

## GRANDMA'S ILLEGAL DRAGON RACING CIRCUIT

A Scientifically Improbable Adventure in Actuarial Heroism

Being the Complete, Annotated, & Emotionally Devastating Account of How Spreadsheets Saved the Multiverse, With Dragons, Nachos, and the Discovery That Everyone Matters

# Prologue: The Tuesday That Tore Reality a New One

\*\*\*

B

eneath Budapest, 1943. The lights were low because the man in charge believed electricity favored the Reich and headaches favored the weak. Meridian Blackthorne, twenty years and six months old, hunched over a steel desk with one cheek to a cipher sheet and the other to a half-finished scarf. Her hands preferred the yarn, but her mind worked in digits: sixes that looped into eights, call signs with nervous tics, coordinates that jittered like the heartbeats of people not quite resigned to their deaths.

She had never met a pattern she didn't want to domesticate. The last telegram, intercepted at 0100 and encoded in the lazy pride of men certain of their own inevitability, had been a three-step waltz—until she noticed the extra interval. It was not a mistake. The sender was a mathematician, or someone who believed in mathematicians the way generals believe in artillery. Meridian—Merry to anyone she didn't intend to disappoint—watched the line of numerals blink under her desk lamp. She counted the rhythm with her toes.

Each new set of coordinates described the edges of the city. Each followed the line of recent round-ups, "special cargo," the signature of her nation's best efforts at cruelty. But these last numbers didn't make a perimeter. They made an ellipse. They bulged where the others pressed tight. She could taste the intention—an error on purpose, and in the margin, a seed of mercy.

She penciled the ellipse onto a ration slip, then an overlay: longitude, latitude, projected delivery schedules. The result refused to be a facility, a warehouse, a train stop. It wanted to be a wound, and it wanted not to heal. She shivered.

Another operator, barely old enough to cuss in three languages, drifted past. "You finish that, M?" He flicked at the yarn with a finger, missed, and considered it a success.

"Nearly. They're hiding something." She half-turned, eyes flickering to the field phone and back. "A supply dump that isn't, or a thing they know they shouldn't have."

He shrugged, gave her the official frown, and moved on. No one cared as long as the sheets got filed and the scarf stayed gray.

Merry snipped the final digit from the decoded string, added it to her master sheet, and frowned. Not enough. Not... complete. In another world, she might have run the numbers for a decade, but in this one, the world planned to erase her by March.

She thought of her mother: "Certainty earns you dinner. Ambiguity, you eat alone." The voice always came with the scent of scorched pudding and the sense that her mother loved her precisely as much as she loved the elegance of a proof.

It would have been easier to let the question go. Instead, she fished out her grandmother's knitting needles—a forbidden alloy, technically, but so was existence these days. She unpinned her lapel and inserted one needle, slow and deliberate, through the thickest part of the insignia. It bled thread. It was satisfying.

She stood and stepped into the corridor, leaving the ciphered sheet visible on her desk as insurance. The corridor was cold, the kind of cold that treated you as a theory, not a phenomenon. At the end of the hall, past the locked door and the catatonic soldier on permanent night watch, was the storage closet everyone called the Redoubt. Merry could pick the lock with a pencil if the guard was truly sleeping, but tonight the challenge suited her mood. She twisted the knob, counting the seconds it took to loosen, and slipped inside.

The closet was occupied by a woman the world had already misfiled as ancient. Dagmar Voltaire, alleged Soviet, chronic liar, and caretaker of what she claimed was the largest collection of pre-war Meissen teacups east of Dresden. She had three

fingers on her left hand and used them with the dexterity of a pianist or a pickpocket. The night's project was arrayed in front of her: a spread of porcelain slivers, each numbered and notched.

"Darling," Dagmar said, not looking up, "if you intend to blackmail me, please start with something original. Everyone tries the vodka story. No one ever chooses the Baltic catamaran." She picked up a fragment, turned it to the light, and smiled with half her mouth. "But you, Merry, are not everyone."

"I need a favor," said Merry. The weight in her voice was accidental; she was not good at social math.

"Do you now." Dagmar tucked the fragment into a velvet pouch that looked like it could also be used to suffocate an infant, if the need arose. "I suppose you want forged papers, a car, and the absence of questions. Or perhaps you're here for tea."

Merry, who was both parched and desperate, hesitated.

"Tea, then. Always the right choice." Dagmar produced a battered tin, unscrewed it with a flourish, and poured two dollops of black leaves into a beaker. "But we are nearly out, and you will have to share with the British." She pronounced it as a disease.

"Bring him," said Merry. "I need him for the mission."

Dagmar's eyebrows spiked. "Ambitious. Do tell."

But Merry's plan would not survive the telling, so she ignored the bait. "He's in the supply shed, reading the labels for pleasure."

"Of course he is. I'll fetch the idiot." Dagmar levered herself from the crate, cloak settling about her like a bat, and ghosted away. The air tasted faintly of bergamot and ozone.

Left alone, Merry inhaled. The scarf, unspooling in her pocket, seemed to pulse with her heart. In another ten rows it would be long enough to wrap twice around her neck and, with luck, her fate. She started knitting, faster and faster, as if the stitches could build a bridge to a place where this all made sense.

The British arrived in a wind of apologies. Reginald Cupsworth, universally “Cups,” wore a threadbare uniform several ranks above his pay grade and a satchel full of ceramic mugs that no one dared search. He was tall, thin, and arranged for maximum inconvenience to everyone else. “Ah! Meridian. And the indomitable Dagmar. What a fortuitous triangulation of assets.”

Dagmar snorted. “If you speak in geometry again, I will make you a shape.”

“Noted.” Cups perched on a stack of crates, produced a mug, and dusted it off with a sleeve. “Shall we skip the etiquette and get to the part where you reveal our odds of survival?”

Merry set her needles aside, fingers buzzing. “I’ve intercepted something. I believe the Germans have found—” The word would not come. She’d written it on a slip, but to say it aloud would make it too real. “—something old. Not a weapon. A... biology.”

Cups’s eyes narrowed, and Dagmar’s mouth thinned to a cut. “A code name?” said Dagmar.

“No. An animal. Or a thing. The numbers don’t match anything else.” Merry pressed the scarf to her chest. “I want to see it. I want to stop them.”

Cups smiled with all his teeth. “Here we observe the rare spectacle of three individuals committing simultaneous treason for entirely separate countries. Nature is, indeed, marvelous.”

“I will need those forged papers,” said Merry.

Dagmar reached into her cloak and produced a small sheaf, signed and stamped. “Already done. I assumed you would not resist the puzzle. And the car?”

Cups tapped his foot. “I have requisitioned a 1938 Adler, painted it the most unremarkable beige available, and packed the trunk with two weeks of rations, two cases of tea, and, for emergencies, a crate of dynamite I found labeled as ‘potatoes.’ Shall we?”

Merry nodded, the motion abrupt. “We move at first light.”

But they did not move at first light. They moved at 0300, through streets that gleamed with ice and the polite indifference of a city in siege. Cups drove like he was playing a piano: one hand on the wheel, one composing narratives for their passage. "Observe," he whispered as they passed a checkpoint, "the Stuka of bureaucratic inertia. Note its plumage—gray, officious, and entirely unthreatening unless provoked."

Dagmar, in the back seat, flicked a shard of teacup against the window, calculating trajectory. "Please focus. We are not immortal."

"We are, briefly, if the odds are favorable," countered Cups.

Merry said nothing. She watched the world outside strobe by in fragments, her mind half on the scarf in her lap, half on the scenario she was about to break.

At the next checkpoint, a soldier in a borrowed greatcoat demanded papers. Cups offered them with a smile so convincing it offended the concept of suspicion. The soldier glanced at Dagmar, who feigned senility by drooling onto her collar, then at Merry, whose scarf had migrated to her mouth like a toddler's security blanket.

"Reason for travel?" said the soldier.

"Medical," said Merry, voice muffled. "Inspection and vaccination at the southern camp."

The soldier checked his list, shrugged, and waved them through. It was too easy. Merry expected the bullets to come at the next turn, but they did not. Instead, Cups made a hard right and accelerated, the engine's whine a thin shield against her fear.

Only when they reached the river's edge did she breathe again.

Dagmar was first out of the car, cloak snapping in the wind. She scanned the horizon, then grunted. "The facility is over the next ridge. Fenced, with two posts and a floodlight. There will be more inside."

Merry fingered her knitting needles, which she'd hidden in her hair, and nodded. "We go on foot from here."

Cups shouldered his satchel, produced a thermos, and filled three mugs in quick succession. "Last comforts, then?"

They drank, and the warmth was real.

It was Cups who spoke what they all felt. "To fate's most unlikely contingency. May it, for once, not eat us alive."

Merry finished her tea and said, softly, "Let's find the thing they're hiding."

The wind on the ridge was sharp as a lie, and the sky above them glowed with what might have been stars or tracer fire. They crept forward, three treasonous equations in search of an answer, and every step Merry took, she counted.

\*\*\*

The facility was not where it should have been. It was where it shouldn't, at intervals prescribed by a calendar only the most drunken physicist would respect. At a distance it looked like a warehouse perched on the edge of a ravine, but close up, Merry saw the afterimage: the hangar appeared, vanished, then reappeared three feet to the left, sometimes with an extra window, sometimes without.

"Observe the endangered species in its natural habitat," Cups whispered, crouched behind a frostbitten shrub with binoculars reversed for comedic effect. "The Nazi, ever the innovator in applied existential horror, has created a facility that exists only between seconds."

"Shut up," said Dagmar, "and check the sentry rotation. I count five."

Cups nodded, scanned the embankment. "Four human, one dog, zero dragons. Unless the dog is especially creative."

Merry ignored them both. She watched the hangar pulse. Every time it snapped into being, the air rippled; every time it blinked out, the world seemed to breathe easier. Her calculations from the cipher sheet had predicted a window of five minutes, during which the building would exist long enough to host both experiment and catastrophe.

She squinted at her watch, synchronized it to the pulse, and waited for the next alignment.

When it came, they moved.

The fence was topped with what passed for barbed wire and what actually passed for an aesthetic commitment to discouragement. Dagmar produced a tiny hook of platinum, attached it to the wire, and counted to three. There was a hiss, a thump, and the security circuit surrendered with a whimper. “Go,” she said.

They slid through a breach, knelt beneath the shadow of the hangar, and listened. Inside, engines growled—not the coarse rumble of trucks, but the sleek snarl of aircraft. Merry tried to breathe, but the air was tight and sticky, like honey left too close to fire. She touched her needles, stowed in her hair, and muttered numbers under her breath.

“Next,” said Dagmar.

A side door, disguised as a vent, stood unlocked. They squeezed through, past stacks of crates labeled in the insistent block print of men who never expected to be audited. The interior was a split-level labyrinth: the upper floor an observation deck with a control room, the lower a flat expanse interrupted only by two long, parallel trenches.

In the trenches were the dragons.

They were not the wild creatures Merry had dreamed as a child, nor the aloof overlords of legend. They were broken things, massive but diminished, chained with cables thicker than her waist. Their scales, once bright, had dulled to the color of pencil lead, except in the places where wounds had scabbed over with silver. They lay motionless, except for the ripple of breath and the slow blink of eyes that had watched too much and decided to forgive nothing.

Merry’s mind went perfectly quiet.

At the far end of the hangar, a Messerschmitt buzzed to life. Its wings had been modified: knife-edge thin, bristling with glass tubes. The swastika on its fuselage had been overpainted with a new symbol—a fractal spiral that echoed the one on the cipher sheets.

“They’re going to test it,” said Merry, voice flat.

Dagmar’s lips pressed into a line. “On the dragons.”

Cups, less immune to shock, stared. “Oh, you absolute bastards.”

The Messerschmitt lifted on a short runway, wheels skidding on concrete. It accelerated straight at the trench, and at the last instant, a man in a white coat barked an order into a microphone. There was a flash—ultraviolet, sickly, and wrong—and the world tilted. Merry’s teeth rattled. The dragon nearest the impact spasmed, arching against its chains. Energy crackled through the air, making the hair on her arms stand. The Messerschmitt didn’t so much stop as dissolve, its pieces reassembling two meters off the ground, perfectly still, a sculpture made of hatred and haste.

Dagmar’s hand found Merry’s shoulder, squeezing so hard it should have left a mark. “Your window is closing.”

“I need to get closer,” said Merry.

“I will buy you five minutes,” said Dagmar, “and if I do not survive, I want you to steal me a dragon scale.”

Merry nodded. It was the only deal worth making.

Dagmar ghosted away, her cloak blending with the shadows. She pulled a velvet pouch from her pocket, then, in a sleight of hand so quick even Cups missed it, tucked porcelain fragments along the seams of the catwalk above. As she moved, she whispered in Russian, the syllables harsh and urgent. At the third support pillar, she stopped, licked a finger, and pressed it to a seam.

A noise, soft as a sigh, rippled through the hangar. It grew, folding in on itself, until it became the shriek of a thousand teacups shattering in sequence. The echo stunned the guard at the upper level, who dropped his gun and clutched his ears. On the floor, the man in the lab coat whirled and began shouting orders.

“Now,” said Merry, and ran.

Cups followed, pausing only to narrate: “The observer notes with considerable distress that our survival odds have plummeted to approximately nil.” He produced a revolver from somewhere even less reputable than his past, and covered her as she sprinted for the trench.



The air down here was worse—ozone, blood, and a hint of thunder. Merry skidded to a halt at the lip, eyes wide. The closest dragon watched her without moving.

Up close, its face was a geometry of pain. Its eyes, though, were alive, gold on black, lit from within by an ancient math. Merry fumbled for her needles. She unscrewed the cap on her scarf, added a double row, and started knitting, hands a blur. The numbers sang in her head: intervals, series, an equation that did not want to solve but, if solved, would become something neither weapon nor shield.

She heard gunfire—real, sharp, and final. Cups shouted, “Two minutes, Merry! No pressure!” The scarf grew: seven feet, then eight. She changed yarns twice, splicing as she went, until the scarf was heavy in her lap and the pattern told her to stop.

She looked at the dragon. “If I’m wrong, this will kill us both.”

The dragon made a noise, halfway between a sigh and a laugh. Merry could have sworn it nodded.

She wrapped the scarf around the dragon’s snout, then looped the third tassel—the one she’d always meant to finish someday—through the chain closest to the dragon’s foreclaw. She jammed the knitting needles into the concrete, forming a triangle with the beast at its center, and yanked.

Nothing happened.

Above, the world flickered. The hangar began to lose cohesion, walls warping, sound sloshing from place to place. Cups fired twice, then dove for cover as the Messerschmitt’s new pilot tried to line up a strafing run inside the building. Dagmar, bleeding from one arm, scrambled to the far side of the catwalk and began throwing porcelain like grenades.

Merry closed her eyes and thought of her mother, of the need to make things line up, of the way a pattern could make meaning out of nothing. She counted to three, then to five, then to eight. The numbers looped, then changed key, and something inside the triangle snapped.

Reality, for a second, reasserted itself. The scarf glowed—not with heat, but with intention. The dragon’s scales reflected the pattern, and the chain cracked, then

shattered, then unspooled into a thousand harmless links.

The Messerschmitt disintegrated, its pilot sucked into a bubble that vanished as quickly as it appeared. The man in the lab coat fell to his knees, clutching his head and sobbing. The hangar, which had been mid-flicker, landed hard in the real world, every wall and window snapping into fixed position.

The dragon, free, stood. It flexed wings that had not felt air in years. It looked at Merry, then at the scarf, then at the hole it had just made in the world. She expected it to flee, to burn the building and everyone in it. Instead, it inclined its head, as if awaiting instruction.

“Cups!” she called.

He emerged from behind an overturned crate, suit ripped but dignity intact. “Yes?”

“Get the car. We’re leaving.”

Cups nodded, ran, and Merry turned to the dragon. “Come with us. Or burn it all down. Your choice.”

The dragon made a sound like a bell, then vaulted the trench in a single, impossible leap. Dagmar watched, grinning despite her blood, and said, “You owe me a scale, darling.”

Merry reached up, plucked a single shimmering flake from the dragon’s flank, and tossed it. Dagmar caught it, then pressed it to her lips.

The hangar, behind them, began to shake. Not with fear, but with the anticipation of freedom.

As they ran, Merry thought about the scarf, about the pattern she’d improvised, about the thing she’d just set loose. She knew, already, that she had not simply solved the problem.

She had opened a new one.

\*\*\*

The hangar was no longer a hangar. It was a bell jar of bad ideas, pressurized by panic and buckling at every seam. Alarms screamed in three incompatible keys, as if competing to see which could shatter the most glass. Merry, Dagmar, and Cups sprinted through corridors that kept rearranging, each corner opening onto a hallway that either led to freedom or doubled back to the horror they were trying to leave behind.

The dragon followed, not running so much as flowing, its body adapting to every space like memory foam traumatized into heroism. “Left!” Merry called, but the floor rotated ninety degrees and made left into down. They tumbled, landed in a heap, and rolled through a door that did not, strictly speaking, exist.

On the other side was the main pen. It was lit by arc lamps strung between scaffolds, each lamp running its own nervous breakdown in stuttering flashes. There, at the far end, was the reason Merry’s calculations had felt so wrong. The reason the hangar existed “between seconds.” The reason, perhaps, the world existed at all.

The eldest dragon.

Its name would later be Whiskerion, but at this moment it was only the Sunderer: a beast older than the concept of regret, gold scales so bright they threw shadows backwards, eyes as deep as the solution to an unsolvable equation. Its body was longer than a zeppelin, its wings so vast the edges couldn’t decide which direction to go. Around its neck and every limb, chains—not just iron, but conceptual chains, braided from probability and paradox, each link a thesis statement on how the universe could go wrong.

It lifted its head as the trio entered. The room got colder, then warmer, then settled into a temperature that felt like apology.

“Bloody hell,” said Cups, his voice more reverent than he would ever admit.

“Darling,” said Dagmar, “please tell me you have a plan.”

Merry nodded. “We break the chains.”

“That’s less a plan,” said Cups, “and more an aspiration.”

The dragon watched them with the patience of someone who has already survived everything but boredom. Merry approached, counting her steps. The closer she got, the more the world tilted: up was suddenly ambition, down was shame, and the sides of the room kept swapping roles. At chain's length, she looked into the dragon's eyes.

There were galaxies in there. Not the vague poetic kind, but actual galaxies, tiny and brilliant and real. She saw the moment her scarf had been knitted, saw herself as an old woman at the end of all things, saw Cups and Dagmar arguing over a deck of cards, and then saw, somewhere deep in the spiral, a boy with her hair and her fear and her talent for making the improbable into the necessary.

The Sunderer lowered its head so Merry could touch the nearest shackle. The metal was cold, then hot, then neither. She wrapped the scarf's end around the lock, then signaled for Dagmar and Cups to take the other sides.

"On three," she said.

"Of course," said Dagmar, "because numbers never let you down."

"One—"

Cups whispered, "There are forty-seven guards approaching. All with guns."

"Two—"

Dagmar spat on her hands and gripped the chain.

"Three."

They pulled.

Nothing happened at first. Then, the scarf began to vibrate. The pattern Merry had improvised in terror now rippled with power. Each stitch glowed, not with visible light, but with a sense of narrative inevitability: a story that wanted, badly, to reach its punchline. The chain sizzled, then splintered, then exploded into a cloud of logical fallacies.

The Sunderer flexed, and the remaining chains shattered in sympathy. The dragon rose, unfurling wings that battered the air into submission, and roared—not a sound,

but a presence, a commandment that everything else in the hangar, including time itself, should get out of the way.

For a moment, the room was quiet. The alarms were still going, but at a respectful distance. Merry looked up and saw the Sunderer's gaze settle on her. The voice arrived not in her ears, but in her bones:

"CHAOS PLUS ORDER EQUALS MEANING."

She blinked. The world snapped into focus.

Nazi reinforcements poured in, weapons raised. Cups, ever the fatalist, muttered, "The observer would like to note that now is a very good time for a miracle."

Merry climbed onto the dragon's foreleg, helping Dagmar and Cups up behind her. The Sunderer shifted, angling its body toward the hangar's main doors.

"Ready?" she said, half to the others, half to herself.

"No," said Dagmar, "but proceed."

Cups gripped the dragon's scales and closed his eyes. "I'll narrate if we survive."

Merry wrapped the scarf—her probability anchor, her one good deed—around the Sunderer's limb. She felt the stitches pulse with the need to be used.

The dragon charged.

Every step destabilized reality further. The concrete shattered, reassembled, and then decided not to exist at all. The hangar stretched, the doors retreated, and at the finish line, the world simply ran out.

The Sunderer leaped.

For a second, they existed in nothing. Then, everything happened at once. The dragon tore a hole through the boundary of the hangar, ripping open a seam in probability itself. On the other side, Merry saw all possible worlds: the ones where they failed, where they died, where she never took up knitting or trusted anyone or dared to be more than a solution in search of a problem.

She saw, too, the future—the scarf passed from her hands to a boy's, the dragons free, the world just a little more habitable for weirdos who cared about equations.

They landed on the other side. A forest, then, and a sky unburdened by war, and the only sound the thump of the Sunderer's heart.

Behind them, in the wound the dragon had left, something dark and formless peered through. Merry caught it, just for a second, and knew they hadn't escaped clean.

The scarf, still glowing, pulsed with a new pattern. She recognized it: a recursive sequence, a thing that would repeat, again and again, until it figured out how to save itself. Or, failing that, someone else.

She slid from the Sunderer's side and looked up. The dragon gazed back, its galaxies now less a threat and more an invitation.

Cups broke the silence. "Did... did we just hijack a dragon from outside history?"

Dagmar snorted. "We did, darling. And the world will spend the next century pretending it didn't happen."

Merry, exhausted, laughed. The sound felt like home. She looked at the scarf, at her friends, at the dragon that had just rewritten the odds.

And then she looked at the sky, and wondered what kind of story her grandson would write, if the world ever let him.