



THE **LAND** OF
THE **BEASTS**

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BEASTS

By S.F. Claymore

Champion of Psykoria

Champion's Rising

The Dragons' Will

Comics

The Great Taelon Laskar

The War of the Night: Arc 1 - Before Sundown

The War of the Night: Arc 2 - Wolf Cults

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CHAPTER 1

A KING'S QUEST

King Breetor woke with a start to the sound of trumpets and almost fell off his throne. His wife was approaching through the grand chamber—thank the gods it was her and not his guests who'd caught him snoozing, ahead of their council meeting. He adjusted his long red robes and cape of grey wolf fur, before brushing a strand from his long, blond unkempt hair away from his face.

The king's troubled look did not go unnoticed by the queen, who assumed her own seat beside him. She wore a white dress supported by a cloth-of-gold band. Breetor took a glimpse at her large light-blue eyes, her hair long and unkempt, like his but far smoother.

“You seem troubled, Breetor,” she said, speaking in a quiet tone that only they could hear. “Stay sharp.

Our neighbours within the Slykan Union are already rebuilding the damage done during that dreadful beast's reign. Psykoria may not be as large as Slyke, but we are falling behind Lorzak, Koriown and Ravalox. To uphold our reputation as proud warriors, it is now our turn to fix the damage. Now, it is our turn to fix the damage. You must reconcile with the realm's nobles today."

"I'm fine, Aurandria. I just didn't sleep well, that's all."

Aurandria tilted her head, her gold locks flowing onto her right shoulder. "Breetor, you don't need to lie to me, or anyone in the palace right now. Those who were disloyal have already been rooted out, and those captured—"

"Don't remind me, Aurandria," Breetor cut in, breaking eye contact. "The last thing I heard before the trumpets woke me was the sound of their heads rolling."

"But that isn't what troubles you, is it?"

Breetor raised his eyes. A long pause ensued.

"I was never meant to be King of Psykoria," he said. "That was to be Gandron's burden. Even Antorius should've assumed the throne before me. They were

the ones groomed for this, not I."

Aurandria brought a hand to the king's shoulder. "Your brothers will be dearly missed, but do not forget whose betrayal brought about their deaths. You were the one who assumed leadership of our realm then, and you were the one who stood before that beast. You were the one who claimed *that*."

Aurandria pointed towards a sword leaning against the dog-engraved armrest of Breetor's throne. It looked every bit the weapon of a king, with a blade of white metal and a pommel resembling several golden crystals pointing upwards.

"*The Saviour Sword*, everyone is now calling it," Aurandria continued. "Left behind by the God of Time, summoned by a priestess to banish from our world the wicked beast responsible for influencing the nobility's rebellions."

Breetor brushed a hand against the sword's smooth diamond-white pommel, a sky-blue gem resting in its spherical cup. "Do not speak like it's some sort of prize," he told the queen. "I had to execute those traitors, including Lords Rokar Lystak and Berrun Iferas. Had I not, the realm would've never trusted me to lead them against that beast. But the cost ... I

don't know if Psykoria can ever be united again." His brow sharpened. "If the nobles can't comply, I feel my only choice may be to root out those who refuse my colours."

Aurandria moved her hand to Breetor's knee. "That's why we've invited the nobles here today. Compose yourself, Breetor. They'll be here soon."

*

"It's like I said, Your Highness," said young, burly, bald Lakor Lystak clad in a green top embroidered with gold linings. "Lyandor will start no rebellion against the throne. However, for your public execution of my brother, those serving under me shall no longer wear the Sigmus family red." He held forth his sleeve. "From here on, Lyandor's colours are green."

Breetor grew agitated. Lakor wouldn't start a rebellion, but he had no qualms aiding a rebellion led by another. "So you are ready to turn on me if given a good reason? I cannot stand for this, Lakor. I invited you all here to Royal Sigrun today to ensure there will be no mutiny in my realm."

The bald man snorted. "For now, it's not on my mind. But we Lystaks take family insults very seriously. Even if you did put an end to that monster

which plagued us all, Lyandor will not tolerate such disrespect, even from a king."

Breetor's teeth clenched. He wanted to end the Lystak line and let a family more loyal to him lord over Lyandor. However, making a scene while they were guests in his court would only turn others against him.

He gazed upon the other guests. "And the rest of you?"

"You know Korsenn is loyal to the throne," came the soft voice of handsome Lord Sorcus Stold, his long blond hair draped down the back of his blue robes and red cloak. "I would do anything to protect my cousin the queen."

"Thank you, Lord Sorcus," Breetor muttered. Aurandria likewise gave Sorcus a smile.

Breetor turned to the bearded man next to his wife's cousin. "Lord Thith, is it true that Realmscore has taken up orange? I thought you were loyal to my father during the conflicts?"

Thith lowered his head. "Yes, Your Highness, but it is not done so in rebellion against you. It is only because the other nobility have done the same, and for Realmscore not to would signify weakness."

“The people won’t see it that way.”

“Perhaps not in Royal Sigrun, but I do it to prevent my own folk from turning against me.”

“The same can be said of Ronnia,” said slender, raven-haired Lord Fulgor. “We take up our purple colours not to defy you, but to show that Ronnia is just as strong as the other parts of Psykoria.”

Breitor’s gaze turned upon the one empty seat at the table.

“Does anyone know the intentions of Lord Baxter Iferas?”

“Your Highness,” said Thith, “word is that Falinton has taken up blue, and that they’re gathering an army.”

Breitor’s brow lowered. Baxter Iferas’s predecessor, much like Lakor Lystak’s, was caught and publicly executed for rebelling against the throne. Although Lakor claimed to have yielded, Baxter had never done so.

“Lord Thith,” said Lakor, “if Realmscore is truly loyal like you say, your lands separate Falinton from Royal Sigrun.”

“As do yours,” Thith retorted.

“What if they go south?” Lakor continued. “Where

do Ronnia’s loyalties lie?”

“I told you,” replied Lord Fulgor. “Ronnia is loyal to the throne!”

For almost a minute, the nobility argued. Even their guards joined the verbal exchange. Aurandria tried to silence them, but to no avail. Breitor sat massaging his temples the whole time.

After a few more moments, the king had finally heard enough and stood.

“Silence!”

The commotion immediately stopped.

Breitor slowly sat again. “Lord Thith, Lord Fulgor, I do not question your loyalty, but I shall tolerate these colours you wear for now, until other ambitions are quenched.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” said Thith. “If the other nobility wear red again, so shall Realmscore.”

“And Ronnia,” Fulgor added.

“And you”—Breitor looked to Lakor—“give me one good reason I should trust your word?”

“You executed Rokar with your own hands, Breitor Sigmus,” he responded, before averting his gaze. To Breitor’s surprise, his voice softened. “I know he ... wasn’t the same man after The Ultimate Evil appeared,

but he was still my brother. Maybe time will heal those wounds, but for now, I cannot wear your colours, especially not while Falinton does the same.”

Queen Aurandria sighed; it always amused her whenever she heard that beast referred to as *The Ultimate Evil*, a vague name given to it by common folk. It seemed to have stuck with so many; especially bards and poets.

Lakor’s softened tone caused the tightness in Breetor’s jaw to loosen. “Who here was the last to see Lord Baxter?”

“He’s always been a private man, Your Highness,” Thith replied, “but it was his men who were spreading word of changing their colours to blue. Only when Lyandor did the same, did Lord Fulgor and I follow as a show of our cities’ strength.”

Breetor remained silent. Much of Lord Lakor’s defiance came from the bravado typical of the Lystak family. However, he hadn’t yet fallen to darkness like his brother. Lord Baxter was the clear problem for now.

The feast soon ended, but not a single attendant was satisfied. The beast may have been defeated, but its influence plagued Psykoria still.

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“You’re going to storm Falinton and overthrow Lord Baxter?” Aurandria exclaimed. “Do you know what impact this will have?”

“I know, Aurandria,” Breetor replied. “But I cannot allow these rebellions to continue. If anyone else rises up in his place—”

“Then there’ll be war in Psykoria.”

“And if I do nothing, there’ll be war anyway.”

“I know things with Falinton aren’t looking good, but we don’t know for sure if Baxter intends to start a war.”

“You heard the other nobles, didn’t you? Most may be loyal to me for now, but these colours they’ve taken up will only increase the distrust. How do you think the people will see this?”

“You really think routing Baxter Iferas will solve everything?”

“No, but I must show everyone that the crown won’t tolerate such defiance. You stood behind my decision to execute Lords Rokar and Berrun, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but the things they’d done were abhorrent. Their actions killed your parents and brothers. They

murdered their own councillors who questioned their thirst for power. When you finally seized them, the people were calling for their deaths, but they aren't calling for Baxter's."

Breitor's face turned grim. "Perhaps not, but I'll never be able to rule if the nobles turn against me. I was never meant to be king, and they know it. Once I am done with Lord Baxter, we shall see how the others react before any further decisions are made."

"And what if they turn against you?"

Breitor eyed his sword. "Then perhaps that beast has already won."

The pair were silent, until Aurandria threw herself upon Breitor. She wept on his chest.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Breitor. Return to me once this is over. Can you promise that, at least?"

Hearing the queen's words, Breitor's face softened, and he put his arms around her. "That, I can, Aurandria. I will return to you, no matter what happens. I promise."

Aurandria handed him a red locket rimmed with gold. "Then let this remind you, in case you ever forget."

Breitor opened it and gaped. "Aurandria, why would you do this?"

"So a part of me can go with you, wherever you end up."

Breitor pulled out what was inside; several strands of Aurandria's golden hair tied together by a red bow. He said, "I would've never wanted you to cut your beautiful hair."

"I know," Aurandria replied. "So remember your promise."

CHAPTER 2

THE CENTURY STORM

“How long until we reach the Temple of Water?” Breetor’s fair hair swept out as the wind soared over their ship. He wasn’t accustomed to being at sea for long.

“If the wind stays this strong, Your Highness,” replied Captain Honarius Obrik, “we’ll be there by sundown.”

Breetor looked back at the captain; a burly, red-tanned, rough-fleshed man with thin, greying locks and a braided beard. He was his most trusted marine, hence Breetor rode his ship out of all those in his fleet.

Honarius approached. “The target is Falinton, right? And we must remain unseen?” Breetor nodded. “If what you say is true and the mages at the Temple

of Water remain loyal to you, crossing Thargost River with them will be easy. You’ll reach Falinton before they know what hit them.”

“I know,” Breetor replied. “It was my plan, I just ... the hydromancers say they’re loyal, but I’m having a hard time trusting anyone after what happened when the rebellions led to the deaths of my family.”

Honarius smiled beneath his thick beard. “You trust me.”

“You sailed our party around the continent during those troubled times. I know you can be trusted, but these mages ... I know little of them. This could all be a ploy orchestrated by Lord Baxter himself.”

Honarius’s meaty hand leant on Breetor’s shoulder; his skin was almost as rough as a straw canvas. “The people are more loyal to you than you think. They know who led them to victory against The Ultimate Evil, and they know you had a hand in the God of Time’s summoning. Not many men can say that they’ve summoned a god.”

“Captain,” a voice, not yet broken by age, interrupted.

Stood behind Honarius was a weedy teenage sailor in scruffy clothes, with a scraggy pile of dark brown

hair resembling a bird's nest.

"Dinner's waitin' below deck," he continued.

Honarius chuckled before further roughing up the youngster's hair. "Bout time. I'm starving. What say you, Your Highness?"

"I'll follow," Breetor replied. "I just need to get a bit more fresh air first."

Honarius and the youngster gave a brief bow, before heading to the lower decks. Meanwhile, Breetor stared outward, seeing the other ships.

There were few captains he trusted as much as Honarius among his fleet, but he saw one he knew was loyal; Klom Artheit, a close friend of his late brothers. The lean, balding man met the king's gaze, lowering his head, which Breetor returned. Klom, the fleet's most experienced sailor, stood with his hands behind his back, glaring towards the horizon. It was he who selected the other captains, ferrying Breetor's army to the east side of the realm.

*

After joining the others for a meal, Breetor slept in the lower cabins for what was meant to be the rest of the journey. It wasn't his shipmates who woke him, but the ship itself as it rocked like a drunk sailor's tankard.

"What was that?" he asked. His cabin-mates had stumbled, some falling out of hammocks.

"I don't know, Your Highness," a soldier replied. "Maybe we should find the sailors?" Like the king, the soldiers were more accustomed to land than sea.

Rising from his hammock, Breetor approached the door, and the ship swayed again. He slammed into the wall.

A sailor thrust the door thrust open. "Your Highness, the sea has suddenly picked up!"

"A storm is doing this?" Breetor exclaimed.

"Yes, Your Highness! We need—"

The ship listed once more and Breetor fell to the floor. The sailor, who'd balanced himself, helped the king stand.

"We need help on deck," he continued. "The captain's request. These waves are too strong even for us. We know you're not sailors, but every bit of manpower will help."

*

The sea was stronger than Breetor had feared. He helped Honarius tug on ropes hanging from the mast, desperately trying to pull their ship away from the storms.

“Are you sure hydromancers aren’t behind this?” Breetor cried.

“No, sire!” Honarius responded, his words only barely audible amidst heavy rain. “We saw the shift in weather, but this—this is beyond any storm we’ve ever faced!”

“Couldn’t we have made it to land before this happened?” called one of the commanders.

“We tried, but the storm picked up too quickly!”

After a successful tug to straighten the sail, Breetor looked out to sea. Captain Klom’s ship was likewise struggling against the storm. The fleet was scattered; some ships were so distant they resembled toys.

Cries filled the deck. A huge lump had risen in the water, sweeping through the fleet. Several vessels were tipped, pouring crew into the fierce sea. Others were pulled under, never to be seen again. The lump whitened into a wave and ravaged the first ship it hit.

“It’s coming our way!” a shipmate cried.

The fleet’s hydromancers stepped forward, raising their hands. Wielding their ability to manipulate water, they held back the wave as best as they could. It weakened, but their ship was rocked. Men were hurled overboard, some sliding towards the edge. Breetor fell

back, but caught Honarius’s outreached hand.

“What sort of storm is this?” the king cried.

Honarius hesitated, though usually so quick to crack a remark.

“I never expected to encounter this,” he muttered. “Not in my lifetime ...”

“Encounter what?”

The ship shook again, but this time Breetor stayed afoot.

“The Century Storm,” Honarius replied.

A wave swept on board. The hydromancers couldn’t stop it; some were swept off their feet. A sailor’s spine snapped as he was hurled against the mast. A man dropped lifeless beside Breetor’s feet.

“Honarius,” he said, “I have an idea. It’ll protect our ship from damage, but we won’t be able to ride the winds back to Psykoria. We’ll move wherever the waves take us.”

“The waves are taking us south-west,” Honarius responded. “That’s the opposite direction from Psykoria!”

“How far from Psykoria will this storm go before it’s passed?”

“I—I don’t know! If this truly is a Century Storm,

very little is known about it!”

Breetor glimpsed the Saviour Sword’s hilt poking out the scabbard on his back. The decision was his; he could protect their ship from damage and save the crew, but they would ride the waves away from Psykoria until the storm had passed.

One of the other ships was sunk, but Captain Klom’s held fast; his own hydromancers did well to weaken the waves.

Everyone aboard Honarius’s ship were shouting again. Breetor turned. A wave double the size of the last approached from the vessel’s right. Two other ships were tipped before the wave even crested. Only when it towered high over their vessel did the whites of the sea appear.

Breetor drew the Saviour Sword. As the wave crashed down, white light glowed around the divine blade. A glowing orb surrounded the vessel. Unable to break the barrier, the wave pulled the ship and those on it beneath the sea.

Everyone aboard dived for cover, but Breetor stood firm. Their ship was underwater, but the orb both protected them from damage and kept the vessel upright.

“Sire,” Honarius muttered, his voice filled with amazement. “You ... you can channel a god’s power through that sword?”

“Only what the sword will let me. I can protect our ship, but I cannot move it. With the wind shielded from our sails, all we can do now is ride the storm wherever it may take us.”

Outside the sword’s barrier, the sea was raging ferociously. The ship was dragged farther and farther from Psykoria.

“What of air?” another shipmate asked. “Is there a limit to our air here?”

“I ... don’t know,” Breetor said, “but the waves will eventually carry us back to the surface, won’t they? I can let in more when we have the chance, then seal the orb again.”

“*If* the waves bring us back to the surface,” another sailor added.

While the shipmates worried they might yet suffocate, the vessel did eventually rise to the surface. It was brief, but one second was all Breetor needed to let some air into the orb, right before they were swept undersea by another gargantuan wave.

“We’re far from home now,” Honarius said,

gravely.

“What do you mean?” asked a soldier.

“When we rose, I couldn’t see a feature in sight. No land, no ships, nothing. We’ve been swept far from Psykoria, and with this storm carrying us further still, no known lands are near.” His solemn eyes turned to Breetor. “I appreciate your attempt to save us, Your Highness, but being stranded out here, maybe it would’ve been better to be eaten by that wave.”

*

When the storm passed, the ship rose and Breetor finally lowered the barrier. Honarius told everyone the legend of the Century Storm.

“It’s said to be a powerful shift in the Slykan Sea, one which happens once a century, if that. I don’t need to tell anyone here the power of its waves, but supposedly it’s pulled shipwrecks from one end of the continent to another. Ships with designs no one recognised were seen in the Ortisian Kingdom up north. It’s since been learned that they came from realms in the far east.

“Many disregarded such tales as myth, saying they were simply strong storms that sailors exaggerated to avoid admitting defeat to.”

“You needn’t worry about anyone here doubting

their words,” Breetor muttered.

“Aye,” Honarius continued. “But while we’ve survived the waves, what troubles me is the distance the storm can pull a ship in such short time.”

Since rising to the surface, the sailors have been trying to move the vessel north-east. However, their sails had been damaged, and while they managed to go east, winds pushed them further south, deeper into uncharted seas.

CHAPTER 3

GUARDIANS OF SACRED LAND

Breitor vomited overboard. Several arduous months had passed. He thought much about Aurandria, and the promise he made to return. He cursed the presence of her locket; it was harder to contain his emotions every time he saw it. It was only supposed to be a short journey to the east of the realm, but because of the storm, even their navigators couldn't decipher their whereabouts.

After Breitor helped tie down the sails, Honarius waddled over. He'd lost much weight in the months, as had many shipmates. Breitor himself felt his stomach growl every hour, but couldn't afford to be greedy with food; none of them could.

"You should go inside, Your Highness," the captain said through dry lips. "The heat out here isn't doing

anyone any good. My men and I remain to look out for land."

"We seek land for fresh water, right?" a groggy Breitor retorted. Though there were many hydromancers, the waters they conjured were usually salty like sea water, not ideal for drinking.

"Yes," Honarius continued. "Though there is much fish to catch in these seas"—he signalled to where other sailors were gutting some fresh catch—"our water won't last the long journey back. If we can replenish our supply, we can sail as far north as necessary to find familiar territory."

"And I shall help you," Breitor said weakly. "What good is a king who can't help his people?"

Honarius placed a hand on his shoulder. "In your state, sire, you'll only hinder us. Please, I ask you this as a friend. Go inside and get well. It worries me to see you fight your fever like this."

The other sailors, once fit muscular men, now had bony frames. However, they all set to work like nothing had changed. Omivar, a scruffy-haired youth, passed by Breitor with a rope in hand. Out of all the sailors, he was the only one who hadn't outwardly changed, being skinny from the start. He gave the

king a bow, before moving on. Breetor looked at the rope he held in his own hands, and considered how in just seconds, Omivar, the smallest of Honarius's crew, had completed what he'd been struggling with for minutes.

Realising his folly, the king returned to the lower decks. It was only when he reached his cabin that he remembered why he'd always occupied himself helping the sailors; whenever he rested, he couldn't stop thinking about how much he missed Aurandria.

*

Breetor's sickness passed. The crew were relieved, but it hadn't changed the king's yearning for home.

"Has it been six months yet?" he asked the captain.

"Only one week since you last asked, Your Highness."

Breetor felt like it had been more than a month. He approached the starboard side of the deck, where most of the ship's mages were resting.

"Cerrtrus," he addressed a middle-aged grey-robed man. "Still nothing?"

Cerrtrus, who'd been looking towards the distance, turned his stubble-marred face towards the king, shaking his head of thick greying hair. "With my

voyancy, I can only sense more sea."

Breetor sighed; every day, he'd been thinking of different ways for the cerebromancer to find land. While the king's knowledge of sailing was limited, he knew how to work with mages. No matter what he asked, they were too far for the mage to detect even the faintest hint of land, familiar or not.

Breetor turned towards a pair in blue robes: a bearded, brown-haired man, and a freckle-faced red-haired woman. "Jallun, Essha, isn't there anything you hydromancers can do to make the waters guide us to land?"

"We could speed us up, sire," Jallun replied, stroking his beard, "but the captain instructed us to save our mana."

"We're lost," Essha said, while straightening a sleeve. "We don't know where the closest speck of land lies. If we used our hydromancy now, we could go a little faster, but our direction would still be aimless."

"Once we see land," Jallun continued, "we can really mover the ship forward."

Breetor glimpsed the other hydromancers behind the pair. They were miserable. Everyone was hungry and wanted to go home; they missed their families,

friends and loved ones. Most were difficult to talk to, but at least these two, a couple, were content with being together. As for Cerrtrus, Breetor had got to know the man a little. The cerebromancer had little to return to in Psykoria; he'd always been a loner who wanted to explore vast places, so wasn't too distressed by the situation.

As Breetor left the mages, Omivar scurried past. The youth bowed, as he always did when he saw the king, before continuing on his way. This time, Breetor called out his name.

The youngster stopped, slowly turning around. "Yes, sire," he muttered nervously.

"How did someone your age come to join Honarius's crew?"

"I—I—always wanted to explore the world, I did, sire. Wanted to be a sailor since I was little. But my parents, they—they never wanted me to go to sea. Farmers, they are, sire, farmers in a village called Brodikk. Do—do you know of it, sire?"

Breetor rubbed a over his growing stubble. "I can't say I do."

"South of Lodia it is. Nothin' special 'bout it. Nothin' for me there, not—uh—well—"

Breetor cut off the youngster's stuttering. "How did you meet Honarius?"

After taking a deep breath, Omivar cleared his throat. "Went to the pier in the south. Helped there for a bit, before—uh—" This time, he hadn't stuttered; he'd gone silent.

Breetor sighed and dismissed the young sailor. Omivar bowed, before rushing away.

"I could tell you the rest if you wish," Honarius's voice echoed. The captain hadn't been far, overhearing their discussion while gutting some fish. "You won't get any more out of him."

Without Breetor asking, Honarius went on.

"Saw the young lad at the pier every time we were there. He'd run away from home, it turned out. Was pretty helpful at the docks, but wasn't looked after. Folk at the pier were rough with him, so much that it felt like they were trying to drive him away. It never worked though."

Honarius stood, tipping a full bucket of fish guts overboard. Breetor stood back; the stench might make him sick again.

"Thought I'd dig into why he ran. Turns out, his mother died when The Ultimate Evil was around, and

his father became so distraught that his appetite for drink knew no limit. Never even noticed when the boy ran, even to the day he died. Ain't nothing left for young Omivar to go back to, so I took him on my ship.

"A helpful lad, honestly. Turning into a fine sailor, he is. But if you've ever seen him when he's had too much to drink? Ha! The boy thinks he'll find himself some kind of exotic maiden beyond our continent. Good luck to that, I say!"

Breitor managed a smile. "There's nothing wrong with a youngster's dreams."

Chuckling, Honarius threw more guts overboard. "Not at all, until you realise your fleeting dream will never come to pass."

"You speak like yours were once the same." Breitor approached the captain, curious.

Honarius smiled distantly. His voice was unusually faint. "They were, I suppose. But I've been at sea my whole life, and the closest I got to my dreams was when I ferried that priestess in your fellowship. There's nothing like that out here, I'm afraid. My old friends found such things back home, but here I am, my hairs gone grey, and I ain't found nothing. The boy's

chasing an imaginary end, unfortunately."

"Then why did you take him aboard? Why feed his false desires? Did you see too much of yourself in him?"

Honarius's eyes lowered. "I wanted to spare him, hence why it took me so long to enlist him. But he wouldn't have lasted long at the docks, not in the state he was in. He's better off now. Better to chase the impossible than die a sodding mess unwanted by your peers, wouldn't you agree?"

Breitor smiled again, placing a hand on Honarius's shoulder. "You've given the boy much. And don't give up on *your* dream yet. You have many years ahead. You may still find what you've been looking for."

As Breitor left, Honarius sighed, carved the scales off another fish. "Whatever you say, Your Highness. I'm over it. The sea is who I fell in love with. I just wish she hadn't betrayed me like this."

*

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

Breitor stirred and yawned in his hammock.

"Your Highness, we've found it!"

"What?" Breitor grunted, rubbing his eyes.

"We've found land, Your Highness! It's not on our charts!"

Breitor hurried to the upper deck. Ahead was a large island, big enough to be a realm of its own. On it were distant mountains, some which appeared larger than any in Psykoria or its neighbours.

Several rocky outcrops rose from the sea. Honarius was in deep concentration as he steered to avoid them.

“This is not within our continent, is it?” Breitor asked.

“No, sire,” Cerrtrus replied. “We’re yet to learn exactly how far we are from home, but we suspect we’re in the south-west of the Slykan Sea.”

“Still,” added Essha, who was sitting in Jallun’s arms, “we can gather enough supplies from here so that once we do learn our whereabouts, we can make finally sail home.”

The crew’s spirits had lifted, excited about being able to explore this unknown land.

Suddenly, there was a serene, high-pitched, melodious song.

“What is that?” Jallun asked.

“It sounds like a girl,” Breitor said.

“A girl singing,” Cerrtrus added.

Omivar pointed. “Look!”

A silhouette was sitting atop one of the rocky

outcrops.

“Is that a woman?” Honarius asked.

“It is!” Omivar exclaimed.

The crew couldn’t take their eyes off the beautiful being sitting in the distance.

Honarius aggressively turned the ship towards the direction of the seductive song. They changed course so suddenly that many of the crew slipped.

“Captain!” Breitor asked. “What’s the meaning of this? Continue towards the island!”

The captain hadn’t heard Breitor. Not only Honarius, but the rest of the crew gazed towards the woman as if in a trance. Breitor tried to wrestle control of the wheel away from the captain. To his surprise, Honarius resisted his king. Rebutted, Breitor struck him, and the captain dropped with a thud.

Breitor steered the ship away, and seeing that they were leaving, the woman leapt into the water. In the place of legs, she had a fin—a mermaid!

With the song silenced, the crew snapped out of their trances.

“What the heck is wrong with all of you?” Breitor scorned. “It was just a mermaid! You’re sailors, right? You see mermaids and mermen all the time!”

The crew mumbled apologies. Mer-folk sightings were not uncommon in the seas surrounding Psykoria, and they were not known to be hostile.

The song returned, louder and in a chorus. This time, even Breetor's senses numbed. His mind filled with ecstasy and longing, and he no longer saw the song as a distraction; he desired to listen to the sweet serene sound for as long as he lived. He couldn't go on without it!

Mermaids climbed around the edge of the ship. Without stepping aboard, they hung over the edges, looking towards the crew provocatively. Their songs grew ever louder. The men approached them like brain-dead zombies. The Saviour Sword fell from Breetor's hands, clanging to the deck below. With flowing bronze hair and angelic features, the mermaid before him was the most beautiful thing he'd ever laid eyes on. The melody coming from her mouth made him feel calm and totally at peace. He didn't have to return to Psykoria. He didn't have to face all the trials brought by the egos of other lords. He could stay here forever with this beautiful being.

A faint voice inside Breetor's mind cried out a single name. Breetor shut his eyes. His hands clutched

his ears, and he cried that name aloud: "Aurandria!"

A mermaid dragged a sailor overboard. Again—one of the soldiers. Countless more followed, dropping into the sea like rocks. Breetor looked back at his seducer. His longing continued, but reason overcame his lust. Snatching up the Saviour Sword, he drove it through her gut.

The mermaid's song instantly stopped. The others' tunes faded. The mermaid before Breetor glared into his eyes with shock. The sword glowed a powerful white light.

"I made a promise," Breetor said. "I shall return to Psykoria alive."

He slid his sword from his victim and the mermaid dropped back into the sea. Breetor looked to the others. With their enemies' voices quiet, the king's shipmates were coming to their senses.

"Your conviction is great," one of the mermaids told Breetor, "but we cannot allow conquerors to enter this sacred land."

"They speak our language?" Omivar gasped.

"We are not conquerors," Breetor replied. "We are far from home, and need to reach land before we run out of water."

“We do not permit folk bearing steel to enter our lands. Turn away at once.”

Sire, Cerrtrus’ voice echoed, projected into Breedor’s head using voyancy. We must land on this island. If we don’t, then even if we figure out the way home, we’ll never survive the journey.

Breedor didn’t want to fight these creatures; they were just protecting their home. But they had already killed many of his shipmates, and as much as he wanted to lessen the bloodshed, he’d fight these creatures if he must.

“Do you intend to stop me?” he asked, raising his sword.

The mermaids’ eyes clearly recognised the power within his sword, and they feared it. One by one, they leapt back into the sea. The last to depart hissed, “We will not fight in vain against power such as yours. But those in this land will not be so timid.”

The mermaids left the survivors weeping and shivering over how easily they had come under their influence; even the female members of their crew. Looking overboard, they saw the floating corpses of shipmates who’d been drowned by the seductive creatures. Almost half of their number had been slain.

After moments of silence, Honarius came to.

“What happened...?” he muttered.

“Consider yourself lucky, Captain,” a shipmate said. “The king spared you from danger.”

“Danger?” he said, looking towards Breedor.

“We’ll discuss it later,” the king said. “For now, let’s finally dock, wherever we are.”

CHAPTER 4

BEASTS OF LEGEND

Once the ship reached shore, the mermaid's warning flashed through Breetor's mind.

We will not fight in vain against power such as yours. But those in this land will not be so timid.

Breetor stepped onto solid land. Whatever dangers lay ahead, they had to find water.

He trekked across black sand until he reached grass. Putting down his sword, Breetor flopped onto the ground like a rock in an avalanche. It had been months since the surface beneath him wasn't rocking.

Honarius and some others quickly caught up to him.

"Your Highness, you shouldn't run off like that. We know nothing of this land."

Breetor stood. "You're right. Apologies. It's been so

long since I've lain on solid ground. Have you left men to guard the ship?"

"Yes, sire. I shall stay alongside them. This vessel is my responsibility. What of the rest?"

"We're going to explore these lands and find the water we need."

*

Hours passed, and Breetor's party hadn't found water yet. They'd followed the direction of distant mountains, hoping it might source a river. Not only had the trek taken much time, but when they got there, the mountains were dry.

Weary, they set up tents as the sun went down. The land was quiet, and they hadn't spotted any creatures other than birds.

In the centre of the small encampment, the party sat around a fire, roasting fish. Most spoke joyfully about how they would be legends when they returned to Psykoria, being the first from their continent to discover this new land. Breetor was silent. He just wanted to see Aurandria again.

He looked to the stars above. It was only under their majestic light that he gained the confidence to repeat the promise he made to her for the first time

since they were caught in the storm: “Aurandria, I shall return. I promise.”

“Your Highness,” Essha said, breaking him out of thought. “Jallun’s missing!”

“Jallun? How?”

“He said he was going to relieve himself and went into the dark, but he’s not returned!”

Breitor understood the hydromancer’s concern; she and Jallun were usually inseparable. He turned his gaze to Cerrtrus. “Can you locate Jallun?”

At those words, everyone in the camp went silent, looking towards the cerebromancer. Cerrtrus closed the book he was reading and rose to his feet. Standing by a tree, he shut his eyes, reaching out his voyant senses.

He let out a cry.

“Dead, Your Highness. He was attacked by a—”

A pair of huge dark grimy hands reached out, grabbing Cerrtrus by the shoulders and yanking him into the darkness. A grotesque crunch followed. The mage soared towards the encampment, landing on the campfire and quenching the flames. It took several moments for everyone’s eyes to adjust to the moonlight. They wished they hadn’t.

Cerrtrus’s head, neck, and upper shoulders were missing. The wounds showed visible tooth-marks.

There were more cries, and more crunching. Without their fire, it was too dark to see.

Breitor took up the Saviour Sword. The blade glowed with a powerful light, illuminating the camp—and their attackers: three lanky creatures with dark flesh the shade of dirty moss. Their large block-shaped heads had huge mouths and enormous teeth.

Other men and women were caught in their huge hands, at the end of long thin arms, body parts violently chewed away. A severed hand stuck out one monster’s mouth. These creatures were not unfamiliar to the Psykorians; they had encountered them and their insatiable appetites during the recent war.

“Trolls!” Breitor cried.

The creatures lunged forward, pot-bellies hanging over thin, short legs. Huge hands reached forth. Several more party-members perished before anyone could react. Swords hacked at their dark flesh, but any wound inflicted immediately knitted back together. An enraged Essha screamed as she blasted one with water, but the troll pushed through her attacks and drew closer.

“Water’s no use!” someone cried. “We need fire to beat these things! Only flames will stop their regeneration!”

“We don’t have any fire!” yelled another.

There was a crunch. The two voices silenced.

“Stand back!” Breetor commanded. “Get away from them!”

Everyone retreated, even the emotional Essha. Breetor stood between the trolls and the rest of his party. Two munched on the fallen carcasses of his comrades, while the other looked his way.

“Milord!” someone cried. “Be careful!”

Breetor had faith in his sword, the same which had struck down The Ultimate Evil and ended a war that nearly destroyed all civilisation. The troll closed in, and Breetor met its charge. He drove the Saviour Sword through its gut, and a beam of blinding light shot through the hideous creature. The troll roared, hurt by the wound even if the damage would quickly heal—and it would not recover against the Saviour Sword; in seconds, the troll’s entire body incinerated within the light. Ashes fell where it had stood.

The other trolls looked to where their peer had fallen. They shied away from the light. Breetor stepped

forward, and the trolls backed further off.

“Kill them, sire!” Essha cried with fury in her voice. “Punish what they’ve done!”

The trolls tried to flee. Breetor thrust the Saviour Sword, and a beam of light impaled one of the beasts. The second let out a cry and its body was incinerated, but as its ashes crumbled, it became clear the third had escaped.

“Get it!” Essha shouted. “Destroy the monster!”

Lowering his sword, Breetor turned to her. “It’s gone, Essha. It won’t bother us again.”

There was madness in the woman’s eyes. “Are you sure?”

“After what it saw I can do to their kind, yes, I am. Trolls are terrified of those rare few who can kill them. We learnt so on the battlefield.”

It was no solace to Essha, who screamed, hurling her staff to the ground, before dropping to her knees and weeping uncontrollably. Other survivors tried to console her. Breetor looked to the trees in the distance. His sword’s light illuminated parts of Jallun’s blue robes amidst puddles of blood. The trolls had eaten his whole body.

“Milord,” Omivar said shakily. “I—I don’t think

it's safe to remain here. We—we should get back to the ship.”

Breitor didn't want to return yet, knowing they hadn't found water. One glance at Essha made him reconsider.

“You're right,” he replied. “We'll go back. Those too afraid can stay there, but we must continue exploring. We'll never survive without replenishing our water.”

*

It was still dark when they returned to the coast. Essha had been quiet outside of sobbing. The other mages tried to keep her company, but the hydromancer just wanted some space. Soon, the king's party returned to the beach.

“Do you smell that?” Omivar asked.

Breitor took a sniff. “Something's burning.”

“Burning?” asked another companion. “Do you think our shipmates have been cooking?”

“No, it's far too strong.”

They trekked around a bend, finally coming into view of the ship. Everyone gaped. The vessel was blackened, covered in ash; the sail and ropes were burnt to cinders. The smoke was still fresh. Omivar

and the other sailors wailed in anguish.

“Are there any survivors?” Breitor asked the mages.

None of the remaining mages had voyancy as potent as Cerrtrus, but they scanned as best as they could.

“There!” a soldier cried, spotting someone by sight.

“Captain!” Omivar called, racing towards the large rock.

Honarius sat slumped against the boulder, his body burned on one side, the other half coated in soot. Breitor pushed past the sailors and approached. He was alive, but barely.

“Get water for his burns,” he ordered.

“Water?” asked a soldier. “Isn't that why we're here?”

“From the sea!” Breitor exclaimed. “It's better than nothing! Hydromancers, conjure what you can! And the rest of you, try to find other survivors!”

Essha and some others stepped forward, conjuring water to pour on Honarius's wounds. Honarius groaned; a hydromancer's water was salty like the sea, and though it soothed his burns, it stung to the touch.

The captain struggled, but words groaned from his dry throat. “No ... survivors.”

Breitor looked back at him. “You can speak? What happened?”

“D ... d ... dragon ...”

Breitor’s brow raised. “Did you say ... *dragon?*”

“R ... red ... dragon.”

Despite the hydromancers’ efforts, Honarius’s burns were too great. No more breath came from his mouth. Breitor’s head dropped. The mages continued, until he placed a hand on the closest shoulder.

“That’s enough. He’s already gone.”

*

Other blackened bodies lay aboard the ship. All those who’d stayed had been part of Honarius’s crew. The bodies were taken to the lower decks, the doors of the cabins bolted shut. The vessel they’d sailed on for so long would now serve as their tomb.

Everyone sat on the shores, staring blankly. The sun had already risen.

“Why?” Omivar asked. “Why would a dragon attack them? They wouldn’t have tried to fight it. It wasn’t a battleship.”

“Food, perhaps,” a soldier replied. “Just like those trolls.”

“It didn’t even eat the remains,” said a mage. “It

wasn’t after food.”

“I think I know what this island is,” Breitor muttered. “For centuries, there were tales of dragons coming to our lands, only to disappear soon after. Many disregarded these stories as myths, thinking dragons didn’t really exist. But they came to our lands during that war, didn’t they? We know they exist.” Breitor raised his eyes. Everyone was listening intently. “I think we’ve found it. This is the land from which they came. We’ve found the land of the beasts.”

The others went silent, some shaking in fear. If this was a land ruled by dragons, how could they hope to survive?

Even Breitor was starting to lose hope. He wanted to give up and jump in the sea, but his hand brushed a lump in his pocket. He drew out the locket given to him by Aurandria and rubbed it tentatively. He had a promise to fulfil.

The king stood. “We must survive in these lands.”

“How?” a soldier asked. “You saw what just one of those things could do.”

“We have to, otherwise we’ll never get home.”

“And how can we get home without a ship?” a sailor asked.

“We’ll build a new one. There are trees here, right?”

“We’re sailors, not shipwrights.”

“It doesn’t have to be a perfect vessel, but it’s better than losing hope and giving up, don’t you agree?”

The sailor sighed with exhaustion. “I suppose, sire.”

“But first, we need to familiarise ourselves with this place and find food and water. So dry your eyes, all of you. We overcame that beast which corrupted our lands, so we can surely overcome this. By this journey’s end, let history remember us as the men and women who discovered the fabled land of the beasts.”

CHAPTER 5 PREY

With every passing day, the Psykorians’ throats grew drier. The air was humid, and not a single river or pond could be found. They reached a large plain where stray horses trekked about. After spending a day trying to catch some, they were unsuccessful. The attempt only worsened their thirst.

They came to a pass between two rocky cliffs.

“Sire, are you sure about going this way?” a soldier asked with a hoarse voice.

The daunting cliffs towered over them like sentinels. “It certainly looks like there’ll be something grand beyond this pass,” Breetor replied. “Something of importance.”

“Like dragons?”

Breetor said nothing more and continued.

They hadn't gone far when the air resounded with tremendous thumping.

"What's that sound?" Omivar asked.

"Something a seaman wouldn't recognise," Breetor said. "Cavalry."

"Cavalry? You mean man-ridden horses? Not like the stray ones we've seen lurking about?"

"Yes. They sound far too organised to be wild."

After a moment, Breetor signalled for his party to take cover behind some nearby boulders. They waited, and the rapid thuds grew louder with every second.

Countless horses galloped by. They were ridden without saddles. Upon the horses' backs were muscular men with red war paint. Their torsos were bare, their arms and legs covered by rough cloths. Some carried spears, and others bows. Slain animal carcasses were slung over the backs of their horses.

One rider particularly caught Breetor's attention. She was a slender woman clad in beige robes, with long brown hair, carrying a large branch as though it were a staff. Methodically, her head turned their way. She called something in a foreign language, and the riders halted.

"Why'd they stop?" Omivar whispered.

Breetor remained silent. His heart was racing.

The woman pointed a finger their way. Several riders trotted forward, spears at the ready.

"We should surrender," Breetor said, standing up.

Seeing the outsiders, the riders aimed their bows and pointed their spears.

"Hail," Breetor called. He was greeted by silence. "We are not here to hurt anyone. We're just passing through."

The riders were silent. The robed woman dismounted and approached Breetor. She gestured to her staff. Breetor looked back, confused. The woman gestured again, this time pointing at Breetor, then at her staff. She was telling him to hold it. Hesitantly, Breetor did so.

The woman closed her eyes and took a deep breath. For a few seconds, she entered a meditation-like trance.

"An interesting language," she said, her words marred with a unique mildly sharp accent.

Breetor froze. "You learned our language from me just like that?"

"Yes. Yours is the fifth I've acquired through such magic. My name is Ardall Kreller, high shaman of the

Sikkar tribe. What about you?"

"Breetor Sigmus," he replied, offering a handshake.

Ardall took his hand. "What tribe are you from?"

Breetor hesitated; Ardall hadn't yet realised they were not from this land. Was it wise to tell her?

"Come now," she continued with a smile. "We are all of the same kin. No tribe is at war with one another. What have you to hide?"

Breetor decided to be honest. "We're not from here at all. We sailed from a distant land."

Ardall tilted her head slightly, then burst out laughing. "Well, why didn't you just say so?" She turned around, saying something to the riders behind. They all laughed together, bows and spears lowering. "You must be lost. You should come with us. We just finished hunting stock for our families. We're returning home now."

Breetor was bewildered at how easily they'd taken a liking to them. Were all people in this land so hospitable?

"Could you lead us to fresh water?" he asked. "We're awfully thirsty, and haven't drunk anything in days."

Ardall chuckled as several unmanned horses were brought forward. "No problem at all. Can you ride?"

*

Riding without a saddle didn't prove too difficult for Breetor and the soldiers, but the sailors complained of sore bottoms. The tribe were amused by their awkward shifting.

"Why are they not such good riders compared to some of you?" Ardall asked.

"They're men of the sea," Breetor replied. "They haven't ridden horses much, and when they have, it's with a saddle."

"A saddle?"

"It's a type of seat we put on a horse's back to make riding easier."

Ardall sighed. "Such a thing would burden a horse."

"Perhaps a little, but they're strong creatures."

"I couldn't imagine anyone putting something like that on the greater predators."

Breetor's head lowered. "Greater predators, like ..." He was hesitant to mention dragons after what happened to the ship.

Ardall who gave Breetor an odd look. "You don't have such predators in your land? No wyverns, chimeras, manticores, hydras?"

Breetor's brows raised; all these creatures existed

here? “Not in our land. The most magnificent creature unique to us is the pegasus.”

“I see. We have pegasi here too. You’re lucky to still be alive. The creatures I mentioned aren’t even the strongest. The griffins—they rule over the others like kings.”

“But they’re not the strongest either, are they?”

Ardall raised an eyebrow. “You speak like you know something.”

Breitor remained silent, prompting Ardall to continue.

“Indeed. The strongest creatures in this land are the dragons.”

*

They hadn’t yet reached any water when the riders came to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” Breitor asked.

“They’ve found something.”

Ardall spurred her horse forward, joining those at the front. She and several others dismounted.

“Milord,” a soldier asked. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Breitor replied. “But I’ll find out.”

Breitor trotted his horse ahead. He glimpsed the piles of half eaten carcasses. Some were horses, but, to

Breitor’s horror, the rest were human.

Growls echoed around them.

“Manticores!” a rider cried.

The riders scattered, enabling Breitor a better view of their predators. They resembled lions, but their faces were a combination between feline and man. Menacing eyes gazed above ape-like noses, and rows of sharp teeth filled their man-like mouths.

Some hunters fled, others took up positions. The manticores were fast, savagely tearing through man and horse alike.

Breitor was a good rider, not a brilliant one. He turned his steed, but the horse reacted too slowly. A mantichore tore through the mount like paper. Breitor stumbled towards the predator. While he was only a good rider, he was a brilliant swordsman. He parried the mantichore’s paws, before the Saviour Sword impaled the beast’s back. The creature roared its death cry. Breitor stood, pulling his weapon free.

Another leapt towards him. Breitor swung his sword to meet it. Despite its size, the beast was cut clean in half.

Breitor looked around; the riders had taken circular formations. One mantichore made short work of their

defences, but another group trapped a beast. The creature was stuck with spears until it died. Regardless, more men had fallen than manticores. The tribe were fierce fighters, but the predators were fiercer.

Another beast turned towards Breetor. This one was larger than the others. When it leapt, Breetor held his sword high. An orb of white light surrounded him. The manticore bounced back like it had hit a wall. Breetor attacked, but the nimble creature evaded. Unlike the first two he'd fought, this one feared and avoided Breetor's sword.

Breetor and the manticore circled one another. After exchanging feints, the creature pounced. Breetor stepped to his right and parried a paw with the flat of his sword. When another swept round, he adjusted his sword and blocked with its edge. The manticore's paw was severed from its leg.

The beast roared in pain. Seeing his chance, Breetor lunged forward. The Saviour Sword thrust deep. The manticore roared again, falling to the ground. He stabbed once more, and the creature roared no more.

Surveying his surroundings, Breetor was the only man still standing before the manticores. Many a man and horse lay dead, some already food for the

predatory creatures. He recognised many of the fallen: his soldiers, many sailors, and even Essha. Did none of the other Psykorians survive?

Gritting his teeth, Breetor cried out and charged the nearest manticore. To his surprise, the beast abandoned its meal and fled. He considered pursuit, but the manticore was too fast to chase. Instead, he turned to his fallen brethren. Dropping to his knees, Breetor let out a woeful cry.

*

Breetor remained with the bodies until sunset. The lurking manticores ignored him. Some were finishing their feasts, others had already left. His eyes turned towards the sky; it would soon be dark.

"Aurandria," he muttered, eyes welling with tears. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I'll be able to keep my promise."

Soon, the manticores left, some taking carcasses with them. For a time, Breetor's only company were vultures and crows come to finish the leftovers, but they scattered when horses approached again.

"Your Highness!" a voice cried. Omivar was among the survivors, riding behind one of the tribesmen. Evidently, after falling from his horse, he'd been

fortunate to be pulled upon one of the others' mounts.

"Omivar," Breetor muttered, "the others, they ..."

Omivar went silent.

Breetor turned towards Ardall. "Why did you flee?"

"You see the dead, don't you? It's not just your friends who perished. Manticores are some of the fiercest predators in the land. They may not be as large as wyverns or hydras, but they're superior hunters. We have defensive tactics against them, but even so, the odds of survival are slim."

"You have magic, don't you? Why didn't you use it?"

"My magic isn't meant for fighting. Besides, you saw what happened to your mages, didn't you?"

Breetor glimpsed back to the half-eaten bodies of Essha and the other robed forms.

"I saw you kill three by yourself," Ardall continued. "That sword of yours has strong magic. Is such power common in your land?"

"This sword is one of a kind, but the magic our people wield can indeed be powerful."

Ardall nodded. "So our kin are not prey in your land?"

"We are the dominant species there."

"I understand. I am sorry for what happened to your friends, but this is why our kind stick must together."

"We still need to find water."

Ardall smiled, before turning her horse around. She said something in her native tongue, and a horse was brought forward. "Then ride with us, Breetor. We're almost there."

*

Within a valley between several mountains was a vast lake. As soon as it came into sight, Breetor rushed his horse ahead of the tribe. He halted the animal, quickly leapt down and started scooping water into his mouth. The tribesman bearing Omivar soon followed, letting the youngster dismount and do the same.

For what might've been an hour, the pair drank and washed in the pond, having missed the taste of cold, fresh water after being in these humid lands for so long.

When they were finished, Omivar floated in the lake to refresh himself, while Breetor approached Ardall.

"Thank you," he said.

Ardall smiled. "Like I said, our kind looks out for one another here. You two have nowhere else to go,

yes? Will you come with us to our home? We can teach you what you wish to know. Likewise, I feel there is much you may be able to tell us.”

Breitor nodded. He hadn't lost hope yet.

CHAPTER 6 THE OUTSIDERS AMONG THEM

Though refreshed during the trek to the Sikkar tribe's home, Breitor was riveted by fears about what happened to the ship... and Honarius's last words.

R ... red ... dragon.

Why would a dragon attack them like that? During the war against The Ultimate Evil, dragons came to their land to help fight. Some of these dragons were green, others red, but no matter the colour, none were hostile towards them—so why now?

He recalled the mermaid's warning: *We will not fight in vain against power such as yours. But those in this land will not be so timid.*

Breitor understood now, how violently they opposed outsiders here. Would the dragons hunt them, knowing he and Omivar still remained? It would

be wise to blend in with the Sikkar tribe as much as possible.

“Here we are,” Ardall said. “Welcome to our home.”

Ahead was a large wall of wooden poles. Something within the wall creaked, and several poles started to ascend. It was a primitive gate.

“Is this the only gate?” Breetor asked quietly.

“No,” Ardall replied. “We have four.”

“The walls may be good to protect against the likes of manticores, but against winged creatures like dragons, wouldn’t you be barricading yourselves into a killing ground?”

“Attacks from manticores and other creatures are common. Dragon attacks are very rare, and not all dragons are hostile. Some would even protect us from their own kin.”

Breetor’s face turned curious. “They do that?”

The shaman nodded. Would such protection apply to Omivar and himself?

He followed the others inside. The tribe folk lived in tents. Women, children and the elderly rushed out to meet them. Many ran eagerly to relatives and friends, but others searched in vain for those who

perished. Breetor couldn’t understand their language, but there was soon weeping and wailing. He, too, lowered his head.

“Sire, what’s happenin’?” Omivar asked.

“They’re grieving for their fallen.”

Omivar shifted uncomfortably. “Oh. They ain’t blamin’ us, are they?”

“I don’t think so. Ardall told me that manticores attacks are common. Our presence has nothing to do with it.”

The riders trotted further inside, when Ardall signalled to a large tent. Several horses were stabled within. Even from outside, the foul odour of their manure was strong. The tent had an outer layer of wooden poles, much like the village’s walls, but only high enough to prevent the horses’ escape. A wooden stand with support beams was currently pulled aside while a pair of tribesmen waited to put it back manually. Breetor and Ardall walked their mounts inside. The horses within weren’t tied, and men were already waiting to brush, feed, and hydrate them.

After Breetor exited the stables, countless members of the tribe crowded around Omivar. Some grinned, others showed stoicism. The children especially

couldn't seem to take their eyes off him.

Ardall laughed. "They've already learned that outsiders walk among us."

"Charming," Breetor muttered, hoping the attention wouldn't spread to him.

"Do not fear, Breetor. They mean you no harm. They're simply amazed. None of us have ever seen someone from a different land before." She placed a soft hand on Breetor's shoulder. "Come join us and share tales of your land. We shall do the same. I will translate everything you say, and everything that is said to you."

Breetor sighed. "Do you mind if we begin tomorrow? I'm too tired. Even if I wanted to exchange tales, I wouldn't be able to tell or hear one in my current state."

Ardall chuckled. "Very well."

A sleeping mat was rolled out for him in a small tent near the centre of the walled village. Omivar was shown to a different one, but he enjoyed the attention too much to sleep yet.

Though Breetor was a king accustomed to large, luxurious beds, he was also a seasoned warrior, used to sleeping in tents during harsh climates. By such

standards, this one was comfortable, and he slept soundly.

*

Breetor awoke the next morning to foreign chatter. He emerged from his tent, sword in hand. Ardall and several others were talking to a group of tall, muscular men clad in furs, wearing leather helmets with a plume of black hair rising from the top. Drawing closer, Breetor spotted their legs. They were not men at all—they had the lower bodies of horses.

"Centaur?" he muttered, not meaning to say his thoughts out loud.

Ardall heard him and looked back. She signalled for Breetor to come forward, which he did with caution.

"Their kind exists in your land?" Ardall asked, signalling towards the centaurs.

"Yes. Well, those which neighbour us." Centaurs did not dwell in Psykoria, but were common in the neighbouring realms of Slyke and Lorzak.

"They too find themselves hunted by the larger creatures," Ardall said. "We trade with their kind, and aid one another where we can. These centaurs came to trade wools and silks for fish. Their horse-legs aren't

ideal for hunting in water.”

Breetor felt envious of the bonds between species here. Most centaurs in Slyke kept to their own communities, and those in Lorzak seldom mingled with humans. It was interesting how having a common vulnerability brought together species that held only hostility towards one another, in lands where they were not hunted prey.

His thoughts returned to dragons. They were certainly capable of flying between realms; how else would they be able to visit his lands? But if they weren't always hostile, as Ardall said, might they be willing to help Breetor and Omivar find a way home? That would be one way to remove stranded outsiders from this place.

“What's on your mind?” Ardall asked.

“Nothing,” Breetor lied. “Just ... thinking about what we've learned so far, that's all.”

Ardall paused a moment, then smiled warmly. She placed a hand on Breetor's shoulder. “There is much for you to learn yet, but worry not, I shall help you.”

*

Throughout the day, Breetor helped the tribe with their errands, getting to know the people. Ardall

stayed with him, translating whenever needed.

“Sometimes,” he told a group of tribesmen around a campfire, “we'll host contests, pitting one man's fighting strength against another's. I've won every sword-fighting tourney I've entered.”

When Ardall translated his words, the listeners were amazed. None doubted him; they'd already seen his swordsmanship. Breetor would never mention that he was a king, nor that the reason he was such a good fighter was that he'd spent much of his early life practising with a sword, whereas his older brothers were the ones who focussed on the study of rulership.

“Breetor,” Ardall said, “they want to know of your journey, how you came to be stuck on our land.”

Breetor shook his head. “Omivar, that one's for you. Your knowledge of the sea is far greater than mine.”

Giving the king a bow, Omivar began speaking of the sea. Breetor said no more that night.

As Ardall accompanied him back to his tent later, a group of fattened dogs and cats munched away from large bowls piled with food.

“Don't you think you're overfeeding them?” Breetor asked.

“We feed other animals as much as we feed ourselves,” Ardall replied. “We’re all prey, after all.”

“And they don’t fight each other?” Breetor signalled first to the dogs, then the cats.

Ardall chuckled. “There have been occasions, but we teach them to get along.”

Hearing a chirp, Breetor noticed a group of birds eating seeds from small containers on the wooden pole wall.

“Don’t the cats catch them?”

Almost as soon as he’d asked, a white cat with dark spots pounced towards the pole. The birds scattered, and their hunter was left empty-pawed.

“Yes,” Ardall replied, “but we’ll feed the birds until they are caught. It doubles as a trap, seeing as we can eat them too, if we’re low on better meat.”

Once they reached Breetor’s tent, a group of pegasi flew past the moon.

“Pegasi,” he said. “Reminds me of home. They’re highly-valued steeds in my land, but it takes a great deal of skill to ride one.”

“Is that so? Pegasi here are never ridden. They’re mountain-dwelling herbivores which usually keep to themselves. Are you among those who can ride one?”

“Yes. I was trained once I reached maturity.”

“Interesting. Something you could speak of to the hunters, perhaps?”

With a smile, Breetor nodded. “Are they free of predators here?”

“Mostly, but the larger flying beasts still hunt them if unable to find other meat. Even so, pegasi are among the nimblest flyers in this land. Not an easy catch, even for dragons.”

Breetor opened the flap to his tent. “You hunt again tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“May Omivar and I join you? It would enable us to better explore these lands, learn the geography, and see more of these predators you speak of.”

Ardall smiled. “I was intending to ask you the same thing. We’ll all be safer with you alongside us.”

Saying no more, Breetor bid Ardall goodnight, then settled to sleep in his tent.

*

“We’re going to start dressin’ like ‘em, sire?” Omivar asked.

“Yes,” Breetor replied. “We need to blend in with the tribe.”

Omivar nodded, and the pair dressed like Sikkar tribe hunters, even applying war paint. Breetor copied whatever symbols he saw on other tribesmen as best as he could, but Omivar tried to mark himself with more glamorous shapes, such as swords, lightning and flames.

“Those symbols look too foreign,” Breetor said. “We need to blend in, remember?”

“I—uh—yes, sire,” the youngster stuttered, wiping some of them away.

A young chestnut-haired woman approached Omivar. Wordlessly, she held out a hand, signalling him to stop. Dipping her fingers in the vat of paint, she drew native markings on Omivar, covering all his foreign designs with the shapes and curves more representative of their tribe. Omivar was silent the whole time. When the woman was finished, she gave him a gentle smile.

As she left, Breetor simply raised an eyebrow at Omivar, then Ardall approached.

“I see you had no problem marking your own warpaint,” she said, almost in disappointment.

“I merely copied the others,” Breetor replied.

Ardall smiled, before leading the pair to where the

other hunters awaited.

*

Upon setting out, the hunters made extra effort to avoid swamps. They trekked across a grimy overpass, keeping their distance from the edges.

“Why is the floor here so slimy?” Breetor asked.

“The terrain below is a swamp,” Ardall replied.

“So that’s why we came up here. I guess travelling through bogs is an unpleasant option.”

“That isn’t the main reason we avoid them.”

Ardall’s words raised Breetor’s curiosity, but he stilled his tongue, being extra careful not to let his horse trot where the floor was most slippery.

A cry suddenly rose from beneath the cliff.

“Pay it no mind,” Ardall said.

Breetor halted his horse and dismounted. “It sounded like a person.”

“It likely was. I told you, our kind are prey in these lands.”

“If a beast is nearby, we must prepare to defend ourselves.”

Ardall sighed, before halting her own steed. “Very well, Breetor. I’ll show you what it was.” Dismounting, she walked carefully to the edge of the cliff, signalling

for Breetor to follow. “Look.”

Breetor cautiously approached, careful not to slip. He gaped. Trudging through the swamp was a large creature with a reptilian body and multiple long-necked heads.

“What is that?” Breetor whispered.

“A hydra,” Ardall replied.

“And them?” Breetor pointed towards another group of human hunters, trying their best to fend the beast off.

“I cannot identify which tribe they’re from, but they were foolish for traversing this swamp,” Ardall replied. “They must be glory-seekers, younger members of a tribe thinking they can prove themselves by slaying great beasts.”

One of the men was caught by a hydra’s head. The beast wrenched him side-to-side, chewing his torso until the upper body fell from the creature’s jaw.

“As you can expect,” Ardall continued, “very few men like that remain. Most of them die in these foolish battles.”

“They aren’t defeated yet,” Breetor said.

The group of hunters opposite the hydra continued prodding the beast with spears whilst carefully backing

away. No wounds they inflicted fazed the beast, and the marks their blows left soon disappeared.

“Are its wounds reknitting themselves?” Breetor asked.

“Yes,” Ardall replied. “You cannot kill a hydra that way.”

“Then how? Cut off its heads?”

Ardall chuckled. The creature lumbered towards its attackers and a net was dropped from a rock overpass. The men cheered and stabbed repeatedly as the beast struggled against its bindings. Just then, an axe-wielding hunter stepped forward and brought his weapon down upon the beast’s neck. When his peers noticed, they cried out in either scorn or anguish.

The severed head sank in the bog, and two more sprouted from the stump. One of the new heads quickly reached for the net, casting it away. The other bit off the hunter’s skull.

“It regrew its head!” Breetor exclaimed. “Not only that, but a second one too! How is that possible?” Ardall shrugged her shoulders. “How do you kill them?”

“Fire is said to prevent their regeneration. Dragons have been seen to kill them this way.”

Breetor nodded, keeping his eyes on the fight. After

freeing itself, the hydra quickly slew several more foes, prompting the survivors to flee. The men ran faster than the beast could slither, but those who slipped in the boggy terrain were caught and devoured.

“They’re not so difficult to outrun,” Breetor muttered. “I imagine it’s even easier outside their marshes.”

“Good observation,” Ardall said. “It is why their kind aren’t as threatening as manticores. They mostly stick to their swamps, but will attack any intruders. As long as we stay clear, we needn’t worry about them.”

*

During another day’s venture through rocky land, the party halted before a cliff. Ardall and the hunters looked over the edge, while Breetor and Omivar sat feasting on bread.

“Omivar,” Breetor said, “are you enjoying life among the tribe?”

“Yes, sire,” he replied enthusiastically. “This place is a wonder, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but do you not miss home? I know Honarius has fallen, but there’ll be other captains who’ll take you on their ship. I could put a good word in for you with—” Breetor cut himself off. He was going to say

Captain Klom, but recalled the Century Storm.

Omivar’s smile faded. “Sire, I don’t think we can go home.”

After swallowing his last mouthful of bread, Breetor washed it down with some water. “Do not lose faith so easily, Omivar. I believe there is a way.”

“How? We can’t sail by ourselves. We need navigators, and fishermen, and—”

“There is a way. Just trust me.”

Omivar tilted his head. “What’re you plannin’, sire?”

Breetor paused. Was it wise to tell the youngster that he intended to find dragons, especially after what happened to their ship?

“Sire,” Omivar pressed, “please tell me your plan won’t involve us betrayin’ the tribe? They’ve been so good to us.”

“I would never betray them, but once I’ve learned what I need to, we may have to leave.”

A loud wail sounded and a white creature flew up from the cliff. It crashed against a rock, rolling several paces along the ground nearby.

“Is that a pegasus, sire?” Omivar asked.

Without answering, Breetor approached the fallen

creature. The pegasus' eyes blinked rapidly; its breaths were heavy.

“The wound isn't deep,” he said. “We can save it.”

“Don't waste your time, Breetor,” Ardall called. “It's gone.”

“No it's not. These bites were merely a graze. If you can spare some of the herbs we collected this afternoon, I can save it.”

Ardall sighed. The other hunters, despite understanding Breetor's mannerisms, had no intention of helping. Breetor placed a hand on the pegasus gently, stroking its snow-white fur. The creature was in more pain than its light wounds suggested.

“What's wrong with you?” Breetor whispered gently.

The pegasus gave Breetor one last look as thanks for caring, then died.

Breetor crouched over its carcass, perplexed. “I don't understand. It... its wound was only light.”

Ardall placed a hand on his shoulder; something she did often. “It wasn't the deepness of the wound which killed it. When you're finished mourning, shall I introduce you to the creatures which caused this?”

Soon, Breetor was gazing at a wide valley where

several large reptilian beasts passed by. Their bodies were snake-like, but they had arms and legs and walked rather than slithered.

Breetor's jaw dropped. “Are those dragons?”

“No,” Ardall replied. “Wyverns. They're not as big, and as you can see, they lack wings.”

Breetor's awe faded. “I see. I should've realised.”

Ardall chuckled. “It's a common mistake. Many a man has mistaken a wyvern for a dragon, even in this land.”

“What makes a light nibble from one of them so deadly?”

“Their saliva is poisonous. Get it in your blood, and you won't live long.”

Breetor finally understood: the pegasus, being one of the fastest flyers in this land, was able to avoid capture, and the wyvern's bite only glanced it, but a glancing blow was enough to kill. He asked, “Why was the pegasus down there?”

“If I had to guess, it must have flown a long way and needed water from the valley.”

“I see. How is it we've avoided such large creatures until now?”

“They live underground,” Ardall responded.

“We know most of the entrances and exits to these subterranean places, and have deliberately avoided them.” Ardall’s hand came to his shoulder again. “We’ll be passing many today, as there are grains on these cliffs worth collecting. I’ll point each one out so you always remember to steer clear.”

*

As the days passed and turned to season, horses, flocks and other animals migrated from place to place. Manticore sightings grew rarer. The weather remained humid, even when it was wet.

Time’s rapid passing made Breetor think of home. He wondered if the harvests went well, if the disputes had improved, and, of course, about Aurandria.

“Breetor,” Ardall said, her hand again resting on his shoulder. “What’s on your mind?”

“The animals have been active lately,” Breetor replied, returning to his initial thoughts.

“It’s migration season. Even the manticores are on the move. We’ll do the same soon, if the weather grows harsher.”

“You get harsh weathers here?”

“Only strong rains.”

Omivar passed by, his arm interlocked with that

of the young woman who always applied his war paint before a hunt.

“Omivar,” Breetor greeted him.

Omivar’s response was a simple lowering of the head; he’d grown more distant since Breetor told him his plan to one day leave the tribe.

“Your friend has adapted to our ways well,” Ardall said. “Better than yourself, to be honest. He is even learning our language.”

Ardall walked away, but signalled for Breetor to follow. He hesitated, watching Ardall sit by a pair of tree trunk stools.

“Maybe it’s time I started teaching you our language,” she continued. “You can’t let Omivar get too far ahead of you.”

While Ardall told him some basic words, Breetor’s eyes wandered. It didn’t serve him much purpose to learn the Sikkar tribe’s language, not while Ardall could speak his. He wouldn’t remain with them much longer, but Omivar was growing more attached to them by the day. Then again, the young sailor’s goal had always been to explore other lands and hopefully find a place he could fit in. Had he finally achieved that goal?

He thought of Aurandria again, and what might be happening in Psykoria. Would the nobles wage war on her instead? He dreaded the thought.

Ardall noticed how he hadn't listened to anything she'd been saying. "Breeter, what's wrong?"

"Apologies, Ardall," he replied. "I—I don't think I'm ready for this."

Ardall paused, before eventually smiling. "It's all right, Breeter. I guess you're a little taken aback by how close Omivar has grown to Nidra. Very well then, let us re-join the others."

Ardall made her way back, but Breeter looked towards the sky, repeating the promise he'd made before: "Aurandria, I will return to you. I promise."

*

Breeter and the hunters ventured around a range of grassy hills. They'd covered a great distance, and the weather was warmer here. They were having lunch on a hilltop when there was a loud thud.

Turning towards the sound, the hunters backed away. Breeter gasped when he saw the creature. It was just as large as the wyverns, but had a lion-like body, its front legs clawed like an eagle, and it had a mane of white feathers framing an eagle's head.

"Behold, Breeter," Ardall said. "A griffin, one of the proudest, most regal creatures in the land."

The griffin halted, turning its eagle eyes upon the humans before it.

"What is it doing here?" Breeter whispered.

"Just passing through," Ardall replied. "It won't attack if you show it respect."

"How do I do that?"

"Bow, perhaps?"

None of the hunters had reached for their weapons, but all gazed upon the creature, some even lowering their heads. Ardall was doing the same, prompting Omivar to follow. Breeter, being a king in his own land, was hesitant. However, it would do his people no good if his pride got him killed. Slowly, he lowered himself and bent a knee to the regal creature.

He bowed for several moments, then realised the griffin hadn't moved. Somehow, the beast's eyes didn't make it seem the proud creature the others spoke of; it looked almost sad.

The griffin leapt into the air, flapping its white-feathered wings. It disappeared among the thick clouds.

Ardall placed a hand on Breeter's shoulder.

“Consider yourself lucky, Breetor,” she said. “Griffin sightings are incredibly rare, and you were mere paces away from one.”

Breetor looked upon the hunters, each in awe of what they’d just seen.

“Ardall,” he said, “when I looked upon the creature, its eyes didn’t speak of pride. It seemed... sad.”

“Good perception. There is a reason for that. Perhaps it is something we should speak of around a fire one night.”

*

Various ventures had seen the hunters trekking through many different types of terrain. Breetor questioned the island’s geography as they rode along a rocky plain.

“There are distant mountains which are volcanic,” Ardall replied, “and deep caves which run through several ranges. In the south-east, there are an almost endless range of grassy hills.”

“You’ve explored all these places?”

“Not in person, but as you know, I have magic. I’ve met with different tribes, man and centaur alike, some of which are nomadic. They’ve spoken of these lands, in their own languages of course.”

“And you trust they told the truth?”

Ardall smiled. “They’d have no reason to lie.”

“Do you know where the dragons dwell?”

“I know of the areas, but not the specific places.”

“Can you tell me?”

Ardall’s friendly demeanour suddenly disappeared.

“Breetor, why are you so interested in dragons? You said that one destroyed your ship, yes? I hope you’re not planning to find that dragon and slay it.”

“Not at all.”

“Then why are you so interested in them?”

Breetor paused. Would the truth anger Ardall and the tribe?

“He hopes they’ll be willin’ to fly ‘im home,” Omivar’s voice called out. “I’ve noticed it. He’s been tryin’ to figure out where he can find dragons, and believes he can convince ‘em to help him leave. The dragons don’t want us outsiders here, so maybe if he can talk with one before it tries to kill him, he can strike a deal for the dragon fly him home.”

“Omivar ...” Breetor muttered.

“Sorry sire, but I won’t be goin’ with you. Not only am I happier here than I’ve ever been in Psykoria, but the idea of facin’ down a dragon terrifies me. It’ll kill

you, sire, just like it did the captain—and the rest.”

Omivar parted, giving Breetor an apologetic look. Slowly, the Psykorian king returned his gaze to Ardall. The shaman’s face was grim, her eyes almost tearful.

“Breetor—is—is what he said true?”

He let out a breath. “Yes. I do wish to return home, and I’m now convinced that dragons are the only way.”

“Breetor, if that truly is your goal, I—I don’t feel comfortable letting you stay among our tribe. If—if the dragons find out your intentions, they might not just come after you, but us as well.”

“I understand.”

Ardall raised her eyes. “But it doesn’t have to be this way. Cast aside such foolish desires. Returning home might be impossible, but you can forge a new life here. Stay with us. You’ve seen how happy Omivar has become. Does living with us really bring you more trouble than it did in your homeland?”

Breetor paused. She was right about that: while he remained here, he didn’t have the worries of governing the realm that he did back home. Omivar may have left nothing behind, but Breetor would abandon much. Psykoria might be in chaos already, especially with

no one to sit on the throne. He was confident that his sword’s power would let him stand up to most of this land’s beasts, but despite part of him wanting to forget the troubles back home and stay with the Sikkar tribe, he couldn’t leave Aurandria to such troubles.

“Ardall,” he said, “convince me there is another way, one which doesn’t involve dragons. I would prefer to remain among the tribe until I have a better plan to get home, but I feel like I’m running out of options.”

Ardall glared deep into Breetor’s eyes. Silence followed, until the shaman finally spoke. “Come to my tent tonight. I shall speak to you of dragons ... and the chimeras.”

“Chimeras? Why the chimeras?”

Ardall’s face was grim. “You will know after you’ve heard the story.”

CHAPTER 7

TALES OF DRAGONS

Breitor was met by a warm, dim light from a fire in the centre of the tent. Ardall's was larger than most. Stepping inside, Breitor knocked into a rope. Many more hung all about. Some had wooden or stone carvings tied to the ends, while others had bones.

"What are these?" he asked.

"My charms," Ardall replied. "They bring this village and its people good fortune."

"Is there anything from a dragon among them?"

Ardall shook her head.

A hole in the centre of the tent's top let out smoke from the fire. "What if it rains?"

Ardall smiled beautifully, but no tempting thoughts crossed Breitor's mind, not while he remembered Aurandria. The shaman pulled on a rope

looped around the hole. It sealed for a second, until she pulled another, reopening it before smoke could fill the tent.

"Please take a seat," she said, gesturing to a thick mat beside the campfire.

Breitor did, whilst Ardall took her place on an identical mat at the opposite side of the fire. A book without a cover was beside Ardall's seat, written in Breitor's own language.

"Did you write about my language?" Breitor asked.

"Yes," Ardall replied. "I record the different languages I learn. This one is incomplete. It can be hard to memorise certain words at times, but my knowledge of your language is kept fresh by my conversations with you."

"How does your magic enable you to learn languages?"

Ardall waved a hand with dismissal. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me. I've known many mages in my time."

"Very well. The magic I conjure through my staff looks into the mind of the one touching it, then passes to me their memories of understanding and communication. The thoughts become embedded in

my mind, just as they are in yours. However, with so many languages in my knowledge, it can be hard to remember one that's not been used in a long time. That's why I keep records of them. Since meeting you, I've forgotten much of what I knew of the others, except for my own. This is only natural with lack of use." She signalled to the crude coverless books beside her sleeping mat. "But these remain with me, if there ever comes a time where I need them again."

Breitor understood. Ardall's magic was a unique form of voyancy, seeing how it tapped into another's mind and memories.

"Before we begin," Ardall said, "would you mind taking a brief look through this?" She handed Breitor the book. "Just in case I've made some mistakes?"

Breitor scanned the Slykan words within the pages. Psykoria had its own language hundreds of years ago, but the Slykan one was forced upon them during a period when their lands were conquered by the Slykan Empire. When imperial rule was eventually abolished, all the realms once part of it were allowed to regain their monarchies, but their old languages had already been lost to a past generation.

"I see no mistakes," Breitor muttered.

Ardall thanked him, taking back the book and putting it aside.

"All right Breitor, it's about time I told you what you wanted to know."

Breitor made himself comfortable, sitting quietly as he gazed at Ardall's fair features, illuminated by the fire between them.

"I will start by telling you about the dragons themselves, and the differences between those of different scales.

"Living in mountains past the large grassy hills to the south-east are the green dragons. Typically, they are larger than the other types, yet more cumbersome. They keep mostly to themselves, and rarely bring harm to other creatures outside hunts. Out of all the dragons, they are said to be the most sociable and trusting towards other species."

"There are ancient tales of green dragons in our lands," Breitor said. "They brought ruin to several villages. They did not seem so trusting then."

"Perhaps they were provoked," Ardall replied. "What do the tales say they did after laying waste to these places?"

"They fled, never to be seen again."

“That definitely sounds like they were provoked. It is natural for man to fear that which they do not understand.”

“I ... guess you’re right.”

“Thus, they attacked the unusual creature, fearing it had come to harm them. Ironically, their own actions are what caused their doom. Such a pitiful outcome.”

“What of the others?”

“You recall the volcanic mountains I spoke of this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Within the caves beneath them, piles of endless treasure are hoarded by the red dragons. The fires they breathe are the hottest of all their kind, and their skin more heat-resistant. They aren’t hostile by nature, but are very withdrawn and have a fascination for objects of value. Try to steal their treasure and they will show no remorse.”

“Then why did one attack our ship?”

Ardall paused. “I wish I could answer that, Breetor, but to be honest, I don’t know.”

Breetor had seen green and red dragons before, helping to fight The Ultimate Evil. He didn’t like to

speak of those times, but did speak of another tale. “There was a man I met, one who also wielded an unusual weapon. He mentioned that it was created for him by two dragons. One was blue and lived in water. The other was silver, and could spit lightning.”

“Ah,” Ardall grinned. “You know a little of the blue and silver dragons? Very well. I shall speak first of the blues. As you said, they live in the sea, and are unique among their kind. Their wings are smaller, so they aren’t able to fly as swiftly, but they have gills as well as lungs, enabling them to breathe both in and out of water.”

“Just like the mer-folk?”

“Just like the mer-folk. They aren’t able to breathe fire like the others, but are able to send forth the air in their lungs like a gale. This, they can do both in and out of water, though it’s said to be far more destructive beneath. Their bodies are longer and more slender than the other dragons. I dare say they’re less like a lizard and more like a snake. I cannot tell you much about their personality traits, but those who’ve better observed blue dragons often say they are calm and peaceful. There have been instances where they’ve been provoked but chose to flee rather than fight, even

when their provokers wouldn't stand a chance."

"They're pacifists?"

"So the stories suggest, but there have been accounts of them fighting other dragons, making it clear they will defend themselves."

"What of the silver ones?"

"The silver dragons dwell in the highest mountains of this land. Their dwellings are said to touch the clouds themselves. Do not ask me how or why, but they breathe surges of lightning rather than fire."

Breeter nodded; it matched the tale he was told.

"They are also said to be the fastest fliers out of their kind, often referred to by men as *sky dragons*," Ardall continued. "They act as enforcers among dragons, actively preventing their kin from mingling with the lives and affairs of other species. Other dragons view them with scorn, but we are thankful for their existence. It is because of them that dragon attacks upon humans are rare."

"If their affinity is lightning," Breeter said, "how could a blue dragon and a silver dragon have created an artefact of ice?"

Ardall shrugged and shook her head. "That is beyond my knowledge. Have you seen this ice artefact

for yourself?"

"Yes. It's a bow, wielded by one who has mastered many ways to use it."

Ardall stroked her lower lip. "Interesting. A tale you might wish to share with the rest of us another time, perhaps?"

Breeter smiled warmly.

"Next," Ardall continued, "I shall speak of the dreaded black dragons."

"Black dragons," Breeter said. "One of them is a part of the same tale involving the ice bow I spoke of. You say *dreaded*, and from what I've heard, I shan't disagree."

"Indeed. The black dragons are hateful of all species other than their own. It is them, and the caves they live in towards the land's north, that we must avoid. Out of all the dragons, they are the most aggressive. If you see one, you better hope it doesn't spot you, for a black dragon will kill you just for being lesser.

"Lastly, there is an ancient myth among the people in this land of a gold dragon."

"A gold dragon? Only one?"

"No one knows where it came from, but those who've seen it claim to have never seen a sight so

magnificent. It has never been spotted harming anyone, and is also said to be larger than any dragon ever seen.”

“Is there any proof of this gold dragon?”

“Unfortunately not.”

Breetor sighed. A part of him doubted the creature even existed. He moved on: “I heard a dragon’s flesh is weaker around the belly.”

“That is a known fact,” Ardall replied. “But it makes them no less difficult to slay. No man in this land has been known to fell one.”

Breetor looked upon the Saviour Sword he’d placed at the side of the tent. “I don’t intend to be the first, but if I must defend myself, I’ll at least try.”

Ardall’s brow lowered. “You still believe they can help you go home?”

Breetor returned his gaze to the shaman. “Have you thought of another way?”

Ardall paused, before moving beside Breetor and grasping one of his hands. “Please cast away these foolish desires of confronting these creatures. Omivar spoke of your fears that they’re hunting those from outside lands. There is no knowledge about dragons being particularly hostile towards outsiders, but why

take that chance?”

Breetor withdrew his hand. “I must, Ardall. There may be no other way home.”

Ardall sighed. “Then let me speak of the chimeras, once one of the most dangerous beasts in this land, now at the brink of extinction. They weren’t the largest of beasts, being smaller than the wyverns and hydras, but were a greater threat to our kind than those. They resembled a large lion, with a second neck growing out their back, bearing the head of a goat. Further, their tail was like a snake.”

Breetor gulped at the description—they certainly sounded like strange creatures.

“But what made them so deadly,” Ardall continued, “was their nigh-invincibility. Their flesh regenerated twice as swiftly as a hydra’s. Entire bands of human hunters have failed to slay even a single chimera.”

“Do the methods used against hydras not work against chimeras?”

“No. Their regeneration is too fast. Their lion head is also capable of breathing fire just like the dragons.”

“Then what happened to these creatures? Why are they almost extinct?”

“In fights with other species, the chimeras have

been known to always outlast their adversaries. In the past, they have defeated hydras, wyverns, and even griffins, despite being smaller and weaker. This caused their confidence to grow. They desired to be known as the strongest in this land. And so, the chimeras challenged the dragons. They made attacks on our kind, and a silver dragon arrived to stop them, as expected. Together, a large group of chimeras killed the silver dragon, but with great losses of their own.

“The largest of the silvers visited the chimeras. Many believe the chimeras realised their folly, having struggled so hard to bring down just one dragon, knowing that they wouldn’t stand a chance against the rest. It is not known what passed between those chimeras and the dragon, except that the silver dragons left them alone after this meeting.

“But it wasn’t just the silvers whose attention they drew. The black dragons, hearing that the chimeras had wanted to challenge their kind, roamed the land attacking all chimera dwellings. They never stood a chance, and that is why there are very few alive today.”

Breitor was silent, lowering his eyes. If he had to defend himself against a dragon, would it be wise to fight? Even if he succeeded in slaying one, would the

black dragons retaliate the same way towards humans? Would they even spread their wrath upon the lands beyond?

“I ... understand now why I must never kill one,” he muttered. “But that is not my objective. They understand our words, correct? Even if we cannot understand theirs? The man with the ice bow said as much.”

“If you find a dragon which doesn’t want to communicate with you, how will you defend yourself?”

Breitor suddenly smiled. “Did you not see my sword’s barriers?”

“You think it can repel a dragon’s fires?”

“It can repel anything, Ardall. This sword belonged to a—” Breitor cut himself off. Was it wise to mention how he came to bear the Saviour Sword? The people of this land knew nothing about the gods of his people.

Ardall clutched both of Breitor’s hands. Caught off-guard, he met her gaze. Her hazel irises reflected the light of the fire, and Breitor realised how beautiful they were.

“It’s not just that I don’t want you to seek dragons,” she said. “I don’t want you to leave at all. Stay with me tonight, Breitor. With your power, you can lead

the tribe with me. The others already respect you, but most importantly ...”

Ardall’s lips were upon Breetor’s. His eyes widened. Time seemed to stop, but the Psykorian king did not return the kiss.

Ardall drew back. “You hesitate still?”

“I—I have a wife back home,” Breetor replied. “She is the reason I am unwilling to leave my old life behind.”

“I see,” Ardall said, seating herself down again, trying to keep her face aloof, betrayed only by her reddening cheeks. As though to hide her embarrassment, she hurriedly tried to resume the conversation. “To be honest, if you’d come here several years prior, you might’ve seen a dragon by now.”

Breetor paused awkwardly, trying to gauge how much his reaction might have embarrassed the shaman.

“Breetor?” Ardall pressed, irritated by his silence.

Breetor shook himself off. “What happened back then?”

“A war,” Ardall replied with wide eyes, and spoke quickly, diving into a new topic: “It is because of this war that the griffin you saw days ago was filled with

sadness. It was a war between dragons. We believe it started because of what happened to the chimeras. The black and silver dragons have been at odds since anyone could remember. But this time, there was no turning back. They wanted to destroy one another until their rivals were wiped off this world for good.

“It was a war which devastated our lands during its years. Other creatures were caught in the crossfire, even griffins. No one knows how it ended, but it caused the green and red dragons to leave for a time. We first thought they’d gone forever, but they returned several years later. The dragon war had ended by this point. The blues, however, haven’t been sighted in our seas since.”

Breetor tried to follow. He noted how the green and red dragons left around the same time they were spotted helping his people in their war. The conflict between the black and silver wasn’t what caused them to leave; they left to battle a greater threat which would’ve destroyed their own land too had it not been stopped. However, important the details, though, it wasn’t quite enough to distract him from Ardall’s kiss.

“Ardall,” he said. “Before we continue, can you promise to keep what you did here tonight a secret

from the rest of your tribe? Especially Omivar.”

Ardall’s brow twitched. “Of—of course.” Her cheeks reddened again, and though she stayed composed, there was more irritation in her voice.

Breitor bowed his head in thanks, and attempted to resume the conversation, “How did the dragon war end?”

“No one knows for sure, but it took a huge toll on both sides. Very few black and silver dragons remain. No one has seen a silver dragon since, and the black dragons have retreated to their caves. They’ve been spotted, but none would dare approach.”

“So, this land’s greatest enforcers are gone,” Breitor said. “But so too is its greatest threat.”

“Perhaps,” Ardall said. “It wasn’t just dragons who were killed during that war. Many other creatures perished, and some dwellings were destroyed for good. This land lacks the harmony it once had. Dragon sightings were a marvel, and if we saw a black one, we knew a silver would be close by. Such sightings are rare now.”

Breitor was silent. If the griffins were viewed as royalty, the dragons were like gods.

“Breitor,” Ardall continued. “You’ve got enough

answers tonight, so let me ask you something. What is it about your wife that makes you so desperate to go home? Have we not been good to you here?”

Breitor’s brow lowered, and he stood. “Thank you, Ardall. I think that’ll be all this night.”

Ardall rose, again taking hold of Breitor’s hand. “I told you, Breitor, I won’t let you embark on such a foolish errand. I know you have a wife back home, and if I thought it were possible to help you return, I would do so. I assure you, dragons are not the answer, especially if it’s true that they’re hunting outsiders. Cast away these memories of your old home. Stay with us. If you don’t, you’ll only spend the rest of your life lamenting what you no longer have. You must forget your old home. You must forget your wife.”

Breitor’s teeth clenched. He snatched his hand away from Ardall’s grasp. “You speak like betraying one’s own heart is such a simple task. I can assure you, doing so is a much harder quest than seeking dragons.”

Ardall’s head lowered. Her next words came out low. “Breitor, if you cannot cast away your desire to find dragons, then ... then ...” She raised her eyes, now welling with tears. “I cannot let you remain with our tribe.” Her next words were filled with anger. “If you

do invoke the dragons' wrath, and they learn of your association with us, who do you think they'll come after next?"

Ardall dropped to her knees, weeping. Gently, Breetor placed a hand on her shoulder the same way she always did to him. "I understand, Ardall, far more than you think. I will leave the tribe tomorrow. Please take care of Omivar for me."

To Breetor's surprise, Ardall slapped his hand away aggressively. Fury was in her eyes. "Then go, Breetor. I hope you do find dragons, and that they gobble you up for your foolishness."

CHAPTER 8 THE LONE DRAGON

Breetor cut his sleep short to pack his things. Sunrise approached. The camp was quiet. He only took from provisions he'd caught himself during hunts. Once the supplies were ready, Breetor changed out of his Sikkar tribe attire for the last time, donning the same gold pauldrons and red cloak he'd worn during the voyage. He left everything the Sikkar tribe gave him inside the tent.

Sunlight shone through the gaps between distant mountains. Would he find dragons there? Recalling what Ardall told him last night, the greens resided in the south-eastern hills, the reds in the volcanic areas, the silvers, if any yet remained, in the highest mountains, and the blacks in the caves north. The blacks should be avoided, and after what happened

to the ship, the reds couldn't be trusted. Climbing mountains would be difficult, even if the silvers remained there, so the best choice was to venture south-east and find the greens.

He left when the sentries weren't looking, attracting as few eyes as possible. Once outside, Breetor took one last look back at the camp. The tribe had been kind but his calling was not with them. He took out Aurandria's locket, rubbing it in his hands. He longed to hold her in his arms.

The hours passed and Breetor came upon familiar lands from previous hunts and forages. However, the fields were empty, even of livestock. There were tracks, but Breetor didn't want to get distracted; it was dragons he sought, not prey.

He spent his first night beneath a protruding rock-face hidden behind larger stones. Sleep was interrupted by growling manticores. He'd long grown used to these creatures, and sliced the Saviour Sword through the first attacker. When a second followed, Breetor quickly severed its claw. The creature wailed, backing away as blood poured.

A larger manticore stepped forward. Light glowed around the Saviour Sword's blade. When the creature

pounced, a beam blasted forth. A hole burned through the manticore's body and it dropped to the ground like a log.

Nudging the alpha's carcass with their paws, the others realised he was slain, and fled.

When they were gone, Breetor took up his belongings and parted. Had he been a sounder sleeper, the beasts would've had him for sure.

*

Most of the areas Breetor expected to have food were empty, having been harvested in earlier hunts or by other tribes. Worse, though, was finding reliable places to sleep. Breetor picked areas he thought would make good camping spots back in his lands, but the manticores always found him. If he'd fully slept, he would've been eaten by now, but his first night taught him to keep his senses alert even during rest. Fighting off the manticores proved easy thanks to the Saviour Sword, but the restless nights were taking a toll.

A war-cry filled the air.

Breetor woke beneath moonlight; his body had finally given in to fatigue and forced a deeper slumber. Manticores surrounded him, but it was they who were being hunted. Human hunters leapt from

all directions, thrusting with spears. The manticores turned and attacked and the hunters broke away.

Breetor rose. Had these hunters not attacked, the manticores would've finally got him. He called out in an attempt to garner the beasts' attention. He lifted the Saviour Sword and a sphere of white energy surrounded the manticores.

"It's me you want, isn't it?" Breetor called. "Come and get me."

The manticores attacked and, like so many before them, fell before the Saviour Sword. Only when it was done did Breetor lower his barrier. The hunters emerged from their hiding places.

"Thank you," Breetor said, "I would've—" He went silent after noticing that they were of the Sikkar tribe. Their faces bore no glee.

Ardall stepped forward, with Omivar alongside her. Omivar's expression was similar to the other hunters, but Ardall's was one of relief.

"Breetor!" she said, rushing forward.

The shaman hugged him, but Breetor's face turned grim. "I thought you wanted the dragons to eat me?"

Ardall drew back. "No, Breetor. I—I was just angry, that's all. I—I wouldn't want any harm to befall you."

"If it were up to us," said Omivar, "we wouldn't have bothered comin' to bring you back from this foolishness. When men fight manticores, men die. Haven't you noticed that already? The rest of us don't have a godly sword like yours."

Several hunters had fallen before Breetor conjured his barrier. They'd only tracked him under Ardall's order, not because they wanted to.

"You didn't need to do this," Breetor told her.

"Yes we did. Those manticores would've killed you had we not. You don't know the lands well enough, nor the best places to camp and harvest during different seasons. You may fight better than any man here, but you cannot survive without our guidance."

"I won't turn away from my quest, Ardall. I'm going to find the dragons."

"I know, and I understand nothing will sway you from your goal."

"We don't wanna be here," said Omivar, "and there's no way we'll help you confront a dragon. But Ardall insists that we accompany you for now, until we see the hills where they reside."

"We shan't go closer than that," Ardall continued. "Once the hills are in sight, that is where we'll part."

“Very well. Lead the way.”

*

It was a windy day. Whistles echoed as the breeze whooshed through luscious grass. To the left was a rocky mountain range, and on the right an endless plain.

“I wasn’t heading in the right direction?” Breetor asked, resting his hands upon the hair of his horse.

“No,” Ardall replied. “You were going east, but not to towards the green dragons’ hills.”

Breetor sighed; he was such a useless wayfarer. “Are we near?”

“Not yet. It’ll take at least another three or four days. I will point out the hills when they are in sight.”

Since rejoining the tribe, manticores hadn’t hindered Breetor’s sleep, and finding supplies was easier.

A huge shadow passed over the party.

Its shape was not unfamiliar: large wings, a long tail, and a lizard-like head. Its body was riddled with scales as green as grass, its underbelly beige like pale sand. The tip of its tail was shaped like an arrow, with darker green crests rising over the back all the way up its spine.

The entire party were silent as the creature flew into the mountains, before descending beyond the rocky rise. A faint thud followed.

For moments, there was silence.

“Was that...?” a stunned Breetor murmured.

“Yes,” replied Ardall.

“So we *are* close?”

“We’re not. I don’t know what a green dragon is doing this far west.”

More silence. Being so close to a dragon, Breetor didn’t want to pass up the opportunity. The green dragons, much like the one they’d seen, were the most sociable and trusting towards other species. In an instant, his fears disappeared.

Breetor dismounted his horse and approached the mountains.

“Breetor, what are you doing?” Ardall called out, sharp but hushed.

Breetor ignored her and continued onwards. The others lacked the courage to follow, knowing what waited beyond.

*

The mountains weren’t high, and several passes lay around their bases. Breetor chose directions based

purely on instinct. It had been morning when he separated from the Sikkar tribe. He trekked between the rocks and climbed over surfaces. Breetor then looked to the sky. It was past noon.

His wits suddenly returned. What was he doing? What did he hope to achieve by pursuing a dragon? How was he going to convince it to bring him home?

Looking back, only the faces of more mountains lay behind.

A deep grunt sounded from ahead.

There was a small arch with a man-sized hole. Through it, all he could see was more rock.

A huge green scale whipped past the gap. Heavy footsteps echoed from beyond.

Making his steps as quiet as possible, Breetor cautiously approached the hole. Looking through, he couldn't see the dragon anywhere. He cursed his luck and crawled forth, just barely able to fit. He glared around the bend. The dragon was lying on its belly, chin rested against the ground, its face pointing his way. Its eyes were closed, but numerous horns sprouted from its head, a darker shade of green than its scales. Two longer ones pointed skyward, four on each side of its head. The crest lining its tail and spine reached

all the way to its scalp. Steam lightly emitted from its nostrils. To Breetor's surprise, its breaths were quiet for something its size.

The dragon's eyelids rose, revealing yellow eyes with black slit-like pupils. Breetor froze. A few seconds beneath the dragon's glare seemed like minutes. Even the Saviour Sword in his hand did nothing to embolden him. Breetor's heart caught in his chest, his body as rigid as the mountains around him.

The dragon closed its eyes again, unconcerned with the human before it. A sense of relief washed over Breetor.

*

Breetor stayed with the dragon for the day, watching the creature snooze. For a while he dared not move. When his legs ached too much, he slowly sat on a smooth rock. His eyes barely left the beast.

Sunset arrived. Because of the mountains around them, it quickly grew dark. Breetor's stomach growled; he hadn't brought food.

The dragon stirred. It rose without straightening completely. Breetor's froze at how huge the creature was. Its mouth alone was more than large enough to gobble him whole.

Before sundown, the dragon flew over one of the mountains. Breetor considered following, but the creature swiftly returned, bringing something wrapped in its tail. The object was flung forward. Breetor flinched. A fresh cow carcass landed with a thud, stopping just short of him.

After a deep breath, flames gushed from the dragon's mouth. Breetor winced, but the flames never touched him. At first he smelt smoke, then cooked meat. When the fires disappeared, the cow had been roasted.

Breetor expected the dragon to devour the cow whole. Instead, it lay back down and closed its eyes. When Breetor didn't move, the creature's eyes opened again. A grumbling sound came from the creature's throat as it signalled to the carcass with its nose.

Breetor gestured with his hands as he replied. "It's for me?"

The dragon gave a single nod and closed its eyes again.

Breetor's tummy rumbled, so he approached the roasted cow. Unsheathing a knife from his boot, he cut the meat piece-by-piece, eating until his appetite was sated.

Being one man, he couldn't eat the entire cow by himself. When he was full, he leaned back and burped. Breetor wanted a drink, but the skin at his waist was empty. Instead, he simply watched the amazing creature before him.

*

Breetor struggled to sleep come dark. It wasn't because of the hard surface beneath him, but the thoughts on his mind. Should he ask the dragon to take him home already? Or should he stay with him and learn all he could before making such a request? The beast was clearly intelligent, and had the courtesy to feed him.

Someone called his name in a sharp whisper. "Breetor!"

Ardall peered through the hole, with Omivar and another hunter shivering in terror at her flanks.

"Breetor?" Ardall continued. "What are you doing here?"

Breetor looked towards the sleeping dragon. He recalled being unable to see the creature from the other side of the hole.

"The dragon is here," he whispered, signalling right.

The others stared. "Has it agreed to your pact?"

Ardall whispered back.

“I haven’t asked yet, but I shall in time. For now, I will learn more about this creature. It is as you described their kind. Peaceful and sociable. When I was hungry, the dragon gave me a roasted cow.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of staying out here overnight, are you?”

Breitor took one more look at the dragon. “I am, Ardall. I think I’ve made a new friend.”

CHAPTER 9 A BOND GROWS

A mighty whoosh passed through the air. Breitor hastily rose. The dragon landed with a deafening thud, before greeting its companion with a nod. After moments of hesitation, the statue-still Breitor returned the gesture.

The dragon turned its yellow eyes upon the roasted cow, which was now swarming with flies. Breitor flinched when the beast growled, letting steamy air gush from its nostrils. Not only was the meat reheated, but the flies were driven away. With its eyes back upon Breitor, the dragon signalled towards the meat.

Breitor touched it with a finger. Drawing his knife, he cut off another chunk. It tasted almost as good as yesterday.

“Thank you,” he said. “I come from another land.

My ship was carried here by a storm. Do you understand me?”

The dragon acknowledged his words.

“Have you any way of speaking?”

With a low growl lacking any hostility, the dragon shook his head.

Breitor used hand gestures as he continued. “Your kind has been to my land before. Not long ago, many green dragons went there. You helped us kill a monster which threatened to destroy our entire world. Do you know what I speak of?”

Another nod.

“Were you one of the survivors?”

The dragon paused, lowering its gaze, then shook its head.

Breitor was confused. “No? Then not all your kind came to aid us?”

The dragon grumbled a sad sound without giving a direct response. Breitor asked again, but was cut off mid-sentence by a sharp roar. His heart almost stopped. Had he made the dragon angry?

The dragon’s expression softened, and a low grumbling echoed. Its mannerisms seemed contrite.

“Are you apologising?”

The dragon moved its head softly.

“Why are you out here alone?”

The creature grumbled uncomfortably. Breitor realised the futility of trying to gain a complex answer from a beast that couldn’t speak. He grunted with frustration, scratching the back of his head.

The dragon lowered its head. Breitor was startled, but the creature started signalling. First, it pointed its nose towards the sky, then to the space behind Breitor. Behind him was more mountain.

“The sky?” Breitor asked.

The dragon shook its head.

Breitor looked upward again, and at the powerful light gleaming upon him. “The sun?”

This time, the dragon gestured with relief in its eyes. Breitor looked towards the mountain behind, then back at the dragon.

“The sun behind the mountain?”

The dragon rolled its eyes, pausing a moment, before tilting its head left and right. Breitor understood the gesture; he was partially right. He took one more look at the mountain when another thought occurred.

“Is that way east?”

The dragon told Breitor he was right.

“Sunrise?”

The dragon’s response was deeper. Breetor smiled, marvelling at his success. The dragon started gesturing again. First, it gestured its front legs towards itself, then at its own wings, giving them two light flaps. Finally, the dragon pointed its nose towards the remains of the reheated roast cow.

“So, at sunrise,” Breetor started. “Yourself?” He posed the last word like a question. “Went for a fly? To catch more cows?”

At that last sentence, the dragon gave the same gesture about Breetor being only half right.

Breetor paused, looking at the roast cow. “To eat?”

The dragon gave another nod.

“So at sunrise, you went out to eat?”

The dragon grumbled happily. Breetor grinned, knowing he was making progress. Communication wasn’t impossible after all. He could learn much from this incredible creature.

*

Days came and went. With every passing hour, Breetor’s comfort with the dragon grew. His fear of the creature eventually vanished. The dragon understood his words far better than he could its mannerisms. Nonetheless,

where Breetor would’ve once spent hours trying to understand a single sentence, they were soon having day-long discussions.

At first their discussions were casual, almost like the stories Breetor exchanged with the Sikkar tribe. The dragon listened more than it tried to respond, and mostly communicated trivial things like what it wanted to hunt the next day, and how the other creatures reacted beneath its shadow.

The dragon hunted three times a day. When the first roast cow was finished, it tossed Breetor another one. As much as Breetor enjoyed the roast meat, after eating similar things for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day, he started to forage from the fields around the valley to help vary his meals.

*

After countless days with the dragon, Breetor built a simple log cabin to shelter himself from rain. The dragon often slept beside it, further warming him up.

This morning, Breetor stood outside that shelter, using the reflection of his sword as a mirror while using a smaller blade to shave the beard growing on his face.

“Is it all right for me to ask about your kind?” he

said. “About why dragons of different colours dwell in different parts of this land? And why, for example, all silver dragons like to protect others, while all black ones wish to dominate them?”

The green dragon grumbled. A sharp roar was its way of saying it didn’t like the topic. Fortunately, the dragon did no such thing now, and started gesturing.

It took Breetor some time to put the dragon’s gestures into words, but he learned that each type of dragon had their own monarch who made such decisions. The monarchs were only hostile toward one another when there was a disagreement with the other’s kind, like there was between the silvers and the blacks.

“What stance did your kind take in their war?” Breetor asked.

The dragon explained that the greens remained neutral. They rarely interfered with the disagreements of the other dragons, however destructive a war between them might be.

“What of your decision to help in Psykoria? How did you even know of our troubles?”

The dragon paused, dwelling on how to respond. It signalled to itself.

Combining gestures to itself and the objects around, the dragon spoke of one particular dragon. Pointing its snout towards the golden hilt of Breetor’s sword, he soon realised what it was telling him.

Breetor’s next words came out as a whisper. “The gold dragon ...”

The gold dragon, the only one of its kind, who lorded over all others, sensed the danger in the other lands. It led the green, red, and blue dragons to face the beast. The revelation of the blues’ involvement surprised Breetor; no one in the Slykan Union had seen them, for their fight was under the sea. More must’ve been going on under the continent’s waters than humans knew.

The creature’s snout signalled the hilt of Breetor’s sword again. Upon the dragons’ return, the gold stopped the fighting that had been raging between the silvers and the blacks, then had them punished for their foolish conflict which devastated the land. Not only did it heavily reduce the dragon population, but other creatures were killed too. As punishment, both monarchs were sealed away. The silvers had been losing the war and were almost extinct, while the blacks stayed in hiding, constantly trying to free their

monarch.

“Of the green dragons, are you the monarch?”

The dragon shook its head. It then signalled with its wings wide and limbs spread; its way of saying *big*. The dragon monarchs were larger than their subjects.

That was all Breetor learned that day, but during another discussion he questioned the dragon about its kind. Dragons were few because their females took years to give birth, and even longer to become fertile again. The dragon war and their aid in his lands only further reduced their numbers. They did, however, have incredibly long lifespans.

One night, as the dragon slumbered, Breetor gazed towards the stars above. He was reminded of Aurandria once again, prompting him to take out her locket. He muttered her name and vowed anew: come morning, he must ask the dragon to take him home.

*

With Aurandria on his mind, sleep hadn't come easily. Breetor emerged nervously; how would the dragon react to his request?

While eating his breakfast, he considered his approach. Should he ask immediately, or get a better idea of the dragon's disposition?

Finishing his meal, Breetor emboldened himself. “I have a question for you today. Have you ever left this island?”

The dragon glanced back at Breetor, before shaking its head.

“Have you ever wanted to leave it?”

The dragon's eyes narrowed curiously.

Breetor changed his approach. “Have any of your kin ever wanted to move elsewhere?”

The dragon gave a sharp roar, startling Breetor; it wanted to change the topic.

Recomposing himself, Breetor rubbed his fingers against the locket. He couldn't give up now. “To be honest, I am eager to return to my homeland. I have a wife back there, and other obligations. I had been hoping you'd be able to take me home.”

The dragon stared back at Breetor silently.

“I understand if you don't want to leave, but I must find a way home. If not you, are there more of your kin who might be willing to make the journey?”

The dragon roared loudly this time — not just trying to change the topic, but angry.

Realising his fault, Breetor stepped back. “Apologies,” he said. “I—I didn't mean to upset you,

I just—”

The dragon turned away, grumbling, before flapping its wings and taking to the sky. Breetor watched the magnificent creature soar ever higher until it was out of sight. His last hope of returning to Psykoria had gone.

*

An hour passed, and Breetor remained in the valley alone. He wasn't sure if the dragon would return, so he packed his things and prepared to leave. Should he seek the same dragon, or find another? Would it even be safe to find a different one? They might not be as hospitable as the first. Maybe he should find the green dragon monarch. Would the kings among them be more sympathetic with his cause?

Breetor trekked south-east. He still had provisions, a mixture of those given to him by the Sikkar tribe and the dragon. He wasn't too confident in wayfaring, but had little choice.

By sunset, he had moved in the opposite direction from the sun, but also bore right. This led him to a swamp. Undeterred, Breetor trekked through the bogs, seeking where the marsh was hardest. The sound of birds grew distant; the only noise left was his trudging

steps. The stench was unpleasant, but wasn't harsh enough to gag a seasoned warrior like him.

The swamplands led to a valley between two cliffs. As he followed the bend, the ground grew soggy, caking Breetor's legs in mud from the knees down. His muscles ached, so he leaned against the cliff face and took a rest. Breetor wanted to sit, but there was nothing around him but bog. The path ahead led to two openings. Breetor glimpsed movement in one. Squinting, he watched.

A sound came from behind.

The light beyond the valley was blocked. Breetor returned to where the path bent—something noisily trudged through the swampy waters. As silently as he could, Breetor unsheathed the Saviour Sword.

A scaly head peered round the bend, then roared in Breetor's face.

Startled, Breetor swung the Saviour Sword. The severed head dropped into the swamp. He watched it where it lay, decaying rapidly before his eyes. The creature stepped into full view. A hydra, with three remaining heads, now one was cut off.

As the fallen head withered, two new skeletal necks burst out of the neck wound. Muscle and bone formed

before Breetor's eyes, soon coated with tissue, flesh and scales much like the others. Where the hydra had four heads, it now had five.

Breetor didn't want to fight the creature, especially in this marsh. However, escape would be difficult here.

The hydra attacked, lashing with three of its heads. Raising the Saviour Sword, Breetor conjured a barrier. The attacks rebounded, making the hydra's other heads roar.

More trudging came from behind. A second hydra approached from the direction of the two paths. Breetor had nowhere to run, cut off from both sides.

He turned to the closer beast, his sword glowing with light; he must slay the first before the second could reach him. The Saviour Sword absorbed the barrier's light, then shot forth a beam. The hydra launched its next attack, but light blasted through the beast's body.

The hydra staggered, a gaping hole spewing blood from its chest. Breetor's sword glowed again. Before he could attack again, the beast lunged forward, the wound in its chest closing back up. Breetor conjured a barrier. The hydra's heads slammed into the glowing orb.

The other hydra was closing in. Breetor had to finish the first—and fast.

He repelled more attacks, then saw his opening. Lowering his barrier, Breetor lunged forward. The Saviour Sword drove through the beast's body.

The hydra roared as divine energies roasted its insides. The creature pulled itself free from the sword and swept out a head. Breetor blocked with his weapon's blade and the hydra's jaw was severed. The head recoiled. Breetor closed in again. The hole in the hydra's chest was slower to regenerate now; the aether energies had caused much burning. Confidently, Breetor attacked again, but something struck the back of his leg.

Breetor fell to a knee, losing grip of the Saviour Sword. The other hydra had caught up; were it closer, it might've bitten off his leg. Breetor reached for his sword, but the jawless heads lowered in front of it, already healing. It wasn't jawless much longer.

Another roar sounded. The hydras' heads turned upward as a shadow crossed the valley.

"It's you..." Breetor muttered, recognising the larger beast immediately.

The green dragon swept down, grabbing one

hydra by the body and flying up out of the swamp. The other was startled, backing away from Breetor. Hurling its victim upward, the dragon breathed flames. Even as the hydra fell, the dragon caught it in its jaw again. Trapped, the multi-headed beast was further scorched. It wailed—damaged but not dead. The dragon slammed the hydra against the top of the cliff, cracking its bones. Flames engulfed it totally, turning the muddy creature charcoal black. Its ashes erupted like a volcano.

The dragon landed in the valley, cutting off the other hydra from Breetor. The hydra was already backing away. A roar from the dragon caused it to flee entirely. The dragon stood guard over Breetor until the multi-headed beast was out of sight.

“Thank you,” Breetor muttered.

The dragon grumbled, before signalling away from the valley. They must leave.

*

Once away from the swamp, the dragon led Breetor to a lake, where he replenished his water and washed away the dirt from the marsh. When the dragon flew ahead, Breetor followed its direction, again reminded of his foolishness in travelling alone.

They returned to the rocky valley, and the cabin. Opening the door, Breetor returned his gaze to the dragon.

“I apologise,” he said. “I—I didn’t know if you were coming back. You left so abruptly, and were in such a bad mood. I thought ... I thought you were gone for good.”

The dragon grumbled again, before laying its head down to rest.

“It won’t happen again.”

The dragon let out a short puff.

Entering his cabin, Breetor was so exhausted from his perilous trek that he quickly settled to sleep.

*

Someone faintly whispered his name, waking Breetor. Ardall was peering through his cabin’s window. Outside, the dragon was sound asleep.

“Breetor,” Ardall whispered again. “Is everything all right here?”

“Yes. I’m actually surprised to see you so close.”

“The others are waiting beyond. They wouldn’t dare come closer, but I had to check on you.”

“I’m fine, Ardall. I... I’ve actually befriended the dragon. I learned much about their kind, more than

you were able to tell me.”

Ardall looked back in disbelief. “Really?”

“Yes. It told me the gold dragon really exists, and was responsible for stopping the war between the silvers and the blacks.”

Ardall paused. “Are you sure you’re all right staying here by yourself? Do you know the way back?”

Breitor grinned. “I do not know the way back, but the dragon does, and I’m sure it’ll be willing to guide me if I asked. But thank you anyway. I’ll be better off communicating with the dragon alone. It might not be so trusting if others were to watch.”

“Very well, Breitor, but there is one last favour I have of you. Could you record anything you learn of the dragon’s language, the same way I noted down words I know of yours?”

Breitor sighed. “To be honest, Ardall, they don’t seem to have a verbal language. I just learned its mannerisms and motions, which aren’t too different from ours when speaking with a mute. I don’t know how I would document it.” Breitor suddenly had an idea. “Ardall, could you bring me the book you made on the Slykan language?”

“I have it here with me. I brought it in case you’d

already documented parts of the dragon’ language, and I might need it to help me translate.”

Breitor smiled. “Can I keep it for now? I have an idea which might make communication with the dragon much easier.”

Ardall was reluctant, but handed the book to Breitor. “Please don’t lose this.”

“I won’t.”

“Take care of yourself, Breitor. You’ve achieved amazing things since coming here. I’m sure your homeland misses your courage dearly.”

When Ardall left, Breitor quietly flicked through the pages of her book. Come morning, he would teach the dragon the Slykan alphabet.

CHAPTER 10 A MESSAGE FOR HOME

The sky was filled with lightning and rain. Fire illuminated the moon blood-red. Royal Sigrun's sentries were dying, shot down by flaming arrows and elemental attacks. The defenders fought back, but were quickly overwhelmed. Those they fought against were Psykorian, much like themselves, only their cloaks were not red, but a mixture of blue, green, purple, and orange.

Breitor woke, his hands drenched in sweat. The dragon slept outside his cabin. Moonlight gleamed from above while light raindrops hit his wooden roof. Morning hadn't yet come.

His dreams were worse each night; his anxiety was growing. "I really need to get home."

"Breitor!" someone whispered sharply.

Ardall was back. It had been a long time since Breitor last saw her, and he'd been hard at work teaching the dragon the Slykan alphabet since that day.

"We were passing by, so I decided to check on you. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," Breitor replied. "Ardall, can you do me a favour? I need to get a message back to my homeland."

"That ... can be achieved."

Breitor's eyebrows rose, having not expected such a simple response. "Really?"

Ardall nodded. "There is a—"

The dragon grumbled and moved, giving the shaman pause.

Breitor smiled, knowing his friend was simply stirring in its sleep. "Don't mind the dragon. Please continue."

"There is a bird, a very rare and prized one, but we have three in our camp, and had ventured here trying to catch a fourth, but it got away. I am willing to spare one to help you."

"A bird? Can a bird really get a message from here all the way back to my lands?"

“Yes, but it’ll need a scent.”

Breetor was bewildered—a bird requiring a scent? This land truly was filled with amazing creatures. With his focus on the larger beasts, he hadn’t noticed the smaller ones.

“Please come back at noon,” Breetor continued. “You may wait outside these mountains if you wish. I will return to the camp and we can better discuss things there. But first, I must tell the dragon of this venture. I ... made a promise to him, you see.”

Ardall smiled, before parting. Breetor looked back at his companion, hoping it’d have no problem with his brief departure. He tried settling back to sleep, but slumber hadn’t come easily. A civil war may have already broken out in Psykoria, but if things weren’t too late, even a simple letter might quench any possibility of war.

Sleep did eventually come, but another dream of conflict awaited.

*

Just like in the previous days, Breetor showed the dragon pages from Ardall’s book, speaking the words and showing his companion the characters representing each sound and syllable. He was surprised

how intently the great creature’s slit-like eyes scanned the pages. Though the dragon could undoubtedly understand human speech, the creature hadn’t known anything about human alphabets.

Only after Breetor finished his lunch did he muster the courage to speak of his plans. “Friend, I must make a short journey.” The dragon looked back curiously. “I must send a letter back to my homeland. I have a duty among them, and there is a chance they already think me dead. I must confirm to them that I am alive and well, lest bad things happen there.” Breetor lowered his head. “I hope you understand.”

The dragon’s snout lowered. Its eyes were narrow, showing its discomfort.

“I am not travelling alone. I’ll meet with some friends, the same ones who guided me around this land before I came here.”

The dragon suddenly roared—it was even less comfortable about Breetor meeting with others.

“You do not trust them?”

The dragon shook its head.

“They will not harm me, their leader cares about me too much.”

The next roar was different; the dragon didn’t

think them strong enough to keep Breetor safe.

“No, I am the one who’ll keep them safe, but with them, you can rest assured that I won’t be wandering into any hydra marshes.”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed, and a sharp puff came out its nostrils.

“I will return once it’s all over.”

Another roar: Breetor’s friends didn’t want him returning here.

He smiled. “No, they don’t, but they’ve already tried their best to stop me, and failed. I will be back, all right?”

The large creature’s temper flared. Its snout signalled towards the book; it hadn’t yet mastered its understanding of the Slykan alphabet, and looked forward to continuing.

“Yes,” Breetor replied. “We’ll pick up right where we left off when I return. Is that all right with you?”

The dragon lowered its head. With narrow eyes, it let out a puff. Regardless of Breetor’s reasons, it didn’t want him to leave, especially not with the Sikkar tribe.

Breetor looked to the sun directly above. “I must go. They’re waiting for me.”

The dragon roared angrily again, before signalling

sharply with its snout. It was telling Breetor to leave if he wished, but wasn’t hiding its displeasure. The creature then lay its head down.

Breetor sighed. “I will return here. I promise. I’ll leave the book, all right?”

The dragon’s eyes were shut. It was feigning sleep, but wasn’t fooling Breetor. Still, it gave no other response.

Saying nothing more, Breetor turned away, hesitantly crawling through the hole.

Once outside the mountains, he found Ardall, Omivar and several hunters camping.

“I’m glad you came,” Breetor said.

“We never left,” Ardall replied.

“Shall we?”

*

Rain fell as the day wore on. Breetor was drenched when he reached the camp. It was a different location to the one he’d been accustomed to. The camp was still surrounded by stake walls, but was in a vast woodland.

“You’ve moved camp?” he commented.

“Indeed,” Ardall replied. “We move to this camp during rainy seasons. It provides better shelter.”

“Why not just stay here all year round?”

“Two main reasons. The first, is that it gets awfully hot here during dry seasons, whereas our summer camp is located in a high plain where the winds are stronger. The second, is that this location is closer to manticore territory. Like I told you before, manticore attacks are rare at this time of year, but this location is dangerous during summer.”

Breitor scratched his thick mane. “Was I really with the dragon that long?”

Ardall smiled. “You spent less than one season with us, leaving just before the rain came. You’ve been gone throughout an entire cycle since.”

Surprised, Breitor turned away from Ardall. His presence was sparking discussions among the tribe folk.

“Are they angry at me?”

“No, quite the opposite, actually.”

A group of smiling children started chanting something. Indeed, there was no anger.

“To be honest,” Ardall continued as they walked, “I’m surprised you survived so long in the wild without food or shelter.”

“The dragon brought me food, and enough warmth to last me the nights.”

“Do you know what the children are calling you?”

Breitor shook his head.

“*Dragon tamer.*”

He chuckled. “That is not a name I’ll take home with me. You cannot tame something that is already sentient.”

Upon reaching Ardall’s tent, the shaman halted. “You’ve learned much of dragons these past months. Tell me, did you record anything of it?”

“There wasn’t anything to record. Sure, I learned to understand the dragon’s grunts and mannerisms, but I wouldn’t know where to start when documenting it.”

“Where is my book?”

“I left it with him.”

Ardall’s face turned to a glare. “Why would you do that?”

“He wasn’t happy when I left. It remains with him as assurance that I’ll return. I haven’t yet finished teaching him my alphabet.”

Ardall shrugged. “Very well, Breitor. I’m just glad you survived the ordeal. Our folk will be speaking stories of the great Dragon Tamer for generations, even after you leave. So, there is the matter of your message?”

“Yes, and this bird you mentioned.”

Ardall chuckled. “It’s called a long-beaked tern, a rare and valuable bird prized for its ability to fly great distances. I have no doubt one of them could safely deliver a message to your homeland.”

“Are you sure about parting with one of these valuable messengers? And even then, can it fly all the way to Psykoria? I mean, we are awfully isolated here. Who’s to say the bird doesn’t stray from its route and end up delivering the message elsewhere?”

“They are prized for more than just their ability to fly great distances. These birds have a very strong sense of smell. They are capable of picking up a scent and tracking it to its source. As long as you have something with a scent matching that of your homeland, the tern will find it for sure.”

Breitor paused. “I have nothing on my person which would give off such a scent.”

“What of your sword?”

Breitor shook his head. “My sword was not forged in my home city. Neither was my armour, for that matter. I don’t think ...”

Breitor went silent, remembering something with him that definitely originated in Royal Sigrun.

His words grew excited. “Can these birds track the scent of a person? As in, if that person were still alive, could they track them?”

“For sure, though only this person would receive the note, whether they be in your home city or not.”

“Yes,” Breitor continued. “I do have something for the bird to track.”

*

That evening, Breitor rode through the rain again. Ardall sat upon a white steed beside him, with a tribe member on her right steering a cart covered by a silk cloth. Beneath this cloth was a large cage, and in it the long-beaked tern.

Breitor had yet to glimpse the bird, having spent most of the night preparing his note. He’d chosen his words carefully:

Aurandria, I hope this letter reaches you intact.

Know first and foremost that our ships were hit by a legendary storm, and it was all I could do to use my sword’s power to keep us alive. I did not want to leave you, I never would, but I’ve been shipwrecked on an uncharted land with no definite way back.

I have made friends and seen things that in our

lands are regarded legend. I've seen a dragon, and you won't believe me if I tell you any more than that. This place is real, Aurandria, as real as every land in the Slykan Union.

I hope things are well there. You must do whatever you can to appease the unrest. If the nobility stirs because of my disappearance, show them this letter: they must know that I am alive and well, and that I shall return as soon as I can.

If there is already war, know that I will put an end to it upon my return, one way or another. I yearn to hold you once more, Aurandria, and even now, I am on the verge of seeking a way home. Every day, I think of the promise I made you. I intend to keep that promise, even if it's the last thing I do.

I will return to you, Aurandria, no matter what happens. I promise.

Breitor signed the letter, but it lacked the king's seal; all of the stamps he brought were destroyed when the ship was burned.

He travelled to the coast, and found the vessel was where they'd left it. The currents weren't strong so close to the island.

"This was your ship?" Ardall asked.

"Yes. Now, it is only a tomb for those who died when the dragon attacked."

Ardall and Omivar bowed their heads in silence.

"Is the bird ready?" Breitor finally asked.

Ardall nodded, before turning towards the handler and telling him something in their native tongue. A veil was removed, exposing the large cage.

The bird wasn't as big as expected; most crows in Psykoria were larger. Its body was long and lean, its wings pointed at their tips but proportionately large.

The handler grabbed the bird, his thumbs resting gently upon the sharp-feathered ochre-brown wings with patches of black, whilst the rest of his fingers curled carefully around its white belly. Breitor passed him the canister bearing his note, which Ardall carefully tucked into a brace around the bird's right foot.

"Breitor, the scent?"

Taking a deep breath, Breitor reached into his pocket and pulled out the dusty golden locket. Opening it carefully, he showed Ardall the strands of smooth golden hair, tied together by a thin red brooch.

"Please be careful with it," he said.

Ardall was irked, but took it gently. She raised the hair to the bird's long, pointy brown beak. It unnerved Breetor to see it digging through the bundle of hair. Regardless, he said nothing as the small creature picked up the scent with its long slit-like nostrils.

Moments later, the small creature raised its head, looking towards the distance. The handler said something, which Ardall translated: "He has the scent."

"Good," Breetor replied. "He will take this message to my wife?"

"Yes."

"Then let him fly."

Ardall signalled to the handler, and the tern was released into the distance, flying faster than any bird Breetor had ever seen.

Watching it leave, Breetor grew anxious. Would the bird really reach Psykoria? Was it already too late to stop the conflict? If the realm was now at war, would someone shoot it down, thinking the message was from a foe? Shaking himself off, he cast these worries aside.

"What will you do now?" Ardall asked.

Hiding his emotions but for a single tear, Breetor

let out a deep breath. He did not intend to speak his next words aloud, but they came: "I want to go home."

Ardall was irritated. "That's not what I meant. Will you come back with us, or do you intend to return to the dragon?"

Breetor smiled. "You already know the answer to that, Ardall."

The shaman frowned. "You still think this dragon will return you home?"

"I don't know, but my communication with it has improved. We communicate effortlessly now. Even if this dragon isn't the answer, when it learns our language, it might be able to help me figure out another way."

Ardall scoffed. "Didn't you say the dragon was unhappy when you wanted to meet with us?"

"Yes, but ..." Breetor paused.

Ardall tilted her head. "But what, Breetor?"

He met the shaman's hazel eyes once more. "Its main concern was exactly this, that you'd try to stop me from returning to him."

This time, it was Omivar who scoffed. "Leave him. Let him find his own way back, if he's that eager to get himself killed."

Breetor frowned at Omivar. When they first set out from Psykoria, the youngster had been shy to even talk to him, but now he wasn't afraid to voice his displeasure.

Ardall snorted, though. "Come, Breetor. We pass the valley on the way back. And next time, don't leave my book behind."

*

An uneasy silence filled the air. Gone were the days of chatter Breetor once shared with Omivar and Ardall. Even the other hunters were uncomfortable speaking their own tongue while Breetor was near. It was a relief for all when the valley finally came into view.

"This is where we part, Breetor," Ardall said.

Breetor dismounted. "Thank you, Ardall, for everything."

The others turned away, eager to leave, but Ardall stayed with him. "If you go into that valley, you will not see us again. I already promised these men that this would be the last time they come here."

"I understand. I'll return the book when I'm finished with it."

Ardall sighed. "The book is of little concern. The hunters are starting to question me about these

repeated attempts to check on you. Any more, and I risk losing their respect. You've noticed the change in Omivar, haven't you?" Breetor glared at the hunters, but stilled his tongue. "I do care for you, Breetor, but if you're truly set on returning to that dragon, then this really will be goodbye."

Breetor smiled distantly; the tribes in this land weren't free from political troubles like his own, after all. "I understand, Ardall, better than you know."

Ardall hesitantly turned away and returned to the hunters. She kept her eyes away from Breetor, but the struggle was obvious.

As the tribe left, Breetor finally made his way back to the valley, returning to the dragon. Immediately, the creature raised his head from the ground, looking curious. It tried to hide any signs of glee, but its eyes told Breetor how much it'd missed the company. With a smile, Breetor placed his belongings beside his cabin.

"I told you I'd be back, friend."

CHAPTER 11

A DRAGON ENRAGED

As the days passed, Breetor learned more about the dragon.

“How is it your kind are able to understand our words, regardless of different languages?”

The dragon’s signalling and gestures were clear. It wasn’t the words they understood, it was the mannerisms and body language which came with it. Dragons were keen at picking this up, not just in humans but in all animals.

Breetor’s fondness for the dragon grew, but his nights were troubled. Whenever he looked to the stars, he was reminded of Aurandria. He fingered the locket. Every night, he’d sleep telling himself to ask the dragon if it’d be willing to take him home, but each morning, he lacked the steel to do so.

Then came a morning when Breetor was alone.

He waited hour after hour, thinking the dragon was on a hunt. He looked upon the language book, seeing it open on the same page as he’d left it. Breetor did that often, allowing the dragon to study whilst he slept.

He waited until sunset, but the dragon never returned.

Determined to wait, Breetor ate some leftovers from one day prior. Only when the moon glowed through the clouds did he finally tuck himself in to sleep. What followed was a cold night compared to every other, and his anxieties about Psykoria only made things worse.

*

Breetor had grown so accustomed to the dragon’s warmth that without it he shivered in his cabin even when it wasn’t cold. With the dragon still absent, he made his way back to the Sikkar tribe.

He reached some fields where he’d fought manticores. The bones had become dust. Throughout the day, Breetor passed many other familiar places. By night however, he was on a plain he didn’t know. He was retracing his steps when luck found him. A Sikkar

hunting party passed by. The hunters first looked like they would ignore him, until Ardall made her way through. “Breetor, you’re awfully far from the dragon’s valley.”

“I know. He—he just disappeared yesterday. I waited the whole day, but he never returned, even until now. I could think of no other action but to find you again.”

Omivar said something to Ardall in the tribe’s native tongue. Having learned to understand a dragon’s mannerisms, Breetor was able to understand Omivar’s words. He wanted them to pay Breetor no heed and continue away.

Ardall looked back at the hunters, then returned her gaze to Breetor. “Is your quest over? Have you finally cast away your homeland and decided to stay with us?”

Breetor paused. If the dragon had truly abandoned him, he’d never survive these lands without the tribe. However, he couldn’t forget about Psykoria and Aurandria.

A deafening whoosh came through the sky.

They looked upward. A great shadow passed over. For a split second, Breetor saw a huge red creature

gliding from the clouds. In moments, the image was hidden behind a wall of flame.

Instinctively, Breetor thrust the Saviour Sword high in the air, calling upon its divine powers. A barrier of white light sprang from the sword, surrounding Breetor and the Sikkar tribe. Fire crashed against the light, only to be repelled.

“It followed us?” Ardall asked.

“No,” said a shaky Omivar. “That—that one is red!”

When the flames disappeared, Breetor and the hunters saw their attacker more clearly. It was a dragon like the one Breetor had befriended in the mountains, but this dragon was as red as blood. Its snout had a more defined shape, with sharper scales marking the bridge of its nose.

“You—you saved us,” Ardall muttered.

“I haven’t saved anyone yet,” Breetor replied, keeping his gaze on the row of pointed scales marking the dragon’s jaw line.

With a roar, the dragon unleashed another gust of flame. Again, Breetor’s barrier repelled them. Remaining airborne, the dragon roared in frustration. Breetor recognised the nature of the red dragon’s roar.

“Dragon!” he cried. “I know your kind understand human speech! Why do you attack us?”

The dragon bared its fangs, then swept down. The Sikkar tribe scattered outwards. Ardall cried for them not to, feeling they were safer near Breetor. Claws swept out. Breetor raised his sword at an angle. The dragon’s nails crashed into the sword. The divine weapon absorbed the force of the attack and Breetor felt no impact upon blocking the strike. Frustrated and confused, the dragon retreated.

“Do not underestimate this sword, dragon,” Breetor said. “It once belonged to a god. Even your kind struggled against the creature he used this sword to defeat!”

The dragon scoffed, undeterred. It was interested only in him, not the tribe folk.

“Ardall!” Breetor called. “Get out of here!”

“What? You’re going to fight it by yourself? I know that sword of yours is special, but you’re just a man, Breetor. You can’t beat a dragon!”

Breetor knew by the confident look on the dragon’s face that it agreed. “Did you not hear what I just said, Ardall? Do you want to know why the green and red dragons left this land? It wasn’t to escape the

war between the silvers and the blacks. It was to battle a greater threat. That beast would’ve destroyed this entire world had it not been stopped. Even the dragons could not defeat this foe.”

Ardall was in disbelief. “A foe ... even dragons could not defeat?”

“But they did help. Our lands would’ve perished had they not come. It was not the dragons who defeated this foe, it was something greater. We call them gods. It was we who called one into our world. This sword came from that god, a gift left to man so we could defend ourselves from such beasts.” Breetor looked back towards the dragon. “You know what I speak of, don’t you?”

The dragon grunted; its confidence hadn’t wavered. With a roar, flames gushed from its mouth. Breetor again shielded himself and the tribe.

“Ardall, please leave! I will handle this!”

Ardall was hesitant, but the rest were eager to go. The dragon flew in a circle, then swept round and breathed more flames. Breetor shielded everyone until Ardall could take charge. She rallied her tribe and they rode away, leaving Breetor alone with the red dragon.

“All right, dragon,” he said. “You still want to

fight? Fine. But answer me this. Why did one of your kin destroy our ship?”

The red dragon, its eyes yellow just like the other, smirked almost arrogantly. It gestured a claw at his own under-belly, orange as opposed to the green dragon’s beige. Understanding, Breetor’s eyes narrowed.

“It wasn’t one of your kin, it was *you*? Why?”

The dragon flicked the beige horns sprouting from its head: two large ones pointing upwards, and three rows of smaller ones spanning the centre of its scalp.

“I see. You reds don’t like outsiders, thinking we’ve come to steal your treasures. That’s why you’re here now?”

Impatient, the large creature shook its head, before lunging. Breetor thrust forth the Saviour Sword. A beam of light shot out. Knowing not to underestimate Breetor’s sword, the huge beast strafed out of harm’s way.

The dragon closed in and thrust a claw. Breetor ducked and the attack swept past. As the creature ascended, Breetor shot another beam. The distant dragon evaded it. Two more followed, but neither met their target.

The dragon descended, flames gushing. Breetor’s

barrier was his only defence. Flames surrounded the orb protecting him, until the dragon rammed forth. The barrier held firm, but the thud echoed through the entire plain.

The dragon retreated. Breetor saw his chance. Gripping the Saviour Sword in both hands, he charged towards the creature’s orange underbelly. The Saviour Sword swept in an arc, but the dragon evaded whenever Breetor drew close.

Something wrapped around his waist. The dragon’s tail! It lacked a pointed tip, but was lined with the protruding crimson spikes. Many dug into Breetor’s chest. Before he had a chance to cut it, the dragon hurled him a great distance. Breetor hit the ground hard, rolling across the plain.

He was lying on his side, facing away. Groggily, he rolled over. The dragon was advancing. The Saviour Sword was not in Breetor’s hands, but several paces away. Panicking, Breetor moved as quickly as he could. With an earth-shaking thud, the dragon landed between Breetor and the sword. He looked into the dragon’s yellow eyes, knowing that without his weapon, he didn’t stand a chance.

“Aurandria,” he muttered, “I—I’m sorry. I failed.”

The red dragon roared wrathfully, but its flames never came, as a green creature of equal size slammed into its side. The red dragon, across the plains, rolling as Breetor had moments ago. The green flew forth, roaring. Breetor recognised the newcomer: the green dragon he'd befriended. It roared several more times, as the red rose and did the same. Their voices were similar.

The red suddenly lunged forward, spewing fire. The green flew upwards. Flames grazed its lower body. Unhindered, the green bit down on the red's neck, wrenching it from side to side. The red thrust a claw at the green's belly, but the green angled itself so it met the thicker part of its scales.

The red wrenched itself free from the green's teeth, but the moment it did, fire gushed from the green's mouth. The green dragon's flames weren't as fierce as the red's, who tucked in, letting the thickest of its scales repel the fires.

The red dragon breathed flames of its own. The green swayed aside and its claw swept down. The red tried to defend as the green's claw tore through the scales around its left arm.

Blood gushed, and the red dragon regained its

distance. The green advanced, only to meet its rival's fiery breath. For a moment, Breetor thought the green dragon was engulfed, but it'd tucked itself whilst advancing. Its thicker scales withstood the fire.

Once through the worst of the fires, the green dragon smashed a paw across the side of its rival's head. The red's flames spat sideways, before fading completely. The green wrapped its tail around its foe's neck, holding its head still. The flat of its paw smashed into the other dragon's captive head. The green dragon struck its rival repeatedly. The earth shook with their thuds. Though the red's flames were fiercer, it was clear which of the dragons was stronger.

One blow struck so hard that it knocked the red dragon free from the green's tail. The red crashed to the plain with an ear-shattering thump. Rock and dust erupted. The dragon lay motionless, groaning weakly.

The green dragon landed beside its defeated rival. Using a foot to pin the other's head, it roared loudly and threw gestures. Breetor recognised these: the green dragon was telling the red that Breetor was its friend and it wouldn't let any dragon harm him. It went on to tell its rival that their kind had suffered far too much, so it had no intention of killing the other

dragon either.

With that, the green dragon released the other. Groggily, the red dragon rose, staggering like a waking drunk. After limping a short distance, the beast took flight and finally fled the scene.

Once the red dragon had departed, the green turned its yellow eyes upon Breetor.

CHAPTER 12 THE DRAGON'S MESSAGE

Breetor's heart was beating hard. The dragon may have saved him again, but he recalled its anger when he left to re-join the Sikkar tribe.

“Thank you,” he eventually uttered.

The dragon took a few steps back, pointing its snout to where the Saviour Sword lay. Still aching from his bruises, Breetor lumbered over and reclaimed it.

“Why did you suddenly disappear? Where did you go?”

The dragon grumbled, flicking its head towards the distance. It wanted to show Breetor something.

Breetor reclaimed his bag. “Very well. Lead the way.”

Strangely, the dragon lowered its belly to the ground, then signalled with its head.

“What was that?” Breetor asked, uncertain.

Keeping its belly on the ground, the dragon made the same gesture with its head.

“You want me to ride on you?”

The dragon nodded, a gesture Breetor couldn't possibly misunderstand.

“Is it safe? You will not drop me?”

The dragon promised. Breetor was hesitant still, but part of him was excited. How many men could say that they'd ridden a dragon?

Cautiously, he climbed the creature's green scales, making his way up to the spine below the wings. The dragon gestured for him to climb higher. Breetor stopped above the wing joints, just before the neck. Holding onto the dragon's scales as the wings flapped, he looked down to see his companion slowly lift off the ground. At first he gulped, but once they were flying, he found it no different from riding a pegasus.

Soaring through the sky, they passed the valley housing wyverns, various hydra marshes: including the one where he was attacked, both of the Sikkar tribe camps, and other tribes he didn't recognise. All below looked upon the dragon in wonder and amazement. Despite being native to this land, the sight of a dragon

was still a marvel. Horses galloped along empty fields, and manticores camped around isolated cliffs. The view was so magnificent that Breetor couldn't help but smile.

*

The dragon flew to an isolated mountain, distant from anywhere Breetor had ventured. The valley they landed in lacked any features but for a single huge rock which looked to have been split in half on its opposite side.

The dragon lowered its belly, gesturing for Breetor to dismount. Once he did, the beast walked to the flat side of the rock and signalled for him to follow. Breetor paused. Letters had been seared into the stone, marking out not just characters and words, but entire sentences.

“You made this?” he asked. The dragon bowed its head.

Breetor read the message:

My name in your words is Rakkan. When the dragon war started, I was the only dragon who was not silver or black who took part. I fought with the silvers because I hated how the blacks treat other beings. I was spared in the end because the blacks didn't want to start war

with the greens. But the greens, reds and blues fought in your lands. Because I fought in the dragon war, I was gone. When I returned, the greens cast me out. They said I had left them to fight other dragons. I was alone for a long time, until I met you.

Breitor finally understood why this dragon had been alone when he met him. “Rakkan?” he said. The dragon bobbed its head. “Why did that red dragon attack me?”

Rakkan sighed, and with gestures, let Breitor know that while the other greens simply cast Rakkan out, the reds felt his punishment was too soft. They never wanted to harm Rakkan for fear it might enrage the other greens, but that particular red dragon, a rather hostile individual among its kind, noticed Rakkan befriend Breitor these past few months. Rakkan knew about the red dragon, but didn’t think it’d do something so bold. Until their confrontation, the red hadn’t realised Breitor was one of the survivors from the foreign ship, otherwise it would’ve hunted him sooner. The red dragon intended to kill Breitor because it felt Rakkan must live alone. Apparently, the other dragons, red and green alike, were mostly

unconcerned with what Rakkan did, but that one red was an exception.

Rakkan didn’t fear repercussions from the other reds because that one acted out of turn. Its kin would likely scoff at it, but nothing more. Dragons were cautious with infighting after what had happened between the silvers and the blacks.

The next gesture made Breitor unsure.

“Please repeat that?”

Rakkan made the same gesture; Breitor’s interpretation was not mistaken. The dragon was asking if it could go back to Breitor’s homeland and live there with him.

His words came out quietly. “Why did you get mad when I asked you this before?”

Rakkan signalled again. It got angry that day because leaving this island meant casting itself even further away from its kin. However, as time passed and Rakkan grew closer to Breitor, the dragon had come to realise it was time to move on, and a fresh start might be its best choice after all.

Breitor suddenly felt a sense of excitement. His mission had been accomplished in a grander way than he’d dreamed. Not only would he be able to get home,

but how would the other nobles react if he returned with a dragon?

“Yes, Rakkan. You are more than welcome to come with me back to Psykoria.”

Fighting back tears, Breetor turned away. He could finally go home.

*

Was it worth paying the tribe one last visit? With Rakkan’s encouragement, they flew to the Sikkar camp.

At the dragon’s initial appearance, the tribe panicked. They hadn’t even taken up arms; none of them wanted to fight a dragon. Ardall calmed everyone, noticing that the dragon was green, and that it bore a human rider.

When the dragon landed, the tribe silently gazed towards the huge creature. Rakkan lowered its neck to the ground, letting Breetor dismount.

“Breetor?” Ardall asked, before rushing forward and hugging him. “We worried the other dragon might’ve had you.”

“It would have, had Rakkan here not come to my aid.”

Ardall drew back. “Rakkan?”

“That’s the dragon’s name in our language.”

Ardall looked towards the dragon, who gave a gesture she didn’t understand. Further behind, Breetor glimpsed Omivar amidst the other fearful tribe members, clutching together with Nidra.

“Take care of yourself, Omivar, and do not let the red dragons know that you came from outside.”

Omivar, despite having come to resent Breetor, smiled. “You take care too, sire.”

Breetor returned his gaze to Ardall. “I guess this is it. Thank you for everything. Had it not been for you, I would’ve never survived here.”

“What will you do now?” Ardall asked. “Has the dragon already agreed to take you home?”

“Yes, and he’s coming with me.”

“Maybe this is best for both of us. At least this way, I can move on.”

“Perhaps. I apologise for being unable to return your feelings.”

“It’s all right, Breetor. I’ve come to understand. You just go home and make that wife of yours happy. The coming days will be dull compared to these past years. I’m sure there will eventually come a time when we grow tired with tales of the Dragon Tamer”

Rakkan roared loudly at the comment, startling everyone in the camp. Breetor shrugged his shoulders. “I tried to tell them you didn’t need taming, but they still call me that.”

A puff of weak smoke burst from Rakkan’s nostrils—a dragon sigh.

Ardall looked back at Breetor, who shrugged once more. The pair finally chuckled, and Breetor walked around the camp, exchanging claps with the children one last time. He braced arms with the hunters, including Omivar. Lastly, he took up Ardall’s hand and kissed it.

Breetor and Rakkan finally left the Sikkar tribe, leaving behind tales that would be told among them for generations to come. They soared ever onward, and at last, Breetor was going home.

CHAPTER 13 GOING HOME

Royal Sigrun’s sentries prepared the war machines when Rakkan approached their city. The dragon grew wary, but Breetor was relieved to see the city in one piece, and that its sentries wore red. The fact these sentries still wore Breetor’s red colours signified they were loyal to the throne, but what if one of the other nobles had seized the crown and switched their colours to red?

“It’s all right, Rakkan. Even if they do shoot, my barriers will protect us. Let them see me. When they realise a man rides you, they’ll want to better assess things before they attack. The last thing my kin wants is to pick a fight with a dragon.”

Heeding Breetor’s words, the dragon descended, making its back visible. The sentries held fire, and the

dragon landed outside the city walls. Rakkan lowered its head so Breetor was seen.

“Who are you?” a sentry cried.

Without saying a word, Breetor unsheathed the Saviour Sword. The guards’ eyes bulged, instantly recognising the godly blade’s shine. Only after seeing the weapon did they recognise a face they hadn’t seen in a long time.

“I have returned,” Breetor called out.

The city went silent, the guards in disbelief.

The gate creaked open. Several figures came into view. Breetor’s eyes instantly fixed on the central one. He uttered her name. “Aurandria.”

Aurandria stepped forward, wearing a red dress. Her fair features and golden hair were just as Breetor remembered; in his absence, she hadn’t lost any of her beauty.

“Let me down, Rakkan,” Breetor said, almost as an order.

Rakkan growled, preferring Breetor’s usually cooperative tone, but let him dismount.

Breetor and Aurandria rushed into each other’s arms. It mattered not that so many eyes watched them.

“We thought you were dead,” Aurandria wept, her

tears spilling over Breetor’s chest.

A single one dripped from Breetor’s eye. “Don’t think I’d break my promise to you that easily.”

Another figure stepped forward: Captain Klom Artheit. “It is a relief to see you alive, sire. When the storm passed, we searched for you long and hard. We believed everyone on your ship was dead. But then that letter arrived, and we thought it a miracle.”

As Aurandria still clutched him, Breetor wiped his tear away. “It is good to see you well,” he told the captain. “I am glad to learn that the letter made it safely. It must have quenched much of your concerns. Who wears the crown now?”

It was Aurandria who answered. “You, of course.”

“If the realm thought me dead, surely a new king was named. What became of the throne before the arrival of my letter?”

Wiping her eyes, Aurandria chuckled. “Come inside, Breetor. We have much to tell you.” She looked towards the dragon. “Likewise, it seems you have much to tell us.”

*

Breetor couldn’t believe what he’d been told. “When you survived the storm,” he asked Klom, “you returned

here, kept quiet about the voyage, and let everyone think I was still here?”

“The voyage was a complete failure,” Klom replied, “but everyone who sailed was loyal to you, otherwise they might not have made the trip, knowing we were attacking the realm’s nobility. All lips remained sealed.”

“But how did you manage such a thing? No one had seen me for all the time I was gone. Did the nobles never request council? Or even grow suspicious as to why I was not seen for so long?”

“We kept them under control,” Aurandria replied.

“Does Lord Sorcus know?”

The queen shook her head. “I thought it wise to keep this secret even from him.”

Breitor scratched his head. “How did you come up with such an idea?”

“It was no secret that before you left, Baxter Iferas, and possibly Lakor Lystak, were on the verge of rebellion. Had we let the realm know you were dead, there would’ve surely been a war for the crown. Baxter would want it for himself. Lakor would’ve taken up arms against the others, if only for glory. Lords Fulgor and Thith wouldn’t want to be proven inferior to the

rest, and even my cousin might have formed another side claiming I was the rightful heir. Needless to say, we had to stop this at all costs. Hiding your death was the only way.”

“Granted, it wasn’t a permanent solution,” said one of the senior councillors, “but it seemed like the best idea until a better one could be found.”

Breitor was in disbelief; not only had they kept the peace in his absence, but they had done so in a way where he could resume his duties as king with minimal trouble. He asked, “To clarify, it was three years since we sailed?” The others nodded. Breitor directed his next words towards Aurandria. “And you’ve been the one acting in my stead, letting the realm think it was always me?”

Aurandria smiled. “Do not forget, I was the Lady of Korsenn before becoming your wife.”

Breitor chuckled. “Of course, and unlike me, you were always groomed for ruling the Stold line. Perhaps you’re better at this than me.”

Aurandria likewise laughed. “Ruling Korsenn alone was nothing compared to Royal Sigrun, let alone all of Psykoria. No, Breitor, you are the rightful heir to the throne. Whether you were groomed for it

or not doesn't matter. You are the last of the Sigmus line. For now."

Breitor's eyes shot upon Aurandria after her last comment. The queen winked. Klom and the councillors struggled to stop their own laughter. To change the subject, Breitor asked, "Have the other nobles done anything of note?"

The others paused, before Aurandria spoke. "Thanks to them thinking you were still here, no one would attack so carelessly. Everyone in Psykoria respects your militant prowess. They haven't forgotten that it was you who led our armies to victory when Lords Berrun and Rokar sided with the beast folk are calling 'The Ultimate Evil.'"

Aurandria went silent. Breitor could tell there was more. "What else?" he pressed.

"There are reports that Lord Baxter is amassing an army. And Lakor too, though he claims his is just to defend himself from Baxter. Baxter would still need to pass through the territory of either Lakor, Thith or Fulgor to reach us. Thith and Fulgor raised sentries in your defence, but I do not trust Lakor."

"Nor do I. Would the combined armies of Falinton and Lyandor be enough to besiege us?"

"Not yet, which is why they've been stalling all this time."

Breitor smiled. "Fine."

He looked towards a window, glimpsing Rakkan's green hide. "Laying waste to Falinton and Lyandor would be easy now, but it's no longer necessary. I know what to do. Send out word that there will be another summit here, just like before I left."

"Are you sure that's wise, sire?" asked one of the councillors. "Lord Baxter may seize the opportunity to march his army here with safe passage."

"If he does that, we'll crush him. As the queen said, his army isn't ready, even if we didn't have Rakkan. He will not be so foolish. If anything, he'll simply remain absent, just like last time. By the time the meeting takes place, they'll all know about Rakkan too."

"What are you planning, sire?" another councillor pressed.

"I'm going to tell them the truth. I want them to know what I've been through, and why I haven't been seen in so long. I want them to see Rakkan for themselves. If they can't respect my rule after that, then perhaps war is the only way."

The others were quiet.

“It’s worth a try,” Aurandria said. “It may be our only chance to end the uprising without bloodshed.”

“It might just work,” the first councillor added. “But what if Lord Baxter is absent again?”

Breetor’s eyes sharpened. “If Lord Baxter, or any of the others for that matter, fail to attend, I will take it as a message that they no longer recognise me as king. In that case, I’ll have no choice but to root them out.”

CHAPTER 14 FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

The summit was an hour away. Looking out the window, Breetor watched his last guest arrive.

“He’s actually attending?” Aurandria muttered, peering over the king’s shoulder.

Breetor smiled. “Looks like I might not have to raze Falinton after all.”

Lord Baxter Iferas, a wiry man with a dark moustache, was flanked by blue-cloaked guards. Like everyone else in Psykoria, he had learned about the dragon after Breetor had been flying with Rakkan around the entire realm. The huge creature sat outside Royal Sigrun’s gate, prompting Baxter to constantly peer over his shoulder.

“The dragon doesn’t mind having to sit out there

all day?” Aurandria asked.

“He’s fine with it,” Breetor replied. “If anything, he enjoys the change of scenery.”

“Well, his presence has added to your kingdom already, hasn’t it? What is it you’re calling those mountains now?”

“Green Dragon Summit. Rakkan picked that range himself. They were originally part of the Border Mountains, but now are part of Psykoria. No one was inhabiting them, but if they did, they’d have had Rakkan to contend with. The range protrudes away from the main Border Mountains and into the north-western part of our lands, rather neatening the shape of our realm.”

Aurandria chuckled. “You’ve been back less than a week, and you’ve already conquered new territory. But there’s still one more battle to be won.”

Breetor’s tone grew serious. “I know. Come. Let us go meet our guests.”

*

Upon hearing the tale, the five nobles sat silently, trying not to let their jaws drop. Their eyes made their feelings clear: having learned to read the mannerisms of a dragon, doing so with other men was easy for

Breetor now.

“We believed him dead,” Aurandria added. “But we couldn’t let the rest of you know, fearing you might start a war for the crown. While many of you willingly bend the knee to King Breetor, you wouldn’t show the same courtesy for one another. We needed to prevent war at all costs.”

“Even I was not told of this,” Sorcus complained.

“I decided to keep it from you, Sorcus,” Aurandria replied. “It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you, but if you knew, and they didn’t, they’d take it as an insult, don’t you all agree?”

The others said nothing, but Breetor could read their eyes: Aurandria was right.

Lord Thith suddenly chuckled. “Well, that is certainly quite the tale. If it wasn’t for the dragon outside these walls, I might never have believed it, even from you, sire.”

“Are you angered by the queen’s attempts to hide my suspected death, Lord Thith?” Breetor asked him.

“Not at all. I may have no desire for the crown, and I certainly wouldn’t have participated in any war for it, but I understand the queen’s intentions, and know the others would want your throne if there was no true

successor.”

“Admittedly, sire, I would have fought had any of the others made their claim,” said Lord Fulgor. “It’s not that I want it, but I can’t see myself bending the knee to any of them.”

Breetor diverted his eyes. “Lord Lakor?”

The stout bald man grinned a moment, before letting out a hearty chuckle. The other nobles scowled, but he ignored them. “King Breetor, you certainly are one heck of a man. Before you left, Lord Baxter and I had been conspiring to end the Sigmus Dynasty once and for all.”

Baxter rose to his feet. “Curse you, Lystak!”

“Calm yourself, Lord Baxter,” Lakor said, signalling for him to sit. “You have the dragon out there, don’t you? It’s over now.” Baxter remained standing as Lakor held his gaze. “Truth be told, Baxter was eager to start a war in your absence. However, he could never besiege Royal Sigrun alone. He needed me. We were building our armies to be sure of victory, but had we known you weren’t here, we would’ve attacked by now.” Lakor’s eyes turned to the window, glimpsing Rakkan in the distance. “Even seeing your dragon these past few days, we might’ve struck, but

after hearing your tale ...” Lakor suddenly kneeled. “You have Lyandor’s undisputed loyalty, sire.”

His green-cloaked guards did the same.

“I’ll admit, my brother was no saint,” he continued, returning to his seat, “but I still hated to see him beheaded like that. We Lystaks have always prided ourselves on our courage, but I doubt my brother or father would’ve had the guts to befriend a bloody dragon. I know for sure I would’ve steered away from that thing if I saw it. You needn’t worry about Lyandor’s allegiance, Your Highness. My city bows to the throne once more.”

Breetor sighed with relief; his tale of survival had won Lord Lakor’s respect, rather than the threat of a dragon. At least he’d swayed one of his rivals in a peaceful way. He asked, “Will you take up my colours again, Lord Lakor?”

All eyes were upon Lakor. The situation was clear: if he took Breetor’s red once again, so would Thith and Fulgor. Lakor’s eyes panned to Baxter, who sat slumped in his seat, eager to be out of this summit, but afraid to act boldly, alone. “That depends entirely on Lord Baxter, sire,” Lakor said. “If even one of the other nobles wears their own colours, then so will I.

But anyone wearing green will bow to your rule. It is only a sign that we are not below the other cities.”

Breetor uncrossed his arms; that was as far as he'd get with Lakor. At last, he turned his stern gaze upon Lord Baxter. He spoke with an edge. “What have you to say, Lord Baxter?”

Baxter's grumpy expression sharpened as all eyes watched him. “Breetor Sigmus, personally, I don't care much for your struggle, but it has become obvious to me that rebelling against you would surely spell my doom, even without that new pet of yours.”

The throne room shook from the sound of Rakkan's roar. Almost everyone in the council was startled.

“Rakkan doesn't appreciate you referring to him as my pet,” the king said calmly. “He is far more intelligent than most men I've known. He does not bend to my will, nor I to his. He will fulfil a wish of mine only if he desires, and I will not force him if he doesn't.”

Baxter composed himself. “I will not go to war with you, that's for sure. I want no part of that creature, and as Lakor has kindly pointed out, I lack the strength to face the entire realm alone.”

Breetor hummed, disappointed that Baxter was cowed only through intimidation. He hadn't truly won him over.

“In any case, I *would* take up your colours,” Baxter continued, “if only to prove that Falinton's intention to overthrow you was quenched ... but having heard that you initially sailed out to raze me, I don't feel my city should.”

Breetor's eyes grew as sharp as his sword. “Is that your answer, Lord Baxter?”

Baxter suddenly bent a knee, just like Lakor before him. “Sire, I do not want the Iferas name sullied, nor do I want Falinton burned.” He raised his eyes, standing once more. “But I cannot make my people wear the colours of a man who would've had them killed before proving my intentions. Rest assured, if your successor proves himself less rash than yourself, maybe he can make Falinton, and the rest of Psykoria, wear your family's colours again.”

Breetor watched Baxter silently reseal himself. He saw everything that had happened to him in a new light, now. Razing Falinton had never been the answer, even back then. The storm's intervention wasn't a coincidence; Lord Baxter may be angry about

Berrun's execution, but unlike his brother, he wasn't an inconsolable despot who executed anyone who questioned his goals.

Baxter's closing sentence was curious though; Breeter himself had gained his ire, but he would bear no ill-will against his children, if he ever had any. The king smiled faintly, hoping the others wouldn't notice. There was hope yet.

*

Upon the nobles' departure, Breeter and Aurandria sat alone in the throne room. Per request, the chamber was free of guards.

"If you ask me," Aurandria said, "the meeting went far better than expected. Lord Baxter's presence was a victory in itself. At least there will be no civil war in Psykoria, and despite the colours they wear, they all bow to you. Your story completely won over Lord Lakor."

"Unexpectedly so. However, if there is any lesson for me in this, it's that the issue of the nobility's colours cannot be fixed by me."

Aurandria's brow creased. "What do you mean by that?"

Breeter sighed, lowering his eyes to the ground.

"Baxter made it clear that he will not take up Royal Sigrun's red as long as the crown is worn by the man who planned to raze his city. However, his hostility is directed solely towards me, and no one else." Breeter looked back upon Aurandria. "It will be up to my successor to fix what I cannot, so that his successor, and the next, will not have the burden of rebellion lurking over their reigns because of something I did."

The pair were silent for several moments.

"Do you regret sailing out?" Aurandria finally asked.

Breeter chuckled, leaning back in his throne. "Had I not returned, I would've regretted it for the rest of my life. All things considered, though, that's not an easy question to answer. Yes, I regret spending three years of my life without you by my side, but because of my voyage, I've beheld magnificent things most men could only dream of. I've met wonderful people, ridden fine horses, and made a great friend." Turning towards Aurandria, he spoke his next words softly: "And now that I'm back, I feel like the time we spend together will feel even more special than before."

Aurandria blushed, then chuckled. "That, Breeter Sigmus, I can definitely agree with."

The Land of the Beasts

Bretor finally rose from his throne. “Well then, my love, let us get going. Between keeping the peace, chronicling my experiences, and spending time with my queen, there’s no time to waste.”

“No time at all?” Aurandria asked playfully. “Not even a little bit?”

Bretor raised an eyebrow. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well, seeing as your new friend is outside the city, before he decides to go back to those mountains you’ve seized, could I ...” The queen grew hesitant. “Could I maybe ... see what it’s like to fly on a dragon?”

Several minutes later, the king and queen of Psykoria were both seated upon Rakkan’s back, suspending their duties for a short time to soar through Psykoria’s skies.

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So, that ends a short prequel to my *Champion of Psykoria* saga. If you've enjoyed the story, it would be much appreciated if you could leave a review.

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To read more about King Breetor, be sure to check out my *Champion of Psykoria* saga if you haven't already. It follows Breetor's son and heir, Prince Snarmis, plus it features Breetor prominently, and reveals far more of the frequently mentioned *Ultimate Evil*.

Thanks again for reading.

S.F. Claymore