

## From the Depths of Time

A ray of light from the rising sun touched the summit of the mountain. The blinding spot of light became a line of fire which crept down, spreading to the companion peaks, until sunlight linked the tops of the massif into a glowing whole. The sun began picking out nearby peaks, and eventually the top of the entire range was ablaze with light.

Down in the valleys, the shadows persisted, softened a little by the glowing heights. It would be many hours before the sun's rays penetrated the depths of the valleys. Some places would not see the sun at all, and frost would persist for the entire day.

A bell tolled in a monastery somewhere below. The people of this country of short days and long nights were already on the move, tending to the hardy crops and animals which survived and even flourished at these altitudes.

High on the second-highest peak, which was only a little smaller than the highest peak in the area, a stone tinkled as it slid towards the valley. A small earthquake a few days ago had caused a spur of the mountain to shear off. The resulting cascade of rock continued to settle, and now and then small rocks slid down the scree and bounced down to lower levels.

The face of the fault was not completely sheer. Fissures and ledges marred its smooth surface, and in one place a rock teetered on a narrow ledge. Then the rock fell, revealing a small crevice. This allowed the rays of the rising sun to penetrate the crevice, and something ancient started to wake. The mountain seemed to shiver.

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"Where did it come from?" demanded the Earl. His scowl travelled around at those at the Council table, stopping at the scruffy looking individual at the bottom.

"Er, we don't know, sire."

"It is your job, as Wizard, to know about the supernatural, the odd, and the contradictory. It's in your oath. Not to mention your contract."

The Wizard Harshen shrank under the Earl's gaze. "Er, sire, you know how it is, sire..."

"Of course I know how it is! How it's been for ages now." The Earl stood up and walked around behind his chair. Everyone avoided his gaze. They carefully didn't look in the Wizard's direction. "I know that your role is mostly ceremonial these days. All your 'spells' are sleight of hand and misdirection. But, damn it, Harsh, surely there's still some small part, some nugget of the old wisdom still remaining."

Harshen noted that the Earl hadn't used his full name. There was hope. "Well, Jack, erm..." The Earl's face was stony. "Well, sire, I can look. I can check back in my records. There may be something."

The Earl gave in and sat down again. "Thanks, Harsh. Thanks all of you. I know that you have all tried. I guess that it doesn't matter where the creature came from. What is important is what we are going to do about it."

He sighed. "OK, all of you, please go back to your people and see what you can come up with. I declare this meeting over. Please stay for a minute, Harshen."

When the others had gone, the Earl sighed. "What are we going to do about this Dragon, Harsh? Dragon! In this day and age! I'm sorry I called you out, pal. It was out of sheer frustration."

Harsh was an old friend of the Earl, so he didn't comment. He snapped his fingers, and a card appeared between finger and thumb. "Sleight of hand, you called it, Jack. And you are right." He sighed. "Another word for it is conjuring, of course. But 'conjuring' used to mean so much more."

He clicked his fingers again and a small ball of light appeared in the air in front of him.

The Earl started. "Is that...? How did you...? Is that real?"

"Is it real magic, Jack?" laughed the Wizard. "Yes, it is. I didn't want to cause alarm in the meeting, but it seems that magic, after being in the doldrums for centuries, maybe millennia, is experiencing an upswing. But it has been so long..."

"So we may have the means to deal with the Dragon?" The Earl was immediately hopeful.

Harsh was silent for a while. "What do you mean by that, Jack? What do we have to deal with? The Dragon has just been sitting there, on the crag, for three days now. And so far as we can tell it's done nothing."

"True, but what if it gets hungry? What if it starts eating cows, or horses, or heaven help us, people?"

"Let's keep people away. There are sheep up there, and it has shown no interest in them, but I recommend sending a few cows and horses up there. We do need to know what it feeds on."

"What if it's people that it eats? It's a magical creature after all. We can't really send a couple of people up there."

The Wizard laughed grimly. "That won't be a problem. People are curious about the Dragon, and will take themselves up there, one way or another. Even if you prohibit them from visiting the creature. In any case, my apprentice and I will be going up there to take a look tomorrow. It's our duty."

"Ah, yes. Be careful, old friend."

"Strangely, I don't think that the Dragon is going to be a problem, Jack."

The Earl sighed. "Ceremonial, I said. Well, my role is also ceremonial these days. I have no real authority over them, but people still let me boss them around. They insist that I chair the Council meetings, for instance."

"It's not surprising, Jack. You're a natural leader. That's why they defer to you."

"Thanks, old friend." The Earl laughed. "Even the Mayor defers to me, and it's his darn Council!"

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There was a crack and another layer of rock sheared off. Rocks and boulders crashed down into the valley. As it happened, there was no one to observe this, as the second peak was far from the routes up to the prime peak. The small crevice grew to a wide chimney, which narrowed as it delved into the mountain. Light probed into the depths of crevice, and something ancient moved within it. The mountain trembled, and the crevice grew deeper. A sound like a mumbling roar emerged from the ever-widening crevice.

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"What are we looking for, sir?" The apprentice toiled in the Wizard's wake. They were climbing slowly up into the hills behind the town. "Apart from the Dragon, sir?"

"Hmm? Well, Grak, we're looking for information. If the Dragon has been catching and eating animals, there may be bones, or even bits of animals, that we can use to determine what it eats. That sort of thing."

Grak didn't seem worried. He just nodded. The Wizard, who on the other hand was a little worried, envied his apprentice's ability to shrug off any concerns. Of course, Harsh tried to shield his protégé from the dangers of their business, such as they were these days, but he suspected that Grak wouldn't have been worried in any case.

They turned a corner, and they could see the crag that the Dragon was perched on.

"No bones. No bodies," said Grak.

"Hmm, yes, but that doesn't mean... Eeek!"

The Dragon had flown down and perched on a rock near them.

"Good day, sire," said Grak, bowing to the Dragon. "I hope you are well? We mean you no harm, sire. We just want to know why you have suddenly appeared here. Is there anything that we can do for you?"

The Dragon extended his neck and sniffed at Grak and his master, then, with a flap of his wings, he flew back up to his perch.

"He seemed nice enough," said Grak, as he and Harsh retreated to lower levels.

"Yes, yes, boy. But leave the negotiations to me."

"Sure, boss. Sorry."

Harsh looked at him with suspicion. He was by nature a cautious man, but Grak seemed to be able to make friends with anyone. Perhaps even Dragons?

"Can I trust you to be careful, Grak?"

"Mmm? What do you mean, Harsh? I mean, sir."

Harsh sighed. Grak was a good lad, but he wasn't the type to address a person by their full name or title. He'd even called the Earl 'Jack' once, causing Harsh to gasp in shock. The Earl didn't seem to notice. Grak called the Earl's wife Jenny, but so did everyone else. Harsh smiled. The only person that Grak had trouble talking to was Ellen, the Earl's daughter. She reduced the boy to a stuttering mess just by walking into the room.

"Well, Grak, how do you feel about being stationed up here for a while?"

"Up here? With the Dragon? That would be awesome, Harsh."

Harsh smiled. "OK, then, I'll square your absence with your school teacher. You'll need to get your camping gear, I guess. Please keep a safe distance away from the Dragon. We don't know what it is capable of."

"Sure, Harsh. Wow! This is so exciting! Thanks, Harsh. I mean, sir!"

"Don't worry, Grak. You don't need to call me 'sir' all the time!"

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"So Grak is up there keeping an eye on the Dragon. Should I send some men up there to protect him?" The Earl was sitting on his private balcony, drinking tea with his daughter.

"Grak's up there alone?" asked Ellen. "Oh no! He must be so scared."

Harsh chuckled. "He's loving every minute of it, Ellen! I've been up there a few times, and he's keeping a detailed notebook of the Dragon's movements. No, Jack, I don't think that you need to send men up there. Grak's not worried, and neither am I, for some reason."

Ellen muttered "But still..." under her breath.

"Has he seen anything of interest, Harsh?"

"Well, he reports that sometimes the Dragon isn't there. I asked if it flew away, and he said that, no, he just wasn't there. He refers to the Dragon as 'he'."

“Hmm. Has he eaten anything? A sheep? Or a cow?”

“Grak said no. He’s not seen the Dragon eating anything.”

“Curious. Well, we’ll leave things as they are.”

“I do have something to report, Jack. I’ve been going through a few of the older magic tomes and grimoires. Previously they were of only historical interest, but now, well, I’m finding all sorts of useful stuff. For instance, Dragons are often mentioned.”

“Interesting. So, are there any hints on how best to deal with them?”

“Deal with them? In many of the legends, Dragons seem to be on the side of Humanity! Dragons frequently step in to repel the forces of Darkness.”

“Well, well. So we should be nice to the Dragon, then?” The Earl laughed.

Harsh nodded. “Yes, Jack. Though it doesn’t seem to need anything from us.”

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An eye was visible the crevice. A monstrous eye, many times the size of the eye of a mundane creature, edged by stiff eye-lashes to the same scale. It had a dark pupil and an iris the blue of the sky. It moved. Left and right, left and right, the creature’s movement causing more rocks and pebbles to crash down the mountain. Slowly the crevice was growing, and the creature’s thick brown hair was visible now and then. The individual hairs of the creature’s coat were long and stiff. Another eye appeared now and then as the creature apparently moved its head from side to side in its entombment, slowly, slowly freeing itself.

A huge chunk of rock broke away, and a clawed paw could be seen, flexing as if the creature was exercising long unused muscles and joints. The claws were long and sharp. The creature roared, and the sound was like muted thunder, as its head was still locked into the mountain.

Down in the valley a tourist was training his binoculars on the peak.

“Say, what’s that?”

A local who was acting as a guide for the tourists borrowed the binoculars and scanned the peak. His body went rigid when he looked where the tourist was indicating, and he nearly dropped the binoculars.

“This is bad,” he said in the tourists’ language. “Very bad indeed!”

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Harshen climbed the last few metres of the track up to Grak’s camping spot. Suddenly he realised that he could hear voices talking. Who did Grak have with him? Harsh had passed through the Police cordon on this way up here, so he knew that people were mostly keeping away, as the Earl and the Mayor had requested.

He turned the last corner. He saw Grak’s fire, his little tent, and a few of Grak’s belongings. Hmm, his apprentice was a tidy boy. There was also a farm bike, and a figure was seated next to Grak by the fire. The figure turned.

“Oh, hullo, Harsh.” The girl and Grak moved apart just a touch.

“Hullo, Ellen. What are you doing up here?”

“Ah, well, I thought of Grak up here alone. I wondered if he was scared. The Dragon could be dangerous! So I came up here.” The girl’s cheeks were slightly pink.

Grak snorted. “The Dragon isn’t dangerous.” He seemed to have lost his shyness around the Earl’s daughter.

“You didn’t know it wasn’t dangerous, Ellen! You could have been in danger too!” Harsh pointed out.

“Oh well, er, I suppose. I didn’t think of that.”

“Anyway Grak, do you have anything to report?”

“Not really, Harsh. He’s just been sitting there as usual.”

“He came down and perched on that rock when I got here,” added Ellen. “It gave me such a shock! But he only sniffed us and sat for a while, then flew back to his crag.”

“I’ll get my journal,” said Grak, and stood up. The Earl’s daughter stood up too.

“I’d better get going, Grak. Mum will be wondering where I am.”

She moved slightly towards Grak, and he moved half a step towards her. Then she turned away and put her helmet on, started her farm bike, and drove off with a wave.

Harsh reviewed Grak journal, which was detailed, but uninteresting.

“Here’s your supplies, Grak. I’m wondering if there is any point in having you up here all the time.”

Grak was about to agree when the Dragon took off, soared high in the sky, and bugled. Harsh and Grak watched as the Dragon spiralled even higher, and blasted its war-cry into the heavens once more. Then it spiralled back down to its usual perch.

Grak looked at Harsh and laughed. “Oh, I think that I’ll stay up here for few more days.”

“Good boy! Well, I’ll head home. Maybe I’ll send your supplies up by bike tomorrow.”

“By bike?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I see. Thanks.”

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Ellen always seemed to be around when Harsh reported to the Earl. Harsh didn’t mind, the Earl didn’t seem to either, so Harsh didn’t mention it.

“Big news, Jack. A creature, we don’t know what, is digging itself out of a mountain in Seraphia.”

“Seraphia? That’s on the other side of the world! Why is that big news?”

“Oh, Dad! A Dragon appears here, and this creature appears there? There’s got to be a connection.”

She smiled at him, and he smiled back. “You’re right, of course,” he laughed. He turned to Harsh. “What do you think, Harsh? Perhaps they are enemies?”

“I think that they are enemies. From the depths of time, I think, Jack. From the depths of time. It’s interesting that you immediately assumed that, though. My contacts in Seraphia say that the creature emanates evil, and the Dragon does not. Anyway, one possibility is that the creature is an Ichneumon, a legendary creature and a known enemy of Dragons. I have a picture here.” He spread a scroll across the table.

“Hmm, let’s have a look? What is it? A weasel?”

“A mongoose. Or at least, it is similar to one.”

“How big is it, Harsh?”

“Good question, Ellen. A normal mongoose is roughly the same size as a cat at its biggest. The one in Seraphia is probably of a comparable size to the Dragon.”

“Wow!”

“Wow, indeed. I’m trying to find out more from my contacts over there. This resurgence of magic... Well, don’t laugh, I contacted them by crystal ball.”

Ellen and the Earl smiled.

“My contacts are some distance from the site, and are travelling there at this moment.”

“Couldn’t they use a magic carpet?” Ellen joked.

“Don’t laugh too soon, Ellen! They are reviewing all their magical documents, and who knows? Maybe there’s a flying carpet in there, somewhere!”

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“So, it seems to be digging itself out of the rock, Xanh?”

“Yes, Harsh.” His image in Harsh’s crystal ball nodded.

Harsh’s friend, who was a Sorcerer, the Seraphian equivalent of a Wizard, paused to take a sip from a wineglass. “We suspect that it is a fearsome Beast, one which our scrolls say was almost invulnerable to our weapons. However, the records detail several occasions when such a Beast was destroyed by a Dragon. Oh, and it doesn’t like fire.”

“Hmm. Our Dragon seems friendly to humans, but it is half a world away from your Beast.”

“I don’t believe that is a problem. Most daemons and similar creatures can... What’s your word for it? Ah, yes! ... teleport themselves anywhere that they want.”

Harsh mused. He scratched his beard. “Ah, yes. Some of our legends say similar things. You don’t know exactly what it is? The Dragon seems friendly, but I don’t get that feeling when I think about your Beast, Xanh.”

“No, indeed. My assistant has been part of the way up the mountain, and she says that she can feel the evil emanating from it even low on the mountain. But she couldn’t get near to the Beast, and swears that she will never go closer, if she can help it. She couldn’t identify the Beast for sure, as it is still mostly buried in the mountain.”

Harsh nodded. “Did you protect her with a charm or amulet?”

Xanh paused. “Um, no. I wish that I could have. My role has mostly been symbolic. I lead some celebrations and festivities here, my friend, but I confess that until recently I believed that any charms and blessings that I have invoked were just for show. But these days I see real effects. Also...”

Xanh paused and created a small ball of emerald green fire. He gestured and the ball of fire moved through his crystal ball and appeared out of Harsh’s ball.

Harsh laughed and put his hands around the ball of fire and quenched it. “Nice one, my friend. I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

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Harsh and Ellen rode their bikes up the mountain and into Grak’s camp-site. High above them on his spur of rock, the Dragon looked down at them for a moment then resumed his usual pose, staring at who knows what. Ellen removed her helmet and put her arm around Grak, and he bent his head and kissed her.

“That was fun,” said Harsh. “It’s years since I’ve been on a bike. I think that I was not a lot older than you are at the moment, Grak. Hmm, what’s wrong, Grak?”

Ellen looked at Grak, “Yes, Grak, you do seem quieter than usual.”

“Uh, sit down, guys, and I’ll tell you.”

Harsh looked around. He'd seen Grak's camp-site before, but never really looked at it. The fire was burning some substantial logs, and there was a small pile of fuel to one side. Some bigger logs provided seating for visitors. There were no trees visible in the rocky valley, only bushes, so where had it all come from? Harsh had his suspicions, but he'd talk with Grak later.

"So, what is it, Grak? What has shaken you up?"

"Well, there's not much to do up here when the Dragon is quiet, so I've been roaming around."

"Yes. You found that grasshopper. I've not seen anything like it before," said Harsh.

"Well, I decided to climb up to the Dragons crag. It's just a grassy slope, over there to the right."

"Oh, yes. That's not too bad," said Ellen, looking at the slope. "It's just a bit of a scramble, that's all."

Harsh looked at it with suspicion. "Hmm. If you say so. What happened then?"

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Grak scrambled up the last bit of the slope. He made it to the ledge that extended over the valley and became the Dragon's crag. Grak looked down at his camp, which seemed a long way below. What now?

The Dragon was looking at him, but he just sat there, not moving, not reacting. Grak walked slowly up to the Beast, ready to retreat if necessary. The boy hesitated and then slowly extended his hand to touch the Dragon's flank, and the creature sighed. The Dragon was covered in scales, but it was soft and warm to the touch. Grak couldn't decide what colour the scales were as they shimmered and reflected light from the sky, the mountains, and the tough highland grasses.

"Well, now," said Grak. "Thank you. But you are waiting for something, aren't you, sire?"

Grak climbed onto the Dragon's back. He felt that it was the right thing to do, and that the Dragon wanted him to do it. The Dragon sighed again.

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"You climbed onto the Dragon?" breathed Ellen. "How brave of you!"

Grak cast a glance at Harsh. "I think that he wanted me to. I suspect that he encouraged me to climb up there in the first place."

"You didn't feel compelled to climb up to the Dragon and climb onto him?" asked Harsh. "This is important."

"No, Harsh, sir. You're wondering if the Dragon is able to influence humans, aren't you?" The boy thought about it for a moment or two. "No, sir. I really wanted to get close to him. He didn't make me climb onto him, Harsh. I really don't think that he did. He might have encouraged me, sir. Asked me to, but without words."

"So what happened next?"

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Grak screamed as the Dragon dropped into the valley.

After Grak had climbed onto his back, the Dragon stood up. He saw that Grak had settled comfortably, then he took a step forward and just dropped from the ledge.

The Dragon opened his wings and checked their fall. One flap of his huge wings, and they rose up past the cliffs at the other side of the valley.

“Hey, you don’t usually take off that way, Dragon!” Grak sensed that the Dragon was happy and full of joy. They continued to rise, and if Grak had known about thermals, he would have guessed that the Dragon was using one.

“I can see for miles, Dragon. This is amazing! There’s the town, and I can see the city in the distance. Wow!”

A brief wave of vertigo swept over Grak, which was the only time that he felt dizzy while on the Dragon’s back.

“We’re going higher! Will I be able to breath?” Grak wondered. However, he didn’t seem to be having any trouble.

The Dragon went into a shallow dive, bugled, and everything changed.

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“Everything changed?” asked Ellen.

“Yes. The weather is clear. After the change, it was cloudy. I think that it was a different place.”

“Teleportation!” Harsh murmured.

“What?”

“I’ll explain later, Grak. What happened next?”

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It was suddenly cloudy, and the Dragon and Grak were just below the cloud ceiling. The Dragon spiralled downwards, and perched on a crag, just like it had near Grak’s camp-site.

“There’s another Dragon! It is a Dragon, isn’t it? Wait, there are others! There. There. And there!”

Suddenly a flock of small bird-like Dragons appeared. They twisted and turned as a unit, swirling around the bigger Dragon. He snapped at them, but they had swirled away and disappeared.

Up high in the sky, a very large Dragon skimmed the underside of the clouds, and while Grak watched, another of the large Dragons appeared from a higher altitude and burst through the cloud layer. It approached a third large Dragon and the three turned, and continued in a slightly different direction.

Grak’s Dragon looked at him and took off. There was no diving into the valley this time. Grak decided that the Dragon had been teasing him when he first carried Grak into the air. Suddenly the clouds disappeared and Grak was looking down, over the Dragon’s flank, at his camp-site. The Dragon suddenly banked steeply, the valley swung around them, and the Dragon landed on his usual spur of rock.

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Great chunks of rock were breaking away and tumbling into the valley, and the ancient creature was pushing and pulling on the rocks which still trapped it. Xanh and his apprentice were watching from across the valley, using a telescope that they had brought along with them.

“It won’t be long,” said Tien, Xanh’s apprentice. She looked grim. “It’s at least halfway out of the rock. Do you agree, sir?”

“Yes, Tien. I’m not sure what is going to happen then. The military are waiting to see which way the Beast moves. They are going to try to contain the creature, but I don’t think that it will be possible.”



Tien shivered. “They won’t be able to stop it from going anywhere it wants. You haven’t felt the Beast’s aura, boss. I can sense it through the telescope.”

Xanh looked at the mountain without the benefit of the telescope. “I feel it a little, my dear, but you have always been more sensitive than me.” He laughed a little. “I’m afraid that those who I told fortunes for got little value for their money, but you, I think, did much better.”

She smiled at him for a moment. “Don’t be so sure, Master. I think you did better than you believe.” Then her mind turned back to the Beast, and her face fell again.

“Are you sure that your fiancé is with the military contingent down in the valley, Tien?”

“Yes, Xanh. I’m sure.”

Xanh put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Tien. I can’t tell what might happen to him.”

She nodded. “I’ve tried so hard to penetrate the mists of time, but I’ve had no luck.”

Across the valley rocks continued to fall, and suddenly there was a crack which seemed to the watcher to be felt through the ground as well as falling on their ears. A huge chunk of rock peeled from the mountain, and, breaking as it fell, tumbled into the valley.

The Beast wriggled and squirmed, but was still held by its hips and back legs. The humans who were watching all took a step back. The Beast shook itself and struggled for a bit longer, but then it subsided and stopped moving.

“Not long now.” Xahn picked up his phone to inform his superiors.

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“He’s a bit restless today, isn’t he?” Ellen said.

Grak nodded. “Yes. He keeps looking down here, doesn’t he?”

“I want to go up there.”

Grak looked at her. “Really?”

“Yes. I think that he wants me to.”

“Do you think that it’s safe. Your father...” His voice trailed away as he saw her face. “Er, OK.”

They scrambled up the grassy slope, and tackled the rocks which led to the Dragon’s crag.

“That wasn’t too hard. Wow. The Dragon is huge when you get close!”

Grak took her hand, and they walked up to the Dragon who was watching them closely.

“He wants us to climb onto his back,” breathed Ellen. She touched the Dragon’s flank. “Oh, he’s warm! Let’s go!”

“But... OK.” Grak protested a little.

He and Ellen climbed onto the Dragon’s back and Grak who was seated at the rear put his arms around the girl.

“Every time I think that we could fall off, I suddenly feel that the Dragon will ensure that we won’t.”

“Mmm, yes. I think he’s telling us that. It’s not his thoughts exactly. Maybe Harsh would know? Oh, here we go!”

The Dragon stood up and took off up the valley, without dipping into the valley like the first time that he had carried Grak. Then, suddenly the sun moved and the weather changed.

“I think that we are in Seraphia,” said Grak.

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The sun was just setting in Seraphia, and the Dragon wheeled down into the valley and perched on the roof of the Temple.

“Let’s get up there, Tien,” Xahn said hurriedly. “I hope it’s safe.”

“It is, Master. One moment.” She picked up a device from Xahn’s disk.

“But...? OK, let’s go.”

The Dragon was perched on the ridge of the roof as Tien and Xahn emerged onto the flat section of the roof.

“Greetings!” called Tien.

The boy on the Dragon’s back looked at his companion and then replied. “Greetings. I’m Grak and this is Ellen.”

Xahn’s device had translated his words. “How did... Never mind. I’m Xahn and this is Tien, my apprentice. I know of you, Grak. You are Harshen’s apprentice, but who is this?”

“I’m his girlfriend,” said Ellen. Grak glanced at her but didn’t say anything.

“Um, we can’t get off the Dragon, sir. He wants to be ready to take off at any time. Is the Beast still in the mountain, sir.” said Grak.

“Well, it’s not yet managed to free itself, Grak. It’s over there, on the second summit of the range at the other side of the valley.”

The Dragon’s head whipped around and it bugled. The Beast across the valley replied with a roar that the humans felt deep inside themselves. The Dragon took off and soared into the heights. He hovered just below the clouds and bellowed a challenge. Again the Beast replied. The Dragon circled lower, closer to the Beast in the rock.

The Beast surged in its rocky prison and let out a bellow. It tried again, and was still unable to break free, but a rolling ball of darkness shot towards the Dragon, who twisted in the sky, the ball of darkness barely missing him. He flew higher and circled well above the mountain and the Beast.

“Did you feel that, Grak? That sense of death, that horrid, horrid feeling of sheer...” Words failed her. “Sheer badness? Evil!”

“Yes. I think that the Dragon is protecting us from most of that, just as he was preventing us from falling off his back. It’s horrible.”

The Dragon turned and shot a ball of fire at the Beast, but was off target. Both creatures shot a missile at the same time and the ball of fire from the Dragon met the ball of darkness from the Beast and both missiles just vanished with a loud bang.

The sun set, and the creatures stopped creating their magic missiles. The Dragon circled for a while, and the Beast down below stopped moving. The Dragon flew back to the town and spiralled down to the Temple, where Xahn and Tien were waiting.

“So the fighting stops when the sun sets? Ellen, I think he wants us to dismount.”

Ellen nodded.

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“I’m in huge trouble with your parents, you two,” said Harsh. He was trying to look stern.

“Apparently I’m responsible for you climbing on the Dragon and taking off for Seraphia.”

“Sorry, Harsh. We didn’t know...!”

“I know, Ellen. I know.”

Xahn was laughing, as was Tien. “We will look after them, Harsh, my friend.”

Harsh's image nodded. "Thank you. But you are going to be in the middle of a battle tomorrow, I think."

This brought Xahn back to earth. "Yes, you are right. Anyway we will look after your friends tonight. I don't know why, but the Beast becomes quiescent at night. The Dragon is snoozing on the roof at the moment. That gives us a little time."

Harsh wished them luck and signed off.

"Well, friends, let me show you where you will be sleeping. I —"

A young man in a military uniform burst through the door.

"Wei!" Tien hugged the newcomer.

"Tien's fiancé," explained Xahn.

"Hullo," Wei said, his arm still around Tien. "I came up to see Tien, Xahn, sir, because tomorrow there is going to be a battle, I think."

Xahn nodded. "And you want to talk to her alone? That's OK, Wei. But we will eat in half an hour. And I will introduce you to our guests."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you! We will see you later." Wei bowed to everyone and then he and Tien left.

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"I like Wei and Tien. Xahn as well."

"Yes, so do I, Ellen. Say these monk's cells are quite comfortable, aren't they?"

"Yes. Did they say they were for guests?"

Grak nodded. "Well, we'd better get some rest. Who knows what will happen in the morning?"

He climbed into his bed, but Ellen just stood there. "Grak?"

"Yes?" He was worried.

"Can you hold me, just hold me, for a bit?"

"Sure." He made room in the bed. She slipped in beside him, and he gathered her into his arms. They were quiet for a while.

"You know, Grak, I've led a pretty sheltered life."

"But you've been abroad on holiday, haven't you?"

"Yes, but only with my parents. They pretty much decided where we should go, where we should eat and so on. Hotels and resorts. I should have been more assertive! I'm such a wuss!"

Grak laughed. "No, Ellen. Your father is a powerful character. You take after your mother, who is a sweet woman, but far from pushy."

"Ha! You should see her bossing my Dad around some times. But I know what you mean."

There was silence for a minute or two.

"We never went abroad, Ellen. We couldn't afford it. But we all went down to the coast every year. My parents and my sisters stayed in a caravan, once, and I was in a little tent. I woke up one night, and something was snuffling outside."

"Goodness! Did you find out what it was, Grak?"

"A hedgehog."

She laughed. "Maybe if I'd had brothers or sisters it would have been different."

"Yeah. I was always fighting with my sisters. And they were fighting with each other."

"That must have driven your parents mad!"

“They ignored most of it. They just stepped in when the fighting looked like it was going to become too physical.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Mmm.” They fell silent again.

Grak was about to suggest that she return to her own bed, but he realised that she was asleep. He smiled and kissed her on the head, and carefully climbed out of the bed. He climbed into the other bed and fell asleep himself.

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The inhabitants of the Temple rose early, before the sun rose from behind the mountains.

“The Dragon wants us to hurry, I think,” said Grak and Ellen nodded. Xahn and Tien showed them to the refectory where the monks breakfasted.

“We’ll stay here at the Temple,” said Xahn and Tien nodded. “I think that there will be casualties, and we can gather them here and tend to them. Fortunately many people have already fled.”

Grak and Ellen grabbed some food and the monks gave them a satchel with more food, and they hurried up to the roof. The Dragon was pacing the roof, obviously anxious to be off.

“Quickly, quickly,” Ellen urged, though they were moving as fast as they could.

They were only just seated when the Dragon took, bugling his war cry to the heavens.

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Tien came running up the stairs to the turret room.

“We’re running out of space, Xahn. The Abbot has started to move casualties into the refectory. I don’t know where he is getting the beds from.”

“Harsh sent a few, but it is hard to move that volume quickly using magic. I’ve brought in some from the hospital in the Capital.”

“Oh, right. I should have guessed.”

“Are there many casualties coming in?”

Tien thought for a minute. “No civilians for a while, but there are...” She broke down.

“There are some troops. Many? Have you heard from Wei?”

Tien pulled herself together. “Only a few...”

Xahn put an arm round his apprentice. “... but you’ve not heard from Wei.”

Tien looked down and took a deep breath. “No, Master. There has been no news from his unit.”

Xahn looked within himself. “I can’t see him anywhere, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“But I should be able to see my own fiancé!” wailed Tien.

“No! It doesn’t work like that! You know that! You KNOW that! Concentrate on what I’ve taught you.”

“Yes, Master.” She turned to look at the scene of desolation. The turret room which was the highest point of the temple gave a view down the whole valley. On either side of the valley the mountains still stood, and seemed to be untouched, but Tien and Xahn knew better. Entire chunks had been sheered off the solid rock of the mountains and the rubble was piled here and there on the valley floor.

The formerly fertile lowlands looked far from capable of supporting life. They looked as if they had been stirred like a pudding, and pieces of wood brick and tarmac from the smashed buildings and roads stuck up through the churned earth in many places, like the unmixed ingredients.

The river that had flowed in a meandering fashion down the valley was blocked and diverted by debris, pooling in some places, and flowing somewhere underneath the chaos in others. The water was oily and dirty, burnt and poisonous, muddy and discoloured. Bridges had been destroyed.

“Horrible!” said Xahn and Tien nodded. They turned to look at the town behind them. The desolation was not as bad but in one or two spots it looked like a sooty bomb had exploded. Everything in the craters was covered in black sludge, and they knew that it smelled as bad as it looked.

“I think that the Temple has some magic and that has protected the town,” said Xahn.

“Yes, and the troops were successful in diverting the Beast down the valley. Thank goodness they brought in those incendiary weapons! But it cost them.”

Xahn knew that she was thinking of Wei again. The troops had succeeded it is true, but many were injured and a large number, including Wei, were missing.

“I wonder how our friends are doing,” mused Xahn.

They turned and looked down the valley again. At the extreme end of the valley it looked like a strange thunderstorm was happening. Dark clouds filled the valley and flashes of brilliant light arced through the clouds. Now and then a ball of darkness burst out of the cloud mass and impacted on the floor or the sides of the valley. This caused a fountain of earth or rock to erupt for a moment, Xahn knew, covering everything in a black sticky stinking sludge. Neither the Dragon nor the Beast could be seen because of the distance and the dark clouds.

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Grak and Ellen held tight to the Dragon as it powered through the air towards the Creature’s tomb.

“Wow, he’s in a hurry!” said Ellen.

“Yeah, but we are too late! Look!”

The Dragon landed on a spike of rock close to the place where the Creature had been trapped and hooted mournfully.

“It went down that way!” said Grak. “Look, the rocks are covered in black slime.”

The Dragon hooted again, this time its bugling sounded more hopeful. It took off and followed the trail that the Beast had left behind it. It seemed that the Beast was intent on destroying anything man made. They flew over a row of cottages that seemed to have exploded.

“I hope the people got out OK.”

“Xahn said that there were very few people left on this side of the river, Ellen. The Beast’s aura drove them out, he said.”

Suddenly, Ellen yelled. “Up, up, Dragon! It’s hiding in that swamp!”

The Dragon dodged as the Beast reared up out of the swamp. As it did so, the Dragon shot a bolt of fire at the Beast and scored a glancing blow, while the Beast’s ball of darkness was way off target.

“It wasn’t ready to fire at us! It thought it would catch us in its ambush!” exulted Grak.

“Yes, but now it has time,” said Ellen grimly.

The Beast shot off another ball of darkness, the Dragon dodged and shot a ball of fire at the Beast, which also dodged. The two antagonists settled in for a long battle, hurling their bolts at each other.

“He’s agile in the air. He is going to be hard for the Beast to hit,” said Ellen.

“Yes, but the Beast is able to divert the Dragon’s fireballs.”

“True. Left, left, Dragon. Woooow! That was close.”

Somehow they could tell that the Dragon found that amusing.

“He’s glad that we are here helping him!”

Hours passed. As the battle continued, it seemed that the Beast would not be able to hit the Dragon. But eventually the Beast’s bolts of darkness spread a black fog when they exploded. Slowly the cloud built until Ellen and Grak could barely see through it.

The Dragon broke off the fight and rose above the black clouds.

“He’s unsure what to do,” said Grak, as the Dragon hovered over the battleground. Then the Dragon turned and flew up into the mountains.

“He’s giving up?” Ellen was shocked.

“No, he’s determined. He has to do something. He’s got a plan.”

“Yes, you’re right! How could I doubt him?”

The Dragon landed in a small dell, that was protected from the battle area. Now and then a small dark cloud would find its way into the dell, but it would quickly evaporate.

“He wants us to get off.”

They dismounted and watched as the Dragon took off. He gained height and then suddenly he was gone.

“Where’s he gone?”

“I feel that he will be back. We’ll wait for him?”

They settled down and consumed the food and water that they’d brought with them.

“It’s late afternoon, isn’t it, Grak?” said Ellen after looking at the sky.

“Yeah, I think so. It only seems like an hour or so since we left the Temple.”

Ellen nodded. “But I’m tired.”

“Me too. But I’m glad we could help him.”

Grak leant against a rock. Ellen rested her head on his shoulder, and they dozed, waiting for the Dragon’s return.

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Wei wiped the blood from his eyes. The cut seemed to have stopped bleeding, and he could see around him. The big flame-thrower that his section had been operating was a tangled mess, smashed by a direct hit from the Beast. Wei smiled grimly, as he remembered how the Beast had turned away from the troops and headed down the valley.

There was a groan. Wei pulled what looked like the remains of a table which pinned down one of his comrades.

“Wei? Are you OK?”

“I think so, Ling. Are you badly injured? I’m afraid that all our comrades have been killed.”

Wei realised that he couldn’t easily move his arm. Dislocated?

He and Ling helped each other move away from their position. He was shocked when he looked around. Everything had been flattened, and their big flame-thrower had been moved twenty metres or so by the Beast’s blast.

“How far to the town, Wei?”

“Probably about five kilometres.”

They made their way down what was left of the road. Ling was limping, so progress was slow.

“At least we diverted the Beast away from the town! Let’s hope that the Dragon can finish the job!”

Wei found a wheelbarrow which had survived the battle, and they made better time after that.

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The Dragon appeared with warning in front of Grak and Ellen. He had a shining object clasped between its claws, and gently deposited it on the grass.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Ellen.

“An egg! An egg? Where did it get an egg from? He’s definitely not a female!”

The Dragon looked at them.

“He’s sad. But determined. He’s going to finish this, somehow!”

“Yes! He’s also saying goodbye, Ellen.”

“What? You’re right! I don’t understand!”

“I think I do. Farewell, old friend. I salute you and honour you.”

“But...”

The Dragon took off and bugled as it headed towards the conflict zone. Grak and Ellen watched as it hovered over the dark cloud stirred up by the Beast. It peered down, as if it could pierce the gloom with its gaze, then dived.

“No, no, no...” Grak yelled as the Dragon disappeared into the clouds.

A titanic explosion rocked the area. Xahn and Tien felt it up in the town, and Harsh paused as the magical and mundane shock-waves reached him on the other side of the world.

Ellen and Grak were tossed about by the physical shock-waves, and glimpsed other magical realms as the explosion reached them.

“Don’t cry, Ellen. We’re OK!”

Ellen picked herself up, and threw herself into Grak’s arms.

“Don’t you realise, Grak! He sacrificed himself for us!”

“Yes, and he did it willingly. I hope that I would do the same if I were in his position. At least he left us his egg.”

They turned and looked, but there was no sign of the egg.

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Tien placed her hands on the patient’s head. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Xahn was tending to the patient next to her.

“We should be able to reduce the sedation tomorrow or the next day. How close were these poor people to the blast that affected them?”

Tien finished treating her patient. “About ten metres. Anyone who was closer than them did not survive.”

“Wait...” said Xahn.

But Tien had gone rigid. She had sensed the same thing that Xahn had.

“Wei! Wei has been brought in! He’s alive!” She spun around and headed for the door.

Xahn smiled at her retreating back. “He’s OK. He wasn’t affected by a blast, but he has a physical injury.”

He had picked up this information using magic, but Tien was gone and never heard what he said.

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“So, still no news?” Harsh asked.

“Sorry Harsh, no.” Xahn scratched his head. He hadn’t had time to shave it recently.

Tien and Wei rushed in. “Xahn, the military have found them! A chopper is bringing them here. They are unharmed, but a bit bashed about!”

“I heard that,” said Harsh. “That’s good news.”

“We’ll call you back, Harsh.”

Harsh nodded and closed the connection.

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“How do you feel, guys?” Xahn looked around the table. Grak and Ellen had bandages and dressings, but weren’t badly injured.

“We’re OK,” said Ellen, moving a little stiffly because of her bruises. “How are you?”

Wei had his arm in a sling. “We’re OK too, Ellen. Xahn and Tien were back here, helping the wounded, so they were safe. I was injured and knocked out. I have a broken scapula and a dislocated shoulder. We got away with it lightly compared to some of the poor people who received a near miss from the Beast’s blasts.”

“What happened to those who sustained a direct hit.”

“They died.”

“The Dragon... The Dragon...” Ellen started to cry.

“Don’t cry, Ellen. He was a hero, it is true, but I feel that this scenario has been played out many times over the years.”

“That doesn’t really help,” said Tien, and Ellen nodded.

“But it seems that the threat of the Beast is over. For now.”

“For now?” asked Wei. “Surely it didn’t survive?”

Xahn looked around at them. “This has happened before. There are records of conflict between the Dragon and the Beast, going back to the beginning of recorded time. The records don’t say what happened in all cases, but the conflict always ended with a cataclysm. My guess is that the Dragon kills the Beast or the other way around and both creatures are destroyed as a result. Or maybe the conflict shifts forward in time? I’m not sure.”

“Maybe a situation where both get destroyed is unusual,” suggested Tien. “If the Dragon wins we enter a golden age, but if the Beast wins, all is darkness.”

“We can look into that theory, Tien. We’re going to need to study the old records, but if what we think is true, it will be a long, long time before the creatures will be seen again.”

“I think that the creatures are re-born every cycle,” said Grak.

“Why, Grak?”

“Well, Tien, there’s the egg. It was definitely an egg. The Dragon is going to be reborn.”

“But why did the egg disappear? Where did it go?”

Grak shrugged. “I don’t know. But no one has ever found a Dragon egg, have they, Xahn?”

Xahn nodded. “Or a Beast egg.”

They all nodded.

Xahn stirred. “Well, we need to update Harsh. He’s been waiting patiently for quite a while now. We need to get him to reassure your parents, you two. Then we need to figure out a way to get you back home!”



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