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In the Shadow of the Dragon's Wing

by Jeff Crook

PART ONE

Victor rode slowly through the gutted, burned-out shell of Tolford. These were fires caused by panic, overturned lanterns and candles. There hadn't even been a fight. So he moved on, for nothing here interested him, and the greasy stench of the place lingered in his nostrils.

He led his mule down the slope and crossed the stream at the ford. From there, he followed the road to Breg. When he rode through here two weeks ago, ripe corn bordered the road on either side, making a thick walled lane eight feet high. Now blackened stalks stubbled the flat gray land as far as the eye could see now. A wind blew over it from the north, a cold wind raising clouds of ash and whistling softly through the taller stalks, making the silence of the empty land all that more profound.

Later in the morning, he reached the ruins of Breg, the first village attacked by the dragon. This place was much better than Tolford; a fine testament to the full might and power of this dragon. There were no crops to burn here, only pastures and livestock. Lost cattle and sheep wandered the ruins, lowing, bleating miserably, some of them still bearing the festering wounds of the dragon's fire. Victor dismounted, leaving his mule, Auda, to wander among the other animals. As he approached the outer wall, he came upon a heap of slag and charred bones that

had once been a group of armored defenders. He made a sign over them, then walked on.

Near the center of town, he found a large claw mark in the sandy soil, and some distance away a toppled but still-intact wall burned black where the dragon had breathed its fire at someone. He counted thirty paces between the claw mark and the wall, where a clear, human shape – a reversed shadow of someone with his hands raised – had been etched into the stone. As he stood over it, looking down at the lingering reflection of the last moment of this person, he could still smell the brimstone, even though it had rained twice since the attack. Victor looked back at the claw mark and noted the distance, his heart pounding, realizing that this was indeed a huge dragon, a massive creature. Then he walked back to Auda, mounted, and rode away. At the edge of the village he paused, listening, and then hurried on. He could already hear the sounds of the army coming up.

Victor spent most of the remainder of the day trying to keep ahead of the army and its scouts. The Grand Duke of Tarrasq had sent a large force of warriors and war wizards to deal with the invading dragon before it had a chance to find its way to a large city, like Tarrasq or Marque. Victor wasn't afraid of being captured. He carried a Ducal Pardon in his saddle bags. What he feared was being stopped and sent back before he could find the dragon.

The sky remained empty and pale all that day, the forests dark and silent, the moors barren and chill. On several hilltops stood great slabs of stone that had been raised long ago by a forgotten people, but the wind and rain had long since erased any inscriptions that might have told what purpose they served. They didn't look like tombs, but they were nonetheless lonesome and forlorn. Victor rode past them on the west side to prevent their shadows from falling across his path.

As evening approached, the wind shifted around to the west, blowing steadily now and smelling of rain. He knew the army would stop for the weather, so he made his camp beneath a rock overhang before the rain started. A storm came in the night with a hollow roar across the heath. He was glad to be dry, but he built no fire and the night grew cold. He wrapped himself like a mummy in his blankets and drifted off, trying not to think until sleep came, and when it finally came, he slept hard and dreamlessly. Once, during the night, he woke with the impression that someone lay beside him, but he immediately fell back to sleep.

Victor awoke when the rain stopped, Auda standing over him and snuffling his face with his big black nose. It was still some hours before dawn, but he couldn't sleep. He lay awake and watched the clouds break up and the stars come out icy and distant. He thought about the old woman at the ferry, and about the boy. He had liked the boy, had seen a great deal of himself in him. In another life, the boy could have been his own son, but he had no sons, no children at all. He had Auda, he had his memories, but he had not seen any of his old friends for many years, not since he was expelled from the Order. He was breaking their law just being here, but he was already cursed and under anathema; he didn't care. All he cared about was finding the dragon before the army did, finding it and fighting it. He wasn't afraid of fighting it, only of arriving too late. This was his last chance. A dragon like this only came along every hundred years or so, when the great dragons of the dragon isles drove out their young to make room for new hatchlings.

There were many things he feared. He feared an ignoble death, but he did not fear death itself. He feared growing old. He feared sickness and infirmity and failure. But he had learned to use his fears to his advantage. In the long years of training to do this thing he did, in his long apprenticeship to his master, he had learned that fear could give him the power to do extraordinary things. But alone at night, when fear came, there was very little

he could do about it. Like right now, he was afraid of dying. He hoped that soon, tomorrow perhaps, he would meet the dragon. He could almost feel the dragon, feel himself moving toward that moment when fate would decide if his curse would end and he would be free at last.

And then he felt it. He looked up and saw a shadow pass high overhead, like a tiny dark cloud scuttling across the sky. Auda snorted and stamped. It was the dragon. He cowered down in his cloak and almost hid his head. Although the dragon was very high and could not possibly see him, he could still feel that cold nauseating wave of dragon awe pass over him. But when it had passed, he leaped up and threw off his cloak. He watched it glide away, so high it looked almost amongst the stars. Then it dove, plummeting like a falling star itself. Soon he could no longer see it.

He was alone, just as he preferred, moving towards the dragon, to face it alone, to die alone or to conquer alone. He gathered his things in the dark and set out, leading Auda down the hill. Dawn found him at the edge of a forest with a barren waste of hills before him.

An hour before sundown, Victor stopped at the crest of a hill. Behind him, the dust of the army rose like a tendril of smoke on the horizon. He had gained almost a day on them. Below lay a hidden fold of the land that had escaped the dragon's desolation. It was the place he had sought all day; he could not have wished for a better place, an area of open fields divided by woodlands. The ground closest to him was on a higher level than the one beyond the woods. He wasn't seeking the dragon's lair, it didn't matter where the dragon had its lair. He wasn't interested in fame or the treasure of the dragon's hoard. He only wanted the dragon, to meet it in battle on ground of his own choosing.

Victor rode Auda down the hill, across the meadow and into the woods. He dismounted, then set to work. Now that there was the job to do, he felt better, free, relieved to be about it at last.

First he unslashed his fighting lances and laid them out carefully on a level space of ground. He covered them with a blanket so that the dew would not get to them. Then he took his sword and sheathed it and strapped it to his side, and he took his axe from the thong on the saddle and stuck it in a fallen log. Then he unsaddled Auda and brushed him down.

"Brave Auda," he said to the mule as he brushed. "Tomorrow we meet the dragon. You are not afraid, are you, Auda? Nothing frightens my brave Auda. Brave, noble Auda. I saved an apple for you." He didn't feel ashamed talking to the mule so tenderly. The mule nudged him with its nose.

"Brave Auda," he said. "You saved me from them and condemned me as you condemned yourself. But tomorrow, I think it will be over. Tomorrow, it ends. This is the dragon we have sought for ten long years, my friend."

He finished brushing down the mule in the dark, working by feel until it was done. Then he took his axe from the log and walked off into the woods. He didn't hobble the mule; he knew Auda would not stray far from their camp.

At the bottom of the woods, he worked as silently as he was able, cutting only the branches he could reach and dragging them out into the lower meadow where he would lure the dragon. Victor gathered a good quantity of dry wood to kindle the bonfire he was building, but he wanted the green wood to make it smoke. The smoke would draw the dragon to him. He hoped the dragon would come to his bonfire and ignore the dust of the army. He hoped that he would prove a more tempting target.

But he cut only the smaller branches, lopping them with one slice of the axe because he didn't want the dragon to hear the obvious man-noise of an axe in the woods. He didn't know how close its lair might be, and he didn't want to draw the dragon to him until he was ready, especially not now, not until the morning. He

worked quickly and carefully in the dark. The makings of the bonfire rose in the moonshadows of the lower field. He didn't light it when it was finished. That would wait until daylight.

Victor walked back to his camp, finding his way in the dark by the mule's stomping and blowing. Then he built a small fire, and by its light, he tended to the edge of his fighting lances, honing them carefully. He ate a little dried meat and fruit, chewing slowly and getting all the juice out. He spread his blanket over Auda's broad black back, and then he rolled himself in his cloak. It was warmer here in the woods than under the rock shelter last night. The fire helped. The fire felt warm on his back and he quickly fell asleep. He slept in the deep loam of the forest wrapped in his cloak.

PART TWO

Auda listened to his breathing, waiting for Victor's breath to even out in sleep. He was glad that Victor could sleep, tonight of all nights, because he couldn't, and he wanted to see Victor with his own eyes one last time. He was glad for the blanket Victor had spread over him, for even after all these years away from his native desert, he still hated the cold. He waited for Victor to fall asleep. At last, he fell asleep and Auda changed.

Auda was a man, a eunuch.

Auda was made a eunuch and sold into slavery when he was thirteen. His first master taught him how to provide carnal pleasures and charged money for his services. When he was sixteen, he was sold to a warlord who had grown very fond of him. The warlord taught him about weapons and battle. At nineteen, he was captured in battle, and then his captors sold him to the Temple of the Free Order of Draconic Lancers in Tarrasq, where he was made a squire to a warrior monk named Haldrad, who died of plague. Then he was passed on to a promising young monk named Victor to be his squire and lance bearer. Already Victor was the best Free Lancer in Tarrasq and

over the years as his record of dragon kills grew, many considered him to be among the best Free Lancers to have ever worn the helm.

And Auda became Victor's lover. It was not uncommon for a squire and his lord monk to develop such a relationship. The Temple didn't encourage it, but they rarely punished it. The relationship between the monk and his squire was forged in dragonfire, for the Free Lancers were first and foremost dragon fighters. The Temple usually looked the other way if the monk and his squire did not flaunt their relationship.

Auda was unique among squires in that he was a eunuch and a slave rather than a free man. Most squires were free men in training to become Free Lancers themselves. As a slave, Auda would never have been allowed to become a squire, but his extensive training in war made him too valuable to spend his days cooking rice and washing robes at the Temple. He had killed his first dragonrider and dragon before he was eighteen, a feat that would have made him a Free Lancer in his own right had he not also been a slave.

But even though he was a squire to the finest Free Lancer in the land, he was still the property of the Order. Eventually, they sold him to the Grand Duke of Tarrasq to guard his harem. Victor had protested, but it was a political gesture to the Grand Duke. The Duke had in fact asked for a Free Lancer to guard his harem, but the Temple couldn't agree to that, so they gave him the next best thing - they gave him Victor's famous squire. The Grand Duke had begun following the Aranian custom several years before and already had a large harem and a palace just for his wives. Auda was made captain of his harem guard. Even so, Victor came for him.

Victor broke with the Order for love of him. He entered the harem palace one night searching for Auda and was captured by the guards while Auda slept. For entering the harem palace, he was sentenced to die, and Auda vowed never to sleep again. No

one but Auda knew that Victor had come not to steal one of the Grand Duke's wives, but to steal the captain of his harem guard.

And so Auda used his authority to gain entrance into Victor's prison the night before his execution. He killed the guards and helped Victor escape, but in the melee at the prison gates, his horse was killed and he was captured, while Victor, sorely wounded, rode away.

He was, of course, tortured and forced to confess his love for the disgraced Free Lancer. The Grand Duke had his war wizards concoct a curse to punish him and Victor both. The curse was as old as the world itself, but unique in its application and its particular effects. They transformed him into a mule. As long as Victor was awake, Auda remained a mule, but whenever Victor slept, Auda resumed his former shape. Then they sent him to Victor along with a Ducal Pardon, so that they both could live in peace for the rest of their days, the man, and the mule, together and forever apart.

Auda sat by the small fire, naked save for the blanket that he wrapped tightly around his shoulders, quietly watching Victor sleep. Usually he never spoke for fear of waking Victor, but tonight, he whispered, half to himself, half to Victor.

"You expect to die tomorrow, don't you? You sought this dragon with the hope that it would kill you," he said. "Because you want to die, but you want to die in battle as a Free Lancer. With your death, my curse will be broken. But I would rather remain an animal and serve you than see you die, my love, my night, my eyes."

Auda lay down next to Victor, facing him, but not touching, and he watched him sleep because he could not sleep himself. He watched him until dawn, and then as Victor began to stir, he rose to his feet and waited for the mule to return.

PART THREE

Victor awoke in the gray of dawn, angry with himself for oversleeping and angry with Auda for not waking him. The campfire had nearly died, so he blew on it and added twigs to it until he had a small blaze. He knew he should eat something, but now that he was awake with the morning facing him, he felt no hunger. Only the thirst, but he knew that could not be quenched until the dragon was dead. Still, he should eat. He would need it all today.

He toasted some bacon on sticks over the fire and ate it, and he drank a little water from his flask. Then he took the apple from his pack and split it in half with his dagger, and he gave half of the apple to Auda and the other half he ate himself. "You will not begrudge me half of this apple, will you Auda?" he asked, watching Auda slobbering over his half of the apple.

Victor dropped the apple core into the ashes of his fire, then he placed the saddle on Auda's back and cinched it, checking the straps for wear and damage. He eased the bit into Auda's mouth and let the reins hang to the ground. Then he dumped a double-handful of oats on the ground. He poured the last of his water into his helm and let Auda slurp it up.

With Auda taken care of, he opened his pack and laid everything in it out on the ground. There was a torch, and the bandages and medicines that the old woman had given him, and a needle and thread and a sharp skinning knife. He removed and unrolled his fighting cape and laid it across a bush. He laid out a quiver of arrows and his bowstring and checked the heads of all the arrows before placing them back in the quiver. They were strange arrowheads, long and hollow and sharply-pointed, like the tooth of a viper. Then he opened a box that contained little balls of what looked like clay and dumped them into the pouch at his belt. Each one was just small enough to be squeezed into the hollow point of an arrowhead.

Victor fitted one arrow with a ball of the clay, careful not to let the point prick his finger. Then he strung his long bow, and he

took the torch and lit it in the fire and walked down through the woods to the lower meadow. He had two jobs to do today – to kill the dragon and to die in the effort. To do one without the other would be to fail. If he just wanted to die, he could simply wait for the dragon and let it kill him. But instead he wanted his death to buy the death of the dragon as well, to pay for the villages it had burned and the people it had killed. He'd been born in Tolford.

He walked out of the trees into the meadow where the bonfire waited. He thrust the torch into the bonfire and stepped back to watch the black smoke pillow up against the morning sky. There was no wind, so it would carry high and be seen from far away. The army would see it, of course, but he hoped the dragon would see it first. He watched the sun rise up over the top of a hill, then walked back to the edge of the wood and squatted in the undergrowth, the bow held ready with the doctored arrow on the string, and from here he could see a broad stretch of the sky in the direction from which he thought the dragon might come, and he also had an unobstructed view of the bonfire, and a clear path of retreat away from it into the woods. He settled down and waited, sucking on a pebble to assuage his thirst.

He was well hidden in the woods, with his olive-green cape wrapped entirely around his body, only his face showing and the hood pulled well down over his eyes. He leaned the bow against a tree so his hand wouldn't make the grip sweaty and slick before the time came. He waited for what seemed a long time, too much time really because it allowed him time to think, and he was becoming nervous and wishing the dragon would come and also wishing that it would never come, that he might never see it. Try as he might, he could not turn his fear to his advantage, he could not make it work for him; he wanted to run now, he wanted to get up and fling it all away and go back to Auda and ride away, and he knew what it was then - it was the dragon awe working on him, and then he knew that the dragon was near and he was all right. Then he felt the eyes of the dragon pass over

him. He felt the malignant stare cross his face without stopping. He had not been seen, not yet anyway, but now he knew the dragon was there, somewhere, watching.

He eased forward a little, gently lifting aside a small leafy branch, and looked all around, scanning the sky and the clouds building low on the western horizon, the edges of the meadow and the hills beyond. He could not see it anywhere, but he knew it was there because he felt the tightness in his chest and tasted the coppery taste in his mouth. Sweat dribbled down his forehead and nose. And then he saw it, but only because it moved; its dull mottled-red scales blended perfectly with the rocky outcrop of red granite upon which it perched some three miles away. He saw the wings rise as it maintained its balance on the windy pinnacle of the hill, while it studied the fire and the meadow. From this distance, the dragon looked tiny, like a toy magically brought to life.

Victor saw the dragon lift its head and sniff the air. He was content for now to watch the beast as it tried to appraise the bonfire. The dragon had not as yet made any sound. It knew that there was a man about, or so it seemed as Victor watched it silently lift its wings and leap into the air. The dragon rose up, hovering on the warm currents rising of air, moving upward as if by power of thought. It circled higher and wider around the distant hill, until it was but a tiny speck against the sky. For a moment, Victor lost it in the sun. "He is smart," Victor said aloud. Then he saw the dragon straighten out and begin to drop very slowly. As it dropped, it grew perceptibly larger. Victor saw it glide now in a shallow dive, its wings tucked in close to its body so that it rode only on the tips, just as a falcon. He saw the long, spined tail working like a rudder, holding its course straight as it dove at the bonfire. Victor took hold of his bow and knocked the arrow to the string. He held it crosswise over his knees, but he did not stand. Not yet.

The dragon came on now, growing ever larger as its speed increased, and dipping lower to the ground, so that now it skimmed just over the summit of the hill on which it had perched. Not yet. It dropped quickly and leveled off and began to drop again, becoming larger, huge, monstrous and beautiful in flight. Not yet. When it reached the edge of the meadow, Victor said "Now" and stood and drew back the bowstring until the fletching tickled the corner of his mouth, leading the dragon now as it came on, not slowing, gaining in speed now, its mouth open just a little so that the sword-long fangs whistled in the wind of its speed and its in-drawn breath. Victor took a deep breath, held it as the dragon soared within two hundred yards, let it out a little between clenched teeth.

The dragon must have sensed him then because it turned and looked him straight in the eyes. He saw the red fires burning in those eyes and he held his shot. The huge wings beat three times, braking in the air, and the dragon screamed so that the wind of its rage blew the hood of Victor's cloak from his head. He heard the great leathery wings cracking like sails in a storm. Black smoke fanned, swirled round, dust billowed in the air, blinding him momentarily, and the dragon was gone. He stood still for a moment, releasing the tension on the bow. Victor returned the arrow to the quiver, looked around one last time, and then began to run, slapping branches out of his way.

The meadow was already blazing behind him, the bonfire spread by the dragon's wings. Victor looked back over his shoulder and saw the dragon race headlong out of the smoke, its mouth open wide and full of fangs. It breathed, incinerating the place where Victor had lain in ambush, the great serpentine head arching down and behind as the dragon passed over, scorching his hiding place with its fiery breath.

Victor changed direction, darted left, circling back toward his camp, and above the treetops the dragon glided like a thunderstorm. Now it was hunting *him*.

Victor circled around and came down on his camp from the north, scrambling down through the vines and leaves. Auda stood there, his mule eyes rolling white and glaring in his black face, pawing at the ground. The dragon passed overhead with a noise like a forge, the great tail plowing through the treetops, a cascade of leaves and broken limbs raining in its wake. Victor dropped the long bow and draped his red fighting cape over his shoulders, and then he slung the bow across his chest. He picked up his three fighting lances, grabbed Auda's reins, and vaulted into the saddle. He dug in his heels and, holding the reins in one hand, the fighting lances in the other, bent low over Auda's neck as he crashed up through the forest, mounting the slope to the upper meadow, the second stage of the fight.

As Victor reached the edge of the forest, he reigned in. The sky was empty save for the smoke drifting up from the lower meadow. He took each lance and stuck it into the soft soil about twenty yards apart, just under the eaves of the forest. Then he chose the third one, the stoutest of the three, with a broad serrated blade, and rode out to the center of the meadow. He sat upon Auda's quivering back and waited in open challenge.

They saw the dragon coming in low over the treetops, its mouth shut tight, its claws extended to kill. *He attacks like an eagle,* Victor thought. *And I am the fish?* Auda snorted and stamped. They waited there, waited for the claws to draw closer, the dragon to drop lower, skimming at head height above the grass of the meadow. The dragon's wings spread out, catching every particle of air, slowing, but not too slow, to catch the man on the end of its claws and snatch him from the saddle.

When the dragon was so near that Victor could see the grooves full of rotting meat in the extended claws, he dug in his heels. Auda snorted and charged directly at the dragon, Victor tilting the lance upward as the two, mounted man and monster, hurtled together. The dragon saw the broad, toothy blade lifting up towards its throat, so it backed air, its wings buffeting, fighting to

gain altitude, but it stalled and collapsed to the ground. Victor rode out beneath its tail, turning as he did so.

He crossed the dragon's front, arrogantly riding with the lance held high, balanced in his right hand, and the dragon, seeing his foolish arrogance, breathed its fiery breath. But Victor had measured the distance back at the village of Breg, and as they galloped away, the fire exploded harmlessly behind them. He rode to the edge of the forest and stopped. This dragon will not make that mistake again, he thought.

He stuck the lance in the ground and almost with the same motion swung the bow over his shoulder. He pulled the arrow from the quiver, knocked it, drew, aimed, released. The arrow winged across the air as the dragon gathered itself to spring. The arrow buried itself deep in the shoulder-joint of the dragon's left wing. The little poison pellet hidden in the head of the arrow dissolved quickly in the dragon's hot blood, and the wing, suddenly robbed of all feeling and strength, slumped uselessly to the ground. The dragon tossed its head about, looking at it as though betrayed.

Victor rode further to his left and knocked another arrow, this one without poison. He drew and fired, purposefully missing this time, but drawing the dragon around until it faced him. He plucked the second lance from the ground near his hand and readied it, tossing aside his bow as he did so. This lance had a longer shaft, with a thick head like a wedge made for splitting wood.

"Now for it, dear Auda, let us die upon this dragon together," Victor shouted, urging Auda into a charge, lowering and leveling the lance at the dragon. The dragon gathered its legs under its body, claws digging into the soil, and arched its head back like a snake, exposing the broad field of its chest, drawing the man onward, opening itself to the lance while it sucked in air through its nostrils, filling its lungs with fire. Victor leaned forward in the saddle, bracing himself, the tip of the lance piercing the bright

air before him, the mule's hooves pounding, head tossing as it ran in its sturdy, short-footed gallop.

And so, as Victor leaned ever farther over the neck of the mule, the lance quivering towards the heart of the dragon, the dragon's head snapped forward like a striking snake, jaws gaping, the fire of its breath boiling up its throat so near that Victor could see it and smell the brimstone. And at the same time, Victor stood in the saddle, lifting the lance toward the dragon's heart place, and Auda plunged into the narrow ravine that crossed the meadow and was hidden by waist-high grass. A river of fire roared above them, spilling down a little into the trench that hid them, setting the grass on fire. They moved quickly down the ravine to avoid being engulfed. Victor tossed aside his now-useless lance; the steel head was melted like a candle, the wooden shaft blazing almost down to his hand. "Auda, what have you done?" Victor shouted. Auda snorted and galloped toward the forest.

For a moment, the dragon stood silent, puzzled, wondering if the warrior was also a wizard, and then it saw the manner of the trick. With a scream of rage that shook dirt loose from the sides of the ravine, it hurtled across the meadow, following the mule and rider galloping away in the bottom of the ravine towards the forest. It charged into the trees, trunks snapping as it blew into them, and became entangled by the useless wing dragging behind it. Auda scabbled up out of the ravine and galloped into the forest.

They rode out on the other side of the meadow and stopped. Victor tugged a lance from the ground and propped its butt on the stirrup. Across the meadow, the dragon waited just at the edge of the trees, waited for the man to come out. It did not see him. Victor felt soiled by Auda's deception. He had made the dragon look like a fool, and this was a tragic thing, for dragons are the noblest of creatures, graceful and proud. This did not lessen his desire to kill it, but the killing should be done well and with dignity.

"Do not try that again," Victor said as he urged Auda into a trot. He steered Auda away from the ravine. Auda was winded now, but still strong, and his heart would not quit until the battle was over. At the sound of his hooves, the dragon whirled and charged out of the forest. Victor lowered the lance and couched it under his arm, leaned forward in the saddle. The dragon came on, head low, claws gouging and throwing dirt and clumps of grass, tail snaking behind it.

Victor tilted the lance low to bring the dragon's head up. It lifted its head to avoid the sharp serrated blade and at the same time sought a riposte, but Victor turned Auda sharply to the left, keeping the lance between him and the dragon. The dragon followed the tip of the lance, its neck curling around, the good wing lifting to maintain its balance and exposing its side. Victor drove in under the wing, swinging the lance around and standing in the stirrups, leaning in, burying the lance into the dragon's shoulder and with the force of the charge lifting him momentarily from the saddle until Auda came under him again, and they rode out from under the wing, dragging the lance out, severing muscles and tendons from the shoulder. Turning left again, Auda nimbly avoided the great spiked tail that whipped down to smash them, and they rode out across the dragon's front. Victor swung the lance to his left and pointed it at the dragon.

The dragon, seeing the lance again leveled at him, performed a lightning riposte, head dipping under and around the blade dripping with its own blood, driving in and snapping the lance into splinters mere inches from Victor's shoulder. Victor tossed aside the broken haft and circled back to his third lance. The dragon was anchored now and could not follow him.

He stopped beside the lance and looked at the dragon. Its eyes narrowed to slits and seemed to stare through him, seeking the marrow of his life. Despite his desire to die with this dragon, he was unable to suppress a shudder at the vision of his own death in the dragon's eyes. But he didn't hesitate. He grasped the

third lance and yanked it from the ground. This lance had a narrow haft, a long, thin, delicate-looking blade, and a wide crossbar about an arms-length from the head, much like a boar spear. He rode out to the center of the meadow and saluted the dragon. The dragon growled low, bubbling, a little blood dribbled between its teeth and fell smoking to the grass. *He will not avoid the lance this time, Victor thought, but will seek me through it. He will not breath fire until he is sure of hitting me. He knows now that he is dying.*

Victor prodded Auda into a trot, taking his time now and still holding the lance erect. He circled left to check on the condition of the shoulder. The dragon favored it and tried not to move, only following the man with its eyes. But the head drooped perceptibly. *He's getting tired now, can't hold his head up, Victor thought. Or he wants me to think that.* Victor sawed the reins and turned the mule to the right, at the same time kicking it into a charge.

Victor crossed the lance to his left, put the reins in his teeth, and held onto the lance with both hands. He charged across the dragon's front, to the right, driving in, turning the dragon on its wounded leg. The dragon recognized the tactic and tried to back away, but its dead wing dragging on the ground slowed it. And by that time, Victor was already upon it, the lance dipping in, plunging in between the shoulder and neck where the great artery lay, the man leaning up and against the lance, driving it deeper with his weight and the mule turning in toward the dragon adding its power to the thrust so that the lance sank to the crossbar in the dragon's scaly flesh.

The dragon made no sound; it clamped its jaws tight trying to hold in its life. Ignoring the agony of its right shoulder, it drove against the lance, trying to reach the man, blood spuming, drenching the man and mule, but the mule turned with the dragon, kept the dragon away from the man. "Breathe!" Victor groaned through clenched teeth. "Here I am! Kill me! Give me

your fire!" The dragon tried lift its leg to strike with its claws. It was off balance, the left wing dead, the right foreleg destroyed, and it could only drive itself upon the lance to reach the man, and then it could not even do that. The great head, the great spine-crested neck, sank, lay gently upon the ground.

Victor withdrew the lance. He dismounted slowly, painfully. He drew his sword from the saddle sheath. The dragon lay quivering, huge before him, breathing out its last, its blood flowing like a hot wellspring from the wound in its neck. The eyes followed him as he walked towards it. "Why did you refuse, grandfather?" he asked the dragon. "Why not kill me as I killed you?" The dragon didn't answer.

He lifted the sword high, and the dragon closed its eyes. He brought the sword down at the base of the dragon's skull, neatly cutting the spinal cord and killing it instantly. Slowly, the dragon's taut muscles relaxed in death, cracking and groaning as the great body collapsed upon itself, sounding very much like a ship sinking. Victor sank against the hot, bloody scales of its neck and the sword fell from his fingers.

PART FOUR

Victor walked Auda down to a little brook that flowed through the woods. He lay on the bank with his face in the water, drinking as the mule drank, sucking the water straight into his mouth from the living earth. Then he rose and shook himself. Auda followed him as he walked back to the meadow where the dragon lay enormous in the sun. Victor looked up at the sun and saw that it was only midday.

"I've failed again," Victor said.

The dragon's good wing had fallen half-folded so that it formed a sort of high arched roof beside the body. The sun shone through the thin membrane of the wing, shedding a pale light the color of blood. Victor walked into this cathedral and sat in the blood-wet

grass. He put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands and he sat there. He felt empty, drained, not only of strength but of emotion. The passion was gone and he wondered if anything could replace it. Even his own desire for death was gone. He was lost in the death of the dragon.

"What will I do now?" he asked Auda. Auda twitched his tail and said nothing. He knew the army would be here any time now. They couldn't miss the smoke rising all around him. Victor lay back in the blood-soaked grass and, exhausted, fell asleep in the shadow of the dragon's wing.

###



Bird Sign

by B. A. Barnett

Galem knew one thing for certain: the bird was odd.

It was as large and round as his fattest sow, with an abbreviated beak that seemed an afterthought on its nub of a head. Its neck--probably as long as his forearm when extended, Galem guessed--rested in a coil atop its red-feathered body.

Crimson, his wife would have told him. *The feathers are crimson.*

UI drew up beside Galem. "Is it dead?"

The bird's body puffed slightly, then contracted.

"No," Galem said. "It's breathing." He leaned forward for a closer examination, but took a startled step back when the bird shuddered and burred--a sound Galem had never heard a bird make before.

"What did you do?" UI asked.

"I didn't touch it." Galem watched with an open mouth as the bird's rhythmic shuddering and burring continued. "I think it's snoring."

UI cocked his head to one side. "Just found it sitting here, you say?"

"Just sitting here," Galem said, though the description didn't sound quite right. The bird wasn't sitting just anywhere. It was in the temple, on the statue of their god Eony.

It was on Eony's head.

UI drew a knife from his belt, and Galem grabbed his wrist. "What are you doing?"

"That bird's fat enough to feed both our families for a week," UI said.

"You can't kill it."

"Why not?"

"It might be sacred."

"The bird?" UI barked a laugh. "Ought to make one roost on my own head; make me sacred."

UI stepped toward the bird, but Galem held fast to his wrist. "Don't."

"You best let go, friend."

"That's not going to happen."

UI stomped on Galem's foot. Galem yelped, releasing the larger man's wrist as he hopped away, his foot throbbing. UI lunged at the bird, blade raised.

"No!" Galem leapt, grabbing UI around the waist. The men toppled to the stone floor with a thud as UI's knife clattered away into one of the temple's sand gardens. Galem, his arm pinned beneath UI's bulk, struggled to tug it free.

The fat sow shouldn't be eating birds that big, he thought.

Ul rolled off him, but Galem's relief disappeared with a choked cry as the man wrapped his thick, calloused hands around his neck.

#

Prefect Gynn shook his head in disgust. "Fighting in the temple."

"I'm sorry, Prefect," Galem said, head bowed.

"He started it," Ul muttered.

Galem glared. "I was saving that bird."

"Are you children?" Gynn said, throwing his arms into the air. "Have these two men before me suddenly become children? Friends and neighbors some fifteen years now, and you're fighting over a bird."

"It *is* a fascinating bird," the seer Fao said, studying the sleeping creature as if it were a pile of entrails from which he was attempting to divine the weather.

"I didn't bring you here to tell me how pretty it is," Gynn said. "I brought you here to tell me if it's a sign."

"Oh, it is, Prefect. Absolutely."

"Of what?"

"I have not the slightest idea."

Gynn sighed, as did the council members gathered behind him. *No reason for them to sigh, he thought. They're the ones who convinced me to choose this fool of a seer.*

"Is it a good omen or a bad omen?" Gynn asked Fao. "Can you tell me that, at least?"

"No, Prefect."

"What *can* you tell me?"

"It's a fascinating bird."

Gynn slapped a hand against his forehead. *I summoned the entire council to meet here for this nonsense.*

"Ought to kill it now," Ul said, licking his lips as he eyed the bird. "There are hungry people in this village."

Galem looked up with a horrified gasp. "You can't eat a sign!"

"What if it's a bad sign, like a drought? We should eat it before the worse happens."

"Dear sirs, I'm afraid eating this bird would not stop the drought," Fao said, poking at the bird's feathers.

"But you said you didn't know what the bird portended," Galem said.

Fao shrugged. "I don't."

"But you said eating the bird won't stop the drought."

"*Would not* stop the drought. A drought. Any drought. It was purely hypothetical."

"But you said . . ."

"Eony damn us all to the Fire Lands, would you fools be silent and hide your stupidity!" Gynn's cheeks flushed, first with anger, then with embarrassment. He hadn't meant to yell. He never yelled. At the seer, perhaps, he corrected, but never in front of the council. Their eyes were all on him now, and the only sound in the temple was the bird's persistent snoring.

"Tell us, Galem," Gynn said after a deep breath to calm himself.
"How exactly did you come upon this bird?"

"I came to the temple to offer my prayers, like I do most mornings. Only this time--this morning, that is--the bird was here."

"Was it sleeping then?"

"Yes, Prefect."

The bird burred, and Gynn shuddered with it. "Was it making that awful noise when you found it?"

"No, Prefect. It didn't start snoring until just after UI showed up."

"And what brought you to the temple, UI?"

"Had prayers of my own to offer," UI said.

"And what did you . . ."

A high-pitched whoop interrupted Gynn's question. Fao scampered to his side, tugging at his sleeve with one hand and pointing at the bird with the other. "It's awake, Prefect. It's awake."

The bird whooped again, and Gynn winced. "So I hear."

The men swarmed around the bird. The creature stood, its talons clicking against the stone of Eony's head as it shifted to keep its balance on the statue. The bird stretched its cord-like neck to its full length and regarded its observers with wide, crystalline eyes.

UI sidled up to Gynn. "Let me kill the bird now and you'll be an honored guest at our table when we eat it."

"Bite your tongue if you're so hungry," Gynn said, shoving the man aside. The prefect stepped toward the bird, but stopped

with a cringe as the creature let out a piercing, yet entirely new, noise.

"Eony," Galem said with breathless awe. "It said Eony. It *is* a sign."

The bird opened its beak and made the sound again.

Fao pushed his way in front of Galem, waving a hand in the air. "No, no, no, my dear man. The bird clearly said *eonee*, which is, of course, Old Anellish for snow. It is a sign that there will be snow.

"When?" Galem asked.

Fao shrugged. "Next winter, I imagine. That's when it usually snows, does it not?"

My prayers have been answered, Gynn thought, rubbing his throbbing temples. *This seer has finally shown himself to be the useless fool he is.*

"A sign." Galem crouched beside the statue and stared up at the bird. "My prayers have been answered."

Gynn slowly withdrew his hand from his aching head. "What did you say?"

"I said my prayers have been answered." Galem smiled up at the bird, but the creature's gaze was fixed on Gynn.

"What did you pray for, Galem?" Gynn asked.

"For a sign."

"Of what?"

"Anything. I've always wanted a sign from Eony. My cousin received a sign once and he was the most revered man in the village for weeks."

Gynn stared at the bird a moment, then turned to UI. "What did you come here to pray for this morning?"

"Well, Prefect . . ." UI looked down and shuffled his feet. "Well, I didn't come here to pray so much as to complain."

"About what?"

"Well, you see, Prefect, since winter I've been praying for a good spring harvest; praying not to go hungry. The harvest was just fine, but not nearly as good as some other folk had it, and those folk hadn't been praying every morning like me. Thought Eony owed me a bit more than I got."

Gynn grabbed UI and Galem by their collars and dragged them to the temple's entryway. "Congratulations, gentlemen, Eony has answered you both. Go home." The two men blubbered, but Gynn shooed them down the temple steps, then whirled to face those still in the temple. "Fao!"

"Yes, Prefect?"

"You're useless. Find another village in which to be it."

"Prefect?"

"You are no longer the village seer. Be off with you."

"But Prefect . . ."

The bird whooped, and Fao, for the first time since Gynn had met him, remained silent. The seer looked to the council members, entreaty in his eyes, but the only answer he received was impassive silence. Fao hung his head and plodded out of the temple.

Gynn spread his arms and addressed the council. "I apologize for bringing you here, friends. Please, go home. Enjoy what remains of the day."

With nods and handshakes, the council members parted ways with Gynn, leaving him alone in the temple with the bird. The creature flapped its wings, but did not take flight.

"Eonee," it squawked.

"That seer may not know Old Anellish," Gynn said, "but I do."

In a flash of crimson feathers, the bird flew out of the temple crying, "Eonee!"

Gynn shook his head. "Damn drought coming."

#

A misplaced step landed Fao in a roadside puddle. Used to the routine, he sat up and shook what muck he could from the drooping sleeves of his robes. They had once been blue, but a few coatings of mud had made them the shade of the last pile of entrails from which he had attempted to divine the weather.

"Jesoin," he said, using what he had decided was the Old Anellish word for *damn*. What it really meant, he didn't know, but he at least had the language right. It wasn't as if anyone actually spoke Old Anellish.

And if it hadn't been for that accursed bird, he would be curled up in a study with a jug of wine and a warming fire instead of trudging down the Northern Road in the rain. He still didn't understand what had happened--one moment he was offering an explanation for the bird's presence in the temple; the next Prefect Gynn was ordering him out of the village.

Fao had worked hard to become a seer. He couldn't see anything that wasn't right in front of him, of course, but faking it was an art, and his mentor had assured him that when it came to charlatans, he was the genuine article.

"Do you need help, friend?"

Fao looked up at the sound of the voice. A stout, long-necked man in crimson robes stood at the puddle's edge, staring down at him with crystalline blue eyes.

"You look just like that stupid bird," Fao muttered.

The man looked himself over with a smirk. "I don't appear to have wings."

"Or a beak. Or feathers. And you don't make that annoying whooping noise."

"You don't seem fond of birds."

"Just the one." Fao pushed the mud around with his feet. "Wish the prefect had let Ul eat the loathsome thing."

The man shook his head and made a clicking noise with his tongue--the kind of noise one would make to gently scold a child. "I don't think that's what you wish."

"No." Fao sighed. "I wish I was a true seer."

The stranger held out his hand. "Let me help you, friend."

Fao took the man's proffered hand, but as he was yanked to his feet, his vision clouded. When it cleared, the man was gone, and a familiar whooping sound drew Fao's gaze downward. Standing where the stranger had been was the bird.

Fao screamed and stumbled right back into the puddle.

"Jesoin," the bird squawked as it flew off, its red feathers the only color visible against the grey sky.

#

The sky had gone from grey to black by the time Fao reached Guganel, the next village along the road. He made his way to an

inn and groaned when he saw the placard boasting its name: The Red Bird.

Fao stepped inside. Despite the wariness-inducing sign outside, there was nothing red nor bird-like about the inn's interior; just warm, comforting wood tones, a rafted ceiling, and a handful of men laughing and drinking beside a crackling fire.

The innkeeper--a tall, lank man who wavered like a corn stalk in the breeze as he walked--rushed over to Fao, wiping the reddish-purple remnants of some sort of berry on his apron. He offered a smile that nearly wrapped itself around his entire head, and then an open-mouthed look of pity as he eyed Fao's slouched, mud-splattered form. "Poor soul, I'm not sure what to offer you first--warm food, warm bath, or a warm bed."

Fao smiled for the first time in days, having expected his bedraggled appearance to garner a poorer reception. The innkeeper's pity was something he would have to pay for, but it was welcome attention all the same. "A bath first, please, and then . . ."

Fao stopped as the laughter in the common room turned into screams. He saw each man there, in turn, reddened with blood and ripped apart by a kalla beast--a black-furred creature, twice the size of a grown man, with claws that could snap bones as if they were twigs.

"Friend?"

Fao turned back to the innkeeper, whose impossibly long face twisted into a quizzical expression.

"Is something wrong, friend?" he asked. "You're as white as an Anellish albino, even with the mud."

Fao risked another look at the common room, which was once again a tranquil scene. One of the men waved his arms about, in

the midst of a story, and the others laughed and slapped their knees.

"They're all going to die," Fao said.

"Die?" The innkeeper laughed, the sound as high-pitched as he was tall. "Those fellows are the greatest hunting party these parts have ever seen. They've faced thirty kalla beasts and not a one of them has failed to come back in one piece. Just wiped out a whole nest today. Did this village a favor, killing them off before they got any bigger."

"It would have been a bigger favor had they killed the mother."

As if on cue, a heart-rending wail ripped through the night, and one wall of the common room exploded in a shower of splinters as a kalla beast burst inside.

"I'll be leaving now," Fao said over the screams he had heard in his a vision a moment before.

#

Every village Fao visited brought another vision and another disaster--fires, famines, plagues, ravenous insects. One village even had a surly ghost with a penchant for hurling puppies down wells. The seer couldn't decide which was worse--that his visions came too late for him to do anything about them, or that they had thus far kept him from a decent bath.

On another rainy day during his travels, Fao found himself once again coated in mud and sitting in a murky puddle. "Forty two," he muttered, though counting the times he slipped had lost its appeal after number five.

"Jesoin!"

The familiar squawk elicited a snarl from Fao. He glared at the bird as it landed beside the puddle, its red feathers appearing strangely untouched by the rain.

"I learned some Old Anellish back in Nar before that giant ate the village," Fao said. "I know *jesoin* means recompense."

"Jesoin," the bird screeched.

"Yes, I get it. Lesson learned. Now take your accursed visions back."

The bird cocked its head, regarding Fao as if he had asked a question it didn't understand.

"I take it back," Fao said. When the bird made no move, the seer slapped his hands into the puddle, howling in frustration as the muddy water landed everywhere except on those perfectly smooth feathers. "I take the damn wish back!"

The bird stared at him, motionless except for the occasional blink. Fao looked into its eyes--wide, blue, and innocent--and something in their depths made it clear that the creature was not going to take back the visions.

Fao drew a knife and leapt at the bird. "Jesoin!"

#

Ul had just sat down after a long day of work in the fields when he heard a knock at the door. *Whoever it is, they better have brought food*, he thought as he heaved his heavy frame out of the chair with a groan and waddled toward the door. He had been plagued by a constant hunger for over a month--ever since he saw that red bird in the temple. He ate non-stop now, having gone so far as to slaughter his prize milk cow and devour the entire roast himself. Nothing satiated him, though, and everything he gorged himself on only made him think about that bird--roasted, sautéed, or stewed.

UI opened the door, and his round face scrunched in surprise. "Huh." He took the filthy, foul-smelling figure at his doorstep to be a beggar at first, but as the man looked up, he realized it was Fao the Seer. "Thought the prefect had you thrown out of the village." UI sniffed, wrinkling his nose so much that it almost disappeared in the folds of his skin. "Why do you smell like a kalla beast?" UI sniffed again. "And puppies?"

"It's a long story, my friend." Fao held up his hand, revealing the decapitated carcass of a large, round bird with crimson feathers. "Shall I tell it over dinner?"

#

"Poor UI." Galem shook his spindly head as several men heaved his friend's bulk into the grave, puffing and straining the entire time.

"If only Fao hadn't been in the bath when he choked on that bone," Galem's wife said with a stately sniff.

"Poor UI." Galem clasped his wiry hands and shook his head again. "At least he's not hungry anymore."

UI's body landed in the grave with a heavy thump. The men who had been lugging it held onto each other for support, panting with relief. A single red feather drifted up from the grave--they had spent an entire day picking them out of UI's clothing in preparation for burial. Galem watched as the wind caught the feather and carried it toward the river that ran alongside the village.

Galem sighed. "That poor red bird, too."

"Crimson," his wife said. "I saw the feathers when you were picking them out. They were crimson."

#

Prefect Gynn's eyes narrowed with doubt. "A true seer now, you say?"

Across the table, Fao curled into a ball in his chair, all but lost in the oversized robes he wore. Gynn had lent him the clothes only because he didn't want to smell the month's worth of grime the tiny man's own robes had collected. Gynn was particularly perplexed by the muddy paw prints he had seen on them. He recalled Fao muttering something about a ghost hurling puppies.

"A true seer." Fao sniffled. "It's not so great."

"I imagine not," Gynn said in his most snappish tone. "Being a true seer means one does not get to prance about being self-important and useless."

Gynn glanced down each side of the table at the twelve council members gathered there. Instead of offering advice, they stared back at him with wide-eyed expectance. The prefect buried his face in his hands and sighed. He wasn't sure what to do about Fao. He thought he had seen the last of the charlatan when he threw him out of the village weeks before. *I'm no seer,* he thought, *yet even I saw that the bird portended a drought.* But now Fao was back, and his every word thus far had been nonsense: that stupid bird gave him visions; he killed that stupid bird because it wouldn't take the visions back; that stupid bird killed UI in an act of beyond-the-grave retribution.

"Where is Rafmun?" Gynn asked. It was unlike his new seer--his very pleasing and useful seer--to be late.

"He'll be along," Fao said with a dejected sigh. "But you're going to need a new seer." He sank further into his robes.

"Why?"

As if on cue, Rafmun burst into the room. Gynn would have been relieved to see the man had he not been in flames. Rafmun flailed about for a moment, somehow managing not to set

anything else on fire, before finally disintegrating in a puff of smoke and ash.

Fao shrugged as if this was a normal occurrence for him. "They call it spontaneous combustion in Falypse."

Gynn gaped at Rafmun's sooty remains. He wasn't sure what horrified him more--that the man had burnt to a crisp in front of him, or that Fao might actually be a real seer.

"Prefect Gynn!" Foom, the village constable, rushed into the room, but came to an abrupt stop in front of the pile of ashes. "What is that?"

"That," Fao said, "is Rafmun."

At least he's not on fire, Gynn thought as he looked up at Foom. The man was rubbing his right thigh. His sheathed sword always jabbed his leg as he ran, and he only ran when he had bad news to deliver.

"There's a woman demanding to see you, Prefect," Foom said. "She showed up on the strangest boat."

An old woman stormed into the room, shoving Foom aside and scattering Rafmun's remains. She sneered at the cloud of ashes she had stirred up, as if it had attempted to assault her.

"I beg your pardon, madam," Gynn said, "but that was my seer you just stepped in."

The woman bore a striking resemblance to--as he was sure Fao would have put it--that stupid bird. Her rotund figure was clad in a disturbingly tight red gown, and a clump of crimson feathers adorned the knit cap she wore over her frizzy grey hair. A beak-like nose protruded as far out from her face as the feathers did from her cap. Her crystalline blue eyes seemed far too young for her wrinkled face, and her neck was far too long for her stout

body. The woman pointed a pudgy finger at Fao. "That little man killed my husband!"

Fao responded with a peevish snuffle. "Stupid bird had it coming."

The woman let out a shrieking whoop. In a whirl so quick that Gynn barely had time to register what was happening, she morphed into a bird--one phenomenally fatter than what he had seen in the temple weeks before. It stretched out its coil-like neck and flew straight at Fao with another whoop.

Fao leapt from his chair, ducking behind furniture and council members in an attempt to escape the creature's attack.

Gynn scrambled under the table and watched as the council members fell to the floor one by one, clutching at peck marks and talon scratches. *Eony help us if the village healer turns out to be as useless as Fao*, he thought. He peered out from beneath the table just as Fao used Foom to shield himself from the bird's next attack. While the bird scratched at Foom's flailing hands, Fao unsheathed the man's sword. The weapon looked ridiculously large in the seer's hands. He waved it in the air as he staggered backwards under its weight, somehow managing to nick one of the bird's talons.

Fao dropped the sword and fled.

The bird settled on the table. It stretched its neck down to examine its wounded talon, then let out an enraged whoop and flew after Fao. Once it was gone, Gynn crawled out from under the table to an accompanying chorus of groans from Foom and the council members.

"Stupid bird," he muttered.

#

Galem darted out of hiding as soon as the old woman followed Constable Foom into the village meeting hall. He knew he should be tending to his fields instead of snooping around the river's edge, but the boat the woman had arrived on was too unique not to marvel at--clearly another sign. It was a small vessel--room enough for two or three people, Galem guessed--and it had the most vibrant red sails he had ever seen.

"Crimson," Galem muttered before his wife's voice had a chance to register in his head.

He ran a hand along the boat's strange body. It felt like there was a hard frame beneath it, but the surface had the downy feel of an enormous feather.

"Out of the way!"

Galem looked up to find Fao the Seer running toward him. The tiny man shoved him aside and pushed the boat into the river.

"You can't take that," Galem said, darting into the shallow water. Fao pulled himself and his dripping robes over the boat's side, and Galem scrambled in after him. "What are you doing?"

"Those birds are a menace." From somewhere in his robes, Fao produced two sticks--the kind one would use to start a cooking fire. He hovered close to the deck and rubbed them together.

"They have to be stopped."

"Murderer!"

Galem tried to snatch the sticks away, but Fao whacked him on the hand with one.

"They're demons, Galem. Saw that in a vision. Little red demons come to drive us all mad--if we don't all die of starvation after the drought, that is. Everywhere they go, it's the same. Plagues and kalla beasts and puppy hurling." Fao shook his head and sighed.

"Those poor puppies."

Galem made another move for the sticks, but turned at the sound of a familiar whoop.

"Another sign," he exclaimed just before the bird plowed into him.

#

"Poor Galem." Gynn shook his head as Foom pulled the shivering farmer from the river.

"It's a sign," Galem said, his voice quavering and his teeth chattering. Clumps of wet, red feathers were plastered to his skin.

"A sign." Gynn snorted. "Of what?"

"A drought, Prefect."

Gynn raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps you're not such a fool after all." He turned his attention to the old woman's boat as it made its way down the river in a burst of crimson flames. He could still hear Fao's maniacal laughter echoing from somewhere within the blaze. "Want his job?" he asked, looking down at Galem.

Galem's face lit up.

Gynn sighed. "Stupid bird."

###



Dragon's Flare

by Tala Bar

"I don't believe in dragons!" cried a young man from the audience, after the Minstrel had finished his tale.

Finbar laughed, wryly, "Neither do I, really. It's just a tale, man, you should enjoy hearing it, not necessarily believe in it."

A few minutes later he followed his hostess to her house, where he would spend the night before continuing on his way. The morning lighted on a pleasant autumn day, and he was all set to travel the short day trip to the next village. Finbar was in a good mood, and nothing was to disturb it for him!

As relations between the two villages were cordial, there was a clear path to walk in. The area was hilly and slightly rocky, with a few trees growing sparsely here and there. They were mostly standing in a fall, their leaves getting colorful brown, reddish and yellow before falling, and the grass under foot was yellowing as well, after a relatively dry summer. The Minstrel was still whistling to himself as he walked, his sack on his back and his coat on top of it, his long staff in his hand, being partly leaned on and partly played with, waved in the air in the rhythm of the tune he was whistling. He was gaily and curiously looking around him, when he suddenly stopped.

Up above, at the top of one hill higher than the others, a strange rock reared its oddly shaped form. It was quite uneven, serrated with protrudences here and there, giving the overall impression of the head of a dragon ... Dragon! Finbar inhaled, close his eyes then opened them and looked again. It really looked like a dragon, though he was sure he had never seen dragons in his life. Nor, as he assured that young man in the village, did he really believe in their existence. But here Finbar felt the need to be a little careful. For, as a matter of fact, on his traveling he indeed encountered some sights and creatures, which he found it hard to believe in their existence outside his own tales and songs, sometimes he thought he actually dreamed all these fantastic encounters he had had. Now, that dragon, surely -

The shape changed, it moved. It grew taller as if the dragon was standing up. Then a pair of huge wings appeared on both sides of the strange head. They moved, flapping hard until the Minstrel could almost hear them. The rocky creature then took off, flew up in the sky, then started circling, going down - down - getting really big as it came closer and closer to Finbar...

The Minstrel was standing still, as if planted in the ground, not able to move. The dragon hovered for a few minutes above him, as if studying his appearance, then, slowly and gradually, it folded its wings and landed, right beside Finbar. The Minstrel, who had held his breath until then, emitted a long breath then inhaled, deeply.

"So, you are Finbar," he heard a rumbling voice emitted from the direction of the dragon. He was now forced to look at the monster, even just to be polite. It was, of course, enormous. Well, let's just say, quite big. Certainly bigger than the largest horse Finbar had ever seen, perhaps twice as high, much wider and certainly very long between the tips of its head and tail. The latter was moving restlessly to and fro, giving the Minstrel the sense of immediate danger and he tried to move away from it. In these few moments he had also a chance of looking at the

appearance of the dragon, and it amazed him more than he could ever think. It was scaly, of course, according to the best stories; but the scales did not lie flat. They were standing on edge, making the monster look as if it was bristling; the low rays of the rising sun reflected in each of these coppery bristles, and Finbar was not sure later if it made the dragon more or less frightening. It certainly gave it a look of unexpected, bizarre beauty. To add to it, from among the spiky scales on its head shone a pair of the clearest green eyes he had ever seen.

Again, he felt the need to be polite, if just to try and avert danger. "Did you speak?" he asked.

"I was just making our acquaintance," the rumbling voice resumed, and the minstrel noticed an orange light flaring out of the monster's mouth together with the sound.

It is breathing fire, Finbar thought, fleetingly, his heart even more racing than before.

"Yes, I am Finbar," he answered in a trembling voice, "and you?"

"You can call me Andy, but right now, I was sent to help you in your coming trouble."

"What trouble?" The argument made Finbar less aware of the danger emanating to him from the dragon itself.

"Here it comes. You step behind me and you'll be all right."

"How can I step behind you when I see nothing in front of us?" The Minstrel insisted. But then, he saw it too. Right in front of them, from behind a hilly fold in the ground, a row of flickering rose, until it took the shape of spear points. Behind them helmets shone in the sun, and soon whole bodies of marching soldiers came, advancing right on Finbar and the dragon. The

beast spread its wings and rose in the air, a mass of shining copper points.

"Don't worry, I'm here with you!" The rumbling voice sounded like drums in the Minstrel's ears, as the dragon's body diminished in size up above him. Finbar turned his eyes from it toward the approaching soldiers who, in quite a short time, were standing before him.

"Hey, man, what are you doing here, all on your own? Aren't you afraid? There is a war going on, and you are right in the middle of it!" It was the commander of the group who was addressing him, a great mass of a man looking heavy and strong, a head taller than Finbar himself. Instead of a spear he was carrying a large club, as if to show up his rank, though a short sword was hanging from his belt. Finbar had met military men before, but singly, and in very different circumstances.

"I never heard of any war?" Finbar answered with an outer calm, which he did not feel inside. As a wandering minstrel, he knew his way around people and had never been afraid even of the strongest and most violent of them. But he had never met them in a mass of great number, making them not separate humans but a great big monster no less intimidating than the dragon. For a second he lifted his eyes to see where was that creature.

"There is a war going on just now between these two barons, and if you do not stay with the one who is your patron, you'd better join it to find a safe place and not stand between two warring armies."

"But I am a minstrel!" he protested. "I wander about and do not belong to any baron, nor am I interested in fighting."

The man laughed, with his men joining him in a roar.

"Interested? Who is asking you? You're coming with us, to become one of us and fight for our baron, and if you do not come

willingly, we'll take you by force." He signed to the men, and two of them stepped forward. "Take him!" the commander ordered.

Just as they stretched their arms at the Minstrel, a great roar sounded from above, and a mass of coppery spikes fell on the men. It did not look as if they were frightened away, because a shower of spears flew at the dragon. But it shook them off and a flame burst out of its mouth, scorching the soldiers. *They were lucky to wear helmets*, Finbar thought, then he felt arms seizing him just the same, using his body as a shield against the monster. But the dragon waved its enormous wings, its spiky scales hit at the men, forcing them to drop the Minstrel and scatter away. The dragon roared and rumbled again, throwing flames after the escaping soldiers, until none of them was left around. Then the monster lifted and was gone, and for a few moments Finbar was alone among the round, rocky hills.

He shut his eyes for a moment, falling to the ground, catching his breath. "Did you get a good fright, then?" He heard a laughing, clear voice that did not belong to the scene he had just experienced. He opened his eyes and immediately rose to his feet.

"Where have you sprung from?" he asked the lovely woman standing before him. She was dressed in a copper armor made of spiky scales, and under her copper helmet, from among some curls of coppery curls, shone the loveliest pair of green eyes he had ever seen.

"But you must know me. I am the same Andy who had just saved you from a fate worse than death," she laughed.

"Worse than death ... well, I wouldn't argue, but thank you all the same. Still - Andy, as in..."

"You can figure out yourself what it is short of, with all your knowledge of ancient mythology..."

"And the dragon?"

"Well, it's useful, don't you think? I could not scare them away in the form of a beautiful girl, could I?"

###



The Providence of Poets

by Paul M. Jessup

Mael watches Saracyn dance around the night fire to the rhythm of the war drums, her body undulating beneath the dark branches of the blackwood trees. The captain, Ak-Paluk, hired her to bring up the men's spirits during the night hours after the fierce battle. While she dances she sings the songs of after-war, the poems of combat's shadow.

Dark days, Mael thinks, when our sons use our own poems against us. He gets up and moves towards the back of the encampment, the sounds of the night world echoing around him.

Behind the rows of tents Mael sees the River of Ravens ahead of him, bodies floating face down amongst the scattered black autumn leaves and the clumping green of slime. He sees the shimmer of stars and moon reflecting between the reeds against the surface of the river and walks towards it. Behind he can hear the men in chorus, the sorrow of war heavy on their hearts.

Mael walks into the river, the cold water brushing against his thighs. The reeds around him clutter like the links of chains, parting with a psychic movement to his limbs. He pulls one of the bodies next to him, rolling the corpse over so that he can see the face.

It was the face of his twin brother.

Mael's own face, reflected genetically in the dark, scars of words imprinted on the skin beneath the red and orange of the rebel's uniform. Mael wraps his arms around the cold, wet body and holds his brother there, underneath the black sky, and sings the songs of rebirth.

May your next life, he thinks, be more than this.

#

That night Mael dreams of birds ripping at his skin, tearing his flesh and rendering his muscles and blood naked to the world. The bird then dips its beak into the ground and pulls his twin from the earth, stripping the rotting flesh from his twin as well.

The birds then dress them in the sun.

#

Mael awakens with Al-Paluk kicking him in the guts and pouring water over his head. It's still barely morning, the light of night clinging onto the air around them with desperate hands, trying to fight the light of the sun. Mael grunts and grabs his weapons of paper and black ink.

"Time to move?" Mael asks.

Al-Paluk nods and holds his fingers to his lips.

Mael shrugs.

How can an army make no noise when it moves?

Such is the nature of war.

#

As they gathered each person together, moving silently through the encampment, leaving their tents and their belongings behind,

Mael sees Saracyn's body hanging from a blackwood tree. Around her neck was a crude sentence, her body stripped and covered in the lashes of a poorly constructed haiku. He tries not to look at her face as they marched by, tries not to see her dead eyes stare out from behind the shadows of the leaves.

It disgusts Mael that she had been murdered.

She deserves better than that.

They all deserve better than that.

#

Rain falls on the ninth day of marching, with the ruins around them being the only shelter. Mael feels the soft mist against his face, his clothes sticking to his body heavy and damp. He sees figures dart through the empty stone arches out of the corner of his eye. The movements are like a grey blur against the rising columns and empty shells of houses.

Al-Paluk holds his hand in the air.

The fingers cupped into the shape of a bird.

Be warned, his finger say, we are being watched.

The rain smells like copper.

#

Mael feels something move in the brown sack he has over his back. The noise is a strange, desperate and hungry rustling. His body breaks into a sweat against the damp rain, his stomach alive with the snakes of fear. *Impossible*, Mael thinks, *an animal must have gotten inside*.

Up ahead they can see the end to the ruins, the stone giving way to the hills and the sky beyond. The earth feels grey and blue,

the sun stalked and killed by the iron rain clouds around them, soaking all color from the world. Mael misses the nuances of greens and golds, yearns for the shades of color of the summer that he know of in his youth.

Mael looks up as they walk and sees a shadow sitting on the semicircle ruins of a dome roof, the shadow's legs perched and ready to leap. The face of the shadow is hidden beneath the ropey strands of black hair, the arms dangling down like long thin logs draped in vines.

Mael feels queasy.

The sack rustles some more.

Hungry.

Soon, he thinks, soon we will be out of this cursed ghost town and once again see the battlefields of war. Odd, how even something such as combat can feel like home after awhile.

#

The ruins seem to stretch on, repeating itself after awhile. *We should be out by now, Mael thinks, I've seen that shadow of a man on top of those ruins three times in a row. It's the same person. I know it is.*

More noises come from his sack. He thinks of opening it, to see if it really is some wild animal come to eat. He's afraid though, afraid that it would be something else entirely. Something he dare not even think of.

It's not possible, he thinks, not possible.

Al-Paluk stops the marching. The men sigh and slack a little, hoping to be out of these dark lands and back into the war soon enough. "Why are we stopping?" One of them yells as Al-Paluk

walks amongst the rank, unspeaking, his face furrowed with anger.

He walks up to Mael and smacks him with a craftily made nonsense verse, the snap of his words cracking against the soft of Mael's face. It stung almost as much as the poem his mother would recite whenever he misbehaved as a child, growing up in a house filled with the painful words of war poets. "Open your sack," Al-Paluk says, his face thick and unmoving.

Mael nods.

Behind him he hears the whispers of the army like a fluttering of wings, beating with words and ready to be born in the air. Mael looks up briefly before he opens the sack, seeing the dark figure at the top of the ruins drop like a stone towards the earth.

Inside are the body parts of his twin, chopped with an axe the night before and stuffed in the sack. Wrapped around each limb was a large green leaf that kept it from decaying and stinking. The limbs twitched, as if alive. On the top lay his brother's head, the eyes moving beneath closed eyelids, the mouth opening and closing in a rapid series of barely audible words.

Al-Paluk sighs.

"It's almost like you are carrying yourself, dismembered and ready to be reborn."

Mael closes the sack and hears the sound of feet hitting the ground behind them. "Yeah, I guess. I wonder, I wonder why he's moving..."

Al-Paluk shrugs.

"Maybe he's not dead just yet."

Mael nods.

"That must be it."

Al-Paluk walks back towards the front of the disheveled group of poets, not noticing the shadow that rises amongst their ranks. The shadow is covered in chains, his eyes and lips sewn shut. "Make sure the animals don't get to it. And tell us next time you feel like stealing the dead and bringing them with us, Mael."

The shadow smiles, the threads around his mouth peeling back against the skin, pulling his lips tighter with each twist of flesh. "Am I the only one who can see him?" Mael thinks.

#

That night they tried to sleep, each poet tossing and turning in the endless ruins, stark nightmares haunting each moment. The day had ended abruptly, without the soft colors of night seeping into the air. It was like a black curtain dropped, the world spinning into the landscape of shadows.

No stars.

No moon.

Just a black void of a sky.

The ruins around them are alive with owls and other predatory birds hunting in the air above them, searching for the remains of animals left to die.

#

Mael clutches the sack close to his body, the parts of his twin twitching and gripping from behind the cloth.

Mael listens closely and hears what his twin whispers. "They are us and we are they, the shadows of two worlds between us. You have fallen into our trap, oh dear brother, you have been sent to the dead lands, where no living should ever step foot. We sprung

it the night before, while you slept, while you slept and dreamt of me..."

Mael doesn't move.

Doesn't breathe.

Doesn't even think anymore.

The shadow amongst them walks through the restless camp with a lantern made of a human head, the oily light filtering through the black night mist around them as he swings the skull on its iron chains. The light swings with the skull, sending the shadows out long against the edges of the camp.

"Welcome to the land of unlife, where your poems will not save you, your humanity here is worthless. You might as well just wait to die," Mael's twin says.

Mael can't believe it.

Can't believe a word of it.

#

The next morning, a plague is spotted running through the camp. The plague worms its way from body to body in a spontaneous lick of corrupted prose, it's lyrical death causing people to repeat its words and grow black lumps all over their bodies. Al-Paluk wants to get the camp moving, to get the camp beyond the ruins around them.

Nobody cares to move anymore.

Moving seems pointless, time and space both endless, warped. By night the plague claims almost all of the army, leaving only Mael and a handful of other soldiers, whispering their poems like prayers in the wind, trying to keep the plague and ghosts away from them. Even Al-Paluk is dead.

"You shouldn't have fought us," the head says, "You should have just let us kill that fucking king. We would all have been better off. Instead, we all confront death. Even you, the living, must now confront death."

#

Mael sees the shadow move through the scattered dead now, lifting the bodies up on his shoulders, his lamp still swinging behind him. Mael feels his own breath freeze inside of his lungs.

#

The next day the bodies are all gone, carried off into the ruins by the shadow. Soon Mael is all that is left of the army, his brother's head whispering to him of death and dying, of doorways and wars. While his brother mutters, talking in random poetry, he conceives an idea.

He lifts his brother's head out of the sack.

"What?" His brother says, "What are you doing?"

Mael peels back his brother's eyes. Out of the eye sockets shoot an oily yellow light. The light of the dead. He sees it point towards a hole in the ruins, a hole in reality itself. "I'm finding my way home," Mael says.

#

He follows the yellow light
Crawls through the tear in the universe
And finds himself washed on the floor between worlds.
In the land of the living.

The land of poetry and war.

###



Eating In

by Chris McTrusty

"Ooh, I must say, Edward," Marian puffed. "The table looks a treat."

The sitting room of Edward's small cottage bathed in the orange glow of a roaring fire. A table, set for two, was placed to one side, by the room's only window. Smiling, Edward placed Marian's travel bag by the bedroom door.

"I wanted our first night together to be perfect," he said.

"As do I." Marian squeezed out a smile and squeezed herself onto the couch.

Edward poured them each a small sherry. "I read so many of your letters over dinner alone, wishing you were here," he sighed. He handed Marian her sherry. "And now you are...my darling."

"Here and hungry." Marian smiled up at Edward. "...Darling."

"Yes, yes, my love, you must be hungry after your journey."

Marian nodded. "Will dinner be very long?"

"We should be able to rustle up some grub in no time, my dear." Edward settled on the couch beside Marian.

"You mean *we'll* cook it? That *I'll* cook it?" Marian squirmed uneasily. "I'm not in the habit of cooking. Back in the city, we often eat out in taverns. You place an order with a serving wench and the food is brought out to you."

"Indeed?"

Marian smiled weakly. " I don't cook much at all, really."

"Then you shall tonight, light of my life!" Edward declared, gently squeezing Marian's shoulder.

"But, Edward I-"

Edward waved a dismissive hand. "Fear not, oh fair one. This meal is not hard to prepare. In fact..." He stood and beckoned she follow him. "Come. Let us begin."

In the cramped kitchen, Edward gestured at his huge hearth. The hearth, along with a rough hewn chopping block occupied the majority of the kitchen. "The food is cooked in the hearth and-"

Marian peeked into the small larder. She gasped and turned to Edward. "Are we eating *tinned* food?"

"I can assure it is quite fresh, my dear."

"Oh yes, I'm sure. But, still..." Marian frowned. "I only eat meat that is fresh and *not* in tin."

"My love, I would offer nothing but the freshest, primest food for your enjoyment."

"I don't know..." Marian said. "You hear so many bad stories about food in tin."

"The tin often enhances the flavour. And much depends on how it is cooked," Edward said. "We in the country often feast on such morsels. I beseech thee, my dear. Indulge me."

"We-ll, all right..."

"Excellent," Edward beamed. "Let us begin!"

Fifteen minutes later, Marian nudged Edward.

"Can we eat now?" She wiped the back of a hand across her brow. Tin or not, she was famished.

Edward checked his hourglass. "Perhaps a little longer..."

"What? Well, can't we check?"

"Very well. Pass me the oven mitts, please."

Edward eased the tin onto the chopping block.

"There is a way to check if the food is ready - that does not damage the casing - in case it is not ready," he chuckled. "A trick of the chef's trade." He added, with a sly wink.

"Hungry." Marian rolled her eyes.

"Ah, yes, of course."

With great skill, Edward peeled away a piece of the tin casing.

"Always begin at the top," he instructed.

Marian nodded. "Still hungry."

The tin casing peeled back.

"Away foul beast!" cried the (slightly crispy) knight in the armour. "Ye shall yet taste cold steel!"

Edward quickly snapped the visor shut.

"You see," he said. "It isn't ready yet." He did a quick mental calculation. "I should say another five to seven minutes at one hundred and eighty degrees."

Marian sighed and swished her tail. "Oh, all right. Let's get blowing."

###



Sky Mountains

by Marina Lee Sable

The sky leans into the darker
sounds of night and lightning-
illuminated cloud mountains
rising, igniting the ionosphere
as the world retreats.

The pewter sky shocked neon
as each haloed sprite dances
along the cumulus tops.

Moondown, elusive spirits
of the ethereal world
light their chandeliers
and lower fluorescent filaments
to Earth, threading their way
through leafless trees,
a monochrome city hanging
for an instant in another plane.

I step back to the blue edge
of the other world,
my fallen dusts, neon lit,
lifted on metallic threads
drawing me back through
the electric hum of time,
back to the sky mountains
where I belong.