

Rational Dragon Warrior

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. 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 done so. 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 8 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. But I had little time to ponder this mystery as I was 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, sometimes called Loto or Roto, as he was called in his homeland so long ago?"

"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 was 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 dragon 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!"

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 said, shouldering past me to the door leading to the stairs to the lower level of the castle. I followed mutely.

At the base of the stairs, another pair of guards snapped to attention as the king passed, and he lead 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... find 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 grey, 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, high in the mountains I saw another castle, seeming to radiate malice, and I could well imagine the Dragonlord looking down from that castle to the lands he had claimed as his own. I shivered, but the king did not seem to notice, focused on the castle, as he said "Do you see that place?" he did not wait for my answer as he continued "when 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 them."

The king whirled on me, "Then all that changed. He reveled himself and began his rein 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 climbing the treacherous mountains to reach him. None of those soldiers ever came back. He killed them all, 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, he seemed to be the weary king I first saw once again. "So what would you have of me, supposed ancestor of Erdrick? You must want something, else you would not have come here to see the broken kingdom I no longer call myself the ruler of. If you did not want something you would be, at this very moment, planning on how to do the deed of slaying the Dragonlord, but 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. No shield. How is it you have even journeyed to this castle?" he asked, surprised. "Even the lands between this castle and Breconary 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, ancestor 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, and 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.

"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 stay away?" 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 for fancy for a fruit she imagined could be bought there, and

should have nothing to fear from the short journey from the castle to the nearby town. "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 of this troubled land."

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."

"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. "Otherwise, you will be dead. 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. 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."

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 wasn't such a good idea after all, Erdirick's ancestor or no. "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, exasperated.

"Quality? 1500 gold. You want something to practice with? Say, a little less than two hundred." said the shopkeeper 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 adorned the space within the doors of the so called "weapon shop", leading me to see the Dragonlord's hand in this, as well. "How much do you have? 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 the Dragonlord 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, his reaction was not the one I expected. He laughed.

"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 as- 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."

"What happened to them?"

"Dead, I expect." he said, scratching himself. "Never saw them again, anyway."

I shuddered and thought, what was I in for? Though, they may have just been saying that to get better prices, like the man said, and then skipped town. "And 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." I said dryly, the pieces coming together for me of the king's behavior, and that of his guards. They had obviously heard the story before! But why hadn't my parents told me about the Token? I thought to myself. That would have made things so much easier!

He leaned his arms on the counter and motioned me closer. "The rumors say that king's daughter, Princess Gwaelin, knows where the token has been hidden, that knowledge 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?"

"Hide and Seek?!" the man exclaimed. "Good lord man, she's at least your age, the princess isn't a child! Where have you been these past months? She was kidnapped by the Dragonlord ages ago!"

"What? Kidnapped?" 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.

"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 120 coins. "And a good sword costs fifteen hundred?" I asked, aghast. "I would need a trunk full of gold coins to buy that. I might as well just drop the trunk on anything that threatens me, it would be heavy enough!"

"Assuming you could lift it." the man said, looking at my arms.

I ignored the comment. "And that doesn't even begin to cover armor too, which I'll certainly need."

"To fight the Dragonlord, you're going to need Erdricks armor, if you can find it, and his lost sword, and a decent shield, and some luck. 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 a 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."

My eyes lit up. "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. "Anyway, do we have a deal?"

I hefted the club. It would have to do, so I handed him 60 pieces of gold.

"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. 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, whatever" 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.

Chapter 3: The use of magic to make things

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, sir? Monster repellent? 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?”

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 earlier. 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 and said “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, you want a dragon scale, don’t you?” he said in a whisper.

“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.”

“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 actually 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 said "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 the likes I had never seen. 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 was "I couldn't afford that! Not even the king could afford that!"

The man chuckled. "That's the problem. 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 did 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, and no one else's. Usually dragons are just off doing their 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!"

"They are. 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, but they were around long before the Dragonlord. Heck, long before Man some have said."

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?" "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 awhile. 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 speciality. 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 then 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 ancestor. What's your name, anyway?"

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

"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 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 basics. 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. and 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. 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 descendent. 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.

"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 Eridrik'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: Solving the 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. Secondly, 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! Give me something with an edge, please! But at least I was getting a workout. 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. I could only wonder at what awaited me, below.

Stepping up the few stone stairs leading to the entrance of the tomb, 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 did however feel a strange force as I mounted the stairs and a faint shimmer, like a curtain being parted, sparkled around me briefly. Perhaps I thought to myself, This place is protected by magics even the Dragonlord can not 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 the 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 gravesite, 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 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? I rushed to the chest and sank to my knees, hesitantly reaching out to touch it. Nothing seemed to happen, 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 come 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 ancestor or not? I guess it didn't matter, but still. 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 can not say more. I intreat 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 then 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 were better ways of doing things, and we were 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, time to go see 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: Using magic against our hero

I had only the briefest of warnings as a bolt of energy sizzled past me, making me throw myself to one side. I really need to get some armor one part of my brain thought at me. The other parts were all clambering to discover what had happened! To review, they said, you left the crypt, heading back into town. There was a tree outside you didn't recall seeing before, but didn't think anything of it. As you walked past it, you did happen to notice the shadow of the tree kind of looked like a hooded figure, and threw yourself to one side. Now you should turn around and see what's going on. I agreed. 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.

The wizard's 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 through 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! Another part of me wondered if this was the time and I remembered, oh yeah, the WIZARD.

"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. 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 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. Nice dodge there, by the way. How did you know?"

"The shadow."

He sighed. "You would have to notice that. Great, I had to get the "hero" with the high luck stat."

I looked confused.

"Luck influence perception checks- don't worry yourself too much. Just know that maybe after I kill you, I'll have enough experience to learn the Illusion: Greater spell which doesn't suffer from that stupid shadow flaw."

"The what?" I said, honestly confused. "How does killing me help you learn magic? That's just... dumb."

"From the man carrying the club. Somehow I am not insulted. 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, speaking a single word I didn’t understand. From out of nowhere, bands of force wrapped around me and I rather painfully slammed into them, apparently they didn’t move, while I still was. Ow.

“As I was saying.” the wizard said, as he lowered his staff. “The penalty for killing my master’s creatures is death. By the way, I think my casting of the Immobilize spell went very well, don’t you? Hard to dodge when we both act on the same initiative count.”

I could only glower at him, wonder what he was on about now, my arms being glued to my sides and my legs being wrapped up as though with a thick rope. I struggled a bit, but the bands only glowed a bit and held tighter.

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 cast it too well, did I get your mouth as well, caveman?” He swung his staff at me and hit me in the jaw, making me see spots. Being unable to move it was extra painful, I couldn’t roll with it or anything. 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?

“Nope, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to hit you.” the wizard said. “So you can still talk, if you want.”

“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 a hair above 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 here, 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.

“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 and I both fell to the ground, the bands of force having disappeared 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 also saw a small pile of gold coins where the wizard once 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. As I gathered up the gold, a slime drew near. It was going to be a long walk back.

Chapter 6: Our Hero makes Magic

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 as my strength was almost gone, and I bled from more than one wound. I had one hand on a large tree nearby (yes, I had checked the shadow) 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, don't ask 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 wizard had said to me- is this what he meant? But wizards studied books to learn their craft, that much everyone knew! I was no wizard, was I? How was this possible? I hefted the club to my shoulder and staggered on, even with my newfound health, I didn't want to be caught out here in the open. I needed information, 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, 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, and 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? I entered town and began walking, what was my priority now? See the tool shop owner about the new questions I had? Get my armor and weapon? 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 through 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 in town.

I entered the weapon shop with a jingle, having hit the bell with the door and the blacksmith called 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 and was about to have 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 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. 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!" I said, the townspeople's reactions suddenly becoming clear. "Well I'm not, and that's the end of it. I just did what anyone would do, I fought, and I won, 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 eying 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, I think I'm justified in saying I earned it, and spending it on things that will help me kill even more of the Dragonlord's creatures in the future, thus getting back even more of the King's gold. Don't you think?"

"Absolutely." he said, now only half paying attention to me, focusing 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.

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, which 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 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, I briefly wondered what was up with seamstresses in this town, didn't they know how to make anything but but this one outfit? Of course that old guy with the beard, who was wearing the grey robe and standing in the back, he could use some new clothes, I thought, and realized this crowd might want something from me.

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.

"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?"

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

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 didn't the people in town even know 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.

"I will be after some sleep." I replied. "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, how could I have forgotten? Though up until that very moment, I wouldn't have said I needed to at all. Strange. 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.