

Chapter 4

Father Serrell, the high priest of Sulltheria, always welcomed the opportunity to expand his mind, taking any chance to learn something new. Today, he had found himself with a larger opportunity than most days, but most of what he was learning was that he had acrophobia.

Or perhaps not. It wasn't as if he ended up completely debilitated every time he ascended his cathedral's bell-tower, and that was pretty darn high. Phobias were supposed to be irrational, and there was nothing irrational about being scared shitless when all that stood between him and the ground were the claws of a dragon.

Well, the claws and a mile of air, but it was the air that was the problem in the first place, really, so Serrell didn't think it counted.

Either way, he somehow survived the trip without suffering even a single heart attack, and once he felt secure enough to open his eyes again, he found himself on his knees in a grassy field, with a crystal-clear lake to his left and a cliff on his right.

And a dragon in front, of course. He probably shouldn't ignore the dragon.

"Well?" asked the aforementioned dragon, and it occurred to Serrell that he had probably missed a fair chunk of explanation at some point while he was busy not having a heart attack.

"I'm sorry, my..." started Serrell, before pausing. In his old age, he'd developed the habit of referring to everyone as 'my child', but that hardly seemed appropriate for a dragon. "... sir?" he corrected himself. "Though the spirit is willing, I fear the flesh is weak. What was it you wished to ask of me?"

The dragon growled, causing the lake's surface to shimmer and dance and a few pebbles to tumble off the cliff. "I asked if it is true that you can resurrect the dead," he demanded with his usual impatience.

"It is true that Sulltheria, through me, can perform such a miracle, but I fear I will be unable to fulfil your request."

"You haven't even heard it, and you deny me already?"

"What is known as resurrection is... misnamed. It is merely a miracle of powerful healing, able to completely restore a body from even a single drop of blood."

"I fail to see your problem," grumpily snapped the dragon. "You would claim a single drop of blood to be 'alive'?"

"The miracle does nothing to retrieve the soul, only to reattach what is already there to the reformed body."

The dragon smirked, finally understanding what the old man was implying. With its container dead, a soul would soon depart to the afterlife, and what was the point in rebuilding a body if the result lacked a soul? The outcome would be no more than a corpse with a heartbeat. The result would be edible, for sure, but would lack the taste of purity and royalty the dragon sought.

But 'soon' was not instantaneous, and besides, with proper preparations, there were means of trapping souls. It would suffice for his purposes.

"That is an acceptable limitation. I do not wish you to revive one who is already dead. I wish for you to teach me the skill."

At that, the priest frowned. "There is no skill to teach. You ask, and Sulltheria either answers, or he does not."

"He answers *you*, and I refuse to believe a human can possess a skill that I can not."

"As I said, skill is not involved. As to why Sulltheria deigns to acquiesce to my pleas, I could not say. Who can know the mind of a god? Perhaps faith is a factor, and should you desire to hear my teachings on the god of light and life, I would be more than happy to share my knowledge."

"I refuse to believe that a *god* can possess a skill that I can not, either," snapped back the arrogant dragon. "Very well, I will simply have you perform a resurrection a few times as I watch. I need only copy what I see."

The elderly high priest smiled to himself as the dragon took off. He was far past the age where one either needed to accept their approaching mortality or else fall to despair, and as such, the dragon didn't scare him. At least, now that they were both back at ground level. He looked forward to the dragon failing and the proselytising he would get to do as a result. He was fairly sure no-one had managed to convert a dragon before.

He'd always questioned why Sulltheria had granted him such miracles. Perhaps this opportunity was the answer?

Josse sat impatiently on her ledge. She knew the dragon was up to *something*. She had no idea where he'd been, but he'd since returned to the lake and was hanging around down there. Was there another person, too? At the distance, it was hard to see, but the dragon certainly seemed to be facing a speck of some sort.

Another sacrifice? It would be unusual to have two so close together, but maybe her brother had found another obstacle in need of removal.

And then the dragon took off, leaving the speck behind, diving vertically up the cliff-face, contrary to how diving was usually supposed to work.

"I don't suppose you've put any further thought into my offer?" she asked, as the dragon spread its wings, coming to a sudden halt and hovering in front of her.

"Indeed I have, and with a few adjustments, I believe it could prove acceptable."

Another emotional outburst of hope threatened the princess, but she stamped down on it. Hard.

"*Adjustments?*" she asked, frowning.

"Nothing serious. In fact, your brother is already dead, and you are queen, just as you desired."

Josse leapt to her feet. "*What?*" she exclaimed. "Then..."

The dragon held up a claw to forestall her, and once again, Josse forced down her hope. The smirk the dragon was wearing was the opposite of reassuring. There was a catch somewhere, and it was obviously going to be a doozy.

"Now, about those... *adjustments*," spoke the smirk. "You will not be reigning directly. Rather, I have appointed a regent in your name. A girl..."

His sentence hung, the words 'by the name of' dying in the dragon's throat as it occurred to him that he had never actually asked her name. With humans as numerous and short-lived as they were, he typically didn't bother, but in this case, it would have been useful. "Brown eyes and hair, about your age. Dressed like one of those servants you people have. Called you not just a master, but a friend."

"... Lindy," breathed Josse, and the smirk widened.

"Ah, was *that* her name? In any case, she will reign in your place, and I have made my position clear that should she suffer any unfortunate incidents, I shall let your entire kingdom know my displeasure. I wonder how long she would last should I revoke my protection? Not that I intend to do such a thing, of course."

"... Damn you," whispered Josse, well aware the dragon intended to use her for blackmail. Or maybe both of them as leverage over each other. Not that she had any evidence the dragon was telling the truth. "I want to see her."

"That would be advisable. It would do your kingdom some good for their queen to put in a public appearance. But first, I have need of a test subject."

Without further explanation, the dragon grasped the princess and dropped back to the base of the cliff, depositing her before the priest.

The priest, old as he was, was by no means senile, and the fact that the dragon had just dropped a living girl in front of him made it obvious what he was about to do. Likewise, the princess, seeing someone in the garb of a high priest, put two and two together with impressive speed. "Don't..." they started in perfect synchronisation, but that was the only word they had time for before a claw pierced clean through the princess's back.

The pair of humans stared into each other's eyes, a thin trickle of blood running from the corner of Josse's mouth, but a vast tide of the stuff flooding from her pierced torso. She had just enough time to mouth something silently at the priest, unable to make a sound with her heart and lungs destroyed, before the dragon flicked her dying body into the air, catching it in his mouth.

The crunch was audible even to the priest.

Given his abilities as a healer, he'd seen a lot in his long life. Oozing sores, mangled limbs, terrible monster-inflicted wounds. Poisons and diseases. Curses. Any decent healer eventually found themselves in a situation that left them up to the elbows in pus, surrounded by the stench of decay. The good ones always got used to it, out of pure necessity.

None of that was the reason he held on to his lunch. The only reason he didn't lose it there and then was because he'd already lost it during his earlier flight.

The dragon shuddered, his face falling into a lax expression of bliss as his tongue almost unconsciously licked the remains from his teeth. "Everything I hoped it would be..." he whispered, lowering his head to lick up the pool of blood.

Unfortunately—at least from the point of view of the princess—he caught himself in time, remembering what the purpose of the blood was supposed to be. "Heal her," he demanded.

"W... What?!" stammered Serrell, all thoughts of successfully converting a dragon to his god forgotten. "You murdered someone simply to provide material for resurrection? How could you be so callous?!"

"Where did you think I was going to get a sufficiently fresh drop of blood from, you old fool? Now hurry up; if the time limit is the departure of the soul, you have mere minutes."

"I thought you would use livestock! A cow or something!"

"You humans *are* livestock," snapped back the dragon. "And if you value your life and hers, I suggest you stop wasting time and get on with it."

Grumbling, the priest held his arms outstretched, devoting a prayer to his god, chanting sacred messages of power and healing. It culminated in a great cry of, "**Resurrection,**" and, for reasons known only to Himself, Sulltheria answered. The pool of blood erupted upwards, flesh and bones knitting themselves together out of thin air. The naked body of Josse gasped for air, her eyes opening wide in shock as she began screaming, her final memory being a tooth of the dragon crunching through her skull.

And for the first time the session, the grin of the dragon faltered, for he had seen nothing. Air had become flesh without the slightest movement of mana. Miracles were not magic, and the display had failed to give the dragon even a single hint on how to replicate the feat.

He grunted with concentration as he cast his own spells of perception and divination. "Again," he demanded, raising a claw.

"Sulltheria will smite you for abusing His power like this. Mark my words," growled the high priest.

"Why me? It's *you* calling to him," snorted the dragon, not halting his swing.

Josse's helpless screams were abruptly cut off as the dragon bisected her at the waist.