

STEDL AND DRAGONS

Stedl stood and watched in sorrow as the parade of knights marched through the main street of Holmfast. Those around him cheered or stood in quiet awe, but if a single other soul shared his misgivings to the knights, they were out of his sight. Three knights—one at the head of the procession, one in the body, and one at the tail—carried ten foot tall poles, atop which were enormous meat hooks, skewered onto each of which was the green scaled head of a dragon. The eldest dragon that the knights had killed was still a youngling. The youngest, Stedl doubted it was older than three years.

Stedl steeled himself and approached one of the knights on the periphery. “Ho there.”

“Liven ye, fellow!” the knight encouraged, stopping to speak with the somber man.

“Tell me the tale,” Stedl asked, looking up to a dragon head to indicate he meant the murders.

The knight happily indulged with an animated speech, which drew a crowd around Stedl to listen and watch with him. “The accursed endassium mines of Herdra are accursed no longer! Under the blessing of Sah and with the wisdom of our Good King Hest, two score of we knights marched a fortnight and a day from Tellan to Herdra. There we saw that the legend was true: that the mines from which our grandfathers drew out endassium had fallen to the hold of monsters! All the buildings of the town, once homes and shops and churches, smashed to pieces under their wickedly stepping claws! We knights tarried

not, but advanced upon the foul beasts! With slash of blade and sting of arrow, we felled not just these three dragons you see today, but a dozen more which are now parading north and east and west of Herdra! Praise be to Sah! Glory be to the Good King Hest!"

The knight lifted his begauntleted fist into the air, and Stedl's neighbors cheered. Stedl's sorrow had only deepened as the knight had spoken, but the knight had long since moved on from speaking only at Stedl.

Without a word or gesture, Stedl turned and left. He could have said much: *They are not fearsome because they are evil. They are fearsome because you are evil, and they are powerful and good.* He could have gone on a long, long while, if he were still youthful, still under the impression that any such sentiment would not be falling on deaf ears.

He returned to his home at the outskirts of town, near the bank of a river, built there himself with the help of his then-new neighbors. He walked slowly, his aching knees fussing that they had long since served their purpose, let us rest now, we have served you a full life and then some.

When he arrived home, he sat in a rocking chair before his unlit fireplace, rocking and staring blankly at the dim stonework. His mind's eye was racing. In his mind's eye, he was climbing up into his attic, dusting off chain mail, restringing a bow, and buckling on his quiver. He was stalking after the knights, and one by one he was picking them off as they split from their formation to relieve themselves or to search for those who were mysteriously absent, until before they realized it, they were few in number, and then none.

But with his age and the life he had lived, he begrudgingly knew better.

Do not tempt revenge, he sat and thought. Do not create martyrs.

As the day was waning, Stedl lit his fireplace, lighted a lantern, and ventured up into the attic. He drew out his old equipment and laid it out before the fire, examining each piece. The pack, the tent, the boots, the tinderbox... On the whole, it had held up better than he had. He sorted his equipment, packed his pack, and then he went to sleep.

Before the sun had risen in the morning, Stedl was standing, his armor donned, his bow strung, his pack upon his shoulders and waist. He stepped out of his door and began on the road northward, toward Herdra.

Midday, while kneeling over a stream to drink, the man's reflection in the water caught him. Looking back at him was a face with wrinkles set into dark skin, and a short beard that was more grey than black. It was strange, bordering on inaccurate, to say that this was the same face as that of a man who had been taken by a dragon as a husband, long, long ago.

The old man took his drink from the stream. He then stood and continued marching on. It was three more days to Herdra. Perhaps four or five if his knees did not get on board with the idea of the journey.

Each night in his tent, before he could begin falling asleep, Stedl laid and stared at the tent's ceiling, casting his mind back thirty, forty years. Back to a young man who barely looked like him anymore. Back to the clifflands of Venderra, and a big red lizard. He couldn't keep the thoughts in any order, and even when he tried to recall the timelines of what had lead into what, it was as though there were no such conceit as causality, but rather that each fragment of memory was its own atomic existence. In one flash, the young man and the dragon were sitting in a canyon across a campfire from each other, the young man cooking, the dragon lying flat with her chin on the ground yet still looming over him. In one flash, he was helping unpack crates of clothing and food from off her back, delivering them to a camp of refugees from a flooded city, and then riding atop her back as the wind stung his face on the return journey to make the route yet another time. In one flash, he was kneeling on a hill aiming an arrow, when from the corner of his eye, he saw her struck by a mortar, and then watched her spiraling down, and by the time he could make it through the battlefield to her, she had been killed, and he felt at once in his heart that no creature deserved to die again as long as the world should turn, and also that no revenge would be great enough to make up for the loss of her. In one flash, she was humoring him in letting him examine the fractal complexity of the writing of dragons, not imagining that he would actually be the first human not to

dismiss it as impossible for humans to learn. In one flash, they were in a dark and safe place, falling asleep chest to chest, heart to heart, breath to breath.

It was five days' journey to Herdra. When he arrived, he found the town to be in more or less the condition that the knights had described. Every building was smashed down. Hardly anything in the township stood taller than the man's line of sight. The town was quiet save for the wind blowing against the ruins. There was not a soul up here except for Stedl.

He made his way through the town, past the fallen churches and shops and homes, and over to the mine entrances. There, he lit a lantern, and proceeded in.

It was a long and cold way down. As he marched, he wondered whether his magical talents had left him over the years. They had fallen into disuse, and he would not blame them for going away. He stopped, turned, and raised his free hand. With a tide of force, gravel on the ground began rolling up the tunnel slope. Stedl smiled a little, and resumed his journey downward. As if his talents had only needed a nudge to get started, he soon began to smell the sting of endassium. He followed the odor down and down, and as the tunnels branched out, he followed the smell of the magical rocks, until arriving at a dead end, a slope of loose rocks from ground to ceiling. Stedl picked up a rock, and saw with confidence that it was mined with teeth, not picks. He began casting the rocks aside, freeing up the passage. When he had cleared enough at the ceiling to crawl through, he did crawl so through, lantern first, into the dragon's hutch. Inside, atop a nest of endassium pebbles, was a green egg as tall as Stedl.

Stedl sat himself down on the slope that descended toward the egg, and looked at it by the lanternlight. All at once, he was relieved there was a survivor, and distraught for the loss that he or she had suffered before they had so much as committed the crime of hatching.

With the family of dragons murdered to make way for industry, the king's men would be back before much longer. Stedl crawled back out of the hutch and set about repairing a covered rickshaw from the town above, to bring the dragon to a safer home.