

# **JAMES & THE DRAGON**

**Vol. 1 of the Farloft Chronicles**

by

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Smashwords Edition

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## -THE DRAGON-

Farloft, the dragon, had been living in this region for centuries. Once a friend of man, as the years passed he had become shunned. Now he lived quietly in his mountain top retreat - an observer rather than a participant in the lives of humans.

Now, Farloft sat on a rocky perch above the entrance to his lair, his piercing golden eyes following the approaching wizard.

The cold morning air had no effect on him - dragons felt neither hot nor cold. His observation of Laval began early this morning. He first caught sight of the wizard through the fog on the valley floor as he emerged from the forest below out onto the plain. The human would need an hour or so to wind his way up the path to the cave.

Farloft flexed his iridescent green wings in the morning sun as it caressed the mountain top, his wing span as large as any sail on the ships at sea. His massive claws bit at the stone of the ledge to keep him from involuntarily taking flight. He wanted to hunt this morning, but with the wizard's pending arrival his stomach would have to wait.

Farloft's last experience with Laval was a most unpleasant memory. The dragon did not intend to leave his lair unguarded. He gave only a momentary thought to flying down to meet the wizard, then thought better of it.

Best to sit and wait.

Best he let the wizard come to him.

Best to be on your own ground when dealing with someone that could not be trusted.

## - THE WIZARD -

Laval rode steadily on in the bitter cold. Only an escaped lock of his long, raven black hair and his crooked nose could be seen from the depths of his crimson colored robes. He was a man on a mission.

The King always kept a “master wizard,” as his father and his grandfather before him. No one could remember how Laval came to be at court or how long he had been there. It was as if the kingdom had never been without his powerful magic. The wizard was the King’s most trusted adviser. His magic struck fear in those that were his enemies, and awe in those few that were his friends.

The road took Laval through the sparse countryside. Nothing had grown well this past year, not crops or children. The young and the elderly were the first to die of the plague. The villagers were hit the hardest. The King closed the castle to visitors at the first sign of plague and therefore kept the ruling class free of the disease. But, beyond the walls of the castle, the land and its people were barren and cold.

As Laval approached yet another village he noticed the vacant, hungry look of the people as they peered out their doors or looked up from what duties could not be ignored that brought them out in the bitter cold. He heard the sound of the mucus filled coughs that accompanied those who were bound to die from this horrible plague. He reflexively pulled his cowl up higher around his neck to over his mouth and nose. No sense taking chances. There were thatched roof houses in this village with no signs of life - no smoke from the chimneys - no coughing - only silence.

Laval steadily urged his mount forward. A peasant rose up from nowhere and grabbed his leg above the leather of his boot.

“Somethin’ for the children? A crust of bread?” he begged, as he walked beside the wizard’s steed.

Laval knew better than to give into the man. If he gave to this poor wretch, he would be mobbed by all who saw he had anything to give. He pushed the man away with his booted foot, almost knocking him to the ground even though the push was light. The man was that weak.

“I have nothing to give.” He spurred his horse and rode on through the village at a trot.

Laval looked back. He could remember when that place was full of laughing children with round faces. Now there were only the sights and sounds of death. This past spring and summer during the long months the plague ravaged the land, he worked all his considerable magic to stop the spread of the disease. But, it was no use. The people continued to die.

Laval’s mission was to obtain a portion of the wing from Farloft the dragon. Combining the magic within that wing with his own considerable wizard’s magic, he was sure he could create a potion that would stop the ravaging disease. Dragon’s wings were known for their healing power.

Even with Laval’s considerable skills, it took over a week to locate the dragon’s lair. The last time he saw the dragon was years ago when he was wizard to the former King. Dragon and wizard exchanged heated words over an error of judgment on Laval’s part, he was sure Farloft would remember. Dragons possessed excellent memories. That past

transgression would make it difficult to convince the dragon to give up the needed portion of his wing.

Laval rode on for the rest of the day. He fought his way through the dense forest at the edge of the kingdom and emerged below the western ridge where the dragon's lair perched on the highest peak. It would take him another hour, a least, to reach Farloft. The wizard pulled his heavy robe tighter around his lean frame. He hunched lower in his saddle against the bitter wind through the valley he must cross to the mountain heights.



## **- THE DRAGON AND THE WIZARD -**

Not far from where a young peasant boy named James worked, this unique meeting between dragon and wizard was taking place - unique not because of its participants, but because it took place at all.

For neither the dragon nor the wizard liked one another. The dragon thought the wizard was sneaky and underhanded.

Which he was.

The wizard found the dragon pompous and arrogant.

Which he was.

But, it must be said in defense of the dragon, that it was difficult for the dragon not to act like a 'know it all.' After all he had lived over a thousand years and had seen just about all there was to see.

"What I ask is not so much," the wizard Laval stated. He shifted uncomfortably on the rock where he sat. It was cold in the dragon's outer cave, there being no fire.

"Oh no, not much," Farloft said sarcastically. He eyed the wizard with suspicion. "If I give you a piece of my wing it will only leave me flightless for weeks and at the mercy of any knight wielding a sword or a villager with a pitchfork. And how am I to hunt if I cannot fly?" Farloft asked.

"No one has ever found this place but me. I will see that you are well cared for from the King's herds until you are healed."

"And whose word do I have on this agreement?" Farloft snapped. "I am hunted and shunned by humans. It is not like the old days when we dragons were revered." Farloft's brow furrowed in disapproval. "If I believed you could concoct a cure for the plague with the magic from it... if I believed you would cure the people and relieve their suffering.... I might consider it, but I am not so sure." Laval had lied to him in the past. "I am afraid you will fail and the villagers will continue to die and what will become of me? Left to starve, unable to fly for weeks. Do you know how hungry a dragon can get in even one week?" Farloft asked defiantly. "Well, let me tell you. Hungry enough to eat a wizard and I would not eat a 'peasant,' much less a 'wizard,' unless they were the last thing edible on earth." Farloft snorted in disdain, his tail thrashing in irritation back and forth across the rock floor of the cave.

A silence fell between the two. The second lid of Farloft's golden eyes started to sneak closed. The interview was over; Laval had failed unless he could think of some other strategy.

"Well," Laval said idly. "In any case, most likely what I have read is wrong. I can't imagine that a dragon's wing has such power. It is probably just talk. Old tales passed from storytellers over the years - distorted in their telling way out of proportion."

Farloft's eyes popped open. "Out of proportion?" he squawked. The words choked in his throat. "No power?????" he shouted indignantly. "Out!" Farloft yelled. "Out! Before I change my mind about eating wizards."

All of a sudden the cave became stiflingly hot. Laval saw Farloft's scaly skin melt from an iridescent green to an almost blinding red glow.

Laval gathered up his robes and made a hasty retreat toward the mouth of the cave.

"I'm going," he shouted loudly over his shoulder, to make himself heard above the

rumble in Farloft's throat. Any minute now, flames would be licking out the mouth of the cave toward Laval's fleeing backside.

"I'm going," he repeated, "but I'll be back."

Laval just made it to safety behind a boulder outside the cave as the opening was engulfed in the flame of Farloft's anger.

## - JAMES -

James stood knee deep in the mud of the bog. His breath formed small puffs in the chilled air as he huffed and grunted to cut the peat from the bog. Soon the ground would freeze too hard to chop the peat, used as fuel to warm the villager's small homes. The last three mornings a light dusting of snow covered the land when James woke up. During the day the sun did not warm the earth enough to melt it. Soon the heavy snow would come. If he did not have enough peat cut and stored by then, he would likely freeze this winter. James' stomach growled. He had not eaten a decent meal in weeks. Freeze or starve, he thought, what a choice.

The crops were meager this year - the soil poor and too few hands to work them. The plague hit the village hard this past growing season. James' family died along with almost two-thirds of the rest of the inhabitants. James was now an orphan with no one to care if he joined the numbers of the dead.

He side-stepped an area of the bog where one of the villagers marked a warning at the edge of a sink hole with a stick. Before he died his father made James swear not to come to the bog alone. It was dangerous, he warned. There was quicksand. A body would get swallowed up before help could arrive. James broke that promise to his father. He had no one to come with him. Everyone in the village was looking out for their own family, or at least what was left of it after the plague. No one had the time, energy or resources to take in another mouth to feed.

At the age of ten, James was left to look after himself the best he could.

He pulled his tattered cape up close around his neck and bent over double once again, to hack at the peat with his dull spade.

He was exhausted and cold when an older man and his son approached the bog.

"Whose there?" the man called.

"James," he answered. He could see now that it was the blacksmith and his son. There would be trouble.

The two came closer. "You been out here a bit," the Smithy said. "Nice pile," he commented as he hefted one of the squares of peat. "You wouldn't mind sharin' would you?"

The man's son took a defensive position between James, in the bog up to his knees, and the pile of peat. The older man picked up several pieces and piled them in his arms. "We've sick at home need warming. You look healthy enough to cut a few more pieces 'fore the cold sets in."

James took a step forward. "And you and Tithe look healthy enough to cut your own peat." He started up out of the bog to defend his hard day's work.

Tithe pushed him backward into the bog with his spade. "And we be strong enough to take what we want," Tithe said.

The Smithy picked up two more pieces and gave James a smile full of rotten teeth. "Thank ye lad." Tithe backed up waving his spade maliciously.

James could do nothing. The Smithy was the largest man in the village even with the weight loss from the lack of stores this year. His son was twice James' ten seasons and almost twice his size. James had never been big.

He stood shivering in the bog, nothing for it but to cut more. He pushed his long

dirty brown hair out of his eyes and got back to work.

## **-LAVAL FACES THE PLAGUE-**

Laval was frantic. Upon his return to the castle he found that a kitchen maid had come in contact with a peasant while searching the orchards for any overlooked apples for the King's table. She had come down with the plague. There were now two kitchen maids, a stable boy and Laval's only child, Megan had the plague. Megan went to administer to the sick in her father's absence. She was very ill. Laval knew he could not save her. He simply must convince Farloft to lend his power in order to battle the disease.

He bent his head down to Megan and took her hand. "You must rest, my dear. I am going to get something to help you recover."

Megan clung to her father's hand. "Don't go father," she pleaded. Her body was racked with a cough from the effort of speaking.

"I won't be gone long," he assured her. "And when I return I will have a cure," he said with conviction. He would not leave Farloft's lair without the wing piece he needed.

He left his daughter in the care of her former nursemaid, saddled one of the King's finest steeds and raced back toward the dragon's cave.

## - JAMES SINKS -

James was once again working in the bog. It seemed an endless task trying to cut enough peat to stay warm. He longed for his father's strong arms and his mother's warm ones.

He was on his last cut of the day. By now, his legs were no longer aching, but numb from the cold of his wet task. He had ceased to have any feeling in his feet an hour ago. Twice he stumbled and sunk to his crotch in the mire of the bog.

James took a step to his left. He immediately began to sink. He struggled to pull himself from the sucking ooze of the quicksand. The more he thrashed about, trying to gain a purchase on solid ground, the faster he sank.

He could find nothing on the bog to grab hold of. Within moments he sunk waist deep in the muck.

He tried to reach the spade he dropped. If he could reach it, he could drive its head into solid ground and possibly succeed in pulling himself out. He strained toward the handle, his fingers just touching its tip.

The quicksand made a gurgling sound, almost like the earth was belching and James sank deeper into the bog.

"Help!" he screamed.

He knew it was useless. The village was too far away and the villagers were all inside trying to stay warm.

In panic, he called again. After all, it was all he could do.

"Help! Please help me!"

By now, only his shoulders were above the quicksand.

He never should have broken his promise to his father and come out here alone. Better to freeze to death than be buried alive.

James shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Can anyone hear me? Please help me!"

## **- FARLOFT HEARS A CRY -**

Farloft was out hunting when he heard James' cry. The dragon shifted his wings in the air current that held him aloft, in order to get a look at whomever it was who was in distress.

A boy.

Farloft's keen eyesight made him out clearly. A lad stuck in the bog. The dragon scanned the fields below and saw no one coming to the boy's aid. He appeared to be all alone.

Farloft tucked his wings a bit closer to his body which angled him into a steep glide toward the bog. By the time he reached the boy, James was almost totally submerged.

There was no time for pleasantries. Farloft popped his wings fully open above the bog. He used their great mass against the air to bring himself to a stop. He flapped twice to position himself just above the boy, and with one huge front paw reached down and yanked the lad from the quicksand. One more backward thrust of his giant wings, and both he and the boy were on solid ground.

"Please don't eat me," James pleaded. For he felt sure that was the dragon's intent. Why else would he pull him free? What misfortune, James thought. To be dragged from quicksand only to be eaten by a dragon.

"Eat you?" Farloft retorted. "I would rather starve than put anything as filthy as you in my mouth. Where are your people?" Farloft demanded. He didn't give James time to reply before breaking into a tirade. "Did your father not warn you about the dangers of cutting peat by yourself? Had I not come by when I did you would have drowned. I cannot believe your parents let you out alone on a day like this." Farloft stuck his nose up in the air and inhaled deeply. "By the smell of it, it will not be more than a few hours before it snows again."

Farloft looked down at the boy. The lad stood before him coated with mud from head to foot, doing his best to remain standing. The cold, a close brush with death, and a dragon encounter left him unsteady on his feet and close to tears.

"Are you all right?" Farloft asked, in a gentler tone.

The boy wiped at his nose with one muddy fist. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"Do you think you can make it home?" Farloft asked.

"Aye," the lad replied quietly, but made no move to go.

"Well then, off with you." Farloft commanded.

James barely took two steps before his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground.

Farloft clucked his tongue in dismay. "This will not do at all." He moved around in front of the boy. "I suppose if I leave you here you will freeze to death." He pushed at the boy with one massive claw. The lad, unconscious, failed to cringe from Farloft's touch. "And I suppose if I flew you home your people would either chuck pitchforks and rocks at me or run from me and leave you to freeze. Either way, you freeze," Farloft said to himself. Dragons were used to talking to themselves. Due to their reputation, quite often they only had themselves for company. "Cannot leave you here to freeze. Cannot take you home." He shook his head from side to side. "How do I get myself into such predicaments?"

Farloft positioned himself where he could get a comfortable grip on the boy. He reached out with one immense foot, picked James up and sprang back into the air.



## - LAVAL SEES A CHANGE -

Laval made the level space outside the dragon's den just as Farloft emerged after depositing his burden in the cave. Both wizard and dragon were surprised at the others appearance.

"What are you doing here, Wizard?" Farloft demanded in a gruff voice.

"I have come to ask you once again for a portion of your wing. I will beg if need be. My daughter is ill."

Farloft remembered the child when she was born and how happy her birth had made Laval and his wife. He remembered Laval's wife's death and the comfort the child gave him through those times. He remembered her as a toddler, unafraid of a huge dragon. He delighted in speaking with her and being on the receiving end of the good healthy scratches she gave him between his shoulder blades. He remembered the young lass with the lovely, raven hair. He often caught her out gathering herbs for her father's potions and ointment. They would spend a lazy afternoon together those days, after her father and Farloft no longer spoke - after a dragon was no longer wanted in the presence of humans.

"Megan is ill?"

"Yes, the plague has reached the castle," Laval replied. "Please, Farloft, put whatever is between us aside and let me save my daughter and anyone else I can."

Farloft looked up into the sky. "You will have to run your steed hard to make it back to the castle before it snows." His decision made, he spread his wings out wide. "Take a piece from each wing, close to the body and the same size on both sides. Perhaps you will not mis-balance me and I can still fly, after a fashion."

Laval extracted his knife and with precision took a small piece from each wing.

Farloft thought about sending the boy home with Laval, but he doubted the boy could live through the cold trip on horseback to the village. And besides, it might be condemning the boy to death if Laval carried the disease from the castle. He decided to keep the boy until he was fit to travel.

Laval bowed to the dragon. "Thank you, Farloft."

"I sincerely hope Megan recovers, Laval."

Laval bolted to his horse's back and was off.

## - THE DRAGON'S LAIR -

James awoke in a cave. He saw no sign of the dragon. He found himself lying from the waist down in a pool fed by a warm spring. The water felt as comfortable as bath water, and James realized his feet and legs were no longer numb from the cold.

He was surprised to find the cave well lit, without the benefit of any torches James could see. He puzzled on this miracle for a moment before he noticed several small, natural rock, cone formations which rose from the floor perhaps as high as his waist. From their depths came a soft golden glow and long pillars of steam. This glow then reflected and refracted off the ceiling of the cave which was completely covered with a naturally formed crystal deposit.

James slid further into the pool, letting himself float as he studied the huge crystals in the ceiling. After he satisfied himself on this wonder, he flopped over and scrubbed at the caked mud in his hair and on his face. The clear water of the pool took on a dark brown shade where James worked away at the dried bog stuck all over him. He shed his simple garments and scrubbed them on a rock by the edge of the pool until the water from them ran clear and clean. He prudently dressed again, just in case he needed to make a quick escape should the dragon return.

He noted the cave's two adjoining tunnels. The one large entrance would undoubtedly be the way out. The other smaller tunnel leading off in the opposite direction was darker and would probably lead him only further into the cave's depths.

Reluctant to leave the pool's warmth, James knew he had to. His clothes needed to be dry before he tried to get home. Going out in weather like today's, while wet, would surely mean his death by freezing.

He climbed out of the pool to investigate the glowing cones in the floor of the cave. He leaned over the side of one surprised to see it contained boiling water. The cone's sides were studded with crystals like the ceiling and the crystals glowed red hot with the heat of the water. James warmed himself in the heat from the steam rising off the surface of the bubbling liquid. He would have fallen asleep but for his growling stomach.

James was startled by the approach of the dragon, the scraping noise of his mighty claws on the rock floor of the cave and his humming announced him. It surprised James that dragons sang. It surprised him even more to find he recognized the ballad the beast was humming.

The huge dragon came around the corner, tossed something in the nearest steaming cone, and proceeded directly to the pool where he stepped in with both front feet, seemingly oblivious to James' presence.

"Feeling better?" Farloft asked over his shoulder.

"Yes," James answered hesitantly.

"What is your name, boy?"

"James," he replied.

"Oh no," Farloft began. "You cannot possibly be a James. I have known several James' in my time." He shook his massive head and clucked deep in his throat. "No, no. The James' I have known were all big, strapping lads with broad shoulders. You are much too small for a James. I shall call you Jamie."

Farloft finished paddling in the water. He sat back on his haunches holding his wet

front feet over a cone to dry. "A dragon must stay clean," Farloft explained his actions. "Dirt affects buoyancy, you know." His eyes fell on James.

James stood with his hands on his hips in a defiant pose. "My name is James. My father's name was James and his father before him."

Farloft snorted in disdain. "Perhaps they grew to be James', but I doubt they were James' all their lives. No, I shall call you Jamie."

"And what is your name?" James demanded in a not-too-friendly tone.

"I am called Farloft," the dragon replied with dignity.

"Then I shall call you Far," James pronounced in a sarcastic tone. If Farloft shortened his name, then he would shorten the dragon's.

Farloft's brow ridges lifted in surprise at the boy's impudence. The lad was willing to take on a dragon over his name. The dragon's expression quickly changed to a smile. "Very well then, it shall be James."

"And I am pleased to meet you, Farloft." James bowed to his huge captor. "May I ask why you brought me here?" If he was to be the dragon's next meal, he hoped he could talk him out of it. For now that Farloft was in the cave, James could see there would be no getting away from him. His huge bulk blocked the entrance completely.

"No ulterior motive, I assure you," Farloft replied. "Now for supper."

James would have run but for Farloft blocking his path. He closed his eyes, fell to his knees, and prayed for his death to be quick.

Meanwhile, Farloft reached into the cone and removed what he threw into it upon entering the cave. When he turned back he found James kneeling before him. He waited politely for James to finish his prayer.

When the dragon failed to seize him, James opened his eyes.

"Hungry?" Farloft asked with a friendly snaggle toothed grin, as he held up what he pulled from the cone.

James saw it was a very large elk, the fur scorched off and the flesh cooked to a pale white.

"Poached elk," Farloft announced, as he placed it on a rock slab between James and himself. "I usually do not go to the trouble of cooking my meat, but I know you humans prefer it that way."

Farloft yanked a full hindquarter off the elk and handed it to the boy. "Bon appetite, James. That is French for eat up."

James sighed in relief. He was not going to be the dinner, he was invited to dinner. He swallowed his fear of the dragon and dove into the first piece of meat he had seen in months. However, that was not an easy task. He could not lift the leg, it was too large. He attempted to pull some hot meat from the bone, but it burned his fingers.

"Do you not own a knife?" Farloft inquired between mouthfuls, when he noticed James' difficulties.

"No, sir."

The dragon pointed with a leg bone toward the other opening in the cave wall behind James. "Go through there. Help yourself to whichever one you like."

James obeyed the dragon's instructions. He went down the tunnel off the cavern to find a treasure trove of articles at the end. There were knives, and swords, and gemstone studded goblets, and gold plates, and chests full of an array of lovely, sparkling jewels with strings of pearls, and filigreed crowns, and scepters of gold, and....and....and.

James' eyes were dazzled by all the shine. He chose a dagger close at hand with a jewel studded hilt and dragon heads on the guards. He turned to go back to the main cave to eat, when he spotted a ruby. Its sparkle lured him like worm to a fish. He picked it up off the pile of mixed gems and jewelry, surprised to find it warm in his hand rather than cold. James held it up to let the light reflect off it. Its deep red surface was so large he could see the better part of his face in it. It seemed to talk to him; "Take me. Take me for your own." He had no use for a ruby, especially a ruby this size. He could never show its beauty to anyone, they would know he stole it. He could never sell it, for the same reason. What could a peasant boy do with a ruby like this? James did not know. He only knew he had to have it. He shoved it deep into his pocket and returned to the main cave.

## **- JAMES AND THE DRAGON BECOME FRIENDS -**

James burped in satisfaction as the warm meat turned over in his now-full stomach.

Farloft had finished his portion of the elk ages ago. He lay on his stomach drawing in the sand by the pool with one giant claw.

"Would you like the rest of this?" James offered. The elk's leg was far too much for him to eat even if he had been starving.

"If you are sure you do not want it?" Farloft replied.

"I'm sure. I couldn't eat another bite," James assured the dragon.

Farloft took the leg and began to gnaw on it absently as he talked. "Now tell me, James," he began between bites. "How did you come to be at the bog alone? Have you no family?"

"No, sir," James replied. He moved to the pool and began to clean the knife with the fine handle. "My father and sister died in the plague this past year."

Farloft gulped down the last of the elk and resumed his place on the sand. He lay with his head on his front feet looking ever so much like an overgrown green dog. "Have you no mother?"

"She died when I was born." James set to polishing the knife with the edge of his now dry cape.

"No one at all left to care for you?" Farloft asked.

"No one, but I'm old enough to take care of myself," James asserted.

Farloft did not remind the boy of his near death in the bog as proof he was not as capable of caring for himself as he attested.

The dragon noted the care James took to clean the knife. "You know, you chose well," Farloft indicated approval of the knife with a shift of his eye ridge. "King Ludlow gave me that dagger upon our victory over the Baldars."

"You fought with King Ludlow?" James was clearly astonished. He knew the tale of the battle of Elgon and the ballad sung every year at the festival of Elgon. He had never heard of a dragon in it.

"Aye," Farloft stretched. When he came to rest again he rolled onto his back staring up at the crystal ceiling. "I know, I know," he said in dismay. "The ballad sung today of the battle of Elgon is missing the stanza about our part in the victory."

"Our part?" James asked even more astounded than before. "There was more than one dragon there?"

"Oh yes," Farloft replied with a sigh of memory. "In those days, there were so many dragons that we lived in clans. Each clan had its own leader. All the leaders were there that day. All eight of us." Farloft started to hum and then broke into song.

"When the battle raged un-heeded.

When the Baldars looked to win.

Then the dragons, fire blazing,

Put the battle to an end."

"King Ludlow was victorious, but the dragons paid a heavy toll. We lost five leaders, forced from the air by spear or arrow wounds. A boulder from a catapult hit Flyoff and before he could regain the sky, Baldar troops swarmed over him like ants on a dead carcass. There were only three of us left after the battle. The leaders are the fathers

of the clan. Without them, their clan dies. But, we won,” Farloft said, as he rolled back over on his stomach. “King Ludlow knew what a great price the dragons paid for his victory. The King gave us all he had to give. To me, that dagger you hold. The same dagger he fought with that day. To Fireall he gave his shield and to Fairgain he gave his sword. He was a good and honest man. Sometimes I wish humans lived as long as dragons. Life would be so much simpler.”

“I’m sorry about your friends’ deaths.” James moved closer to Farloft and laid the knife at the dragon’s feet.

“Thank you, James. But that was long ago. You may keep the dagger while you are here.”

James picked it back up and slipped it into his belt. It was heavy and made him feel safe. No one in the village owned a weapon as grand as this dagger. But, it also made him feel ashamed. Farloft trusted him with something that held great value, in both money and memories. It made James think about the ruby he stole from the dragon’s treasure room. James pushed the thought from his mind. The dragon probably stole the ruby in the first place. Everyone knew dragons kept stolen treasures. Then again, maybe it too had been a gift from some admirer. James was thinking there was a lot he probably did not know about dragons.

“The other things in the cavern where I got the knife, were they all gifts?” James asked in order to relieve his conscience. Stealing something already stolen was not the same as stealing someone’s property first hand.

“All gifts,” Farloft confirmed to James’ dismay. “Dragons and man used to work and fight together for the good of the kingdom. Humans are great gift givers and they found out quickly that dragons love shiny, sparkling things. Anything that sparkles or glitters can be seen a million different ways by a dragon. Like here,” Farloft pointed out. “What makes the cave light?”

“The light from the cones on the crystals above,” James answered, proud of himself for already having figured out this riddle.

“Aye, but more.” Farloft explained. “Look at the pool’s surface.”

Farloft was right. The pool reflected the colored crystals on the ceiling. James had failed to notice that while in the pool.

“And the walls,” Farloft pointed out.

The slate walls of the cave danced with small brightly colored rainbows of color. To James’ surprise he had missed these too.

“They are created by the refraction of the light from the cones off the crystals,” Farloft explained further. “I love this place. It is even better than the gift chamber.”

James shifted uncomfortably at the mention of the chamber again. The ruby felt heavy in his pocket. The dragon saved his life, fed him, given him the jewel encrusted dagger to use, and he had stolen from him. If only he could put it back. But, what excuse could he make for returning to the treasure chamber?

Farloft noticed James uneasiness and in misinterpreting it, he rose to his feet. “Best get you home. It will be dark soon.”

James followed Farloft down the tunnel the dragon came through earlier, to another chamber which opened directly to the outdoors. Snow fell heavily. It swirled around the mouth of the cave, already forming drifts close to a foot deep.

Farloft sat down heavily. “Well, I suppose you are stuck with my company for a bit

longer. You certainly cannot walk home in this and if I flew you, you would freeze before we got there.”

“Wouldn’t you freeze too?” James asked with curiosity.

“Dragons do not experience hot or cold, James. We have our own internal regulators that keep us at just the right temperature.”

It was the first of many things James would learn about, and from the dragon, that winter while he shared Farloft’s hospitality during the worst snows the Kingdom had seen in many years.

## **- JAMES WORKS FOR HIS SUPPER -**

“Farloft, STOP!” James yelled in alarm.

Farloft was standing on his hind feet violently scraping his shoulder on the crystal ceiling. The rocks were crumbling from the roof onto the floor below. The only safe place from the fallout from above was the archway to the inner cave where James stood.

“What is the matter with you,” James shouted above the sound of the pelting rocks.

“Itch,” Farloft said and kept rubbing. “Can’t quite reach...”

“Stop,” James called. “Let me do it before you bring down the whole ceiling on us.”

Farloft came back down on his all fours. “You would do that?”

“Of course,” James said as he moved closer to Farloft. “Give me a way up.”

Farloft lowered his head and put out a front paw as a step. James vaulted from the back of the dragon’s foot to Farloft’s head and then slid down his neck to where his wings met at his shoulder blades. He scratched as hard as he could. Farloft huffed out a pillar of smoke as he arched his back into James’ scratch.

“A couple of your scales are loose. Does it hurt?”

“No, that’s the problem,” Farloft explained. “Can you pull them off?”

James grabbed hold of one of the large scales. “This won’t hurt?”

“No, go ahead.”

James yanked off the scale and dropped it. It fell with a slight drift to the floor.

“You all right?”

“Much better,” Farloft sighed.

“Hold on there’s one more lose.” James peeled off the second scale and dropped it.

“Thank you, lad. That is so much better. It’s just a spot I can’t reach.” Farloft relaxed under James’ continued scratching.

James finally stopped. Scratching Farloft was like rubbing your finger tips on a rasp. “How’s that?”

“Great, thank you.” Farloft almost purred.

James slid down Farloft’s wing to the floor of the cave and walked over to the edge of the pool. “Is this good enough?” James asked, as he held up the silver punch bowl. Farloft had been bringing him silver pieces from his treasure room to polish before stopping to scratch.

“Excellent!” Farloft almost roared. He lifted it up to the light of the sparkling ceiling. “I can see myself in it.”

James was fast finding that there was nothing a dragon liked better than something that sparkled. Farloft literally glowed when he looked at a favorite piece.

“It is renewed to its old shine.” Farloft reached behind himself and pulled out another large punchbowl and handed it to James. It was as black with tarnish as the one he held was bright.

“Not another one,” James moaned. “Why did they give you so many punchbowls? Do dragons even drink punch?”

“I suppose I would if it was offered,” Farloft replied.

James sat in the sand by the pool looking at the corroded bowl.

“Now, James,” Farloft scolded. “You wanted to repay me for the use of the knife I gave you, did you not?”



“Yes,” the boy answered. “But, I didn’t know it would mean polishing your treasure. I feel like a kitchen maid.”

“It is something I cannot do for myself. It is a great favor to me. Besides, you should not picture yourself a kitchen maid, but rather a squire. Who do you think keeps the knight’s armor polished?”

James smiled and set to rubbing the sand over the tarnished pot. “How about another story to pass the time, Farloft.” The dragon’s stories had been entertaining them for days. James had never heard a better storyteller, even from the traveling bards at the yearly festivals that drew so many from hill and dale.

“Let me see,” Farloft began. “Since we were discussing silver, I will tell you of James the Blacksmith,” Farloft announced.

“Oh no, Farloft. Not a smithy,” James protested. The thought of a blacksmith brought the village smithy to mind. He was a mean, carousing, drunk with his two front teeth missing, to say nothing of the stealing. Not suitable at all for a legend. “Tell about another knight or someone else worth a tale.”

“James the Blacksmith is a fine story and well worth the telling,” Farloft retorted. His eye ridges pulled together in a frown of defense. James could see how people got the wrong ideas about dragons. Farloft really could look fierce without even trying. “Now keep polishing and listen.”

Farloft cleared his throat and as he gazed into the pool his story of James the Blacksmith began to unfold.

## **- JAMES - THE BLACKSMITH-**

“James, the Blacksmith lived with his wife and eight children in the small village of Cornover. He had to shoe many horses and fix many a wagon and hand tool, in order to care for his large family. But James was more than just a smithy, he was an artisan. The queen herself had discovered his talent and kept him well supplied with silver from the kingdom’s mine in Leftland.

“The smithy fashioned beautiful bridles from the silver which the queen gave him. In turn, the queen would give these bridles as gifts to her handmaids and as prizes to the victors of the tournaments held each year on the castle grounds.

“James’ work was much admired by all who saw it. However, beauty was not all the smithy fashioned into his bridles. Some said that he placed a bit of magic in them as well. All who owned one said that their horse was far more responsive when the silver bridles were put on than before their use. So the rumors began to spread that James placed a magical touch on his work when he forged the silver. Magic that gave the riders better communication, through the bridles, with their mount.”

“Was it really magic?” James asked with wonder in his voice.

“Wait and see.” Farloft replied. “Now, allow me to continue, please.”

The boy leaned forward in anticipation idly rinsing the pot in the pool.

“This was in the time of King Ludlow. His queen, and the queen who commissioned the bridles from James the Blacksmith, was Queen Harrah. Queen Harrah had been queen for many years, but the royal couple had yet to be blessed with a child. So, it was with great joy the king announced one spring the queen was pregnant. That Christmas, or the New Year at the latest, there would be an heir to the throne. The whole kingdom spoke of nothing else for weeks. Their words filled the air like cottonwood fluff on a breezy day. Speculation and bets were made as to the date of birth, the sex and the color of the eyes of the royal addition. The handmaids whispered about what they thought revealed the child’s specifics. One day, they said the queen carried the child high, so it would be a girl. The next day, she carried it low, so it must surely be a boy. In all cases, her carrying was a burden, for the queen was far too old to bear a child safely.

“When the child did come, late in the same year, it was a large, healthy boy. Unfortunately, it was also that same birth that caused the good queen’s death.

“King Ludlow mourned his queen for months. It was said the only joy he received during that time was from the smiles of his son and heir, which he named William after his dead wife’s father.”

James stopped polishing and set the bowl down.

“Yes?” Farloft asked interrupting his story.

“My sister said that was the way my father was with me when my mother died,” James said.

“Your father was a wise man,” Farloft pronounced. “Some men turn from the child of a dead wife. They mistakenly blame the child for their loss. Such was not the case with King Ludlow or your father. They both saw the right of things.”

James nodded and wiped a tear which threatened to fall with his sleeve. Speaking of his father still touched his heart and renewed the pain of the loss of his family.

Farloft laid quietly awaiting James’ signal to resume his tale. The dragon had lost

many close friends and family in all his years. He knew one needed time to grieve.

“What happened to William?” James prompted finally, picking up the bowl again and working sand into the fine detail of its carved designs.

“Well, a wet nurse was found for the child. Her name was Cassandra and she had been married to one of the captains in King Ludlow’s army. The captain was killed by a Baldar raiding party and his wife Cassandra was left with a new baby and no husband to care for her or her child. Her situation much improved when she volunteered to suckle the king’s child. She moved into the castle and was set up in her own compartments in the nursery wing.

“Two years passed with the King seeing Cassandra daily when he came to visit his son in the nursery. Slowly, over the two years, the King and Cassandra came to like and then eventually love each other. In the third year after the death of Queen Harrah, King Ludlow married Cassandra.

“Almost from the start, all was not well with this royal marriage. For you see, Queen Cassandra was a jealous female and she taught her son, Dwayne, to be jealous too.

“Both William and Dwayne were raised side by side. Schooled together, trained together, and disciplined together. No matter whether Dwayne was a better horseman or archer; no matter whether William was slower in math and science than Dwayne; it was always known and repeated over and over, so it would not be forgotten, that William was to inherit the throne upon the death of their father, King Ludlow.

“Queen Cassandra, in her jealousy, wanted her son to be king and she set about poisoning Dwayne’s mind toward William. As the years passed, the rivalry between the boys became a topic at court and even spread beyond the castle walls. The king did everything he could not to show favoritism between the two lads, but facts were facts, and one day William would be king.”

“I thought this was a story about a blacksmith and his magic,” James interrupted. He was just getting interested in the smithy when Farloft had gone off talking about dull royalty and their feuds.

“I am getting back to that,” Farloft soothed. “Now where was I? Oh yes, the two lads.

“William and Dwayne were both young men of 19 years the year the Baldars began their onslaught against the kingdom’s borders in earnest. It was not long before the king realized he would have to wage an all out war against the invaders before he was rid of them for good. He spent many sleepless nights worrying about his kingdom, his people and his family. If he were to die now, he was sure that the kingdom would be split apart by his two warring sons.

“It was one night, very late after the moon had set, that he remembered James the Blacksmith and his magic bridles. The King thought if it was true the bridles were magic, perhaps James could fashion a sword and shield which would contain enough magic to keep a king safe from his enemies and allow him enough time to straighten out this problem with his sons before he died.

“King Ludlow went to the smithy the next day. He commissioned a sword, shield and dagger, with his crest, to be made over the next fortnight. The smithy was reluctant to take the job. He had never made weapon or shield. Besides, his uncertainty of the correct way to fashion such metal, he was also a very pious man and did not believe violence was the answer to any quarrel. He did not want to fashion a weapon to kill men. The King

pleaded and then finally had to order the smithy to make the weapons and shield before he stomped out of James' shop.

"Every night, for fourteen nights after the King's departure from the shop, James toiled over the sword, shield and dagger for the King's commission. And every night, James the Blacksmith cried for what he knew these weapons would be used. His tears fell upon the sword and the shield and the dagger and were hammered and ground and polished into their metal.

"When King Ludlow came to fetch the weapons and shield, he was pleased with their workmanship and paid James the smithy well for his hours of toil. Little did the King know that he should have paid James far more for his tears than his craftsmanship. For you see, later, when King Ludlow went into battle, he was invincible. The shield, polished with the tears of a pious man, protected him from every attack. His sword and dagger found the heart of the enemy almost on their own. Battle after battle was won. The Baldars retreated to lick their wounds and regroup to attack another day.

"By then, William and Dwayne were 20 years of age and longing to prove themselves in battle. The King resisted allowing them this until he was informed by his scouts that the Baldars were making one final push with a force that far outnumbered the kingdom's defenses."

"Was that the battle of Elgon?" James asked.

"Aye, it was. So you know what happened."

"Yes," James answered. "Young Prince William was killed and Dwayne was to inherit the throne except he died before the King of a fever."

"That is correct," Farloft affirmed. "But, what you do not know is the most important part of the story."

Farloft rose and went to the other side of the pool to lap a drink from the stream that ran into it. He looked up at the ceiling as if it were the stars in the sky and then continued.

"That night, after the battle of Elgon, there was a rumor round the camps that Dwayne could have saved Prince William, but failed to intervene so he would be the next heir to the throne. This rumor came to the King's ear and he spent a sleepless night thinking of the ramifications of this tale if it were true."

Farloft circled back around the pool and lay down once again by James as he worked.

"He had thought to announce the next day that Dwayne would be heir to the throne, now that William was dead. Could he trust his kingdom to a man who might not have gone to the aid of another who was like a brother to him? King Ludlow did not want to believe this ugly rumor. But who was to know if it be rumor or truth? There was one thing that King Ludlow knew for sure; he could not take a chance on making such a man heir and then giving him the ability to be invincible too. For if Dwayne inherited the kingdom, he would also inherit the sword, shield and dagger of the King.

"So that is how it came to pass that King Ludlow bestowed his magic weapons upon we three dragons. He knew if they were in our care, they would not fall into the wrong hands."

James looked down at the dagger stuck in his belt. "This is that same dagger?"

"The same. Made by good James the Blacksmith years before your birth or your father's birth. Given to me in trust by the finest king that ever ruled, King Ludlow."

James came over and sat down on Farloft's hind foot. Farloft curled his tail about

the boy's legs in affection. James sat with his back to Farloft, his head down. He removed the knife from his belt. "I don't deserve to use this, Farloft."

James threw one leg over the dragon's tail so he could look at him and be honest to his face. "This is a dagger for kings and valiant men. I am just a peasant boy."

"All kings and valiant men were once boys," Farloft said softly.

"Yes, but I am not worthy." James could feel the ruby against his thigh in his pocket. It felt as though it were burning a hole in his skin. "I am not even honest."

"What do you mean?" Farloft asked.

James slid down off the dragon. "I stole from you," he said, as he pulled the ruby from his pocket. "I took this ruby from your treasure the first day. I don't even know why. I just wanted it. You don't have to believe me, but I was going to put it back. You just haven't left me alone long enough to do that." James placed the jewel on the sand. Then laid the dagger beside it. "I'm sorry, Farloft. You're the first one to care about me since my father and sister died and I betrayed you. Punish me however you like. I deserve whatever you do."

Farloft poked at the ruby with one long claw. "I knew you had it. This ruby has been singing to me for days. I guess you did not hear it. That is fortunate for you. There is a wonderful tale about this ruby and how it came to me," Farloft began in his story telling voice.

"I don't want to hear the story of the ruby, Farloft," James protested. "Don't you understand? I just told you I stole from you."

"Yes, yes, I know," Farloft replied tolerantly. "But you are sorry, are you not?"

"Well, yes, of course I am," James said haltingly.

"Well, then that is all there is to be said about that." Farloft pushed James back to sit on his hind foot with his nose. "Now listen carefully and I will tell you the story of the ruby, and how I came to have it, and why you stole it."

"But how can you tell me why I stole it if I don't know myself?"

"Because, I know the story of the ruby and you do not. Now stop talking and do me a favor, give a good scratch between my shoulder blades."

James climbed up on Farloft's back and scratched him hard where his wings met his back. He scratched so hard a number of the dragon's scales flaked off and fell to the ground.

"Ummmm...That is good. A little lower James," Farloft requested as he seemed to melt into the sand. James could feel the dragon getting lower and flatter on the ground below him.

A small puff of smoke escaped Farloft's nostrils. "Thank you that will do, James."

Farloft rolled gently onto his side and wrapped his tail round him. James climbed down and cuddled in the pocket between the dragon's tail and side, atop his hind foot, polishing the pot was forgotten for the moment. James snuggled his toes under Farloft's tail for warmth.

"Comfy?" Farloft asked. He really was growing to love this young lad. It had been many years since the dragon had anyone with whom he could enjoy a pleasant conversation and a good scratch. It was so much fun to pass on the history of the kingdom to ears that had never before heard the stories. As the storm raged outside, they sat or lay in the "crystal room," and talked, and talked, and talked. In truth, Farloft talked and James listened, but James listened well and Farloft basked in the attention the boy

gave his stories.

“Well, go ahead,” James prompted impatiently. He had been with the dragon only days, but they were the most wondrous days of his life. Farloft knew everyone and everything that ever happened in the kingdom since before man came here. The dragon really had known many men named James and all of them were the stuff of legend, tall, strong, trustworthy, and brave.

## **- THE TALE OF THE ZONGULDAK RUBY -**

“Zonguldak is a land far to the East. It has a parched and arid landscape where the air itself almost burns the skin and there is no relief from the sun’s heat. It is as different from our cool climate here, as water is from sand.

“The people of Zonguldak are olive skinned. On a daily basis, they wear long robes with hoods, to keep off the sun, which are made of a light gauzy material. For special occasions, or if they are very wealthy, they wear a material called ‘silk’ woven from the threads made by tiny little worms.

“Is that where you got the ruby?” James interrupted.

“No,” Farloft replied. “Let us just say the ruby came to me.” Farloft cleared his throat.

“In Zonguldak there lived a young man named Turan. Turan lived with his father, mother, two sisters, and grandfather. Turan’s family was known as the finest makers of silk throughout Zonguldak. His grandfather was the head of the family and the business.

“One fine day, in the cool of early morning, Turan was out riding when he heard the most beautiful song. It was not that of a bird, nor quite human either. He followed the sound to the bank of the river Banzees. There on the sand he found the ruby, and to his surprise, realized that it was from the depths of the jewel the glorious song arose.

“The stone was not nearly as beautiful then as it is now. For it had been tumbled and tossed in the river, for no one knew how long, before it came to rest there on the shore.

“Turan, who was enthralled by the ruby’s song, picked it up and took it home. He did not tell anyone about the jewel and was surprised to find that no one else except him heard its lovely song. At night he would sit and polish it for hours as it sang endlessly to him. Over the weeks, and then months that followed, the ruby came to look as it does today from the hours of toil Turan put into polishing its surface.

“While Turan polished, and listened to the ruby’s song, he would daydream of things all young men think about. He was anxious for the time when he would run the family business and have all the money he wanted instead of the moderate allowance his father gave him. He dreamed of the changes he would make and the silks he would produce. He had grand ideas for designs that were not the old traditional ones his grandfather and father produced.

“Unfortunately, Turan’s wishes and dreams came true all too soon. I say unfortunately because he came to be in charge of the family silk trade through misfortune of the worst kind. Turan’s grandfather unexpectedly fell ill and died. At the reading of his grandfather’s Will, Turan received the family business rather than his father. This so angered the old man he swore Turan cast a spell on his grandfather to obtain the family business and the fortune that went with it. Turan’s father disowned him. He took Turan’s mother, and two sisters, and left. Where they went, Turan never knew. The young man mourned not only for the loss of his grandfather, but also for the loss of all his family. He never saw them again.

“The next time he heard the ruby’s song, he wondered if he had inadvertently bewitched his grandfather. But, these thoughts were short lived.”

Farloft leaned down and scratched his cheek in thought with a large green paw.

“Turan now ran the business by himself. Also, with his inheritance he instantly

became one of the richest men in the land of Zonguldak, and one of the most eligible bachelors. Fathers came from far and wide to tell him of their daughter's beauty, of their fine cooking and cleaning talents, and their ability to bear him many sons. Some women were even so bold as to come to his shop on pretense of buying silks only to flaunt themselves before him.

"Turan saw none of them. His eyes saw only the Sultan's beautiful daughter. He had never met her, only seen her on the balcony of her room overlooking the palace gardens. Many a warm night Turan scaled the garden wall. He sat concealed in the limbs of a lotus tree watching her raven hair sway lightly in the breeze; her gown hugging to every glorious curve of her body. Now that he was rich, Turan dared to dream of having the princess for his wife."

James squirmed uncomfortably at Farloft's side. He didn't know what to make of all this talk of girls and their habits. He far preferred the stories of knights, royalty, even blacksmiths.

Farloft didn't seem to notice James' disinterest. As always he pushed on with this story, lost in far off memories of people and places long dead.

"And so Turan turned away all the fathers and all the other women of the city who came to call. Instead, he sat listening to the song of the ruby as he polished and dreamed of a life with the princess.

"It was not long after he thought of the princess as a bride that her father, the Sultan, paid a visit to Turan's shop and offered his daughter in marriage to Turan. The young man and his dream princess were married a week later.

"However, dreams do not always come true as you imagine them. Like Turan's dream of wealth which brought about the death of his grandfather and his family's desertion, his dream of the princess soured too. For though his wife possessed beauty beyond compare, she was ill tempered, spoiled and a nag. Her meals were never quite to her liking. The servants never kept the house clean enough. Her jewels did not sparkle enough. Even her silks, the finest in all of Zonguldak, were not soft enough. The older Turan's wife became the more negative and mean she grew.

"As time went by, Turan began to dream another dream. He now realized the ruby really was the source of his daydreams coming true in their own twisted fashion. So he tried his best to dream something the ruby could not destroy. He thought if he kept the dream simple and not involving anyone else, he could make it work. So he dreamed only of getting away from his troubles. As the years passed the simple dream became a little clearer. He would go West to where it was cool; where a man could walk in the rain and be surrounded by green fields instead of deserts.

"One day a pale skinned man, from a land far to the West, came to Turan's shop. He invited Turan to come home with him and to bring his silk worms to make the fine silks of his trade in the new land far to the West. He said Turan would be a rich man; that no one in his land had ever seen fabric as delicately woven as Turan's silks.

"Turan saw his chance to escape Zonguldak and all his problems. He carefully packed several crates with silk worms, settled his affairs, bid his wife goodbye, and with the ruby in his pocket, sailed West with the pale skinned stranger.

"The voyage was long and arduous. The sea tossed the ship and threatened to sink it more than once. Turan was never more thrilled to see land than when he reached the shores of our kingdom."



“He came here?” James asked with surprise.

“Aye,” Farloft answered. “But, his landing was not as he wished. When the crates of his precious silk worms were opened, he found they were all dead. Seawater seeping into the containers drowned his irreplaceable cargo. Turan finally came West, but the ruby destroyed this dream too. Turan was a pauper in his new land with little more than the clothes on his back.

Farloft yawned and rested his head on his front paws. “He wandered aimlessly through the countryside as a beggar half out of his mind from his misfortune, until he came close enough to my lair that I heard the ruby’s song. Just like Turan years before, I followed the song to find an old man with white hair and beard, warming himself by a small fire in the edge of the woods. Turan held the ruby in his hands, still enticed by its song.

“Once he got over the shock of meeting a dragon, Turan, told me the story of the ruby and his misfortunes. I offered to relieve him of his jeweled burden. The ruby’s song was lovely, but it could not destroy a dragon’s dreams. Even after all these years of trial and ill fortune, Turan was still reluctant to part with the ruby. We talked long into the night before he finally handed over the stone to me for safe keeping. And that is how I came into possession of the Zonguldak Ruby.”

“What happened to Turan?” James asked, as he stretched out at Farloft’s side, eliciting a big yawn.

“He lived out his life not far from here working the soil in peace at last.”

“The ruby did talk to me,” James affirmed. “That must be why I stole it. It made me. It bewitched me like it did Turan.”

“It talked to you?” Farloft asked, as though he needed the fact repeated in order to believe it.

“Yes, it said ‘take me’.”

“The ruby of Zonguldak does not talk, James. It sings.” Farloft shook his head from side to side. “That was not the ruby talking, that was your inner greed voicing its desires, much as Turan’s greed worked its way into his dreams years ago.”

James looked away in embarrassment.

“Perhaps you should stick with your original apology for taking the ruby,” Farloft suggested. Farloft nuzzled the boy gently in the chest. “Come now. I have run on too long. It is time for some sleep.”

James hugged up against the dragon’s side. “I’m sorry, Farloft.”

“I know, James. The best lesson learned is one learned from your own mistakes. Believe me. A thief cannot be trusted and trust is the one thing we all crave. Remember this time, but do not dwell on the negative. Instead, remember what you have learned of honesty, trust and loyalty these last few days and you will grow into a fine man worthy to someday carry the dagger of King Ludlow.”

Farloft nuzzled James again and raised the corners of his lips revealing many huge sharp teeth in a dragon’s equivalent of a smile. James hugged Farloft’s nose in reply. When James released him, the dragon laid his head down, using the end of his tail for a pillow, and quietly hummed them both to sleep.

## **- WIZARD'S BREW -**

The lights in the wizard's tower burned day and night. Laval's heart contained only hatred in it and plans for revenge. He returned from his meeting with Farloft to find his only child dead. He had not been in time to save his beloved daughter. If Farloft had not been so stubborn...If the dragon had just complied the first time he asked for the wing portion, Megan would still be alive.

In spite of his grief, he brewed the potion and others that were ill were now recovering. In the process, he discovered a very interesting property of the wing.

He wanted revenge against Farloft. The wizard could not kill the dragon even with his considerable magic, but he could make the dragon miserable for the rest of his life. The best revenge he could think of was worse than killing the dragon - far worse.

With the use of the unusual properties of the wing and by combining it with other elements, he believed he could succeed in changing Farloft from a dragon into a mere human. It was the worse punishment he could think of for the dragon. Farloft would end his days as a tired old man in a village of poor peasants trying to convince everyone he once was a powerful dragon.

He only needed another portion of Farloft's wing for the potion and somehow he would get it. Laval would have his revenge.

## - THE WAY HOME -

Farloft stood at the outside entrance to his cave, his nose stuck upward in the cool morning air. The day promised sunshine and warmth - unexpected considering the land remained locked in winter. The snow that was several feet deep earlier was melting fast, leaving riverlets of water and mud puddles everywhere.

James had been with Farloft over two weeks. Now that the weather was exhibiting its milder side, Farloft thought it was time James headed home. The boy did not want to leave.

"Your people will be worried," Farloft said.

"I told you, I don't have any people," James reminded the dragon. "Can't I stay here with you?"

Farloft looked down at James. The dragon's eyes were filled with a mixture of duty and concern, tinged with regret. "This is not the proper place for a boy. You belong with your own kind."

"But, I want to stay here," James protested. He threw his arms around Farloft's stump of a front leg. "Please, Farloft. I want to stay with you." He buried his head against the dragon's leg.

Farloft felt the wetness of the boy's tears on his scaly skin. He would like to have given in. He loved James and wanted the boy's company forever, but that was not possible. James was young and needed the company of other humans. Besides, living with a dragon could prove dangerous for the boy. Humans had grown to hate and fear dragons over the years and that included anyone who associated with a dragon.

"I am sorry, James, but you must go. It is for your own good." Farloft nudged James away from his leg with his nose. "I have greatly enjoyed your company these last weeks. I assure you I will never forget our time together. It will be quite lonely here without you."

"Then let me stay," James pleaded with tears brimming in his eyes.

Farloft shook his head. "It is dangerous for you here. There are those who hunt dragons and would think nothing of cutting down a boy who stood between them and their prize."

James took the dagger from his belt and offered it to Farloft. "Here."

Farloft shook his head. "You have more use for it than I ever would. It will keep you safe. Keep it hidden and never use it in anger."

James, knowing he could never win this battle to stay, tucked the knife back in his belt and threw his arms around Farloft's leg again. "I love you, Farloft," he mumbled into his leg. Then he abruptly let go and ran from Farloft down the steep slope in the direction the dragon indicated the village was when James asked earlier.

Farloft watched reluctantly as James half ran, half tumbled to the foot of the mountain. The boy never once looked back. When he reached the level below, he headed straight for the trees and the village far beyond. It took all of Farloft's great dragon strength to keep from calling him back.

## **- FARLOFT WORRIES -**

Not long after James left, Farloft began to worry if he sufficiently warned James against the dangers of telling anyone he stayed with a dragon? Had he impressed upon the boy enough that he should keep his dagger hidden under his tunic? Should he have even given the boy the weapon? It would be a great temptation for thieves and cutthroats. It might put the boy in more danger than it did him good. Maybe he should not have let James go alone. It was a long way to the village.

Farloft sniffed the air. No more snow for a time. No rain. He lay his head down on his front feet again. It was warm in the sun on the rock ledge above the entrance to the cave.

He told himself he was worrying for nothing. James was a smart lad. He would be all right. Farloft sighed deeply. He just could not help worrying about his new young friend.

## - JAMES ARRIVES HOME -

James felt very hot and tired when he walked into the village late in the day, just as the sun was starting to set. He ran most of the way in a kind of blind hopelessness. He looked a mess; his face streaked and stained from his tears and his clothes muddy from numerous stumbles and falls on the slippery, sodden terrain.

A group of half starved children, outside one of the huts on the edge of the village, sounded the alarm. The villagers poured from their homes to see the return of one they thought lost to the freezing weather of the past two weeks.

James felt somewhat guilty when he saw the gaunt faces of the people. Where he had been warm and well fed by Farloft, the storm of the last few weeks had taken its toll on the villagers. They all looked hungry and some had deep mucous filled coughs.

A woman who used to be one of his sister's friends touched his arm. "We thought you were lost. It was the second day of the storm 'fore anyone even seen there was no fire at your hearth. By then it was too late to search for ya."

"Where ya been?" a voice in the crowd called.

"How'd ya survive the storm?" another asked closer at hand.

"I found a cave and sheltered there," James replied.

"There are no caves close by," the blacksmith challenged, his face so close James could smell his stale breath through his rotten teeth.

"I got lost in the snow," James explained. "I wandered far away."

The woman who spoke earlier touched his face gently, its fullness well illuminated by the setting sun. "Whatcha been eatin', James? You're as round as a tree squirrel."

"Nuts and berries," James replied and knew immediately his lie would be caught.

"No berries this time of year," the smithy said in an accusing voice. "Where ya really been?" He asked and at the same time jerked James around to face him.

"In a cave, I swear," James repeated.

"Hey, what's that?" the smithy asked, as the last rays of sunlight glinted off the hilt of James' knife.

James covered the dagger with his hand. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" the smithy asked indignantly. "Give it here. Let us have a look."

James reluctantly removed the dagger from his belt.

"Lordy, look at that." The smithy exclaimed on seeing the brilliant dagger. "We got us a thief."

"I am not a thief," James protested. "Farloft gave it to me." The dragon's name just slipped out. James was sorry the moment he said it.

"Who's this Farloft?" someone demanded. "I never heard of such."

Murmurs of assertion rumbled through in the crowd now huddled in a half circle before James.

James reflected for a moment on Farloft's warnings earlier in the day, but could not come up with a plausible story now that he had slipped up. He decided telling the villagers the truth was the best course of action.

"Farloft is the dragon we sometimes see shadow of on a clear day."

The woman next to him stepped back in fright. "You been with a dragon?" she asked in disbelief.

“Well, yes.” James instantly realized the mistake he made in telling them about the dragon. Farloft warned him. Why hadn’t he listened?

“Why didn’t he eat ya?” someone demanded, their tone gruff and accusatory.

“Dragons don’t eat people,” James replied. He noticed everyone had stepped back away from him, not just the woman.

“Everyone knows dragons eat people,” Tithe said, at the front of the crowd.

“No, Farloft says....” James did not get the opportunity to finish his sentence.

“He talked to ya?” a voice exclaimed in disbelief.

“He’s bewitched,” someone else shrieked.

“Kill him ‘fore he turns into a dragon and eats us all!”

“No,” James cried.

The smithy stuck his meaty fist at James’ face. The magical dagger jumped into his hand and immediately came up of its own accord and sliced the smithy’s arm to the bone. The smithy cried out in pain and surprise.

The crowd rushed forward in one huge mass. James stumbled backward in an attempt to escape them the dagger falling accidentally from his hand. The smithy’s son took up the dagger and his strong unrelenting hand caught James’ arm. James felt the pain of his own dagger’s steel as Tithe plunged it home into his chest. James fell back in a scream of agony as the rest of the crowd over took him.

One instant the setting sun was lighting the crowd descending on James, the next, something huge was silhouetted against the sky casting a shadow over them all.

It was Farloft diving from his place on an air current high above.

His worries about James had taken him aloft, but he could see when the crowd scattered for the shelter and safety of their homes, that he was too late. James lay prone on the ground, the dagger of King Ludlow protruding from his chest.

Farloft landed at his side. “James?”

James’ eyes flickered. The dragon saw recognition and relief in them.

“I am going to take you home,” Farloft announced. Without further word, he picked James up and with one mighty thrust of his giant wings rose instantly aloft.

### **- FARLOFT FLIES FOR HELP -**

Farloft eased James down on the rock slab in the cave with the crystal ceiling. The boy moaned in pain.

“I never should have made you go,” Farloft muttered under his breath. “Never.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” James assured him. “You told me not to tell about you. It just slipped out.” James coughed and writhed in pain. “Cold,” he whispered through teeth that had begun to chatter.

Farloft spat a burst of dragon fire at a boulder nearby. The rock took on a red hot glow. He studied James with deep concern. The dagger still protruded from the boy’s chest. Farloft did not possess the dexterity to remove it. His paws were far too large. The boy was going to die if he did not do something soon. Unfortunately, there was only one thing he could think to do.

“I am going for help, James,” he said. Farloft was not sure James heard him. The boy was lying with his eyes closed now, breathing laboriously. “I will not be gone long,” Farloft promised.

He gave the boulder one final blast to make sure the room would stay warm in his absence, then he was gone.

## **- THE WIZARD AND THE DRAGON MEET AGAIN -**

"I have come to ask a favor," Farloft said to the wizard standing on the wall of the castle.

When summoned by the guard upon Farloft's unexpected arrival, the wizard came straight here from his bed, still in his dressing gown.

"Yes?" Laval coaxed. A favor granted, would be a favor which needed to be repaid. Perhaps this was his chance to obtain the piece of Farloft's wing he needed for his potion.

"I need your help, Laval. Your healer's knowledge. A friend of mine is injured."

"I don't know much about dragon healing," Laval said with a note of disdain in his voice, as if a dragon were not worth healing.

"He is not a dragon. He is a boy of perhaps ten years of age." Farloft shifted impatiently, his tail switching in agitation. "Will you come?" he asked in a voice slightly more fierce than he had intended.

"Of course," Laval answered with a nod of his head. This might just be the chance he needed to avenge his beloved daughter's death. "I will dress and meet you at the gate." He hastily disappeared from the wall.

Before long he reappeared dressed and mounted on his sorrel steed, his healer's bag hanging from the pommel of his saddle.

Farloft crouched down low before the wizard on his horse. "Come," he ordered. "Horses are too slow. We will fly." Farloft extended his neck for the wizard and placed a large front paw out to assist Laval aboard.

"Very well," Laval said in surprise and dismounted his horse to remount Farloft.

The dragon must be very fond of this boy to allow him such a liberty as riding him, Laval thought. To the wizard's knowledge, no one had ever ridden a dragon in all of history. "Where do we go?" he asked.

"Home," Farloft answered, and sprang into the air with such urgency Laval almost fell from his seat on the dragon's neck.



## **- THE WIZARD'S MAGIC -**

Laval examined the unconscious boy in the inner cave of the dragon's lair. The wizard recognized King Ludlow's crest on the dagger's hilt stuck in the boy's chest. The lad felt pale and cool to the touch, his breathing short and painful, if the look on his face was any indication. The front of his tunic was soaked in blood.

"How did this happen?" Laval asked.

"The villagers turned on him. He did nothing to deserve this." Farloft answered in irritation. "Can you help him?" Farloft snapped in irritation.

"I don't know, Farloft," Laval said, soothingly. The dragon seemed extremely upset, more than any other time Laval could remember. "He has lost quite a lot of blood."

Farloft began to pace even though there was hardly room for more than a few steps before he had to turn, tail thrashing, and retrace his steps. "It was all my fault," he muttered.

"What was?" Laval asked.

"I gave him the dagger," Farloft shouted in frustration and anger. "I sent him home."

Laval's mind began to work at a frightening speed. The wizard knew the true tale of The Battle of Elgon, even if the story had been altered over the years. If Farloft would fly a wizard for the boy, and give the boy the dagger of King Ludlow, he had to be very special to the dragon. This was the chance Laval had been waiting for. His time for revenge was at hand.

"Calm down, Farloft." The dragon had the cave so hot from his agitated behavior Laval could feel sweat trickling down his back under his robes. "Perhaps...." he said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps what?" Farloft demanded.

"Perhaps with your help we can save him." Laval looked up at the dragon. "I will need stronger magic than just my own to stop the bleeding when I remove the dagger. I will need another portion of your wing."

"If that is what you need, that is what you shall have," Farloft stated. He placed the edge of his left wing on the rock slab above James' head.

Laval removed a wickedly sharp knife from his healer's bag and began to deftly slice a piece of membrane from Farloft's wing.

"Just enough for the boy," Farloft warned the wizard.

Laval nodded as he completed his work. "I will place a sleeping spell upon the boy to make his pain less. This will not be easy on him."

Laval placed his palms on the boy's temples while reciting an incantation quietly under his breath. The boy's breathing became deeper and slowed considerably. The wizard then placed both hands on the hilt of the dagger and with one mighty yank, freed it from James' chest. The boy groaned and Farloft shot the wizard a fearsome look. It was lost on Laval. He had his head down working on stemming the new flow of blood from James' wound. Laval wrapped the wing membrane around his index finger and with great care shoved it into the hole left by the dagger, effectively lining the wound with dragon skin. The blood immediately began to coagulate. The flow subsided and eventually stopped.

“Help me bandage him,” Laval said.

Farloft held James propped up in a sitting position as Laval placed a bandage on the wound and kept it in place by wrapping the full circumference of the boy’s chest. That accomplished, Laval washed the remainder of blood from himself and James.

“We need to keep him warm and his thirst quenched,” Laval stated. “He has lost a lot of blood.”

Farloft curled up on the slate floor making a bed for James as he had so many nights before. “Bring him here.”

Laval carefully lifted the boy and placed him atop Farloft’s hind foot between his tail and side as the dragon directed.

“I will see to his warmth,” Farloft said defensively. “There is a cup there in the cleft which he uses.” The dragon indicated a golden goblet beside a plate on a small ledge nearby. “You can fetch water from the pool outside.”

Laval found it extremely interesting the boy had been here often enough to have a goblet from the dragon’s treasure trove for his own personal drinking needs. Where did the boy come from and what brought the two together?

“Call me when he wakes and I will fetch some water,” Laval said and with that retired to the far side of the cave where he wrapped himself in his robes and feigned sleep.

Silently, he fingered the small portion of dragon wing he hastily torn from the larger piece he put in James’ wound. He tried to judge its size by touch. It was so small. But, dragon magic was very strong. It would be enough. He would have his revenge.

## - TOUCH AND GO -

"Laval?" Farloft called softly.

Laval raised his head from off his arms, crossed upon his bent knees.

"He is waking up," the dragon announced.

Laval grabbed the cup and hurried to the pool just outside the main cave entrance. The wizard did quite a bit of thinking before he fell asleep last night. He decided to be as helpful and cooperative as possible with Farloft. This would make the dragon even less suspicious of his intentions.

Laval returned with the water in time to see the boy open his eyes.

"Farloft," the lad said, but the effort sent him into a coughing fit.

"Do not try to speak," the dragon soothed.

Laval lifted the boy's head and put the cup to his lips. "Just a little," he cautioned.

When James finished drinking, Laval removed the cup and eased the boy back down. The wizard felt his skin. It was still cool and clammy to the touch. He undid the bandage about the boy's chest, which he strategically placed in the front so it would be accessible without moving the lad too much. Even so, Laval's patient moaned in pain.

"Careful, Wizard," Farloft snapped.

Laval looked up directly into Farloft's hovering face. "A wound this serious is bound to cause pain, Farloft. I take no pleasure in hurting the boy. Now that he is awake, and we know that he is mending, I can prepare a potion to ease his pain and help him sleep."

Farloft huffed and retreated a bit.

Laval felt content with the way the injury looked. Although still a gaping hole, he saw no swelling, no redness and no further bleeding. Hopefully, all of this indicated the lad would recover in time. The magic in the dragon's wing had done its job. He re-wrapped the wound and gave the boy another drink.

"What is your name, boy?"

"His name is James," Farloft answered for him. He looked down paternally at the boy. "You lie quiet now. You are going to be all right."

Laval rummaged through his healer's bag. He removed a vial of purplish colored powder. The wizard emptied the cup, refilled it with warm water from the hot springs pool, sprinkled the powder on top and then swirled it to mix the drink.

"Just a few swallows of this, James," Laval advised, as he held the cup to the boy's lips again. "It will make you feel better."

"Thank you," James said softly. It only took two sips before his eye lids began to droop. On the third, they blinked twice. On the fourth, he patted Farloft's side affectionately and drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

## **- THE BOY, THE DRAGON AND THE WIZARD -**

The three in the cave quickly fell into a routine.

Laval proved himself quite useful. He not only tended to James' wound, but he also went on a daily hunting expedition to procure food for the trio. Though he possessed no weapons, he never returned empty handed and always brought enough to satisfy even Farloft's large appetite. Farloft told James the wizard no doubt killed the game with magic. The dragon carefully inspected whatever Laval brought back. Down deep in his dragon soul, he still did not trust the wizard, but he had to admit Laval did save James' life and was gentle in his actions toward the boy.

Farloft never left James' side, or more correctly, James never left Farloft's side. The dragon kept him warmly cradled between his side and tail. He watched over him day and night, soothing him when he cried out in pain, telling him stories when he asked, humming or singing while he slept.

As for James, the pain was difficult to endure. Laval's potions helped some, but Farloft's company kept him fighting to stay alive. His recovery was slow, but recover he did.

By the end of the month, both James' chest and Farloft's wing mended and the time came for Farloft to take Laval home.

"You have been most helpful, Wizard," Farloft complimented. "I owe you a great debt."

Laval acknowledged the comment with a mere nod of his head. "I hope you will allow me to return for a visit and check on James in say....a fortnight?"

"You think that needful?" Farloft asked.

He looked over his shoulder at James sitting by the mouth of the cave, in the mid-day sun. His back was against the rock face. The color had returned to his cheeks. In fact, unless the boy moved, which still gave him discomfort, you would not notice his injury.

Laval tried to keep as calm as possible. He had heard dragons could smell fear and deceit. He needed an excuse to return, yet not make the dragon suspicious. He also needed to get close enough to Farloft to administer the potion. He still intended to brew it from the piece of the dragon's wing hidden in his pocket.

"James is not fully recovered. I think it would be wise for me to look in on him one last time. Of course, if you should need me prior to that, you most certainly could come and get me," Laval offered.

"Thank you, Laval." Farloft bent down to allow Laval to get aboard. "We shall look for you in a fortnight."

"Goodbye, James," Laval waved. "I will see you soon." He climbed aboard Farloft and found a place to sit where the neck met the shoulders of the dragon.

"Thank you, Laval," James called back from his place in the sun.

"I will be back shortly," Farloft told the boy.

The dragon stepped to the edge of the mountain and then just dropped out of sight over the edge. James heard the wizard cry out and then saw Farloft and his passenger rise on an air current over the valley below. Farloft was such a tease, James thought and smiled to himself. He had scared the wizard on purpose.

### **-YET ANOTHER BREW -**

Laval worked tirelessly in his chambers. His heart had not softened toward the dragon. If anything, he felt greater anger toward Farloft than ever before. Seeing the dragon with James, how much the boy loved him, only reminded Laval of the loss of his beloved daughter and how much that still hurt him.

A satisfied smile crossed the wizard's face in spite of his exhaustion. Laval pictured how rewarding it would be to see Farloft's reaction when James turned from him. The boy would have little interest in Farloft once the novelty of his being a dragon disappeared. The dragon would suffer the loss of a loved one just as Laval had with the loss of his daughter.

Laval toiled long into the night and on the twelfth day; he finished the potion that would turn Farloft the Dragon into Farloft the Human.

## **- THE FATE OF FARLOFT -**

Laval reined in his horse just out of sight of the entrance to Farloft's cave. He checked the vial cushioned in his robe pocket one last time. He wanted to make sure it had not broken. The thin vial lay intact cradled safely in cotton. The glass blower who normally made the containers for his potions wondered why the wizard wanted a vial so thin and slender. Laval explained it was needed for the application of medicine.

The wizard wanted the vial especially thin to ensure it would easily burst when it struck Farloft. He did not want to take the chance of it bouncing off of Farloft's tough, scaly hide. The dragon need not ingest the potion. It would activate on contact.

He smiled in triumph. This was the day he would get his revenge.

"Laval's coming," James shouted with innocent enthusiasm.

Farloft did not tell the boy of his past history and general distrust of the wizard. Instead, he allowed James to think of Laval in a more kindly fashion based on his instrumental part in saving his life.

Farloft noted the wizard as he crested the edge of the plateau before the cave. The dragon had not needed James to inform him of Laval's approach. He heard the wizard whistling as he rode. Something Farloft thought very uncharacteristic of Laval.

Farloft's skin crawled. His dragon senses coming to attention. Something seemed very wrong here.

James ran forward to greet Laval. Farloft placed a large protective foot in the boy's path. "No, James. I do not wish to see you trampled. Wait until he dismounts."

Laval's horse pranced and tossed its head in the presence of the dragon. Laval brought him under control, dismounted and tied him securely to a nearby tree.

"You are early," Farloft challenged.

"It was such a nice day I thought I would come while the weather was clear." Laval looked to the West. "I feel it may snow again soon."

Another thing that did not ring true, Farloft thought. The wizard knew as well as the dragon the signs of coming snow. There were none today. Farloft became more and more suspicious, but of what he was not sure, other than the intentions of the wizard never seemed what they appeared to be.

James ran forward. "Come on, Laval. You can have lunch with us. Farloft brought down a grand, big stag this morning." James gave the wizard's sleeve a short tug. "Come on, I'm hungry."

"You are always hungry," Farloft said with a lop-sided toothy grin at the boy as he ran toward him.

Farloft, with James at his side, headed toward the cave entrance. Laval trailed close behind, his hand feeling for the vial in his pocket. He pulled the potion out. Farloft's back was to him. There was no possible way the dragon could turn in time to save himself.

"You are looking well, James." Laval commented in an effort to keep Farloft unsuspecting.

"Thanks to Farloft," James said, and patted the dragon's side affectionately. "And you, of course," he added, as he turned back toward Laval.

The noonday sun reflecting off the pointed glass vial in Laval's hand, made it appear to be a dagger.

"Watch out, Farloft," James shouted, and with the speed of youth, rushed toward the wizard.

Laval watched Farloft's head begin to swing around, in the background, as James dashed toward him. It was throw now or lose his chance for revenge. He lobbed the vial in an effort to clear James' head and hit Farloft's back before the dragon could turn.

James sprang up off the ground and batted at the object thrown by Laval. It shattered above him raining a glutinous, green ooze down upon his head and shoulders.

"Yuck!" James cried, as he tried to wipe the potion from his hair and face.

"What have you done?" Farloft demanded of Laval. The dragon turned back around and was studying the wizard suspiciously.

"Nothing," Laval lied and took a step backward toward his horse.

"Stay where you are," Farloft ordered. He moved closer to James and sniffed at the boy's hair.

"Something made from my wing," Farloft declared in a deep rumble. "What are you up to Laval?"

The wizard did not get the opportunity to answer. All of a sudden James fell to his hands and knees between Laval and Farloft.

"I don't feel very good, Farloft," James said.

Farloft was surprised to see the boy's skin take on a greenish glow. "What kind of wizard's work is this?" the dragon grumbled in growing anger.

Laval took another step toward his mount.

"One more step, Laval, and I will sear you to well done," Farloft warned.

"Oh!" James shouted in surprise as his body began to elongate and his skin began to appear scaly. He jerked convulsively as a tail, not unlike Farloft's burst the seam of his pants.

"Farloft!" James screamed in fright; when he looked down to find his hands turning to feet with huge claws the size of spades sprouting from each toe.

"Laval!" Farloft snapped. He started to advance on the wizard.

"Farloft!" James cried, arching his back in pain as wings began to thrust up through the back of his tunic. "I'm changing into a dragon."

Farloft could not believe his eyes when he turned from Laval to look at James. The boy no longer resembled a human at all. Instead, he looked very much like a small version of Farloft. His shredded clothes lay in a pile beneath his iridescent, green belly.

James was shaking uncontrollably on four new legs, his wings sadly drooping their tips to the ground.

"Thirsty," James said in a hoarse voice, and took several faltering steps toward the pool outside the cave entrance. When he reached it he collapsed on his belly, lapping water in great gulps as steam rose from the contact of his mouth with the pool.

"Why?" Farloft asked Laval. "Why have you done this to the boy?"

"It wasn't meant for James," Laval answered. "It was meant for you."

"Why make a potion to turn a dragon into a dragon?" Farloft asked, wrinkling his brow in confusion.

"It was supposed to have the reverse affect on you," Laval admitted. "You were supposed to change from dragon to human."

"Indeed?" Farloft questioned. "Why would you wish to turn me into a human?"

"I could think of no worse punishment for a dragon than to be turned into a man."

"Punishment for what, Laval? What have I ever done to you?" Farloft asked in all innocence.

"You caused the death of my Megan." Laval spat in a release of pent up anger.

"Megan is dead? I did not know," Farloft said in shock. All during Laval's stay with them at the cave he had been so preoccupied with James he had not thought to ask about Megan.

"You didn't ask," Laval spit out. "By your reluctance to give me the wing portion I needed to make the cure for the plague she died. If I had obtained it the first time I asked, I could have saved her."

"I am so sorry," Farloft apologized. "You know I would have never harmed her." He sighed. "If I had known, I never would have..."

"Saying you are sorry will not heal this wound. I will never forgive you. I will make it my goal in life to seek retribution for your evil ways."

James was oblivious to the wizard and the dragon's conversation. His body felt on fire. When he regained his strength, he waded into the pool and lay down, wallowing in the cool waters, effectively washing off all the wizard's potion. Having relieved his thirst, and his burning skin, he now stood on four sturdier legs looking at his reflection in the pool.

"Farloft, I look just like you," he observed out loud.

"I know, James. I will have the wizard turn you back immediately," Farloft assured him, while never letting his eyes leave the wizard.

"I can't," Laval insisted.

Farloft's skin began to take on a crimson glow. Spikes bristled in anger from his nose, brow and neck ridge.

"None of that, Wizard," he warned. "He should not suffer for my mistake. You will turn him back at once, and be hasty about it, or I will light a fire under you."

"No, Farloft," James exclaimed coming to join the two combatants. He rubbed his new little bony dragon head on Farloft's shoulder. "You must not hurt, Laval. Don't you see, he's done us a great favor? Now you will no longer be alone and I will have a family again." James looked up at Farloft lovingly. "You can teach me everything there is to know about being a dragon."

Farloft's brow knit in concentration. He remained silent for a moment until he finally said, "and for Laval's treachery, he is stuck with two dragons instead of one," he said, slightly amused. "It looks like the joke is on you, Wizard."

Laval sat down abruptly in defeat on the nearest boulder. With a shake of his head he brought up his hands to sooth his brow where the worst of headaches was just beginning to form. Nothing had happened as it should.

"Laval has done us a good turn, even though he may not have meant to." James said. "I think we should give him a gift. A kind of reward, and I know just the thing. I'll go get it. You won't go, will you Laval?"

Laval shook his head in dismay without looking up.

James went into the cave reappearing almost instantly. He walked to Laval and to Farloft's amazement, spit out the Zonguldak Ruby at the wizard's feet.

"Sorry about the slobber. I couldn't figure out how to carry it. All of this is new," James said, as he lifted first one large foot and then another.

Laval picked the stone up and began to absentmindedly polish it with the end of his



robe.

“Can you hear it sing?” James asked.

“Yes,” Laval answered, with a touch of awe in his voice.

“Good,” James said with satisfaction and winked at Farloft.

Farloft had to admit, it was a fitting gift for the wizard. Laval would no doubt get what he deserved in the end.

The wizard appeared to be mesmerized by the jewel. He rose, as if in a trance, walked to his horse, mounted and rode away without another word.

Farloft watched his departure with satisfaction. “Giving Laval the Zonguldak Ruby was a brilliant idea, James,” Farloft complimented. “You are already beginning to think like a dragon.”

James smiled at the compliment and flexed his iridescent, green wings in the afternoon sun. “Teach me how to fly,” James said with enthusiasm, as he pumped his wings up and down vigorously.

Before Farloft could reply, James stopped, folded his wings and turned toward the dragon. “No....teach me how to breathe fire...” he exclaimed with equal enthusiasm.

Farloft smiled tolerantly at the new young dragon.

“And how to hunt...and tell the weather...and...” James began to bound around Farloft on all four of his new dragon feet, his wings flapping randomly, threatening to take him involuntarily aloft at any moment.

All of a sudden a deep rumble emitted from James. He immediately froze, looking down at himself, unable to believe such a sound came from him. “What was that?” he asked Farloft.

“That was your stomach growling,” Farloft informed him. He placed his wing over James in a paternal gesture of affection. “There will be time enough to teach you all you ask. Quite a lot of time, in fact, now that you have the life span of a dragon. Right now I think we had better feed you.”

The two started toward the cave for James’ first meal as a full-fledged dragon.

**- THE END -**

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Thank you for reading.

I hope you enjoyed James and Farloft's adventure.

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