

The Desert Shimmer

While telling you my tale hold these truths close in your mind. I may seem now, through the lens of memory and a comforting span of time, to have been brave, but in honesty, I was nowhere near it. I was young; I was quite angry, reckless, and a tad arrogant. Fate found a child to humble that day. However, as with any good story, I was also remarkably lucky...

It was mid-summer in nineteen-fifteen, and I had just turned eleven years old. High Arch, Utah nestled in an expanse of valley hidden among the tall mesas and primordial rock formations. Farmland was sparse but manageable, livestock was lean, but endured.

What High Arch did have was an abundance of gold. It ran through the rocks like frozen streams of shimmering gold. However, with this gift came blight. The land, the wildlife, and our town lived under the constant shadow of Ferris.

The brass band, in shabby red uniforms, waited nervously underneath the shade of the gazebo. They sweat beneath the brims of their black hats and within their woolen coats. The conductor eyed the skies from over the top of his copper-lined spectacles. His grey, bushy mustache twitched in the hot breeze.

I watched the nervous unease of the other children around us from atop my brother's shoulders. Brendan was almost eighteen. He and our mother argued incessantly about including me in Brendan's adventures through town. He'd been fighting for more independence for months. Brendan wished to go off on his own, to spend time with friends without his ball-and-chain of a younger brother.

I knew it was a lie; he wanted to see Faye. She lived up on the hill in the wealthy part of town. Faye was sweet enough, but her neighborhood consisted of the mine and ranch owners. My brother and I came from the streets that housed the laborers for those families.

We stood inside a partitioned section of the town square with every child between the ages of ten and eighteen. The remaining townspeople sat in the grandstands surrounding the square.

From my shoulder-high perch, as I searched for my mother, I spied someone waving in our direction. Faye sat next to her father in the stands. She was thin and wore a delicate linen dress that cuffed her slender neck. She was fair skinned with green eyes. I understood why Brendan liked her. She was also among the smartest people her age. She'd turned eighteen three months ago and was now ineligible to be a representative. My brother's hand shot-up, waving back.

Faye's father placed a disapproving hand on her shoulder. She looked down into her lap and away from the two of us. Her father then glared at my brother and me. His suit was clean and pressed. Golden medals hung from his coat's lapel. He was an officer in the High Arch militia, and our town's own personal hero. Faye's father wasn't necessarily rich either (wealthier than us mind you), but he had something we didn't. He had prestige.

I continued to scan the crowd for my mother, looking for her wide-brimmed dress-hat, but was unable to find her in the sea of faces.

"He really doesn't like us," I mentioned to Brendan.

"He's from up on the hill--what do you expect?" Brendan replied.

“So’s she,” I said pointedly.

“She’s not like him, Ishmael.”

“Uh-huh.” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes. She’s not,” Brendan shook me.

“I didn’t roll my eyes!” I lied.

“You always roll them. Every. Single. Time.” My brother and I argued, often.

“Well, it’s the truth,” I said.

“Shut up. You don’t know her,” Brendan snarled at me.

“You do?”

“Don’t make me drop you!” he warned.

The wind whirled and everyone shot their attention to the red rock cliffs outside of town. Protruding from one side of the cliff face was a massive stone archway, our town’s namesake.

A shape emerged from behind the arch. Ferrix crawled on four, clawed, limbs to the top of the stone formation. The dragon lifted his head high and proud, and then roared. His voice carried across the desert. It maneuvered over the sands, down to the river, through the streets, then into our very hearts. The heat made his form wobble and shift in the air like a mirage. His umber colored scales were flecked with glinting bronze.

I'd seen him at least once a year for as far back as I could remember. Always to collect payments of our gold in exchange for his protection. He was ever watchful over the valley. Whether he patrolled its skies or sat atop the tall mesas, his presence was felt by all.

This was my first Ceremony of Terms. Every ten years Ferrix gave our townspeople an opportunity to plead our case so as not to be eaten by him. He, of course, debated in favor of roasting our town and devouring everyone. A chosen youth would have to argue against him. For the last hundred and thirty years, Ferrix had won every single debate.

But, Ferrix always offered a bargain, pay him each year in gold and we could keep our lives. He controlled who came into the town and who left. He'd even protected us from other dragons, outlaws, interlopers, and other criminal types. Ferrix always kept his word when agreed upon. Though we'd never had any trouble with other dragons, we were prone to more than our fair share criminals who desired our gold.

Ferrix stretched his wings and glided off the crest of the arch. He dove down to the desert floor. Flapping once with a great *whoosh*, he stopped his dense form just above the rocky ground and kicked up vast dust clouds behind him as he rushed toward High Arch. The town seemed to take a nervous breath and remained deathly silent. We were hostages to the claps of the dragon's thunderhead wings.

"Don't worry, Mel," Brendan put me on my feet. "Everything's going to be fine, just stay quiet."

"K."

Then the great Ferrix was above us. He flapped several times, hovering above his subjects. Sand whirled around us, stinging my skin and the wind berated my eardrums. Behind

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the spinning air, I could hear the deep rumblings of what I have since come to know as a dragon's chuckle.

He landed with surprising quietness. He was tall, even on all fours. He was two stories in height, which was just shy of the tallest building in High Arch. His drab brownish scales appeared to have a tint of red through them, which made his copper ones shine even brighter by comparison.

Around his neck were arcs of gold chains crafted by the townspeople. Hammered rings with deep engravings hugged some of the spines down his back. His horns were riddled with wealth. They were actual horns, but to me, they had always appeared to be antlers, like those belonging to pronghorn antelope. Shining chains hung from the antlers; some swaying like golden bridges from antler to the other.

His copper eyes scanned the crowds in amusement as people coughed in the sandstorm. The women in the crowd dusted off their fine, now filthy, dresses and waved their plumage-laden hats feebly.

Our mayor, Thomason, stepped forward as the whirlwind subsided. He was tall, and his hair perfectly parted and styled. He waved a hand at the conductor frantically. But the elderly man's glasses were frosted with a thick layer of dirt.

"Walter!" yelled Thomason.

The conductor turned with a start, tapped his wand blindly, and began to wave it through the air. From what I could see, between the shifting bodies of those around me, the instruments of the downtrodden band erupted with clouds of dust from their brass mouths. Ferrix let another foreboding chuckle escape. The band puffed an upbeat tune before Ferrix rose his claw to hush

them. The blinded conductor kept his fevered hands moving despite the disjointed honking and hooting of the terrified musicians abandoning the jingle

“Ferrix, the Golden, the Desert Shimmer,” Mayor Thomason recited the dragon’s titles. “Defender of High Arch, Burner of Bandits, Grand Serpent of the Sand Seas, Golden Jewel of Red Rock, we humbly welcome you back,” Thomason concluded.

“Thomason,” replied the dragon, who hadn’t bothered to nod at the mayor.

“We’ve gathered here again to negotiate for our survival. As per the first *Ceremony of Terms*, the one who will represent us on our behalf must be of the age of innocence.” The mayor indicated Brendan’s and my section. He dabbed his forehead with his pocket square.

“Let us hope,” rumbled Ferrix, “There’s one skilled enough to argue this time around, for your sake.” His amused attention rested on Thomason.

I tried to remember all the lessons from class about debate, but this was my first year debating my classmates. I frequently lost my temper and was disqualified. I was terrible at it, which was as close to a banish-worthy trait as one could have in High Arch.

“I choose,” the dragon thought for a moment then continued, “the month of March.”

Nearly all the kids within the partition let out a sigh of relief and took their seats. March was not their birth month. This disqualified them from being this ceremony’s representative. My heart thudded into my stomach. It did not disqualify me. I clutched Brendan’s pant leg as he sat down and placed his arm around my shoulder.

My brother looked over at me, and then whispered, “It’s all right.” He smiled, but I could tell he was trying to hide away his worry.

“We’ll now determine the day of birth for our representative,” Thomason turned and extended a hand to his two volunteer assistants. He moved like he was the ringleader of a circus as they wheeled the town’s rolling cage into the square. We used the cage for bingo nights every Sunday evening.

“Drop the pageantry, Thomason.” Ferrix rolled his copper pupils dramatically. The expression would have made me smile if I wasn’t terrified.

Thomason seemed to deflate. The two men brought the cage near. Within it waited dozens of small numbered balls. They cranked mechanism, and the balls began to tumble over one another.

“Enough,” shouted Thomason. The cage rattled and shuddered, then stopped. He opened the gate and extracted a ball from the pile. “March the Tenth!”

My heart broke. Brendan looked over at me, his eyes wide.

“All those born on March tenth,” announced Ferrix, “come forward.” The dragon smiled. It occurred to me then that dragons did not necessarily smile, they snarled happily.

I walked forward, horrified and dazed. Brendan’s hand found my wrist. He knelt. “It’s going to be fine, Mel, they still have to negotiate age, you’re going to be fine.”

I nodded, I didn’t have words, my stomach rolled over itself nervously. If I spoke, I might have cried. Six other kids filed out onto the grass. One was a year older than me; her name was Cherish. I’d threatened her in a debate recently. The others were older still, and all seemed to be near eighteen. I hoped it would be one of them.

“Nineteen-fifteen, by your kind’s count,” stated Ferrix to the Mayor. He eyed his opponents one at a time until his coppery pupils found me.

“It is and it’s the thirteenth ceremony,” Thomason confirmed, and Ferrix swiveled his gilded head back to him. “Odd ceremonies go to you.” He nodded at the dragon.

The dragon lowered his body to the ground and lay in the grass. He straightened his long neck, stretched out his wings, and gazed at his possible adversaries.

I couldn’t help but stare at the membraned wings above me. The sun shone through them; dark veins seemed like the roads on a weathered map. He folded them near to his body, crossed one of his clawed forelimbs over the other, and waited. He seemed quite relaxed considering he’d soon debate to kill us all.

“I choose the anniversary number, thirteen,” Ferrix announced, his attention firmly on me.

Thomason then had to add or subtract from that number using the individual digits that made up the year nineteen-fifteen. Both he and the dragon were constrained to a handful of seconds to reply or the other would inherit that turn and decide for them. It was a game that Ferrix played well.

“Tick-tock, Thomason,” baited Ferrix slyly.

“I add the five from nineteen-fifteen,” he blurted, then shut his eyes as if he’d already lost.

Ferrix chuckled, “Cumulative of eighteen.”

The number couldn't be below ten or above eighteen by the end of the exchange. Also, it couldn't stay outside those parameters for more than one turn or the process would be forfeited. Ferrix could then do what he wanted to us without a representative to debate against. If none of the participants matched the age that was determined the contest would start over until one was reached.

“Remove the nine,” Ferrix puffed arrogantly.

Thomason hung his head, then glanced at me ashamed. As if he'd failed me. At the time I hadn't realized he did.

“Cumulative of nine,” he stated morosely.

“Don't linger below ten,” Ferrix warned. He lowered his head so to look into the eyes of the defeated man. “Or should I just make my choice now and presume you won't honor the ceremony rules.” Wisps of smoke leaked from between his teeth. He was a stickler for the rules; ones he and our ancestors crafted.

“I add a one, from nineteen-fifteen.”

“And I'll add the last one.” Ferrix turned to me. “Cumulative of eleven.”

My heart stopped, he manipulated the ceremony to choose the youngest opponent, me. Ferrix had eaten debaters in the past for broken rules, even more once the negotiations had concluded.

“Everyone! Go on back to your seats now,” Thomason dismissed the others. “Ishmael Barker, come.”

I turned around looking for my mother again. The crowd was silently still, then I saw her. She stood-- her neighbors held her from rushing out to me. She wept. I'd only ever seen her look as helpless one time in my life. The day my father didn't come home from the mines.

"No," Brendan bolted from his seat, "That's not fair!"

A sudden gust struck me in the back and pushed me face-first into the grass. When I looked up, Brendan lay on his back, he was angry, but more so, terrified.

"Do not interfere!" boomed Ferrix. "Control your kind, Thomason, or you'll be sweeping up their ashes!"

Thomason, who'd been thrown to the ground also, scrambled to my brother. He took him by the arm, hauled him to his feet, and back to the grandstands. Brendan was furious. He stared at the dragon with such fiery hate that I thought he might rush out again. My brother and I seldom got along, but now, with a rather high possibility of me being ingested, it all seemed a stupid waste of time. We only have so much time with the people we love.

I turned over to find Ferrix's eyes burning; they began to glow like molten metal, pushing the copper to the edge of his pupils. He hadn't stood, but his wings were outstretched aggressively.

"Stand," Ferrix ordered.

My back ached from the impact. I didn't speak even after I was on my feet. The dragon cocked his head curiously at me. His eyes cooled slowly.

“Have you learned the customary greeting?” he asked. His voice wasn’t at all humanlike. It rumbled, replacing familiar sounds with their nearest dragon equivalent. It wasn’t difficult to understand, but it was distracting.

I nodded.

“Um. Ferrix, the Golden, Burner of Bandits, the Desert Swimmer,”

“Shimmer,” Ferrix corrected. He tapped his claws, waiting for me to finish.

I continued, “Desert *Shimmer*, Golden Jewel of the Red Rock, Defender of our town, and Big Snake of the Sand Seas.”

“Close enough.” Ferrix chortled. “Go ahead, continue.”

“I accept this debate on behalf of my people,” I concluded.

“Very good.” He dipped his head low, “but you forgot to introduce yourself.”

I felt my eyes go wide, “I’m uh, Mel- I mean Ishmael, Ishmael Barker.”

“I do hope you are ready, little Barker.” His lip curled, revealing his dagger sized teeth.

“Would you like to go first?”

I shook my head.

“Second, then?” he asked.

“In class, they say it gives you an advantage to be the last one heard,” I blurted.

“Indeed,” commented Ferrix. “I believe it does.”

“I think I need all the help I can get here,” I said aloud.

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I hadn't meant to, but it came tumbling out of my mouth nervously.

Ferrix laughed, to my surprise. His mouth hung open like a panting dog's, emanating short barks that turned the air humid.

"Honesty, very refreshing," he said when his laughter subsided.

"No one else seems to agree with you," I retorted.

He looked down on me, adjusted his forelimbs, making them more comfortable and said,

"Well, let's begin, little Barker."

I nodded.

"You see, few things have changed since I arrived in your valley. I hunger just as I did then. I can cook all these people, eat them, then be on my way. It's really, very, simple. Now, I could do this over a year or in a couple of days." His voice dropped low, taking a devilish tone. "I am inevitability in its truest of forms. I promise, a dragon's promise, I'll enjoy it. Relish it. I'll rain down fire and ember, burn the very rainclouds from the air. Your crops will roast, and homes will burn. The rivers, I will boil, then and only then will I come for you all. It's in my very nature to do these things. Now please, Ishmael Barker, why I should not do this?"

I waited, trying to remember my debate lessons. As with each test, each practice argument, I froze. Ferrix waited in patient silence.

"Well," I thought out loud. "I can't appeal to your humanity, because you don't have any." The crowd took in a nervous breath, waiting for the dragon to engulf me in flames.

"Clearly," He said, nodding toward, and flicking his wings.

“It’s an odd question though,” I became sidetracked by my overactive mind. “Are inhuman things even capable of humanity?”

“Off-topic, but an intriguing query,” he entertained me. “Not all your kind have humanity, so therefore, humanity isn’t intrinsic to humans. Your kind likes to think of themselves as the only ones capable of such a phenomenon. Untrue.”

“So, you’d say you have humanity or at least the essence of it?” I asked, hopefully.

“Not for humans,” he retorted lazily.

Demoralized, I searched for another avenue. I paced in front of him. “How many times have you won this debate?” I asked, finally.

“Soon to be thirteen,” Ferrix rumbled proudly.

“So, you’ve just about heard it all?”

The dragon nodded slowly.

“Well, that’s unfair,” I laughed nervously.

“Blame your halfwit ancestors. They too tried to appeal to my *humanity*. Thought I might not eat their young, like I did them.” He examined his claws as if he were distracted. “Misguided imbeciles. The young taste much sweeter.”

“What if I say, we’ll stop mining gold for you if you attack us. You’d reply?”

“I’d retort with a threat to burn your livestock. But that is pending an agreement for protection. For now, convince me that you should keep your pitiful lives at all.” Ferrix’s mouth opened wide with a long yawn. His lips drew back revealing double rows of teeth.

“What about a home in town?” I offered. “We don’t need to be enemies.” The crowd groaned behind me.

“We dragons are hatched within boiling-molten earth; no shabby wooden domicile may replace that. We’re solitary things. Not to mention wood is prone to burn, and I have dreams of fire,” he answered.

“What about appreciation instead of fear? We could have peace. A celebration once a month, in your honor.”

“*Peace*,” Ferrix scoffed. “I do not need your fake appreciation. You are hostages, *my* hostages. I feel nothing for your pleas of peace.”

“All creatures have the right to live. You’re taking that away from us,” I argued.

“If you have the right to live as humans, then my right is to exist as dragons do. My existence comes with the instinct to burn and feast. Our rights as living creatures are in direct conflict,” he swatted away the point.

“Fine,” I said, frustrated. “We don’t need your protection. We have the bravest men in the state! They’ll protect us.”

I threw a hand toward the crowd. They remained silent.

“You forget again, we haven’t made a deal for protection yet, little Barker. Let alone your survival.”

“Still, it proves we don’t need you,” I said.

“Oh, without a doubt,” he rolled his eyes again. “These men seem very eager to back this plan of yours.” He nodded at the silent crowd. “You’re unaware of the advancements humans

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have made. Tinker machines, flying things, with guns- armored vehicles on treads. I don't believe these men, no matter their *bravery*, are up to that task."

He was right, again. There had to be something someone hadn't thought of before. I wracked my brain for any solution. Each argument I thought of was quickly rooted away with the obvious *he'll just burn us* answer.

"What's the longest negotiation you've been through?" I asked.

"Twenty-eight hours." Ferrix stretched, stood, then began to circle me slowly.

"They must have been great at arguing." A growing part of me almost hoped he'd eat me after we were done. If not, the town might.

"Stubborn, actually, also too thin for my liking. Bones, though yielding a satisfying crunch, aren't much for flavor." Ferrix blew jets of flame from his nostrils as he sauntered. The crowd recoiled, and Ferrix smirked.

He was mocking all of us; he wasn't taking this seriously at all. Ferrix wasn't even trying to debate anymore. He expected us to give in, to bribe him with gold forever.

"Alright, I've had enough. The militia has underground living quarters. We'll live under your feet where those flames of yours won't ever hurt us. So far down you couldn't dig there if you tried." I lied. "Even dragons sleep, and when you do, we'll come for you." I dragged a finger across my throat. The crowd let out horrified gasp. Representatives didn't often threaten to kill Ferrix, or openly lie for that matter.

He looked to the townsfolk. "Have we chosen to rebel, again? Any survivors of the year

eighteen-ninety-one present?" The crowd stayed silent. "There's no need to be shy. Go on, rise, be seen."

Slowly people rose from their seats. I recognized them. Neighbors, shop owners, militia members, teachers, my mother. They were all scarred, crippled or, burned. Some were missing legs or arms. My mother had her own scars and kept her eyes down. Faye's father also stood; his bushy eyebrows furrowed. He was a hero; lost a leg evacuating a burning building. I'd heard the stories most of my life.

"I believe they are evidence of how well rebellions have fared. As for your underground homes, should they exist, there's no depth in this dirt that you may hide from me. It will not be the first time I have turned earth to glass," He said and continued his stroll.

I shook my head, and my anger continued to build. I didn't like when Brendan cornered me, I liked it much less when Ferrix did so.

"What do you want from us?!" I exploded. Ferrix stopped and looked at me hungrily. His eyes began to burn again. "Serve or die, that's it! So, why do any of this anymore?" I yelled.

The crowd turned on me, most screamed objections angrily, while others begged Ferrix to spare them.

"Silence!" Ferrix bellowed, then released a primal roar. Everything shook and my ears rung. There seemed little sound left in the world. For unbearable moments I waited for the fire. When he spoke, his voice as dangerous as a spark struck in a dry wheat field.

"You hold surprises, child. Anger's a welcome change to this tired ceremony."

“I just don’t see why we need to do this anymore. We can’t win. Everything stays the same. Even you have to be bored of this!” I accused.

“Dread is never boring.” He shook his antlers, the chain bridges jingled lightly. “It tastes nearly as good as roasted fat-man.”

Ferrix stopped pacing and eyed a particularly round resident in the grandstands.

I wondered if all dragons enjoyed inducing such fear, then a thought dawned on me. “When was the last time you had to defend us from a dragon?” I asked.

Ferrix froze, a clawed forefoot hesitated in the air.

“Not for some time.” He eyed me with suspicion.

“But dragons love gold. You’re proof of it.”

“Your point?” He stepped toward me as if he were about to pounce.

“My point is, we have a lot of gold, shouldn’t the skies be swarming with dragons? But it’s only you. I wish there was another.”

My voice was dark; an involuntary smile crept over my lips.

“They could kill you. You do well against outlaws with rifles. Makes me wonder if we can’t go find another dragon to come and take your place.”

The dragon glared, his eyes radiating again. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted. The sound of a motorcycle saved me. The entire town spun around to see a lone rider barreling through Main Street. Dirt trailed from his duster. He was the personification of the

desert. On his back was holstered a rifle. Goggles protected his eyes, and a faded-red bandana hung over his face.

His name was Jonah Redding, the town scout. He lived out in the desert and was easily the most well-known person in town. Not only did he survive the land; he survived the outlaws. He alerted us to any and all threats. When I was younger, I'd spend hours pretending to be him, he's all I'd wanted to be. He didn't live in the shadow of Ferrix. He was allowed to roam, as free as anything I could imagine.

The town murmured as the scout's motorcycle roared into the square. Thomason walked out to meet him. They spoke in hushed words and Thomason shook his head in surprise at whatever Redding had to say.

"Not now," Thomason seethed; he pressed frustrated fingers into his forehead.

"What's happening!?" screamed someone. Panic had broken through the uneasy silence of all the others, and they rang out. The mayor rose his hands and shouted feebly against the noise.

I glanced at Ferrix. His eyes told me all I needed to know in that moment. They were once again a cool copper as he stared at me arrogantly. He knew that time for my debate was running out quickly. Redding only came to town under one of two circumstances; supplies and approaching danger. Bandits were coming.

Ferrix let the town panic. He seemed to bathe in the overwhelming chaos. They turned to him and pleaded for his benevolence. He loved that they all needed him.

“Quiet down,” he cooed at the crowd. He strutted as they called for his help. “Enough. Let us come to an accord so I may stop these barbarians.” He looked to me again. “Your time is up.”

“Just take the normal deal,” someone screamed at me.

“They’re coming! Hurry up!” yelled another.

Their voices overwhelmed me. They were content to live under Ferrix’s threat of violence rather than solving any of this.

“Let him speak.” At the sound of Ferrix’s soothing voice, they quieted. “I offer you and the town of High Arch ten years of protection for my weight in gold, to be paid each July first until re-negotiations come again in the year nineteen-twenty-five. Do we have a deal, Ishmael Barker?”

I trembled angrily, feeling my face go hot as he came near. I wasn’t going to end up like the rest of my fear-filled town.

“No,” I growled.

The crowd burst into an unintelligible clamor, but Ferrix laughed.

Will *you* defend the town?” he asked. “Go then, great Ishmael, and slay these fiends of men.”

“No.” I hadn’t ever heard my voice sound steadier.

“Then what do you propose?” he asked condescendingly.

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “Without an agreement, one way or the other, you can’t do anything. Those are *your* rules.”

He rose a scaled brow curiously.

“So, until you or I forfeit, you can’t defend, or destroy, or do anything. You’re stuck here with me.”

“I could kill you!” he roared, “What then, stupid child?”

“Not until we make a deal,” I corrected, “you’ve never eaten anyone before an agreement was made.”

He reared up on his hind legs, standing taller than any building I’d ever seen. He berated me with a gust of wind from his wings, which sent me tumbling across the grass. I came to a forceful stop against the wooden steps of the gazebo.

“You see that plume of dust on the horizon?” His eyes seared the air. “I’d estimate a gang of at least fifty thieves. They will tear through this town, killing all of you. Now, agree to my terms!”

I stood, shaky at first, but found my footing. “But you promise us the same thing, destruction, pain. So no, no deal,” I shot back at him.

Ferrix seemed shocked. “You’re prepared to die, are you? Ready for the winds of death to sweep you away?”

“No,” I laughed hoarsely and rubbed my sore back. “But I’d rather die here and now, than live the rest of my life with something like you over my head.”

The crowd began to run for their homes.

“You bluff badly,” he growled ferociously. “Without me, this town will fall. Other dragons will come for whatever is left, and they won’t be as kind as I have been.”

“Oh, so we have the *kind* dragon? That’s *definitely going* to keep the others away. You know, you’re the only dragon any of us have seen. Only you!” I screamed at him.

He eyed the incoming cloud of dust, then back at me several times before answering. “They dare not stray near. I own these lands, they are mine!”

“Lies! I think you know so much about our machines because you know what they can do.” I shouted. “Kill dragons.”

He was uncharacteristically silent. The air around him rippled and burned.

“You’re hiding as far away from those things as possible.” I continued to berate him. “That’s why you keep us hidden. Our town’s silence is the only thing keeping them from finding you and shooting from the sky. Just like all the rest of your kind!”

“Do not speak of my kind!” He sent flames into the air over my head.

I covered my head and dove to the ground. “Tell me why!? Why are there no other dragons!?” I screamed at him.

“Take the deal!” he slammed a claw down onto the ground.

“Are they all dead? What are you hiding from?” Stay on topic, that’s what they taught in class. Control the flow of the debate. Don’t let your opponent stray too far when backed into a corner.

“We’re out of time, Barker!” Ferrix’s voice was desperate, but there was something behind that, was it sorrow? “Accept my terms!” he exploded.

“What happened to the others, are you the only one?” I walked toward him. To my surprise, he stepped away from me. Faye and her father, Jonah Redding, Brendan and my mother were the only people who remained in the stands. They watched awestruck as I backed Ferrix away from them.

Ferrix shot fervent glances from me to the ever-growing cloud and the fight that came with it. He roared at me wrathfully. My instincts told me to run but kept advancing. He snapped at the air in front of me, his jaws clapping loudly.

“Are you the last?” I screamed.

He stopped retreating from me. “Terms,” he growled lowly. “Be quick about it.”

I stared at the beast in shock. I didn’t think I’d still be alive, let alone considered terms.

“Now,” Ferrix roared. “End this!”

I needed to stall, to think, “You need us. Just tell me why.”

“Barker,” he snarled, furiously. His head hung low; his body poised aggressively.

“Terms!”

“No more gold, no more threats, no more re-negotiations. One final deal,” I clarified.

He looked out over the horizon, anxiously hungry for battle and blood. Looking into the dragon’s eyes hurt my own with their sheer brightness, two orbs burning like the desert sun above. I could hear the engines of the outlaw vehicles. I kept myself from looking at the horizon. If I knew how close the criminals were, I might’ve crumbled beneath the wants of the dragon.

Ferrix didn’t answer. He stamped the ground and let hazardous flames burst from his maw.

“One deal, Ferrix, or your perfect hiding place will be gone forever, and the world will come for you.” Apprehension built up in my chest.

He berated me with his wings again, but this time, I kept my footing and fought against the gale. I closed my eyes and covered my face from the stinging sand. “Yes! Now hurry! Terms! You insufferable vermin! I yield!”

“You continue to protect us from people who would steal, or otherwise hurt, the town. No more payments in gold. Your payment is in safety. We protect you from those tinker machines you hate. We keep the secret that you’re here. We’re partners, the town of High Arch and you, working together. If one of us goes down, so does the other. The deal is peace, forever and always!”

Gunshots rang out, and I flinched. I told myself not to turn, to not look at the destruction of my home. I’d destroyed us, I was sure of it. My family would be killed by the raiders, the town would burn, and Ferrix would leave us to suffer and die. I had doomed all of us.

The dragon looked beyond me at the marauding outlaws in the streets. He was beyond furious, and I was sure that if he could burn the entire earth, he would have.

“Ferrix!?” I screamed desperately for him to reply.

“Deal!” he roared. A thrush of air sent me flying as the dragon took off. For moments I floated in open air then I hit the ground and my vision wobbled. The world shook then darkened. I rolled to see him flying into battle.

Ferrix roared and landed in front of the stampeding vehicles. He let loose a jet of flame that seemed as solid and impenetrable as stone. It emanated blue from his mouth before

transitioning into a violent red orange. Vehicles burst into flame then exploded in his tornado of fire.

The dragon dove into battle amid the sounds of gunshots and screams. He swiped a rider from a cycle and sent him careening into a building. His claws found the roof of a truck with several raiders in the bed. The truck had sped through the flames, intent on ramming the dragon. Ferrix lifted the machine into the air, his powerful wings driving him upward.

Some of the outlaws jumped from the truck while others took aim at his head. Higher and higher, he rose, before diving downward. The outlaws in the bed of the truck became weightless, flailing above the truck bed. Ferrix sped up, his great wings thrusting his heavy form toward the earth below. He stopped abruptly and released the truck down onto the bandits. The metal meteorite plummeted toward the raiding party and slammed into the road. Outlaws went flying as the truck exploded.

Like terrified raindrops, the bandits from the truck-bed came tumbling to earth. I looked away, and one by one, their screams ended with thuds onto the pavement.

Several motorcycle raiders circled the carnage, drawing my attention back. They fired their revolvers up at him wildly. Ferrix strafed the ground and released a torrent of fire on them. The riders were taken by the flames, their forms dusting to ash in the unfathomable heat. He landed among his pool of fire and carnage, unburned and hellish in appearance.

One of the raiders crawled from under a turned over vehicle and desperately ran from Ferrix. The dragon stalked through the flames. His eyes flared in the shadows of his face. Ferrix snapped the man up violently and took off into the sky. With that, the remaining bandits panicked and ran for their lives. Ferrix, in patented Ferrix fashion, showed no mercy. He soared

above them, hawk-like, diving and snatching them from the dirt. He swallowed them in one or two unsettling crunches before searching for his next mouthful.

When he was done, and the gunshots had ended; when he could find no more retreating raiders, Ferrix landed in front of me. The dragon was not impervious. He'd been hit several times during the skirmish. Black blood oozed from the wounds, and pillars of sunlight cascaded from bullet holes in the membrane of his wings. I closed my eyes and tried not to imagine spending my last moments floating in a stomach full of dismembered criminals.

He lowered his adorned head, his breath wreaked of sulfur, burned hair, and meat. "Ishmael Barker, you and I have a deal," he stated.

A motorcycle started up, and both Ferrix and I found the rider. One of the outlaws sped through the smoke, he weaved between the broken vehicles and remains of his unlawful friends and out of town. Without hesitation the dragon took to the skies and gave chase.

...

"Now, times are different, but we still keep Ferrix's secret. Town's grown up since we started keeping our gold," I told the group of school children who sat on the rocks in front of me. We sat at the mouth of Ferrix's cave that rested in the shadow of the grand stone archway. "But thieves still come, some of them in suits, waving contracts, but still they try to take what's not theirs."

My motorcycle acted as my backrest. I cleaned my goggles absently as I told my story to the school children sitting in a semicircle. "Ferrix, he always honored the rules, I don't know if that's a dragon thing or a Ferrix thing, but he did. I can respect that, even from him."

A young girl with pig tails raised her hand. “Mr. Barker sir?”

“Mr. Barker’s my brother. Mel’s fine,” I corrected.

“Um, what’s happened to Ferrix?”

“He’s not been seen in town for a while now,” I answered, and turned toward the cave. “I think he prefers the silence, too much noise in the world now-days, you see.”

“Is he old now?” asked the girl.

“Is he dead?” asked one of the boys in the front row.

“My older sister saw him once. When the mob came to town and wanted to start casinos or something. They were dug in pretty deep at the hotel, and Ferrix ate them all up, rooted them out,” chomped another kid.

“Not alone he didn’t!” commented the pig-tailed girl and pointed to me. I refrained from commenting on the matter.

“So?” asked one of the other girls. “Ferrix?”

I thought for a moment, “Funny thing is-“

From behind me, an impressive plume of flames shot from the recesses of the cave. The fire struck the archway and wound around it. Horror illuminated the children’s faces. Then a deafening roar muted their terrified screams. They were sent running down the rocky path toward town.

The pig-tailed girl held her ground long enough to see the dragon emerge triumphantly. Then she too ran. I felt the heat from his body before he came into view.

“Very mature, you two,” My brother’s wife, Faye, chastised us then followed her class down the hill.

I laughed and could hear Ferrix’s distinct chuckle.

“You didn’t let me finish,” I mentioned.

“Words aren’t nearly as memorable as a good entrance with a hint of fear. They’ll remember that for the rest of their days. Trust me,” Ferrix replied. He came to lay leisurely next to me. His body curled around me and the motorcycle.

Though I had aged into a man, Ferrix had hardly changed at all through the years. A few new scars lined his body, mine as well, but from what I could tell, he was the same as he always had been, as he always would be.

He’d never answered my question about other dragons. I often wondered if he was truly the last, if he was lonely. From time to time, I’d catch him scanning the skies, his eyes filled with longing, instead of quiet alertness. I couldn’t pretend to know what this creature felt. I’d never asked again, not in all the years we knew one another. In truth, I didn’t want to know if he was the last, not anymore.

We sat like always, keeping watch over our town. Two sets of careful eyes on the horizon, waiting for when we’d be needed. Those far off days had become more frequent as time moved ever forward and the world shrunk in around us. I wondered how long we could keep him safe, how long he might let us. I wondered if I may live to see a day without him and what an odd world that would be.

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I told myself that he'd outlive all of us. I didn't know if that was true, but I had become quite attached to the dragon, and it was easier than thinking about darker, unseen, days.

“We need to work on your approach if that's your version of ‘hint of fear,’” I commented. “We need them to like you, remember?”

Ferrix, the Golden Shimmer, puffed dismissively. The two of us laughed in the shade, as the noon sun burned above, and High Arch thrived below.