

Chapter Twenty One: The Servant of Lord Kaithdross

The large dragon huffed and sniffed. "I am Regebrass," it bellowed in a deep, rumbling voice. "Servant of the great Kaithdross, Lord of the Haarkbaah Dragons." It stomped and huffed again, swishing its long tail and rolling its shoulders with an agitated air.

James stared open-mouthed at the giant, armoured dragon. He had not expected it to talk, let alone speak the Standard Tongue with such high-quality.

Sam slid down from his mousslo as he spoke. "Regebrass. Servant of Kaithdross. How can we help you?"

The dragon moved its arms animatedly as it spoke. The ground shook a little when it stomped. James was oddly reminded of a performer on a stage. He still couldn't comprehend what he was witnessing.

"There is but one way to help me," the dragon said. "You can die. For that is why I have been sent here. Lord Kaithdross wishes you dead. And so, whoever you are, it is time to die."

James groaned internally, fear seizing his chest. *Why does everyone want to kill us or hurt us?*

"A moment," Sam said to the dragon, holding a hand up. He winced and held his bruised chest.

James disembarked from his mousslo, along with Evan and Castan. He looked between his companions, hoping to make some sense of this bizarre creature, and was surprised to see the stern look on Castan as he regarded the dragon, having expected to see fear or confusion from their guide.

"You do not know who we are?" Sam asked.

The dragon hesitated, appearing to consider the question. "It matters not. Lord Kaithdross has spoken."

"You misunderstand," Sam went on. "I mean to say, if you do not know who we are, then how do you know you have the right people?"

James perked up. Maybe this dragon did have the wrong people. He felt it was a futile hope, but held on to it nonetheless.

The dragon's long snout twisted as its head reeled back, clearly confused at the question. "I have been sent by Lord Kaithdross to destroy you. One of you is James Island. It matters not which one."

James's stomach dropped. It took him a while to recover, and he realised Sam was speaking again.

"And there is no way we can change your mind?" Sam asked casually.

"Nothing will stop me from fulfilling my mission," Regebrass bellowed, puffing its chest out. Its armour gleamed in the sunlight, though it looked worn and dented in places.

"Castan," Sam said, turning and lowering his voice. "Would you hold the reins of the mousslos? Keep them safe and calm."

Castan nodded, moving before Sam had finished speaking.

Sam stepped forward. "Regebrass. Servant of Kaithdross. My friends and I have just come from a battle, and we are injured and very tired. Can we postpone this fight to the death, per chance?"

If the situation were any different, James may have been tempted to laugh at the absurdity of Sam's conversation with the dragon. But instead fear and anxiety churned his stomach and caused his temple to throb. There was no way they could go up against a giant creature like this, even if they were all at full strength.

The dragon shook its head. "An admirable question. But alas, there is no chance. For I, Regebrass, have been sent-

"Understood," Evan interrupted. He stepped closer.

James saw that Sam was also approaching the dragon. He now knew they would have to fight, and that he would have to be a part of it. He wondered how useful the three-hit sword combination Sam had taught him would be against this foe.

"Very well," Sam said. "But one more question, before we begin. Tell us, why does Lord Kaithdross want us dead?"

"Lord Kaithdross needs no reason for his actions."

"You don't know, do you?"

Regebrass snorted and stomped agitatedly. "No more words, human. Time to die."

With two great strides that shook the earth, the armoured dragon was upon them. Sam jumped back as it slammed a palm to the ground.

Evan closed in from the side with his sword drawn. He deftly leapt over a sweeping tail and continued his approach. The tail lashed out again. He jumped again but his boot caught on the tail and was sent spiralling to the ground.

Sam came from the dragon's other side and plunged his sword into the meaty flesh of its foot. Regebrass roared to the sky and stumbled backwards as Sam released the sword.

James withdrew his own sword, cursing himself for not having done so already. They should not be fighting. Sam had broken ribs and Evan was just unconscious. Not to mention the open wound in James's side. He focused and told himself to stay strong. He looked for an opportunity to strike, knowing that running straight for the twenty-foot dragon would only get him killed.

As Evan and Sam closed in on Regebrass, the dragon raised a leg and brought its foot crashing down in front of them. The earth split into jagged cracks as a shockwave sent out chips of rock and dirt. Sam rocked on his feet, steadying himself, while Evan was thrown to the ground.

"Feeble little ones," Regebrass growled. "I will crush you all."

Evan rolled away from another foot stomp, and threw a hand out, shouting a foreign word. The ground by the dragon's foot crumbled and burst upwards. The earth rolled around the scaled foot and set it firmly in place. Regebrass faltered and stared at his immersed foot. Evan dropped to the ground, panting with exhaustion.

Bouncing on the spot, James saw his opening. He fought through the sharp pain in his bloodied side and rushed forward with his sword in both hands.

Regebrass slammed a fist down, cracking the raised rocks and freeing his foot. His back remained to James. When James came to its left foot, he grunted and thrust the sword into the scaled skin. It plunged in almost half way down the blade. The leg jerked outward in shock, causing James to lose his grip on the sword and fall onto his hands and knees. His sword remained in the dragon's foot as it hobbled away, grunting with each step.

James pushed himself backwards along the trembling ground as the dragon reeled towards him, an angry glare in its yellow eyes, its sharp teeth bared. Fresh blood seeped from James's side, staining his desert cloak.

Evan attempted to charge at the dragon but was held back by the sweeping tail.

Sam was sprinting towards the dragon from the other side. Despite a pained grimace, he held a look of fierce determination. He rocketed into the air, sailing towards the dragon's head. Regebrass turned and back stepped, clearing more distance away from Sam's flight path. Sam looked helpless in the air, now unable to do anything but fall back to the ground. An easy target. The dragon readied an attack.

A hazy blue wind gather around Sam. James saw that Evan had his arms raised, channelling his magic. The Voarn cried out and threw his arms up to the sky. As Regebrass swung a fist towards Sam's falling form, the blue wind burst and shoved Sam higher up. The dragon's

fist swung through empty air. Sam flew in a wide arc over the dragon, bringing his sword down and slicing a long line down the back of Regebrass's head, below his goggles strap.

Regebrass roared, a shrill cry, and held a hand to his head.

When Sam landed, he faltered and fell to knees. He grimaced with pain, sweat dripping from his face. James felt the need to join the fight more, seeing how strained and injured his friends were. But his sword was still embedded in the dragon's ankle.

Evan readied his sword and ran from behind the dragon. Not knowing what else to do, James charged towards the dragon. He wouldn't let them fight alone.

"Hey! James called out. "Hey! I am James Island."

Regebrass's head immediately turned to him. He leaned forward and bellowed, "Target!"

The dragon faced James full-on and raised an arm to attack. James kept running towards it, knowing that hesitating would get him killed. Adrenaline rushed through James, giving him strength despite his fatigue. Regebrass's large hand came down on him with a great rush of air. James dove forward and just cleared the hand that crashed into the ground behind him. He scrambled away, dust and dirt rising around him, and found himself underneath the dragon's legs. Beside his sword.

James grabbed the hilt and pushed the sword deeper in. He slid the blade along the fleshy wound, spilling out blood, before releasing the sword. Regebrass howled and tried to step back. He faltered and fell to a knee, shaking the ground and causing James to stumble back.

Evan rushed forward with his sword raised. The dragon roared, reaching forward and slammed his fist down over him. A rush of wind blew over Evan and the force shifted him to the side, his boots sliding along the earth. Evan continued his charge, though expending his magic was clearly taking a toll on him, as his face gleamed with sweat and his movements looked slower to James.

The dragon growled loudly and his tail swung up and crashed into the ground, before flicking up and down again. The reverberations shook Evan and caused him to tumble backward. He rolled onto his back and tried to rise. The tail slammed down and flattened him with a loud thud. When the tail moved away, James saw Evan lying with his eyes closed, blood smeared over his nose and mouth.

"No!" James cried out.

"Two left," Regebrass grumbled, and approached James. He winced with each step of his bloodied foot but kept going relentlessly.

James frantically searched for Sam, and saw him approaching from behind the dragon. Relief washed over James, seeing Sam had recovered enough to still be in the fight.

Sam launched himself into the air and readied his sword for another attack.

Regebrass spun and swung an arm out with startling speed. The thick arm-brace caught Sam in the air and sent him hurtling through the sky. He crashing into the ground and tumbled through the dirt, becoming still.

Regebrass leered at James with an upturned smirk. "One little one left."

A numbing chill ran over James, now faced with the dragon alone. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring the pain shooting through him. His peripheral vision saw Castan with the mousslos farther away, but he knew they could not help him.

"Come here, little one," Regebrass said as he stomped towards James.

A shadow fell over James as a giant hand came down. He dove to the side but thick, fleshy fingers curled around him. James's breath left him as he was lifted off the ground. He slammed his fists down and pushed against the clawed fingers, but the hand squeezed harder and sent crippling pain through him. The air rushed over him as he was brought up to the dragon's face. Exhaustion overwhelmed him and the sudden increase in height caused his head to spin.

"No match for Regebrass," the dragon growled, bringing James closer. Hot, sweaty breath hit James as it spoke. "Maybe I will keep you as a toy for the journey back. Space can be very pretty."

The suggestion caused James's stomach to lurch, and his breath left him for several seconds.

Over Regebrass's armoured shoulder, something in the sky caught James's attention. A dark spot, slowly moving. At first he thought it was just a craft in the atmosphere. Then his heart jumped when he considered that it was another space dragon.

Regebrass noticed James's wide-eyed look and curiously turned around.

The small object came hurtling towards them, revealing itself to be the form of a man. A heavy red robe trailed in his wake.

"Another toy to play with," Regebrass said, not fazed by the sight of the newcomer.

James looked on in shock. The sky brightened as a ball of white light built up around the falling person. In an instant, a thundering beam of energy shot out, colliding with the dragon's back. Regebrass jolted forward. He released James, sending him falling to the ground. James called out as the world spun. He hit the ground hard, pain exploding through him.

James fought through the dizziness in his head. He looked up to see the energy beam stop. The charred remains of the dragon's armour fell away, melted metal plopping on the ground. Some sections landed near James.

Regebrass staggered back, his scaled torso now bare. The figure landed between James and the dragon. A large hood hid the stranger's face, but somehow James felt as though he had seen that red coat before.

"How dare..." Regebrass roared, panting heavily.

The red figure shot into the air, flashing like lightning. The dragon attempted to catch him and brought its hands together, but a disc of white light appeared at the man's feet. The light solidified as he pushed off it and soared higher in the air, clearing the dragon's head by dozens of feet.

Another blinding light surrounded the robed man. Regebrass roared at the figure in the sky. A shockwave of energy blasted out as another beam of energy shot down from the man's hands. The searing light entered the dragon's open mouth, filling its throat with intense heat. Regebrass's eyes bulged as its arms and legs tensed, frozen rigid. The beam tore through his mid-section with a gush of blood and flesh, burning the ground.

When the beam finally stopped, Regebrass crumpled to the ground. Another disc of light formed at the man's feet, and he used it to jump off. He sailed through the air and landed near James.

Dust and sand blew out from his impact, swirling through the air as a silence fell over them.

Sam was slowly approaching them, grimacing with a hand pressed against his chest. James was relieved to see Sam standing, but he kept his focus on the hooded stranger. He hoped they hadn't just been saved by someone else who wanted to kill him.

"You have our thanks," Sam said to the man, who remained standing still.

James jerked back when the man raised his hands, but relaxed when he saw he was only reaching to pull his hood back. He revealed a messy crop of brown hair over a chiselled face. His jet-black eyes studied them.

"No thanks necessary," he said. "I see a dragon attacking a group of desert folk on mousslos, it's not hard to see which side to help."

"It's great to know that good and bad are still clear these days," Sam said.

Farther away, Evan stirred on the ground. James ignored everything else and ran to him. Evan rose onto a shaky knee. James came and supported him. Evan was a mess, his face bloodied and bruised.

"Our foe is defeated?" Evan asked in a hoarse voice.

James responded by looking back at the red-cloaked man facing Sam.

"Impressive," Evan muttered, eyeing the remains of the dragon.

A shudder shook James's shoulders. That dragon had named him personally. It had been sent here to kill James. Who would do such a thing? And how many more unknown forces were out there that wanted James dead?

"Come on," James said, and curled an arm under Evan. He winced when his side spasmed with pain, before switching arms to his good side. They made their way to Sam and the stranger, hearing their talk as they neared.

"Well we're glad you happened to be near," Sam was saying. "Menas must favour us, indeed."

It suddenly occurred to James where he had seen this man before. He was the passing traveller that had warned them of the approaching sandstorm when they left Tyken Town the other day. Had he called himself a priest?

They all formed a tight circle as James and Evan came to them.

"We didn't get your name last time," Sam said.

So he also remembered the man, James realised.

The stranger squinted in the sunlight as he looked over them. "Tallas. Tallas Radagan."

"The priest of Menas," Evan said.

Tallas nodded.

"The gods certainly do favour us," Evan said in a low, thoughtful voice. "Your god, Menas, has our thanks."

"I'll be sure to tell him so," Tallas said with a small smile.

"A Priest of Menas," Sam said, "*and* an Oneron. Haven't seen the like before."

Tallas regarded Sam with a cool look that was hard to read. "I am no Oneron."

Sam kept his expression neutral, but James knew there was a lot going on behind his eyes. An expressionless Sam held the most emotion, he had learned.

"We saw you come from the sky," Sam said. "Higher than any Oneron could reach. But I know an Oneron Jump when I see one."

A smile crept on Tallas's face, though his eyes were sorrowful. "I have some knowledge of the Oneron, but I am not one of your kin, I'm afraid. Menas's gift of Spirit magic guide my actions."

Sam seemed to consider the explanation. "A great gift it is. I've rarely seen such power."

"Which tends to draw unwanted attention," Tallas said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have pressing matters to attend to. I was on my way north when I saw you folk in trouble."

"Of course," Sam said, stepping back. "Light be with you."

"And with you," Tallas said as he moved away from them. He stopped and looked at them sideways, as if assessing them.

James thought he was going to say more, but instead Tallas turned and jogged away from them, towards the rolling dunes. It looked as though he intended to run the whole way, but once he was a good few feet from them, Tallas bent and shot into the air with a great velocity. James marvelled as the man's dark form rocketed hundreds of feet in the air, soaring as if he were an aircraft taking off. At first James thought Tallas was flying, but then the wide arc of his trajectory slowly fell back to the world. He landed so far in the distance he could hardly be seen now. James guessed Tallas had covered a distance of over a kilometer.

"By all the gods..." Evan muttered in awe.