

ARMORQUEST

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

BOOK I

INTO THE FIRE

RESPECT

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Into the Fire: Respect

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CHAPTER 1

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

Standing on its hind legs, the dragon was almost as tall as the trees along the road. It raised its face to the sky and bellowed a thunderous roar.

“Guess he’s not too happy that we interrupted his lunch,” Timothy said to his two companions.

Although Timothy was not a child, he was young enough that someone observing the scene would be surprised to see him standing as bravely as he was, sword drawn like the heroes of old, ready to battle a dragon.

Some of his bravado came from the armor he wore and the sword and shield he carried. His shield had protected him from the flames of dragons. His armor had defended him against dragon claws and teeth. And his sword had destroyed dragons.

Some of the bravado he felt also came from the companions he traveled with. On his left side stood Kanika, a tall, athletic woman who was an experienced Knight of the Way. On his right side stood Bernard, a tough, burly man from the Far North Mountains. They had been his companions for the last several months and had become almost like a family to him. Together,

INTO THE FIRE

they had faced many dangers and had many adventures. He knew he could depend on them.

Most of his bravado, though, came from seeing what the dragon wanted to do. Just moments before, while walking down a quiet, picturesque forest path, Timothy and his friends had heard a dragon roar, closely followed by screams and the crashing of tree branches. Running to discover what was happening, they found this dragon chasing a horse-drawn hoverwagon filled with children. Timothy had watched in horror as the kids jumped out of the hoverwagon seconds before the dragon flipped it over. Now the driver of the hoverwagon, a wiry, older man, stood between the dragon and the children. He used a pitchfork to hold off the dragon while a young woman hurried around, gathering the kids and trying to get them to safety. As soon as Timothy saw the dragon attacking these people, his heart filled with anger. Any concern for his own safety was pushed aside. He rushed in to help them.

Bernard forced a laugh. “Well, you know, I always get grumpy when *my* lunch is interrupted, too.”

The dragon looked down at Timothy and his companions. It roared again. Timothy felt the hot air of the dragon’s breath on his face. “This is a little bit more than grumpy,” Timothy said, closing the faceplate on his helmet and drawing his sword.

The dragon cringed back slightly when it saw Timothy’s weapon. Timothy and his friends all carried the special swords used by the Knights of the Way. These swords, along with the armor Timothy and Kanika wore, were the only truly effective tools for fighting dragons. But even though they were armed with the weapons of the Knights of the Way, this dragon was still very dangerous. Now, however, with Timothy’s sword drawn, the

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS



INTO THE FIRE

dragon knew that the three humans he roared at were dangerous as well.

Snarling, the dragon's loud gravelly voice bellowed, "*LEAVE ME NOW AND YOU WILL NOT BE HURT!*"

Timothy glanced at the man, woman, and children. Some of the children had already hidden in the nearby trees. The woman had picked up a young girl and now helped an older boy who had hurt his leg. The man with the pitchfork bravely stayed between the dragon and the children.

The two strong horses remained tied to the wagon. One had fallen and gotten so tangled in its reins and harness, it could not get up. The other pulled against its reins, trying to get away from the dragon in a panic, but because of the weight of the upside-down hoverwagon and the fallen horse, it could not go anywhere. Normally, hoverwagons glided a couple feet above the ground on a cushion of energy created by powerful cerulean stones placed underneath the wagon. The power of the stones made the wagons easy to pull. But with the hoverwagon upside down, it had become a trap, leaving the man, woman and children vulnerable to the dragon's attack.

Timothy shouted, "We aren't going anywhere, lizard!"

"*LIZARD!?!?*" Enraged by this insult, the dragon slammed its front claw on the ground between Timothy and Kanika. They both quickly rolled out of the way. Kanika was back on her feet a heartbeat later. Timothy, not as experienced as Kanika, landed on his hands and knees. "*HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT!*"

"Good," Kanika shouted, "we've got its full attention."

"That's a good thing?" replied Bernard, as he grabbed Timothy's shoulder and hauled the boy to his feet with a single jerk.

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

Kanika drew her sword. “Better us than them!” she said, pointing at the children. “We’re armed for this type of threat. Those people have no such protection.”

Neither did Bernard. He only carried a sword, an enormous single-bladed weapon, which he now pulled from the sheath on his back and held up between himself and the dragon.

The three swords glowed with a soft, bluish hue, a similar blue to the stones that powered the wagon’s repulsor lift. The dragon hissed, causing Timothy to grin. “Thought you were just harassing some defenseless travelers, didn’t you?” he shouted. “Weren’t expecting *us*, were you?”

The dragon’s long body slunk back again, but this time like a cat getting ready to pounce. Timothy’s confidence faded. Timothy had fought larger dragons before. There were many different types of dragons: some with two legs, others with four; some with wings, others without; some that were highly intelligent, others that were little more than animals. This dragon appeared to be an intelligent one. And even though it looked thin and weak compared to other dragons Timothy had come across, it was more than strong enough to pose a serious threat.

The dragon’s head suddenly darted at Bernard like a striking snake.

Bernard, untrained in the formal arts of battle, ducked down instinctively. The snapping jaws of the dragon missed the Northman by inches, but the bottom of the dragon’s chin slammed into the back of Bernard’s head as the beast drew back for another strike.

Through the transmitter in his helmet, Timothy heard Kanika’s voice. “Kanika to the nearest base,” she said. “We need assistance! We are three miles North/Northeast of the Horseshoe

INTO THE FIRE

Waterfalls. We have made confirmed contact with a dragon. Repeat, we need assistance! Confirmed contact!”

The dragon shifted its attention from the warriors back to the wagon.

“I don’t think anyone is close enough to hear,” Kanika said to Bernard and Timothy. “We’re on our own.”

The fallen horse continued struggling to get up while the other one pulled and pulled against its harness. The man, shaking in fear, stood his ground and the woman, still holding the young girl and now supporting the wounded older boy so he could walk, helped a terrified third child to her feet. The dragon stepped toward them.

Kanika clanked the flat of her sword on her shield. “Hey! Over here!”



The dragon turned its head to look at Kanika and whipped its tail at her. She barely had time to deflect the blow with her shield, and even then the force of the hit knocked her down. As she fell, though, she spun her falling body around and caught the dragon’s tail with the thin blade of her sword.

The dragon howled. Sometimes a single well-placed strike from a sword of the knights could destroy a dragon, but never a mere strike to the tail. Still, the glowing blue energy of the blade caused the dragon significant pain.

“Timothy,” Kanika ordered in a commanding whisper, “I’m

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

going to distract the dragon by jumping over it. You and Bernard attack its belly while it's watching me."

"Sounds like a plan," Bernard said.

While the dragon roared, Kanika took two running steps and then activated the cerulean stones in her jumpboots. Blue energy blasted from her feet and launched her into the air and toward the dragon. She made the jumpboots seem almost easy to use.

Craning its neck to follow her movements, the dragon exposed its belly, just as Kanika had predicted.

"Let's go!" Timothy shouted to Bernard. They both ran toward the dragon.

Kanika had underestimated the speed and length of the dragon's reach, though. Its front claw darted into the air and grabbed her leg as she soared over its head. With Kanika in its hand, it swung its head back around and blasted a jet of flame at Bernard and Timothy. Bernard jumped to one side, Timothy to the other. The fire scorched the ground between them.

Bernard continued running toward the dragon, but the beast hit him with its free arm, throwing him a dozen yards back. The dragon then tossed Kanika aside, throwing her into the trees on the side of the path. It quickly spun around toward the wagon again, swinging its tail around as it did. The tail slammed into Timothy's side, knocking the boy down.

Wheezing, Timothy scrambled to his feet. He watched the man threaten the dragon with his pitchfork. The dragon laughed. The woman slowly backed away as she carried the small girl and supported the boy with the hurt leg. The third child she was helping clung to her leg, slowing her down. She and the children were still very close to the hoverwagon... too close.

Timothy was not as skilled as Kanika with his jumpboots,

INTO THE FIRE

but he knew there was only one thing he could do. He curled his toes upward and leaned forward, triggering the cerulean stones in his boots. The energy burst released from the stones launched him up in the air, over the dragon. He landed with a thud and fell



to his hands and knees between the dragon and the man with the pitchfork.

Lifting his helmet's faceplate, Timothy looked back at the older man. "Take those children and get out of here!" he yelled. The man did not move. Was he too scared, too brave, or too foolish? "Hurry! Go!" Timothy shouted in frustration.

Timothy stood and lifted his sword, pointing it at the dragon. "Leave us!" he demanded.

The dragon's mouth curled. Was it smiling? "*FOOLISH CHILD,*" it bellowed. "*WHAT ARE YOU COMPARED TO ME? NOTHING BUT DUST! OUT OF MY WAY! I HUNGER AND THOSE HORSES ARE WHAT I CRAVE!*"

"Horses?" Timothy said aloud. So the dragon was after the horses, not the people. Of course! The horses would make a much more satisfying meal than people. But Timothy still didn't move. The woman and the three children with her were too close to the hoverwagon. They would get hurt if the dragon got to the horses, and Timothy was not going to let that happen. "Mister," Timothy whispered to the man with the pitchfork, "you've got to get those kids out of here in case that dragon gets past me!"

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

“LAST CHANCE, HUMAN. IF YOU DO NOT GET OUT OF MY WAY, I WILL DESTROY YOU AND TAKE THE HORSES ANYWAY.”

Timothy stood firmly in his place. “You see my sword, and you know what it can do. You should respect me!”

The dragon growled a low laugh. Timothy knew that most dragons were vain creatures, and judging by the dragon’s reaction to the “lizard” comment, it seemed this one was no exception. He hoped by telling the dragon to be respectful, the dragon would stop to gloat and argue, and that would give the people enough time to get away.

“OH, YES, I SEE THE SWORD! AND I RESPECT THE POWER OF THAT SWORD! BUT I DO NOT RESPECT YOU, THE CURRENT HOLDER OF THE SWORD! YOU ARE NOTHING BUT A GRAIN OF SAND TO ME, SOMETHING TO BE STEPPED ON! YOU ARE MERELY A DROP OF WATER, SOMETHING TO BE SWALLOWED!”

Timothy glanced back at the people behind him. The man finally ran to help the woman with the children. Timothy smiled while the dragon continued to brag, giving the man, woman, and children time to get to safety. *“YOU ARE NOTHING BUT AN INSECT, SOMETHING TO BE SMASHED!”* Behind Timothy, the people ducked behind a fallen tree. *“KNOW THAT I AM FAR GREATER THAN YOU!”*

The dragon’s final statement was punctuated by a blast of flame. Timothy crouched down and hid behind his shield the way he had learned from Kanika. Flames exploding around him, he felt the heat in the air and smelled the burning grass. The sound of the flame echoed in his ears.

Then, under the roaring flames, he heard something else. A voice, coming from the transmitter in his helmet! “Hang on,” it said. “We can see the glow of dragon flame! We’re almost there!”

INTO THE FIRE



THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

The dragon's flames stopped and Timothy lowered his shield. Behind the dragon, little more than specks in the sky, were five giant eagles flying toward them.

"NOW, CHILD, YOU HAVE HAD YOUR CHANCE!" The dragon took a step forward and opened its jaws. If it struck from this short of a distance, Timothy doubted he could dodge out of the way in time.

The dragon's head darted forward. Timothy activated his jumpboots and leapt into the air in a backwards flip. As he flipped over, he saw the dragon's head beneath him. Normally, he would have jumped to one side or the other so the dragon would have to turn its body in order to attack again, but Timothy chose instead to direct his jump straight back so he could stay between the dragon and the people. He landed on his feet, right in front of the dragon, and tumbled backward.

Timothy laid on his back, the dragon towering over him. With a roar, the dragon brought its heavy front claw down at Timothy, who barely had enough time to roll out of the way before it slammed on the ground next to him.

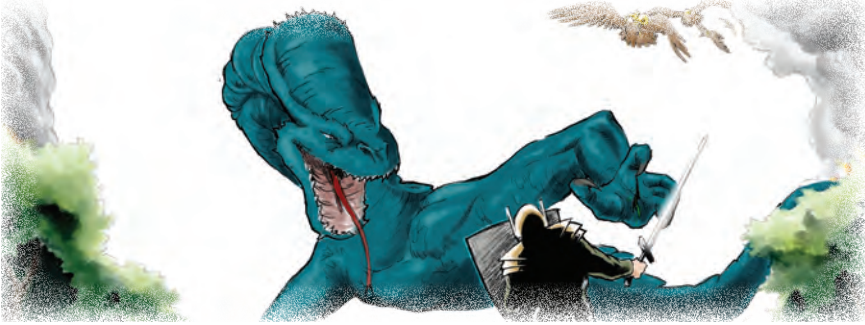
The dragon raised its other claw and this time Timothy did not roll out of the way as it came down. Instead, he thrust his sword upward and into the "palm" of the claw. The dragon pulled its claw back, no longer roaring but instead shrieking in pain.

In the sky beyond the dragon, the flying eagles grew larger as they came closer. Timothy could now see the riders on the eagle's backs. Eagle Riders were the elite fighting force of the Knights of the Way—the best of the best. But would they get there in time?

Timothy stood and raised his shield as he saw the powerful, corded muscles of the dragon tense to strike once more.

INTO THE FIRE

The young warrior brought his sword arm back. He doubted he would be able to destroy the dragon, but he hoped he could at least slow the dragon down enough to allow the Eagle Riders to get it.



Behind him, he could hear one of the children crying. He could hear slow footsteps as the man and woman helped the last of the children escape. He could hear the two horses neighing in panic.

In front of him, he could see the Eagle Riders getting closer and closer. He could hear a purr-like growl deep in the dragon's throat. He heard Kanika's voice scream his name. He saw the dragon's claws dig into the ground and the dragon's head start to move to strike down on him.

The Eagle Riders were not going to make it in time.

Timothy gripped his sword tightly.

Then, just before the dragon's head darted forward, a screech pierced the air. The dragon's eyes widened and its jaw dropped in surprise as it whirled its head around. Something like a whimper escaped the dragon's mouth. As the five Eagle Riders swooped downward, the dragon scrambled over both Timothy and the wagon, disappearing into the woods.

THE DRAGON IN THE WOODS

“Don’t worry about that thing,” the voice in Timothy’s helmet shouted. “We’ve got him!”

Timothy waved to the Eagle Riders as they flew over his head. The final Eagle Rider waved and flew over the woods, after the dragon.

Bernard, rubbing the back of his head, stumbled down the path toward Timothy. “Well, your plan didn’t work too well,” he said to Kanika.

Kanika limped out of the trees and onto the path. “You said it was a good plan,” Kanika said.

“I said it sounded like *a* plan, not a *good* plan.”

Timothy shook his head and rolled his eyes. Bernard and Kanika had been arguing a lot over little things like this lately.

Kanika placed a hand on Timothy’s shoulder. “You did good, kid. You kept your cool. You placed yourself between the dragon and the people. You used your sword smartly, and those were some nice jumps.”

“Yeah,” Bernard said, elbowing Timothy in the arm, “nice jumps. Landing? Not so much.”

“Jumping is easy,” Timothy said.

“Landing is hard,” Bernard finished. The three of them laughed. “That’s why I keep my feet planted firmly on the soil.”

The children who had been hiding in the woods started coming back. The man walked over to the horses and quickly began calming them down. The woman counted the children and gathered them together in a group. There were eleven children and it seemed only two had been hurt. Some of the children still looked scared, but most looked relieved.

Bernard trotted around to the hoverwagon and lifted the side to flip it back over. Timothy and Kanika both hurried over to

INTO THE FIRE

help. They got it up on its side, and then pushed it over so it was right side up. It gently floated on the cerulean energy coming from the stones underneath.

Kanika approached the woman and the children. "You're safe now."

"Are we?" the man snapped. The fallen horse was now standing and didn't seem to be hurt. The man climbed up onto the driver's bench and looked down at Kanika. "I pay my taxes to your Imperial City because you Knights of the Way are supposed to protect us! But here we are, practically in the shadow of the city, and we're *still* attacked by a dragon!"

"Sir," Kanika said, "the dragons have become bolder lately. We're looking into it."

"Looking into it?" the man said as he untangled the reins. "You knights are worthless!"

Timothy stepped forward. "We just rescued you, in case you didn't notice!"

The man hopped off the wagon and stepped so close to Timothy that he could smell the man's breakfast. "Oh, you did? What would have happened if your turkey riders hadn't shown



up? My horses would be dragon food right now! And we *all* could have been the dessert!"

Timothy, his face turning red, started to answer but stopped when Kanika put up her hand in front of

him. "Sir, please know that we are pledged to always do our best to help you."

Without a word, the man got back up on the wagon and waited impatiently for the woman to load the children. Timothy shook his head as he helped the woman lift the younger children up onto the bed of the hoverwagon.

"Please excuse my father," the woman said to Timothy. "He meant no disrespect."

"Could have fooled me," Timothy answered.

"We used to live in the North," the woman continued. "We came down here because we started seeing more dragons. And now this happens. My father is scared and upset. But I do thank you for protecting my students and my father and me from that creature."

The man turned and yelled, "Quit talking to them and let's get going!"

Again, Timothy started to say something. This time, a quiet, but stern, whisper came over his helmet's communication system. "Leave it, Timothy," Kanika's voice said.

Timothy kept his mouth closed.

The man snapped his reins. The horses trotted forward. The wagon glided behind them.

"Good day," Kanika said. No reply came.

Timothy pointed at them as they left. "Look at him! Floating away on technology he wouldn't even have if it weren't for the scholars of the Imperial City!"

"I wanted to punch that guy in the nose for the way he was speaking to you," Bernard said after the wagon was gone.

Kanika smiled. "How very sweet of you, Bernard," Kanika

INTO THE FIRE

said. "But I'm a Knight of the Way. And that means treating everyone with respect."

Timothy frowned. "Everyone? Even someone like that?"

Kanika nodded. "*Especially* someone like that. Now come. If we hurry and don't stop, we can get to the Imperial City by nightfall."

The three started walking down the path once again.

"Wait," Bernard said, "what do you mean if we don't stop? We're going to stop to eat lunch, right?"

"We'll eat lunch," Kanika said.

"And dinner?"

"And dinner."

"And we're going to *actually* stop to eat them, right? Eating while I walk gives me indigestion."

Kanika sighed.

Timothy laughed quietly.



ARMORQUEST

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

BOOK 1

INTO THE FIRE: Respect

ARMORQUEST

Long ago, when the scourge of dragons descended on the land to enslave and devour, the Knights of the Way stood strongly against them. With the power of the Emperor infused into their swords and armor, the Knights drove them back to the northern wastes. After many years, the danger of the dragons had become nothing more than the stuff of legend and the mission of the Knights was forgotten by the people. Believing that the land is now unprepared to stop them, the dragons are returning to wage war on the realms of man. Only an army of battle-tested knights will stand a chance against the onslaught.

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

Having cobbled together the various pieces of a Knight's armor, Timothy has arrived at the Imperial City to begin his training to become a Knight of the Way. Along with a group of cadets from all reaches of the kingdom, Timothy faces a series of challenges which will stretch not only his talents, abilities and intelligence, but his character as well. Skills will be tested, friendships made, and a calling revealed.

The Way of the Warrior is a six-book series beginning with
Book 1: Into the Fire.

If Timothy is going to become a full-fledged Knight of the Way, he must learn the Way of the Warrior. Lesson one: Respect authority, respect others, respect yourself.

