

Friend or Foe?

"Barker?!" I called out breathlessly, my feet thumped against the ground with every step. He always does this; run off. All he has to do is see a rabbit, fox, a bird in a tree even, and he'd be off. Sometimes it'd look to be nothing at all. And I'd always be the one to chase him and herd him back home. Sometimes it's easy to get him because he'd catch the creature quickly, but sometimes he'd disappear into the mountain ranges for a couple of hours. I'd give up the chase then and just wait for him to come home.

But today seemed different. Instead of going uphill like he normally does, he's run downhill. He was silent, calm, like a mouse running through a house in the dead of night.

As I chased him, just able to keep my sights on him, I noticed the trees. They were thinning significantly as we got further down the mountain. Instead of being impassable and overgrown, tall and overpowering, it's almost like they're... dying off.

I was finally able to see because all the foliage was gone and I noticed something else; there was nothing ahead of us. Barker was not chasing anything. His nose was twitching, though, so he could smell something. Without warning, the trees drop off altogether. I stood on the edge of a large, circular clearing. The ground was dry and cracked; it looked as though nothing had been able to grow here for hundreds of years.

And in the middle of this dead, lifeless field, it just... sat there. The fading light of the afternoon sun reflected off its faded, brownish scales. Its tired, glassy eyes lazily roamed over Barker as he ran over to greet it and jumped fervently to lick its smoking nose. Its tail would lift ever so slightly off the ground and thump back down again every now and then; like an old dog trying to wag its tail. Its shoulders were hunched over. All of its bones were too well defined and prominent to be healthy. It would have been about 10 metres long from nose to tail tip.

I don't recall how long I was standing there, but its eyes finally made their way to me. It looked over my body like it was examining me. Its eyes showed mild curiosity, but it soon lost interest, swinging its massive head back to look at Barker.

"You're a... dragon..." I whispered stupidly, pointing. I knew it couldn't possibly be a dragon, but... it was.

Stepping towards the monstrous beast, I stopped again when it looked as though it was going to move. Barker, noticing my hesitation, trotted up to my feet, sort of grabbed my hand in his mouth and led me over to his new friend.

He continued to pull my hand until I was face to face with the dragon. He then seated himself next to the dragon, looking up at me with what looked like a smile.

The dragon swung its massive head back to look at me. Pushing its nose out, it looked like Barker when he wanted a pat. I complied, tentatively reaching out to stroke the singed scales on the end of its long face. It started to make a noise that could only be described as purring.

"Jiao! Come back home now! It's getting too late to look for that damn dog!" The dragon pulled away quickly, looking towards where my father's voice had wrung out from.

“No, not my father...” I whispered. I turned to look, making sure it was my father. It was. And he had his pitchfork.

“Jiao! Get back!” he cried, rushing the dragon with his pitchfork, using it like it was a jousting stick.

The dragon reared up on its back legs, turned and retreated to the far side of the clearing.

I felt my father’s arm protectively wrap around me and pull me behind him.

“This is why I say not to come *down* the mountain! You don’t know what’s down here!” he cried over his shoulder at me.

“Don’t hurt it, please! It’s not dangerous!” I cried back, ignoring him.

“Yes it is!” he emphasised his words by shoving the pitchfork at the beast a few times. Barker came trotting over and hid behind me, shivered slightly with his ears flattened and tail between his legs.

My father shouted at the beast and shoved his pitchfork more forcefully.

The dragon was got angrier. Its nose began to smoke. Its tail began to sway. Slowly, it lifted itself off the ground and stood on its hind legs. It looked at us one last time, and opened its mouth. Fire exploded in every direction, but in one main direction: ours.

Written by Morgan Jamieson