

*DING DING DING DING DING DING.* The tinny bronze bell at the center of Airelheim rang without rhythm through the night, echoing across the sleeping town. Light fell out of hastily unfastened doorways as confused residents lit lamps and candles, roused from their slumber into the pitch dark. Half-awake men stumbled outside, rubbing at their heads with one hand and clutching shining weapons with the other. A few drunkards, still awake at the late hour, stumbled from their dark corners, confused and delirious.

Within minutes, a rising tension gripped the populace, teetering on a panic. The teenage watchman that stood in the tower continued his assault on the bell, fueled with adrenaline. His voice, still high pitched with the cadence of youth, split the cold spring air.

“DRAGON! DRAGON!”

The words no man wanted to hear – words that sent frozen needles of fear down the spine of every Gren countryman.

In the Fangrender home, Arlek, head of the household, stumbled down the stairs into the great hall. He gripped his long, bronze-tipped spear in his right hand, his face unreadable in the dark. His worried wife followed him across the floor, wringing her hands together in worry. At the foot of the stairs, a young, sleepy girl watched them both, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

“Father, what is it? What’s going on?” she questioned, the lady of nine barely reaching up to her father’s chest.

Arlek glanced at her, then to his wife. “Irne, please care for Tavra. I’ll be back.” Without any further ceremony, he opened the front door, letting in a blast of frosty air before it fell shut behind him.

Irne hurriedly crossed the room, kneeling down before Tavra to speak to her on her level. “Dear, there is a call for the able men; your father must join them. Do not fret,” she added swiftly when she saw the young girl’s brow furrow. “He will return soon. Let us go back to bed – it is far too late for girls your age.”

Tavra let herself be pulled along, but kept sparing looks over her shoulder at the front door, as if it would reopen at any time. Then they started up the stairway, causing the young noble to look at her footing, then up at her mother instead. The deep creases of worry in her face betrayed her attempt at appearing unconcerned. It made a cold weight form in the pit of Tavra’s stomach.

“Is father in danger?” Tavra asked, nearly trotting to keep up with her mother’s pace.

“Don’t fret about such things, dear,” was all she replied, answering the question by omission. The young girl pursed her lips in frustration. If father was in danger, shouldn’t she know? What was wrong? She swore she heard the bellman yelling and half the town was awake. Normally, such calls to action only happened in wars – anything else could be settled with a few traded blows between belligerents, or words for those more civil.

The pair crossed the threshold into Tavra’s room, where Irne led her daughter back to the messy bed she rose from. Tavra obediently climbed into the warm and heavy blankets, hunkering down

to stave off the chill of the night that pierced the wooden walls. Irne gently pulled the blankets properly over her daughter, taking a long moment to do the simple task, relishing it.

Tavra stared quietly up at her from under the blankets, her big golden eyes tracking the movements of her mother.

“Good night, my sweet,” Irne whispered, smoothing out one last wrinkle before standing straight. Tavra returned the words, after which her mother left the room, closing the door behind her. Tavra listened quietly for the fading footsteps and, once she was sure they were far enough, quickly slipped out of bed.

A small window graced her room, offering warm light in the daytime, but was currently covered by a wooden shutter, insulated with furs. She pushed the sliding cover upwards, letting a sliver of silver moonlight in. She dared not fully uncover the window – the moons were bright enough to reveal the movement if one were to look.

The small crack was enough to let in the noise of the streets, filling her room with the chaos of the outdoors.

Metallic clanks and clatters echoed across the street as weaponry bounced off of cobblestone or other blades. Men were throwing spears and longbows to anyone who could wield them, including those that barely appeared out of their childhood. Many were shaking – though whether it was in fear or excitement, Tavra could not tell.

She ducked her head to stay out of sight and simply listened.

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“What kind of beast is it?” Arlek demanded, spinning his spear so he could rest the butt of it on the earth, propping his tired body up with its strength. He knew that the call was for a dragon. He had faced dragons in his younger year; he knew better than to underestimate them. Around him, the rumor mill churned about what kind of dragon could be stalking in the dark; some whispered voices spoke of an exotic acid-spitter, seen only a handful of times by the civilized world. Others scoffed.

“We think it’s a great forest drake, lord,” a youthful voice answered. Arlek turned to face the young man – thirteen winters old, he judged, dressed poorly in whatever nightclothes he went to bed with. They wouldn’t offer any protection in a fight.

“Most probable,” the nobleman replied, squaring his shoulders.

“The rotten beast was spotted in Old Hinoff’s field,” another man offered, his voice raspy from years of smoking a local, herbal mix that served only to entertain the unfortunate. “It took one of his woodstriders down and was helping itself to it when he saw it! Took off faster’an a ringtail, he did,” he laughed before breaking into a short coughing fit.

Arlek eyed him critically before taking a look around. He took notice of the small crowd of militia men growing around him, as if waiting for his command. Being the only recognized

dragonslayer in town, as well as the local ealdorman, the locals gravitated towards him for leadership and guidance. If the beast refused to leave, it would come down to their weapons – and the Fangrender's namesake experience – to protect the town.

Raising his spear, gleaming in the flickering firelight of the surrounding torches, Arlek addressed the crowd. "A forest drake is common, but nothing to underestimate, men. We call them 'great' for their great control of the green world – magicks trapped in their corrupted body by Yggrax," he called to the agreeing dark rumble of the crowd. "We will free Yggorum's great powers from within its hideous hide! Let us march in His honor!"

A resounding roar of agreement echoed his sentiment and the band marched in a poorly organized mob through the town in the direction of the last sighting. Their marching step was underscored by the ringing bell, continuing to sound even as the settlement laid awake. The young bellman that raised the alarm had been replaced by another whose arms were not strained.

The moons still sat high in the sky when the armed townspeople stood outside the gates to Hinoff's farm. Arlek noticed with a critical eye that a few of their group had slunk off in the short trip, hiding out of fear of the encounter. The young man that spoke earlier was among them – vanished into the dark. Coward.

While the troop hesitated, Arlek kicked open the nearest gate to the woodstrider pen, taking note that Hinoff's household was completely dark. The old man and his wife must be sheltering within, attempting to not be noticed. Old Man Hinoff was called such for good reason; he was far too old to put up a fight. His sons were already preparing to transfer the homestead in case of his passing.

On the large, dark field, it was eerily silent. The distant barn stood unlocked, its doors bashed open from the inside. Woodstriders stood in small groups throughout the field, frozen in distant corners after making their escape. Even from a distance, Arlek could see the whites of their eyes. Mist curled in the air in front of their nostrils, betraying their otherwise complete stillness.

Only a short walk into the field, Arlek held up his hand to stop. A dark shape was outlined in the silvery moonlight. The stench of blood was carried to them on the wind, metallic and fresh. A minute passed in silence. Perhaps the beast was asleep? If so, a quick stab into the weak links of its scales would send it fleeing in panic.

Just then, the wind shifted. A cool breeze pressed to their backs, its reversed direction carrying their scent towards the monster. Within moments, a massive head lifted from the earth, green scales glittering. Four large horns formed a crest around the beast's head. Green eyes – each the size of a man's fist – set upon them, pupils large in the dark.

Arlek could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he held the gaze of the nightmare beast. One beat, two, three. No one moved. The nobleman slowly shifted his stance, preparing to call for a charge.

“Slay the spawn of Yggrax!” a loud voice called from within the group, immediately causing the massive head and Arlek’s own to swivel towards the sound in unison. Without any sort of plan or coordination, the confused group suddenly half charged towards the dragon. Cursing, Arlek joined them, knowing this haphazard charge would be the best chance they had at getting the first strike, regardless of planning.

An ear-piercing roar thundered through the group, echoing through the valley in which Airelheim sat. Arlek set his jaw and continued his charge, ignoring the pain in his ears. In his periphery, he could see a few men faltering, fear plastered on their faces.

The great dragon’s dark scales made it hard to truly behold in the night, but the moonlight provided just enough to show that it was much smaller than initially thought. As it reared up in panic, Arlek could tell its wingspan and height were only half the size of an adult – a juvenile. With any luck, a starving one that could not fight.

Arlek arrested his charge just out of reach of the beast, throwing his spear with practiced precision at its long neck. A cry of pain proved the weapon hit home. An unseen spray of blood audibly splattered the earth. Arrows whistled past, followed by the soft clink of those that glanced harmlessly off the thicker scales.

A far less experienced man charged straight at the beast with his own polearm, hoping to ram the point directly into its chest. He was made to pay for his hubris as a swift slash from the monster’s claws tore through his body, sending it tumbling across the ground. It came to a rest many lengths away and moved no more.

The life was exchanged for many more points and blades hitting home. Even those without any experience managed to overcome their fear with adrenaline, stabbing the creature with the varied weapons farmers could muster. A pitchfork neatly stuck out of the dragon’s flank among bleeding marks left by spears, scythes, and axes.

Wounded and inexperienced in battling such a group, the dragon flared its wings and beat them heavily, attempting to take off.

“The wings, slash the wings!” Arlek roared, stirring a few of the frozen group into action. Spears reached into the air, others were thrown; many missed their mark by a wide margin, but two managed to pierce through the fragile membrane. Arrows flew from the rear, ripping pinholes in the fragile membrane. The wounds were not enough to stop the drake, however, and it quickly lifted into the air, wheeling lopsidedly in the sky.

The swift and vicious assault took effect mere moments after it took off. Cheering broke out as the drake shuddered in air, losing altitude as its wings started to beat out of sync. It was dropping fast. Eyes widening, Arlek realized with growing horror that the dragon was flying in the direction of his own estate.

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The commotion in the streets was dying down to a murmur and Tavra began to consider going back to bed. She was shivering in her night dress and her place under the covers seemed more welcoming by the minute. The insects, immune to a dragon's presence unlike nightbirds, were lulling her to sleep with a rhythmic lullaby.

Her ears perked at a new sound at the cusp of sleep. A soft whooshing noise and the crack of what sounded like a leather tarp – distant at first, but growing. She lifted her head off the window frame, squinting in the dark. A blob, outlined in silver, quickly grew in size before her mind, sleep-deprived and confused, could even process it. Suddenly, a massive beast collided with the building ahead of her own estate, the heavy ball of scales shattering the wooden home before tumbling uselessly across the ground.

Unable to process the scene, Tavra simply stared blankly at the mass. She had heard of dragons before in story and myth, but to see one? It was smaller than she had imagined. The details were blurred by the dust kicked up by its own crash landing, but the light revealed just enough to see. It had three horns now – one snapped in its landing, leaving a large bleeding stump. The splintered remains of spears and weaponry stuck out from its flank. A dark slash across its throat was bleeding profusely.

The entire front yard of her own estate lay between Tavra and the dragon, leaving it a good distance from her, but her heart still seized as it stood slowly from the rubble. One wing lay limply by its side, clearly broken. It began to limp forward, angling towards the forest beyond the town walls. Tavra knew the forest well; it bordered their own estate and encircled the entire town on its northern edge. She was always warned to stay away from its depths, but she never considered it could be housing such a danger.

Yet, in this state, was it even a danger? The stories she heard implied it would continue destroying the settlement and killing everything until it breathed its dying breath. The reality was a far cry from that – it almost seemed pitiful, limping as it was.

Its head suddenly lifted upwards and it began to hobble forward faster, tilting its head back slightly as if hearing something. Shortly after, Tavra began to hear it too – distant shouts and cries. The hunting party had caught up with its quarry.

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They had lost a few men running across the town at full tilt, but Arlek determined they could catch up when possible. His heart was hammering in his ears, drowning out almost all other noise. Irne, Tavra – they're in danger, great danger. The beast could have already killed them.

He nearly assumed the worst, rounding the corner and seeing the neighboring house completely smashed on its northern edge, revealing the interior. One man froze – the owner, Arlek noticed – staring at the remains of the home. Soft moans echoed from within and he quickly dove into the debris, searching for his wife and sons. A few joined him.

Arlek let them, knowing well that the remaining men should be enough to push the dragon out of the settlement, or even kill it. Even a youngling like this was not so easily slain. He knew it

must've already been severely weakened to be so clumsy and flighty, and the additional wounds were a tipping point to grounding it.

And a grounded dragon was a dead dragon.

The beast had left a helpful trail of blood to point out its path, which the hunting party quickly sprinted after. Arlek gestured off to the sides, commanding half of the party to encircle it from the left while he and the others took the right. Weak as it was, it could still smash buildings with its sheer weight. He did not want it to back up into any other homes.

It had not made it much further down the road than its crash site before the hunters happened upon it, stumbling and limping as it was through the shortened grass of the town's interior. Even now, it continued to shamble forward, its breath coming in heavy grunts.

"After it, men; it is nearly downed! We will have a great skull to mount after tonight," Arlek called. He could see the bloodthirst in his fellows' eyes. Fear had melted away the moment the dragon fled. The deepest of instincts scream prey the moment a creature runs.

Running up on its right side, Arlek kept clear of its claws. Its wing dragged uselessly on the ground, reducing its range even further now that it could not bash the men with them. Armed with a farm scythe he grabbed from Hinoff's farm – which he personally noted to repay him for – Arlek took a dive into the dragon's strike range to land a slash across its foreleg, hoping to bring it down to its knees. Metal scraped against the tough scale, then slipped off, leaving no mark.

The dragon hissed, slashing out with its wicked claws still coated in his countryman's blood. Arlek dropped down, letting the strike fly overhead. Another man, seizing the moment of distraction, threw his spear at the broad flank. Another cry of pain, another hit. Not much longer now. It could only lose so much blood.

A distant scream could be heard in the distance. It was lost in the hammering of Arlek's heart. The battle ebbed and flowed like water and he melted into its motions, looking for a moment to direct his men to a killing blow.

Then, as if Yggorum himself swapped the moons for the sun, the dark of the night vanished and light bloomed across the battlefield.

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Tavra had darted out of her room to follow the progress of the fight past her window. She was now glued to a window at the top of the stairs, watching her father chase down the weakened animal. Pity gripped her; it was so weak. Why not just let it leave? It would never come back having gotten those wounds, in her mind. She had once grabbed a ringtail by its tail and gotten bitten, and so she never did it again. To her, this was the same lesson, amplified greatly.

Tearing her eyes away from the battle, Tavra quickly noticed something the group of men overlooked – another distant speck, growing rapidly, headed straight for the town. This time, she immediately knew it was another dragon.

Tavra quickly fumbled with the wooden window shutter. It was heavy and hard to hold upwards with her little hands, but she managed to push it enough to just stick her face outside.

“Father! Father, look!” she screamed, pointing uselessly into the night with her free hand, completely invisible against the shadowed wall. Yet, she tried. Her father didn’t even flinch. Moments later, the dragon was upon them.

A great ball of fire burst down the street, lighting the entire world up as if it were day. It struck past the green dragon, which screeched in surprise and threw itself to the side, nearly crushing a few of the militia. The flame roared over the heads of the men. Tavra could feel its heat through the open window, intense on her scales.

Only a handful of flame-spouting dragons had ever been seen. They were not from here; one type lived in the highest mountains far, far away. Whispers and legends spoke of another, great red fire beasts living among endless sand. In all of these times, there had never been a confirmed case of a firespitter burning a town in Vandell. Yet.

As quickly as it appeared, the flame dissipated, vanishing into smoke stinking of rotten eggs. Nothing had caught – as if by a miracle, the flame had been shot directly in the space between the homes. Chaos and shouting reigned below as the men gathered themselves, stumbling backwards. Some already began to run away, taken by primal panic.

Their eyes dazzled, almost no one could make out anything anymore in the dark. Tavra blinked her eyes incessantly, trying to clear away the sparkles in her vision. Through the smoke, she could almost see the outline of another dragon; one that was much, much larger than the original. It was larger than even the adult forest drakes she’d heard of, towering over the rather stunted juvenile that still lay on the ground.

A few men, spurred on by adrenaline, immediately went for the new attacker, willing to lay down their lives to protect their home. Instead of attacking, the new dragon simply moved around the few men, sidestepping. It had a certain pattern to how it walked that gave it an uncanny grace, as if it was picking its steps carefully, practically dancing around its assailants. Realizing the futility of their attack, the braves pulled back, weapons readied.

As Tavra’s vision adapted to the dark once more, she could start to make sense of the newcomer in bits and pieces. Its scales struck her – a deep, dark blue hue that looked almost black in the moonlight, accented with flares of orange and pinkish-red. Its wings were patterned with orange whorls of color, and they were huge. While the forest dragon’s wings were just barely large enough to lift it, this dragon’s wings appeared almost comically large in comparison. It was a breed that Tavra had never seen or even heard described.

It was beautiful.

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Gritting his teeth, Arlek squinted to stare upwards at the massive dragon that had joined the fray. In all of his years, the only time he had ever heard of a dragon fighting alongside another was during courtship or protecting a nest. This was all among the same species, and, clearly, the firespitter was no forest drake.

Reality dawned on him slowly as he looked up at its great wings, which nearly blotted out the stars above. Even as he stared the creature in the face, he had to fight to believe it – a great sky dragon. None have seen one on the ground before, as they normally passed far above. It was known that they could spit fire, but they never intervened with the ground's business. They were Yggrax's spies, while the forest drakes were his claws.

A sky dragon on the ground was simply unheard of.

Pulling his feet under him, Arlek stood slowly, grabbing his scythe as he did. It could have easily killed all of them with one breath of flame, yet it missed somehow. To such a wide-ranging weapon, the militia may as well have been standing still. It was a warning shot.

The dragon itself kept a watchful eye on them, occasionally turning to sniff and nudge the downed forest drake. The wounded youngling stared at its larger companion, and if it was able to speak, Arlek would swear it was begging for help. It keened softly to the bigger species, tail lashing on the ground. The sky dragon rumbled in return, swinging its blue head upwards to look at its broken wing. Then, it gently nudged at the flank of its fellow, encouraging it to stand. All the while, its eyes barely left the crowd.

Since the first attack was dodged so cleanly, the remaining challengers stood aside, unsure what to do. They kept glancing to Arlek for command, who was, in turn, staring dumbly at the dragons.

A complete silence fell upon them, disturbed only by the insects.

Mere moments later, the forest drake was up on its fours, still bleeding profusely but moving. The great creature beside it kept a protective wing tented over it, as if guarding it. It made no sense. Arlek could find no rhyme or reason in it.

Nearby, he heard one of his fellows hiss in rage. "Yggrax himself is commanding the beasts. Since when does he play war with his monsters?" A few men, close enough to hear, nodded in grim agreement. There was no other explanation.

A loud bang coming from outside the group pierced the ensuing silence, causing all to look up at the source. Arlek's blood ran cold as he saw Tavra, eyes wide and petrified, staring out into the night.

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Tavra's shaking arms gave out from holding up the heavy shutter for so long, sending it flying shut. The old wood split, causing the previously solid piece of wood to collapse and fall inwards, leaving an open hole where it once sat. The clatter echoed in the silence, catching everyone's attention. Including the dragons.

The blue dragon seemed to stare right at her, mouth slightly agape as if preparing for flame. Then, the jaws shut, and it tilted its head slightly. Their eyes met. Breath caught in Tavra's throat.

Movement below pulled the firebreather's attention from her. Another man made use of the sudden distraction, sending an arrow at the beast. The projectile hit home, digging into the deep blue scales of its foreleg, eliciting a high-pitched squeal from it. It lifted its leg and shook it, trying to remove the offending item, then simply held it to its chest, hissing.

The commotion had given time for the young forest drake to hobble further away, to a safer distance and nearly to the trees. It was scrabbling painfully at the stone wall, leaving a trail of blood as it dragged its limp body over the structure. The sky dragon noted its partners near escape, taking a split second to consider its chances. Then, suddenly, it blasted the ground in front of the townsfolk with its great flame, raising a wall of fire in the grass that burned taller than a man. The militia fell backwards in surprise, cut off from their quarry.

The dragon turned, hurrying away to follow the youngling, limping on three limbs before it yanked the arrow out of its forelimb with its teeth. It nimbly hopped over the wall, using its massive wings to assist its leap. Soon after, the forest drake slipped over the wall, its tail disappearing behind the battlements.

Then they were gone. Cinders rose into the night sky, chased by the sound of the crackling fire. Soon the fire, too, was gone, the grass not dry enough to sustain a blaze for long.

Tavra felt herself embraced from behind and pulled from the window, far too late to avoid having seen everything. As Irne whisked her to the safety of her room, Tavra mulled over what she saw. In those moments when her eyes met the dragon's, she could swear she saw something behind them. Without words, the dragon had spoken, the gaze betraying its fear and anxiety – betraying its intelligence.

A bang sounded below as Arlek burst in the front door, staring into space. He met Irne in the entryway, assuring her he was not hurt in a far-away voice. He then rummaged through their stores until he found a stiff ale, pulled up a chair, and drank. He knew dragons. He had killed dragons. Never had he ever seen dragons of different kinds cooperate.

The words of his comrade echoed in his head. Yggrax commanded those beasts. The beasts had seen his home, his daughter and, worse, lived to remember.

"Yggorum help me," he prayed, then took a deep swig of his ale.