

Here Be Dragons

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Written by Deborah Rorabaugh

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"I don't get it," Commander Ed Straker of SHADO complained to Virginia Lake.

She didn't comment, simply raising one well manicured eyebrow at him.

"This is the third time in as many weeks the Ufos bugged out at the first sight of the interceptors," Straker went on. "And this last one makes no sense at all. That one flew right into the Moon's surface, a hundred miles from *anything*."

"Well, trajectory analysis doesn't give us any clues," Lake said, handing him the reports. "And *we* certainly aren't doing anything out of the normal. No new equipment. Even the last personnel change was over four weeks ago."

"Well, something's changed. What they're doing makes absolutely no sense."

"Maybe an analysis of the wreckage will tell us something," Lake suggested. "The recovery team should be there in about an hour. Maybe we've gotten lucky and they're having equipment problems."

Straker glared at her. "We should be so lucky. No, there's something else going on. They're lulling us into a trap, or..."

"Or what?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't be so worried."

With a sigh he headed out of the control room. After a moment he heard Lake behind him, following him to the crew lounge.

To Straker's surprise, the crew lounge was occupied even though it probably shouldn't have been. Five off-duty crew people, including Doctor Doug Jackson and John Masters, were seated around the table, books and papers piled at their elbows. A monitor and keyboard were positioned where Jackson had access to them but the others couldn't see them. A second monitor was placed where everyone could see it.

Straker recognized the room on the second screen as the Moonbase astronauts' lounge. Mark Bradley's face appeared.

"You guys didn't kill me while I was gone, did you?" he asked.

Jackson chuckled - something Straker had rarely heard. "You hear a voice, but cannot locate the source of the sound."

The other people at the table groaned. One of them announced, "I'm going to turn him."

"Lord... *Straker* is an archlich, you goof," someone else said. Straker thought the player's name was Newcomb. "Besides, he's invisible. Hell, he may not even be there."

"And he might be. I cast *magic circle against evil*," Masters stated. He looked to Jackson for confirmation of success. Jackson gave him one of his infuriatingly uncommunicative smiles.

"Can I *please* teach them a lesson," Gay Ellis's voice said through the speaker. "Just a little?"

Jackson cleared his throat, catching everyone's attention. "You see a beautiful elven woman dressed in ancient mithral armor and carrying a finely crafted elven thin sword. There is a blue nimbus around her. She smiles at you."

Master and Newcomb both spat out epithets.

"A ghost... that bloody barkeep didn't say anything about a ghost," someone grumbled. "Treasure, he says. A whole wizard's tower full of treasure and all we have to do is get rid of one undead wizard. Nobody said anything about ghosts."

Jackson gave them another of his inscrutable smiles.

Straker cleared his own throat. "Lord Straker?"

Behind him, Lake chuckled.

"You knew about this?" Straker demanded, glaring at her.

"Colonel Lake was kind enough to set up the computer and the communications link to Moonbase," Jackson said.

"Don't we have rules about that?" Straker asked, knowing the answer and suspecting her response.

"The computer was being surplused and the communications link is using a sideband we stopped using months ago," Lake explained. Her expression was bland but Straker detected more than a hint of amusement. Straker knew that if he bothered to look, she would have covered all her bases, found all the necessary loopholes - the equipment use was unusual but allowable. He turned back to Jackson and the players.

"Lord *Straker*?" Straker repeated.

"Very powerful undead wizard," someone said. "He's been three steps ahead of us the entire time."

"Sound familiar?" Lake said. This time she didn't bother to keep the chuckle out of her voice.

"I thought the bad guys were usually played by the dungeon master," Straker said, recalling what he knew of the game from his time at the War College. Several of his dorm-mates had been avid gamers.

Jackson shrugged. "Astronaut Bradley and Lieutenant Ellis are far more competent than I when it comes to strategy."

"You're welcome to join us, sir," Newcomb offered, although Straker knew the offer wasn't sincere.

Jackson held out a blue folder. "I have a character for you right here."

Straker flipped open the folder and skimmed the top sheet. The character's name was Tsignotchka, nicknamed Tsigi. A twelfth level monk, sixth level wizard. Human male, lawful neutral, strong, dexterous, normal intelligence, low charisma.

"A monk?" Straker asked. "An *ugly* monk?"

Jackson gave him another one of his inscrutable smiles.

Straker turned to the second page. Another set of statistics. Across the top of the page a scrawled SECRET. Tsigi was a dragon in disguise. A steel dragon. A very *large* steel dragon.

Straker found himself grinning. "An ugly monk." His grin grew wider as he saw the falling expressions around the table.

"Where do I sit?"

* * *

"All right, Doctor," Straker said, cornering Jackson in his office later. "What gives with the game?"

"I have no idea what you mean," Jackson protested unconvincingly.

"Dungeons and Dragons in the crew lounge and a secure link to Moonbase?"

"Let us say that it is part of an experiment I am conducting with Colonel Lake's assistance."

"What sort of experiment?"

Another of Jackson's inscrutable smiles. "That would be telling."

"How long has this been going on?"

"The campaign itself has been going on for about a year. But we added the link to Moonbase four weeks ago so Lieutenants Bradley and Ellis could stay in the game while 'away'."

Straker glowered at the psychiatrist. A year - Jackson had been running a D&D campaign for a year with SHADO personnel and no one had seen fit to say anything. He wasn't sure if he should be pleased that they'd been so circumspect or annoyed that it had gotten past him.

And then there was the matter of 'Lord Straker'.

"So what's this with naming the villain after *me*?"

"What makes you believe he's a villain?" Jackson asked.

"I thought undead were always evil?"

"Not always. In this case, Lord Straker, Ostanglore Thraklinagunda'a, is an ancient, very powerful elven cleric of *Corellon Larethian* who chose to become a baelnorn in order to assist and protect his descendants. Lady Elvieta was his wife. She is not a ghost, exactly. Just remember that not everything is as it seems."

"Especially when you're running things. So Tsigi is a plant, right?"

"If by 'plant' you mean he was placed in the party as a spy or agent, yes. He is working under the direct orders of *Bahamut* to render what assistance he can to Lord Straker without endangering his own mission, which is to locate and neutralize the local chapter of the Cult of the Dragon."

"And I'm guessing that to accomplish his mission, he needs both the party and Lord Straker and he's not supposed to blow his cover as a mild-mannered monk."

Jackson nodded.

Straker sighed. Trust Jackson to come up with a convoluted campaign with plots within plots. He had no doubt that Jackson had only given him what he absolutely needed to know to run the steel dragon monk.

"So, give me the Reader's Digest run-down on steel dragons," Straker ordered.

"They are fascinated with humans and prefer human form," Jackson began. "However, unlike silver dragons who can live on human food, steel dragons need more sustenance than that and so about once a month they will find and eat something much larger - a bison or a couple cows."

"I can't imagine the animals' owners being happy about that."

Jackson chuckled. "Luckily in a fantasy setting there are generally wild herds to feed upon. On more civilized worlds, a dragon will invest in a cattle ranch or something similar."

There was something decidedly unnerving about the fact that Jackson had included what a steel dragon would do on a 'civilized' world.

* * *

The weekend was quiet. The few equipment and personnel issues were handled more than adequately by Foster and Freeman. The one alien attack had been thwarted with little difficulty by the Moonbase interceptors.

The lull allowed Straker time to study the manuals Jackson had loaned him on dragons and D&D monks.

Straker didn't want to admit it, but he was impressed at how much thought had gone into making dragons 'playable' and 'real'. What was in the books was so much more logical and well thought out than anything fantasy related that had ever crossed his desk 'upstairs'. Even the history of the fantasy world Jackson had chosen sounded 'real'.

As for SHADO, the one oddity that showed up over the weekend, if it could even be called an oddity, was that Jackson had signed out for a three day holiday away from his office at SHADO H.Q. Straker knew that Jackson had no living relatives and he had few interests outside of SHADO. The commander had even heard joking speculation that Jackson was allergic to sunlight since he spent so much time eighty plus feet underground. 'Vampire' was one of the terms bandied about by wags in the Control Room.

Jackson had laughed when he heard about it during a senior staff meeting. Then his tone turned serious. "Real vampires are far more destructive than the ones in the films. It's not blood they live on, but souls. They feed on joy and hope and creativity and then throw away the husk as they move on to their next kill. It would be much easier to spot them if they couldn't walk in daylight or were terrified of crucifixes."

"Well, hopefully we don't have any hanging around here," Foster had said. "The aliens are bad enough."

"I doubt a vampire would pass the psychological tests."

Straker wasn't sure if Jackson had been joking or not. It was sometimes hard to tell.

"So, Jackson roped you into his game," Foster commented after finding Straker poring over the manuals and taking notes.

"Don't tell me you're in on it too," Straker grumbled.

"I sat in a few times," Foster said. "Got killed every time I got into a fight. And..." here he chuckled, "who would have thought that every single barkeep and storekeeper in every single town who had a good looking daughter with a come-hither expression was a retired adventurer who hadn't lost anything with age."

"Maybe he was trying to tell you something," Straker suggested. He tried to keep from laughing.

"Alec and Ginny both suggested the same thing, but I can't imagine what they meant," Foster said with a grin.

The door slid open and Lieutenant Johnson walked in. She handed a report to Straker. "We've just finished running the attack patterns of the past six Ufo attacks through the computers, sir."

"And?"

"Nothing. No discernable patterns, no explanations, except that on the past three Fridays it's like they saw ghosts instead of interceptors. The analysis indicates the one that crashed may have actually been flown into the ground."

"That makes no sense at all," Foster commented. "A suicide run with no target. They have to know we've put precautions in place to keep them from planting those mind-bending crystals on us."

"And it certainly makes no sense to plant the crystals so far from Moonbase in any case," Straker added. "No, I still think it's something else. We're missing something." He sat back in his chair, tiredly rubbing his hand across his eyes.

"Look, sir, Alec's already left and Virginia will be here any minute," Foster said. "Why

don't you head home?"

Straker had to admit he *was* tired and hungry. It had been a long day and he remembered forgetting to eat lunch *again*.

"You'll call me if another Ufo decides to commit suicide, right?"

"Of course, sir."

* * *

The Bedloe Inn was on Straker's way home. It was run by one of Alec Freeman's retired RAF buddies and his family. The food was unadventurous but hearty and he and Alec dropped by at least once a month.

Victoria, the Horndagger's eldest daughter, was charming as always. Her smile was bright against *au lait* skin and she always had a smile for him when he came in. But then, she always had a smile for everyone.

She led him to his 'usual' table toward the back of the main room. "Looks like we've got some weather coming in," she commented, nodding toward the front windows. The sky was darkening ominously but rain *had* been in the forecast.

After some innocuous pleasantries, Victoria took his order, leaving him to watch the other patrons as they came in. Mike, the owner, was tending bar. He was a big burly man who reminded Straker of Alec except for the ginger hair. Joel, Mike's brother-in-law, was most likely in the kitchen and Victoria's mother Janna was tending the till.

Not everything is as it seems. The phrase popped into his head and echoed there for a moment. Straker took a closer look at his surroundings. There were ornate antique weapons mounted on the walls, but the ones closest to the bar seemed oddly utilitarian. The blades looked well honed and the hand-grips were wrapped in what looked like new leather.

Victoria brought his meal and ice tea and left him alone again.

The room was starting to get crowded but no one seemed interested in him, leaving him to eat his meal undisturbed. Despite being in the film industry, his face wasn't well known, a fact he was grateful for. He'd seen actors and notable directors get mobbed by their more fanatical fans. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Straker was debating whether or not to order dessert - Joel made a 'killer' black stout cheesecake - when there was a commotion. Straker had noted the three unkempt young men when they walked in, but they had seemed well-behaved and therefore ignorable - until now. Now they were at the till making threatening noises to Victoria's mother. Straker thought he saw one of the men pull out a handgun and reached into his jacket for his own.

Suddenly the man with the gun yelped in pain, dropping the gun as his companions backed away from the counter. Then Straker saw a sword in Mike's hands and a very respectable dagger in Janna's. Straker had no doubt that they both knew how to use their weapons. Joel was standing in the doorway to the kitchen holding a crossbow with a bolt already loaded in it.

A gun may have been easier to conceal, but a crossbow was just as deadly. And Joel looked like he knew how to use it as well.

Who would have thought that every single barkeep in every single town who had a good looking daughter with a come-hither expression was a retired adventurer who hadn't lost anything with age.

* * *

The police arrived with surprising swiftness. They took statements from the witnesses and then allowed everyone to leave - excepting of course, the three young men who had started

yelling that *they* were the victims, not the people they'd tried to rob.

The police were having no part of it.

Straker was constantly amazed at how delusional many, if not most, criminals were. They honestly seemed to think that cops were as venal and stupid as they were, and that 'normal' people were worse. Jo Frazier had thought that even *he* was gullible and ruled by 'male lust', at least until he threw her out of his flat.

He still wasn't sure why he had even invited her home. Maybe because he wanted to believe her, wanted to believe there were good honest people around who hadn't been tainted by the war against the aliens.

His ruminations were interrupted when an officer came over and let him know he could leave. The predicted rain had started and the officer, his name tag said 'Ryan', clucked his tongue. "Not gonna' be a fit night for man nor beast tonight."

"I've been out in worse," Straker remarked. "And I don't live all that far from here. You have my number if you have any more questions."

"Chances are we won't need to," Ryan said. "We've had complaints on these three before. And this time, it won't go easy for them. They're not kids any more."

Straker bid the officer a good evening before heading to his car. The rain had let up just a little and the clouds didn't cover the entire sky. There was still a stripe of blue to the west near the horizon.

He has halfway home when his phone chimed. "A Ufo got through, termination Southern England," Lake announced. "Sky-one's on its way."

Lake's voice vanished into a hash of static. *Damn.*

A burst of something - lightning, possibly, or something else entirely - slammed down on the edge of the road. Straker slew the steering wheel over as another burst struck the road.

The Ufo.

He couldn't see it in the cloud cover, but the weird whirring was growing louder.

Then, something appeared in the clouds. Not the Ufo and not Sky-one but something about the size of a small airplane. Straker couldn't make out details as the silvery object silently wove its way through the clouds.

He could hear the Ufo firing its heat weapon, but he still couldn't see it or its new target. *He* was no longer the target - that much he sure of - otherwise he would no longer be around worrying about it. And he still didn't hear Sky-one. Straker assumed the Ufo was firing at the silver object. But why? What was it?

Then something exploded in the clouds, pelting burning debris onto the road up ahead. Straker slammed on the brakes.

Up ahead was another car. Its nose was in the ditch and it looked like the paint had been scorched. Straker has fairly certain the marks weren't caused by lightning. He also thought he recognized the car - it was SHADO issue and the color was the same as the one assigned to Jackson.

The car's door was open and Straker spotted a slender dark haired figure moving near it. *Jackson.*

Straker pulled his own car behind Jackson's and got out. Now, finally, he could hear Sky-one's engines somewhere in the clouds, roaring over the now driving rain. Straker climbed out and hurried over to the SHADO psychiatrist, ignoring the downpour. Jackson seemed unsteady on his feet and as Straker came closer, he realized there was blood on Jackson's jacket. It was dripping down his arm, off his fingertips.

Straker helped Jackson to his car, ignoring the crimson that was now staining his own jacket. Jackson slid into the passenger seat and lay back with his eyes closed.

"Want to tell me what happened?" Straker asked.

Jackson took a shuddery breath. "I underestimated... I got too close."

Under the interior lights Straker could see that Jackson's jacket was ripped and there was a deep gash down his left arm. "I'm taking you to the hospital," Straker announced, mentally mapping out where the nearest emergency room was.

"No," Jackson said. "No hospitals." His voice was barely above a whisper but there was an intensity about it that told Straker that he wasn't likely to get Jackson's cooperation if he insisted to taking him to a hospital.

Straker sighed. "Well, I'm not thrilled with the idea of you bleeding to death in my car, either." He paused, considering the options. "I don't live all that far from here and I've got a pretty well stocked first aid kit. At least I can get you bandaged up. So, who or what did you underestimate?"

* * *

Jackson still hadn't answered the question by the time Straker had finished cleaning and bandaging the gash in his arm.

"That should do it," Straker announced. Jackson's color was getting better - he no longer looked like he was one of the undead. "So, who did you underestimate? The Ufo, or whatever it was that took it out before Sky-one got there?"

"You saw it?" Jackson asked. Straker wasn't sure if it was curiosity or fear or something else entirely, but he detected a touch of *something* in the psychiatrist's voice.

"I saw a shape in the clouds," Straker admitted. "About the size of a Ufo. Shiny, maybe metallic. It was hard to make out in the rain. But there was no noise, at least not jet or prop sounds."

Jackson seemed to relax just a little.

"Want to tell me what it was?" Straker asked.

"Something the aliens shouldn't have been expecting."

"So it was the aliens you underestimated?"

"Or misunderstood," Jackson admitted. "We have always assumed that their thought processes are similar to our own. They are certainly capable of mimicking human behavior, understanding human motivations sufficiently to co-opt weak minded individuals. But..."

Straker waited for him to continue.

Jackson just shook his head.

"Then maybe you can tell me how you got hurt," Straker said. "It looked like your car was attacked, but that wound came from something sharp."

"Shrapnel, actually. The Ufo self-destructed rather than face..."

"Than face what?"

Again Jackson shook his head. "I doubt you would believe me."

"Doctor, we work for an organization that is fighting a secret war with aliens from outer space. Try me."

"I think they thought they saw something chasing them, something utterly terrifying."

"Something more terrifying than Sky-one closing on them?"

Jackson nodded.

"You said they *thought* they saw something. What did they think they saw that was so frightening?"

"Commander, I believe they thought they saw a dragon."

"Then, what did *I* see?"

A haunted look came into Jackson's dark eyes. "I don't know."

* * *

"Computer analysis is inconclusive," Lake told Straker the next morning after Straker handed Jackson off to SHADO's medical section for examination and treatment.

"Except that Sky-one was well out of range of the Ufo when it self-destructed and *I* saw something in the clouds."

"What you saw may have been reflected light from the Ufo," Lake suggested. "It could even have been lightning."

"Lightning that close comes with thunder. There was no thunder," Straker told her. "And Jackson's car was attacked. I can understand them coming after me, but why Jackson?"

"He *is* a SHADO operative."

"The last time they attacked a single SHADO operative it was to trap and release a programmed agent in our midst." He was referring to Astronaut James Regan who had been captured and programmed by the aliens. It hadn't been detected until almost too late. "There was no attempt to trap Jackson," Straker added. "They wanted him dead."

"You were driving the same road. Maybe they mistook his car for yours."

"Do you honestly believe that?"

"Then what do *you* think they were after?"

Straker shook his head. He hated puzzles like this, ones with pieces missing and no picture. It was galling. And then there was Jackson's assertion that the aliens had been running from a... He noticed Lake studying him.

"A dragon... They were after a dragon."

* * *

"Medical has cleared Doctor Jackson," Foster told Straker the next day. "No evidence of alien interference, although how they can tell is beyond me."

"Good, good," Straker commented absently.

"We've been over the debris. Nothing."

"That doesn't surprise me," Straker admitted. "Something scared them out of their minds."

"A dragon?" Foster chuckled.

"Don't laugh, Paul," Straker warned. "What would you do if you discovered that dragons weren't a myth?"

"Run like hell and hope it wasn't hungry?"

"Seriously, Paul."

"I *am* being serious. A hungry dragon could ruin your whole day." He was grinning. Then his expression turned more serious. "But if they only *thought* they saw a dragon, then what was it and why didn't Sky-one see it?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think Jackson knows?"

"He says no." Straker sat back in his chair, hands steepled in front of his face. "Paul, it's occurred to me that there is one factor that may not have been included in the analysis of the last few Ufo attacks, the ones the interceptors took care of. The astronauts involved."

"They didn't even make contact," Foster reminded him.

"Do it anyway, and then check what the gamers were doing at the time of the attacks."

"You have an idea."

"Let's call it a hunch."

* * *

Foster came back within an hour with the results. They were exactly as Straker had expected even though it made absolutely no sense for it to be true. One astronaut had flown all three missions. And that one astronaut had been within firing range of the Ufo that flew into the Moon's surface.

Mark Bradley. And Gay Ellis had taken over the center seat for each of those missions and in each instance the game had been interrupted so they could go on duty.

It made no sense, but it was nonetheless true.

"Get me copies of all the communications between Astronaut Bradley and Moonbase during those missions," Straker ordered. Then he headed out of his office to locate Doctor Jackson. There was still a missing piece to the puzzle and he was certain that Jackson had that piece.

"Commander," Jackson greeted him when he walked in to the doctor's cluttered office in the medical center.

"Doctor, you told me you thought the aliens thought they saw a dragon and that's why they self-destructed," Straker began without preamble.

"Yes, I said that."

"But you had no idea what *I* saw in the clouds."

"Yes," Jackson said slowly.

Straker nodded, arms crossed in front of his chest. "Doctor, what were you doing just *before* the Ufo started shooting at things on the ground?"

Jackson's forehead creased in puzzlement. "I was speaking with Lieutenant Masters. He had a concern about the side channel we were using, something about signal leakage."

Straker nodded. That was one of the reasons SHADO had stopped using the communications system the gamers were now utilizing.

"Did you and he talk about the game at all, use your player character names, maybe?"

"Before he rung off, he mentioned something about having Tsigi watch my back. I assume he was making a joke about you taking the character. I said something to the effect that Tsigi should be watching *your* back."

"Masters knows about Tsigi being a dragon?"

Jackson nodded.

"And Bradley?"

"Naturally." Jackson gave him a speculative look. "You have a theory about what's been happening."

Straker managed a chuckle. "It's crazy."

"Commander, we're in a bunker eighty-feet below the surface engaged in a war against aliens from outer space. Now, what is crazy?"

"I have one more thing to check before I say anything," Straker said. "But if I'm right..."

* * *

It all fit. The puzzle picture was utterly mad, but the pieces fit. Now all SHADO had to do was wait for another attack to test Straker's theory.

"We have reason to believe the aliens are at least partially telepathic," Straker had explained to Lake, Foster, and Jackson. "At least they don't communicate with one another in any way we can detect and they seem to be able to control some humans that way, correct?"

There were nods all around.

"What if they don't understand us as well as we think?" Straker asked. "What if they don't understand us as well as *they* think?"

He saw Jackson's eyes widen in understanding. "They are like computers, logical, orderly. They don't understand imagination. They don't understand games."

"They don't understand make-believe," Straker said.

Suddenly Space Intruder Detector's electronic voice rang out: "Have five U.F.O.s on positive track, Course, four-two-six, one-five-eight; green. Speed, zero-Sol -eight, Range, Thirty two million miles. Red Alert."

Straker and the others hurried into the Control room. Now to test his theory.

In his mind's eye he could see Mark Bradley's interceptor speeding out to stop the aliens. He could see Gay Ellis, Lady Elvieta, wishing *Lord Straker*, undead cleric of *Corellon Larethian*, god-speed and good hunting, just as she had done the previous times.

Interceptor two got one of the Ufos. Interceptor one, Mark, got the second. One alien ship veered away, back the way it came, barely missing colliding with one of its fellows. That one was taken out by Interceptor three.

"And the fifth one?" Straker asked.

"It's through," Ford said. He rattled off the predicted trajectory termination. Southern England.

Straker took one of the headsets and slipped it on. Ford set the frequency, as he'd been briefed, to the one the gamers had been using. Straker watched the radar blip on the screen, burning it into his mind's eye. Then summoning all the venom and disdain he could muster he said: "Commander Straker condemns you to *die*."

The blip seemed to waver. Then it vanished from the screen.

"Confirm U.F.O. destroyed," SID announced.

"But Sky-one can't have gotten anywhere close," Lake said, wonderment in her voice.

"Just like Sunday," Foster murmured. "They saw a dragon?"

Straker pulled off the headset and unplugged it from the console. "No, they just met Commander Straker, Lord Straker's half-elf heir, twentieth level wizard and sworn defender of the Great Wood." He gave Jackson a sidelong look. "The aliens don't understand make-believe. When Jackson and Masters put all the data on the player characters into the computer and sent a copy of the data to Moonbase, the aliens picked it up and thought it was real. Masters and I fed Commander Straker's stats into the system last night and they believed that, too."

"So, all we have to do is tell them to die and they will?" Foster asked.

Straker shook his head. "I wish it was that simple. At some point they'll realize our magic isn't as powerful as they thought. But in the meantime, we have a pretty good weapon. And so long as they keep believing that 'here be dragons', we have a better chance than we had before."

Foster just shook his head. Lake looked bemused as she walked away to do the analysis on this most recent battle.

"Your theory was most interesting," Jackson murmured.

Straker chuckled, relieved. It could have gone terribly wrong. But there was one more thing he needed to test before he was satisfied.

"I don't think I can convince Foster that there really are dragons hiding in plain sight, but you really need to learn greater invisibility. Regular invisibility doesn't work when you're fighting."

Jackson's eyes widened in surprise, or consternation - Straker couldn't be sure which. But he was sure that his suspicions had just been confirmed.

"*Tsigi*," he murmured before heading back to his office.