

## **This Far**

*N. Noel Sol 11/25/2021*

I don't tend to write much about myself. Not out of any misguided sense of superiority, but just within the boundaries that I simply don't particularly see the worth of it. Page has suggested I write at least one personal piece for this project, however, so I'll make a genuine effort to at least try to write some information on myself and my life and my previous rider.

I am a European dragon that goes by my middle name, Noel. I likely suffer from albinism or a similar pigmentation issue due to my coloring, as I am pure white with no observable patterns, and am around 30 ft long from snout-to-tail, the smallest of any of my draconic systemmates. Page and I consider ourselves the oldest of the system and there's an argument as to who between the two of us may be the "original" owner of the body if one exists.

Before existing within this body, I was a war dragon who worked within a human military. I grew up in a large costal settlement during a period that was pre-industrialization, in an archipelagic region that experienced a warm Mediterranean climate. I was one of many different dragons which were used for military purposes and due to my coloration and agility, I was specifically utilized as a daytime scout. The country I lived in had been at war since before I was hatched, or perhaps constant conflict was just a feature of the region; I couldn't really say one way or another.

Within young adulthood I met my human partner, my rider and captain. She was of medium height for a human, perhaps even on the tall side comparatively, and her complexion matched the light wood brown that many others had where we lived. She had dark brown hair, another commonality, that she preferred to keep either short or tied from her face when long enough to do so. Her peers would often tease her for her "baby face," especially in comparison to my own sharp and thin looks.

It wasn't love at first sight: while I was interested in the prospect of being on formal missions, I was apathetic and disinterested in her at first. I didn't know what to make of her, so at first, I ignored her when not impolite to do so. We grew closer as we

went through training and regular missions, a side-effect of spending so much time with one another.

The more we went out, the more it was revealed that she wasn't just competent, she excelled under pressure and had an intellect as sharp as my spikes. Combined, we were one of the top pairs to send out into the mainland for reconnaissance, especially in areas where fighting and battle preparations were already well underway. We were quiet, efficient, and deadly when the situation called for it. Her superiors loved and lauded her.

The years flew on and her accolades grew. In our society, dragons were viewed as tools or animals more than as individuals; while successes could be attributed to a specific dragon, mutual victories created through a combined dragon-human pair were always attributed to the human. We were treated comparable to how I imagine war horses are treated, if war horses could speak and breathe fire. But that wasn't to say that the attention my rider garnered was undeserved: she was an intelligent tactician, she had an innate intuition, and outside of missions her honest and dedicated demeanor could sway even the stoniest of hearts.

But my rider wasn't perfect. While she was an amazing soldier, there were societal and career expectations that extended far beyond just the missions we engaged in: due to her reputation and her ability to speak so frankly and convincingly, those above her were desperate for her to enter politics on their behest. She could help make their battle plans a reality with a combination of garnered public and private support. And the societal pressure to retire to bear children was nothing to scoff at, either. While my partner had originally been born into the middle/lower classes, she'd scraped and clawed her way up in society entirely on merit alone and was considered high class by many due to her decoration. High ranking women in the military and in politics were expected to settle down with men of similar stature and bear troupes of future soldiers, to be molded into similar high-ranking warriors and politicians, ideally carrying on the family legacy.

She wanted none of it. Politics held no value to her, as she hadn't been raised within them and preferred not to be placed upon a pedestal undeserving. She also wasn't interested in any men and had no plans for retirement. She didn't love war and she'd

grown tired of the danger present on missions as she got older, but she loved flying on me and seeing places of the world in its glory, just the two of us together. We were also seriously romantically partnered, something that wasn't unheard of among dragon/human military pairs, but which was still viewed as largely unacceptable in the public sphere.

One-off or temporary relationships between dragons and humans weren't minded as long as they didn't interfere with societal duties of both the dragon and the human, but anything outside of that was considered deplorable. It's a hard outlook to fully translate: concepts of "sin" didn't exist where I was from. Rather, your obligation and responsibility to society was the most important and prized thing there was. Anything that got in the way of such, especially something such as my partnership to my rider, could result in your being socially outcast if you did not have a backing reputation and at least make the attempt to keep it under wraps. If you at least had that, people tended to look the other way as much as they were able to.

Those above her eventually reached the conclusion that they could no longer look the other way on my rider's unwillingness to mesh within politics and create a family. But there was no way to "convince" her to retire: my rider was as stubborn as she was smart, and she was well-loved and well-respected by those around her. If she didn't want to go into politics, her fellows would support her decision. So my rider's superiors decided to force her hand the only way they could conceive of, by removing me from the picture.

Large-scale battles and planned attacks weren't uncommon. They were a tool to place strategic pressure or, in particularly favorable situations, to conquer specific valuable places or other assets. Different types of battles utilized different kinds of dragons, but not all battles incorporated human riders; the aerial maneuvers and different types of elemental or 'magical' attacks utilized on the field were frequently considered too risky for the squishy humans to get involved in from the air, and instead humans were typically relegated to the ground in specific formations.

We often had breaks in-between missions, ranging from several days to several weeks depending on larger conflict situations and both how extensive our previous mission had been. Burn out was carefully managed around for the sake of both human

and dragon health within the military through this. Sending me on a “surprise” mission to the mainland immediately after returning from my last outing was unusual, but not something I was capable of arguing with given my rank and species.

As I’m sure you can already guess, I was sent as a tag-along to a large-scale battle. I don’t remember if the battle had any greater purpose or if it was an excuse to get rid of multiple dragons at once, but the platoon I was a part of was composed of a mixed batch of medium and large dragons, with myself being the smallest of the group by far. There were no groups of human soldiers to accompany us on the field. Instead, we were “managed” by a handful of high-ranking individuals. We were muzzled and flown to an area at dawn, and as the sun was setting against our backs, we were pointed in a specific direction, at a specific time, and shouted at to get going. There was little, if any, communication—it was more like we were hounds and they had opened up the gate in front of us, expecting us to go after the “rabbit” of the fight instinctively. I didn’t understand what they were doing then and still don’t now. It was as though without our riders they really *were* just treating us as animals.

But going we went, right into the claws of the prepared defenses. The dragons we were facing were all larger than me and had the added backing of human groups on the ground offering them backup and support. The fight had no preamble and started as soon as we saw each other.

I was killed towards the start of the fight. In attempting to fight a dragon larger than me, unexperienced in any form of battlefield combat as I was, I was caught unaware by a medium-sized dragon who tore into one of my wings, almost ripping it out entirely. I plummeted. I do not know what happened afterwards, if it was the collision with the ground that killed me, the damage from the fight, a stray shot that finished me off while I was unconscious or in shock, or something else. Either way, I died.

And then I ended up here. How, or why, I don’t know. What happened in-between dying and showing up here is also unknown to me, and I also don’t know why I didn’t originally retain any of my memories even though my identity and sense of self was functionally unchanged.

I've been in this system for 24 years, give or take. And unlike so many other dragons who had past lives comparable to mine and who ended up in systems postmortem, my rider is still nowhere to be seen. I don't know what happened to her. I don't know where she is. And I miss her every day. Her absence in my life is an ache that I don't think will ever fade away: she'll never know my family, my hatchlings, or see the ways I've grown and changed as a person. It shatters me.

A part of me wonders if the separation was an accident, some sort of byproduct of having not died together. A different part of me wonders if this is some sort of divine punishment bestowed upon me by entities unknowable, some sort of retribution for a crime I have forgotten I committed. But it's a mystery to me either way and something I've had to learn to move on from. Maybe one day I'll reconnect with my rider, in another lifetime, but all I can do is cherish her memory now and hope for the best in the future.