

THE
CHRONICLES
of

DRAGON

BOOK 1

THE HERO, THE SWORD
AND THE DRAGONS



Craig Halloran

The Hero, The Sword, and The Dragons

The Chronicles of Dragon: Book 1

By Craig Halloran

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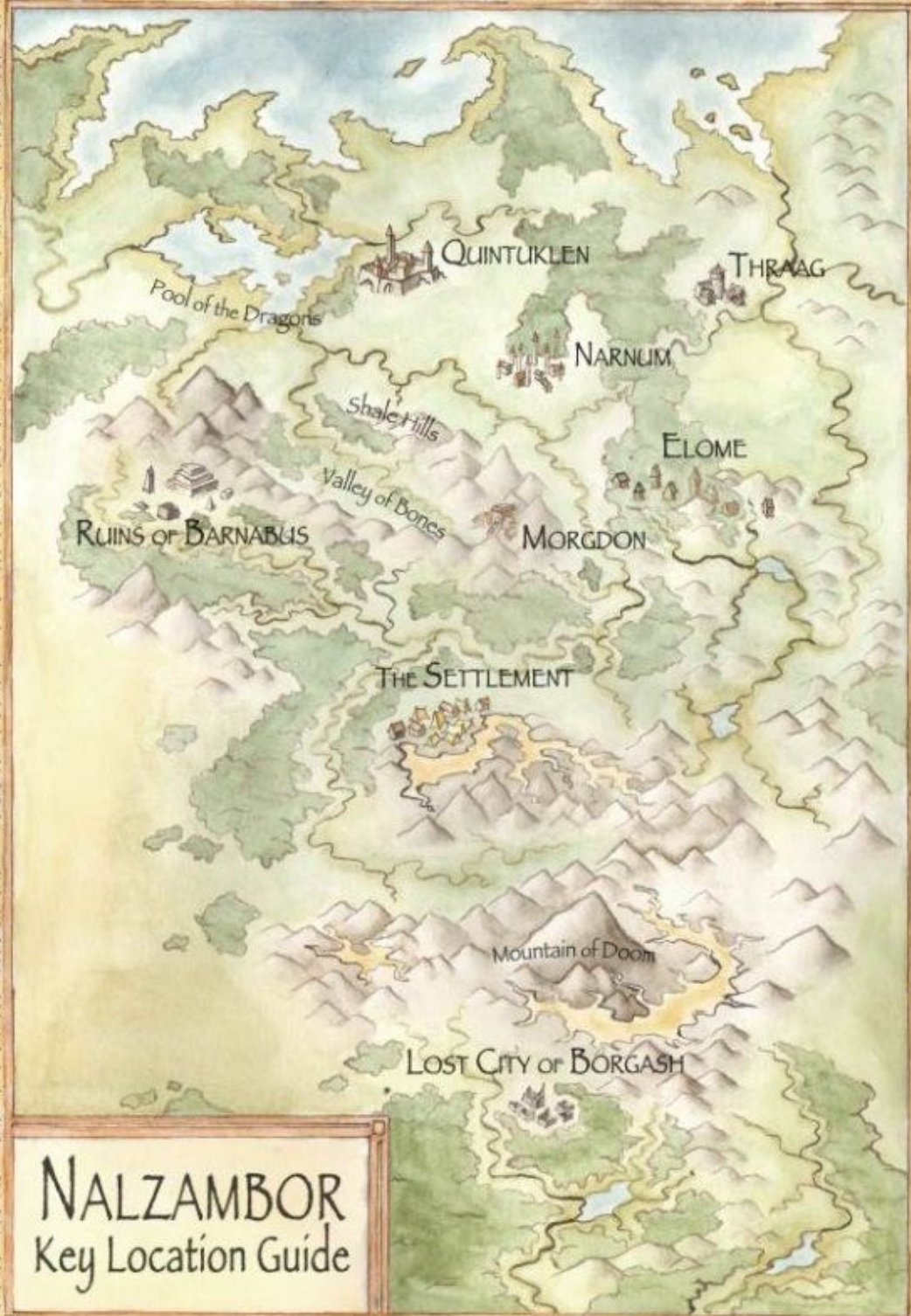
Dedication

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

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Key Location Guide

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CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

“Just do what you always do, Dragon.”

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

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

I felt sick. My skin turned clammy, and the sound of the woodland crickets became loud and

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

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

Clatch-Zip!

Clatch-Zip!

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

"Stupid bloody Orcs!"

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

Zip! Zip! Zip!

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

I stood straddling the crest of a ravine, where a small stream of lava was flowing below. The face on the mountain, a frightful grimace it seemed, some said was a coincidence or a design of arcane wizards that once took harbor there. Or it was a massive scarecrow created by dwarves that wanted to be left alone. It was, without question in my mind, the face of a dragon. A massive cave filled with rows of teeth could be seen, smoke rolling from its mouth. The eyes shimmered with fire, and the nostril holes dripped lava. It would be hard to argue that it didn't look like a dragon, that it was just

happenstance, an illusion, something the feeble minded shared to encourage fear to be spread by other feeble minds.

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

The base of the mountain was sheer, black rock, no smoke, nor stairs, nor solid footholds. Not smooth, but rough, and spanning hundreds of feet high. This was the part that kept the adventurers at bay: the curious, the daring, the foolish, the greedy that wanted the dragon's hoard, rumored to be large enough to fill every household in an entire kingdom or more. It was impossible to get in, but to get out, with loads of treasure, it would take at least a thousand of the stoutest men to do that. Unless of course you knew a secret way, which it so happens I did know.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

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

I screamed so loud my voice began to crack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah!” I elated.

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

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

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

I glared at Brenwar.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah ... the fear in your sweat is gone already I see and replaced by your spiteful tongue," he said

moving very little, poised rather, pleasant, as if he was being served dinner. “Still, it is good to see you, Son, as always.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I see things as well, Nath ...”

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

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

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

“No!”

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

“How long, Son?”

I kicked at the piles of treasure.

“Two hundred years.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Me. Yes, I knew it was supposed to be me. Deep down in my heart, I knew it was true. But one

would think I'd have a sister or brother to share the responsibility. I continued to pout.

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

"Oh, stop. You were hatched from an egg."

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“When I was your age, I was a bigger man, stronger, faster than the others. Our dragon hearts

account for that. Like a horse's times two. I was cocky, too, for a while. I befriended the dwarves and learned about black smithing and forged the sword you've become so fond of over the years."

I jumped to my feet.

"You made Fang?"

"Indeed."

"But, if you weren't supposed to kill anybody, then why did you make the sword?"

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

"How many did you kill?"

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

I thought about that.

"But don't we save lives when we take the lives of those endangering others?"

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

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

"Save the ones you can, Son. Expect no rewards or thank-you's, and move on, which I don't think you are very eager to do."

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

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

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

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

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

He was talking another hundred years at least.

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

My father leaned back, dragon claws cussing his knees, and said, "Take the sword. The one you borrowed. It was going to be a gift anyway, but you slipped out of here like a halfling rogue before I

could gift it to you. Take Brenwar,” my father’s tone darkened, and so did his smoldering eyes, “and do not return this time without your scales.”

“What? I can’t come back?”

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

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

I shouted back. “Earned it for what?”

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

“Really?” I said, surprised.

“Son, have I ever lied?”

“No,” I said.

“Or been wrong?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I waved my hands up in front of me, saying, “Oh, no-no-no father. It’s dragons. I want to be with

the dragons. It's just that I find myself feeling so sorry for the others." I lied to some small degree. I also wasn't so sure I wanted to sit where he sat forever, even with all the treasures of the world at my feet. There had to be more to what he did.

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

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

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

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

"Ha! You didn't really think he'd kill me, did you?"

"I would've."

"For what?" I demanded.

"Brenwar slammed my scabbarded sword into my chest.

"For stealing."

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

"I know."

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

"Just keep walking, Chatter Box. I'm ready to go. I feel so blasted small in this place. And there's no ale or dwarves..."

Brenwar kept going on, but I couldn't listen. My mind was too busy wondering if this would be my last time at home or not. My scales! I had my doubts I could do it, but determined I was, and a good bit deflated, too. How could I ever be a great dragon like my father? I didn't even have one scale

CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

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

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

The most dreaded, not so vast, nor appealing, was Thraagramoor, or just Thraag, grim as a mudslide, crumb poor, and run by the orcs, ogres, and goblin sorts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He grunted, kicked his short little legs into the ribs of his horse, and charged forward. "To

Narnum it is then, Nath! But by my beard, they'd better not have run out of dwarven ale, else I'll drag you back to Morgdon by your ears!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A tower rose over three hundred feet tall, like an ivory tusk had burst from the ground. It was a beautiful thing. Massive windows adorned its circular walls where an outward staircase spiraled

upward like a green vine. I could see tiny bodies moving and peering through the bay windows. I dreamed about the day I'd be able to fly around that tower, wings spread wide, soaring through the air. But for now I was a ground pounder, same as the dwarves and men.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, my pillows are softer."

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

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

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

Smack!

Brenwar jostled me hard in my side.

"Come on, Nath Dragon!"

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

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

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

“Fool!” he grumbled. “You’ll never learn, will you?”

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

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

“Am not!”

Through the city I went, my passions subdued, the sun dipping over the horizon. I led us into a less traveled part of the down, through some alleys and well off the commoner’s path.

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

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