

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
RICHARD A. KNAAK

LEGENDS

—†— OF THE —†—

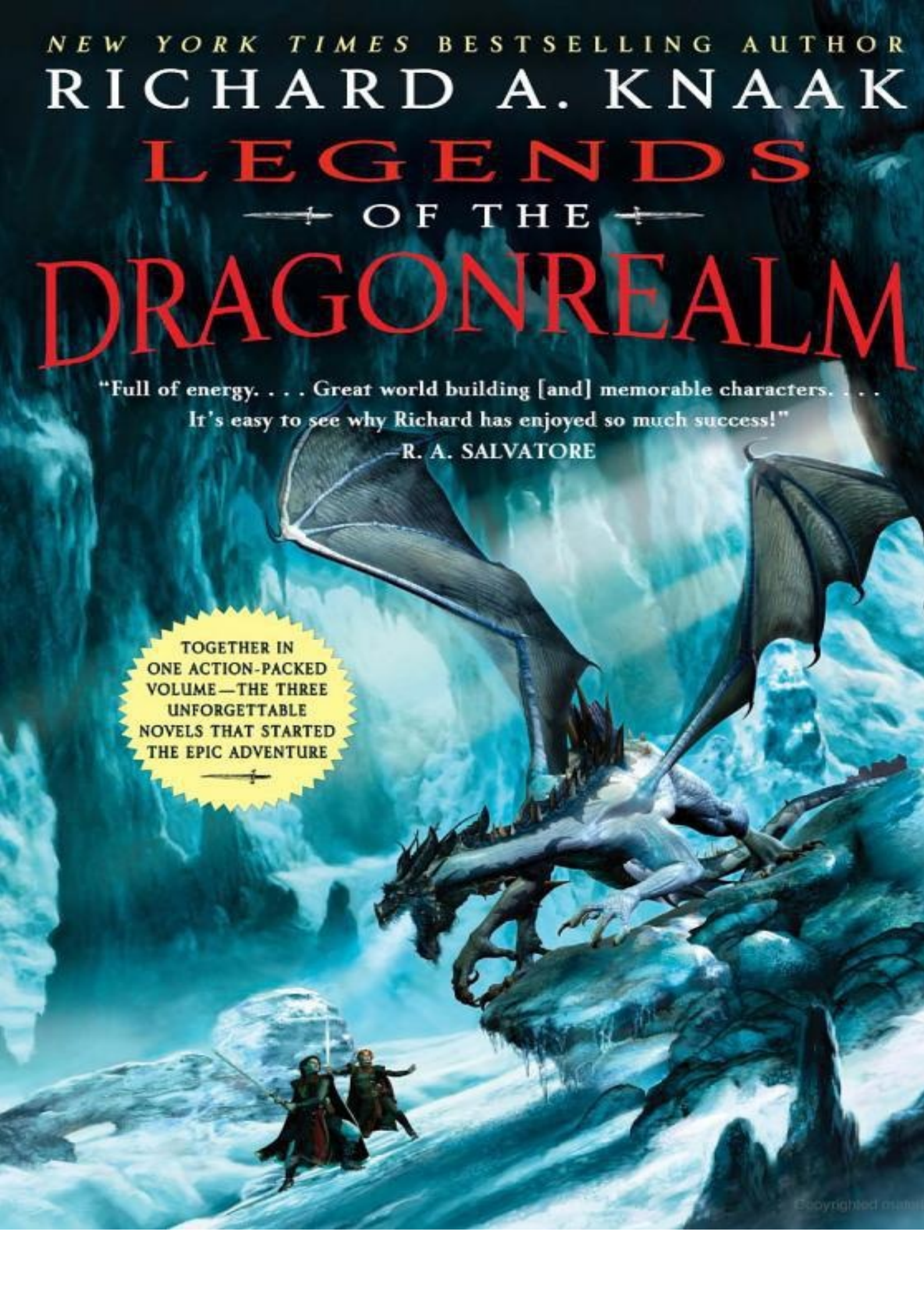
DRAGONREALM

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It's easy to see why Richard has enjoyed so much success!"

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TOGETHER IN
ONE ACTION-PACKED
VOLUME—THE THREE
UNFORGETTABLE
NOVELS THAT STARTED
THE EPIC ADVENTURE



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LEGENDS OF THE DRAGONREALM

RICHARD A. KNAAK



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*For my mother, my father, my siblings, and the rest of my family—and all those who have enjoyed the
series over the years! This is how it all really got started!*

*Special thanks also to Pat McGilligan, Brian Thomsen, Barbara Puechner, and Margaret Weis! Some
are no longer with us, but all played a part, whether they knew it or not, in the realization of the
Dragonrealm. ...*

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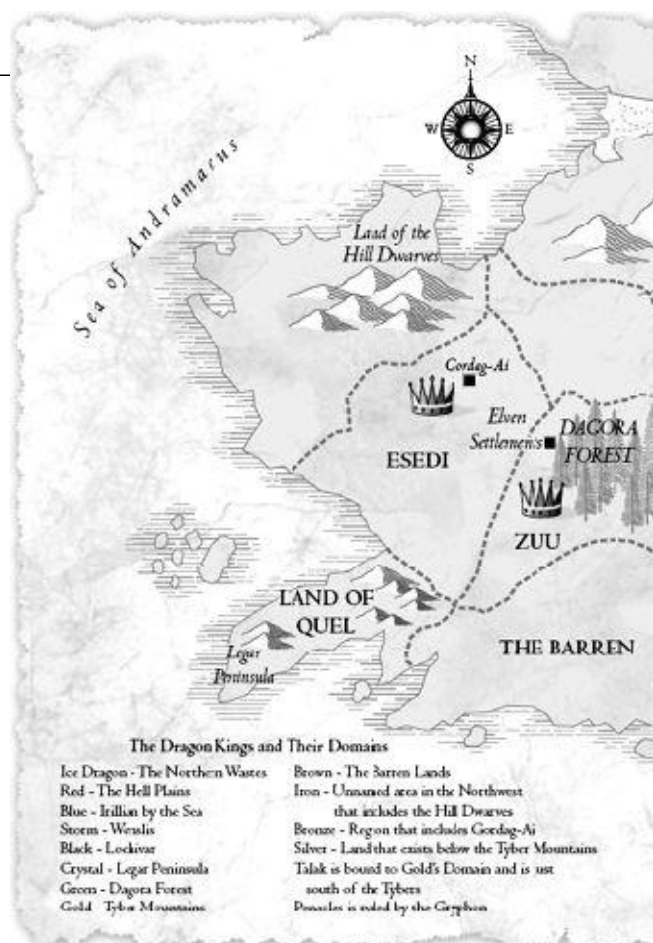
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A JOURNEY AROUND THE DRAGONREALM

THE DRAGONREALM is a place of myriad domains and fantastic creatures, and a careful traveler should know much of the land if he wishes to travel it safely. Here, then, are some of the places that you will come across. ...

The Legar Peninsula thrusts out of the southwest edge of the continent. This is where the burrowing Quel—once masters of the Dragonrealm—live. This mountainous domain is inundated with gleaming crystal formations. Here is the domain of the most reclusive of the Dragon Kings, the Crystal Dragon.

The Sea of Andramacus: The violent waters west of the Dragonrealm. Little is known of them, but legend has it that they were named for a demon. ...

Land of the Hill Dwarves: There is no true name for this region, but the hill dwarves are said to live in the eastern part of the region and the ambitious Iron Dragon rules without mercy.

Esed lies southwest of the Iron Dragon's realm. This is where the Bronze Dragon holds sway and the human kingdom of Gordag-Ai is situated.

The Kingdom of Zuu: This other human kingdom is located southwest of Esedi and deep in a valley that is bound to the edge of the vast, magical Dagora Forest, situated in the center of the continent. The people of Zuu are famed for their horses. ...

The Dagora Forest: This far-stretching forest is where most elves are said to live and where the more benevolent Green Dragon rules.

Mito Pica: A human kingdom lying east of the Dagora Forest and at the edge of the Hell Plains. Mito Pica holds a secret that will change the history of the Dragonrealm. ...

The Hell Plains: To the northeast lies the volcanic Hell Plains, ruled by the Red Dragon. Here, it is rumored, also lies the castle of the foul sorcerer Azran Bedlam. It is guarded by the Seekers, an avian race once masters, but now slaves.

The Silver Dragon rules the unnamed land to the north of the Dagora Forest. He serves also as a confidant of the Dragon Emperor, but covets his position.

The Tyber Mountains are situated north of that and include the mountain citadel of the Gold Dragon, also known as the Dragon Emperor. The mountains are riddled with deep caverns.

The Kingdom of Talak lies at the base of the Tyber Mountains. Though somewhat independent, it is supposed to show fealty to the Gold Dragon. Its ruler is Rennek IV, but his son, Melicard, is already taking much of the reins.

The Northern Wastes may be found far north of the Tyber Mountains. They are home to many great burrowing creatures and are the domain of the Ice Dragon.

The Barren Lands lie south and southeast of the Dagora Forest. Once lush, they were destroyed in a magical upheaval during the Turning War. What remains is ruled by the bitter Brown Dragon.

The Kingdom of Penacles, east of the Barren Lands, is no longer ruled by a Dragon King. Instead, during the Turning War, it was liberated by forces led by the Gryphon, a unique creature who resembles the mythic beast. He now rules, but must constantly be on guard against the Dragon King. The Serkadian River runs north to south next to Penacles.

The mist-enshrouded land of Lochivar, east of Penacles, is ruled by the Black Dragon. It is said to have dealings with the Wolf Raiders, who come from a land across the eastern sea.

Wenslis is a rain-drenched kingdom under the rule of the Storm Dragon, whose domain is north of both Penacles and Lochivar. The most vain of the Dragon Kings, the Storm Dragon thinks himself a god.

Irillian by the Sea, ruled by the Blue Dragon, is northeast of the Storm Dragon's lands. An aquatic being, the Blue Dragon is not as benevolent as his counterpart in the Dagora Forest, but sees use in humans and has allowed them to be an almost-equal part of his kingdom. He has, of recent times, had dealings with the Gryphon, much to the frustration of many of his kind.

These are but some of the fantastic places a traveler will discover. The Dragonrealm is a place of flux, and new and ancient wonders are revealing themselves. ...

FOREWORD

IN THE BEGINNING, there were dragons ... or ... maybe not. ...

Every author starts out as a reader, generally a voracious one. I was no exception. The moment I learned the written word, I devoured one story after another. I read mysteries, science fiction, humor, and more, but what most fascinated me was epic fantasy ... and what fascinated me most in epic fantasy was dragons.

It probably helped that I was heavily into dinosaurs, too—that's another story—but whatever the overall reasons, my initial story attempts had to include dragons ... but not just big, lumbering, fire-breathing beasts. Oh, those were handy, but I liked my dragons a bit different. Yes, they were intelligent and yes, they were shapeshifters—things done in the past and that will continue to be done in the future—but I didn't just seek to make their society and hierarchy different. The truth is ...

Well, that's, hopefully, for another volume.

Firedrake, the first novel, was also my first completed manuscript. I had come very close to selling it on a couple of other partials, but *Firedrake* was the one I was determined to finish completely before sending it out. In it, we are introduced to many of the essential characters of the world: Cabe Bedlam, heir to a legacy both good and evil; Gwendolyn, the Lady of the Amber; the mythic Gryphon; the Dragon Kings; and, of course, the enigmatic Shade and the impossible Darkhorse. There were hints of the mysterious history of their land, hints of a succession of ruling races and, more current, tragedies to befall both heroes and villains.

Upon a suggestion, I took *Firedrake* to a publisher about an hour and a half away. Literally walking in off the street, I asked to speak with the editor (and no, you really can't do that these days). After some surprise, the editor came out, accepted my material, and said to contact him again in two weeks. I did so and was told that while he had enjoyed *Firedrake*, in truth, the company was publishing on their own series at this time. However, because of the strength of the manuscript ... was I interested in submitting some material based on their series?

I was. I did ... and for those of you interested, this became my first foray into Dragonlance, soon leading to my *New York Times* bestselling novel, *The Legend of Huma*.

Introduced to an agent by none other than Margaret Weis, I pushed on with *Firedrake*. When I submitted it to Warner Books. I ran into the editor at a convention and he informed me that he was interested in picking up the novel and asked if I had a sequel in mind. I told him I did (I actually had three!) and he offered to pick one of them up as well.

That was *Ice Dragon*, the chilling follow-up in which Cabe and our other heroes continue to face the treacherous drake, Toma, and the fatalistic lord of the Northern Wastes. Both books were hits and I was quickly contracted for a third and fourth. The first of those, *Wolfhelm*, is contained in the omnibus and concludes a running "trilogy within the trilogy" concerning the Gryphon—part man, part creature—whose own origins lie across the eastern sea in a realm ruled by the Wolf Raiders and the god. It introduces a land at least as fantastic as that of the Dragonrealm, including some characters who would become significant as the world moved on.

I hope that you will enjoy my world, which continues to this day. Happily, the series has been published worldwide, with new readers discovering it and longtime fans returning to relive the saga. The Dragonrealm has many stories still to come and I look forward to sharing them with you. ...

All the Best,

Richard A. Knaak

LEGENDS OF THE DRAGONREALM

FIRE Drake

I

BELOW, TOWARD THE great Tyber Mountains, they came. Some in pairs, some alone. Fierce dragonhelms hid all but the eyes; eyes that, in most cases, burned bloodred in the coming darkness. Each was armored in scaled leather, but anyone testing that protection would find it stronger than the best of mail. Flowing cloaks, like wild specters of the night, made the riders appear as if they were flying and, in truth, any onlooker would have believed such were possible for these men.

If men they were.

Eleven they numbered, gradually coming together in one group. There were no words of acknowledgment or, for that matter, the simple nod of a head. They were known to each other, and they had traveled this way countless times for countless years. Sometimes their numbers were different, but the path had always been the same. Though each counted the others as his brethren, feuding was common among them. They thus rode silently for the entire journey, ahead of them the Tyber Mountains, stretching to the heavens, beckoning.

At long last, they reached the first of the mountains. Here appeared to be an end to their travels. No path wound through the mountains; rather, the road ended abruptly at the base of one of the largest of the leviathans. Nevertheless, the riders made no attempt to slow. They seemed intent on charging into the very earth itself. The mounts did not question their masters, but merely pursued their course as they had always done.

As if bowing to their defiance, the mountain seemed to melt and shift. The impregnable barrier of nature disappeared, and a vast path now led through. The riders, ignoring this fantastic act, continued on at their hellish pace. The horses snorted smoke as they passed the barrier, but showed no sign of fatigue. This journey was nothing to their kind.

Through twisting and turning road they moved. Icy trails and treacherous ravines did not slow the group. Again, though things not of man's world hid and watched, the riders were not hindered. Few creatures would be so foolish as to confront them, especially knowing the travelers' nature.

Quickly looming up was the great sentinel of the Tyber Mountains, Kivan Grath. Few humans had ever seen it up close, and fewer still had ever attempted to climb it. None had ever returned. Here the path led. Here the riders came. They slowed their animals as they neared the great Seeker of Gods, its name translated. At its base, they stopped and dismounted. They had reached their goal.

Buried in the mountain was a great gate of bronze that seemed as ageless as the land. It towered over the onlookers, and on the face were carvings ancient and undecipherable. One of the riders walked up to it. Beneath his helm were eyes like frost. What little of his face that was visible was also white. Grimly, he raised his left arm, fist clenched, and pointed it at the gate. With a groan, the huge, bronze door slowly opened. The pale warrior returned to his companions. The riders led their mounts inside.

Torches provided the only light inside the cave. Much of the cavern was natural, but the work of expanding it would have left even the hill dwarves overwhelmed. It made little difference to the riders; they had long stopped paying attention to their surroundings. Even the sentries, only shadows but ever present, were ignored.

Something dark and scaled and only barely humanoid crawled up to the riders, its clawed, misshaped hand outstretched. Each of the cloaked travelers turned his horse over to the servant.

The riders entered the main cavern.

Like some resplendent but ancient temple, the citadel of their host gave forth a feeling of tremendous power. Effigies of human and inhuman form stood here and there. All were long dead, and even history had forgotten their kind. Here, at last, did the riders show some measure of respect. Each knelt, one at a time, before the great figure seated before them. When all had done so, they formed a half circle, with their host before them.

The serpentine neck arched. Gleaming eyes surveyed the group. A bloodred tongue lashed out momentarily in satisfaction, the tremendous, membraned wings stretching out in full glory. Despite the dim light, the gold sheen of the dragon's scaled body completed a picture of pure majesty befitting the king of his kind. Yet there was just the slightest note of some-thing akin to insecurity. Whether the others noted it or not was hidden in their own thoughts.

In a voice that was a hiss, yet caused the very room itself to vibrate slightly, the Gold Dragon spoke.

“Welcome, brethren! Welcome and make this home yours!”

Far spread apart, each of the riders became blurred, as if they had become nothing more than an illusion. Yet they did not disappear. Rather, they grew; their bodies became like quicksilver, their shapes twisting. Wings and tails sprouted, and arms and legs became clawed, leathery appendages. The helms melted into the faces of their wearers until they had, in actuality, become the faces. Mouths spread back into maws, rows of long, sharp teeth glistening in the dim light. All traces of humanity disappeared in the space of a minute.

The Council of the Dragon Kings came to order.

The Gold Dragon nodded. As emperor, King of Kings, he was pleased to see that the others had followed his command so readily. He spoke again, and this time smoke issued out as he did.

“I am pleased that you could make it. I feared that some of you might have let emotions overrule you.” He stared momentarily at the Black Dragon, monarch of the sinister and deadly Gray Mists.

The Black Dragon did not speak, but his eyes blazed.

The Emperor of the Dragon Kings turned his attention to the nearest of his brethren. The Blue Dragon, more sea serpent than land creature, bowed his head in respect.

“The council has been called due to the request of the master of Irillian by the Sea. He notes strange happenings and wishes to discover if such events exist in the lands of his brothers. Speak.”

Sleeker than most of his kind, the Blue Dragon resembled a race animal, his movements fluid, and his voice was appropriate for a being who spent much of his life in the seas of the east. The smell of salt and fish filled the room as he spoke. A dusty, tan dragon, Brown, wrinkled his nose. He did not share his brother's fondness for the sea.

“My liege. Brethren.” He studied all around him, especially the Black Dragon. “In the years gone by, my domain has been very placid. The humans have remained quiet and my clans have had good hatchings.”

This time there was a grunt from the Brown Dragon, who was lord of the Barren Lands in the southwest. Since the end of the wars with the Dragon Masters, he had seen his clans decrease. Most claimed it was the work of the self-styled Masters themselves, but no one was sure what sorcery the warlocks had used in their attempt to defeat the Kings. They had caused the Barren Lands, but whether they had caused the loss of fertility in the Brown clans was open to speculation in private. Brown was still the fiercest of fighters.

The master of Irillian by the Sea ignored the slight outburst and continued. “Recently, however, things have changed. There is unrest—no, that implies too much. There is ...a feeling. That is all I can call it. Not just among the humans. It appears to affect others, even the wyverns and minor drakes.”

“Ha!”

The remark was followed by a wave of bone-numbing cold. A slight frost settled wherever the Ice

Dragon's breath had reached. The Gold Dragon stared disapprovingly at him. Gaunt to the point of being cadaverous, the king of the Northern Wastes laughed again. Of all the dragons, he was one of the least seen and the least loved.

"You are becoming an old dame, brother! Subjects always become unsettled. One merely places a restraining claw on a few and crushes such thoughts."

"Speaks the monarch of a land more empty than that of Brown."

"Speaks the monarch who knows how to rule!" A blizzard threatened to erupt from within the Ice Dragon.

"Silence!"

The thundering roar of the Gold Dragon overwhelmed all else. The Ice Dragon fell back, his snow-colored eyes averted from the brilliance of his emperor. When the King of Kings became angered, his body glowed.

"Such infighting nearly brought calamity on us once! Have you forgotten that so soon?"

All held their heads low, save for the Black Dragon. On his massive mouth was just the barest hint of pleasure. The Gold Dragon looked at him sharply but did not reprimand. In this instance, the king of the Gray Mists was justified.

Drawing himself to his full height, the Emperor of Dragons towered above the others. "For nearly five human years did we fight that war—and nearly faced defeat! Our brother Brown still feels the aftereffects as he watches his clans dwindle! His problem is the most evident; yet we all have scared from the Dragon Masters!"

"The Dragon Masters are dead! Nathan Bedlam was the last, and he has long since perished," bellowed the Red Dragon, who ruled the volcanic lands called the Hell Plains.

"Taking the Purple King with him!" Black could restrain himself no more. His eyes became like beacons in the night.

The emperor nodded. "Yes, taking our brother with him. Bedlam was the last and deadliest of the Masters. With his final act, he crippled us. Penacles is the city of knowledge, and Purple was its master, he who planned our strategy." The last was said almost reluctantly, for Gold did not care to remind his brothers who had really led in those days.

"And now his lands have been usurped by the Gryphon! How much longer must we wait before we strike? Generations of man have since come and gone!" Black shook his head in anger.

"There is no successor. You know the covenant. Thirteen Kingdoms, thirteen kings. Five and twenty dukedoms, five and twenty dukes. No one must break the covenant ..." For now, the emperor added to himself.

"While we wait for a successor, Lord Gryphon plots. Remember, he was known to the Masters."

"His time will come. Perhaps soon."

Black eyed his lord warily. "What does that mean?"

"As custom, I've taken Purple's dams as mine. The first hatchings produced only minor drakes, most of whom were put to death, of course. This hatching, however, looks more promising."

The other kings leaned forward. Hatchings were of the utmost importance. A few bad hatchings could threaten any of their clans with extinction.

"Only a handful of the clutch turned out to be minor drake eggs. The majority were firedrakes. However, four eggs contain the speckled band!"

"Four!" The single word was like a cry of exultation. The speckled band, this was the sign of King. Such eggs were to be guarded, for successors of Dragon Kings were extremely rare.

"It will be weeks before hatching takes place. The dam guards against unruly minor drakes, not to mention scavengers of all forms. If luck holds, they will all break free."

Black smiled, and a dragon's smile was something sinister. "Then will we crush this Lord

Gryphon!”

“Mayhap.”

All turned to he who would dampen their rejoicing. Once again, the master of Irillian by the Sea stared at them, his eyes challenging each of them to speak. When none would protest, he shook his maned head sadly.

“None of you will listen! Must I speak again? Do not misunderstand me. This news brings great happiness to me. Perhaps my fears are unjustified. Nevertheless, I must speak, or I will always have regrets.”

“Then speak and be done with it! I grow weary of this prattling on!”

Ignoring Black, the king of the Eastern Seas continued. “I have felt such a stirring of uneasiness only once before. That last time, it foreshadowed the coming of the Dragon Masters.”

There was a hiss of anger—and, perhaps, fear—from more than one of the great lords.

Black was now smiling. “In truth, brother Blue, I must apologize for myself. You have brought up the very point that I wished to discuss.”

The emperor shook his head. “This land is old. The Dragon Kings have ruled for ages, but our reign is young compared to that of some of the earlier races. Even now, traces of ancient powers turn up. This stirring of our subjects’ feelings may very well be magical in nature. Still,” he paused and studied the cavern, “we have tried to weed out those who might possess some sort of attunement to those ancient ways. I know of few humans now living who are a threat.”

“There is one that may threaten us.” The words were quiet but firm. Without looking, all knew that Black had spoken out again.

“And who may that be?”

The Dweller of the Gray Mists spread his wings in confidence. The audience was his. “We know his family well. Very well. He is young, untrained, but his name is Cabe Bedlam.”

As one, the Dragon Kings, even Gold, backed slightly, as if just bitten. “Bedlam!” was whispered by more than one voice.

The emperor fairly shrieked. “Why have we not known of this human? Where is this hatchling of a demon-warlock?”

“In the lands now held by the Gryphon. Nathan Bedlam placed the child, who is his grandson, Mito Pica. Since the region is known for the spawning of warlocks and their like, I have sometimes sent spies forth. It was one of them who discovered the human.”

Red growled. “You crossed two borders at least, brother! I wonder how many spies you have.”

“We all have our ears and eyes. Besides, this human had to be watched!”

“Why did you not have him killed?” the Green Dragon asked. “This is most unlike you, Black. When have you become hesitant in pursuing your goals?”

Bowing his head subserviently to the emperor, Black replied, “I would not do so without permission from my lord.”

Gold snorted. “There is a first for everything, apparently.”

“Do I have your permission?”

“No.”

There was silence.

“With the hatchlings only a short time away, I will not permit a conflict that may draw the Gryphon in against us. He is cunning; he knows the importance we place on the speckled-band eggs. His agent could cause us harm in that respect. As long as the Bedlam whelp remains where he is and knows not his danger, we will leave him alone.”

“If we wait much longer, this youngling could take up the mantle of his accursed ancestor!”

“Nevertheless, we must wait. When the hatchlings are strong enough, this last of the Bedlams will

die.”

He settled back. “This council is over.”

The emperor leaned back and closed his eyes as if to sleep, pointedly ignoring his brethren from this point on. Wordlessly, the Dragon Kings spread themselves apart. Their bodies quivered and shrank. The great reptilian faces pulled away until they were once again dragonhelms covering near-inhuman faces. Wings shriveled and tails ceased to exist. Forelegs became arms while the hind ones straightened.

When all was done, the riders saluted their lord and departed from the chamber. Gold did not watch them leave.

The dark thing that had taken the reins of each horse waited as the travelers took their mounts, and then shambled back into the vast, eternal night of the caves.

Out of the bronze gate the Dragon Kings rode. Some in pairs, others single, all following the old path through the mountains. A wyvern, just waking, accidentally stuck its head out in their path, and sighting the riders, pulled itself to one side and cowered. It did not move again until they were long by.

At the end of the Tyber Mountains, the group split apart, each one going his separate way, knowing that mortal men would pay little attention to a single rider. Those who dared impede them would only be leaping into death.

A single rider, heading to the south, slowed as his fellows disappeared from sight. Ahead of him was a small grove of trees, and it was here he finally halted. Staring into the darkness, he settled down to wait.

His wait was short. Within minutes, he was joined by another of the Dragon Kings. Wordlessly, they acknowledged one another’s presence. There was no friendship in their actions; they merely had a common goal and sought to accomplish it through the easiest means possible.

The newcomer pulled a great sword from its sheath and held it out, point first, to the other. His companion reached forward and placed a gauntleted hand on the tip. His eyes glowed brightly and power emanated from him. It flowed through his arm, through his hand, and finally into the weapon itself.

When they were finished, the sword glowed and pulsed. Slowly, the light dimmed, as if the power were being absorbed by the object itself. After a moment, the sword had returned to its former state, save for a slight vibrating. The other rider replaced it into the sheath.

The two stared at each other, communication taking place on a level far different from those of men. They nodded. What was to be done was necessary. Then the newcomer kicked his mount and rode off. He was not headed in the direction of his kingdom; rather, his destination appeared to be south.

The remaining rider watched until his comrade was out of sight. His gaze turned momentarily to the overwhelming mountain range and to Kivan Grath in particular. Then, turning away, he rode off in silence.

The floodgates had been opened.

II

WHERE’S MY ALE?”

The Wyvern’s Head Tavern was known for its diversity of customers, some human, many not. One such nonhuman was the ogre that now banged down his meaty fist, breaking off a good portion of the table. His demeanor matched his face—cruel and ugly.

His eyes sought a black-haired human in his twenties who even now was hurriedly filling a mug with ale and cursing the slowness with which it poured from the spigot. To the ogre, his features were as ugly and incomplete as any other human's, but by human standards, they were regular. His face was not the face of heroes, but the strong chin, slightly turned nose, and attentive eyes gave him a rough sort of handsomeness.

Customers standing nearby formed an unintentional barrier that hid him from the thirsty creature's sight, but the human knew it was only a matter of time before the ogre came searching for him.

Cabe rushed forward, nervous, but forced to confront the ogre because he was a serving man of the tavern. Quickly, he dropped the heavy mug on the table and almost blanched when a drop nearly hit the ogre in the face. He waited for his rather dull life to flash before him.

The creature eyed him murderously, but decided the ale was more important. Tossing a coin to Cabe, the ogre picked up the mug and drank with a gusto that would have outdone most men. Cabe made a quick retreat to the kitchen.

"Cabe! Brought Deidra a present, did you?" A deft, slender hand relieved him of the coin and a well-endowed form wrapped itself around his body. Deidra gave him a long, moist kiss and then artfully deposited the coin into her blouse, a piece of clothing that did very little to conceal her generous attributes.

She flung back dirty-blond hair and smiled as she saw him staring at her ample chest. "Like a view do you? Maybe later." It was always later for Cabe, never now.

Deidra turned, wiggled her backside, and carried a tray out into the tavern. Cabe watched until she was out of sight and then remembered the coin he had lost. It might've been worth it—later on anyway.

He knew that Deidra liked men with money, but she still seemed attracted to him—somewhat. Admittedly, he was not ugly, and while he was not the stuff of heroes, he was still capable of handling himself in a fight ...providing that he stayed long enough. For some reason, Cabe almost always backed away if a fight seemed close. That was why he was working in a tavern and not making his way in the world, like his father, who was a huntsman for the King of Mito Pica. Although Cabe had been useless on the hunts, his father had never seemed too upset about it. He even seemed pleased when his son told him that he had managed to find work at a two-bit tavern and inn. Rather odd behavior for a warrior, but Cabe loved him.

He pushed back a lock of black hair, knowing that somewhere under his touch was a wisp of silver that he constantly kept covered or colored. Silver streaks were supposed to be the sign of warlocks and necromancers. Cabe did not want to be killed by a mob just because he had hair like a sorcerer. The trouble was, it appeared to be spreading.

"Cabe! Get yourself out here, basilisk dung!"

The summons by his employer was one that Cabe would have obeyed even if he had not been employed here. Cyrus was a mountain of a man, and beside him, even the ogre looked small.

He rushed out. "Yes, Cyrus?"

The owner, who looked more like a bear than a man, pointed to a table far away in a dark corner. "I think I saw a customer back there! See what he's up to and if he plans on buying something!"

Cabe made his way to the spot Cyrus had pointed out, slipping around the various tables and customers. It was strangely dim, but he could see that no one was there. What had Cyrus—

He blinked and looked again. There *was* someone there! How he had failed to see him the first time was beyond him. Hastily, he moved to the table.

A cloak. That was all the man, if it was a man, appeared to be. A hand, the left one, slipped into sight and placed a coin on the table, and from beneath the hood of the cloak, a strong but unreal voice spoke.

“An ale. No food.”

~~Cabe stood for a moment and then realized that he should be getting the customer's order. With a mumbled apology, he made his way back toward the bar.~~

The ale was handed to him by Cyrus almost immediately, but as Cabe started back through the crowd, he was caught up by a large hand.

The ogre dragged him over and stuffed a coin into Cabe's hand. “When you're done there, bring me another ale! Keep it in the tankard this time!”

Reaching the table, he placed the ale down carefully. As he did so, the gloved hand reached out and grabbed him by the wrist.

“Sit, Cabe.”

Cabe tried to loosen the grip, but it was as if the hand were stiffened in death and would never let go. Resignedly, he sat down on the opposite end of the table. As he did so, the hand released him.

He tried to look at the face under the hood. Either the light of the tavern had become dimmer or there was no face beneath the cowl. Cabe jerked back in fear. What sort of man had no face? Worse yet, what would such a creature want with someone as insignificant as he? As if amused, the stranger turned his head for better inspection.

But there was a face. It was slightly out of focus and always in half shadow. He caught a glimpse of silver hair amidst a field of brown.

Warlock!

“Who are you?” It was all he could get out.

“You may call me Simon. This time.”

“This time?” The words made no sense to Cabe.

“You are very much in danger, Cabe Bedlam.”

“Danger? What—Bedlam? I'm not—”

“Cabe Bedlam. Can you deny it?”

He started to speak, and then thought. Regardless of what he thought, Cabe could not make himself deny the bizarre accusations of this warlock. No one had ever called him by that name, nor had he even thought of it. ... But for some reason, it sounded right.

The face of the stranger sported a small smile. Maybe. It was so hard to tell. “You cannot deny it, Good.”

“But my father—”

“—is your stepfather. He has served his purpose. He knew what had to be done.”

“What do you want of me? I mean— Oh, no!” Cabe remembered what sort of tales surrounded the name. It was a name of legend ... certainly not one suited for a serving man in a tavern. Cabe was not what he did not want to be, a warlock. He shook his head frantically, trying to force the reality away in much the same way he tried to deny the silver streak in his hair.

“Yes, because your name is Bedlam.”

Cabe wrenched himself away from the table. “But I'm not a warlock! Get away from me!” Quickly realizing his outburst, Cabe looked around the tavern. The customers were drinking as if nothing had happened. How could they have missed that shouting, even with the noise of the crowd? He turned back to the warlock—

—only to find that no one was there.

Frowning, he searched under the table, half expecting the shadowy form to be there. There was nothing ... except a coin, perhaps left by the warlock. Cabe was uncertain about taking money from a necromancer, but finally decided that the coin appeared normal enough. Besides, he needed it.

With one final, uncertain glance, he hurried away. The crowd was barely noticeable to him. Only the words of the warlock demanded his attention. He was a Bedlam. He could not deny it, even though

he had never known it before.

~~New thoughts issued forth. A warlock was a person of power. Why had his ability not manifested itself? Who was this stranger who called himself Simon—"this time"?~~

Cabe broke out of his reverie as someone grabbed him by the shirt. He found himself staring at the grotesque features of the ogre, its hot, fetid breath wrapping over his face in waves. Cabe felt like throwing up.

"Where's my ale?"

The ale. Cabe had taken the ogre's coin and had forgotten the drink.

"Try to run off with my coin, eh? Thought I'd be too drunk to notice, did you?" The creature held his other meaty fist and prepared to swing. "You need a lesson!"

Cabe shut his eyes and prayed the blow would not break his jaw. He waited, expecting it to fall any second.

And waited.

And waited.

Opening one eye a slight crack—and then both wide—Cabe saw the crumpled body of his attacker. The ogre's companion, a heavysset thug, was trying to revive him by throwing water on his face.

Those in the crowd who had seen the incident appeared awed.

"Did you see?"

"I never saw a man move so fast!"

"One punch! Igrim never went down from just one punch!"

"Igrim never went down before!"

The thug helped a still-groggy ogre out the door. Cabe had a dark suspicion that he had not seen the last of the creature. Most likely, he and his friend would be waiting in some dark alley.

Some customers congratulated him while others merely watched warily. Cyrus, far in back, was nodding in what could only be described as confused satisfaction. Cabe wondered exactly what it was he had done. As far as he was concerned, he had been motionless.

Gradually, the crowd returned to normal. Cabe went about his duties, but his mind was on other things. Occasionally, he would turn his attention to the table in the shadows, and once or twice he thought he saw something, but when he looked again, the spot was empty. Oddly enough, none of the new customers chose to sit there.

Dark was falling, and with it came the first signs of storm. Most of the customers had disappeared for some reason or another.

He did not hear the rider enter, but he could feel his presence. So could those around him. The silence that came so suddenly spoke much for the power of this newcomer. Cabe dared a glance and immediately wished he hadn't, for that short glimpse revealed to him an armored figure whose very presence caused those customers near the door to scurry out in a hurry. Each step taken by the newcomer was arrogant, threatening in its precision. The warrior, whoever he was, scanned the interior of the inn as he walked toward the backmost booths, and every being who had not yet left secretly prayed that they were not what the silent visitor sought.

As the armored figure sat down, most of the remaining customers departed. The eyes of the armored figure watched each and every person leave and then began to study the various employees of the inn. Cabe tried to find other things to do, but knew he could not avoid the newcomer for long. Cyrus came over and whispered to him.

"Quickly, man! Serve him whatever he wishes, and don't, for Hirack's sake, ask for payment!" Hirack gave him a shove in the general direction of the stranger. Cyrus only called upon Hirack, the local go-between of merchants, when he was extremely nervous.

What, Cabe wondered, had happened to the peaceful existence he'd once maintained? Slowly, he

made his way through the now-empty tavern and finally stopped in front of the stranger's table.

The helmeted head turned to him. With a start, Caba realized that the man's eyes were bright red. Little of his face was visible, and the skin seemed clay-brown and as dry as parchment.

"C-can I get you something, sir?"

The eyes appraised him. Caba now noticed the sinister dragonhelm the traveler was wearing.

"I want none of your poor ale." The voice was nearly little more than a hiss.

"Food?"

The unblinking eyes continued to appraise him. Caba shuddered, remembering he had just asked the stranger wanted food. He had not intended to offer himself in that respect.

"Your name is Caba."

"Yes."

"So simple." The words were not intended for Caba, but were merely a comment.

"I am going to leave now. When I leave, you will come with me. It is of the utmost importance."

"But I can't leave! My employer—"

The figure paid little attention to this. "He will not prevent you. Go and ask him. I will wait outside."

Caba backed away as the other stood up. Even considering the elaborate dragonhelm, the stranger still towered over him. There was little doubt in Caba's mind that this was one of the Dragon Kings. He shuddered. When a Dragon King summoned, even the highest of men obeyed.

The rider left without another word. Caba hurried back to the others, most of whom had hidden in the kitchen.

"What happened? What does he want?" Cyrus no longer acted like the bear Caba remembered. Fear covered him.

"He's waiting outside. He wants me."

More than one pair of eyes widened. Cyrus looked at him closely. Caba might as well have been a leper. "You? What have you done to incur the wrath of the Dragon Kings? It has to be something horrible for one of their own to come amongst us!"

The others, including Deidra, backed away. Cyrus continued to rant and rave. "Go! Quickly! Go before he chooses to destroy my tavern! I'll not protect you!"

Caba tried to defend himself. "I've done nothing! Someone! Tell Lord Gryphon's agent here!"

One of the cooks, with his arm around Deidra, picked up a cleaver and waved it in his direction. "We're too far away from Penacles for the lion-bird's protection! Get out before we throw you out!"

Reluctantly, Caba backed out of the kitchen. The sound of thunder warned of the storm coming. He grabbed a cloak and reluctantly made his way to the front entrance. There was no chance of escape. If he attempted to hide or run away, the Dragon King would surely have him hunted down. Few would try to protect him.

It was raining outside. Caba put the hood of his cloak up over his head.

A horse snorted. Caba turned and found himself gazing up at the rider. The mount was a fierce, unnatural animal. Beside it, nervous, was a smaller, normal horse. It was the reins of this mount that were thrown to him.

"We ride! Hurry!"

Caba climbed up. The Dragon King waited until he was settled and then started off. The serving man hurried after him, half wondering why he did so and knowing what might happen if he did not.

High above, the storm screamed unnaturally.

IN THE CITY of Penacles, in the midst of its bazaar, was the tent of Bhyram the fruit peddler. It was a stormy night, and Bhyram was cursing because he was having to put all of his merchandise in the tent.

by himself. With every sack, he cursed his assistant, a young man with great thirst.

An odd voice came to him from outside. "How much for two srevos?"

Srevos were sweet fruits that usually brought four coppers. Bhyram automatically said eight.

There was a clink of coins on the ground. The merchant turned around and rushed outside the tent. It was raining hard, but he could tell that none of his fruit had been stolen.

He could also tell that no one could have been nearby. Muttering an old saying to ward off sorcery, he cautiously picked up the eight coppers.

After all, he was still a businessman.

ON AND ON they rode. The dark rider seemed untroubled by the storm, and Cabe had long since given up fighting it. Even when the rain ceased to fall, neither noticed it.

They were heading west, and in the deep recesses of his mind, Cabe vaguely recalled that these were the lands ruled by the Brown Dragon, the aptly named Barren Lands. Dry mud and occasional weeds made up most of the Barren Lands. It was not the most hospitable of places ...and they were heading into the heart of it.

Reason told Cabe to run. Reason told Cabe that his end was surely in sight. Reason, however, could not overcome the fear that Cabe felt when he dared a glance at his unholy companion. Fear—another something else.

A duty for him to perform?

It seemed so muddled in his head. He frowned. His head had not felt straight ever since the ...since the ...

He could not think about that time. Something was blocking all such thoughts, protecting him.

Protecting him from the Dragon King.

They were now well into the Barren Lands. Despite the heavy rain, the ground beneath the mounts' hooves was dry and brittle. Such was the curse, for no matter how much water poured into the Barren Lands, none of it was absorbed. Instead, it just disappeared. Cabe knew that the Dragon Masters had been responsible for this.

They had seen. They had known. The firedrakes of Brown were the deadliest of fighters. Only because of this waste had their power been checked—but to no purpose. The Dragon Kings still ruled and the war-locks and witches who had fought against them were no more.

Cabe looked up. The clouds above the Barren Lands were breaking up; yet the storm still raged elsewhere. Even the giver of rain dared not stay long. If there was a land cursed, it was this one.

"Stop."

The hissing voice of the Dragon King pierced through his mind. The helmed figure was staring at the ground as if searching for something. After a moment, he dismounted and ordered Cabe to do the same.

"Wait here."

The lord of firedrakes stalked off into the wastes. Cabe waited, knowing that flight was foolish. Perhaps, he thought, the Dragon King merely wished him to perform some task. Somehow, though, that did not ring true. The Kings had more than enough servants capable of handling anything Cabe could do.

It was not long before the other returned. His hands were empty. With great purpose, he walked up to Cabe and, with one sweeping motion, pushed him to the ground. The great sword that had hung from its scabbard was now out and pointing at the hapless human.

The Dragon King was a figure terrible to behold. The eyes burned—yes, burned—bright, fiery red. The dragonhelm seemed to smile the smile of a predator, and Cabe realized that he was seeing the true face behind the human form. In the pale light, the scales of the Dragon King's armor glistened brown.

The sword, held in his left hand, did not shine. Rather, it seemed as black as an abyss.

~~The hiss that was not quite a voice reached Cabe's ears. "These were once my lands. They were not barren. Once, they were the most bountiful of grasslands and forests." He glared at the shivering human with total hate. "Until the time of the Dragon Masters!"~~

The point of the sword brushed back Cabe's hood. The eyes of the King widened. "A warlock! The final proof!"

The silver streak in his hair was evidently visible. Cabe wished that he really had all those powers that were supposed to be at the beck and call of a sorcerer. At least he would have stood a chance of escaping. Why had he come with him? All along, some part of him knew that the Dragon King meant to kill him.

The dark figure raised the sword as if to swing. "By the blood of fire-drakes killed with his own hand, Nathan Bedlam destroyed the life of my clans! By the blood of his own kin, I will bring that life back!" The edge of the sword came screaming down at Cabe.

The point of a gleaming shaft came through the front of the Dragon King's chest, the blade of his sword stopping short of Cabe's head.

Stunned by the sight, the human could only watch as the reptilian monarch stared at the arrow that had pierced his body completely. A look of incomprehension passed over what little was visible of his face. He touched the point gingerly.

And fell forward.

Cabe only barely managed to roll out of the path of the Dragon King's body. The corpse hit the ground with a dull thud. The black blade slipped from the grasp of the limp left hand and clattered to one side.

Slowly, unbelievably, Cabe stood up. No one came forth to claim the shaft. No one. He stared at his feet, and the enormity of the situation hit him for the first time. He was alone in the midst of the Barren Lands, and at his feet was the lord of those lands.

Dead.

A TRIO OF fire-drake dams, in human forms, scratched and clawed at an emerald-colored piece of amber in which stood a human form. They had scratched and clawed at it in one form or another for several decades, but had never made so much as a single mark in it.

A FURRED HAND moved an ivory piece on a game board, and leaned back, looking for a comment from the opposing player whose mastery of the game made each move a lesson.

"Brown appears to be in a weak position," was all his companion had to say.

CABE GINGERLY PICKED up the dark blade and hung it in his belt. It made him feel only slightly better to be armed. He debated on what to do with the body. If he left it where it was, the dead Dragon King's subjects might consider this an act of disgrace and hunt him down. If he buried it, he might not give it the proper ceremonies. Again, the subjects might seek him out.

He left it where it was.

There was no sign of the Dragon King's mount. That had seemingly disappeared at some moment after its owner's death. Cabe's own mount was still where he had left it. He climbed on and considered his next action.

He could not return to his village. That would be suicidal. Where, then? The city of Zuu? No, Zuu was too well controlled by the Green Dragon and was too close to the Barren Lands. Though the master of the Dagora Forest rarely interfered, it was just too much of a chance to take.

Penacles? The Gryphon ruled there. He had taken over the City of Knowledge after the death of the

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