

Drynwideon, The Sword of Destiny – Yeah, Right

By R.A. Gregory

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This is a work of fiction. None of the characters in this book are based on real people, alive or dead. Any resemblance to an actual person in name or otherwise is purely coincidental.

To Ollie, as always, and to Ian, my ever patient editor. Also to Brian McMullan for his conviction, support and hard work running around in the background while I was writing this.

Finally, for Goy, who did the amazing cover artwork for the book. May a long and fruitful career await you.

Chapter 1

Gonald the Mighty hurled a curse of defiance at the storm raging around him and searched for yet another handhold. He had been climbing for hours now and was nearing the point of exhaustion, but still, the craggy peak of Mount Terror seemed no closer. Risking another glance upwards through the stinging rain that continually lashed his sun-bronzed and muscular torso, he could see the mountain looming mercilessly over him, outlined in stark relief again and again by the giant bolts of lightning that split the very heavens high above.

Muttering another curse, this time to himself, Gonald launched his body sideways into space, landing on a narrow ledge and only just missing a rocky outcrop that would have disembowelled a lesser man than himself. With a grunt of satisfaction at having cheated death once again, he continued climbing, inching closer and closer towards his destiny. Tonight would be the night he met his greatest challenge, the night that would mark him out as a true hero among heroes, the night they would speak of for a thousand years to come, he thought. Tonight would be the night that he completed what should have been done more than twenty years before.

Wedging himself tightly in a small hollow between two jagged outcrops on the pitiless slopes of Mount Terror, the wind and rain whipping his golden locks wildly around his scarred and worn, yet still handsome face, Gonald paused for respite and reflected on the circumstances that had led him to this hellish night and the nightmare confrontation that lay at its end.

It was twenty-five, no thirty-five years ago, now. How the time had passed. He was just a young barbarian warrior, barely out of the monastery, taking his first, tentative steps on the road to becoming a fully-fledged hero. If his memory served him correctly, he didn't even have a single mark on him back then. A wry smile crossed his face as he looked down at the myriad of white lines crisscrossing the backs of his hands and arms. And that was nothing compared to the twisted knots of countless whip marks and sword strokes on his broad and well-defined back.

He'd been fighting as a low-grade mercenary somewhere on the flatlands of Womgom, his very first meeting with the elves, in fact. Caught in an ambush by the little buggers, he'd used his training to good effect, laying waste to most of them with a single swing of his now trademark wooden club, however, one of them had managed to duck the blow and had stabbed him in the side with a poison blade. Left for dead by the cowardly elves, he'd lurched aimlessly around the barren flatlands for days, half delirious from the effects of the poison and half from loss of blood.

Just when he thought that the last of his strength had departed him and almost willing the poison to finish him off, he'd stumbled upon a small watering hole of the sort used by animals, rather than people. Collapsing heavily at the edge of the dirty pool and greedily scooping handfuls of the brackish water into his mouth, he'd heard a soft keening sound, almost a wail. Recognising it to be the unmistakable sound of a new-born in distress, he'd rolled onto his knees and begun searching for the origin of the noise. At the very least there should be a meal in it came his deranged thoughts, as he painfully dragged himself around the edge of the watering hole. Finally, he found the source of the sound. There, half buried in a pile of baking hot rocks was an egg. It looked nothing like any egg he'd ever seen before,

being about a foot in diameter and shimmering like a pearl. It had started to crack open, but whatever was inside had been unable to hatch completely because one of the rocks had shifted and fallen on top of the egg. Lifting the rock slowly from the egg and raising it over his head with the aim of using it as a makeshift club, he'd stopped in his tracks as the hatchling emerged. If the egg was a mystery, then this was doubly so. Maybe it was his delirious state he thought, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make out what the thing actually was. At one moment, it looked a bit like a snake, the next it had a winged appearance, then it seemed to take on an almost human outline. It was as if the shape of the thing was constantly shifting before him to dazzle and confuse the eyes. And talking of eyes, he'd never seen any like these before. So big, so black, so deep that he felt himself falling into them, a feeling of overwhelming love and helplessness enfolding him so completely that he dropped the rock he was holding right onto his head, knocking himself out cold.

When he came to, several hours later, he felt strangely refreshed. There around his midsection was a cloth bandage and his wound had obviously been tended to in his unconscious state. He secretly hoped that other parts of him had also been tended to while he was asleep, preferably by exotic maidens with long flowing hair, but then he was a young barbarian warrior, so that was only to be expected. Quickly putting those kinds of thoughts aside, he'd looked around to see who had helped him, but the watering hole was deserted. In fact, now that he thought about it, there was no sign of the mysterious egg or hatchling either. Instead, lying next to him in a small wicker basket was a baby, fast asleep and softly burbling to itself. He'd scrambled to his feet in shock, completely oblivious to the pain in his side and searched frantically for its parents, but there was no one in sight. He'd called out again and again, but no one answered. Finally, he'd given up looking and had taken the baby back to the camp, all thoughts of the strange egg and hatchling forgotten. He'd intended to give the baby up to the first woman he met, but every time he looked at the child, he was filled with the same feeling of all-embracing love and knew deep down in his heart that he and only he could be her protector.

And so, it came to pass that he, at first just plain old 'Gonald', then 'Gonald the Barbarian', became known throughout the land as 'The barbarian with the babe on his back'. Oh, what a glorious life he'd led, killing and smiting, smiting and killing his way back and forth across countless cities and kingdoms, always with the child at his side. At first, she just mimicked his movements, but as she grew she began to fight alongside him. Together they became a formidable pair and people soon stopped mocking them and started to fear them instead. In many ways, he reflected, the girl had been exceptionally good luck for him. More than once they were caught in situations that should have resulted in certain death and yet somehow, they had always managed to escape unharmed. And as tales of their adventures spread, so grew their fame, until the glorious day that Gonald finally achieved full hero status and took the honoured name 'Gonald the Mighty'.

And then she'd turned on him. They were fighting swamp monsters in the Deadwood Forest at the time. By then she'd grown from a ferocious girl into a beautiful young woman and her long black hair and obsidian eyes, not to mention her other more shapely assets, were the talk of every tavern and brawling hole in the land. On more than one occasion he'd had to step in to ward off the attentions of an unwanted suitor. Most recently, it had been a young prince, from one of the more powerful kingdoms that had caught her eye and as her protector, he'd wasted no time in putting that little spark of romance out. The fact that the prince would

probably never walk in quite the same way again didn't bother Gonald in the least. In fact, by that time, most people that met Gonald didn't ever walk the same way again. Most of them never walked again, ever. Anyway, there was something different this time and since the incident with the prince, she'd been increasingly distant towards him, a smouldering resentment at his presence building up in her eyes every time he looked at her.

He'd never seen it coming, but then you never do he often mused after the event. They'd just finished off the last of the swamp monsters and he was catching his breath when suddenly she'd rounded on him and smashed him over the head with her club. As he staggered around the clearing they were in, half dazed from the impact, she hit him again and again, screaming something about it being time for a change. He'd not fully realised what she had meant until he finally hit the floor, head spinning from the repeated blows he'd received. As he looked up at her looming menacingly over him, he couldn't be sure if it was his eyesight that was deceiving him, or whether it was reality, but just as it was all those years ago with the hatchling, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make out her shape. She seemed to shimmer and dance before him, and once again he could see what looked like part snake, part winged thing and part human. It was then that he finally realised that the hatchling and the baby he'd rescued and raised as his daughter for all those years were one and the same thing. He recalled her mocking him in his semi-conscious state and remembered the burning pain as she drove her hunting knife home in exactly the same spot as he'd been stabbed all those years before. Then laughing, she'd left him bleeding to death on the forest floor and as his vision finally left him, he saw her fly away, yes, that's right, she took on a winged form and flew up out of the clearing and into the skies above.

If it wasn't for the fairies, it would have been the end for him right there and then. But, somehow, they'd found him and taken him to one of their remote magical strongholds where they'd been able to heal him. It was a painfully slow recovery and he learned from them only some considerable time later that the thing he'd once considered to be his daughter had gone back to the prince and had married him, only to murder him and the rest of the royal family shortly afterwards. Having seized power, she had marched on and taken several other nearby kingdoms and was rapidly building an empire that was engulfing everything around it. Fear had gripped the land and people everywhere were talking in dread tones about Ka, the Dragon Princess and her unstoppable Dragon Army.

Driven more by guilt and shame than by anything else, he'd vowed to hunt down and destroy Ka and the Dragon Army, in order to restore peace to the land and, more importantly, to his own soul. Leaving the fairy stronghold with a heavy heart, he'd begun the greatest and most important quest of his life. He'd followed her tracks for years, always one step behind her and the devastation she was causing, but never far enough behind to avoid the many monsters that her passing army had raised from the bowels of the earth to wreak havoc on the land above. As such, he'd been forced to kill the Orc King in the Marshes of Redfurn. He'd beheaded the Elf King with a single blow of his mighty club on top of Gormongash Hill and smote the colossal Rock God at the battle of Liberenfraughmilch. He'd even crushed the evil Blue Nun in her impenetrable fortress, the Black Tower, although afterwards even he admitted that he'd taken things a bit too far with that one. Finally, he was here, on the slopes of her stronghold, Mount Terror, ready to face the Dragon Princess once more and this time to make her pay for her treachery with her life.

A bolt of lightning shot through the air and struck the mountainside just above Gonald's hiding place, sending a shower of sparks and molten rock raining down on him and jolting him smartly from his brief reverie. With a dull grunt, his muscles barely rested from the short break, he shrugged and left the meagre shelter of the hollow to once again begin his ascent. As he did so, the storm above him seemed to intensify, as if it could sense his presence and wanted to scrub him from the very face of the land. The rain pounded him mercilessly, slicing into his exposed skin as it fell from the heavens, driven by the wind that had now become a gale. As it screamed past his ears, buffeting and threatening to dislodge him from the narrow ledge he was standing on, it was joined by the deafening boom of peal after peal of thunder, each one a reminder of the ever-present lightning that seemed to be getting closer and closer to him.

Tensing himself ready for another leap into space, Gonald jumped from the ledge into the darkness surrounding him. As he did so, his foot caught one of the small rocks that the lightning had dislodged, sending him tumbling off-balance into the abyss below. Twisting with frantic effort, his years of experience and cat-like reflexes taking over, Gonald narrowly avoided goring himself once again on a rocky spur and landed with a heavy thump on a small plateau gouged into the side of the mountain, some fifty feet below where he'd started. Breathing heavily, Gonald cautiously checked himself for broken bones and muttered a silent prayer of thanks to the Goddess of Heroes when his fumbling revealed no serious damage. Slowly rising to his feet and dusting himself off, he smiled bitterly at the thought that no matter what the Dragon Princess or Death itself could throw at him, he would remain undeterred in his quest to end her life and his shame. As he finished patting himself down, his hand brushed a weather-worn leather scabbard and he glanced reverently at the sword hanging by his side.

Drynwideon, the killer of giants. Drynwideon, the maker of truths, Drynwideon, the sword of destiny. No one knew how old it was, but it was both ancient and magical. Some said that it had been forged at the very beginning of time when The Bright Ones had walked the earth and that in the hands of a true hero, its blade would never dull. Others said that it was made by the dwarfs for their High King a thousand ages before The Bright Ones, from a metal so rare that none now existed. Yet others said that the dwarfs had, in fact, stolen it from an even earlier race of mortals and that it had not been made, but rather sent by the gods from beyond the stars to keep mankind and the other races in their place. Regardless of these myths, all Gonald knew was that it was extremely sharp and likely to be the only thing that would be able to separate the Dragon Princess' head from her body. He patted it reassuringly, not daring to unsheathe the blade, in case its brilliance should reveal his location and began once more in earnest to climb the unyielding face of Mount Terror.

As he climbed, his thoughts drifted to the time that he'd acquired the legendary sword. It was at the battle of Gormongash Hill, some years before, where he'd faced the Elf King and taken his head off with his club. He'd been forced, albeit with a heavy heart, to give his trademark club away after that battle, the Heroes' Code only allowing the possession of one enchanted weapon at any point in time and to be honest he'd never felt the same since, but in his mind, he knew it was the right thing to do. He could still remember the strange old man he'd given it to, bent and wizened, with only one eye and barely a tooth in his head. It was the same man who had first told him about Drynwideon and its power when he'd been drinking in a rough seaman's bar in the Port of Naxis several months earlier. He couldn't

recollect where the old man had come from, or why he'd begun talking to Gonald, but together they'd ended up getting roaring drunk, sharing tales of past battles and heroic deeds. At the end of the night, the old man had conspiratorially slurred his tale of the magic sword, the only thing that could dispatch the Dragon Princess and how she had found it and placed it into the safekeeping of the Elf King. Spilling the last of his beer on the rude wooden table between them, the old man had reminded Gonald of the Heroes' Code, saying that as a former hero himself, he'd be happy to look after Gonald's club if and when the time came. And so it was, that immediately following the battle, when Gonald was still admiring Drynwideon's magical sheen and mystical markings, surrounded by the bloody and dismembered remains of the Elf King and his army on Gormongash Hill, the old man had once again appeared and held Gonald to his promise. Since that day, Gonald had never seen the wizened old man again, although he often thought about and lamented his lost weapon. And periodically he was wrenched from his sleep by a recurring nightmare, in which he recalled the look of amazement and confusion on the Elf King's face as he brought his mighty club around for the first and last time.

A sudden change in the texture of the rock face brought Gonald back to reality. He must have been climbing for longer than he thought because finally, he'd reached the peak of Mount Terror. Here, the storm raged at its fiercest, literally tearing the mountain apart as the lightning shattered the summit and the howling wind span the smashed rock into a whirlpool. Risking a quick look over the scree he was resting on, he saw her. There, in the centre of the maelstrom was the Dragon Princess. She was as beautiful as ever, Gonald thought with a sigh. This was not going to be as easy as he'd hoped. All those years of following her trail of destruction, building the hatred inside him with every step he took and at the end of it all, she still had the same power over him as she did when she was a child.

Ducking down behind the summit, Gonald chided himself for being a fool. "You need to be strong, Gonald," he said to himself. "This is the night you've been waiting twenty years for. This is where it ends. This is your revenge. You know what she's like and this feeling is just a trick that she's playing on you. Now, go down there, whip Drynwideon out and take her cursed head off with it!" he continued. "Thanks, Gonald. It's always good to know I can count on you," said Gonald. He didn't often talk to himself, but on the rare occasions that he did, he always felt better afterwards. Looking down at himself, he quickly rubbed as much of the dirt off his body as he could and adjusted his leather shorts and chest-piece for maximal impact, in true hero style. With a final, casual flick of his wrist, he swept his golden locks away from his eyes and jumped up with a roar to face his destiny.

Balancing for a moment on the edge of the summit and not even bothering to dodge the flying rocks, which just bounced off him, he cast a truly magnificent figure. Lit from all angles by the deadly bolts of lightning, he was the mighty hero personified. He was justice and his time was now. Leaping with an even bigger roar, his descent of the scree slope on the other side of the summit was absolutely perfect. Almost floating on the sliding carpet of stones, he came to a stop just metres from the Dragon Princess, a look of pure fury on his rugged features.

The Dragon Princess regarded him impassively. "You took your time. I was expecting you ages ago," she said with barely concealed disdain in her voice.

“Ka! Your reign of terror is over. I have returned to do what I should have done all those years ago. Destiny has brought us together once more, but after tonight we shall never meet again,” cried Gonald over the noise of the storm.

“I do believe that you’re right... father. But you are woefully mistaken if you think that you are going to defeat me, tonight or any other night for that matter,” the Dragon Princess hissed.

“Don’t call me father!” roared Gonald at the thing that he himself had called daughter for so many years. She looked wonderful tonight, he mused absentmindedly. That was the problem with barbarian heroes. Even when they were supposed to be working, they were always so easily distracted by matters of the flesh. Standing there, dressed in a jet-black, figure-hugging, one-piece dress, her raven hair held in place against the raging storm by a gold filigree net with a recurring dragon motif, it was hard to believe that she was the source of all evil in the land and his sworn enemy. And as a fully-grown woman, she was even more beautiful than he remembered. Her ruby red lips lay in stark relief to her pale, angular face, but as always, it was the eyes that mesmerised him. So big, so black, so deep...

“Stop it!” bellowed Gonald, outraged at feeling himself begin to fall under the Dragon Princess’ spell once again. “Your dark magic won’t work on me anymore, Witch, for I have this to protect me!” And so saying, he whipped Drynwideon from its scabbard and held it in front of him, arms outstretched as if fearful of its ferocious power. As if on cue, Drynwideon’s blade flared a deep blue-white, momentarily blinding both Gonald and the Dragon Princess.

“I hadn’t expected it to do that, but no matter. It is just a trinket, that’s all, and harmless to me,” said Ka, blinking furiously to try and regain her sight as the blazing blade settled down to a more acceptable glow.

“Behold, Drynwideon. Killer of giants, maker of truths, the sword of destiny itself. And soon to be the beheader of Dragon Princesses,” Gonald yelled into the swirling storm, a knowing smile creeping across his face. “You only say that this is a trinket, because you are scared of it, Ka. You seek to sow doubt in my mind because you know that I hold in my hands the only weapon that can ever defeat you,” he continued.

“Oh, really? Is that so?” replied Ka, a cruel smile breaking her lips. “Wouldn’t you be happier with this instead?” she said. Gonald looked on in amazement as the Dragon Princess made a strange circular motion with her arms. And there, where before there was only air, appeared his mighty club, which she grabbed and straddled provocatively in the classic barbarian pose.

“Where did you get that from?” asked Gonald, the look of disbelief never leaving his face.

“From you, of course!” replied Ka with a sneer. “Don’t you remember drinking with a strange old man in a tavern in Naxxis? A bent and wizened old fellow with barely a tooth in his head,” she continued mockingly. “Well, that was me in disguise all along, you dull-witted oaf!” As she said this, her form began to blur and twist, and for a fraction of a second, there before Gonald, stood the decrepit and misshapen figure he had given his club to all those

years before. “Yes, I tricked you,” she said, resuming her normal form, “and now I have your famed weapon, while you haven’t got a chance in the world.”

“So, it has come to this,” said Gonald softly. “To have my own club used against me in my greatest battle,” he continued, bowing his head towards the ground. Then, lifting his head proudly, a fierce grin spreading across his face, he bellowed: “So be it then. Let us fight!” And with that, he lunged towards the Dragon Princess, Drynwideon shining steadily in his hands.

Ka easily blocked the lunge with Gonald’s mighty club and so the great battle began. Together they whirled around the summit of Mount Terror, locked in a deadly dance, each anticipating the moves of the other, each recalling the many years that they had fought together side by side. As they spun around, lunging, feinting, sweeping and slashing, neither could get the upper hand. As the minutes turned into hours, fatigue began to set in, but neither Gonald nor the Dragon Princess showed the slightest signs of relenting. Finally, with a frenzied attack, which would have made any barbarian hero proud, Gonald broke through Ka’s defences and slashed her cheek with Drynwideon. Momentarily stunned by the blow, she fell back, raising her hand to her face and feeling the warm blood dripping from the wound. Gonald hesitated, reluctant to press home his advantage and in that moment Ka lowered her hand and still retreating, regarded him with an icy cold stare of pure hatred.

“I’ve had enough of playing with you!” she spat at him. “Now you die,” she said, her form shimmering to reveal the dragon inside her.

As her black wings unfolded in a dramatic sweep and her dress unwound to partly reveal her tail, Gonald returned the stare a hundredfold and roared back at her: “No, now you die!” Raising Drynwideon over his head, his face a picture of perfect rage, he rushed towards the Dragon Princess, intent on delivering his death blow.

Screaming as he went, the Dragon Princess regarded him coolly. As he closed the gap between them, Gonald brought Drynwideon down in a powerful sweeping arc, which should have neatly separated Ka’s head from her body. Only he stopped in mid-swing when he noticed that Drynwideon’s blade was no longer glowing. In fact, it wasn’t even shining. Instead, it had turned a dull grey colour, more like iron than steel. Staring at the sword in confusion and frustration, Gonald slowly looked across at the Dragon Princess. Then he looked up at the Dragon Princess. Having fully transformed into her dragon aspect, she towered above him, scales glistening black in the night sky, a red glow deep in her belly, warning of the terrible fire she carried within her.

Gonald felt something warm trickle down his leg as he once again raised the useless sword in defence. Regarding him through now golden eyes, the Dragon Princess spread her enormous wings, blocking out the noise of the storm raging around them. In absolute silence and with something that could only be described as a smile on her dragon’s face, Ka blew Gonald a small, yet fiery kiss. As the gout of deadly flame sped towards him, he watched in horror as Drynwideon melted before his eyes, the sword becoming nothing more than a pool of molten metal at his feet. As the dragon’s kiss finally engulfed him, Gonald the Mighty’s last ever words to the world were: “Oh, shit!”

ONE
THOUSAND
YEARS LATER...

Chapter 2

That was the problem with heroes, thought Drin, as he reached over and cut another slab of meat from the hunk that was slowly sizzling over the fire. They never did their homework properly, just rushed around killing and smiting everything in sight, and ended up getting roasted alive by the Dragon Princess. It was the same story every time. Last night it had been the tale of Chiro the Magnificent... burned alive along with his trusty battle axe. The night before that, the saga of Waldorf the Enchanter, who travelled the length and breadth of the land in search of the mythical spear of Arragonof, only to find it at the foot of Mount Terror, where he ended up as a pile of charred bones. And then there was Jackman the Brave, who had actually managed to raise an entire army against the Dragon Princess, only to have both it and himself incinerated when he finally marched against her.

At the very least, Gonald should have talked to the dwarfs before marching off and killing the Elf King. That way he'd have found out that the real Drynwideon, which the dwarfs had indeed made for their High King, but out of normal steel, not a magical substance, had, in fact, been stolen by the elves and melted down for agricultural implements during the Great Famine centuries before. What he'd actually run off with was a cheap replica, with a low-grade shimmer spell placed on it, that the Elf King used when on official business, such as at the royal ploughing ceremony on Gormongash Hill. No wonder he'd looked so surprised moments before Gonald had taken his head off! All that killing and bloodshed simply because Gonald the Mighty didn't have the sense to do some basic research beforehand. Typical! He'd have been better off sticking to his club, or even just trusting in a simple dagger, rather than some pseudo-magical sword he'd heard about in a squalid drinking hole.

Rolling back towards the fire, Drin smiled to himself and brandished his dagger, playfully swiping it around in the air in mock-barbarian fashion, before slicing another chunk of roasting meat off the slab. Mmmm, the food tonight was really good he thought as the hot, greasy juices ran down his throat and into his ever-greedy belly. He idly hoped that it wasn't someone he knew, or even worse, someone he was close to, as he swallowed noisily and bit off another mouthful of hot flesh from the end of his dagger. It hadn't been an easy decision for the village to turn cannibal all those years ago, he reflected, however, times were hard and after a thousand years of living under the Dragon Princess' merciless rule, it was no surprise that the land had given up and the crops had failed year after year. Yes, things were bleak indeed. The earth was scorched and scarred from the ravages of Ka and her Dragon Army. But then again, bleak wasn't too bad. A few years before, things had been grim, before that things had been desolate and before that things were dire. There was even a time when Drin was only a young boy when things had actually been hopeless. But that was then and Drin was ever hopeful of a time when things would be only austere, or perhaps even just a bit dreary. Those would be good times indeed he thought, his jaw steadily grinding up and down on the unfortunate villager that had become tonight's dinner.

"Oi! Shut your gob when you're eating, will you?" came a rough voice by his side, quickly followed by a snigger and a hefty kick to the legs. "You're putting me off my Karl with all that chomping and slobbering. If you liked him that much, you should have told him while he was still alive, not waited until now to declare your eternal love." It was Boggor the Brave, the village's answer to a hero. Drin had forgotten that Boggor had sat down next to him that night and now he was paying the price for having not moved sooner. Boggor was not

particularly well muscled, but was more heavily set than the other villagers and used his size to compensate for his total lack of brains. Drin considered him to be a bit of an oaf, who had unfortunately achieved a degree of notoriety the year before when he'd allegedly rescued the Chief's daughter from what he claimed was a pack of starving wolves in the mountains. The fact that no wolves had ever been seen in the hills surrounding the village, combined with the mysterious birth of a child to the Chief's daughter some nine months after the incident, led Drin to a different conclusion. However, to the rest of the village, Boggor had saved the Chief's daughter from certain death, the child was a gift from the gods, although unfortunately not one you could eat due to its high birth and therefore Boggor was a hero.

"You can talk, Boggor," retorted Drin with a snort, his relaxed and reflective mood now completely shattered. "The noise you make when you eat is enough to wake the dead, you filthy pig," he continued, earning himself another sharp kick to the legs from Boggor for his efforts. "Anyway, did you say that this was Karl?" Drin went on, pointing his dagger at the now greatly diminished and rather sad looking lump of meat hanging over the fire. Secretly, he couldn't wait until Boggor's number came up. Then they'd be feasting for at least a week before they needed anyone else for the lottery.

"Yeah, that's Karl alright. I helped drag him into the temple for the finishing ceremony earlier today. And watch your language, Weirdo. I'm important now and I can make bad things happen to you," replied Boggor, still trying to work out exactly what Drin had meant by 'filthy pig'.

"Oh, that's not nice," said Drin, flicking the remaining piece of meat from his dagger back into the fire. Karl was alright as a person, but he did have quite an impressive list of unpleasant diseases and was not noted for his attention to personal hygiene. So, yes, they'd only eat him once, but that wasn't the point. Drin was going to have to talk to the village authorities about this. There had to be a better selection process for the evening meal than families simply dumping their least favourite offspring into the lottery. In Drin's case, it didn't matter. He was as safe as you could get. He didn't have any family left and had learned to sleep with one eye open so that no one could place a lottery ticket onto his sleeping body, as occasionally happened when people got drunk or fell out with each other. In fact, it was the 'sleeping with one eye open' thing that had earned him the name 'Weirdo', the villagers not being noted for their depth of imagination when it came to name calling.

Drin cast a despondent eye over the motley assortment of villagers encircling their particular fire and looked across to the other small fires scattered around the village square, each complete with their own lump of sizzling or smouldering Karl. Things should be better than this, he thought with a sigh. Most of the villagers, at least those that hadn't been eaten yet, were thin and malnourished, forced to scratch about on the desolate hills surrounding the village for anything that could supplement their meagre nightly meal. Their clothes, little more than rags, clung to their skinny bodies and their eyes were filled with the blank stare of the terminally hopeless. Some looked a little less dreadful and in the main, these were the ones that showed evidence of having had a trade at some point in the past. However, with no agriculture, no crops, no beasts of burden or pack animals and a total ban on weapons other than daggers and short swords, there was little call these days for anyone with a skill or a craft. And so, the farmers, bakers, carpenters, cobblers, potters and healers had all put down their tools, closed their shops and joined the multitude of hopeless souls that passed for the

inhabitants of the village. Even the village blacksmith had precious little to keep him busy, the only real work coming from the Chief and his cronies, or the small Dragon Army outpost up the road. A few of the villagers, such as Boggor, had ingratiated themselves with the Chief and the Dragon Army, running favours for them and generally grovelling and greasing as much as they could for the small rewards they were given. As such, they were among the healthiest and best dressed of the villagers and Drin reserved a special disdain for them. They would be the first against the wall when the villagers turned on the current and rotten status quo he often mused. And then, of course, there was the Chief himself and his awful family, not to mention the ever-attendant Priests of Ka, who were little more than butchers disguised as religious maniacs and the Dragon Army itself. They were at the top of the tree that was for sure. Living in luxury within the garrison, with the finest food and the best clothes, apparently supplied directly from the Dragon Princess' own stores. And, of course, being the sole arbiter of law in the village and the Dragon's Princess' officially appointed spokesperson, the Chief and those closest to him were naturally exempt from the lottery, which in Drin's view called the whole system of village government into serious question.

As for Drin himself, well, he was slightly better off than most of the villagers, but certainly nowhere near as comfortable as Boggor and his crowd. And that was because, unlike the others that chose to spend their days scrabbling around in the hills for sustenance, Drin did his foraging inside the garrison, right under the nose of the Dragon Army itself. Many years before, he'd found an abandoned rabbit hole close to the fortress, but completely hidden from view by a well-placed hummock in the ground. Over a period of weeks, he'd scraped out and widened the hole until he could squeeze inside. Having reached the main burrow, he'd continued digging until he was sure that he was inside the garrison and sure enough, when he'd broken through the last of the hard-packed earth above him, he'd hit the jackpot, coming up in the main storeroom itself, right at the back, behind a stack of old salt barrels where no one ever came. From that day on, Drin had visited the storeroom daily, taking only a small amount of food at any one time, so that it wouldn't be noticed and gradually building a stockpile of supplies back in the burrow. He was still always hungry, but never as much so as the other villagers and he was too sensible to gorge himself, lest they become suspicious and start asking awkward questions. As it was, he'd recently noticed an increasing amount of hostility and mistrust being directed towards him by the other villagers, as they gradually wasted away and he somehow managed to maintain his physique. He knew that soon he'd have to do something drastic and it was that realisation, combined with the fact that everyone could see that the village was slowly dying, no matter what the chief said, that had led him to start stockpiling other resources ready for his forthcoming exodus. Consequently, he'd managed to acquire, or rather steal, a thick travelling cloak, a dark brown hat with a rather floppy brim, a small waterskin, a decent pair of walking boots, a leather satchel and a small sword from various unfortunate individuals within the garrison. It was hard not to smirk when news about the missing items trickled down to the villagers during the Chief's weekly pep-talks, but Drin had managed to remain straight-faced and now things were almost set for his departure.

Rising slowly from his place next to the fire, Drin dusted himself off and said to the general assembly of bodies: "Right, I'm off. I've had enough for tonight. Maybe I'll see some of you tomorrow. You never know, maybe I'll be eating one of you and with a bit of luck, it might be you, Boggor. Anyway, goodnight everyone."

“Oi! Watch what you’re saying. I’m important I am. One of these days I’m going to be Chief of the whole village and then you’ll be in trouble, you, you... Weirdo!” cursed Boggor, as Drin neatly sidestepped the kick that was being aimed at him.

“Whatever, Boggor,” said Drin as he headed away from the warmth of the fire and off towards the relative safety of his home.

Home for Drin wasn’t much more than a hovel, but then most of the homes in the village had badly deteriorated over the last few years, with many of the larger houses having been pulled down for firewood. The same was true of the huge wooden fence that had once protected the village from bandits and wild animals. Now that both had effectively died out, there was little reason to have a protective barrier to the outside world and so the fence too had come down to feed the nightly bonfires. All that was left of it were a few solitary logs that were too hard to pull out of the ground, looking for all the world like drunken sentries, silently guarding the threshold between the village and the wilds beyond, as they swayed and creaked in the breeze.

As he trudged homeward, avoiding the larger potholes and open drains that crisscrossed the dilapidated street, he thought about the village, the only place he’d ever really known and its place in the Dragon Princess’ vast empire. Nestled high in the hills, in a forgotten corner of the land, it was hardly a bustling metropolis and in all the years he’d lived there it had shown no signs of ever becoming one. While people seldom ever left the village, no one, apart from the soldiers of the Dragon Army ever arrived. It was as if they were at the end of the line, cut off from reality, a last forsaken outpost in the realm. Even the Dragon Army garrison just over the next rise, which was the closest other habitation, was more of a dumping ground for the dregs of Ka’s forces, than a functioning military unit. Home to a shoddy rabble of thugs, murderers and hooligans who had nowhere else to go, it was a place for the army to conveniently forget those who would never otherwise shape up. Beyond the village, the hills grew steeper, quickly becoming rocky and mountainous, offering little comfort to those who strayed too far. Some of the older folk said that the village had originally been built on fairy land, but if that was the case, thought Drin, then any magic it held had been lost long ago. Others used to joke around the fireplace that somewhere high in the mountains lay the remote fairy stronghold where Gonald the Mighty had been healed a thousand years before, but Drin thought that wishful thinking at best. Mind you, it was hard to explain the fact that occasionally, when someone had wandered off the mountain paths or had been lost in a snowstorm that should surely have killed them, they turned up a few days later, safe, well and refreshed, but with no recollection of where they’d been or who had taken care of them. Drin had tried to rationalise that one, but at the end of the day, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that they’d either fallen into a hollow or found shelter from the storm, he couldn’t shake off the feeling that there were greater forces at play up there. And that was why he was going to find out for himself what lay beyond the mountains at the edge of his world. He hardly expected to find the fairy stronghold, but to his mind, anything was better than having to endure life in the village, with its endless monotony, the flesh lottery and nightly tales of failed heroic deeds. Yes, it would be the quiet life for him, Drin thought. He’d find somewhere peaceful to settle down and spend the rest of his days foraging what he could from the land, free of oppression, free of tyranny and most of all free from the cult of mindless hero worship that plagued his fellow villagers.

Reaching his hovel, a small, wooden lean-to resting against the side of another, partially demolished house, he wrestled briefly with the crude latch, before ducking his head and entering. Ah, home at last, he thought with a feeling of relief. Another night without incident. Bending down in the darkness to try and find the edge of his cot, Drin didn't notice the door slowly close behind him. It was only when it hit the door frame with a soft thump that Drin sprang upright and turned to meet a huge, hairy fist travelling towards him at great speed. The fist connected squarely with Drin's jaw, sending him spinning around like a top and knocking him out cold.

As a burly figure dragged the unconscious Drin out of his hovel by his ankles, it turned to an accomplice, silhouetted by the night sky, and jerking its head towards the lean-to, said in a gruff, disinterested tone: "Burn it down." And with that, the figure started to make its way out of the village, heading towards the hills with the limp form of Drin in tow.