

Chapter 6

"Can we collapse his lair?" suggested someone. "Surely even a dragon couldn't survive a mountain being brought down on their head."

"No," replied someone else, thumbing through a thick and dusty tome. "Dragons always inscribe their lairs with protective runes. Among other effects, they always reinforce the structural stability. Sufficiently powerful magic could bring it down, but not quickly or quietly enough to not give him a chance to escape."

"Besides, we want this to end with the dragon both alive and not in a mood to torch Cruithia," pointed out Steven. "Otherwise, from what Father Serrell said, performing a miracle of holy smiting would have a good chance of killing the dragon outright."

"Pity it's only a 'chance'. Aren't staying on the dragon's good side and rescuing Queen Josse contradictory goals, anyway?" sighed the first speaker rhetorically.

"Not necessarily. Burning down Cruithia would harm the dragon, too. If we retrieved our queen without harming him, it's likely he wouldn't be willing to go so far to avenge the slight."

"Couldn't he just make the Pact with someone else?"

"Eventually, yes. But it's not like he has a new lair and kingdom ready prepared, and every other kingdom on the continent despises him. More than a few glory-seekers would jump at the opportunity to slay one of the last dragons. It would cause him a period of unacceptable risk."

"As far as I can see, we have two options," declared the second speaker, looking up from the tome of dragon-lore. "One. We send infiltrators up the mountain, rescue Queen Josse, and bring her back here unnoticed by the dragon. Once she's here, the Pact would prevent the dragon retaking her."

"The pact also forbids anyone setting foot on the mountain," pointed out Steven.

"Yes, which is why we'll need to try *really* hard not to get caught. The second option is negotiation. Trade something better to get our queen back."

"And what exactly are we supposed to trade?"

"According to this, dragons prefer the taste of high-class foods, but it's based on blood, not actual ranking. It takes four or five generations of a new royal family to peak. Beyond that, they prefer females, which is obvious enough. They also value 'purity', but that is very nebulously defined."

"Then we have no chance of producing something sweeter to him than Josse."

"Not unless you fancy kidnapping a princess from a neighbouring kingdom and raising her here, specifically to turn into food. And we all know what they do to their princesses; we'd have to kidnap one young and raise them for years. It's not practical."

"What about threats? If you're so sure he's as dependent on the Pact as we are, why don't we tell him we'll no longer provide sacrifices or prevent foreigners climbing the mountain until such a time as our queen is returned?"

The group shared an uncomfortable look. "It *might* work," said Steven, "but if it doesn't... If we openly abandon the Pact like that..."

"That just leaves infiltration, then. Are we *really certain* he doesn't have a backup lair somewhere?"

"As certain as we can be. We do our best to keep track of his movements, and haven't noticed him spending excessive amounts of time anywhere in particular. Besides, given his personality, I doubt he'd leave a lair unattended, and he doesn't trust anyone other than himself."

"I think there could be another class of solutions we're overlooking," spoke up a fourth member of the discussion for the first time.

"Oh? Such as?"

"Please treat this as merely clarifying our options, but one possibility is that we tell Lindy we're making the attempt, and then we just... *don't*."

"As tempting as it is to ignore the situation, I think it would be ill-advised," sighed Steven. "Not because of Lindy, but rather, if we let the dragon get away with this, I worry he'll take greater and greater liberties in the future. We need to do something to maintain the equality of the Pact and discourage him from acting unilaterally."

"Then the next thing to point out is that *retrieving* Josse would be significantly harder than merely *reaching* her. Royalty have been dropping like flies recently. What would be one more? And such an unfortunate event, while she was under the protection of the dragon, would certainly constitute a breach of the terms on his part."

The group fell into silence as they considered the option, looking for any downsides.

"She's the last surviving member of the royal family. Without her, I don't see how we avoid civil war."

"... Given the treatment Father Serrell described, she's unlikely to be in any fit state to rule, anyway," carefully opined someone. "A regent would be necessary even were she rescued."

"We could tell Lindy she was convalescing?"

"No, she'd insist on tending to her personally. We can tell everyone else she's convalescing, while telling Lindy suicide?"

"Maybe Lindy would accept that, but it still leaves the problem of reaching the dragon's lair. Easier is not the same thing as easy."

"About that... Didn't the dragon promise to bring her here to meet with Lindy?"

"Why would he? Wasn't that likely to be another deception?"

"He probably means to use them as blackmail over each other. For that, they need to know the other is alive. Queen Josse won't currently have any hard evidence of Lindy's condition, since Father Serrell didn't get the chance to talk to her, and that could lead to... Well, suicide, most likely."

"Queen Josse would care that much for a mere maid?"

"The pair are close, but it's the kingdom as much as Lindy herself."

"Isn't that exactly what we want, then? What if the dragon brings Queen Josse to visit, and the information she takes back *isn't* that Lindy is alive and well? She commits suicide, the dragon learns an important lesson, Lindy gets closure even if not the result she wants, and we maintain the convalescing lie to the rest of the kingdom as an explanation for why Lindy is continuing to act as regent."

"What stops the dragon revoking his protection of Lindy? And what do we do about the question of heirs? Or when people start asking how long their queen is going to be convalescing for? It may work in the short term, but I don't see how this would be any better for our future than letting the dragon have his way."

"We have no good options, do we?"

Steven snorted with derision. "Depends how you define 'good'. There are no perfect options, for sure, but were I to ask you if you would rather be here, having this discussion, or in the palace of one of our neighbours discussing the latest dragon raid and what steps could be taken to prevent the next, which would you answer?"

"You're not wrong. For all the benefits the Pact brings us... What's one princess? Why shouldn't we let the dragon take an occasional liberty? It wasn't as if he kidnapped a princess from the palace; she was sacrificed, as per the terms. If he'd just eaten her there and then, what right would we have had to complain?"

"Except that the question of the future is a good one. Even if we let the dragon have his way, we still have no available heir."

"Here's another unpopular option, that I feel I should put out there for the record," said the fourth speaker. "He returns Queen Josse, purely to solve our lineage problem, and in return we make a few changes to the Pact. Greater protections to stop him pulling a stunt like this again, and... we promise him the first-born girl of each queen."

"That would require Josse's cooperation."

"That's fine. She's welcome to refuse. For now. She can always change her mind later, when she can't face living with the dragon any longer."

"That's... horrible."

"Again, she's one person, who by rights should already be dead."

"At least the other kingdoms haven't sold themselves out to a devil..."

"If it wasn't us, it would have been another kingdom, and we'd be in an even worse state."

"A deal with a devil, huh..." mumbled someone. "I have another idea. No idea if it will work, but if it does, Queen Josse gets to live happily ever after, the question of an heir ceases to be an issue, and we solve our dragon problem for good."

"As if such a convenient option exists," snorted the fourth speaker. "Well, go on then. Hit us with it."

The thinker hit them with it.

"You have an odd definition of 'happily ever after'," mumbled Steven thoughtfully. "Let's call it 'happier than the alternatives' instead. Now, would someone please fetch Father Serrell?"

On the mountain, days passed uneventfully as the dragon slumbered. Josse lay still on her ledge, her stomach aching painfully as it demanded food. Stranded as she was, she had nothing with which to fill it. The waterfall ensured plentiful water, but water did little to reduce the hunger pangs.

In the castle, after an initial burst of preparation, things had equally settled down. People questioned the disappearance of the dragon, but it wasn't unusual for him to remain in his lair for days or weeks at a time, so such questioning had more to do with impatience than any thoughts something had happened.

And so the dragon awoke, still feeling somewhat bloated, but at least able to move around. It took a few seconds more for him to come to his senses and remember *why* he was so bloated, at which point he burst from his lair, happy to find his pet queen still alive, if not completely well.

Nor completely pure.

"I'll be taking one of Lindy's arms for that," he growled.

"You haven't even shown me any evidence she's still alive," answered Josse, not bothering to move. "Don't expect me to take your word on *anything*, you evil fiend."

The dragon smiled a smile with far too many teeth. "Then you equally will also need evidence that I follow through on my threats, and there is no time like the present."

Seconds later, the pair were flying through the air back towards the capital, and at its heart, the royal palace. Josse, somewhat despairing, didn't even make comments about her lacking food or clothing. Perhaps the dragon would continue to forget, and she'd starve to death? She spent her flight pondering what a resurrection miracle would do in that case. Would it nourish her, or would she immediately die again?

And so the dragon and ragged queen landed in the palace courtyard, which had been swarming with activity from the moment the watchmen had spotted the dragon in the distance. Knights lined the walls, both top and bottom. There were more than the usual amount of bows on display. Squads of mages tried to look inconspicuous in their flashy robes.

More importantly, Lindy wasn't anywhere to be seen. Steven and his group had all agreed that they couldn't trust her not to do something stupid, and so she had been spending all her time the past few days taking governance lessons in the palace library, carefully insulated from the activity outside.

"What sort of greeting is this?" asked the dragon, grinning again. "Why don't you fetch your little regent and forget whatever foolish plot you've cooked up."

"I would rather she not be present for this discussion. She would... disagree."

"Oh?"

Steven sighed. "Each resurrection miracle counts as one sacrifice per the terms of the Pact."

Josse made an incoherent squeak, while the dragon radiated surprise.

"I have no objection to that. In fact..."

He flashed a toothy smirk that lasted mere milliseconds before his neck whipped around, magical light flashing in front of him as he reacted to the quiet twang of a crossbow firing by deploying a protective barrier. It almost certainly wasn't required; even a ballista wouldn't penetrate his scales without the aid of powerful enchantments, so what chance did a mere crossbow have? But he hadn't lived so long by taking risks, and whoever had fired had presumably done so for a reason.

And then the smirk failed as he realised it wasn't aimed at him. The bolt shot past the edge of his shield, thudding into the back of Josse. Her inferior human ears hadn't picked up the launch, nor had

she processed the dragon's actions in her hunger-weakened state. Thus, the bolt suddenly sprouting out of her chest came as a complete surprise.

She looked down in confusion, only having time to say, "Oh," before she collapsed, the bolt having scored a perfect hit on her heart.

"Death to the kingslayer!" came a yell from the wall, and then all hell broke loose. And in the chaos, if Steven didn't react with quite as much surprise as he probably should have done, not even the dragon noticed.