town. A church spire stuck up from the west side of the town and the town hall towered monolithically over the town square and all the buildings to the east, its two bell towers chiming in the distance, signalling the end to the working day. There was no castle or keep to be found here, no archery ranges or city walls, and the nearest settlement was over 50 miles down the cobbled highway that connect this corner of the world to all of the other settlements in the realm. It was a peaceful little town, or as Katal preferred to think of it: 'Defenceless'.

As Katal wandered casually down the hillside towards the town the first villager caught sight of him and gaped in horror. 'First of the day.' He thought to himself. 'At least he's not a screamer.' The man stared from his porch as the dragon strolled through what would appear to be his farm, the silence was short lived as more people spotted Katal, sparking a wide panic. People ran panicking in all directions as he strolled on to the first street. Away from him. Towards him, some nearly ran in to him. *'Like Headless chickens.'* He observed. *'How they managed to even survive without me in control is beyond my comprehension'.*

The street was more or less a direct route to the town centre as he recalled, though like a river it wound left and right before its final destination. Shutters were hastily closed and doors locked as Katal meandered his way down the narrow street with Fray in tow, for a creature that was meant for flight and freedom the streets were very claustrophobic.

"I could never understand why humans all live so hemmed in like this, it must be horrible living and sleeping in the same place all the time, especially for a creature with such a tragically short life span." Katal observed.

"Yes... Sorry." Fray muttered.

"Sorry are you? The world doesn't revolve around you..."

"Sorry." Fray repeated glumly

As the town centre drew closer the town hall's bells seemed to be ringing more frantically and a commotion could be heard in the distance. The last corner came to an end and instead of an empty town square, Katal was greeted by a small host of lightly armoured militia and a score of angry peasants. "Oh look Fray, they've organised a welcoming party for us" He said dryly.

Instead of cake and good wishes they were greeted with the 'Thrum' of crossbow bolts and 100's of angry shouts. "If I were you I would hide around the corner."

Fray nodded and retreated to safety.

The militia were hardly highly trained marksmen, it was hard to tell under his tough hide but he was sure that most of the bolts were missing, and the few that managed to hit him feebly bounced off him. Some shutters in the houses around him opened and he was pelted from the windows with

household items, some cutlery, rocks, even a sponge hit the end of his nose sending an aroma of unpleasant dish water up his sensitive nose. 'Great hit me with a sponge, with any luck it might choke me to death.'

This was getting tiresome, Katal took a long breath and let loose a torrent of heavy black smoke. The street was immediately sent into a dark haze and the pathetic host that irked him dispersed, along with the angry crowd who ran screaming for their hovels.

Katal chuckled to himself. *'Best not set fire to the buildings, they might be full of food!'*

Katal turned to the white horse and stared deep in to his eyes. "Why don't you stay there for a short while, I'll be sure to have them bring you to me when everything calms down."

Fray nodded glumly, he wouldn't running off, Katal's compulsion made sure of that.

As the dragon emerged from the blackened street and in to the town square he let out a sigh of relief. Though he would never admit it to anyone or anything he less than fond of enclosed spaces that weren't his own cave, they always felt constricting and alien, taking away the freedom to roam that was naturally his and human towns were particularly bad, not being designed for the wanderings of a dragon nearing 10ft at the shoulder.

Katal stood in the middle of the cobbled square and bellowed. "Townpeople assemble before I burn your hovels to the ground!"

After what felt like an eternity of patient waiting the humans gradually started flooding in to the corners of the square, *'Eyes wide with wonder no doubt.'* He thought to himself. As soon as he decided that enough people had were present he began his well planned speech.

"Right then! Good news my dear town. From this moment on I will be assuming total control of Askolov, its people and all of its resources! The bad news is of course that you will have to remain here to actually run the town... Shame that one really."

There was still silence amongst the crowd, a tense atmosphere shrouded the entire town, binding it with just a hint of fear. The silence was suddenly shattered as the massive town hall doors flew wide open and out for all the world to see came the town mayor Reynold Volebus, striding flamboyantly to the top of the many steps that led up to the main entrance that he had burst through unwelcome.

The dragon shuddered. He had not forgotten his old friend Mr. Volebus. The man could literally talk even a parrot to death, or win an argument against a rock. He was tall for a human, his head; plunked on top of some massive shoulders hovered at least six and a half feet above the ground, he did not need the flight of steps he stood on top of now to tower over his villagers. Dressed in deep blue robes so dense, the only reason it did not vacuum in the light is because any light that reached him was being violently reflected away by his many gold and silver necklaces decorated with some stones that even Katal had never come across before.

Out of all this man's hideously annoying mannerisms and terribly unfashionable features, the very worse thing had to be that he showed absolutely no fear of Katal was so ever. Not even a bit. In fact, the very first time the dragon had arrived at the village many years ago, the man much younger in his years stood at the top of those very same steps and stared down the dragon, as if he was sizing him up for a fist fight. What he was really sizing Katal up for was talking, for once Reynold Volebus started talking, there was no end to it.

"Dragon!" Reynold Volebus began.

"Oh no please don't start talking." Katal muttered to himself, he could already feel his blood pressure rising.

"I, my colleagues and the citizens of Askolov do not welcome you back to our fair town under the charter of 1046 created by Ser Aflador of the Knights Of The Oval table of Snowalot we wish for you to depart without fuss or damage to property and without causing harm to any of our citizens, as Mayor of this town I speak by the people, for the people and for the surrounding lands as of this date, it has been discussed that you shall not only leave the town, but also vacate the entire area!" He stopped for breath.

Katal was amazing he had managed to finish that sentence without keeling over, apparently he had not lost lung capacity with age.

"I bid thee farewell and would wish for you to..."

"Please stop right there. Please. Now. Thank you." Katal interrupted. "Do you seriously think that just because you can talk for king and country that you will make me leave today?" (though he had achieved temporary success before). "Because I do not, you are no longer in control Volebus. I am now in control. You can stuff that charter down your throat because I certainly won't eat it, what I intend to eat is your livestock! And... Urm." He had to stop, Volebus was giving him one of his cold unforgiving looks. It was like looking in to a violent storm localized behind one man's eyes, it did not help that standing up where he was, he literally appeared to tower over the massive dragon.

"All right... That's enough of you old man!" Katal knew the man well enough not to get in to an argument. He could make a bear feel guilty for eating a fish, a knife for cutting bread or make a hay bale leap off a cliff. He barged through the crowd of onlookers and bounded up the steps, the willingness to get rid of the mayor made him more lively than he had been in a decade. "That's enough out of you for one day me thinks!" Quickly he threw Volebus back inside the doors from which he burst through and slammed them shut.

Finally the town was his to control, it had occurred to Katal to dispose of Volebus in the past, but in truth he could not bring himself to do it. Volebus was if nothing else unique, he stood strong in Katal's books as the only human besides the king himself who had the ability to make him genuinely nervous and for that Katal respected him. Of course it did also occur to Katal that the man was a relative of king and, despite hearing whispers that the two never truly got along with each other, the king was a proud man and killing Volebus would be seen as an insult to the royal family, bringing down their wrath and possibly a whole army upon the dragon.

Right now though, shut behind a set of huge doors he was temporarily dealt with, and that meant Katal had control. So many things came to mind, so many ideas flowing through his head. He could govern this town and turn it in to utopia! Clearing his throat he turned to the crowd. Words of ancient wisdom built up in his throat while the crowd waited impatiently for him to speak. "Town of Askolov here me!" He roared. "A fitting ruler I am for you, I am many centuries old and have wisdom from beyond the ages which I shall now use to govern you!"

The town stood silent and glum. "Even death is cheerier than you lot. Well any ways, I hereby from this day ban all sponges from the town of Askolov and the surroundings lands!" Katal felt as magnificent as he was.

Somebody in the crowd started a clap but was quickly silenced. The crowd did not cheer or jump with joy. Frankly it did not matter one bit to Katal, it did not matter to him whether or not the town was destroyed in an earthquake, he would simply watch on and smile. What he was really here for was food. His belly which almost always begged for food was now groaning with the thought of the mountains of food which could be provided by the villagers with the snap of a claw. All they needed was some motivation. "Now listen here and listen well Askolov. You may remember me or you may

not. I am Katal! Your true ruler. You may remember sending a knight to my home a few years ago, or again you may not. If you are wondering where I have been, no for the more simple minded of you, I was not killed. This NEW knight that came strolling by just this morning made me think things over. It is time that you learned the hard way not to attempt foolishly to vanquish the great Katal! I am more powerful than you can comprehend. Believe me, from now on you will fear and respect me!" Too make a point Katal took in a deep breath and blasted out a blistering column of fire high in to the sky.

Melancholy and fear swept over the bewildered crowd of humans, he could smell their fear, they did not mean to oppose him any longer. "I want you to bring me all the food you can muster and put it in the town center! Both your human food and livestock and be quick about it or you will all end up in here instead!" He patted his paunch with a paw and bellowed with laughter.

The villagers had obviously gotten comfortable with the quiet life as it had not taken much to make them panic and run for food. All Katal had to do now was sit, glance an evil look every now and wait for the food to arrive.

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Reynold Volebus got to his feet. The steward came rushing to his aid as soon as he saw him. "I'm all right, I just got the wind knocked out of me. Call an emergency meeting with the council for Katal has returned!" And with that the steward nodded and quickly hobbled away.

He propped himself up against a stone pillar. The dragon was supposed to be dead. Sir Frankworth had not returned from the dragons keep, but neither had the dragon, so it was assumed that both had perished. Apparently it was a mistake to attempt to plunder the creatures gold. This would not do at all, all the dragon needed to do to take control of the frightened villagers was get the leadership out of the way, not that anything could be done about it now, he was already bellowing out orders from outside the building and had barred the main doors with his bulk. All that could be done now was gather the town council.

Gathering the town council did not take long. In an emergency such as this, all the important political figures of the town would flee to the town hall. The steward returned bright red and out of breath. "The council is assembled in the rear reception area sir."

"Very good."

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"Excuse me Mr Mayor... But I thought you had a plan? We don't need a lesson on dragon psychology." The sheriff interrupted. Helen Gervain the town sheriff was the polar opposite of the mayor, in both looks and personality. She was short and stout, abrupt and down to the point.

The mayor rose to his defence. "Do not fear Helen, for I have a plan. The reason for the psychology lesson is that we know this dragon, and can use this to our advantage. Katal cares about nothing but himself, his gold and most importantly in this case... His food. He will likely demand food be brought to him as before. While before we hoped that the excess food would slow him down we were proven to be wrong."

"You mean you were proven wrong mayor."

"Yes Helen, thank you for the input. This time though, my plan will work. I say that we give him all

the food he can eat! I say that we keep him inactive in his cave and feed him till he gets to fat to leave that little round entrance. Then when he can not get out we block off the entrance so that he is trapped in there forever!" The mayor looked quite pleased with himself.

The sheriff nodded with satisfaction. "As much as I hate to say it Reynold, that might actually work."

"Then it is settled, all in favour of my plan raise your hand!"

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Apparently this little town had been doing quite well for themselves as it was not long before a vast array of food was displayed before his very eyes. His stomach rumbled violently. An aroma of smells filled his nostrils and brought drool to his awaiting maw. It had been a long time since he had seen so much food in one place, the town remembered him well for no tables were brought out for the food to be laid upon, they only got in the way and could not hold as much food as he would like. Instead wooden wheelbarrows and carts full of one sort of food per one was brought before him, each filled with bread, rice, pasta, cakes and all of the snacks he loved dearly. These human foods were mere appetizers for the ferociously hungry dragon. Soon slabs of meat and piles of fish would be carried in for him on carts pulled by the humans animals (Which he would usually finish the feast with).

His belly growled once more, he could not wait another second. "Leave me humans, and be quick with my meat!"

He surged forwards and headed for the most fattening treats that had been brought to him, the cakes. Cramming his head inside the wheelbarrow he breathed in the sweet aroma of the cakes before planting his maw face first in to them and feasting. The taste of sugar, cream and jam filled his mouth, he had almost forgotten the sweet taste of human food. It truly was a shame that it could not be produced in as vast quantities as he would like.

Katal's jaws snapped up as much as he could fit in his mouth, which was a lot and unfortunately there was not enough cake to sate his desires. As quickly as he had begun he finished gorging on the sweet cakes and pulled his head from the barrow.

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A few lonely villagers still stared on from various corners of the square as Katal vacuumed up the food they had worked so hard to produce, every now and again waving his already well fed behind in the air before retreating with bits of food stuck to his maw. Katal was a glutton of gluttons and would eat beyond when his rubbery belly could hold no more, and they knew it well too. Unfortunately the beast also came with the stomach of a glutton and the chances of the small town producing enough food in one go to burst the fat reptile were slim.

Jared the bakers assistant watched on in amazement. How one creature could eat food that took so long to produce in such a short amount of time amazed him. He pitied the creature, living on his own with no one to keep him company but his food. Unlike the rulers of this kingdom his own race remembered well what the humans had done to the dragons so long ago, it was not even a wonder to him why the dragon reacted to them like this, it took an observer and not a true citizen of the dismal little town of Askolov to see what was really going on, and an observer he was.

"Jared!" Came a call from the back the bakery; his place of work and an unfortunate home.

He chose to ignore the calls of the man he had to call master, though if there was one thing that his master, the owner of Askolov's bakery did not like, it was being ignored. A strong hand pulled sharply at his tail in a most disrespectful manner while the back of his head received a sharp blow. "Stop paying attention to the filthy creature!" The man yelled.

Jared pivoted his sensitive ears away, how such a small man could create such a deep and loud noise was beyond his comprehension.

"You were lucky that I was kind enough to give you this job as it is! Are all your kind so easily distracted?"

It was obviously a question that he did not want an answer too, Jared scratched nervously at the fur behind his ears. "The rest of the town were watching."

"Turn and face me when I am talking to you!" Jared was grabbed by the shoulders and spun around to face his master. The man was red in the face, more likely caused by drink than the constant rage he seemed to remain in. His grey hair was beginning to retreat from his tall forehead while a thick moustache drooped down around and below his mouth, not helping to cheer up his appearance at all.

Jared defended himself. "The bread is in the oven. There is no reason why I should not spend a few minutes to watch the commotion."

"Well your time is up. Get in the back and do some work! Animal." The old man turned and head to the back of the shop.

He paused for a second. "You have more in common with that creature outside than you do with us."

There was no use arguing with the man, lest he be thrown in to a fit of rage. After all he was right, here was the only place in not only Askolov, but the whole province that would hire anyone like him. Humans of this land did not like anything that did not resemble themselves, they had gone to war many centuries ago driving out most of Jared's kind and others like them, any that were left behind were rejected by society even to this day, the ones humans referred to as 'beast folk'.

Heading for the ovens in the back of the bakery Jared turned to have one last look at the dragon, it seemed to have finished all of its food. Intoxicated it sat on its haunches and belched. There sat one of the last of a mighty race, despite having intelligence beyond that of the average man, strength to take on an entire army and armour that could deflect a ballista bolt as if it were a blunt pencil. He still gave in to instincts and indeed had more in common with an animal than a man. Jared always thought it a better way of living, taking what he wanted, living with nature. Perhaps he did have more in common with the dragon than the iron loving, axe wielding, genocidal humans. It was better to be that than a second class citizen, barely a step above a slave.