

Maiden Quest

Bloodwurm

The forest was cold. We were hunting for food near the village of Glockenston. My partner's was the little guy with the axe, Uore Ogrebreaker. We followed Aleguard the Paladin. My name's Bloodwurm. I'm a dragon, and a glorious example of a dragon at that.

My appearance inspired awe in the minds of all right thinking beings with my row upon row of nearly impervious forest green scale stretched from the tip of my nose to the spikes on my tail, providing the source of my name. Above each golden eye is a copper colored forked horn. From my back sprouted a pair of truly wonderful wings capable of propelling me through the air at speeds unmatched by any other living being. Some describe my wings as being "bat like" which is more than a little insulting, comparing my awe inspiring self to any minor mammal. Besides bats have "dragon like" wings.

For the record, the situation with which I open this tale was all a big misunderstanding. Some beings, mostly humans given how intrinsically untrusting they are as a breed, when seeing a magnificent dragon and a three-foot tall dwarf together, immediately assume the worst. This is why Uore and I were running for his life (I, of course was in no danger at all, but it would have been rude to force Uore escape the mob alone, so I was running with him,) from a rampaging mob, complete with torches and pitchforks.

Someday I must determine precisely why torches and pitchforks are the preferred weapons of human mobs. If we were being chased by a rampaging horde of farm workers the pitchforks might make sense, but these were townsfolk, and it would seem to me that farming implements would likely be a bit scarce on the ground. I can think of no reason for them to be carrying torches at all, I mean it was broad daylight, just past midday, how long were they planning on chasing us anyway?

Of course, every group has at least one nonconformist, and this group of villagers with pitchforks was no exception. Among their number was someone with a bow and the ability to use it. The archer was quite literally a pain in my arse. Already an even dozen of his shafts had bounced off my scales, and another four had found their way past my natural armor to embed themselves into my hindquarters and each one sapped a bit of my strength. I scrambled around the curve in the path hoping against hope that there would be a clearing large enough that I might spread my wings and take flight.

No such luck, of course. All I found was more path with both sides hemmed in with ancient trees, far too small a space for me to spread my wings sufficiently to get airborne.

Uore on the other hand, was having the time of his life. The little man had large eyes the color of emeralds. His wild, red hair framed his head like an explosion of flame, his actual face almost completely hidden by his bushy eyebrows and beard. Despite his size, he was graceful and amazingly agile. If we had not been in danger of losing our... I mean Uore's life, I would have been laughing at the way his too large chainmail twisted and flexed around his moving body.

“Come oan ye blasted lizard,” he laughed as he pulled yet another arrow from his armor. “Let's shaw thae townies whit happens whin thay poke th' bear.”

Dwarves, always ready to fight. They are insane, every single one of them. “Aleguard said no fighting Uore, you know that,” I gasped. Really, dragons aren't meant for running. We are magnificent creatures of the sky, the masters of all we survey! “I don't want to have to explain a whole village of dead people to him.”

The dwarf never broke stride, yet still had the energy to offer me a dirty look. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought he doubted my ability to slay an entire village. “Ah suspect he wilnae be overly thrilled whin we lead this bludy horde intae camp either,” he glanced to one of the trees we marked on our way out on our hunt. “We'll be finding oot in a wee bit though, th' haugh we camped at is juist bygane th' neist bend in th' path.”

I knew he was right. I also knew then and there that there was only one thing I could do. Only one thing my honor would allow me to do. I reached deep into my reserves and doubled my speed.

By the time we had reached the clearing where our camp stood, we had perhaps a minute lead on the pursuing mob and were well out of their sight. Upon reaching the camp Uore stopped dead in front of the meeting tent.

“This is wur ah stop!” he bellowed. “'ere 'n' nae a step further! Tae arms!” he called to the camp.

“What is happening?” the Enchantress Kimona asked, exiting her personal tent.

Aleguard stuck his head out of the meeting tent. “What's wrong? Uore, what have you and that idiot dragon done this time?”

Obviously, Uore's posturing had raised our leader's anxiety level to the point where he was making unfounded assumptions about my guilt. I ignored his near panic as I dove through the doorway of the meeting tent, neatly sliding between Aleguard's legs. “Hide me! Hide me! Hide me!” I pleaded in a manner that suggested that I didn't really need to hide, and that my need for invisibility was purely for the sake of the poor fools chasing me.

“By Baldur's Bloody Beard dragon,” our leader and my first Human friend asked quietly. “What did you two do?”

“We were minding our own business, just exploring a bit,” I explained from my place under the meeting table. “Suddenly all the men from that little village called Glockenston are chasing after us. They attacked me for no reason at all!” I pointed to the four shafts extruding from my hindquarters.

“I see,” Aleguard said in that way of his that suggested that he didn’t believe a single word of my honest and utterly truthful account of the events that led to the current situation. “So a horde of hooligans from the village decided to chase the pair of you for no reason?”

“And attack...” I pointed out not wanting the important point of the arrows extruding from my hide end to be forgotten. Those shafts itched like no one’s business.

“Aleguard.” A pair of legs came into my line of sight. I recognized those legs as belonging to Takke Farwit, the woodland elf who had aligned herself to our quest. “Uore and the little Great One have led quite an angry group of visitors to the camp.” The tan leather of her leggings flexed as she bent over to look me in the eye from where I stood guard under the table. Her eyes, black as night, shone as she regarded me. “What has happened little Great One?”

“The villagers might be angry because the woman screamed, possibly.” I admitted.

“And why,” Aleguard asked as he too leaned over to be able to see my eyes. His hair formed a golden halo around his face, much like a summer sunrise. “Why did the woman scream?”

I wondered for a moment if I should be insulted that my friend was so ready to believe that I had done something wrong. “She was probably a little startled when I ate her pie.”

“Pie?” Aleguard asked.

“You ate her pie?” Takke asked as well.

Damn my sweet fang. “I didn’t think she really wanted it, seeing as she left it in the window like that. It was a good pie too!” I explained with a shrug. “Apple, and the tin plate added just the right bit of crunch! There’s no understanding some humans.”

Aleguard sighed and started to pinch the bridge of his nose, the way he does when he’s getting a headache. I remember hoping that my friend wasn’t getting sick.

“And when she screamed, she sort of knocked over a pan of oil that she was cooking in.” I continued.

“Little Great One,” Takke said softly, “Did you start a fire?”

“No,” I shook my head, “SHE started a fire. It was just a little one though. It only jumped to three other houses.”

“Aleguard?” The Enchantress Kimona called from outside the tent, “the Head Man of Glockenston would like a moment of your time.”

“Oh bloody hell,” Aleguard said, pinching his nose harder. “Stand up Bloodwurm.”

I cautiously climbed out from my guard position under the table. My friend immediately draped a cloak over my shoulders, covering my wings and taking the time to break off the arrow shafts so that they did not show. Takke seemed to understand what he was doing even if I did not and tossed him a hat, which Aleguard pulled low over my eyes.

“Bloodwurm, follow me, and keep your bloody mouth shut.”

I nodded while wondering if there was anyone in the world this disguise would fool. The three of us exited the tent.

“I am the Paladin, Aleguard,” my friend said to the waiting mob. “Who wishes words with me?”

One of the huskier villagers stepped forward. “I am Dusmu of Glockenston, I am the Head Man of the village. We were pursuing a vicious dragon and lost him just outside your camp.”

“A dragon?” Aleguard asked in apparent surprise.

“Aye, a huge ravening beast.”

Huge? I liked that. Under the hat I fought against a wide toothy smile. That was when I noticed that Uore now had black hair. The Enchantress must have been busy...

“A huge dragon?” Takke asked.

“Aye, at least the size of ten men,” the Head Man stated authoritatively, while the villagers behind him made noises of agreement.

The size of ten men? I wish.

“... and a vicious thing it was. It burned down half the town and devoured a dozen of my sheep!” a voice from the crowd called.

I most certainly did not. It was only four houses that got burnt, and I didn't eat any sheep. Eat a single sheep and you're picking wool out of your teeth for weeks thank you very much. It's even worse if you try to cook the wool off with a bit of flame. You never get it all, and then you're contending with wool with a horrible burnt smell stuck in your teeth for weeks.

Not to mention that if I was actually large enough to consume a dozen sheep, I wouldn't be on this epic quest, and I'd never have met my friend Aleguard.

“The Beast was chasing a man, some huge barbarian from the looks of him, probably part giant given how large he looked compared to the dragon,” the Head Man continued.

Aleguard looked to the members of our band. The Enchantress shook her head, Uore, now dressed in a simple, tanned leather jerkin and leggings, simply stood there all stoic, the way he gets when

trying not to laugh, Takke just smiled.

Unsheathing his sword, Aleguard held the blade in the ceremonial position that his order used for oaths. “No one in this camp has seen a part giant barbarian or a huge vicious dragon recently!” he proclaimed as the sword flashed signifying that the Paladin was speaking nothing but the truth.

During our journey together, my friend, Aleguard, often told me that the truth was a very precise thing, and by how one went about phrasing their proclamations of the truth, one could exult in his honor and still get away with quite a lot.

Still, Aleguard’s proclamation impressed the villagers just as it was intended to do. “The beast must have taken flight,” the Head Man said, “and is probably feasting on the barbarian he was chasing.” The man shook his head in seeming sorrow for the loss of the imaginary man to an imaginary dragon, when he seemed to see me for the first time.

“Gods man! What happened to you?”

Suddenly the entire horde of villagers was staring at me.

“The Pox!” the Enchantress said, breaking the silence that was building as the assembled villagers attempted to reconcile my magnificent beauty with the horrible hideous plainness that is the human condition. “He is a survivor of the Pox.”

“Ah!” the Head Man said as he moved to place one of his massive hands on my shoulder, then seemed to think better of it and nervously stepped back. “Don’t worry lad, you survived it. And as far as your skin goes, I’m sure it will get better, and even if it doesn’t, I’ve seen worse.”

The crowd of villagers immediately erupted into spontaneous conversations about the worst of the disease caused disfiguration of their varied experiences, totally ignoring the fact that as citizens of an isolated village they shared all the same stories.

“We’ll be leaving you and your party to your peace Paladin,” Dusmu of Glockenston said as he began leading his people away. “Stay on the alert for the Dragon, if the vicious beast has gotten a taste for human blood...”

Our group maintained its silence until the villagers were well away and out of earshot. It was Kimona the Enchantress who spoke first in her cultured, educated tones.

“I cannot believe that anyone would believe that a dragon, even a miniature dragon could possibly be a human survivor of the Pox.”

“Bloody idiots.” Uore agreed. “Hauf giant barbarian? Thair bunnets ur oan o’er tight!”

“Well,” Aleguard said after another few moments of thought, “they’re not exactly trebuchet engineers.”

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My story isn't an unusual one. Not for a dragon. Well, not all that unusual anyway.

I was hatched in a cave, surrounded by the warm gold and jewels of my Mother's horde. I was a precocious young hatchling, the first of my clutch to hatch, the first to fly, the first to make my own kill, the first in so many other ways. The elder She-Dragons of my Mother's clan were so impressed with both my achievements and the green of my scales they gave me a name that promised greatness. Bloodwurm. I was destined to rule.

Or at least be a primary mate of She Who Ruled. Dragon society is extremely matriarchal after all.

Unfortunately I was also the first of my brood to stop growing.

This may not sound like a big thing until you understand that unlike all my clutchmates, female and male; I stopped growing at a length of only slightly more than a cana, one tenth the size of my next smallest clutchmate. I was flabbergasted, but the elder She-Dragons of the clan told stories of males of the past who didn't reach their full growth until later in life.

I never thought I would escape the envy and hostility of the clans other males, the majority who grew to their full magnificent sizes. The envy I felt for them and their growth was at least pure, but the way they regarded me... It was all the fault of the She-Dragons and the way they treated me.

It was our fiftieth summer when the last of my clutch mates left the cave, and she was more than twenty cana in length. A mere twenty summers later my mother mated again, and by my one hundredth summer I was assisting mother in the caring for a new set of hatchlings.

Not long after my new younger siblings began to fly I was sent to live with the other males waiting for their growth. There were ten of us during my time in the 'Bachelor Cavern'; a vast chamber furnished with gold and jewels from the hordes of others. We were kept in opulent luxury with only the most pleasant of duties. I was, of course, the smallest of the ten.

And I hated every moment of it.

"Bloodwurm," Greatfang, one of my fellows asked on the fiftieth anniversary of my arrival in the Cavern. "What is your problem? This is the life, whatever we want, we get, our every whim catered to, and the clan asks for so little in return. Why can't you just enjoy it?"

"I am a dragon, not a plaything. I am a being of worth, I am one hundred and fifty summer old, I should have my own horde by now, I should have my own keep.. This..." I gestured about the cavern, "isn't living, it's existing. We sleep on gold gathered by others, we eat food brought to us like nestlings... it's even pre-killed for our safety. We are treated as things, not dragons!"

I stormed from the Cavern and sought out the elders of the clan that very day. That was when I got the first glimmer of hope in most of seventy-five summers. They told me of the legend of the Maiden.

Dragon legends tell of horrific creatures known as Maidens, vile monsters, long of claw and tooth that steal the treasures of honest dragons, and frequently bewitch knights into attacking and sometimes even killing innocent dragons.

Still, the legends say that if a dragon small of stature were to defeat a Maiden in combat and consume its flesh, the magic of the beast would grant the dragon his full growth. It seemed odd that no one could tell me what a Maiden might look like, nor even what kind of creature it might be, but all the elders assured me that they were vicious beasts.

Therefore, armed with this knowledge I began to make my plans. Quests such as the one I intended were not taken without preparation, but I wasn't obsessive about it. At the young age of two hundred twenty five summers, I set forth on my quest to find a Maiden. There were those who suggested that I was being reckless with my quest after putting so little preparation into it, but I knew I was ready.

Having no idea what a Maiden looked like or indeed what a Maiden might be hindered my quest to no end, until the day thirty summers into my quest, I met Aleguard the Paladin.

He was making camp in a clearing during a thunderstorm, his firewood was soaked and he wasn't getting it lit. I'd heard tales that the clan elders told of Humans. Intelligent creatures it was said. Not intelligent on a dragon level of course, but they knew not to make messes in a cave. Knights were a kind of human, and as long as they weren't bewitched by Maidens, they tended to be decent, if excitable beings. Humans in groups tend to attack innocent dragons, but I'd heard that on occasion lone individuals can be trusted. So I landed to help him out, and maybe earn a berth in his tent for the night, after all, even dragons prefer a warm dry place to sleep.

So of course, the man who I later learned was called Aleguard, immediately drew his metal fang (which it turns out is called a 'sword') and attacked me. The clan elders had neglected to mention how jumpy humans could be. The metal fang glanced off my scales and the two of us ended up rolling in the mud.

"You'll never win Beast!" he said in a scary elder dragon voice as he slashed at me with his metal fang. That really surprised me. I hadn't known that humans could do that voice.

"I don't want to win Human," I gasped. "I was going to light your fire in exchange for a night out of the rain."

Aleguard pushed away from me. "You talk?"

"Of course I can talk." I huffed. "I'm a dragon, not an animal!"

The big man stood up from the mud, towering over me, his eyes wide with surprise. I suppose it was the absolute shock and joy of meeting a dragon for the first time that caused his speechlessness. After several seconds of the two of us allowing the rain to wash the mud from our upper bodies and silently staring at each other, I sneezed.

The flare of the small gout of my internal flame seemed to bring him to his senses. “You said that you could light the fire?” he asked.

I nodded.

Aleguard sheathed his sword, and reached down to me. “Come on then.”

The wet wood was no match for my internal fires; it took only seconds for a blazing fire to push back the cold of the night. Aleguard broke some salted meat from his pack and shared his meal with me and we spoke into night. After an hour of meaningless conversation, Aleguard told me of his quest to avenge his mentor, the great warrior Threndor who had taken the orphaned Aleguard under his wing a mere twenty-five summers before.

At first, I was amazed that someone would have such deep feelings for a being they had known for such a short time, but then I realized that Humans had exceedingly short lives. Indeed the period that I spent in my egg alone amounted to what many humans would consider a long life.

Aleguard and Threndor had sold their services in defense of a small town that was being terrorized by an evil Arch Mage named Engenth. The two had set defenses around the town that had trapped and severely wounded the evil sorcerer. The Mage had escaped to lick his wounds, but not before a battle that had killed Threndor and very nearly done the same to Aleguard. The citizens of the town had nursed Aleguard back to health, and my new friend then set himself on a new quest. He would avenge his mentor and kill the Arch Mage, no matter the cost.

After hearing his tales of adventure and revenge, I knew that Aleguard would understand that we were kindred spirits, and fellow adventurers, so I told him of my quest to defeat a Maiden.

For some reason he seemed to find the idea that I sought a Maiden to be humorous. Then he told me that he had sought of few of them himself in his youth as well.

When our words finally ran out we both found ourselves in need of sleep. Aleguard banked the fire and offered me a blanket from his pack. Come the morning, I decided to accompany the man on his journey, joining our quests, at least for a while.

That was eight summers ago.

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“You have the most interesting luck young Dragon,” Kimona the Enchantress said. Her hands pulsed with healing magic as she moved them over the punctures caused by that infernal archer and his nasty arrows. The feeling of her healing magic doing its work was like nothing I’d ever experienced before, indeed the sensation had my left rear leg involuntarily thumping. I liked the Enchantress quite a bit, she was the least hideous human I’d met to that point, and so far the only human I’ve ever met with flesh that was a proper color. Her skin was deep ebony, a shade that would have been a proper color for a dragon, indeed her flesh held the same hue as my mother’s scales.

Of course the effect was spoiled by her hair. Dragons don't have hair, nor do they color their mouths and eye lids with odd pigments. Kimona's mouth always looked like she had taken a bite of bloody meat, and her eyelids were painted an odd blue that I'd never seen in nature, but even with all that, she was still, as I said, the least hideous human I'd ever met.

"You manage to find yourself in the most hazardous situations," she said continuing her thought, "then somehow through luck and good friends manage to extract yourself without major injury."

Before I could protest that such was the life of an Adventurer Dragon, we were interrupted by Uore.

"Pamper th' blasted lizard efter witch." The Dwarf said from where he stood watching her perform her magic. "Afore ye waste time oan that immortal beastie, change me back, am'fair peched o' keekin lik' a lassie."

Kimona blinked. "What do you mean 'looking like a lassie'? All I did was alter your hair color from red to black."

Aye, black hair! whit dae ye think a dwarf lassie looks lik'?

Kimona seemed intrigued by this information. "So all female dwarves have black hair and beards?"

"O' coorse thay dae. Oor girls aren't malformed lik' ye lot!" Uore huffed. "Change me back afore anither dwarf comes alang 'n' ah huv tae chap oot his wallies!"

Kimona smiled, her teeth clearly framed by her red lips, when made a small gesture, and Uore's hair color shifted immediately back to his familiar copper red hue.

Uore grabbed hold of his beard and yanked a handful up so that he could see it. After satisfying himself that it was back to his original color he nodded his approval. "Thank ye. Ye kin gang back tae th' beastie noo."

"Fascinating." Kimona murmured before returning her attention to my remaining wounds. "I joined this quest to learn more about dragons, Bloodwurm," she laughed, her voice making interesting musical sounds. "It seems I'm learning about many different peoples."

"Well," I noted, "not everyone is lucky enough to be a dragon."

For some reason, that made her laugh again.

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The next day we were on the move again, Aleguard and the others on horseback, and I was in the air breaking trail as it were. The few maps that Takke had of the area were minimalistic at best and rarely had any real detail to warn us of what was ahead.

I was scouting ahead of the party reflecting on how we were once again closing in on the object of Aleguard's quest, well, the party's quest really. The Arch Mage Engenth's lair was supposed to be just past the next river crossing.

There was a strong updraft over the river, and I used that updraft along with some carefully considered wing motion to manage a hover maneuver and began a cautious survey of the road below me.

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Aleguard and I had been on Engenth's trail for eight summers by this point. Two summers before, we almost had him when he destroyed the Elfish village of Geldof for failing to pay him a tribute. That was where Takke Farwit joined our quest becoming the fourth member of our party. The Elvin archer had been hunting when her village was destroyed, her mate and nestling killed. Once she heard that we were in pursuit of the Arch Mage she insisted upon coming along to exact her vengeance.

That was when we ran into one of our little problems, which for some reason always seem to involve me. It seems that Takke's people worship dragons.

Literally worship. As Gods.

Now, I'm not faulting their taste, but dragons are not Gods. We are the magnificent Pinnacles of Creation, yes. But Gods? No. So our relationship took some work.

For days I had to tell her that I wasn't a God, that I wasn't judging or testing her, that there was no reason to throw herself to the ground when I approached and that if she was really interested in worshiping me, she should be giving me the big pieces of salt pork at the evening meal.

It took some time, but Takke finally started to relax around me. But even with that she refused to use my name. To my first and only Elf friend, I would always be the 'little Great One'. Still it wasn't like our friendship was so stilted by her adulation of my kind. We spoke for hours around the fire with me telling her of my youth and the time I had spent in the Bachelor Cavern while she spoke of her village, her mate and her hatching, which she claimed to have gestated inside her body. Ew... Just ew. Hadn't she heard of eggs?

I wondered if Aleguard knew about how Elves hatched their young?

My musings were interrupted by a red bolt of magic flashing past my left wing. My eyes immediately tracked back along the path of the magical attack but found nothing and no one at what must have been the point of origin. Another bolt of eldritch energy came from an entirely different vector, and I dodged it. Someone wanted to play? Fine. Being a small dragon had many disadvantages, but I was the most maneuverable being in the air. I decided to see if whoever it was could hit a moving target as I bobbed and jinked in the sky, making my way back to my friends.

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Despite the magical attack on my person, the party was cheered at my report. Magic meant a magic user was in the area, and the only magic user who was supposed to be there was the Arch Mage Engenth. Soon we would know, but for now, we were happy to at least believe we were close to our goal.

That didn't mean we were foolish. After all, this was an Arch Mage we were coming to confront. Our forward progress slowed as Aleguard and Uore looked for physical traps, Kimona for magical, and Takke and I focused on danger that might have come from the sky.

The worst thing about being on guard is how draining it is when compared with just going along. It seemed like every step took our full concentration, and sometimes even that wasn't enough as was evidenced when I discovered a pit fall trap that the others had all missed.

“Discovered” as in fell into. It was just fortunate that the spikes at the bottom were most thoroughly blunted by my scales and that the poison on those spikes was intended for humans. I thought the toxin was quite tasty, and had made sure to lick all the spikes clean. It takes quite a bit to interfere with the body chemistry of a dragon. The Enchantress Kimona still insisted on checking me medically after I climbed out of the pit.

After recovering a small sample of the potion from a spot on my back that I couldn't reach, she was most vexed when she discovered that the most toxic poison she had ever encountered only enhanced my appetite... and gave me gas... well, more gas than usual.

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We first encountered the Enchantress six months before. She appeared at our camp outside the port town of Gywer on the Great Inland Sea. She was far from the first human female to come to one of our camps. Aleguard always attracted a fair amount of female attention; it seems that there is something about an Adventurer that entices certain human females. Even Uore had visitors of this type. I once asked him why he would dally with a female from another species.

“Thay kin be tae tall 'n' huv na hair in th' richt places, ye bloody lizard,” he said with a grin, “bit they're 'ere 'n' they're willing.”

I wasn't sure what they were willing to do, but didn't put much thought into it, having long before determined that I would absolutely never understand humans, or dwarves.

Anyway this strange woman entered our camp and asked for Aleguard. She was tall for a human female, with skin as dark as Takke's eyes. Her mouth was blood red and her dark hair was worn in such a way as to make her head appear to be twice as large as it was. She wore traveling robes of dark blue velvet and had a short sword at her waist. I also noted a bronze dagger attached to her left sleeve. She was very different from the usual woman who came to our camps. Aleguard, however, didn't seem to notice this.

“I am sorry Lady,” my Paladin friend said, trying to let her down easily. “We are breaking camp to continue on our quest, and pretty as you are, I haven't the time or ready cash for...” Aleguard

was suddenly silenced and his eyes were bugging out comically.

An unexplainable wind whipped up out of nowhere and appeared to be swirling around the woman, “I am Kimona of Monusiar, not some common harlot, fool.” She gestured and Aleguard sank to his knees holding the area between his hind legs.

“I am looking to accompany your party on your quest. I have heard of the dragon among you and wish to learn of him and his ways,” she continued.

That worried me for a moment, what if she was here for me the way some human females had come for Uore? The mere thought made me feel a bit queasy.

“n' how come wid we want a slip o' a lassie lik' ye tae come along?” Uore asked, on guard since whatever the woman had done to Aleguard.

“I am an Enchantress,” she said as if that explained everything.

I knew that an enchanter was a human magic user more powerful than a witch or wizard, but less so than a mage, and that an enchantress was female. Beyond that, she seemed to be just another human to me.

“Having...” Aleguard said from his knees in a high pitched voice, before stopping and clearing his throat to begin again in a more normal tone. “Having a magic user along for when we finally face Engenth would be useful. We will be facing danger every step of the way Lady Kimona. Are you ready for the dangers involved in being with us?”

“I have faced danger every second of every day since I began my research into magic and power Paladin Aleguard.” She moved to stand before me, reaching out to run her fingertips slowly along my jaw. “For a chance to learn of the great Dragon clans I would quest into the netherworld itself.”

The woman stiffened as Takke suddenly appeared behind her with her Elvin blade at the Enchantress' throat. “By attacking our leader for his poor assumptions you may have that opportunity sooner than you think.”

“A most interesting party you have here Paladin,” the Enchantress said, taking care to not move while in Takke's grip. You travel with a dragon, a dwarf, and a...” slowly she brought her left hand up to touch the blade at her throat, “an elf? Yes, an elf all allied against an Arch Mage. I would learn much from this quest.”

Aleguard and Uore exchanged looks. “Let her go Takke. Welcome to the party Enchantress Kimona.” Aleguard said. How long until you will be ready to go?”

“I will be ready when you are Paladin Aleguard.” She said simply before vanishing in a small puff of smoke.

“I hope you aren't making a mistake Aleguard,” Takke said sheathing her blade.

“Git a bawherr o' th' fire, that yin haes.” Uore noted quietly. “Ye'd best be canny laddie, that yin is likely tae shaw ye yer bits if ye git her mad.”

“I'll try to restrain myself, Uore,” Aleguard said quietly. “More than worth it to have a bit of magic on our side when we kill the bastard.”

“Aye,” Uore agreed scratching at his chin under his beard with the handle of his axe. “Whit say ye, ye bloody lizard? tis ye she means tae study.”

I shrugged. “She has nice skin and pretty eyes, as well as the common sense needed to see that I am among the most magnificent of beings. What's not to like?”

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After I found the pit fall, we slowed in our progress to allow us to search more thoroughly for the dangers this trail had. The three leagues to the river became a five-hour slog. We encountered more traps, but triggered none of them. At one point, several arrows peppered our group. Takke took a shaft in her left leg. Aleguard shielded her while Kimona performed her healing magic on my elf friend. Uore vanished into the brush, only to return a short while later with a bloody axe and an evil grin befitting a dragon.

The next true challenge didn't reveal itself until we reached the river. There was evidence of a bridge that had once made the crossing, but the span was long gone leaving only the moorings on either side.

It was decided that from here on it was too dangerous for the party's mounts so the horses were hobbled in a small glen on our side of the river. Kimona cast protective enchantments on the mounts and our gear before we returned to the river to make the crossing.

I would of course fly across, and Kimona would do her magical disappearing thing to make her crossing. The others would have to ford the river at what appeared to be a shallow point, or swim across. This would be particularly hard on Uore, not only due to his stature but also for the hatred of water his kind shares. The dwarf made no protest however; he simply hefted his axe and was the first to set foot in the water.

Uore's action appeared to be the trigger for the next trap. As soon as his foot touched the water, a fully grown dragon reared up from the hedges on the far side of the river. With a roar, a spray of Dragon Fire was heading at our party.

Without thinking, I placed my body between my dwarf friend and the Dragon Fire with my wings spread to offer as much of a shield as possible. The inner flames of the opposing dragon washed over me.

I wasn't impressed. Something was inhibiting my opponent's innate magic; the flame was nowhere near the intensity it should be. Not that it mattered, to a dragon the internal flame is just another bodily function, as harmful to another dragon as one human's breath is to another. It

might smell bad, but it can't hurt you.

Unfortunately, it could hurt my friends. I had managed to shield Uore, but Kimona yelped as a bit of the Dragon Fire curled around Aleguard's shield and burned her arm. This had to stop. I inhaled and let fly with my own internal flames straight at the other dragon's face.

My attack didn't hurt her, but it did blind her for a few seconds while our party ducked out of sight behind the fractured stone moorings of the old bridge.

"A Great One!" Takke gasped, trembling like a leaf. "We can't fight a Great One."

"Ye saved mah lefe!" Uore said quietly.

"You've helped me more than once Uore," I assured him. "If anything this just makes us even."

"Even? Even? Efter a' th' times ah pulled yer pie-eat'n arse frae th' fire?" Uore huffed, "Ye bloody lizard, we ur nowhere near 'even'"

"Is everyone alright?" Aleguard asked bringing my attention back to our situation with the She-Dragon.

"NO!" Takke shouted. "We face a god. We cannot win."

"Dragons can be fearsome," Kimona said as she finished healing her own left arm, "But they are not gods."

"She's not even all that powerful," I noted.

"She?" Aleguard asked.

"Yeah, she's a female, and a cute one at that. What bothers me is that she's sick or something. Her internal flame was nowhere near as hot as it should be, and that weird roaring she's doing... something's not right."

"Th' damned dragon is trying tae murdurr us ye bloody lizard!" Uore spat. "Is that 'not right' enough fur ye?"

"You said that the dragon's roars were 'weird' Bloodwurm? What should she be doing?" Kimona asked.

"Yelling at me for associating with you lot for one thing," I admitted. "She-dragons are horribly judgmental. She didn't even proposition me!"

"This is na time tae be thinking wi' yer..."

"Bloodwurm," Kimona interrupted Uore's rant. "Do you think she may have been bewitched?"

I peeked over the mooring so see that the She-dragon was still standing there looking for us. “Well, the fact that she hasn’t taken flight to come after us says something odd is going on.”

“But who could bewitch a god?” Takke asked shivering in fear.

“Can you do anything Bloodwyrn?” Aleguard asked. “Does the size difference make you as vulnerable as the rest of us?”

“Oh please Aleguard,” I said with confidence I didn’t feel. “I am a dragon. Little things like size don’t matter to the likes of us.” I stood away from the stone works and was promptly ignored by the dragon across the river. An idea formed in my mind. “She’s ignoring me. She must be bewitched to be a guard against humans. I’ll deal with this. If I can break her trance, she’s likely to carry me off. Don’t worry about me; just do what need to be done. I’ll catch up as soon as I can.”

---oooOOOooo---

I took wing and approached the She-dragon. Still she ignored me. This dragon was gorgeous! And so... large. Easily fifty cana in length, with a wingspan of at least forty, and a vacant look on her face. That look reminded me of some of the human females that Aleguard had brought to the camp...

Weird. No matter what I did, how long I hung in front of her face, she paid me no attention. I tried speaking to her; I even hit her with another blast of Dragon Fire. Nothing.

Purely from frustration, I whipped my tail against her face, gouging her left cheek with my tail spikes. My breath caught at the sight of the small rivulets of emerald green fluid that welled up in the gouges. That was certainly... arousing. The female blinked and seemed to become aware of her surroundings.

“What? What happened?” she asked the universe, shaking her head vigorously to clear it.

“Greetings.” I said in the formal way. “You were bewitched.”

“What? Who? There was a small human who...” she seemed to notice me for the first time. “You caused me to wake?”

Still clinging to formality, I performed a small bow in midair. “I did. You were guarding passage across this river, and attacked the party I am part of.”

That was when Uore stepped clear of the stone works, and the female immediately sent a burst of Dragon flame at him. I held my breath as he barely made it back to the relative safety of the moorings.

“I... I... I have to guard this road. No mammals may pass!” she said in an odd manner, her voice starting to lose its emotion. Was the magic reasserting itself on her? I had no choice.

I approached close again, rubbing my flank across her neck. “Are you sure you want to stay here and fight? I can think of so many things to do that would be more fun.”

Her eyes focused again and her massive right hand reached out to stroke my belly. “I... must... I... You are so tiny.”

The She-dragon’s eyes dilated and her breathing sped up. Perfect. “You know what they say Baby...” I said abandoning formality for a more gentle approach. “Once you go small, you want it all.”

The She-dragon wrapped her massive hands around my body and leapt into the air. “My lair is near. Very near.”

“I hope there’s gold, Baby,” I said as she flew through the air with me clutched to her chest. “Lots of gold gets me in the mood.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got gold and jewels as far as the eye can see in my lair.” Her breathing had become a full fledged panting now. “I’ll treat you right... you’re so tiny...”

The things I do to advance the party on its quest. I shook my head as I listened to my new friend babble on about my stature.

She-dragons, size queens, every single one of them.

---oooOOOooo---

After a time... well, after a few times anyway, I woke to find myself being held delicately to the chest of the massive She-dragon as she slept.

I carefully extricated myself from her embrace and made ready to exit. This was exactly what I hated about my time in the Bachelor’s Cavern. She never even asked my name and never offered her own, just treated me as a piece of meat for her pleasure.

Putting the oppressive callous attitudes of the female of my species out of my mind, I made my way out of the cave that held my hostess’ lair. I exited the cavern leaping into the open air, my eyes widened in surprise.

The daystar was well above the horizon? How could it possibly be morning? If my being gone had caused any of the party to be hurt... I launched myself into the sky and began my return to the place I last saw my friends.

The return flight took most of an hour, so the sun was high before I reached the destroyed bridge where I had left the party the previous afternoon. They hadn’t waited. Damn it! I know I told them to go on without me, but didn’t they know how fragile they were?

The trail held hints of their passing, Uore’s habitual scoring of trees and stones to mark his passage allowed me to shadow their path. I found signs of a protracted battle between my friends

and some enchanted plants. The plants were laid waste to, and while there was evidence of blood, human and dwarf, no bodies, no indication that they had lingered on the site telling me that whatever injuries suffered, they hadn't been severe enough to delay the trek to the lair of the Arch Mage.

At midday I found the spot that Aleguard and the others had spent the night, the ashes of the fire were stone cold, they were hours gone, but I still thought I was catching up. From this point, I was restricted to the ground, as the trees were far too thick to allow me to follow the trail from the air. This slowed me down quite a bit.

Now I was finding bodies every few hundred cana. The stench of these bodies was horrendous, they had to have been dead for weeks, but they showed evidence of Aleguard's sword and Uore's axe, and a few even had Takke's arrows protruding from empty eye sockets.

These were long dead bodies with recent wounds. That meant Necro magic. My stomach roiled at the thought of such horror. One good thing though, experience had taught me that reanimated bodies burned just fine. I stopped to gulp down a few mouthfuls of a sulfurous soil to stoke my flames. If those abominations have hurt my friends, the Necromancer and I were going to have some words.

It was almost dark when I finally found the home of the Arch Mage. The lair appeared to be a castle cut into the living rock of an imposing mountain. I tried not to think of the power required to form such a thing.

The fields that allowed the approach to the castle were littered with bodies, some obviously reanimated, and others appeared to have died during their original lifespan. Still I couldn't find any sign of my friends beyond an occasional splash of their blood. They had been hurt, but kept moving.

How could I do any less? I was now close enough to hear the sounds of battle. Did I charge in and join the fight? Or did I get the lay of the land first and position myself to do the most good? Once again, I took to the air. I would enter the castle from one of its towers and attack from an unexpected direction.

---oooOOOooo---

The tower offered entrance to a one capable of flight via its many windows. I decided to start as high as I could so that no one could end up being behind me. It turns out I wasted my time because the tower was empty. The various rooms I found were even devoid of the furnishings I had come to expect in human dwellings.

I didn't find anyone until I reached the main floor of the castle and was rewarded with once again finding the sounds of battle. Emerging from the last door, I found Takke backed into a corner attempting to defend herself against a half dozen Hell Hounds.

Aleguard and I had come to know the conjured beasts well when we first encountered them while

on the Arch Mage's trail. They were tireless, very strong and almost unstoppable.

And they burned like candles. I demonstrated this for Takke when I cut loose with my internal flame. The elf huntress was nothing if not resilient; she instantly shifted from defense to offense when my fire lit five of the six Hell Hounds afire by driving the last of her arrows into the right eye of the sole surviving beast by hand.

"Bloodwyrn!" she called leaping over the still burning animals to wrap her arms around my neck before she realized what she was doing. "Oh! Forgive me little Great One. I meant no disrespect. We thought that the large Great One had killed you!"

"Almost," I admitted trying not to smile. Then I spotted her bow, broken into two pieces, "your bow?"

"It served me well." She murmured digging in her pack to get at her short sword. I knew that losing her favorite weapon hurt more than she was willing to admit. She had often told the story of how her mate, a woodcrafter, had made the bow for her just before his death. "I was separated from the others. They should be through there." She said gesturing toward a large hallway.

"Let's go then." I said as I headed out in the direction she indicated.

Together we crept through the passage. Evidently, the Arch Mage thought that six Hell Hounds were enough to deal with a single Elf, no other combatants came our way. The hallway opened up into a huge room, where we found a terrible battle taking place.

Kimona was the closest to the doorway we were standing in, casually casting magic in all directions, changing the various conjured beasts and shambling undead into small inoffensive objects with a casual ease. It was only because we had been together for as long as we had that allowed Takke and me to see that she was tiring.

Uore was bounding about the room with his seemingly inexhaustible dwarven energy, slashing with his axe at every turn, leaving dying...well no, not dying as they were already dead... well, horribly injured...but can Necro-beasts who don't know pain be injured? Anyway he left badly dismantled... things in his wake... all the while laughing his head off.

And Aleguard... The Paladin, my first friend was in the middle of the largest grouping of the Necro beasts, his blade flickering in the light of the room, hacking a path through the undead toward the tall figure in blood green robes that could only be the Arch Mage Engenth.

That was when Uore caught a blade in his thigh and went down under a horde of the Necro-beasts."

With an inarticulate roar I launched myself into the fight. Claws slashing fore and aft, Dragon-Fire and just plain old fashioned forward momentum allowed me to blaze a path through the horde. I was over Uore in seconds having eviscerated the beasts on top of him and was standing guard over him like a mother over her clutch of eggs. Takke made her way to our friend through

my wake as I unleashed gouts of Dragon-Fire at the nearest Necros.

No one hurts my friends.

“Bloodwurm,” Uore whispered from where he lay. “We're aye nae even ye bloody lizard!”

That was when I knew Uore was alright.

Most of the Necros in the room had fallen by now, Aleguard was actively fighting the Arch Mage himself while Kimona had worked her way close enough to begin one of her spell chants.

Suddenly Engenth did... something that stopped Kimona's chant in mid word, and the Enchantress fell to her knees screaming, then from the Arch Mage's left hand a bolt of crimson magic arced to Aleguard's chest and he was writhing on the bloody floor of the chamber, his screams rending the air.

“You thought it would be easy did you?” the Arch Mage hissed. “You actually thought that you had the power to challenge me?”

Again I was moving without conscious thought slashing my way through the few remaining Necros in my path between me and the evil mage. I landed not five feet from him and opened my mouth wide to let loose with my internal flame.

The part of my mind that was still rational took a fair bit of enjoyment from the look of horror on the magician's face when he knew that he was going to die. I exhaled forcefully, fully intending to end the human's life, and expelled a small ring of smoke.

In my excitement, I hadn't been giving my internal flames enough time to regenerate. Before I could remember that I could kill him with my fore claws, Engenth had recovered enough to go back on the offensive. With a gesture, a massive oak table flew across the room to slam me into the wall hard enough to shatter the table and dent the wall.

That hurt. My left wing was destroyed, my hips shattered, I fell to the floor leaving a smear of green blood on the wall, all the while hoping against hope that Aleguard had a way out. Aleguard always had a way out. That's why he was our leader.

Engenth bent over to pickup Aleguard's sword. “I will kill you with your own sword Boy,” “Then your elf and dwarf will follow you in death. The dragon will make some most interesting potions before I turn what's left of him into a Necro-beast, and the little witchling you so thoughtfully brought for me will warm my bed until I tire of her.” He raised Aleguard's sword above his head when I realized that Aleguard wasn't going to win this time.

Aleguard couldn't die. I needed him. Without my Paladin friend how would I find a Maiden? How would I get my growth? How would I ever amount to anything?

My foreclaws dug into the stone floor and I used the strength of my forelegs to throw myself across the room. I was in mid arc when Engenth started the downward stroke with the sword and I

realized that I wasn't going to make it. I hadn't had the strength to put my forelegs within striking distance of the Arch Mage, but... maybe I could...

Using the last bit of strength in my body, I threw my neck forward; I just had time for a single bite. I felt my jaws close around flesh and I bit down with all I had. I hit the stone floor hard, and had to blink my eyes hard to clear them enough to find that I was staring up at the headless corpse of the Arch Mage as it began to fall.

---oooOOOooo---

From where I lay on the floor, I was still looking at the headless body. Aleguard and Kimona sat up to stare at me.

“Bloodwyrn!” Aleguard said quietly. “Well done dragon, you saved us.”

I nodded and was about to speak when my eyes bugged out, and I spit the head of the fallen Arch Mage across the chamber. In a fit of panic I clawed my way across the stone floor to a spot under one of the wall torches. Reaching up I wrenched the torch from the wall and set about carefully running the torch's flame along my tongue trying without success to kill the taste.

Note to Self: *Arch Mages taste HORRIBLE. Do not, under any circumstance, eat an Arch Mage.*

---oooOOOooo---

The death of Engenth caused the remaining Necros to fall... well not 'dead' exactly because they were already dead, but at least no longer moving about and the magically lit torches in the room died shortly after. Kimona was seriously depleted of her magic and couldn't heal anyone or even start a fire. Fortunately it didn't take long for my internal fires to regenerate enough to light the logs in the hearth and provide us with heat and light for the night. Aleguard and Takke were the least injured among us, so they set about disposing of the decaying bodies and once that was done, Takke went scavenging for food. She found the Arch Mage's food stores so we feasted that night.

Kimona set about bandaging my wounds and arranging my damaged limbs in the hope that I wouldn't do any more harm to myself before her magic built back up to the point where she could perform her healing spells again.

“Th'morra we loot th' castle tae th' bedrock.” Uore said following the meal after issuing a loud belch that still echoed in the chamber. “Sae, whit dae we dae neist?”

“Well,” I said quietly. “I still need to find one of those horrible Maiden creatures.”

I noticed the exchange of glances among the other members of the party that always seemed to coincide with my discussion of my first quest.

“Bloodwyrn,” Kimona said from where she sat next to the fire. “We haven't been honest with you.”

“What do you mean Kimona?” I asked.

“We...” Takke hesitated. “We know what a Maiden is little Great One.”

“You do?” I was so excited I caused my damaged wing to try to flap. That hurt quite a bit.

“Bloodwyrn. A maiden is a human female who has not yet engaged in the pleasures of the flesh,” Kimona said. “There is nothing magical about the state or about young women in general.”

“But...” I stuttered shocked at this information, “but the legends tell of the Evil Maidens bewitching Knights into attacking innocent Dragons and stealing their hordes. If there they aren’t magic, then how do they do that?”

“There is magic and there is magic Bloodwyrn,” Aleguard said quietly. “A pretty young girl can convince some men to do many foolish things. Not terribly unlike the stories of how the She-Dragons sometimes tried to impress you.”

I remember thinking about how that changed things. Maidens were humans?

“You saved my life this day Bloodwyrn, more than that you saved me from the attentions of that vile creature,” Kimona said quietly, lowering her eyes. “In the ways of my people, that created a debt between us that I can never repay, so if a maiden is truly your wish, I offer myself to you. My pursuit of magic has kept me pure in the ways of the flesh.”

“Manys th’ laddie wha dreams o’ hearing they words.” Uore said.

I pondered both Kimona’s offer and Uore’s comment, I also wondered why they had all kept this from me... Still it was an easy decision.

“Thank you Kimona, but no,” I said shaking my head and wincing at the pain that action caused my injuries. “I can’t take you up on your offer.”

The Enchantress looked positively relieved and Aleguard laughed that booming laugh of his.

“Good on you Bloodwyrn. I knew you would choose the right way.”

“Oh yes,” I agreed nodding. “Now that I know what you humans taste like, there’s no way I could possibly EAT one of you. No way it’s worth it. I’d rather just stay small.”

---oooOOOooo---

A few measurements:

A **cana** was a unit of length used in the former Crown of Aragon. The exact meaning was not consistent but the use in Barcelona was a distance of 1.5708 meters, or a touch over 5 feet.

A **league** most frequently refers to the distance a person or a horse can walk in an hour, more or less three miles.

