

## Chapter 1

### The hero finds himself at the castle

The king regarded me wearily from his throne, half slumped on the gilded chair as though the will to live had been slowly leaving him for some time. Behind me, two guards in tarnished armor watched the door, careful to never take their eyes off me as though I might spring at any second to assassinate their broken monarch. I had no weapon, which had seemed to surprise them when I arrived, and they had checked me and checked me for some hidden means of causing harm, but found nothing. Another guard, the one that brought me into the king's presence, nervously paced the floor a few meters away from me, possibly regretting having brought me before the king as I had asked. I had taken stock of the room as I had entered, and times were indeed hard if this was the throne room of a king. The room was small, for a start, perhaps eight meters to a side, and apart from an empty throne to the king's left, no other furniture or furnishings were in evidence. A thought struck me that there was not even a fireplace in this room, though the winters here were more mild than in the north, certainly a stone castle has a certain amount of chill in any season. I also vaguely wondered how I was seeing the king at all, given there were no torches or windows in evidence in this room, but this didn't seem important and so I swiftly forgot about it.

I had little time to ponder these mysteries as I had been quickly introduced to the king and now waited for his reply. He rubbed at one eye as though trying to expunge the deep sadness I saw there, and he tried to sit up a little straighter as he leaned forward.

"So you claim to be a decedent of Erdrick, or if you prefer Loto or Roto, as he was called in his homeland so long ago?" The king delivered this question in a dull tone, as though reading from a script of some kind that he had long since memorized and was simply going through the motions to recite.

"This is what I have been told, nearly since birth, your majesty," I answered, bowing. "I have no reason to question those that told me this, so I can only assume it is true."

"And by what name do you call yourself?"

Somehow, this question paralyzed me with a sudden fear. *My name? What is my name? I must have one, everyone has a name, don't they? How could I, the soon to be hero of the world, not have a name?* But like a flash, my name came to me, and I told it to the king.

"I see," he said, leaning a little bit more forward in his throne and lowering his voice a touch. "The real question is, do you have any proof of this extraordinary claim?"

My shoulders drooped. The king was correct, I had little more than the clothes on my back that I could claim as my own, to say less of proof that my ancient ancestor had once been the great warrior Erdrick. The king slouched back into the chair. "I see that you do not." He looked as though he was going to say something more, then stopped himself. We regarded each other silently for a moment. The king took a breath. "Yet you are here to see the fulfillment of a prophesy, namely that Erdrick's decedent will one day free us from the tyrannical grip of the Dragonlord."

"I am willing to make the attempt." I said as bravely as possible. "Someone must try, after all!" I did not, at that time, wonder that if there was a prophesy about the eventual downfall of the Dragonlord, could one have inferred the eventual *rise* of the

Dragonlord? And if so, why not look for certain signs of their coming and take care of the problem before it became a problem? Would that not have been better all around? But as I say, this did not cross my mind at that moment, as I had other things to think about. Like the distracting clicking noise of the guard's armor as he stomped about the room, and the way the king's crown didn't quite fit him.

The king scowled, and repeated my words in a mocking tone. "Someone must try?" Then angrily. "Someone must try!?" He heaved himself out of the throne and the guards came to attention, causing me to take a step backwards. "I did not mean to offend-" I started to say, putting my hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Come with me," he spat, shouldering past me to the door that led down the stairs to the lower level of the castle. I followed mutely, wondering how I might make amends for what seemed to be so great a misstep, but a part of me couldn't help but think *at least he doesn't look so depressed now. Nor does he seem to be 'reading' from that script he was using before.* At the base of the stairs another pair of guards snapped to attention as the king passed, and he led me into the courtyard of the castle. The halls and passages seemed oddly empty, as if the very spirit of the castle had taken hurt, and driven all but the most loyal from its walls. I heard two ladies discussing princess Gwaelin, something about... finding her? Perhaps she had hidden from her tutors somewhere in the castle in a youthful prank or perhaps the talk was more sinister, I knew not. I knew only the king's back and the guards following close behind me, hands no doubt tightly gripping their spears should I once again, in their minds, think of treachery. Our hollow footsteps echoed through the gray, stone walls, until we came to a staircase and began to ascend.

The stairs took us to a battlement atop the castle walls, and the guards again took positions by the door. This left us little room to stand, and I took the king's side and looked out over the water. The king pointed angrily south-east over the wall to the island just off the coast. There, across the bay on another part of the continent I could barely make out another castle, seeming to radiate malice. I could well imagine the Dragonlord looking out from that place to the lands he had claimed as his own. I shivered, but the king did not seem to notice. No, his attention was clearly focused on the castle, as he said "Do you see that place?" He did not wait for my answer as he continued. "When Mhen the Dragonlord first came to these lands in his guise of a friendly wizard, we welcomed him. His magic aided anyone in need, be they rich or poor, and all the people loved him. In return, I gave him that castle as his home, and our ports were full of boats going between there and the mainland." The king whirled on me. "Then all that changed. He revealed himself and began his reign of terror in our land. At that time, the bridge that connected the island to the mainland was intact, and I sent soldiers to attack from the east, crossing the bridge, and from the north, crossing the water and braving the treacherous swamps to reach him. Only one of those soldiers returned. He killed the rest, destroyed the bridge, and ever since, demanded tributes of gold and other wealth." The king paused, slightly winded by the climb up the stairs and the force of his statements. "And you would say that *someone* has to try to stop him? As though we have not? Hundreds gave their lives before you, boy, and you come to my castle, with no weapons, no proof, and say that you are going to succeed where so many have failed?" This outburst seemed to quiet the king's anger, and his voice lost its edge. Before my eyes he seemed to become the weary king I first saw once again. "So what

would you have of me, supposed descendant of Erdrick? You must want something, else you would not have come here to see the broken kingdom I no longer call myself the true ruler of. If you did not want something you should be, at this very moment, planning on how to do the deed of slaying the Dragonlord. Instead you stand before me. Why?"

Suddenly the king gave a surprised jerk, as though looking at me honestly for the first time. "No weapons," he said softly. "No armor or shield. How is it you have journeyed to this castle, and from where?" he asked, surprised. "Even the lands between this castle and Breconary, hardly steps away to the east, are thick with the Dragonlord's minions. One cannot go five paces in any direction before encountering a slime, or a ghost, or a ghoul, or a skeleton, or a werewolf, or any number of other creatures hungry to sate themselves on your spirit, blood, or both." He regarded me suspiciously. "I have told my servants who stock the castle's larders never to venture forth without at least two soldiers at their side, lest they be slain unmercifully on the quarter mile journey to Breconary. So tell me, descendant of Erdrick, how you came to be here!" He slammed a hand down on the wall to emphasize his question. Then he softened, sightly. "Or perhaps I misread you, and you are a student of magic, already a mighty wizard in your own right?"

I heard the soldier's armor clinking behind me, and reasoned they must be moving closer to me, should I now reveal to be an agent of the Dragonlord, here to play a cruel trick on this broken monarch. *Pushing him off the side of the castle would be fairly easy at this point, but the Dragonlord must have allowed him his life for some reason, if he's as powerful as the king says. Why send an agent to kill him now?* I nevertheless made no sudden movements but did not look behind me, thinking that too may betray me in their eyes. "To tell you true, my king, I cannot answer that question, for I do not know the answer. I can say I am neither a mighty warrior or a great wizard, at this time. As I look out over the castle walls I do see you are right, the land is thick with creatures that would wish me ill. But yet, here I am, unharmed. Perhaps they are able to sense my potential to destroy them, and stayed away from me as I journeyed to this place?" But this excuse sounded weak even to my ears, as the slimes and ghosts of this region would fall to the merest blows of a child with a stick, to say nothing of armed guards with armor and spears. Even a maid could carry a club to fend off a blue slime if her Lady desired her to make the journey into the city to sate her fancy for a fruit she imagined could be bought there. Such a person should have nothing to fear from the short journey from the castle to the nearby town. But as the king had so rightly pointed out, I had not even a sharpened stick to defend myself with, making me an easy target. How had I come here unharmed? There was one reason I could think of, which I offered. "Or perhaps they knew I could not harm them and so felt I was no threat?"

The king regarded me a moment, his head to one side as he looked me over. He straightened, and shook his head, seeming to resign himself to get rid of me as quickly as possible. "The boon?" he said shortly.

"Your majesty, as you yourself have said, I have no weapons or armor. I will need them to assemble the clues that will lead to the defeat of the Dragonlord. I have come to ask for aid in that form, that I might travel the land, become stronger, and help the people as I have been told I must."

The king laughed softly, "A trail by fire then? Rather than study under great weapon masters or wizards to gain the skills needed you would plunge into the land and leave a trail of monster corpses in your wake? Learn what you need to know through hard won experience, be it magic or fighting prowess?"

"If I am truly the one destined to defeat the Dragonlord, it should matter not which of these paths I take, as they will lead to the same result, will they not?"

"If you are the one," he agreed, not sounding convinced in the least. "Otherwise, you will be dead, in short order. Very well! I will give you a measure of gold to purchase weapons and armor at Breconary, and wish you luck."

"Could I not just have a spear such as your own men use, and a set of armor like theirs?" I asked, pointing my thumb behind me.

"Sadly no." the king said jovially, as the guards behind me stifled laughter, as though this was a joke they had shared before. "We have precious little resources now as it is, with the Dragonlord demanding more and more of our assets with every passing day." *What does he do with them, exactly?* "He has allowed our garrison to keep one spear and one set of very rickety armor per guard in the castle, and he took the rest. I think it amuses him for us to 'play' at being a kingdom, when he knows that we know that he could take it all at any time. I have a little gold I have saved from his greed, and I will give it to you, but that is all I can do."

"But," I sputtered, "you could easily have one less guard in the castle, and give me their equipment. I can free you from the grip of this tyrant-" *But of course you don't believe me. You think I would just disappear with it, weakening your already meager defenses. Not helping me costs you nothing, and by my own words, if I truly am what I say I am, I will come into whatever equipment and resources I need with or without your help. A fine pickle I've put myself in.*

The king shook his head. "Too risky. What if the Dragonlord found out I had helped you? I would like my castle walls to continue going straight up and down, rather than along the ground, if you know what I mean."

The king said this lightly, but I saw the fear in his eyes. He really believed that the Dragonlord was that powerful. I began to feel a twinge of regret for starting this quest. *Perhaps it isn't such a good idea after all, Erdirick's descendant or not.* "Well." I said at last. "I would be grateful for any help you can provide that doesn't endanger you."

"That's the spirit," the king said, slapping me on the back. "Besides, I'm sure you'll stumble across Erdick's sword and armor in no time, and it'll be a moot point anyway!" He took the lead back down the tower's steps and took me to the treasury room. "Wait here," he said, and slipped a key out of his pocket. Disappearing inside, I stood outside the hall, the two guards now openly smirking at me.

"What?" I asked of them sharply.

"Nothing," the one said, shaking his head.

"Good luck though!" said the other.

"You don't think I'll succeed?"

"Oh, it's not that, so much as-" the other guard nudged him. "Actually it's exactly that," the other guard finished for him. "Right?"

"Right."

I scowled at them, but the door opened again and was locked by the king, and he gave me a heavy bag of coins. "That's all I can give you, may it serve you well."

“Thank you, your majesty.” I said honestly, “I will spend it wisely.”

“See that you do. Come and tell me of your adventures once you get the chance, I’d be... interested to hear them.”

He dismissed me, and the guards took me back to the entrance of the castle. Once outside, I leaned against the castle wall and opened the bag. The king actually gave me a tidy sum! I estimated at least a hundred small, gold coins lay in the bag, and I thought I might even have some left over after buying weapons and armor. I smiled, and whistled a little as I made the short, thankfully uneventful journey to Breconary.

Unfortunately, my mood soured almost immediately after arriving.

## Chapter 2

### The hero finds out how much stuff costs

"How much for a sword?" I asked the man before me, exasperated.

"This quality blade right here? Fifteen hundred gold. You want something to practice with? Say, a little less than two hundred," he answered patiently. The sign above the door was plain enough, a rectangle of metal with a sword shape hammered into it. The man behind the counter had come from the forge, making me wait while he finished something in the back. As he stepped behind the counter I saw his arms were twice the size of mine and I began to feel a little bit intimidated. Then I brightened, I was the inheritor of destiny! This man would not intimidate me, even if it did look like he could break me in half very easily. There were no other patrons in the shop, and quite honestly it was easy to see why. Not much merchandise adored the space within the doors of the so called "weapon shop," leading me to see the Dragonlord's hand in this, as well. *Naturally he wouldn't want weapons made, it might give some young upstart, such as myself, ideas that they could be used to defeat his minions. I'm surprised he left even this blade available.* "How much do you have? Anything to trade? Maybe we can make a deal."

I hesitated to tell the man the king himself had sent me on my quest, as he did not want the Dragonlord to find out he helped me and this man could very well be working for that dread figure himself. I did, however, feel it safe to confide that I was the living relative of Erdrick in the hope that the man might be willing to part with something more readily if he knew. After all, no one likes their boss, especially a man like the Dragonlord, so even a minion of his might be inclined to help overthrow him if he knew the conclusion of the prophecy was imminent. After all, the Dragonlord would know I was after him soon enough, now that I had gotten started! However, the man's reaction was not the one I expected.

He laughed in my face.

"Oh, you and my great uncle." he chuckled, "Just like the last three guys we had in here. Don't suppose you've got his Token on you, do you?"

I was stunned. "What are you talking about? Others have claimed the title before me?"

"To score a sweet little piece of action in the tav- I mean a better deal on a sword? Sure, like I said, the last three people in from the castle said the same thing, since about a month ago, I guess."

Fear began to grip me, this was not how this was supposed to be going. *There were others, I wasn't the first?* It was no wonder I had gotten the reaction I did at the castle, if 'descendants' had been making themselves known for months now. *But who were those people? Were they raised as I had been, with tales of being Erdrick's heir given with their mother's milk? Or were they simply charlatans looking, as this man had said, for better prices or special treatment? And more importantly-* "What happened to them?"

"Dead, I expect," he said, scratching himself. "Never saw them again, anyway. I suppose some simply mentioned it to try and get a better deal on equipment and then

never mentioned it again. But they were all travelers, like yourself, and they all left for parts unknown.”

I shuddered and thought, *what am I in for? Will fake descendants be everywhere, making my job that much harder as the real one, as I won't be believed? Or worse, will some be tired of fakes and run me out of town should I claim that title? Am I a fake too? How can I really know? Wait, there is a way...* “This token you mentioned, what's that?”

“Something Erdrick had made that would prove his rightful heir I guess. I've heard about it, never seen it of course. I'm not his great, great grandson or whatever, now I am?” He laughed all the harder.

“No, I don't suppose you are.” *But why haven't my parents told me about the Token? I thought to myself. That would have made things so much easier, if I had been able to claim that before coming here. Wait, would anyone here know the token to see it? Why haven't these fakes made a fake token as well, if a simple blacksmith has heard of it certainly others would have too. How would I even know it if I saw it?*

He leaned his arms on the counter and motioned me closer. “The rumors say that the king's daughter, Princess Gwaelin, knows where the token has been hidden. Apparently that knowledge is handed down to all royal ladies since his death.”

“I didn't see her at the castle, I'll have to go back. Though someone said something about finding her, so maybe she's playing hide and seek, so it's not a good time right now. How old is the princess, anyway?” *How would she know an heir to look at him or her though? Is she going to give that information out to just anyone? How would I convince her if I need the token to convince people I'm who I say I am? A nice little circle isn't it?*

“Hide and seek?!” the man exclaimed. “Good Lord man, she's at least your age—the princess isn't a child! How do you not know this? Where have you been these past months? She was kidnapped by the Dragonlord ages ago!”

I was a bit stunned by this revelation. “What? Kidnapped?” My estimation of my enemy went up slightly. *The Dragonlord seems to be on the ball, not what one usually expects from evil dictators.* “What about the queen?” I asked, dreading the answer. I had seen the empty throne, after all, so I had a pretty good idea what was coming.

He shook his head. “Killed in the attack by the Dragonlord, I'm afraid. The king isn't getting over it, ether, from what I hear of castle talk. I guess he's about given up.”

I stood and pondered for several seconds. The princess, kidnapped? The queen, dead? No wonder the king looked as he did. And there I stood, cocky as anything, telling him I was the solution to all his problems. I felt... ashamed. The clatter of a weapon being banged on the counter repeatedly startled me out of my reverie.

“Oy! You want this sword or not?”

“Well, I don't have nearly two hundred gold coins,” I said, exasperated. “At least, I don't think so. Let me count it.” I did so, coming up with a total of one hundred and twenty coins. As I separated the coins into piles so I could keep track of them I figured I should keep the man talking, he was eyeing the coins with more than a little greed in his eyes. “Why are swords so expensive anyway? Scarcity?”

“That's part of it, of course. But swords are expensive in the best of times. Do you know the kind of work that goes into making a good blade?”

I stopped sorting. “Not really.”

He brightened. “Let me tell you!”

*I suppose any craftsman is eager to explain about his craft, especially if it helps justify his prices.* I went back to sorting as he explained.

"First I have to choose the correct sort of metal for the type of blade I want to create. The more impure it is, the more work I have to do getting rid of those impurities. So I have to work with miners and try to get a good deal on what they like to call iron ore, but is usually mostly rock. You ever see a sword made out of rock?"

I shook my head.

"You won't either. So I melt the nuggets down they manage to get out of tunnels and turn them into bars. Of course I have to add things like carbon if there isn't enough to some of the stock, blades are made of various layers- are you listening to me?"

"Yes! Go on, it's all very interesting." *Is he making a cake or a sword? Layers? Is he putting me on?*

"Right. They charge an arm and a leg even for stuff with a lot of rock stuck to it, because mining is dangerous and nasty and dirty and no one wants to do it. So they deserve a good wage which raises prices. With the correct bars, well, rods really at that point, I can join them up and begin hammering them. Certain type of metal in the center, certain type of metal at the edge, based on the properties of flex, edge retention, hardness vs brittleness, there's a lot to consider. This takes a lot of work. And I mean a lot. You ever lifted a blacksmith's hammer?"

"No."

"Ha! Didn't think so. You heat the metal over and over and pound away until it's roughly the right shape, and by that way that takes a lot of fuel. Fire has to be extremely hot to make metal hot enough to shape, so there's another cost right there. Then you have to quench it properly because oil gives it different qualities than water. Different for salt water too, come to think of it. You can ruin a blade by accidentally using the wrong bucket. So you're paying for the person to not mess it up, either. How you would know the difference? Then you have to give it a good edge, which takes more work on the grinding wheel. It can take weeks to make a proper sword, you know how many nails or butter knives or barrel bands I could make in that time?"

"No idea."

"Course you don't. So now you know why I charge so much. A good sword will last you a lifetime. Or at least a battle or two, which is usually the same thing." He laughed.

"But a good sword costs fifteen hundred gold!" I protested, aghast. "I would need to lug a trunk full of gold coins to buy something that expensive. I might as well just drop the trunk on anything that threatens me, it would be heavy enough at that point!"

"Assuming you could lift it high enough," the man agreed, looking at my arms dubiously.

I ignored the comment. "And that doesn't even begin to cover armor too, which I'll certainly need. That probably takes almost as much work."

"Now you're getting it," he agreed. "To survive long enough to travel the world looking for what you'll need you should wear the best armor you can get. And what you need to find is *Erdrick's* armor. And that's not all. To fight and win against the Dragonlord himself, you're going to need his armor, his lost sword, and a decent shield, a lot of skill with both, and some luck. His armor was enchanted, if rumor is to be believed, and has special properties. I can't even imagine what it would sell for, assuming you would want to. But don't let all that stop you, some leather armor would get you started." He put the



sword back behind the counter again and brought out a heavy looking wooden club. "Here's my advice: Buy this club to get started. There's a guy in town selling Dragon Scales on the sly, even though the Dragonlord has made them illegal. Tell him "a rainbow shall make a bridge" and he'll sell you one for 20 gold. Beat up some slimes or whatever to make some more gold, then come back here and buy the leather armor. Repeat, buy a sword. Range further afield, beat up some more lucrative monsters, buy better stuff, repeat until you've got the best. How about that?"

"What's a single dragon scale going to do for me, and what's up with that passphrase?"

"Just a little ditty we came up with," he said, shrugging and not making eye contact. "These Dragon Scales have been enchanted, they'll absorb a little of the damage should you get hit. It's not as good as armor, but it's cheaper. Against low level enemies such as you'll find around here you're better off dodging them anyway. Armor has to be repaired if it gets hit after all, don't depend on it. Wear armor to save you should you fail to dodge an attack. This way you get used to dodging first, and don't develop bad habits."

I barely heard him, despite how good this advice actually was. I was thinking about dragon scales. "I should save up and have someone make a set of armor out of those!" I exclaimed. "A shield as well, if he had enough. Think about it!"

"I... don't think it works like that," he hedged. "And like I said they're illegal. Wearing that much dragon scale would bring down every monster in the region, hoping to kill you and curry favor with the Dragonlord. A single scale you can tuck into your shirt, it's not so obvious. Anyway, do we have a deal?"

I hefted the club. It would have to do, so I slid 6 piles of gold over to him, set the club down on my side of the counter, and started gathering up the rest. "Wait a second, how is fighting slimes going to help me earn money?"

"Were you born yesterday or something? The monsters are made by the Dragonlord, of course. That's where they all came from! You think we had a plague of slimes around the castle before he showed up? No, we did not. He uses gold and turns it into creatures, that's why he needs so much of the darn stuff. But beat the monster, and it turns back into the gold he used. Naturally, the tougher the monster, the more gold that went into making it, and the more you earn by beating it."

"What a fantastic system." I said. "I can become a better fighter and get rich at the same time just by beating up the monsters around the castle. Brilliant! Thanks, you've helped me out a lot. I'll be back for that armor soon!"

"Yeah, sure, be seeing you then," the man grumbled as I went out the door with the club on my shoulder, to find a man with a dragon scale for sale. He didn't sound convinced, but I would show him. I would show them all! I was the rightful descendant, I would find the token, and the armor, and the sword, and a decent shield, and train, and one day defeat the Dragonlord.

That's when a sharp rock jabbed me in the foot and I hopped forward a couple of steps. I looked down at my fairly poor shoes. *I can't wander around looking for tokens and whatnot in shoes that can barely protect me from cobblestone paths in towns! Wonder how much some decent boots go for around here?*

Luckily a shop selling boots was nearby, and I entered the store with a ding from the bell above the door.

"Good afternoon," said the man sitting and working on a pair of shoes in the middle of the place. "What can I do for you?"

I looked around, and this place at least looked like a proper shop to buy proper footwear. It smelled of leather, and tanning agent, and dust, and all around were shoes of every kind. *I suppose even the Dragonlord needs something to keep his feet dry.* "I'd like a better set of shoes, or some boots I suppose," I told the man. "I've just come from... From..." I stopped dead. Where had I come from? *This isn't my home town. I walked here. From a place. Elsewhere. Right? That place must have a name, why can't I remember it?* Just like me not knowing my own name for a second I hoped it would come to me when I needed it, but the name of my town, what it looked like, and the people I knew there seemed out of reach at the moment. Was I losing my mind? What was happening to me that I couldn't recall these basic facts about myself?

"Yes?" the man prompted.

"Far away," I continued lamely, "and I have many leagues yet to go. What can you do for me?"

"I'm sure we can find you something," the man assured me. "Put down your club," he gave it a dirty look, "have a seat and let's see what we're working with here."

"Of course. By the way, have you had a problem with people claiming to be the descendant of Erdrick lately? Back in, uh, my home town we've had a plague of them!"

"I've heard talk of some from village gossip," he admitted. "None have come in here. I guess they hope to find Erdrick's boots as well as his armor?" He barked a laugh. "Now, let me get my tape." The man got out a fabric marked with numbers and measured my feet after taking my shoes off.

"Erdrick left boots behind as well?" I asked, trying to appear uninterested and simply making conversation.

"No sir, that was a joke. I mean the man must have worn some kind of boots, but who would enchant boots to last for the ages? No, only long lasting artifacts would have survived to the present day, such as the sword and the armor."

"Ah. Pity, I'm sure they would have been a fine example of their type."

"No doubt. Now what sort of boots were you thinking of?"

"Cheap?" I offered hesitantly.

He sighed. "I did gather that, sir, meaning no offense of course. Let me show you my available styles in your size." He went around the shop, comparing his 'tape' to various pairs of boots, while I sat furiously thinking. *The others didn't come in here! Maybe they were just trying to swindle the blacksmith, and didn't think a shoemaker was worth the trouble! Or maybe they just didn't want to push it? A sword being much more expensive than a pair of shoes, at least I have to believe that. Or maybe they just had better shoes than I started out with. How much can I read into this, really? And of course he could be lying, though why he would I can't imagine.*

My purse now lightened further I left the store with a decent pair of boots and more of a spring in my step. I was getting outfitted and had more information than when I had started. I needed to find the princess and rescue her. She could give me the information about the token. With the token I could possibly get better prices because now my story

would be believed. And I knew what I needed to take on the Dragonlord. My quest was off to a good start.

### Chapter 3 The hero meets a knowledgeable fellow

You would think that, walking through the street of a town, even one as empty as this one was at the moment, with a wooden club on your shoulder would cause more concern. But no, people nodded to me, said various pleasantries, and went on their way. I followed the directions given to me by the blacksmith/weapon shop owner to the “tool shop,” whatever that meant. Oddly enough, this so called “shop” had no sign, but rather a young looking boy called out to me as I got closer.

“Care for some Herbs, noble master? Lengths of rope? Even the wings of the Wyvern to make your travel easier. We have it all!”

I regarded the boy as he finished his little speech. “With all the monsters out there, I don’t expect you see many travelers, do you?”

“Indeed not sir, what with the Dragonlord being so close and all, we hardly see any new faces here!”

“So then,” I asked, more to myself than to him, “What sense does it make to hire someone to tell people this is the tools shop, when presumably every person in town already knows, and you’ve admitted strangers hardly ever come here? Wouldn’t a sign be cheaper and easier, freeing you up for other labors?”

The lad looked away, embarrassed. “Hire, sir? No sir, I’m the apprentice.”

“And this is you learning the craft then, is it?”

“That’s uh, what I’ve been told. Sir.”

“Well, you’re off to a great start, I have the urge to lighten my purse considerably after hearing that rousing speech just now. This is the door then?” I pointed to the door with the club. Apparently the boy hadn’t learned sarcasm yet, he just held it open for me with a smile.

“Go right in!”

Stepping across the threshold into the rather dimly lit, musty smelling store, my eyes adjusted to take in a rather portly man in a green tunic and pants behind a counter. He seemed to be napping. He perked up when he saw me though, and jumped up off his stool.

“Ah, welcome, welcome! Come for some tools, have you? Not to worry, plenty in stock, you just tell me what you need and I’ll make it happen for you.”

“What I really need is a rainbow to make a bridge, but if Herbs are all you carry-”

“Keep your voice down,” the man said, quickly looking to either side of me as though hordes of monsters were at any second about to stream past me. “I figured you for one of them,” he said in a hushed tone. “You want a dragon scale, don’t you?”

“One of *them*?” I asked suspiciously.

“Heroes,” he said with a snort. “You’ve just come from the blacksmith, after all, yes?” He pointed to my club. “Personally, I might stop selling the things, I’ve not heard a report of anyone rescuing the princess, so I’ve had enough deaths on my conscience for a lifetime.”

“They might not necessarily be dead...” I hedged.

He got that *are you crazy?* look on his face. “Please, give me some credit. Whoever rescues the princess will no doubt have her hand in marriage, and that’s just a small step to being king. So it’s no wonder would be heroes are out there trying. But

they rush into things, pell-mell, and get squashed by something they're not ready to fight. It's obvious."

"Or they come up against something nasty, run away, and go live quietly someplace, having learned their lesson."

"I suppose. I mean, I hope that's true, but, it's a harsh world out there, you know? Take it a little too fast, and it's over for you."

"That's why I need all the protection I can get." I said, stepping up to the counter. "And the blacksmith recommend your... product... as a good starting point."

"It's not much. Barely better than what you're wearing, but if you don't have the money for real armor, it'll have to do."

"Actually, that's something I wanted to talk to you about. The product, could more be used to create a suit of armor? I mean, if they're enchanted like you say, more of them would be better, right?"

He suddenly stumbled backward over his stool, and caught himself on the wall behind him. "In all the months I've- no one has ever asked- wait here."

He disappeared rather shakily into the back, and I heard a lot of bumping around and things being moved. Could it be possible? He stuck his head back through the door, looked around again, and came out with some candles, which he set on the counter. Moving his hands and speaking in a low monotone the candles flared to life, and he went and closed the door and locked it. Drawing the curtains, he took a bag of powder from behind the counter and started sprinkling it around the room, while he chanted something. I looked on, curious and interested at the actual workings of magic going on around me. He finished and turned to me. "It won't keep out the Dragonlord or anything, but it's better than nothing."

He seemed to be expecting some response from me. "I don't know anything about magic, so whatever you think is most appropriate."

"Right, right," he grumbled. "You're still too low level."

"Low what?"

"Never mind. Be right back."

When he again emerged from the back I was stunned at what I saw him carrying with him. On a dummy made of wood, there was a work of art I have scarce seen before. A helm rested atop the most magnificent dragon scale armor I had ever- heck, I had never seen dragon scale armor, period! Lacquered, with designs and swirls of color it almost seemed to catch the light in a rainbow of color that shimmered, even in candlelight. Resting to the left was a shield of the same material, and I saw peaking out from underneath, dragon scale boots of all things! My first thought, which I blurted out, was "I couldn't afford that! Not even the king could afford that armor!"

The man chuckled. "That's the problem, lad. I made it too well. And it took me quite a while too, I might add. I had to have special needles made and enchanted to pierce the scales, and even then they wore out quickly. But- well, go ahead, touch it."

I reverently made my way closer, the light from the candles dancing off the armor, almost hypnotizing me. I put my hand up and was astonished when I couldn't actually touch it! The armor itself seemed to be pushing me away somehow.

This time he really did laugh. "You can't, can you? Your hand just sort of stops, right? That's the power of the enchantment put on the scales. Individually, it's hardly worth bothering with, but put this many in one place..." he trailed off. "Let's just say it

would take something equally powerful to hit the person wearing it. I know, the one time I tested it, blows just slid right off. But what do I charge for it? It's sort of like my masterpiece, you know? Something I've worked on, added to, for years now." He shook his head. "But what do I have to show for it? With dragon scale now illegal, wearing this would paint a target on you so fast, whole villages would run away from you a mile away, just to make sure they didn't get caught in the backlash."

"Now that's one thing I don't understand." I said, taking my hand away from the armor. "Why exactly did the Dragonlord make dragon scale illegal to own?"

"I guess you're one of those that believes the term Dragonlord isn't an epithet, but I assure you it is. He is the literal Lord of Dragons. No one knows why, but they follow his orders, as though even they were afraid of him. Usually dragons are just off doing their own thing, which is hoarding treasure, usually, but ever since he came around, they work for him."

"Wait, I thought monsters were made by the Dragonlord out of gold!"

"Some are. But older dragons are natural creatures, like cats. By that I mean yes, they are magical, natural creatures, and there aren't many of them in the world so most believe them to be a myth. They were around long before the Dragonlord, long before Man some have said. That's why there's so few now. They're dying out, having been hunted to near extinction because of the threat they pose to us."

This was a lot to take in at once, it seemed many of my ideas about who my opponent was were wrong. "So where does that leave dragon scales then?"

"Think about it. The only way to get dragon scale is..." he waited.

"Kill a dragon?"

"Right! How do you think our former king Lorik would like it if you started killing his subjects? To get their, I don't know, shoes or something."

*I needed new shoes, and I didn't consider killing a villager for theirs. I guess the concept is the same.* "But they must die of natural causes."

"Sure, once every couple of hundred years you might hear of one dying. And that's only hearsay, based on them not being seen for a while. Like I said, dragons hoard treasure primarily. Which they have hidden in burrows. When they feel it's their time to die, they return to their secret burrows, collapse any entrances, and die with their hoard, hoping it will never be found."

"You're pretty knowledgeable about this stuff!"

"Well, dragon scale was my specialty. So naturally I studied them."

"That does make sense." I turned back to the armor. "So I've heard of Erdrick's armor, do you think this armor is better than that?"

"Hard to say," he replied, looking down. "We have tales about what it could do, of course, but no one has worked magic like that in a long time."

"Why's that?"

"It's hard! Look, I can tell you've got a bunch of questions, let me put this away and you can join me upstairs and we can talk some more."

"I'd like that, thank you."

"Eh, business isn't so great, and at least this way you might think twice about telling people you're Erdrick's descendant. What's your name, anyway?"

I told him, but asked, "How did you know I was Erdrick's descendant?"

"Nice to meet you. To answer your question, who isn't? That is to say--"

“You’ve heard the claim before.”

“Exactly. Stay right here a minute, okay?”

The shopkeeper dragged the armor back through the door and I heard a lot of shuffling again as he presumably secured it somehow. Coming back, he opened the curtains again, blew out the candles and pointed me up a set of stairs opposite the door he had used.

“Go on up, I’ll just tell my apprentice to mind the store until I get back down. Make yourself at home.”

I went up to a very cozy room with several large, padded chairs facing a fireplace, and sat down in one of them. I had learned a lot from this guy, but I couldn’t shake the feeling I should have already known most of it. Why should someone have to tell me these things? Wasn’t I the decedent of Erdrick? Shouldn’t I be telling him about the armor? It didn’t make sense. I heard him come up the stairs and he put his head into the room. “I’ll get us something to drink, be right with you.”

He soon brought a pot of coffee into the room and poured us both a cup. Lighting a pipe, he settled back into the chair and set his coffee on a small table next to him.

“Okay, so, enchantment, right? What you need to understand about putting magic into an object is: magic resists being used in that way. And the magic has to be placed into the item as it’s being created. So, say you want to remake Erdrick’s armor, right? First you have to learn blacksmithing, so you can physically make the armor. You could hire it out and stand there while it’s made, but you would just get in each other’s way. And it can’t be crappy stuff, either- the better quality metal and construction, the more readily the magic takes. So you’re standing there pounding out armor- now you have to know the spell you want to put into the thing. It has to be cast, but in such a way that it goes into the armor rather than just doing whatever it is that spell does. So you’re basically casting two different spells at once, meaning you have to be a pretty good spell caster to do it. Oh, and not to mention that the more magic you try to put into it, the harder it gets. Just like you couldn’t touch my armor, the more magic an object has inside of it, the stronger it pushes new magic away from it. Now, what spells are you putting into your copy of Erdrick’s armor? Stories vary about exactly what spells were put on it, but one thing that’s constant is healing. Any wound short of death will be healed in minutes. It was also made to be harder than regular iron, so while it’s lighter and thinner, it protects better than armor twice as thick. We know that, just like any other enchanted object that the armor itself will eventually go back to the state it was in when it was forged, so any damage the armor takes will work itself out over time too. There was one story that it would protect against poison, and another that it could make you invisible. I don’t know. The best part about it is the cost- if you can find it, it’s yours, no charge! Whereas the best armor that’s made like that today will set you back probably eight thousand gold at least. The reason is obvious- once you learn enough blacksmithing to do any good, now you have to learn spellcasting, which is just as hard, then buy the material, make the thing (slowly, as you’re not only smithing but casting too, hard to do both at once) so really, there’s only a couple of people in the world that can do that sort of thing. A tiny scale like I sell, that’s a lot easier, and really... hummmm, I guess I can tell you this. I’m not actually adding magic to it, I’m just enhancing the protection properties it already has. Dragons are hard to kill for a reason,

you know? Apart from being big and scary and breathing fire. But it is a spell of my own design, so I'm the only one that makes them."

"That's pretty involved all right."

"And that's just the basic, layman explanation of the whole thing. But good enough to understand how hard it is."

"So on the one hand we have an armor that, at the very least, will heal you given enough time. On the other, an armor that turns away blows."

"That's about the size of it. I'm not sure, given combatants of equal skill, which would prevail. After all, once the guy in Erdrick's armor realized what was happening, he would stop trying to cut you and just try to get your weapon away from you. Or start going for the head, as you can't heal from having your head chopped off I don't care what armor you're wearing. So neither one makes you invincible. Also, the Dragonlord is a top notch wizard, he could know a spell to undo my work like that." He snapped his fingers. "Making you decked out in little more than the clothes you're wearing now."

"He must have some weakness."

"Not that I know of. Still interested in going?"

"I am Erdrick's descendant. I know you've heard it before, but I truly feel I am, that it's my destiny to succeed."

The shopkeeper pondered a moment, puffing on his pipe.

"I... believe you. Don't ask me how, but there is something about you. Something different than everyone else I've seen come through this town. But the fact is, I still don't think you have a chance. So I'll make you deal."

"Okay."

"Bring me Erdrick's token, and I'll let you borrow the armor."

"You mean it?" I asked, excitedly, almost jumping out of the chair.

"Course! You just have to rescue the princess, get her to tell you where it's hidden, then slog over to there and pick it up, then make it back here without getting killed. Easy as pie."

"I would have done that anyway."

"I wish you luck, my boy. I really do."

"What do you think my next move should be?"

"Visit Erdrick's tomb. It's north-west of here, and inside is a tablet you should read. If you can, anyway. By the time you get back you should have killed enough of the Dragonlord's minions to afford some better equipment. Also talk to people in town, someone knows something, you can be sure of that."

"Thank you for everything." I said, standing. "You've been more of a help than I can say." I reached over to shake the man's hand.

"Think nothing of it, I was glad of the company. I want to see you back here after I hear the princess is safe, you hear?"

"You will, don't worry."

I left the store feeling much better, I had a destination, a plan, so why was there still a little voice in my head that that silently screaming I was missing something. Something important, and sinister.



## Chapter 4

### The hero solves his first mystery

\*thump\* As I smashed my club into what had to be the thirtieth or so slime I had run into since leaving the town of Breconary for Erdrick's tomb, I began to wonder about several things. The first being how long it was going to take me, killing these pathetic creatures, to buy a decent sword at one or two gold per slime.

*I suppose if I killed one every minute, and I need fifteen hundred gold that would be fifteen hundred minutes. There's sixty minutes in an hour. Ten hours would be six hundred gold. Double that for twelve hundred gold. That leaves three hundred to make up, another five hours, correct? So maybe three days as I do have to eat and sleep and rest every so often? I could live with that, the risk seems slight. The problem is, will I actually find that many slimes around here? And what would it mean if I did? But there was another consideration; why would the Dragonlord station such pathetic monsters within sight of his castle? I could almost believe the Dragonlord, keeping a watchful eye as he did on the kingdom himself, wouldn't need any other deterrent to rebellion, but for a man that planned his coup out in such detail, it seemed quite careless. On the other hand, maybe monsters don't like him any more than we do, or stronger monsters didn't like being around him, and had fled the area long ago.*

My other thought was how tired I was going to be swinging this stupid club around after even one hour, much less ten! Give me something with an edge, please! But at least I was getting a workout. I was trying to swing the thing first with one hand and then the other, so I didn't develop one muscle bound arm while the other stayed the same, but wondered if that's how it worked anyway. Suddenly, I spotted a stone structure matching the description I received from the tool shop owner, and knew my first goal was in reach. He told me that it was more a crypt than a grave, having been interred with honor after his death into a monument to last the ages, and that most of it was underground. This was only the entrance, so as long as I found some stairs right inside that went down, I was in the right place. I could only wonder at what awaited me, below, but as long as I watched the one entrance I couldn't be taken by surprise. I gripped the club and made my way forward, expecting something to spring out at me as this would be a great place to ambush someone, now wouldn't it?

Stepping up the few stone stairs leading to the entrance of the tomb, I looked down the stairs and relaxed my guard. *Nothing.* I found it strange that the place seemed untouched by the Dragonlord's minions or even the master himself. Such a place, being an icon of the people, would no doubt be his style to destroy. I had however felt a strange force as I mounted the stairs and a faint shimmer, like a curtain being parted, sparkled around me briefly. *Perhaps* I had thought to myself, *this place is protected by magics even the Dragonlord cannot penetrate.* I also noticed a torch set in a holder to the right of the door come to life as I climbed the last stair. *I guess that means I can go in.* Taking the torch in hand, I peered down the staircase into the blackness below.

The tomb smelled of age, but only faintly of moss. The walls were dry and straight, evidently well repaired and looked after. That, or magics had been set on the place to keep the elements out as well as the Dragonlord's creatures. There before me stood an ornate tombstone, topped with a cross and set with an inscription:

Here lies Loto, son of Ortega  
Had he not lived, we would have died  
Let the world remember the name  
Erdrick

I read the chiseled words twice, not comprehending. The tool shop owner told me of some kind of tablet I would need to read, to be found here in Erdrick's tomb, but I saw nothing. I looked around the back- nothing. I walked the perimeter of the chamber- nothing. The walls were gray stone, no doubt brought here to insulate against the raw earth. The chamber was not wide or deep, just big enough for a person of average size to walk around the chamber, with room to spare on either side. I saw nothing of note or interest, felt nothing, heard nothing. It seemed a grave in every sense of the word. Almost, I turned to go. Almost, but there was a puzzle here, I was sure of it. I could not believe the man would steer me wrong, he seemed quite capable in both his crafting of the armor and the working of magic, unless he had simply been mistaken. Could he have been misinformed? I couldn't believe he would knowingly steer me wrong after taking me into his confidence as he did. I tapped the walls, seeking for some hidden door, but only the echo of my club upon the walls came back to me. No, there was no hidden chamber beyond these four walls, I was sure of that. The only feature of the room-

Of course, the gravestone itself! I put my hand against the stone, and nothing happened. A scowled at the stone, but then realized any number of people may have touched the thing over the years, it was the only thing in the room. Something more would be needed. I named myself and added "I am the descendant of Erdrick spoken of in prophecy." After speaking this I was rewarded! The stone began to radiate, and a light blazed forth from the cross, illuminating a section of the wall directly behind the stone, near the floor. These stones crumbled to dust, and behind them, I spied a treasure chest! The light subsided, leaving me feeling much better, of course the wizards of the day had protected such an important artifact with potent magics, how could they do less? I was foolish for thinking I would just stumble across it like any old fool that wandered in here. In fact, I became elated- this above all proved I was the descendant of Erdrick as I claimed! Who else could have opened the way as I did? Had not naming myself been the key? I rushed to the chest and sank to my knees, hesitantly reaching out to touch it. Nothing seemed to happen, no other traps or protections were in evidence, so I pulled the chest out from the hole in the wall it had been thrust into and opened the catch. Inside was not so much a tablet as a small leather book, which I picked up with trembling hands, and began to read.

*I am leaving these first few pages of my journal blank in case I need to leave a message for those that read it after I have finished it. If these pages remain blank, know I have failed in my quest. Read well then the tale of my sorrow.*

*How forward thinking, I thought. Maybe I should keep a journal too.* The ink was different and the style of writing was slightly changed after that, and I sat down and wedged the torch between the lid of the chest and the bottom so I could read without holding it. I read on.

*Greetings to those that come after me. I have much to impart and only a few pages to do it. This book details the quest to find my father and the destruction of*

*Baramos. Some years later, I wished to know if peace remained in the land and had my friend, who had helped me defeat Baramos, cast a powerful spell to look into the future. What he reported saddened me- little progress had been made, both scientific (what's that, I thought) and magical, in fact, magical knowledge had been lost! What tragedy. He told me worse was yet to come, however, as another evil force had arisen and sewn chaos over the land. So I took steps to insure that those who came after me would have the tools they needed to combat this evil as I did. And so you hold this book in your hands. You may believe finding it means you are my heir. Perhaps that is true, perhaps not- what is important is that the people believe it is true and thus, rally around you and support you. To that end I had fashioned a disk made of gold, upon which I placed my mark and had hidden in a remote corner of the world. I told the king's daughter where to find it, and she promised all royal ladies of her line would be told so that, if it was needed, it could be found. It has no magical properties of its own, it only serves to "prove" you are my "ancestor." If you can find it, I would be honored to count you among my family even if you are not, so put no meaning in our blood relationship. Show the token in times of need, and hopefully, help will be given. In my travels I assembled a powerful staff which I used to remove the protective spells around Baramos so he could be hurt. After they were no longer needed, I broke the staff once again into pieces and gave them to trusted men to hand down through the ages and keep safe. Assemble this staff again for it will be needed to piece the heart of the evil you now face. I will instruct this journal be hidden in my grave, to be revealed to one seeking to destroy this evil when the time is right. Upon this everything rests, I hope it will be done.*

My gaze hardened. So, was I his descendant or not? I guess it didn't matter, but still. Like he had written, it mattered more that people believed I was, so that they would be more inclined to help me. *And this must be the source of the "prophecy" as well, this spell cast by Loto's friend. Again, why not just cast the spell a few more times, figure out what caused the Dragonlord to rise, and tell us to watch out for that? Why wait until the damage is already done?* There was not much left to read.

*You know what you must do. Be wary, the forces of evil will corrupt the land as easily as the hearts of men, be careful you who trust. Even you may feel yourself swayed by the evil one's words, but hold fast! Two more things I must tell you: the first is that you must journey alone! On this my friend was very clear, to do otherwise will invite disaster upon you and the world. So while you read of my journey and the friends that accompanied me, be aware no others can journey with you. The second is more sinister but yet, the more baffling. Know that I not mad as I write this- something is wrong with the world. I cannot say more. I entreat you, notice everything, question everything, do not ignore the strange happenings that confound you as so many others do. As I grow older my misgivings about the world increase, questions no one can answer confounding me. Why is the world the way it is? Why has no scientific progress (there's that word again!) been made in my lifetime, or the lifetimes of my forefathers? Why does it seem certain things have been placed into the world only for my convenience? Why do I meet, at exactly the time I need to, the one person who has the information I seek? Why do the creatures I fight seem to grow in power as I do? These questions and more I shall take to my grave, perhaps you can put my spirit to rest by answering them, for I cannot.*

*Good luck. Perhaps one day, you too will take the name Erdrick and it shall be your grave a hero visits in the future.*

I slowly closed the book, stunned. He writes that he is not mad, but how could he be sure, those last paragraphs seemed like madness to me. The world was “wrong?” What does that mean? But at the same time, those words spoke to me; Had I not come to the castle without knowing how? And what of the enemies I had already fought? There did seem to be more red slimes than blue after a time outside the castle slaughtering them. I shook my head, I was not going to find answers in this place! I opened the book again, two more pages were left blank after this, and I took a casual look through the pages to see what I might find there. The first page was obviously hurriedly scrawled, by one who did not care much for his penmanship. I had to struggle a bit to read it, but it seemed to say:

*My name is Loto, and I have just turned 16. Just this morning I was summoned to see the KING! He wants me to go kill some creature he called Baramos because my father couldn't. What makes him think I would have any better luck, anyway? And what's with this piddly amount of gold he gave me to do it? I want to hire an army, not a street walker!*

Why did that seem so familiar to me? I flipped to perhaps the middle of the book.

*Sailing again. Why can't things we need ever be just down the street from each other? Why do they always have to be a thousand miles apart? It's so SLOW! I see water wheels being used to drive millstones to crush grain, why do we not have any way of storing that motion as energy and releasing it later? If you could, that water wheel could be attached to the side of the boat and used to propel it when there was no wind.*

And the man wrote he was not mad? Was he insane? Wait, that didn't make sense, I stopped myself. Anyway: Storing motion? Putting water wheels on the sides of boats? That was crazy talk! But he continued:

*And when there is wind, are we really using it to best effect? Could a better arrangement of sails catch a lighter wind? Or make the boat go when the wind wasn't exactly blowing in the right direction? Could the wind be captured somehow and used later when there was less? The captain will not let me try any other sail configuration, he says this sail was good enough for his father, it's good enough for him.*

*If this is the kind of stuff he was thinking about, I thought, It's a wonder he ever defeated this Baramos guy.* But in the back of my head, a seed had been planted. *What if there are better ways of doing things, and we are looking right past them because something “had always been done that way?”* I stowed the book under my arm and retrieved my torch which was burning low. Shoving the chest back into the hole, I was surprised to see the wall reform around it. I stared at it curiously, but decided it had been built to be opened and closed multiple times, possibly to check for theft or to return the journal after I was done with it. It has Loto's... I mean, Erdrick's after all, it should rest with him. My thoughts were racing as I climbed the stairs out of the crypt and blew out the torch, replacing it in the holder outside. I hefted my club up to my shoulder, it was time to return to the tool shop owner and tell him his “tablet” was really a book, and that Loto wasn't the man we all knew. I left the protective field of the tomb and was so lost in thought I didn't think to wonder why there were no slimes about, and that's when I was attacked by a tree.

## Chapter 5

### The hero learns some things about magic

I had only the briefest of warnings as a bolt of energy slammed into my back, sprawling me forward. *I really need to get some armor*, one part of my brain thought at me.

The book had gone skittering away from me but I had held on to the club, so I flipped myself over and started to rise when my eyes caught sight of the one that had launched the bolt at me. One can only describe him as “a wizard.” A dark wizard, at that, being covered head to toe in that white robe, the hood of which was pulled up over his face leaving only his blazing eyes to be seen from within the darkness. He carried a staff that had a shiny sphere set into the end of it, and it was pointed at me and glowing. *Crap*. I thought. *This isn't going to end well*. I sat back down and the wizard nodded like I had just made the right choice. Then his eyes shifted a bit and I followed his gaze-  
*double crap*. He had spotted the book!

His voice was ragged and grating, “Doing some light reading then, in a dead man’s house? Though I guess a cave man would do everything in his cave.” He laughed a funny laugh like he had told the best joke in the world, but I was just confused. Cave... man? What? Oh, right, the club. I really needed to get a sword. Sword and armor, if I lived though this. Maybe someone in town could lend me the money.

*Hey* I thought, *what if I could lend money to people in exchange for getting more back later? I could make, with enough time, infinite money!* Another part of me wondered if this was the time and I remembered, oh yeah, the *wizard*. Who wanted to *kill me*, at least by the looks of things.

“I don’t recall seeing that on you when you went in there, so you must have found it inside. The Dragonlord will be interested to read what it has to say, I’m sure.”

I knew I needed to distract him, buy some time to think of some plan to get myself out of this. “You’ve been following me?” I asked.

“In a way,” the wizard answered. “I wasn’t traipsing along your wake, skulking behind trees if that’s what you mean.”

*It sounds like that’s exactly what he was doing, though.*

“Once I realized a hoard of slimes from the area had been killed, I investigated, with, what it is, oh right, magic. And what did I find? Some neanderthal with a club, destroying my master’s fine work! I would have just killed you then and there, but you went into the tomb, so I thought I would wait until you came out, to see if you were carrying anything interesting. And, oh look, you are. Well, you were. I’m surprised you’re still alive, you must have not taken too much damage on the way here. Still, we had better get this little contest underway, yes?”

I looked away, but tensed myself to spring, adjusting the grip I had on the club. “What if I just agreed to give you the book in exchange for my life?”

“I’m afraid the penalty for killing my master’s creatures-”

I didn’t give him a chance to finish, I sprang at the wizard, but he must have anticipated me, whipping the other end of the staff at me and knocking me back down before I could fully get up. *Ow*.

“As I was saying,” the wizard said, as he pointed the glowing end of the staff at me again. “The penalty for killing my master’s creatures is death. By the way, I think my

maneuver just then was quite well done, don't you? Strange how a magic user can physically attack the so called hero of the age and knock them around, isn't it. I suppose I should be glad we met when we did, given too much more time and our situation may have been reversed."

I could only glower at him, wondering what he was on about now. *I wouldn't get that much stronger after only a day of wandering around beating up lesser minions, would I? Hardly.*

He laughed again and turned away. "But perhaps I should deliver you as a gift for my master. One of his dragons I'm sure could use a meal of a would be hero. Don't you think?"

He paused and looked back at me expectantly, as though I was going to answer, and laughed again when I not did.

"Perhaps I hit you too hard, did I get your mouth as well, caveman?" He swung his staff at me and hit me in the jaw, making me see spots. *Wait, wasn't there something I could be doing in this situation? Dodging, that was it. Shouldn't I be dodging, or blocking, or something? Maybe look into a shield when I get back to town?* It didn't seem fair he was getting to attack me and I couldn't hit him back, but he wasn't giving me time to get up. He swung again, this time braining me in the head. Somehow, I knew, don't ask me how, that something white had just turned... orange? Where had that thought come from?

"See, now that was hitting you in the head," the wizard said. "If you want me to stop, give me a reason."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Obviously you do, as you have just said something, which is not nothing, so you've contradicted yourself. Did I hit you a bit too hard? How's your HP doing? Getting low? Should I cast a heal spell?"

Was this wizard high? My mouth dropped open, which hurt actually, and I stared at him. HP? The heck was he talking about now?

"I've done that before, you know. Brought someone to just 1 HP, then healed them. I wanted to see how many times I could do it before their brain gave up and drove them mad. It was... quite instructional."

This wizard was sick, sick, sick, as well as mad. I needed to get OUT of there, but how?

"I see you are a bit shocked. Yes, your hero friends that came before you screamed quite delightfully before I broke them and sent them back into the world as examples of what happens to those who stand against the Dragonlord. I wonder if he will command that to be done to you, as well? Oh, I do so hope he does!"

The really sick thing is this wizard sounded totally sincere, like a little girl wishing for a pony on her birthday. Actually, had I ever even seen a pony? For that matter, had I ever seen a little girl? *Focus, you moron!* part of my brain screamed at me. *Maybe he did hit me too hard.*

"Well, time to collect my prize and get you back to the Dragonlord." the wizard said, bending to pick up the book. "Seems rather unassuming." He turned it over and over in his hands, looking at it from every angle. "I don't think he would be too mad if I took one quick little peak, do you? After all, it could have fallen open and I glanced at the page anyway." He opened it.

Immediately, his body caught fire and he screamed, having no time to react or cast a spell, he burned away before my eyes to nothing. The book fell to the ground, the gold I expected appearing out of thin air as the wizard died. I looked at the book with trepidation, it had fallen to the ground open, to what looked like the first few pages. I retrieved my club and crawled over to it, noting that there were glowing symbols now on the pages that had before been blank. Afraid to touch it, I moved closer and saw there was some writing on the bottom of the page.

*That was your one freebie, it won't work again. Don't mess up like that, next time.*

Great, I was being admonished by a book now. Well, really whoever it was that put that spell into the book in the first place. Was it keyed to any hand but mine? If the tool shop owner had opened it, would that have been his fate? Or was it keyed to evil? I guess I would never know. Gingerly touching it, I found it not even warm and scooped it up. I scooped up the small pile of gold coins as well and finally stood, and thought at least some good had come out of it. I looked around for his staff. *Something like that could come in handy or be sold*, I thought, but it was gone too. *Pity. Was it part of the wizard such that it had been made out of the gold used to fashion him? Is that why it vanished, or was it simply burnt when that protection spell went off?* As I took a step to check around the back of the tree in case something else was hiding back there a slime drew near.

It was going to be a long walk back.

Breconary! How the sight of the castle and nearby town served to bolster my flagging spirit as I saw them in the distance. I knew I needed to reach them quickly and seek medical care, or at least some herbs. My strength was almost gone, and I bled from more than one wound. I currently had one hand on a large tree nearby (yes, I had checked the back of it) which helped to steady me. The sun shone brightly overhead, and a hint of a breeze whispered in the leaves above my head, making me feel all the worse for spending such a day being beaten up by wizards and other foul creatures of the Dragonlord.

*It seems to me I should be more durable than this*, I thought. *A couple of slimes getting in a lucky hit or two shouldn't cause me so much grief.* I spied another somewhat past the tree I had taken refuge against, and luck was with me, I hadn't yet been seen. As quietly as I could, I crept up behind it and slammed my club into it roughly. It gave a kind of "eep" sound and vanished, leaving behind a coin. I straightened, puzzled at something after scooping up the coin with my free hand. Somehow, I could not say how, I knew that I needn't go back to town to be healed. Curious, I chanted the words that had suddenly come into my mind and my wounds closed! I still felt battered, but I was no longer in danger of dying, that much I was certain about. Without so much as a dusty tome to guide me, or years as a wizard's apprentice, I had nevertheless just cast my first magic spell. I was stunned, and stood there marveling at what had just happened for several minutes, looking over my arms and legs to be sure that, yes, I was indeed healed. I did know that some part of myself had been lost to perform this miracle, and I might be able to perform it once again, but not twice. I did so, and again, my wounds were further soothed and repaired in the blink of an eye. I shook my head, thinking back to what the king had said to me- is this what he meant by "trial by fire?" But wizards

studied books to learn their craft, that much everyone knew! I was no wizard, was I? Yet wizards cast spells, and I had cast a spell, so that made me a wizard! How was this possible? I hefted the club to my shoulder and staggered on, shaking my head. Even with my newfound health, I didn't want to be caught out here in the open. I needed information, a shield, and rest, and a sword, though perhaps not in that order.

I entered town again and the man that had greeted me upon my arrival last time gave a start. "You're back!" he said, seemingly amazed. I took a moment to look him over before I past him. He wore a white vest over a blue tunic and pants, the same as everyone else in town who wasn't a merchant, over the age of 80, or a soldier. My tired brain struggled and gave up, finding this minor mystery somewhat uninteresting in the face of everything else I had encountered today. Still, it was polite to answer him, and I realized I was staring at him somewhat vacantly.

*Perhaps I took a blow to the head at some point?* I cast my mind back to what he had said as I approached. *Ah, yes.*

"This surprises you?" I asked.

"Well, uh," he looked around, flustered. "No one has ever come here, left again, and then returned. Not for a long while, anyway. Welcome back?"

"It wasn't easy." I replied. "Still, I learned a few things and now I'm off to do some shopping I couldn't do before."

"Right, right," he said, now thoughtful. "You, uh, you better move along then."

"Sure, okay." *Odd, what caused him to suddenly change his attitude?* As I entered town and began walking, I thought about what my first priority was? See the tool shop owner about the new questions I had? Get my armor and weapon, hoping the gold I had made plus a trade in of a slightly used club would be enough? Take a rest? I considered, and decided I was tired of lugging this stupid club around everywhere with me; The weapon shop would be my first stop.

As I walked though the streets, I noticed a change in attitude by other townsfolk as well. They now stayed away from me, while those men dressed in armor and carrying swords gazed at me with suspicion. Had something happened while I was away? *Strange.* Had I been more alert I would have wondered what all these armed men were doing wandering around town like I was, but at the moment I was more puzzled at their attitudes than their presence here.

I entered the weapon shop with a jingle, having hit the bell with the door and the blacksmith called to from in back. "I'll be right with you!"

"I know the drill," I answered softly, and dropped the club on the counter with a thump. *I'll be so glad to get rid of this thing,* I thought, pushing it as far away from myself as it would go. I added the bag of gold on the counter and started to count some out of it, noticing for the first time just how much I had accumulated. This was about to lead to a profound idea about how carrying around this much gold hadn't seemed to be as much of a problem as I had initially feared when the blacksmith emerged from the back and disrupted my train of thought.

"What can I do for- YOU!" He looked me up and down. "How did you get back here?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I replied somewhat angrily. After all, was this really the best treatment the soon to be hero of the world should receive? I went on. "I



walked. Has this whole town gone crazy? I was welcomed warmly enough the first time I came here.”

“Get out of here, I won’t sell to a... a... traitor!”

“What are you talking about? Traitor? Me? Impossible! I’ve beaten up who knows how many dozen of those stupid slime things, visited a grave, solved a puzzle, almost gotten killed by a wizard, and made it back here. Which necessitated more killing of slimes, ghosts and one flying lizard thing... whatever it’s called. How does that make me a traitor?”

“You really did all that?” he asked, amazed. “With just the club?”

“I did, though I had some help with the wizard, and I resent the implication I’m- Wait, you think I survived because I’m in league with the Dragonlord?” The townspeople’s reactions suddenly became more clear. “Well, I’m not, and that’s the end of it. I just did what anyone would do. I fought monsters, didn’t die from it, and now I’m back. Are you going to take my gold or not?”

“Well,” he said sheepishly. “I guess I owe you an apology.” I noticed him eyeing the gold in the pouch that was sitting on the counter. “With all the others that have come here and never returned, I just thought, you know?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, well, no harm done.”

“You really made all this gold killing monsters?”

“I did. And while some might argue it should be returned to the king as the Dragonlord stole it from him in the first place, I think I’m justified in saying I earned it. Spending it on things that will help me kill even more of the Dragonlord’s creatures in the future seems a fair trade. After all, doing this I’ll be getting back even more of the King’s gold. Don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” he said, now only half paying attention to me, focusing more now on the sack of gold. “So what did you want to buy?”

“I want to sell this club back to you and pick up a somewhat decent sword and a set of leather armor. Will this be enough to buy all that?”

“Let’s take a look,” he said, spilling the pouch onto the counter. His eyes glittered like the gold now haphazardly strewn about the counter. We counted.

I walked out with a sword at my hip and wearing something resembling armor, and I even had enough coins for a stay at the inn. This I badly needed, magic or not. I was feeling more like a hero now instead of just a guy with a club, and I stood a little straighter because of it.

That was good, because outside the blacksmith’s there was a mob waiting for me.

I paused in mid-step. I looked at them. Blue shirts, blouses, pants and white vests seemed to make a rippling sea of resentment as they stood there silently. I briefly wondered what was up with seamstresses in this town, didn’t they know how to make anything but this one outfit? *Of course that old guy with the beard, who is wearing the gray robe and standing in the back, could use some new clothes,* I thought. *Perhaps he’s some kind of non-conformist, or just doesn’t like blue.* Through my mental haze I realized this crowd might want something from me, as they had seemingly gathered together of their own volition.

I gave a slow smile, and a rather nervous laugh. "Can I help you?" The crowd seemed to grow more agitated, eyes shifting to see if anyone would be the first to step forward. No one did. I stopped smiling.

"Uh..." I began.

Then I jumped as a voice behind me roared "What's all this then?" It was the blacksmith, standing behind me.

There was a pause. "He came back!" someone in the crowd shouted. "He must be in league with You Know Who!"

"Voldemort?" someone else whispered.

"No, you idiot, the Dragonlord," I heard someone else answer. "Who in the heck is Voldemort?"

"Not sure, I just thought it was-"

"Not so!" the blacksmith bellowed. "This man has won through using his own strength and skill, because he is not a coward in the face of danger, but a hero!"

"Prove it!" someone shouted.

"Yes, show us the token!"

There was a general agreement to this statement and the crowd looked at me expectantly.

"I only just got into town today." I shouted. "You expect me to rescue the princess and find Erdrick's token in a single day? I didn't even have a sword until a second ago. You wanted me to rescue the princess with a *club*? If it was that easy why didn't one of you do it?"

Well, the crowd grumbled a bit at that. "You must have some proof," someone insisted.

I was reluctant to show the diary, but at this point, what choice did I have? "Well, I do have-"

"HOLD!" a new voice commanded. The crowd looked and there was the tool shop owner, waddling his great belly towards us. "I will personally vouch for this man," he said, stepping up to my side. "Anyone here that cannot accept that can find somewhere else to buy their herbs, I can tell you that."

I felt some of the tension go out of the air, as the people turned to one another and spoke in hushed tones, looking at me sideways. I heard "blacksmith" and "tool shop owner" and "trustworthy" and wondered if the people in town even knew these guy's names. Odd. *Wait, had I asked their names? I could have sworn-*

"Very well," one of them said, pointing to the tool shop owner. "But if this guy turns out to be working for him, you'll suffer his fate too." They dispersed, grumbling, and I was left standing with the blacksmith and the tool shop owner.

"Thank you both," I said, relieved. "I'm not sure what I would have done if you hadn't come along just then."

"Think nothing of it," said the blacksmith. "Just remember where to come when you need a better sword!" He laughed, pounded me on the back, staggering me a bit, and went back inside his shop.

"Are you okay?" the tool shop owner asked me, concerned. "You're still looking a bit orange, though your HP seems to be okay."

"I'll be fine after some sleep." I replied, not exactly registering his words about HP. "But I found something in the tomb of Erdrick, and I have a lot more questions now than when I started."

"Cast your first spell, did you?" he asked with a grin, gesturing towards the tavern down the street.

I nearly stumbled. "How in the world did you know that?"

"Magic leaves traces," he said. "Which you might learn to recognize, if you're lucky. For now, let's get you a hot meal, and you can tell me all about your adventure."

A meal? Of course. Eating! I had forgotten I needed to do that too. *Wait, how could I have forgotten something like that?* Though up until that very moment, I wouldn't have said I needed to at all. *Strange. But then, this whole day has been one oddness after another.*

As we walked I thought about buying this sword again, was there something I was thinking about? Gold? I was sure it would come back to me, right now sitting down seemed like the best idea in the world.

## Chapter 6

### The hero eats dinner and learns where his magic comes from

The tool shop owner busied himself over the fire making us some dinner as I told him about my encounter with the wizard after exiting the tomb. He exclaimed over the book, torn between devouring it then and there and his cooking.

"I never imagined it could be a whole journal," he told me. "Legends speak only about a tablet, with various words of wisdom chiseled onto it. But this? An actual historical account of Erdrick's deeds in his own hand? It would be priceless among scholars of history!"

This perked me up considerably. "Priceless you say?" I looked it over in a new light.

He turned at the sound of my voice and then let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, I see what you're thinking. You could sell it and get some better equipment."

"At the moment better equipment would keep me alive," I agreed. "The journal, while perhaps interesting and full of tips on how Erdrick defeated the evil he was up against that I could use in my travels, can't exactly be used in the same way."

"Agreed. It's almost falling apart it's so old, actually now that I think about it the binding is all messed up, the paper is fragile and yellowed with age, and it smells from being in a damp cave all these years. It's probably not worth as much as I thought. I'll give you three gold for it."

"Three?"

"Five- Ten! I'll give you ten gold for it!"

"I could go whack a few slimes on the head and get ten gold."

"Ah, but gold is worth more now that the Dragonlord has used so much of it up to make his army," the man protested. "So ten gold is worth a thousand in normal times."

"Tell that to the blacksmith," I grumbled. "He still wants fifteen hundred for a decent sword."

The spoon clattered to the ground. "How much?"

"Fifteen hundred."

"I didn't pay that much for this *house*, and that was before. What is he thinking?"

"That it's a risk selling someone claiming to be Erdrick's descendant weapons in the current climate? So it has to be worth his while?"

"Yes, I suppose," he reluctantly agreed, bending down to get the spoon. He went to wipe it off and continued stirring the stew.

"And it's not all that bad," I protested. "I figured it out. Even just sticking around here killing weak monsters at a decent pace it wouldn't take me longer than three days to earn enough money. It's not like the Dragonlord is going anywhere, there's no rush. I can use the practice in combat anyway, I've never really used a sword before."

"And you might learn another spell or two," he agreed absently.

"Yes, about that..."

He waved me off. "We can talk about that. We're talking about the journal now."

*I thought we were talking about how much swords cost.*

"It really is a fascinating find, and I'm willing to make you deal."

"I'm listening."

“Let me have it. It’s safer anyway, you not lugging it around for it to fall into the Dragonlord’s hands should one of his minions get hold of it. I’ll give you a few things in exchange: In a few days I’ll be able to make a copy of it. You can take the copy or just leave it here for safe keeping, but it’ll be yours either way. You can then read it without fear of it falling apart, and I will have already read it so I can tell you what parts are the most interesting.”

I rubbed my chin. “So give you something I already own in exchange for a copy of the thing I already own? That doesn’t exactly sound-”

“Let me finish. Like I said, the journal is priceless, but you know I own something basically priceless as well. When the time comes I won’t just *loan* you the armor, I’ll outright give it to you. We trade two priceless things, what do you say?”

“That sounds like a better deal...” *I suppose even after the Dragonlord is defeated his minions will be roaming the land. Someone is going to have to take care of them, and recover the gold. It may as well be me. The armor will help, even the man that can kill a Dragonlord can get overwhelmed or run out of magic out in some forest. Especially if they go berserk after he’s dead and just swarm me. Even after he’s dead it won’t be useless, and one day when I’m old I could sell it and be set for the rest of my life. Apart from the intrinsic value of the scale, the armor worn by the hero that killed the Dragonlord would command a high price even it was just leather.* “But actually it sounds like I’m getting the better deal. I can use the armor to make money, until the Dragonlord’s minions are all dead, anyway. And given the number of them I’ve run into just around here, they seem limitless. Are you sure it’s fair?”

“You’re not thinking like a scholar, I can do something similar. If I can make one copy, I can make another. Yes, it won’t be ‘Erdrick’s journal’ the original, but in a way it’ll be better. Like I said that book looks like it could fall apart at any moment. This one would be new, and created by using a real writing desk, a decent pen, and penned by a real scribe. Erdrick wrote it on the road, after all, so the quality will be questionable at best. My copy will be far easier to read.”

I thought about this for a moment. *Would Loto want his journal to be out there in this way? Would I? He did win, after all, so even his mistakes couldn’t have been that bad. I would want heroes facing danger not to make the mistakes I did, wouldn’t I? That’s the whole point of writing down your story in the first place. To have an accurate record and set the story straight. It just seems... No, he didn’t write it for just me, he even said himself I might not actually be related to him. He wrote it for whoever came after him in a time of need, and how can I greedily keep knowledge from people? But wait-* “What stops someone from buying a copy from you, and then making their own copy, and selling it for less than a copy from you costs?”

“Well, nothing, I suppose,” he admitted with a sour look on his face. “But only one made from the original is guaranteed to have the fewest errors. You start making a copy of a copy, and then a copy from that, and so on and errors might creep in.”

I hummed. “But then we have the opposite problem, don’t we? Only someone with a ton of gold is going to read it, because you won’t sell the copies cheaply.” *At least not at first. Every copy will be worth less than the one before it because that’s one more copy of it out in the world.*

“Hey, it might not be swinging a hammer all day, but copying something like this is still a lot of work. And paper isn’t cheap, neither is having a cover made and the whole thing bound together.”

“I don’t disagree, you should be paid for your efforts. What I’m proposing is some kind of borrowing system. I’ll leave my copy here, but if someone wants to read it they can pay a few gold and get access to it.”

“Like listening to music at a tavern,” he agreed slowly. “A farmer wouldn’t be able to afford a private musician, but all of them buying drinks and a meal generates enough business for a tavern to hire one. Everybody benefits. I could set up a place with a lot of books, not just this one, and charge a daily fee to read as many of them as you wanted. What in interesting idea.”

“I suppose if you wanted to take one with you, to read that night at home, you could pay the value of the book. In case you ‘forget’ to bring it back, I mean. You get your money back when you bring the book back in good condition.” *And of course adding to the collection might get you a month’s access or whatever.*

“Yes... yes! That could work!”

“Combine that with an earlier idea I had about lending gold to people in exchange for a fee when it’s repaid, and pretty soon you could really have an empire of lending shops. Books, gold, whatever!”

“Lending gold?”

“Sure. To take my example I go in, I want gold to buy a sword so they give it to me. I buy a sword and use it to make money killing monsters. I survive because now I have decent equipment so I make more than enough to pay the loan back, give them something extra for the use of the gold, and make extra for myself.” *I wouldn’t have had to beg for the king’s kindness if something like that existed. I would have just gone there.*

“You’re just full of good ideas, aren’t you?”

I laughed. “Wait until you read the journal. Loto wanted to put water wheels on the sides of ships to help them move when there wasn’t wind!”

“How in the world- Anyway, I’ll see for myself. So we have a deal?” He stuck out his hand.

“Erdrick’s journal in exchange for the first copy, to be left here, on display, for anyone to read should they request it, possibly for a fee to be split 50/50 between us, and the armor, which will be mine to keep once I present the token to you?” He nodded. “Deal.” I shook his hand.

“I can’t wait to get started. But for now, we eat.”

The man dished out the stew, cut bread and got out a tub of butter, poured us each a glass of ale, and we sat down. We ate for a few minutes before he spoke up again. “So let’s talk about this magic you did.”

“It was the most amazing thing,” I began, starting to get excited about it again. “Suddenly I just knew, out of the blue, that I could heal myself. A chanted some words and felt something leave me, but in exchange my wounds healed up. I knew somehow I could only do it twice at most in succession, but that’s still better than nothing. What happened?”

“You say ‘out of the blue’ but that’s not exactly the truth is it? Something had just happened right before that, right?”

“Well, yes,” I admitted. “I had killed a monster. But how does that relate? I’ve killed a hundred of the things by now if I’ve killed a single one.”

He nodded. “It does. My boy, you have to understand something about the world. Most people, just are not going to put the effort in to become great fighters. Why would they? Take our current situation for example; monsters show up after the Dragonlord steals the kingdom’s gold right? Do the people of the world band together, sweep across the countryside, and try to do something about it?”

“No,” I decided. “The king told me they sent soldiers, hundreds of men, to the castle of the Dragonlord. Only one returned.” *Only one. Should I be suspicious of that? Is there a spy in the castle now?*

“Exactly. They relied on those supposedly who trained to protect them to do their job and protect them. But these soldiers didn’t do extra training or bring any better weapons or armor than the base minimum the kingdom provided. Imagine a man simply deciding one day to become a blacksmith and picking up a hammer. Is his first creation going to be anywhere near as good as he imagines it?”

“Unless he’s some kind of prodigy, no. How would he even know where to start?”

He jabbed the air with his spoon. “Exactly. Is it any wonder they all died? I don’t mean to make light of their sacrifice, but they had no idea what they were in for, because they didn’t work up to that assault of the castle like you are doing. You came looking for help, you didn’t just rush off and try to take down the Dragonlord on the first day. Now those that are left are forced to cower in villages like this one hoping some hero comes along, who has the strength to carry on. Someone who casts their fears aside, and knows they can survive.”

“Is that a song?”

He harrumphed. “Never mind. The point is they aren’t out there fighting, getting stronger and helping to rid the world of this evil. They don’t study magic or swordplay either, just going about their daily lives as they had been. If they were called upon to fight, they couldn’t. Even the guards that escort people to and from the castle are more likely to simply run from the Dragonlord’s minions than directly confront them. It’s safer, not risking his ire by killing his creatures.”

*So am I putting the town in danger by staying here? I’ve killed plenty of monsters, is he going to be planning some kind of revenge? If it takes it out on the town I’d feel terrible!*

“So they aren’t really becoming better soldiers either, maybe better runners,” he mused. “But you- different story. You show up, buy weapons, and head out to make a name for yourself. You kill dozens, then hundreds, then maybe thousands of the Dragonlord’s minions by the time you’re through and therein lies the key.”

*Ugh, thousands? I hope not.* “To what?”

“To your progress. Why you’re different from the average villager now, and how that difference will continue to grow until you mature into a proper hero. Consider that these monsters were created with magic, after all. You kill them, that magic is released when they turn back into gold. Most of it just vanishes back into wherever magic comes from, but a tiny bit of it ‘sticks’ to you, if you will. Now given what I’ve said about the

villagers here, and the fact you've killed the Dragonlord's minions and they haven't, what happened?" He paused, gesturing for me to fill in the blank.

"As I've killed enough of them for it to make a difference, now I can use magic too. That's what happened to me. I killed something, and that little bit of magic was enough to push me over the edge, and now I know a spell."

He nodded. "Exactly. Not only are you absorbing a little energy you're out there swinging your club- er- sword around, you're getting stronger. I bet you could feel it after a few monsters drew near."

"It wasn't pleasant," I agreed, remembering. "I switched hands just to try and give myself a break. But it did get a little easier."

"So just like the blacksmith that gets stronger bit by bit every day he works, you will get stronger too. Your craft isn't hammering iron, it's killing monsters, and you can get better at it just like an apprentice blacksmith. We actually have a name for this- levels. It's a kind of shorthand for scholars that study these sorts of things. We would say 'he went up a level.' When you do that you can take more punishment, you get stronger, you can use spells more often."

"So if I keep 'raising my level' by killing monsters..."

"You'll absorb more magic, and that will translate into more spells. We aren't sure where the knowledge comes from, perhaps magic itself or the gods give you knowledge when they know you can handle it? We can't really say."

"But wait, I could learn magic the other way, right? If you had books of spells-" I stopped as he was shaking his head.

"This magic you've absorbed is instinctual. Don't get me wrong, you've got magical power inside you now there's no mistaking it. You can use it however you wish, and if you did study you could use that power to cast those spells you learned in the traditional way. But you would still have to start from the beginning and learn to read magical writings and manipulate magic like anyone else does it. And that you just don't have the time for. Believe me, if rumors are to be believed the spells you learn will be combat type spells useful for your adventure, and not how to keep water clean or something like that. You are, after all, killing things designed to be killing machines so it makes sense you get combat type spells absorbing their residual magic when they die. You're much better off raising your levels out there and taking what magic you can get than spending years as an apprentice."

"So I'm essentially using the magic of the Dragonlord against him." *I guess I see his point. It's better to get stronger, and get gold to buy better stuff, and take the magic as a nice bonus rather than the point of doing all that otherwise. Studying magic will get me none of those things, and I would still need armor and to condition myself to take hits because you can bet the Dragonlord is going to hit me a bunch of times. I would need a lot of 'levels' to survive the encounter, levels I won't get unless I'm out there bashing slimes in the face. Just knowing magic isn't good enough. I see his point.*

"That's a good way to look at it."

"Okay. I get it. So what's my next move?"

"If you're looking for a goal to shoot for, raise your levels until you feel confident moving about the countryside. Visit some other towns, and see if you can't figure out where the princess was taken. Probably the Dragonlord's castle but who knows? That's your next goal, bring her back. Then you can find the token. With that you can convince



more people, and maybe get more in the way of help from others. In the short term rest for the night at the inn, I can show you where it is, and on the way introduce you to a man that can restore your magical power. Yes, he knows a spell to restore a person's magic power, but of course he can't cast it on himself. That would be... That would be... Crazy!" He laughed.

"I suppose." *So, like Loto said, the exact person I need just happens to be here? If he really can restore my magical potential I can fight near the town, heal myself when I need to, have that loss restored, and continue on like that as long as I want. Very suspicious.* "How long to copy the book?"

"Several days."

"Fine. I'll want to read it before I go too far on this quest, like you said if there's mistakes Erdrick made on his quest at the beginning I want to know about them. It seems important. By that time I should have enough for the better sword, and enough 'levels' I don't have to worry too much about the long journey between villages. Hopefully someone will know something about the princess, and I can get her rescued soon."

"Sounds like a plan. You know where I'll be the next few days."

"I do. Have fun copying the book I guess?"

"I'll try. You done? Want seconds? Otherwise we can clean up here and take a walk."

"I'm the hero of the world, of course I want seconds."

## Chapter 7

### The hero learns about the key... to his adventures

The next two days passed slowly, as I ventured into the lands and wilds around the castle. The sword I had purchased served me well, cutting down the Dragonlord's monsters with far greater ease than trying to bash them with the club. I spent some of my hard earned gold on a shield, so I could get used to fighting with it, and by the second day felt confident enough to visit the town of Garinham to the north west. It was almost due west of Erdrick's tomb, a thin strip of land with the ocean on one side and a mountain range on the other allowing access. Having stopped at the tomb to again pay my respects and make sure it was untouched since I had been there, (whatever protection magic could have been inside the journal, and my removing it could have allowed monsters near, but it seemed this was not so) I set my sights west and moved on past it. I made it to the village with little trouble, following the coastline I couldn't miss it so there was no possibility of me getting lost. I stayed for lunch to rest a bit at the Inn, and talked to the people there who were quite astonished to see a new face. The town itself was tiny, barely more than a collection of houses and shops, though the people were quite friendly. They, I noticed, like their counterparts at the castle and nearby village of Breconary seemed to wander around almost at random, with nothing to do. They looked helpless, moving lethargically, but brightened when they saw me. They eagerly welcomed my approach, and spoke up with hardly any prompting on my part with what seemed to be the first thought that popped into their heads.

*This too is the Dragonlord's doing. With the lands unsafe to travel commerce has no doubt been brought to a standstill. That means no raw material moving around to be made into products, such as ore from mines or wheat from the fields. So what else are they going to do? Sit at home and feel sorry for themselves? At least moving around like this gives them something to do. Food stores must be holding out thus far, they don't seem to be starving which is a relief. A pity those monsters I kill out there are made by the Dragonlord, and simply become gold when they perish. Can't eat gold! The number of monsters that were not slimes (as I assume they would be very poor eating if you could even slurp one down and not gag) could feed a... village... This thought brought me up short. I haven't seen any game animals anywhere, I thought with a chill. Are they hiding, or just dead? No cows, deer, rabbits, birds, sheep, pigs, nothing like that. What are these people going to eat once this crisis is over? If all other animals have been driven off because of the Dragonlord pretty soon people around here are going to starve. They can't work the fields because monsters would attack them, so they can't even grow vegetables or harvest wheat for bread. This kingdom is in more dire straights than I first thought. I really must hurry and get strong enough to challenge the Dragonlord before even worse happens.*

I had been standing there brooding for some time and so a young woman in blue and white by that time had wandered close and came to talk to me. "Welcome to Garinham," she cheerfully told me. "May your stay be a peaceful one."

"Thank you," I said to her. "I'm sure it will be." *As it doesn't seem like there are any monsters roaming around here. Are they instructed to stay away from villages then?*

She moved on. I felt a little sad, she could have stayed to talk, what else did she have to do? I shook that thought out of my head. *She has no obligation to stand there and let you stare at her. You're not the hero of the world yet, just a person who happened to make it between towns. And even then it would be her choice, and she choose to move on after politely greeting you. She doesn't owe me anything, and she didn't have to say hello in the first place.*

It seemed people were quite proud of their little town, as not long after that an old man in a gray cloak and pointy hat walked up to me. "Do you know the story of this place?" he asked.

"I don't!" I admitted.

"Garin, a wandering minstrel of legendary fame, is said to have built this town."

"Is that so? But surely you mean founded?" I asked politely.

"What?"

"You said built. I highly doubt a minstrel, no matter how legendary, could build a whole town by himself. I doubt he sang it into existence. So clearly he didn't build it himself."

"I meant what I said," he fumed, and walked off.

*Strange. I guess that explains the name though, Garinham. The hamlet of Garin. Or the place he ate a lot of ham. I could go for some ham.*

Another strange interaction was a man I took to be a mercenary of some kind, dressed in leather armor and a helmet. He asked me if I knew of a man named Nester, and grew disinterested when I told him I did not. But there were rumors as well. Another old man, I had to look twice to make sure it wasn't the same one as before, boldly told me of the princess.

"Many believe that Princess Gwaelin is hidden away in a cave."

"Preposterous!" I told him.

"It isn't, many people believe it. You can ask them!"

"What? No, I don't care what people believe. I'm saying it's not logical for her to be hidden away in a cave as you say. Why would the Dragonlord abduct the princess and then not take her to his castle? A cave? Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not saying I believe that," he assured me, "I was just telling you what many believe."

This made sense to me. "I see. And what do you think?"

He leaned closer to me and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I think she's hidden away in a cave."

"But you just said- never mind. Good day sir!" I walked away, thinking the man a bit addled. *No doubt the bleak, lonely emptiness of his hopeless, futile predicament is beginning to get to him.*

I walked away from him, as he was seemingly hiding at the end of a short path that went nowhere surrounded by stone blocks. The only other rumor about the princess was told to me by a young boy I encountered. If you can call his "news" a rumor at all.

"It is said that the Princess was kidnapped and taken eastward." He told me this as if he was showing me a shiny gold coin he had found, or a feather or a smooth stone he was proud of. I hated to burst his bubble, but the actual fact of the matter was that much was obvious, where else could she have been taken? I told him so.

“That stands to reason, lad,” I told him. “We seem to be on the west coast. As you can see, the ocean stands to the west of us.” I turned and threw out a hand, taking in the ocean that glittered and sparkled in the afternoon sun hardly steps away from the village. “She could easily have been taken south, but unless the Dragonlord wanted her off the continent, he couldn’t have taken her west. Thus the only way forward for him was east.”

“I guess you’re right,” he admitted. “You’re pretty clever, huh?”

“I try my best.”

I didn’t feel clever as he walked away, as a sudden thought struck me. *We are inches from the ocean, yet I see no docks or boats nearby. When this great minstrel ‘built’ this town, why didn’t he move it the five minute walk down to the shore and start there? Include a dock as part of the town so it could have boats and thus, perform fishing. It’s like it was founded deliberately away from the water for no reason. Goods could more easily flow in and out, more food would be available, there would be a whole raft of benefits. Very odd. I suppose the docks could have been ruined as a part of an attack by the Dragonlord’s minions but I don’t see any wreckage. I’ll walk down there on my way out just to see, but I really don’t expect to see anything.*

I gave no thought to the enormous building I passed as I looked around the town, barely glancing at the door to the place, and had then seen all the village had to offer. With a shrug I went on my way, drawing my sword as I knew it wouldn’t be three steps before I was once again facing some agent of the Dragonlord. Before going too far I did go down to the water but as I suspected, no wreckage of a dock was to be found. The area here was as wild and untouched as the rest of the land, making me wonder what they had been thinking. The perfect place for a town, and they instead looked over at the field that must have been there before the town was and thought “yes, that’s the place, that field over there. Build near the water? Oh no, perish the thought.”

It seemed my earlier fears that this area might soon be depleted were groundless, as I still couldn’t go twenty steps in any direction without facing something itching to end my life. I made it back to the safety of Breconary to have my magical power restored, and sighed a great sigh as I went back out again to slaughter more monsters. My gold totals slowly rose, so it seemed likely I would earn enough gold to buy the better sword by the end of the third day. I felt myself getting a bit stronger by the end of the second day as well. As the sun set that evening I went back to town, planning to stop and see my new friend and see how he was coming along. The tool shop owner told me he was making good progress copying the journal, and presented me a blank journal for my very own, which I spent some time on before supper, as it was too dark to go monster hunting any more that day. After that he joined me by the fire up on his second floor.

“I must have killed a hundred slimes today,” I told him. “I honestly don’t understand it. Where are they all coming from? I’ll pass through a grove of trees, clear them out, go look at the ocean for a moment to catch my breath, and the same grove of trees yields a dozen more. They can’t move all that fast, you would think the land was covered with the things, underfoot at every step, given how many I seem to kill. But no, they’re always several yards apart. And it’s not just slimes, it’s ghosts, and drakes, and I’ve

seen the occasional wizard skulking around as well. Always singly. Even slimes might overwhelm me if there were that dozen that attacked me all at once, but no, always one at a time. Does it mean something? Are they just not smart enough to work together?"

He considered. "I suppose only someone running around killing as many creatures as you do would notice. It is odd. I'm afraid I don't really have an answer for you, though."

"I mean how many did the Dragonlord make? And why? Some kind of scare tactic, just to keep people in line around here? His hobby? But there must be other towns to guard, and even his gold can't be limitless. I will find other monsters further from here, won't I?"

"I can't know the Dragonlord's mind, but yes, I would assume so. Rumor has it that crossing a bridge will bring new monsters to bare... Where did I even hear that from?"

*The same place as the princess being taken east I suppose? Or that she was stuffed into a cave? What, do certain monsters mark their territory and respect bridges as their boundaries? That seems unlikely.*

"As an interesting note, Erdrick ran into a similar problem. The demon he was fighting, a being named Baramos, used gems instead of gold to create his monsters. Apparently this type was everywhere at one time as well."

"Did he? Strange, that the magic would have changed over the years. Or maybe they just knew similar but distinct spells? One thing bothers me about the whole thing. The wizard I saw spoke to me, seemed intelligent. All the ones I've met since then I've not given a chance but they turned into gold just the same when I killed them. So I know monsters created from gold *can* be intelligent, and these wizards are not people that have simply joined the army of the Dragonlord. But then why aren't all of the Dragonlord's monsters intelligent enough to speak?"

"It can't be simply the size of the creature, it's magic that's making it possible in any case. It's really just the shape it happens to take, if I had to guess."

"Exactly my thinking! I mean maybe the Dragonlord doesn't want to create an army that could turn against him? Perhaps he can choose how smart the creature is when he makes it? If they were smart enough to think for themselves, they might think 'why am I following this guy instead of doing what I want.' I don't recall if the wizard that did speak to me gave me more gold, maybe using extra gold could give them extra abilities?"

"That would make sense. Magic can do extraordinary things."

"It just doesn't add up. A smarter creature would live longer, he wouldn't have to make as many. All these creatures roaming the world, it's almost like..." I stopped mid-sentence and blinked a moment. *They were put here simply for me to beat up, making me stronger and increasing my wealth. And to slow me down in my journey across the land.*

"Almost like what?"

"Never mind." *He'll think I'm crazy.* "Does the journal have anything to say along those lines?"

"He never thought about it. At least not in the beginning. Later he did start to wonder about some odd stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like doors."

"Doors?"

“Indeed. Apparently there were some doors no one had a key to. People just wandered by them not caring what was inside I guess. But there was a key to them, sometimes halfway around the world. And even more interesting, there was a magic key that could open ‘magic’ doors and a thief key that could open ‘thief’ doors. Either key would not work in the other ‘type’ of door. Can you believe it?”

“Why would anyone do that, make a lock for a door there was only one key to in the world?” *No wonder he thought about things being for his convenience in the world.*

“He asked that of himself many times. Perhaps he discovers an answer later but I doubt it. He had to go around finding these keys to open the doors he came across. Now days, of course,” he announced proudly, “we simply have keys. Much easier. Too bad they’re so fragile.”

“How so?”

“They break with only one use. One might almost think keymakers planned it that way to increase their own wealth.”

“Wait a second, start at the beginning again. What you’re telling me is that long ago, only certain keys could open certain doors?”

“That’s right.”

“And the keys didn’t break then?”

“You know, I guess they didn’t!”

“But now people make keys, and they can open any door, but only once?”

“That’s about right. We don’t have anyone that makes keys around here. Maybe to the east?”

“Yes, no one at Garinham offered to sell me any. Wait a second, Garinham!”

“What about it?”

“There was a door there! Some absolutely enormous building with no windows. I glanced at it but it didn’t seem interesting enough to really think about. It had a door. Someone in that town must own the place. Do they buy a new key every time they want to go in? I wonder what’s inside.”

“How big was it?”

“You know, now that I think about it, it stretched the entire length of the town. It’s crazy. What could they keep in there?”

“Could be anything I suppose, if it’s that big.”

“I’ll have to go back there and- Wait a second, this doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“The king used a key to unlock the door to the treasury. Are you telling me every time he does that he has to buy a new key? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard! He either opens it very rarely or the king has a person that can make keys somewhere in the castle. And if any generic key can open any door, how does he keep people out of the treasury? I mean there were guards, yes, but still...”

“That stands to reason. You could go ask him. Maybe that door is special?”

“Maybe. I will ask him! He seemed happy enough to see me the last time. A little too happy, if I’m being honest. Insisted on me telling him of my adventures thus far.”

“You can’t really blame him,” the man told me a little sadly. “I’m sure he would like nothing more than to take up a sword himself, rush to his daughter’s rescue, and avenge his wife’s death. But no, he must remain in the castle and pretend to be the king

of this land. He has been forced to rely on others, like yourself, to do what he wishes he could do.”

“Oh.” I was a bit taken aback. “Yes, that does make sense,” I decided. “He can’t send soldiers, he hardly has more than a handful at the castle as it is. There are no travelers in the land to bring news and gossip. And my stories may raise spirits at the castle if the king is telling others of them.”

“You have the right of it, I think.”

“So tomorrow I’ll head back to Garinham, I’ll need to kill more monsters anyway I may as well go somewhere as I do so. I’ll check out the door, but first make a stop at the castle and see what the king has to say. Maybe I’ll look around for more doors, see what the castle looks like. I was escorted back and forth but they know me know, maybe they’ll let me walk around a bit.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to ask. Do you have enough gold for the Inn?”

“I do, thank you for asking.” I stood and stretched. “Thank you for your hospitality once again. I’ll let you know what I find out about that door.”

“I would be curious to know. Be safe out there.”

“See you later.”

## Chapter 8

### The hero learns that some people have funny ideas about things

The king brightened as I walked into the throne room the next morning, actually smiling in what seemed a genuine way as I approached him and went to one knee.

"Your majesty," I greeted him.

"Again our newest hero of the realm returns!" he exclaimed. "And seemingly better outfitted and stronger than ever. Rise, and tell me of your exploits so I may record them in the royal scrolls for all time!"

Something in his voice made me suspicious as I stood, and I looked at him. Things clicked into place. "You were actually being sarcastic the first time you asked me that, weren't you?" I asked suspiciously.

"Ah." He had the good graces to actually seem a bit embarrassed, looking away from me. "In perfect honesty, yes, yes I was. I thought you would spin some tale of heroism to try and impress me into giving you more money or something. But then you told me about the tomb, and finding the journal, and meeting with the townspeople and all that. You didn't ask for anything, and I verified your story with the owner of the tool shop so you're on the level. You really do seem serious about all this, and I regret my earlier rather flippant attitude when you came to tell me your deeds."

*He didn't mention that last night, but then, I suppose there was no reason to do so.* "So if I was here to ask for more money..."

"I would have to refuse you," he cheerfully informed me. "My reasons are the same, I can spare little money while the kingdom is under siege."

*And if you have to buy a key every time you want to open the door...* "Of course. That's not my intent anyway," I assured him. "So do you want to know what I've been up to, or..."

"I do! As you actually seem to be taking this seriously, unlike your predecessors. I would actually be interested in what you've been doing the last two days. Please, go ahead!" He brought out a writing desk, uncapped his ink, and dipped in his quill.

*Is there no royal scribe? I guess it gives him something to do. Actually, shouldn't he be seeing, what are they called, claimants? Supplicants? To dispense the king's justice or something? Though with travel so limited maybe he has literally nothing better to do. Still, the last two days are mostly just killing monsters.* I told the king of what I had been doing, including visiting the next nearest town and almost reaching my goal of having enough money to buy a decent sword.

"And is there no word of my daughter?" he asked wistfully.

I hesitated. "Only one rumor of note, majesty, though I hesitate to even bring it up it's so outlandish. According to one villager the rumor is she was hidden away in a cave, of all things." *The other about her being taken east is hardly worth being called even that, though I suppose she could have been taken south but for what end?*

"A cave? I see." He seemed to be considering the claim seriously, waving the quill back and forth a little as he stared off into space.

"But this must be nonsense, why would the Dragonlord take her and then not have her by his side? I doubt there is anyone he would trust to watch her, for a start."



“True, that would be the more logical thing to do,” he agreed. “Still, there is a cave system somewhat nearby. It goes under the water, leading south. You’ll find it far to the east of here, should you wish to check it out.”

“With a better sword in my possession, it will be my first destination,” I promised him. “It can’t hurt to investigate, and no doubt I would need to go that way sooner or later anyway.” *Even if it’s just to put that rumor to rest, at least I can say I tried.*

“Indeed. Is that everything?”

“For now, yes. But I did wish to discuss something with you, majesty.”

“Very well.” He stoppered the ink and set the pages aside to dry. “What would you like to discuss?”

“Keys and doors,” I replied. “The tool shop owner,” *I really must remember his name*, “explained to me after finding some odd lore in Erdrick’s journal about doors in his time that keys in the modern age can open any door, but are only good for one use.”

“That’s true,” the king agreed. “Makes opening the treasury a hassle, and I have to waste soldiers guarding it because any fool could open it, but what about it?”

“It seems to me I might encounter doors that need to be opened on my journey. As I saw you open a door I figured there must be a person that made keys somewhere in the castle. If you don’t mind me buying one or two just in case, I thought you could introduce me.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Sensible, and if you go by royal appointment perhaps you think to get a better deal, eh? I can’t fault your thinking or your logic. There’s no secret, so I don’t mind telling you. Yes, there is a key maker here in the castle. Guard! Show our young hero to the east wing so he can visit our key maker. Tell him I sent him, see if he can get a better price as he does seem to be the one to- what is it?” We both looked at the guard who was looking like he was about to deliver bad news, or was holding in some gas.

“Sire!” The guard replied crisply, now that he was under scrutiny. “I can’t sire, it was one of the things on today’s agenda for later that I needed to tell you.”

“He’s not sick is he? That would be a disaster! Why wasn’t I told immediately?” the king rose from his throne.

“It’s nothing like that, sire,” the guard hastened to assure him. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“But you don’t know?”

“Uh...” He looked to the other two guards at the door who seemed to find every interesting thing at the corners of the room to study.

“Speak plainly, what’s going on?”

“The door separating the two wings was accidentally locked last night,” the guard informed him. “We’ll need a key to open it, and as only your royal personage is allowed them-” He said this as a man trying not to openly pin blame on his monarch, but at the same time shifting blame away from himself or others because of that monarch’s perhaps questionable policies in the past. It was a delicate balance, and he seemed to be practiced at it.

*Wait, last night as in about the time we were discussing keys? Had I come the day before in ignorance I could have just walked the halls without issue but only when I learned about keys did some kind of obstacle come into my path? This can’t be the Dragonlord’s doing, even his reach can’t be that long. But what other explanation do I*

*have? Coincidence? Maybe, but it seems directed at me rather than simply a random occurrence.*

The king covered his eyes with his hand. "Incompetence. Never become a king, my boy, you'll only regret it. All the problems are yours but you can't take any of the credit for their solution, because it's *expected* for you to have the solutions to everything. Of course I did decree that only I could buy keys, for obvious reasons, but never thought I would be locked out of my own castle in this way. Very well, I'll use one of my keys to... my keys..." He was patting the pockets of his robe. "Oh dear. Now that is a problem!"

"Majesty?" I asked.

He lifted up the cushions of his throne, feeling around the edges. Then he looked under the chair. He patted his pockets again. My hopes were sinking as each of these steps was performed. Finally he spoke again. "Nope. I used the last key I had to open the treasury for you. I didn't rush off to buy any because I figured *in my own castle*," he reiterated, glaring at the guard, "I wouldn't need to because he's just down the hall. Now it seems half my castle is denied me!"

"Couldn't someone with an ax just chop the door down given a bit of time?" I asked, puzzled. "It is an emergency at this point, right?" *I mean aren't people now trapped in that part of the castle?*

The king and the guard (the king first, the guard after seeing it was fine by the king's example) fell into peals of laughter, slapping their legs and gasping for breath. The king suddenly stopped, and the guard hastily straightened again.

"You know, if this hero thing doesn't work out, I'll hire you for my jester," the king told me. "Should this Dragonlord situation ever be resolved, anyway. Chop a door down. With an ax, like it was a tree." He threatened to laugh again while miming chopping something down with an ax but clamped down on it. "Wow. That was a good one. No, you'll have to travel to Rimildar to get some. No help for it, I'm afraid."

*Really? There's no other solution but me heading to another town to buy a key for you, to unlock a door in your castle?* "Wait, hasn't someone on the other side realized it? Couldn't they just get the man who sells the keys and get him to unlock the door? I'm sure it won't be long before someone over there realizes it, right?"

"You would think that," said the guard. "But the key maker has a strict policy. Someone has to buy one of his keys, he won't use them himself."

"Oh yes, very strict," the king agreed seriously. "Almost an oath really. Strange fellow, but there you have it."

"Even to save his own life? He's trapped over there!"

"A man of iron principals, is our key maker," the king assured me. "He would rather die and his skeleton decorate his chambers forever rather than take one step towards a locked door with the intent to unlock it for himself. Being able to make keys, well, that's an awesome responsibility isn't it? I think we all sleep better at night knowing the man has a policy like this."

*Do we? Do we really though?* "And no one on the other side currently would have the gold to purchase a key?"

"Doubtful," the guard said. "He charges a hefty fee, and with gold as scarce as it is..."

*One would think we would move to another currency in that case, like silver. Or that keys would only be one or two gold, given how valuable it now is.* “I see.”

“Besides, none would dare to go against the edict of their king, that’s me in case you forgot,” the king added. “Even if they had the gold, better that they follow my orders than let it get out they bought a key of their own.”

*Is it? Is it really? Better to be trapped than figure, ‘oh, the king will understand that in this one case we had no choice’ and just buy your own darn key?*

“Never fear, if you’re low on gold. I’ll reimburse you when you return,” the king assured me. “Off you go then. If you don’t know where Rimildar is one of the guards can direct you.”

“Of course, majesty,” I said, bowing. *This is stupid. How can they be this stupid?* “I would like to request one other favor, in the meantime. May I have leave to explore the rest of the castle without an escort?”

“There aren’t any secret passages or anything,” the king assured me, a little too hastily. I hadn’t even thought of that. “Not that I’ve had anyone looking, or anything. But I’m sure you’re not here to make off with the meager furnishings the castle has left. Very well, guard, tell the other guards the current heir of Erdrick may have free run of the castle.”

*Does he not know the name of the guard, does he not care to know and just calls all of his guards ‘guard,’ or does this man have the rather unfortunate name of ‘guard?’*

“At once sire,” said the guard, who turned and went down the stairs.

“Thank you, sire,” I told the king. I also left, leaving him to, presumably, sit staring at his other two guards and do nothing. While I did everything for him. Didn’t really seem fair to me, but I guessed we all had our part to play.

I explored the rest of the castle, and yes, there was a locked door that people were shouting through. It looked like wood, I was half tempted to find an ax somewhere and just go at it, but any one of these servants could do the same. *Why did they find that so amusing anyway? Is it iron or something and just disguised as wood? But why go to the trouble?* “Isn’t there a window or something someone could climb out of?” I asked the group around the door. “Or climb up into that part of the castle to go and get a key?”

“Windows are too small,” one of them told me. “It’s a castle, after all. They’re just for firing arrows out of, not for squeezing through. No, they’re screwed all right. Probably die unless someone can find a key somewhere.”

The others agreed this was probably what would happen, not seeming all that broken up about it, despite how much they said it was such a shame. They all seemed to be of the mindset it was just inevitable, nothing could be done, and those on the other side should just accept their fate and die quietly. I, of course, was not going to let any such thing happen. *There must be some other option!*

“Could I slip gold under the door, and someone on that side could take it to the key maker and buy a key?”

“And go against the wishes of the king? None of *us* would be so rebellious!” The others agreed hastily. “Besides, it wouldn’t work. Look for yourself.”

I did, the door was tight on all sides. I had to hand it to whoever built the place, they had done a good job with the doors. “I guess not. Could we get a bird to take a small sack of coins though the window, or maybe just throw one through? There must

be a ladder, we could get up to the arrow slit and pass some..." The people there started looking at me like I was mad, and I heard a whispered "bird?" from the back as though they were saying "arsonist" and I beat a hasty retreat. There was something wrong with the people here, there could be no doubt about that. Well, if a key they needed, then a key I would get. The place couldn't be that far away, right?

I got directions to the place, from three different people because it seemed so unlikely what they were telling me, but their stories all matched up. The town of Rimuldar was, in fact, *on another continent altogether* meaning it would take me weeks, if not months of travel to make it there. I would have to make it to the eastern edge of the land, go under the ocean through the swamp cave (the only cave to the east making me highly suspicious because it had been mentioned so many times already) then around a series of mountain ranges to finally reach a town that sat in the middle of a lake. There was no port, so even trying to sail there I would only get halfway before I was back to the same problem. I would have to walk the entire distance, and that town was the only one on the entire continent. Everything else had been destroyed by the Dragonlord and left to become wilderness again. There were no roads, even if I had seen a horse or a cart, there would be no benefit to having either. I didn't know the first thing about caring for a horse in the first place, and it would probably cost me more gold than I was going to spend on the sword given how much everything else cost around these parts.

Needless to say, I needed another option. The people now trapped behind the door in the castle would be dead long before I could reach this town even in the best of times, and then return. Just walking to Garinham took far longer than it normally would because of all the minions of the Dragonlord I had to stumble over and destroy. I couldn't begin to imagine how many I would run into on a journey of this length. What would I eat, to start with? Would I have to camp in the wilderness the whole trip? I headed back to Breconary to talk it over with the tool shop owner, the man had a dragonscale armor maybe he had a spare key lying around? On the way I passed a building I hadn't given any thought to before and then pulled up short. Whipping my head back I stood there and stared. It was a small building, set against the edge of a wall, maybe 8 meters across and 5 meters deep. But most important of all *it had a door*.

I raced over to it, figuring I would do the only thing I could do in that situation- I pounded on it.

"Hello?" I called inside. "Is anyone there?"

I heard a surprised squeak from inside, as if someone gasped and then fell off a stool. There was some clattering around and a voice ghosted through the thick wood. "Hello?"

"Hello in there! Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because there's a door! Look, do you have any keys? They need one up at the castle due to a... certain incident."

"I don't sell keys, I sell fairy's water, I mean fairy water. Do you want to buy fairy water? Come in then, I'm not doing business through a closed door."

“How do you do any business at all?” I shouted through after a brief pause. At this point the townsfolk who were out were looking at me quite strangely and edging away from me. “How do you go home for the night? You must have a key to open this door!”

“I really don’t,” they assured me. “Sorry, you’ll have to come in if you want any fairy water.”

“What good is it?”

“Keeps minor minions of the Dragonlord away.”

*Oh, that would be useful.* “And you’re not out here selling it why? No one can buy your product if you’re going to put a locked door in their way. Keys seem to be in extremely short supply in this region.”

“I did wonder why business was so slow lately,” they admitted. “Nothing for it though. Nice talking to you.”

“Gah! Buh!” I sputtered, as they moved off again. I had no idea what to say to that. They had locked themselves in their own shop? How was that good for business? Any number of people would want that product, provided it worked, given the risk of simply traveling between here and the castle. I would gladly buy some, just to have a bit of a respite from being attacked every few steps. But if I needed a key, that was on another continent, how was I supposed to get access? *And why did they call it fairy’s water first? Do I want to know what it’s made of?* I shook my head and headed to the tool shop. The more I stayed here the more I didn’t understand this place. *But what happens if I start to? This place could drive a person mad, and I have a feeling that person is me.*

The tool shop owner didn’t have any keys, and admitted it was a bit odd the fairy water shop had “closed” in the way it had, given the brisk business it was likely to do otherwise. Nor did he have any ideas on getting to Rimildar any faster. He had a map, and between here and there were many hills, mountains, and forests. There was no shortcut, I would have to take the long way around. And it would be a long way indeed.

“This key business though, it seemed a large part of Erdrick’s quest, and it seems like it’s going to be a large part of yours as well.”

“So it seems,” I agreed. “And you’re sure they can’t just be chopped down?”

“And ruin a perfectly good door?” He seemed shocked. “Perish the thought. No, no, it’ll never work. You have to use a key.”

“If you say so. But they’ll be dead by the time I get back!”

“There is every possibility of that. But that is really the king’s fault, for having a door put there in the first place. And you say they didn’t seem all that concerned?”

“They did not.”

“Curious. Well, what else can you do? Better buy some torches if you’re going to explore the swamp cave. I have a fine selection if you would care to look?”

*He’s a merchant all right, I shouldn’t let myself forget it.* “I’ll get some, but I’m not leaving right this second. Another day won’t make a difference. I *have* to earn enough gold for a better sword, especially if I’m undertaking a long journey.” *I would rather strike first and win a battle in a single blow than buy better armor and try slugging it out with whatever I came across on the road.*

“Humm, undertaking. Poor choice of words there, but I take your meaning. I don’t disagree. You have to do what you think is right, just as Erdrick did. And believe me, from what I’ve learned from the journal you’re not the only one to run into ridiculous

situations. I'll go over it with you tonight, hopefully I can get through the last of it and you can have the copy to take with you to read."

"Fair enough. I'll see you tonight." *I go once more to the slaughter.*

## Chapter 9

The hero descends into the darkness and finds exactly what you expect to be there

And so I headed to Garinham on the off chance someone there knew anything about keys, as they too had a locked door, and almost at once was besieged by the usual assortment of the Dragonlord's minions. As I completely expected this it was no problem, and slashed and stabbed my way across the countryside as I had many times before. Arriving there I saw the same people wandering around and asked them about the building at the north end of town.

"What building?" most said.

"That building," I would reply, pointing it out.

"Oh that place!" they would reply with a shrug. "Never thought about it."

Every single person in town acted like this was the first time they were seeing the place, and none claimed any knowledge of what was inside. Somehow I didn't find this as surprising as I once would have, back in the long forgotten ages past I called *yesterday*. I simply nodded like it was the most natural thing in the world a building they walked past day in and day out should be a total mystery to them and said my farewells. I considered banging on the door again just to see what would happen but standing there I decided that honestly? I didn't *want* to know if there was someone inside. What would it mean if there was? Talking to them would no doubt simply confuse me as in the case of the fairy water "shop" or annoy me... Like the case of the fairy water "shop." I had gold to earn, "levels" to raise, and clearly the town could take care of itself without my help so I was just going to get on with whatever I had in front of me. I left, wandering some distance south of there just to see what I could find, which turned out to be a dense forest, a small lake, and to the south east a mountain range. I stayed in the forest as long as I dared, then headed back to Breconary.

What seemed like an eternity later I finished killing what I hoped was the last minion of the Dragonlord, and headed into town. My purse was, I wish I could say it was bulging but honestly it simply looked as it always did. I grew concerned and checked the thing over, and no, there was no hole in the bottom. I had kept careful track, in my possession should be enough gold to buy the sword and if I could sell my previous one back to the blacksmith, a night at the inn to rest and any supplies I might need so I could begin my journey to the swamp cave, should that prove to be my next destination. I had picked up and stored exactly fifteen hundred gold, but as I had once told the blacksmith, that much should require a huge chest to carry. I had no chest, just my small money pouch. There was a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach that somehow this was all for nothing, that maybe the Dragonlord's magic could reach into my pouch and take the gold away from me? *Is that why the creatures around here seem endless? The gold just goes back to him and he makes more creatures with it? Has all this been for nothing?*

But I knew it wasn't completely for nothing. Even if I had no gold to my name I felt stronger than ever, and had absorbed enough magic in the course of my three day blitz to now be able to cast several spells. I knew how to heal myself, cast a fireball like spell at my enemies, put them to sleep, create a ball of light that could illuminate dark places,

and keep my enemies from using magic against me. I marched into the blacksmith's shop with more confidence than I felt, and he was waiting for me at the counter.

"Welcome," he said to me. "You're a man with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Ready to see what a real sword can do for you?"

"I am, if you've got one," I said, equally ready to play this game if that's what it was.

He laughed. "Good, good. Let's see the gold then." He brought out the sword he had showed me before, complete with scabbard.

*Here goes nothing.* I untied the pouch and made to dump it over.

"Hey, not on the counter, they'll go everywhere!" he protested. "Here, just let me." He grabbed it away from me and hefted it in his hand.

*What is he doing? Can he really tell how many coins are in there by just hefting it? But again, how? Each one weighs something, and there's a lot of coins in there! Supposedly. They'll go all over, he said. That pouch can't hold that much gold... Can it?*

He seemed satisfied, giving a nod. "Yeah, that's exactly right. Here, I'll give you a new pouch, save us both the trouble." He slid the sword and an empty pouch that looked about the same as mine across the counter, and held out a hand. "You'll want to sell your old sword back then?"

I was about to hand it over when a sudden thought struck me. This sword had served me well, and there was really no reason I couldn't forgo a shield and use two swords. Imagine it! A sword in each hand, essentially allowing me to attack twice per opportunity. Then I shook my head. *I'm becoming as absurd as those people walking past a building every day and not wondering what it was. It would never work. Two swords, it's preposterous. Better to stick with the shield, and I do need a free hand to gesture with if I'm going to be using magic on a regular basis now. I would have to drop the other sword, but I can just stop gripping the... the... what do you call the thing on the shield that I hold? The grip? Stop gripping the grip? That can't be right. Besides, I don't want to have to go out again today to get more gold to stay at the inn and get supplies.* I handed the sword over and he counted some of my own coins back to me. *There are coins in there, no doubt about that. He pulled out a handful. What in the world is going on with that pouch?*

"Wonderful doing business with you!" he told me when it was done. "Let me know when you want a better set of armor or a better shield!"

*I have my eye on a very special set of armor, thank you very much, but a better shield wouldn't go amiss until I can prove myself to the shop owner and get the full set.* "I will," I promised the man.

Feeling far better now that I had a real weapon to my name I stopped in to see the tool shop owner, and found him waiting at the counter as well. He handed me a new looking book with a grin. "Your very own copy," he told me. "Enjoy it."

"I'm sure I will. Does it contain any wisdom I should be aware of?"

"He makes some good points, brings up some things I hadn't thought of. You were right about the boat thing, he did suggest somehow using a waterwheel to propel a boat instead of using it to turn millstones. He also wondered why man couldn't fly like a bird, and he was right on about the progress we've made in the few hundred years since his death. Or should I say the lack of progress?"



“What do you mean?”

“Look around. Our houses are built no better than they were in his time. Blacksmithing hasn’t changed. Most people don’t know how to read or write. Our roads are still dirt, our roofs still thatch. Our ships are no faster, nor can they withstand storms any better by being of better construction. I could go on but you get the point.”

“I suppose. Maybe if the land wasn’t under constant siege by people trying to take it over, and making monsters run around everywhere, we might be in better shape today.”

He nodded sadly. “You may have the right of it. They were dark times then, and they are dark times today. Still, I see you have your new sword. Let’s see it then!”

I proudly drew it, holding it up for him to see.

“Yes, it does look good in your hand. You’ll look the part of a true hero, once you’ve got some decent armor and shield at your side.”

I felt a jolt of excitement and wondered if I had impressed the man enough to not need the token. That could go a long way for my further exploration of the land considering the length of the journey that was before me. “Do you mean you’re giving me the armor?”

“Of course I am!” My spirits rose further, this was great news! “Right after you bring me the token. Didn’t we discuss this?”

And there it was. They fell again, and I put the sword back. “Of course.”

“You didn’t think I was just going to hand it over right now?”

“No, no, we had a deal. The journal and the token, I remember.” *But you have to admit that’s what it sounded like. Honestly, don’t tease me like that. If I wasn’t the hero of the world and a man of honor I would just take the stupid armor. I had my sword out, after all. But I’m no bandit, and he is a friend and has helped me tremendously, but he did take a bit of a risk there. If I wasn’t who I said I was he could easily have been in danger, should I decide that was the right moment to rob him because I had tired of playing this little game. Doesn’t my accepting this limitation despite really, really wanting that armor show I am who I say better than any ancient bit of metal?*

“Exactly. What are you going to do about the keys situation?”

It took me a second to switch gears in my head. *Wait, what are gears anyway, and why are they being switched? Where does that phrase come from?* “What choice do I have but to head there? The world seems to be shoving me in that direction for some reason. The rumor about the princess, the whole door situation. There’s not much left for me in this part of the world, present company excluded of course. I’m just concerned the journey will take too long for it to be worth it. I’m not even worried about those locked up people, they could think of something I’m sure if they really got desperate. No, I’m worried about *me*. Weeks on the road? I’d starve, unless there are game animals further out in the forests I’d be able to hunt. But I’ve seen no evidence of any around these parts.”

He didn’t seem concerned, and chuckled while shaking his head. “Is that what you’re worried about? You’ll be fine! You walked here from someplace, didn’t you? How did you survive that? I’ve taken the liberty to create a pack for you.” He lifted a travel sack from behind the counter. “Everything you should need, and at a good price as well!”

*Wait, he's got a point. I did come from somewhere, but neither of the two villages nearby seemed familiar to me, nor did anyone greet me as though they knew me. I haven't thought about it since leaving the king with his initial gift but where exactly did I come from, and how did I survive without so much as a gold piece to my name. I realized the man was staring at me, giving the pack a little jerk as if to say "you want it? Huh? Huh? Do you? Do ya? Well? Well?" "How much?"*

He told me, and I figured it was fine, I would have enough for one more stay at the inn. *If I am leaving tomorrow it'll be constant battles across two continents, more than enough to refill my purse if only three days fighting around here got me the sword.* "Sold."

With that he showed me various sections he had marked in the journal I might want to pay particular attention to, and wished me luck. "I hope I see you back here again," he said as I was leaving. "Make sure to see the king before you leave in the morning too. You'll want to tell him about the new sword you got."

"I suppose. I'll see you in a few months, I guess."

"Oh, I don't think it'll be as long as all that. See you later!"

I left, feeling that confusion I was becoming accustomed to once again rising within me. *Of course it's going to be months. Look how far away it is. Come on.*

The next morning I did go to see the king, who was pleased I was tracking down the rumor of his daughter's location and that I had a decent weapon at last. Not pleased enough to offer me any other resources, of course, but pleased all the same. (Not that he could, now being locked out of his own treasury which I decided might become a problem for him when it came time to pay his staff, but that was his problem) I headed east, as before every few steps coming into opposition with a minion of some kind. I had expected a fairly hard journey, but in truth it seemed to go as smoothly as it was possible for a journey to go. Yes, I was plagued by monsters at every step, but I ate when I was hungry, slept when the sun went down, and made my way towards the east coast. I expected to run out of food at any moment and kept my eyes open for any animal I could kill, but then realized this was foolish in the extreme. While monsters wanted my blood and rushed up to me to kill me, any natural animal would do the opposite. What was I supposed to do, chase them down on foot and cut them to pieces with my sword? I should have brought a bow and some arrows if I wanted to catch something to eat, but as the days passed the food in the sack held out so I made good time. In all honesty I couldn't tell you exactly how many days I traveled, almost as if it wasn't even important, hugging the coast so I didn't get lost. I passed a desert, then a swamp that seemed to drain my vitality, luckily I didn't have to spend long there. Then a forest and finally the plains that led to the bridge I would cross to get the swamp cave. I was more than halfway there! I headed over it, past another small wooded area, and again was confronted with a poison marsh I had to slog through. The shop owner had included several herbs in my pack, and I made use of them, preferring to save my magical power for emergencies. The sword proved worth every coin I had paid, which was a good thing as even in the swamp monsters of all sorts saw fit to attack me. *Are they immune to the poison here? Just taking a step here I feel my vitality draining, but here they are. And they don't seem weakened in the least. Doesn't seem fair.* But finally

I made it into the cave and headed down, knowing I would be passing under the water and to another continent on the other side.

With my ball of light at my shoulder I made my way through the cave, water dripping from the ceiling and pooling at my feet. I explored the place, just to say I had left no stone unturned, and that's when I ran smack into the green dragon.

I halted in my tracks as the dragon came into view. *Yes, that's a dragon*, I thought to myself. *There can be no mistaking it. Look at that thing! No wonder they're so feared. I couldn't take a creature like that in a fair fight. And what's beyond it? Why is it here?*

The beast was enormous, hardly fitting into the passageway it was squeezed into, and I couldn't help but stop and stare at the creature. *It's really a dragon*, I said to myself. *Never thought I would actually see one.* Green scales shimmered in the light of my spell, and I thought that perhaps I had lucked out. The beast seemed to be sleeping, curled up around itself so maybe, just maybe, if I slowly backed away I might actually survive this encounter. Smoke trickled from its nostrils, and of course I must mention the teeth, sharp and white, in a jaw that I'm sure could crunch through the meager armor I was wearing and get to the juicy flesh within with relative ease. Their ears twitched and an eye, an intelligent eye, snap open to look at me.

"Well, well, well," they singsonged. "What have we here?"

*Ah, it can talk. Because of course it can. How am I going to get out of this? I can't fight that thing! Can I talk my way out of it? Seems like I better start trying, and fast.* "Er, would you believe a traveling merchant that got lost?"

"With that sword in your hand?" they asked. "Not likely." They raised their head.

"Sword? Sword? Oh this sword!" I made a show of looking at it like I had never seen it before. I gave a forced laugh. "I do have one! Just a deterrent against, uh, bandits. Yes, bandits on the road, very dangerous, not to hurt, uh, people, such as yourself. Goodness no!"

"Oh, I think it is. Looking to make a name for yourself down here, is that it? Creep up on a poor, defenseless dragon in their sleep?"

*Defenseless? In what world?* "What? No. I'm just passing through to buy keys from Rimuldar. You can just go back to sleep, I don't mean to disturb you."

"What is a merchant buying keys for, anyway? Do you know..." they said conversationally as they got to their feet.

*Don't look at the claws. Each one bigger than one of my fingers. I said don't look-you looked at the claws. Well done.*

"...how boring it is to be down here all the time?"

"Then why stay, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh, you'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, that's why I asked?" *I mean I may as well keep them talking, right? Talking is not eating me for a snack.*

"Huh." This seemed to bring them up short. "That's a good point. Well, you see this door here?" They pointed with their tail and yes, a door was in fact behind them. "I'm guarding it."

"What, down here?"

"Yes, down here. You know, where we are? Right now?" The dragon looked at me like "are you stupid?"

"You don't have to tell me," I started carefully, knowing a bit about dragon lore, "but it wouldn't be your hoard behind that door, would it?"

"Ha!" They said. "As if it would fit in this place. No, sadly I have been ordered away from guarding my hoard by my lord and master. He has told me guarding this door and what is beyond it is more important than my hoard."

"He didn't!" I said, shocked.

The dragon nodded seriously. "He did. Can you imagine the nerve of that guy?"

"And you have to follow his orders? Even when your hoard is involved?"

"Well, no, but have you seen him?"

"I haven't had the honor." *Oh, good answer, that was a good one. Keep that up.*

"He's not called the lord of all dragons for nothings. He's huge! Dragons get bigger the longer they live, I have no idea how long he's been alive. So no, I don't have to follow him because of any sort of compulsion but just because if I don't, he would probably eat me."

"He's that big?" I asked, my spirits sinking.

"He's that big," they agreed. "Twice my size at least."

*I'm so dead. I thought he was a man, the king said he looked like a man when he first came, right? I thought "Dragonlord" was a title, because he was powerful enough to command dragons. But it turns out the tool shop owner was right, and he's an actual dragon himself? He's the literal lord of dragons on account of his age? He just used magic to turn himself into a man as a disguise? Super.*

"Well, this has been pleasant, but I feel I should probably eat you now. Orders, and all that," the dragon sighed. "It has been some weeks since I saw anyone. It has been nice chatting, wouldn't mind some company for an hour or two but..."

"Wait, just wait!" I shouted, as the dragon advanced a step.

"What is it?"

"It's just, I can't get away anyway, right? Why not have a chat? If you're as bored as you say when will you next get the opportunity?"

They considered. "I suppose. Put that sword down so I know you're not trying to trick me."

"Of course!" I slid it back into the sheath and they sat down.

"What shall we talk about?"

"Let's play a game!" I suggested. "If I can guess what's behind the door, you have to grant me a boon."

"And by a boon you mean your life, is that it?"

"Maybe..." *What else could you really offer me at this point?*

"You know how terrible it would be if my master found out I hadn't eaten you?"

"Have you just now told me it's been weeks since you last saw anyone? How would he find out?"

"Magic, I guess? Oh very well, you'll never guess anyway so I agree. Just to make it sporting I'll allow you, oh, three guesses, and then I get to eat you."

"But if I guess right you don't eat me," I reminded them.

"Three *wrong* guesses and I get to eat you," they amended. "Boy you humans are picky. Place was better off before you all showed up."

*Was it though? And are you really telling me you wouldn't have eaten me and been all like 'oh, I just said you could guess I didn't say a right guess meant anything, don't you remember?' Come on, I know the stories about these sort of games, the wording is everything.* "Okay, my first guess is something related to Erdrick. Something the Dragonlord doesn't want used against him, either the armor or the sword or both." *Of course I have a pretty good idea of what is behind that door, but guessing it right off is no good. I have to make this dragon think it's going to win. This is about stalling, getting him to like me so he is hesitant to eat me.*

"Wrong," they said. "Nothing to do with that guy. Guess again."

"Okay, my second guess is a monster he created using gold that even he can't control. He locked it down here in hopes it would never escape to challenge him."

The dragon laughed. "Not even close. Third guess!" They licked their lips and I noticed a little drool coming down.

"My third and final guess is the princess," I said, trying to hide any excitement I felt.

"Oh." Their face fell. "You guessed it. Darn it, I really was looking forward to eating you, too."

"She's really back there?" My excitement reversed as I thought about what the dragon had just told me, in its place I felt a deep sadness begin to grow inside me. *I will have to be the one to tell the king his daughter was dead.* I was really hoping I was wrong about this, but it seemed I wasn't. The how and why of the princess even being here would have to wait, it made no sense but reality is what it is, not what we wish it to be. *I have to keep my tone light, I'm not out of danger yet. But if I play this right, maybe I can get out of it in one piece.*

"Yup, marched in weeks ago, and I was told to guard her. Don't get any funny ideas now, I'll have you bitten in two ways before you can get this door open."

"No, no," I waved him off. "There's no point. Weeks ago? She's undoubtedly dead by this time. I'll just be on my way." I got up and turned to go. "Nice talking with you. Have fun guarding a dead princess I guess?"

I didn't get three steps before the dragon's voice, now pitched with fear, called out to me. "Wait!"

Chapter 10  
The hero finds a way to deal with the dragon

“Yes?” I asked lightly, not turning around. “You’re not renegeing on your word now are you?” I put my hand on my sword again as though willing to draw it at any second.

“I don’t care about that,” the dragon protested. “What did you mean she’s probably dead?”

“Oh, that!” I slowly turned, a look of concern on my face. “You did say she was brought here weeks ago?”

“Yes, must be, I mean I don’t know exactly how long but it’s been a while.”

*Right, no clocks down here. Do dragons even know how to tell time? I mean they’re smart enough to talk, they could probably understand the concept.* “And you said it’s been that same amount of time since you saw anyone, right? She was actually the last person you probably saw in that case, right?”

“Yes, so?”

“So no one has brought her any food or drink in that time. I don’t know how it is for dragons but we humans have to eat and drink on a regular basis. Like, three times a day. We die if we don’t.”

“You’re kidding! Trying to trick me!”

I shook my head. “No, it’s just the truth.”

“You can’t just go into a hibernation state if food is scarce? It’s how we guard our hoards for weeks at a time without leaving. Then we’ll just hunt something large and be set again. I mean I knew dragons were superior to humans but to think you needed to eat *three times a day?*”

*Of course you believe yourself superior. I think I’m superior to you, don’t I? Weaker, maybe. Smaller, for sure. But not inferior.* “Three meals of varying size, yes. You really didn’t know? Odd, you would think the Dragonlord would have mentioned something like that about the prisoner. Maybe he just thought you capable enough he didn’t have to mention it.”

“Where would I get food for a human? I don’t even know what you eat. Rats?”

I shuddered. “No, not rats. I don’t know, but he trusted you to figure that out, didn’t he? Man, he’s going to be angry when he comes to collect her again, don’t you think?”

“Furious,” the dragon agreed, sounding agitated. They spun and pounded on the door. “Hey, you in there! You still alive? Answer me!”

“I’m telling you, she’s dead.” *And there wasn’t a thing I could do about it. She was kidnapped far before I even arrived.*

“You’re just trying to get me to open the door!”

“I’m not. Like I said, I don’t have any keys anyway. Do you?”

“Keys? Of course I don’t have any keys, where would I put keys?”

*Where do you put your hoard?* “You could stick it under a scale couldn’t you?”

“No, don’t be stupid. Hey! Answer me!” More pounding.

I waited.

Finally the dragon gave up and slumped over. They moaned. “What am I going to do? He’ll kill me for sure. She did talk to me in the beginning, but then stopped. I thought she was just annoyed but I suppose that could have been when she died, huh?”

*No, you think? But I was diplomatic enough not to say this, I was still in deadly danger, after all. Perhaps a bit more flattery? "There's really no way you could open the door?" I asked gently. "I mean the size of you, your strength and power! Tear it down, let's make completely sure." There's a small chance she's just too weak to answer. It's a long shot, but if I can get this dragon to panic enough, maybe I can rescue her after all. Near death or not, the king will want to know what happened to her. "We can always have a new door put up." How did this door get down here in the first place? Someone carried a door into this cave and set it up here? That doesn't make sense, who would do that?*

"Yes, yes of course!" the dragon agreed. They gathered themselves and launched a mighty attack against the door with his claws. The sound of the claws bouncing off reverberated through the cave and he staggered back. "Impossible, it's just a wooden door. You are trying to make a fool of me!"

I held up my hands. "Upon my honor, I'm just standing here. I've done nothing, you've had an eye on me the entire time I've been here. Have I cast any spells?"

"No," they reluctantly agreed. They went back to pounding on the door, trying to smash it down, then reared back and blew fire at it.

*Oh yeah, I would be dead, trying to kill something like this. And the king wants me to fight a dragon even bigger than this one? Hate to break it to you but the kingdom is screwed. Maybe I could poison him or something...*

The dragon regarded the door, which remained unscratched. "Maybe the Dragonlord put a spell on the door? This is crazy, it's just wood. I can knock over trees like nobody's business. There's no way a simple door could resist me."

"I've recently been made aware that may not be the case," I informed the dragon. *It explains why the townspeople were laughing at my ax idea. If a dragon can't take a door down, what's an ax going to do? But why should it be that way? There should be nothing special about putting some wood together, calling it a door, and suddenly being unable to scratch it. Which begs the question, why don't I have a carpenter make me a door, and then carry that around as a shield? If it can stand up to what this dragon just did to it, it can stand up to anything.* "That's why I was heading to buy keys. Someone at the castle locked a door and the king used his last one earlier, thinking he could buy more at any time, but now because the person that sells keys is beyond the door, they're stuck."

The dragon stared at me for a moment and started laughing uproariously. There was a bit of mania in it, and the dragon's tail slapped the ground. "The so called king locked himself out of a section of his own castle?" they managed.

*He didn't do it directly but I suppose it's close enough and besides, why would I want to contradict this dragon?* "Yes."

"And now he can't buy keys, because he doesn't have a key to open the door to see the man to buy keys?"

"That's right."

"HA hahahahahah! Oh that's priceless. Humans are so stupid!"

*I can't even disagree, confound it all. But you didn't have to say it like that, did you?*

"See," they went on, "this is what happens when you don't have dragons as advisors anymore. He locked himself out of his own castle. Oh, that's just too funny."

*It is, in a way, but it's not that funny. I mean come on! And are they saying dragons were advisors at one time? To kings?*

Finally the dragon's laughter died down, and they turned somber again. "Seriously though, what are we going to do? She could be dying in there!"

*Oh it's 'we' now, is it?* "I can bring a key back with me, I mean I don't know how much they cost but I've made some gold on the way here. I'll probably make more, the minions of the Dragonlord should be on the southern continent as well."

"No doubt, but how long is that going to take?"

"Days, for sure. Weeks at most to get there and then back here."

"Weeks?" the dragon moaned. "Fires that be this is a mess I've gotten myself into."

*You know something? This is actually working. I mean she's either dead or she's not, there's nothing I can do about that at the moment. Until I know for sure, one might almost say she was **both** dead and alive, at the same time. There must be some sort of deep truth about the world hidden there but now isn't the time to go into it. Unless someone is getting into that cell with magic she's definitely dead. But I think I might make it out of here alive. Time to 'turn the screws' a bit more, if that's what you would say in a situation like this.* "Maybe he wants her dead, and you're just going to take the blame for it," I suggested, tapping a finger on my chin.

"Oh no. Oh no!" The dragon started spinning in place, muttering to itself. "Did I not bow to him deeply enough one time? Did I say a bad thing about him and it got back to him somehow? Why does he hate me? Oh, it's just like him to do something like this, destroy me indirectly before slashing me to pieces with his own claws. And I've just been asleep down here, thinking how great it was that he trusted me with this. I've been such a fool!"

*Yes, far superior, in many ways.* "Shouldn't I be on my way? The faster I get going the sooner I can get back here."

"Just wait, wait, let me think!"

"Okay," I raised my hands in surrender. "Take your time, no rush." *Yes, think it over. The only way you can tell for sure is to let me go and get a key. You can't walk into town and... Well, I suppose you could you're an enormous dragon. You can do what you want. But would someone sell you one? Then come back here and let me open the door, allowing me and her at least the possibility of escape.*

"There's no help for it. You'll have to ride me," the dragon decided, coming to a stop again and looking down at me.

"Exactly, I'll just be on my way and- what did you say?"

"I don't like it either, but you're just not very fast. I mean, if anyone saw me, riding a human around like I was some sort of, of, of horse? That would be the end of my reputation forever!"

*And what about me? If a person saw me they would think I was in league with the Dragonlord. Riding a dragon, has that ever been done before?* "Are you sure that's the only way?" I asked nervously.

"Of course I'm sure. Here," they bent over. "Get on my back, and hold onto my horns. We'll make good time, it's that city to the south, right? Not a problem."

"Back. Sure." I thought furiously, but there seemed no way around it. And it would solve my problems. No monsters would attack me while riding a dragon, that's for sure. I hated to not collect the gold I normally would have but the life of the princess was the



main priority at this time. If we could actually save her by getting there and back more quickly, could I refuse this dragon's help? I climbed up on the dragon and gripped the horns, both of them facing back so it wasn't too uncomfortable.

"Ready?"

"I guess- ya!"

The dragon took off running, twisting around the walls of the underground cave as quickly as they could, and burst outside into the open air again. Which I hastily tried not breathing, as it was more of that poisonous swamp I had made my way through on the other side. Once past it though the dragon really went all out, charging across the plains at what I estimated would be at least five times my top speed. And this was a charge. I was forced to creep along because every five steps I had a minion of some kind to deal with. The dragon didn't care about any of that, simply tearing a straight line path to the south as much as they were able. Small trees and rocks were simply ignored, smashed aside like they didn't even matter, and once we were out of the hills and into the forest they dodged larger trees without much more difficulty. So it was more like ten times, as I wasn't able to move like this. The speed and power of the beast again made me believe I would probably have no chance against them, and watching the countryside fly by was admittedly rather exhilarating. It wasn't the most comfortable of seats, but the dragon's scales and my holding on to their horns kept me in place as they ran. Monsters scrambled out of our way, gaping at us as we zipped past them, and I wondered how soon it would get back to the Dragonlord that a *human* was seen riding a *dragon*. *But then again maybe it never will, because who wants to come to the Dragonlord with such a claim, but have nothing to back that claim up with? I mean if more than one monster told the same story I suppose it could be believed, but what monster would go first? And of course it seems like only certain ones can talk in the first place...*

The city of Rimuldar came into view as the dragon scrambled up the side of a mountain, yelling back at me that this was a short cut and to hang on. "There's a mountain pass here," they yelled, "we clear this one section and it'll save us an hour or two going around the whole range."

It seemed they were right, for a dragon that admittedly spent most of their time guarding their hoard (and lately a princess) they knew a lot about the surrounding countryside. Their claws gave them the grip they needed, and we rose high into the air along the mountain path, and then back down the other side. I was able to see that the city was indeed smack dab in the center of a large lake, with a strip of land leading to it from the east. But the dragon didn't head in that direction when we reached the plains again, surging forward towards the lake.

"Is this right?" I called to them.

"Don't worry, dragons are at home in the water! This will be faster."

I could do little but trust them, unless I wanted to fling myself off and hope I survived the impact. But the dragon was as good as their word, plunging into the water and swimming like a serpent toward the town. They finally stopped, breathing hard, and let me climb off their back at the edge of the town.

"I'll cool off a bit, go get some keys and get back here," they told me.

"Right," I told them, flopping off their back like a fish. My legs burned, which was weird as I didn't think I had been using them, but scrambled up the rest of the way

towards the town. I could have sworn the dragon was trying not to laugh as I floundered around trying to work feeling back into them, but I didn't look back to be sure.

The town was fairly large and standing at the edge of it was a young man, so I approached him. He seemed quite confused (rightly) that I wasn't entering the town from the east but it didn't seem to bother him that much as he announced without hesitation as soon as I got near "I am Orwick, and I am waiting for my girlfriend."

"Nice to meet you, Orwick," I replied. "That's great, just great, totally a priority in these dark times. However, some of us have urgent business here. Where can I find keys?"

"Keys?"

"Keys, yes. I wish to buy some, and I've heard your town can accommodate me."

"Keys?" they repeated. *Wait, have I stumbled upon the village idiot?* Then I chided myself. These were not the thoughts of a worthy hero, champion to all people, were they? No, they were not. I must have patience and understanding, compassion and- "You're not some kind of thief, are you? I mean wanting to unlock doors? That seems pretty shady if you ask me."

*Ah, they just didn't know if they should tell me, being a stranger and all. I get it. "I have my reasons. Can you tell me if this town sells them?" Because it would be just my luck that they didn't, or just ran out or something.*

"Sure." He directed me to enter the town and look for a certain building, and I thanked him and made my way there. Entering the shop I saw a man behind a heavily fortified desk, surrounded by stone.

*Does he need that much protection? These walls must be a meter thick, is he expecting to be robbed at any- oh, maybe he is.*

"What can I do for you?" the man asked.

"I'd like to buy keys, hopefully this is the right place?"

"It is. I sell all manner of the one type of magical key that exists in the world. And nothing else. How many would you like?"

*Nothing else? Do you do such a brisk trade in keys that you can afford to only sell them? How much are these things, can I even afford one? I guess if you're the only source of them but there are no other towns on this continent- never mind that for now.* "As many as I can buy. How much?"

"No discount for buying more than one. They're fifty three gold apiece."

That wasn't so bad, considering what my sword cost. I counted out as much gold as I could, figuring I didn't want to make my way all the way back here and it was better to have one too many than one too few. I figured I could buy more at the castle and maybe cheaper than this with the king at my side but wondered if saving a few gold was worth the risk? I decided it wasn't and started my way out of town again. I passed an inn and as I still had a few coins to my name had an idea and made a slight detour into the place.

"Greetings, stranger," said the woman behind the counter. "Welcome to Rimuldar. What can I get you?"

"How much for a recently slaughtered pig, or a whole turkey, something like that?"

She took a step back, eyeing my sword and perhaps thinking I was some kind of crazy person. Which had I not been myself may have seemed the case, which just goes

to show you. I had been rather hasty in my thoughts with ye old Orwick, hadn't I? "You want to eat a whole pig? How long have you been on the road, exactly? I can cook you up anything you would like, make no mistake."

"It's a long story, and I'm sort of in a hurry. It has to be to go. I don't mean to be rude, but can you accommodate me or not? I need to get going again."

"I suppose," she answered slowly. "Not exactly the most common thing in the world, to have a stranger come in and want a whole hog right off the bat. I suppose if you're just stopping in... You don't want any vegetables or anything like that?"

"No, just the meat. As much meat as..." I spilled the remaining coins I had onto the counter. "...this will buy me."

She looked it over, considering. "How about a side of beef?"

"That would be perfect!"

"Just a minute. Pa!" she shouted up some stairs.

"Yeah?" I heard a voice shout back down.

"Go get me a side of beef from the basement."

"What? Now?"

"Yes now, I'm asking aren't I?"

"Hold yer horses then." He stomped down the stairs and around the corner, out of sight.

"Mind telling me what this is all about while we wait?" she asked.

*How to sum it all up in one sentence? Ah!* "Would you believe it's all part of a plot to rescue the princess?"

She shook her head. "No I wouldn't. Who are you, anyway?" I gave her my name, making no mention of my supposed ancestry. She would just want proof I couldn't provide anyway. "And this meat somehow factors into your grand plan?"

"Let's just say it's a thank you to someone who went out of their way to help me recently."

"Meat? A whole hank of meat?"

"Yes. It will directly lead to the princess." I stopped myself before I said "if she's still alive."

"Well, lots of crazy people in the world I expect. Look at us, my family runs an inn at a time when nobody goes anywhere because of the Dragonlord. What sense does that make, if you really think about it?"

"I'm sure business will pick up again soon," I told her, suppressing a giggle.

She glanced at my sword again. "Just who are you?"

I was saved from answering by the man stomping up the stairs again, hefting a slab of meat secured with a rope. "Where am I putting this then?" he asked.

"This man just bought it, hand it to him," the woman told him.

"What in the world?" But he did as instructed, and I was surprised to find I could handle it quite easily, and hefted it onto one shoulder. The two stared at me, seemingly as surprised as I was, and I shrugged. *I guess all the fighting I've been doing lately has paid off?*

"I've been raising my levels," I told them, as if that explained everything, and walked out trying not to outright laugh at the blank looks on their faces.

## Chapter 11

### The hero rescues the princess. Sort of

I headed back to the edge of town, trying to avoid people's glances as I now had a chunk of raw meat on my shoulder. *Who is the town idiot now? It's you, you are the town idiot. I suppose any activity can seem strange, when you're on the outside looking in. But the people doing that activity have perfectly valid reasons for it.* But it had to be done, and making my way past the last house and to the lake I looked around.

No dragon.

*Great, if they've decided to leave me here, it's going to be a long trip back.* I searched the water, and saw a dark shape rising from the depths and stepped back. *Ah, there they are. Maybe I should step back?* The dragon exploded out the water, sending it everywhere, and shook the water from their eyes and looked around. I was of course drenched now, standing there looking at the dragon like "did you have to do that?"

"Ah, you're back!" they exclaimed, totally ignoring the look or not getting it. *They are a dragon, how practiced would they be in reading human facial expression and body language?* "That didn't take long, I was hoping to..." They cocked their head to the side. "I can't help but notice that delicious looking thing is not a key, unless they've started making them very differently from when I last saw one."

"I've got several, don't worry about it." I patted my... My... I knew I had several keys on my person, knew it as certainly as I knew there was a dragon in front of me. But exactly where they were I wasn't sure. *Did I put them in my pants pocket? I must have, my armor doesn't have pockets, where else would they be? But I don't feel them. Yet I know I own them. Also if there was a door I know I could unlock it. Odd. Anyway get rid of this thing before dogs start chasing you or... When was the last time I saw a dog anyway?* "This is for you." I held up the meat and the dragon swam over to the shore.

"Really?" the asked suspiciously.

"Yes. I figured you would be hungry after all this so I got you some meat. Is that so strange?"

"A little," they admitted, climbing out. They sniffed it like a cat and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. "Doesn't smell poisoned."

"I didn't poison it!" I insisted, starting to get a little miffed. *You aren't the Dragonlord, and are currently helping me. Why would I poison you at this point?* "I went to the inn, asked for it, and brought it right out to you. I had some gold left, and you helped me out, so I'm repaying you. Maybe you would have preferred the gold but like you said before, where would you put it at this point?"

"You really thought of me, this whole thing is for me?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. I would have to cook part of it anyway and we don't have time for that. Do you want it or not?"

"Of course I want it, are you crazy!? I'm starving. I was trying to catch some fish but-" They grabbed it and started wolfing it down. "Oh that's good," they managed between bites. Bones crunched as the dragon tore into it, ropes and all. Didn't take them long to devour the whole thing, and I had to force myself not to imagine how little time it would take them to eat me like that should they have a mind to. "Wow, I could go

for another one of those,” they lamented. “Man, thank you. I didn’t think you would do that, you really are not like people I’ve met in the past. How about that? Of course many were just yelling and screaming (there’s a difference you know) and trying to run away. From me! Can you imagine it? Cuddly old me, invoking such fear.”

*No not at all.*

“Unless you’re hiding another one somewhere we should probably get going. Climb on!” They turned and hunkered down, letting me scramble onto their back again. “Holding on tight? We’re off!”

The trip back went as smoothly as the trip there, the dragon retracing his steps back to the swamp cave in short order, though the sun was getting real low by the time we made it back. *That’s still weeks off the journey, I can’t imagine how I would have made it without this dragon’s help. I’m glad I convinced them, and have to hope the princess is alive at this point otherwise how am I going to get away? They would have to bring me in, maybe even blame me somehow, like I got past them, killed the princess for some reason, and they caught me. What other choice would they have? Eating me? They see the princess is dead, say ‘well, that’s too bad. You know that beef really whetted my appetite why don’t you just come a little closer and help me take care of that?’ and chomp me down. They close the door again, and put on a look of surprised dismay when someone comes to get her again.*

I cast my spell of light once again once we reached the cave, though the dragon said they didn’t need it because they could see in the dark. I couldn’t, and they didn’t mind, so we made our way back to the door and again I had to stagger around a moment because my legs felt all weird. Finally I shoved the key into the door (that I pulled from *somewhere* but despite my trying to pay attention to where I still didn’t seem to manage it) and twisted it gently, hoping maybe it would survive another use if I wasn’t rough with it. I jumped back as the thing simply vanished, the door creaking open. *What?* But I had little time to ponder this mystery as inside a small stone chamber was the princess... And the smell that something died.

“That’s disgusting,” the dragon said, looking around. “On the floor?”

“Where did you think she would go?” I retorted, working up my courage to brave the stench and see if she was still alive. “There’s no chamber pot in here. There’s no anything in here. It’s just a tiny, stone, chamber.” *Why? Why put her in this tiny chamber? What does it achieve? My goodness, she was in the dark, in this slimy, nasty smelling cell for weeks? Even if she did survive her mind may not have. Nursing her back to health she may have real issues after all this, like a fear of the dark or enclosed places or bad smells or being trapped-*

“I suppose. That whole eating all the time thing, I guess that means you have to... Uh you know- So is she... dead or what?”

“Not sure.” I headed inside and knelt by her, rolling her over. She must have been just sitting there and passed out, she was face first on the floor. Her once fine clothes were torn and dirty, her face smudged and hair tangled. In short, she looked like someone who had spent weeks without food or water, sunlight, fresh air, or a comb. But she also looked “Alive. She’s alive,” I announced. “Barely. She breathing, but look at her.” Her face was pale and sunken, her skin dry and cracked. “She needs a healer, I

don't have those skills." *Or anything to give her. I could cast my curative magic on her, but she's not hurt, simply dehydrated and starving. Magic can't help with that.*

"I suppose I've come this far," the dragon lamented. "We'll have to get her out of here. Can you carry her and ride me at the same time?"

I was stronger than I thought, my recent experience showed me that, but this was something else entirely. "We would have to pass through the poison swamp! She's not in any condition for that!"

"Just hold her nose, she'll be fine."

"Hold her- she's breathing shallowly enough as it is, that might finish her off."

"What choice do we have? You say she needs a healer, right? We can't bring one here."

I considered it. "No, I suppose we can't. We didn't spend long there, I suppose there's no help for it." I gathered her up into my arms, she didn't actually weigh that much that I could tell. Not eating for weeks will do that to you, I suspected. I cradled her in one arm and held onto the dragon's horn with the other. "Okay, let's get going."

The dragon made their way out of the cave, heading north again. "Actually, we don't have to pass the swamp again," they decided as we wove through the cave. "The ocean is right there. Faster to swim anyway."

"I suppose it could work," I decided.

"Come on, don't you trust me? It'll be fine. Hang on tight now!" They shot from the cave, heading south, and plunged into the water. I did hold her nose as we went under, and the dragon looked back at me as they started west. "Oh, right, sorry, hit the water a little harder than I intended there. She still okay?"

The water had soaked her, so now she wasn't just filthy she was muddy too, her hair now stuck to the sides of her face and head. But she still seemed to be breathing. "She's fine."

"Okay then, here we go!"

The moon was high in the sky as we neared the island where the Dragonlord had made his castle, and I could just make out where the bridge must have once stood. It didn't actually look that far from one coast to the other, honestly a small boat could easily make that journey in moments. I filed it away for future reference, knowing I would need to head to that island one way or another fairly soon. We swam past it, following the northern coast as closely as the dragon could.

"By ash and smoke," they lamented. "I hate being this close to his castle. What if he can see me? He looks out and sees a dragon swimming around, with two humans on his back? He'll just kill me with magic from there. But this is so much faster than land, and we don't have time to waste."

"First of all, is that really possible? And secondly, is his eyesight really that good? I can tell there's an island there, yes, but I can't even see the castle. How would he see us at this distance?"

"It's there. And he's studied magic a long time. I have no idea what he could do."

"Just concentrate on swimming. He has no reason to be looking this way anyway, magically or otherwise."

"I guess you're right."

"I mean if he kills you, he kills all of us. I'm right on your back after all. We live or die together, my friend."

"Oh yeah. That's a small consolation though."

The hours past.

We finally made our way towards the castle, and the dragon had me get down while we were just in sight of it.

"No, keep going," I told them. "I can't fight and carry this princess at the same time. We're marching right up to the gates just like this. I can't risk it."

"You'll have to," the dragon told me. "I can't get near the place."

"Of course you can. Believe me, they have like six guards in the whole place, tops, and none of them is going to be able to hurt you."

"That's not it."

"Then what? Remember the Dragonlord's castle is right over there. You don't want to be out in the open. Are you just going back? Don't you want to know if she lives?"

"Yes, but I just... It's complicated, okay?"

"No it isn't. Come with me. I'll tell the guards you're with me, we can even say you had a hand in saving the princess. You'll be a hero. Maybe be appointed an adviser like you said." *Not that you would fit up the stairs but I'm sure something could be done.*

"I can't get near towns, no nearer than I went back in Rimuldar, okay?"

"Why?"

They hesitated.

"Come on, tell me."

"It's the smell!" they shouted. "Happy?"

"Smell?"

"You humans. Apart from just now when you went into the water with me, when was the last time you bathed?"

"Uh..."

"Exactly. We 'monsters' have a very developed sense of smell. All of us. Why do you think towns are safe? My kind don't want to get close because it smells so bad. We can't stand it."

"It's *smell* that keeps monsters out of towns? I thought there must be some reason, but not that."

"What, did you think it was magic or something? No, ugh, I can smell all the humans in that castle from here. You have to go the rest of the way yourself. Sorry."

"You will stick around though, right? No one is going to believe me otherwise."

"I don't know..."

"Look, you've chosen your side. You left your post, helped me bring the princess here, you're stuck with us. What, are you going to go back and guard an empty chamber? Pretend she just vanished through a locked door when someone comes to collect her? Report to the Dragonlord yourself that you had to give her back to the king before she died? You have no good options here, sticking with us now and hoping I really can defeat the Dragonlord is your best bet at staying alive at this point."

"Just... just go for now. I don't know what I'm going to do. I have to think."

"All right. Hope I make it." It didn't seem like that long a distance but the minions of the Dragonlord didn't care it was night time. They would individually attack me just the

same. I slid off the dragon's back and started towards the castle. I had to run from several monsters drawing near, it seemed the dragon standing over there didn't matter to them either, they made a beeline for me once my feet hit the ground. *Wait, is that how the fairy water works? It makes you too smelly for monsters to get near you? But then that would imply... She called it 'fairy's water' first... like water that came out of a fairy? Kinda glad I didn't buy any.*

Entering the castle the guards sleepily looked over at me, and then came wide awake.

"Is that?" asked the one to the right.

"Could that be?" asked the one to the left.

"Yes. I need a healer immediately," I told them.

"The princess!" they both shouted, running further into the castle. "The princess has returned. Bring a healer, quickly! Someone! Anyone! Help! The princess!"

They roused the whole castle and everyone started crowding around me until I shouted at them to keep back and give me room.

"Where should I take her? Where is the healer!?"

"I'm the healer," said a woman's voice from behind everyone. "This way."

We headed to her room and set her down on the bed. "Go on, get out of here," she was calling to the crowd outside the door. "Don't need you gawking at her." She came back in and quickly started looking her over.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

"She was held without food or water, honestly I'm not sure how she managed to survive to this point."

"She's a fighter, our princess. That matches up, she's quite dehydrated. But at the same time soaking wet. Have the kitchens send up some broth, cold, we'll need to get something in her right away. Right then, I have to get these clothes off her, warm her up, make sure there's no bruising. Well, what are you standing there for? I've told you what you have to do, haven't I?"

"Right! Broth, got it." I left. The crowd was dispersing but the king, a robe thrown over him, met me going the other way. He was, of course, accompanied by a guard.

"It is you," he breathed. "You succeeded?"

"I've brought her," I told him. "But if she lives or dies tonight is up to her and your healer. I need to get broth from the kitchens. Can someone show me the way?"

"I will," said a man. "No sleeping after this, I can tell you that much. Come on, this way. The princess, returned! What a fantastic night."

"Wait," said the king. He embraced me, even as wet as I was from riding around on the back of a dragon through the ocean all night. "I owe you a great- are you wet?" He took a step back, looking me up and down. "What in the world? I didn't think it was raining out..."

*Ah, he hadn't even noticed.* "I came by the water, it was faster."

"That must be quite the tale. I must see her, but I owe you much, as I was saying. We'll discuss your reward tomorrow."

"Thank you, sire." *Assuming she survives, anyway.*



So the kitchens provided me some chicken broth, the cook saying yes, that was the best thing for her. "Just trickle it into her mouth," he said as he ladled some into a bowl. "A tiny bit at a time, so she swallows it naturally. She'll be up and about in no time. Best food in the world is right here in this kitchen, yes sir."

"That's probably what the healer has in mind," I agreed.

"Full of all sorts of goodness, our stocks," the man went on. "Quality ingredients, they make for a better end product as you can imagine."

*Could you get on with it?*

"Of course, I'll have to start the feast right away."

"Feast?"

"For the princess' return, of course. Did you think we wouldn't have a feast?"

"Better to keep it quiet, or the Dragonlord will just have her stolen again."

"Oh, there is that," they agreed. "Here you are. Maybe a small feast? A special lunch? Another egg with breakfast? Toast cut into triangles instead of rectangles?"

"Whatever you think is best." I made to leave before they started listing other options. "Thank you, I may be back for more if she finishes this."

"Not a problem, we've got lots," they called after me. "I should start making more," he decided, nodding to himself. "Yes, she may want more after that bowl, a lot more, gallons."

*Gallons?* The one that led me to the kitchens took me back and the healer took the bowl from me. I was not allowed in the room again, though I noticed the king was and there was a roaring fire in there now as well.

"Left her half frozen," she admonished me as she took the bowl. "What were you thinking?"

"Going by water?" *It wasn't exactly my idea, I was just a passenger. But I do have to admit it worked.* "To get her back here as quickly as possible. You think I could do that, carrying her over land and fighting off the Dragonlord's minions at the same time? She's back alive, isn't she? Now it's up to you."

"You would have managed something." She slammed the door on me.

*Right, sure I would have. Fighting one handed with the dead weight of a princess in my arms. Tell me another one, and I'll hire you as my jester.* With nothing much else to do I sat in the hallway out her door in case she needed something else. The long night of waiting began.

## Chapter 12

### The hero explores the other side of the castle

I was shaken awake by a servant the next morning, who told me breakfast was served and took the blanket I didn't remember having the night before from me. I must have fallen asleep there in the hall outside her door and someone took pity on me and draped it over me. *That was nice of them. But there's someone I need to be more worried about.* "The princess?" I asked, figuring everyone would know if she was recovered or not.

She shook her head. "No change," she reported sadly.

But I was heartened by this news, not brought down. *No change means still alive. That's a good sign I would think. If she can make it one night she can probably make another, and another after that. Getting care now puts her chances on the rise, she wouldn't have lived much longer in that cave.* "Don't lose hope, okay?"

She tried to smile. "Of course, sir. If you would like to follow me?" I stood and stretched, then fell into step with her. "You are the one that brought her back, are you not?" she asked shyly.

"I had some help," I admitted. *Shoot, the dragon! I hope it's still out there. I should probably tell someone not to fly into a panic if they see it from the castle walls, now that it's light out. Well, after breakfast I guess.*

"Oh. Then they should share in your reward!"

"Don't worry, I won't forget them." *They'll probably want it in beef, the kingdom doesn't have much gold left. If the king is to be believed anyway.*

"Why aren't they here as well?"

"That's complicated. They had something to do elsewhere."

"Oh." we walked in silence a moment. "It must have been very scary, fighting off the Dragonlords minions to get to her."

"There was a time I honestly thought I would be someone's lunch," I told her. "Still, it all worked out in the end."

"I think you're very brave."

"Thank you."

"Here you are." She stopped in front of a room and opened the door.

*Ah, don't need a key for that- wait.* "This is a room," I announced stupidly. Something in the back of my mind perked up at the thought of a key but I couldn't quite recall what it was at the moment.

She tried to hide her smile. "I thought you may want to freshen up, you are invited to the king's table after all."

"Yes!" I agreed a little too quickly and loudly. "Washing! Yes, before breakfast, I do that all the time, obviously."

"Obviously," she agreed, trying not to laugh. "I'll stay out here to escort you to the king so you don't get lost. You don't know the castle very well do you?"

"No, I've only walked around it- wait, the king?"

"Of course." She looked confused. "You are the hero of the day, naturally you would dine with the king."

*Dine, perhaps, that means dinner. Not breakfast.* "He honors me too much."

She shook her head. "No, we are all thankful. This is the least of what you deserve. All love our princess, she is a ray of light and hope in these times. The king's spirits are lifted to see her return, and everyone wishes to meet the hero who made it possible. But luckily I was chosen, so..." She blushed and looked down. "Here I am."

"I shouldn't keep him waiting. I'll be out in a moment."

"If you need any help... I mean... I'll be waiting," she finished lamely as I closed the door.

*Now what do you suppose that was all about?*

I paused.

*Oh!*

We didn't really look at each other as we made our way to the dining hall, where the king was already seated.

"Ah, our hero joins us!" he jovially announced. "Come, sit by me and tell me of your heroic deed!"

"Majesty," I greeted him, bowing and accepting a place at his right. *My heroic deed? Of convincing a dragon to let me buy keys and then ride on their back to get her here as soon as possible? Sure, that'll make a good story.*

"But I do have a question," the king told me gravely, leaning over the table seriously. "Where was she found?"

"The swamp cave," I told him. "Strangely enough, the man who told me she could be found underground was correct. I owe him an apology." *The 'hint' that she was taken east was too obvious, the kid gets nothing.*

The king went hummmm. "I wonder. That does explain one thing."

"What's that, your highness?"

"How she managed to cling to life for so long. That place, as I understand it, is quite moist."

"It does go under the ocean, it was quite damp, yes."

"She probably was able to get some water that way. It could have been much worse had she been kept somewhere dry. The healer said she was quite dehydrated."

*That's a good point. Wait, she was, like, licking water off the walls? Trying to collect it off the floor? She's really been through Hell, hasn't she?* "I agree, majesty."

"But come! Eat, and tell me of your bravery."

He motioned the servants forward, who put a rich and varied breakfast before me. I started to eat and wonder what story I should tell. I was no bard, to spin a web of adventure, so I settled on simply relating the events to him as they happened. *But first, I should take care of the real hero of the story.* "Actually, can someone go and see if there's a green dragon in the area?" I asked.

"A green dragon?" the king gasped. "Should we expect an attack? Did you lead it here when you rescued the princess? Or did you subdue the beast and bring it back as a trophy?"

"None of those things. They are part of the story as well, and may join us against the Dragonlord. If someone could see to their needs that would be appreciated. They

can't approach the castle but hopefully they didn't run off in the night. Just tell them I sent you, and they shouldn't eat you." *I hope?* "They are intelligent and can speak, bring them some beef or something and you'll be fine."

"A green dragon, truly? If you can get the dragons to fight on our side... Even a few could make a huge difference. They are some of the most feared creatures in the land. To ride into battle with a dragon at your side, now that would be worth a song or two. You must tell me how you managed this miracle!" He issued orders to his guards to get going and track the creature down, and bring it food as I suggested.

*Not through strength of arms.* I told the king about my journey to the cave, glossing over the fact I was attacked every fifth step or so as saying "and then I fought another slime, and then I fought another slime" over and over would have been quite boring. I told of how the dragon spoke to me, and I convinced it that the princess was probably dead, given her situation. They agreed to accompany me to Rimildar to buy keys-

"Keys, of course!" I shouted. "I completely forgot about that. Let's go unlock that door so those people on the other side can be let out. Are they still okay?"

"Oh, they're fine," the king assured me. "You don't have to rush off this second."

"It would only take a moment, I'm sure they would like to be freed," I insisted.

"Very well, show him to the door," the king commanded one of his guards, who brought me over there. I unlocked the door and as it vanished I couldn't help but wonder how one locked a door, anyway? *Clearly the key is needed to unlock it. But how do you lock it? Do you have to use a key for that as well? Strange.* The guard propped it open after it swung wide and everyone from that side streamed past, thanking me for freeing them. I rejoined the king.

"Everyone safe then?" he asked.

"Seemed that way. Now where was I?"

"The dragon was going to let you go."

"Ah yes. So there I was, in the swamp cave. Water dripping all around me..."

When I was finished the king leaned back in his chair and scowled thoughtfully. "I don't understand it," he said at last.

"Nor do I. Locking her up there seems foolish in the extreme, but leaving her there to die? Why not just kill her outright if that was the Dragonlord's intention?"

"What?" the king asked, looking at me as if for the first time. "No, no, that's all perfectly reasonable if you think about it. No, I'm concerned about this Orwick fellow you said you met. The town wasn't that big you said, right?"

"Uh, no, it wasn't your majesty." *What is he talking about, reasonable if I think about it? Who cares about Orwick?*

"So why didn't he just go over to his girlfriend's house? Why was he waiting for her out in a field someplace? Did you find her and direct her to him?"

"No, I was trying to hurry and save your daughter." *I would almost ask if he was joking, but he didn't seem the joking type the other times I've spoken to him. I'm sorry I mentioned the man.* "That took priority, sire."

"Of course, of course. I hope she showed up. I feel sorry for the man, being made to wait like that."

"Yes..." I replied slowly. *What?*

“But enough about him. Given the ease my daughter was rescued I’m sure you’ll have the Dragonlord killed by the end of the week. I assume you’ll want to stick around until my daughter wakes up?”

*I should “stick around,” as he puts it, in case she needs medicine or herbs not to be found in the castle. Though wouldn’t something like “enjoy the hospitality of the castle” have been more appropriate?* “Yes, sire. I need her to tell me where to find the token, so everyone believes I am a descendant of Erdrick and I can get some more help.” *And that armor set.*

“That’s fine. A servant should have shown you to a room, I’ll let you use it until then. I’ll assign her to you, heaven knows we have enough maids around here we can do without her for a few days. Tell her if you need anything, and she’ll keep your room clean and all that. I’ll have her fetch you when my daughter wakes up. I’ll be in the throne room when you have more deeds to record. I’ll see you then.” He got up, and I rose as well.

“Thank you sire, until then, be well.”

He gave a curt nod and the guards formed up as they escorted him out of the room, presumably to the throne room where he would sit and do nothing the rest of the day. I, meanwhile, stood there in confusion. *I thought he said something about a reward? Was this breakfast the reward? The use of the rooms? The... maid? I mean I suppose he doesn’t have any gold to give me, he’ll need to buy keys from his keymaker before he can open the treasury again. I hope he has enough gold because I’m not opening the door with one of my keys... Hey wait a second didn’t he say he would reimburse me for the key I did use on his behalf? And what about the one holding his daughter? I’m pretty sure he did, but he just left, and now it would be awkward to bring up. What was I thinking about? Right, I could have gotten a promise of some future reward for all my hard work. I guess I’ll have to take the safety of the princess as my reward, which is fine. Have the Dragonlord killed by the end of the week, HA! I’m pretty sure I couldn’t even kill a regular type dragon at this point, how am I supposed to kill something even bigger, tougher, and more magical than that?*

At a loose end I decided to go see what the other part of the castle looked like, then go see my new dragon friend. I headed past the now propped open door, wondering if just closing a door with a lock served to lock it, and wondered why they had this random door in this hallway in the first place? It didn’t seem a logical place for one. *The wedge getting knocked out and the door swinging closed would explain how it was ‘accidentally’ locked.* The other side was much the same as the side I had already seen with a few additions. The man selling keys was in a courtyard with trees and grass, an odd place for him but maybe he liked the outdoors without actually *being* outdoors? One man admitted to me to looking for the castle cellar, which was not easy to find. Apparently he had been waiting to search this side of the castle, and now was scouring the walls like that was going to help. He was dressed like a guard but in a different uniform, so perhaps he was a higher rank? *He doesn’t seem like a spy or anything like that, but his reason for being here seems so made up. I don’t actually understand what he’s looking for.* “You mean the key dealer? He’s right over there,” I told the man. “Otherwise you would have to go into town to find the blacksmith or the dealer in tools and other oddities.” *Like a certain dragon scale armor I’ve been dreaming about since I left?*

“Not a seller, a cellar,” he clarified.

“That clears things up.” *It didn't though.*

“I'm talking about a basement. A lower level!”

“AH! Why didn't you say? You mean like the wine cellar.”

“He gets it, yes, the wine cellar.”

“And someone made it difficult to find? Why? Can't you ask someone where it is?”

He seemed shocked at the very idea. “Oh no, I couldn't do that,” he told me. “If you do find it, let me know though.”

“I sure will!” I lied. *Please get away from me.*

The other bizarre thing I saw was a dead end hallway with some sort of magic placed on it. This took the form of a shimmering wall or curtain of energy stretched across the entire hallway. Wandering aimlessly around the other side was another guard.

“Hello?” I called to them.

They whipped around, hope shining in their eyes. “Hello?” they called back.

“Are you all right in there?”

“Of course I'm not all right! This blasted barrier came out of nowhere and trapped me here. I was looking for the wine cellar, at the request of the king, but I've been stuck here for two days. Everyone just walks by as if I don't exist. You have to help me!”

*Two days? How long did it take me to leave on my adventure and get back? The door was locked more than two day ago, right?* “You're looking for the cellar as well?”

“The king wanted wine, but for some reason no one can remember how to get down there. Look can you help me or not?”

*And this didn't concern the king? A whole floor of his castle just vanishing? Guards were just sent out to start looking, rather than securing the place and seeking the help of a wizard as clearly magic would be involved? What sense does that make?* “I don't think so, I don't know much about magic. Is it preventing you from leaving?” I reached out a hand.

“Don't touch it!” he cried, and I pulled back. “You can pass through it just fine, that's not the issue. The problem is you'll probably be dead when you do.” He pointed to what could have been a spear, clearly what he poked it with, but it was twisted and ruined now. “That happened when I poked my spear into it.”

“Thanks for the warning. But what is it?” I looked it over, and it covered the entire passageway two meters deep from floor to ceiling. It shimmered with color, but was transparent.

“Don't look at me, I don't know. If it's some sort of security magic why put it on this stretch of hallway? But at the same time it can't be the Dragonlord's doing, why trap a guard somewhere?”

“It does seem rather pointless,” I agreed. “Look, I don't think doors can be damaged but what about these walls? They seem to be made of stone?”

“I suppose, but to what end?”

“I have an idea, I think I can get you out. I'll be back soon.”

“I'll be here,” they replied sadly.

I hurried back to Breconary and nodded to the apprentice who it still seemed had the job of trying to get people into the shop despite everyone in town knowing where it was, and walked up to the counter.

"My friend!" the tool shop owner exclaimed. "You've returned! And I heard a rumor about the princess?"

*Did someone from the castle rush here to tell the town she had been brought back? Pretty brave of them.* I waved that off. "I'll tell you everything later, right now I need a pickax, or some other means of destroying stone. Do you have one?"

"I suppose that's a tool, and we are the tool shop," he mused. "Let me look around. Why do you need one?"

"A guard at the castle is trapped so I'm going to basically go through the wall from the other side to free him."

"Trapped?"

"Some kind of magical field that ruins things that pass through it."

"That is troublesome. But you don't need to break any walls."

"No?"

"Have you read the journal?"

I shook my head. "I've been too busy trying to survive out there against the absolute flood of the Dragonlord's minions." *If the princess takes a few days to wake up I know what I'll be doing in the meantime though.*

"That's a problem, but anyway it mentions various spells including one that allows safe passage past magical barriers. It seems there were a lot more of them in his time, maybe some kind of not well understood natural magical phenomenon?"

"If you say so." *So it could have just sprung up out of nowhere because 'magic'?* Odd. "And how does that help us?"

"By itself, it wouldn't I guess. But I've collected lots of old books in my time and that got me thinking. He also mentions that spell was put on his armor, along with the ability to heal wounds, but that's neither here nor there. The point is I have some old books and I've been trying to track down the spells he mentions in there. I'm pretty sure I found that one. Watch the store and I'll go get it."

I told him that would be no problem, *I doubt there will be any customers anyway,* and he vanished down the stairs, to return a moment later.

"Ah ha, yes," he cried, opening it and scanning through it. "Yes, I think I can cast it and get your wayward guard through this barrier. The spell description is incomplete but the formula seems intact. I'm sure it's that spell, given what he describes about it and these symbols here. With less of them around I guess it fell out of use, but if they're starting to return maybe it will see a resurgence of popularity as well."

"You can teach it to me?"

"You already know I can't, we talked about that remember? You absorb magic from the creatures you kill. It's totally the wrong kind of magic for you."

"Just checking. You're going to have to walk with me to the castle in that case. Are you willing to come with me, then?"

"Going to have to, aren't I? Not too far a walk, is it?"

"With luck we won't even be attacked once." *If we are not, it could be five or six times. I hope this doesn't count as traveling with someone, that Erdrick warned against in the journal. It's only temporary, they aren't in my party or anything. I'm just escorting*

*them to the castle and back, I think he meant trying to do the whole quest with someone else.*

“That’s not reassuring.”

But the man followed me to the castle and through the halls, making the guard perk up again as we neared the end of the hallway. The tool shop owner explained what he would need to do, and luckily the barrier wasn’t so thick he couldn’t cast magic through it. He cast the spell and the man cautiously put his hand through the barrier. When he didn’t cry out in pain he quickly jumped through, landing on our side.

“Thank you,” he told us. “It was awful, being stuck in there.”

“This is the lost spell of StepGuard,” breathed the tool shop owner. “Amazing. You’re welcome, I’m glad it worked. I’ll have to copy it to some new parchment, and write up a description of what it does. What a find! Wizards the world over will be ecstatic to find one of the lost spells has been found.”

“If you ever need something, come see me,” the guard told them. “I can’t do much, but I owe you.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I told him, and he rushed off to take care of things one might take care of after being trapped in a room for two days.

“You mind if I finish walking around this part of the castle?” I asked the shop owner. “Then I can escort you back and tell you about what I’ve been doing. Oh, and we need to stop and see a dragon on the way, if he’s still around here.”

“Dragon? You have been busy. It’s a rare opportunity for me to see the castle, take your time.”

“Thanks.”

But there wasn’t much interesting left to see in the castle so we headed back to the entrance. We got stopped by a guard who told us the dragon had indeed been found, and was waiting for us in the northern forest. They had been fed and thanked for their part in the rescue of the princess, and to please make sure they stayed far away from the castle.

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” I told the nervous looking guard.

“You think a dragon has honor? It wouldn’t hesitate to attack this place if ordered by the Dragonlord.”

“I’m not so sure. Anyway I’m heading out there now, I’ll make sure they know not to get too close.”

“That’s all we ask.”

“Come on,” I told the shop owner. “Come and meet my scaly friend, just stay downwind.” I laughed at his odd look and we headed north into the forest.



Chapter 13  
The hero asks for help and starts reading the journal

We didn't have to press far into the forest to find the dragon waiting for us, and the tool shop owner stared longingly up at them.

*Perhaps he's thinking "look at all those scales" or "this whole thing was a trap and I'm about to be eaten after all why was I such a fool now that stupid kid of an apprentice of mine will totally ruin my shop."* Something along those lines. "Allow me to introduce you," I finally said, as they were staring down at him as if trying to figure out what he was all about. "This is, uh, this is... Hummm." I realized I didn't actually know either of their names as I turned to introduce one to the other. *Do dragons even have names we can pronounce?*

"I am Kethrinax," the dragon told me. "My pronouns are she/her."

"The- what's this now?" I asked.

"I am a female dragon so I'm just letting you know. Otherwise you might go around calling me 'him' which would be quite annoying." She paused at my incredulous look. "By ash and flame don't you humans even know how to introduce yourselves properly?"

"I... We don't... You're female?" I blurted.

"What, did you think I was male? Ha! Look at the graceful curve of my neck, the dainty horns upon my head."

*Dainty? They're as big as my arms! What do male horns look like?*

"I don't suppose a human would appreciate the difference- ah I'm the only dragon you've ever met aren't I? Apologies, of course you wouldn't know what to look for, I don't fault you for that. But yes, I'm female. You think a male dragon would have let you do what you did? They would have chomped you on the spot, brutes that they are. I mean, don't get me wrong. Of course they have their uses occasionally, eggs have to come from somewhere but they wouldn't have given you any pleasant conversation you can be sure of that. So you're lucky I am."

"I should be making some notes," the tool shop owner lamented. "This is a fantastic opportunity to learn about dragon customs and physiology."

"I appreciate your interest," Kethrinax told him. She sighed. "Most humans that encounter us now just try and stick us with things, or cast spells on us. It's most distressing, we really are not mindless beasts you know. I suppose it's somewhat our own fault, retreating from the world as we did. You just don't see us enough to know we aren't a danger to you."

"I can see that. It is good to make your acquaintance, Kethrinax. Just call me the tool shop owner, everyone else does. It's been so long since I heard my own name I'm not even sure I totally recall what it is! Isn't that strange?"

"I have no basis for comparison," she told him. "And you're both male, then?"

"Yes, I'm male, and my name is," I told her my name.

"I'm male as well," said the tool shop owner. "You really can't tell?"

"Can you?" she retorted. "Just by looking? I mean I know for a fact humans don't have the sense of smell we dragons have. Believe me, I know."

*She really does.*

"Why of course! It's fairly obvious to us, I suppose because we're all at the same level. I mean the same height. I mean there are physical cues, as there must be for

dragons, like you were saying. Being a different species I can understand how you might have trouble..."

She shook her head. "I was actually just kidding about the neck thing. You poor dears. I feel sorry for some of you, I really do. Anyway, how is the princess? Were our efforts successful?"

*What is she talking about? Some of us?* "She made it through the night," I told her. "But she isn't awake yet."

"Is there hope she will wake up?" she asked.

"The king should have the best healers at the castle," the tool shop owner told her, though he sounded uncertain. "Of course, they've probably never dealt with anything like this before. How many people are locked in a room for weeks on end and almost die?"

"Hopefully not many," she agreed. "Even your kind is above that, I expect."

"Have you given thought to your next move?" I asked her.

"Oh, I've thought of *nothing else*, thanks for asking," she replied sarcastically. "I can't really go back, can I? Best if whoever shows up to claim the princess simply believes me slain and reports that. As long as no one reports I'm hanging around the castle... Why are there so many low level monsters crawling around here anyway?"

"You use that sort of language too?" the tool shop owner asked, surprised. "I was just explaining that to our hero here before he left."

"It's the way the world works, why wouldn't I say it like that?"

"Well," he started, clearly trying to figure out a phrasing that wouldn't get the huge dragon angry with him. "It's an interesting way to think about how the world *could* work in the abstract, but that's, I mean... right?"

"You really have no idea, do you?"

"Huh?"

"To answer your question," I told her, "I have no idea. They are now more of a bother than anything else, so I don't know why they're all over the place. They'll keep the townsfolk penned in, without question, and maybe that's their purpose."

"Strange to see so many though," she mused. "Well, I doubt they'll report anything. Most of them see me and run the other direction. I am a dragon, after all. Who are they to question my coming and goings? It's the Dragonlord himself seeing me from the top of his castle that I really worry about."

"There's no doubt about that," the tool shop owner agreed, a little wistfully. I thought he was talking about the Dragonlord seeing her but no, he was actually talking about her directly. "From the tip of that sinuous tail to the tops of your iron hard horns. From your scales that glitter like diamonds, to your eyes that shine brighter than any jewel I have ever witnessed. You are a dragon, fierce and majestic, wise and secret like the dark of the moon."

"Oh my," she said. "Flatterer. Next you'll be comparing me to a summers day."

"No, no, I mean it!"

"Er, if I could just have a word?" I pulled him a little ways away from the dragon. "You're not talking in terms of, like, raw material or anything are you?"

"Shhhhh," he shushed me. "Don't say that! Dragons have excellent hearing, she'll hear you!"

"We do," the dragon shouted after us. "And I did!"

*Ah crap.* I pulled him further away and her ears perked up as she leaned forward a little. "Look, I need her to stay on my side, okay?"

"Don't worry about it, I didn't mean it like that anyway," he told me. "She's a magnificent creature, that's all. What, I can't get a little poetic about her just because she's a different species?"

That brought me up short. "I guess?" *I guess I first saw her as wanting to eat me, and a guard for the princess. That would have colored my impression. He saw her as a friend to me, someone that helped bring the princess back. So of course he would have a different reaction. And he does like old lore and things I guess.*

"I mean what other opportunity will I have to talk to an actual dragon? They've been around much longer than we have, you know. When we came down out of the trees or whatever, there they were. They already had language, knowledge of magic, a society. To know how she sees the world? To get her opinion on things, how she thinks the world is going? She knew about levels, I thought we came up with that but was it dragons all along? Is that really closer to the mark than we thought? What does she know about how the world works and how much of it will she reveal to me? Erdrick's journal might sell to other scholars but everyone would read the real story of dragons. But beyond that just look at her, is she not spectacular? Those scales, those lines, those curves!"

*She's not a sailing ship.* "I mean, I guess?"

"And this is the man destined to save us. A man with no soul. Pity."

*She's a killing machine, you didn't see her eat that beef!* "Just don't get her angry!"

"Did she seem angry? She seemed more amused to me than anything."

"I don't know, she's a huge dragon. I don't know what she'll take offense at."

"I'm sure she'll let you know. Now come on, before she takes offense to us not including her in the conversation."

"You don't think she would, do you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on."

"All done?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, sorry about that," the shop owner told her. "My young friend here wanted to know my intentions, that's all."

"Oh, he saw me first, and all that? We dragons know all about possession, there's no need to be shy. A brief fight between the two of you should settle it. It doesn't have to be to the death, usually among dragons there's some sort of victory condition the two males agree upon. I mean all this assumes I'm interested in either of you in the first place. And I'm not saying I'm not, but... Usually I go for taller males for obvious reasons so know there could be challenges should one of you win me."

"Uh, fight?" he asked, nervously glancing at my sword.

*Is she talking about what I think she's talking about? Or is she just messing with us? I don't know any more about dragon humor than I know about dragon offenses.*

"Actually, that's the original reason I asked about your current plans," I told her, trying to get control of the situation back again. "I was hoping you could teach me about fighting. Fighting dragons, specifically. I'm going to need to know how if I'm going to kill the Dragonlord."

"You?" she asked, clearly sounding amused. "Fight a dragon? With your tiny sharpened stick? You're not serious."

"I am."

"He's twice as big as I am. Can you even imagine something twice as big as I am? I'm the size of one of your little huts."

"We actually have houses now," the shop owner told her. "They're a bit bigger than you."

"Whatever," she said, unconcerned. "I mean I suppose you could eventually wear my HP down, but come on. All I have to do is hold you down with my tail—"

"HP?" the shop owner interrupted.

"Hit Points. You know about levels but not HP?"

"But levels is an abstract concept, it's a way of thinking about things."

"Or is it?" she asked shrewdly. "Anyway, HP represents the damage you can take. Or I can take. Or really anything can take. I hold you down and smash you with one of these," she held up a claw, "do you think you'll survive?"

"That's what I need to know," I protested. "So that's why I'm asking you for training." *Wait, do doors have unlimited HP? Is that why you need a key to open them and they can't be smashed down? But wouldn't she know what? Not if she never tried to smash a door open in the past.*

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt. Me. It wouldn't hurt me," she clarified. "You it might hurt."

"That's a risk I have to take."

"But fighting her isn't killing the minions of the Dragonlord," protested the shop owner. "You won't be absorbing their magic and learning new spells. How can you raise your levels if you're not doing that?"

"Nothing says I can't do both. I think the experience of knowing how dragons fight is more valuable than just levels. I can be a high level and not know what the heck I'm doing and lose right away because I don't realize some obvious thing dragons do in a fight."

"That's true, I just want to make sure you know what you're doing."

"Oh, there's no chance of that," the dragon told us both sweetly. "But I do have to admire your courage. Even as I lament your foolishness for even planning on confronting the Dragonlord with the intent to kill him. You think dragons *want* to be his minions? Imagine making all of us bow to him. All dragons. You think we couldn't take him if even just a few of us attacked at once? Think about it."

So Kethrinax agreed to give me a taste of what fighting dragons would be like, and went to find or make a clearing in the forest we could use, some distance from the castle. She wasn't going to do it out in the open, because that would attract attention, especially this close to the castle of the Dragonlord. If he spotted either of us he would expect one of us to win and kill the other, and get very suspicious when that didn't happen. This, she explained, would be bad because then he might show some initiative and actually leave the place to come see what was going on. Then we would really have a problem on our claws/hands. I agreed, and the walk to anywhere nearby held little danger for me at present, so I didn't mind. I escorted the shop owner back to the village, and headed to the castle to find my rooms. I had a journal to read.

The story began when Loto turned sixteen, and was sent by his king to finish off this Baramos fellow as apparently his father had failed to do so. This was the start of him questioning the sanity of those around him, for example the king. After all, he reasoned, just because his father was supposedly a great hero (he had apparently died in his quest so even that status was questionable) that didn't mean he would be. He hadn't received any training at that point in his life (*this sounds familiar somehow?*) how was he, a kid, supposed to beat some monster up. (*Yes, very familiar.*) He did the smart thing and immediately asked for some help at the local tavern. He recruited several more experienced people including a female swordsman, a wizard with a flying basket, and at their insistence, his friend tagged along too. He was not a great fighter (at first) mainly just swinging heavy clubs around but he survived. The more important thing by far was the lessons with Daisy, in how to actually use a sword. (*Wish I had someone to show me what to do.*) They were off on their adventure.

Which in the beginning consisted of (*who didn't see this coming?*) running around beating up monsters to collect the gems they left behind. These they could trade in at shops for gold, which they used to buy some better equipment. Loto's thoughts here paralleled my own, wondering why all these weak monsters (which still gave the party trouble at first) were wandering around. (Daisy went easy on the monsters here, giving Loto a chance to hone his skills.) After they had the best equipment they could have (*and no doubt raised their 'levels' in the process*) they sought out the "Thief Key" and then used it to open any "Thief Doors" they had passed in the castle and nearby towns. They collected something called "seeds" which could apparently help them in some way, a "MagicBomb" whatever that was, and found enough "TinyMedals" to turn in to some guy they had met that would give them prizes if they found enough. Loto here again went on for about a page about who this guy could be, and what his deal was as these medal things didn't seem to have any purpose he could see, yet could be traded in for useful items like weapons.

They left the kingdom and traveled to another, Loto wasn't clear on how, he seemed to think the method so commonplace as to not give it much mention. Clearly something that doesn't exist anymore, at least that I had ever heard of. He helped a king get his crown back, rather than just making a new one, and headed off to help a village full of sleeping people.

"And what," I said to myself as I read about the curse of the town, "in the world is an elf?"

I took the short trip up to the sickroom but the guard said there had been no change, so I headed back into town to see the tool shop owner.

"So I'm up to the part where they awaken the sleeping town, but apparently the cause was the Elf princess Ann running away with a human boy. Her mother cast a spell on the entire town in retaliation. What the heck is an elf?" *And how powerful was magic in the past? If I could cast a spell of that magnitude I could cast it on the castle of the Dragonlord, putting all the monsters inside to sleep and just stab the Dragonlord where he lays.*

"I thought you might wonder that," he replied, getting a book out from under the counter. "They haven't been seen for many years, but apparently they were a race like

ours that was more tied to nature.” He opened and flipped through the book until he got to an illustration, which he showed me. The picture was of a fairly beautiful girl, with pointed ears, and flipping through the pages showed her in various poses, wearing a dress that resembled an upside down flower. “Mostly female, from what I understand, they were long lived, perhaps even ageless as there didn’t seem to be any old ones. They come and go in history, most nowadays haven’t even heard of them.”

“I hadn’t. Did they all die out of some disease or something?”

He shrugged. “Some people say they have their own world, next to ours, and they retreat into it when dealing with us becomes too much for them. Others say they just hide really well in our world and keep to themselves. Who knows? I hope we didn’t offend them somehow, and they left for good. Records like this and the journal are all we have now to say they even existed at all. Maybe they’ll come back one day, when the land is safe again. I think I would like that.”

*Yeah, you’re the guy complementing a dragon on her scales, so why wouldn’t you like... Okay I can see the appeal in this case, if that’s what they really looked like she is quite beautiful.* “I guess if I see anyone with pointed ears out in the world I’ll know who she is.”

“See if you can bring her back for an interview. But politely, they have different sensibilities than we do. You know that offending a dragon thing? Well, it goes double for them. Say, that reminds me, when are we going to see Kethrinax again? I want to make sure I have plenty of ink and paper so I can write down what she says. I’ve already written down what I remember of what she said, so I’m hungry for more.”

*Interview with a dragon. What will he think of next?* “Once I get through the journal. A few days.”

“Fair enough. Don’t forget to come and get me. As much as I would like to see her, I’m not stepping foot outside the village without an escort.”

*Couldn’t you raise your ‘levels’ fighting these monsters just as I did?* “I won’t,” I promised him. “Thanks for the information on elves, they seem like nasty beings, given the two kids... Well, you know... Instead of just running away together.”

“They have different rules, and ways of living that we are not meant to know. But I agree it was a tragedy what happened to them. If only Loto had gotten there sooner, maybe it could have been avoided.”

“Maybe. See you later.”

I headed back to the castle, I had more reading to do.

## Chapter 14

### The hero talks to his maid about the absurdity of the world

After the elf village thing was taken care of the group went in search of the magic key, finding it after various trials inside a pyramid, whatever that is. They backtracked, looking for any doors they could now open, and dropped off their medals. Loto tried to ask the guy why these things were seemingly scattered all over the world, who had done it, and why they were under bushes and such. He didn't get an answer. Their next stop was to find a ship (*ah, there's where all the sailing begins and his musings on water wheels attached to ships*) which the king of the land would gladly allow them to use. In exchange for, and I had to read this passage several times to make sure I had it right, pepper. *As in the spice? Like salt and pepper?* But that's what it said, so I had to believe it. I mean it was more generous a deal than I had gotten from *my* king, which was a bit of gold and being yelled at because I hadn't realized he had tried to stop the Dragonlord before my arrival. But it was still pretty weird. Not as weird as the situation they faced when they got to the town of Baharata where they learned the owner of the spice shop had recently been abducted by bandits. Yes, bandits. *This pepper stuff must have either been really something in the past or it was more rare. But wait they didn't steal the pepper, as one might expect, they stole the person that sold it. That makes no sense.* Here Loto began to muse on how improbable it was that the one person they needed to talk to should need rescuing just as they arrived. This bandit person didn't move against the spice shop the week before, or the week after, which I did have to admit was a bit coincidental. *Like doors being locked which forced me to go to a certain town, or that magical barrier springing up when it did.* I sat and thought about what I had gone through thus far, looking for other examples.

Every town had a blacksmith, nothing odd there. The princess was a big one, being in a place I could somewhat easily reach and behind a door just as I went to buy keys to open doors. The lady selling "fairy water" seemed to be going out of her way to make it difficult to buy her product, so that wasn't really related to me that I could see. Finding the shop owner who just happened to be knowledgeable about the world and had a suit of armor that could greatly help could be one. I went back to reading.

With the ship "in hand" the group started their quest to track down certain magical orbs, six of them. I had to wonder where these orbs had gone, if they were so powerful and useful in the defeat of evil, one would think they would be around somewhere! *Maybe I'll find out what happened to them.* But first the group needed to find the "final" key, and yes he referred to it by that name several times so it seemed that was the official name for the thing. I shook my head, wondering who had named it that, and looked up to find "my" maid bringing me lunch. As she had been assigned to me there wasn't much for her to do at present, so I invited her to eat with me, and I showed her the journal.

"This is Erdrick's journal?" she asked, clearly surprised. "It doesn't look very old, are you sure you're not being scammed."

"It's a copy of it. I left the original with the tool shop owner, who copied it for me. If I'm being scammed it's by Loto himself, as I found the book in his grave-site to the west."

"Must be the real thing then," she agreed. "Did he really do all the heroic things the stories say?"

"I'm not sure about stories, but the most heroic thing he's done up to this point in his travels is find a bunch of keys and rescue an abducted shop worker."

"Oh."

"But I haven't read that much, maybe he'll do more heroic things as I get through it." *Apart from musings about the shape of ship's sails or whatnot.*

"He did defeat Baramos though, right? All the stories say that!"

"Not single-handedly, he had help. But presumably, as he survived to leave the journal and Baramos isn't wandering around anymore."

"Wait, that can't be right. If he had help then the others should be just as famous as he is! But you never hear stories about them, do you? It's just Erdrick, Erdrick, Erdrick!"

I had to admit she was right. "Maybe they died?"

"Oh no!" She covered her mouth in shock. "I hope not! Read me some and let's find out!"

"You want me to read to you?"

"If you don't mind," she replied, looking away and fidgeting. "You didn't call me for anything so I've been kinda bored all morning."

"Called?"

"The rope." She pointed to the rope that hung in the room. "You pull it and it rings a bell and I would see what you needed."

"I see! Well, honestly, that seems a little over the top for me. If that's the right phrase. I mean I don't need any special treatment or anything." *I suppose everyone just assumed I knew about it, but having never lived in a castle before I did not.*

"Tell that to the king, he assigned me to you, so you're stuck with me."

"In that case, let's see what happens after Loto got his ship then, shall we?"

"Thanks," she said with a small smile.

To find the "final" key the group had to solve a strange puzzle by pushing boulders around a cave, and the maid (Who said her name was Clarissa) grabbed the book away from me claiming I was lying.

"You're not lying," she said, scowling at the page. "There's a diagram and everything."

"You know," I said dryly, "if we have to stop every five minutes because Loto does some weird thing we're never going to finish."

"Seriously? It's been that sort of thing the whole journey?"

"It's not completely out of the realm of possibility, believe me. It's been mostly mazes, if I'm being honest, not puzzles like this, but I'm not surprised to see one."

"Okay," she relented, handing me the book back.

"Thank you. Where was I? Shoving rocks... Right."

Their "reward" for shoving the rocks around was not the final key, but a vase. They were all quite confused about this, but the wizard of the group said it felt magical and thus, important. Loto by this time agreed with him, saying that if something was put in their path it was no doubt vital to their mission.



They soon learned where the key was, and as Loto had predicted, the vase was put to use draining a pond so they could walk down to the no longer underwater shrine and pick it up.

“What did they do with it after that?” Clarissa asked.

“Book doesn’t say. Just that they went back around the world opening ‘final’ doors with their ‘final’ key. Why?”

“I just hope they put the water back, and then destroyed that thing.”

“Destroyed it?”

“Of course destroyed it! A vase that could drain a whole lake? What if they accidentally dropped it into the ocean? Would it drain the whole thing? Think of the damage that would do. Baramos didn’t need anything fancy to destroy the world, just that one magical item. Who made such a dangerous thing anyway? And why?”

“Good question. They never explored that. At least it was hidden in the rock pushing room.” *He was a magic user, why didn’t he just make something like that? She’s right, it would have been devastating.*

“Which took them, what, a half an hour to figure out?”

“Well...”

“So not really all that hidden, was it? How did the key get to the bottom of the lake? Who built the shrine down there? Why not just not do that, hide the key in the cave, and not make the most dangerous magical item in the world?”

“I have no idea, but it seems like you two would have gotten along. He asks questions like that all the time in here.”

“Really?”

“Yup. You’ll see. It should be right about this time, as they’ve started to sail everywhere.”

“Read on then.”

I did. The group got the green orb from some random person in a random town, which was convenient for them. But all this sailing left Loto a lot of time to think, and here he started musing about how inefficient life around villages was.

“For a start,” I read out loud, “why is magic used so little in day to day life? My friend the wizard can roast an enemy with a fireball, why does the blacksmith not use magic to heat the iron he wishes to work with? Keeping a forge fire going must be costly, as the fuel is consumed quickly. But perform the same task with magic and that cost is eliminated. Plus if the metal can be kept hot he doesn’t have to stop work every few minutes to reheat it. This would raise his productivity, allowing more to be made in a single day. This means he has more to sell, making him more money. I’m sure it could be done, heating metal up slowly with magic must be easier than calling up enough heat to create a ball of fire that incinerates a monster. He says it takes many years to become a wizard but I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about simply learning a single spell or two, by rote if you must, to make your chosen profession easier. Cooks use fire to prepare food, everyone has a fireplace to heat their homes. Torches and oil are burned to light the way in the dark. It seems like everyone knowing a simple fire spell would save countless trees and expense from many professions. Yet this is not done. Why?”

“That’s a good point,” said Clarissa. “There must be someone in most towns that studies magic. Even if the blacksmith knows none, having their shops next to each other when the magic user wasn’t busy they could be helping the blacksmith. Then they share the profit on the finished product. You don’t know if it was heated with fire or magic, nor should you care. You’ll pay what he asks or go without.”

“Both get to do something during a time the magic user would just be waiting around for a customer,” I mused.

“Exactly. Why wouldn’t they want to earn extra money?”

“It seems to me they would.”

She nodded.

“What would happen if I lost the final key?” I read next. “What if it should be stolen from me? If one of the orbs is behind a locked door would that be it for the quest? Could it no longer be completed, dooming the world? Losing the key does not seem likely, but the world is a dangerous place. It could be dropped without me knowing. Whoever has set this all up is counting on many, many things going exactly right. It seems dangerous to me.”

“I wondered where my keys went, after I bought them,” I admitted. “I wasn’t sure where I put them, but when I needed one it was there.”

“That happens to me!” Clarissa told me. “Like right now if you wanted me to dust your room I would get out my duster and do it. But where is my duster right now?” She spread her hands, showing me she wasn’t carrying anything. I looked her over, as it seemed she was giving me permission, after all. She was quite pretty, with shoulder length brown hair that was somehow styled to hang in swirls. Her nose was just the right size, and she had all her teeth, a bit of a rarity even among nobles and royalty. She had on her maid’s uniform, with the cute little skirt and the cute little apron and the cute little cat ears on top of her cute little-

I blinked a moment. “Are you wearing cat ears?”

“Oh these,” she sighed, reaching up to touch one. They were on a headband on her head, and they looked like cat ears made of some sort of fabric. “Yeah, the king-” She stopped and looked around the room. She leaned over and checked under the bed. I certainly didn’t steal a glance at her legs as she did this, which were covered in high, white stockings. With a scowl she hopped off the bed, checked the closet, the wardrobe, under the bed again, behind the mirror, and behind the curtains by the window. She leaned close to me, putting her hands around her mouth to whisper to me. “The king makes us wear them. Personally I think he’s going *nuts* in his old age, but don’t tell him I said so. I’d be fired for sure, or worse!”

“I won’t,” I promised her. *And I’m not saying you’re wrong either. After that breakfast with him...*

“Good.” She climbed back on the bed, settling her legs under her. She smoothed down her dress, folded her hands primly and looked at me expectantly. “Long live the king. Go ahead.”

“What were we talking about?”

“Things going right?”

*Was that it?* “Right. The same happened to me. If that door hadn’t been locked and if the king hadn’t used his last key, forcing me to go halfway around the world to get

more I never would have been there in time to rescue the princess. If any one of those things hadn't happened, she would be dead."

"It is strange. What else does he say?"

At this point the party had reached Zipangu, a town under the watchful eye of the mayor Himiko, who turned out to be a monster in disguise. They beat up the monster and claimed the purple orb, which we both agreed was a stroke of luck that they had it.

"But how did the monster get into town?" Clarissa asked. "I thought towns had special magic put on them or something to keep out monsters. I mean how would be not be overrun otherwise? Have you seen how many monsters are out there? Oh, of course you have, silly question. Sorry, duh!" She hit her head with her palm.

"According to my sources it's the smell," I told her.

"Smell?"

"I guess they have a better sense of smell than we do. Human towns just smell bad to them and they stay away. Maybe this monster was born with an immunity to it or something?"

"A monster with no sense of smell who liked being a mayor and just happened to have the orb they needed, which they found by ransacking the room after killing them? They seem to go around poking into cabinets and such wherever they go, and it seems it's a good thing they did. Even if it does seem kind of creepy, are they just swiping stuff they find from the real owners? If they hadn't they would have just walked out and never found this orb."

"That's true. Maybe the real mayor had the orb and the monster just kept it around not knowing what it was?"

"Okay, I see what you mean about bizarre things happening. What's next?"

The next thing they did was help a newly created town get on its feet and go back to a town called Lancel, using the Final Key to unlock a door with another maze and at the end, an orb.

"I've never heard of any of these towns," the maid complained. "Where did they all go? Towns should stick around more than a few hundred years."

"I agree," I told her, thinking about it. *Where have they all gone?*

The next adventure they found themselves in was meeting a group of pirates who insisted they had once discovered an orb among their treasure but had since lost it. None of the party actually believed them, and waited around for the pirates to leave and then ransacked the place. *(I guess that's true to form, for them. They do an awful lot of stealing stuff from towns despite being heroes. What is up with that?)* To the surprise of none of them it was found in a chest at the bottom of a staircase behind a boulder.

"Good thing they had all that practice from earlier," Clarissa said with a grin. "Pushing rocks around, I mean."

"At that point I'd imagine they went around shoving everything that looked even mildly suspicious." We both laughed.

"But they did steal it," she went on, sobering. "Doesn't seem very heroic."

"I was just thinking that too! Counter point, they didn't attack the pirates and kill them all in an attempt to get them to reveal where it was."

"So they're heroic because they didn't do a more awful thing?"

"I guess when you put it that way, but they were trying to save the world. The pirates were only hurting themselves by not giving it up at the start."

She sighed. "I suppose they had stolen it themselves, so it was justice, of a sort. Read on."

The group headed to Samanao Castle and for reasons Loto didn't make clear the entire group was thrown into the dungeons at the bottom. It didn't really take as the guards didn't even bother to search them and so using the Final Key they left the cell-

"Wait a minute," interrupted Clarissa. "Let me understand this. These people found thief keys and magic keys and then this final key, right? They searched the world for special doors after finding these keys so they could be opened."

I had told her about the other keys, of course. "Right," I answered, I could see where she was going with this.

"But there must have been other keys in the world, for example the guards would presumably be able to unlock the cell these guys were just thrown into, right?"

"One would assume that, yes."

"So then how did keys work in the past? Did they not vanish at all like today? Were there special ones made for special doors? Like you couldn't use the key that opened the cell door to open the door to the kitchens?"

I shrugged. "All I know is what I'm reading here, don't ask me."

"Life back then must have been so confusing, people wouldn't have known if the key they had could open the door they wanted!"

*But is our way of vanishing keys really any better? The only thing that keeps me from opening the treasury of the king is wanting his good will in the future. I have my own keys now, so it's not really all that secure. And with the door to the other wing of the castle open, anyone could buy a key and do the same. It's pretty weird.* "Maybe that was the point," I suggested. "Greater security."

"Obviously not, if these guys got thrown in jail and then just walked out a second later. You couldn't have two keys that opened the same door, only the cell key should have opened the cell door."

"Maybe the final key magically changed shape to be whatever would open a door?"

"Then why bother keeping the magic or thief key?" she asked triumphantly.

"I have to admit you've got me there. It doesn't make sense."

"Just so we're both on the same page."

"Well, yeah, I'm reading it to you, we have to be on the same page."

She just groaned and rolled her eyes. But she was grinning too.

## Chapter 15

### The hero spends more time with Clarissa

Having broken out of jail the group wasted no time in finding the real king, who it seemed was down in the dungeons with them. He explained about the impostor king who it seemed was another monster that could freely travel in towns!

"I guess the other one wasn't that special," Clarissa remarked.

"Maybe people bathed more often in those days?" I suggested.

"I don't know about you but I wash regularly," she sniffed.

"Maybe my source was having a bit of a laugh at my expense and it's actually something else?"

"Who is this 'source' of yours anyway? You never did say."

"If you will brave the outside of town with me I'll show you. You would never believe me otherwise."

"I'll think about it."

The impostor could be revealed with a special magical mirror so they headed to retrieve it. With the mirror in hand they demanded another audience with the king, and made him look into it revealing he was some kind of troll, whatever that was. Then then did what they did best, and beat up the-

"Let me get this straight," Clarissa stopped me, holding up a hand. "These guys have a key that can open cell doors, right?"

"That's how they escaped, right."

"And they found the real king minutes after getting out?"

"Yes..."

"And instead of just letting him out and confronting the fake, they found this mirror (and where is it now I would love to know) and marched back into the castle. So here's this group of people that the guards had *just finished throwing into the dungeon* back again, and none of the guards said to themselves 'hey wait a second I should be guarding my king. Maybe attack these fellows, keep them from getting any further into the castle?' Really? They just marched these guys back into the throne room as if nothing had happened the first time? If they knew the king was fake and that's why Loto and his friends didn't have their stuff taken why didn't *they* attack him the moment they knew he wasn't the real king? Isn't their job to safeguard the king, not a fake? If they did know, how did they know about the final key? Did they just assume that Loto would escape 'somehow' and leave it at that? If they were afraid of getting hurt why not just escort them out of the room as if going to throw them in the dungeon, explain the situation, and let the heroes take care of it right then? None of that part of the story makes any sense at all!"

"I have to admit, they took the long way around."

"The long way around?" she echoed. "It's like they were trying to move a bucket of water, but instead of just lifting the bucket they got a sieve and tried to use that! That's not the long way around it's sheer foolishness!"

"Finding out that Loto wasn't the brightest guy, huh? Not like the stories?" *Maybe that's why he wanted me to read this. Maybe he thought the same later, and regretted running all over instead of just confronting the problem directly.*

"I should say not! No wonder he locked this up in his grave, he didn't want anyone knowing the truth!"

"Huh. Hadn't considered that. Maybe he only wanted me to know, so I didn't make the same mistakes he did. Well, people are going to start learning the truth as the tool shop owner in town is going to make more copies of this to sell."

She covered her eyes with her hands. "Our great hero was a moron!"

"Maybe the cell was magically sealed?" I suggested, a stretch for sure.

"So use the magical key!"

"Yeah, yeah that's a thing. I don't know." *There must have been a door, the king got in there somehow. And why not have the real king killed immediately? Why keep him around to cause trouble later? Did the guards think this guy, who just happened to look like the king, was crazy and didn't listen to him? They must have suspected something was going on, right?*

"Go on, get the rest of it over with. What other stupid things did he do? I'm too invested now to walk away."

With the troll dispatched they found the magical staff that allowed you to change your appearance and they had some fun with that, then traded it immediately afterward for a bone that a man assured them would help them track down a ghost ship the pirates had mentioned. Loto handed the thing over with hardly a thought, it seemed he was quite excited to track down this ghost ship, though taking the word of a pirate seemed an odd thing to do in the best of times. I would have thought the staff more useful, but he clearly didn't think so. Luckily the bone worked (I could tell Clarissa was holding herself back from asking how by the tremor in her upper lip) and they sailed straight for it. Turned out it was real, and they helped the restless spirits find peace at last.

"So they can do some good in the world when they put their minds to it," Clarissa grumbled.

"Kind of odd they took the time though," I mused. "I mean they were trying to find these orbs, and they didn't even suspect one was on the ghost ship, so why not leave that until the land was safe? Why take the risk?"

"He wasn't that bright, remember?" she replied with a grin.

"Ah, there is it."

The group then left the sea for a time, heading to a "Gondo Cave" that held a lot of challenging monsters and at the end, another orb. Someone at the newly founded town they had helped had dug up the yellow orb which was a stroke of luck, so they got that when they headed back to check on the place. This completed the set of six, and they used the orbs to...

"To what?" Clarissa asked, as I had paused in my reading.

"Are you sure you want to know?" I asked, looking at her over the pages of the book. I wasn't holding it like a shield in case she decided to smack me or anything.

She sighed. "Just tell me. It's something bizarre, isn't it?"

"You might say that. They used them... to hatch an egg."

"An egg."

"It had a large bird inside, apparently named Lamia. Or Ramia, the ink is a little smudged here I'll have to go ask the tool shop owner which it is."

"Did they?"

"According to this, yes."

"A bird. They traveled possibly for months across the whole of the land finding these 'special orbs' and the 'magical' thing they did, in the end, was help hatch an egg."

"Yes. On the bright side they now had a bird that could fly them anywhere in the world. No more sailing. I suppose that's where his questions about why we can't build a machine to help us fly came from?"

"I suppose that could be useful. But wouldn't it have taken years for the bird to grow up enough?"

"According to this they just took off with it. If there was time in between they don't mention it."

"And where did they make this poor baby bird fly? Knowing Loto probably someplace bizarre, like a far away farm he heard had a new kind of apple he wanted to taste."

I shook my head. "Not according to this. They toured the world one last time, stocking up on healing herbs and the like, making sure they had the best equipment they could find and that it was in good repair, then headed to the castle of Baramos." *Which I guess could float, which is why they needed the bird? Has it crashed in the meantime? I haven't seen many flying castles in my time, what kind of magic can float around a huge chunk of earth with a castle on top of it for months or years at a time?*

She seemed surprised. "Something sensible at last!"

"I agree. Few details are given of the battle here but they won, obviously, and headed back to Aliahan to give the king the good news. Unfortunately, the news didn't stay good for long."

"What do you mean?"

"Says here as they were talking to him a figure stepped out of nowhere and told them he was the one behind it all, with Baramos just being a mouthpiece. His name was Zoma."

"Zoma? There are no stories about him! I thought Baramos was the end. Wait, you don't think someone is behind the Dragonlord, do you?"

"I hope not. Says here they went into Alfreward, deep inside the earth. Loto bought a dragon sword, which reportedly cost 15,000 gold and had the power to greatly harm dragons."

"You don't think that's the legendary sword, do you?"

"Maybe. But at that point he wouldn't have known we would have to deal with a Dragonlord. So I don't see how it could be." *Would be nice if I could track one down though. Even a 'better' sword might not compare to one specifically made to wound dragons.*

"Did they find those tinymedal things down there?"

"You bet they did! That really drove him bonkers."

"I can bet."

"So to defeat this new threat they needed some different magical treasures, the first being the Hero Shield. Ah, maybe we'll get an answer to your question."

"Shield? There's no shield in the legend. Just the sword and the armor!"

"Maybe the shield was lost, or destroyed in the battle?"

"I guess we'll find out."

"They went into the Nail Mark, don't ask me what that is, exactly, and there was really no one guardian just the usual monsters roaming around. Odd. They found another town, there was an even more powerful sword for sale there, 23,000 gold which was called the Snow Sword. Good thing he had spent all that money on the dragon sword which was now useless! There are some notes here from the tool shop owner about a ruined page, something about Daisy and a Bikini? He can only speculate what that means."

"I can guess," Clarissa said coldly.

"Anyway, moving on they headed back out of there, found another entrance to the underground world and, ah, found the town of Kol where they bought the King's Sword for 35,000 gold!" *Good thing they just bought the snow sword that was now useless.*

"King's ransom sword you mean. That's crazy! No sword, no matter how magical, could be worth that much!"

"Yeah. I mean maybe gold was more plentiful in those days but come on! They also got the blade armor for 6,500 gold which seemingly reflects half the attack back at the attacker. Now there's an armor I wouldn't mind getting a hold of."

"It does seem like there are many more magical things in Loto's world than in ours," Clarissa mused. "Wands and robes and books and seeds."

"Yeah." *Is magical knowledge being lost? Suppressed? If I had half the magical items he talks about I would be in fantastic shape against the Dragonlord. If I could afford them.*

"You found the book in the grave, right?"

"That's right."

"But nothing else?"

"Just the chest the book came in, why?"

"He bought all this stuff, why didn't he leave it for the next hero, i.e. you, in the same place? A book survived, armor and swords would have."

"That's a good question. Maybe he felt if he left me a bunch of magical items I might rush off to battle the Dragonlord thinking they made me invincible, but in reality got me killed. He did ask his friend to look into the future with magic."

"Now there's a magic we could track down. See how you defeat the Dragonlord, then do that! Or if you didn't, see how you died, and then not do that."

"Would be nice, I admit. Let's see, more accounts of traveling and searching for better gear, wow they were really worried about this Zoma character. Must have made an impression on them, they went out of their way to search out the best items they could find. That done they retrieved the second item they needed to defeat Zoma, the crest. Whatever that is. They then went to... Wait a minute, I thought he wrote three before." I flipped a few pages back. "Zoma stole three treasures. The shield... Oh wait, sorry, the pages were stuck together. Here we go. Let's see, they were now able to enter some kind of tower using the bird and found the light armor. That's three, the shield, the light armor, and the crest. I guess the light armor is the one from the legend."

"But wouldn't heavy armor be better against someone as scary as Zoma? I mean if he passed up armor that magically transferred damage back to the attacker, it must be something special but it doesn't sound it."



"I don't think it means heavy vs light. I think it's just 'the light armor.' That's the name of it."

"AH!" she got a look of recognition. "Got it."

"They made the rainbow drop, using the Sunstone and Rain Staff-" I held up a hand. "Don't ask, it's not mentioned before this. I have no idea where these items came from."

"Wow, you already know me so well."

I grinned and went on. "They used it to make a bridge," *Oh, that's where that passphrase came from when I talked to the tool shop owner. One of the legends must speak of this but this Zoma isn't known... Never mind.* "Then they faced Zoma. You've got to be kidding me!"

"What?"

"They found those tiny medal things *inside Zoma's castle.*"

"Did he make them?"

"I don't think I want to know at this point." *But how would they have gotten there otherwise? Just what were those things?* "He had to fight a few of Zoma's underlings, and the Light Orb makes an appearance here. Again, no idea where it came from this is the first time it's mentioned. He uses it to take down a barrier of darkness around Zoma, and they bash him until he dies. The tunnel between the surface and underground worlds collapses, leaving them apart forever, and Loto returns the hero we know him as, Erdrick, the savior of the world!"

There was silence in the room for a moment.

"Well," Clarissa finally said, "not exactly like the legends is he?"

"It's been a long time, naturally anyone telling the stories about him would, in the first place, not want to make the man who saved the world look bad, and two may have changed some details to make a better story."

"I guess it has been a couple of generations. Long enough for the world to completely change, the way he tells it. Even minor changes to the story, over time, would add up. But the names of the items they wouldn't change, would they? Why would someone invent a seed that give you greater strength, for example? No, those must have existed at one time. What happened to our world?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "The equipment they were able to buy, the magical items they used, just don't seem to exist anymore. I find it hard to believe even the Dragonlord could suppress knowledge to that extent." *He hasn't been around that long, after all.*

"Doesn't seem the type, just wants people to be afraid of him."

"What is his goal anyway?"

"You'll have to ask him when you see him!"

"I will. I'll do that." I changed my voice a bit. "Excuse me Mr. Lord of all Dragons, wondering if before we try to tear each other to pieces you might be good enough to tell me exactly why you're doing all this terrorizing the country and whatnot? There's a good chap."

She laughed. "That will work for sure!"

I laughed along with her. "He couldn't resist my refined culture and wit."

"He would tell you anything you wanted to know."

"No doubt."

After a moment she quieted again. "So what now?" she asked.

"There's a lot to think about relating to what he said, but we have more pressing concerns. I figured I would get some training in today, so I'll again extend an invitation to you. If you want to come meet the other person," I hesitated to say person but they were, in a loose sense, so it was probably fine, "that helped rescue the princess they're waiting for me out in the forest to the north."

"Guess I have no choice," she told me, swinging her legs over and bouncing off the bed. "Let me go get changed and I'll accompany you."

"I'll go down and you can meet me at the castle entrance."

"Sounds good. See you in a bit." She left so I made my way down there to wait. I didn't have to wait too long when a person tapped me on the shoulder. "Okay, I'm ready to go."

I turned, expecting to see the maid but someone else was standing there. She had her hair pulled back and made into a bun, and was wearing a set of leather armor that had been blackened to be as dark as possible. Under this she wore a black, one piece garment that hugged her skin, showing off her figure at least the parts of it not covered by leather. She wore high boots, and leather plates had been attached by cords where possible. She had several types of knives on her person from what looked like throwing knives to wicked looking daggers she could draw with each hand. I admit I was staring at her in shock for a little too long. I wasn't the only one, as the guards were looking her up and down in an appreciative way as well, I noticed.

"It's me, Clarissa, you dope," she teased me, smacking my arm. "I can't look that different."

Looking at her face I realized with a start it was her. This new look had completely taken me by surprise so much I hadn't even recognized her face. Somehow I had to recover from this, and suddenly it came to me. "Oh, sorry, I didn't recognize you without the cat ears."

"The cat ears?" Her eyes narrowed.

*Abort, abort! You said the wrong thing!* "I just mean, what are you wearing?"

"Well you hardly expected me to leave the castle wearing that maid outfit did you?"

"No, of course not, but I expected just, I don't know, normal clothes. You look ready to set off to fight the Dragonlord yourself!"

"Not here, come on," she said, pulling me through the castle gates.

*Not here? What is she talking about?*

We headed some distance from the castle, and of course a slime drew near, which Clarissa dispatched before I even got my sword out. "Er, what?" I asked, feeling my wits a bit slowed for some reason. Then it came to me. "You're not just a maid, are you?"

"What gave it away?" she asked slyly. She turned to face me. "No, the fact of the matter is none of us 'maids' are simply maids. The king tried one thing, a direct frontal assault on the Dragonlord's castle, which failed miserably. After his wife died in the Dragonlord's retaliation attack he just sort of gave up, and refused to try anything else. So we in the castle started making our own plans. One of those plans was to train us maids to be fighters."

*“So you are a maid! Maids can’t storm the Dragonlord’s castle... Can they?” I suppose at this point I should believe anything is possible. Isn’t a dragon waiting for me in the forest? I mean come on, a fighting maid should be low on the things that surprise me, especially after reading that journal.*

She waved that off with a chuckle. “I started as one. I don’t know what I am right now, I’m not one thing or the other. Obviously we haven’t had long, my training is far from complete, but as you saw I’m ready to take care of myself. I suppose you would have preferred the ‘helpless maid’ at your side, holding onto you and saying how scared she was so you could ‘protect’ me?”

“I- I guess I would be lying if I said that wasn’t the case. That is sort of what I expected. I’m sorry. It was stupid, I know. Daisy taught Loto about using his sword properly, this shouldn’t have been such a shock to me. I just... Didn’t think I would ever see you like this! I had one expectation of you, and you turned it on it’s head. I apologize, but you have to admit the whole transformation is rather unexpected.”

“At least you’re honest about it, that’s something,” she mused. “To answer your earlier question, no, we wouldn’t be storming the castle, not like the soldiers did. But it was the hope that the Dragonlord would demand maids for his castle by now, and once we gained his trust and he felt we were harmless we could strike. Even he has to sleep sometime.”

“You... that’s...”

“What?” She scowled.

“You’re thinking of him as man.”

“Of course he’s a man,” she scoffed. “We saw him when he was checking our kingdom out, under the guise of being a helpful old wizard. We learned he knew more destructive magics than we expected, and had an army of monsters at his command, but he’s still just a person. We knife him in the back when he’s asleep and that’s it for him. Except,” she sighed, “he never demanded us come serve him. I guess maybe he has monsters do it? But we still train, just in case. It’s better than what the king does, which is nothing, and if the castle was attacked again we could help defend it. There are so few guards left after all.”

“You would have gone to your deaths,” I told her sadly. “You have no idea. Don’t get me wrong,” I went on quickly, “I think if things had been the way you thought that plan would have a high probability of working. You would be the last people he expected to be a threat, and so actually the biggest threat because it turned out you knew how to fight. It’s a pretty great plan, and I highly respect you and the other maids who have gone out of your way to try and carry it out. But it wouldn’t work, no, not in a million years.”

“You know that for sure?” she asked, not buying it.

“I do. Come and meet Kethrinax, then you can make up your own mind. She’s been telling me things, things about the Dragonlord, I think you need to hear them as well.”

“Very well,” she agreed, seemingly mollified by my words. They were true, it was going to take some adjustment seeing that cat eared maid transform into a competent warrior basically before my very eyes but-

“Wait a minute,” I blurted, as she started to walk past me.

“What now?” she asked.

I smiled, she would love this. "There's enough monsters around here, the Dragonlord's not going to miss them believe me. Let's get you some levels."

Chapter 16  
The hero is asked to make a critical choice

“Heal!” shouted Clarissa excitedly. Magical energy sparkled around her and any minor wounds she had sustained in the past two hours healed themselves. “I did it,” she announced proudly, still clearly not believing her own eyes. “I can do magic!”

This was the successful culmination of a small experiment on my part begun when I took her out of the castle. We had traveled north east to where more powerful monsters seemed to reside and worked as a team. I would weaken them, she would finish them off. My thinking was that she would then receive the bulk of the magical energy given up by the dying creature as she landed the finishing blow. (I had no means to test this of course, at least not at present, but that wasn't the focus of the experiment) Also as they were more powerful, it shouldn't take as long for her to raise her 'levels' as it had taken me killing slimes and the like around the castle. This proved correct, in more than one way. She hadn't needed any time at all once we arrived to absorb enough magic to cast her first spell, but more importantly it vindicated the tool shop owner. *Don't get me wrong, I didn't doubt the man, but don't people say trust but verify? I'm sure I've heard that somewhere. This proves that anyone can come out here and gain levels just like I did. On the one hand it means I'm not all that special after all, but on the other, this is maybe what the soldiers from before lacked. Levels. Magic. No wonder they were swept aside in the initial attack. But now the Dragonlord has given us the means of his defeat!* “You sure can,” I told her, feeling a bit of pride at my part in all this. *Reading that journal did teach me a few things. I wanted to know if Clarissa could use magic after killing monsters like I did, and I assumed the answer was yes. I came up with an experiment to prove that one way or the other, (have her kill monsters) ran that experiment in the field, (she killed monsters) and got a result that verified what I believed would happen. Without all of Loto's “this makes no sense” and “why did this happen the way it did” I never would have considered it. She could not use magic before, now she can. What other conclusion can I draw?*

“Heal!” she said again, touching me this time. I felt my wounds close as well, and she wasted no time in saying “heal!” again. This time nothing happened. “Wait, what happened?” she asked, clearly panicked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“It's okay, this is normal,” I assured her. “You've only absorbed enough magical energy from monsters to cast the spell twice in succession. It was the same for me. As you gain more 'levels' you'll gain more magical power capacity, and can cast more spells before it runs out. As for it running out, after you rest for a bit it'll replenish itself, or you can go talk to a man in the castle. He can say a sort of prayer over you and replenish your magical energies. I can introduce you when we get back.”

“That old guy that sits behind the desk, but doesn't seem to sell anything?”

“That's the one! You know him?”

“I've seen him around, we all wondered what he was doing there. He didn't seem to be hurting anybody so we never asked him to clear out, but we did wonder what he was up to.”

“Clearly he's there to replenish people's magical power.”

“Of which there are exactly zero people in the castle that applies to.”

“Well, there's two now.”

“There will be two once we return to the castle. How did he earn a living before you came along?”

*I mean if you want to be specific about it, sure, when we get back there will be two.* “I have no idea, but to be fair I still don’t. He doesn’t charge me anything.” *I am the hero, I should get some perks without having to flash the token in everyone’s face. I was just glad someone took my word on faith.*

“He doesn’t- he does this for free?”

“It’s just a quick prayer. Doesn’t cost him anything.”

“It’s a service. It doesn’t cost the chef at the castle anything to prepare the meals, but he still expects to be paid.” Her eyes narrowed. “Have you heard it enough to have learned the prayer?”

It would be painful admitting I had not, despite the many times I had visited the man while raising my ‘levels’ but it was the truth. *I have to tell her the truth.* “I didn’t really bother paying attention to it.” But I could salvage it a little, and quickly went on. “He said it wouldn’t work trying to restore your own magical power, that’s why I didn’t bother.” *And now I look like a short sighted fool. Wonderful.*

“Too bad, but we can head back. If he taught it to both of us, I could restore yours and you could restore mine while we’re out here.”

I put up a finger but considered and put it down again. “You’re not wrong.” *At least, unless it’s something to do with the location or the man, and not the prayer itself. Makes me wonder why that works in the first place. Are the gods really listening to that one guy, and his one prayer to restore magical power when almost everyone lacks such a thing? It does seem an odd thing to do, and only exists because I’m around to need it, just like Loto said.* I was troubled at the implications of this, but couldn’t really do anything about it.

She smirked. “Of course I’m not. Shall we head back, meet this Kethrinax of yours before the sun goes down?”

I looked and she was right. The sun was getting lower in the sky. With reading the journal, traveling all the way out here, fighting monsters, and now the walk back I wouldn’t have a lot of time to practice fighting dragons today. “This is originally why we came out here, it’s true. Let’s go, good thing it’s on the way.”

We continued the procedure on the way back, letting me take the first shot on anything she thought she couldn’t take in one blow. But soon it was just slimes and minor ghosts again which she also quickly got tired of encountering every fourth step. “What is with all these things anyway?” she asked me, frustrated.

“You’ve got me,” I told her. “But I’ve asked myself that many times.”

Clarissa now stood with her mouth hanging open, staring up at the large green dragon in the middle of a charred circle of earth in the middle of the forest. Her hands gripped her daggers as she looked the creature up and down. “We can’t fight that,” she said quietly, a note of panic in her voice.

“We’re not here to *fight* her,” I told her, continuing to walk forward. “Come on, she won’t hurt you.”

“Won’t hurt me?” Her voice went up an octave. “That’s a dragon!”

"A dragon?" Kethrinax said, clearly feigning alarm and whipping her head back and forth. "Where?"

Her expression hardened, changing from fear of being eaten to fear of being the butt of a joke somehow. "Wait, they can *talk*? What's going on here?"

Kethrinax started laughing, and I rolled my eyes.

"Clarissa, may I introduce Kethrinax the green dragon? Kethrinax... I'll wait." I waited until she stopped laughing at Clarissa's expression of dismay. "Thank you. This is my ma- my new friend Clarissa, who I would like to learn more about the Dragonlord. Can you tell her what you told me?"

"Sorry about that," Kethrinax told her. "It was a mean trick, but clearly *someone* was saving me for a surprise, so if you're going to be mad at someone, please be mad at them. I mean he could have told you."

"Oh, I will be," she promised, letting go of her daggers and turning to face me. "So your source of information is a real dragon? But you said that same person helped you rescue the princess- oh."

"How is the princess, by the way?" Kethrinax asked.

I sighed. "Still unconscious, at least she was when we left. But still alive, so that's something."

"It's not nothing, I suppose," she agreed. "Are you sure she's getting the best care? I don't know much about human medicine but is this normal?"

"After what she went through? I have no idea," I admitted. "But if she can get better care, I don't know where that would be or how to take her there. You know how hard it was getting her back here, you think I could have done it alone?"

"Assuredly not!"

"There you are. Unless you're willing to help out again she's stuck where she is."

"True. But yes, Clarissa, was it? I was the one tasked with guarding the princess. Little did I know she would nearly die in there until our hero here came along and convinced me to check on her. And no, to answer your next question I have no idea why he put her here where he did, leaving her to die. We can't figure out his motive."

"I see," she replied slowly. "He told me there was some reason the maid's plan of learning to fight and stabbing him in his sleep wouldn't work, but that I should hear that reason from you. So here I am, what's the reason?"

"Do what? Stab the Dragonlord in his sleep? I should say- what's a maid?"

"We clean the castle, and serve food, and do odd jobs."

"Oh, a servant. I've heard of that, yes, we dragons wouldn't put up with such things but you're telling me a bunch of servants got together and came up with a plan to enter the Dragonlord's service, get him to lower his guard, and then stab him in the back?"

"That's right," she answered proudly.

"Huh. Maybe I *have* underestimated you humans after all. Still, like the hero here said, it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"Because the Dragonlord is a dragon, that's why. An old one. And old dragons are big dragons. He's twice the size of me. Why do you think we listen to him, gave him the title of Dragonlord? That's not his name, you know."

“Oh,” she said softly. “I did not consider that. We really would have gone to our deaths, wouldn’t we? He just *looks* like a man. One of us tried to stab him he would just change back into his true form and roast or eat us or both.”

She nodded. “More likely both. Even we like our meat cooked, especially as we have the biological means to do so. It’s a good thing you didn’t get the opportunity, it would have been a disaster!”

“Clearly. But hang on, how do you intend to fight him then, if he’s so huge and scary?” she asked me.

I shrugged. “At the moment, I have no idea. That’s why I wanted to practice fighting a dragon, to see if it was even remotely possible. We might have to use some indirect means, like poisoning him or somehow collapsing his castle so he’s buried under it.”

“You would have to feed a creature of that size barrels of poison,” Clarissa decided. “Not really practical.”

“I agree,” Kethrinax said. “It’s a tricky business.”

“But what about the maids?” she went on excitedly. “We’ve proven it works, we can all head out and ‘raise our levels’ like you said. If we all got magic, enough of it to really hurt the Dragonlord, we could win right?”

“Except I have to face the Dragonlord alone,” I told her reluctantly.

“Exactly, it’s the best chance we have to- wait what?”

“I have to face him alone.”

“No you don’t. Are you crazy? You’ve seen I can take care of myself, and we maids all have similar training. We could all come into the field and really run the monsters out of here and raise our levels at the same time. You need us, hero. You’re not still thinking of me as just a maid, are you? Fight the Dragonlord alone, preposterous. Is this some male bravado thing or what?”

“No, no, no,” I told her quickly, waving my hands. “It’s just, look.” I got out the journal, not even pausing to wonder where I had pulled it from. “Right in the beginning of the journal here.” I read her Loto’s words. “... you must journey alone! On this my friend was very clear, to do otherwise will invite disaster upon you and the world. So while you read of my journey and the friends that accompanied me, be aware no others can journey with you. Is what it says.”

“Give me that!” She snatched the book away from me.

“Is this some sort of human courtship ritual? It’s all very fascinating,” Kethrinax told me, looking between the two of us.

“No!” we both shouted, then glared at each other. She went back to reading. Her gaze softened as her eyes traveled down the page, starting from the beginning where Loto had written to me (*Or I suppose anyone who bothered to find the journal*) about what I was to do now. “It does say that,” she breathed, coming to the end. “What in the world?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Everything points to Loto’s mission ending in failure without the help of his friends. Time and again they saved each other on his journey. But I must travel alone? It can mean only one thing.”

“What’s that?” She looked up at me, closing the book.



“That the spell showed me traveling with someone, maybe someone I came to care about, and that got them killed. In that instant I go berserk, making me easy prey for the Dragonlord, and he crushes me easily in my unthinking rage.”

“Someone you care about, huh?”

I colored and looked away. “Maybe.”

“Well!” She handed the book back and I put it away. Somewhere. “Far be it from me to question ancient prophecies written hundreds of years ago created using magic which may or may not be reliable. But I can tell you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Loto also talks about using some kind of staff, but in his journal entries he says nothing about using a staff to defeat Baramos. He uses that ball of light or whatever it was that came out of nowhere against *Zoma*, but there’s nothing about a staff used to defeat Baramos. So how reliable is anything he wrote, really? If he can’t even keep his own facts straight?”

“The light orb, right, but that can’t be...” I got the book out again and flipped to the back, skimming as I went along. “The only staff he mentions is the change staff and the staff of rain. That he turns into the rainbow drop to make the bridge, using it, the stone of sunlight and the crest. You’re right, he doesn’t use any kind of staff on Baramos directly!”

“So who are you going to trust? Loto? Let’s review what he’s done; not leave you any of his top tier equipment despite managing to leave his ratty old journal laying around for hundreds of years. Entrusting the location of his token to a princess who is lying in a coma perhaps never to awaken instead of just writing it down. Tell you to do the opposite of what he has done, and travel alone. Get his magical items mixed up in his own account of events he supposedly lived through. Take, in some situations, the most roundabout way of doing things that is possible to do. Need I go on?”

“I’m enjoying it,” Kethrinax told her. “Sounds like a story worthy of a dragon’s telling. We love telling stories you know.”

“Stories?” I asked, a bad feeling overcoming me. “You don’t think...”

“What?” both asked me.

I got the journal out again. “What if this journal is actually a trap? Could the Dragonlord have gotten the original, changed it in subtle ways, and put it back for someone to find? What if the whole thing is a fabrication, a story, like Kethrinax says? How could I prove it otherwise? You said this *Zoma* character is unknown yourself, where did they come from?” *I’ll have to talk to the tool shop owner, make sure they frame it correctly if they start selling it. This all may not have happened at all.*

“It’s not out of the realm of possibility,” Clarissa told me, sounding smug. She had crossed her arms over her chest and one finger was tapping on her arm. “It’s that journal or me, who are you going to put your trust in?”

“Wait, wait, let me think about this a second,” I protested, waving the journal at her. “The journal makes good points. The way he thinks about things, the questions he asks about the world. Like why is that guy in the castle that can restore magical power there when I’m the only one (in the beginning) who would have used that service? How did that door in the castle get locked at the exact moment it did, forcing me to get a key to save the people on the other side, leading me to the princess? I wouldn’t even have asked those questions without reading the journal, I just would have accepted them.”

“And that’s reason enough to simply trust all of it despite the warning signs?”

“I don’t know!” *I mean how do I know you aren’t the Dragonlord, in a female form, there to keep an eye on me and persuade me against Loto’s advice?*

“Look,” she said quietly, putting both hands on the book and pushing it down. She looked into my eyes. “You have to do what you feel is right. Take the lessons of the journal, that’s fine, but realize it might not be all that it seems.”

*No, she must be who she says she is. If I start thinking otherwise, I can never trust anyone.* “If... If something were to happen to you, because of me...”

“I made my choices too, hero. We’re in this together. More likely you’ll die and I’ll have to carry on where you left off.”

*She’s not wrong.* “Fine. For now,” I hastened to add. “But if we learn more, or find some way of proving the journal hasn’t been tampered with, I will act to keep you safe.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be a hero worth admiring if you didn’t...”

“Admiring?”

“Now kiss!” Kethrinax exclaimed excitedly. We both came back to ourselves and Clarissa stepped back. We had been getting a little close together.

“You want us to what?” she asked her.

“Oh, uh, it’s a dragon word. Nowkis. It means ‘I’m in complete agreement!’ I didn’t want you to do anything.”

“Does it?” she asked. “I’ll have to remember that one.”

“Uh, it’s pretty regional, I don’t know if dragons, you know, around here would know it all that well. I’m from pretty far away, actually.”

“Uh huh. Anyway, back to the task at hand. The Dragonlord is an actual dragon, neither of you knows how we’re going to beat him, and we have training to do. Does that sound about right?”

“It does to me,” I told her, putting the journal away again and grasping the hilt of my blade. “Kethrinax, if you’re still willing?”

“What, did you think I knocked all those trees down and moved them for my own enjoyment? Come at me little one, I’ll show you just how outclassed you are trying to fight a dragon.”

I charged.

## Chapter 17

### The hero meets the princess

I sat in my room that night, joined by Clarissa who had changed back into her... *Work clothes? Maid "costume?" Official uniform?* I had no idea what to think about the cute, cat eared woman sitting across the table from me at this point. Who was she really? The fierce fighter who got over her fear of the dragon and took a few turns when I needed a break, or the maid assigned to me by the king? *Or neither of those things? Does she need to be one thing or the other? Can't she just be herself, doing what she needs to do in order to survive the world she finds herself in? She's Clarissa first, the maid thing is just her job, and the fighting thing is just her trying to do her part against the Dragonlord. But who is she, herself?* She had brought dinner from the kitchens and sat down to eat with me without even asking. Probably not typical maid etiquette but then, it seemed maids around here weren't typical so what did I know? She certainly didn't have a typical maid relationship with me and I wasn't going to demand she leave and eat elsewhere; I was somewhat glad of her company to be honest, but also wishing she had left me alone after my embarrassment of the afternoon with her watching. I wouldn't send her away just because of that.

"Don't look so down," she told me. "I think you improved a little bit there, in the end."

"It's kind of you to say," I almost didn't growl, thinking about how spectacularly I was tossed around by Kethrinax. The problem with dragons was their formidable defenses, starting with their shape. They had a long neck, so getting past all those teeth and horns to strike at their bodies meant you had to be extremely quick. But if you could manage it, there was the tail, which they could use like we would use a hand. It was just as strong as the rest of them, so if you didn't watch yourself while you were trying to hack at the body the tail would come at you from the side and wallop you. Of course one could strike at the neck directly, hoping to sever the head, but those backwards facing horns meant they could simply turn their heads and pull back a bit and you had two pointy bones to deal with. Plus their claws, plus the fact she told me the Dragonlord was a *winged* dragon, so he could use his wings in combat too, shielding his body or knocking a person off balance. So he was going to be even harder to deal with, if I could even reach him being twice as tall. I could just see it now, me smacking the legs of the Dragonlord while he looked down at me in amusement and then fried me with magic, or his fire breath, or magically augmented fire breath.

"I mean it," she went on. "You think I could throw a knife with anything resembling accuracy for weeks once we started training? Because I couldn't. I had to 'level up' my knife throwing skill." She put her hand over her mouth to hide a smile.

"If only I could level up my leveling up skill," I grumped.

"Well, at the moment I only see you leveling up your being a stick in the mud skill."

I had to chuckle at that. "Okay, okay, you got me," I told her. *She is trying to raise my spirits, maybe I shouldn't be so down on myself.* "There's just so much riding on me, I have to get this fight right, the first time." *I suppose that's what the practice is for. Better to fail now and learn than just rush the castle and get killed in the first five steps.*

"On us, hero. On us. Or did you forget I'm going to be at your side now?"

*"Not at all." At least until I leave for the Dragonlord's castle. How can I, in good conscience, take you into a place like that? I mean I suppose Daisy followed Loto to the bitter end, but she had been a mercenary for years according to her. How long has Clarissa been training? Of course, the same could be said for me so maybe I'm just being a big hypocrite. Maybe if I had seen "warrior Clarissa" first instead of "maid Clarissa" I would more think of her as the warrior first and this being just a part she was playing. But I don't. I see her as the "helpless maid" first and her decked out in armor and carrying weapons as the part she's playing. I'm a terrible person, aren't I?*

We talked about other things as we ate, she really was good company, and had seen a lot of crazy things in her time as a maid. After we finished and she cleared up said goodnight. "I have a lot of things to tell my fellow maids," she told me. "And I have my own exercises to perform before tomorrow. So I'll see you then."

"See you then," I replied, wondering what I was going to do with myself as the sun went down. *I'm supposed to be the hero of the world, I can't work less hard than a maid, can I?*

She left and I decided to go into town, have my sword sharpened by the blacksmith and talk to the tool shop owner about the journal and the Zora fellow mentioned within. I made it there without issue, the path being well known to me now. People nodded to me as they passed, so at least that was better than a gathering mob like I had seen not that long ago. I stopped into the first shop and told the man what I wanted, getting the sword out and setting it on the counter. The blacksmith looked at me like I had gone nuts, swords didn't need to be *sharpened*, he told me. "You must be thinking of something else."

"I've spent the day (or at least part of it) smashing this thing into dragon scales, skeleton bones, gooey slimes, whatever the heck ghosts are made of, and more. Are you telling me it's held an edge though all that?"

"My friend, you could throw a tomato in the air, whip that blade up, and slice it as cleanly as anything you've ever seen even after a hundred days of doing what you've done today."

I shuddered. *Please, by all the gods, I couldn't take a hundred days of that. I don't want to have to do it tomorrow, though I know I must. Either let me win or kill me, but please don't drag it out that long, I beg you.* "Could you do it?"

"Do what?"

"The whole tomato thing you just said. Could you hit a tomato with a sword after you threw it? Sounds pretty hard to me."

"I just used that as an example, I wasn't suggesting you try it. Still, go get a tomato from the market and set it down on a table and slice it if you really want to make sure."

"Okay. If you say it's still just as sharp," *and it seems to be now that I look at it, which is odd. What is this sword made of anyway?* "I'll take your word for it and bother you no more tonight."

"Glad to hear it's being put to good use though. Come back when you need better armor or a bigger shield. And tell everyone who asks where you get your equipment from!"

"I will." *I'm the hero of the world, and this is my favorite store in town.*

The tool shop owner invited me in and said that, yes, Zoma was known to those who researched history. "He's not as well known as Baramos was, because Baramos went around terrorizing people and got his name out there. The only ones who heard the name Zoma were, like it said in the journal, the king and Loto's group who went and killed him. Those deeds were recorded for those that want to look into it, but by then everyone knew Baramos was dead and was too busy getting drunk or smashed to care. They celebrated thinking the danger was over, poor fools. But it worked out in the end." He shook his head with a chuckle. "Why do you ask?"

"We were concerned the journal might be fake, or at least parts of it faked, in order to make it harder for me to defeat the Dragonlord."

"You think he found it and changed it? Why not just destroy it?"

"Isn't it better from his perspective that I follow bad advice than no advice at all? If I'm flailing around there's at least a 50% chance I'll do something right, but if I follow bad advice it's 0%."

"Maybe," he allowed. "I mean it all seems to line up fairly well with other accounts--"

"Which have all been passed down for hundreds of years?" I interrupted.

"What's your point?"

"So perhaps a young dragon, hundreds of years ago, got it into his head to become the lord of all dragons someday. This dragon, deciding not to repeat the mistakes made by Baramos, who he noticed just got killed by a hero, looked into that history. Finding it full of useful things heroes should do he came up with some changes, waited until Loto died, changed his journal, and made sure the two accounts matched up by appearing as a storyteller that spun tales of Loto's adventures. When he felt he was powerful enough he showed his true intent and here we are today. I come along, find the fake journal, and follow its terrible advice to a bad end!"

"That would be an insane amount of planning!"

"Dragons know they are going to live a long time. Wouldn't you start planning things out if you knew you were going to be alive in three hundred years? And still be in your prime? Heck, be as powerful as you might ever be?!"

"Uh, maybe?"

*After all, one hero was spawned to travel the world looking for the means to defeat it. Why wouldn't the same thing happen when I, as the lord of all dragons, made my presence known? Even if he gave up that dream later, or died before he could get to that point, there would be no harm done planning for it. At that point it would just be a cruel joke played on us, what would a dragon care about that? No, I think it's plausible.* "I'll ask Kethrinax tomorrow, get her opinion."

"You're bringing me, right? I have so many new questions for her!"

"We go there to train, but if you think you can make it back here on your own, you're welcome to come. I'm not really an escort service."

"I understand. Maybe you can ask her to come nearer the town that night so I don't have to go as far?"

"I'll ask her."

And so I headed back, turned in for the night, and was awoken by a knock on my door the next morning. Clarissa was there, bright eyed, and started setting up the table. I noticed she was once again setting the table for two and wondered why she didn't

prefer to eat with her fellow maids. *Did they 'kick her out' for being assigned to me? Or do they just have such different schedules and people to serve in the castle they don't eat together at all?* I felt a little bad, clearly she had gotten up early, washed, dressed, went down to the kitchens, loaded up a tray, and brought it back up here. Meanwhile what had I done that morning? Slept. *Does that seem fair to you?* I had washed in the other chamber, so I had only heard her setting the table, and when I seemed presentable I came out to sit down.

"I have two volunteers to go with us today," she announced, picking up a teapot that was leaking steam out the spout. She poured the tea and looked up at me.

"To learn to fight dragons?" I asked.

"I doubt they're ready for that," she clarified. "No, they're going to stick nearby though, while we practice, in case they get into trouble. But I thought they might fight some minions and raise their 'levels' just like I did."

"A party of four is somewhat traditional," I mused, rubbing my chin. All the while thinking *great, even more people that can get killed and it'll be my fault. Wonderful.*

"Exactly what I thought!" she exclaimed happily, setting the teapot down.

*Wait what?*

"That's why I didn't press for more, I thought four seemed to be the best number of people to have."

*Oh, the party of four thing. The tool shop owner wanted to come too, but I guess he's out. I'll have to remember to ask her if she could stand being nearer the town so he could do his interview.* "You think they'll be able to?"

"I don't see why not. I clearly did. I'm stronger and faster than I was yesterday, I'm sure of it. I want to go further as well, maybe in the afternoon we can head out and find some stronger monsters to kill again."

"Sure, whatever you want."

"Great! Well, sit down, I may be your maid for the moment but I'm not going to spoon feed you!" She laughed.

After we finished she took the tray away and went to change. When she headed to the gate she was trailed by two similarly dressed woman she introduced as Alita, and Rose. Alita had short black hair, large green eyes, and seemed to favor a slightly curved sword instead of the twin daggers. I briefly wondered how much maids made to afford such a thing being made but maybe the maids pooled their resources to have made enough for the whole group. Rose on the other hand had swept back blond hair that fell below her shoulders, blue eyes, and had a bow across one shoulder. A quiver of arrows rode at her hip, and she also had a dagger strapped to one leg. *Probably in case she ran out of arrows.*

"Nice to meet you," I said to them.

"So this is our hero and savior?" Alita wondered, looking me up and down and then walking around me like I was a horse she was thinking about buying at the market. *When was the last time I saw a horse?* "I suppose he'll do."

"Alita, be nice," Rose chided. "It's nice to meet you too. Clarissa said your name is..." and she said my name.

"That's me. And you're both going to be okay leaving the castle and fighting monsters? They're going to be all over once we step outside."

"Clarissa filled us in," Alita told me. "If what she says about 'levels' is true, and learning magic and all that, we're totally prepared!"

"I brought extra herbs and such," Rose told me in a whisper, leaning over to me. "Keep an eye on her, she's kind of... exuberant?"

"Let's go!" she was saying, dragging Clarissa by the hand. "Get out of this stuffy castle at last and actually *do* something! Dragonlord, here we come!"

*Oh yeah, so getting killed.*

So the four of us rotated who got to perform the final blow on any monsters we ran across on the way to see Kethrinax, and made good time to the clearing where she was waiting. The two maids were properly excited to speak to a real dragon, and hung out at the edges of the place while we continued our practice. They were pleased to learn about the gold they could make doing this, and as we were sitting there resting remarked that this probably paid better than being a maid, and they wished they had known of it earlier.

"But it requires an evil overlord to steal the kingdom's gold and create wondering monsters," Clarissa protested. "At least as a maid you're not relying on the suffering of others to make your living."

"Good thing we're getting in on the action now then," Alita remarked. "Before the hero here destroys them all and gets all that gold for himself."

"He's so selfish," Rose agreed with a giggle. "Trying to keep people safe and all that. Now we know the real reason he does it. The gold."

"For sure."

*Not exactly, ladies.*

We headed back into town for lunch and couldn't help but overhear that the princess had awoken, so after a quick bite we headed back to the castle to see for ourselves. The guards let us through at once, it seemed she had been asking about whoever saved her, and I dropped to one knee by her bed.

"Majesty," I greeted her. She still looked terrible, with limp hair, sunken face, and thin arms. But she was propped up with pillows and smiled as I was announced, her eyes were clear so it didn't seem like there would be any long lasting effects of her ordeal. The remains of her latest meal hadn't been cleared away yet, and it seemed she had an appetite so that was probably also a good sign. The healer was in the room with me, and Clarissa came too, but our two newest party members the healer made wait outside.

"So you're the hero that rescued me?" she asked, voice a bit hoarse. "Please, rise. Sit by my side."

"I had a hand in it," I admitted, not wanting to say I had exactly rescued her. I had secured her release, was more accurate. "Princess, please, if you can tell me, do you know *why* the Dragonlord put you where you were? It makes no sense and it's been bugging all of us since we found you."

She giggled and covered her mouth. "I annoyed him."

"I'm sorry, what?" I asked after a moment.

"I annoyed him," she repeated. "Off key singing, and annoying questions, and insentient babbling, and weeping, and completely unreasonable demands just all the

time. I was quite a brat, if I do say so myself.” She looked quite pleased as she made this announcement.

“And this was some kind of plan?”

“That’s right. I was hoping to be put somewhere outside his direct view. Make it easier to escape. Little did I know he would shove me into that cave. And then just leave me down there. I guess he figured I wasn’t all that valuable to him after all.”

“You must have made quite the impression on him,” I suggested.

“For sure. He gave up thoughts of actually marrying me by the second day, the second can you believe it? I was hoping for the first but I really hit my stride the second day, so it’s not too bad.”

“Yes, quite the achievement.” *She annoyed him so much he just threw her away? Interesting technique, but I suppose it was all she had.*

“It worked out in the end, if you found me, which I’m told you did. For that, I thank you. Tell me, how may I reward you, hero?”

*Ah, now we come to it. Finally!* “I desire but one thing, majesty. I wish the secret knowledge-”

“Of what’s under my skirt? You pervert!” she interrupted. “But you did save me, so I suppose any reasonable request...”

“Uh, no, majesty. The knowledge that has been passed through your line-”

“You want our secret family chili recipe?”

*How much of what she did was an act, I find myself wondering.* I pressed on. “The location of the token as made by Erdrick, proving you are his heir.”

“I’m not his heir,” she protested. “I come from a line of kings, not heroes!”

“That you do,” I agreed. “No, I wish the token for myself, but I am told you know where it is to be found.”

“Ah!” She smiled, realizing what I wanted. “You want to find it and claim his bloodline as your own.”

*She gets it!* “I do. I have been told I am related to him, but many people require more substantial proof before they will aid me.”

“Those jerks!”

“Agreed, highness.”

She seemed to consider. “The request is not without merit, I admit. And I can help to guide you to the token, that much is also true. I can’t point to it on a map, you understand, but I do know how far away from it someone is. That can help you locate it, for sure.”

“Then you will help me find it?” I asked, hope rising within me.

“Of course, if you need it for your quest, let it finally be found. Maybe then people will stop asking me about it, honestly, the thing has been such a pain in my behind. Why he left the coordinates with us and not the object itself... Anyway. Before I can give you any direct help though you must answer me one simple question.”

“Anything!”

“Do you love me?”

“Er...” I stared at her, but she seemed quite serious. “I’m not sure of the relevance...”

“It’s a simple yes or no. Do you love me?”



“Princess, this is our first meeting, do you not remember? We are strangers, I don’t even know your name, how can I claim to love you?”

“But you must. Do you love me?”

I looked over to Clarissa who looked as baffled as I felt, and turned back to the princess. “Do you mean in a general sense, like I love the kingdom and the royalty that rule over it?”

“No, I mean me. Personally. Do you love me?”

“I’ve only just met you. I admire your plan for escaping, of course. But I cannot honestly claim love for you, personal love, after so brief a meeting.”

“But you must. Do you love me?”

At this point I looked around the room for a lifeline and the woman looking after her came to my side. “Why don’t you get some rest, my dear?” she asked. “I’ll have some nice tarts sent up from the kitchens, would you like that?”

“But he has to love me!” she protested.

“I’m sure he does dear. We all do. Let’s let her get some rest now, maybe in a few days she’ll feel more like herself.”

“He has to say yes, don’t you see? It’s the only way! Do you love me? Say you do! Say that you love me!”

“It was an honor meeting you, majesty,” I told her, giving her a bow and filing out with the rest.

“But you must!” she called out as the door closed. “Do you love me?”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I looked at Clarissa, who was wide eyed. The other two had stayed in the hall and looked confused, and the healer just looked concerned.

“I’m sorry about that,” she told us. “Clearly there’s been some mental stress from all this that may take months to heal properly.”

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“Consider what she’s gone through,” the healer suggested. “Being taken from her family, the life she knew. Her mother, dead, possibly even killed right in front of her by the minions of the Dragonlord. No one came for her, she lost hope. The Dragonlord tossed her aside for some reason. Maybe she had some plan to annoy him, maybe she was just being herself, I don’t know. It’s possibly true that’s just something she told herself, over and over, after being abandoned. That it was all part of her plan, and not because she was undesirable. Clearly she wants someone to hold onto, the king as I understand it has never been all that affectionate with her. She wants to know she is loved, it’s understandable.”

“Should I just tell her yes?”

She shook her head. “Lying to her won’t help her situation any. You are strangers, she would pick up on that sooner or later, and then demand to know why you lied. I’m sorry. Whatever you needed to know from her may have to wait until she’s not obsessed with being loved and can think straight again.”

“Wait, what’s this?” Alita asked. “She’s holding something hostage until you tell her you’re in love with her or something? That’s crap!”

“Lita...” Rose tried to shush her, grabbing her arm and looking haunted.

“No, it’s not right and you know it. I should go in there and give her a piece of my mind-”

“Please, do not disturb my patient any further today,” the healer said with finality. “She is not well, and we are going to have to take it slowly so she can become well. Besides, you should remember your station, maid. Yes, I recognize you despite that ridiculous getup you’re in. Its is not for you to lecture the princess on anything, despite how you are dressed at the moment. Why not have the kitchens send up some tarts, that is your actual job, is it not?”

“Ridiculous-” she started to say, but the healer primly turned and went back into the room. “Whatever. It’s your call, hero, do what you want.”

“I’m sorry about whatever it was you were talking about, but you’ll just have to go without it for now, I suppose,” Rose said. “It isn’t that big a deal, right?”

“I suppose you’re right,” I told her sadly. *No fancy armor. Great. Now what am I supposed to do?*

## Chapter 18

### The hero gets a makeover

The four of us sat in a large room in the castle, clearly used by the king when he wanted to meet foreign dignitaries or whatnot. The chairs were large and plush, the table a fine wood polished to a mirror shine, and tapestries hung from the walls to cover the bare stone. We were fairly sure it wasn't going to be needed in the next hour, so Clarissa suggested we sit down and talk about our next move.

"So do you really need this armor?" Rose asked. I had told them everything, how the tool shop owner had been helping me and had offered me a full suit of armor if I could prove I was in the line of Erdrick.

"Yeah, we don't get any fancy armor," Alita complained. "Why should you?"

"Are you really planning on marching into the castle of the Dragonlord, fighting our way through the place, and battling him to the death?" I asked her.

"Uh, yes? What else are we training for if not that?" she answered, clearly insulted I would even ask. The others nodded.

"Knowing he's a dragon twice as big as Kethrinax? Not to mention he's also an accomplished wizard because of all the time he's been alive studying magic."

"Let's turn it around then," Alita suggested. "Are you planning on marching into his chamber alone? Wearing the scales of his subjects? What if you had a helmet made of the skull of one of the king's subjects? What would he do?"

"Order me killed, I guess?"

"Exactly. He would be enraged. You think some silly armor would protect you at that point? Given the size and magic as you've just pointed out."

"Well what do you suggest?" I asked shortly. "This," I banged on the armor I was wearing, "isn't going to save me. And unless one of you has seen the Light Armor in some dusty back room in this castle I'm going to assume it's long gone. Clearly it wasn't with the journal, so after hundreds of years it could be anywhere. Am I supposed to scour every corner of the world to find it? If it has held together this long anyway, which I doubt."

"I don't like that idea anyway," Rose told us quietly.

"What idea?" I asked, rubbing my head.

"Relying on some magical artifact from his time. I mean, can't we solve our own problems with what we know today? Why do we need some smelly old armor he wore?"

"Well said!" Alita told her, slamming the table with her palm. She smiled and looked away, mumbling thanks. "She's right," she said to us. "We have a problem, let's solve it with our own strength, our own magic, our own ideas. We can always have better armor made, okay maybe not magical armor like his was in the past but we know how to get money now, lots of it. We can have some made."

"It's true," Clarissa agreed. "We don't have to rush off this second. We've got time to get outfitted. Not only that we can discuss things with Kethrinax, maybe dragons have some weakness they don't like talking about, but that she'll tell us considering who we're facing."

"Lightning?" Rose asked.

"Hard to control that, but sure," she agreed. "We have some time, for now let's just raise our levels and keep practicing. Maybe talk to the tool shop owner, look at old books to see if dragons have been killed in the past and how they managed it."

"It sounds okay to me," I agreed. "But if you saw that armor, you would know why I wanted it so much. Even if I took it off before entering the Dragonlord's chamber, the protection it would offer making our way through the castle could be invaluable."

"So you just have to figure out how to find a small piece of metal instead of a large one," Alita told me. "At least the armor you couldn't hide under a rock."

"But at least we can guess it does still exist, the princess implied she did have some way of locating it. She wouldn't have if she knew it was gone."

"We could always have, you know, a fake made?" Rose suggested. "No one knows what it looks like, do they?"

I shook my head. "I wondered about that, after I first talked to the king and found out others had claimed the title. Asked myself why there were not a dozen fake tokens in the world already. But no, I won't be the one to start down that road. I won't do any of this quest dishonestly. I will either find the token, as is my destiny as an descendant of Loto, or somehow make do without." *And if I am not related to him, and it is not my destiny to save the world, so be it. But I will die trying with a pure heart before I stoop to trickery to get the armor.* "But even apart from the armor, the token may open other doors, get us more help. It's a symbol of hope more than anything. Nobody knows me, they can't trust me. But the token is part of a greater story."

"I don't completely disagree," Alita reluctantly admitted. "And I have to say, my estimation of you has gone up a little. You're sticking to your principles, despite your need for the token. I wonder if I would do the same..."

"Of course you would!" Rose insisted. Alita just looked troubled.

"What I don't understand is why make that information so vulnerable," Clarissa mused. "Telling only one person? And what if the line of kings didn't have daughters? Only sons? Or what if the queen died giving birth to her first daughter without passing it down? The token would be lost forever. You should never have information known to only one person ever, it's too easily lost. Write it down and hide it, is that so hard?"

"You say that sitting in a castle that, until recently, sported a locked door that prevented anyone from buying any keys to unlock doors. Redundancy is a four letter word here at Tantegel Castle."

The others laughed. "He has a point," Alita said.

"What if it wasn't in just one place?" I blurted, inspiration coming to me in a flash. "What if it is written down somewhere?"

"Wait, you don't think..." Clarissa began.

"I do," I told her, nodding. "I think I have an army of maids of my side, and as you can go anywhere in the castle without being questioned, you have your next mission. Search the quarters of the princess and the queen looking for any scrap of knowledge about the token. It must be written down. What if a queen forgot it? Or it's a series of numbers that could be easily mis-remembered? No, the more I think about it, the more I feel that somewhere in this castle is a clue. Loto wrote things down, his journal is evidence of that. I'm guessing he wrote this down too. Even some coded message would be more than we have now. You have to find it!"

“Not just us, hero, you’re going to help too,” Alita told me, a smile coming to her face I didn’t like the look of one bit.

I put my hands up. “I’m not a maid. I’m pretty sure if I’m caught snooping around, even as the person that brought the princess back, it wouldn’t go well for me. Peeking into the princess’s wardrobe? The king would throw me out, he wouldn’t care what I was looking for.”

“But what if you looked like one? Then you could be right by our side.”

“Er, what? I don’t like that glint in your-”

“Wait are you suggesting we...” Clarissa asked, with an expression on her face that might have been horror or excitement, it has hard to tell.

“Yes I am,” Alita told her, smiling broadly.

“Oh goody!” Rose said, clapping her hands together. “This is going to be fun!”

“Fun?” I echoed, horrified. “What are you talking about, fun? We don’t have time for this, besides I would never pass for a... For a...”

“Believe me, no one looks at maids twice,” Alita told me. “As long as you have the clothes and perhaps a wig, just keep your head down and it’ll be fine.”

“There is no way I am-”

And so seemingly only moments later, but possibly hours later, I found myself dressed as a maid. The three had taken an almost devilish delight in getting every single detail perfect. Every. Single. Detail. I protested, many times in fact, that in the time it was taking them to make me look like a maid they could have searched the rooms and been back by now. But they would hear none of it. My clothes came off, measurements were taken, you get the idea. The only real benefit I got out of it is they changed back into their maid clothes at the same time so I at least got to see more of them than I ever expected. (Alita browbeat the others into it, saying fair was fair after all) I would have protested more strongly, but the fact was I needed these ladies and if they wanted to have a bit of fun, who was I to deny them? *Even if it is at my expense. I am, after all, allowing them to risk their lives outside these walls. Maybe allowing is the wrong word, they can go where they like. And they have maid I mean made it clear they’re following me even into the heart of the Dragonlord’s castle. Though I of course plan to leave them behind should I attack the place, they don’t know that. They could die, and they must realize that at least on some level. Horribly, at the hands of the Dragonlord or his minions. This might be the last bit of fun they ever have. Can I really deny them that?* They went a bit overboard, in my opinion, finally gushing over how great I looked when they were done and having me twirl around and pose and such. Then came the moment of truth, stepping out into the hall and following them. They were chatting away as we headed through the halls of the castle like nothing was amiss. I had to admit they had a point, the other people wandering around didn’t seem to notice, and we easily reached the rooms of the princess and went inside.

The room was fit for royalty, at least in terms of size if not grandeur, as many shelves and displays stood empty. “Much of what should be here has been sold,” Clarissa told me sadly. “To satisfy the ever increasing demands of the Dragonlord for gold. The king called it a temporary loan, to be reversed once the kingdom had money

again so he could buy his stuff back, but who knows how many of the treasures of the castle will be returned when this is all over.”

“So we’ll make new treasures,” Alita told her. “Come on, start looking around!”

*Oh now there’s a big rush. I see how it is.*

We searched the rooms, it seemed the books hadn’t been sold as many of them were still on shelves. We left them for last, looking for loose bricks or other hiding places one might have put a few slips of paper showing where the token was. We searched her desk, and any papers we found in the drawers. We searched her closets and wardrobes, checking for false backs and boxes of trinkets collected while younger. We looked over, under, and into everything in the room, then finally turned to the books. Each of us took a stack of them, shaking them out for any loose paper and briefly looking them over to see if they were relevant. Many were just books most likely used in her studies, though some were storybooks. One book we found, which was under the bookshelf and shoved in the back caused Rose to blush furiously, exclaim “oh my!” and quickly put it back again before the others could grab it. But we did have one piece of good luck, as a slip of paper fell out of one book as Clarissa shook it. She looked it over and handed it to me, asking “What do you make of this?”

I looked it over. It seemed to be a short poem, and the book it came out of was not about poetry, making it fairly out of place. The poem read:

To bring forth  
the light that makes  
evil rue the **darkness** that they  
caused to ensue, once again must a hero  
make tremble the land as an aged  
one watches the hourglass  
sand.  
Two paths lay  
before the proof  
of the birth the first is a maze  
through the mountains’ great girth. The second  
is shorter but more full of woe as there  
you will find no crops that can grow.  
World is broken  
find my token.  
At the end  
of the world  
Loto

“Well that last part doesn’t even rhyme,” Alita complained. “But it is signed Loto, so…”

“Is this the clue we needed?” Clarissa asked. “And why is it laid out so funny?”

“It’s a poem,” Rose told her. “It’s as much a painting with words as a landscape is a painting with, uh, paint.”

“It’s supposed to look like that?”

"Many poems are enjoyed more by looking at them and not just hearing them read," she explained.

"Oh!" teased Alita. "Has *someone* been spending their hard earned money on books of poetry?"

"There's nothing wrong with it," she quietly protested. "Besides, that was before everything, you know..."

The ladies went silent. They did know. We all did. Alita took Rose in her arms. "I know," she said softly. "Those days will return, we'll make sure of it."

"Yes we will," she replied fiercely.

"Not until we figure this out," Clarissa told them. "Let's keep looking, just in case, but this is probably the best we're going to get."

And it was the best we got, having completed our search of the princess' rooms we moved on to the king's rooms. I got a bit more nervous at this but there were no guards here so the others just breezed right in. I wondered if that was wise, just letting anyone have free access to the king's chambers. On the one hand it freed up a few guards, and there were precious few of them left in the castle. But on the other that meant every night they would have to do a sweep of the room to make sure someone wasn't hiding in the wardrobe or something to knife the king in his sleep. *I mean he had some looking for wine, right? They could have been guarding his rooms instead.* But as I looked around it seemed to be the same story here, most possessions were gone leaving the place rather stark. There were few places a person could hide, so the verification the king was alone probably didn't take long. We searched the place as we had done before, but came up empty.

"We better be about our duties," Rose told them, passing a window and noting the sun was getting low. "We can puzzle out the meaning of the poem tomorrow, maybe."

"Do you..." and here I paused thinking to myself *what are you doing man? It's over, why would you say things like "want some help?" You said it. Why? Why did you say this crazy thing? Brain, what is happening up there?*

The three stared at me. Apparently this wasn't something they had expected either.

"Help?" Clarissa asked.

"I mean, it's just..." *Why did I offer to help them? This is crazy!* "You spent all that time making me look like this..." *And you can take it off now. Isn't that what you wanted?* "It would be a shame to not..." *Not what, you fool? You idiot! Stop talking!* "get the full experience." *You didn't stop as I requested! What is wrong with you?*

"You want to experience being a maid?" Alita asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"I want to help," I explained, wondering if that was indeed the only reason. "It doesn't matter if it's saving the world or just making your jobs a little easier. There is work to be done. Let me help you do it. What am I going to be doing otherwise? Besides it would be weird seeing you dusting or whatever, or Clarissa serving me after being given an honorary maid position, if I'm just sitting around."

"He likes it!" she decided, breaking into a large grin. "Being a maid! It's the only reason! He wants to walk around the castle like this some more!"

"I don't know, I think he really does just want to help," Rose told her. "The dress is largely irrelevant at this point. He probably doesn't even think about it anymore, like us the first time we wore the armor. After a while it just became normal."

"No one looked at him twice, just like we said," Clarissa agreed. "Maybe he wants to see how long he can keep up the ruse."

"I just want to help!" I protested. "Do you want me to or not?"

Alita and Rose looked at other other, and Alita shoved Clarissa so she stumbled into my arms. She was laughing. "Go on you two. Do what she does and you'll be fine. Have fun!"

The other two linked arms and headed away down the corridor, giggling and whispering. I helped Clarissa straighten up.

"Well she didn't have to shove me," she grumbled. "But thanks for catching me. You really want to do this?"

"If I can help, it's better than me sitting around in my room. Getting too late to go back to see Kethrinax. She'll wonder what happened to us, we were only supposed to be gone for lunch."

"Okay, Miss Hero, let's make you into the best maid you can possibly be!"

Several hours later we finally got a chance to eat, after clearing away the king's dishes and cleaning up after everyone that ate in the main room. I followed Clarissa's lead as best I could, and it wasn't hard though I didn't exactly know all the maid etiquette I should have. She coached me a bit before the meal started and reminded me not to speak, or I would give it away at once. I got through it, and she took me through her other duties for the evening. Lighting fires, getting out clean linens, picking up clothes to be taken to the laundry, that sort of thing. I mostly carried things, she would take them into the rooms if there was someone there. It was dark by the time she took me by the hand and said we were done, leading me back to her room.

"And you practice weapons on top of all that?" I asked her. "How?"

"It hasn't been easy," she admitted, lighting her lamp and turning to face me. "But like you saw, anyone in a maid outfit is mostly ignored, unless they do something to call attention to themselves. We cover for each other, giving a few people a chance to practice but then taking extra work on the next day so we can trade off. It's been slow, but what else could we do?"

"I understand," I told her. "I don't think they understand what you go through. I didn't."

She reached up and took off my kitty ears. Yes, I had worn them, the king's orders were the king's orders, after all. "Glad you do now. Let's get you out of that outfit, unless you intend to sleep in it?"

"Uh, no, best take it off," I agreed.

"Turn around so I can get your buttons."

We got it off, and she handed me my clothes so I started to get dressed again. *I guess I'm not staying the night. Wait, why did I think that? Just because you let her dress you up, did you think she would bring you to her bed that very day? Is that the reason you offered to help? Don't be absurd.*

"Thanks for putting up with us today," she told me as I pulled my shirt on. "I hope it wasn't too bad for you."



“I’m not saying I would want to wear that every day,” I told her. “But it was fine. I got to blend in for the search, and we did find what we were looking for, I hope. And you enjoyed it, as did the others. Don’t say you didn’t.” *That made it a little worth it. I guess.*

“Oh no,” she replied with mock seriousness. “Watching you squirm at the beginning was simply delightful. I wouldn’t have traded it. Still, when someone tells your story I’m sure they’ll spend a lot of time on the day you disguised yourself as a maid to get the clue that led to the token.”

“Who is going to tell anyone? Not you, I hope!”

“Oh?” she asked innocently. “You’re not going to put the full details into your own journal, to be found hundreds of years from now by the next hero?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“What a pity,” she said sadly, but she was trying to hide a smile. “At least think about it, okay? I think it could be a valuable lesson for them.” She put a finger to her chin. “Gee, I hope Alita doesn’t go spreading it around. She’s a terrible gossip you know.”

“Do you think she would?” I asked, worried.

“No, I’m sure it’s fine,” she decided. “See you tomorrow.” She opened the door for me.

“Have a good night, Clarissa,” I told her, stepping back into the hall.

“Bye!”

Chapter 19  
The hero works with the maids to decode the poem

The next day the girls had to cover for other maids who wanted their time to practice so I went alone to see Kethrinax and apologize for the day before.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told me, waving a claw in the air. Which given how dangerous they were could be taken two ways, I supposed. “Dragons are fairly laid back, given how long we live. You humans rush, rush, rush all the time, which is fine I’m not saying you should live like we do. You can’t. A dragon is still considered young after having lived a whole human lifetime, after all. I figured something came up and you would be back. Or you got jumped by the Dragonlord’s minions and you were dead. I would have followed up in a week or so, maybe.”

*I suppose I can’t say I didn’t expect something like that. After all, she felt the princess would be fine despite being alone for weeks with no food or water. She didn’t leave her post and go asking what to do, she just took it in stride. What’s a few weeks or even months to a dragon?* “Something did happen, a few things actually. The princess woke up and seems... fine?”

“Is that a human thing? You don’t sound convinced.”

“She woke up, that’s for sure. Started babbling about me needing to love her when I asked about Erdick’s token. The healer thinks something might be wrong in her mind, and we need to give her time to come back to herself.”

“Hopefully they know what they’re talking about.”

“I hope so too. With her talking nonsense we needed another clue to where the token was, and made a search of her rooms. It took longer than I expected, for reasons I won’t get into, but we did find a poem. Here, you want to see it?” I held it out.

“I’ll take a look,” she told me, carefully taking it in her claws. She held it up to an eye, squinting at it. “Ugh, Draconic is so much easier to read. Of course we write bigger so there’s that.”

“Draconic?”

“What?” She looked back down at me. “Oh, you think *your* language is our native language too? Don’t be absurd. We have our own, I’m speaking your language for your convenience.”

“Oh right, that word you taught me before. Nowkis. So it isn’t just different words than we have, you have a whole different language? And the name of it is Draconic?” *The tool shop owner will be miffed he missed that. Oh, don’t forget to ask her to come closer to town for him.*

She snorted. “Still remember that, huh? Figures.” She went back to squinting at the poem.

“What’s it sound like?”

“One second, I’m trying to- the last line doesn’t even rhyme, ugh, dragon poetry is so much better than this.” She handed it back.

*Of course it is.* “Did you get anything out of it?”

“I would suggest checking some maps, you have those right?”

“We have maps, of course we have maps!”

“Given you can’t fly, maybe a dragon made map would be better, but no matter. Look for a mountainous region that leads to a swamp.”

"A place no crops would grow, yes, that makes sense," I agreed. "I'll take a look, thanks."

"Of course. Now, as to my language." She paused, thinking. "How about a song?" She took a deep breath and drew herself up.

*Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin  
Naal ok zin los vahriin  
Wah dein vokul mahfaeraak ahst vaal  
Ahrk fin norok paal graan  
Fod nust hon zindro zaan  
Dovahkiin, fah hin kogaan mu draal*

"Interesting, thank you. What does it mean?"

She sighed, looking up into the sky. "Not much, since the Dragonlord took over. Basically that those born of dragons, i.e. we dragons swear upon our honor to fight evil. That our foes no matter how strong will tremble when they hear us roar, that dragons will answer the prayers of those that need it. It hasn't been sung in a long while..."

"You'll sing it again, and mean it. All dragons, I mean. This dragon will fall one way or the other."

She looked down at me. "You really think so?"

"I wouldn't have come this far if I didn't."

She gave a short laugh. "I guess that's true. Enough talk, if you want to win the love of the princess for real you have a lot more training to do! Attack!"

*I really don't though.*

After I stopped for lunch I told Kethrinax I would probably do more level raising in the afternoon, but I would stop back before sundown if I could.

"Whatever," she said. "I have plenty of naps to catch up on if you're not around."

*What are you, a cat?* I headed back to the castle to get some lunch and headed to the common room where my new friends were working. *Shoot, I forgot to ask her, didn't I? Well, when I go back then.* They greeted me but had someone else serve as I expected. It would have been quite awkward otherwise. However, Rose shyly made her way over to me and handed me a rolled up parchment.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi yourself. What's this?"

"It's a map I found when I was cleaning. I've been thinking about that poem. I think I have an idea where to find the token."

"That's great!" I exclaimed, popping up out of my seat.

Rose gave a squeak and stepped back.

"Oh, sorry, didn't mean to startle you." *Great, nice job, hero.* I sat back down again. "I was just excited. I mean this is great news isn't it?"

"If I'm right. I don't know that I am. Um. You're not going to like it."

"Why is that?"

She shook her head. "I can't really talk now. The three of us will come to your room when we're done for the night okay?"

“Fine, that’s fine. I’ll keep this safe until then.” I put it away, not really thinking where or how. It was a huge, rolled up parchment, I couldn’t have put it in my pocket but I knew it was “on me” and I could get it out at any time. “Thanks.”

“Sure,” she told me with a little wave. “See you later.”

I headed up to my room and got the map out before I left, looking it over. There did seem to be a lot more towns on it than I recalled seeing on my trip out to Rimuldar to buy keys. *Wonder if that guy ever did find his girlfriend...* I didn’t see any good spots, though there were plenty of mountain passes and areas marked with “dangerous swamp” the token could have been left in. I rolled it up and headed out to bloody my sword on the minions of the Dragonlord.

That evening I was pacing in my room wondering where the three were when finally I heard a knock. I threw the door open and there were my friendly maids, smiling on the other side. At least, Rose and Alita were. Clarissa just looked upset. “Come in,” I told them, throwing it open wide. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Sorry for taking so long,” Clarissa told me as they stepped inside. “The king is still obsessed with finding his so called wine cellar and we maids had to start looking too.”

“Personally I think this whole basement of the castle thing was made up,” Alita said, plopping down on the bed. She yawned. “I’ve never seen it. Is this going to take long, I really want to get some sleep.”

“It shouldn’t take long,” Rose assured us quietly.

“And he’s been suggesting we should make some cat tails, to go with our cat ears. Can you believe that?” She tore the cat ears off her head and threw them down. “Tails? Don’t we have more important things to be doing?”

“Do you?” I asked. She glared at me. “I’m serious though, have you told him about the ‘warrior maid’ effort you’re going through? If he doesn’t know, how can you expect him to respect your time? He may think you’re just sitting around- How would they even attach?” I moved this way and that, trying to look behind her.

She crushed down her skirt in the back with her hands. “Don’t even think about it, hero. And no, we thought, well...”

“He might order us to stop,” Alita told me. “And I suppose it is a slight risk to the kingdom, if the Dragonlord found out. We couldn’t take the chance. This whole cat thing is really odd.” She kicked off a shoe and then the other, wiggling her toes. “I thought maybe he would get better now that his daughter is awake but it seems he’s just getting worse.”

“Any improvement on that front?” I asked.

“She hasn’t demanded that anyone else love her,” Rose reported. She did give a little smile and a wink. “I guess that’s just for heroes like yourself.”

“But she is still okay?”

“She’s not up and around,” Clarissa clarified. “She’ll be in bed recovering for some time, and then have to take it slow to build up her body again. Don’t worry, there’s no chance she’ll sneak into your rooms at night,” she added with a smirk.

“That was the furthest thing from my mind,” I assured her. *Would that even happen? And what would I do if she did?*

“So bring out the map, let’s see what you found,” Alita told her.

“Okay.” She unrolled the map and set some weights at the corners to keep it rolling back up. “Can I see the poem again?”

“Sure.” I handed it to her and she looked it over again.

“Come and look at this.” We all crowded around the table, and I turned the lamp up a little. “I think every part of this poem is a clue,” she began. “Let’s start at the top. Look at the shape. You remarked on that, Clarissa.” She turned the poem up. “Look at the word sand, and it goes out of its way to mention an hourglass. And the poem-”

“Looks like an hourglass,” Alita finished. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Um, I’m not done,” she said.

“Let her finish, Alita,” Clarissa chided.

“Sorry, Rose. Go ahead.”

“It’s okay. Then there’s the word darkness, which is written bolder than the other words. I think that means something too. Then there’s the line about the two paths.”

“Kethrinax said it probably means a swamp,” I told them. “Where no crops grow.”

She nodded. “I think so too. Look here, far to the south. There’s a mountain path this way that would lead to this part of the swamp here, but if you went this way it would be shorter but miles more swamp as you went east. But this location matches up in so many ways.”

“How so?” Clarissa asked, looking back and forth between them.

“Look at the shape of the swamp, and the shape of the poem. Then that last line, you know the one that doesn’t even rhyme? What if the ‘end of the world’ doesn’t refer to an event like the Dragonlord taking over, but a location? The end of the world, or as far south as you can go? Put the poem over the swamp,” she turned it and set the paper against the map. “I think the word ‘darkness’ is the location of the token.”

“It does fit,” Alita breathed. “The shape of the poem, the swamp gets really narrow here like the center of an hourglass. The two paths, it being the end of the world. The word ‘darkness’ is right in the center on the eastern most part of the swamp, making it the hardest to get to. Makes sense to put it there. Wow, Rose, this is amazing! I think you cracked it.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that amazing.”

“Yes it is, come on! You’re the best.”

“I just like poetry that’s all. And I happened to find this map.”

“Maybe you’re the descendant of Erdrick, in that case. Any of us could be really.”

“That would be nice.”

Everyone looked to me.

“What? You can have it. All it’s gotten me is a lot of danger.”

“And some new friends?” Clarissa asked.

“That too, of course. Rose, good work with this. The only real problem I see now is... The only two problems I see now are... Among the problems I now see are; how to verify it without going all the way down there, how to survive the swamp once we get there, how to get there without it taking half a year, and what to do if we have it wrong.”

“It is a long ways away,” Alita agreed. “It’s as far south as you can go, but to be fair it is on the same continent.”

“Look at what’s in the way,” Clarissa told us, tracing a path with her finger. “We would have to go all the way to the west to avoid these mountains here, across this

bridge, follow the west coast, cross this bridge, cross the southern desert, then make the choice to take the mountain path to the north east or the swamp path to the south east. It's crazy far away, mostly because we can't go directly there. We have to go around all this stuff!"

"Or we could take a boat," I suggested. "I know they still exist, after all. Then we just have to sail around Dragonlord island, head south a bit, and we're there."

"Too bad the world isn't round," Alita grumbled. "If we could hire a ship to sail around here and go north," she indicated sailing around the landmass to the east, "we could meet them here and just go north a little bit more. That would save us even more time and we could still practice as the ship sailed."

"You might as well wish you could fly!" Clarissa said with a laugh. "A round world, you sure do have an imagination!"

"Why couldn't we fly?" I asked. "What ever happened to that bird Loto hatched? In the journal he never said it was killed or anything. Shouldn't it still be around somewhere?"

"That was hundreds of years ago!"

"Didn't he say it was a phoenix? They're supposed to live forever, right? Be reborn again and again?"

"I guess..."

"What about our pledge to use our own ingenuity and not rely on the artifacts of the past? Have you all forgotten? It was just yesterday that brave, brave Rose here reminded us of our honor and our own worth." Alita asked us. "We swore an oath!"

"I don't think we did though," Rose reminded her. "It was just a suggestion."

"Don't recall any oath," Clarissa agreed. "But I do agree. We should spend time searching for a solution based on what we have and know today instead of looking for some mystical bird that may no longer be alive."

"Okay then, what do we know, today, or have, that would allow us to go there more quickly?"

"Could we manipulate the magic of the Wyvern's wings?" asked Alita. "They can magically take you places, and I've seen them for sale in the tool shop. 70 gold, right? That's not so bad."

"They can bring you back to the place you left from," Rose told her. "It's no good. They would just bring us back here. I do agree it's odd they work like that though."

"So it would cut our journey in half, that's not nothing."

"True."

"What about the journal? There were some crazy ideas in there, right?" Clarissa asked.

"Journal?" the other two asked.

"Loto's journal. I found it a few days ago. It does have some crazy ideas in it, but the only one I can see helping us now is the floating basket idea. But how it would help us I don't know."

"Don't the stories say that one of Loto's friends had a magical basket he could fly around with?" Alita asked. "But we don't know how to make those, do we?"

I shook my head. "You're thinking of the right thing, and that's maybe where he got the idea, but Loto wanted to do it without magic. He observed that leaves tossed over a fire rose into the air. He wondered if you couldn't capture that hot air and use it to float."

"Float? In the air?"

"That's the idea."

"But how would you direct it? You would just fly upwards!" Rose protested.

"He imagined sails, just like a sailing ship. Of course they can use oars if the wind dies down and still get somewhere. We would be stuck."

"How much air would we need?" Clarissa asked. "The more wood we had to burn the heavier the basket would be. That's no good."

"As you can see," I told the others, "the design had a lot of flaws."

"Let's see it," Alita demanded, so I got out the journal and showed her. She looked it over and nodded, rubbing her chin. "Okay, okay, there are some challenges I admit. Let's go into town tomorrow and see what we can do. I want to talk to the tool shop owner and the blacksmith. The seamstress as well, we would need a lot of fabric to catch enough hot air for this all to work."

"You don't think it could actually work though, do you?" Clarissa asked.

"We'll see," she answered mysteriously. She sat down to pull her shoes on again and stretched. "I'll see you all in the morning!"

After they left I stood staring at the diagrams and notes Loto had made about the floating basket. *What did she see that I'm not seeing? Would such a device really be able to get off the ground? The resources it would require, such as the fabric to make the upper part, and the wood to make the basket itself, would be hard to come by. But to actually make it work? The question is does floating through the air on the wind really cut our travel time by that much? I mean factoring in the time to make the darn thing, just like dressing me up before, I would have to say no. We may be able to go more directly, yes, but can't I walk faster than the wind? Maybe we should just walk, though the thought of all the monsters that are between us and the southern part of the continent... I shudder to think. But the gold. Think of the gold!*

I got undressed for bed, wondering what Alita had in mind, and wondered if all the effort for the token was worth it. *But at least this is an honest goal. And if the basket works other people can use it. Think of it, baskets floating between towns! We could use them to create better maps, even help guide ships to shore as a light from a basket could probably be seen from further away than one on land. They may have all sorts of uses...*

## Chapter 20

### The hero is full of hot air

“So let me get this straight,” the tool shop owner said to us. The maids and I, dressed for combat of course, had headed to town early that morning and several of the townspeople had been gathered. The blacksmith, the seamstress, the basket maker, along with their apprentices all stood around outside the shop. “You want to make a huge bubble out of fabric, that has an opening in the bottom. Through that opening you want to shoot hot air, in the hope the fabric will fill up with hot air and rise to support a basket. To this end you want a simple magical item made that has one purpose; get super hot. Place it at the bottom of the hole and you should have an unlimited supply of hot air.”

“Possibly put into some sort of stove,” she agreed with a nod of her head. “I want it to be safe, and to direct the air upwards into the fabric above it. So it has to be hot enough to make lots of hot air, but not hot enough to melt through the metal thing it’s inside. Hopefully the blacksmith can make an iron stove or container of some sort that would serve.”

He nodded, muttering that was probably doable.

“Having filled the bag with hot air,” the tool shop owner went on, “it would rise off the ground, allowing you to travel south in a basket you hang beneath the bag more quickly than walking. Some kind of air boat, in the end.”

“That’s right. What do you think?”

He considered. “I suppose a very hot rock could be made with magic. Yes, a big ‘ol rock that just got as hot as it could.”

“A design with vents all around the bottom could draw cold air unto the stove unit,” the blacksmith mused, stroking his beard. “Then just a pipe stuck into the hole so the hot air didn’t escape. Kept clear it would stay cool enough I reckon.”

“But the cloth required!” protested the seamstress. “I don’t think you could sew together all the clothes of all the people in town to get a big enough bag!”

“Cloth can be made though,” Alita pointed out. “I mean someone makes it. Just make more of it.”

“Sure, but why would we do that?” the basket maker asked. “You really think this crazy thing is going to work?”

“You would do it because we would pay you to do it,” she told her acidly. “And leave it working, or not, to us.”

“Well why didn’t you say so?” she asked, brightening considerably. “If you’re paying I’ll make you whatever size basket you want!”

“That’s more like it,” she replied with a wink to me.

*Guess I’m footing the bill for all this. Wait, what does that even mean? What do feet have to do with bills? Ducks have bills, does that relate in some way?*

“We’ll have to work fairly closely together,” the seamstress decided. “Work out some kind plan so it all works together. We’ll need rope, lots of it, to tie the basket together. Thread, cloth, glue maybe? To be big enough to hold...”

“Four people,” Clarissa told her.

“That’s a big basket,” the basket maker told her. “Going to take some time.”



“Making that much fabric and sewing it together will be weeks,” the seamstress warned us.

“So will making this magical rock,” the tool shop owner told us. “It won’t be cheap either.”

“Gold we can get,” I told them. “Just keep track of it and we’ll see you are all paid. Time isn’t a factor, at least for now. Work together and do it right, we may only get one shot at this.” *Huh, seems I’ve said that before about something else.*

“Because you don’t want to crash and die?” the blacksmith asked.

“Exactly,” I told him. *But the real reason is that the Dragonlord is a winged dragon. He sees this thing floating around and may just decide to pay us all a little visit.*

The townsfolk adjured to the town hall, a big enough space to start laying out plans for the floating basket. After I emptied my coin purse for them, of course, as did the other maids. That at least showed we were serious about the project and we promised them as much gold as they asked for later.

*After all, if it really is going to take weeks I’ll have plenty of time to raise my ‘level’ and earn gold.*

“There’s still a problem,” Rose quietly spoke up. “How do we make it go where we want?”

“Leave that part to me,” I told them. “Come on, I think I have an answer to that problem.”

We headed into the forest where Kethrinax was, and she greeted us.

“You’re up early,” she told us. “Want to get an early start on practicing?”

“Actually,” I said, “I wanted to run something by you. You’re pretty strong, right?”

“I should say so. Why?”

“And you scaled those mountains pretty well, and swam really well, you can basically go anywhere right?”

“Yes...” she answered suspiciously. “I suppose so.”

“How would you feel about helping us out with a little project? Heck, I suppose we could pay you too, if they leave us any coin.”

“You have my attention.”

I laughed. “I thought that might help capture your interest. What I want you to do is this...” I explained the whole floating basket plan, and came to the part she could play. “We hook you up to a harness. Then you just drag us along behind you, in a straight line south to where we think the token is.”

“You really have a high estimation of my strength,” she exclaimed. “I don’t think any one dragon could do that!”

“Oh.” I was disappointed. *Is this going to work at all then? Will we have to come up with some sort of sail?*

“What about some of your kin?” Rose asked. “Working together you could do it, right?”

“Maybe with two more,” she decided. “But finding two dragons willing to go against the Dragonlord is going to be tricky.”

“So don’t tell them. They don’t need to know why we’re going there. We’re just hiring them for the first floating basket test. We’ll have to be careful how we talk when they’re around but they don’t need to know I plan to kill the Dragonlord. The one doesn’t

even have anything to do with the other, if you think about it. And who doesn't wish they could kill the Dragonlord? You said even dragons aren't exactly friends with him, so if we say we plan to do it, that's still a far cry from being able to. They would all just laugh at us, just like you did."

"I suppose if you wanted to see just how far it could be pulled," she mused, staring off into space. "How much gold are we talking about here?"

"I don't know what the townspeople will charge us," I admitted. "Or how long it will take to take so I know how much I'll have in that time. Basically I'm just going to spend my time until it's ready fighting monsters and raising money which will probably take the next several weeks. Hopefully that should cover any expenses." *Even outrageous ones.*

"The maids will be with you," Alita told me. "Since we've told them about raising 'levels' the other maids have been itching to try it out too. They want magic of their own, and I can't blame them. We'll all pool the gold we get, it should be plenty even if they're unreasonable about it."

"But your duties in the castle!" I protested. "The king!"

"Screw the king," Rose blurted. "This is more important!"

The other two stared at her, and she blushed deeply and looked like she wanted to hide somewhere.

"Wow, Rose, that was... Wow. You said it," Alita told her, looking at her in awe. "Screw the king is right. He can pick up his own dirty laundry from now on. Doesn't he know there's a war on? We'll head back, tell the maids to drop everything, armor up, and get out here. We'll make way more as monster hunters than we did as maids in any case, even holding back some gold every day as a 'salary' to make up for our not working at the castle anymore. We'll need rooms in town but we'll manage."

"Won't you get in trouble with the king?" I asked. *And how is this going to be pinned on me? Will I be welcome if I was the reason all the maids left? I suppose he wouldn't be able to prove that, and they made their own decisions. I didn't force them into doing anything.*

"What's he going to do, send his guards after us?" Clarissa said with a laugh. "We outnumber them two to one at this point. And by the time he realizes what's happened we'll be several 'levels' above them. They won't be able to intimidate us into coming back or punishing us."

"We're at will employees anyway," Rose told me. "The king can fire us, or we can leave at any time, for any reason. It's not so great usually, because that threat of losing our jobs is always hanging over us. Yet another wonderful rule by our wise and loyal ruler. He probably thought we could never find anything else and so wouldn't do anything to risk our position. Going to work against him this time though. I mean, the *decent* thing to do on our end would be to give a few weeks notice so new maids could be brought in. But this is more important," she reiterated. "And being a maid doesn't require all that much special training. You just do what needs to be done inside the castle. He'll find more. We need the gold for the floating basket and there's only one way to get it now. *He's* not going to finance the effort, if the castle's coffers even contain anything at this point. There have been rumors of 'hard times to come' which we all took to mean 'we're not getting paid pretty soon because of gold shortages.' Believe me, this works out well for everyone."

“Rose is right,” Clarissa told us. “The people in the castle *like* having maids around to do stuff, but they don’t *need* them. Not when we could be doing so much more. Besides, maybe he’ll be relieved to a certain extent he doesn’t have to pay us anymore.”

“And let him live without us for a time,” Alita put in. “Maybe he’ll realize how valuable we are and the next maids can be paid more as he sees exactly what doesn’t get done with us gone. He’ll realize he needs to pay us a good wage or we’ll just find something else that does.”

*Would he?* I thought. *I don’t know that it works like that.* “But we only need the basket to get the token. I mean it’s too late now, we told them to start working on it, but the token just gets me the armor. To involve the whole town in something that just benefits me-”

Clarissa shook her head. “No, you’re wrong about that.”

“Wha?”

“Don’t you see? To make this all work the townspeople will need to all work together. They’ll have a common goal for once, and something exciting and new to occupy them. Oh, sure, most won’t believe it’ll ever leave the ground but in the back of their minds they’re going to be thinking ‘but what if it does?’ This isn’t about you, or the token. It’s about them. Getting them excited about something again. They’ve been without hope for so long, worried about the Dragonlord and what he might do next, they’ve just given up. Seeing this basket actually float into the sky? Knowing they all had a hand in making that happen? Their spirits will be lifted just as much as the basket will be.”

“And what if we did find the token using the basket?” Alita asked. “Imaging floating back over the town, and holding it up for all to see. They’ll know the prophecy is finally coming to pass. That you are the hero that will defeat the Dragonlord. And again, they all had a hand in making it come to pass. Won’t they start to wonder, hey, what else could we accomplish if we worked together?”

*If they do, it’ll be the most dangerous thought ever in history, unless I miss my guess.* “They might,” I admitted.

“So let them have this. A big, beautiful symbol of their unity and cooperation.”

*That will hopefully not be so big as to attract the wrong kind of attention and go down in flames at the claws of the Dragonlord.* “Can you find some?” I asked, turning back to Kethrinax. “Given a few weeks?”

“I know some likely places,” she admitted. “We dragons spend a lot of time just guarding our hoards, maybe that’s why things have gotten as bad as they have. If we had been more active, maybe the Dragonlord wouldn’t have arisen as he did. Still, the only thing I can do now is my part. I’ll go look. Check back here once a day or so in two weeks, and I’ll see who I’ve come up with.”

“Thank you.”

“He’s our problem too,” she admitted. “Go on, you’ve got gold to recover. I’ll have to promise them a lot, so get to it.”

“Good luck.”

*So much for an interview, I kept forgetting the tool shop owner wanted one, and now she’s leaving. But hey, now I can offer him an interview with several dragons not just one. That will make up for it, right?*

The next few weeks passed quickly. The maids, at least the younger ones that could fight, all left the castle that very day. Working in groups of four to make sure they didn't get into any trouble they couldn't handle they slowly worked their way outwards just as I had. The gold they earned got them better equipment though most went into the general fund to raise the basket. When they got magic and felt they could handle it they broke into groups of just two, doubling their potential earnings. As before I was slightly worried monsters would get smart and start staying away but every morning there were just as many of them as there had been the day before. I was staying in town, not having returned to the castle since the maid exodus, which had nothing to do with me not wanting to run into the princess and everything to do with just being too busy. That's what I told myself, anyway. I didn't know what kind of reception I would get, if I would still be welcome, given the king must by now know what happened to all his maids. They were all "working" for me now, or at least in service to the world directly as I wasn't exactly paying them. They were earning their gold the hard way. Clarissa for one was happier than she had ever been, mostly because she didn't have to wear cat ears anymore.

For my part I headed between the nearest towns carrying supplies and raising my own 'levels.' I learned several new spells including one that would return me to the place I had left from, so I didn't have to buy Wyvern's wings and could more quickly go to get needed supplies for the floating basket and return with them. At that point I knew seven spells, and within the week knew an eighth, the worthless spell of Repel. It would keep monsters away, guess how, so not only did I hate using it for that reason but I *wanted* monsters to attack me. So that one I hardly ever used.

After three weeks I found Kethrinax had returned, with two dragons in tow. Both were male, though I couldn't tell just by looking at them despite them being bigger. They could just be older, after all. She introduced them as Tompkoner, the red dragon, and Fredelistorn the blue.

"Greetings," I told them respectfully. "Thank you both for coming. This could be an exciting time for both our kinds, if this project works out."

"Or it could be a terrific disaster," Tompkoner pointed out. "You're serious about this floating basket idea?"

"We are," I assured them. "Construction is going well and the principal is sound." *The townspeople did some tests with a scale model, not wanting to waste a lot of resources on this despite our promise of payment. Putting a candle inside a lightweight frame of paper eventually made it rise into the air, so we're all hopeful it will work at a larger scale as well.*

"Disaster would be good for a laugh," Fredelistorn agreed. "And this isn't some kind of trick?"

"Would I trick you?" Kethrinax asked, a bit exasperated.

*And would she admit it straight out if it was?*

"To get my treasure? Yeah, maybe."

"I don't even know where it is," she told him. "If you died, it would remain undisturbed forever."

*Hey, when this is over, maybe have the tool shop owner research a spell to find treasure hoards of dragons that have been dead a long time. There must be some,*

*right? Enough to make the effort of discovering such a spell, if that's even how it works, feasible. Actually how does that work? How do people that don't absorb magical creature's life force like we do come up with new spells? Have to ask him about that.*

"It better," he growled.

"That aside," Tompkoner said, looking at me. "How much are we getting paid for this, anyway? Kethrinax here was quite vague."

"I suppose whatever you think is fair?" I offered hesitantly. "We're paying a lot for the supplies to make the thing, but we've been keeping some back for you three." I untied my pouch and dumped it out, no longer surprised it seemed to contain far more gold than it should have. It made a small pile there in the grass, and all three dragons looked about ready to pounce on it, or me, or the others in an attempt to secure it for themselves. "We'll have more, the basket will take at least another two weeks, and we're all strong enough to range fairly far from the castle. Stronger monsters require more gold, so that helps. We'll also provide for your meals while we're here, I talked it over with the farmers in the area. I didn't know when you would be back but now that I know you're here I'll have some cows brought."

"Ummmmmm, cow," all three went.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, I agree. Is that satisfactory? Also keeping in mind if this does all work, as I hope, many people may express an interest in such a mode of travel. You'll be in a good position to start your own service doing this and charge what you want. At least for a while, until other dragons see they can make money doing the same and undercut your cost, forcing prices down."

"Reasonable. I assume we're talking about a pile that big for each of us?"

Tompkoner clarified.

"It may take some time, so that's possible. We are going as far as we can to the south, so I do what you to feel your time is being compensated fairly."

"Then I'm agreed."

"As am I," Fredelistorn agreed.

"You know I am," Kethrinax said in a resigned tone. "Glad that's settled. Make yourselves at home, boys, we'll be here until they call for us."

"Townspople won't get nervous we're here, will they?" Fredelistorn asked. "I don't want there to be any misunderstandings."

"They've been told you're here," I assured them. "They're fine with it." *Sort of. I mean it's not like they could do anything about it. But I told them dragons would be helping, and they agreed no other creature could do what we need. Mainly drag the basket where it needs to go. A hundred flying creatures was suggested, but how would we get them all to fly in the same direction? Only dragons are smart enough and strong enough to do this. So they at least won't try and attack them, or panic if one happens to get near the town.*

"Good enough for me."

And so the next two weeks passed as well, and the floating basket came together. Of course it was just laying there at the moment, and we were trying to figure out how to start filling it. The townspeople had created a sort of arrow shape, and put sails on it to help the dragons out, so it wasn't just a bubble. The basket was elongated as well, and would almost comfortably fit the four of us, the stove, and some supplies. Almost. It was

going to be a tight fit, but somehow I didn't mind. The townsfolk were nervously glancing at the dragons, who were there in their harnesses, waiting for the bag to be inflated so they could get into position. (Impatiently waiting, they said the smell was terrible but as long as were on our way soon they could stand it) The basket had been made with solid attachment points they hoped would hold up, but we would have to take it slow at the beginning to make sure. Knotted into them were the ropes that would dangle down and attach to the dragons, who would walk side by side and pull us along. To say I was nervous was a bit of an understatement, as so many things could go wrong.

*At least the magical heat source worked out. Others have been expressing interest in such a thing to heat their homes in the winter. One wonders why they haven't already made such a thing. One hot rock, even an expensive one, would be cheaper than all the wood they must burn in a year to keep their houses warm. And in warmer months they could use it in their stoves for cooking, or to heat bath water, or iron clothes, any number of uses. I think they'll be a popular item this town exports fairly soon.*

"Why not just hold it open?" Fredelistorn suggested. "We are fire breathing dragons, after all."

"Agreed," Tompkoner said. "Held open wide enough it shouldn't be singed, and it should start filling up with hot air if we all shoot some fire into it."

"You won't roast any of us holding it?" asked one person in the crowd.

"Excuse me!" Fredelistorn exclaimed, sounding hurt. "I am a dragon. Flame precision is a point of pride for us. Why once I cooked an apple right on the tree, and the leaves nearby it weren't even singed."

"I once cooked an egg, right under a chicken who didn't even notice," Tompkoner bragged.

"That's nothing," Kethrinax chimed in. "I once threw an egg into the air, flamed it in mid-flight, and when it landed in my mouth it was cooked to perfection."

"Once, I came upon a man who was fishing," Fredelistorn told us. "He was chewing a bit of grass, and I blew a stream of fire so fine it caught just the tip of the grass on fire. He had a big nose too, wasn't even singed."

"Please," Fredelistorn yawned. "Once I found a young man with long hair laying on a tree branch. When the wind blew the hair I set a *single strand* on fire. He didn't even notice until his entire head went up. It was hilarious, watching him dive into the water below to put it out. He looked ridiculous climbing out soaking wet, his hair all burned up unevenly."

"That's all well and good," Kethrinax started. "But one time-"

"If we could return to the subject at hand?" I cried, figuring this might go on the rest of the day if I didn't say something. "Filling the bag with hot hair- I mean hot air?"

"Oh, right," she replied, a bit sheepishly. "It's fine, hold it open."

So those of us with high 'levels' (figuring if they did miss, we would be the ones to best survive) held the bag open, and the dragons got into position. These working on it said they had coated the inside with various things that would hopefully keep the air in better and I hoped they were not too flammable. The dragons shot their fire into the opening, again and again, and the bag began to expand and lift. At a certain point the piping from the stove like contraption was put into place, and more hot air was captured

by the bag. It got bigger and bigger, and to the amazement of most the dragons had to be quickly harnessed as the basket lifted off the ground.

*It's going to work. Loto would would proud. We're on our way!*

## Chapter 21

### The hero proves himself by finding a bit of metal

Rose and Clarissa found out something new and exciting about themselves in the first few moments of our flight from the town. With the dragons gently tugging on the basket at first, and then more and more strongly, we rose into the air and begin to move south. The townspeople cheered and waved as they saw their hard work actually pay off, but neither was waving back as the town disappeared behind us. Instead they were holding onto each other for dear life, eyes squeezed shut and whimpering about falling. It seemed they each had a deathly fear of falling from high places! Who knew that was a thing? They sure did now! Alita and I were not exactly comfortable, one hand gripping the edge of the basket and the other holding the other's hand, but we looked down at the dragons now swimming around "Dragonlord Island" far below. The ropes (in both directions, to tie the dragons to us and the basket to the hot air bag above) seemed to be holding, the sails were full, and we hadn't smashed into anything so we were off to a good start. I wasn't sure if I was more nervous about tumbling to the ground from this height or the Dragonlord seeing us and launching some kind of attack, but I did know I would breathe easier once we were well away from this place.

"Are you sure you don't want to look at the view?" Alita teased the others. "It's pretty great!"

"I saw all I wanted to see!" protested Clarissa. "Thank you very much."

"You can't stay like that the whole trip."

"We're going to try!"

"Your loss. Whoops, we almost ran into that bird!"

"Oh that poor bird! It must have been as frightened as we are," Rose managed.

"The... No, there was no bird, Rose. I was just joking."

"Thank goodness!"

"She is no fun at all," she told me with a smile.

"She'll come around," I hoped. "Give her some time."

The two eventually did come around a little, sitting in the back of the basket looking less like they were going to die at any minute and more like they just wanted to. I had to admit, they were missing out. The view from above was unlike any I had ever seen, and I couldn't help but think that *this is how birds see the world. Or I guess winged dragons, no wonder one thought they could take the whole thing over. It does make everything seem smaller.* But more importantly than that *this is actually working. We're on our way to the southern part of the continent and we're not flying there on some magical bird we hatched with orbs somehow found scattered about. Rather in a device we ourselves had built. Well not us, specifically, the townspeople built it we just paid for it. But the design he came up with works, and only took a little magic to complete. Make enough of these and simply tie them to the ground and you have floating lookout posts, messages could probably be sent between them with flags or something if you had good enough telescopes. If you could make really long ropes you could probably fly them without dragons, going between towns far more quickly than walking. I wonder if you could make some kind of "oar" that worked in the air? Or maybe a better way to set the sails to go where you wanted to go.*



We stopped for the first night as the sun was setting, the dragons hauling us down after we opened a few of the vents sewn into the upper part of the bag. There were several ropes we could pull that opened flaps on the other side of the bag to let some hot air out. Of course they couldn't have known how many we would need so there were some spaced around the whole thing. We simply opened one at a time until it seemed we reached a good equilibrium where the bag stayed inflated but also floated low enough to the ground it wouldn't get blown away. Of course we secured it with some metal spikes and ropes into the ground, using tools the blacksmith loaned us. But as we worked to secure it (and after Rose and Clarissa celebrated being back on solid ground) I talked to the dragons.

"How was it from your end?"

"We'll need to redesign the harness a little, if we can," Kethrinax told me. "It doesn't fit quite right. So I don't think I'm able to pull as well as I might be."

"If you can describe what changes you want made I'm sure we can do it. It's basically just tough strips of leather and rope, after all. How about you two?"

"I'm fine," Fredelistor said, and Tompkoner agreed. "No problems on our end. It's a bit of a workout don't get me wrong," he went on. "We can really tell when the wind is cooperating or not. We decided to be a little more flexible about it, as long as we're heading *generally* south it's fine, it's better to work with it than against it."

"Makes sense. We can always walk a day or two if we can only get close in the basket. Save your strength, we have mountains to go over after all."

"Yeah, that should be interesting," Tompkoner told me. "I don't know if it'll be easier because the basket will want to go up anyway, or harder if the winds aren't right."

"At least it isn't a monster drawing near every fifth step," Alita said, stretching. "We should actually clear this area out before we settle in, as we just sat around all day. No 'levels' for us today."

"We'll watch the basket," Kethrinax told us. "We have better night vision. Be back by dark and we'll go out hunting and you can watch the basket."

"Sounds fair," I decided. "Rose? Clarissa? Want to see what sort of monsters roam around here?"

"May as well," Clarissa decided. "We'll need firewood anyway, we can grab some from around here I'm sure."

So we made quick work of the monsters in the area, and when the sun was about gone headed back. We made a camp, started a fire, and had our dinner while the dragons were out hunting. They came back and we bedded down, the basket to one side, the dragons forming a ring around us. I was pretty sure nothing would climb *over* a dragon in the night to try and get to us, but still insisted on a watch. With the seven of us it was only a little more than an hour each, as best as the person on watch could tell. The night passed uneventfully and in the morning we climbed into the basket again. Some of us more reluctantly than others, it was true, but the other two didn't refuse nor did they seem as worried today. They didn't look happy about it, of course, but as we closed the vents so the hot air built up again they didn't cower in the back like they had the day before.

"Getting used to it?" Alita asked them.

“Not at all,” Clarissa replied. “But you’re right. We can’t be terrified the whole time. We have to face this fear.”

“Speak for yourself,” Rose told her. “I had nightmares about falling off of things all night.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Maybe next time you can invent a machine that makes tunnels, and we can just walk through a long tunnel behind it.”

“Go underground? With no way out?” Alita asked, looking worried. “No thank you. I prefer the open sky.”

“But falling!”

“Don’t relish getting crushed underground when your tunnel collapses around me either.”

“Oh, I guess that could happen. Still, if it wasn’t for you three I never would have been able to do this. If I was the hero of the world, I would have just walked to the swamp, no matter how long it took me.”

“But you are one of the heroes of the world,” Alita protested. “Believe me, songs will be sung of the bravery of Rose, who soared in the sky like a... a... What’s a bird that rhymes with Rose?”

“Sparrows?” Clarissa offered.

“Like a whole group of sparrows!”

“I’m not brave, I’m just too scared to be left behind at this point. I have no choice but to go on.”

“Oh Rose,” she sighed. She went over and hugged her. “You have no idea how much courage you possess, do you?”

“Stop moving around, you’re rocking the basket!” she cried.

“Uh oh, uh oh!” she cried, wiggling so the basket rocked back and forth. Rose let out a high pitched moan and held on tighter.

We laughed.

We continued like this for twenty days. It took us three days to finally leave sight of Dragonlord Island, sticking close to the east coast of the land. The dragons dragged the basket across the hills but decided to swim around the mountain range that blocked their path on the second day. On the third day it was flatland, with a bit of swimming. At the end of the sixth day we had a choice to make. We were looking across the channel at the forest on the other side, and the mountains beyond that.

“According to the map,” Rose told us, unrolling it, “the land beyond here is either forest, hills, or those high mountains you see. We can either work our way directly south, try to climb the mountains, then have mostly plains here, forest, and then the most swampland to try and slog through.”

“We could swim around it here though,” Alita pointed out. “Go completely south to the ocean, then directly east past the ‘choke’ of the ‘hourglass’ and then we’ll know we’ll be close to the token.”

“That’s at least several days travel though,” Clarissa cautioned. “Where would we stay for the night? We can’t stay in the swamp! And it’s all swampland along the coast according to this.”

"It's a problem," Rose admitted. "The other option is the long way around. Go east following the mountain range rather than going over it."

"You think this trail really exists?" Clarissa asked, pointing to the trail marked on the map through the mountains. "This map is pretty old."

"But mountains don't really move all that fast," Alita reasoned. "And it's marked as being a good trade route. That means wagons and horses can make it through."

"But that's what confuses me," Rose protested. "Is this map wrong? The only town nearby is Cantlin, but how would you get there though this route? It's surrounded by mountains and forests to the east. The only way to get to it according to this map is from the one bridge north of town."

"Hey you're right," Clarissa admitted, looking at where she was tracing on the map with her finger. "Wait, that tiny spec, could it be a fishing town there? There's not much good land between this forest here, the mountains to the west and the ocean to the east but a small town could be there."

"Who would walk for days through that mountain pass, see a tiny strip of land, and say 'yes, this is where I want my town' though?" Alita asked.

"Someone who didn't like neighbors?"

"I guess."

"Town or not, which way are we going?"

The three stood a moment, looking the map over. "I don't like it," Clarissa said at last, "but we'll have to go the long way."

"I agree," Alita mused, nodding. "It's not ideal, but it's better than making our dragon friends swim for three days straight. We can camp at the base of the hills, just outside the swamp, and if we get an early start the next day we can hopefully reach the center and get back out before dark. Rose?"

"Could we head south west from here, cross the mountains, cross this lake, head around Cantlin, cross these mountains and head into the swamp from the north west?"

"Butts right up against the swamp," Alita told her. "And those mountains are pretty thick. I'd rather not risk it, as we're not really in any sort of hurry anyway."

"Agreed," she allowed with a nod. "The long way around it is."

"What's in the swamp?" Fredelistorn asked at last.

"Yeah, I thought we were just testing this basket out," Tompkoner added.

"We think there's treasure," I told them. "We thought we would check it out, being in the area anyway."

"Not dragon treasure, I hope?" Fredelistorn asked, a hard edge to his voice.

"No, no, something left there long ago. Nothing to do with dragons." *Dragonlords, yes. Dragons? No.*

"That's okay then. I guess you weren't kidding when you said it would take some time. Well, whatever, we go where you tell us."

"Glad that's settled. Let's set up camp for the night."

And so the next day we crossed the ocean to the other shore and stayed on the edge of the forest to rest for that day. The next saw us nearing the path, which thankfully did exist, and the next few days saw us winding our way through the mountains. We were slowed by various old rockslides needing to be cleared, but the dragons proved invaluable at that, and we pressed on. Finding the forest days later showed we were

almost out of the mountains, and a day later we came to the plains again. Another few easy days of following the coast (we saw no towns but there was the wreckage of one along the way) brought us to the hills. Several days of going up and down them brought us to our ultimate destination- the south swamp.

Alita had the bright idea of changing the rope configuration a little, tying all three dragon harness ropes together into one long rope we secured into the ground as best we could. Then we let the basket go as high as it could (Rose and Clarissa stayed behind on the ground) and used the spyglass we had brought to look over the swamp.

"It's a swamp all right," Alita told me, looking through it. "Check out just there, do you see something?" She pointed and handed me the glass, so I tried to point it where she was pointing.

"Something stone?" I guessed, not really able to tell. "There's something sticking out of the ground there I think."

"Yeah, I thought so too. Looks like the center of the place, so that's where we should head in the morning."

"Should we all go?" I asked. "Breathing those fumes isn't pleasant. And there are monsters roaming around, of course." *How did they get all the way down here? Have they just been walking to all corners of the world this whole time?*

"I guess it depends on which is going to weaken us fastest," she decided. "If you think it's the swamp, then no. Carry as many herbs as you can and move as fast as you can. Heck, leave your armor behind so you can move even faster. Avoid the monsters and get in and out. If you think it's the monsters, then yes. Having all four of us spreads out the damage we take, and increases the damage we can dish out. So hopefully we take less damage in the first place. We would need four times the herbs to counteract the swamp but would also have four times the healing magic. If we reserve our magical power strictly for that."

"That is the best use of magic. I hate to go in alone, if I got into trouble that would be it for me. Maybe we'll split the difference..."

"Just take one of us?"

"Exactly. And think of it this way. If we should fail the other team still has a chance. Learn from our mistake (if you can see us from here) and don't repeat it. Get the token and get back. Get the armor and deal with the Dragonlord as best you can."

"So you're saying one of *us* could be the real heir?"

"And I was just here to get you this far. Yes. The journal even says the token is really just to prove you have the skills and I guess 'levels' to have found it. Not that you really are related to him. If you can get into the swamp and back, that means you have a good chance against the Dragonlord."

"Then we have our plan," she decided. "We all go in. *But* we go in as two teams, not one big team. That way if one team runs into trouble the other team can help. But we all prove ourselves by making it to the center and getting out again. We've all come this far, after all. It's a test for all of us."

*And if we all fall, the dragons cut the basket loose, head back to town on their own, and at least tell everyone what happened to us. The basket proved itself so others can make another, we will have at least improved the world to that extent.* "Very well. Let's open the vents and head back to the ground."

The next day our group rose early, checked our equipment, and said farewell to the dragons.

"Risking your lives for the promise of treasure," Tompkoner said to them when they explained they would be back by nightfall, or probably not at all. "I didn't realize dragons and humans had that in common."

"Maybe there is more common ground between us," Fredelistorn agreed. "I hope you find it, and don't get dead. It's actually been nicer than I expected, traveling with you. I've learned a lot about human behavior."

"Not so nice we're going to take less gold when we get back," clarified Tompkoner quickly.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that," Fredelistorn agreed. "Just that I thought... Well, never mind what I thought. Good luck."

"Thanks," I told them. "Kethrinax, if we don't make it back, I think you know what you have to do. Our task falls to you. I think you know what I mean."

"I do," she agreed. "Something has to be done. If you puny humans, no offense, can risk your lives how can I do less? You have my word, I'll figure something out if you fall. This world will not remain how it is."

The other two dragons looked at her very curiously, but I nodded. "Thank you. Clarissa, you ready?"

"Ready."

"Follow us in after a few minutes," I told Rose and Alita.

"We know the plan, I helped make the plan," Alita protested. "You just focus on keeping yourself alive. Both of you keep the other safe, okay? We all come out of here."

"Agreed."

We headed inside.

The swamp was a terrible place. The fumes made it hard to breathe and seemed to sap our strength. The monsters, who seemed to have no trouble wandering around, attacked in force, slowing us. I realized too late that perhaps I should have asked if the dragons were immune to the worst effects of the swamp and if I could just ride one of them to the center, but then I thought better of it. *No, this is my quest, and my trial to overcome. I mean, if I use what resources I have that does mean I'm smart enough to reach the center. I don't necessarily have to be 'the strongest' to defeat the Dragonlord. Just clever enough.*

But we pushed on, and finally, about mid-day, we came to a stone sticking out of the ground unlike any other we had seen. In fact, we hadn't seen any stones, just weird plants, mud, an icky green haze, and monsters. None were near the stone and the air seemed clearer, so we got close. It stood slightly taller than myself and seemed to be a worked block, with four sides straight and smooth. The only real feature we found on it was an indentation of a hand, and given my experience at the tomb I was pretty sure what that meant.

"So what are you waiting for?" Clarissa asked.

"Rose. She should be here to see this. She decoded the poem and led us here. She's earned that."

"I guess that's reasonable. We'll wait, at least I can breathe here."

“It’s odd, the tomb that held the journal didn’t have any monsters in it. Apparently there’s protection magic of some kind that was put on things in the past.”

“That would be nice to know.”

“You can say that again.”

We didn’t have long to wait before the other two joined us, and I turned to face them. “Clarissa, Rose, Alita? Thank you all. I don’t know if I could have gotten here without you, and you have been steadfast companions since our meeting. It is time for this portion of our quest to be done, and so, before you now, I will place my hand upon the stone and see what destiny has in store for me.”

They nodded and I turned, resting a hand on the indentation.

Nothing happened.

I cleared my throat, figuring there was another part to this after all. “I am a descendant of Erdrick, here for the token of proof,” I announced, feeling a little foolish in front of the others but it had worked before. It worked again. Part of the stone vanished below the hand print and as I stepped back I saw a small alcove had been created. Laying inside was a hand sized golden disk, engraved with some sort of symbol, that I immediately knew was Erdrick’s token. I didn’t know how I knew, it could have been anything really, but even despite the fact it was what I was looking for it didn’t strike me as just a golden disk, but an object of power. Looking at it gave me the certainty of “this is Erdrick’s token” in a way looking at a tree I knew “this is a tree.” I reverently took up the token and spun, grinning and holding it up for the others to see. “It worked!” I told them. I heard a grinding noise and looked back, the alcove was gone, and it seemed a solid stone again. The others crowded around me, exclaiming over it, and I let them hold it.

“Let’s start back,” I told them, when I got it back again. I put it away, there would be time to look it over when we weren’t in the middle of this very dangerous swamp.

“Same teams?” Alita asked.

“I guess,” Rose told her, distracted by the stone. “It’s weird, don’t you think it’s weird?”

“What is?” Clarissa asked.

“This whole thing. How does the magic know who somebody’s great, great, great, great grandson is?”

“It’s magic, isn’t that the explanation for anything magical? How do dragons breathe fire? I can’t do that, but they seemingly can. It’s magic, it’s not supposed to make sense.”

“I don’t buy it,” she complained, putting a hand on the stone. “I am a descendant of Erdrick, here for the token of proof.” We were all floored when the stone alcove reappeared, and there, sitting on it, was yet *another token!* She stared at it, we all did, and I got mine back out to compare them. Looking at mine I got the sense it was *the* token, but when I looked back at hers I got the sense *it* was the token. I looked at her. “Are we related?” she asked.

“One way to find out,” Alita decided. She yanked the token out of the alcove and the chamber sealed again. She handed Rose her token, bumped her out of the way with her hip, and put her hand on the stone. “I am a descendant of Erdrick, here for the token

of proof.” The chamber opened again. A third token was there. “Yup, as I thought,” she said, taking it. “Clarissa, may as well get one for yourself. This isn’t some one of a kind item, it’s proof that the trial has been passed. This stone just magically makes tokens when you announce who you are. It doesn’t check, it’s not smart. Rose was right all along.”

“We’re going to do it,” Rose said softly, gripping the gold coin like object tightly in her hand. “We’re going to free the land from the Dragonlord.”

“You bet we are,” Alita replied, pulling Clarissa to stand in front of the stone. “You completed the trail with us, get your token too!”

“I am a descendant of Erdrick, here for the token of proof.”

## Chapter 22

### The hero returns to a hero's welcome

We made it back to the edge of the swamp as the sun was going down, stumbling out and taking in great quantities of fresh air. The dragons had a fire going, which was nice of them, and helped us over to it as best they could. They had found some dead tree trunks they had dragged over to make benches, so we didn't have to sit on the ground. There was something roasting over the fire which smelled great after the swamp. I was grateful to the dragons for going through the effort, they were decent sorts after all.

"You made it!" Kethrinax had exclaimed as we came into view. "Did you do it? Did you get the treasure? You don't have to go back do you?"

We all dropped heavily to the tree trunk and weakly held up the tokens for the dragons to see.

"Ah," Fredelistorn began.

"Yes," Tompkoner agreed. "That is a thing. That you brought out. Of the swamp. After risking your life."

"Er," Kethrinax wondered after a moment. "He does have a point. Isn't that a little underwhelming? Are four slightly enlarged gold coins considered a treasure in human society?"

"I bet it's all they could manage," Tompkoner decided. "Right? The rest is still back there, you just brought proof of it back and mapped out the route so you can go right to it tomorrow."

"Must be," Fredelistorn agreed. "Want us to head in tonight and grab the rest? We'll only take a small portion in payment."

"You'll hardly miss it! Very small portion."

"Just a token, merely a trifle."

"This is all of it," I assured them. "It's what the coin represents, that's all. Believe me, this is a treasure."

"If you say so," Tompkoner told us. "I hope it was worth the risk. You all look terrible, and I only know what humans look like from hanging around you all. So imagine what another *human* would say if they saw you!"

"We'll be fine in the morning," Clarissa told him. "If I don't sleep for three days."

"Now that would be the dragon thing to do," Fredelistorn said with a laugh. "I wouldn't be surprised in the least if you did."

"No, we have to start back in the morning," I announced. "We can sleep on the way if we have to. There's work to be done."

"Sleep on the way?" Rose squeaked. "In the basket? You're crazy!"

"Making more baskets?" he asked.

"If they hold up as well on the way back, there will be a demand for them," I replied, not exactly answering the question.

"It's such a shame," Clarissa said, looking out over the water.

"What is?" Alita asked her.

"That the world isn't round. If we went south from here land couldn't be more than a day away. Easy walk back to the castle from there."



“Even if it was we wouldn’t know how much ocean was between here and there. It could be much more than a days worth, and then where would we be?”

“Oh, I guess you’re right.”

“Have some meat!” Kethrinax told us. “It’s been cooking for some time now, it should be good for you, I think? I’ve been watching you at night so I hope we did it right. It’s so hard to work at your scale.”

“It smells great,” Rose told her. “So I think you did just fine. Thank you for thinking of us.”

“Oh, well,” she stammered, “it was nothing.”

“Insisted on it, she did,” Fredelistorn told us, putting on what some might have called a posh accent.

“Yes,” Tompkoner agreed, following his lead. “Made quite the fuss about making the campsite just so for your return. Was in quite a state all day, worry I would have called it, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh yes,” Fredelistorn said seriously. “Exactly what I would have called it. Quite worried, she was. Pacing. Straining to see you coming back, almost as if you were her own children.”

“She’s grown quite fond of you, if what we saw today is any indication.”

“Very fond, yes.”

“Quit it, you two. It wasn’t that bad,” she protested.

“It was,” they both assured us, smiling broadly. Which is something to see, on a dragon, because of all the teeth and such. Had given me quite a fright the first time I saw them do it, didn’t know they could smile, but they explained it to me so it was fine.

Kethrinax looked out of place, and I wondered if dragons got embarrassed like humans did. It seemed they did, the way she was not looking at us. “We’re fond of her as well,” I told them. “We would have worried if it was her doing something dangerous, wouldn’t we?” I asked the others.

“Oh yes,” Rose replied without hesitation. “She’s a good friend to all of us.”

“I’m glad the hero here found her,” Alita told them, putting an arm around my shoulders. “And that she didn’t just chomp him the moment they met.”

“How did you two meet?” Fredelistorn asked her. “Why wasn’t there chomping? Must be a story there, given relations up to this point.”

“Later, later!” she told them. “Let them eat and get some rest.”

“Humph, I know a dodge when I see one,” Tompkoner complained.

“Too right,” Fredelistorn agreed. “There’s a story there and make no mistake.”

The dragons agreed to keep watch all night so we could sleep, and after eating we dropped off pretty quickly. We all seemed fine the next morning, and were all looking forward to leaving the swamp behind. We had twenty or so days of travel before us, but at least this time we were returning triumphant. Our spirits rose as day by day we got closer and closer to the castle, retracing our steps along the coast. We talked about what to do with our tokens, and the others agreed with the money they were bringing back from all the monster killing they had been doing every night (and from the swamp) they were going to have their final armor made.

“We’ll incorporate the token into the front,” Alita told me. “That way there can be no doubt.”

“But isn’t that dangerous?” I asked. “I mean it won’t be the same material as the armor, and something like a skeleton with a sword could easily stick right through it.” *Or the claws of a huge dragon?*

“If it was gold, you would be right,” she agreed. “It’s not. It’s something else.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been testing various things. You’ve been watching me haven’t you?”

“You’ve been messing with it since we started back, yes, I had no idea what you were doing.”

“Messing with it.” She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, messing with it? It can’t be scratched. I’ve tried with my weapon, with rocks, dropping it, crushing it, I even had Kethrinax try and put a hole in it with her claws. She couldn’t. I think it’s magical, and not normal metal at all. So putting it into an armor is actually safer. Sure it’s a small area but it’s better than nothing.”

“Oh.” I was a bit embarrassed. *Obvious in retrospect. Who originally read Loto’s journal? Who was told to question everything, to not accept the world as I saw it? Me. But I didn’t experiment with the token, I just put it away. She actually learned more about it.* “I guess that will be fine, then.” *Of course if what she’s saying is true, and I don’t doubt that it is, could whatever magic that made the token be applied to other things? Like armor, perhaps? Why not make a whole armor out of the stuff if it’s so difficult to destroy? In fact why not have your armor there, and have it be the proof of who is your descendant instead of just a token? It’s more useful, for one thing, and probably would have protected us on the way out of the swamp, if rumors about it are to be believed. Well, the one person that went in to find it, anyway. But I was supposed to be acting alone anyway so that would have been that taken care of. This whole token business is just so weird, but I guess it’s not scouring the world for tiny medals, whatever they were. So I should be thankful for that.*

And finally the day of our return was at hand. As we approached the town we saw something new- a floating basket that had a person in it! We looked at each other through our telescopes and waved frantically, the person in the basket doing something and it started lowering. Moments later it was back in the air again, and we both watched as our respective baskets got closer. The one over the town was rounder, clearly meant only for going up and down in, and as the dragons came to a halt outside town people streamed out, shouting and waving in excitement at our return. *Clearly the person in the basket told them we were coming. So they haven’t been idle, they made another bag after they saw ours worked and used it for a lookout post as I hoped it could be used for. Good. Hopefully it spreads from here and takes off. So to speak.* It took some time to tell them how far we had been and that the bag had held up well, and some swarmed over it looking for wear or other signs it could be improved upon. Everyone wanted to shake our hands, slap our backs, tell them about the state of the world. (They were somewhat disappointed when we said we had seen so little of it, mainly just coastline, to try and move as quickly as possible) They threw a big feast in our honor that night, including the dragons, and of course the rest of the maid force came back from their day of ‘leveling up’ and were overjoyed to see their ‘sisters’ return. It felt good to be *home*. It was a strange feeling, this place being home, I mean I didn’t have a house here or

anything I still stayed at the inn every night but here were all the familiar faces I had come to know. *Isn't that what home is?*

Finally the party broke up and I caught the eye of the tool shop owner, who nodded. I told the others where I was going and I would see them the next day, and followed him to his shop. We went upstairs and he lit his pipe as he settled into his chair.

"Do you have it then?" he asked.

I smiled and handed him the token without a word.

"Yes, that must be it," he admitted. "Just looking at it I somehow know this is the real thing."

"I found that too," I told him. "Strange, isn't it? And it's made of something really hard, Alita did some tests and it was unscratched." *Well, not on that one, specifically, but on hers. But they should be the same material so it's just as well.*

"Erdrick's token. To think I would live to see it." He shook his head. "The armor is yours, of course. I won't go back on my word. I just hope it's enough."

"I do too."

He handed the token back to me. "I should tell you, we've not been idle while you were away."

"I saw the basket."

"Yes, yes, that's impressive enough I agree. Once they saw it actually worked they just had to build another for the town. Finished it a week or so ago, it's been a real point of pride for the whole village. The castle has commissioned one, of course. Out of curiosity, the king requested the same sort of shape but with cat ears, of all things. Any reason that might be? You've spoken to the man directly, yes?"

"On the bag? Cat ears?" I put my hands sticking up from my head to illustrate.

"Yes."

"Wow, he's taking his obsession a little too far. I don't know, the maids all had to wear them as well. Before we left he was talking about adding tails to the uniforms as well. They were quite relieved to be leaving before that was required, from how they were talking."

"Strange. Well, we've been working on it of course. Make some of our money back for the one we made for the town. Everyone pitched in what they could. But that's not what I'm talking about. I've been gathering up every old book I can find. Trading for the journal, mostly, but not in every case. Looking into old wizardry, things from Loto's time, trying to piece together what happened to everything he mentioned. Spells, magical items, the works. The former maids have been invaluable there, traveling to nearby towns to do the trading for me. Wonderful girls they are, just wonderful. So helpful and strong, and to think they were just maids before!?! Astonishing what you can accomplish if you try, isn't it?"

*Oh, you don't have to sell me on the idea, believe me. I already know.* "Find anything interesting?"

"Far as I can tell, the world just changed one day, and nobody noticed. Just went on living their lives as if it hadn't happened. But the signs are there, if you look for them. It's troubling, make no mistake."

“But what could do that? Even magic worked on a huge scale... To cover the entire land? Make people forget things, erase magical items? How?”

“Perhaps the gods did it?”

“To what end? We’re not being punished, life went on much as before, no? We still have magic, and monsters, dragons and warriors.”

“That we do. I can’t explain it, or tell you what we should do about. Personally I don’t like that theory, myself, I just wanted to know your reaction to it, and it was similar to mine. No, if it was the gods it was too sloppy. Why leave clues like the journal and other books to remind us what we had lost? And like you say, it couldn’t be a punishment. If a dog does something wrong you have to catch them in the act and punish that. Finding it later and punishing them is useless, they won’t associate the two things. If we know that about dogs they must know only something similar would work in our case, right? Makes no sense. There was no pronouncement by the gods that ‘you have done wrong, here are the consequences’ so we would have no idea what we did to attract their ire. Thus, how to avoid doing so in the future.

“But if it was a spell, where did the person go who did it? Why not brag about your skill and take credit? It’s almost the opposite, that the land changed and whatever did it wanted that fact to stay hidden. And again, to what end? The world almost seems smaller, somehow. Loto went so many places, did so many things on his quest to defeat Baramos. But the Dragonlord? Right over there. You could swim there right now. I’m not recommending that, by the way. We have less towns, less ships, less everything. I don’t know.”

“The only thing I can do is take care of the problems that are before me,” I decided. “I leave everything else to scholars such as yourself. The gods or magic or something else, the world is how I find it. I’ve maybe left it a little better because of the basket, maybe I’ll defeat the Dragonlord after all and finally bring peace to the land. But then again, maybe not because I’ll die at his talons. But at least I’ve made some contribution, and others may take up the fight in that case.” *The fighting maids, though are they maids anymore? They need a new name.*

“About that...” He got up and took something off his mantle. He handed it to me and I looked it over curiously. It seemed to be a model ship with a wheel sticking out the side of it. The wheel was turning.

“What is it?”

“It’s a scale model,” he told me, sitting down again. “You know the ship that could propel itself Loto had the idea for?”

“This is what he was talking about?”

“Not sure about that, but I had a local woodworker build me this. Enchanted the wheel to never stop moving. It works, put it in water and the boat moves. He suggested maybe putting the paddle at the back, he’s working on a new model to see how it performs. This one tends to move in a circle. One on both sides would probably fix that, or one in front and back and propping the boat up on hollowed out logs. He started noting down ideas one after another once we saw it worked, he seemed quite excited about the whole prospect.”

“Really?” I was surprised, holding the boat up and looking at it from all angles. “Can it be made bigger?”

"I made the stone, didn't I? Possibly. Maybe putting the enchantment on some gears so they are always turning, and that way you could disengage the mechanism with a lever when you wanted the boat to stop. It seems a little magic in the right place can go a long way. We've just been too blind to see it. Or magic just seemed to be in the realm of scholars, not useful for everyday life. I'm starting to think that was shortsighted, possibly a little greedy on the part of those that have studied magic. Like me, I'm ashamed to admit."

"But attitudes are changing," I said, lowering the boat. "I think this," I shook it gently, "is just the beginning."

"I hope so. I've actually started teaching my apprentice magic. It will take years, just like it took me, but he was pestering me once he saw that basket float into the sky using the heat source I made. He's never really shown that much interest in anything before, so maybe he'll stick with it. Being motivated to learn about something is a far more potent teacher than me just demanding he learn it for the sake of learning it."

*It's fairly odd, him studying magic for so long but then opening this shop. Shouldn't he have gone into the magic business? I suppose the herbs are magical, to heal so quickly, but still. I wonder what path his life has taken to lead him here. "I agree." When I discovered I could get stronger and get magic and get gold from killing the minions outside they went from a nuance to a revenue stream. Same as with the former maids, they rushed out to take their share of the action. I became very interested in destroying as many as I could, rather than just avoiding them.*

"So it seems you've started more than just a floating basket making industry. Why Loto never followed through on all these ideas we may never know, but bringing that book to light may have truly changed the world." He chuckled and shook his head. "What would the world look like today if he had? If we had hundreds of years to refine the design of the basket, and these ships, and whatever else we come up with? Anyway, that's what we've been working on, thought you might like to know."

"I think it's great! Most of the gold we made on the trip has to go to the dragons, but I'll keep financing this in mind when I get some more." *Maybe starting some kind of school or place ideas can flourish. Teaching one person about magic like this guy is doing would take years, like he said. But what if you could teach a dozen people at once? It's not that much harder, you still have to do the teaching right? May as well get the maximum return for the investment.*

"Ah, a person who knows where the heart of the issue lies. Always liked that about you, I did. Like I said, plans for a larger version are being drawn up. That doesn't cost anything. Materials? Sadly there we might run into a snag. Just doing another basket is going to be a stretch with what we have around here. And even with the former maids being strong enough to go between towns and protect supply routes, what would we use to buy the materials?"

*And there it is again, we need a place that has a lot of gold to give it to people, in exchange for getting more back later, so they can build things and make money with them. I should really be writing everything I think of down... maybe in a journal?*

"Expect you want to collect the armor and get to bed?" the man asked, rising. "Don't want an old man talking your ear off all night. Come along, let's see if it fits you and make any adjustments needed."

I jumped up out the chair as well, setting the model boat back on the stand that was made for it so the wheel didn't scrape anything. It was finally time, the dragonscale armor was mine at last!

## Chapter 23

### The hero shows off his new armor

My three friends stared at me the next morning after they had gotten up. I had put on the armor, boots, helmet, and had the shield at my side as well. The scales shimmered in the morning sunlight outside the inn, and I felt that all the effort we had gone through was worth it. In this I really felt like a dragon warrior, and I could almost feel the magic coursing through the armor, protecting me. But that was probably just my imagination. What wasn't my imagination was their reaction, and the staring by the passing townsfolk in the street.

"That's the armor you were talking about?" Alita finally managed.

"This is it! Pretty nice, huh?"

"I'm totally jealous," she admitted. "I really can see why you wanted it."

"It's actually made from the scales of dragons?" Rose asked, walking around me.

"Collected over the course of years, according to the tool shop owner. Made with enchanted tools to handle the hardness of the scales, and imbued with further magical protections to help turn blows away from the person wearing it."

"How are the dragons going to react to you wearing it?" Clarissa rightly wondered.

"We're going to find out," I told them. "After you go ask them how they would feel about my wearing it. If they're against it, I'll go take it off before we go see them. I don't want to offend them." *Or get attacked.* "But I would like to try it out in real combat to make sure it's not just a dream and it'll come apart with one blow. I just wanted to show you what your hard work had earned me."

"I know who's walking in front of us from now on," Alita told me. "It's you, in case it wasn't clear."

"That's fair."

"We all have tokens," Rose reminded the others. "Wonder if he has any other sets lying around?"

"He doesn't," I assured her. "He let me into his lab under the store. Crazy place, all sorts of books, and magical ingredients in jars, and half finished projects down there. This was the only armor he had, his greatest work he called it."

"I can see why," Clarissa admitted. "Better go find the dragons, in case they're hanging out around town. They don't like the smell any better but they're getting used to it, being around us. They may wander through here and if they see you before they're prepared..."

"Thank you."

"Let's go girls."

"One second. I think you look very handsome," Rose told me. "A proper warrior at least. Now if you just had that sword of Loto's he got at the end, you might stand a chance."

"Thank you."

"He's alright," Alita allowed. "I mean the helmet doesn't cover much of the face, you can still see it's him."

"Alita!" Rose said, shocked.

"What? I don't want him getting a big head."

“Yeah, helmet wouldn’t fit anymore,” Clarissa said with a chuckle. “There is something about that armor though, isn’t there?”

“I wouldn’t mind being inside it,” Alita agreed. “Wonder what the blacksmith can come up with for the three of us. It has to look impressive, I won’t stand next to that in anything less.”

“I’m sure it will be magnificent,” Rose told her. “Come on.”

The three left town and I sat on a bench waiting for them to come back. People were giving me a bit of a wide berth, the armor was clearly dragon scale and everyone knew the Dragonlord’s edict. But he wasn’t going to swoop into town and attack me, how would he even know it existed until he saw it? But it was a very clear act of aggression and declaration of war if ever there was one. “I’m equal to you,” it said. “I have your scales, how can I not be? And when I destroy you, I will be shown as greater than you besides.” Right?

The three came back and said the dragons were fine with it, if I was willing to take the risk they didn’t care. Scales flaked off all the time according to them, and regrew like we would grow nails or hair. It wasn’t a big deal, as long as we hadn’t killed a dragon for the scales directly. As they were the only dragons I had met, and I couldn’t see the tool shop owner killing one, that was taken care of. So I headed out to see if it would hold up. I naturally didn’t expect the same looks of awe and shock as from my friends, even further from my mind were howls of laughter, and three dragons holding onto each other lest they fall over from mirth. But that’s what I got. They kept looking back at me and starting up again.

“It’s like he’s cosplaying as a dragon!” Fredelistorn managed between howls.

“Oh, look at me, the tiny human pretending to be a dragon!” Tompkoner agreed. “I’m so fearsome, growl, gurr! Watch out, I bite!”

“It’s like he found a dead bear, skinned it, and is wandering around the forest pretending to be the bear!” Kethrinax added. “Can’t you picture it?”

“I can!”

“Me too!”

“If you’re quite finished?” I asked after they finally quieted down.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kethrinax told me. “I just didn’t expect it to be so hilarious. I just kept imagining a dragon wearing, like, a hat and thinking they were blending in with ‘other’ humans.”

“I kept thinking about a dragon cursed to be a human, and wearing some old scales they found to remind themselves they were a dragon,” Tompkoner put in.

“I mean it is a bit ridiculous, isn’t it?” Fredelistorn asked.

“No,” I answered bluntly. “It’s good protection. Or do you deny your scales would make good armor for a human?”

“I suppose not,” he admitted. “You are fairly squishy.”

“What’s cosplaying?” Rose asked. “Did I pronounce it right?”

“Humm?”

“You said that word...”

“Oh, sorry! It’s a word in Draconic. It means dressing up and pretending to be something you’re not. I don’t know what it would be in your language.”



*Why would dragons, who don't wear clothes, have a word for dressing up in different clothes and pretending to be something you're not?*

"So he was cosplaying as a maid before?" Alita asked. "That's how you would use that word?"

"If he dressed up as a maid and did maid things, sure, that's a correct usage. Did... Did he? Do that?"

"Never mind!" I hastily told them.

"But he is right," Tompkoner admitted. "Dragon scale would make good human armor. Probably better than anything metal, it's just as tough, lighter, more flexible. You have to give them that."

"Nowkis!" I blurted, wondering if I would catch Kethrinax and get to admit what she was really saying before.

"Oh, you know some Draconic? Why didn't you say?" Tompkoner asked me.

"That's really the only word I know," I replied glumly. *Not what I was hoping they would say.* "Kethrinax said it once. I would be interested in learning your language though, when we're not under so much threat," I went on honestly. Learning their language would go a long way to improving relations between our people, after all. And they had learned ours, so it was only fair.

"It's pretty regional though," Fredelistorn told me. "I'm not sure other dragons would know it."

"She said that as well..." I said suspiciously. I looked over to see her staring off at a cloud or something. *So I still don't really know, she could have told them... Oh well.*

The two dragons and my friends backed off so that Kethrinax could take a few swipes at me in mock combat, and I learned a few things about the armor. It didn't stop me from being swept off my feet, bashed in the head, or thrown to the ground. The shield would stop fire breath but the surrounding air still got hot so it wasn't that much use for a prolonged blast. And it wasn't so light that ducking and weaving and trying to hit her didn't tire me out. It did. A protracted battle still wasn't in my future, and a dragon the size the Dragonlord was claimed to be would take a long time to die of even severe wounds. From every angle you looked at it, a direct confrontation was a terrible idea. He could wear me down and sit on me, then cast all the healing magic on himself he wanted. We needed other options.

Alita suggested the entire team try to take on Tompkoner, who was the larger dragon by a little bit, and while we did better I was pretty sure it wasn't good enough. He showed he could lash out with a claw, his tail, and blow fire all at the same time, keeping three of the four of us at bay. Choosing his targets carefully he left Clarissa alone most of the time, which proved correct because her tiny daggers couldn't get through his scales anyway. We were all sitting and resting, the dragons looking somewhat smug which I thought wasn't exactly fair. *We are, after all, working hard to free them from the yoke of the Dragonlord in addition to ourselves. It's not our fault they're so much bigger, faster, and stronger than we are.*

As if this thought prompted them, Tompkoner turned to me. "Why are you practicing fighting dragons anyway? Kinda seems like you've done it before, any reason for that?" He looked at Kethrinax out of the corners of his eyes.

*Oh boy, here it comes.* "You really can't guess?" I answered.

"I can guess. I want to hear it from you. All this fighting, getting magic, the treasure hunt in the swamp, now this new armor? Which I take it had something to do with that coin you found, as you immediately got the armor when you got back and not before. You called it a treasure, did you trade it for the armor? Much more useful but someone must have wanted it badly, as badly as you wanted the armor. It all points to one thing. What is that thing?"

"We want to fight the Dragonlord." I braced myself for either a real fight, which we would probably lose if we couldn't get away to the safety of the town, or being laughed at again.

He did neither, simply looked at me. Rather sadly, I thought. "Do you really think that you humans, no matter how you try, can defeat something that laid enough of us *dragons* low that we don't think of disobeying him? Do you think we just rolled over when he announced himself? We aren't exactly big on following orders, dragons never had a 'king' before this guy decided we should. He demonstrated we would be fools to oppose him."

"What would you suggest?" I shot back. "Just letting him rule in fear forever? How many towns are left in the world? You went across the world, did you see even a single one? We stayed to the coastline, you know, *the best place to put a town* because of access to shipping, fishing, recreation. But not one single town. If there are a thousand people left in the world I would be surprised. We're too frightened to leave our settlements, and if this goes on pretty soon there won't be any of us left. We have to do something while we still can!"

"I wondered about that," Fredelistorn told me. "Why there were so few of you. Dragons live so long we only have a clutch of eggs every few hundred years, but I figured you would have kids all over the place. Did he really do that?"

"Who else could have? Loto writes about all the people he met and saw in his travels. A dozen towns or more, both above and below ground. I've barely seen 3 towns since I started all this."

"Ah!" Tompkoner gasped. "So how do you know other towns aren't packed with tons more people? Maybe you're just out in the sticks here, and bigger towns are just in places you haven't been?"

"I technically don't," I admitted. "But isn't this the capital? It's where the king lives, his castle is right there? Wouldn't the biggest town be nearby?" *Of course, it's where the Dragonlord lives too, right over there. So most people probably would have packed up and left as soon as they could. So maybe I do have a skewed sense of things.*

"Oh, that makes sense. Yeah, I don't know, it's a good point. So you're really going to try and kill him, huh?"

"If that's our only option, yes."

"Is there another option?" Rose asked hopefully.

"Take away his ability to do magic? I have no idea if such a thing could be done. If he can't use magic to make monsters, his ability to influence the world vanishes."

"I've never heard of such a thing," Kethrinax said. "Doesn't mean you can't, but that may be harder than killing him."

The other dragons nodded.

"Probably easier to come at it the other way," Alita mused. "Get rid of gold."

"Get rid of gold!" all three dragons exclaimed.

“Sure. If he doesn’t have gold to turn into monsters, no more monsters. We decide on a new currency, and throw all the gold we have into the ocean. Kill monsters, trade the currency, into the ocean. Might take a few years but we could do it.”

*Sure, but wouldn't the Dragonlord retaliate once he figured out what we were doing? It wouldn't escape his notice for long.*

“No more gold?” Kethrinax repeated, sounding horrified.

“No more shinies?” Tompkoner agreed.

“Go ahead, just cut my throat out now,” Fredelistorn demanded, sticking his neck out. “It’ll be less painful than a world without gold!”

“Don’t be such a crybaby, it’s just an idea,” Alita told him, shoving his head. “Do you really think the king would go for it?”

“If he could get a new coin with cat ears on it, maybe,” I told them. “Kidding! I’m just kidding,” I assured the dragons who started to protest again.

“Actually, dragons once talked about creating our own currency,” Fredelistorn told us.

“Oh yeah?”

“True story. We didn’t do it because we couldn’t figure out what to put on it. Someone suggested doges. You know, a dogecoin, but then no one could agree on a breed, so the whole thing was just scrapped.”

“Doge?” Rose asked.

*Why wouldn't a dragon coin have a dragon on it though? I think they're having a little joke at our expense.*

“Oh, right, that’s a dragon word for a... What are they in your language? Tiny animals.”

“Mice?”

“No, not mice. Bigger. All sizes really, all colors.”

“Rabbits?”

“No, not rabbits. Bite you, very noisy sometimes.”

“Parrots?”

“That’s a bird, right? No, four legs. Tail.”

“Cats?”

“Opposite of cats, I think. Some have floppy ears, live in houses with people.”

“Dogs?”

“Dogs! Yes, that’s the one.”

“I’m just learning so much about dragons,” Rose said.

“I think they’re not being serious,” Alita told her. “Dogecoin, please.”

“No, no, true story!” they all assured her.

“Anyway,” Alita drawled. “That isn’t helping. We need ideas on what to do about the Dragonlord. If you’re with us, that is. You’re not attacking us or running to your ‘master’ about our plans so I have to assume you’re at least neutral on the idea.”

“His being in power doesn’t benefit us all that much,” Tompkoner told her. “Our lives haven’t improved, we still just do our own thing. And humans being in power, well, they’re too short lived to matter all that much either. So I guess we don’t care, but I do think it would be a shame to see you all dead. We’ve had some good times, I would feel bad knowing you had thrown your life away.”

“Same,” Fredelistorn agreed. “You’ve rubbed off on me. If you are going to do this, you better have a *very* airtight plan.”

“You do care!” Rose decided, sounding delighted. She went and threw her arms around the one dragon’s front leg, and then the other.

“What’s all this?” Fredelistorn asked, looking down at her. “Some human thing?”

“It’s just a hug. She’s expressing her feelings.”

“I wish I could ‘hug’ her back then, I guess. But I better not.” He flashed his claws.

“It’s okay,” she said, stepping back. “So you’ll help us?”

“If I think of something I’ll let you know,” Tompkoner promised. “But don’t count on it.”

The others wanted to go get their order for armor into the blacksmith, so they headed back to town. I figured I should go see how the king was doing and update him on everything that had happened, so I headed back to the castle. It wasn’t to show off the armor, of course, at least that’s what I told myself. I mean it was pretty nice, but I really should check in with the king. Right? It had been awhile, if he was initially mad for the maids thing I’m sure he wouldn’t be at this point. So it was fine, he should be told about what was going on his kingdom. Even if he did just sit around most of the time. The guards recognized me after a moment, stepping back and staring at my armor. Which, again, totally wasn’t the point of me being here.

“Go right up,” the one on the left said. “I’m sure his majesty will be glad to hear you’re safe.”

So I did. The chamber was much the same, but sitting to the king’s left was his daughter, looking much better now after a month and a half. She had filled out again, and her hair had a bit more shine to it now. Their clothes didn’t look quite as nice as they had, at least the king’s clothes were not as pressed or clean as they were the last time I was here. The princess it seemed had two different shoes on, wasn’t sure what that was about, but I felt it best not to mention it. *Much like asking what the heck they do in here all day? Just sit here? The both of them? I would go mad with boredom, but just like before here the king is. Not training, or watching over his kingdom, but just in this tiny room with no other furniture or fixtures. So odd.* I went formally went to one knee. “Majesties,” I greeted them.

“Ah, our hero returns!” the king said. “I was beginning to worry, I hadn’t seen you in so long.”

“My travels took me rather far away,” I admitted. “I’m glad to see you are up and around, princess. No further trouble from the Dragonlord?”

“None. I think he learned his lesson the first time he abducted me,” she said. “I must say, you’re looking far more ready to combat the Dragonlord than the first time we met. Are you ready to look for the token now?”

I waved a hand. “That won’t be necessary princess, we already found it.” I got it out of somewhere and held it up. “You see?”

“You found it?” she echoed.

“Yes, princess. We managed to stumble on it in our travels, so there’s no need to trouble yourself.”

“But... But...” she stuttered, clearly at a loss for words.

"I thought I should tell you of my return, majesty," I shifted my focus back to the king and put the token back. "I know you like to keep abreast of my progress."

"Indeed I do," he agreed, stepping down and getting out the book he had used to record my previous adventures. "So what have you been up to, apart from convincing my younger maids to leave?"

"Ah, about that... I hope it hasn't inconvenienced you at all."

"It has, actually. The older maids, the one that didn't join this fighting group they seem to have formed, have been doing their best. I suppose we must all make sacrifices in these times."

*Yes, having a few less maids is such a huge sacrifice for you. Moron, maybe you should actually leave these walls for once and see how your people are suffering out there. Then make plans to do something about it, instead of relying on me to do everything for you.* "You are quite right, of course, majesty."

I told him about having the floating basket made, and my journey south with the dragons. Finding the token in the swamp, (I didn't tell him about 'cosplaying' as a maid or finding the poem, though the princess was clearly holding herself back from asking exactly how I knew where it was as we clearly made a beeline for the place after leaving here), and then making our way back. How the tool shop owner gave me the armor because I had found the token, and how we were all rather stumped as to what to do next. "I suppose our current plan is to continue to fight monsters and see what other magic we can take from them," I decided. "Meanwhile we'll come up with possible plans to get rid of a huge dragon, and free the land from the grip of terror."

"As you have found the token, you will no doubt succeed," the king told me. "I do apologize for my behavior the first time we met. It seems you really are the one."

"Think no more of it," I told him. "I know you had your doubts, just as I did. You acted exactly as you should, and it was enough to get me started. In fact..." I counted out handfuls of coins and set them on the table. "I can now return the gold you gave me, which I considered a loan in any case, having the means to get as much as I want now."

"Thank you," he said seriously. "Unexpected, but welcome. I will see it put to good use. The gods know we have precious little of it around here anymore, especially after paying the craftsman for a floating basket. What a marvel that is, what will they think of next?"

"I can only guess, your majesty. If there's nothing else, I will take my leave."

"Of course. Oh, before that, you haven't come across any secret passages or anything in the castle have you?"

"I haven't really looked, your majesty. Should I?"

"I'm not sure," he replied, looking confused. "I just feel there may be an item of importance in the castle. But I can't find it. I recall as a small boy hearing about some kind of basement to the place, but my guards have found nothing in looking around. I just wondered if your destiny had caused you to stumble on it."

"I'm afraid not."

"Pity. Well, if you must go without it, that too must be your destiny. I just wish I could remember what it was this castle held. No matter. You my go, and you have my prayers that an idea for what to do about the Dragonlord will come to you soon."

*Yes, don't offer any actual help, just 'prayers' because that always works.* I bowed and made my way out. *That went a little better than expected. Let's see how the others*

*are doing at the blacksmith's and go from there. Wonder what he was talking about though, a magical item hidden here long ago? I wouldn't mind one, maybe I should wander around a bit, see if my 'destiny' can be of some help.*

Chapter 24  
The hero gets some much needed information

“Two months,” the blacksmith was saying as I entered his shop.

“There’s no way you can do it faster than that?” Alita protested.

“Not if you want something that’s going to hold up. What in the world?” He looked past her and saw me coming into the room. “What is that?”

“Oh, you like it?” I asked him modestly. “Just a little something-something I got from a certain someone. Pay it no mind.” He strode around the counter and started prodding me. “Do you mind?”

“Someone really made armor out of dragon scale,” he finally allowed. “That’s crazy.”

“Crazy enough it just might work?”

“Oh, it’ll work, if you can survive every dragon in the land attacking you the moment they- wait a second. Don’t you have some dragons on your side? How did they take it? Or have you not shown them yet?”

“Let’s not dwell on the past,” I told him. “How about the armor for my party members here? Two months?”

“At the earliest. I’m only one man, and armor, especially as fancy as they want it, will take time. If I even have enough raw material, which I may not.”

“Can you melt their current stuff down? I’ll donate my old armor to the effort as well, as you can see I don’t need it.”

“I suppose, that would fill in the gaps. They want full suits, more or less, so that will take a lot of iron.”

“What if you mixed gold into it?” Clarissa asked. “We can get you lots of that.”

“That would be super heavy though.”

“Would it?” I asked. I jingled my pouch. “No matter how much gold I put in here, it doesn’t seem to weigh any more.”

That brought him up short. “You’re right. Never thought about that before.”

“Besides we’re stronger than we look,” Alita told him. “Fighting monsters for a month will do that to you. Even if it was heavy, it wouldn’t weigh us down all that much. And if we have two months, we’ll be stronger still!”

“I might be able to add bulk by creating a shell of iron, then doing a gold/iron backing. I don’t know, I would have to see how well it held up in a small scale test before I made four complete armor sets with gold in the mix.”

“We could make it to nearby towns while you work,” I suggested. “See what iron they have available. If it’s going to take that long away, use what you have for the first one and we’ll see what we can find for the others.”

“Fair enough. Obviously I’ll give you a break on the price if you supply your own iron or gold, if it comes to that.”

“Speaking of gold,” Rose spoke up. “Here’s a down payment.” She handed a coin pouch over and he hefted it.

“Thank you kindly, Rose.” He handed it back. “But you don’t need to do that, I know you’re good for it.”

“Oh, okay.” She shyly took it back.

“As for the rest of you...”

“Oh, sure, make us pay up front,” Alita handed over one, as did Clarissa.

“Don’t get me wrong, ladies, I’m sure you’re good for it as well but...”

“No, we understand,” Clarissa told him. “Rose is Rose. We’ll leave you to it.”

“I’ll need your measurements though,” he told them, “so don’t think you’re going anywhere just yet. Follow me into the back and take everything off. Now where did I put my tape? Apprentice, have you seen that ribbon with the marks on it?” He walked into the back.

“Measurements?” Rose asked, looking ready to bolt. “Taken by a *man*?”

“Afraid so,” Alita told her, pulling her by the hand. “You want custom armor, it has to fit, and there’s only one way to assure that. Just like getting a dress made. Come on, I’ll make sure he doesn’t leer any longer than necessary.”

“But... But...”

“You wait outside!” Clarissa told me, pointing to the door.

I raised my hands in surrender. “Of course. I’ll be just outside.” *I’ve seen you all already anyway, because of the cosplay. Cosplay.* I snorted. *I’ve been hanging around dragons too long. Soon I’ll want to pay for things with dogecoins.*

Moments later the three red faced girls joined me again.

“Everything go okay?”

“We will never speak of it again,” Alita informed me. “So what’s the plan?”

“Monster fighting time, I suppose,” I told her. “Then tonight we talk about how we’re going to actually win this fight.”

With the magic we had returning to the town was a snap, so we simply walked in a straight line away from the castle all day. We killed monsters as usual, and when the sun was going down we headed back to the town. We had a hearty meal and finally the topic of what we were going to do about the Dragonlord was at hand.

“Something is missing,” Clarissa announced, after a moment of discussion.

“Hope?” Alita asked. “Sanity? Common sense?”

“No, no, I mean we have no idea what we’re doing.”

“Yes, that’s why we’re talking about it, right?” Rose asked.

“That’s still not what I mean. Stay here, I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She grabbed her weapons and headed out the door.

“What’s she planning?” Alita asked as she vanished though it.

We all just shook our heads.

Moments later she was back, with a guard in tow. She shoved him down into a chair and grabbed another one for herself. “Everyone, meet Kandan, a guard at the castle.”

“I was, until I was abducted and brought here!” he protested. “I’m still supposed to be on duty you know! What’s all this about? Aren’t you the runaway maids?”

“Runaway?” Alita scoffed. “We’re trying to save the world here, you know? Finding another job in a village literally two minutes away isn’t running away, either. What have you been doing lately?”

“My job. Guarding,” he answered testily. “I’m not just going to run off when the fancy takes me.”



"Fancy!?" She slowly stood up and went for her sword. "I'll show you fancy!"

"Don't fight," Rose told her, laying a hand on her arm. "Just tell us what he's doing here."

Clarissa waited, arching an eyebrow.

"Fine." She plopped down in her chair again. "But this better be good."

"It will be," Clarissa told us. "I asked around. You know how, when the Dragonlord first showed himself the king sent a force of soldiers to the castle to try and kill him?"

I nodded. "He told me as much himself. He said they all died. All but... one..." I glanced at the man sitting with us, and he let out a breath.

"Yes, I was the one the Dragonlord let go," he admitted. "To tell the tale, and all that. He ordered no monster to harass me on the way out, and I crawled back to the castle in disgrace. I've tried to make up for what happened but there's no way I can. He... he killed them all. And he... And he..." The man looked about to break down, and I could imagine why. If I had gone in with a force of hundreds of soldiers and I was the only one to come out alive? How would I feel?

"It's okay," Rose told him softly, taking his hand in hers. "It wasn't your fault. No one here blames you. We're not here to make you relive that. Just relax."

"Thanks. Rose, right? I always heard you were kind, it's just-"

"Actually, that's exactly what we're here to make him do," Clarissa told us. "Sorry, but it's important. Right now you're the only one that's been in the castle, and seen the Dragonlord himself. We need to know everything."

"Oh, so we can plan accordingly," Alita decided. "Smart. Yes, turn his act against him. Look, Cranston or whatever-"

"Kandan."

"Right, Kandan. This is your chance to make your being alive still mean something. Tell us everything. If there's a hope of us defeating the Dragonlord, it rests with you."

*I always thought it rested with me, shows you what I know.*

"You really think so?" He looked around the table, sounding surprised.

*It is a good idea. I was going to suggest scouting the place out with the basket, maybe even taking a look at the layout from the inside, if we can get in without being attacked right off the bat. What does 'off the bat' even mean? What do bats have to do with it? Anyway, this way we don't need to, he can just tell us!*

"Don't feel you have to force yourself," Rose told him. "But if it's not too much for you-"

"Force yourself," Alita told him. "You think this is a game? We have one shot at this. Give us what we need to make the most of it."

"Yes, I know," he sputtered. I noticed he hadn't let go of Rose's hand, and was actually gripping it tighter. "I'll try."

"One second," Clarissa told him, getting up.

"Now where are you going?" Alita demanded. "You're the one who brought him here! If there was someone else you should have gotten them-"

"It'll just take a second, sheesh!" She went over to the counter and came back with a drink for Kandan and some paper, ink, and pen. "Good thing they had some, but they keep records of things too." She gave him the mug.

"Thanks," he said, drinking about half at once. "Okay then."

"Go ahead." She dipped the pen in the ink and held it above the page.

"The castle had at least seven floors, and the layout was almost nonsensical," he began. "Some floors were large, sprawling mazes completely in the dark, while others seemed to be little more than staircases. Monsters crowded everywhere. Werewolves, wizards, men of stone, armored suits with no one inside. We were completely unprepared, but we knew we had to win through. We ran from what we could, many sacrificed themselves to block the path so others could move forward. We had to move up and down stairs, I couldn't draw you a map, just to get anywhere. The place seemed built to force us into the longest path possible in the confines of the castle walls. Narrow hallways, no real rooms, just monsters, and darkness. And the screams of the dying as we pressed on. Oh, the screams..."

"It's okay," Rose told him. "You're doing great."

"But you made it down?" Alita prompted, after he took another drink from his mug.

"We did," he told her. "Down deep. How he even made it that deep, I don't know. We passed a more open area, water on every side. Held back by magic? I don't know, it must be, the place is an island. He somehow dug until he hit water, underground stream maybe? Cavern full of water? Pushed it back, put in the final floor, and just to show his power left some walls unfinished. No stone held back the water, it was just floating there."

"That's going to be a problem," Alita mused.

"Let him finish, plan later," Rose chided. "Go on, Kandan."

"We went past it, into a small chamber. Throne room. I'll never forget that. Six meters across? Diamond shape, with the throne in the center. He sat on what looked like enormous blocks of gold."

*What is with people in power sitting in tiny rooms? He has a whole castle and he sits in a damp chamber at the bottom? I guess he is a dragon so he has some excuse. And he wanted whoever came to fight through the whole place, I guess. Jerk.*

"Wait, how did he fit into a six meter across room?" Alita demanded. "That doesn't make sense."

"He's not that fat," Kandan explained. "In fact he looked rather frail. All the worse when he... You know."

"They don't know he's a real dragon," I told her. "They think he's just a man with the title of Dragonlord. Apparently he keeps that form in his castle. Probably because it was not built to hold dragons, but humans."

"That raises some possibilities." Her eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"He welcomed us, praised us for getting so far. Then just used magic to kill everyone but me. We were weakened by that time but still. He cast some kind of fire spell, burned them up one at a time. Just laughed as we tried to attack him."

*Not high enough 'level,' not good enough armor or weapons. They have spears, for goodness sake. Still, something to watch out for. We knew he was a spell casting dragon, it's too bad they didn't know the secret. Maybe a few 'levels' and they would have survived.*

"Said I should go back and tell everyone what I saw that day. He gave me a guide, a wizard, who led me back outside. The wizard blew the bridge apart right in front of me, cast a spell on me that sent me back to the castle. I told the king we had failed. He was

still in shock from the death of his wife, he's never been the same since. He let the Dragonlord have whatever he demanded, and here we are today."

"Can you draw out any of the castle layout?" Clarissa asked, holding the pen out.

He shook his head. "It was complete darkness. Some of us brought torches, but they don't help that much. We were just rushing through, trying to make the sacrifice of those that stayed behind worth it. There were so many twists and turns, and narrow passages, it's impossible."

"But no *secret* passages? The path was straightforward just long and harrowing?"

"No secret passages, no."

"That's something." She made a note.

"I'm not sure what else to tell you."

"I don't have any questions," Clarissa told him. "You?" She looked around the table.

"How high was the ceiling?" I asked. "In the room with the Dragonlord I mean."

"Regular height? I don't know, I wasn't there as an interior decorator. It didn't seem all that high, I guess?"

I shared a knowing look with Alita, who nodded. "I think that's it."

"Okay." Clarissa wiped the pen off and capped the ink. "This is good stuff."

"You think so?"

"It's a lot more than we knew before, so yes. Thank you. If you think of anything else, come find us in town."

"And you'll use this to kill him?"

"We'll make a plan. Hopefully our own strength and skill will kill him. This is just so we know what to expect on our way there."

"I wish you luck. If there is something else I can do, let me know."

"We will. Thanks."

The others and I thanked him, and he drained his mug and stood. "I'll see you around. Rose, I hope I see you later. Don't get killed, okay?"

"I won't," she promised. "Bye."

*Oh sure, she gets a 'don't get killed' what about the rest of us?*

"So what does that tell us?" Alita asked when he was gone. "Anything we didn't really know before? I mean I suspected it wasn't going to be easy."

"Interesting trick with the water," Clarissa replied. "A form in insurance?"

"Probably. If you kill him the magic goes away, and the water crashes into the place. I doubt you would be able to get out in time... If you didn't have magic."

*Which we all do, so it's not a problem for us.*

"We would have to be fast though," Rose added. "It sounded like it was right there. We would have to kill him, make sure he was dead, and then avoid the rushing wave. Who knows how fast the water would move?"

"We would probably be fine," Alita said. "Those soldiers were dead one way or the other. Poor guy. But maybe we can give him a little peace. You thinking what I'm thinking?" She asked me.

"Yeah. He, for some reason, hangs out in human form. In a room too small to accommodate his full bulk. We keep him in there, and we only have to fight the man. A far easier prospect than fighting the dragon why are you looking at me like that Rose?"

She was looking at me like she was fighting hard to not call me an idiot right to my face, because she was too nice a person for that.

"He probably knows the same magic we do," she reminded us. "He can just take the fight outside. In fact if we attack him I see it going like this. We step into the chamber, say we're going to take his life, he says, 'not so, and to punish your insolence I'm going to destroy the town you came from!' He vanishes, turns into a dragon now that he is outside, flies over there, burns the place to the ground, and is waiting for us when we make it back there. He doesn't know we have magic to bring ourselves outside, but we still can't move as fast as a flying dragon. The town would be in danger, and it would be all our fault!"

"Crap she's right," Alita spat.

"Could we enrage him enough he stays there, trying to kill us, until he runs out of magical power?" Clarissa asked hopefully. "Then he can't leave and we can kill him then?"

"Saving enough magical power of our own to escape the water?" Alita asked.

"Oh. It could be done, right?"

"If you think anything you could say or do would keep him there in such a rage that he lost track of how much magic he used. I mean I have a sense of it, when I'm getting low. Don't you?"

"Yeah," she admitted.

"And would our healing magic outlast whatever destructive spells he threw at us? We really don't know how much magic he can do at one time. Don't want to find out the hard way, either."

"Well, you think of something!"

"Cancel the magic on the water and hope it slams into him before he can react?" I suggested. "Hard to cast magic when you're not able to breathe, I think."

"It's an awful risk," Rose told me.

*Well you think of something!* I didn't say because I wasn't going to be mean to Rose, *what kind of a monster would do that?*

"We'll keep it in mind as a last resort," Alita allowed, "but it's not easy. For one thing how would we cancel his spell, none of us has that kind of magic. Stopspell will stop a spell from being cast, but would it work on a spell already going? I don't think so. Plus, he could be an excellent swimmer, and he must know his own castle, he won't get lost."

"They can see in the dark, dragons," I admitted. "He could simply take a breath and swim out of there. I wonder if he can still see in the dark in his human form?"

"He can still do magic," Clarissa figured. "So I don't see why that would change."

"Must still sleep though, could we put him to sleep?" Rose asked. "That's a magic we do have."

"I'm sure the first thing he would do, upon hearing someone in the hall, would be to cast Stopspell. I don't think we can count on using magic to fight him. Just to heal ourselves, that's safest."

"It's a fair point."

"We don't have to decide now," Alita told us, standing and stretching. "We got more information, we'll have plenty of time until the armor is done. Just think about it, and

we'll come up with something. He can't be invincible, even he has a weakness. Let's find it."

"Good night," we said to her, getting up ourselves.

But as I walked back to the inn I was troubled. *How are we going to beat him? He's superior to us in every way. Magically, physically, he seems untouchable. I can't even handle a 'young' dragon, even with the others helping it doesn't seem possible. How do you defeat something you can't even touch?*

## Chapter 25

### The hero makes his way to the final boss fight

In the days that followed we helped where we could in making the armor that incorporated the tokens and discussed various ideas on how to destroy the Dragonlord and survive the process. We didn't come up with much, and we realized after testing some things that our stopspell magic was more limited than we thought. It could stop magic being cast on the person that cast stopspell, but magic targeting someone else, for example yourself, could still be used. It didn't stop all magic around the person that cast it, just direct spells. So even if we did manage to fight his human form to the brink of death, he could still leave the castle with magic. Because he wasn't casting the magic on us, but on himself, stopspell wouldn't do a thing. I didn't know how long it took him to change, but I had to assume not long at all. If he got out, changed, and flew away, he could be anywhere in the world in hours and simply recover. Then come back to fight us again and again with a horde of minions until he won.

This was not ideal.

But what could we do?

This is what kept me up at night, pacing around various places trying to look for inspiration. I wandered the town, the castle, trying to think of a way to kill the Dragonlord quickly enough he couldn't just cast a spell and get away. Once he left the castle it was over, his dragon form was basically unbeatable. *Our weapons are just too small compared to him. He's armored head to toe, can fly out of our reach, and still breathe fire or cast spells at us from the air. If only there was some way to collapse the castle on top of him while he was asleep. Loto, you thought about flying machines and wheels on boats, why not about something to make a castle crumble? You know, something useful?*

I was wandering around the castle wondering how I would collapse it (and keeping an eye out for buttons or levels that would open secret doors to a lower level) when I saw something. Something I had come to hate since coming here, but a mystery I had never bothered to solve. It had given me trouble in the past, but now maybe it could be useful to me? But it was part of the castle, right? I couldn't just yank it out of there and...

Or could I?

A fantastic idea blossomed in my mind. Yes, I could see it now! It was a simple plan, so it didn't rely on too many things going right. And if magic worked the same there as it did here, and that would be easy to test, it could work. Right? It solved the problem nicely, but could it be done? I ran out of the castle and back to town, through the streets that were dark and empty now. But lights were on inside the various shops, as I had hoped. *With the castle ordering their own basket, I figured every able bodied person that can hold a tool would be working on some part of it.* I burst into the carpenter's shop, and those inside nearly dropped their tools in surprise. How must I have looked in that moment? Eyes wide, winded, hair every which way, and then bursting in on them like that? But I didn't consider that at the moment, I simply went straight to the man in charge.

"I need you to make something for me!" I demanded of him, looming over him as he was seated. "Drop everything else! You must finish this by the time the armors are done!"

"What?" the man asked nervously. "Make you something? What? Can't it wait until morning?"

"You have to get started now! I have a plan to defeat the Dragonlord, and you're going to help me!"

"Me?" he squeaked. "I'm just a carpenter."

"Exactly!" I announced, poking him from the side and making him jump a little again. "It must be you, there's no other way."

"Other way to what? You're not making any sense."

"What? Oh. Right. I should explain." I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. "Here's what we're going to do..."

I explained my idea.

The man protested it would never work.

I explained it would, given how I knew this world worked, and hadn't people told me things were the way they were and there was no way around it?

The man wondered if I hadn't cracked from the strain.

I told him I hadn't, and that I knew of several examples that I could demonstrate with not far from here.

The man thought about it for a while, drumming his fingers on the table.

I tried to contain my frustration at any delay. The work would take weeks, if it could be done at all, letting him think about it wasn't any sort of delay. Besides he would need to go to bed soon, and with no plan to work from he couldn't start building anything.

The man got a far away look in his eye. "It could work, couldn't it?" he finally asked.

"That's what I've been telling you!" I tried not to shout. "You see?"

"I'll get started right away."

The next day I excitedly told my friends the plan, and they too thought I was crazy at first.

"We have to do something crazy," I told them. "What other options do we have? We have to nail him with something so outlandish he's never even considered it. And this is a guy that trapped his own castle, I remind you."

"I would want to do some testing," Clarissa told me.

"Of course!" I agreed. "I'm not suggesting we don't. In fact it's critical we do because like Alita said we only get one shot at this."

"I did say that," she agreed. "I'm so smart sometimes."

"No one here would deny it," Rose told her seriously.

"They better not!"

"So let's test it!"

We spent that morning making sure every part of the plan would work, and they finally came around and decided there was no reason it wouldn't. Magic worked a certain way, and it produced the same results every time. We could use that fact, in conjunction with what I had learned along the way, and put an end to the Dragonlord's

reign of terror. All he had to do was play his part, and we were pretty sure what we had learned from the survivor would insure that.

With the plan in motion we still had work to do. We raised our 'levels' as much as we could while the blacksmith and carpenter worked on our stuff, and finally it was all ready. We were ready. We needed to be as strong as possible just to fight our way through the castle, so gaining 'levels' was necessary. The other former maids were ready, as they had a part to play in all this too. "If the plan doesn't work, it's up to you to contain him until we get back," I told them. "We can't count on having enough magical power to leave the castle if he does. We may have to fight our way back out, meaning you'll have to deal with him for a time."

"We understand," they had said. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that." I hoped that too, but they were strong and capable from all the work they had done, so I had faith in them to cover that part of the plan.

The morning we planned to attack the castle the three came out of the inn wearing their new armor. Each was painted a different color, and each had a slightly different style, but my heart soared to see them. It wasn't the clanking, ill fitting armor of old, that one might buy and put up with because there was no other choice. No. This was armor tailored to the person who wore it, following their every curve and looking more like a second skin than simply a metal barrel they had climbed into. The joints were hinged and reinforced, the token shined from their chests where it had been placed. They were truly Dragon Warriors. The townspeople as well quieted as we stood before them, I in my dragonscale and they in their shining and complete suits.

"Ready to go?" Alita asked me.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I told her. "Everyone?"

They nodded their heads. I turned to the assembled group. "We go now to face the Dragonlord," I told them. "We go, knowing that there is every chance one or more of us will never return." *Please let Loto's journal be wrong. Please let this not be a mistake. I don't want to lose them because I wasn't strong enough to say they should remain behind, that this was my fight alone. But they were with me every step of the way, their own tokens prove that. This has to work, it has to!* "But we go willingly, to protect you, and the world, from this great evil you all know. Before the day is out, the threat of the Dragonlord will be no more, or we will have died in the attempt. You have all worked tirelessly to support us. First with the basket, and then on my next idea, despite what misgivings you had. But the basket worked, you see one floating above you now." *He's never attacked it, does he not care? Does he not know, just sitting down in his lair at the bottom of the castle? Much depends on this.* "So too will this idea work. I have staked my life on it. I bid you farewell for now, please pray that we all return triumphant."

They cheered for us, and we climbed into the basket. All around it, former maids in armor not as nice as my party's grabbed hold of ropes and stepped into rope loops around the basket. It being only so big, and it taking too long to move back and forth, we had to deliver everything in one shot. We closed the flaps and waited, the basket started lifting off the ground. *But will it be enough to lift everything?* We hoped it would, and the dragons stood ready should this whole crazy scheme of mine work out. The bag floated higher, the ropes straining now to lift the other people and the crate the basket was attached to. *Come on, come on, lift, higher!* It stopped lifting.



“What do we do?” Rose asked, looking over the edge. Her hands gripped it tightly, she wasn’t any more comfortable in the air but she seemed determined to show courage now. “It’s not going to lift off the ground.”

“Tie the other basket to it, quick!” Clarissa suggested. “The lifting power of the two bags might be enough!”

The people below hurried to accomplish that, grabbing the line the basket was tied to and dragging it over to us. Every person in town it seemed was there, straining to keep the basket from floating away as they worked.

*We’re all a part of this, look at what working together we can accomplish.*

With the additional bag the crate started to lift, people were calling for all vents to be closed, for more heat to be captured by the bags. The operator did so, then climbed down, so his weight wasn’t adding to the problem. (And not at all because he didn’t want to get dragged to the castle, it was just the weight thing, he said so over and over) The former maids were holding on under the basket as the two bags slowly started dragging the crate, and then it worked, the entire thing lifted off the ground, and the dragons strained to move it to the shore and then over the water.

“You can do it,” Rose whispered, knowing even shouting they wouldn’t be able to hear. “It’s not far, you can do this! I believe in you.”

And they did. The dragons dragged the two baskets to Dragonlord island, across the swamp that surrounded the place and to the entrance of the castle. We didn’t need to let out much hot air to thump the package to the ground and the soldiers (*no longer simply ‘former maids’* I thought to myself, *they are soldiers now the same as any other*) got ready to heft it into position. But there was one more test we had to perform. The castle loomed large ahead of us, but we knew what we had to do. The four of us jumped from the basket, the dragons waving and pulling the baskets back the way they had come. *They’ve done their job, now it’s up to us.* The castle door was open, what did the Dragonlord have to fear? So we went inside and Rose used her spell to go outside again. The final test was done, and we waited for her return.

“They’re setting it up now,” she told us. “I hope this works.”

“There’s every indication it will,” I assured her. “Come on, we’ve kept the Dragonlord waiting long enough.”

“Before we go further,” Clarissa said, putting a hand up. “I just want to say, it’s been great fighting at your side these last few months. I never believed when we maids decided to band together and learn how to fight that I would be marching into the Dragonlord’s castle one day. Rose, Alita,” she said my name as well, “it has been an honor.” She stuck out her hand, and we grinned, sticking our hands out to rest on top of hers. “Let’s do this.”

“This” being a conservative slog through the castle, lighting torches and using herbs to preserve our magic as long as possible. As the soldier had told us the place was a maze, and we knew we had to make it to the Dragonlord looking like as much of a threat as possible. We fought as best we could as a unit, me in the lead, and it worked in our favor that monsters seemed to come at us one at a time. We could sometimes get around them, if the passageway wasn’t too narrow, and strike from all sides. I don’t know where Rose got all her arrows from, but she stayed out of harms way as best she could, firing again and again to cover us. (She picked up any unbroken arrows after the

monster turned to gold of course) We marked passages with chalk so we knew where we had come from and didn't get turned around, and more than once came to a dead end and had to take another path. The girl's armor didn't look so new anymore, but mine was holding up nicely. The enchantment saving me from most blows, so I didn't need as much healing as I feared. *It was completely worth it, without this armor we would have really had a much harder time of this. I can take the monster's focus, letting the others get around them, and even as strong as they are, we're high enough 'level' that we're doing okay.*

Then we came to another dead end, and this one seemed to be a small stone chamber. We were about to turn and go back up the stairs when Alita put a hand on my shoulder. "Wait, what's that?"

Clarissa held the torch up, as we only used one at a time and both her and Alita switched off torch duty as one went out. (Rose couldn't use a torch and a bow at the same time, after all) We looked over at the far wall, expecting some kind of monster or other horror but it was something completely out of our expectation. Hanging on the wall was a magnificent looking sword.

"What in the world?" Alita asked, looking around. "Don't get too near it."

"Agreed, it could be a trap," I mused, crouching down on the floor to look at the stones that made it up. *Are any loose? Does it look like the floor could give way to a pit trap or something?*

"What a sword though, do you think..." Rose asked.

"Loto's sword?" Clarissa wondered. "I mean it could be. Look at it!"

The sword was long, but with a shining, narrow blade that reflected the torchlight like a mirror. Not a hint of rust could be seen, and the guard looked like a stylized bird, not uncommon for swords made hundreds of years ago or so the blacksmith had once told me. I had asked him what the last sword of Loto might look like out of curiosity, and what he described seemed to match the sword that was before us very closely.

"Must be a trap," Rose said. "Why keep it here otherwise?"

"Agreed," I told her. "Why not keep it yourself, even if you don't use a sword he wouldn't want me using it. He would have kept it at his side. It makes no sense for it to be here."

"Is there some way we could get it?" Alita asked. "I don't see any traps, no spikes, no threads to trip us or trigger a collapse. I mean it's right there!"

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "But consider, the Dragonlord's magic can turn him from a dragon to a human. It can hold back water, and make monsters out of gold. Could it not also turn a stick into a sword? I don't want to be holding a stick at a critical moment when I'm face to face with the Dragonlord."

"Agreed," she finally allowed. "Let's just leave it. It's too suspicious that's it here, and we should rely on what we know now. If it's still here when he's dead, well, fine."

"Agreed," I said.

"Agreed," Rose said.

"Agreed," Clarissa said.

We left, making our way back down the passage. *It's for the best. We're not trying to kill him anyway, that way lies disaster I can feel it. This sword has served me well, and I paid enough for it. Let it be my weapon even now.*

We continued downward, closer and closer to our confrontation.

Finally we saw it, the final level. Water held back on either side, just as the man had said. The Dragonlord was near. We checked our armor, tightened the straps on our weapons, and burst from the hallway to our final confrontation.

“Welcome,” said a man sitting on blocks of gold. “I was beginning to think you were all dead. Shall we get started?”

Chapter 26  
The hero closes the trap, and his journey begins

“Wait a moment,” said the man, as if seeing me for the first time. He had stood and saw leaning closer to me, as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. “What is that you’re wearing? Are you here to pledge your loyalty to me, as some kind of human dragon or what? Are these others some kind of offering to me?”

“I’m just cosplaying as a dragon,” I told him. “You have a problem with that?”

“You’re what?”

“Cosplaying. It’s a Draconic word that means-”

“I know what it means,” the man snapped. “I was speaking Draconic before your grandparents’ grandparents were born. You’re pretending to be a dragon?”

“Honestly? I’m mostly wearing it because I figured it would enrage you, given your ban on it. The protection aspects are nice as well, of course.”

“Of course,” the man agreed. “And it’s more weird than anything else. What if I wore a suit made of human toenails?”

“That would be disturbing...” I agreed.

“Same here. I’ll let it slide, seeing as how you’ll be dead either way. You *are* here to kill me, I take it?” He looked the four of us over.

“You are the Dragonlord, are you not?” Alita asked.

“Yes, wouldn’t want to accuse the wrong guy,” Clarissa agreed.

“I am. You may call me Mhen and I am lord of all dragons.” He spread his arms, purple robe billowing and the staff in his hand crackling with energy.

*Wait, did he put magic on his staff to make it look more magical?*

“Don’t look like much,” Alita told him. “I bet I could take you alone!”

“Oh do you?” he sneered at her. “Maybe-”

“Before we get into that,” I interrupted. “I have a question for you.”

The others looked at me in confusion, this wasn’t in the script but I had to offer him a way out. I had to. It was the only way I would feel better about what was to come if he played his part as we expected.

“Go on.”

*Why did you lock the princess up in that chamber to die? Why the sword hanging there?* But no, I had only one question that needed to be answered right now. “Why did you do it? Why did you turn on us?”

“Is that what I did?”

“According to the king, yes. He told me of when you first appeared, how you helped all those in need. The people loved you, and everywhere you went you were welcomed with open arms. What changed? What drove you to this? Or do you just *like* sitting around a damp basement with nothing to do?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Strange, sounds like you’ve gotten most of the actually story,” he admitted. “But it’s what happened after that he probably didn’t tell you. He may not even realize it, I don’t see why a human would. Yes, in the beginning I basked in my newfound adoration. Having just mastered the spell to take the likeness of a human I went among them. I saw their need, how they lived. I was happy to help, and they were happy to accept my help. But that’s the problem, you see. They demanded more. It wasn’t enough for them, saving crops for example. The big stuff that magic can do

easily but is hard to do otherwise. No, they wanted me to solve more and more minor problems for them. It got on my nerves. I finally saw your people for who they truly are, and I knew unless I got rid of you, forever would you be hounding me for the most minor of things.”

“And so you decided to kill us all,” Rose ended sadly.

*Yeah, couldn't you have just left? Flown to other villages or started a magical school so they didn't have to rely on your magic all the time?*

“Not all of you,” he protested quickly. “You’re still alive, aren’t you? The strongest will survive, and be better for it. They’ll know how to solve their own problems, and not rely on me. Then I can once again walk the fields and the mountains and the plains in peace. Without you humans dogeing my every step.”

“You mean dogging,” Alita told him.

“Oh yes, sorry, dogging- I don’t care about that! Who has been teaching you Draconic anyway?”

“Sheesh, sorry, don’t have to bite my head off.”

“Not yet,” he replied slyly. “Wait for it.”

“So have we won your little game?” I asked him. “Will you call off your monsters now? We did make it here, we solved our own problem like you said.”

“Oh, you think I should give up, just like that?” He snapped his fingers. “You made it here, promotions all around and we head back for a beer? Is that what you think?”

“I don’t drink beer,” Rose told him.

“Maybe the occasional ale,” Clarissa agreed. “Beer? No way.”

“You know what I- answer the question.”

“If you’re playing by the same rules as we are, yes,” I told him bluntly. “You’ve accomplished what you wanted, so call off the monsters and give us our gold back. Help us learn magic, so we don’t have to rely on you, and can solve our own problems. We’re willing to learn, I think you’ll find.”

“Very well,” he replied simply.

There was a moment of silence.

“Really?” I asked, hopeful. “You’ll really do it?”

“Honestly using gold like this breaks my heart anyway, I would rather hoard it. If you’ve really learned your lesson, there’s no reason for me to continue, and you can start getting that gold back I’ve already used.”

“We have.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“So prove it.”

That stumped me. “Do what?” I stammered.

“Prove it. If you’ve attained the wisdom I’ve hoped, and you represent the best that human kind has to offer, prove it.”

“Tell me how, and I’ll do it.”

“Oh no,” he shook his head sadly. “Remember, this is about solving your own problems. You have a problem, solve it. I’m waiting.”

I looked between them, and they looked back at me, unable to come up with anything by the looks of it. But I remembered the journal, and I wondered if this is why it had warned me to come alone. "You want me to kill one of them, don't you?"

"What an interesting choice," Mhen admitted, looking interested. "What would killing one of your companions prove?"

"That I was serious in meaning what I said. That, by her sacrifice, she also realized that giving her life would save many others."

"Now that would be something to see," he admitted. "If one of them just stood there and allowed you to take their lives. Of course, if one is good, isn't two better? I mean I see three of them, certainly you don't need to leave with more than just one."

"I see," I told him, sounding resigned. *Time to go back on script.* "You don't intend to ever stop. This is all just a game to you, isn't it?" I drew my sword. "You know, I think Alita was right. You don't look like much. Maybe I'll just solve my problem by killing you."

"Oh will you?" Mhen screeched. "Foolish human, I might have actually done it, had you killed two of them. Had you chosen which of your friends lived or died. But no, you think you can take me? The greatest dragon who ever lived? See my true form and tremble!" He started tracing a magical symbol in the air.

"Wait, you can't-" I tried to say, but he just laughed and slammed the glowing symbol into himself. In the place of the man was... A very scrunched up dragon, pinned between the ceiling and the floor here who gave a little squeak of surprise. His limbs were mostly pinned against the floor, and his head was bent over because he was far too tall to fit in this tiny space. We had known what was coming and flattened ourselves against the far end of the room, so we weren't crushed under his bulk. I smirked and advanced, there was still a little room to move, for me at least and my party. Not so much for him though. "Didn't exactly think that one through, did you?" *So much for the greatest dragon, who can't think one step ahead and realize he's way too big for the space he's trying to occupy.*

"Wait a second, let's be reasonable about this," he managed.

"Oh, we're very reasonable people," I assured him. "Aren't we ladies?"

"Very much," they all agreed, raising their weapons and advancing.

"Wait, wait!" he cried, and we slowed.

"Yes?" I asked. "You've changed your mind?"

"Maybe?" He worked one claw loose and traced the same symbol in the air, managing to press it against himself again. With an inrush of air the dragon was gone, and the man was back.

"Where do your clothes come from?" Rose asked.

"Fools!" he ignored her. "You should have killed me when you had the chance. Now I'll just wait for you outside, at my full size, and you will all know true despair!" He laughed and vanished.

We all breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. *At least, I hope so.* "Come on, we better head back there just in case."

"You wouldn't have killed us, right?" Alita asked me.

"What? No. I would have fallen on my own sword before I raised it against you," I assured her. "Any of you."

"How could you even ask that?" Rose asked her. "Do you really think so little of him?"

“Me? What about you? Where do your clothes come from, honestly.”

“What? It’s a legitimate question.”

“Come on,” Clarissa told them. “Before he releases the water down here, it’ll only take a second for him to realize what’s happened.”

So we slogged back through the castle, using our light magic this time as we didn’t have to conserve any more. (I hoped) The way was easier because we could follow the markings we made, and soon we saw the shaft of sunlight through the door that told us we were close. I didn’t hear the sounds of combat, which was a good sign, and we stepped around the device that I heard shouting coming from.

*The reason we couldn’t use our magic to wish ourselves out here. It may just work after all.* “No problems?” I asked the soldiers that were there.

“None at all,” one answered. “It seems it worked perfectly. He’s been swearing at us, but-”

“Is that the so called hero?” a voice shouted. “What is this? Let me out of here at once!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” I told him. I walked over to it and knocked. “I think you’re going to be in there a long, long, time.”

“I’ll escape, just you watch. Fireball!” There was a noise from inside. “Yipes! What in the world? What is this? I demand to know what you’ve done to me!!!”

“Pretty simple, really. For some reason locked doors around here are quite troublesome. You can’t get them open without a key. So I thought to myself, what happened if you built a frame, and you installed six doors to make a cube? Could you trap even a Dragonlord? It seems the answer is yes.”

“You haven’t trapped me. I’ll just magic myself out like so!” There was a word barked, probably Draconic. “Wait, what?”

“It’s how the magic works,” I explained. “You used the magic of ‘outside’ first I assume, we know that spell. It takes you to just outside whatever building or cave you’re in. In this case, just outside your castle where we put the doors. But you can’t use that spell anymore because you’re technically outside already. This isn’t a building, and even if it was for the purposes of the magic, what door would the spell select? The last one closed? I made sure to close and lock the *bottom* door last, and the magic can’t shove you underground so it wouldn’t work in any case. And you won’t be able to use ‘return’ magic either, because it takes you to the place you left from. In that case, right here in front of your castle, where this cube is. As long as we don’t move it, you’re stuck here.”

“You trapped me behind *doors*?” He sounded incredulous. “These are actual doors?”

“That’s right. They can’t be smashed aside, burned, chopped apart, only unlocked. Believe me, we tested it, and it made some trouble for me in the past. They’re just wood, but somehow being a door makes them special. So I thought, why not use that to our advantage? I knew right where you would go, so I left this here for you. You can’t escape with magic, and you can’t open a door without a key. I wouldn’t suggest transforming either, that would be *very* messy. I won, without fighting you for even a second. So would you say I’ve learned the lesson you tried to teach or not?”

“Ha! I’ll get out of here, just you wait!”

"I don't think so. Die in the dark, just like you left the princess to do. We're done here."

We signaled the dragons, who started dragging the basket back to pick us up, while the guardians of the cube started setting up camp. Until we were sure the Dragonlord had died of starvation or thirst someone had to watch the area. Just in case. They had agreed on a rotating schedule, which I and my friends were part of, as we needed to see this through as well.

"So we won," Rose said, standing there at my side. "And without the big fight we feared. A pity he couldn't see reason. We could have learned so much from him."

"Maybe," I agreed.

"My heart was about to burst, when you went off script like that," Alita complained. "It worked out but what were you thinking?"

"I had to give him a chance. Given how horrible that trap back there is, I couldn't condemn him to it without being absolutely sure."

"I think it was the right thing to do," Rose told her.

"I have to agree," Clarissa added. "You really did finish this honestly. Yes, he ended up trapped in that ingenious device you thought of, but you did give him a chance. More than he would have given you."

"Thanks. I'm just glad none of you are hurt."

"Nothing a bit of spellwork and a good night's rest wouldn't cure," Rose said with a smile. "Our armor needs some work too, if it's ever going to look as good as it did before."

"Why do we need it anymore?" Alita asked. "We won."

"We won't but the minions of the Dragonlord are still out there. Eventually they'll learn what we've done. If some are as smart as that one wizard I spoke to, there will be attempts to free him. They'll need keys, not easy to get when you're a monster, but we'll have to be on the lookout. We need to sweep the land end to end, and make sure they're gone. No more will be made, it's true, but how many are still out there? We have won the day, but there is still much work to be done."

"I'm sorry I asked," she groaned.

We all laughed.

Back at the castle we presented ourselves to the king and told our tale. As before the princess was at his side, sitting in the throne room.

"And you're pretty sure he's gone forever?" the king asked.

"I don't know how he can escape, given how doors and transportation magic works," I told him. "We'll be guarding the cube until we're sure he's dead. Given what the other dragons have said he'll probably hibernate, slowing his degradation so it could be years before we can be sure. But for now he's no threat to anyone."

"Well done!" The king hopped up off his throne. "And without whatever I thought was hidden here in the castle. How about that? I expect you'll want my kingdom now, as a reward? It's yours, here's the crown!" He whipped the crown off his head and held it out.



*Er, what? Why would I want that? Besides, weren't you the one to counsel me never to become a king? Pretty sure he did. Wait, that makes so much more sense now that I think about it. He really does hate it, doesn't he? Being king.*

"You would give up your kingdom, just like that?" Rose asked.

"Yeah, that doesn't make a lot of sense," Alita echoed. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing!" the king assured us, maybe a little too quickly. "I just want to reward you, that's all. Would you like to marry my daughter? Oh, but there are four of you. Well, you could all marry her!"

"Dad!" the princess yelled. "I can't marry four people. And three of them are girls!"

"What do you have against girls?" both Rose and Alita shouted back, then looked at each other, red faced.

"Anyway," I went on, "I still have work to do. The minions are not gone, they must be dealt with, and we must guard the cube. I have no time for running a kingdom." *If what you're doing here is running a kingdom, anyway. I don't see it.* "Though I thank you for the offer."

"One of you, then? A queen is just as well." He offered the crown to the others, and they shook their heads. "I see. Pity, pity." He put it back on his own head. "Perhaps in some kind of advisory role?"

*He really wants someone else to take the blame if something happens? Is that his game here?* "I'm told at one time kings had dragon advisors," I told him. "We happen to know three, why not ask one of them? Rekindle the tradition and make it harder for another Dragonlord to rise. After all, you don't make war on a kingdom you're the adviser to." *Right?*

"Oh, good idea, I'll ask them right away!" He ran out.

"Take care of your father, will you?" I asked the princess.

"You really don't love me, do you?" she asked sadly. "I felt so strongly that you had to in order to succeed. But you didn't need me at all. It's so strange. I expected to marry you, but I guess that will-"

*You know, maybe I should have taken that crown when I had the chance. Put this kingdom on the right path and get it away from these two. No, that wouldn't be right. They need time to heal and-* I found myself being kissed by someone, and in my shock didn't really kiss them back. Clarissa pulled away from me and spun on the princess.

"This one is mine," she told her. "Get your own. Let's go, hero." She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room, the other two trailing us and trying to stifle their laughter. "Don't read too much into it," she told me in the hall. "I like you and everything, but I saw that look on your face."

"What look?"

"Like you were about to say yes in the hopes that she might whisk you to her bedchambers right that second."

"I had no such look! It was pity, I was thinking about them needing to heal and the two of them drawing closer in their time of need and shared grief over losing the queen."

"Sure, keep telling yourself that. Come on, we have work to do."

"Tell her! Come on, you saw!"

"I don't know what I saw," Alita told them. "Rose, what did you see?"

"Hummm... I wonder."

The three led me, protesting, back into the sun. It was good to be among friends, and we did have work to do. Schools to set up, magic to rediscover, a world to fix. This world was broken, if trapping the Dragonlord behind a set of doors actually worked. I needed to discover how and why, and if anything could be done. If anything *should* be done. But for now, I was content. The danger would lessen every day we killed monsters without them being replaced, and soon people could travel again and start living their lives. Maybe even in a basket.