

A New Life

Chapter 1

by Ludaire

“Go, go, go!” Ludaire shouted over the clash of steel that surrounded them. “Retreat! Get back to the bridge!”

The red panda panted, taking stock of the situation. Their people had been totally outmatched. The enemy had triple the number they’d expected. Their eyes fell on two of their soldiers who hesitated on the edge of the clearing.

An explosion wracked the area, and Ludaire was nearly knocked off their feet. They coughed through the dust, and quickly looked for their people as it cleared. Both were on the ground, and they barely had time to register that both seemed to be moving before they were interrupted by two draconic soldiers closing in around them.

Ludaire brought their sword into play to fight off the attack, and quickly fell back towards their two fallen soldiers. While their well-practiced sword hand kept the two at bay, they focused their mind, drawing on the power of the spell tome they held in their other hand. As the spell completed, they jumped back slightly and let loose the magic. A blast of wind slammed the into the two dragons in front of them, sending the pair flying into the air.

After a quick check to ensure there wasn’t any other immediate danger, Ludaire turned to see to their people. The farther soldier was on their feet already, so the red panda knelt to check on the nearer of the two. She coughed a bit as she saw them before muttering, “You should...leave me...”

“Not happening,” Ludaire replied firmly. They pulled her to her feet, and she collapsed against them. Thankfully, the other soldier stepped in to help.

“I’ve got her,” the woman said. Ludaire smiled slightly as they recognized Adira, their second in command. “Keep the enemy off our back, Commander, and I’ll get her to safety.”

“Thanks, Adira. I’ll give you as much time as I can,” Ludaire said. They readied their weapons and once again turned back to the fight.

The retreat was long and difficult. It was nearly an hour of constant fighting. Many would have considered the losses minimal considering the circumstances. However, Ludaire was used to smaller, more surgical strikes, so each fallen comrade struck them hard.

Over that hour, the greatest threat Ludaire and their people faced was the enemy commander, a huge golden dragon in full plate armor, standing nearly seven feet tall. He wielded two enormous blades along with powerful magic. He was unstoppable. Ludaire had kept to the back to keep the enemy off their people, and thankfully they’d been able to avoid a direct confrontation with the powerful dragon.

Finally, Ludaire’s group reached the bridge. The roar of raging water filled the air. The river was over a hundred feet across, and the deadly rapids were nearly that far below them. Each side of the river was a sheer cliff. Ludaire was thankful for the safety of the wide and sturdy stone bridge. However, it did mean it would be far more difficult to execute the red panda’s plan for covering their team’s escape.

Ludaire was the last to reach the bridge and had sheathed their weapons to run at a full sprint across the grey stone. As they neared the far end, they checked to make sure everyone ahead of them was off the bridge. The remainder of their company had gathered on the far side. Adira had passed the injured soldier on to someone else and had just finished organizing the group to continue the retreat. She turned to look at Ludaire, took a deep breath, and started forward to help them hold the bridge as everyone else got moving.

“No!” Ludaire shouted, pulling their spellbook back out. “Go with everyone else. Get our people as far from here as you can as quickly as possible. I’ll be along shortly.”

Adira frowned. She clearly wasn't convinced, but after only a moment's hesitation, she nodded and rejoined the group. As Ludaire turned back towards the enemy on their heels, they heard their second in command shouting to get people to pick up the pace. The red panda frowned slightly as they saw the powerful dragon commander at the forefront of the group making his way towards them. They were thankful that their lighter force had gotten enough of a lead to provide a bit of time, but every moment counted, so they quickly focused their mind.

Magical energy swirled around the red panda as they summoned every ounce of magical power they could muster. Black and purple robes flapped in the wind that was whipped up. The spellbook glowed in their hands, casting a deep, golden glow over the white, black, and viridian fur of their face. The clouds above turned dark and stormy. The dragons noticed the magic and quickened their pace.

Realizing that they needed a bit more time, they interleaved a quicker spell into the magic. The wind around them picked up speed, and then a gust of hurricane-strength winds rushed out in front of them, buffeting the enemy soldiers. Nearly all were blasted off their feet. Even after landing, most couldn't even stand in the fierce wind that continued to hold the dragons back.

Unfortunately, the one dragon still standing was the immovable golden dragon. The powerful wind spell barely slowed him down.

Ludaire backpedaled a bit, trying to buy a bit of time. The armored behemoth closed in on them, raising his swords, and when the dragon was only a meter or two away, the spell completed. The world went white as several bolts of lightning hit the bridge just behind the dragon charging the red panda. A deafening thunderclap echoed through the area. A third of the bridge was instantly annihilated, and the soldiers on the other side of the new gap quickly fled as the rest of the bridge started to collapse.

Ludaire, however, went down hard underneath the weight of the enormous dragon, who had been blown directly into them. The two rolled across the stone, wrestling to gain the upper hand. Ludaire finally managed to push himself away to get some distance and skidded across the grass that they'd rolled onto.

Ludaire jumped to their feet, drawing their sword just in time to block the initial thrust from the dragon. The red panda's enemy was blindingly fast, despite the heavy armor that encased him.

The two clashed, and Ludaire found themselves on the backfoot immediately. The golden dragon had lost one of his two blades, but he was better armored, had nearly a foot and a half in height over Ludaire, and clearly had more experience and skill with physical combat. The red panda just barely managed to hold on with their slight edge in maneuverability and by constantly giving up ground.

They tried to gain the space to cast a spell, but the enemy commander didn't let up, so they knew they had to force an opening. With a careful parry, they redirected their foe's weight to the right and dove to the left, preparing another spell as they went. Rolling back to their feet and gaining a bit of distance, Ludaire blasted their opponent with a wave of fire. An explosion filled the area as the fiery spell met the dragon, blowing up a huge cloud of dust.

Ludaire stood, panting, and they heard a chuckle. As the air cleared, it was revealed that the dragon had completely blocked the fire magic with nothing more than a raised arm. "Impressive," he admitted, a small smile on his face, "but it won't be nearly enough to save you."

The two blades met again.

Ludaire threw everything they had into the fight, their whole world reduced to attack, block, and counterattack.

Then, after only a few more exchanges, the red panda felt their grip slip. Their sword went flying out of their hands, followed by a kick that sent them to the ground, clutching their stomach.

Ludaire coughed, trying to regain the breath that had been knocked out of them. They grabbed at the spellbook that had landed just next to them, but before they could get a good grip, an armored boot kicked it from their hand. They then felt steel brush their neck and froze. Ludaire looked up at the

dragon that had bested them and dared not reach for the limited magic they could manage by hand. The red panda closed their eyes and took a deep breath, preparing for the worst.

It didn't come.

A moment passed, and instead of the quick slice of steel followed by oblivion, they sensed a spell. Before they could do anything to interfere, that spell wrapped around their magical capabilities. They quickly recognized the blocking spell, meant to keep one from accessing magic, but they were far too late to fight against it. They flinched as the magic that normally suffused their mind slipped away, leaving them unable to cast or even see magic.

Confused, Ludaire chanced opening an eye to look up at their opponent.

The dragon above looked pensive. He then lifted his head and gazed out at the bridge, muttering to himself. Even without the dragon's eyes on them, Ludaire didn't dare move with the blade still at their neck. All they could think was that they had to keep the dragon occupied however long they could to give their team the chance to get away.

Ludaire's captor lifted his right hand near his mouth and spoke into his vambrace, or rather into some communication device that must be hidden there. "Get everyone together and take them back to the castle. Normal post-battle measures. I will meet you there later."

Good, Ludaire thought. Even if he gives chase, at least he doesn't have a contingency for bringing his whole force across the bridge. Now I just need to keep him focused on me for as long as possible.

The dragon narrowed his eyes and stared down at Ludaire. "That was some pretty impressive magic. Especially coming from your kind."

Ludaire said nothing, keeping their face carefully neutral.

"Hm... I wonder..." The dragon's gaze grew in intensity as his eyes burrowed into the red panda. Ludaire's face turned slightly defiant as their green eyes met those golden orbs. Only a few seconds later, though, the intensity overwhelmed them, and they dropped their gaze. They had a strange feeling that they'd failed some test...or passed it.

"Get up."

Ludaire glanced up at the dragon and was confused to see a small smile on his face.

"Get up," the dragon repeated, a bit more sternly.

Ludaire slowly stood, eyes on the sword that followed their collar bone. Their mind raced. They were totally baffled as to what the dragon planned. However, they were willing to play along with anything to buy more time. Plus, if they focused on maximizing the delay before anyone pursued their team, there wouldn't be time to think about their odds of escaping alive.

"Disrobe."

Ludaire's jaw dropped, shock causing them to forget their situation. "Excuse me?"