

## Fahdonmul's Gambit

Clad in the finest ebony armour, Helga made her way through the cave entrance, a daedric claymore on her back, and an ebony shortsword in one hand. The other cast a candlelight spell as she crept through the tunnels.

*Corvo, huh?* she thought sullenly. *No honest man would choose such a place for a meeting. This stinks! Probably a bandit leader... Well, they'll get more than they bargained for if it's a trap.*

The tunnel widened out into a large cavern, a corner of which was lit by a small lantern on a table. Next to it was a suit of glossy, black light armour, the kind that assassins favoured, but somehow so polished so that she could see her face in it. Sensing a trap, she reached out with her sword, to knock the armour aside and look for a hidden ward or lever.

"Leave that alone," a deep voice cautioned.

Helga spun around, her pulse racing, sword drawn, a destruction spell in her other hand. The lantern's light revealed a massive creature, with brown scales, and pale scutes along the belly. Small eyes followed her, gleaming with intelligence.

*Talos help me,* she thought. *That's a dragon! How did it even get down here...?*

"Die, dragon!" she snarled, and switched to a shield spell, but the creature did not move. It seemed to be watching her, and yet, somehow, she could see disappointment in the beast's eyes.

"*Drem.* Peace, wanderer. To die is unnecessary," the dragon said. "I wish to talk. I request a parley."

"You fear me that much?" Helga sneered. "You wish to plead for your life, worm...?"

The dragon hissed angrily. "*Vobalaan joor!* Do not try my patience with slurs," he snapped. "And your position is not as strong as you think. I wield enchantments and could strike you down where you stand. Yet I do not. Pray *try* and show that same courtesy."

The warrior lowered her weapon, but did not sheathe it. "Very well, w- ...dragon. What do you wish to talk about?"

"You are here to investigate this cave, yes?" the dragon said. "A job from the innkeeper, yes? To find Corvo...?"

"That is correct. It specified that a spellsword or mage would be required."

"Good. *I* am Corvo," the dragon said. "Not my real name, of course, but a useful alias

when treating with mortals. I wanted someone here, an adventurer in good standing who I can trust to think with their brain and not with their sword. I wish to engage your services. Though your eagerness to slay me makes me question your suitability for this task," he added sharply.

"You? A *dragon*, want to hire an adventurer...? Why...?"

"I wish you to bear a message to those in power," the dragon said. "My own appearance would cause alarm, therefore I need an emissary to act on my behalf. I had considered the Greybeards, but they are reluctant to leave their fortress."

"And if I do?"

"You will not find me ungrateful," the dragon said. "Gold... Precious artifacts. Ancient knowledge, if you prefer. I can teach you to forge better armour than you could imagine, that would make your ebony platemail seem like eggshells in comparison. But what I have to say to you will be to your advantage in any case."

"Alright," Helga said, and cautiously sat down. "But if this is a trick... "

"It is not," the dragon said. Craning his neck, he turned and snorted, igniting a couple of braziers with carefully-directed goutts of flame before finally returning his gaze to the spellword. With the cavern now properly illuminated, Helga could see that the creature was wearing jewellery... a gold band around his neck. The claws, too, were not their natural dark brown, but had been painted black and glossy.

"You will surely have noticed that what you call 'dragon attacks' have been greatly reduced," the dragon began. "Without Alduin, the World-Eater, the *dovahhe* who once gave him fealty have found a new cause. I, Fahdonmul, have done this. I am their *thuri* now, by right of conquest."

"*You*? The dragon king? You are not even an Elder Dragon. Just a lesser dragon."

"A 'lesser dragon' who managed to vanquish Alduin," Fahdonmul said smugly. "And I caution that if you *were* to murder me, or send Blades after me, your people would suffer most dearly. This is not a threat," he added quickly, "It is a warning. I have united most of the survivors under my banner, so to speak. Those who serve me will commit no further acts of random violence while I command them.

"But know that if their beloved *thuri* were to be slain by a wandering adventurer, some *tahrodiis joor* who treacherously broke the ancient terms of parley, they would seek grim vengeance. And it is likely that my replacement would *not* be as... accommodating... as I am towards the mortal kind. Your lands would face, not one *dovah* half out of his mind with bloodlust, but an organised, well-planned and *sustained* attack on your Jarls and their holds. Skyrim would be reduced to ashes. Now, *I* do not want this to happen, and nor do you, if you are wise."

"Oh, really! If you wield such power, why aren't you using it? Isn't that what dragons *do*?"

"Because I admire mortals," Fahdonmul said. "You are tenacious. Other *dov* have taken names such as Mortal-Terror-Devour. *My* name means 'Strong Friend' in your tongue. I slew Alduin that it might bring... an *understanding* between our kinds."

"You want... *peace*?" the spellsword scoffed, looking suspicious. "Explain yourself."

"Very well. We of the *dov*, we are driven to conquer, and in the ancient times that served us well. We ruled Nirn. But now, the situation has changed and our violent impulses will be the end of us, if we cannot overcome them. Some of us have. I am one such, who has conquered their desire to conquer," Fahdonmul raised one foot, revealing a set of golden bracelets that shimmered slightly with magical energies.

"These protect me," he said. "But one also contains an illusion enchantment. It clears my *hadrim*, my mind, and calms my blood-lust to a point where I can fight its allure without too much effort of will. My brothers, those who serve me, are similarly-equipped. But I need your help. It would be to our mutual advantage," he insisted.

"But you are a *dragon*. Why would I want to help you at all?"

"You look at me and see a monster. And my looks *are* against me. But the *dov* are people too, and we are vulnerable in ways you do not understand. We cannot reproduce," Fahdonmul said. "If you kill a Nord bandit, there will be other Nords born. But if you slay a *dovah*, you are taking something from the world that can never be replaced. Father Akatosh alone has power to make more of us, and so far He has not, unless you count a few *dovahkiin*, dragonborn. And those too are at an end, so the prophecies say. We are a dying race... perhaps I seek your pity. That would be a reason to help us."

"You are also highly dangerous," Helga said. "Your return heralded terror and death, and before that, you enslaved us for thousands of years. Why *should* we wish share this world with you after what you have done?"

"There is some truth in that. But we did not seek to *eradicate* you," Fahdonmul said. "And when you *had* extirpated us, what happened? You mortals promptly enslaved *yourselves*! The Ayleid hegemony, the Aldmeri Dominion... Need I go on? "This is the thing," Fahdonmul grinned evilly. "The *dov* do not seek extermination. Not even those who still wish mastery, or to hunt mortals for pleasure and sport... Why would they slay you all and be left with none to rule or to fight? "I say again, we do not wish to purge the world of Nords. But the Thalmor *do*. And the *dov* can help protect you from them.

"I would also warn you that a time will come again when you require our aid. There are artifacts in this world that only a *dovah* can activate for you. What will you do then, when you need them against a terrible foe, but the *dov* are extinct or a handful

of paranoid survivors too scattered and afraid of mortals to help?

"And, know this - that Alduin is not gone forever. If, upon his return, there are no *dov* left in the world to repel him, then he shall conquer, and the world shall end. Your races, your souls, your history. All shall be lost. If that is what you *want*, then by all means, kill away. *Krif voth ahkrin*. Some of us, at least, will relish their last fight and die happy, knowing that you have destroyed yourselves as well."

"You have gone quiet," Fahdonmul said, cocking his head. "Perhaps now you see that a decision you thought was simple can have unintended consequences, yes?"

"It is a lot to take in," Helga admitted. "And part of me still fears you are lying. Attempting to trick me."

"I do not lie," Fahdonmul said. "I do not need to. And besides, deception is considered *vobalaan* - unworthy - among the *dov*."

"Here is a truth... reality is never simple. In trying to make it so, by trying to force things to be black or white, yes or no, live or die... In doing this, you create new problems for yourselves by ignoring the nuances."

"For example, the Dragon Cults were not that simple either," Fahdonmul said, sounding sad. "Mistakes were made, yes. But they *started out* well. We did not land one day and demand your worship - *you* came to *us*. We protected your kind, kept you safe and helped you do things which you could not. In exchange, you crafted things for us. Showered us with love, praise and food. It was *nice*."

"And for many centuries, we had this balanced arrangement. Everyone was happy. But gradually things changed. Worship went from being voluntary, to mandatory, to slavery and cruelty. And now, you Nords... You only remember the bitter, bitter end, when it had all gone wrong and the war began between our kinds... After the power went to Alduin's spiky little head and the balance was lost. And even after that, some still loved their sky-lords, and buried the fallen that they may one day return..."

"You said that Alduin will return a second time," Helga interrupted. "Do you know when?"

"No. That is for Father Akatosh to decide. But it should not be within your lifetime. It may even be that he will only return when the last *dovah* is slain and Father Akatosh, seeing that all his children are murdered, will declare this world a failed experiment and start anew, sending Alduin to deliver his vengeance. Even I, who ride the currents of time, do not know this for sure. But it is something your leaders must consider, when they make their decision."

"And on that subject, I now wish to tell you of the fight against Alduin," the dragon said. "Perhaps you may call it boasting, and perhaps we of the *dov* do love the sound of our own speech, but I would have others know of my deeds. It may sway your opinion on whether we deserve to live, or whether you would end the world just to be

rid of us... If you would rather burn the world to a cinder than share it with a hated race."

"Huh," the spellsword sniffed.

"Alduin was banished ages past," Fahdonmul said. "That act ended the Dragon War and without his protection and leadership, the extermination of the *dov* began, of good and evil alike. Indeed, those who most loved their mortal worshippers made the easiest targets, not willing to believe that their mortal friends would betray them... But I digress. The World-Eater was banished, but not forever... and finally he returned as Paarthurnax had feared. He began to build up his power base..."

"Paarthurnax?"

"No, Alduin." Fahdonmul said, and cocked his head slightly. "Paarthurnax has a power-base consisting of four old men in an isolated monastery. ...Or do you mean, 'Who *is* Paarthurnax?'"

"Yes. Is he a dragon? Is he dangerous?"

"All *dov* are dangerous if provoked. As are mortals," the dragon pointed out.

"Paarthurnax was one of Alduin's trusted lieutenants until the Dragon War began. It is said he received a divine revelation from Kynareth, and She touched his heart. He began to pity mortals and aided them *against* Alduin. Paarthurnax taught your kind to Shout as the *dov* do. And by the means of a *Kel*, what you would call an Elder Scroll, his mortal allies banished Alduin to the far future. Or, as you would call it, last month."

"Paarthurnax always knew that Alduin's return would happen eventually, and while the rest of us hid or were cruelly hunted down when the Dragon Cults fell apart, he survived and waited, teaching mortals both how to Shout, and also how to use this power for *peaceful ends*. For his past actions have caused the pointless deaths of men and *dov* alike, and he does not wish to have yet more tragedies on his conscience.

"And then, as he had predicted, Alduin finally returned - a shudder in time that all surviving *dov* felt. Finding none of his kin nearby, save for the hated Paarthurnax, Alduin moved swiftly to build up his power base. He feasted upon the *siljejoorre* of the dead, a wicked, wicked act. He began to revive our fallen *zeymah* as the prophecies foretold. *That* was an admirable deed, but his manner and motives for doing so were not. He wanted, not to *save* our kind, but to raise an army that would conquer the world and enslave mortals once more.

"I might add that these resurrected *dovahhe* were turned loose on a whole new world, with no time to adapt to the new way of things. Small wonder they were confused and violent, having been slain by mortals once before."

"But I digress. To ensure the steady supply of fresh souls to devour, Alduin sought to prolong your civil war and the carnage it brought. When Ulfric was captured and taken for beheading, his death would not have suited Alduin's purposes, and he intervened at Helgen to prevent it.

"However, the execution of the fabled Last Dragonborn *did* very much suit his purposes... And when the dovahkiin's head fell into a basket, Alduin was there to devour the *ziil* of the so-called 'Ultimate Dragon-slayer'. He crowed over this triumph, thinking it would ensure his dominion over all, but fortunately for all mortals, *I* took the dovahkiin's place."

"You took their place on the chopping block?!" The warrior gurgled. "How?"

"*Niid!*" Fahdonmul snapped irritably. "No, no, no! Alduin would have devoured *my* precious *ziil* instead. I was not at the execution... I came later, to do what the *dovahkiin* would have done, *should* have done, had they been spared. The prophecy *had* to be fulfilled, and because you *joorre* stupidly robbed your own saviour of their head and fed their *ziil*... their dragon-soul... to Alduin, *I* had to join in the fight. I could not idly perch whilst the world itself was in peril.

"*I* became your champion. *I* fought Alduin, risking my own immortal soul, partly because I am your Strong Friend and it is my nature to aid your kind. But also because I could never have bowed to Alduin again. Like Paarthurnax, I betrayed him, and he would surely have devoured us both as threats to his plan."

"Okay," Helga said. "How do you know what happened at the execution if you weren't there?"

"*Onik laan*. A good question. As I said, Alduin was well pleased with his devouring the dovahkiin, and he Shouted boasts of his victory often and in tedious detail. I heard his Voice upon the winds, and that is what drew me to aid your kind once more. For Father Akatosh would not have given His gift to a mortal unless there was dire need for one of the *dov* to battle His wayward child.

"I sought Paarthurnax. This upset the Greybeards for they feared I had come to assassinate their mentor. But I wished only *tinvaak* with the Old One. When Alduin was banished, it left a *tiid-ahraan* - a hole in time itself. Seeking the means by which he was banished, I opened this wound with the *kel*. I did not learn the eldritch horrors of dragon-rend, if such a thing is even possible for one of the *dov*. But I did bring back refugees from the Dragon War, who would surely have perished otherwise.

"And this break in the flow of time was noticed by Alduin. He came to the Throat of the World."

"There was a confrontation," Fahdonmul said. "There, Alduin tried to slay me, and Paarthurnax too, for we both opposed his plans." Fahdonmul held up a foot again. "But this device I made also contains an enchantment to fortify my talons. By this means, I maimed Alduin and left him gasping for breath. Then, I rolled him down the mountain like a cheese wheel and threw him in the river," the dragon's eyes gleamed

wickedly and he bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

"*Sahrot krongrah*. That deed alone cost him all but the most devoted of his allies," Fahdonmul said. "He fled, then, to Sovngarde, there to nurse his wounds and recover his strength by devouring the dead. But I flew after, guided by Odahviing, his estranged general.

"In Aetherius, I struck him down. Alduin, that is," he added quickly. "Not Odahviing. Alduin perished, my teeth to his neck. His *ziil* flowed out to Father Akatosh, that he may return to fulfill his task at the End of Days," the dragon sighed.

"In truth I am grateful for this, for devouring the *ziil* of a fellow *dovah* is a horrifying deed. This is not mere mortality, but a true death. I, who seek to preserve my race, would not wish to destroy another of us forever, not even Alduin..."

The dragon shivered and went quiet for a few moments.

"Though some do say that our souls are not truly devoured, but offered up for the favours of a higher power," Fahdonmul added, sounding less miserable. "For it is known that a *dovahkiin*, lacking the body and mind of a true *dovah*, can use the souls of murdered *dovahhe* to gain new abilities. One soul for one ability of their choice, spending their victim's *ziil* like a coin to be bartered... Just as the immortals of the soul-cairn barter the trapped souls of dead mortals. I would like to think that my fallen *zeymah* who have lost their *ziil* have been bartered, rather than wiped utterly from existence."

"But I digress. *Bormahu werid*, Alduin fell to my teeth and claws. The deed was loudly praised by the heroes of Sovngarde, though I could see the disappointment in their eyes."

"What? If what you say is true, you saved the world!"

"They hoped a Nord would do it," Fahdonmul explained. "An epic battle, where the three legendary heroes who first banished Alduin return to make triumphant war upon the World-Eater! The *dovahkiin* there to strike the killing-blow after facing many hardships!

"*That* is the stuff of legendary! *That* makes for an inspiring ballad of mighty deeds! 'A rival dragon turned up and killed him' does not.

"Besides, as you have consistently pointed out - I am a *dovah*. I would not be the first to have been praised by mortals for my aid and then promptly stabbed to death for being 'too dangerous to live'. The Blades wish to do that to Paarthurnax, and he helped save you all. Twice, now! It is said that a *dovah* should not be trusted. But are mortals any better? We shall see."

Fahdonmul sighed and paused, as if considering his next words.

"Understand this, adventurer... We of the *dov* are a conflicted race, and our desires are at odds with one another. We crave dominance and are proud, but will gladly serve

beneath a stronger *dovah* and feel no shame. We defend our territory, and we cannot trust one another, but we need companionship to stay sane. We can be cruel, but we mourn our brothers' losses..."

"Yes, yes. Why are you telling me this?"

"I bare my soul to you, warrior, as no *dovah* has ever done before, that you may understand the cruelty of our situation. Why we are the way we are. Why so many resort to violence - because they are confused and trying to resolve their inner turmoil in the only way they know. And why these calming enchantments I wear may be the only hope of our survival. But you are impatient, so I will get to the point.

"The *dov* have returned, this you know. Many of my *zeymah* were raised from death by Alduin's power. But others among us - precious few - survived the purges by hiding. Paarthurnax, on his mountain. Mirmulnir. Vulthuryol, Ahbiilok and others beside. Including myself."

"For an age, I hid in vast caverns beneath a far continent," Fahdonmul said. "In those caves, I wrote a history of the *dov*, carving the words in the rock with my talons, that my words might live on, even if I was slain like my poor *zeymah*. I hoarded treasure to distract myself, a substitute for company and dominance, but that only worked for so long. I craved companionship. And so, I finally returned to Tamriel and hid there, where the Blades would not suspect. Under their very noses."

Fahdonmul paused and cocked his head slightly. "If you wanted to hide a tree, where would you put it?"

"...In a forest," Helga said, and gasped. "Wait, *what?!*"

"I see you understand," the dragon grinned wickedly. "I did what few *dov* would even consider, the notion itself an affront to our pride and the belief in our superiority. Fearing death, I swallowed that pride, and posed as a mortal, a *kaaz*. If anyone noticed my soul was unusual, they thought me dragonborn. It is true that I was vulnerable like that, but the *Bruniikke* and the Blades would not find me, even if they thought such a thing was possible."

"How could you do *that?!*"

"Alteration magic," Fahdonmul replied. "Remember, I was there before linear time. I am a mighty *dovah* - to me, such things are trivial. Too trivial for my *zeymah*, most of whom would rather die than pretend to be a mere *joor*. And so they died - proud - while I debased myself and lived."

Helga glanced at the brown dragon thoughtfully. "Earlier, you said you needed help. If you can produce these enchantments and make the dragons wear them, what help do you need from us?"

"Food," Fahdonmul said simply. "We need to eat. Mirmulnir hunts bandits. I... well... I have sometimes hunted Thalmor Inquisitors. Others hunt game such as mammoths, but they breed slowly and we cannot rely on them forever. And if we hunt your deer and cattle without some kind of permission, we will come into conflict with your Jarls and their men.

"So we need an agreement to solve this problem... A treaty. Those Jarls who honour the alliance I propose, the *dovahhe* under my command will cause no further violence in their holds. And we will aid them in protecting their lands. Ancient wisdom and lore can be theirs, and we can see things from the air that others cannot."

"But if you can become a khajiit, why not deliver the treaty yourself? Why do you need *me*?"

"Several reasons. The *kaaz* are not welcome inside your cities. Your High King is more likely to listen to a fellow Nord than a beast-man, yes? Especially an adventurer with many deeds behind them. But also, because... Well, who would believe me to be a *dov*? And if they did, would they not try to slay me while I was weak and vulnerable? A single arrow could end me in that form, a single sword-stroke could remove my head. And while it is true that the spell would fail and the bulk of my dying carcass would crush them all, that would offer me cold comfort in death.

"The other matter is the Blades," Fahdonmul said. "They seek our total extermination. This must cease, for the reasons I have already told you. Their foolish obsession could end the world as we know it."

"And then what? You want them disbanded...? *Executed*...?"

"*Niid!*" the dragon yelped. "No! They are worthy opponents, and their skills will be needed in times yet to come. But they *must* choose their targets more wisely. Those who have sworn fealty to me and wear my token around their necks must not be attacked without my leave."

"You would spare the Blades, despite the threat they pose you?" Helga looked incredulous.

"As I said, they have our respect as worthy hunters. But remember that not all *dov* are mine to command. Some will still pose a threat, though we will try to fend them off as our part of the bargain.

"My demands are that the Blades cease indiscriminate killing of my kind, and that they end their vendetta against Paarthurnax and his students. If he, like Alduin, should fall into madness and evil, then - and *only* then - should he pay the price for his betrayal, though the very thought of it pains me sore.

"In return for these concessions, we will aid them against the Thalmor, for *that* should be their *true* purpose - fighting the disease that has infected the Empire... Not wasting their time harassing an endangered species. The Blades and their predecessors have

made reluctant deals with our kind before, and I am open to similar alliances where our goals align."

"What if they refuse? What if they insist that you all have to die?"

"I know where they live," Fahdonmul said ominously. "And if the Blades insist on being an obstacle to peace, they can expect to receive visits from a certain khajiit assassin," he said, glancing pointedly at the gleaming black armour near the cave entrance. "Though I truly hope it does not come to that. *Krosis se krongrah*. It is always regrettable to destroy a worthy rival."

"So," the spellsword summarised. "Let me see if I have this straight. You want me to try and negotiate a peace treaty between a horde of dragons and the High King, where you lot try and live peacefully through the aid of enchantments, and render your aid to us, while we provide food and call off the Blades?"

"That is a simplification, but yes. I plan to manage the final negotiations myself, at High Hrothgar - but I need you to open the conversation for me. At least *try*. If you fail you shall still be compensated for your efforts. And if you succeed... your name will go down in legends."

"But will other dragons willingly accept these enchantments?" The warrior insisted doubtfully. "Would they not see it is a collar, chaining them? Enslavement? An affront to their dignity?"

"That very much depends on the *dovah*," Fahdonmul said. "Remember, we are individuals. We are *not* all the same. A mortal might be a farmer or a warrior... An assassin or a man of peace. Indeed, they may be several of these at once. The *dov* are just as varied.

"Some will reject my enchantments utterly, viewing it as a trap, or believing that mortals *deserve* to be hunted by our kind. Others may spurn them, yet still learn peace through the self-discipline of Paarthurnax and his 'Way of the Voice'. They too deserve protection.

"Some will wear them in order to please me, their overlord. Some will wear them out of fear that they will be slain, while others may embrace them wholeheartedly, seeing them as a tool to become more powerful, for a *dovah* with his inner turmoil quietened can achieve great things. This is the carrot I dangle before them."

"Very well," Helga agreed. "I accept your quest."

"You have my sincere thanks," the dragon said. "There is a chest in the corner. Inside it, you will find scrolls with the text of the treaty and a backpack to hold them, should you need it. And also an advance on your payment."

The warrior took these, and headed towards the cave's exit. At the last, she stopped and turned back around, fixing the dragon with one last look of doubt.

"...What if this newfound power, this clarity of thought, allows your dragons to conquer us mortals more easily?"

"Then I will have failed," Fahdonmul said, "...and may Father Akatosh forgive me."