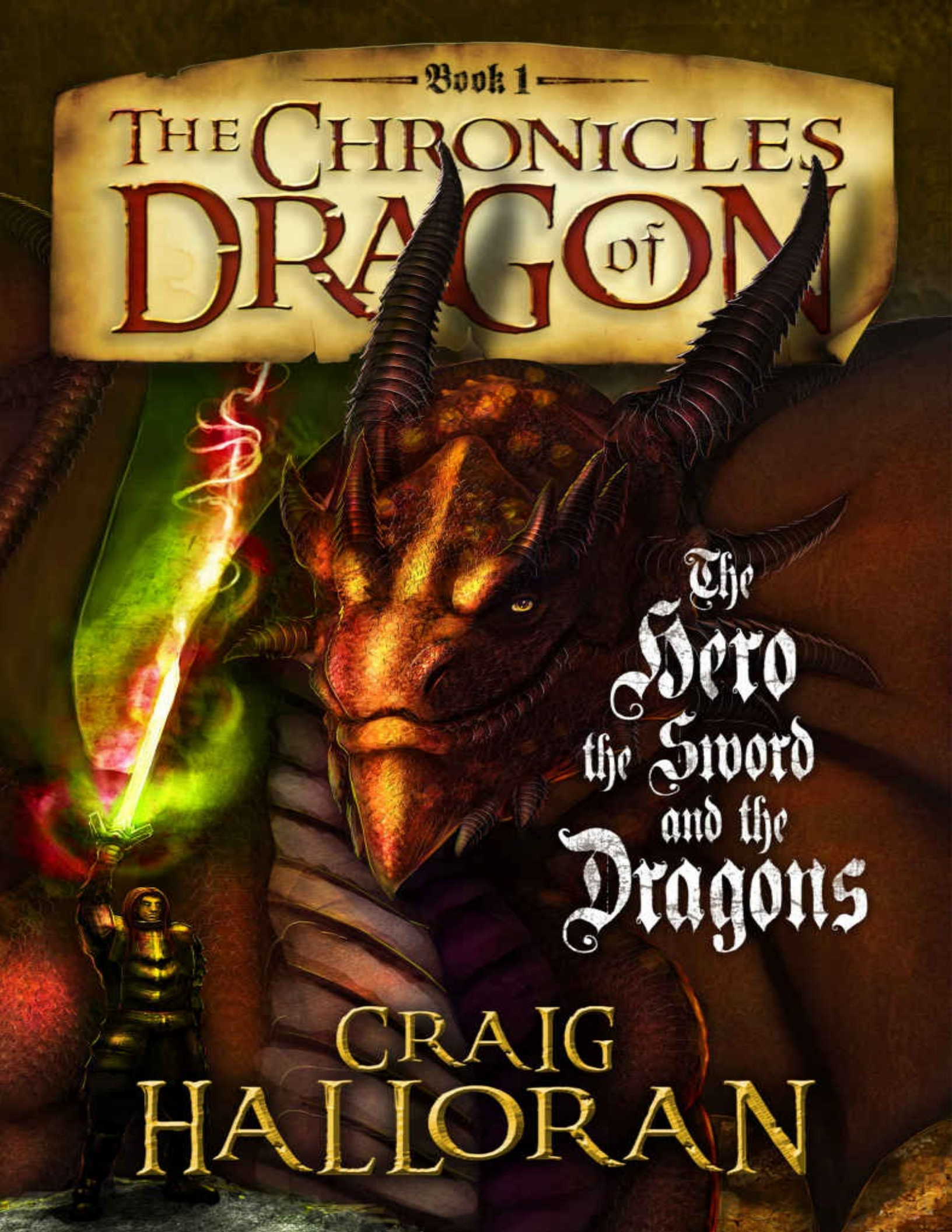


— Book 1 —

THE CHRONICLES of DRAGON

The
Hero
the Sword
and the
Dragons

CRAIG
HALLORAN



The Hero, the Sword, and the Dragons

The Chronicles of Dragon: Book 1

By Craig Halloran

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The Hero, the Sword, and the Dragons

The Chronicles of Dragon: Book 1

Dedication

To my son, Nathaniel Conan. Words can never express how much you mean to me, but I wrote you a book anyway.

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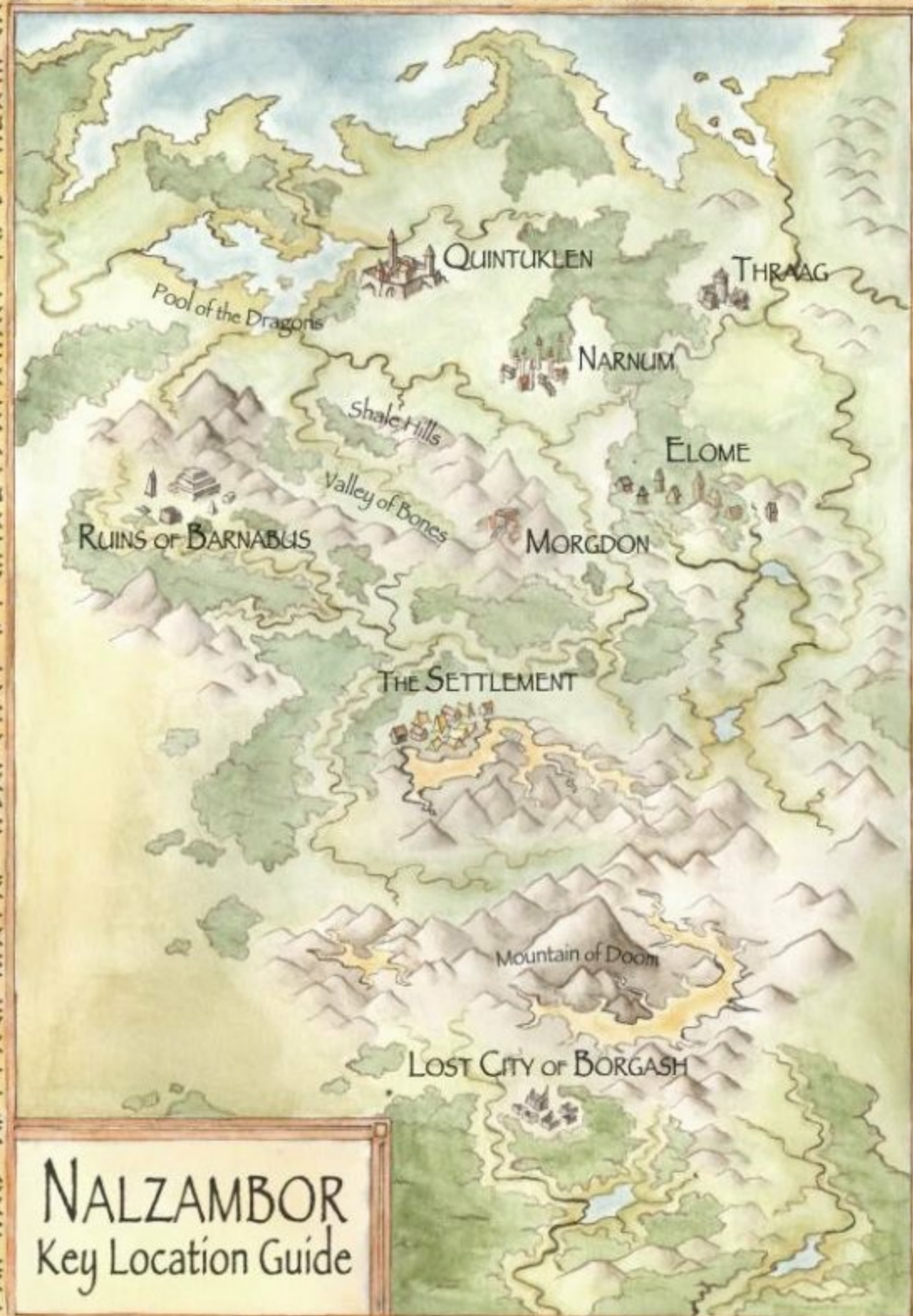
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Key Location Guide

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CHAPTER 1

I was running hard, pushing myself past human limits, to the only place I knew could help. Home. I already could tell that my wound was fatal, and with every step the loss of blood made me more woozy. Orcs were hot on my trail, at least a dozen, howling for my head. I was certain they would not stop; they were stubborn and stupid, slow as well, but I was smart and fast. I was a dragon, after all... in a very man-like sort of way. By appearance, I was a man: big, long haired, and rangy—more than capable of whipping a few lousy dragon-poaching orcs, until they got the drop on me. So now I was running for my life, my dragon heart pounding in my chest like a galloping horse, mile after mile, until I had no choice but to come to a stop. I looked down at the crossbow bolts protruding from my side, through my back.

“Egad!” I exclaimed, checking the wounds. The blood had already stained a patch in my armor, and I knew it was still worse than it looked. Every breath I took was painful and biting. I knew I was bleeding inside, and I had to stop it or die. I pulled the lid from my canteen and drank, which did little to quench my thirst, but it brought some relief. I reached inside my satchel, my little bag of tricks, and fumbled for a vial.

Over the years, I’ve picked up a few useful things, like potions. Magic potions. They can do many things. Turn you invisible. Make you bigger. Smarter. Faster. Stronger. And even heal. In this particular case, it was a healing potion in a vial as big as my index finger, which was pretty big, but it only looked to have about one drop left as I shook it before my eyes.

“Ugh,” I moaned, the pain not getting any better, “I don’t think this will do it.” I looked down at my wounds and tried to decide: should I take out the wooden shafts first or afterward? I’d been hurt before, plenty of times, but this festering wound was a tricky one.

“Just do what you always do, Dragon.”

That’s what I call myself, and I talk to myself a lot. My real name is much longer, difficult to pronounce and spell, but part of it is Nath. So, if a commoner ever asks, Nath Dragon is my name; saving dragons (and other things) is my game.

I tore a piece of bark from a tree, pinched it between my teeth, and bit down. Beads of sweat erupted from my forehead as I began pulling the first bolt through my skin. The good thing about them being crossbow bolts was they weren’t as big as arrows, but they sure did pack a punch. I groaned, certain I was going to die as I ripped the rest of the shaft free.

I felt sick. My skin turned clammy, and the sound of the woodland crickets became loud and irritating. In the woods there are many dangers, and I wasn't anywhere close to being out of harm's way. Anything could pick up the trail of the wounded: overbearing bugbears, wily wood elves, pesky witches, dog-faced gnolls, transforming wolves, tricky sprites, were-shadows, or even worse ... dragons. Yes, there are bad dragons, too, but it wasn't likely I'd run into two dragons in one day or that a dragon would want to fool with me, for that matter. But they did on occasion; I'd seen it for myself. The most beautiful and dangerous creatures in the world. The noblest and greediest, too.

"Do it, Dragon!" I was gritting my teeth on the tasteless bark once more. The pain was excruciating, each bloody inch I tugged free twice as painful as the last. *Don't black out.* A wave of wooziness assailed me as I got the last bolt free and slipped to my hands and knees, trembling like a leaf. I put the healing vial to my lips and watched that last pink drop slide down the tube and land on my tongue. Elation. Exasperation. It coursed through me, head to toe, mending every fiber, sealing every unnatural pore. The relief was astounding but the healing incomplete. As quickly as it had started, it stopped, but at least I wouldn't be dripping blood anymore. Spitting it, perhaps.

Clatch-Zip!

Clatch-Zip!

Two bolts ripped past my face and quavered in a nearby tree.

"Stupid bloody orcs!"

I pushed myself to my feet with a groan and began sprinting through the woods, each step feeling like a punch in my stomach. I had to get home, find my father, and explain to him how I had gotten whipped by orcs, which never would have happened if I'd been allowed to kill them in the first place.

Zip! Zip! Zip!

My legs churned harder and harder as I began to outdistance my pursuers, cutting across the grassy plain, and the barrage of bolts began to subside. So on I ran, the sounds of the angry orcs fading away, leaving only the wind in my ears and the sharp throbbing pangs in my stomach. I just hoped I had enough strength left to return home.

Of course, my father probably wouldn't be too pleased by my return, either. I had his sword that I named Fang, a beautiful glimmering object of steel and magic woven together like its own living thing. Well, it hadn't been given to me; I'd sort of borrowed it, and by then I was pretty sure my father would know it was missing. He wasn't the most understanding when it came to such things, either.

So I ran, through the shallow waters, over grassy gnolls, by shining cities whose towers almost reached the clouds, each long stride a hair shorter than the last, until I made it to just within my keen eye's shot of the Mountain of Doom and collapsed.

CHAPTER 2

As the sun rose, warming the chin hairs on my haggard face, the last thing I remembered was the blackness of the coming night. For all I knew, I'd been asleep for a day. I don't think a screaming ogre could have woken me. At the moment, everything felt fine. Then I moved.

"Ugh," I said. I wiped the morning drool from my mouth and spat out the tangy taste of my blood. I still had miles to go, and I wasn't so certain I could make it. Upright as I could be, I staggered forward. My stiff legs were no longer capable of churning after days of running off and on, but I knew I had to keep going, seek help, and not die.

Ahead was the Mountain of Doom, which isn't its real name but a shorter name I'd given it because I never cared to take the time to say things properly. I swear, long names are given to things just so others will have something to talk about or just to give some little wretch yearning for knowledge something significant to do. I can spell it, backward as well as forward, but I'm not going to. Learning it once was more than enough already, and I see no need to repeat myself. It's just a word. But the Mountain of Doom, my home, is beyond words. It's something you just have to see for yourself, and if you ever do, and you're wise, you'll gape in wide-eyed wonder, turn, and run away.

The base of the mountain is miles wide, maybe a league or two. I used to have to run around its base as a boy, every crevice treacherous, loosely footed of shale and streams of lava hot enough to burn your leg to the bone in an instant. That area is called the marsh of sulfur. The peak's nose reaches into the blue, snow caps blending into that cloudy sky (such as it was that day) before disappearing. Steam. Smoke. Those gases billowing from cave mouths, some small, others large and even enormous, seemed to illustrate that the mountain was more than a clump of rock and clay, a living and breathing part of the world itself.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and fought for secure footing over the shale as I made it two miles deeper into the rising heat. The heat didn't bother me; I was used to that, but it wrought damage on my glorious mane of recently mangled hair.

I stood straddling the crest of a ravine, where a small stream of lava was flowing below. The face on the mountain, a frightful grimace it seemed, some said was a coincidence or a design of arcane wizards that once took shelter there. Or it was a massive scarecrow created by dwarves that wanted to be left alone. It was, without question in my mind, the face of a dragon. A massive cave

filled with rows of teeth could be seen, smoke rolling from its mouth. The eyes shimmered with fire, and the nostrils dripped lava. It would be hard to argue that it didn't look like a dragon, that it was just happenstance, an illusion, something the feeble-minded shared to encourage fear to be spread by other feeble minds.

I sighed. It was pretty much the reason no one came here very often and lived. Mile after mile I trudged along in agony, deeper into the valley of living lava, until I had nowhere else to go but up. I looked back, the green grasses and tall trees no longer within sight, the rising mist now hiding my view of the gentler, softer world.

The base of the mountain was sheer, black rock, no smoke or stairs or solid footholds. Not smooth but rough and spanning hundreds of feet high. This was the part that kept the adventurers at bay: the curious, the daring, the foolish, and the greedy that wanted the dragon's hoard, rumored to be large enough to fill every household in an entire kingdom or more. It was impossible to get in, but to get out, with loads of treasure, would take at least a thousand of the stoutest men. Unless of course you knew a secret way, which it so happens I did.

A natural archway greeted me like an old friend as I fell onto my knees before it. No runes, no nothing, just a familiarity that I had from long ago. I began to speak to it, my raspy voice struggling to be clear, as my tongue was thick and swollen with fever. Word after word, minute after minute I chanted in a language more ancient than man, more difficult than women, more lengthy than a river. It took thirty minutes before I finished, and nothing happened.

"Open," I tried to shout, slamming my fists into the rock. My voice was gone now, withered away like the ashes of a burning log, my efforts spent in failure. *Noooooooooo!* I collapsed, holding my belly, the taste of blood filling my mouth, my last flavor before dying.

The archway shook and quaked, angry. From the corner of my watery eye, I saw a sheet of rock lifting. *Thank goodness.* I lay there in pain, misery, and suffering, eyeing the portal open to safety but unable to move. How long, I did not know. The archway shuddered and buckled, and the doorway began to sink, a mouth closing, lips soon to seal shut. *Move!* But I could not. It seemed my death was likely to come first.

CHAPTER 3

Something powerful grabbed my arm and started dragging me though the portal as the doorway closed shut like a clap of thunder. Gruff hands rolled me over and pushed on the bloody patch on my armor.

I screamed so loud my voice began to crack.

“See, yer alive,” a strong voice said, “...for the moment. Now let’s get you patched up, restored to full health, so your father can be guilt free before he kills ya.”

“Thanks, Brenwar,” I groaned, “you always know what to say to make me feel better.”

“Har!” He reached down and grabbed both my hands. “Up you go!” He almost jerked my arms from the sockets as he ripped me up from the floor. I looked down at Brenwar with a frown as big as his, glowering in pain. My dwarven friend was as big and stout as a sand-filled barrel, raven bearded, and armored in heavy metals from his chin to his toes. You’d think he’d sound like a wagonload of scrap metal when he walked, but all I heard as I followed was the sound of well-oiled leather rubbing together. I followed him up a cavernous stairwell designed for monsters, not men, spiraling upward without end. I knew where I was but wasn’t certain where Brenwar was going.

“In here,” he said, stopping at an opening I swore hadn’t been there a moment ago and shoving me inside. “Wait.” His booted feet stomped up the stairs, echoing then fading away.

I was in an alcove where a lone torch hung, its orange light offering warm illumination to the scenes of many dragon murals painted across all the walls. I gasped as one of the images of a painting came to life. A female dragon, tall as me, slender and batting her eyes, walked over, her tail tickling my chin. I knew she was a female because her belly scales were lighter than the others. Male dragons tend to be darker. But if you truly know dragons, as I do, the eyes were a dead giveaway. The females have lashes on their lids, nothing too pronounced but noticeable all the same.

Her scales, copperish and pink, reflected the most beautiful colors, and her comely face offered a smile. In her hands was a vial, the same as the one I had drunk from days before, which she tilted to my lips. I gulped it down, fell onto a pillow big enough for a cow, and let the magical mending begin.

I burned, inside and out, with satisfaction. My weary bones were revitalized. My innards—dormant, agonized, and bleeding—now regenerated. My vitality was back. My aching feet were no longer sore. I felt as strong as a horse as I tore off my armor, stretched out my mighty frame on the pillow, and shouted at the top of my lungs with glee.

I swear the lady dragon giggled before she pecked me on my head.

“Thank you,” I said, combing my hair from my eyes. The dragoness was beautiful, her features soft behind her armor and razor-sharp claws. After all, beautiful things have to defend themselves. I waved as I watched her disappear back into the mural among her kind, a queen defending in a glorious battle of dragons charging across the sun-glazed sky.

“Ah!” I elated.

I fell back on the pillow, wanting to sleep, as my mind told me I needed rest, but my body was ready to go.

“A bath perhaps,” I said to myself, getting up, grabbing my gear and sword.

A gruff voice disagreed. “You can have your bath later, Nat—”

I glared at Brenwar.

“Er, I mean, Dragon. Your father waits.” The husky dwarf walked over and took Fang from my hands. “I’ll take that.”

I held my head in my hand. I could leave now if I wanted. I was healed and all the better for it. My father, he wouldn’t come after me. He never did. He threatened to chase me down but usually just sent Brenwar instead, who was slow. A team of galloping horses wouldn’t make him fast.

“So be it,” I said in resignation. Up through the Mountain of Doom I followed, one heavy step at a time, the revitalized feeling in my organs replaced with a queasy feeling. My energy, endless one moment ago, was now gone. Oh, I was fine, my health fully operational, but that didn’t do much good in the presence of an angry father who I had been reluctant to listen to for quite some time. When we stopped in front of a massive set of doors that stood almost five stories tall, Brenwar looked up at me with a hard look in his eyes and said, “I told him you needed bathed, but he insisted that you come now.” He reached up and patted me on my lower back. “I’ll see to it you’re bathed before the funeral. It’s been an honor knowing you, Dragon.” With that, Brenwar, my only true friend in the entire mountain, pushed the door open far enough for me to squeeze through, and like a fat rat out of a metal can, he scurried away.

And there I stood, at the threshold of all thresholds, looking back over my shoulder for escape but finding none. If I had had some dragon scales by now, things would probably be all right, but I didn’t. With great hesitation and a trembling heart, I stepped inside.

CHAPTER 4

Imagine the throne rooms of the greatest kings in the world combined and all their wealth lying at their feet. That's nothing compared to my father's throne room, and those kings are nothing compared to my father. There he sat on his golden throne, treasure covering the floor as far as eye could see, glimmering and twinkling in the light of the lanterns. Like a man he sat, more than three stories tall, monstrous wings folded behind his back, dragon head resting in the palm of his clawed hand, eyes closed. There had never been a king that big.

I pushed the door closed with a loud *wump*, stirring the golden coins that slipped from their pile toward the floor. To my relief, my father, a heavy sleeper, did not stir, yet my heart pounded in my chest. I supposed that it should be pounding in my chest, but I had figured that feeling, that nervous feeling you get as you tread into the unknown, would fade away with age. It hadn't. I pushed the hair back from my eyes and proceeded forward.

My father, the largest living thing in the world so far as I knew, was scaled in red mostly, a brick red, with trims of gold along his armored belly, wings, and claws. His taloned toe alone was almost as big as me, and I was big, for a man anyway.

"Come closer," he said from the side of his mouth. The power of his voice sent tremors through the room, upsetting more piles of precious metals and jewels.

I kept going, taking my time, having no desire to begin the conversation but very eager to end it. I stopped a good fifty feet away, craning my neck upward, trying to find the first word to say. My tongue was thick in my mouth, and I thought of all the brave deeds I had done, but it all seemed so minute before my father.

He snorted the air, opened his dragon's maw, and said, "You smell dirty. Like an orc."

That bothered me. He always had to say something that bothered me.

"It's good to see you too, Father," I shouted back, my words barely a gerbil's compared to his. And I was loud, loud as an ogre when I wanted to be.

One eye popped open, brown like a man's but flecked in gold and glaring. The other eye opened as well, the same as the first, its intent no less hostile. My father leaned back on his throne, long, powerful neck stretching between the massive marble pillars behind him, which held the ceiling. He was glorious and powerful; his mere presence began to charge my blood. I was proud to have a father like that, but I hadn't told him so in a long time.

“Ah ... the fear in your sweat is gone already, I see, and replaced by your spiteful tongue,” he said, moving very little, poised rather, pleasant, as if he was being served dinner. “Still, it is good to see you, Son, as always.”

That part got to me a little, but only because I knew he meant it. The way he said it was the truth. Everything he said was true, I knew, whether I wanted to agree to it or not. My father, which is what I called him, because his real name would take the better part of the day to say, had a voice of a most peculiar quality. Powerful and beautiful like a crashing waterfall. Wise and deep with all the wisdom in the world combined. Soothing and uplifting. But my proud ears had gotten accustomed to it over the years.

“Yes, well, Father, it’s good to see you, too. There’s nothing quite like taking a long journey home. Scraping and clawing for your life, bleeding out your last drop,” I laid it on thick, “gasping for your last breath, only to be saved at the last moment of life, healed, only to be jostled and dragged here without a moment's rest.” I began pacing back and forth, hands on hips, throwing my neck back. “And you complain, of all things, that I have not had a bath.”

Ever seen a dragon smile, one with a mouthful of teeth as long as you? That’s what I was seeing now, and it bothered me.

“Well, you know how I feel about those foul creatures, and I was excited to see you, smelling like orc's blood or not, and it’s been so long, several weeks at least,” my father said.

Now my father was being ridiculous. Dragons are never in a hurry to do anything. It takes them a minute just to blink. They aren't slow by any means or measure, no matter how big they are, but they take their good time doing anything. Hours are minutes to them, if even that long.

I plopped down on a huge stack of gemstones, inspecting a few before tossing them away.

“Father, it’s been almost a decade,” I said, agitated. “Have you even moved since the last time I was here?”

“Certainly, Son, I've moved quite a bit since you’ve been here.”

“I see.” He never moved except when it was time to feed, which wasn’t very often. He hadn’t moved since I was a boy, either. “Father, what would you know of me?” I had to push things, be impolite; it was the only way to make this conversation go quicker.

“I see things as well, Nath ...”

“No, don’t!” I yelled, but it was too late. He began pronouncing my full name, which is as long as a river, syllable after syllable, ancient, poetic, and powerful. I listened, minute after minute, mesmerized, my aggravation beginning to subside. My name was a beautiful thing: prosperous and invigorating.

“... nan,” he finished, over an hour later. “Have you gained any scales?”

There it was. The dreaded question about my scales. Here I was, a son of the greatest dragon but without a single scale. Despite all the right I had done, it seemed I'd done my own fair share of wrong as well.

“No!”

My father snorted. I saw a look of disappointment in his eyes, and I felt disappointed as well. I'd failed. Despite all my great deeds in the lands of Nalzambor, I was not living up to expectations.

He sighed, and it seemed such a terrible thing.

“How long, Son?”

I kicked at the piles of treasure.

“Two hundred years.”

Like a man, my father reached up and grabbed his skull with his four-fingered hands. I knew what was coming next.

“Son, the first hundred years of your life were the most wonderful of mine. You did everything I said. You listened. You learned. You grew. And when you became old enough, I let you choose. Stay in the mountain and continue to grow or risk losing everything you are just to see the rest of the world.” He shook his head. “I never should have given you that choice.”

“I wanted to see things for myself. It was my right. You told me I needed to understand the world of men,” I argued.

“Yes, I did. But I told you not to get too close. Don't get caught up in their ways. You are not one of them. You are one of us.”

“How can I be sure? I still look like a man. I talk like a man.”

He stopped me, head leering over at me, his eyes showing a glimmer of the infernos within.

“True, Son, but I warned you not to *act* like a man. I showed you what dragons do, how they act, how they respond.”

I rose to my feet and resumed my pacing through the hoard, coins jingling beneath my feet.

“Maybe I don't want to devour herds of sheep and goats like a beast. I like my food cooked and making use of knives and forks. It's civilized. Unlike the dragons that pillage the flocks.”

Father said, “The herds are for feeding, man and dragon alike. Forgive me for forgetting to use my knife.” He wagged a talon at me. “If you had your scales, you'd understand, Son. You are meant to be a good dragon, the same as me.”

I wanted to please my father. I really did. But, as the years passed and the hairs on my skin became more coarse, I had an aching doubt that I was ever going to become a dragon. There were many things that I could do that men could not. Living long was one of them, but I never felt sure.

“Father, how can I know that I am a dragon? If I was a dragon, certainly I'd have scales by now.

The others do.”

“Son, you are not like the others. You are like me. As I’ve explained, there are dragons like the rest, and there are dragons like us. I am the keeper of this world, a protector of men as well as the dragons. But I won’t live forever, and who will protect them when I’m gone? It has to be you.”

Me. Yes, I knew it was supposed to be me. Deep down in my heart, I knew it was true. But one would think I’d have a sister or brother to share the responsibility. I continued to pout.

“What about my mother? Will you ever reveal her to me?”

“Oh, stop. You were hatched from an egg.”

“I was not hatched from an egg like a goose!” I yelled. It infuriated me, him saying that. I knew I had a mother, and I suspected she was mortal, but my father, truthful and wise, had been holding something back all along. And it infuriated me that I did not know.

“More like a little crocodile,” he said, joking. “You had scales when you were born, we... er, I was so proud. But after a few years, they fell away.” His voice saddened. “And that’s when I knew.”

He had slipped! There was indeed a mother; I was certain of it. But I could not remember her face or anything of her at all. Was she a dragon or a mortal?

“Knew what?” I asked, even though I had already heard the answer before.

His voice was heavy as he said, “That you would be the child that replaced me. That the responsibility was yours, whether you liked it or not. As I did not have a choice, Son, neither have you. There is only one great dragon in the world, and if it isn’t me, it must be you. Without us, the world is doomed.”

That was it: the ship's anchor strapped onto my back. The burden of an impossible responsibility that weighed me down to my knees. *I didn't ask for this.*

CHAPTER 5

The more he kept talking, the smaller I felt. It was a big part of the reason that I didn't come home to visit too much. He told me about the Dragon Wars, where one brood of dragons battled another for the sake of mankind. Every race—man, elf, dwarf, gnolls, orcs, and ogres—had been in danger those days, but the dragons, the good ones like my father, won out. It had all happened long before I came, and it was impossible to believe that there had been such devastation. Mankind, all of the races that is, had been on the border of extinction. My father had sacrificed everything to prevent that, and he had the scars and missing scales to prove it. Still, it was all hard to believe, that life on Nalzambor had been so cold and hopeless.

I stretched on a sofa, as soft and exquisite as one could be, and listened again. There must have been something I was missing. Why didn't I have my scales? And yet again, he told me why he thought I didn't.

“For every life you take, you must save another or more. It does not matter if they are good or evil; who can really tell? There is good in everything, evil as well”

I knew better: orcs were evil. Gnolls, orcs, and bugbears, too. And renegade dragons, remnants of the Dragon Wars, were, too. It never made any sense to me to let them live.

He knew what I was thinking. “It's not just the orcs, Son. Men and elves can be just as bad. Have you not seen how they treat people? Would you treat your people like that? Outrageous.”

It made sense. I'd spent so much time among them that I rarely noticed anymore. Some of their kind, men liked, and some they didn't like. They would feud and war with one another. Brag and boast about their riches, their kingdoms and princesses. I just laughed at them. They hadn't seen anything like I had, so their commentary was quite meaningless to me, but the company was very entertaining.

“My father was the same as me and you. He made this throne, but this treasure was here long before he came, even his father before him. And like us, they were born dragons that turned to men. You are not like your brothers and sisters, nor was I. They care little for the world of mankind, but it's important that we do. Men and dragons need one another. It's how life is.”

I never really understood why dragons needed men except to make treasure, which was still one of those things I enjoyed searching for in my journeys. I met many great men, elves, and dwarves, but I never saw any reason we needed them. They tended sheep and cattle. Made objects that I assumed

dragons were too big to craft. That was another thing. I never saw a dragon build anything.

“When I was your age, I was a bigger man, stronger, faster than the others. Our dragon hearts account for that. Like a horse's times two. I was cocky, too, for a while. I befriended the dwarves and learned about blacksmithing and forged the sword you’ve become so fond of over the years.”

I jumped to my feet.

“You made Fang?”

“Indeed.”

“But, if you weren’t supposed to kill anybody, then why did you make the sword?”

“Because it’s a symbol of truth, hope, and strength. The men respected a man that swung a blade. And I never said you couldn’t kill, just that it’s only a last resort. But again, take a life, save a life or more.”

“How many did you kill?”

“Enough to remember each and every one. Seeing life diminishing in a dying creature's eyes is a sad thing indeed. We are here to save lives, not take them.”

I thought about that.

“But don’t we save lives when we take the lives of those endangering others?”

“How can you know for sure? At what cost, Son? Men will always fight and feud, whether we help them or not. They’ll listen for a while, then wage war with one another. In all of your heroics, how much have you really changed?”

It was true. Battles were won and lost. Good men died, and bad ones lived. Evil withered in the dirt only to rise again into a strong and mighty tower. There was nothing that held it back for long. Not war. Not power. Not peace. This was the part that gave me a headache. Holding back against evil, the despicable beast.

“Save the ones you can, Son. Expect no rewards nor thank-yous, and move on, which I don’t think you are very eager to do.”

I liked being with people, but they aged quickly, and sooner or later I would always have to move on. It was hard to watch them fight so hard for a life that wasn’t long lasting. And maybe that was what I liked most about men. Every day mattered to them. Each one was new, never the same, filled with new adventures over every horizon. Men, good and bad, knew how to live.

I let out a long sigh. I still had no idea how to get my scales.

“I can see in your eyes that you are frustrated, Nath—”

“NO! Don't say it again!” I held my hands up.

“Sorry, Son. You should stay among your brothers and sisters awhile. I’d enjoy your company. Maybe my guidance will sink in.”

He was talking another hundred years at least.

“No,” I stammered, a good bit angry at myself, “I want to earn my scales. I want to be a dragon!”

My father leaned back, dragon claws clasping his knees, and said, “Take the sword. The one you borrowed. It was going to be a gift anyway, but you slipped out of here like a halfling rogue before I could gift it to you. Take Brenwar,” my father’s tone darkened, and so did his smoldering eyes, “and do not return this time without your scales.”

“What? I can’t come back?”

An impatient tone took over his voice like a dam about to break.

“NO! Take with you that which you need. You’ve earned that much at least, but do not return without your scales.”

I shouted back. “Earned it for what?”

“Saving our kin. The dragons. Like I’ve told you to. Focus on the dragons. The little green one, Ezabel, was quite grateful for your intrusion. She sends her best. And she’s not the only one.”

“Really?” I said, surprised.

“Son, have I ever lied?”

“No,” I said.

“Or been wrong?”

I remained silent. I wasn’t ready yet to admit that, so I shrugged.

My father shook his neck, a column of red armor over pure muscle. Then he said, “I don’t just sit here as you think and leave every once in a while to gorge myself on cattle. I do many things you aren’t aware of. I see things that you cannot.”

That was new, but I wasn’t so sure I believed it. If he ever did pop out of the mountain, I was certain the entire world would know; each and every being would be screaming like the world was on fire. I know that I would be if I wasn’t his son. Then I realized he’d gotten me off track.

“Am I really banished as you say?” I asked, unable to disguise my worry.

“Yes,” he said, his voice stern. “It’s time you decided. Do you want to be a dragon or a man? Which is more important to you, Son?”

It was a hard question to answer, and it shouldn’t have been. Among the dragons, I wasn’t so special, but among the people, I stood out. The women, smelling like blossoming rosebuds, running their delicate fingers in my hair, whispering words in my ear that would make a bugbear blush. I liked it.

And the elves, when you came across them, were so pure and delicate in beauty. Their mannerisms were quaint, direct, their cores as strong as deep tree roots. A bit arrogant, though, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy humbling them from time to time.

The dwarves, brash and bold, like my dearest friend Brenwar, were the fiercest fighters and stubbornest competitors of all. They were hardy, grim, and a little mirthful, and I found nothing but comfort among their kind.

“Ahem.” My father interrupted my thoughts. “Do you really have to think about it so much? By now the choice should be clear!”

I waved my hands up in front of me, saying, “Oh, no-no-no, Father. It’s dragons. I want to be with the dragons. It’s just that I find myself feeling so sorry for the others.” I lied to some small degree. I also wasn’t so sure I wanted to sit where he sat forever, even with all the treasures of the world at my feet. There had to be more to what he did.

Father lowered his head all the way to the floor, his face a dozen feet from mine, hitting me with a snort of hot air. I felt like an insect when he said, “I’ve been in your shoes and walked the same path, and I know what you are thinking. You think like a man. It’s time to grow up and think like a dragon. Now, with all my heart and wisdom, it is time for me to go. Take care, Son.”

He reared up, went around the throne, and melded into an enormous mural of himself that was painted brilliantly on the wall. All of a sudden I felt alone. His presence, for the first time in my life, seemed gone. It was clear that he was serious about my scales, and I’d better be getting serious as well.

I spent the next few hours shuffling through the piles, loading a sack with anything I thought might help me, knowing full well it was up to me, no matter how many tricks I had in my pack. I departed, taking one last long look back at the mural of my father and wishing that I was on the other side of the grand painting as well. Brenwar awaited me, leaning against a wall, arms folded over his barrel chest, bushy black brows raised with alarm.

“You live!” he said, more in a grumble, but a surprised one.

“Ha! You didn’t really think he’d kill me, did you?”

“I would’ve.”

“For what?” I demanded.

Brenwar slammed my scabbarded sword into my chest.

“For stealing.”

“Borrowing,” I said, correcting him. “Besides, it was mine to take anyway.”

“I know.”

“You did?” I said, surprised. “But how di—”

“Just keep walking, chatterbox. I’m ready to go. I feel so blasted small in this place. And there’s no ale or dwarves...”

Brenwar kept going on, but I couldn’t listen. My mind was too busy wondering if this would be

my last time at home or not. My scales! I had my doubts I could do it, but determined I was, and a good bit deflated, too. How could I ever be a great dragon like my father? I didn't even have one scale.



Brenwar Bouldergrind

CHAPTER 6

Brenwar's stout legs were too slow to keep up with my long-legged pace, so we rode on horseback. Otherwise he'd complain the entire way. I wasn't usually in such a hurry, so I normally preferred to walk, but I felt a degree of haste these days. Northward we went, toward the five great cities.

The Human city of Quintuklen was filled with magnificent castles and shining towers that overlooked vast rich and reaching farmlands.

The dwarven city of Morgdon was a mass of stone blocks and metalworks, like a dwarven-made mountain, grim and impenetrable.

The elven city, Elomelorraahn, which I just called Elome, the most majestic of all, was hidden in the fog and forests.

The Free City, Narnum, hosted all the races, at least all those not so monstrous, damaging, or tormented. It was a trade city where all the merchants from all the races came to do business, and I found it the most exciting of them all.

The most dreaded, not so vast or appealing, was Thraagramoor, or just Thraag, grim as a mudslide, crumb poor, and run by the orcs, ogres, and goblin sorts.

"Well," Brenwar said, "which way will it be?"

The Mountain of Doom lay in the south, leagues and days from the others. The cities were each two weeks' ride from each other. They formed a rough circle, with Narnum, the Free City, hosting the middle. Everything in between was unprotected and dangerous land.

"Free City, as if you didn't know," I said, hoisting my canteen to my lips.

"I thought we were to be rescuing dragons and such? There'll be no dragons in that city."

"Ah, but is there not talk of dragons wherever we go?" I was grinning.

"I say we go to Morgdon first, then. My kin will be happy to see you again." He stroked his beard. "Not so much as me, but they'll be glad."

Visiting with dwarves was almost as bad as visiting with dragons, except the dwarves were always working, drinking, smoking, or frowning. Their voices were gruff, their conversations short, but they also took time to host their guests. They liked to talk about the things they built and the battles they fought in—with vivid detail. But if you'd heard one dwarf story, you'd heard them all. I was polite when I said, "How about on the way back then, Brenwar?"

He grunted, kicked his short little legs into the ribs of his horse, and charged forward. “To Narnum it is then, Nath! But by my beard, they’d better not have run out of dwarven ale, else I’ll drag you back to Morgdon by your ears!”

I couldn’t help but smile as he spurred his mount, the hot air of the sun billowing in my recently chopped hair thanks to those dreaded orcs. It would grow back before we made it to Narnum City, where I could find an elven barber to refine it with a dash of magic here and there.

We traveled dusk to dawn, over the plains, through the woodlands, over some mountains, through some small lake towns, and well past the ruins. All the way we chatted with caravans and merchant trains. It was spring, and farmers, miners, and merchants were moving along the dusty and cobblestoned roads, taking their wares to every city in the north.

As usual, I heard the same rumors of war, for there were battles and skirmishes everywhere. There were soldiers from many races, all eager to lay down their lives to make money for their families. Brave men we met, and I admired them all. Of course, there were others, too, up to no good. Some spoiled and bold and others as crooked as a busted dog's tail. But I didn’t chat too long. I had heard it all before. I’d fought in wars myself.

Nearing the end of the tenth day, my hips were sore from all the hard riding, and words couldn’t describe my elation when I saw the tiniest tip of a spire in the middle of Narnum City.

“Brenwar! We’re almost there. Two hours' ride at most, wouldn’t you say?”

“Aye, I can’t see it, but I know the road as well as you. I knew when we were five hours away three hours ago.” He snorted. “I knew we were a day away a day ago. I see no reason for celebration. It’s not like we haven’t been here before.”

“Ah, it’s just better to actually see it. Having the goal in sight. Can’t you ever get excited about anything?”

“I’ll be excited when I have a barrel of ale under my bones and a full tankard as big as my head. It looks the same as it always has: not dwarven.”

Well, I was happy. The past few months I’d been outside the cities, tracking down dragon poachers and hunters. Life wasn’t all fun and games for me despite all my advantages, but when I went to the city, I made the most of it. And anyway, a place like Narnum, a mix of everything in the world, was where I went to find the ones who tried to hunt dragons.

This city in particular was different from the rest. A mix of everyone tried to thrive here, and for the most part it worked out. All of the races, good and bad, had a say in Narnum, which for lack of a better word was nothing more than a giant marketplace ruled by many dukes and earls that feuded with one another most of the time, paying little attention to the troubles of the people if they were not their own. There was never enough for most of them, and what they gained, they quickly lost. At least

that's how I'd seen it over the past two hundred years.

A tower rose more than three hundred feet tall, like an ivory tusk had burst from the ground. It was a beautiful thing. Massive windows adorned its circular walls where an outward staircase spiraled upward like a green vine. I could see tiny bodies moving and peering through the bay windows. I dreamed about the day I'd be able to fly around that tower, wings spread wide, soaring through the air. But for now I was a ground pounder, same as the dwarves and men.

The closer we got, the more people we saw, dozens becoming hundreds, hundreds becoming thousands as we approached the only great city that had no walls. A river flowed through the city from east to west. I could see the tall buildings, some reaching more than a dozen stories tall, but most were not so tall at all. There were guardsmen and garrisons all along the way. The protection of the city was well paid for. The citizens, hard workers, liked it that way, and I didn't fault them. I'd want my efforts protected as well.

The roads were paved with cobblestones and brick. The markets thrived with activity as we trotted deeper into the city. A half-elven auctioneer worked the stage in the marketplace, selling pieces of jewelry to a crowd of excited onlookers. He was dashing, not as dashing as me, but his lips were as fast as a hummingbird's wings. Banners marking the neighborhoods fluttered in the air. Children played in the fountains, and some begged for coins. Women aplenty hung from the windows, whistling at me, to Brenwar's chagrin.

"Quit ta' flirting, will you! Let's find a tavern, eat, drink, and make grumpy!" He was hollering at me.

One buxom gal was yelling my way, "Handsome warrior, will you come and stay with me tonight? I've the softest lips in all of Narnum."

"I can see that," I said, momentarily mesmerized.

The women kept calling to me, one compliment following the other.

One shoved the other, saying, "No, my lips are softer."

"You are so gorgeous, and look at those broad shoulders! I will massage them all night."

"Your handsome eyes, are they your mother's or father's? I've never seen gold in a man's eyes, not even an elf's. So splendid and superb," a comely gal with long lashes noted, posturing from her window.

I stood and gaped at all of the wonderful things coming from their painted lips. I couldn't help myself.

Smack!

Brenwar jostled me hard in my side.

"Come on, Nath Dragon!"

I didn't budge ... spellbound. Flattery was a weakness of mine, something my father had warned me about, but it didn't seem to ever sink in. I didn't want to fight what they were saying and saw no reason to, either.

"In a minute," I shrugged. "As you were saying, ladies."

They all laughed and giggled as Brenwar took my horse by the reins and dragged me away.

"Fool!" he grumbled. "You'll never learn, will you?"

"I hope not," I said, waving at the ladies, whose attentions faded from me and coated the next traveler with their wares and pleasantries. I frowned.

"Whatcha frowning fer? You'd think you'd learn by now." He thumped his bearded chest with his fist. "Next time, I'll lead us in. You always go the same way. You're as drawn to those sirens as an orc is to stink."

"Am not!"

Through the city I went, my passions subdued, the sun dipping over the horizon. I led us into a less-traveled part of the town, through some alleys and well off the commoners' path.

"Let's try this one," I said, pointing at a tavern, dark and dangerous, three stories tall, constructed of timber, and roofed in red clay tile. It gave me a shivering feeling. "There's plenty of trouble to find in there." So in I went, oblivious to the stranger's eyes that followed me from the road.

CHAPTER 7

There was music, hollering, and tale telling inside, and I liked that. Mostly men of questionable pedigrees, long gazes, and hard faces. The smell of roasted pheasant filled the air, and I was ready to eat. Brenwar pushed his way past me and saddled up to the bar.

“Ye got dwarven ale?” he asked a tall, bald man wearing a black apron.

I took a seat alongside him, paying no attention to the stares glaring on my back. This city was used to travelers of all sorts coming and going all times of the night, but this place was one of those that kept close to its own.

“The same for me and two full pheasants, not charred, either.” The two coins that I plunked on the table widened the barkeep's restless eyes. “And your undivided attention when I ask.”

The barkeep slipped away, a small woman appearing moments later with two tankards of frothing ale as big as her head. Brenwar gulped his down in several large swallows, let out a tremendous belch, and looked at me.

“You can have mine,” I said, turning my attention away from the bar and toward all the people inside.

Two men, one a bald giant, another part orc, each laden in muscle, arm wrestled over the wiles of a dainty girl with a look of trouble in her eye. A coarse group of men and women sat at a long table near the stone fireplace in the back, the adventuring sort, somewhat like me, some of them casting nervous glances over their shoulders.

An elven man wearing light-purple garb and long, pale-green hair sulked in the corner and played a black lute of many strings for a small group of swooning women. His music was wonderful and strong. All in all, the tavern, a roomy little hole, was nothing compared to so many other taverns that tended to be much larger and more occupied. Still, it offered what I'd been looking for: trouble.

Three orcs sat in the back, beady eyes glancing my way and back. Another man, long and gaunt, sat huddled in the corner fingering a blade, his tongue licking his lips as he gazed at me like some kind of meal.

At one end of the bar was a fair-haired woman, a long sword strapped on her full hips, her tongue as coarse as that of the hulking man she accompanied, the one who had sneered at me earlier. I wasn't so sure they presented the kind of trouble I was looking for, but they were trouble. The kind that conspire and thief. Rob graveyards, fight fiends and ghouls for gold. Kidnap women, sell

children, and don't look back on their deeds with regret. Of course, my father would tell me not to be so judgmental, but I could detect evil, and it hung as heavy as a wet blanket in here. But did they trifle with dragons? That was what I was here to find out.

Brenwar's elbow rocked me in the ribs.

"Time to eat," he said.

Two steaming pheasants greeted my senses with a delightful aroma. One thing you could say about these rundown taverns of disreputable ilk: they tended to have tasty food. My stomach rumbled, and my mouth watered. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I started eating, tearing off big hunks at a time. Brenwar grunted and almost smiled, trying to keep the juicy bird meat out of his beard.

"Say," I said to the barkeep, shoving a gold coin his way, "I'm in need of some *dragon* accessories."

The man glared at me and said, "I don't know a thing about that, and it's best you take such business elsewhere." He shoved the coin back

I shoved it back saying, "Beg your pardon, sir. Then a bottle of wine will do."

He hesitated, took the coin, and pulled a bottle down from the top shelf, setting it down and pointing to the door. "Once it's gone—you're gone." His eyes grazed the pommel of my sword on my back. "No dragon talk in my place." He turned and left.

"Cripes!" Brenwar said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "Why don't you just scare off every dragon poacher in town? Why don't you go ask for some orc accessories as well?" He glared at the orcs, still huddled in the corner, grunting with dissatisfaction over something.

I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "You eat and drink; I'll do the rest."

As we sat and gorged ourselves on bird meat and wine, I felt the tone in the room shifting. The patrons that sat near us began to fade away elsewhere. Many of the patrons seemed to stiffen, some leaving and more notorious sorts arriving. The men began to bristle and brag, their comments about their exploits designed to catch my ear. Like most bad people, it seemed they didn't like me. Despite my rugged armor and attempt to blend in, I looked more than formidable. So far as I could tell, I was the tallest man in the room, my shoulders, arms, and chest as knotted and broad as the rest. What they hadn't noticed about me before, they had noticed now. But I didn't come here looking for a fight. Or did I?

I tapped the big brute at the end of the bar on the shoulder.

"Do that again, and I'll cut off your hand," he warned.

"No doubt you would try," I said, smiling over at the fair-haired woman with the curious and inviting eyes. "I'm in need of dragon accessories."

"Get out of here!" He shoved me away.

Dragon accessories were a profitable business. A single scale was almost worth a piece of gold. Dragon teeth, scales, skin, claws, and horns, whether they contained magic or not, were highly prized possessions that adorned many wealthy citizens. It was a practice that made me sick, seeing my kind displayed for fashion. Dragons were the same as the other races but treated like something different. Of course, not all dragons were good, but most people viewed them all as bad.

I shoved him back.

“You touch me again, you’ll be the one to lose your hands.” No one shoves me around.

The fair-haired woman forced her way between us, pushing her angry friend back with both hands, saying, “No blood here tonight.” Then she whirled on me, poking her finger in my chest. “Go and sit down. I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’ll not stand for any talk of dragons. We fight for gold, not poach.”

“I can see that now. But I pay well. Pardon me,” I said with a slight bow, retaking my seat. *That ought to get them going*, I thought.

The man and woman warriors grumbled with each another, then departed, but she gave me one long look over her shoulder as they went. Now Brenwar and I sat and waited. The barkeep continued to glower at me, but he didn’t throw me out as long as we kept paying, and Brenwar was still eating and drinking. So I sat, noted all the scowls, and waited and waited and waited. I was a dragon, so waiting wasn’t such a bad thing for me. But words travel faster than the wind sometimes. That’s when two lizard men wandered in, both taller than me, crocodile green, dressed like men, and armored like soldiers. Their yellow eyes attached themselves to me first as they ripped their daggers out and charged.

CHAPTER 8

Lizard men. Big, strong, and fast like me, except not nearly as smart, but that didn't really matter when all they wanted to do was kill you.

I slung my barstool into one, cracking it into timbers over its head.

"Blasted reptile! Ye spilled my drink," Brenwar bellowed, clubbing another on its head with his tankard.

Slowed but not stunned, the lizard sprang on top of me, driving me hard to the floor. I locked my fingers on its wrists as it tried to drive its dagger into my throat. Its red lizard tongue licked out as it hissed, angry and fateful. The lizard men weren't many in the world, usually pawns to greater evil but effective pawns nonetheless. I drove my knee up into its stomach with little effect as its blade strained inches above my neck.

"Dieeeesss, dragonssss!" it said with a heave.

It felt like the veins were going to burst in my arms when I shoved back with all my strength. Over the sound of the blood rushing behind my ears, I could hear a rising clamor and more hissing voices. Not good. Yet Brenwar's bellows were clear.

"NO!" I yelled back. In a blink, I freed one hand and punched its long nose, rocking back its head.

Whap! Whap! Whap!

The lizard man jerked away from my stinging blows, but my hands felt like they were punching a wall. Still, lizard men hate getting hit in the nose; so do most lizards, for that matter. My blood was running hot now, the warrior in me suddenly alive as I jumped on its back and smashed its face into the floor. The dagger clattered from its grasp, and I snatched it up and rolled back to my feet.

Brenwar had the other one on the ground in a choke hold.

Crack!

And now it was dead, but the first two weren't the last. Three more were charging my way, not with daggers but with heavy broadswords this time. I can't imagine what I had said to draw so much attention.

Shing!

There was an audible gasp in the room as I whipped Fang's glowing blade through the air. Every eye was wide and wary, and I had to remember I had no friends here except Brenwar. The lizard men

stopped for a moment, but they were well-trained soldiers ordered to move forward.

The first lizard man charged past Brenwar, sword arcing downward and clashing hard into mine, jutting my arms.

Bap!

I punched its nose, rammed my knee in its gut, and jammed my sword into the thigh of the one behind it, drawing a pain-filled hiss from its lizard lips. Two more were down, and the third had an angry dwarven man latched on its back. I raised my sword to deliver a lethal blow. I know, I know. My father warned me that killing is only a last resort, but I don't care what anyone says: lizard men and orcs don't count.

"Stop!" The barkeep screamed. "STOP!"

No one moved, not even the lizard men.

Crack!

Well, that was one lizard man that wasn't going to move again for sure as Brenwar rode its dead body down to the floor.

"YOU, with the magic sword, get out of my TAVERN!"

"Me? But they attacked me!"

My longsword Fang hummed in my hand, its blade glimmering with a radiant light like the first crack of dawn. I brought the tip of its edge toward the barkeep's nose. I wasn't in any mood to be accused of something I didn't do.

He held his hands up but tipped his chin up toward the folks behind me. I had a bad feeling as I turned to look. The two arm wrestlers stood now, each with a short sword in hand, eyes narrowed and ready to jump. The orcs, once three and now six, had drifted closer. The adventurers at the long table now stood. A staff glowed in one's hand, and a sword glimmered in another. One warrior, grim faced and wearing chain mail, had a crossbow pointed at my chest. One woman, small and slender, stood poised on a chair, a handful of throwing knives bared. There were more, too, each focused on me, ready to fight or kill if need be.

"You can all try to take me if you want, but you won't all survive. Is your life worth the risk or not?" I glared back at the barkeep. "Your patrons can't pay if they're dead."

It was a bluff. I wouldn't have killed any of them except the orcs. I swear they don't count. Neither do the lizard men, three of which had begun crawling back out the way they came. Lizard men didn't get along with me. We went way back. Well, I didn't mention it before, but I've been around awhile, and when you live a long time and do what I do, you tend to make enemies. I had plenty to go around. Chances were that one of my enemies knew I was here and had sent in a squadron of goons to kill me.

“Just go,” the bartender pleaded, his eyes nervous now.

I looked at the two dead lizard men on the floor and asked, “What about them?”

“I’ll take care of them. The lizards don’t hold any worth with the authorities.”

Brenwar had resumed his eating, his blocky, mailed shoulder hunched back over his pheasant. I was still itching for a fight. The tension in the air had not slackened. My legs were still ready to spring. That’s when the man in the corner stood up and walked toward the center of the room. Long and gaunt, hooded in a dark cloak, he seemed more of a ghost than a man. All eyes now fell on the man that held a hefty sack in one hand and dropped it on the table to the sound of clinking coins.

Slowly, he pulled his hood back, revealing a shaven head that was tattooed with symbols and signs I knew all too well. He was a Cleric of Barnabus, a cult of men obsessed with the dragons. Meddlers in a dark and ancient magic. I hadn't expected to come across one so soon. His voice was loud and raspy as he pointed at me and said:

“This bag of gold to the one that brings me his head!”

Clatch-Zip!

A crossbow bolt darted toward my ducking head and caught the barkeep full in the shoulder.

“What!” Brenwar roared, readying his dwarven war hammer, sharp at one end, like an anvil on the other.

“Don’t let that cleric escape, Brenwar!” I said, smacking the muscled goons' blades with Fang. I clipped one in the leg and took a rock-hard shot in the jaw from the other. He gloated. I retaliated, cracking him upside his skull with the flat of my blade.

“Agh!” I cried out in pain. A row of small knives was imbedded in my arm, courtesy of the little rogue woman. I’d have to deal with her later. I had to get the cleric, who was scurrying away toward the door. Brenwar was a barricade at the door, a host of orcs swarming at him.

“Let’s dance, you smelly beasts!” he yelled, hitting one so hard it toppled the others.

He could handle himself, and I had bigger problems: the party of adventurers had surrounded me. Well, mercenaries seemed to be more likely the term for them. I leapt back as the lanky fighter with the brilliant sword tried to cut me in half. He was a young man, confident in his skills.

Clang! Clang! Clatter!

He lacked my power or speed as I tore his sword free from his grasp.

Slice!

I clipped muscle from his sword arm and sent him spinning to the floor.

Then everything went wrong.

The little woman jammed a dagger in my back. The wizard fired a handful of missiles into my chest, and the crossbowman, now wielding a hammer, slung it into my chest. That’s why I wear armor,

forged by the dwarves at that. My breastplate had saved me from dying more than a dozen times, but I'd gotten careless. I should have negotiated with this hardy brood, but I wanted to fight instead. I was mad. I was Nath Dragon, the greatest hero in the land, as far as I was concerned. It was time they saw that.

I banged the tip of my sword on the hard oaken floor. The metal hummed and vibrated with power.

THAAAAROOOOONG!!!

Glass shattered. Men and women fell to the floor, covering their ears, all except me and Brenwar, who stood on top of a pile of what looked to be dead orcs. I could see him yelling at me, but I could not hear. His lips mouthed the words, "Shut that sword off!"

I sheathed my singing blade, and the sound stopped immediately. The entire tavern looked like it had been turned upside down. Everyone living was moaning or wailing. The loudest among them? The Cleric of Barnabus. Huddled up in a fetal position, shivering like a leaf.

Fang's power was pretty helpful when it came to ending a fight with no one dying, but it didn't work on every race, or most of the time, for that matter. Fang only did what it wanted to do. My father said the sword had a mind of its own, and I was pretty sure that was true. I grabbed the cleric by the collar of his robe and dragged him over the bar. Brenwar had the cleric's bag of gold in his hand when he came off and plopped it on the bar. The barkeep, grimacing in pain from the crossbow bolt in his shoulder that had been meant for me, smiled as the dwarf filled his hands with the gold and spilled coins on the bar. "Fer the damages. The rest I'll be keeping."

"So long," I said, tying and gagging the cleric and hoisting him over my shoulder. "And thanks. This man will have just what I'm looking for."

The remaining patrons, still dazed and confused, holding their heads and stomachs, paid no mind at all as I left. They should have learned a lesson today: never pick a fight with an opponent you don't know anything about; it just might be a dragon.

CHAPTER 9

No one outside seemed to mind as we pushed our way through the bewildered crowd of the neighborhood, loaded our prisoner onto my horse, and galloped toward a part of town I knew better. The authorities weren't likely to give much chase, if they even bothered at all. Some parts of the city were void of the common rules of order.

"Here," I said to Brenwar, turning my steed inside a large barn full of stables.

A stablehand, a sandaled young man with straw colored hair, greeted us with an eerie glance at my wriggling captive.

"No questions," I said, handing him a few coins.

"No problem," he said with a smile as broad as an ogre's back.

Stables and barns are good places to do business, or interrogations, for that matter. No echoes, and the smell of manure tends to offend most people, keeps them away. I shoved the cleric from my saddle, and Brenwar dragged him inside the stables over the straw and stood watch outside.

As I said, the Clerics of Barnabus are an evil lot, and we go way back. The fact that one had already come after me was a stroke of luck, both good and bad. Bad because they almost got me killed. Good because this man would lead me to their next nefarious plot. Normally, some desperate person would tell me something or find someone that would when I asked after dragon articles. I'd follow their information, and sometimes that led to a dead end, but oftentimes it led me to where I was going. The Clerics of Barnabus, it seemed, had become privy to my ways. And when it came to dragons, they had eyes and ears everywhere. From then on, I would have to be more careful how I went about gathering information.

Now the hard part: interrogation. Taking information from an unwilling mind by force. It wasn't a very dragon-like way of doing things, but it didn't always have to be brutal.

I pinned the man up against the wall by the neck and jerked the rag from his mouth. His impulse to scream was cut short as my fingers squeezed around his throat.

"Urk!"

"That's a good little evil cleric. Keep quiet, and I'll let you breathe." I squeezed a little harder, forcing his eyes open wider. "I talk. You answer, quietly. Understand?"

He blinked.

That was pretty much all he could do, and I took it as a definitive yes. I could tell by the tattoos

on his head that this acolyte was only a few notches above a lackey of the cult. He had some magic, but nothing I couldn't handle.

"See my dwarven friend over there?" I said.

Brenwar peered inside, holding a manure shovel in his hand.

"Look at what he does to people that don't cooperate."

He took the shovel, blacksmith hands holding both ends of the wooden handle, and grunted.

Snap!

The skin on the cleric's already gaunt face paled. His eyes blinked rapidly.

"Now, I'd say that shovel's thicker than your skinny bones. So I suggest you answer my questions in detail, or you'll be going home in a wheelbarrow."

The man's chin quivered. I couldn't ask for a better result.

"Y-You're, you're N-Nath Dragon. Aren't you?"

"You didn't know that already?"

"I was told it was you, but I did not believe until I saw for myself. Someone mentioned you'd come into town. I followed you in. Fully ready to see you dead. There is such a high bounty on your head. But you move so fast. Impossible. Unnatural. I knew I'd lost as soon as it started, but I had no choice but to try," he said, grinning sheepishly.

I slapped him in the face.

"Please, no flattery if you want to walk again."

Evil ones always try to beguile and convince a person their distorted intentions are only for the best or out of necessity. It's tough to sell me if you're a man, but an attractive woman is a different story, and I knew right there and then I had best be more careful.

"We hate you, Nath Dragon! We'll have your head by dawn!"

"My, it seems you've forgotten what happened to my dear friend and the shovel. Brenwar!"

"No!" The evil cleric pleaded. "No. I can't have my arms and legs splintered. I'd rather die. Make a deal with me."

"No."

"Hear me out. I know where many dragons are kept, near this city. Small ones."

He had my attention. The little ones, some as small as hawks, others bigger than dogs, weren't easy to catch but were easy to keep. The thought of them being caged infuriated me. I pushed harder on his throat.

"You tell me now, and not a single bone of yours will be broken."

He nodded. I eased the pressure.

"Take the trail to Orcen Hold."

Finnius the Cleric of Barnabus lived, and Nath Dragon and his dwarven companion, Brenwar, were long gone. But still he struggled in his bindings, and his knee throbbed like an angry heart where the dwarf had whacked him with the busted shovel.

“Let me help you with that,” a woman said. Her dark-grey robes matched his, but she had short raven-colored hair and thin lips of a pale purple.

She pulled the gag from his mouth and helped him to his feet.

“Have you done well, acolyte Finnius?” she asked, cutting the bonds from his wrists.

“I did exactly as you ordered, High Priestess.” He rubbed his reddened wrists. “They are halfway to Orcen Hold by now. Your plan, Priestess, I’m certain will be successful. In a few more hours, Nath Dragon will be ours.”

She rubbed her hand over his bald head and smiled.

“You’ll be needing more tattoos after this, Finnius. I had my doubts you would pull this off, but it seems you did quite well. Assuming, of course, they arrive as expected.”

“Oh they will, Priestess. Nath’s eyes were as fierce as a dragon's when I said it. He’ll not be stopped.”

She walked away and said, “That’s what I’m counting on. This day, the Clerics of Barnabus will forever change the life of Nath Dragon.”

Finnius limped along behind her toward the front of the stables, where the stablehand greeted her from a distance. A long serpent’s tail slipped out from underneath her robes. Striking like a snake, it knocked the boy clear from his feet, smacking him hard into the wall. Finnius swallowed hard and hurried along.



High Priestess Selene

CHAPTER 10

Orcen Hold. Not nearly as bad as it sounds but still bad, miles northeast from Narnum toward the orcen city of Thraagramoor. It's a stronghold filled with brigands and mercenaries, all swords and daggers for hire that sometimes form an army, and you never know whose side they are on.

It isn't just orcs, either, or even mostly orcs for that matter, but men and some of the other races as well. The name most likely kept unwanted do-gooders like me away. I'd never been there before, but the world was vast, and even in my centuries of life, I still couldn't have been everywhere. That would still take some time.

Brenwar and I rode our mounts up a steep road that wound up a hillside rather than around it, which would have been wholly more adequate. On the crest of the hill, no more than a mile high, I could see there was a massive fort of wood posts and blocks jutting into the darkening sky. Pigeons scattered in the air, wings flapping, before settling back along the edges of the walls. Pigeons are crumb-snatching carrion, never a good sign, rather a bad one, as the black-and-white-speckled birds are drawn to filth. Of course, what would one expect from a place named Orcen Hold?

I pulled my hood over my head as the drizzling rain became a heavy downpour, soaking me to the bone in less than a minute. I hated being wet, drenched, saturated in any kind of water that I hadn't planned on. You'd think a tough man like me would be used to it by now, but I saw no reason to like it. I like the sun, the heat on my face, the sweat glistening on my skin.

As the horses clopped through the mud, we made our way around the last bend, stopped, and looked up. Orcen Hold was a good bit bigger than it had looked from below. A veritable city that could host thousands, where I assumed at most were just a few hundred. Well fortified. There were watchtowers along the walls with soldiers spread out, crossbows ready to cut down any unwanted intruders. Ahead, the main gate, two twenty-foot-high doors, stood open behind a small moat. I couldn't shed the foreboding feeling that overcame me any more easily than I could the water soaking my back. It didn't seem like the kind of place where two men entered and got to leave... alive, anyway.

Still, we trotted over the drawbridge, through the doors, and underneath the portcullis that hung over us like a massive set of iron jaws.

"Yer sure ye want to do this?" Brenwar's beard was dripping with rain.

“I’d do just about anything to get us out of this rain.”

Behind the walls over Orcen Hold lay a small city, not refined but functional. The roads, normally covered with the brick and stone customary to most cities, were dirt now turned to mud. The buildings, ramshackle and ruddy, were tucked neatly behind plank-wood walkways. People were milling about, dashing through puddles and across the streets from one porch to the other. Some shouted back and forth in arguments of some sort. The children, possibly the most mottled ones I’d ever seen, played in the mud, their faces, grimy, poor, and hungry. And the smell. I could only assume it would have been worse without the rain, so for a moment I was thankful for the deluge.

The Troll’s Toe. That was the place we were looking for. The Cleric of Barnabus, Finnius was his name, had proven to be a very unwilling participant after he let loose the location called Orcen Hold. His tongue had frozen in his clenched jaws. A well-placed spade to the knee, courtesy of Brenwar, and he’d told me what I was certain I needed to know.

The light was dim as the sinking sun continued to dip behind the clouds and disappear, turning an otherwise hot day cold. The wind began to bang the wooden signs that hung from chains in front of the buildings, making the dreary trek from an unknown city worse.

The firelight that gleamed from behind the dingy windows was a welcoming sight despite the coarse faces that glared at us with more remorse than curiosity. Blasted orcs. If it weren’t for them, I swear that life on Nalzambor would be an excellent party.

“There,” Brenwar said, pointing his stubby finger in the rain. “Seems we’ve found what yer looking for. But Nath, it’s not too late to turn back. I’d say we’re outnumbered here, uh, about a thousand to one.”

“I thought you liked those kinds of odds,” I said, trying to wipe the rain from my face.

“Er ... well, I do. But, this place reeks. If I’m to die, I’d like it to be somewhere a little closer to my home.”

“Die?”

Brenwar looked a little bit ashamed when he said, “I just want to make sure I get a proper funeral. I’ll not have a bunch of orcs burying me in the sewer. Or you, either, for that matter.”

Brenwar was a bit obsessive about his funeral. It’s a special thing for a dwarf. If they had their way, they’d die in battle, but they just wanted to be remembered for it. Brenwar, an older man by dwarven standards, had lived longer than even me and more than likely had a couple hundred years to go. He’d been with me so long, it didn’t seem that he could ever die. But I’d seen other dwarves as great as him perish before.

The wind picked up, banging the sign to the Troll’s Toe hard against the rickety building frame as we hitched our horses and went inside. Warm air and the smell of bread dough and stale ale greeted

us as we sat down at a small table away from the firelight. The crowded room was momentarily quiet, more on account of Brenwar's presence than mine. It wasn't often you saw a dwarf in Orcen Hold, but Brenwar's bushy-bearded face wasn't the only one. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling we were all on our own.

CHAPTER 11

It was a rough bunch, as bad as I'd ever seen: tattooed, scarred, ornery, peg legged, eye patched, and hook handed. It looked like the perfect place to get in trouble. The men were as coarse and rude as the orcs and half-orcs that snorted and blustered around the bar. The women were as crass as the men, singing and dancing on a small stage, their voices as soothing as a glass of boiling water.

"Now what?" Brenwar asked, looking back over his shoulder.

"We wait," I said, waving over a waitress with hips as big as an ogre's.

"What will it be, weary travelers?" She had a gap-toothed smile.

"Two of whatever tastes best with your ale," Brenwar spouted. "Human food, not the orcen mishmash that tastes like mud and worms."

She tried to make a pretty smile, but it was quite frightening when she said, "As you wish, dwarven sire."

"I think she likes you," I said.

"I certainly don't see why she wouldn't," he said, watching her prance away.

I sat there, sulking and soaking, damp hood still covering my face. It wasn't as if anyone would recognize me, but I'd still stick out like a sore thumb. There was something about my eyes and looks that drew stares, and for the most part, I like that kind of attention, but here, it was the kind of attention I didn't want. I just needed to lie low and wait until the opportunity presented itself. In a pain-filled voice, Finnius had assured us that I would know.

My appetite was barren, but the food wasn't half bad as I sat there and picked at it. Something about the greasy meat and cheeses they served in the worst of places always made me want to come back for more. It was getting late, though, less than an hour from the middle of the night, and my wet clothes finally began to dry. The rain no longer splattered on the window panes, and I could again see the moon's hazy glow. I craned my neck at the chatter about dragons that lingered in the air, but it was hard to make anything out over all the singing voices and carousing.

Brenwar nudged me, pointing over toward a mousy man with hunched shoulders whispering among the tables. I watched him, his lips flapping in a feverish and convincing fashion. Some shoved him away, while others minded his words with keen interest. He had my interest as well. *Dragons*. I could see the word on his lips as plain as the nose on his face. I wasn't a lip reader or mind reader, but when it came to anything about dragons, I could just tell.

Like a busy rodent, he darted from one table to the next, collecting coins and scowls while directing the people toward the back of the room, where I watched them disappear behind the fireplace mantel. *Don't ask for it. Wait for it.* That's what the cleric Finnius had said. It made sense, too. Asking would only rouse suspicion.

"You think he'll make it our way or not?" Brenwar combed some food from his beard.

The little man's head popped up our way as if he'd heard Brenwar's question. He scurried toward us, his ferret face nervous, eyes prying into the shadows beneath my hood. Brenwar shoved him back a step.

"Some privacy, man."

The small man hissed a little then spoke fast.

"Dragon fights. Five gold. Dragon fights. Five gold. Last chance. One. Two. Three ..." his fingers were collapsing on his hand. "Four. Fi—"

"Sure," I said, sliding the coins over the table.

He frowned.

"Five for you!" he said, offended, scowling at Brenwar. "Seven for the dwarf!"

"Why you little—" Brenwar made a fist.

"Six," I insisted. You have to barter with dealers like these or else they won't respect you, and that can lead to trouble.

"Fine," he said, snatching the additional coins I pushed his way. He left two tokens, each wooden with a dragon face carved into it. "Under thirty minutes. Be late and no see."

I looked over at Brenwar as the little wispy-haired man left and said, "I suppose we should go, then."

Brenwar finished off the last of his ale and wiped his mouth.

"I suppose," he said, casting an odd look over at the large stone fireplace. "It's underground, it is. I feel the draft and the shifting of the stones. We're over a cave or something carved from the mountain. Bad work. Not dwarven." He got up and patted his belly. "Probably collapse on us, it will. They probably let the orcs build the tunnel."

"You'll dig us out if it does, won't you?" I followed him behind the mantel. He didn't say a word.

One thing about Nalzambor, there were always new places to go. It was impossible to ever see what was behind every door in every city, and for the most part it was exciting. The chill from the damp clothes and biting air had worn off now, and the hearth of the stone fireplace was like a warm summer day. I put my hand on the rock, nice and toasty, which made me think of when I used to lie alongside my father's belly when I was a boy. He'd tell the most excellent stories, and even though

they usually lasted more than a week, I never got bored of them.

We followed a man and woman of questionable character down a narrow, winding stairwell.

“Bah. Orcen engineers. There should be no such thing,” Brenwar complained, his heavy feet thundering down the steps.

At the bottom, two half-orcen men waited, armored in chain mail from head to toe, and two more stood behind them, spears at the ready. The tips of my fingers tingled. I realized I still had my sword and Brenwar his war axe, but the pair before us, with steel swinging on their hips, paid their tokens and moved on down a tunnel to where many loud voices were shouting. The half-orcen man snatched my token from my hand and sneered.

“Take down your hood.”

Brenwar stiffened at my side, hands clutching his weapon with white knuckles.

I looked down into the half-orcen eyes and growled, “I paid my share. No one said hoods weren’t allowed. You have something against hoods?”

His lip curled back, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away. I wouldn’t let him. I looked deeper into him. I could see his hate and fear. There was little good in him but enough man left for him to step aside.

“Go ahead,” he said, blinking hard and moving on to the next people.

Making our way down the tunnel cut through the rock, I could feel the cool draft nipping at my sweating neck. The sound of voices was getting louder now. A mix of races I could hear. Men mostly, but orcs, too, and a few dwarves as well. We emerged into a cavernous room, part cave, part auditorium, with seats carved from stone that formed a crude arena. The excited voices were shouting at a shimmering black curtain that covered an object in the center about twenty feet high and thirty feet wide. The hair on my neck stiffened as I pushed my way through the crowd that circled and pressed around the wall that surrounded it.

“Kill the dragon!” someone cried, jostling my senses.

An outcry of agreement followed along with a series of cheers. I could feel more bodies pressing against mine, a frenzied and gambling horde. From above, a powerful voice, amplified beyond the powers of nature, shouted out.

“SILENCE!”

I’d never seen so many loud and obnoxious people fall silent at once, yet they did, looking upward at the sound of the voice. A man as tall as he was wide stood in robes laced in arcane symbols, glittering different colors in the light. A dragon’s claw, a big one, jostled around his fat neck as he ran his pudgy fingers through a mop of brown hair. He seemed tired, expressionless, and bored. He yawned, his mouth opening three times bigger than it looked.

Brenwar nudged me, saying, “That ain’t no man.”

Whatever he was, he kept on speaking.

“SILENCE!”

He said it once again, long and drawn out. At this rate, I’d never see what was underneath the curtain.

“LET ... THE ... DRAGON ... GAMES ... BEEEEEEEEEE ... GIIIIIN!”

There was a clap of thunder and a flash of light, followed by a series of gasps.

I gawped at what I saw next: a cage. A series of ironworks constructed into a see-through dome of metal. But that wasn’t what got me. I’d seen plenty of cages before. Instead, it was who was perched inside on a swing. It was a dragon no taller than a dwarf, glimmering with orange and yellow scales, clawed wings covering his face and body. He shone like a diamond inside a room full of coal. My nerves turned to sheets of ice when the big fat man said, “SEND ... IN ... THE ... TROLLS!”

CHAPTER 12

It seemed so out of place to imagine such things as trolls fighting a dragon, albeit a small one, to the death. My inner self was recoiling, uncertain what to do, when the cage doors opened on a tunnel to a rousing chorus of cheers. A troll—ten kinds of ugly all wrapped up into a ruddy piece of brawny flesh towering ten feet tall—stood there pounding its fist into its hand. The smacking was so loud it popped my ears. I tore my eyes away from the troll that lumbered, arms swinging into the walls, shaking the cage on its way into the chamber. The dragon was as still as a crane on his perch, unmoving. *Good boy*, I thought. I could tell he was a boy by the scales on his belly, a little darker than the orange and yellow scales on his body, unlike the girls, who were usually lighter than the rest.

The troll, naked except for a burlap loincloth, narrowed its small eyes on the dragon and let out a terrible yell, loud and getting louder. A battle cry of sorts. A chorus of bestial fury. The dragon remained at peace on his perch, not showing the slightest degree of motion.

The crowd quieted, all eyes as full as the moon and fixated on the dragon. My own heart was pounding in my chest like a team of galloping horses. The troll, every bit as dangerous as it was dumb, lumbered around the dragon like a predator sizing up its prey. Despite their lack of intelligence, trolls aren't impulsive, but once they make a decision, which usually involves something other than them dying, they stick to it.

“What’s going on?” Brenwar muttered.

“I’m not sure.”

“KILL THE DRAGON!” someone cried.

That’s when the chants began, a rising crescendo of fury, and like a frenzied ape, the troll beat its chest, charging the unmoving dragon, massive fists raised and ready to deal a lethal blow.

The dragon’s wings popped open, his serpentine neck striking out as he began breathing a stream of white lava.

The troll screamed in agony, thrashing under the weight of the dragon’s breath that coated it from head to toe with brilliant-white, burning oil. The troll's flesh charred and smoked, its efforts to escape diminishing. From where I stood, the heat was like sticking your face too close to a campfire. The crowd roared so loud I couldn’t hear myself think. I slapped Brenwar on the back, unable to hide my elation as the little dragon finished, leaving nothing left of the troll but the smoldering bones and an uncanny stink.

Brenwar looked up at me, eyes as big as stones, and said, “Did you see that? I’ve never seen a dragon with breath like that!”

Dragons. There were all kinds. Different makes and families, and each kind had a special weapon or two of its own. The orange dragons, called blazed ruffies, were among of the noblest and deadliest of them all. I had to get this one out, and soon. He was still young, and it would be at least a day before his breath returned.

“That should do it,” I said. “Let’s stick around and see what we can do to sneak this dragon out of here.”

There was a lot of murmuring, most good, some bad. It seemed most of the people that liked to take chances had been smart enough to bet on the dragon. I was expecting everyone to leave, but most of them were sticking around and talking. Of course, how often do you get to see a live dragon fight? Their fascination sickened me.

I looked above as the fat man whose mouth was too large for his face spoke again.

SEND ... IN ... MORE ... TROLLS!

My heart sank down into my toes. “What?” I couldn’t hide my exclamation. Wooden double doors opened on the other side of the cage into the tunnel again. Two trolls, this time carrying shields and clubs and wearing helmets, charged the orange dragon on the perch. The crowd screamed. I screamed. The dragon didn’t stand a chance. He’d last another minute or two at most.

“We’ve got to get him out of there, Brenwar!” I yelled.

The dragon zoomed from his perch, dashing between the legs of one troll, who swung, missed, and bashed the other. Dragons are fast no matter how big they are. But no dragon with spent breath and little room to fly could last for long in that cage.

“Find a way in, Brenwar!”

As soon as I pushed one person away, two more appeared. The crowd was in a frenzy, trying to get a closer look. The cage, so far as I could see, didn’t have a door or opening except into the tunnel on the other side. I heard a sound like a rattlesnake’s rattle. The ruffie clawed his way up one troll’s back, tearing its flesh up like dirt, drawing an inhuman howl. He perched on one troll’s head and taunted the other with the rattlesnake sound made by tiny fins that buzzed by his ears.

WANG!

One troll struck the other on its metal helmet just as the dragon darted away. It looked like two clumsy dogs trying to catch a mouse. One troll would swing, miss, and hit the other. That wouldn’t last forever. Dragons, for all their speed and skill, tire quickly after their dragon breath is spent. They are magic, and magic needs time to recharge. Trolls, however, tire about as easily as a wall of stone. Those two wouldn’t stop or slow until they were dead.

“Brenwar!”

I couldn't see him, but I could see people falling like stones, a path of people parting within the throng before closing up again.

The voice from above came again.

“STOP ... THEM!”

I saw him, the fat mage, like a toad on a stool, pointing straight at me. The crowd, dazzled by the spectacular fight, gave the man little notice, but the guards, the ones armed to the teeth, were ready and coming after me. If they got me, I'd never get to the dragon in time, and I still hadn't figured out a way inside the cage.

“MOVE!” I shouted, but the people paid me no mind.

That's when I heard it, an awful sound, the sound of a dragon crying out, his shrieking so loud it hurt my ears. A troll had ahold of his wing. The dragon fought and fluttered, talons tearing into the troll's flesh, but its grip held firm. That's when something snapped inside me. A geyser of power erupted within my bones. Fang, my sword, was glowing white hot in my hands. I was surrounded, but my mind was no longer my own. The guards and men were falling under the wrath of my blade. I ignored the fear-filled screams and howls of fury. I could not tell one man from another. All I wanted to do was save the dragon, and nothing was going to stop me.

There was blood and fury in my eyes as I swung Fang into the iron cage. Fang cut into the iron as I chopped like a lumberjack gone mad. *Hack! Hack! Hack!* I was through, a troll's massive back awaiting me. I sent Fang through its spine and caught a glimmer of the dragon slithering away. Brenwar was yelling. I turned in time to see the other troll's club coming for me. I dove. *Whump!* The club missed my head. I rolled. *Whump!* It almost broke my back as I scrambled away. *Crack!* The troll fell over dead, thanks to the help of Brenwar's war hammer catching it in the skull.

“Come on!” He pulled me to my feet. Ahead, the large wooden double doors, at least ten inches thick, barred our escape from the coming wrath of who knows what.

Brenwar charged, war hammer raised over his head, bellowing, “BARTFAAAAST!”

There was a clap of thunder, the splintering of wood, and a giant hole in the doors that had momentarily barred our path. The dragon was gone like a bolt of orange lightning.

“Follow that dragon,” I yelled, following Brenwar down the tunnel.

The dwarven fighter's short legs churned like a billy goat's as he charged down one tunnel and through another. My instincts fired at the sound of armored soldiers coming after us down the tunnel.

“Do you know where you're going, Brenwar?” I cried from behind him.

Brenwar snorted, “I'm a dwarf, aren't I? Not a tunnel made that can lose me.”

We found ourselves running down a long corridor, where a wooden door had been busted open

that led outside into the once again pouring rain. The pounding of armored footsteps was coming our way, as were voices barking orders and calling for our heads. It was time to make a stand.

A group of heavily armed soldiers rounded the corner, armored in chain mail from head to toe, the silver tips of their spears glinting in the torch light.

“Get him,” one ordered from behind, thrusting his sword in the air.

I whipped Fang’s keen edge around my body and yelled back.

“The first one that comes within ten feet of me is dead!”

The soldiers stopped, looking with uncertainty toward one another. That’s when I noticed the blood dripping from my sword. Their eyes were on it as well, and a hollow feeling crept over me. How many had I killed? Everything was a blur. Perhaps it was troll’s blood, but it didn’t seem dark enough.

“Skewer that man!” The commander’s face was red. “If you don’t follow orders, then you’re dead men anyway. We’ve got strength in numbers. Attack!”

The first two spearmen lowered their weapons at my belly and advanced. All I wanted to do was buy time. Just a few seconds more. I leaped in, batting one spear away with my sword and yanking the spear away from the next man. The soldiers shuffled back. Now I faced them with a sword in one hand and a spear hoisted over my shoulder.

“The next soldier to advance will catch this in his belly,” I said, motioning with the spear.

“Cowards! Charge him! Charge him now!”

The unarmed spearman stepped back as another took his place.

I launched my spear into his leg. The man let out a cry of pain as he tumbled to the ground.

I ducked as a spear whizzed past my face.

“Charge!”

I hoisted Fang over my head and said, “Stop! I surrender!”

No one moved, every eye intent on me.

The commander shouted from the back, “Drop your sword, then!”

Slowly, I lowered my arms. But I had another plan. I’d use Fang’s magic to blast back my enemies as I’d done in the tavern.

“What are you smiling for?” The commander moved forward.

“I’m just glad to put an end to the violence, is all. Oh, and you might want to hold your ears.”

“What for?”

I banged the tip of Fang’s blade on the stone corridor’s floor.

Ting.

Nothing happened. I tried it again.

Ting.

Drat!

“Fang, what are you doing?” I shook my sword.

The commander was not amused. “You going to drop that sword or not?”

I was flat footed now with nowhere to go but out. I grasped my sword in both my hands and pulled it in front of my face.

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to fight you all. To the death!” I let out a battle cry and charged forward. All of the soldiers hunkered down. In stride, I pivoted on my right foot, twisted the other way, and dashed through the busted doorway into the rain.

I was drenched the moment I made it out into the river of mud that was supposed to be a street. I heard a horse nicker nearby and dashed that way. Brenwar, my horse in tow, was galloping down the road, hooves splashing in the water.

“Run, Dragon!”

The heavy boots were trampling behind me as I sprinted alongside Brenwar, grabbed ahold of the saddle on my horse, and pulled myself up.

“Great timing,” I yelled up toward Brenwar as we began our gallop away. “I couldn’t have done better myself—*ulp!*”

Something that burned like fire slammed into my back. Another spear sailed past my head, followed by another. The pain was excruciating as I galloped onward with a spear in my back, holding on for dear life.

It was dawn before we stopped riding. I could barely keep my head up, and I swore I’d black out any second. We didn’t slow, not once, taking trails little known to most. I’d been that certain our pursuers were many. I was restless when we stopped along a silvery stream and gave the horses a moment to drink.

“Finally stopping, are we? Think we lost them?” Brenwar said.

I slid from my saddle, grimacing.

“What’s the matter with you, Nath? You look like ... Egad! Is that a spear in your back?”

He hurried over and inspected my wound.

“Ouch! I don’t need speared again, Brenwar!”

“Why didn’t you say something, you fool? You could’ve bled to death.”

“It’s not that bad,” I gasped. “Only a javelin, right?”

“Sure, and I’m a fairy’s uncle. Still, it’s a small one. Not barbed for hunting. It’s wedged between your armor and your back. Hold this.” Brenwar put my reins in my mouth.

“What for?” I tried to ask.

“Just bite down. I’ve got to pull the spear out.”

I shook my head.

Brenwar yanked out the spear. I screamed. It felt like my entire back was pulled out, and I fell to my knees.

“I’m going to need to stitch that up. And quick. Are you sure you are feeling sound? That’s a dangerous wound. Another inch it’d be inside a lung.”

It hurt, but I’d been stitched up by Brenwar before. Besides, I had some salve that would accelerate the healing.

“All done,” he grumbled as he poked his finger in my face, “and next time, tell me something.”

“Thanks, Brenwar.” I rolled my shoulder, and my back still burned like fire. At least the rain had passed.

“You sure you’re feeling well? You don’t look well.”

“I’ve been recently skewered. I’d assume that’s it.”

“Pah ... Yer fine, I guess,” he said, walking away.

The sun, warm on my face, a feeling that normally gave me comfort, gave me none. Brenwar, usually full of boasts after a battle, was quiet. I picked up a stone and skipped it from my side of the stream to the other.

“Another dragon saved,” I said. “A fairly powerful ruffie, at that.”

“Aye,” Brenwar said, refilling his canteen. “Some fight, too. Works up the ol’ appetite, it does.” He thumped his armored belly with his fist. “How about I snare a rabbit or two?”

“I’ve got my bow.”

“Are ye daft? Ye didn’t bring yer bow,” he argued, his busy face widening with worry.

“What?” I said, “You look like you just swallowed a halfling. Brenwar ...”

The world wobbled beneath me. Bright spots burst in my eyes: pink, green, and yellow. Brenwar’s arms stretched and stretched and stretched toward me, beyond me. His face spun like a pinwheel and was gone. Silence. Blackness. I fell, I think.

Finnius stood alongside the High Priestess of the Clerics of Barnabus with a nervous look in his rodent eyes. He’d seen men dead before, but not so many, not like this. He couldn’t imagine how Nath Dragon had done all this, but the witnesses, the ones that had survived the horror, assured him he had. The arena beneath the Troll’s Toe in Orcen Hold looked like a battlefield. A battle that they had clearly lost, not to mention losing a dragon as well. The High Priestess, however, didn’t seem worried. Arms folded over her chest, a dark twinkle in her eyes, a smile cropping up from the corner

of her mouth, she said, “It won’t be long, Finnius. Nath Dragon will be mine.”

CHAPTER 13

It was dark. I smelled burning wood. Meat roasting over a fire. My eyes opened to a brilliant, starlit sky, and I felt whole again. I rolled over to where a campfire blazed and Brenwar knelt, turning rabbit meat on a spit.

“Dinnertime already?” I got up and walked over.

Brenwar looked at me like I’d come back from the dead.

“What? Has it been a day or more? You look like I’ve been sleeping for a week.” I stretched my arms out and yawned. “I must admit, though, it feels like I’ve slept for a week, maybe longer. I guess saving dragons is bound to catch up with you.”

“Or turning into one,” he said. At least, I thought that was what he said.

“Brenwar, is that some kind of joke?”

I looked at him, the sky, and the moon before turning back toward the stream that was no longer there. A very bad feeling overcame me, like a part of my life was missing.

“Say, how’d I get here? Where’s the water? Brenwar, how long have I been out?”

He mumbled something.

“Louder,” I insisted.

“Three months! Three months, Nath Dragon! And I’ve been out here counting daisies and trapping furry little animals.” He rose to his feet and poked me in the chest. “Now, three months isn’t long for a dwarf, but it’s not short by any measure, either.”

“Why didn’t you wake me, then?”

He jumped to his feet and yelled, “Don’t you think I tried? I could’ve set you on fire, and you wouldn’t have moved! I should have let the harpies carry you off.”

“Harpies?”

“Pah,” he said, waving me off.

I raked my fingers through my hair and checked the beard that had grown on my face. I scratched it with nails that were unusually long, on my right hand anyway. I held my hand out and stared. Brenwar’s downcast face stayed down, kicking at the dirt as I looked at the black scales on the fingers of my dragon-like hand.

“Gagh!” I said, jumping away from myself.

I looked at my other hand, the left, and it was fine, but my right—with black, glimmering scales

and thick yellow claws like my father's—was a thing of beauty. A rush of energy and excitement went through me as I jumped high in the air and screamed with delight. I felt like a child again.

“I can go home again, Brenwar! I’ve gotten my scales! Or some scales.”

I ran my new and old fingers over my face.

“Brenwar, is my face unchanged?”

He nodded.

I was relieved, but I wasn’t certain whether I should have been or not. I shed the blanket from my shoulder, and everything but my right arm was fine, or human at least, and I still wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. I checked behind me.

“Do I have a tail?”

“No!”

“Why so glum, then, Brenwar? I’ve gotten scales!” I said, marveling at my arm.

He shrugged and said, “Don’t know.”

He was being stubborn, naturally, but something bothered me.

“What?”

“I ain’t seen no man become a dragon before,” he said, taking the rabbit from the spit. “Hungry?”

I gazed at my arm, its diamond-like scales shimmering in the twilight, like broken pieces of coal. I could feel power, true power, like I’d never felt before. I swore my right arm was twice as strong as my left, and my left was already stronger than most men’s.

“Come, then, Brenwar! I can’t wait a moment longer. It’s time to go see my father!”

“So be it then, Nath.”

The trek through the Sulfur Marsh at the bottom of the Mountain of Doom had never gone quicker as Brenwar and I made our way through the secret passageway. Most of the time when I came home, I was either half dead, as had been the case the last time, or filled with dread because I had not gained any scales. Despite my father's and my disagreements over the past two centuries, I never wanted to disappoint him. This time, however, I had the upper hand. I had my scales, and my days as a man were numbered.

I took a moment to pause in reflection as I stood outside my father’s chamber doors. The detail in the doors and the rest of the caves and tunnels appeared to have a greater meaning to me now. The brass framework interwoven in ornate patterns on the wooden doors said something to me. The symbols carried power.

“So,” Brenwar’s gruff voice interrupted my thoughts, "are you going inside, or are you going to stand there and gawk? It’s a dwarven door, you know. You’d think you’d never seen it before.” His

thick fingers were playing with his beard. He seemed nervous, if that was at all possible.

“It’s fine work. I just never noticed before. Do you think I should knock?”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

True—in all my years, I hadn’t bothered to knock before. I wasn’t certain why it was different this time, but it was. This time of all times, the little things seemed to matter.

I looked down at Brenwar’s face, then at the door, and lifted my fist to knock. Both doors swung open on their own.

“ENTER, SON, AND MY FRIEND THE DWARF.”

I led, my chin held high, like the time I’d saved my first dragon. I felt like a boy again, new and refreshed, a spring in my step because the hard feelings at failed efforts were gone.

My father, the grandest dragon of them all, sat on his throne, his eyes burning like fire. I’d never seen such an expression on him before. Fearsome. Deadly. Secrets as ancient as the world itself protected beneath the impenetrable scales and horns on his skull. His voice was like a volcano about to erupt, turning my swaggering gate into a shuffle.

“COME CLOSER.”

The gold pieces piled up were slipping like shale, and the entire cavern seemed to shake. I was thirty yards from the foot of his throne when I opened my mouth to speak; my day of glory had come.

“STOP!”

I froze. Something was wrong. Brenwar dropped to a knee beside me, head down.

My father sat there, monstrous claws clasped in his lap, a side of his razor-sharp teeth bare.

“REMOVE YOUR ARMOR.”

“With great joy, Father,” I said, unstrapping the buckles on my chestplate. Certainly he had to have noticed my dragon’s hand at least, yet he said nothing. Perhaps there was to be more of a ceremony with the full showing. I tossed my armor and garments aside, standing with my naked chest out, my incredible black-scaled arm up high.

My father sucked his breath through his teeth, his face smoldering with fury, and roared so loud I thought the mountain had exploded.

I fell to the ground, holding my ears, crying out and pleading for mercy. I couldn’t think or focus; I just screamed as I felt like the entire world was going to end. A sharp cracking sound exploded nearby as one of the marble columns fell. The room filled with heat so hot I could barely breathe. My whole world had gone wrong. I’d never been so terrified.

Somehow I rose to my feet despite all the feeling in my legs being gone. My hands were still clamped over my ears as I watched my father continue his angry bellow. Brenwar was almost covered in treasure, his face devoid of expression, eyes watering like he’d seen a horrible ghost.

I yelled out, “What is wrong, Father?”

His roar stopped, but my ears kept on ringing.

His voice was lower now.

“What have you done?”

I stood, shaking, stupefied, and gawping.

“What have you done?” My father asked again, the rage in his voice gone but the molten steel tone remaining. “Have you ever seen a black-scaled dragon?”

I looked at my arm, shook my head, and said, “No.”

Then I realized something must be horribly wrong.

“The ruffie you saved has been here and told me what you have done. I hoped that it was not true, though I knew that it was. Did you even realize that you killed so many?”

The truth was, I didn’t have any idea how many I had killed at all. I hadn’t even thought about it.

My father looked down, and I felt like it was the last time I’d ever see him again. My heart began to sputter in my chest as I fell to my knees, tears streaming down my cheeks, and begged, “No, father, I’m so sorry. Let me fix this.”

“It’s too late for that. You have cursed yourself. You are no longer welcome in Dragon Home. You’ll take no swords, no gold, no magic ... not anything. You are on your own. If there is any hope left, you’ll have to find it on your own. I’ve told you all I can. Now go, to never return unless those scales are a different color.”

My father gave me one long, lasting look with nothing but sadness and disappointment in his eyes. I’d failed him, I knew it, for the last time. I felt smaller than the tiniest coin in the room as he turned, walked away, and disappeared back into the mural.

Alone, I wept my way through my father’s throne room, never looking back, through Dragon Home, through the Sulfur Marsh, until I wept no more.

Bearded and lonely, I sat inside a cave at least a hundred leagues from my father as another season passed while I contemplated my failure in self-pity. No men killed. No dragons saved. My cursed black scales remained.

If there is any hope left, you’ll have to find it on your own, my father had said.

He’d said many things, and it was time I put them together. I rose from the crag where I had stooped and bellowed the fiercest bellow I could muster. It was time to figure out what I must do to become a dragon, and a very good one at that. Like my father.

From out of nowhere, Brenwar showed up and tossed a beautiful sword at my feet. It was Fang.

“Brenwar! How did you get this?” I asked in alarm and jubilation.

“Yer father only said *you* couldn’t take anything from his cavern. He didn’t say anything about me.” He winked and added, “And that isn't all I got, either.”

Thus begins the Chronicles of Dragon.

Read on for an excerpt from Book 2, Dragons Bones and Tombstones



Nath Dragon

CHAPTER 1

I sat high in the branches, spying the orcen camp below. Brenwar and I had spent weeks trying to locate it. Brenwar wasn't with me. He didn't climb trees, not unless he really had to.

Below, the gruff voices bellowed and drank, celebrating their prized catch: an evergreen dragon. I could see her well from my perch. She was a rare flower, a thing of beauty among the decay of mankind. Small and young, the creature was no bigger than a man. Her tail, slender and serpentine, curled around her body as she lay still. Green, a brilliant green like emeralds, was the color of her scales. Her underbelly was not fully developed, yet it was armored in citrine yellow. Long necked, with a small nose and snout, she had two leathery wings folded over her back. Her chest was rising and falling as if she was out of breath. I could sense her fear as she lay alone and helpless. I had to free her; after all, that's what I did. Or at least, what I was supposed to be doing.

I watched and waited. Certainly Brenwar's signal would come at any moment. The waiting wasn't so bad. And the watching part was another matter. Watching orcs—all of which were brawny, fatty, and boar-like in the face with little tusks jutting from the bottom of the mouths—was offensive. They were crude.

One sat on a log by the fire, picked his nose, poured a nasty stew in his mouth, and belched. Another was plucking the lice from his beard while a different one picked lice from his hair and tossed them into the iron pot of stew. Their purpose in my world was a mystery, because I'd yet to see anything good from a single one of them, ever.

Where are you, Brenwar?

The moon rose to a full zenith, a full, bright yellow, and it wasn't long before the party of orcs began to drift into sleep.

Two orcen guards stood watch alongside a wagon that housed the metal cage that contained the dragon. Both were alert, chests out and spears ready. I knew from experience that the slightest abnormality in the camp would make them sound the alarm. Sneaking up on them wasn't a very good idea. I could get one shot off with my bow, killing one, but getting the second shot off before the alarm sounded would be difficult. And I had to remember that I was not supposed to kill.

My back was beginning to ache, and my legs were becoming numb. I needed to move. Brenwar,

on the other hand, well, he could stand like a statue for days. I've seen him do it. He could beat a stone in a standing-still contest. But me, no. I was a man of action, and I had things to do. A dragon was suffering, endangered, helpless. It made me feel miserable, too. With or without Brenwar, I was going to free the dragon. I didn't rustle a single leaf as I climbed down. A stiff breeze blew my hair into my eyes. It was good, being downwind from the camp. The orcs had snouts almost as good as those of hounds, and I had to be careful they didn't catch wind of me. Of course, on the flip side, I got plenty a noseful of their foul dander.

Wretched things.

I never ate bacon because of them, and I love meat, in all its forms and flavors.

I hunched down behind the tree I'd been sitting in and watched as one of the orcs poked at the dragon with the butt of his spear. It lit a fire in me as I watched the little dragon's tail tighten around her body. The orcs' mocking laughter stirred the warrior within me. My impulses took over. My anger rose.

Control, Nath. Keep it under control.

I reached for my bow, Akron. Compact in size, forged by magic, it hung from the armor on my back. I snapped it into place.

Snap. Clatch. Snap.

The bowstring coiled into place like a living thing. Akron, a wonderful weapon made in the forges of the elves, was a gift from long ago. I spit on the tip of my arrow and rubbed it in. The black arrowhead began to glow with a yellow fire as I nocked it. My dragon arm was steady, solid as a red oak. My aim was true as I listened to the stretching sound of the bowstring. The orcs' throats were as clear as the nose on my face.

Save the dragon. Kill them all if you have to.

Oh, how much I wanted to. But killing, no matter how evil the opponents, wasn't the best way to earn my scales. I hated that part. It was so hard to understand.

Small breath. Release.

Twang!

A streak of yellow light whizzed through the night, soaring past the orcs' heads and into the lock on the dragon's cage. The orcs jumped as if their feet were on fire, gawping at the arrow jutting inside the metal lock.

The dragon remained still.

One orc grabbed his head, bewildered, studying the arrow in the lock.

Wait for it.

I nocked the next arrow.

Boom!

The arrow exploded. The orcs fell to the ground. The sound wasn't so loud, except it came in the dead of night, and in all likelihood I had woken up everything sleeping for a quarter mile. As I watched the pieces of the large metal lock scatter everywhere, the green dragon came to life, her small winged arms clawing at the cage. The dazed orcs scrambled back to their feet, fighting to secure the cage door, one putting his body into it, the other trying to lock it with something else.

Twang!

The orc screamed as the arrow imbedded itself in its ankle.

Twang!

I sent the other howling to the ground as I caught it in its hip.

Two down, none dead, but the dragon was still trapped inside.

Drat!

The camp was a flurry of activity now. Orcs rose from under their blankets, ripped their swords from their belts, and began barking orders. The dragon thrashed inside her cage. The latch, lock or no lock, was still holding. I moved. Bounding across the camp, ducking under a chopping axe, I lowered my shoulder, bowling the next orc over. In a single bound, I made it to the wagon and pulled the cage door free.

A thunderous cry of alarm went up as the dragon's long neck jutted out. She stepped from the cage, spreading her magnificent wings in the moonlight. With a single whoosh, she darted into the sky and disappeared from sight. They're fast. So am I, but the problem is—I can't fly!

"You're welcome!" I yelled, for all the good it did. Of all the dragons I saved, none ever thanked me. Not that they could talk. Well, some could. Most couldn't, and I only knew a few that did. But one would think, for all the times I helped them, they'd at least come back and help me, but they never came.

"Kill him!" the orcs yelled, surrounding me.

I leapt into the wagon and pulled out Fang, its blade glimmering like wildfire. Still, none fled. The orcs were stubborn like that, always letting their greedy intentions get the better of them. The orcs were not cowardly, just stupid. They closed in, weapons brandished, their faces eager for my blood. An orc with a face like cottage cheese let out an angry cry, and they charged.

I leapt on top of the cage as a battle axe whacked a chunk out of the wagon where I had been standing. One by one, they jumped into the wagon, heavy swings nipping at my toes as I danced and batted their steel away, careful not to let my feet slip between the bars. It was chaos as one fought over top of another, trying to tear my legs from underneath me and cut me down in a tide of my own blood.

The dragon I had freed, as with all dragons, was worth a lot. Worth enough for these thugs and rogues to gorge themselves on ale and food for months, maybe even a year. If you ever want to make somebody really mad, just take their money.

The nearest orc bellowed as I sank my blade, Fang, into its shoulder. Fang is short for its real name that is as hard to pronounce as it is to spell, at least for me. Impossibly long. What else should I expect of a sword made by my father? *Chop! Chop! Clang!*

Their blows rattled the cage, tearing more wood from the wagon. I wobbled on my legs as two more of the beastly orcs heaved the wagon in an attempt to shake me to the ground. It was getting hot now, my breath heavy as my sword arm became heavy from deflecting all their blows. My muscles were being put to the test as I struck quickly, clipping an ear, before dancing away from another's broad stroke. I slipped. My foot went down between the cage bars, catching my knee on the metal, filling my head with an explosion of pain. I cried out.

“We’ve got him! Kill him!”

Three orcs surrounded me, trying to pin my arms down. I cracked one in the nose with the sword's pommel and punched another in the jaw. Its head rocked back, but my fist stung from the blow. The orc wrapped its meaty arms around my throat, arcing my spine like a bow, bending me backward over the cage.

I was suffocating. The sweaty thing had me, and I could smell its breath, as foul as garbage. I heaved. It heaved back as I cried out in agony. My leg, still pinned between the cage bars, was ready to snap. My sword, Fang, was useless. I let it slip through my fingers, hanging onto the pommel, revealing a small dagger within that I called Dragon Claw.

Slice!

I stabbed the orc's belly. It recoiled and teetered from the wagon. Bloody dagger in hand, I jabbed it into the second orc's arm. It had power, determination. It was me or him. I had the feeling that before I poked another dozen holes in its arm, my leg would break. The pressure was building, and I felt the tendons in my knee stretching. I swung at him with my dagger, but I could not reach him.

“Let go! Beast! Let go!” My lungs were bursting inside my chest as I cleared my leg from the cage and dodged another blow. I hopped to the ground, rolled over Fang, and reinserted Dragon Claw in the pommel.

Now ten orcs still lived, each snorting in open hostility, not a one willing to yield, though the one I had stabbed in the belly might have been dying, based off the pain-filled groans I could hear. Unfortunate, but it happens. I fought for my breath. It was time to speak.

“This has gone far enough, orcs. I’ve scratched you, maimed you, but I can do much, much worse,” I said, pulling back my shoulders and standing taller than their tallest—and orcs are big,

bigger than men on average. My voice was as big as me, but that didn't really matter if the orcs were too stupid to recognize Common. I could always speak in orcen if I wished, but why lower my standards? They might take that as a compliment.

“So, what will it be, little piggies?” I said, twirling Fang's glowing blade through the air. “Limp home and live,” I shrugged. “Or die.” Which was a bluff, because I'm not supposed to kill them, remember? If anything, they'd figure I was as bad a shot with a bow as I was at swinging my sword.

Dripping blood from their injuries, lathered in sweat—orcs sweated more than anything else I knew—they gathered closer. I'd played the game too long. It was time to get serious.

Dragon saved. Disappear? Disarm? Oh, what to do? Where in Nalzambor is Brenwar?! Fang glimmered in the grip of my fingers, a bright piece of steel that shimmered with radiant, living light. It felt alive in my hand. It was hefty, its flat blade wide, its hilt big enough for two hands, but in my grasp it was as light as a stick, perfect in weight and balance.

Shing!

I struck the belt buckle of the nearest orc, dropping his pants over his ankles. The rest jumped back. But as far as they were concerned, it was another miss.

Oh, great, they're going to attack.

They came at me like a sweaty swarm of hornets, steel stingers in their grasp, ready to skewer me alive.

I was big, an easy target, but I was fast, too.

“Kill him!” the orc said, kneeling down and trying to pick his pants up from the ground. I think “kill” is a very common word for orcs, meaning the same in their language as in mine. I ducked just in time as a sword whistled over my head. I rolled under the wagon to the other side. My blood, still pumping from the moment this all had started, was just warming up. The warrior in me had lost patience when I popped up on the other side and began swinging.

Crack!

I clipped one under the chin with the butt of my sword.

Glitch!

I stabbed another in the thigh, bringing a forthcoming howl and limp.

Slice!

Another orc clutched its bleeding arm where I cut clean through the triceps. I meant to do that.

Parry!

Clang!

A battle axe clattered into the back of the wagon, drawing astonished grunts. I shifted behind the next attacker that was poised to poke a hole in my back with a spear.

Chop!

I sliced through the shaft of the spear, drove my sword into the beast's shoulder, and spun away from another two-handed blow.

Parry.

Clang!

Fang tore a blade from its wielder's grasp.

Glitch!

I stabbed the orc in the chest and watched it, beady eyes now wide, fall over and die.

Oops!

Yes, I'm not supposed to kill other people in order to earn my scales, but I don't consider orcs people. And no one can really say whether or not killing something evil prevents me from getting my scales. And my father said I could kill if my life was in danger. I was pretty sure it was.

I punched an orc in the face with my dragon fist, my right hand. Stabbed Fang into the shoulder with my left arm. It was like having a weapon in each hand, but my dragon arm and Fang had issues, and I'll talk about that later.

I kept the pressure up, my lungs burning, sweat dripping from my hair into my face as I watched all the remaining orcs try to scramble away from my wrath. Like most people, they were hard headed until faced with the possibility of an inevitable death. Then and only then they became reasonable.

The orcs cried out. Bleeding from wounds, some ran; others began to grovel and pray. I ignored them. They could live ... for now. Though I was certain it was a mistake. I fought for my breath and thirsted.

"Thanks for the help, Fang," I said to my sword. I swear it could hear me.

Fang responded with the hyper-low hum of a tuning fork. That was the magic within. Ancient. Mysterious and wonderful.

I ran my battle-numbed fingers over the two dragon faces on the brass-fit pommel, their gemstone eyes red and green. I took a deep breath and slipped it back into the scabbard that hung at my side.

I looked back at the orcs, their expressions defeated yet evil. I could have told them, "Let the dragons alone or I'll be back," but what good would that do? Now it was time to depart and find Brenwar. I felt good as I dashed into the woods and disappeared into the night. One more dragon in the land saved from the clutches of evil, and sometimes from the clutches of the self-proclaimed good as well.

You see, dragons are hard to find, but not so hard to catch. They, like most people, like shiny things: gems, pearls, gold, diamonds, silver, and did I mention gold? Dragons love gold as much as I hate orcs. If you can find them and leave a pile of gold near their nests, caves, nooks, or holes,

chances are, like a trout and a silvery lure, they'll try to snatch it. Drop a net over them, and they're yours, but beware. With claws as sharp as swords, teeth as cutting as knives, and breath as dangerous as anything you ever saw, they aren't so easy to take alive. That evergreen dragon was a little one, but there are others twenty times her size.

My good deed was done, and I turned to walk away.

Clatch-Zip!

Something exploded in my leg.

“Argh!”

Fool! I stumbled to the ground. My chest and stomach were burning like fire. It felt like my entire core was being torn apart as I rose to my feet and ran. I looked down to see a crossbow bolt sticking through my thigh. It hurt. It was a good shot. I dashed into the woods, one foot stumbling past the other, branches slapping my face. *Orcs!* That's the problem with leaving them alive: if you do, they don't usually stop until you're dead.

CHAPTER 2

Another bolt whizzed past my head. I half crawled, half limped, and somehow dove behind the cover of a red oak tree.

Thunk! Thunk!

I made it!

“Drat!” I said, reaching down and yanking the bolt from the back of my leg. “Stupid orcs! How’d they catch up on me so fast?”

I stood up, groaning, my back against the tree, one bolt sailing past, followed by another. I listened. It sounded like there were only two of them, but there might have been three rustling in the bushes and half grunting, half whispering their plans to one another. It seemed they had me right where they wanted me: trapped, with nowhere to run, not that I could. Well, certainly I could outsmart a few orcs.

Whop!

Bam!

Boom!

I stiffened. What was that? What was that, indeed. The sounds of battle didn’t come from me but from beyond the tree. I stood with Fang in my grip and peeked around the bend in the tree.

“Come out from behind there, Nath Dragon!”

I let out a sigh. It was Brenwar, standing tall, for a dwarf at least, three orcs crumpled at his feet.

“Hah!” I said, limping forward, using Fang as a crutch. “It’s about time you showed up, Brenwar!”

He eyed me, and I knew what was next: a lecture. Brenwar liked to lecture me on the things I did wrong, but this time it would be different. This time he was wrong and I was right.

Brenwar hefted his war axe over the plate armor on his shoulder.

His voice was gruff when he said, “I told you to wait for my signal, Dragon.”

One of the orcs started to move.

Brenwar whacked it in the head with his hammer. “But you couldn’t wait, could you? Just a few more minutes was all I needed. But once again, you rushed headlong into danger without thinking about the consequences.” He eyed the blood dripping from my leg.

I slid Fang back into its sheath and folded my arms across my chest. “My leg will be fine. It’s not

that bad.” I tried not to grimace, but I did. “And none of this would have happened if you would have been there in the first place.”

Brenwar was scowling now.

I threw my arms up. This wasn’t my fault. It was his. “I couldn’t wait forever. You know how I feel about that. Seeing a dragon caged infuriates me.”

An angry growl rose in his throat.

I could feel the heat coming off of him, hot like a furnace.

“I’m not talking about your leg, NATH!”

He stepped over a fallen log and punched me so hard in my chest I could feel it through my armor.

“You killed two orcs, fool!” He hit me again, same spot, but harder.

I fell to the ground.

“You killed—AGAIN!”

So I did. But it was in self-defense, and Father said that was all right, if you had to. Now my own anger was beginning to rise. No one pushes me around. No dwarf. No man. No orc and no dragon. I started to rise, but a jabbing pain throbbed in my leg. So I pointed at him instead.

“Don’t do that again, Brenwar! What I did was in self-defense. It’s as much the orcs’ fault as it is mine.”

Brenwar slammed the blade of his war axe into the log.

I winced. He was angry, much more so than I.

He sat on the log and looked me square in the eye.

“Patience, Nath. I was on my way. If you would have just waited, you wouldn’t have had to kill any of them. I’d have distracted them while you freed the dragon. Just like we’ve been doing for months now.” He shook his head as he tugged at his beard with his iron fingers. “Now look at you.”

“What?” I said, checking over myself. I didn’t see anything wrong other than the hole in my leg. “Is it my face?” I patted it over. “Do you have my mirror? Brenwar, where’s the mirror?”

Brenwar just stared at me, pupils blank, eyes expressionless.

“There’s something wrong, all right,” he said.

I was mortified. Was it possible I’d gained black dragon eyes or a black dragon’s snout? Everything felt the same, but I could not help but wonder. “Brenwar, tell me! What is it?”

He muttered something.

“What?!”

Brenwar did something he rarely does unless he’s finished a few tankards of ale. He smiled. Or at least I thought he did. It was hard to tell underneath his black beard that looked like wool from a

lamb.

“Are you jesting with me?” I asked, standing back up, ignoring the pain. As my anger rose, I looked down on him. “Brenwar, why would you do such a thing? It’s not something to be joking about. Not at all.”

He let out a short chuckle, pointed at me, and said, “You’ll think better of it next time, before you start carving into orcs or any other kind. Ha! You should have seen your eyes! You should be worried. And you should be thanking me, too. Your father told me to keep you in line. And you’re out of line right now.”

I stormed away. The pain in my leg wasn’t so bothersome when I was angry, but it still hurt. But something else ached worse: my heart. I ripped a hunk of a tree out with my dragon-clawed hand, took a seat behind it, and wiped the dampness from my eyes. I missed my father and my home in the Mountain of Doom. And even though I’d been away years longer, it already seemed like I’d been gone forever. There was no worse feeling than knowing I could never go home again.

I sat there and sulked for the next few hours. My heart was heavy, and my angry thoughts turned sad as the moon dipped from view with the sun. Brenwar was right, of course; he always was. You would think that after two hundred years of life I’d know much better by now, but I had such a hard time controlling myself. I hated dragon poachers and all their kind, and I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to loving the lust for battle. I had to be better, be wiser, if I was going to solve the riddle that had become my arm and hand. I had to turn my scales any color other than black.

“You ready?” Brenwar said, stepping into view.

I nodded.

“Brenwar, how many dragons must I free to get things back to normal? We’ve freed so many dragons recently, at least seven that I count. Father said that for every life you take, a life you must save, or something like that. I’ve saved more lives than I’ve taken. In all of these months, only those two orcs have I killed, and only because I was trying to save myself from death.”

He shook his head and grunted.

“Well thanks, Brenwar,” I said, shaking my head. I knew it wasn’t up to him to solve my problems. I gazed at my right arm, the dragon arm. It seemed a great way to compensate a man that was left handed. If anything, it did things that my left could not do. It was stronger, faster, and though I shouldn’t admit it, it was a magnificent thing.

Whop!

I ducked down. Brenwar slammed his axe into the tree, inches above my head.

“Have you gone mad, Brenwar? You almost took my head off!”

He ripped his war hammer out of the tree and yelled at me.

“I should be taking your arm off, Nath! It’s your problem!”

“I know that!” I shouted back. I wasn’t an idiot. Why would he say such a thing?

“No, you fool! That’s not what I mean. If you could just see yourself looking at it. You like it! You crave it! Your eyes are like a dwarf’s in a gold rush: hungry as a bear for honey. Thirsty as a fish out of water.” He waggled his dwarven hammer in my face. “You have a dangerous look in those eyes of yours. The kind men get when they have enough power and want more.”

I laughed him off as he walked away. “You’re being ridiculous, Brenwar.” I carved my initials in a rock with my dragon claw. It was another one of those awesome things I liked to do. I smiled as I followed him, saying, “I don’t like it.” *I love it!*

CHAPTER 3

Travel was slow going for the next couple of days, and Brenwar had barely said a word, which wasn't odd for a dwarf, but I could still tell he held a grudge.

I stopped, pulled off my boots, and dumped some gravel from them. We were in the Shale Hills, a network of ravines and green forests with hilltops and valleys covered in a blue-grey shale.

"Hold up, Brenwar," I said, stuffing my boot back on.

The journey would have been more pleasant on horseback, but we'd given them up two rescues ago. Brenwar said they made too much noise. I agreed, much to my regret now. My wounded leg was still in agony. I'd used up the last healing vial on the last adventure. But I wasn't letting it slow us down. I poured out the shale from my second boot, stuffed it back on, and began my tracking of Brenwar.

His tracks, faint but discernible to my eye, led me to a stream that gently flowed over a bed of smooth shale. It was a nice place, lots of ferns, red and green, both sides lined by pines. On the other side of the stream sat Brenwar, refilling his canteen, taking a drink, then refilling it again. He eyed me, shook his head, and turned away. I was starting to get sick of this now.

"Brenwar, are you done pouting at me? Not communicating isn't going to solve my problem. A little advice, such as where we are going, wouldn't be so bad right now." I skipped a stone across the stream. "Of course, I could always rescue dragons all by myself."

"Is that so?"

Well, it was so, but I wasn't going to say that. Brenwar taught me everything I know about tracking, but I fared pretty well on my own now. The fact that I was part dragon gave me an edge even he didn't have, but his centuries of experience provided him with an edge that I had not yet developed. Besides, I needed Brenwar to keep me under control. I needed that, but I wouldn't admit it to him.

I sloshed across the water and stuck my nose down in his face. He still hadn't answered a question of mine. And I was beginning to suspect maybe it wasn't me but rather the questions he didn't want to answer. "Brenwar, why did you take so long to arrive back at the orcen camp?"

He started to turn away, but I stopped him.

"Let go, Dragon. It wasn't so long," he huffed. "It hardly makes a difference how long it was now, anyway." He started to pull away.

I exclaimed, “I waited up in the tree for hours!”

He huffed. “So?”

“No, no, no, no, Brenwar. Not a couple of hours—several hours. You’ve never left me hanging around that long before.”

I got in his face.

He tried to look away.

I could see it in his eyes: he was hiding something. There was certainly something he didn’t want to tell me. I wanted to know what that was. It was driving me crazy now.

“Tell me, Brenwar, or I’ll ask you every minute of the journey. I’ll talk like a chatterboxing gnome if I must. You know how good I am at it.”

“All right then!” He shoved himself back and shook his head. “I had to go.”

I gave him a funny look. It didn’t make any sense to me what he meant.

“Go where?” I said.

He grunted, gestured with his hands, looked around and whispered, “I—had—to—go.” He nodded toward the ground.

“Huh?”

He made another gesture I didn’t comprehend. Then another.

“Oh!” I didn’t know what to think at first, but like a sock in the belly, it hit me. I started laughing so hard that I fell over. My voice echoed from one end of the ravine to the other.

“Will you quit laughing, you idiot! You’ll bring the entire hills upon us!” He tried to stop me. “Quit that!”

It didn’t do any good. I couldn’t get rid of the thought of Brenwar being late because he had to go to the bathroom!

“Did you pile or pee?” I asked, only to erupt in laughter once more. “BRAWAH-AH-AH-HA!”

“Pah! Both, if you must know!”

I was still laughing when I said, “Well, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” I was being sincere.

“Ho! It’s not like that happens often at all... er,” he was twisting his beard and rubbing the back of his head, “...it happens. Now just leave me alone.”

He walked away, leaving me alone with my laughter. Great dragons! I hadn’t laughed like that in ages. There was nothing quite like a bellyful of joy to take away the aches and pains of the soul. I caught my breath, giggled a little more, and sat up on the stream bank.

It took a while before Brenwar sauntered back.

“Let’s go, Laughing Dragon.”

I held my finger up.

“Certainly, but my question remains unanswered. You only told me part of the answer. You told me the circumstance, but I still don’t understand why having to relieve yourself took so long. Hours, at least?”

He grumbled and kicked at the ground.

“Did you have to go really far away? Were your bowels bound up? Was there—”

“No! No! And No!” he said, looking as if he wanted to hit me again. “I’m a dwarf! We don’t go all the time. We can hold our water weeks at a time if we want to! And when we go, it takes some time, concentration, and privacy. Happy are we now, Nosey Dragon?”

“Ah!” I held my finger up once more, not my dragon finger, mind you. “One more question, though.”

He folded his arms across his chest and sighed.

“What is it?”

I reached out, and he helped me to my feet.

“Is that why you’re always so grumpy?”

Up the stream we went, hour after hour, from dusk until dawn. Brenwar was speaking more—well, maybe a few words per hour. When he’s onto something, he’s all business about it, and according to him, he had heard long ago that many dragons were held captive deep in the Shale Hills.

"How many?" I asked him.

He shrugged and said, “How should I know?”

Well, I hoped it wasn’t too many. In most cases, we only rescued one dragon at a time, but I’d rescued as many as three on one occasion. Little ones: one bronze, one green, one red, their scales like shiny mineral stones.

But dragons weren’t all just one color. They had different abilities as well. Some could fly. Others could swim, and some could even cast spells. That’s right, and you shouldn’t be surprised, because they are magical creatures, after all. Even I had magic like that, but I didn’t have the hang of it yet.

I stopped in the stream, the waters rushing over my boots. Some loose shale was sliding down a hill. Brenwar was looking at me and I at him. Something was coming down the hill. Something big. I made my way into the reeds along the bank. Brenwar did the same. I readied my bow, Akron, and waited.

Whatever had caused the disturbance on the hillside wasn’t moving now, but in my bones I could feel that something was coming. It was dusk, and many creatures in the forest came out at that time to

hunt. I filled my nostrils and exhaled in relief. It wasn't one of the giant races, but I wasn't comfortable that I couldn't smell anything, either. That left me uncertain. Curious, too.

I shifted around in the reeds and water, trying to get a better look up the hill. It was dim, the time of day that the dipping sunlight casts the darkest shadows. There is no moon or sun to adjust your sight. That's when your other senses come in. You can't always trust your eyes, but your nose and ears can serve you just as well if you let them. I stepped farther out of the reeds. The wind rustled the leaves in the trees. The waters gurgled at my feet, but I heard the faintest sound. A heavy step. Two heavy steps. I thought what was coming was big, certainly bigger than me, which doesn't mean much.

"Dragon," a voice said in a hushed whisper, "get back here."

It was Brenwar, but I wasn't going to listen. I had my bow, and I was fast, so if something was going to try and eat me, it would have to catch me first. Up and down stream I noticed the last glimmers of sunlight. I was more than halfway across when something emerged from the woods. A dark mass on two legs with arms as long as its feet crept through and huddled by the waters. Its head was large, more shoulders than neck, almost the size of a horse's but more like a man. It looked right through me then scooped a handful of water into its mouth. The icy look in its eyes froze me, and how it did not see me, I didn't know. It just wasn't one of those things I recall ever seeing before.

I held my arm out behind me and made a sign of caution. I was sure Brenwar's keen eyes would pick it out. The creature's head turned my way again, tilted, and paused. Now my heart was racing. I saw the white of its teeth. A set of fangs in particular. Its body stiffened, and something fluttered at its side. It looked as if the ape-like creature had—*wings!* It came closer, wading into the stream, big fists splashing in the water.

I didn't move. I didn't dare move. The last thing you should do when you are facing the unknown is panic. Or move, until you figure out what that move is going to be. My bow was ready. It was just another extension of my body after years of practice and training. If the winged ape made any sudden moves, I would shoot a pointed feather into it. But this thing was big, much bigger than me, and I wasn't going to start a fight with it if I didn't have to. It's not as if it was an orc or a lizard man. If that were the case, I'd have shot ten times already.

It growled, spread its wings, pounded its chest, and charged.

CHAPTER 4

My first shot zinged over the ape's head. Not because my aim was off, but because it wasn't. That thing was fast. Really fast, almost as fast as me, I hated to admit. My second shot hit the pack of muscles in its shoulder and bounced off like a toothpick hitting a wall of stone. You see, there's a difference among the three types of arrows I use: nonmagic arrows for hunting, moorite ones that can shoot through almost anything, and enchanted ones with special abilities. I didn't need a magic one ninety-nine times out of a hundred, but I needed one right now.

Drat!

And the third shot, a magic arrow from my quiver, well that wasn't going to happen. The ape was too close, too quick, and just a few yards from rushing into me. I hooked Akron over my shoulders. The dwarven armor Brenwar had made me had a design for that. I braced myself for impact, reaching down to wrap my hand around the hilt of Fang.

Too late, Dragon!

Brenwar jumped from the reeds and slammed his war hammer into the ape's chest, drawing forth a howl of anger. Brenwar was a couple hundred pounds of solid brawn facing eight hundred pounds of raw muscle.

The ape snatched Brenwar from the waters of the stream, hoisted him over its head, and hurled him like a log. He disappeared into the woods.

Brenwar would never live that down if we lived to tell about it, and I wasn't ready to die without recounting it one last time.

I ripped Fang from its scabbard and thrust at the ape's belly.

It jumped over top of me, landed in the stream, and kicked me in the back.

I slammed into a boulder, and Fang almost slipped from my grip. I held on as I fought to regain the wind that had been knocked out of me. Whatever that thing was, it was strong, fast—a real monster. Not as big as many I've faced but still bigger than me.

It came at me again, face full of fury, its black eyes intelligent and cunning. A real killer.

I chopped.

It twisted.

I stabbed.

It jumped.

I cut.

It ducked.

I pressed the attack.

It howled as I clipped its arm. It shuffled backward, spread its wings, and flew away, disappearing into the night.

Eyes skyward, I stood, alone, basking in the light of my sword's glow. Where did that thing go? I whirled around as Brenwar burst from the brush, brandishing his hammer.

“Where is that thing? Nobody! Not nothing, not anything throws a dwarf without permission! Especially when yer not a dwarf!”

“I think I scared it away,” I said, sheathing my sword. My leg was aching more now than ever and had started to bleed again. “What was that, Brenwar? Any idea at all?”

The once-quiet forest was alive and well now. The night owls hooted, and the pixies were singing. Of course, the pixies often disguised themselves as crickets and such. It was really hard to tell the difference.

“I don’t know what that was,” Brenwar said. “It’s not any part of the lore that I know, and the dwarves are well schooled on all the creatures and monsters of this world.” He stormed up the stream. “But whatever it is, I’m going to see that it doesn’t throw a dwarf anymore. Not ever! I’ll have its head, I will!”

I unhooked Akron and loaded a magic arrow. I wasn’t going to take any chances. Whatever that thing was, well, I’m certain it would have torn me apart without Fang’s help. And don’t get me wrong: I’ve been in plenty of fights without my sword. This thing was different. And its eyes had left an uncomfortable impression on me. And that was dangerous. That worried me.

Ahead, Brenwar had started a new path out of the water and along the tree line. It seemed he didn’t want to take any more chances being out in the open. As for me, I remained in the middle of the water, bow with arrow, scanning the skyline behind and below. If that thing was up there, I still wanted it to see me. The fight in me wasn’t finished just yet, as my senses and instincts were challenged. It was one of those things that my father had instructed me to work on. He said I needed self-control, and I’m sure he was right, but I needed to test myself, too. I wanted to be ready for anything, and I always felt like I was, until recently.

The moon had risen over the treetops now and shone over the water. The heavy spots of clouds spotted the sky like dull grey orbs that absorbed the moonlight. My magic arrow tip twinkled like a sliver of mercy, so bright and shiny it was. The magic arrows could penetrate just about anything, as the tips were of a dwarven made metal called moorite. Brenwar had made the arrows for me himself, and his people had blessed them with accuracy and strength. No winged ape was going to dodge one

of these. No, it better not come back, but I hoped it would. I wanted to know what that thing was.

“Brenwar,” I said, “do you want to camp? It’s getting late.”

I suppose,” he replied, “but I’m not making a fire. I’ll not have that black fiend sneak up on me at night.”

I couldn’t agree more. There was no need for a fire on such a warm night, and for the most part we made fire to roast the critters that we hunted. We had other things of the dwarven sort packed up to eat: strips of dried beef and a round disk of blessed bread that would fill your belly for hours. It didn’t make for the tastiest of meals, and you had to wash it down with a lot of water, but it would get you through the day. I wasn’t hungry at the moment anyway. Besides, there was nothing like fishing in the morning and the smell of fish roasting over an open fire. And this stream was full of trout bigger than my feet. I could feel them swimming by as I waded in the waters.

“You should rest that wounded leg,” Brenwar suggested.

I nodded and gave in.

The next morning, I woke up after a restless sleep that left me feeling empty and edgy. I have to admit that we dragons like our sleep, even though dragons don’t require it. I did, however, because I was still more man than dragon. But that night my dreams were filled with darkness. The winged ape was there, a shadow in the background. There was a graveyard as well and dragons, many dragons, some living and many dead.

“Ye were restless,” Brenwar said, as he roasted a large trout I’d caught earlier.

Brenwar didn’t sleep much. He slept and guarded at once somehow, a dwarven art I never had much interest in. It was one of the advantages to having him around like this. And it probably was another good explanation as to why dwarves could be so cranky—sleep deprivation. But they did sleep, just not for very long, or unless it was after one of their harvest festivals when they’d eat, drink, and be merry for weeks on end and sleep for days, even weeks after that.

“No, I didn’t sleep well at all,” I said, tightening the bandage on my leg, “but the rest isn’t bothering me, that black creature is. I want to know what that thing was, Brenwar. It was dangerous.”

He tossed me a hunk of cooked fish and said, “We’re rescuing dragons, not hunting monsters. I don’t think that creature is a threat to us. I just think we surprised it, is all. It’s someone else’s problem now. Eat. I’m ready to go.”

“Ah, you just don’t want it to toss you around again.”

“That’s enough, Dragon! I’m in no mood for your humor, and you better not be telling anyone about that,” Brenwar warned. “I’ve got plenty of tales I could tell about you, but I don’t.”

I smiled. “Fair enough, friend. Consider the incident stricken from my lips forever, but not forgotten.”

We filled our bellies with fish and broke camp. My irritation subsided, and my stiff leg began to loosen as the bright sun of the new day warmed my face. It seemed to lift that cloud of darkness within.

“So, where do you think these dragons are that we're going after? What have you heard?”

“There's always poachers in the hills, hiding something or another. I just figured we'd go and poke our noses around. It's well known that these hills hide many things, both good and evil.”

Brenwar's answer was pretty vague, but the dwarves didn't often get into the details unless you were talking about building, mining, or blacksmithing. Then they became a waterfall of information, and I must admit, I didn't really want a lengthy explanation either, but I needed some kind of guidance.

After an hour more of hiking, we'd abandoned the stream and resumed our climb up the loose foothills. Tiny bits of shale had found their way into my boots and were digging into my toes, but I trudged along behind Brenwar. He was surefooted and steady, not likely to be slowed by anything. Still, it bothered me that he hadn't said much about where we were going.

In the dragon business, I came across information in the cities and villages. People talked. People talked a lot, and even the best-kept secrets were never really secrets, just something spoken of less rather than more. But at the mere mention of dragons, if someone knew something, in most cases their eyes lit up. Sometimes it took patience, other times charm, bribes, or a stern convincing, but it often gave me another direction to go on. Once I found the right path, I could figure out the rest of the clues from there.

We crested another hilltop, miles now above the stream, the hundred-foot-high evergreen trees swaying in the wind. I tied my mane of red-brown hair behind my head and took a drink from my canteen. So far as I could tell, we were in the middle of nowhere. Just some forest leagues away from civilization, and I had a feeling Brenwar wanted it that way. I was certain he was keeping me out of trouble by keeping me from the cities. It hurt to think about it, actually.

I missed the cities, but my dragon arm caused me to stick out like a sore thumb. I had a way to cover it up if I had to, but what would all of those fawning women think? A man with a dragon arm. As much as I loved it, I was insecure about it. I didn't want people to think it was a cursed thing.

Brenwar headed down the hilltop and started toward another. This forest, unlike most, didn't have all the signs of life of the others. Other than the trees, the rocky ground didn't support roots for the small plants that fed the critters and bucks. That made the hunting more scarce and made the hills seem more dangerous. It was a natural place, but it was grim and foreboding with the black ground against the green.

I woke up from the dullness of the journey when I heard the sound of an axe chopping into wood. I couldn't imagine why anyone would be cutting down trees this deep in the forest. But stranger things

happened in Nalzambor, I figured, as Brenwar and I trod down the hill to investigate.

I couldn't see a person, but the chopping sounds remained steady. On silent feet, I closed in, only to discover the echoes had drifted farther down the hill. I motioned for Brenwar. I was going to lead this time.

The chopping stopped. I didn't hear, smell, or see anything out of the ordinary. But as the wind drifted into my nose, I smelled something out of the ordinary in the forest. Brenwar had a look of concern on his face as I began to back out of the clearing.

Snap! Snap!

Too late! A net rose beneath our feet, jerking us off our feet and binding us like fish more than a dozen feet over the ground. We were trapped.

CHAPTER 5

“You should have let me lead!” Brenwar fussed and struggled in the net as we hung there like a giant's lunch.

I fully expected a small army of orcs or lizard men to surround us as I fought to get my knife. I couldn't reach it.

“Grab my knife, Dragon,” ordered Brenwar.

“I can't reach it. You try and grab mine,” I ordered back.

“I can't even see it. Cripes, I think you're on top of me. Get off me! I'm not a stool.”

We thrashed at our bonds, but all the wiggling did was ensnare us deeper in the heavy cords. The net was made for bigger prey than us, perhaps an animal, but it could be cut.

“Of all the Halls in Morgdon, I'll not be trapped like some kind of morsel!” Brenwar exclaimed. “Get me out of here, Dragon! I'm not going to die in such a helpless predicament as this.”

“You get us out of here.”

“You sprang the trap, not me!”

Our packs were full of plenty of gear that would help—if I could get to them. I could feel Brenwar's pack beneath my seat. That wasn't going to work. My left arm was pinned at my side, but my dragon arm was free enough to reach behind my back. The long claws on my dragon fingers caught my attention. I had an idea. I began sawing at the net's cords with my claws.

“What are you doing up there?” Brenwar asked.

“I'm trying to free us. That's what you want, isn't it?”

“With what are you freeing us?”

I didn't reply. Brenwar admonished me about using my black dragon arm for anything, no matter what it was. But I didn't see the harm in it. It was a part of me. It wasn't as if it was evil or had a mind of its own. Not like Fang, anyway.

“Ah, Brenwar, what choice do I have? It's the only way to get us free right now.”

“No, it isn't.”

“Then what is?”

I continued to saw in silence. That's when they showed up. Two figures in dark cloaks approached, bows aimed at our bellies. At least, I thought it was two. As the net continued a slow rotation over the ground, I'd see one, then the other. Hoods were pulled over the tops of their heads,

and their cloaks dangled over their toes. I wasn't certain what to say, trying to figure out if silence was the best answer, uncertain if they'd speak first or not. But my nose told me this: it wasn't orcs or lizard men, either, so that was a plus.

"Um ... could I trouble you, stranger, to let us down? It seems we've accidentally triggered a wildebeest trap."

I heard the tension on the stretching bowstrings and bit my tongue. The pair weren't playing around, and perhaps we were trespassing, and I wasn't so certain my clever tongue could get us out of here. I cleared my throat when I noticed the pudgy fingers wrapped around the bow.

"That's a very nice elven-made bow you have, sir. Some of the finest craftsmanship I've ever seen." I was trying to be complimentary. The bow was elven but hardly worth commentary. "And those shoes, are they elven made as well?" That's when I noticed one nod at the other. Both of them were beefy and similar in dress: elven clothes, ornate, blending, and fanciful. It seemed these two brigands had either robbed or bartered for their clothing and were hiding from something up here.

"Cut him down," one said to the other in Elvish.

"Dragon," Brenwar said in a whisper. "They speak Elvish. But they can't be elves. You ever seen a fat elf before?"

"No—Eeeee-yah!" I cried out, falling to the ground. I landed on Brenwar. I think it would have been softer if I had landed on a bench of stone. "A little warning first would be nice!"

The two characters stood over us, bows ready, as I picked my way out of the net and assisted Brenwar. The two of them were speaking in Elvish, and quite naturally I could understand every word they said. I knew all of the languages, mostly. So in Elvish I spoke back.

"Thank you for letting us down," I said with a small bow. It always helps to be polite and sincere when arrows are pointing at you. "And I apologize for springing your trap. What were you trying to catch? If indeed this is your trap."

They backed away and spread out a little farther from us and one another. The pair were almost as tall as men, each heavysset. They moved their girth with grace and ease, and I could see the clothes underneath their cloaks were woodsman-like but splendid in design. I just couldn't figure what men were doing in elven clothes and speaking Elvish, at that. My, if any elves saw this, they would frown upon it. The elves—wonderful, sophisticated, proper, beautiful, and in most cases arrogant—would possibly kill a man for this.

They didn't say a word, so I continued in Elvish.

"If it's all the same to you, we'll be getting out of your way."

"Hold your position," a voice said, a mixture of polish and salt in his tone. He sounded elven. "I'd be curious to know what you're doing in these hills."

“These hills don’t belong to you,” Brenwar fired back. Dwarves and elves don’t get along so well. “I’d be just as curious to know what you are doing here.”

Both of the men flipped back their hoods.

I blinked my eyes.

“Brenwar, are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

He nodded.

Both men had long brown hair, almost as gorgeous as mine but not quite. Their features were without a blemish or mark, their eyebrows perched in neat lines, and not a single crease in their foreheads. High cheekbones and strong chins, all distinctions of the elves—except one thing.

“You’re the fattest elves I’ve ever seen!” I said. The words just came out. I couldn’t help it.

Brenwar’s belly rumbled with laughter.

“I knew they weren’t perfect! I knew it!”

Both of the elves folded their arms across their chests and gave us disappointed looks. I felt like a child for a moment, realizing how rude I was. There were all kinds of big people in the world, but fat elves? No. They were all so lean and graceful. I’d never seen an ounce of girth on one of them, and I’d seen plenty of elves in my day.

Fat Elf One walked over and looked down on Brenwar.

“Be silent, dwarf. Else I’ll seal that big mouth hole shut.”

Brenwar’s laughter stopped.

“I’d like to see you try,” he warned. “No elf can best me, not fat or skinny. Ye better mind your choice of words if you want to see your next meal, you puffy face!”

“You bearded hog!”

“Ye’ve got a fanny like an orcen woman!” Brenwar stuck his fingers out. “Two of them!”

As much as I hated to, I stepped in the middle. It was pretty clear these elves, as odd as they seemed, weren’t our enemies. And they didn’t seem like the type we wanted to make enemies of, either. They were formidable underneath their girth. Seasoned and deadly.

“Let’s start over again, shall we?” I said. “I’m Nath Dragon, and this is Brenwar Bolderguild.”

Fat Elf One stepped away, while Fat Elf Two came up by his side and said in Common, “I am Shum.” He bowed. “This is my brother Hoven.” His brother nodded.

The big-hipped and rangy pair just looked at us, and I wasn’t certain whether I should speak or wait for them. But I did have a one predominant question on my mind.

“Oh,” Shum broke the silence, “I’m guessing you want to know why we’re so ... eh ... large for elves.”

I scratched my head. I didn’t want to admit to things. After all, it would be rude, but seeing an elf

in such shape was unique. “Well, forgive me, but I’ve seen many elves and—”

He held out his hand.

“Not all elves are as vain as you know them. In our case, we are thicker thewed and bigger boned, a gift to some, a curse to others.”

“Are there more of you?” I asked.

“Oh certainly. We have families: young, old, big, and small like the rest. But we move much and befriend little. A tiny conclave that comes and goes. We prefer the vast lands and all their riches. We are the Wilder Elves. And we are also part of the Elven Roaming Rangers of Nalzambor.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

From the Author

The Hero, the Sword, and the Dragons is my eighth published work and my fifth fantasy novel. As of 2015 I have over 27 books out. I wanted to take moment to elaborate on where this series is headed. This first introductory book is a novella (100 pages), but future books will be twice as long (around 200 pages). My intent is to write a series of books appropriate for all ages but designed with younger, newer readers in mind (tweens). One of my goals is to encourage people to read, and I think lengthy and wordy books can be intimidating. I know when I was young I had trouble finding books that I could handle. Not every kid can dive into *Lord of the Rings*, but you can build up to that. So I want to offer something that young readers will find exciting and easy to follow.

As for COD (The Chronicles of Dragon), this is a complete 10 bestselling book series. Like my other fantasy series, *The Darkslayer*, these stories will be fast paced and action packed, but COD will be less, er, mature, and loaded with more magic and many, many dragons. Despite the PG-rated content, I think this series will still have something to offer for people of all ages. Thank you for reading this first book. I'm grateful.

Do good always,

Craig Halloran

*****Special offer ... If you liked this 1st book and would like a free Amazon eBook copy of book 2, [Dragon Bones and Tombstones](#), just send an email to craig@thedarkslayer.com. Put 'FREE DRAGON' in the subject line and we'll let you know right away if you win a free copy. Thanks for reading!*****

About the Author

Craig Halloran resides with his family outside of his hometown, Charleston, West Virginia. When he isn't entertaining mankind, he is seeking adventure, working out, or watching sports. To learn more about him, go to: www.thedarkslayer.com

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