

# The Dragon Bound Quartet

The First Book

in the

Dragon Bound

a.k.a Dra@g©n B©und a.k.a

a.k.a **The D-B©und Adventuring Series** a.k.a

starring

**Ruby FireHaven**

and so on and so forth

as conceived, written, and enchanted by

**Celli**

the

**Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod**

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and in the Earthen Vortex

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*Commemorative Internet Edition*

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*Happy Birthday to the LeeZards*

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Book I  
The Book of Grt

# 1 #

Hazen Crots?

Ruby was dejected. She lay motionless on the couch. Her long red hair sprawled about her as she stared at the ceiling.

How could it be so hard to see a dragon up close? They were all over the sky. She could see long columns of them going back and forth from the magic reserve at the base of Mt. Doom to wherever it was they went. Why couldn't she find one on the ground?

For three long months Ruby had ridden her bike everywhere she could think of in search of a dragon, ever since she had gone on a class field trip to the Mt. Doom Museum. The museum was located at the edge of the Zone, and while there she had seen one of the harvester dragons that the local magic utility -- the MDM -- used to collect magic. Only twenty feet and a pane of glass had separated her from a dragon! Since then, Ruby had been on a quest to get even closer to one of those dragons: to watch it, befriend, maybe even pet it. Who knows? But she hadn't even seen a dragon on the ground much less been able to approach it. It didn't make any sense. What was she doing wrong?

Ruby lay back, stared at the ceiling, and thought.

Roger the Troll: it wasn't just a name, it was a description. Roger was a Troll. He was also Ruby's mother's boyfriend, a recent immigrant from the Zone, and he was standing in the middle of the living room, next to Ruby, eating right out of the pan. It was some slop he'd just cooked up. No doubt it was one of his famous recipes that his friends from the Under Belly Society were always raving about. To Ruby and her mom, Rachel, it was just slop.

When Rachel, Ruby's mom, saw Roger standing in the living room, she told him to get, "Back in the kitchen, Roger." He was notoriously messy. He was a Troll. What did she expect?

Roger let himself be pushed a little towards the kitchen before he set his three hundred pound frame square and asked, "What's with Ruby?"

"She's been like that all afternoon. Just let her be."

Yeah, just let me be, Ruby thought.

But that wasn't the way Trolls were. Ruby had had some experience with Trolls lately. More than she cared for really. The great and noble Under Belly Society met at their house every Tuesday evening. Roger, his Troll buddies, and a stray Other or two would cook up a great batch of stinking, uneatable muck. They even gave the dishes stupid names like Wall Paper Paste Surprise or Solomon's Stew. Solomon's Stew, now there was a good one. It smelled awful and filled the house with smoke, but Roger and his buddies drooled over it. "Just like mom used to make," they'd say and then reminiscent about the other side as they spent the night singing Troll dirges.

Trust me, Ruby thought, listening to homesick Trolls singing dirges is no way to end a day.

Roger interrupted Ruby's train of thought. He moved her legs and plopped down next to her on the couch. The whole couch shook when he did this.

"You want some Surprise," he offered, as he held out a spoon of gloop.

“Ew, no,” Ruby responded a little annoyed. That was another thing about Trolls: highly social, gregarious to a fault. She echoed her mother’s words from just a moment ago. “Just let me be.” Maybe the repetition would get through his thick Troll skull.

“No can do.” He shook his head slowly and some Liquid Barf Surprise or whatever he was calling it tonight fell on her jeans. Ruby stared at it in annoyance.

Roger scraped a finger across her leg and swiped most of the goop up. “I can’t leave until we put a smile on that face of yours.”

Great. “Mom!” Ruby cried in desperation.

“Don’t worry honey. I’ll clean your jeans,” her mom said as she grabbed Roger’s pot. “You can stay and talk or you can eat your Surprise in the kitchen.”

That’s right, Ruby thought, talking and eating at the same time were too much for Trolls, like that old joke about walking and chewing gum. To her horror Roger didn’t follow her mom or his gruel into the kitchen. Instead he asked, “So, what’s up? Anything ole’ Roger can help you with?”

You could move out, Ruby thought. You could hop on that piece of crap you call a motorcycle. You know the one Roger, the one that only works half the time, the one you’ve got some piece of broken crap from sitting on the kitchen table right now. You could hop on that bike and just go back into the Zone.

Rachel smacked Roger’s hand softly. He’d been idly scraping Ruby’s jeans and licking whatever goop he found. “What have I told you? On this side we only eat food off of our own clothes.”

She was living in a zoo, a freaking zoo. What was it with her mom and these weirdoes? She had to admit in the scheme of things, Roger for all his mess and blustering size was so much better than her mother’s previous boyfriend Jim, a hyperactive werewolf. The guy never slept, and talk about vain, he was unbelievable. Given the options, Roger really wasn’t that bad.

“Stop it Roger.” Rachel was busy scolding him again. He was bouncing on the couch.

“It’s fun. Try it Ruby.”

She had no choice. When Roger bounced, the whole room bounced. Ruby sat up and got Roger to stop moving for a second. She knew she was being mean, but she couldn’t help it. “Say Roger, why did you come over anyhow? I mean you don’t really like the food. You have to take those magical supplement pills, and...”

“Be nice Ruby.” Her mother cut her off before she could go any further.

It didn’t faze Roger at all. He was a terminally happy Troll. He gave her a broad grin. “They gave me a bridge. Me, Roger Swampgas, I’m only 232 years old and I’ve already got my own bridge.”

“Honey.” Trolls were known for stretching the truth. This was another thing, one of many, Rachel was trying to teach Roger. He had a hard time with the concept.

“It’s practically mine.” He was on a roll. Bridges, tolls, tariffs, he lived for this. “I’m the only Other on the whole crew. Sure today I’m only collecting tolls, but in another twenty years I’ll have seniority on everyone. They won’t have any choice.”

“Twenty years is a long time.” Her mother was already forty seven. “I’m not going to age as well as you do.”

Roger stroked Rachel’s hair. “We’ll build a little cottage right at the foot of the bridge. You can grow turlops and bake gunga snaps.”

Silly, silly Roger. “What about the Hazen Crots?” Ruby asked sarcastically. She flapped her eyes in mockery of her mother. Hey this was fun. “You always said we’d have Hazen Crots?”

“Did I?” Roger looked around a little worriedly. He didn’t know what those things were, but he was pretty sure they were expensive. Everything was expensive, but Hazen Crots? They sounded really expensive. That was another thing he didn’t like

about this side. To be sure those magic supplement pills sucked. They cost a fortune and if he forgot, which he always did, he felt like he was going to die, but that whole money thing was all new to him. No one paid rent on the other side. You just lived under your bridge, stayed with your uncle, or whatever. But over here, everything cost money. Where was he going to find the money for Hazen Crots? He'd have to put in a couple extra hours of overtime.

"She's just messing with you," Rachel said as she rubbed his ears. "Don't worry about the Hazen Crots."

"I don't know," Ruby said. She wasn't going to let this Hazen Crots thing go. She liked seeing ole' Roger spinning. "A promise is a promise. I've been looking forward to those Hazen Crots and now you're saying my hopes, my dreams, the shining star on which..."

"That's enough young lady."

Roger was in a bad way. He was sweating. "I... I guess I'll be going off to work early today."

Geez. What was with this guy? "It's OK Roger." Ruby let him off the hook. Did he really believe he had promised her Hazen Crots? What the heck were they anyhow? "I was only kidding." She paused. She had a smile on her face. The big lug. "I was just playing Roger."

Roger looked relieved.

"Your plan worked," Ruby said. "See I'm all happy and stuff. I owe it all to you and Hazen Crots."

Ruby gave Roger a hug. He returned the favor by giving her a giant bear hug. Troll hug, they should have called them Troll hugs, Ruby thought. Oh, and the smell.

"No offense Roger, but it's time for a bath."

"See, I told you Roger," her mother piped in.

"But I just had one"

"When?"

"Um?"

“Um’s not the deal honey. Twice a day, that’s what we agreed on,” her mom said leading him away.

Ruby didn’t even care that she’d have to listen to their giggles and splashes for the next hour. Maybe Roger would work out. She called after them down the hall, “You should try soaking in Hazen Crots Roger. They’ll make the bath last longer.”

“Hazen Crots?”

“She’s only kidding. Tell him you’re kidding honey.”

“Hazen Crots?” It was the last thing Ruby heard before the water started running.

Well, she wasn’t any closer to a dragon, but at least she was in a good mood. She had Roger to thank for that. Roger and Hazen Crots. She’d have to find out what they were, but her thoughts didn’t stay on Hazen Crots for long. Soon she was thinking about the dragons filling the sky and wondering why she couldn’t see any on the ground.

# 2 #

Hear Ye! Hear Ye!

“This session of The Under Belly Society is now in session,” Roger boomed in a loud voice.

It was all a bit pretentious to Ruby. She sat in a corner of the room with her mother. The society meetings had always been lightly attended. Ruby had attributed it to the food. Smoke was pouring out of open windows and obscuring the faces of the attendees. She knew the two trolls: Bruce Bogdoom who worked at the dock, she guessed some day he would own that, just like someday Roger would own the bridge, and Chad Trailwarden, who was already a self made Troll. He owned his own street sweeping machine. By all rights, Chad could convene the meetings if he wanted. He was the only one present who had been Made, but he deferred to Roger. It was Roger’s house. It was only polite.

There was also a new attendee tonight, someone, scratch that, something, Ruby had not seen before. He had introduced himself

as, “Fearlock, Clarence Fearlock.” He looked like a man made out of melted wax. He gave her the creeps. He had sensed her discomfort. “Oh, sorry about that. I’m a Boogey Man. It’s what we do.”

Clarence, the Boogey Man, was weird and creepy. He had a bizarre interest in their coat closet. “This really is nice Roger,” he had commented while standing in the closet. “Oh, if you two ever need a renter, let me know.”

Rachel had given Roger a look. You had to hand it to Roger, for a Troll he was really empathetic. “Don’t worry honey. He’s just a Boogey Man. Fear is his thing. Inside he’s a pussy cat.”

“A Boogey Man?” Ruby couldn’t help herself.

“Oh, yeah. I’d be happy to scare the pants off you if you’d like.” He paused. “Oh, sorry, figure of speech. Anyway, want to be scared?”

“No thanks,” Ruby assured him.

“Oh, OK. Anyway, if you ever need a renter, let me know. You’d never get robbed. Not that I can guarantee that or anything, but I have an unblemished record.”

“Clarence works security,” Roger explained.

“Oh, I don’t like to brag, but I’m good. I could give you a free sample, no charge.” Clarence the Boogey Man was nothing if not eager.

“Maybe later,” Roger said as he directed him inside.

“Oh, OK. Maybe later.”

Roger continued opening the meeting. It always started the same way.

“We are the under belly of society. We are the dregs, the scum, the lowest wretches.” Roger beamed as he said this. Clearly Trolls had a different sense of propriety. “Without us, society would not function. We do the dirty work.”

Yeah. Yeah. Ruby thought. Just get on with it. Soon he would ask if there was any old business and no there wouldn’t be any. Then he would ask if there was any new business and no



there wouldn't be any of that either. There had never been any business at any of the meetings. They were just an ill disguised excuse to get together, tell a few jokes, and sing a song or two. She was anxious for them to be done. The pizza she and her mom were going to share was getting cold. Mushrooms and pepperoni, she could hardly wait.

Roger continued with his opening speech. "We protect The Dragon where he is most vulnerable."

Dragon? Wait! Hold on there. Had he always said that? They protected The Dragon. What dragon? Not the flying constructs that harvested the magic? They weren't real dragons. Besides, they didn't need any protecting.

"We are the Under Belly Society. We will not quit till our job is done."

They all cheered.

"We're scum."

"The lowest."

"You can't get any lower."

Then in unison they shouted, "We are the Under Belly Society," and simultaneously four glasses of orange juice were raised.

Ruby and her mother joined them and together they drank, "To the Under Belly Society."

"Oh, Oh, and to The Dragon," Clarence added.

The Dragon, he'd said it again. How come this had never stuck out before? Ruby tried to remember previous meetings. Had they ever mentioned a dragon before? Maybe they had? Had she always been too busy smelling the pizza to pay attention? She didn't know.

"OK. Any old business?" Roger asked.

"Nope," Chad Trailwarden said proudly.

"Any new business?"

"You said dragon." Ruby had spoken before she had really thought about it. They all looked at her. "You said dragon." She

looked at Clarence and stifled a shudder. “And you, Clarence, Mr. Fearlock, you toasted to The Dragon.”

“Oh? Did I? Sorry, I get carried away.” He looked to Roger for guidance. “It won’t happen again.”

“If that’s all then?” Roger knew what came next, Uncle Bogwurst’s famous Dried Gunk Casserole. He could hardly wait.

“No!” Maybe this was the information she was looking for. Ruby wasn’t going to let this moment go. “Week after week you guys have these meetings. What are they about? What is the Under Belly Society?”

Roger flustered. “We’re the Under Belly Society, a fraternal organization for those who service the underbelly of society.”

“And protect The Dragon,” Ruby added.

“Oh, we do that.” Clarence looked around uneasily. “To The Dragon.” He lifted his drink and they all followed.

“To The Dragon,” Ruby said her eyes narrowed with suspicion on the Boogie Man. “You can’t possibly be talking about those magic collecting constructs that I see in the sky. Is there a real dragon somewhere? Tell me about this dragon.”

Ruby held the Boogey Man’s gaze. She could feel herself start to shake as she looked at his melting visage. Was he going to fly across the room and rip her face off? Why was she challenging him? Why not corner Roger later?

The Boogey Man couldn’t take her stare. He looked away. He looked at Roger. “Did I say something wrong? Oh? Oh?”

Roger shrugged. It wasn’t a secret. It couldn’t be a secret. They started every meeting vowing to protect The Dragon. The Dragon wasn’t a secret. He owned Mt. Doom and everything on it. Everybody knew that. Not a thing happened on Mt. Doom that The Dragon didn’t know about.

“Everybody knows about The Dragon,” Roger said.

“Not me,” Ruby responded. “Tell me about this dragon.”

“Oh, what is there to say?” Clarence took over the explanation. “He’s a dragon. He owns Mt. Doom and all that’s on

it. No one in the zone lives, breathes, or dies without his OK.” He paused reconsidering. “Oh, well, I mean, I suppose many die without his OK. How could he stop that? But that living and breathing thing. He’s all over that.”

“Why haven’t I ever heard of him before?” Ruby hadn’t. There was no mention of a dragon living at the heart of Mt. Doom. There was no mention in the papers, on TV, or even at the Mt. Doom Museum. Though now that she thought about it, that wasn’t so surprising if he controlled everything.

“Dear, they mention The Dragon before every meeting.” It was her mom.

“Do they? What does The Dragon mean? What color is he? Where does he go? What does he do?”

“No one knows,” Roger beamed brightly. “We’ve been protecting him for so long... How long has it been Chad?”

“Thousands of years. The last time anyone saw The Dragon was 1,200 years ago.”

“That’s crazy. How do you know he’s even there?”

“Oh, you know,” the Boogey Man answered her. “Even if no one has seen him, his agents are everywhere.”

“Yeah? Maybe he’s dead.”

“Oh, no.” He paused again. This Clarence guy, Ruby thought, he had a lot of info, but you had to wait for him to get it out. “Oh, Oh, besides, there’s all those harvesters flying around. Only a dragon would make the harvesters look like mini dragons.”

“You mean The Dragon owns the magic utility... the MDM?”

“Oh, I believe so. It only makes sense. The Dragon owns Mt. Doom. There’s no way he’d let anyone else collect the magic around it. It wouldn’t be good security.”

“But, if no one has seen him in... What was it?”

“1,200 years,” Chad helpfully supplied.

“If no one has seen him in 1,200 years, how do you know he’s still alive? Or, even ever was?”

“Oh, I know.” Clarence looked around nervously. “My dad saw him during that last flight.”

“Your dad? 1,200 years ago?”

The Boogey Man knocked nervously on the table. “Oh, The Dragon is real. Don’t you doubt it. Those harvester constructs are just the tip of the iceberg. If The Dragon had died, we’d all know about it. Dragons don’t just die. Someone has to kill them...”

“And, that’s where the Under Belly Society comes in,” Roger said breaking Clarence off. “We been doing our job for thousands of years. And if we have anything to say about it, we’ll be doing it for thousands more.”

“But The Dragon? How do you see The Dragon?”

“Oh, no. Dragons that get seen get killed.” Clarence looked at Roger. “Doesn’t she read or go to school?”

Ruby ignored this insult. “I want to meet The Dragon. How do you meet him?”

“Don’t say such silly things dear.” It was her mother. “Let sleeping dragons lie. Isn’t that what they say?” She looked to Roger for support.

“Really, we don’t know anything else. I mean you’ve seen us at these meetings. Until this moment I’d forgotten the sacred vow each of us had taken when we joined the Under Belly Society to protect The Dragon. None of us has ever even seen The Dragon.”

“I don’t even think it’s possible,” Bruce said. It was the first thing he had said all night. “Though, there’s got to be a way.”

“No there doesn’t,” Rachel said. “I’m declaring this meeting over. It’s Casserole time.”

That was all it took for the Trolls to stampede towards the kitchen. Ruby couldn’t blame them. After all, it was Uncle Bogwurst’s famous Dried Gunk Casserole. Who could resist that?

But there had to be a way, Ruby thought, didn’t there? A dragon wouldn’t just seal itself up in a rocky tomb and go to sleep for a thousand years would it? Maybe a hundred years, but not a thousand.

“Just put it out of your mind young lady,” her mother said as she offered her a slice of pizza. “Leave the nice sleeping dragon alone.”

“Oh, Oh,” without looking up Ruby knew it was Clarence. “I don’t mean to be rude, but pizza sounds so, Oh, so much better than Gunk Casserole.”

“Help yourself,” Rachel said as she pushed the box toward the Boogie Man and scooted herself just a fraction of an inch in the opposite direction.

This was working out well, Ruby thought. She had wanted to ask the Boogie Man a few more questions, but it would be difficult with her mom right there. It was strange she thought, how one’s goals and ambitions changed in just the twinkling of an eye. A few moments ago, all she had wanted was to get closer to one of the energy gathering mini dragons. Now she wanted to get close to one so it would lead it her to The Dragon. The Dragon. What did he look like? What did he sound like? Why had he been hiding for 1,200 years? No one sleeps that long. Not even a dragon. No matter how old he is.

A volcano though? A volcano could go dormant for a long time.

“The Dragon and Mt. Doom, the volcano, are they related?” Ruby had forgotten her mother was right there. She could see her mother’s frown.

“Oh, Oh, I don’t think so, not in the sense that The Dragon is a product of volcanic activity,” the Boogie Man said cheerfully. He was happy to be the resident expert. The truth was he knew very little, just the tiniest bit more than those around him. “The Dragon just lives on the volcano, probably feeds on the energy. Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t live right at the source.”

“OK! That’s enough!” Ruby’s mother tried to halt the conversation.

“Oh, I’m sorry ma’am. I thought it might be reassuring, Oh, put a damper on a young adventurous spirit. It’s likely when The Dragon dies, if he ever dies, Mt. Doom will explode, all that free magic released...”

Rachel grabbed another piece of pizza and thrust it at the Boogie Man. “Be quiet. We are not going to talk about The Dragon any more tonight.”

This wasn’t going well, Ruby thought. She needed more information. She needed her mother to leave her alone with the Boogie Man for a while. She laughed out loud at the thought. She wanted to be alone with a Boogie Man. How funny was that?

“Oh good, you know a joke.” It was Clarence.

Roger joined the conversation from across the room. “I heard a great joke at work today.” Ruby and Rachel groaned. Troll humor, it wasn’t really humor at all. It had the same relation to comedy that Troll food had with something edible. “How do you get a chicken to cross the road?”

“I don’t know ole’ Swampgas.” It was Bruce Bogdoom. “How do you get a chicken to cross the road?”

“You throw it.”

The trolls burst into raucous laughter.

“Oh, for Troll humor that’s not so bad.”

“You think that’s good. Wait till you hear this one.” It was Bruce Bogdoom again. “What’s black and white and goes round and round?”

The evening had been going so well. Ruby excused herself. She didn’t want to find out if it was a spinning zebra, a newspaper caught in the wind, or a penguin in a revolving door.

There was only so much a girl could take.

# 3 #

The Aye’s have It

Ruby regretted leaving the party early all week long. She thought there must be some way to get more information out of the Boogie Man.

Whenever she saw Roger she made a point of telling him, “Clarence was nice,” or, “I bet it’s hard for a Boogie Man to make friends.”

Roger may have been a Troll, but he wasn’t born yesterday. Finally he asked her, “Why are you so interested in The Dragon?”

It was a good question, but how did you answer it? Why do Leprechauns like gold? Why do Werewolves howl at the moon? They just did. It was in her blood. It always had been.

“I just am.”

“Tell you what. I know he’ll come if I ask him, so I will.” Good ole’ Roger. “But your mother will be watching you like a hawk.” He chuckled. “Like a protective mother hawk looking after its only child.”

She could see his mind turning. “Work on it Roger. There’s a joke in there somewhere.”

“You think?” he glowed. “I always wanted to make up my own joke, but they seem so complicated.”

“I know they’re always so surprising, like a penguin in a revolving door.”

“Yeah, that was a good one.”

True to his word, Roger invited Clarence to come to the next meeting and when Tuesday night rolled around he was there.

Great, Ruby thought, now was show time. She had thought about this meeting all week long. Finally she had come to the conclusion, there was no way to do this discreetly. She was going to have to be bold. She had been trying to get up close to one of those magical construct harvester dragons for months and she hadn’t even seen one on the ground yet, but all that was about to change. Now she had a plan. The illustrious Under Belly Society was going to help her.

“To The Dragon,” roared the members of the Under Belly Society as they raised their glasses of orange juice and clinked them together in a hearty cheer. It was as close to a repeat of the opening ceremony from last week as you could get. The same pepperoni and mushroom pizza from Mr. Steven’s Pizza Express was slowly getting cold and Roger was solemnly asking the same questions he always asked. “Any old business?”

Chad Trailwarden responded just as solemnly, “No.”

That was Ruby’s cue. “Ah, actually there is old business.”

“Huh?” That was Chad.

“Remember,” Ruby said. “Last week it was discovered that The Dragon,” she let the name sink in. “The Dragon is missing. He’s gone. He hasn’t been seen in 1,200 years.”

“RUBY! Let It Go,” her mother commanded, but sometimes you had to throw caution to the wind and risk being grounded for the rest of your natural born life.

“He’s disappeared. We have to find out what happened to him.”

“No we don’t.” That was her mom again. “We need to go to our room and think about...”

Ruby stood up. She didn’t look at her mom. She looked at the Trolls. “Swampgas, Trailwarden, Bogdoom, and you Fearlock, don’t think I’m not including you.”

“Oh, Oh, why me?” For a Boogie Man, he sure looked frightened and unsure of himself.

“Ruby! You’re embarrassing me.”

She faced her mother. “You’ll probably ground me like forever, but before you do I get to say my peace.”

“Well then, choose your words carefully. This may be the last time you see any friends for a long, long time.”

“Fair enough.”

She had the floor. They were all listening to her. She hoped beyond hope that her gambit would work. She started over, “Swampgas, Trailwarden, Bogdoom, and Fearlock.” She



addressed each one of them individually. “Each of you are members of the Under Belly Society. You have all sworn an oath to protect The Dragon, but you don’t even know if he’s alive or dead. How can you fulfill your oath if you don’t know if The Dragon is alive?”

“Oh, we’d know it if he had died.”

“But do you know if he’s about to die?”

They didn’t have an answer for that. “I put it to you that if a fourteen year old girl with the help of three Trolls, a Boogie Man, and a reluctant mother, can surprise The Dragon, or even meet The Dragon without his expressed help and consent, then the security measures the Under Belly Society has put in place over the past 1,200 years are sorely lacking.”

They still didn’t get it. They were Trolls.

“To make sure the Under Belly Society is living up to its pledge we need to test The Dragon’s defenses. We need to start planning our top secret undercover mission, Operation Dragon Quest.”

Well that was it. They’d either go for it, honor their pledge, or she’d spend the next four years in solitary confinement.

Her mother spoke next. “Well that was very dramatic young lady.” The Trolls were looking at her blank faced. The Boogie Man was fidgeting with a coaster. Weren’t they going to say anything? Ruby pleaded to Roger with her eyes. The big lug, come on, help me.

“Uh,” Roger started. He cast his eyes down avoiding Rachel’s gaze. He’d pay for this. “Uh, she’s got a point fellas.”

Bruce was in. He didn’t need convincing. “This could be fun. We can test his defenses and if we find a hole we can fix it.”

“Right. Exactly.”

Her mom wasn’t going to give in that easily. “This is my house, and if you think...”

“She right,” Chad said.

“A voice of reason.” Rachel let her breath out in relief.

“Well first of all it is her house and we appreciate your letting us hold our meeting here Mrs. Swampgas.”

Rachel’s eyes fluttered. She was always bugging Roger to get married, but he kept saying he was too young. It was smarter to wait till they were older, when they were sure a marriage would last.

“And it’s not going to work.”

“Amen to that,” her mother agreed.

“Like I was saying,” Chad continued. “It’s not going to work if we call it Operation Dragon Quest.”

“What?”

Ruby almost felt sorry for her mom. Were they really going to go for it?

“Maybe something like operation DQ.”

“Oh, Oh, I like their Ice Cream.”

“Yeah, Ice Cream Quest.”

“Or, Operation Double Scoop,” Ruby suggested.

“Oh, that’s good.”

“Then it’s agreed,” Roger said in a big bellowing voice. “All in favor of Operation Double Scoop say Aye.”

There were five quick Aye’s and then all eyes turned to look at Ruby’s mom. “What the heck. You’re right. He’s a dragon. How could you possibly get through his defenses?”

They had gone for it. Hip, Hip, Hooray!

Let’s hear it for the Trolls.

# 4 #

## Operation Double Scoop

They might have voted to pursue Operation Double Scoop, but they were still Trolls. They had reasoned, “We can work on this and eat, right?” That had been fine, but once they decided they could sing, tell jokes, and work on Operation Double Scoop all at the same time, they had quickly forgotten the project.

Ruby knew the first step in meeting The Dragon was to meet one of the harvester dragons. With any luck the harvester dragon would lead her right to The Dragon. As far as Ruby could tell the local magic utility, better known as the MDM, didn't sell much of the magic it collected. Roger's enhancement pills came from out of state. He had seen the trucks come in over the toll bridge. So, if the MDM wasn't selling very much of the magic it collected and Mt. Doom as a whole was importing magic, Ruby figured the reason was because The Dragon and his operations consumed a lot of magic.

From these observations Ruby had developed a straightforward plan. Find a harvester dragon and follow it to The Dragon. She was pretty much where she had started, except now she had help, if you wanted to call three singing Trolls and a reluctant mother help.

Perhaps more importantly, she now had the tacit, if grudging, approval from her mom to pump the Boogie Man for all he knew.

"Oh, Oh, I've never seen a harvester on the ground."

"You can see them?" Ruby was surprised. None of the Trolls, her mom, or any of the other kids at school could see the harvesters. Ruby was special in her ability to see magic. It was a rare gift. It marked her as a natural sorceress. Ruby continued, "I thought the harvesters were comprised of pure magic."

"Oh, they are pure magic."

"But how then?"

"Oh, I wouldn't be much use as a security guard if a little magic could get past me."

"Still, that doesn't get us any closer to a harvester. If you've never seen one on the ground and I've never seen one on the ground..." She let the thought trail off as she remembered. "Well, I did see one on the ground once. It was during my field trip to the Mt. Doom Museum."

"Then there it is. We go to the museum."

“No.” Ruby was a little surprised by her own decision. “We need to get one off by itself.”

“Oh... Oh, then.... have you ever tried following them in the sky?”

“I can see them in the sky, and if they’re off in the distance I can see them dive to the ground and return to the sky, but they never seem to do it whenever I get close.”

“Oh, it sounds like a rainbow.”

“You can chase one of those forever.” It was Chad. “I spent an entire afternoon once in my truck trying to get to the end. You know, for the pot of gold, but I never got there.”

Bruce joined the conversation. “Hey, have you ever seen one of those brochures to take a cruise to the end of the world. There’s supposed to be a great rainbow there at the edge, where the water falls off.”

“Oh, I always wanted to do that.”

It was like pulling teeth, Ruby thought, but she was patient and waited until the conversation had died down again.

“So,” she said to the Boogie Man. It was weird how quickly she had gotten used to him, melting face and all. She had thought about it some more. “When I was at the museum, I saw a series of harvester dragons who looked like they were feeding off of a small magical seep or spring. I don’t know what you’d call it. Every couple of minutes a harvester would come back to the same place and grab a piece of magic that was floating out of the ground.” She let that sink in. “If we know where a source of magic is, we could wait by it.”

“Oh, but not on Mt. Doom or by the museum...”

“Or by anything else really. All by itself would be best.”

Clarence gave this some thought. “Oh, Oh, Roger.” The Boogie Man was excited. “Oh, Swampgas.”

Great, another joke, Ruby thought.

Roger ambled over. He had an extra pitcher of juice in his hand. “Need a refill there Clarence?”

“Oh, thanks.”

“About the harvesters,” Ruby didn’t want the conversation to get sidetracked again.

“Oh, right. You sometimes take walks under the bridge, right Roger?”

“It’s all part of the job. Safety First, that’s my motto.” Roger lost himself in fond memories of walking under the bridge. He spoke softly to himself as if in a dream. “The Lake Providence Bridge spans Courtney’s Gulch. It connects Russell and Providence counties serving as a major artery for...” He broke off sheepishly. He had been reciting the words on the commemoration plaque. “It’s almost 350’ high,” he said proudly.

“Oh, it’s a fine, fine bridge.”

“The best.” Then after a brief pause he added, “It’s almost mine.”

Focus gentlemen, focus. “And this has what to do with the harvester dragons?”

Back to that Roger thought. He was about to wander off when the Boogie Man stopped him. “Oh, no Roger, don’t go. We need you.”

Roger stopped as a big a smile flashed across his face. He liked to be needed.

“After you go for walks under the bridge, you feel really good and, Oh, reinvigorated. You’ve told me this.”

“Bridges are my life. I can walk under that bridge for hours. I take my lunch down there. Sometimes I take a nap.”

“Oh, and sometimes you forget to take your magic supplement pills.”

“Yep. Bridges are good for the soul.”

Ruby was putting it all together. “So, if Roger takes walks under the bridge and doesn’t need his magic supplement pills afterwards,” she was excited now, “then that means there is a source of magic under the bridge.”

“Oh, I think so.”

Ruby was so happy, she leaned over and gave Clarence a hug.

“Oh, thank you.” Did he have tears in his eyes? “Oh, Oh, this might be the first time anyone has ever hugged a Boogie Man.”

# 5 #

### Bridge over Troubled Waters

The next evening after school Ruby, Rachel, Roger, and Clarence all piled into Clarence’s rusted out car and drove to Roger’s bridge for a picnic.

“This is great,” Roger beamed. “I don’t know why we never did this before.”

Rachel loved Roger, even if he was a Troll, and was glad to see him so happy. “We can scout out the location for our cottage.”

“OK. You two do that. Clarence and me will look for a magic seep.”

“Be careful,” her mom called after her. “If you run into trouble just call.”

“And I’ll come running,” Roger finished for her. “But this place is safe,” he assured her. “I come here every day.”

Ruby and Clarence found what they were looking for, down a gully and a little upstream of the bridge. In a spot with a perfect view of White Water Creek, there was a small outcropping of rocks and a little water spring.

“Oh, this... this is the place,” Clarence said. Sure enough, as they were watching, a little wisp of magic like a satin ribbon with the consistency of smoke drifted up out of the bubbling water.

They watched the wisp of magic drift into the air. Once it was out of arm’s reach a dragon, one of the mini harvester dragons swooped down out of nowhere. It grabbed the wisp of magic in its mouth and then it disappeared back into the forest canopy above.

“That was quick,” Ruby commented.

“Oh, did you see where it went?”

“No.”

They called out to Roger and Rachel and they all had a picnic around the spring. Rachel had packed a picnic of left over pizza, potato salad, grape juice, and for Roger a stinky smelly thing called a Blitz Sandwich. Ruby didn't want to think about what was in it. It looked like dried bugs.

As they ate Ruby and Clarence watched the spring. Every few minutes another magical wisp of smoky ribbon about two feet long curled into the air. Inevitably a harvester dragon swooped down and grabbed it.

Ruby had studied the dragons as best as she could. Their bodies looked like they were about a yard long with tails and wings to match, but it was hard to judge these things. They were always in motion and never stayed around. They were a mixture of brown, amber, and golden tones. They didn't make any sound and they swooped down from a random direction and flew off into another random direction.

“Can you see where they are going?” Ruby asked.

“Oh, Oh, they just disappear into the trees. Oh, I don't even think they reappear on the other side. I think they just disappear.”

“That's going to make following them hard.”

This was good news to Rachel's ears. I mean it was one thing to encourage your daughter as she pursued her interests and hobbies, but it was quite another to pretend you supported her on a wild dragon hunt. She relaxed more as she lay in Roger's arms.

“Right over there,” Roger said. “We'll build our cottage right over there. See those boulders up in the gorge. We can use those and build a nice solid rock cottage.”

They all lay down after lunch. When they did that Ruby noticed the dragons swooped in even lower.

“Did you notice that Clarence?”

“What now?” her mother asked. Neither she nor Roger could see the dragons and relied on Ruby’s and Clarence’s reports.

“When we’re lying down, the dragons swoop in closer.” She got up and stood over the spring. “Let’s see how close they come to me.”

A few minutes later a dragon swooped down.

“Just out of reach,” Ruby exclaimed triumphantly. “Come on, let’s all move away a little.”

They packed up the picnic and sat down on a group of boulders a few yards off. Another wisp of magic was drifting up. When it had just cleared the water, a dragon came and carried it away.

“Oh, it didn’t even get an inch off the ground.”

“Watch me,” Ruby said as she walked back to the magic spring. “I bet the next dragon comes in just above my arms.” She held her arms up.

Her mother sat up. “Be careful.”

Sure enough, the next dragon came in and snatched the wisp of magic just as it drifted above Ruby’s outstretched hands.

“That’s it!” Ruby exclaimed.

“What’s it?” her mother asked. She had no idea what Ruby was talking about.

“Isn’t that what the MDM has rights to collect, free magic.” Ruby had it figured out. “As long as the magic is within someone else’s reach, it’s not ‘free’ yet.” This was true, but not a complete picture. The MDM magical utility had the right to collect any and all free magic within 100 miles of Mt. Doom that was also outside of the magic reserve zone, otherwise known as the zone. It was easy to tell where the zone began and ended if you had magical sight. A solid wall of harvester dragons patrolled the border. No magic made it more than a few feet into the collection area before a harvester dragon grabbed it out of the sky.

Ruby thought she had figured it out, but there was one little detail that still bugged her.



“How often do you take magic pills?”

Roger answered, “Four times a day.”

“And I made sure he took one right before we left this afternoon.” Rachel was talking from where she lay in Roger’s arms. She gazed up goggled eyed at the big lug. “We know how grouchy you get when you don’t have your pill.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Every hour on the hour. I’m about due,” the Boogie Man said as he reached into the picnic basket. He had wanted to try a new liquid based magic supplement formula. He’d only been out of the zone for a few months, and the supplement pills weren’t agreeing with him.

“Stop!” Ruby ordered him.

Everyone froze. “Is it a dragon?” Her mom was instantly on high alert.

“No.” Ruby looked at Rachel. “Sorry mom. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Clarence, wait a minute on your supplement. First come over here and see if this magic works for you.”

“Oh, that would be nice,” Clarence agreed as he quickly ambled over. “I do miss the way magic felt back on Mt. Doom.” He sat by the spring and was taking off his shoes when the next magic wisp started to rise. The wisp of magic was only halfway out of the ground when it started veering towards him and seeped into his body. “Oh, I say. That does feel good.”

He stayed next to the pool and the next few wisps of magic sought him out. He was like a magic magnet, Ruby thought. She noticed that no dragons came.

The fourth wisp of magic ignored Clarence. As soon as it had drifted up out of arms reach, a dragon appeared and snatched it away.

“Oh, I do feel invigorated,” Clarence said. I haven’t felt this alive in decades.

As they rode back home in Clarence’s car, Ruby stared out the window and recalled some of what she knew about Mt. Doom Magic: Harvesting and Containment, otherwise known as the

MDM. Before the borders had dropped six years ago, she knew the magical utility hadn't existed. It hadn't come into being until shortly thereafter when the government had decided to sell off all of the free floating magic. Some people called this the Great Magic Giveaway, because in a sense this is what the government had done, but that hadn't been the intent. The government had been concerned about Devils, Demons, and even dragons entering the country and causing havoc. If there was no magic available in the mundane world to sustain magical creatures, it was thought this would keep the Others at bay, but it had not. The Others simply brought a supply of magic with them, like Roger did with his magic supplement pills. Still, ridding the mundane world of free floating magic had been the intent and the country had been split up into magic collection zones. These zones had been auctioned off to the highest bidders and the MDM had won the bid around Mt. Russell, better known these days as Mt. Doom. Ruby knew this from watching the news. Ruby had also heard endless debates on TV about collection zones, the impact stripping an area of magic had on native creatures, and of course, why the borders had fallen in the first place. No one knew the answer to that last question, but concern about native creatures had led the EPA to include strict rules concerning magical reserves, protection zones, and a requirement that all magic be 'free and clear of natural users' before it was collected. That explained why the harvester dragons waited until the magic had floated above Ruby's head. Until that had happened it was ambiguous as to whether Ruby was going to use the magic or not, but once it was out of reach, it was fair game. Ruby thought about this. The intent had been to protect any indigenous magical creatures or effects that might be around like Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster, but Ruby was glad the rule applied to herself as well... aspiring young dragon hunting sorceress that she was.

# 6 #

First Contact

Ruby had finally seen dragons up close. Sure they were harvester dragons, insubstantial, invisible to most eyes, but still they were dragons. Ruby was restless all week long. Her mom had said she could tag along with Roger and go to work with him on Saturday.

“Sure. It’ll be fun to have you along,” Roger had said. “We can have a picnic again on my lunch break.”

It wasn’t too much of a surprise when Saturday rolled around and Roger’s motorcycle wasn’t working.

“You can take the bus then,” Rachael suggested.

That would be great. Ruby didn’t really want to ride on the back of Roger’s bike, and OK, he was nice and she had started to like him, but that didn’t mean he didn’t still smell. Besides, motorcycles were dangerous and if she took the bus once, she’d know the way. Then she could go whenever she wanted to on her own.

Ruby said goodbye to Roger when the bus let them off by the tollbooth and slowly made her way down the rocky, tree lined slope. Before long, Ruby found herself back by the magical spring where the wisps of magical ribbons floated into the sky. Or, at least, floated a couple of feet into the sky before a dragon came along and harvested them.

She wondered what it used to be like before the MDM. What was the world like before all the free flowing magic was harvested? Would this have been a nice grove for a Unicorn? Even with the EPA restrictions, would a Unicorn stand a chance against the harvester dragons? They were so fast and efficient, a Unicorn would have to stay right by the spring to get any magic.

Ruby’s mind came back to the present as she watched a dragon swoop down and land. The harvester dragons didn’t ever land. This one was different. As if in confirmation of Ruby’s thought, the dragon took out a handkerchief, dipped it in the water,

and wiped his forehead with it. His? Before she had thought about it, Ruby had started referring to this dragon as a him. As he wiped his forehead, he casually watched a wisp of magic waft up. She watched as he grabbed it. It looked like the effort killed him. He sat down, put his feet in the spring, and splashed around.

He was gorgeous. Soo cute. He let his wings flutter slowly back and forth enjoying a ray of sunshine. He was making grunting noises like he was talking to himself.

“Grt, Grt, Grt.... Grt. Grt-Grt-Grt.” He made a face, stuck out his tongue, and blew a raspberry with his long forked tongue, “Pflllfl.” He threw his hand out as to say, to heck with it. Who needs them?

Another wisp of magic slowly eased out of the ground. When it was only an inch or two long he grabbed at it. He didn't wait for it to emerge its full length. He pulled on it, but it wasn't coming out. She'd never seen a dragon struggle with a piece of magic before. Manna, that's what she'd heard some folks call it, a strand of manna. She was going to have to learn the lingo, but not right now. Right now she just wanted to watch the dragon.

He was really struggling with the strand of manna. He was like a bird in a cartoon fighting with a worm. The worm was winning.

“Grt. Grt,” he said as he narrowed his eyes, wiped his hands on his legs, and got a good hold. He pulled with all his might. The worm, er the manna came free and the dragon went rolling backwards head over tails stopping right at Ruby's feet.

The dragon lay looking at the sky. It was a nice day. He could just lie there. Then he saw a Human. Yikes, he thought. “Grt,” he said. He jumped to his feet and started to high tail it out of there.

Ruby was mesmerized. When she saw him running she regained her voice. “Don't go.”

The dragon paused.

“Don't go. I won't hurt you.”

“Grt?”

The dragon walked slowly back to where Ruby was. He was very leery and looked at Ruby cautiously. He seemed like he was ready to bolt away at the slightest movement.

“Honest, I won’t hurt you,” Ruby said excitedly. All the other dragons had just swooped down and were gone in the blink of an eye. This one had stayed awhile.

“Grt,” the dragon said as he held up the ray of manna offering it to Ruby. “Grt,” he said again as he held it out. When she didn’t take it, he sat down on a rock next to her and began munching absentmindedly on the wisp of magic.

This had gone much better than Ruby had ever hoped. She hadn’t dreamed she’d be standing only a foot away from a real live dragon. Not to mention a dragon who was casually enjoying a wispy snack of magic.

Ruby slowly sat down. She didn’t want to scare him. He put his hands down like he was getting ready to dart off as she eased herself down. When she was sitting down, the little guy seemed to relax again.

He offered her what was left of his manna. “Grt?” When she didn’t take it he resumed his snack.

“My name is Ruby.” You had to start somewhere she reasoned.

“Grt,” he replied. Then he leaned back a little and said, “Grt, Grt, Grt. Grt-Grt, G-Grt.” Whatever that meant. He seemed pleased with himself.

She was considering this when he said, “Grt,” as if to excuse himself and walked over to where another strand of manna drifted upwards. The dragon eyed it suspiciously before snatching it out of the air. He held it in one hand, pointed his finger at it menacingly, and warned it, “Grt!”

The dragon walked back over to where Ruby was sitting and offered the manna to her. She declined. “No thanks. I wish you could talk.”

He looked at her and tapped a finger to his forehead. He wriggled the bit of manna around in his fingers like it was some sort of balloon and twisted it up like he was making an animal out of it. When he was done, he had fashioned a squiggly letter A. He looked up at her to see if she was watching.

With squinted eyes and careful deliberation he handed the formed manna to Ruby. He let go as she took it, but when the dragon was no longer holding onto the manna, it unfurled in a frenzy resuming its original wafty ribbon like shape. Only now Ruby was holding it.

She was holding it! She’d seen magic force lines and manna trails before. She’d even seen other people use magic, like Clarence when he recharged or Goblins at construction sites using bits of magic to weld and form materials, but she had never held magic before. Not like this.

It was cool to the touch and it tingled a little. The manna writhed in her hand. Not menacingly, but in a reassuring way. She wasn’t scared at all. Somehow she knew this was where she was supposed to be and this was what she was supposed to be doing. Everything seemed right.

She formed the magic into a perfect letter A and held it out to the dragon. He raised his eyebrows as he smiled and before she knew it he had swallowed it out of her hands.

“Grt,” he said. “Grt, A. a-a-A. Grt! Grt!” He had a big smile on his face and rushed over to where the magic pool was. He kept looking between Ruby and the water as if it was taking forever for another wisp of manna to appear.

She had timed the flow of manna coming from the spring. “Every six minutes or so. Um? Grt?” she asked.

“Grt.” He nodded in agreement. “Grt. Grt.” He was tapping his foot as he waited. “A-a, Grt, A-a,” he sang impatiently.

“Only, a minute more,” she said as she looked at her watch.

Once the next ribbon appeared Grt rushed it over to Ruby and she fashioned it into the letter B. He ate it quickly, snatching it out of her hands, and gulping it down.

“B-A, Grt. B-A”

They had almost gotten through the alphabet when Roger appeared.

“GAA! LLL!” Grt blurted as he hid behind Ruby and pointed. “LLL! LLL!”

Roger stopped in his tracks. “Is that a dragon behind you?”

“It’s Grt,” Ruby happily explained as she stroked Grt’s head and absentmindedly scratched his ears. She only noticed Grt was shaking when he reached up to hold her hand. “LLL,” he said pointing again.

“Don’t worry Grt. Roger is OK.” She made formal introductions. “Roger this is Grt. And, Grt this is Roger. He may be a Troll, but he’s very nice.”

“And I’ve got lunch,” Roger explained as he held up a six pack of fruit juice and a grocery bag.

Grt stepped out from behind Ruby and took a long formal bow doing a great flourish with his hands.

Roger walked slowly forward and set lunch down on a rock. Then he stepped back as Grt edged forward to investigate.

“Timid little guy isn’t he?”

Grt had grabbed a bottle of juice and put it into his back pocket. Wait, he didn’t have any clothes on. How did he have a back pocket? He started taking things out of the picnic bag until he got to Roger’s lunch, left over Toxic Lump Soup.

“Um, Grt, you might not...”

Grt waved her off ignoring her warning. He slowly popped the lid of the sealed container and took in a big whiff of Toxic Lump Soup. He considered the smell for a moment, then he stood up straight, crossed his eyes, and passed out.

Roger stood concerned over the pair of them. “I didn’t kill him did I?”

“I hope not. He’s not breathing and I can’t feel a pulse.”

“What do we do?”

“Get that Toxic Lump Soup out of here.”

Roger closed the lid on the container of soup and took it into the distance. When he came back, Grt hadn’t moved.

Ruby didn’t know what to do. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a wisp of manna floating up. Running, she jumped into the air and caught the edge of it.

“What’s that all about?” Roger asked. He couldn’t see the manna. He turned his attention back to the dragon. “Come on little dragon guy. What is it, Grt? Come on Grt.”

Ruby had the manna in her hand, but she didn’t really know what to do with it. She was holding it out over Grt when his hand reached up and grabbed it. He brought it to his mouth and munched on the end.

“You’re OK!” Ruby exclaimed. She was worried he had died.

Grt looked at her startled. Then he looked at the stick of manna he was nibbling on. He fell back down again, his eyes replaced by crosses, and his tongue hanging six inches out of the corner of his mouth. He opened his eyes as if for the first time. “Uce,” he said in a desperate pleading voice. “Grt need uce.”

“Uce?” Roger asked.

“Uce?” Ruby echoed.

“Uce,” Grt corrected, not to be left out.

“Juice,” Ruby suddenly realized. She thought this whole thing might be an act. It probably was, but if Grt wanted some juice she’d give it to him.

Once he had been handed a bottle of juice, Grt was as good as new. He wouldn’t go anywhere near Roger’s Toxic Lump Soup, but other than that they were having a great time.

“He sure likes to play,” Roger commented.



Grt had been wresting a ribbon of manna to the ground. He was standing over it, victorious in battle, the mighty Grt.

He brought the ribbon over to Ruby and she fashioned it into a Q.

“Nea-o, Grt, alk.”

“Almost,” Roger agreed.

“No almo, Grt alk,” Grt said proudly.

“Wait a minute.” Ruby had just realized something important. Addressing Roger she asked, “You can’t see the harvester dragons?”

“No.”

“But you can see Grt here?”

Grt sat up straight at the sound of his name. “Grt.”

“Sure I see Grt.”

“You see what that means don’t you?”

Roger had long ago accepted the fact that he was a Troll. Bridges he knew. Most other stuff he didn’t. “See what?” he asked.

“If you can see Grt, that means he’s more than just a harvester construct. Harvester dragons are invisible to you, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So, if you can see him, he’s something more.” She paused. “Maybe he can lead us to The Dragon.”

“Drag-goon,” Grt mimicked her.

Ruby spent the rest of the day alone with Grt while Roger went back up to the bridge.

“Zoeyplankaton,” Grt said. “It rolley off da tongue. Zoeyplankattaton.” He gave a little twirl.

“You really can talk.” Ruby found it all a little hard to believe. All the more so when Grt looked at her and said, “Grt,” in reply.

“Well sometimes you talk.”

She heard Roger coming down the path. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Grt go homey.” Ruby didn’t want him to go, but she hadn’t understood him correctly. “Grt go homey wit da Ruby.”

“Really!”

“Grt!” he nodded as he jumped up and down matching Ruby’s excitement.

“What’s all this then?” Roger asked.

“Grt’s going home with us tonight,” Ruby beamed full of happiness.

“Grt,” accented his agreement. “Grt go wit da Trollie and da Ruby.”

“NO!” Roger said to both Ruby and Grt. He wanted to make this clear. “You can come home with us sure, but not wit da Trollie.” He wanted Ruby to understand. “When your mom goes through the roof. You forced me.”

“You’re the greatest Roger,” Ruby said as she gave him a giant hug and was surprised and overjoyed to find that Grt was hugging both of their legs.

“Roger dat, he’d da greatest.”

# 7 #

## Homecoming

Grt skipped happily along the path holding onto Ruby’s hand. When they got to the bus stop, he rubbed his head into her belly, while saying, “Grt.”

This made Ruby giggle. He was a fun affectionate dragon, if a bit impatient. He kept on looking at the schedule and tapping his foot. When the bus came he hopped on board and told the driver with a pointed finger, “You’d late.”

Grt tried to walk to the back of the bus, but the driver wouldn’t let him. He didn’t need no snot nosed whatever this was to tell him he was late. The traffic wasn’t his fault, but nobody, not nobody rode the bus for free. “Where’s your fare?” It was more of a statement than a question. The Troll blocked the way with his beefy arm.

Grt looked at him and brought his face in real close as he said, “I no pay. I drag-goon.” And then started to walk past the bus driver. He didn’t get very far as the Troll hadn’t moved his arm yet.

“Here Igor,” Roger said as he put three fares into the till.

Igor lifted his hand as Grt explained to everybody on the bus, “See, I no pay. I drag-goon.”

Roger noticed Igor was getting a little sore about all this, so he said, “He doesn’t mean anything by it Igor. You did a great job blocking the way.”

“Yeah, you liked that? The old forearm turnstile routine.”

Grt stood on the bus seat the entire way home. Whenever he saw something interesting he would point it out to Ruby. “Wat dat?” he would say or, “Ooh,” but he was especially fond of, “Grt.”

Rachel surprised everyone when she didn’t go through the roof at the sight of Grt. “He is awfully cute.”

Grt nodded his head in agreement before he rubbed his head against Rachel and fluttered his eyes. “Grt cute... Grt cute... Grt cute.” He had made it into a little song.

After a moment he got bored and started going through the kitchen drawers.

“OK! Enough of that.” Rachel had read a book or two in her time and knew the first night you brought home a new space alien, talking dog, or whatever they trashed the place. Rachel explained this to Ruby and Roger. “Wisdom is learning from the mistakes of others. Grt’s lovable.” She had to giggle. Grt was trying out a pot for a hat and was sizing up which spoon to use as a sword. “He’s cute.”

Grt paused in his play to confirm her statement. “Grt cute.” He noticed everyone was looking at him so he felt the need to explain a bit more. “Grt a drag-goon.” He really stretched the last part of the word out.

“If he’s going to stay here,” Rachel was saying.

“Where’d else Grt go?”

“Well Grt, if you’re going to stay here, you can’t make a mess.”

“Grt cute?”

“No messes Grt. No exploring the refrigerator in the middle of the night.”

“Grt get tirsty? Grt starve.” He was pointing at his mouth and a rumbling sound came from his belly.

“If you’re hungry, you’ll have to ask Ruby. She’s the one who’s going to take care of you, but I’m warning you fair and square. If you trash my house, this will be the last time you ever stay here.”

“Where’d else Grt go? Grt be alone, cast to da wilderness. A sacrificial feast for da wild dog-giees.” He looked up at Ruby with big puppy dog eyes. “Grt died wit out da Rubies.” He was being a bit melodramatic. He was also holding a bag of flour.

Ruby grabbed the flour away from him. “I think this is exactly what mom is talking about.”

Supper went as smoothly as could be expected. Grt didn’t have any table manners. He talked with his mouth full, and if he wanted something, he not only reached across the table, he walked across the table as well, but he balked at Roger’s Cold Drool Surprise. Both Ruby and Rachel had thought it best not to ask whether he had really meant gruel. They were afraid Roger would say, no drool is right. Whatever it was, Grt wouldn’t walk by or over it. To control him, Rachel had surrounded his place setting with extra bowls of Cold Drool Surprise. This had only limited success. Grt started walking around the table instead.

All during supper they had worked on the problem of preventing Grt from making a mess that night. They all knew it was coming, but how to avoid it.

Ruby summed up all the ideas they had. “We can put a collar on Grt and tie one end to me. We can put a bell around his neck.” She paused. “What else is there?”

“Dese all bad idears. Grt not bad guy. Grt cute.” At the end of his speech, Grt started to climb up a bookcase.

It would have fallen over if Roger hadn’t rushed to hold it up. “It would have crushed you.”

Grt was oblivious. “Wat dis?” he asked.

“It’s a book,” Ruby said a little exasperated at this point.

“Listen Grt, can you behave?”

“Grt behave now.”

Ruby had read enough books to know you had to be specific about this sort of thing. Sure he was behaving, behaving badly.

“We need you to act properly, to act in a way that a respectful guest would act. The kind of guest we’d like to have back over again tomorrow night.” Grt looked at her, perhaps uncomprehendingly.

“You do want to spend tomorrow night here?”

“Oh yeah’d.” He looked at her with all the cuteness and helplessness he could muster. “Grt have no where’d else to go. Grt leave, he dead.”

“So how do we get you to stop climbing bookcases and walking over the dinner table?”

“Dis really important stuff?”

“Yes,” Ruby said. Had she finally gotten through? Could he tell her the secret?

“Den you got your workees cut’ed out for you.”

That was not what Ruby had wanted to hear.

She ended up putting an old cat collar around his neck with a bell on it. She wasn’t surprised when he acted like he was choking to death. “It’s for your own good.”

“How’d choking Grt be good?”

He was fidgeting with the collar. “Leave it on,” Ruby commanded.

He dropped his hands. “Geez.” He was forlorn for a second or two and then he shook his neck and listened to the tinkling sounds. He liked this game. He stretched his neck this way and that as he rang the tiny bells.

Soon it was time to go to sleep and Grt hopped into her bed. He was pretty small really. If he curled up tight he wouldn't have been bigger than a pillow or two, but he wasn't curled up tight. He was spread out as big as he could be. "Grt sleep here," he said. "Where'd da Rubies sleep?"

She wasn't going to sleep on the floor or the couch. "Move over," she said being careful to keep him next to the wall.

Ruby was between Grt and the door. He was wearing a collar with a bell around it and she had tied the collar to her wrist with a short length of rope. Grt tossed and turned. He fidgeted with the collar. He yawned and then plop. He was asleep.

It had been a long day. Ruby quickly followed him into slumber.

It wasn't long before Grt opened one testing eye and looked around. Ruby was asleep. He sat up in bed and undid the rope tied to the collar. When it was free, he spent a moment deciding what to do with it. He opted for the classic. He tied it to the headboard of the bed. Then he took off the collar. He gave it a shake. It rang a little, but Ruby didn't even toss in her sleep.

"Grt bored," he said. Then he remembered. He put the collar down in Ruby's sleeping hands, just for a moment, while he reached into his back pocket.

"Ah, uce," he said as he popped open the bottle. It was going to be a long night and he had to behave so he sipped the bottle of juice slowly. Five minutes later it was empty.

"Grt thirsty. Grt Hungee." He pushed at Ruby. "You feed Grt now?" He pushed again. "Rubies? Rubies? You wakees now? You feed Grt?"

Ruby didn't move. She was a heavy sleeper. That would explain why she didn't wake up as he climbed over her, jumped off the bed, and headed for the kitchen.

They had 'uce there and some flour. Maybe he'd make a cake.

# 8 #  
What a Mess

“Burp. Grrrrpppp,” Grt belched as he sat at the foot of Ruby’s bed in a ray of morning sunlight. She sure did sleep a lot, Grt thought. He drank the last of his fruit juice and let out another belch. “Grrruuuppp!”

He craned his neck around at Ruby. No, that hadn’t done it. She was still asleep. He nudged the bed. That didn’t work either. He grabbed the cat collar with the bell on it and rang it as he sang a song. “Goodee mornings, it’s times to feed da Grt. Wakees to da Rubies, it’s timey to feeds da Grt.”

Ruby stirred. She heard Grt singing. He was still in the room. That was a good sign. She opened a bleary eye and instantly shot wide awake.

The floor of her room was a mess. A wild assortment of games, books, and puzzles were strewn about. OK. That wouldn’t be so hard to clean up, five or ten minutes at most. What concerned her were the dozens of empty fruit juice bottles scattered about, the flour in Grt’s ears, and the batter on his cheek.

“You’ve got flour in your ears and batter on your cheek!” Ruby exclaimed frantically.

Grt sensed the importance of this in her voice and searched wildly for the batter with his tongue. When he had licked it clean he sighed in relief. “Dat was close.” He didn’t want to waste any of the cake batter. “Eet good stuff.”

“You didn’t bake anything did you?”

“Grt more of an artiste. Grt create.”

“No. NO!” Her mom was right. It did happen in all the books. Why was it inevitable? Why did she go to sleep at all? Now Grt wouldn’t be able to stay with them.

Ruby's mom and Roger had already awoken. She heard Roger's booming voice. "This is great. Hey Ruby, did you do this? It brings me back to old times. Just like mom..."

Roger the Troll was having childhood flashbacks. "What kind of mess did you make out there?"

Grt thought about it. A flash of recognition went through his head. Yes, he remembered he had done something last night he wasn't supposed to do, but he couldn't help himself. He looked down at the floor. "Grt Sorry."

"No," Ruby said again in despair. She lunged for the door, but the rope Grt had tied to her wrist the night before came up short. Ruby toppled over as the rope dug into her wrist.

"Eet good bit," Grt observed as he stood over Ruby.

Ruby was starting to get annoyed. She sat on the floor as she undid the rope. Her wrist hurt. She was trying hard not to let this, "Little... you little..."

"Drag-goon," Grt supplied helpfully as he licked her face.

"Is that what you are? A little goon?" She had had enough of this. Fine. If he wanted to get kicked out, then fine. She didn't need this trouble. Her wrist throbbed and she knew she would be spending the entire day cleaning up the house.

Grt's feelings were hurt. "Grt no goon," but he brightened up quickly as he added, "Grt drag-goon."

Ruby thought yeah, a goon who is starting to be a drag. Grt ignored her. "Grt create surprise." He grabbed her hand and led her out into the kitchen.

Roger met her in the hallway. "I can't believe it. It's just like home."

Toxic Lump Soup, Cold Barf Surprise, those were the images that came to mind when Ruby thought about Roger's home. She squinted her eyes trying to block it out. What had happened in the kitchen? Every can had probably been opened. Its contents thrown against the wall. Soapsuds mixed with flour smashed into



the carpet. The ceiling freshly spackled with a coffee ground maple syrup mixture.

Grt could sense her anxiety. “Grt sorry,” he said. “Grt get hungree.”

Ruby turned the corner. Her mom was blocking the view. “I can’t believe it.”

“I’m sorry mom.” She knew it wasn’t going to happen, but she had to give it a try. “Can we give him another chance?”

“Sure, any time.”

“OK,” she said dejectedly. “I understand.”

Wait! Her mom wasn’t mad. She hadn’t said Grt had to go. She was smiling. She was in a good mood. She looked around her mom and peered into the kitchen. It gleamed. It was spotless. Sure, a great pile of dishes was heaped in the sink, but they were freshly washed dishes, and on the table was a triple-decker double fudge cake.

“So, can we have some?” Roger asked. He already had a plate in his hands.

“This is what your mom used to make?” Ruby asked him.

“It brings back good memories. Desert for breakfast, pies, cakes, ice cream, sundaes, you name it, but for really special occasions she’d make a triple-decker double fudge cake. So, can we have some?”

“Grt hungree too.”

This wasn’t what she had expected. It took a moment for it to sink in. “So, I’m not in trouble.”

“Heavens no,” her mother said.

“And what about you Grt? Why are you so apologetic?” But Ruby already knew the answer. She saw that the cake already had a giant piece cut out of it.

“Grt hungree. Grt no waits. Grt sorries.”

Ruby was so happy Grt hadn’t trashed the house or made a mess she gave him a giant hug lifting him off his feet.

Grt licked her face. “Grt happy too. Grt eat now?” He had acquired a plate from somewhere and held it up so Ruby would see that it was empty.

He sure could grab stuff quick, Ruby thought.

“Grt eat now?” he said shaking the plate.

“Yes, Grt eat now,” and they all had triple-decker double fudge cake for breakfast.

# 9 #

### A Troll’s Story

Roger was taking his magic supplement pill, while Grt busied himself looking at the bottle. “Et got da preserva-ta-tives and da add-dad-datives.” He looked at Roger. “Dis stuff no good.” He shook the bottle until a pill rolled out onto his hands. He licked it. “P-toey. Dis no good.”

“Rubies, we go back,” Grt said. He wanted to go back to the spring to get recharged on manna. “Grt needa da good stuff.”

“He’s a finicky one,” Rachel said laughing as she recalled the story they had told her about Grt’s reaction to Roger’s lunch.

“Grt no fin-nin-ikies, bereakfast ist da most important-e meal of da day.” He looked at Ruby. “We’s go now?”

“I guess so. Is it OK mom?”

“Yes. It’s OK. Just get home by dark. Me and Roger are going to go shopping.”

“Ah, yeah,” Roger said. “I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

“You promised.” Rachel looked at him accusingly.

He smiled at her, trying to turn the day into something pleasant. Why did they need to go shopping anyhow?

“We can eat lunch at Troy’s Café?” Rachel offered enticingly.

Roger liked Troy’s. It had an all you could eat dumpster buffet for the discerning Troll. “What are we waiting for?”

Ruby found if she gave Grt simple instructions he would follow them. She gave him a bus token and told him to put it in the slot when the bus arrived.

“Grt no pay. Grt drag-goon,” he protested.

“I need you to help pay my way,” Ruby explained in a half lie.

Grt could go along with that. “Grt helping,” he told Igor when he boarded the bus.

“Hi Igor,” Ruby said. She wanted to make up for yesterday. Sometimes Trolls could hold grudges. “Right on time. Good job.”

Igor beamed. “I’m glad someone noticed. Why don’t you sit up front here and keep me company?”

Once the bus got rolling again, Igor told Ruby about his family on the other side and the ways things were. “The zone can be a pretty tough place at times,” he explained. “When the barriers came down it was a real life saver for some of us. We could get out.” He paused. “I know you’re a good kid and all Ruby, but some folks hold prejudices against Trolls, Goblins, Ogres... all of us really.”

She knew this was true. She let him continue. “I mean it really never was easy being a Troll and it’s no picnic if you’re an Elf or one of the beautiful people either. The Dwarves hate the Elves, the Elves hate the Orcs, and the Orcs hate everybody. I guess what I’m saying is on this side at least it’s against the law to form a posse and hunt down a Troll just because he was born a Troll.”

Ruby was appalled. “They do that in the zone?”

“Not in the cities so much, but you get into the countryside and things go back to the old ways. There’s a lot of bloodshed.” He was pensive for a moment. “That’s why I’ve got to work hard. A few more years and this bus will be all mine you know.”

Ruby wasn’t so sure about that. The way the “real world” operated, the way things happened in the mundane world outside the zone was you worked hard for twenty or thirty years and then, if you were lucky, you got a pension or something. Nobody gave

you the city bus you'd been driving for the last twenty years as a retirement present. She wondered about this. "Do you get some sort of pension or something when you retire Igor?"

"Retire?" He looked at her puzzled. "Why would anybody retire?" He got a dreamy look in his eyes. She recognized it from when Roger talked about the bridge. "In another twenty years I'll bring my wife and kids over. Marge, that's my wife's name, she'll home school Sam and Brian right where you're sitting and in fifty, sixty years they'll apprentice under me driving the bus at night."

Roger was nice, but he wasn't clever. She didn't think he really got the whole money thing. Igor was probably the same way. She wondered if their employers knew of their dreams. They must. She was going to have to look into this. Were these Trolls delusional? Was somebody misleading them? Or, were they really going to own everything in twenty years? She couldn't believe that.

"Here you go Ruby." The bus had stopped at the bridge. "Whenever you need a ride, remember, Igor's bus is the only way to travel."

What the heck, she could play along, "But only if you're driving on Roger's bridge and Chad has cleaned the road."

"Exactly. Solidarity."

"Power to the Trolls."

Grt wasn't about to be left out. "Power to da Trollies," he agreed as he jumped off the bus.

# 10 #

The MDM

Putting the Doom in Mt. Doom

The trail down to the spring looked a little different, a little more worn, like it had been used a lot lately.

Ruby felt uneasy. Grt seemed unconcerned, but then he was always a little carefree. When they got to the clearing Grt flew

ahead and splashed into the spring, but Ruby stopped in her tracks, her jaw ajar.

There were signs up everywhere.

No Trespassing  
Property of MDM  
Natural Magic Contamination Area  
Do Not Enter

A yellow ribbon had been stretched across the trail reading:

- MDM Investigation Zone – Do Not Enter -
- MDM Investigation Zone – Do Not Enter -

Someone had already broken the ribbon and Ruby chose to ignore it as well.

She walked slowly and cautiously into the clearing. The spring had been surrounded by orange cones and a big flashing sign, which read:

!!! Danger !!!  
Natural Magic Contamination Area  
Do Not Enter

Grt ignored all the signs as he splashed happily about in the water. The spring seemed to be gushing manna at a faster rate than it had been previously.

As Grt was doing this, a dragonish looking creature, which stood about four feet tall slowly backed into the clearing. He looked like a construction site supervisor or an electrical line worker. He had on muddy work boots, a yellow hardhat, and a tool belt with all manner of arcane looking instruments. He talked into a big old time walkie-talkie and had a clipboard in one hand.

“That’s right. The situation is out of control. It’s hemorrhaging manna left and right.” He paused. “No. No.

Listen we don't know what's causing this." He paused again listening to the voice on the other end. "Look," he said a little annoyed into the walkie-talkie, "if something had changed I'd tell you. I'm right here."

He turned around and faced Ruby and Grt. "Just like before there's a harvester washing his feet in the pool and there's a young..." His voice trailed off.

"We got a code..." He looked at Grt. He looked at Ruby. "Red hair?" he said to himself.

"What was that?" Ruby heard a voice crackle through the walkie-talkie.

"I said Code RED! We've got a Code RED!"

The crackly voice responded. "A code what?"

"Red! Red!" He looked at Ruby again before addressing the distant voice. "I'll get back to you."

He put the walkie-talkie away, which is another way of saying it disappeared, as he looked at Ruby and asked accusingly, "Is this your doing?"

Ruby didn't know what to say.

"That's what I thought." He looked at her and started to write on his clipboard. "It's a Code Red and you've got red hair. Tell me that's a coincidence."

"You just made that up."

"What? What?" he stammered. "Are you accusing me of fabricating evidence, of tampering with the natural flow of The Dragon's explicit will?" He let that sink in, while Ruby, for her part, mulled it over and so did not respond. The Dragon's explicit will... What could that mean?

The field service dragon did not wait for Ruby's mind to catch up. "I didn't think so," he continued. "You're in enough trouble already. You don't need filing a false report to be added to the list of your crimes."

"Crimes? I didn't do anything wrong."

"That your dragon?"

Grt jumped out of the water when he was mentioned and merrily ambled over oblivious to the feeling of dread sweeping over Ruby. “Grt go homey’s wit da Rubies,” he explained happily. He grabbed one of the many manna ribbons, which were wafting around and munched on it contently as he leaned against her leg. “Me and da Rubies we ride on da bus.”

“Right then, by the power invested in me by The Dragon, I present you with your bill.” He handed Ruby a scroll.

It read:

Ruby Firehaven  
Services

MDM Field

Frank

Field Services

6

Billing

1

Grt

Connection

10

Usage charge

44

38 month lease fee

61,000,000,000,000

Total Due

61,000,000,000,061

38 month Credit Option, Approved

Ruby tried to make some sense of the bill. She noticed as Grt grabbed another of the floating manna ribbons the usage charge went from 44 up to 45. She was trying hard not to look at the 38 month lease fee. Sixty two trillion, wasn't that a little excessive? And when did she sign a 38 month lease? Grt started munching on a new piece of manna and that's when the real horror struck her. Whenever Grt grabbed a piece of manna, not only did the usage charge go up by one, but the lease fee went up by a trillion as well.

The bill had changed in her hands and now read:

Ruby Firehaven  
Services

MDM Field

Frank

Field Services

6

Billing

1

Grt

Connection

10

Usage charge

46

38 month lease fee

63,000,000,000,000

Total Due

63,000,000,000,063

38 month Credit Option, Approved



“Sixty three trillion?” She looked at the field service dragon. “Frank?” she said guessing that was his name from the bill. “This can’t possibly be right.”

“Listen missy... what is it?” He grabbed the bill from her and read it. “Miss Ruby, are you saying I’m not doing my job right?” He didn’t stop for a breath. “You’ve got some nerve. First you threaten to file career damaging false reports against a guy who’s only doing his job and now you’re saying I’m incompetent.” His face was turning red.

Grt was grabbing for another manna ribbon. The glade was full of them today. There must have been hundreds of manna ribbons drifting in the air. Some had caught in the branches of trees like party streamers. She focused her attention. “Stop Grt. No more eating until we get this settled.”

“So you’re disputing your bill?” Frank put it back on his clipboard and started to write. Ruby read what he was writing upside down? He was adding charges to the bill.

Bill disputation fee	25
Bill explanation fee	25

The twenty five wasn’t so bad. The fact that this pushed the lease fee up by fifty trillion and the total had now climbed to over a hundred trillion had her a bit nervous. Her mom was going to kill her. That was probably more than the yearly gross national product of most countries.

Frank looked at her. “Anything you want me to add here as long as I’ve got the bill? Almost forgot, I’ve got to add for another bill report and...”

“Stop right there. This is ridiculous. You can’t go changing a bill every second and I haven’t bought anything.”

“Well, those are two different issues really. If you want the short form bill.” He looked at her. “Something static and unchanging that won’t go up?” He nodded his head up and down.

“Isn’t that how bills are supposed to be?”

He took that for a yes and made small talk as he prepared a new bill. “Clearly you’ve never dealt with a Land Shark.”

“You mean loan shark?”

“There’s not much of a difference.” He was done writing and handed her a new bill. “Here you go.”

Ruby Firehaven

Expires 38 months

799,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.53

“What! I don’t even know how to say that number.”

“That’s why I usually go with the long form.”

“Listen, forget this. Let’s just use the old form.”

Frank paused for a second. “You seem like a nice girl. I could go back and make the other bill up again, but then I’d have to go and do all of that paperwork over again. I haven’t got time for that.”

Ruby cut him off. “It only took you like three seconds.” She was exasperated.

“Just slow down and listen.” Frank was trying to do her a favor. “I could rewrite the bill and the total would only go higher. Shssh.” He cut her off again. “If you complain, I add a complaint fee. If you balk, I add the optional balk charge.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Frank leveled his eyes and readied his pencil. “You want ridiculous? Was that a service request? Cause I’m here to oblige. Service is my middle name. So was that standard ridiculousness or the extended warranty plan?”

Ruby was afraid to answer.

“I know. I bet you’re wondering what the difference is between the two options. I’ll tell you. It’s six decimal places.”

Ruby was looking over the bill. She didn’t know exactly how much money it was, but it was a lot.

Grt was nuzzling up to Ruby. “Grt stay wit Rubies?” he asked hopefully.

“I can’t pay this bill. How can you stay? We have to get this straightened out.” Most of the bill had been listed under Grt. He had followed her home. She’d never bought him.

“We workee it out. Hey der Frankees, old buddies, old pails. Wat says we workees dis out.” Grt was trying to warm Frank up.

“I don’t see how we can do that,” Frank said. He was collecting up the cones and taking down the tape.

Ruby sat on a rock and tried to think, but it was hard to concentrate. “I like you Grt, but I can’t pay this bill.”

“Grt stays wit da Rubies?” Grt said worriedly. He looked around pensively and played with his throat like the skin was too tight.

Frank was done cleaning up and now he was pounding in a giant “For Sale” sign right by the magic spring. It was a magic sign. It had neon lights that flashed brightly. The manna was bubbling up from the pond pretty fast and every now and again a piece of magic would drift into the sign. When this happened the sign flashed even brighter.

Frank produced a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off of his forehead. Ruby had seen that somewhere before.

“This place is worth a fortune,” Frank offered. “You should think about buying it.”

“Thanks, I’ve got enough on my mind.” She knew Roger would love it, but like he said it cost a fortune and she’d already owed one this morning. It just wasn’t fair. She’d never bought anything.

“Worried about the bill?” Frank said in a friendly manner. He stretched his wings and relaxed in a ray of sunshine. He had taken off his boots and was wiggling his toes. “You know,” he whispered conspiratorially. “If you wanted, I could just throw in the land for a single gold coin.”

Ruby looked at him suspiciously. “A gold coin?”

“Yeah, everybody knows dragons don’t take paper money. Silver or gold only.”

“You mean the bill is in gold?” Ruby asked. It was only getting worse. A single gold coin was worth over \$500. The bill had just grown again by another three digits. How did it keep on doing that?

“Anyway, if you want the place, I can give it to you cheap. Think of it as a customer appreciation thing, a signing bonus. Whatever you want to call it.” He drifted off sounding a lot like Roger. “It’s a pretty big lot. You might be able to subdivide it, make it into a subdivision, and call it Bridge Meadows.”

He let the offer sink in before he put on his boots. “Well, some us have to work. What do you say? Selling it would be a pain anyway and I hate dealing with real estate agents.”

“Final Offer?” He was about to fly away.

Ruby couldn’t help herself. She knew she’d regret it, but how much worse could it get? She closed her eyes. She knew it was a mistake. “OK. One gold coin, I’ll take it.”

# 11 #

### Bad News & More Bad News

It was a mistake. A big mistake. A huge mistake. The way Frank’s eyes lit up, Ruby instantly knew she had made a gigantic mistake.

“Excellent decision. May I compliment you on your investment savvy? You have an eye for quality. It’s a rare gift.”

“Maybe I should think about it.” She tried to back pedal. “You know, talk it over with my parents.”

“All good ideas, but sorry kid. A deals a deal.”

Frank handed her the deed to the property.

Grt stamped his foot impatiently and Frank tossed him a satchel. Grt draped it around his neck. He looked inside, nodded his head in approval, and smiled. He showed the contents of the bag to Ruby. It was stuffed full of manna.

“Standard issue. Should be a 38 months supply of magic. If you need more don’t hesitate to ask,” Frank explained. He was getting ready to fly off again. It was all happening so fast.

Why were both Frank and Grt so happy? They were acting like they’d made the deal of the century. Sure, she was in more trouble than words could describe, but what had changed so much with that purchase of the land.

“Why does it make a difference to you that I bought the land?”

Frank rubbed his chin and looked at the ground.

Grt kicked at some dirt.

“Tell me!”

Frank looked at her. “Look you can blame me if you want. I don’t mind, but don’t blame Grt. He’s your only friend in this world.”

It made no sense. She had her mother, and Roger and the Trolls were her friends.

“The thing is this,” Frank was having a hard time. He had grown fond of Ruby in the past half hour. He started over. “The thing is...” He couldn’t get it out.

“Tell me!”

“Right, tell you. Like that’s a direct command?”

“Tell me NOW!”

“We made a deal,” Frank explained simply and to the point.

“And?” Ruby prompted him.

“So now you can’t get out of the bill by saying you never agreed to anything. I gave you this nice land as a signing bonus.” He continued sheepishly, “And might I add what a shrewd bargainer you are. Wisdom beyond your years. Beauty unrivaled in the Seven Kingdoms...”

He was giving her a snow job and Ruby knew it. “What are you hiding from me?”

“Promise you won’t hate me?”

“I’m not promising anything else.” Ruby was getting angry.

“At least promise me you won’t hate Grt. He didn’t have a choice. I didn’t have a choice.”

The hairs on the back of her neck were tingling. “Out with it.” She reached into Grt’s bag and grabbed a handful of manna. “Tell me it all, I command you!”

The manna disappeared. A blue light surrounded Frank’s mouth. He fidgeted for a moment and then started talking. He had no choice. “You, Ruby Firehaven, are what expires in 38 months. If you don’t pay the bill in full, The Dragon gets you.”

“What?” She was incredulous. “To eat?”

“Isn’t that what dragons do?”

“I don’t know” she said as she grabbed another fistful of manna. “You tell me.”

It turned out Frank didn’t know much. The Dragon had made him personally that morning. Frank had one directive and that was to get Ruby to agree to something, to anything so the bill would stick.

“I’m no lawyer,” he had said, “so don’t ask me, but you agreed to something this morning that’s for sure.”

“And The Dragon controls the courts.”

“That’s the way I’m figuring it. You made an agreement. You might have been tricked and you might have been deceived, but you made a deal. The deal will stick. Out here past the boundaries, you might have a slim chance, but in the zone it’s a done deal. You’ll never be able to fight it.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t that obvious he wants you.”

“Why?” She asked again dreading the answer.

“I haven’t been around much, but the only thing that comes to mind is eating you.”

Great she thought, I finally get to meet The Dragon and then he’s going to eat me. “Might as well tie me up on a stake outside of his lair on my eighteen birthday,” she muttered.

“That wouldn’t be civilized.”

“And this is?”

Frank left then. “If you ever need any customer service help, be sure to ask for me,” he said before he flew off.

Ruby spent a long time crying.

“Grt sorries Rubies,” he said while patting her head.

In between tears she asked, “Did you know any of this?”

“Grt sorries.” He brushed at her tears. “Grt help da Rubies.” He grabbed a few strands of manna out of his satchel and handed them to Ruby. “Rubies askees da Grt again.”

This was no time to cry. She wiped the tears from her eyes. She looked at Grt. She was afraid of what he would say when she asked him. “Tell me Grt. Tell me Now.”

The manna disappeared from her hands and the same slight glow formed around Grt’s mouth as he told her, “Grt flya in da clouds lookees for da manna. Grt hears da wisper in Grt’s ear. It says go down der, taka da break, you been working soos hard you deserve da breaka. So Grt goes downs der. Grt tinkee he gonna taka da break, but no. He gotta harvest da manna. Grt tink he be tricked. So da Grt takees da breaks anyheed hows. Buts da manna keeps on coming. Da manna be stubborn. Grt pulls and pulls and den Grt tumbles ober and poof da Ruby appears ober Grt’s head. Da voice in Grt ears says go homiees wit da Rubies and Grt all happees.” He paused. “Dat all Grt knowsees. Dat and da Rubies can trusta Grt. Grt belongies to da Rubies. If Rubies send Grt away, Grt vanish. Grt be no more. Da voicee he bindee da Grt to Rubies. Witout da Rubies der be no Grt.”

“The voice was The Dragon?”

“Grt tink so.”

Ruby had to be sure, she grabbed another wisp of manna and asked Grt, “Can I trust you?”

“All’d da ways.”

# 12 #

Something to Remember Me By

Ruby had only noticed the pendant as she was preparing for bed. She couldn't take it off. She had tugged at the pendant. She had tried lifting it over her head, but no matter how hard she pulled, she couldn't get it over her ears. The chain wasn't tight. There was plenty of slack. It was held on by magic.

She sat on the edge of her bed and looked at it again. It was a black pendant. On one side there was a picture of a dragon. She figured it was The Dragon, but there wasn't that much detail. Besides, she'd never seen a picture of The Dragon. Now, there was an idea she thought. Someone must have painted a picture of him. Maybe she'd follow that up in the future, go to the museum again and look for a picture or something, but right now she had a more pressing dilemma. She couldn't get the pendant off.

She couldn't feel it and it hid perfectly under her shirt, but the pendant bugged her nonetheless. She got the feeling it was meant to bug her. No, that wasn't it. It was meant to remind her. The back of the pendant said, Do Not Remove, Property of The Dragon. Now there was a guy who didn't want publicity. Even he called himself The Dragon. She knew Property of The Dragon referred to both the pendant and her. What the pendant was supposed to remind her about was simple enough. Under the message, Do Not Remove, Property of The Dragon, glowing in red digital numbers was a countdown clock, which flashed every second. She watched it flash a few times.

Expires - 37:29:3:05:42

Expires - 37:29:3:05:41

Expires - 37:29:3:05:40

Thirty seven months, twenty nine days, three hours, five minutes and forty two, forty one, forty seconds. She sat watching her life tick away.



This was awful. Not only am I going to expire in 37 months, but I have to wear this stupid thing around my neck the entire time? It felt like a radio transmitter, one of those tags they put on wild animals. She was sure it was more than just an ugly looking clock... That's what it was, she thought, ugly.

Grt had been playing a game of solitaire with a deck of tarot cards. "Grt wins agains!" he exclaimed.

"That's nice Grt." Ruby wasn't interested. She had more pressing concerns.

"Why Rubies no happies?" He looked at her. "Grt wins agains."

"Great." She was going to expire on her eighteenth birthday and she was watching Grt play solitaire. "I need to get this thing off," she said. She was beyond frustration. She had already spent too much time crying today. She couldn't lose any more time that way.

"Eet OK Rubies. Eet good looking pendant." Grt was looking at the pendant and using his hands to form a square like he was a photographer. "Eet sure lookees good on da Rubies."

Ruby knew he was trying to help. "Why does it have to be around my neck?"

"Grt can fixee dat," he said and grabbed the pendant.

Instantly she knew it was gone. It wasn't around her neck anymore. "I'm free!" She couldn't believe it. She was so happy she hugged Grt.

Grt nuzzled against her, "Grt helpee," he said contentedly and then started purring like a cat. "Grt-trg, Grt-trg."

Ruby stroked Grt's ears and that's when she noticed the ring. It was black and formed in the shape of a dragon's head. She could make out little red numbers blinking in its evil eyes.

"No! What have you done?" She looked at her hand again. "And not on that finger! Get it off! Get it off!"

Grt didn't really see the big deal. "Dis finger? Dat finger?"

"That's where a wedding ring goes," or she thought, an engagement ring. "No. Get it off."

Grt knew she couldn't get rid of it, but he slipped it off her finger and stroked her face lightly. "Oohh, dat better. Rubies lika da hareem danca."

What was he talking about? Then she looked down and noticed he was playing with a black pendant that hung by a chain between her ear and her nose. It was just getting worse.

She was getting too excited. She needed to calm down. A nose ring wasn't the worst thing in the world. Plenty of girls had them, even some boys. She took a few breaths.

If Grt could move the pendant around, so could she. She unhooked one end from her nose and the pendant drooped in a long chain from her ear. She gathered the chain together and formed it into a stud. The pendant had turned into a small earring. She took the earring and put it into her belly button.

She looked in the mirror. She had always wanted a belly ring, but no, this wasn't the way. She had resigned herself that at least for now she was going to end up wearing the stupid thing. She tried every option she could think of: bracelet, ankle bracelet, and toe ring. She even tried weaving it into her hair. The magical piece of jewelry had adapted to every situation.

Let's be practical about this, Ruby thought. If I'm going to have to wear this as a piece of jewelry, what's the best way?

She stood in front of the mirror and retried a couple of options: bracelet, earring. Neither one seemed to work. It was too obvious. She put it into her nose. She tossed her hair in mock glamour as she asked Grt, "Does this go with my hair darling?"

"Rubies perties,"

That wasn't the type of reaction she was looking for. She needed the pendant to be bigger. How had she changed it from a chain into a small earring? She turned away from Grt. She pulled on the pendant while it was in her nose and made it grow. She fashioned it into a giant bone shape and turned to face Grt. It was so big she talked with a nasal inflection. "How dose dis look?"

Grt started laughing.

Good that was the reaction she was looking for. She turned and looked in the mirror. Upon seeing how ridiculous she looked with a six inch bone in her nose, she started to laugh as well.

Well, if she ever had a Werewolf for a boyfriend, she knew how she'd wear the pendant.

She played with the pendant some more and became very adept at changing it. Almost instantly she could get it to change from a diamond necklace, to an intricate rhinestone brooch, to a simple hair barrette. No matter what she did, however, it always had a dragon's head for a theme, and it always had the count down clock.

In the end she settled for small black pendant necklace that she could hide under her pajamas and went to sleep to the blinking light of the countdown clock: Expires - 37:29:1:17:09... 08... 07...

# 13 #

### A Very Important Announcement

Ruby was more than a little surprised when everyone showed up for the regular meeting of the Under Belly Society. She hadn't really expected Chad or Bruce to show up. She had thought The Dragon would scare them away, but he hadn't.

Everyone was anxious to meet Grt. Grt for his part thrived on the attention. He was telling Clarence the story of how he had found Ruby. "Eet a stub-born pieca da manna." Grt demonstrated how he had stood over the manna. He flexed his "mighty" muscles and pretended spit on his hands before he continued. "Grt Vicky-torious." Grt then rolled across the kitchen floor till he was next to Ruby. "Grt stare into skiees and der be da Rubies." He had told this story a few times already. It didn't look like he would ever get tired of it.

Roger went through the opening ceremony of the Under Belly Society. Grt especially liked the part where everyone opened a bottle of fruit juice. “Dis good idear. Why we not hava da meating ebery night?”

There was much celebration and back slapping as they ran down the old news. They had not only spotted a dragon, Ruby had brought one home.

Ruby, however, couldn't get into the spirit of the celebration. She was dreading what she had to do. She had to tell them about the bill and the pendant. Her mom was going to go through the roof, but she couldn't keep it a secret. She needed their help.

They were going around the room giving toasts and Grt had stood up and taken his turn. “To da Rubies.” Everybody had drunk to her success, so she stood up. Now was the time. Ruby had let them celebrate as long as she could.

“It's time for new business,” she began. All eyes were focused on her. “I don't know how to say this. I've got good news and I've got bad news.”

How bad could it be? Humans were always saying they had bad news and then they told you were going to get an extra twenty hours of work that week. The Trolls didn't really appreciate the terminology, however Clarence did. He was already worried. “Oh, no. Not bad news. Oh, I hate bad news.”

“We are already celebrating, so I'll start with the good news.” Ruby paused. “We all know that the MDM sold off most of the land under Roger's bridge.”

Roger knew all right. How could this be good news? He had already heard the rumors. The MDM had discovered a magic spring under the bridge and rather than do the paperwork some lazy low level field service representative had sold the entire plot off, over two hundred acres, for a single gold piece. It reeked of corruption. He hoped there would be an investigation. “How could they do that?” he asked. “If I had only know, I'd have bought it.”

Rachel tried to soothe him. “Now Honey, it’s all water under the bridge.”

He was almost going to cry. “But it’s my bridge. It’s not fair. I didn’t even know it was for sale. We were just down there the other day.”

“And that’s the good news,” Ruby continued.

Roger didn’t understand. “How is that good news? We had a place for the cottage all picked out.” He looked at Rachel.

“Sorry.”

“That’s OK honey,” Rachel soothed him. “We’ll find another place.”

“You won’t have to,” Ruby jumped in. “I bought the land.” She paused. “It’s all yours Roger. Here,” she said as she handed him the deed.

They were looking over the deed.

“Oh, I had heard some pretty princess had bought the land.” Clarence looked sheepishly at Ruby. “Oh, I guess the rumors were true.”

Ruby blushed.

Her mom couldn’t believe it. “There’s no way.” She looked at the paperwork. “Who would sell two hundred acres for one gold coin?” Shaking her head she added, “There has to be a mistake.”

“It’s too good to believe,” Chad agreed. “The Dragon owns the MDM. There is nothing as greedy as a dragon.”

Grt stuck his tongue out at him, “Splllth. And dere’s no ting as smelly as da Trollie foodies.” Ruby noticed Grt hadn’t insulted Chad or Trolls in general, just their food. She thought it was very diplomatic of him.

“Sorry there Grt. I guess I don’t think of you as a dragon.”

“Grt drag-goon,” Grt replied proudly.

“Right, drag-goon. No offense there. Let me be more specific. The Dragon is infamous for his greed.” Chad saw that he had appeased Grt so he continued. “For all practical purposes the

MDM is an extension of The Dragon. There is no way he would sell land worth a small fortune for one gold coin.”

“He didn’t,” Ruby agreed. “That was the good news. The bad news is...” She trailed off and looked at her mother. She started to cry and ran to her arms. In between sobs she explained, “The bad news is I’m going to expire.”

“Oh, that is bad news.”

It had taken Ruby a long time, but in between tears she had told them the entire story. She showed them the bill and each of the Trolls had tried to break the pendant.

“I’ve got some metal shears in the truck,” Chad said. “I use them for cutting locks and stuff. You’d be surprised what people chain up in the middle of the road.”

He went and got the shears. They cut right through the pendant as if it was made out of butter.

“See, there you go. No problem.”

But even cut in half, quarters and eighths, it wouldn’t come off. The pendant was held on by magic. After a few minutes the cuts welded themselves back together.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Chad exclaimed.

“Oh, I’ve seen some safes that work that way,” the Boogey Man offered, “but if The Dragon made it, you’ll never get it off. Oh, that is unless, he wants you to get it off.”

Ruby looked at the pendant. “I think this clock tells me when it’s coming off.”

It read:

37:28:3:24:53

37:28:3:24:52

37:28:3:24:51

“This is ridiculous,” Rachel said as she soothed her daughter. “You’re just a child. You can’t enter into contracts. They can’t

hold you to any agreements.” She glared at the gathering indignantly daring them to disagree.

It was Bruce’s turn to talk. “I know I’m just a Troll and I just work at the docks.” He paused to look at Rachel. He didn’t want to cause her pain, but the facts were the facts. “You know how Roger, Chad, and me get all tied up and confused with the littlest things. You know, remember the big fight you and Roger had because he didn’t understand the whole concept behind leasing a TV at that rent to own place?”

Rachel remembered. Roger thought he was buying a TV for \$20. It had taken him months to realize that it was \$20 a month for the next ten years. He had actually gone down there to complain. He had said, “Why do you keep sending me a bill? I’ve already paid for this TV three times.” He still didn’t really get it. Credit, leases, even working at the bridge... He didn’t seem to get it. How was he ever going to own a bridge that was worth more than he would earn in a thousand lifetimes, even if he lived to be a thousand in each lifetime?

Bruce let what he said sink in. “Us Trolls have problems understanding how things work out here in what you all like to call the real world. Well in the zone it’s a different place. In the zone princesses are bound at birth by ancient curses, hero’s start their quests at thirteen, and...” He paused. “And, if The Dragon says he’s got an agreement with you, then he’s got an agreement with you.” As an afterthought he added, “I’d never even heard about an age of consent until I’d been out here for a couple of months. What meaning does that have to a Fey Sprite who only lives for six months?”

Bruce stopped talking. Everyone was silent.

“He’s right,” Chad offered. “I know it doesn’t help, but he’s right.”

Rachel had listened to them. That was all fine and dandy, but they weren’t talking about their own child. This wasn’t some fairytale in which a father sold his daughter for a piece of fruit.

Things didn't work that way. They might live in the shadow of Mt. Doom, but that didn't mean that they still didn't live in the United States of America. You couldn't sell yourself into slavery, and you didn't expire on your eighteenth birthday no matter what you did. It just wasn't the way it was done.

The MDM and The Dragon were just going to have to face facts, suck it up, and write this one off as a lesson learned.

Nobody was going to expire her daughter in what did that stupid thing read, 37:28:2:39:41... 40... 39... 38.

She shook her head. Staring at the numbers was hypnotizing.

“Roger, Ruby, and me, and anyone else who wants to come along, are going down to the MDM headquarters first thing tomorrow morning and get this whole thing straightened out.”

“What the heck is this all about anyhow?” her mother asked.

Nobody had an answer for her.

Ruby no longer thought The Dragon intended to eat her.

Well, maybe if she failed, whatever that meant, but she couldn't be anything more than a snack for a dragon. This was an awful lot of trouble for a small snack.

She felt the amulet around her neck tingle slightly as these thoughts went through her head, and she knew that she was on to something. She wasn't food... the pendant tingled, but if she failed, she might be, and the pendant tingled again.

When she asked, failed at what? The pendant did not answer.

# 14 #

Talk Softly and Carry a Big Stick  
(Or, What the Boogey Man is Good For)

In the end everyone went to the MDM headquarters, but Bruce and Chad. They had wanted to go with as well, but they couldn't get the time off of work. The Trolls continued willingness to help Ruby still surprised her. She had thought as members of



the Under Belly Society they would side with The Dragon and excuse themselves from any further adventures, but Chad had explained it simply. “As long as you wear that pendant, you’re a representative of The Dragon. Protecting you is like protecting The Dragon’s property.”

Ruby hadn’t liked that explanation.

Bruce explained it slightly differently. “You’re like royalty.”

“Oh, what do you know. I thought I was making a joke, but the rumors are true.” Seeing as how nobody had understood what he had said, Clarence explained further. “Just like the rumor, oh, that a pretty princess has bought the land.”

Grt had made a low sweeping bow. “Da princess Rubies.”

Ruby saw the rest of them wondering if they should bow too. “I’m not a princess.” She dangled the pendant. “This thing doesn’t make me royalty. It’s a symbol of bondage.” Like a slave she thought, but the pendant hadn’t tingled until she thought of the wild animal analogy. Great, she thought. I’m nothing more than an animal with a radio tag.

That had been yesterday. Today they were traveling deep into the zone to Rigor Pass, which was the biggest city inside the magic reserve. It was fifteen miles past the border. Most of the way was up a steep, narrow, winding, mountain road. Clarence was driving again, while Ruby was staring out the window gazing in wonder at things she had only read about in books. She saw a gang of Goblins herding mountain goats and countless horse drawn carts manned by Trolls, Ogres, Orcs, Dwarves, and other Demi-Humans she couldn’t even begin to name. She saw a creature with a Human body and a lion’s head. She saw a herd of Centaurs galloping across a hillside. She even saw a Unicorn, though it darted away before anyone else could see it.

The road itself was lined with tourist attractions. One billed itself as the authentic Hanzel and Gretel Cottage. The sign in front claimed it had the Best Pasty in this or any vortex.

They didn't stop. Rachel was on a mission. This wasn't a sightseeing tour.

Ruby was enthralled. It was the first time she had ever been in the zone. It was better than anything she had ever read about in a book, or even dreamed about. The air was a little crisper, the sun a little brighter, and even the birds sang different tunes inside the free magic zone.

It was still early morning when they pulled up in front of an unlikely looking building.

"This is it?" Rachel asked as Clarence parked the car.

The MDM headquarters were located in a small unimposing building on a narrow unpaved dirt road just outside of Rigor Pass. It looked like a small decrepit one story house. The crumbling walls were made out of rock and a few large rotting timbers. It had an old thatched roof that looked like it let in plenty of sunshine and rain. All in all, it looked like a dump.

Nobody answered when they knocked, so they went inside. Ruby knew she shouldn't have been surprised, but she was. Inside the place was huge. It was like one of those giant foyers at the bottom of a skyscraper. A couple of football fields away they could see a lady Ogre sitting at a small desk.

Their feet rang out as they walked across the marble floor towards her. She didn't look up from her nails. She was putting on a fresh layer of neon orange nail polish.

"State your business."

"We want to see The Dragon," Rachel demanded.

The Ogre put down her nail polish. She tilted her head and looked over her glasses at the assembled group in front of her. She sat up straight and primped her hair. She picked up a mirror and picked a dead bug out from between her teeth. She regarded them again. The Ogre loved this line. She thought to herself, it's moments like this that I live for. She put down the mirror and looked at Rachel with a curt smile on her face. "It's good to want things." There she had said it perfectly. Just like it said in the

employee handbook. Whenever a customer wanted something ridiculous, like a reduction in the price of their bill or to correct a “typographical error” she was supposed to say, it’s good to want things, and then ignore them. It didn’t mention anything about anyone ever wanting to see The Dragon in the employee handbook, but she was sure she had handled the situation properly.

So, she happily ignored Rachel when she asked, “What is that supposed to mean?” Instead of responding, the Ogre picked up a small compact and started to apply powder.

Rachel was flabbergasted. “The Dragon. We demand to see The Dragon.”

The Ogre had applied her blush and was going to resume working on her nails when she noticed they hadn’t left. The employee handbook wasn’t that long. It didn’t really cover that many eventualities. She tried her line again, concentrating very hard to enunciate every syllable correctly. “It’s good to want things?”

Rachel grabbed the Ogre by the blouse and pulled her down close. “I don’t think you understand. We are going to see that dragon. And we are going to do that now.”

Under normal circumstances this would have been suicide. The Ogre outweighed Rachel by a factor of at least five to one and quite possibly much more. The Ogre was sensitive about such things and so kept her weight a secret. It wasn’t her fault she was thin boned. She tried to eat five and six meals a day, but she just wasn’t hungry. She still was large though. The Ogre could have thrown Rachel across the room.

“Um, honey, sweetie.” It was Roger. “Um, honey...”

“Back out of this,” Rachel glared at Roger. She returned her attention to the Ogre. “Dragon! Now!” she yelled.

The Ogre was a bit confused. The employee handbook didn’t cover this type of situation. She was supposed to say, it’s good to want things, and then the customer was supposed to walk away. Sure some of them were a little upset, but none had ever tried to

attack her. She was an Ogre, even if a small, petite Ogre. She didn't know what to do.

“The Dragon! Now!” Rachel repeated her demand.

The Ogre started to sweat. This wasn't going well at all. She sensed the anger in Rachel's voice.

This lady was clearly crazy. Who threatened an Ogre? No. Please. No. What had she done to deserve this? This crazy lady... She was clearly mentally unstable. When she told this lady, it's good to want things, the lady probably didn't even understand what she was saying. No one had told her what to do when confronted with the mentally unstable.

She was asking for a dragon, but she had brought one with her. Even now the dragon was looking through her make up. He was probably planting poison in her lipstick or acid in her eyeliner. She'd have to throw it all out. No. Maybe that's what they wanted. He was probably putting a bomb in her purse. If she tossed it down the trash chute, the whole building would explode when it reached the incinerator. As if to confirm her suspicions Grt looked at her and said, “Grt.”

Grt, she thought. What is that supposed to mean?

“Grt,” he repeated.

Why me?

The Ogre noticed the crazy lady had brought a retinue with her. A Troll! He was probably getting ready to bash her face in like he'd done to that melting guy standing next to him.

And talk about crazy, that kid with the scary red hair, she had a far away, melancholy look in her eyes. She was just the type of girl who would walk into the MDM headquarters and start shooting the place up with one of those new high powered AK-47/5889's. She'd read about this sort of thing in the paper. She watched the news. She was nobody's fool. They'd chop her up into little pieces and the janitorial crew wouldn't discover her for six months. It had happened... She couldn't remember where it had happened, but it had happened.

“Now!” Rachel repeated her command.

No. No. The Ogre closed her eyes. She silently pleaded for her life. If she was only safe in her bed, she could pull the blankets over her eyes. No! She wouldn't be safe there either. They would find where she lived. They'd hunt her down.

“Please don't hurt me,” she whimpered. Her eyes were slammed shut. She was shaking with fear. She'd probably lose her job over this, but her job wasn't worth her life.

“Don't tell anybody I sent you. Take an elevator to level...” She looked at her desk. Level what? She'd never sent anyone anywhere. This Human was going to rip out her throat. She was going to eat her spleen. She was going to... She couldn't think of it. Tell her something, she told herself. Tell her anything. She spit out the first words that came into her mind. “Level 34.” Yeah. Yeah. That sounded good. “Level 34. A-a-a-a, room 34, um 3401.”

The Ogre breathed a sigh of relief as Rachel let go of her.

“Level 34 room 3401,” the Ogre repeated thankful she had escaped with her life.

“That's how you get something done,” Rachel said as she marched off towards the bank of elevators.

“Way to go honey.” Roger had never seen anything like that. He was going to have to take her more seriously when she told him to take out the garbage. “You out menaced an Ogre. I didn't think that could be done.”

Ruby shot Clarence a smile. “Thanks.”

“Oh, Oh, believe me, it was my pleasure.”

# 15 #

Not Nobody, Not No How

The group of them walked to a bank of eight elevators. All of the elevators were open and waiting. When they walked inside one, the doors closed. There was only one button. It didn't say 34.

It didn't say, This Way To The Dragon. It didn't say anything. It was a simple white button.

"What do we do?" Roger asked, but the decision had been made when they walked into the elevator. Before anyone had pushed the button the elevator started to go down.

Five minutes later the elevator was still going down.

"Shouldn't we be going up to get to the 34th floor?" Roger asked. He didn't like enclosed spaces. He didn't see how any self respecting Troll could ever work as an elevator operator, but some did. Elevators didn't have the grandeur and beauty of a bridge. At least on a bridge he thought, if you jumped over the side sooner or later you'd stop going down.

Nobody else was saying anything.

He couldn't take it. He waited another minute and then he pushed the button.

The doors opened and they found themselves in a large, empty waiting room. There was room for at least fifty people. There were sofas with metal armrests in them, so anyone waiting couldn't lie down on them and there were uncomfortable looking plastic chairs.

Mounted in a corner was what looked like a crystal ball or a TV. It was filled with fuzzy white and black dots that changed randomly and it made an annoying hissing sound. Taped to the bottom was a sign that read: Do Not Change The Settings.

On the far side of the wall was a counter. Behind the counter was a giant smiling mouth full of sharp crooked teeth. Above the mouth was a pair of beady eyes and below the mouth was a nametag: HI MY NAME IS GREEZ, and then in real small letters that Ruby hadn't noticed at first the message continued: How may I be of service?

Now we're getting somewhere, thought Rachel. "We want to see The Dragon."

To his credit Greez did not blink an eye. Well maybe not to his credit, he hadn't blinked in the last sixteen years, and he was meaning to see an optometrist about that, but the point was he didn't blink. He was proud of that. He kept a steady gaze on this group of... What were they? They were clearly dangerous... assassins probably. No one got past Stacey downstairs. Not in the past 200 years. Her orders were simple. Don't let anyone into the elevators. He hoped she was still alive. Not that he cared about her, but hiring a replacement, especially if word got out that she was dead, would be tiring and time consuming.

He couldn't think about that now. There were two Humans, a Troll, an incredible melting man, and a walking lizard with wings. His eyesight was going. Not being able to blink will do that. In the union negotiations they always said, next year we'll go for the vision plan, always next year. He had waited. Next year never came. Focus, he thought.

Humans, two dangerous female Humans that had killed Stacey the Ogre. He'd heard about these thrill seeking Humans. They'd read one to many fantasy novels and the next thing you knew they wanted to hunt a dragon.

He didn't blink an eye though. He was a professional and he had an eye condition. He reached under the counter and came up with a form. He looked at it, while still keeping an eye on them. It was harder than it sounded, but he was a pro.

"Here you go," he said as he passed the form over to the bigger Human. "One form W/88-9, fill this out and you'll be in to see The Dragon in no time."

Rachel looked at the form.

Greez took the opportunity to put a small sign up on the counter and run out the back door.

The sign read: Out to Lunch.

Rachel was looking at the form. "This is an application for employment?" She looked up. The mouth of teeth was no longer there. She hadn't noticed him running out.

“Where did he go?”

Ruby said, “I think we frightened him.”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything.”

“Well something happened.”

“Maybe we should just follow him through the door,” Ruby suggested.

It was a good idea, so they did.

Greez was sitting at his desk with his legs propped up. He was enjoying a nice peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It was a bit early for lunch, but it had seemed like a good idea to leave the waiting room.

He looked up from his meal to see the five adventures standing in the doorway.

“Out,” he said. “I’m on my lunch break.”

“Listen...” Rachel began.

“Out, Out,” Greez said again. “Union rules, no customer’s in the back office.”

“But you just left...”

“Don’t be telling me my job.” Greez paused. “Have you filled out the proper form?”

“You gave us an employment application.”

“We’re not hiring.” Then he reconsidered. “Did you kill Stacey?”

“Who?”

“Stacey, the Ogre, is she dead?”

“No,” Rachel was appalled. “We didn’t kill anyone?”

“Then you’re not blood thirsty adventures bent on killing innocent monsters for your own nefarious reasons. Maybe a little pocket change?”

“Heavens, No. Have you met my boyfriend Roger?”

Roger stuck his head in the doorway. “Hi.”

“So, you brought a Troll to smash in my face like he did to that other guy?”

“No, we just want to see The Dragon.”



“So Stacey is fine?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to kill me for sport?”

“No.”

“Then get out of my office,” he said as he pushed them out. He was surprisingly strong. “And, don’t bother me until you’ve filled out the correct form.”

He shut the door.

Rachel rubbed her temples like she was coming down with a headache. “What was that all about?”

Ruby asked Clarence, “You didn’t do anything to him?”

“Oh, no. Most of these customer service types are immune anyhow.”

“So what was that all about?”

“Maybe we should fill out the proper form like he asked,” that was Roger. He was surprised to discover he was the voice of reason.

It took them an hour, but they finally found the correct form. Grt had happily handed the form to Ruby. “Dis wat Rubies needs?”

“Yes, thank you, Grt.” Ruby was sick of looking.

It was a simple form. It only had two lines.

Request for Audience with The Dragon, Form WW/98-09

Do Not Write Outside of Boxes                      For Office Use Only,

Do not Modify This

Area

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Approved \_\_\_\_\_

Reason \_\_\_\_\_

Denied   X

Ruby showed the form to her mother.

“This doesn’t look good.” It was Rachel’s first time into the magic zone as well, but she was beginning to get a feel for how things worked here. “Any ideas, honey?”

Roger shrugged his shoulders. “I collect tolls. I don’t know anything about this type of thing.”

“How about you Clarence? Grt?”

They didn’t have any ideas either.

Ruby asked Grt where he had found the form, but he just shrugged. “Grt looksees and it in Grt’s hand.”

She had hoped to find a form that wasn’t already checked denied.

They sat and thought about the problem for a long time. Finally Ruby figured out what to do and grabbed a few rays of manna out of Grt’s bag.

They went back to Greez’s office, but he didn’t respond when they knocked on his door. They tried to open it, but he had locked it. Next to the door was a large window with the blinds pulled low. There was a small crack in the blinds, and they took turns over the course of the afternoon peering through it at Greez.

He stared back. They didn’t know the reason he stared was because of his eye problem, and he didn’t know why they didn’t go away. No one saw The Dragon, not no how, not no way. It said so in the employee handbook, and if they only looked at the proper form, they’d know it as well.

# 16 #

Form WW/98-09r

It was five O’clock. Greez didn’t have a choice. He could spend the night in his office or he could go out and face the Humans again.

Grt saw him coming to the door. He called out to Ruby, “Geezer coming! Geezer coming!”

Greez opened the door and locked it behind him. He pretended not to notice Ruby and the others.

Greez had decided he was going to ignore the Humans and walk straight to the elevator. He might even call in sick tomorrow. He thought he felt a cold coming on... Or, schedule an appointment with the eye doctor. Yes, that was the best thing to do. With any luck, he would need surgery and wouldn't be back at work for a month. Maybe there would be complications. Yes, complications! That would be best! This whole problem would be long gone if there were complications.

Greez was headed for the elevator doors when he noticed his way was blocked. Roger was standing in his path.

Roger smiled a helpful Troll smile. “We have the form filled out. Just like you asked.”

Fine, Greez thought. This will only take a second. He didn't know about Humans, but Trolls weren't that bright. He guessed he would just have to point out that the form came predenied and then be on his way.

Greez let himself be guided by the Troll. “This way Mr. Greez. Ruby filled out the form.”

“Here you are,” Ruby said as she handed the completed Request for Audience with The Dragon form to Greez.

Greez never took his eyes off of Ruby. He grinned and the reflection of a thousand artificial lights danced off his shiny white teeth. He was going to enjoy this. He hadn't liked being cooped up in his office all day long. He took a big rubber stamp off the counter. It was the MDM seal. “Don't you ever read anything?” he asked Ruby as he brought the seal down hard on the application. “Request Denied,” he said. “Now can we all go home?”

Ruby looked down at the form. It had a big MDM date mark stamp on it. The form read

Request for Audience with The Dragon, Form WW/98-09r

Do Not Write Outside of Boxes For Customer Use Only,

*Do not Modify This*

*Area*

Name Ruby Firehaven

Approved X

Reason Cancellation of Agreement Denied

“We’ll see The Dragon now,” Ruby said. Her plan had worked out well. She had modified the form with magic.

“Don’t you know how to read little girl? The request is denied.” He pointed down at the form. “See...” and then he saw the form was marked approved. “What? How?”

“The Dragon,” Ruby said. “We’ll see him now.”

“You tricked me,” Greez complained as he looked over the form. He’d cry if he could. This wasn’t going to look good on his permanent record. No one was supposed to see The Dragon. Not no one. Not no how.

“I did nothing of the sort.” Ruby held her ground.

“No. This won’t work. See, right here you modified this form. Form WW/98-09 specifically prohibits customer modifications.”

“But this isn’t Form WW/98-09. This is form WW/98-09r, the revised form. Now, where is that dragon?”

“But you can’t modify a form, you don’t have the authority. By what authority can you go around making up revisions to forms?” He was on a roll. “We have procedures. Time honored fairy tale traditions. You can’t waltz in here with your real world ways and muck up the works. Without authority all you have is....” His voice trailed off.

Ruby had taken The Dragon's pendant out. He saw that she was holding The Dragon's seal of authority.

Greez thought about saying, that's a horse of a different color, or why didn't you say so in the first place, but his tongue just sort of stopped working.

"By this authority," Ruby stated in defiance.

Greez hadn't seen The Dragon's pendant in... well, ever. He bet nobody had for century's maybe millennium. "Is it real?"

"Yes," Rachel broke in, "and that's why we need to see The Dragon."

Greez sat down. It was already 5:15PM. He wasn't going to get out of there for a long time. "I need a cup of hot chocolate." He got up, walked over to the vending machines, and opened them up with a key. He didn't want to be accused of being an ungracious host to The Dragon's envoys. "Anybody want anything?"

"Grt hungee."

Yes they all were hungry. They hadn't eaten in a long time.

# 17 #

I'm no Lawyer

The couches and chairs were too uncomfortable, so they sat down on the floor in front of the vending machines and whenever anybody wanted anything they helped themselves.

Ruby liked the Fairy Dust Crackers, whereas her mom was more partial to the Flower Petal Cookies.

Clarence, for his part, happily munched on some Jellied Mushrooms, while Grt had a Premium Jellied Manna Stick in one hand and a bag of Cotton Candy Magic Wafers in the other. He was busy trying to decide which to put down so he could grab his apple juice.

Roger was delighted. He hadn't seen Squid Chips or Booger Twists since he was a young Trolling. Greez shared his taste.

Meanwhile, Ruby was just finishing the story of how she had been tricked.

Greez emptied the rest of the bag of freeze dried beetles into his mouth and crunched on them as he considered her story. He took a sip of hot chocolate. “I know you have no reason to believe me and your magic won’t work on me, so you’ll just have to trust your instincts.” He paused. “You probably have pretty good instincts, otherwise The Dragon wouldn’t have chosen you.”

“So he doesn’t want to eat me?”

“Now, I didn’t say that. I don’t know why The Dragon wants you. I just know he does.” He looked at Rachel. “First off understand, if you’re going to fight The Dragon head on, you’re going to lose.”

“I’m not sacrificing my daughter.” Rachel jumped in.

“That may be.”

“There’s no maybe about it mister.”

“OK. Let’s just relax.” Greez pantomimed breathing in and out. It was something he had learned in therapy. “Everybody just breathe in and out.” He glanced over at Rachel. She looked like she was going to strangle him. “You too, Ruby’s mom,” he said urging her along. “Breathe in and out. Find the calm center. We want to let go of our anger. Can you feel the healing power entering your body?”

“Oh, oh, I like this. Find my calm center. This is good.”

“The Dragon,” Rachel reminded everyone.

Greez was calm now. He felt like he could float on a wave of bliss and let the worries of the world drift away. He wasn’t surrounded by a group of bloodthirsty adventures. It was a family, a nice suburban family from the real world with a Troll stepfather and an Uncle who thought he was a statue from the wax museum on a hot day.

“Think win-win,” Greez said.

“Win-win,” Rachel echoed him.

“Exactly, win-win,” Greez repeated softly as he took a few more breaths. He could sense Rachel’s anger building. He could feel her negative attitude towards breath therapy growing, so he took the opportunity to stand up and put some distance between them.

“Let me go get Ruby’s file. Let’s see what we have on her.”

When Greez returned, he put a wisp of silvery manna into a slot on the side of the crystal ball mounted on the wall. The picture was hard to see and full of static, so he hit the ball a couple of times until he got it working correctly.

The crystal ball played a tape of the meeting between Ruby and Frank at the meadow. Greez put the tape on hold. He turned to Rachel. “Listen to the next part.”

The tape played. On the crystal ball an image of Ruby said, “I’ll take it.”

“But she didn’t know what she was agreeing to.”

Greez played the tape again. Ruby’s voice said, “I’ll take it,” again.

“It’s meaningless. It’ll never stand up in court.” Rachel refused to see the futility of her position.

Greez put the tape on an endless loop. “I’ll take it. I’ll take it. I’ll take it.” The same scene played over and over. “That’s all a jury is going to hear. Ruby agreed to the contract.”

“But she’s not old enough.”

“This side doesn’t recognize age as an appropriate defense.” Greez turned his attention to Ruby. “It’s a shame it happened to you. You seem like such a nice kid.”

Ruby was sick of being called a kid. “I fourteen. I’m not a child anymore.”

“You’re fourteen. I’m 798. Trust me you’re a kid. Besides which,” and he turned back to Rachel, “now we have a tape of Ruby claiming she’s not a child.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Really, you can’t have it both ways.”

A thousand teeth or not, Rachel was about to launch herself at him. Roger stopped her. As he did his, he remembered he was the voice of reason. “I thought you were going to help us?”

Greez reflected for a moment and flashed his teeth. “I work for The Dragon first and his property second.”

Grt hissed at him.

“Relax Grt,” Ruby said. This was her battle. Greez was right. Like everyone, there were limits on what he could do. All the same, it was time to get some information out of him. “Do you know where The Dragon is?”

He answered directly. “No.”

“So this audience with The Dragon form is meaningless?”

“I imagine if you find The Dragon that form will guarantee you an audience.”

Well, that was something.

Greez continued, “Even if his plan were to eat you, he’d stop and grant you an audience with him before he did.” Greez said this with a smile. “But then, I’ve never heard of a dragon not talking to its prey. I hear they are like that, sort of like cats playing with mice.”

OK. Now it was Roger’s turn. It took all his will power not to punch this guy. How could he say such cold hearted things? “This isn’t helping,” was all he managed to get out.

“Right you are. I’ll tell you what helping you is. Helping is letting you know that if you take this to court, you will lose, inside the zone or not. It’s a lost battle. The Dragon gave Ruby, literally gave her mind you, millions of dollars worth of land. He wants Ruby, a few million or tens of millions more in lawyers, court costs, or buying a judge a new house...” He let his voice trail off, before he reworded the reality of the situation. “If The Dragon thought he was going to lose, he’d simply let it be known that the judge’s own daughter would have to pay the price in Ruby’s stead... It’s happened before. You’re not going to win a court battle, so don’t waste your time.”



Rachel was not going to go down without a fight, “But this is America. We’ll call in the FBI, the CIA. We’ll appeal.”

“It will be hard to do from a jail cell.” Greez was in his element. He was no lawyer, but had always wanted to be one. “Let’s see.” He took a scroll out of the file and read. “You want to fight it in court, then let’s look at the criminal charges you will be facing. Aiding and abetting a fugitive harvester. Collecting, processing, and redistributing manna without a license.” He looked up, “That’s a big no-no. It’s a national security issue. Collection with intent to distribute. Interfering with a licensed collection harvester and contributing to the delinquency of said harvester.”

The fight was going out of Rachel.

Greez turned to Ruby “Perhaps you will understand the coup de grace the best. Even if you cancel the agreement, you will still owe a cancellation charge, due and payable immediately.”

Ruby knew how that would work. The Dragon wouldn’t owe her anything, and they’d just add a few decimal places to the bill.

“So, there’s nothing I can do?”

“You can do anything you want.”

“But I can’t get out of the deal with The Dragon?”

“Nobody ever has.” He let that sink in. “You’re still looking at it the wrong way. You say the deal, yet you don’t know what the deal is. Stop. Think. If you don’t know what the deal is, maybe The Dragon doesn’t either.”

“And that’s helping?” Roger was so confused. Why couldn’t it be simple?

But that was all the help Greez was going to give them. He ushered them into an elevator and they all rode up together. Once they were outside, he said his goodbyes and whispered softly to Ruby. “If I wanted to outsmart The Dragon, I would talk to George.”

“George?” Ruby asked, but Greez was gone, and so was the MDM headquarters building. A sign stood in an empty lot. “This branch office of the MDM has been closed due to a medical emergency. For service information call \_\_\_\_\_,” but that part of the sign had been left blank.

George?

It wasn’t much of a lead, but it was all she had.

# 18 #

To All Things there is a Season

George? The name had drifted unbidden into Ruby’s mind. Greez may have been giving her great advice or maybe he had been sending her on a wild goose chase. It didn’t matter. She had intended to take the day off from her worries and that’s just what she was going to do.

She felt the sun on her face and shook the thought of George from her mind. A cool breeze drifted through her hair. She lay down finding a comfortable place among the rocks and boulders. She gazed at the clouds, the bridge, and White Water Creek. It all looked so peaceful.

She was up in the gorge where Roger had pointed to weeks before. “We’ll get the rocks for our cottage from up there,” he had said. Now he was carrying a big 12”x12”x24” block of rock down towards the spring. It would join a pile of other rocks already there, which formed the outline of a cottage. Roger enjoyed the work. Ruby was helping him. She would take a piece of manna and cut the boulders into straight even slabs.

“They’re so smooth,” her mother had remarked.

Roger had nodded his head in approval. “Our cottage will be the envy of Dwarves around the world.”

Ruby knew she could have made a cottage in a matter of minutes if she used enough magic AND, it was a big and, and if she knew how to do it. What was she supposed to do? Grab a handful of manna and say, “Cottage?” She knew it wouldn’t work.

It was also safer this way. If there ever was a magic outage or something, the cottage wouldn't self destruct. They still would have a place to live.

Rachel was busy putting in a garden. She said they'd plant herbs, vegetables, and then jokingly added, "a nice hedge of Hazen Crots." Ruby looked at her mom. She was beautiful and happy down there. It hadn't taken twenty years after all.

Clarence had helped them design the cottage or at least the coat closet. He was going to move in with them. Off and on he helped Rachel in the garden, but mostly he was reading with his feet dangling in the spring. He was a fan of what used to be called Speculative Fantasy. The Others referred to them as Historical Case Studies.

Grt was having a grand time. The spring was bubbling up manna at an incredible rate. He was cleaning wisps of magic out of the trees and stuffing them into his bag. Ruby guessed the bag must be pretty full by now.

She was surrounded by family and friends. Things were going pretty well. OK. She had this countdown clock around her neck, but it was amazing, she reflected, what you could get used to. It didn't seem so ominous. She couldn't believe The Dragon was going to eat her, but what then? Talk? Play a game? Oh, and by the way, thanks for dropping by? It didn't seem likely.

Even on her day off, she couldn't help herself. She started to think about The Dragon and what she needed to do. She'd have to go to the museum and do some research, see if they had a picture of The Dragon or something. And George? Was that simply a red herring? They had followed a few leads before they realized it was simply too common of a name. There were thousands of listings in the phone book and the George they were looking for might not even be listed. Everyone knew a George, but no one knew the George. The name was as good as no lead at all.

Ruby looked at her mom again. She was taking this pretty well. They had cried together a few times and it had made them both feel better. She watched her digging in the garden again. Hazen Crots, she thought adding to her mental list, Hazen Crots, a museum visit, and George.

She watched as Grt sat down next to Clarence. For a Boogie Man, Clarence sure was nice.

Ruby pulled The Dragon's pendant out from under her shirt and watched the numbers count down.

37:01:10:19:7

37:01:10:19:6

37:01:10:19:5

37:01:10:19:4

37:01:10:19:3

37:01:10:19:2

37:01:10:19:1

37:01:10:19:0

Thirty seven months, one day, ten hours, nineteen minutes, and zero seconds. Someday it would be all zeros. Strange she mused, the thought didn't worry her. She yawned. She was tired. It was her day off. She closed her eyes and took a nap in the afternoon sun.

Thus Ends  
The Book of Grt

Book II  
The Book of George

# 1 #  
Who Makes the Rules?

Ruby was having a dream. She knew she was in a dream, but even so the danger seemed real enough. She was on a chessboard. She was the red queen. On all sides, dark pawns, rooks, and knights surrounded her. As she watched the chess pieces grew large and menacing. They towered high above her. A giant knight leveled a lance as big as a flagpole at her. "Yield!" he demanded.

A dragon's face filled the sky above the knight. The Dragon was black with glowing red eyes the color of Ruby's hair. He licked at his nostrils with a giant forked tongue as he considered his prey. He smiled revealing rows of glimmering white razor sharp teeth.

"You are no match for me," he laughed as he tied a blue checkered napkin around his neck and readied a knife and fork. "Yield," he said again.

Ruby ran. She dodged around giant castles and hid in the robes of oversized bishops. She ran off the board and into the thicket of an overgrown forest. She ran, and she ran until she came to a clearing with a bubbling brook fed by a magical spring. She recognized the place.

Next to the spring a man sized dragon sat on a stool in front of a table. Across the table was another stool, which The Dragon offered to Ruby. Ruby sat down. On the table a game of chess was in progress. There was a red queen surrounded by black pieces with glowing red eyes. She tried to concentrate on the positioning of the pieces, but at random pawns and rooks would appear and disappear from the board.

She looked at one of the black pawns and watched it change, from black, to white, to red, to a motley combination of the three, and then back to black again.

She thought she saw a way the queen could move and she reached out her hand, but before she got to the piece, The Dragon had placed a black pawn in her path.

"You can't do that!" Ruby said crying foul.

“Can’t?” There was menace in his voice. “I thought you were smarter than that?”

“It’s cheating.”

The pieces dissolved, as did the forest glade, the brook, and the table, till all that remained was a ghostly outline of The Dragon’s head with swirling red eyes.

“How can I cheat, when I make the rules?”

His eyes grew then until they filled the entire world with a warm red glow.

Ruby didn’t want to open her eyes. The sunlight felt warm and inviting on her face. Despite the content of the dream, the nap had done her good. She had finally seen The Dragon and he had given her advice. She knew it was a critical clue to this game they were playing, or whatever it was exactly that they were doing. If he could cheat, so could she. There were no rules. Perhaps, she thought, The Dragon himself might not know where this would lead. If that was the case, she could lead this game wherever she wanted.

She welcomed the idea of unlimited possibilities.

Rachel reached out and stroked her daughter’s hand. Roger had come and gotten her.

“She looks like she’s having a bad dream,” Roger had said. “I don’t know if we should wake her or not.”

By the time Rachel had gotten there, the dream had ended. Ruby looked as peaceful and innocent as she had when she was a baby. “She’s just a child,” Rachel whispered softly.

Ruby opened her eyes. She was up in the gorge where she had fallen asleep. Her mother was sitting across from her. Rachel had a teary smile on her face. Roger kneeled behind Rachel holding her shoulders.

“We didn’t mean to wake you,” her mom said as she wiped tears from her own eyes. “I was just thinking back to when you were a baby.” Rachel didn’t add her concerns about The Dragon.

The Dragon, he had attached a count down clock of doom to her daughter. At the moment Ruby turned eighteen, something awful was going to happen to her.

Ruby knew it was more than just a passing bit of nostalgia that had worked her mother up. Ruby, more than anyone else, knew the strain the pendant was causing. She didn't tell them about the dream. She felt good. She felt in control. "Don't worry. We'll figure this out."

"You really think so?"

She felt the strain in her mother's voice. "Don't worry," she said again. "It will all work out." And when she said it, she knew it was true. Even if she didn't know just yet how she was going to work out the details.

# 2 #

## Speculative Fiction: Where Reality Starts

Ruby, Rachel, and Roger walked down to the clearing together. Ruby thought it must be time for lunch or at least a snack. She was famished.

As they reached the spring, Clarence looked up from his book. "Oh, I hope you had a nice nap."

Ruby recognized the book he was reading, Lucky's Tavern. It was a collection of short stories that all started, where else but in Lucky's Tavern. She had read it years ago. "I really enjoyed that book," she told Clarence.

"Oh, it's a good read, nice and easy, and the historical information can't be beat."

Ruby was aware of this belief. It was popular among the Others. Many of them believed that fantasy fiction published in the real world wasn't fiction at all. Clarence had previously told her, "Oh, maybe not here, or on Mt. Doom, but if it's in a book, it's happened in some vortex, somewhere. Maybe the Thousand Acre Woods or in the Weeping Willows vortexes."

Rachel didn't share his point of view. "They are just stories." She took the book away from Clarence and opened it to the copyright page. "See, right here. This book was published ten years before the barriers came down." She flipped the page again, as she continued, "And some of the stories were first published over thirty years ago. The barriers have only been down for six years. Before they fell, no one knew what was happening on the other side. The stories are just made up." She looked at Clarence, daring him to disagree. "They're not real."

"Oh, real, unreal. I'm no philosopher, but in the zone sometimes it's hard to tell the difference."

"Nonsense." Rachel was a pragmatist. "Something is either real or it isn't."

Clarence was going to let it go. He didn't want to make any waves. He was looking forward to living in their new coat closet and he didn't want to do anything that would spoil that. It was going to be an extra large coat closet, a nice big five by five room. He was even going to get to fill it himself with whatever coats and hats he wanted. A Boogie Man didn't get opportunities like that very often. He had to be careful. He didn't want to muck the works. Instead of arguing the point, he was planning on letting the whole discussion drift away.

Ruby, on the other hand, wanted to delve deeper into this subject. She needed to understand the perspective of the other side. She needed to know how magic worked. "Clarence, explain this concept of yours again, that the events chronicled in fantasy books actually happened."

"Oh, I don't know what else to say," he said as he looked at Rachel.

Ruby stepped in again. "We all know how it works in the real world Clarence. Tell us about how it works in the zone, on the slopes of Mt. Doom."

He paused. How did you explain the difference between the magical world and the mundane? "Oh, anything is possible with



magic. Like this book, Lucky's Tavern, when I was younger and," he added sheepishly, "wilder, I used to frequent Lucky's."

"It's just a story," Rachel interjected.

"Come on mom. Did you ever really think you'd be sitting by a magical spring, with a drag-goon, a Boogie Man, and a Troll?"

Rachel saw her point, but she wasn't about to let it go without a joke. "Roger isn't the first Troll I've ever gone out with."

"Really?" Roger asked.

Well, that was a mistake, Rachel thought. "Sorry honey, bad joke."

"I don't get it." Roger liked a good joke. "What's the punch line?"

He wasn't going to let it go. How could she get out of this? "You know how Trolls existed in myth and fantasy on this side before the fall?"

He nodded.

"Well, this guy I knew in college had the nickname Tommy the Troll, because he was so messy."

"Tommy! You knew Tommy Sludgewater?" Roger was really excited. "He left the swamp... 25 years ago."

Tommy Sludgewater? That did sort of sound familiar. No, it couldn't be possible. Could it? "No one could cross over. How could we be talking about the same guy?"

"Magic!" Ruby had the answer.

"Oh, yes," Clarence agreed. "Magic would get someone here, but once here..."

"They'd be trapped and lose any magic abilities."

"Oh, yes. I think so."

"Tommy made it? I can't believe it. He always said he wanted to travel." It was Roger again. "Where is he now?"

“I don’t know,” Rachel answered. “It was a long time ago. We stopped going out. Do you really think it was the same person?”

“I don’t know mom, but it sounds like it was.” Ruby had an idea. She asked Clarence, “Does that mean we can effect the other side simply by writing a story?” It would be easy to write a story. She was composing it in her head right now. The Dragon let Ruby off the hook. He decided he’d trade the pendant for a nice cold glass of juice and they lived happily ever after. Well, she’d have to work on the wording. Could it be that easy?

“Oh, sometimes. If it were a magical story written by a powerful wizard, then it could be the same as a spell, and spells work.” He looked at Rachel, but she was mulling Tommy over in her head and didn’t notice. “Oh, but if you are asking if anyone can write a story. Say if I wrote a short story, would it then happen? Then no, that’s not the case.” He paused to capture his thoughts and come up with an example. “Oh, oh, if I wrote a story in which Clarence Fearlock had a long lost uncle that left him a gazillion dollars, it would just be words on paper. It would be a nice story, but it wouldn’t happen.”

“So, what’s the difference between that and Lucky’s Tavern?” Ruby asked.

“Oh, that’s simple. Lucky’s Tavern is real.”

It didn’t make any sense to Ruby. “How can you tell? If we assume the book Lucky’s Tavern is a real historical document as real as any other history book, how can you tell the difference between a history book and just a bunch of made up stories?”

“Oh, I suppose you could look at the publisher, the imprint, and all that, but mostly you just know. If you read it and it rings true, it probably happened somewhere. Oh, maybe not on Mt. Doom, but oh my, there are thousands of vortexes.”

“I don’t believe it.” Rachel wasn’t going to buy into this nonsense.

Ruby wasn't so sure. "Are you telling me that Raven Skylark really was a member of the Blue Adepts and he really rescued Princess Al'eena from the Viper Pits of Crog?"

"Oh, Al'eena was a rare beauty, and oh, so nice. She wanted to be a cabaret singer you know. If you went to Lucky's on open mike night, you could hear her sing. Oh, what a voice..." Clarence drifted off in fond memories.

Ruby's mind wandered as well. She had loved the Lucky's Tavern series. She had read all five of the books. They were collections of short stories. The plot of each story started in Lucky's Tavern and each story always began same way.

Eventually everyone went to Lucky's Tavern. They came for the food. They came for the drink. They came for adventure. Whatever you were looking for, Lucky's Tavern was the place you where sure to find it.

"I think I know where we can find George," Ruby said out loud.

# 3 #  
Get Lucky

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Roger asked Ruby. They had come alone. "It will be less conspicuous that way," Ruby had suggested. Her mom had been concerned, but Ruby had assured her. "Roger will be right there with me. We'll be fine."

Lucky's Tavern was billed at the most dangerous drinking hall in all the Seven Realms. The nightly bar fights were legendary. According to the books, the latest owner, One Armed Scott, had bolted down all the tables. It was the only way to keep the patrons from throwing them at each other.

"Are you sure this is it?" Roger asked again. He looked around. It looked like a 50's style hamburger stand. Behind a

chrome counter there was a burly Ogre with an apron and a white paper cap on his head. He was busy making a shake for an Elvin waitress who was chewing gum impatiently. When the shake was done, she rolled off on roller skates and delivered the frosty concoction to a romantic pair of Dwarves in a back booth.

The décor was red leather, white and black tiles, and chrome, lots of chrome. A football game played on a TV mounted over the soda jerks counter while Elvis's voice crooned out of a jukebox.

Roger tried again. He couldn't think of anything else to say. "Are you sure we're in the right place?" This didn't seem like the most dangerous bar in the realm. It wasn't hard to see through the dense smoke. He had seen a No Smoking sign on the front door next to a sign that read, Service with a Smile. The patrons weren't huddled in quiet conversation and there was no fear of being overheard. The patrons were laughing, telling jokes, and having a good time.

This didn't fit with Ruby's image of Lucky's either. "We might as well get something to eat while we're here."

"OK," Roger said suspiciously. Though he was doubtful. The counters sparkled too much for it to be a really good restaurant. A Gnome was even mopping the floor. "I doubt the food is any good."

"Don't be bad mouthing the food buddy." It was the Ogre.

"What do you recommend?" Ruby asked as she took a seat at the counter. The place was about half full. In the books it always went they were fortunate to grab the last seat or the only place left was next to a menacing man with scars on his face.

"Everything's good," the Ogre said as he handed menus to Ruby and Roger. "Everything." He said the last statement directly to Roger.

Roger could take a hint. "Mmm, smells good." He flashed a weak, doubting smile.

The Ogre grunted and walked away.

“Try the Lucky Burger,” a voice at the end of the bar called. He grabbed his half eaten burger and walked over towards them, “And a shake. Don’t forget the shake.”

“Sounds good,” Ruby agreed and called out to the Ogre. “Could we get two Lucky Burgers with fries and two chocolate shakes.”

“Could I get mine with malted bugs?” Roger asked.

The Ogre eyed him disdainfully. “You’ll get it how we make it.” He paused and eyed Roger some more, as he sneered, “And you’ll like it.”

“Um, Yes. Thank you.” Where was Clarence when you needed him? “I hope this is the right place, everything seems too nice and friendly, but the service...” Roger caught the Ogre swinging his head around to listen. “But, the service,” Roger continued. “Out of this world. Really thumbs up. I only wish they had some of those comment cards.”

The Ogre reached between the catsup and mustard bottles on the counter and grabbed a comment card. He put it down and carefully placed a pencil on top of it. As if daring Roger to contradict him, he repeated his earlier warning. “Everything is nice here. Understand?”

“Uh, yeah, sure, uh Milton,” Roger said reading the Ogre’s nametag.

“You got anything else to say?” the Ogre glared.

Roger tried to smile as he reached for the pencil. “Mmm. Good food and great service.”

The Ogre turned around and resumed frying their burgers on the grill. “Onions?” he called over his shoulder.

“That would be nice,” Roger replied.

The Ogre only grunted.

The man with who had suggested the Lucky burgers sat down next to Ruby. He had on an old Cubs baseball cap and a catsup stained t-shirt that read, Beam Me Up Scotty.

“He’s fortunate,” the man said referring to Roger. “In the old days Milton would have torn his arms off.” He got a dreamy far away look in his eyes. “That’s how One Armed Scott got his name you know? Eh.” He waived his hand. “You’re too young to remember. There was a time...”

“When this was the meanest, dirtiest, low downiest bar in all the Seven Realms,” Ruby finished for him.

“You know,” he said forming a quick bond of friendship with Ruby. “Eventually everyone came to Lucky’s Tavern. They came for the food. They came for the drink. They came for adventure. Whatever you were looking for, Lucky’s Tavern was the place you were sure to find it.”

“George,” Ruby said conspiratorially. “We are looking for George.”

“George?” he said. “You’re looking for the mighty Wizard George? George the Destroyer, George the Slayer, George bane to friend and foe, Slayer of Fell Beasts, Killer of Dragons, Looter of Lost Tombs. You know, George.” He looked at her. “That George?”

It must be. “Yes.”

“Never heard of him.”

She looked at him cockeyed.

“OK. I’ve heard of him. George the Mighty, George the Handsome, George the one who by the end of the adventure always seems to win the heart of the heroine...” He cast a sidelong glance at Ruby. “Say, that Troll fella hasn’t tricked you in here... telling you some story about how if you kiss him, in the morning he’ll turn into some prince, has he?”

“Roger’s my dad.”

“Really.” He looked her over. She didn’t look like a Troll.

“Well my step dad. My mother’s boyfriend.”

“Not one of those Oedipal things?”

“Look, do you know where I can find George or not?”

He shrugged. “Hey Milty,” the Ogre turned to glare at him. “Milty, buddy, babe, you know the whereabouts of this George guy? We got ourselves a damsel in distress here.”

The Ogre narrowed his eyes at the annoying man customer. “Never heard of him.”

“Sure you have Milty. He’s George, George the Mag....”

The Ogre grabbed him by the shirt. “Milton. The name is Milton.”

“Right Milton.” The Ogre let him go. The man whispered to Ruby. “He’s a bit touchy. When the new management took over they did this whole 50’s thing and made him change his name. What did they used to call you Milton?”

“Knar’ax the EVIL!” he said glaring at Roger.

Who? What? Why me Roger thought. “Er. Nice Name.”

“Hmph.” The Ogre returned his attention to the Cubs fan. “Now that I think about it, I remember this George guy. He owes me for twenty three years worth of burgers and shakes.” He looked at Ruby. “If somebody could even up his tab, I think I could find him.”

“What do you want to see him about anyway?” the man asked quickly. He gave a sniff. “Is that burning onions?”

# 4 #

## Dragon Hunting 101

“It’s about The Dragon,” Ruby said.

“The Dragon?” the man asked.

“Yes, The Dragon, see...”

He didn’t let her finish. “I know all about dragons. They burn your crops, kill your women, and feast on the bones of your children. They’re parasites,” he said. “Giant rats on wings. So you’re going to kill him?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. “I know exactly how you feel. Your lands destroyed. Everything you’ve worked for your entire life gone. You have nothing left to live for but revenge.”

“That’s not really...”

The Ogre cut Ruby off this time. “Here you go,” he said as he placed their orders in front of them.

Roger figured he must have gotten on the Ogre’s good side, because on top of his burger was one of the flypaper strips that had been hanging by the grill. He bit into the burger. It was juicy perfection, sticky, gooey, crunchy perfection.

“This really is nice.”

The Ogre only grunted.

“Where was I?” the man asked. Ruby was beginning to feel that this man must be George, but she was also getting more and more convinced that her search for him was some sort of mistake.

The madman was ranting on. “...Kill. That’s what I want to do. I want to kill The Dragon. Not just kill him. I want to make sure he’s dead. I want him to croak, give up the ghost. I want him pushing up daisies and to be six feet under. I want to feast on his liver. I want to feel his warm heart in my hands and taste his blood in my mouth. I want to smell the vapid vapors of his dying breath. I want to wear his eyeball for jewelry and sell his hide in the market. I want to make a potion out of his horn and a drinking goblet out of his skull, but most of all I want to kill him.” He gathered his breath. “I want to stab him with a sword and poke him with a stick. I want him to die, to croak, to keel. I want this life to leave him and I want him to be dead.”

He paused. He looked like he might have composed himself a little or maybe he was just catching his breath again. “Is that what we’re going to do?”

“I’m not really sure?”

“Of course you’re not. Before you kill him, and I do mean kill, murder, destroy, rid this world of his blight, and erase him from all memory. Before you do that you want him to suffer, to pay. You want to pull out his toenails. You want to read him bad poetry, and play him easy listening music. You want him to feel the pain in your heart and pray for death. You want to dress him



up in cute outfits, take pictures of him, and distribute them to the leading papers, but most of all you just want to kill him.” He paused making sure he had Ruby’s attention.

“I can help you,” he said calmly. “The problem with most dragon hunters is they go into The Dragon’s turf playing The Dragon’s game. They get themselves a magic sword, a magic shield, or a little ring, and they think their all safe.” He shook his head. “You do that and they’ll be singing a short ballad for you at your own funeral my friend. What you need is superior firepower. What you need is a Multi-National Militia Corp AK-47/5889 with over under rocket launchers, detachable clips, and a heavy duty diamond tipped bayoneted. In short,” he said. “What you need is this.”

He slammed what was presumably an AK-47/5889 onto the counter rattling the dishes. The gun was bigger than Ruby.

When he saw that Ruby wasn’t going to pick up the gun, he reached for it, but the Ogre beat him to it. “You know the rules.” He narrowed his eyes. “No weapons.”

The Ogre smiled weakly at Ruby. “It all went downhill once the corporations bought us out. No smoking. No liquor. No dancing girls.” Then he turned his attention back to the crazy weapons salesman. He was likely George, she thought, but somewhere along the way he’d lost it. He was an insane, has been adventurer, the kind you don’t read too much about in the popular paperbacks.

The Ogre turned back to the guy who was probably George and said, “Most of all weapons aren’t allowed.”

The Ogre took the gun and put it under the counter.

The man who was definitely insane and probably George never missed a beat. Luckily,” he said, “I have a demo tape,” and walked over to the end of the bar where he threaded a silver strand of manna into the side of the TV. Nothing happened.

“It’s a VCR,” Milton called.

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” the man muttered to himself as he fashioned the strand of manna into a VCR tape and pushed it into the player.

The TV showed an image of the Lucky’s Tavern as it stood today in it’s nice, safe, pleasant, 50’s decor.

An image of the weapons salesman filled the TV screen. He was at the bar hunched over a malted milk. It was clear he’d had one too many malted milks. His speech was slurred when he said, “You no goods Mets, nobodies does that to da Cubbies.”

He turned to Milton who was on the screen. “Geeve me anodder one der Milty.”

“You’ve had too much sugar,” Milton said in a nice even reasonable tone.

“Hey, do I get a royalty for being in your commercial?” Milton asked. He had asked the question from the counter behind Ruby and his voice echoed the same question on the TV screen.

“No.” George waved him off. “We’re getting to the good part.”

Back on the screen, George now had an AK-47/5889 in his hands. A booming voice over said, “No matter what injustice the world throws at you. Fight back with an AK-47/5889.”

On screen, shaky with a sugar overload and fighting off an ice cream headache, George snapped the arming clip into place with a satisfying ShlunK! A family of Gnomes dove under the table. The Elvin waitress jumped over the counter.

“More Malt NOW!”

The announcers voice came back on. “Superior firepower. Superior results. The AK-47/5....”

“So what do you think?”

“I don’t really think this is what I was looking for,” Ruby said.

“Don’t make up your mind so fast. You haven’t seen the part where I shoot up the hamburger stand. In the end the whole place

falls apart like it was made out of cardboard.” The Gnome family could see what was coming and was busy sneaking out the door. He called after them. “You can run, but you can’t hide.” He turned back to Ruby. “If you pack one of these babies, you can kiss your dragon troubles goodbye.”

There was no doubt in Ruby’s mind. “No thanks. A gun is definitely not what I want.”

“Don’t you want to kill The Dragon?”

“I don’t think so.” The more this crazy guy kept on saying kill The Dragon. Kill! And I do mean kill, murder, maim, etc., the more it sounded like a bad idea. A really bad idea, a stupid idea, a crazy idea, and I’m not just whistling Dixie here, because that’s about the far outest as you can get, craziest, lock you up and throw away the key, stupidest, craziest idea I’ve heard in a long time, type crazy, stupid idea.

“Come on,” he urged. “The Dragon burned your crops. Killed your family. What do you have to live for but revenge?”

Ruby turned to Roger. “Let’s go, I think this was a mistake.”

Before they could move, the phone rang.

“If it’s my ex-wife I’m not here,” the crazy arms dealer said.

The Ogre answered it. “George? Sure, he right here,” he said holding the phone out to George, The Great, The Magnificent, The Crazy Arms Dealer, you know, that George.

“Ah, listen, I’ve got to be going,” George said. “My ex-wife is a real demon, and I do mean demon. A beautiful Succubus, absolutely wild in bed, but insane, totally insane.” He noticed Ruby’s look. “I know insane, OK. She’s way out there. You sure you don’t want to kill The Dragon?”

“No.” Ruby was sure.

The doorway filled with a great explosion of smoke. Out of the depths a sultry voice sweetly called with a beckoning impulse George found hard to resist. “Oh, Georgie. Georgie Honey.”

George reached out and grabbed hold of Ruby and Roger as he said, "Then we need to talk." He looked frantically at the smoke as he added, "Somewhere else."

And then they vanished.

A curvaceous red lady in a leopard print mini dress walked slowly out of the smoke. She looked around. "I thought you said George was here?"

"He just left," the Ogre said with a leering smile. "Can I buy you a chocolate malt?"

"Oh, that would be sweet darling."

# 5 #

What Manner of Madness is this?

Ruby, Roger, and George arrived back at Ruby's home with a mighty "Poof!" Grt was standing on the kitchen counter showing Rachel how to make a cheesecake.

During the trip, which had only taken a moment, George had changed costumes. He was now wearing a wizard's cap and cloak, both bright blue and embroidered with white moons and stars. His hair had grown white and unruly. It was matched by an equally long and unruly beard.

George regarded Grt. "What manner of fell beast is this?"

Grt looked at him unconcerned. "Grt," he answered merrily.

George drew a great sword, which scraped against the ceiling. "Fell creature. Evil Grt. Prepare to meet thy doom."

Grt jumped down off the counter, putting himself between Rachel and this obviously mad man. He put his arm up to hold her back and reached for a spoon. He held the spoon up as if it was a sword and eyed his foe. "Cwazy George," Grt said. "We meets at lastees."

What was going on? Ruby wondered. This was crazy. This was madness. Grt would get sliced in half by the sword. George

brought his sword up and tapped his weapon against Grt tiny wooden spoon, “En garde.”

“No Swords,” Ruby cried out desperately. George’s sword disappeared. He reached into his robe. He started to pull out an AK-47/5889. “No swords,” Ruby shouted again not knowing what else to do. “No swords. No guns. No knives. No weapons.”

Suddenly, George was empty handed. Grt threatened menacingly with his wooden spoon. George raised his hands. “You wouldn’t attack an unarmed opponent?”

Grt knew that he couldn’t. Crazy George, his archenemy, now was his chance to do him in, but he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t strike an unarmed foe. Grt blindly searched the countertop behind him. His eyes never leaving Crazy George. You couldn’t trust his kind... George was crazy. Grt felt what he was looking for. Wrapping his fingers around it, he tossed a wooden spoon to George.

The spoon sailed through the air. George caught it easily. The spoon had cheesecake batter on it and a glob of the batter splattered across George’s face. He searched with his tongue and licked. “Cheesecake,” he sneered.

“Cheesees-cakes,” Grt responded matching his sneer.

They circled each other in the cramped space of the kitchen. Rachel ducked behind the table. Roger and Ruby stood motionless in the doorway, spellbound by the drama that was unfolding before them.

George fainted with the spoon. Grt hissed and brushed it aside. They circled... and then Grt made his move.

Grt had been biding his time. He was no fool. He knew he was outsized, perhaps even outmatched. Crazy Georges’s skills in the kitchen were legendary. His mother had been a baker and had taught him all she knew. He could make a soufflé out of chocolate bars. He could make roast duck out of lamb chops. He wasn’t just an award winning chef. He was a wizard, but most importantly, he was insane. Grt knew he had to play to his weakness. He waited

until the positioning was ideal. He waited until George was off balance... and he was next to the refrigerator.

Now was his chance! He dove at the refrigerator door and swung it wide. He grabbed the eggs and sneered. There were only three left. Let's see him make a pastry without eggs, Grt thought.

The move had caught George by surprise. No eggs. It was a serious blow, but he knew a few recipes that did not call for the vile orbs. He recounted one of the recipes in his mind. One cup flour, one stick butter, one cup brown sugar, and one cup oatmeal. Spoon onto an ungreased cookie sheet in tablespoon size pieces and bake at 375 degrees for ten minutes. Walla. Florentines! This duel was as good as over.

"No!" he cursed himself. While he had been reciting recipes, the wretched creature had been garnering more supplies. Not only had the wretched beast taken the last of the eggs, it was flashing a cruel smile at him as it measured out the last of the brown sugar. George knew what he had to do. He grabbed a measuring cup off the counter and rushed next door. Perhaps they had a cup of sugar he could borrow.

The next door neighbors were not at home and a bachelor Dwarf inhabited the next house over. "I got a frozen pizza if you want?" the Dwarf offered.

Barbarian! This was bakery. This was art. This was not thawing and heating.

George considered going down the street. No, that would not do. He looked around. No one was looking. He considered his options and decided to cheat. He snapped his fingers and a bag of pure white sugar appeared. Frantically he tore at the packaging and poured what he needed into the cup. Throwing what was left into the air to disappear, he raced back inside.

But, it was too late. With an evil self satisfied grin the dragon pushed a plate of chocolate chip cookies towards him. "Cookies?" the fell beast offered in a mocking tone.

George hung his head. He put the sugar on the counter. He knew when he had been beat. He joined the others at the table and took a cookie. Hesitantly, lest there be some trick or poison, he sniffed at the cookie. He looked at the others. They licked their fingers as they reached for a second helping and smiled as they drank their milk.

George tasted the cookie. It was good. It was more than good. It reminded him of the cookies his mother had made many long years ago. He reached for another as he poured himself a glass of milk. The fell creature had bested him.

Grt held his spoon aloft, his eyes glued on his opponent. It had been a hard fought battle, but he held no grudge. “Grt wins again,” he exclaimed and they all cheered in unison. “Grt wins again!”

All of them, but Crazy George that is. “You got lucky this time Grt. Just watch your back. Some day, in some pastry kitchen, or ...”

Ruby cut him off. “Be a good sport. He beat you fair and square.”

George looked at her. Who was this redheaded girl who preached of fairness? Why had she come seeking him? Why did she keep the company of a baby drag-goon pastry chef? And, what was the secret to these cookies? They’re so moist and chewy. George looked around and realized he had many questions but few answers.

It was time to get some, but first another cookie.

# 6 #

Swapping Stories

George was clearly insane or at least Ruby had thought, but here he was having a fairly normal conversation.

“So you see, Beldor the Black wasn’t really evil. He tithed ten percent to the United Brotherhood and volunteered his time

generously to the Warrior Scouts. He wanted to give something back. It was just the culture he came from.”

“That doesn’t explain the babies,” Ruby challenged him.

“It is a moral quandary to be sure.” George appeared to be engaged in thought. “The Dalcren were the mortal enemies of the Wolf Head Horde. That wasn’t about to change. Beldor simply knew if he let the babies live, he’d be fighting them on the battlefield in two or three years anyway.” He paused again, looking at Rachel this time. “Times were different. It wasn’t too long ago that wolves and other wild animals were killed for bounty. Beldor didn’t get a bounty. He did his work for the love of it and pride in a job well done.”

Ruby didn’t believe him and said as much. “I don’t believe you. Everything I’ve ever read about Beldor paints him as evil as the day is long.”

“And you would be getting your information from?”

“The Warrior King novels,” Ruby replied. She made a face as if to say, where else.

“Exactly,” George continued. “The Warrior King novels written by Collin Montgomery under a grant by the Dalcren Arts Foundation.” He let that sink in. “Never heard about that part did you? If you go back fifty years even the Dalcren’s didn’t know who was worse, Den Savage The Warrior King who rose to power by waging a bloody civil war against Beldor, his own uncle, and the crowned king...”

“Den was the rightful heir. Beldor was a usurper.”

“Debatable. Besides, Den was every bit as bad. He killed his own brother...”

“That was Beldor. Why would Den kill his own brother?”

“Because Kam was the next in line for the throne. Den needed him out of the way.” George raised his hand to cut off Ruby’s protestations. “It doesn’t really matter. It’s all debatable. All histories are full of fuzzy details and historians with an ax to grind.”



“Or authors working on a Dalcren Art Foundation Grant,” Rachel chirped in.

“Exactly. The truth is hard to know. What I do know is that no matter how mean, wild, and evil Beldor was in his youth, he mellowed in his old age, was a good tipper, quick to buy a stranger a drink, and, in the end, amazingly philosophical about losing his kingdom to that brash young upstart, Den Savage. Of course, this would be around the time the Wolf Head Horde had regained its numbers and was pressing the attack in earnest, so it didn’t look like he had given up that much.”

“So, you knew him? You knew Beldor the Black?” Ruby asked surprised, impressed, and more than a little wary by the association.

“He sought my advice on an occasion or two.”

“But you don’t appear in any of The Warrior King novels?”

“Or, the Fifth Prince Series, or the Daggers of Elivinore.” He looked wistful. “I played central roles in both you know, but I never hired a publicist. Now look where I am. I’m a complete unknown, but enough about me. Tell me about yourself, why did you want to see me?”

OK, George did seem a lot more normal now, but after his kill, kill, and I do mean kill The Dragon rant, she didn’t know how far to trust him, and he had just admitted to aiding Beldor the Black. What did that say about him?

All the same, this was the George she had been looking for, who had been recommended to her by an agent of The Dragon himself, and, besides, she had a good feeling about the wizard who sat before her munching on cookies. In the end, she had to admit that she trusted him, so after a moment’s deliberation, she showed him The Dragon’s pendant with the red digital countdown clock on the back.

“Nice,” George said appraisingly. “You could get a tall stack of gold for that on the black market.”

“I can’t get it off.”

“Have you tried a wish?”

“I don’t have a wish.”

George didn’t have a wish either. If he did, he figured he’d be on a tropical island with his ex-wife’s younger sister, but that was a whole ‘nother story.

After a brief interlude, his mind returned to the present. “So what else?”

“To make it all short, I’m trying to get this pendant off. I don’t have many leads. The first was finding someone named George.”

“You’ve done that.”

“The second was to go to a museum and research The Dragon.”

George looked surprised. “Now that is a good idea.” He waited for Ruby. “Anything else?”

“I think that’s it.” Ruby searched her mind. “I’ve also been wondering about why the Trolls all think they are going to own the public utilities in twenty years.”

“They are?” George grabbed a piece of paper. “I’ve got to make myself a note to sell my utility stocks.”

Ruby looked at him doubtfully. “And Hazen Crots?”

“Hazen Crots?”

“That’s it.”

“It’s not much.”

Ruby looked at the wizard sitting across the table from her. He had cookie crumbs in his beard and a milk moustache. Why was he even here? She didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but she didn’t see any other way to find out. “Why are you here?”

“You asked me to come?” George replied dubiously.

“No I didn’t... What do you usually do?” He averted her eyes and reached for another cookie, so Ruby thought it would be best to rephrase her question. “What did you do for the Fifth Prince or Elise of Elivimore?”

He looked at her incredulously. “I taught them magic of course.”

That was it. If anybody needed a magic instructor it was her. Clearly he had some skill. He had brought them back home from Lucky’s in the flash of an eye, right on target. “I could use a tutor,” she said.

George was munching on another cookie while thinking about Suzy’s younger sister Sasha. Sasha was a real hell raiser, and those thighs. They were quite literally to die for. “Huh, What?” He had missed what Ruby had said.

“A tutor,” she smiled. “I could use a tutor.”

“I’m not taking on any apprentices. Too much trouble.”

What! She knew that’s not how it was supposed to go. He had taught desperate heroes magic since the time of legends, of course he would teach her. Wouldn’t he? “What do you mean?”

She wasn’t going to get all sad and teary eyed on him was she? “I’m not going to do it.” Darn it, she was going to cry. “Fine. Fine,” he said, “but just one quick lesson. Magic isn’t hard.” Then he thought better of that last statement and turned to Grt. “On second thought, magic is hard. Very, very, very hard.” He let that sink in and waited until he had Grt’s full attention. “About the only thing that makes teaching or learning magic any easier is strawberry shortcake.”

“Okays, Cwazy Georgies teacha da mageec. Grt makess da straw-berries shorty cakes.”

#7

## Magic Made Easy

Ruby could tell George was distracted. While he was talking, he kept on looking over at Grt who was cooking strawberry shortcake in the kitchen.

“Magic is difficult,” George said. “Really, really hard. The moon has to line up right, the astrological charts have to be in your

favor, and you need more strawberries.” He paused as he looked over his shoulder at Grt. “Fresh strawberries and cream are essential to the proper functioning of any spell. You really can’t do anything until you’ve added the sugar.” He took out a scratch pad and started making notes.

“Maybe we should just wait until Grt is done cooking?” Ruby suggested.

“What? Oh, celestial objects and other mumbo, jumbo, beat two eggs...”

At which point Ruby went into the kitchen and sat on the counter next to Grt. This made it easy for George to follow her and watch what Grt was doing up close.

Once the cake was in the oven. Ruby thought George might be able to focus. Might as well give him one more chance she thought. “So about the magic?”

“Cook for eight to ten minutes,” George said as he wrote the last bit of the recipe down back at the kitchen table. “Right, OK, eight to ten minutes. It’s been six, so that gives us two minutes to explain magic. Here’s the short version.”

He paused taking a deep breath. “Listen carefully. Magic is either really, really hard or really, really easy.” He put his face right next to Ruby’s. “I like the easy way myself. The hard way is like doing an astrological reading, copying down the recipe for strawberry shortcake, and daydreaming about your vacation last summer on a lush tropical Jamaican beach all at the same time.” He bounced his eyebrows. “The easy way, well, it lives up to its name. It’s easy. First you decide what you want, say strawberry shortcake. Then you figure out what steps need to be taken in order to achieve your goal.” He then leaned over and spoke in Grt’s direction, “Like convincing a champion pastry chef to bake a strawberry shortcake. Then...” George paused to watch Grt ladle strawberries over the freshly baked shortcake. When Grt was ready to serve the delightful confection George returned his attention to Ruby. “Then, all you need to do is complete those

steps.” He counted down in his head as Grt brought over the freshly prepared shortcake. Ruby watched George’s lips move as he counted down, three, two, one, “and then, abracadabra, presto chango. It’s strawberry shortcake.”

He lifted his napkin out of the way just as Grt was putting down a warm plate of freshly made strawberry shortcake in front of him. He snapped his fingers. “Magic!”

“That’s not magic,” Ruby retorted.

“We should at least taste it before we make any hasty decisions.”

George savored the strawberry shortcake and would not hear any of their complaints until he was done.

“You really haven’t helped at all,” Rachel said as he was wiping his face

“Perhaps,” George conceded. “Some folks need magic to be hard, really, really, really hard. And, some folks don’t want the bother. For those who don’t want the bother, the secret is easy. Decide what you want, figure out how to do it, and do it.”

“How does that help?” Rachel asked again.

“It probably doesn’t.” George smiled while pretending to look at a watch that wasn’t on his wrist. “Look at the time. Well,” he said to Ruby. “If we hurry, we can get to MagicCo before it closes.”

“MagicCo?” Ruby echoed. “Why?”

“For Hazen Crots. What else? Set a goal, visualize the steps, and then do them. For Hazen Crots and all your magical needs, try MagicCo.” He put his hand on Ruby’s sleeve as he said, “Don’t wait up,” to Ruby’s parents and, “My compliments to the chef,” to Grt before he snapped his fingers and Ruby and him disappeared in a puff of smoke that was slightly reminiscent of burnt strawberries.

Ruby and George were at the entrance to MagicCo, a large warehouse type store that specialized in magic. As they went inside Ruby noticed a sign that said, Open 24 hours, and another that said, We Buy in Bulk and Pass the Savings on to You.

All around her stacked to the ceiling were all the goods an adventurer could want packed conveniently in lifetime size containers. They passed by a twelve-gross pack of magical arrows and a fighter's weapon starter set complete with dagger, sword, and bonus first aid kit. For the new castle owner MagicCo stocked a portcullis and a drawbridge. For the would be castle owner MagicCo stocked a Siege-Engineers Catapult G-44, some assembly required.

George started putting what appeared to be a random array of weapons into the cart. He was looking at the magic sword five pack when Ruby asked him, "Why would anyone want five swords?"

George flipped the pack into their cart and continued down the aisle. "Suppose you were a king and a big old nasty dragon was burning your fields. You'd need a hero right?"

When Ruby didn't answer he continued. "If you send a hero up against a dragon with only a magic sword, you're going to need more than one hero." He shrugged. "That's why you need a five pack."

He had pulled up in front of a rack of guns. "The only real way to kill a dragon is with superior firepower." He was handling a 999mm Glock with attached laser sight and genuine leather grips. "Even something like this isn't good enough." He looked around. "Preferable, we could get our hands on a F-16ma Fighter Plane." George looked at Ruby. "I know a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy who thinks he knows a guy who might, for the right price, be able to lend us a B-99 Bomber for an hour or two. He can't guarantee it'll have an atomic bomb on it or anything, but if you want to kill a dragon..."

"We're not going to kill The Dragon."

He looked around. “OK. Change of plans. Just make him hurt. Make him regret burning your crops.”

“We, you, me, I... We are not going to hurt The Dragon.”

He didn't seem to get it. “What we need are pliers and a blowtorch.”

“No we don't. We're going to make friends with The Dragon. Be buddies, be pals, everybody's going to get along and play nice.”

“I'll just take this for myself then,” he said tossing the handy 999mm Glock two pack into the cart.

“NO!” Ruby said shaking her head in frustration. What did it take to get through to this guy? “No weapons. Not here. Not now. Not ever.”

“It's going to really hurt the economy,” George said conversationally.

Ruby noticed he had gotten a new, empty, cart. “What's going to hurt the economy?”

“Your weapon's ban,” George explained.

Ruby hadn't noticed that all of the guns, bows, swords, and other implements of destruction had disappeared. The entire weapons section of the store had vanished in the blink of an eye. The empty floor space had been immediately filled as if giant unseen hands had pushed the other aisles together to fill the gap. Ruby missed all of this. She thought she just hadn't been paying attention and they were going down a new aisle.

George was looking at a shiny set of full plate armor. “Not really much point anymore.”

Ruby didn't understand what he was talking about, but then that was often the case. She had been curious for a while about something and so asked, “Why do you want to kill The Dragon?”

“Me, kill The Dragon? I don't want to kill any dragon. Don't try laying that on me. As I recall, it was all your idea.” He shook his head in sympathetic distress. “The way you did go on. Kill, Kill, Kill, and I do mean Kill. It was worrisome.”

“That wasn’t me. That was you.”

He thought about it. “So it was. So it was. I guess I still harbor the wee tiniest, intsy bintsiest, smallest bit of a grudge against the evil worm.”

“What did you do?”

George noticed she didn’t ask what did The Dragon do. No. It couldn’t be The Dragon’s fault. Not the noble beneficent ruler of Mt. Doom. “He ran me out of business. This would have been...” He did a little quick math in his head. “When I was younger, quite a bit younger. Let’s see twenty, thirty, forty, almost fifty thousand...”

“You’re 50,000 years old?” Ruby was impressed. He didn’t even look old. He had changed clothes for the trip to MagicCo, and he looked like... like an adult, like a parent just off work taking his daughter shopping. He was wearing dark blue oil stained coveralls with a name patch which read George. His hair was neatly combed, short, dark, and black. He didn’t look old at all. “50,000 years,” she repeated in awe.

“Years?” he echoed questioningly. “Where did you get that idea? Heavens no, I’m only fifty two.” He was close to her mom’s age. “It was fifty thousand hours ago.” He knew if you were going to hold a grudge, it was best to keep track of time in smaller units. “Let’s see.” He did the math backwards in his head again. “It would have been about five years ago.”

“What happened?”

“I suppose if you were to hear The Dragon tell the story, he’d say he won the bid on the Mt. Doom magic concession from the government during the great giveaway.” He paused. “But if you want to know the real story.” He looked around and whispered. “He won the bid on the magic concession... Evil Worm.”

It didn’t sound so evil to Ruby. Didn’t somebody have to win these things and somebody lose. It was just business.

George eyed her. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking it was just business, nothing personal. After he won the bid he had the



gall to set up a meter outside my lab. He sent one of his cronies over. Frank.” He spit the name. “Frank, that’s who he was. Frank came and gave me a bill. Can you believe it? Me, George the Mighty, George the Destroyer, George the Slayer, Looter of Lost Tombs, George bane to friend and foe, Slayer of Fell beasts, Killer of Dragons. He gave me, George, a bill. He wanted to charge me ten thousand a unit.”

10,000 a unit didn’t sound so bad to Ruby. What had her bill been? Something like 1,000,000,000,000 a unit. 10,000 seemed kind of cheap in comparison.

“It was the name that did it,” George mused. “George Killer of Dragons. He’s not as big of a guy as he’d lead you to believe, not as magnanimous. Show up with a name like Dragon Slayer and he was all short, curt, and prissy. Fickle fell beast if you ask me.”

George’s anger was spent for a moment. They wondered down the aisles as George tossed items seemingly at random into the cart. Putting stuff into the cart made George feel better. Shopping therapy is what some folks called it. He had watched a documentary on the LSC, Lair Shopping Channel, which had pointed out the positive health benefits of retail therapy. The LSC had been a real financial success. No longer did denizens of the deep need to come to the surface for the trappings of civilization. All they had to do was make a phone call from the comfort of their slime pit, or whatever they called home and in two to three days DDS, Dungeon Delivery Service, would deliver a package. Medusa would get a new leather treatment and conditioning kit for her hair and the floating eye down the way would get a year’s supply of contact lenses and saline solution. Best of all, and this is where sales really took off, all purchases were guaranteed against loss from adventurers for a full sixty days. Of course, if you read the terms, a police report had to be filed, but it only stood to reason. Sludge monsters weren’t known for their honesty.

It had been an informative show. Retail therapy, it did a consumer good.

George tossed a case of extra healing potions into the cart. “Though, I don’t know why,” he said. “With a ban on weapons, it’s hard to believe we’ll need them.”

They paused at a stack of magical tomes that reached to the ceiling fifty feet above. “All the best selling magic tomes in all the Seven Realms,” George explained as he put one of each into the cart.

He grabbed a three gallon tub of eye of newt and a two gallon double pack of Giant’s sweat. He threw in a magic ring starter set complete with a ring of invisibility and a magic wand assortment.

“The problem with the world is rampant consumerism,” he pointed out as he balanced a 149 piece adventurer’s starter pack on top of the overflowing cart. The starter pack bragged it was everything an adventurer needed to start their adventuring career coming with one week of iron rations, fifty feet of rope, six torches, a dozen door spikes, a ten foot pole, and more.

All the shopping had put George in a better mood. He was even whistling. Ruby had always wondered about ten foot poles, so she asked George, “What good is a ten foot pole?”

“A ten foot pole?” he asked incredulously. “It’s only the single most important piece of equipment an adventurer could hope to have.” He continued merrily in a sing song voice, “You can poke with it, prod, tap, jab. Look, there have been whole articles written in the better adventuring journals about the wonders of a ten foot pole. Don’t know what it is? Jab it with a ten foot pole.”

“Wouldn’t a spear be more practical?” Ruby had given this some thought. “At least then you’d have a weapon at the ready.”

“Somebody,” George said a little condescendingly, “has put a ban on weapons, so a spear is out of the question. And, just to play it safe, I wouldn’t sharpen one end of that ten foot pole, Missy. You never know when you’re going to run into a player killing DM

who rules your ten foot pole is now a spear and has it disappear in a blink of an eye just when you need it most.”

Ruby was used to not understanding George about half the time, so she let the last comment go. “Still a ten foot pole was never much good.”

“You’re speaking heresy.”

“Just hear me out. The average dungeon corridor is a convenient ten feet wide by ten feet tall.”

“Those ancient builders were a bit retentive.”

“And, most pits are also ten by ten.”

“Graphical perfection.”

“So, what good is a ten foot pole while you’re falling down a ten foot wide pit? The pole will never grab the edge and even if it did, the pit is only ten or twenty feet deep. You’d hit bottom before the pole ever wedged.”

George was not going to be deterred. Somewhere on his equipment list he had a ten foot pole written down. Sure it was hard to get through airport security, but on a Jamaican beach you never knew when you’d need one to keep your ex-wife at arms distance as you put the moves on her younger sister. He brought this point up. “They’re good for poking and prodding.”

“But,” Ruby said with a tone of voice that indicated this was the coup de’ grace. “The only thing you’d ever poke with a ten foot pole is something you’d never want to touch with a ten foot pole.”

George wasn’t totally convinced. A ten foot pole had proved to be the best negotiating tool he had when speaking with his ex-wife. He was going to keep it on his list, but this child was special. Logic like that was rare and powerful. Maybe she could defeat The Dragon after all, and I do mean defeat, vanquish, bring to his knees, make him rue the day he ever was born... and so on and so forth.

George was straining against the cart. He could barely push it. “Did we get everything we came for?”

“No,” Ruby said.

George pulled out a small square of paper. He started reading off items as he stretched the paper longer and longer. “Healing potion. Eye of Newt.” The list went on and on. It took George a good minute to read through it and by the time he was done the list was over five feet long. “I think we got everything,” George said at last.

“Hazen Crots,” Ruby reminded him. “We have a full cart but we don’t have what we came for.”

“Isn’t that always the way?” George agreed as he looked around trying to spy the elusive crots.

“There they are,” Ruby said spotting them first. “Up by the check out lanes.”

It was a five pound bag of Hazen Crots. The package said, use a pinch in a tub of water to keep that fresh, just bathed feeling all day long. Just a pinch? Then why did they sell it in a five pound bag? This must be over a year’s supply.

“Economy,” George said, like he had been reading her mind, which he had been. “Economies of scale.” He paused before he continued. “ESP. Telepathy. It’s a simple spell really all of us great wizards...” He noticed her eyes had found the open pack of magic rings. “... Use the magical items at our disposal,” he finished as he took off the ring.

“Any questions while we wait in line,” George asked. It was a long line. It looked like they’d be there a while.

“I have been wondering about your age,” Ruby said. “If you’re only 52, how did you know Beldor and all the rest?”

He looked at her quizzically. “I don’t know where you got the idea I was only 52.”

“You told me.”

“No. I’m more like 627.”

“Ruby did some quick math. “Months?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes. “Months, years. The exact age isn’t so important. The thing that is important is that I’ve lived my life well, done the things I set out to do, and helped the cause of good.” He paused for a moment reflecting on his adventures before he continued. “... Or evil, whichever was more convenient or lucrative at the time.” Then he added as an afterthought, “Whenever somebody says that doing good is its own reward, what they’re trying to tell you is that the competition is paying more.”

Ruby tried again. It was like rolling the dice whether or not she’d get a useful answer. “If you’re only 52, how did you know Beldor?”

“Good clean backwards living,” he said proudly. He gave a little jump trying to click his heals together. He only got an inch off the ground. He landed off balance and started coughing as he leaned against the cart. After he had hacked for a while he explained, “Pipes. After that Gandalt, what a character, after him every wizard had to smoke a pipe.” He coughed again as he put his hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “Don’t pick up the pipe. Trust me. The smooth smoke of bog hollow, or wherever they say it’s from, really isn’t so smooth.” He coughed again. “It was an occupational hazard, as if playing with radioactive pellets and negotiating divorce settlements with demonic forces wasn’t bad enough. Nobody would take me seriously without a pipe in my mouth.” He shook his head. “I could sit in a booth at Lucky’s for months and nobody would talk to me, but the minute I put a pipe in my mouth, I’d get three offers for adventure.”

“Typecasting,” Ruby said understandingly.

“Don’t get pigeonholed by it,” George advised her. “Go your own way. Stay away from the evil weed,” he added before he launched into another fit of coughing.

The line hadn’t moved. “We’re going to be here forever,” Ruby said.

George looked unconcerned. “I’ve got time. We’ll be here as long as it takes.”

Ruby felt compelled to ask, “As long as what takes?”

“As long as it takes for you to ask your final question.”

“So, I get three questions and I’ve already used two?”

He looked at her. “I’m not counting, has it really only been two?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s been two in the last few seconds, and that’s good enough for me, so ask your last question, so we can get out of here?”

“What am I supposed to ask?”

“If I was a demon, that’d be all you’d get.” He looked at her to make sure she didn’t think he was a demon. “You don’t think I’m a demon do you?”

“No,” just a slightly weird wizard.

“I heard that, but don’t worry. You’ve got a final question. It’s been bugging you since you first entered the zone and you noticed the sky was a little bluer, the air a little crisper, and the magic a little more plentiful,” he said prompting her. “Look I don’t have all day. Manna ribbons in the mundane world, but none inside the zone...”

“I have been wondering about that.”

“Not much of a question,” he said a little peevishly.

“I can see manna ribbons by the pond under the bridge, but I don’t seem to see any now. We’re in MagicCo. The place is stacked floor to ceiling with magical items. There are more weird magical creatures standing in line...” She caught the eye of a two headed man with mottled skin in the next line over. “No offense. More wondrous beings than I never knew existed.” The two headed man scoffed and looked away. “How come I don’t see manna ribbons all over the place?”

“Now that is a good question.”

“Inside the zone the air is so thick with mana, you wouldn’t be able to see through it,” George explained. “It’s so thick, so prevalent, so dense, it’s part of the background.”

“So, you’re saying I can’t see the forest for the trees?”

“What I’m saying is, magic sight works differently inside the zone.”

George looked in the cart and found the magic wand assortment pack, nineteen magic wands to meet all occasions.

Ruby noticed the pack only had four wands in it.

“What happened to the rest?” she asked.

“Somebody,” he eyed her again, “put a ban on weapons. This is where the fireball wand would go and this here is the place for the lightning bolt wand. Very useful wands to be sure. Walk tall and carry a fully charged wand, that’s what I always say.”

He popped a wand out of the blister pack. “Look at this wand.”

Ruby looked at it. It was red and down the side printed in black vinyl lettering were the words, Telekinesis Ray, and over that in sparkly gold lettering was the WandCo logo.

“It’s a Telekinesis Ray by WandCo,” she offered questioningly.

“And how do you work it?”

She looked at the wand. It came packaged with removable safety stickers, had a plastic tip over the working end, and on the other it had a clip like a pen might have, so you could store it in your shirt pocket without worrying about it falling out. Wrapped around the clip, secured with a rubber band was a folded up piece of paper on which were written instructions. She spent a few moments reading the instructions.

### Telekinesis Ray by WandCo

This is not a toy. Keep away from children.

Do not point at people, animals, or monsters.

- 1) Remove safety cap and all warning stickers.
- 2) Point Ray at object.
- 3) Click and hold button.
- 4) Keep Ray pointed at object and move slowly to desired destination.
- 5) Make sure to keep Ray on object.

Do not lift people, animals or other living creatures.

Do not exceed 50lbs.

Wand may last for up to two hours. Heavy loads may decrease life expectancy of wand significantly.

WandCo is not liable for any damages for use of its products.

Sold as a novelty item only. Do not use for medical, emergency, construction, or adventuring situations.

Ruby was done reading.

“So, you can work the Telekinesis Ray?” George asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“How does it work?”

“You just point and click.”

“Excellent,” George said as he took the wand from her and put it in the pocket of his grease stained overalls.

“That doesn’t explain about the manna ribbons.”

“No,” he said. “It probably doesn’t, but it does show you know how to read magic.”

“Anybody could read that.”

“Maybe.” He paused considering how to explain this. “Do you know how to set the clock on your VCR at home?”

“Yes.” She didn’t see how this had anything to do with magic.

“And if you wanted to program a VCR to record a show for next Monday night, say the big game between the Elves and the Orcs, you could do it?”



“Yes.”

“Good, then you can show me how.”

Ruby wasn't surprised at all by the last comment. She was ready for it. “But that doesn't tell me a thing about magic.”

“Sure it does. How did you learn to program the VCR?”

“I read the instructions, pushed the buttons on the VCR, and watched what happened. But that's not magic.”

“No? Can Roger program the VCR or your mother?”

“No.”

“Then your ability to do it might as well be magic.” He looked around and pushed the cart forward. “I guess that answers all of your questions.”

“No it doesn't. I'm just as confused as before.”

“You think you're confused. I know what they call me. They don't call me George the Mighty, or George the Good Guy, or George the Ladies Man, they call me Crazy George. Why do you think they call me that?”

Because it true, Ruby couldn't help but think.

“Because it's true,” George echoed her thoughts. “It's true because I've spent a long time trying to understand magic. Trust me. I've told you all you need to know.”

“It's not clear at all.”

“Maybe not, but I've answered your questions,” George said as he began placing items on the checkout belt. “We know that, because we've reached the end of the checkout line. Or,” he mused, “are we at the beginning?”

“Front,” Ruby told him. “We're at the front of the line.”

“And, we were going to be waiting in line until your question was answered. The fact that we're no longer waiting is proof that your question was answered.”

“But..”

“The choice is yours, but if you try too hard to figure it out, in no time they'll be calling you Crazy Ruby.”

“It doesn't really ring true.”

“Then trust me, you know all you need to know about magic.”

# 10 #

## The Gnomes Have It

A pair of Gnomes was checking them out. One stood on a milk crate so she could reach the cash register. The other had climbed into the cart. He tossed merchandise onto the belt and the cashier waved a wand over each item as a crystal ball kept track of the total. When they were done the Gnome at the cash register said, “10,247.”

Nothing happened. George had not heard her or he was ignoring her. He stood still like a statue as if transfixed by some distant object.

The Gnome at the cash register said it again, “10,247 in gold.”

George continued to stare into some far off place, as if waiting for someone or something.

“10,247 in gold, sir,” the gnome repeated her request.

“Who? What? How much?” George said as he finally looked at the exasperated gnome.

“10,247 in gold, sir.”

“Well, pay the lady,” George said.

“Who me?” Ruby asked surprised.

“Who else?” George asked back. He looked at her. “You thought I was giving you a free magic lesson? I may be crazy, but I’m not that crazy. Besides, you’re the one who wants to kill The Dragon.” He saw Ruby’s look. “Or, befriend The Dragon. Look, kill, befriend, maim, destroy... it’s all the same to me. It’s your quest.” He paused as if that explained it all. “So, pay the nice Gnome lady.”

“I don’t have any gold.”

“Then why did you put all this stuff in the cart?” He started pointing out stuff. “Look at this. An adventure’s starter kit? Who

eats iron rations anymore? And a ten foot pole? What good is that?” He cast Ruby a sidelong glance. “I hear they’re overrated.”

“The only thing I wanted was the Hazen Crots.”

“You picked a fine time to tell me.” He turned his attention back to the Gnome. “This wand pack says it contains nineteen wands, but there are only three in the pack. You don’t really expect me to pay full price for that?”

There had been a lot of complaints the last hour. The wand packs were short. The sword set didn’t have any swords, just a scabbard and a polishing rock. The entire inventory of catapults had disappeared into thin air. It was a nightmare, but she kept herself calm. The benefits at MagicCo were legendary, a competitive hourly rate, a medical plan complete with vision, it was better than what they got at the MDM, and they even had a 401k retirement plan. As soon as she hit 401,000 years on the job, she could retire. It was the only thought that kept her going on days like this, that and her break. In twenty hours she’d get a full fifteen minutes to herself. She was lucky to have the job, but this guy was wearing her thin.

“Look, if you don’t want it, don’t buy it.” She grabbed the wand assortment out of George’s hands. “See there,” she said swinging the crystal ball readout on the cash register his way so he could see it. “Only, 10,197 in gold sir... Now, if you don’t mind.”

“The thing is,” George began, “I left my gold coins at home.” He flashed a thin plastic rectangle. “You wouldn’t happen to take a credit voucher, would you?”

“Sorry, sir.” She wasn’t so sure the sir applied to this customer anymore, but you could never tell who was a secret shopper. It probably wasn’t this man, but the two headed guy the next aisle over fit the profile. She reminded herself, 401,000 years, as she took a deep relaxing breath and advised the customer, “Only gold and certified checks. It’s how we keep our prices so low.”

“They’re not actually so low,” George remarked. He had noticed that the manager, an Ogre in an ill fitting white shirt and a tie, was walking by. “MagicMart is cheaper.”

The Gnome sucked in her breath.

The Ogre glared. “Is there a problem here?” He paused a long while before he added, “Sir,” as if to let George know that if there was any option about his calling him sir, he’d have left the title off.

“I was just saying how MagicMart is usually a better deal and they let you use credit vouchers there.”

“Is that so?” The Ogre was going to say more. He certainly looked like he wanted to say quite a bit more and maybe throw in a few punches or at least an eye gouge or two to accent his words, but the rest of what he had to say was drowned out as a fifty foot tall display of paper towels came tumbling down over George, the Ogre, and the checkout stand, all courtesy of the Telekinesis Ray George had put in his pocket.

Ruby had stood still in shock as the rolls of paper towels danced around her. When they stopped moving, George stuck his head out from beneath the pile of rolls and said, “This could take a while to sort out. No sense both of us wasting our time. Why don’t you go chase down those Hazen Crots on your own.”

Ruby knew that without any gold, she wouldn’t be getting the Hazen Crots at MagicCo, but other than that, she didn’t know where to begin. “How do I start?” she asked.

George was flabbergasted. “Child! Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said?”

Ruby was shocked at the outburst. “I’ve tried.”

“Then don’t ask silly questions. Visualize the goal, figure out the steps involved, and do them.” After a pause he added, “There’s really nothing magical about it.” Then, he shooed her with his hands. “Now go.”

George had said it was easy. Visualize a goal, formulate the required steps, and then do them?

She wasn't confident about it and wanted to ask George again, but after he and the manager had extradited themselves from the paper towels, they had gotten into a heated debate. George was saying things like, "whiplash," "neck injury," and "my attorney," while the Ogre was busy clenching his fists and trying hard not to hit George as he said things like, "con artist," "police," and "Clean Up This Mess!"

She thought George was right. There was no sense in her wasting her time with the Ogre, and George looked liked he was having fun.

She was going to have to do this on her own. Her goal was Hazen Crots. She needed to go someplace where Hazen Crots grew. Preferable the finest Hazen Crot patch in the world, Ruby thought, but how to get there? George had always snapped his fingers. She tried it, but nothing happened.

Maybe she was missing a step. "How to get to the Hazen Crot field?" she said to herself. The Gnome cashier shrugged her shoulders. Ruby smiled. She knew the answer. If she could travel by any means, her choice would be flying on the back of a dragon, but not any dragon, on the back of The Dragon.

She closed her eyes, but before she could visualize The Dragon or snap her fingers, she felt giant claws softly grab hold of her shoulders and lift her into the air.

The Dragon had come for her!

George waived goodbye to Ruby as he called, "Now, wasn't that easy?" Then he casually turned back to the Ogre. "A cartful of merchandise is a small price to pay to avoid a lawsuit. What you should be doing is thinking about what it is worth to you personally to insure this careless incident doesn't become a black mark on your permanent work record."

# 11 #

The Stars and the Moon

The ground swept away from Ruby. The Dragon tossed her into the air and maneuvered under Ruby so she landed softly with her legs around his neck. She grabbed onto his silken mane as he sailed off into the sky.

Ruby couldn't believe it. She was really riding a dragon and not just any old dragon but The Dragon himself.

"What's your name?" she asked, but The Dragon hadn't heard her or so she thought. She shouted the question again over the growing wind. "What's your name?"

He didn't answer. Instead he started flapping his mighty wings and the wind rushed past in a roar. Communication was impossible, at least verbal communication.

She shifted her weight and found she was comfortable. She watched as the ground slowly drifted away. She'd never flown before. She'd never been this high in the air. She had no way to gage the height. She could still make out houses, roads, and the occasional very tiny person. Just like she had heard others say, they looked like ants.

Ruby took a moment to take stock of The Dragon. She couldn't see his face, but she wanted to remember as much about him as possible. He was big. That was the first thing she noticed. His flapping black wings stretched off at least fifty feet in either direction. His tail trailed behind them by another hundred feet and was tipped with a spiky barb, while his head stretched out a good twenty feet in front of her and was ringed by purple hair, like a mane.

Ruby patted The Dragon's neck and stroked his scales. His scales were shiny, smooth, and soft like pliable leather. They were mostly blackish, but they also had a silvery, iridescent sheen, like mica has, or oily water when the sun hits it just right. Ruby ran her hands through his long mane as the wind blew it about. The hairs were smooth and fine, like strands of purple silk.

Done with her visual survey of The Dragon, Ruby shifted her attention to the other sensations that accompanied her flight. The

rush of the wind. The heat from The Dragon's body. The musky smell that filled the air, and the rippling motion from The Dragon's muscles underneath her as he flapped his wings and sailed ever higher.

Beyond all other sensations, however, Ruby had an overwhelming feeling of comfort and ease. She was with The Dragon. Nothing else was important.

Time had ceased to matter. They were very high now. There were no houses. The Earth was a cloud covered ball. She must be in outer space Ruby reasoned, but then just as quickly she decided this wasn't a place of reason. She felt a burst of agreement from The Dragon as he rounded a large chunk of tumbling rock. Was it a meteor or an asteroid? She could not say.

The Dragon turned sideways and they graced by a passing comet. It had a star shaped head with a tail of sparkling dust. They dove thru the tail and both Ruby and The Dragon emerged on the other side covered with a sparkling purple sheen. After a moment The Dragon shook his mighty body like an oversized dog. They left the sparkles behind in a glittering donut shaped cloud.

Next, The Dragon circled the moon and then skimmed its surface. Ruby looked behind them and saw that their passing had raised a great cloud of dust, much like a car might do on an old dirt road. The Dragon dipped into a crater hugging the surface of the moon. Then as he got to the other side, he rose with the surface of the crater wall and launched them back into space.

Ruby was ecstatic. Her body tingled all over with excitement, so overcome with passion for the ride, she could hardly think. There was nothing but stars and black space ahead. Her long red hair was blown back by the wind. She looked around trying to find the Earth and then she spotted it directly over her head. She felt The Dragon turn upwards as they fell back to Earth.

It was a disconcerting sensation, falling backwards into the Earth, but she trusted The Dragon. She rode upside down thru

clouds, through the sky. She saw the ground rushing up, but she was unconcerned. At the last minute The Dragon pulled out of the dive, but remained upside down, and together they buzzed the earth, their heads mere feet from the ground. They were over a field of wheat. Ruby stretched out her arms and caught a blade of the wheat in her hand. She saw The Dragon's wings graze the wheat too and still she was unconcerned. He may be gigantic, but she was safe. She trusted him completely.

The Dragon did a sideways roll tucking in his wing, so the rushing earth would not rip it off. He flapped his wings and at a cruising altitude of twenty feet they made an aerial survey of Mt. Doom.

They sped across a lake and Ruby saw Mermaids playing in the waves. As she looked back, she saw jets of water rise from The Dragon's wake. He took her through a waterfall. The spray washed over their skin. He looped around a rainbow. They flew over Gnomes in their fields and Elves in the forest. A flock of Fairies joined them for a while and weaved a wreath of flowers into Ruby's hair. The Dragon sped under bridges and around trees. He weaved between the trunks of giant trees in an ancient forest where the scent of pine filled the air.

The Dragon was circling around Mt. Doom climbing ever higher. They had reached unknown lands of which Ruby had never heard. The ground was a glacier beneath them and as always The Dragon grazed the surface raising a rooster tail of snow behind them. As the mountain curved into a peak The Dragon matched its contour and they shot back up into the sky.

He took her into the clouds and showed her a floating castle. The ramparts were lined with a hundred waiving courtiers, but The Dragon continued on ever higher until he reached the top of the sky where he eased himself from beneath Ruby and together they floated in the heavens until The Dragon felt it was finally time to show Ruby his true face.



## A Private Conversation

The Dragon's head was as tall as Ruby's entire body. His swirling red eyes were as big as her hands. His face was a deep dark black brushed with heavy purples, burgundies, and burnt reds. Short, light, purplish, almost white hair formed eyebrows, while longer strands of this same hair formed a thin beard and side whiskers... And then there was his mouth. It was large, red, and lined with gleaming white teeth, reminiscent of railroad spikes. From out of his mouth a long snake like tongue flicked on occasion as The Dragon tasted the surrounding air.

The Dragon had been curving his neck around to regard Ruby. Ruby and The Dragon's bodies had been lined up upside down to one another, but now he slowly drifted around while he straightened his neck so that they floated downward facing the same direction. The Moon was at their feet. The Earth was above their heads. His nose was even with hers. His body stretched downwards more than a hundred feet into the blackness of space towards the warm glow of the moon, while his wings beat slowly back and forth sending a calm wind towards Ruby.

He was only two feet away. Ruby put out her hand and stroked his face. It was soft, smooth, and pliable. It reminded her of the belly of a lizard. The scales were so small on his face as to be almost invisible. The Dragon stretched out his tongue and licked Ruby's hand and then her face. Ruby scratched his neck, his ears, and his nose. His nose was surprisingly soft, like that of a horse. They fell in space this way for some time getting to know one another until The Dragon drifted out of reach and smiled.

“There have been great and wondrous changes of late,” The Dragon boomed in a deep, rumbling baritone voice. “Or, are these changes only a deceptive calm before a thundering tempest.” He paused letting this sink in. “I hope you know what you are doing Ruby.”

What I'm doing, Ruby thought. This isn't my doing. I didn't put a countdown clock of doom around my neck. What was he talking about? She mentally shook her head. She needed to start somewhere simpler. Something easy. Once she had a firm place to start, she could try to figure out this whole scenario.

Something simple, something basic, like, "What is your name?"

"You have asked me this twice already. Is this really the most pressing business at hand?"

Was he going to answer questions with questions? It was a familiar game in literature, but she wasn't going to play. "Then I'll make it a fourth time. What is your name?"

"Why do you ask?"

No not more questions, Ruby thought.

The Dragon continued, "You call me The Dragon. Others call me The Dragon. Even when I think of myself, I call myself The Dragon. A name is nothing more than what one is called. I am called The Dragon. That is my name."

"But it wasn't the name you were born with."

"Are you some Demon Ruby, that you would bind me by my birth name?" He paused.

No, that wasn't it. She just wanted to know.

"I do not know my name. Is a breeze born with a name? Does a rainbow have a name? What things have names, but the names man gives them? Perhaps, at one time I had a name. It has been so many eons, I may have forgotten." After a moment more, he continued in his rumbling voice. "Even if I had a name, what makes you so sure I would tell you?"

He had a point there. Everybody knew Demons and Devils were very tight lipped about their names. She had read many stories where a character had been vanquished when someone had learned their name. "I guess it's not a big deal. Am I simply to call you The Dragon?"

“If you think of a better name, let me know, but The Dragon has worked for me. In my lands, there is never any question about whom The Dragon refers. Are you satisfied with my answer?”

“Yes.” She was. It was odd thinking about not knowing your own name, but she supposed a bird or a wild animal wouldn’t have a name. Nor would a natural force like the wind or a rainbow. Ruby had read lots of books about dragons. It was her favorite subject, but the stories had always differed in the details. In some stories dragons were solitary. In other stories they lived in a group with a well defined social structure. And in yet other stories, dragons, or The Dragon, was a force of nature, a source of magic. With all the countless magical vortexes, there must be an endless variety of different dragons and dragon societies.

“What type of dragon are you?” Ruby asked, but The Dragon did not answer. “Are you all alone? I mean, are there other dragons or just you?”

“You have already asked your question. In the tradition of these things it is now my turn.” He paused. She noticed he liked to pause. She figured he could talk quieter, in a less booming voice if he wanted to as well, but he must like the dramatics of it. She wondered if the only reason they were having this conversation way up here in space was for the auditory effects.

The Dragon laughed. “Do you think I am being overly imposing?”

How could she lose? Even if they were playing a question for a question, this was an easy one, a gimme. It was almost like him asking her, her favorite color. Her mind drifted off. Most folks would have thought her favorite color was red, but in truth she was more partial to purple. As she was thinking this, The Dragon’s eyes shifted from a fiery red to a pale violet and she noticed the highlights on his scales shimmered with a light purple tinge.

“You can read my mind?”

“Of course. I can do many things. Far more than you have ever dreamed. I would hope that a name like The Dragon would have been some sort of a clue, but,” and he paused here again. “Now I have answered two of your questions in a row and you have left mine unanswered.” He sent a shimmer of color down his body. He looked like a neon chameleon, or an advertising blimp. The Dragon found this thought amusing. “You do not find my present form too intimidating, too grandiose?” he asked once again in his booming, baritone voice, that echoed in the emptiness of space.

She thought about that. He was big, gigantic, monstrous even. He was more than half the size of a football field. If she thought he was going to eat her, he’d be imposing, but for a conversation drifting in space it was comforting to have his massive body around. “I like your big dragon form. I guess you can control your size. You could change to the size of a man, like you were in the dream?”

“Yes. I could.” His voice boomed. “Man sized, mouse sized, or even bigger than I am now. A change in size, color, or appearance, these are all small things, easy to accomplish.”

She thought she saw the edge of his wings twitch. It was hard to read his mannerisms at this size, but then it was probably hard to read his mannerisms at any size.

“I am very good at poker,” he informed her in his booming voice.

She put her hands over her ears. “Enough with the booming. A nice sweet whisper would be nice.”

In a soft, sweet voice that whispered seductively in her ear, The Dragon asked, for it was his turn, “Will you be so kind as to scratch my nose?”

“Yes, of course,” Ruby answered. Rubbing his nose and ears was almost as much fun as riding him had been. She looked around. It was hard to believe she was alone in space with a giant dragon who wanted his nose rubbed.

The Dragon stretched his neck so his head and nose were within reach and Ruby softly caressed his nostrils. She felt the warm breath of his exhale on her arms and hands.

It was her turn for a question. What did she want to know? It was obvious, the pendant. “Why did you put the pendant around my neck? What happens when the timer runs out?” It was two questions really, but maybe he would see it as one badly worded question. Either way, she had said it. Ruby waited for The Dragon’s response.

“That would be two questions. Why did I put the pendant around your neck? I did not. It was your own doing.”

No it wasn’t.

“Now, would you be so kind as to scratch my ears again?”

How could she refuse? She enjoyed caressing his face. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“That may be. You asked why I put the pendant around your neck. You were chosen. Did I choose you? Did you choose me? Did we choose each other? What is fate and what is free will? How can these questions be adequately answered?”

He had twisted his head around and rubbed his head up against her like a cat. The Dragon obviously liked having his face rubbed and scratched. He was enjoying himself. He continued, “Your second question is what happens when the timer runs out. You too will decide this. How can I answer this question? I do not know what you will do in the meantime.”

“But you must have some idea.”

The Dragon had been looking at Ruby upside down as she rubbed his throat. He twisted away and regarded her.

As he did this Ruby noticed the Earth was getting larger above their heads. They had been falling through space. A light breeze was blowing and it was slowly growing in force. Soon she would need to get back on The Dragon, but first she wanted to know about the pendant.

“When the clock on the pendant reaches zero, accounts will be settled. If this means your death and a tasty snack for me,” his tongue shot out of his mouth and he licked his nose and lips with his giant red forked tongue for effect before he continued, “then that is what it means.”

Would he really eat her?

He paused before he continued. “Think of it all, everything that has transpired. If you could turn back time and do it over, would you go back before the boundaries fell and wish that they had not?”

“No,” she knew the answer to that. It would mean no Roger, Grt, Clarence, or exciting dragon rides.

“Would you forgo our contract? Grt would not be your friend nor would he even exist. Would you wave your hand, cancel the contract, and have Grt cease to be?”

“No!” she replied. It was an awful thought. She was happy when she was with Grt. He was a wonderful, fun companion.

“So, you would not undo our deal?”

It wasn’t a fair question. “I’d do away with parts of it.”

“But in the whole, if you had the choice, would your decisions lead you to the same place?”

“I guess they would.”

“Then again you have chosen to accept our deal.”

Had she? Yes, she had. The wind had been growing. She knew she had just one final question before their conversation would end. She shouted, “If you had the choice, you wouldn’t eat me, would you?”

The Dragon laughed at her. His booming voice roared loud over the rushing wind, “No Ruby. What I would have is for you to learn to fly.”

The Dragon flapped his wings and slowly drifted away. Ruby looked upwards into the rushing winds. The Earth had grown large in the sky.

Ruby fell through clouds. She looked back around for The Dragon, but she couldn't find him. He had gone. She knew he wasn't coming back.

This was it, Ruby thought. Time to learn to fly. She snapped her fingers, but nothing happened. Her descent did not slow. She put her arms out like Superman, but nothing happened. She started to flap her wings, but again, nothing happened. It had no effect.

The ground was rushing up. She was going to dive face first into the Earth if she didn't do something fast. What had George said? Set a goal, figure out the steps, and do them. What were the steps to flying? She needed a Pegasus. She needed a dragon or wings. Maybe she could grab hold of a harvester dragon. The sky was always full of them, but it was too late. The ground rushed up towards Ruby with a horrifying speed.

She started clawing at the air. Anything. She didn't want to die. She started to scream. "Help!"

# 13 #

Hazel Kraut

Hazel Kraut, a stout gnome woman standing three feet tall who grew the finest Hazen Crots in all the Seven Realms, was busy watering her garden. She dipped a pitcher into a bathtub full of murky water and poured the contents over her plants. Whenever anybody came to her garden, they'd invariably notice the tub. She would tell them how her husband had put the tub out there when he was remodeling the bathroom, but he had died before he had finished the job. She would sniffle then and complain about how he never finished anything. When he tried to object, she would remind him that he was dead, and that it was impolite to talk with strangers around.

Hazel didn't know the secret of growing Hazen Crots. The conditions had to be just right. It was a fickle plant. She had spent many years of careful study trying to learn its secrets, but she hadn't. She only knew that one day she'd had a grassy back yard

into which her husband had put a bathtub and then her husband had died. When he was buried and the funeral over, Hazel had found that a patch of Hazen Crots had overrun her backyard. She had been pretty upset at first, but that had been before she had discovered that the seeds were in high demand.

Hazel was alone in her garden, surrounded by her plants. The roots and vines formed a thick tangled mat that grew fast, got everywhere, and were hard to cut. The entire garden was covered with what looked like a single plant. Thick vines crawled up into the tub, up over the fence, and snaked into a small garden shack. Giant pink Hazen Crot flowers dotted the garden unevenly. At the center of the large blooms were the Hazen Crots. They were a dull reddish orange about four times the size of sunflower seeds, or about the same size as peanuts.

Hazel stopped to stretch her back, and gazed into the sky. She saw The Dragon flying up there.

“What foolishness is he up to now?” she muttered. He hadn’t been acting like a proper dragon at all lately. The paper was full of stories about his “New Advisor and Consort’s” decision to unilaterally disarm the kingdom. Why did he listen to her? It was sheer suicide. It wasn’t proper.

She’d gotten a letter from her son on the Western Front just that morning and he’d complained that all of the army’s weapons had disappeared in the night. Hazel was worried for him. First she’d lost her husband. Now was she going to lose her only son? The Goblin Horde was just across the border from where her son was stationed. If they got word that The Dragon had disarmed his army, they were sure to attack.

What was The Dragon thinking? Or, maybe he didn’t have a choice in the matter. That was more likely. Maybe the Goblin’s stole all of The Dragon’s weapons under cover of darkness, but Goblins weren’t that smart. It had to be someone else.



Hazel liked to read a good spy thriller at night and stealing all of the enemy's weapons was just the type of thing Bob Stock, Agent 777, would do. As she reminisced about Stock, Bob Stock, a ripple went through her body. He was a lucky one that triple seven, and a scoundrel with the ladies, a real scoundrel.

She smiled at this reverie and then noticed The Dragon had dropped something. It was just like that dragon, she thought, to litter. Common Gnomes got hit with a thousand gold fine if they so much as dropped a piece of lint on the public thoroughfare and here The Dragon was publicly flouting his own rules.

"It isn't proper," she complained to her dead husband Hanfred. "The Dragon should just live like one of us for a week or two. I'd like to see him haul hundred pound sacks of Hazen Crots to market day after day."

Hanfred appeared out of thin air and responded quite reasonably, "He's a dragon Hazel. He could carry a hundred of those sacks and it wouldn't tire him."

"If he were a Gnome." He wasn't too clever her Hanfred, so she clarified again, "If he were a Gnome... and stop stepping on my plants."

Hanfred didn't move, instead he picked one of the big flowers as he said, "But he's not a Gnome. He's a dragon."

"Eh," she waived her hand to dissipate the imaginary conversation she was having with her husband. He had passed away three years ago, but she hadn't noticed much difference. He still didn't do much work around the house and he still didn't understand political subtleties.

She didn't have time for this. She glanced up once more so she could see The Dragon frolicking in the sky. It would give her something to be bitter and sour about all day. She worked. He played. If he felt like it, he littered. Why?

"Because he's a thousand times larger than you," her dead husband answered. He had reappeared and was swirling the flower he had picked around in the bathtub.

"Don't I know it."

Hazel hadn't been able to find The Dragon in the sky again. He had left, but she noticed the piece of litter he had left behind.

"It's just laziness," she said. "How much trouble would it be to pick that scrap of..." Now what is it?

"A girl," her husband supplied. He had always had the better eyesight of the two of them. "A girl," he said again. "You know how those dragons are with their girls."

Hazel didn't. She was a Gnome. Dragons didn't generally go for Gnomes, nor did anyone else but other Gnomes. Anyone that is besides Bob Stock. He was a Gnomes man. Hard work, broad shoulders, and a common sense attitude, that's what Agent 777 looked for, and by my word, if at the end of every novel he didn't wind up with the broad shouldered Gnome.

"Stop you're daydreaming," Hanfred said. He was an opinionated ghost who wouldn't let her have a moments rest. "Bob Stock likes 'em broad shouldered and hard working, not starry eyed and gazing into the sky."

"You can't let me have a minute?"

"Look whose asking for a minute. You took years off my life. I should have listened to my mother."

"Don't start about your mother."

"She told me, 'I'd never be happy with a Croterer.' She said, 'You can do better.' She said, 'You'd be the death of me...' and look at me now. She was right."

Hazel continued bickering with her dead husband as Ruby fell from the sky. They stopped quarrelling, as Ruby got closer and they began to comment on her descent.

"Why doesn't she fly?" Hanfred asked.

"Look, she's flapping her arms, maybe her wings are broken?"

"If they're arms, they're not wings."

This was about all Hazel could stand. She looked at her watch. "Aren't you late for work or something?"

Hanfred looked at his watch. "I'm going to be late. Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he asked as he vanished.

Hazel smiled. Hanfred hadn't gotten any smarter in the afterlife. Didn't he know it was Saturday? It almost made up for the fact that this piece of dragon litter was going to land in her garden.

The girl wasn't any better at diving than she was at falling, Hazel thought. She must have had a good two or three minutes to figure out what type of dive she was going to do and here at the last minute she was changing from a can opener, to a dive, and then back to a cannon ball. In the end she opted for running in the air and clawing at the sky, while screaming. It was all too predictable.

"Form's not so good, but her aim is spot on," Hazel said to herself as Ruby landed in her bathtub splashing water everywhere.

Ruby disappeared into the murky Hazen Crot seeped water of the bathtub. The sides of the tub were two feet tall and covered with thick Hazen Crot vines, while the tub itself was set on a rock platform. Hazel walked over to the tub where Ruby had landed, and climbed onto a rock stepping stone that was placed there for this purpose as she peered over the edge into the bubbling water.

Ruby didn't come up.

"She done lost herself," Hazel said to herself as her husband handed her a rake. "I thought you were going to work?" she asked him.

"What and miss all this excitement?" When she didn't move he added, "You can talk to me anytime. Fish her out before it's too late."

Hazel stuck the rake into the bathtub and swished the rake around. As she did this, she mimicking the movement of the rake with her tongue. Her eyes stared off as she tried to visualize what she was seeking in the murky depths.

"She's not there," Hazel said.

“Deeper, you’ve got to search deeper.” Hanfred had a dreamy, far away look in his eyes as he recited, “The Enchanted Porcelain Pool PP-3 has sixteen adjustable micro jets, vibrating walls, built in water filter, and bubble bath dispenser. It holds over 65,000 gallons of water... one size fits all. All these features tastefully packaged in a white porcelain Victorian claw foot design.”

Hazel probed deeper with the rake until she was leaning over the edge, holding the rake by the end of the handle, and extending it to its full length. “65,000 gallons... of all the foolishness.” Finally she found something. She jabbed again just to make sure. Bubbles rose to the surface as she did this. “That’s it!” she exclaimed and pulled the rake out.

Foot after foot of the rake came out of the water. The rake was much longer than it had been before. It had more than doubled in length. Finally Hazel reached down into the water and pulled out a waterlogged and sputtering girl.

Ruby spit water as she gasped for breath. She wiped the slimy water out of her eyes. She took in a deep whiff. The stuff smelled terrible.

“This is awful,” Ruby said.

“Don’t be bad mouthing my Hazen Crots. They’re the best in all the Seven Realm.” She regarded Ruby. “Nobody asked you to fall out of the sky.”

“It wasn’t my idea.”

“Always blaming somebody else. That’s the way it is with you...” Hazel paused. “What are you?”

“Ruby. My name is Ruby,” she said extending her hand in greeting.

“That’s the way it is with you Ruby’s, always blaming someone else. I’ve never met a more contrary creature that refused to take responsibility for its own actions than a Ruby. Hazel handed Ruby a scrub brush as she narrowed her eyes. “Your people were responsible for the Sapphire Uprising, weren’t they?”

Ruby didn't answer. She was too busy holding onto the side of the tub trying to locate a foothold of some sort to help her get out. Finally, she found a large Hazen Crot root with her foot and started to climb out of the tub, but as she started to pull herself up, Hazel said, "You haven't scrubbed yet," and pushed Ruby down back into the tub. Rather than being in murky water, Ruby suddenly realized that she was lying in a nice relaxing tub filled with warm soapy water and bright white bubbles.

Ruby felt the soothing bubbles ease through her clothes. She looked at the brush in her hand and slowly came to the realization that a nice relaxing bath might be exactly what she needed right now, so she started to take off her shoes, but Hazel wasn't having any of that. "If you take your clothes off before you take a bath, how do they get clean? Huh? Answer me that Miss Sapphire?"

Before Ruby could answer Hazel added, "You just stay there and scrub. I'll make us some tea... and remember to scrub behind your ears." Then without further ado, Hazel disappeared into the tiny garden shed and Ruby was all alone.

The bath was very pleasant. Tiny jets shot water around piling the surface high with bubbles. The water smelled like fresh fruit and flowers. Ruby still had the back scrubber in her hand. What else did she have to do anyway? So, she sat back and scrubbed her clothes lazily, being sure to get her back and behind her ears.

When she was done, she lay back, relaxed, and enjoyed the swirling jets, while she gazed upon the garden.

In the garden she noticed a sign. She was beginning to be thankful for all the signs she saw. They helped her orient herself. The sign said:

Hazel's Hazen Crots  
Best in all the Seven Realms

“Hazel,” she said to herself. That must be the Gnome lady’s name.

As if on cue, Hazel came out of the garden shack carrying a white china tea service for two. She sat down on a stool beside the bathtub and poured Ruby a cup of tea.

“Mm, this is good,” Ruby said. “What is it?”

Hazel took great pains to point at the sign. This girl wasn’t too bright. It went with the Sapphire blood, she thought. “Hazen Crot Tea, finest in all the Seven Realms.

They sipped their tea in silence for a while before Hazel observed, “You’re not much of a diver.” This took Ruby a little by surprise. “What you need to do in the future is decide in advance if you want to do a nice swan dive or a summersault before you jump.” As an afterthought she added, “I don’t go for cannon balls or can openers. They’re not proper dives. Shouldn’t be allowed if you ask me.”

“I wasn’t planning on doing any sort of dive,” Ruby said, and she wasn’t planning on doing anymore again in the near future either. At least, she hoped not.

“It showed,” Hazel continued. “That last part, flapping your hands like that,” she put down her cup of tea and imitated Ruby falling. “It just looked like you were falling out of the sky.”

“I was.”

Hazel shrugged. “No reason not to have some style about it, a little refinement, a little panache.” Hazel saw that she might have hurt the poor Sapphire’s feelings. They were thin skinned these Emerald types. That was it, she thought. She’s an Emerald and she has red hair, clearly a genetic failure. Poor child. No wonder The Dragon threw her out. He didn’t have much patience with failure.

“It’s because of your red hair. Isn’t it?” Hazel prodded. “That The Dragon threw you out?”

This made no sense to Ruby. What was this Gnome talking about?

This Emerald really was dim. “It’s OK child.” Hazel was starting to feel sorry for this castaway. “I’ll do your hair up and it will be any color you want.” Saying this she pushed Ruby under the water.

Hazel held Ruby under the water with one hand and scrubbed her hair with the other. For her part Ruby flailed her arms and legs. She held her breath as long as she could. This crazy Gnome woman was going to kill her. She pulled at Hazel’s arms and tried to get a purchase on the side of the tub, but the Gnome was too strong. Finally Ruby let out her breath and took in a great gulp of water, at which point Hazel pulled her up.

“Took you long enough,” Hazel commented.

Ruby spit water and gasped for breath. She was spitting out water and gasping for breath entirely too much lately. “Why? Why did you do that?”

Poor girl, she didn’t understand the simplest things. “How else can I wash your hair?”

“You’ve got to warn me next time.”

It seemed like a silly request to Hazel. The poor Diamond had barely caught her breath, but if she wanted to go under again, who was she to question. Maybe it would brighten her day.

“Warn you?” Hazel said, giving her a heads up.

“Yes, that…” but the rest of what Ruby had to say was lost as Hazel pushed her under the water again. Hazel noticed that Pearl was thrashing like she had before. It was reminiscent of her falling out of the sky. These softheaded girls liked to play so, Hazel thought.

The water had changed its consistency back to murky, smelly, pond water. Ruby looked up through it as best she could, as she tried to escape what she thought was certain death. The last thing she saw before she breathed in a gulp of water was the Gnome taking a sip of tea as she distractedly held Ruby under water.

## Hazen Crots

The Gnome was crazy, Ruby thought.

The girl is dim, the Gnome thought.

Ruby clutched at the sides of the tub. “You’re not going to try to drown me again are you?”

The Gnome clucked her mouth. Just like an Opal to try and blame you for what they brought on themselves. Hadn’t she just asked to be dunked under a second time? A little peeved the Gnome said, “It’s too late for that. I’ve started to weave the vines into your hair. Now relax or they won’t take.”

Ruby wasn’t sure she wanted to relax. She hadn’t enjoyed her two near death experiences. She didn’t trust the Gnome.

“Relax,” the Gnome said again. “The magic won’t take unless you relax.”

Magic! What magic? Ruby tensed up. She wasn’t relaxed at all.

Hazel stopped what she was doing. “I told you to relax. NOW RELAX!” Poor dimwitted girl, no wonder The Dragon threw her away.

Hazel stopped what she was doing. The girl was as frightened as a rabbit. She’d heard what dragons did to young girls. It was horrid. It was barbaric. She wanted all the details. “So,” she asked eagerly, “What did The Dragon do to you?”

“What?” Ruby didn’t understand.

Hazel soothed Ruby with her hands. Poor child, she couldn’t follow the simplest of conversations. She needed help, guidance, and protection. “What you need is a nice young Gnome to look after you. My son Hanley is about your age.” Hazel dreamed about the two of them getting married. Her son Hanley married to royalty. It was very exciting to think about. The Rhinestone Family was known for it’s flashy parties. She wondered what the wedding would be like.



Hazel's hands had started working on Ruby's hair again and Ruby thought she might be safer if there were more people around. "Is he around? Hanley?" she asked. "I'd love to meet him."

There, the first smart thing this girl had said. "Unfortunately he's on the Western Front fighting the Goblin scourge."

"He's fighting Goblins!" The Dragon had fourteen year olds in his army? You weren't supposed to be fighting battles until you were eighteen, at least. When you were fourteen, you were supposed to be in school playing football, going to dances, and dating girls. "I can't believe someone so young would be in the Army."

"He's a brash young man, my Hanley. He joined up on his 65th birthday." She counted it out in her mind. "He's been doing The Dragon's dirty work for the last 23 years."

Ruby was having a hard time following the Gnome's train of thought. Nothing Hazel said made any sense.

"Of course, when he joined, the Army was an easy life." The girl wasn't very relaxed, but Hazel didn't have all day. She wove Hazel Croc stems, leaves, and flower petals into Ruby's hair as she talked. "He joined a machine gun brigade and got stationed on the Western Front."

"Machine guns?"

"He writes me every week like a good son. He used to write lovely letters about futile Goblin charges. He and his buddies would taunt the Goblin officers and they'd send wave after wave of Goblins only to be gunned down by Hanley and his machine gun." She paused to picture giant stacks of dead Goblins lining the field. "It was supposed to be an easy assignment. Everybody wanted to be a machine gunner on the Western Front. Shoot Goblins all night long and then spend the day stacking and burning the bodies."

What an awful thought. Ruby squinched up her face in disgust.

Hazel hadn't noticed. "Getting rid of dead Goblins isn't as easy as it sounds. They'd stack them into giant piles and then hack..."

“Stop!” Ruby didn’t want to hear any more. She wasn’t a big fan of Goblins. Who was? But, she didn’t want to hear about the mechanics of getting rid of Goblin corpses.

“Exactly,” Hazel continued. “That all stopped. Somebody took all the weapons and now my poor Hanley is defenseless against the Goblin horde.”

Hazel was done. She pulled out a mirror and showed Ruby what she had done to her hair. It looked like a mess. Green scraps of vine, petals, and other garden rubbish were woven into her hair.

“It’s a mess,” Ruby said.

“What did you expect?” Hazel replied with a little petulance. “You’re a very high strung girl. It’s the best I could do.”

“Now,” she said as she helped Ruby out of the tub, “about my fee.”

Ruby hadn’t expected a bill. She didn’t have any money on her. She patted her pockets, but she knew they were empty. “I don’t have any money.”

“Likely story,” Hazel shot at her. Ruby had never considered Hazel friendly, but now she seemed downright hostile. Hazel poked her in the chest. “You’re The Dragon’s agent aren’t you?”

Ruby looked down and noticed the pendant was hanging out of her shirt. Hazel continued, “I bet you’re that idiot advisor.” It was all coming together for Hazel. It was all over the papers, front page stuff, big headlines. Why hadn’t she figured it out earlier? This girl with her soft head being dropped out of the sky by The Dragon, it made perfect sense. She spoke slowly so Jade would be able to follow along. “You’re that advisor who told The Dragon to get rid of all his weapons. Aren’t you?”

What was she talking about?

“It’s bad advice. Get rid of all the weapons. I’m glad to see he finally came his senses and got rid of you.”

Ruby was trying to put together what the Gnome had told her. The Dragon had talked about great and wondrous changes as well. Was this what he was talking about?

Hazel was leading Ruby down a path. Ruby's clothes were soaking wet, water was pouring off her, and her shoes squeaked as she walked.

"Look, forget about my fee." Sending an invoice to The Dragon wasn't worth it. She'd heard stories about small business's that had sent The Dragon an invoice only to be sent a bill in return. After all, there was an invoice receipt charge, check origination fee, and an authorization for payment levy. It wasn't worth it.

She handed Ruby a small potted Hazen Crot plant and a coin purse size satchel of dried Hazen Crots, which immediately became soggy in Ruby's grasp. Hazel didn't want to be accused of being an ungracious host to an agent of The Dragon.

All the same, she worriedly looked into the sky as she ushered Ruby to the garden gate. The sooner she got rid of this Topaz, the better off she would be. She didn't want The Dragon burning her crops. She'd spent a lot of effort building up her Hazen Crot plot. It might not be much, but it was all she had. She'd never actually heard of The Dragon ever burning anyone's crops, but you couldn't be too sure.

Just this morning there was a letter to the editor in the newspaper about how now was the time to strike, while the irons were hot, and The Dragon was weak. Now was the time to revolt, cast off our chains, and make amends for The Dragon burning our crops. At first she had thought the letter was from a crazy crackpot, but then she noticed a Mighty Wizard had written the letter. They were always so hard to understand.

Hazel paused at the garden gate. Again she looked into the sky. No dragon. She had a minute or two.

"Listen, us Gnomes have an old trick. If a war isn't going our way, we declare a truce. You know, beat our swords to plowshares and all that good stuff." She paused letting this

concept sink in as she looked to the sky making sure The Dragon wasn't coming back. "Then, when our enemy lowers their guard, we use our superior farming technology to plow them into the ground."

Ruby wasn't sure if she was supposed to take this advice literally or figuratively.

Hazel was still musing over plowshares. "Of, course, to beat swords into plowshares, you'd need swords in the first place."

Hazel shook her head. "You're a bright girl," for an Amethyst, she thought. "If you ever get back into The Dragon's good graces, don't forget you owe me a gold piece or two."

She looked up into the sky a final time before pushing Ruby out the garden gate.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Hematite," Hazel called after Ruby.

Ruby couldn't help but notice The Dragon had said the same thing.

# 15 #

### Good News, Bad News

Ruby stepped out of Hazel's garden into her family room. She had a towel wrapped around her. Water dripped off her onto the carpet. She was soaking wet. She looked behind her into the bathroom she had just left. The tub was filled with black murky water in which her shoes and clothes floated. She put the Hazen Crot plant and satchel that she was carrying down and turned around.

Grt was running towards her. "Rubies! Rubies!" he cried excitedly with a big smile on his face. He wrapped himself around her legs and gave her a giant hug. "Rubies home. Grt miss Rubies."

Ruby kneeled down and gave Grt a great big hug. "I missed you too."

Roger and Rachel were on the couch watching TV.

“Did you dye your hair?” Roger asked.

“I was wondering what all that splashing around in there was,” her mother said.

Ruby paused for a second. She didn’t know what they were talking about.

“It looks nice,” her mother continued.

“I always thought you liked your red hair?” Roger asked.

“Be supportive,” her mother said to Roger. “It looks nice.”

They weren’t going to start being strange and hard to understand too, Ruby hoped. She needed a break from the madness. Suddenly she remembered the hairdo Hazel had given her, complete with leaves, twigs, and frazzled hair.

She ran her fingers thru her hair. She didn’t feel any leaves or twigs. It was soft and silky. It felt like it did after she washed her hair. She was going to go back into the bathroom and take a look, but Grt was holding onto her hand and dragging her towards the couch.

“Rubies on da T-vees,” Grt said as he pulled her along.

“Rubies on da T-vees.”

Sitting on the couch, the four of them watched the TV. The Mt. Doom News Channel had special nonstop coverage of what they were calling Dragon Watch. It was mostly the same film footage over and over again of The Dragon flying across a field. Every now and then a different clip would be spliced in showing The Dragon dipping under a bridge or going around a barn.

Over the film, two announcers voices could be heard.

A sexy female Elvin voice lilted, “This is the first confirmed dragon sighting in over 1,200 years.”

A less cultured guttural male voice that sounded like it belonged to someone with a speech impediment said, “As some of you’rg will remember, the last flight was at night... bad lighting it was hard’rg to get a clear picture...”

“Actually Brad, very few people had video cameras in the Eighth Century.”

While Jeannette Stevens corrected Brad's commentary, the footage of The Dragon's flight was reduced to a small corner of the screen, and the main screen was filled with a close up of a beautiful, golden haired High Elf, who was busy giving her co-anchor a disdainful glare. Jeannette didn't like being paired with Brad. He wasn't very smart, he sounded like crap, and for her tastes he wasn't very good looking. She was already one of the highest paid anchors in the business and was looking forward to the day when she wouldn't have to work with a brain dead moron.

The camera turned wide revealing Brad Slow. He had taken news reporting to new levels of lowness. His distracters said he was brain dead... and they were right. He was a Zombie, and this was the late-late news. He had a loyal following among the undead community.

The camera focused on Brad. His face was peeling off, his eyes were vacant, and his jaw hung loose when he wasn't talking. He turned his neck in an unnatural way to look at Jeannette and said, "Why do you'rg always do that?" He face jerked sideways when he said, you'rg.

Jeannette hated Brad. "What Brad? What do I always do? State the obvious? Correct your stupid errors?"

Brad seethed with anger. The camera zoomed even closer on his sinister vacant eyes, but he said nothing. Someday he was going to crack. He got a thousand fan letters every night encouraging him to take a bite out of Jeanette's face. The crew had a pool going. He'd been doing a joint newscast with Jeannette for a month now. No one thought he'd make it another month without attacking her.

The producer was counting on that. He already had the special report planned: When Journalist Attack, Undead Hunger, Professional Rivalry, or Ancient Feud? It would be an exclusive. As he would tell anyone who would listen, "At Mt. Doom News we don't just report the news; we make the news."

Jeannette gave Brad one last glare before she smiled at the camera. “While we give Brad here some time to come up with a witty comeback,” she looked at Brad as she continued, “or any comeback. We have a special report from our field correspondent Jim.” She groaned. As the camera switched to a view of Jim, Jeannette’s voice could be heard to say, “This guy is even dumber than Brad.”

The TV showed a video clip of Ruby falling out of the sky. Ruby was silently counting her blessing that neither Roger nor Rachel recognized her when Grt started hopping up and down. “Rubies! Rubies! Rubies on da T-vees.”

Rachel asked with concern, “Is that you Ruby?”

Ruby wasn’t anxious to answer and as she thought of what to say the screen changed showing a smiling Werewolf.

“Am I on?” Jim asked as he held a hand up to his ear.

Jeannette was exasperated. She was reduced to having a conversation with a dimwitted Werewolf about whether his uplink was working.

“Is that Jim, your ex-boyfriend?” Ruby asked.

“It’s hard to tell, but I think so,” Rachel replied.

Rachel had gone out with Jim for a few months before she met Roger. Jim was a Werewolf, a bit hyperactive, and prone to distraction. Apparently he’d followed his dream and was now a TV reporter.

“Yes,” Jeannette said. She was going to have to update her resume. The standards at this station had nosedived. “For what I hope is the final time, if you can hear me, your connection is fine.”

“So, I should start my report now?” Jim asked.

“Please.”

“O-ow-hoooo! Jim Werewolf here reporting for Mt. Doom News.”

The camera pulled back from Jim’s face revealing Hazel Kraut and her garden in the background.

Hazel Kraut was standing on the edge of the bathtub. “Are we on now?” she asked.

“She wants to know if we’re on.” Jim dutiful repeated what Hazel had just said.

“Yes!” Jeannette hissed.

“How do I look?” Jim asked. “Is my hair OK?”

“GET – TO – THE – REPORT,” Jeannette said through tight pressed lips.

Jim didn’t like Jeannette. She was too bossy and she thought she was better than the rest of the news crew. So what if she’d gone to some fancy smancy college and gotten a degree in journalism? So what if she was good looking? So what if she was a High Elf? “O-ow-hoooo!” Jim howled. It was his trademark and he liked to fit it in to his report as much as possible. “O-ow-hoooo! Say Brad...”

Jim waited for a response.

“O-ow-hoooo! Brad. O-ow-hoooo! Can you hear me Brad?”

“Y’rg,” Brad replied. It was this sort of witty repertoire that kept his fan mail rolling in. He got ten times the fan mail that Jeannette got, and why? Because nobody could say Y’rg like he could.

For his part, Jim was hoping to push Jeannette into pushing Brad over the edge. He had tonight in the pool. If Brad took one little bite out of Miss Journalism Degree’s face, he stood to pocket over a thousand in gold. All he had to do was annoy Jeannette enough, so she forgot herself and insulted Brad one too many times. “O-ow-hoooo!” Jim howled.

“Y’rg,” Brad responded.

“O-ow-hoooo!”

“Y’rg.”

“O-ow-hoooo!”

“Y’rg.”

“Will you just get on with the report Jim.” Where did they get these amateurs?



“O-ow-hoooo! Did you know there’s a pool going?”

“Y’rg,” Brad knew. His agent had told him to hold out as long as he could. The longer he waited, his agent had said, the higher his popularity would soar when he finally ate the Elf.

“Get on with the report,” Jeannette seethed.

Right. The report. Jim forgot about the pool. He was a highly paid news professional. “Um, I’m here with…”

“Hazel Kraut,” said her name into the microphone, “of Hazel’s Hazen Crots. I sell the best Hazen Crots in all the Seven Realms.”

“Wow!” Jim said. He had always wanted to do one of those fluff pieces and now was his chance. “I always wanted to know what Hazen Crots were for.”

Jeannette spoke over Hazel’s explanation. “This isn’t a fluff piece Jim. The Dragon dropped his new consort into her garden. We have film footage of a redheaded beauty falling into Hazel’s garden. This isn’t fluff. This is important domestic news. Have you found the body?”

“Um, right. Hazel, The Dragon dropped something?”

“Right here,” Hazel said pointing to the tub.

“The bathtub?” Jim asked.

“No, you dolt. The bathtub is my late husband’s doing. May he rest in peace.”

This certainly wasn’t a fluff piece. This was hard hitting news of national importance.

“Ask her what landed in the bathtub,” Jeannette prompted Jim.

“What about the bathtub?” Jim asked Hazel.

“My late husband,” Hazel answered.

“O-ow-hoooo!” Jim said. He had figured this story out. Jeannette was right. This was big time news. He might even get a Putzer Award for this. He was so happy, he howled again, “O-ow-hoooo! Brad.” He wasn’t going to share his Putzer with Jeannette,

the stuck up Elf. “Brad, it appears that The Dragon is dropping bathtubs out of the sky.”

“No, you idiot,” Jeannette tried to correct him.

“Sorry, I can’t hear you Jeannette. Are you there Brad?”

“Y’rg.”

“That’s right Brad. The Dragon is dropping bathtubs. It seems that in an effort to bypass the recent weapons ban The Dragon is developing a new secret weapon.”

“Y’rg.”

“O-ow-hoooo! I couldn’t agree more. It is desperate times when bathroom fixtures and appliances are used for purposes of aerial bombardment.”

“Y’rg.”

“No!” Hazel tried to correct him. “My late husband.”

“O-ow-hoooo! Yes Brad, the initial tests have been positive. The bathtubs are lethal. The kingdom can rest safe.”

“Y’rg.”

“Thank you Jim and Brad. Once again you have removed any blemish of respectability from this newscast.”

“O-ow-hoooo! This is Jim Werewolf signing off for Mt. Doom News. Back to you Brad.”

“Y’rg. Thank you, Jim. That was very important news. I hope you get the Putzer for that.”

“I’m sure he will. In other news...”

“Y’rg. This is my story.”

“Than read it,” Jeannette said peevishly.

“Why don’t you ever want to banter?” Brad asked Jeannette.

“Well Brad, the next story is about the falling stock prices of the big arms manufacturers. DragonHead Marlin’s price has plummeted by ninety percent while United Armories has already filed for bankruptcy protection. Care to banter about that?”

“Y’rg.”

“Clever. Witty Brad. Y’rg.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” Brad complained.

“Y’rg. Deal with it Brad. Y’rg,” Jeannette continued baiting him. She’d heard about his agent’s advice. If he bit her too soon, maybe his ratings would plummet, and he would get kicked off the show.

Brad glared at Jeannette.

“Y’rg. Are you at a loss for words there Brad? Maybe you’ll think of something witty in an hour or two.” She added a last, “Y’rg,” just for good measure.

“We have a satellite feed with The Dragon’s Warlord Clint Grave. He is commander in chief of the Orcin front,” Jeannette continued. “Warlord Grave, I understand you are having some weapon’s difficulties.”

The screen switched to a view of Clint Grave. Behind him a desolate battlefield stretched off into the distance. Gnome, Human, Troll, and Ogre soldiers wearing The Dragon’s insignia, were wandering around in the mud. Bodies, mostly Orcin, were scattered over the muddy plain along with broken Orcin war banners.

Clint Grave stood with his hand by his ear waiting for the signal from the satellite feed. During this pause, Brad took the liberty of unhooking the wire to Jeannette’s feed. Y’rg, he thought, that would teach her.

“Yes, Jeannette. All our weapons have disappeared. We are thankful that the Orcin menace is still recovering from last week’s battle, but they breed fast. The citizens should rest assured that our best wizards, alchemists, and sages are working on this issue, but honestly we don’t have a contingency plan. Nobody ever thought all weapons of war would disappear.”

After a pause, Jeannette mouthed the words to a question but nobody could hear her.

“Y’rg? Technical problems there Jeannette?”

The camera cut away from her as she gave Brad a rude gesture. Her inappropriate for younger viewers language echoed softly in the background of Brad’s microphone.

“Y’rg, it seems that Jeannette is havin’rg technical difficulties. You were sayin’rg you have disappearin’rg swords Warlord Grave.”

Grave put his hand to his ear. “Yes, all weapons have disappeared, bows, arrows, catapults, swords, daggers, even steak knives.”

Brad didn’t understand. “Wouldn’t invisible weapons make attackin’rg easier’g?”

“Those are two separate issues Brad. We have never developed the technology to stay invisible while attacking. So No, invisible weapons don’t make attacking easier. They are strictly a defensive item.” This of course was over most of the viewer’s heads and Grave knew this, but he had political ambitions. Airtime was airtime. “The issue we are having is not invisible weapons, but that no weapons exist. I can’t see how we would launch any type of attack.”

“Y’rg,” Brad said.

After a pause Warlord Grave agreed, “Y’rg.” He knew you had to stay on journalists’ good side or they would swarm all over you. He didn’t want anybody taking too close of a look at what went on in his own tent. What he did on his own time was between him and a fully consenting adult Centaur. He fully endorsed the militaries don’t ask don’t tell policy.

“Thank you’rg Warlord Grave,” Brad said cutting the feed. “As you hear’rg for yourself, The Dragon is busy exploring alternate routes in order to bypass the’rg weapons ban. Weapons that no one can see ar’rg being employed by invisible stealth fighters on the Eastern Front.” He noticed that Jeannette had plugged her feed back in. “Y’rg, Jeannette. I see you’re back with us.”

“Y’rg,” Jeannette hissed with a look of uncontrolled anger in her eyes.

“I think you’ll a’rg’gre,” Brad said with as much of a smile as zombies can muster, “the Orc’s will never’rg know what hit them.”

“Y’rg,” Jeannette agreed. “They’re not the only ones,” and with that she grabbed Brad’s arm and bit off a chunk.

“Y’rg,” Brad said confused. “What are you doing?”

Jeannette spit out the chunk of flesh in her mouth and bit Brad again as he flailed his free arm and shouted, “Help! Help!”

The screen went blank for a second before a pre-made graphic went up.

When Journalist Attack:  
Undead Hunger,  
Professional Rivalry,  
or Ancient Feud?

In the background there were sounds of Brad weeping and Jeannette saying, “Y’rg, this is my show,” and, “Y’rg, now give me that pool. I’m the only one who ever said it would be the Elf biting the Zombie. Y’rg”

Before they cut to commercial Brad cried out again, “Somebody help me.”

# 16 #

The Calm Before the Storm

It had been quiet a week. Actually it hadn’t even been an entire week since Ruby had last sat up here in the gorge. She had hoped to take a nap and dream about The Dragon again, but she was too restless.

She watched as Roger walked up the slope to grab another stone block. The cottage was really taking shape. Roger spent his lunch and most of his free time down here at the spring carrying blocks down from the gorge. It was Thursday evening. By the end

of the weekend, at the latest, he planned on thatching the roof. Rachel was hoping to move in before the month was out to try and save a few dollars on rent.

Ruby knew The Dragon's bill was causing her mother some grief. She appreciated the thought of her mother trying to economize and save money, but the amount of money involved was too large. She took out the bill and read the figure again, 799,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.53. If you rounded it up, and she was sure The Dragon or one of his agents would find a way to round it up, that was a million, billion, billion, not dollars mind you, but gold pieces, a million, billion, billion in gold. It was more money than there was in the entire world. She had never been expected to pay the bill in gold, maybe blood, maybe something else, but never in gold.

She thought about the final thing The Dragon had said. He wanted her to learn how to fly. She knew he didn't mean it in just a literal sense. It was also metaphorical. There was some way to pay the bill. She was going to have to figure out how and then do it.

She took the countdown pendant out and looked at it. On one side of the pendant was the countdown clock of doom. Red digital numbers read, 36:24:07:45:13. Time was going by. She would turn fifteen in a little over three weeks. After that she would only have three years to solve this dilemma. It sounded like a long time, but she knew it could go by quickly.

But the pendant wasn't just a countdown clock of doom, it was also a symbol. The other side of the pendant had a picture of The Dragon on it. The picture had changed since Ruby had first received the pendant. Instead of a blurry dragon's face, the pendant now showed The Dragon in full flight with a rider in exquisite detail. The rider's hair was a bright vivid red. Besides the numbers on the other side, the hair was the only color on the pendant. The rest was a solid shiny black. It was a bit ironic the rider had red hair, Ruby thought, but the idea drifted away quickly. Instead she concentrated on the symbolism the pendant was

intended to hold. True the pendant was a symbol of her obligation to The Dragon, her bill, their agreement, but it was more than that. She had ridden The Dragon now. The Dragon had wanted to be ridden. She knew The Dragon wanted to be ridden again. Not only was she bound to The Dragon, in some way she did not fully understand The Dragon was bound to her. After watching the news, she realized she was having a profound impact on his kingdom, on all the Seven Realms, and perhaps even beyond that. She also knew the pendant, The Dragon's seal of authority, would open some doors for her and would close others. She put the pendant back under her shirt. She would need to be careful to whom she revealed it.

Roger had sat down beside Ruby. He had misread the reason for her brooding. "Your hair looks good. I'm really impressed with the dye job."

Ruby gave Roger a weak smile. It was sweet of him to try and cheer her up, but she wasn't sad. She simply had a lot on her mind.

"I never thought I'd be saying this, but you look good with black hair." Her mother had joined them to take a rest from her gardening.

Ruby held a lock of her hair in front of her eyes. It really was black. Not just black. It was a deep dark cavernous black. She thought of George for a moment. Her hair was like the depths of a well or a deep cavern. She missed her red hair. She was self-conscious about her new hair color, but it would be good camouflage. Eventually an accurate version of the news had surfaced and the word in the kingdom was that a redheaded girl had become The Dragon's domestic advisor. She had insisted there be a weapons ban and The Dragon had acquiesced.

Ruby hadn't intended to forbid the existence of all weapons, but now that it had happened, she wasn't in a rush to re-allow them. She didn't know what would happen on the Orcin or Goblin fronts, but she hoped the enemy's forces would be equally

hindered. Funny she thought, as George flashed into her mind again, George the Mighty, George the Slayer of Dragons, George Bane to Friend and Foe Alike. She wondered if a blurring of the lines between aid and hindrance was a byproduct of being a wizard. She knew she was destined to be a mighty sorceress, a consort to dragons, if she could only work out the details.

“Don’t worry honey,” her mother soothed.

It was helpful. Ruby had been sinking too deep into her own thoughts. She smiled at her mother and noticed her light brown hair. When the sun caught it the right way, her hair had a reddish glow. She had seen pictures of her mother from long ago. As a child she had had red hair, but it had changed as she aged.

Ruby shook her head. She had done enough thinking. She knew what she was going to do next. This weekend, bright and early Saturday morning, she was going to take Grt on a field trip to the Mt. Doom Museum. She needed to do more research on The Dragon and it seemed like a good place to start. She hadn’t told her parents, but she had a feeling her research would lead her on a trip deep into the zone and the heart of Mt. Doom. It was time to meet The Dragon on his own ground.

She felt her mother’s hands going through her hair. “I just can’t get over how pretty your hair is.”

Ruby took her mother’s hand and held it for a moment. She leaned over and gave her mother a hug. “Everything will turn out fine mom,” Ruby assured her. While she lingered in her mother’s embrace, she looked at Grt down by the spring. He was sitting against a rock reading next to Clarence. He had his bag of manna spiked over the spring. A flurry of magical ribbons streamed into its opening. If she ever needed manna, she was going to have plenty of it. Grt waved at Ruby when he caught her gaze and put away the book he had been reading. It was The MDM Employee’s Handbook and Service Guide.



Of course, Grt couldn't read and he was holding the book upside down, but if Ruby had known Grt had such a book, she might not have taken her trip into the zone and that would have been most unfortunate.

As it was, Grt flew up to where Ruby was and joined in the group hug.

"Hey der Rubies," he said with a smile as he snuggled against her black hair. "We eats soon?"

She patted Grt's belly and said, "Yes. We eats soon."

As the sun went down behind Roger's bridge, the bridge he would own in only twenty more years, they had a wonderful picnic supper, Ruby, Rachel, Roger, Clarence, and Grt.

They ate good food, told wonderful tales of happy days, sang a few songs, and listened to the evening birds turn into the crickets of night. It was the kind of picnic it seems people only have in fairy book stories at the very end... or right before a long and perilous quest.

Thus Ends  
The Book of George

Book III  
Dragon Bound

# 1 #  
The Quest Unfolds

Saturday morning Ruby got up early and took a bath.

She had told her parents she was going to the Mt. Doom Museum, but she had a suspicion that would only be the first stop. She needed to find out as much about The Dragon as she could. Mt. Doom was his home. It seemed likely she would have to delve deep into the heart of Mt. Doom and the zone in order to find out

the secret of the riddle. It was an odd riddle. It was a bill for a million, billion, billion in gold. The Dragon hadn't expected her to pay that bill. He had expected her to find some way around it. It was part of a test, an initiation. For what she wasn't entirely sure, but she hoped whatever it was, it would include many more dragon rides.

Ruby splashed lazily in the murky water of the bathtub. One moment the water was fresh, clean, and full of bubbles. The next moment it was dark, murky and full of plant debris. She pushed her feet deep into the muck at the bottom of the bathtub as she ran the dirty water over her face.

The Hazen Crots had taken over the bathroom. She had left one little plant in there for only an hour while she had watched the news and it had taken over the entire room. Vines grew up the wall, over the toilet, around the mirror, and up and out the small ventilation window. It was a fast growing, hardy plant. Roger had tried to clean it out with little success. The vines were difficult to cut and stuck to the walls with a tenacious grip. Finally Roger had decided the thing to do was drain the water from the tub and starve the plant. This idea had gotten Roger nowhere. The drain plug was a tightly sealed tangle of muddy roots. He had found the easiest way to try and work on the drain had been sitting in the tub. He had been sitting in the murky smelly water for hours when he stopped for lunch. During this break Rachel had noticed he smelled the best he ever had.

Hesitantly at first, they had each tried a bath in the black soupy water. Each of them had had the same experience. Once they had relaxed, the water had turned into a nice foamy bubble bath, and once they had dried off, they were as clean and refreshed as they had ever felt.

Ruby wasn't relaxing right now, though. She was preparing for an adventure. She had washed her hair making sure to leave in plenty of the Hazen Crot leaves and stems. She didn't want to

have red hair right now. She liked her red hair, but the entire kingdom was looking for The Dragon's red haired consort. It seemed like most of them weren't looking for the consort to talk to her or welcome her to the kingdom. They were upset about the weapons ban. It was all over the news.

Once her own hair was done, Ruby worked on Grt. He was splashing in the water, playing with an old rubber duckie he had found under the sink. She was plastering his body with a thin layer of muck from the bottom of the bathtub. Every once in a while she grabbed a strip of manna and smoothed it into the muck. She was working on a disguise spell. If a redheaded girl was going to attract attention, so would a baby dragon.

Grt enjoyed the treatment he was getting.

"Grt at da spa," he said. "Dis good spa. Grt hopies dey have da jiggly machine." He had seen one of those machines on TV where a person straps a belt around their waste and it shakes the fat away.

Ruby looked at herself and Grt through a mirror. To her eyes Grt still looked like Grt and she just had leaves in her hair, but when she looked through the mirror, her hair was black and Grt looked like a five year old boy.

After they got out of the bathroom, Ruby's mother couldn't believe what the pair of them looked like. "That's Grt?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"Hey der Ray-chel."

It was Grt all right. He looked just like a five year old boy wearing a striped t-shirt with messy brown hair.

"One last detail," Ruby said. She had almost forgotten. She pulled out a pair of Groucho Marx glasses, those toy glasses with a fake nose and mustache. It seemed a bit silly to Ruby, but an awful lot of what she'd seen in the past few weeks had seemed silly to her. If someone could see through the Hazen Crot disguise, maybe they wouldn't be able to see through this layer.

She put the glasses on Grt. To her Grt still looked like Grt, only now he was wearing a pair of novelty glasses. She asked her mom, “How does he look?”

“I can’t believe it. He’s so adorable.”

“Grt cute,” Grt said as he did a twirl.

Ruby thought he looked ridiculous in the glasses. Was this really going to fool anybody?

Her mother continued, “It’s amazing. It looks like he’s wearing a pair of broken glasses that have been mended with a piece of tape and his mouth... it looks like he’s been eating candy. His face is just filthy with candy residue.” Her mother forgot herself and started to head off to the kitchen. “I’ll go get a washcloth and clean that up for you, Grt.”

Ruby stopped her. “It’s not real. It’s part of the disguise.”

“Right,” her mom said remembering. “I don’t see how it could get any more realistic. He looks just like a small boy.”

Grt licked around his mouth. He couldn’t taste anything. “Eet be beeter disguisy if candies be real,” he said hopefully.

Her mom offered to drive her to the museum, but Ruby thought it would be best if she took the bus. She was hoping to talk to Igor anyway.

She grabbed a small backpack she had packed with food for lunch and some candy bars for Grt. It was light. She trusted that if she needed anything to complete this adventure, it would be provided for her or she would be able to fashion it out of some manna from the manna bag Grt was wearing disguised as a backpack.

She gave a final hug to her mom and set off towards the bus stop holding Grt’s hand. He was munching on a manna stick. She knew he must look exactly like a little boy eating a piece of candy.

Ruby looked back at her house as she walked away. She waived to her mom a final time. She hoped she would be back for supper, but she doubted she would be. She had left a note under

her pillow telling her mom not to worry. She hoped she'd be back before her mother found it.

She didn't really think she would be. From reading books, she knew these quests usually took longer than a single afternoon.

# 2 #

Weapons!

Hu'ats!

What are they good for?

Igor wasn't driving the bus that Ruby took to the Mt. Doom Museum. She felt a little unlucky starting her quest on anybody else's bus. She had hoped to talk with him.

Igor wasn't always the bus driver, but he usually was. It didn't matter what route she was taking or what time of day. For some reason, Igor usually ended up being the driver.

She was impatient on the ride to the museum. She wanted to start this adventure. As the bus pulled up in front, she regretted her impatience. The museum grounds were overrun with protestors. The biggest group belonged to the NFAA, a very powerful political action committee. The Dwarven representatives of The National Field Artillery Association were scattered all over the plaza, but she could see other groups in the crowd. She saw a diverse group of Monsters and Others representing Mothers Against Dungeon Delvers. It was a very successful group with an extensive membership network. The organization had started five years ago when a Pit Crawler had lost her brood of young to a group of adventurers. Very quickly it had become the leading Monster advocacy group.

The air was filled with competing protest chants. The Dwarves were the loudest, but only slightly. They repeated an un-inspired NFAA slogan:

What do we want?

War hammers!

When do we want them?  
Now!

Over and over they said this in mind numbing repetition. Ruby thought about staying on the bus and going somewhere else, but she knew this was the place she needed to be, if for no other reason than all the people, Monsters, and Others crowding around the building. She had anticipated meeting adversity and hardship. In fact, she figured if she ever had the choice, if the trail she was following forked, the path towards The Dragon would always be the harder path to follow. She simply had been surprised at how soon the path had turned difficult. She knew she had no choice but to get off the bus. It was time to start examining the opposition.

The sidewalk was crowded. Ruby could barely squeeze off the bus. She could barely move. She gripped Grt's hand tightly. She could feel his grip in return. She also noticed Grt had grabbed onto her jeans with his other hand just to make sure. He didn't want to get separated in this crowd.

Ruby saw a break in the crowd and followed it. It led right into the intersection of two competing protest groups. A group of stout Dwarven NFAA members brandishing placards were facing off against an odd assortment of creatures from the deep.

"Catapults don't kill people. People kill people," a Dwarf decked out in studded leather yelled at a small squat creature that looked a lot like an oversized badger with a long spiked tail. The creature held a sign, which read:

First they came for the Gorgons, and I didn't say anything.  
Then they came for the Medusas, and I didn't say anything.  
When they came for me, there was nobody left to notice.

The spiked tailed badger waived its sign in the Dwarf's face. Another Dwarf yelled, "They can have my crossbow when they pry it from my cold dead hands."

A Minataur stepped forward from the group of monsters. He was wearing a M.A.A. t-shirt, Monsters Against Adventurers. He tried to trip the Dwarf up with logic. "Where's your crossbow? Shouldn't you be dead?"

The Dwarf reached for his war hammer. He'd teach this snotty dungeon dweller to talk back to its betters, but then he remembered he was unarmed.

"I can help you with that last part," the Minataur continued, "that being dead part... if you want?"

The Dwarf quickly fell back into the crowd. Ruby moved on. She noticed another creature from the deep dark depths. He had a dozen tentacles coming out of his head, was wearing dark sunglasses, and smiled pleasantly. The banner he was carrying read:

If Galgometh didn't want Kreels to rule the world,  
he wouldn't have given them psionics.

He looked pleased with himself. Normally Ruby would have given him a wide berth, but so was everybody else. It was easy to walk up to him.

He watched her approach.

"Are you a K-reel?" she asked.

"For real," he answered. He liked the way it rhymed. He was having a fantastic time. He couldn't remember the last time there had been such a great turnout for a protest. He'd been to all the protests. He loved a good protest. He protested the war against the Goblins. He protested the war against the Orcs. Whenever there had been a brief peace, he had protested the peace. Sword control, suffrage for the undead, whatever the cause, he had

been there. Someone had to protest and he was just the kind of Kreel to do it. Besides, he fed off of the emotional energy.

“Hey. Are you having a hard time getting through this crowd?” he had asked just to be polite. He was psionic, which was just another way of saying he could read minds. Even so, her mind had been hard to read. It looked like she had shampooed with Hazen Crots. That stuff should be made illegal, he thought. He had protested Hazen Crots along with some other mind readers a few years back, but the turn out had been dismal. Nobody cared about Hazen Crots. He did though. With Hazen Crots in her hair, he could barely get to the edge of her mind. Her kid brother? Whatever he was. His mind was a total blank.

“You going to the museum?” he asked as he started walking that way. Everyone or thing in front of him cleared a path.

Ruby thought she should talk to the Kreel, at least make some small talk, but nothing came to mind. The sights around her were too intense. It seemed as if the whole crowd parted for the Kreel. At first she had thought it was because he terrified them, but slowly it became apparent it was something else. Everyone just moved out of his way. He was like a zipper moving through the crowd. In front of him the crowd zipped open and behind him it zipped shut.

Ruby and Grt walked in his wake through the crowd. People seemingly floated by them and as they did everyone gave Ruby a little piece of their mind.

An old Gnome wearing a Veteran of Dragon Wars pin told her, “When the Nelk came, the first thing they did was take away the Grood’s swords.” What was that supposed to mean?

A young Dwarf who didn’t look like he was old enough to have ever seen battle said conspiratorially, “A man’s home is his castle. With a catapult, his castle can be yours.”

It was like walking through a dream.

Another Dwarf reminded her to “kill responsibly.”



An old lady who looked like she was somebody's grandmother told her, "A +8 Sword of Destruction is the great equalizer," before she handed Grt a piece of hard candy.

Another Dwarf asked her, "When a Giant G'nt'ell knocks on your door, what are you going to do? Parlay?"

What did he mean by that? She had no time to consider. She was pulled along in the wake of the Kreel. She found that Grt was holding her hand and dragging her along.

An old man asked her, "What would Targor do?"

She walked by a beast with a thousand eyes. All of them stared at her intently. He said calmly, "Natural Weapons. Natural Law. Natural Order." As if that explained it all and then he was gone.

Only to be replaced by a talking grizzly bear, which said, "Attack first. Let Natural Selection sort them out."

She was getting dizzy with the parade. She didn't think that she could stop even if she wanted to. Helplessly she trailed along behind the Kreel. She looked ahead and was relieved to see they were almost through the crowd.

A short turtle, with eyes that reached up to her on stalks showed her a note:

See, the pen is mightier than the sword.

A burly Dwarf that looked like his mother might have been an Ogre grunted before he told her, "Pacifists make me want to kill."

What was the meaning of this? Ruby didn't have time to complete the thought.

Another Dwarf asked her, "Have you beheaded a Goblin today?"

Why would she even want to?

Then even the Kreel as he was departing into the crowd told her sweetly, "Give Natural Selection a chance."

“Dat funks,” Grt said at her side. She was still in a bit of a daze. She didn’t know what had happened. Clearly the Kreel had used some sort of magic, but she wasn’t really sure to what purpose. He was back in the middle of the crowd. He waived at her briefly and then turned his attention elsewhere.

“Dat Meester Kre-eel, he know’d how to workee da crowd,” Grt added when it became clear Ruby wasn’t going to say anything.

Ruby stood at the top of the museum steps for a moment. Below her in the courtyard there were thousands of protestors. A few were in favor of the weapons ban, but most of them were against it. She even thought she saw Hazel out there holding a placard:

Our boys deserve our support.  
They deserve machine guns.

It could have been Hazel or just another Gnome. She couldn’t be sure. There were so many of them. They seemed to blend together.

Grt tugged at her shirt. “We goes now Rubies?”

She caught the Kreel’s eye again and again he waived. For just a fraction of a second Ruby felt the anger and resentment of the crowd. She felt the seething hatred of the Dwarves and the yearning for revenge the denizens of the dark held close to their hearts. The Kreel smiled. He was happy. There hadn’t been a protest like this since the Ve’kahn War. Now those were the days.

# 3 #

Laying Down the Law

“O-ow-hoooo! Ruthie.”

Ruby heard his howl the same moment she felt his paw on her shoulder. It could only be Jim Werewolf. He had never gotten her name right.

The whole purpose of dyeing her hair and making Grt look like a little boy was so they wouldn't be recognized and now Jim of all people had spotted her. True he was dimwitted, but he was also a newspaper reporter. She wasn't looking for publicity.

She turned around slowly.

"Hi Jim," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"O-ow-hoooo! Ruthie!" he said again. He liked that she remembered his name. "How are you doing Ruthie? Long time no see." He put his hands through her hair. "Your hair's as black as it's ever been. You always did like it dark." Could she be so lucky and Jim so unaware that he wouldn't remember her hair used to be red. "And this must be little..." he trailed off. Funny, he was usually good with names.

"Grt," said helping him out.

"Right, little Greg." He scratched his chin trying to remember. "O-ow-hoooo! I remember when you were only this big," Jim said holding an imaginary baby. "You always were a messy eater," he continued as he brushed his hand against Grt's seemingly candy stained face.

"O-ow-hoooo! Say Ruthie, you want to be on TV?"

"Not really."

"O-ow-hoooo! Great. I'm a reporter now." He put his arm around Ruby while his other hand went up to his ear. "What's that Miss Stevens?"

A bright light flashed in Ruby's eyes as a cameraman turned on his equipment. To the side of the camera lens was a video screen. On it, Ruby could see Jeannette Stevens.

"I said you're on Wolf Brain." Jeannette's ratings had gone through the roof. Who would have thought that biting a Zombie would be the turning point in her career? She was twice as popular as before. All the undead who used to write Brad urging him to bite her, were now writing her urging her to finish him off.

Jim and the rest of the crew were scared of her. There was a new pool going. Who would she bite next? It was even money on

either Jim or Brad. Jim didn't want it to be him. He wasn't sure about the mechanics of it. He knew if a Zombie bit you, you became a Zombie, but he didn't know what happened when someone who had bitten a Zombie then bit you. He didn't want to find out.

Much to his chagrin it seemed like everyone else in the newsroom wanted to know the answer to that very question. It was the talk around the water cooler. What did happen when someone who had bitten a Zombie bit someone else? More to the point, they were especially curious to find out what happened if that someone else also happened to be a Werewolf. Jim had even noticed that the producer had already made up graphics for the special news report, "just in case."

### Zombies and Lycanthropes Ancient Feud or Professional Jealousy

Jim was anxious to stay on Jeannette's good side.

"O-ow-hoooo! Thank you Jeannette. Jim Werewolf reporting from the Mt. Doom Museum. As you can see the steps of the museum are thronged with angry protestors."

Jeannette hadn't decided whom to bite next. Brad was closer, Jim would make a better story, but biting the producer would really launch her career. "We can see that Jim. That's why we have cameras." She had noticed the more abusive she became, the higher her popularity went. "Have anything interesting to report? Or, are you just a piece of meat waiting to be bitten into?"

"Y'rg," Brad added.

"Shut up Brad."

"O-ow-hoooo? I'm here with Ruthie and her brother Greg. What do you think of all this Ruthie?" Jim put the microphone in front of Ruby's face and she saw her image on the camera. She had long black hair. She was surprised how good looking she appeared. She didn't really look like that. Did she? Grt looked

just like a little boy. He was munching on a piece of manna, but on the screen it looked like he was sucking on a lollipop.

“I’m surprised at all anger the protesters have,” Ruby remarked. She hadn’t really intended to say anything.

“They have every right to be angry,” it was Jeannette.

“But why? Wouldn’t the world be a better place if everyone put down their weapons?”

“O-ow-hoooo! Everyone has put down their weapons.”

“Thank you, Jim,” Jeannette said. “The next time I need someone to state the obvious, I know just where to turn. Would you and Brad like to exchange some witty Wahoo’s and Yeargs back and forth? I’m sure our viewers would love to hear some right now. How about you Brad? I haven’t heard a Yee’herg out of you in two days.”

The video screen cut wide to include Brad. As Jeannette said this he tried to scoot his chair away from her, but it was bolted down. He had a white bandage on his arm where Jeannette had bitten him.

“You know teeth ar’rg weapons,” Brad said sulkily.

“Good point Brad. Or should I say, Yearg. And let’s not forget about words.” Jeannette jerked her body as if to lurch at Brad.

Brad jumped backwards out of his chair and landed on the floor.

“So what about it Ruthie? Any comments?” Jeannette knew she was being mean. That was the point. She could see her ratings climb. If she could get this girl to cry on air, who knows how high her popularity would soar? She’d certainly ask for another raise. “Words are weapons. Should they be outlawed?”

“No, that’s stupid,” Ruby replied. She wasn’t scared of Jeannette. Jeannette was far away in a studio. Jeannette wasn’t going to hurt her. Besides, that wasn’t the point of this conversation. She could feel The Dragon’s presence. It had been decided that weapons would not exist in all the lands. Now it needed to be understood what a weapon was.

“I’ll tell you what stupid is.” Jeannette wanted to say stupid was hiring a brain dead Zombie as a co-anchor or giving a microphone to a hyperactive Werewolf, instead she said, “What’s stupid is a little girl thinking that she can decide national security issues.”

Ruby didn’t feel like she needed to respond to Jeannette. She had her own problems and worries. Besides this wasn’t about her and Jeannette, it was about the fundamental nature of the Seven Realms and her ability to solve a riddle.

She gave the matter a moment’s thought before she continued, “Nearly anything can be used as a weapon, a rock, a stick, this microphone.” Ruby paused for a moment. “This microphone is here now, so we know it’s not what’s intended by the weapons ban.”

Jeannette had a witty remark planned, but Ruby talked over her. “By the same token, we are using words, so we know words are not banned, and Jim here still has his claws. Let’s see your claws Jim.”

“O-ow-hoooo!” Jim was happy to oblige. He flashed his claws.

“Clearly the intent wasn’t to take away the natural part of any creature. Jim’s claws didn’t disappear, Gorgons didn’t lose their breath, and nobody lost their teeth. Not Brad and not you Jeannette.”

“Y’rg. As long as we’re goin’rg on the recor’rg. Jeannette’s teeth ar’rg mor’rg like weapons than mine.” He made a point of rubbing his bandaged arm.

“Shut up Brad. You just heard her. I’m not losing my teeth anytime soon, so just watch yourself.”

Ruby didn’t feel the need to point out to Jeannette that she was being mean. Ruby had watched her on the news over the last month. Brad had made her life miserable. He deserved what he was getting.

Jeannette was continuing, “but if I haven’t lost my razor sharp, Zombie eating teeth,” Jeannette glanced at Brad who was getting ready to run if he needed to, “then Orcs and Goblins haven’t lost their teeth or sharp claws either. The only advantage The Dragon’s forces ever had over Goblins were their weapons. Goblins have a shorter gestation period than rats and they are every bit as prolific.” She paused for a moment. She needed to backtrack a bit. “There is no doubt The Dragon’s forces are the best in all the known vortexes. One Gnome fighter is worth dozens, scores of dozens of Goblins, but at the kind of reproductive advantage Goblins have, if Goblins kill one Gnome for every thousand Goblins, soon the borders will be overrun.”

When Ruby did not start talking again, Jeannette added what she thought would be the capstone to her argument. “Goblins aren’t the only thing the kingdom is constantly fighting. There are horrors from the lowest dungeons depths, which are literally nothing more than walking weapons platforms. Poison Lurkers, Rapturous Spikers, and Blasphemous Devourers to name just a few. Without weapons a Human, Gnome, or Dwarven man at arms doesn’t stand a chance. An entire regiment can’t hold back a single Devourer without any weapons.”

It was an interesting argument, but Ruby was done with it. “If something is created, obtained, or carried for the sole purpose of physically harming another sentient being, that thing is a weapon. Weapons are banned throughout the Seven Realms and over The Dragon’s entire domain.”

“O-ow-hoooo! Way to lay down the law Ruthie. Any comments Jeannette.”

“What about our enemies?” Jeannette asked, as she wondered who this kid was. Losing a debate to a child wasn’t going to do her ratings any good.

“The weapons ban is universal across all of The Dragon’s realm. It does not play favorites. The Dragon’s forces will not have weapons and neither will our foes.”

“You say this as if the choice were yours?” Jeannette was growing suspicious. The new consort was supposed to have red hair, but this girl was talking like someone who was making the rules. It would be just like The Dragon to do this. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d given control of his empire to a mere child.

“I’m simply explaining the way it is. Obviously weapons are gone. They are not going to come back.” At least not if I have anything to say about it Ruby thought.

Ruby had said all she wanted to on this subject. Without saying goodbye or further ado she walked into the museum.

She was unnerved when the Elf she had talked to months before during a school field trip greeted her at the door saying, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

# 4 #

#### A Royal Welcome

“I am Pierce Mosswood,” the Elf said as he inclined his body in a stiff bow. He waived his hand in a welcoming flourish as he continued, “I am but a Low Born, yet if I may assist you during you visit Miss...” He raised his eyes, hoping for an answer.

“Ruby,” she said. “My name is Ruby and this is Grt.”

“Miss Ruby. Master Grt. The Mt. Doom Museum is at your disposal.”

He was making her nervous. She didn’t want more attention. She wasn’t sure how the crowd would react to what she had said outside.

Pierce noticed her discomfort. “Harrg, Bentworth,” he ordered the two Ogres at the doors, “don’t let anyone Miss Ruby would not want following her through these doors.” He looked at her to see if his instructions met with her approval.

Ruby was amiable and let him lead her away from the doors and down the hall.



Ruby had always wondered what the difference between a High Elf and a Low Elf was. Now was the perfect time to find out.

As they walked down the hall, Ruby asked, "Pierce?"

"Yes my Lady."

"I prefer Ruby."

"Yes, Lady Ruby."

"Just Ruby. I've always wondered what the difference is between a High and Low Elf."

Pierce raised his eyebrow at her. They stopped walking as he chose his words. "In different vortexes it signifies different things. To some High Born means royalty, the landed gentry, a person of heredity, wealth, and means. It often indicates either an ability to use magic or more importantly the right to use the available supply of it." He added his own editorial to this comment. "Of course, not having access to manna severely hampers one's ability to learn the ways of magic, so often High Born is an indicator of magic proficiency, if for no other reason than training. It is not unlike the Warlords of Ancient Earth. The Warlord's children spent their youth training nonstop in the ways of weapons and war, while the peasant's children spent their youth plowing fields and were often denied the very right to own weapons. It is not surprising to learn that the ruler's children were masters at battle, while the peasant's children were little more than helpless cannon fodder. In such a society where law is decided by might, ceremonial battle, or duel, prowess in battle is power. What better way to secure power than deny the people one subjugates the opportunity to learn the art? Be it the art of war or the art of magic."

While Ruby was trying to decide whether Pierce was making an analogy with her current weapons ban, Pierce indicated an exhibit hall to their left. "My Lady Ruby," old habits died hard, Ruby thought, "the Mt. Doom Museum is most pleased to have a collection on loan from the Neverland Cultural Extension Center. It is quite the exhibit. The lost boys may be sorely in need of a mother, but they know how put together a traveling museum tour."

Pierce couldn't help, but gossip. "We seem to have misplaced the famous hook, but I am sure it will show up somewhere in the crates when we return the exhibit to Neverland?"

Yet the way Pierce had said it, he had made it seem more like a question than mere gossip. "I would think so," Ruby assured him. Pierce tried not to show it, but Ruby could tell he was relieved by the answer.

Pierce continued walking again. Ruby and Grt followed. He seemed to have a destination in mind and Ruby was curious to see where he would lead her. "You were explaining the difference between High and Low Elves to me," Ruby prompted him.

"Yes. There are vortexes that I have not discussed yet where High refers to a city born Elf, an Elf that is presumed to have culture and learning based on this sole attribute." Ruby could sense the sneer in his voice when he said this. "Trust me, My Lady, culture is not derived from the geographical location of one's birth."

"I would think not," Ruby agreed.

Pierce raised his eyebrows.

Ruby tried to place the meaning of this. She hoped she wasn't going to be changing the rules of reality every time she spoke. One change was enough. She was relieved to find that the pendant she wore confirmed this feeling. Her idle comments to ease the flow of conversation were not going to change the structure of Elvin society.

"The greatest division between High and Low Born Elves arises in vortexes where at the end of time Elves are destined to cross the Great Sea or its equivalent," Pierce continued. "In these worlds High born indicates an Elf who will take the trip, an Elf who is a purebred and therefore immortal. Often these Elves have the blood of the vortex's creator flowing in their veins. These Elves are not completely of this world or even the world they inhabit. Spirits and Sprites come rapidly to mind."

In his discourse, Pierce had mentioned many possibilities. Ruby was sure if pressed he could come up with even more. “How did you introduce yourself Pierce?”

Pierce stopped and faced the Lady Ruby and the Gentleman Grt. He bowed stiffly at the waist and let his hand go low in a long smooth flourish. “I am Pierce Mosswood Lady Ruby, Master Grt. How may I serve you?”

He hadn’t said the same thing. “The only reason I even asked you about High Born and Low Born in the first place was that you made a point of mentioning that you were Low Born when you introduced yourself. As if it was central to your self identity.”

“My lady has a keen ear. She wishes to know why I introduced myself as Low Born? That I might so boldly offer assistance?”

“Yes.”

“You will not be surprised or offended if my answer takes me the long way around?”

Ruby did not answer.

“When I think of myself as Low Born, I remember my birth in the woods. I remember the moss, the sunlight, and the cool spray of mist in a light rain. I spent my youth running through the forests. Though I have the sight, I do not know how to use manna. I can grab hold of a strand and work it in my fingers, but the shape never holds. I have found it safer not to try magic. I have found it safer outside the zone where there is less magic. These things do not answer your question though.” Pierce Mosswood the Elf continued, “They are only one side of the equation. Perhaps the side a High born would look at. Low Born means I am more in touch with the earth, the ground, and the forest. It means I have a firm grip on reality, that I have common sense, and that I have less,” and here he smiled, “but not none, of the pretension you might find in the High Born Elves. But most of all...”

And as he said this, he became formal again. “When I say to the Lady Ruby and Master Grt that I am Low Born, I am reminding myself to temper my own pride and vanity. I am

reminding myself of my own humble beginnings.” He bowed again then as he finished. “Low and High are relative terms. In comparison to the Lady Ruby and the Master Grt I am but a Low Born. Command me as you will.”

It was clear Pierce Mosswood was going to stay bowed until Ruby released him. There had been very few people in the museum, but Ruby wanted to stay anonymous.

She touched his shoulders as she bid him to rise. “It makes me uncomfortable. No bowing.”

He rose. “Whatever the Lady Ruby desires.”

She didn’t think she was going to get him to stop calling her Lady Ruby and if she was honest with herself, she kind of liked it. What was perhaps even stranger was her ready acceptance of his deferral, as if it was her natural due. She wasn’t born as royalty. She hadn’t spent the last fourteen years with strangers bowing to her and calling her Lady Ruby, but somehow it seemed natural. She was willing to accept his homage, but she also felt it important to find out why he was proffering it.

“Why do you call me the Lady Ruby?”

Ruby saw Pierce start to answer, but she cut him off. She didn’t need him to tell her it was a sign of fealty or that he was showing his respects. She needed to know, “Why are you calling me Lady Ruby and Grt, Master Grt? You don’t give these honorifics to every visitor to the museum.”

“The Lady Ruby wears The Dragon’s pendant.”

A flash of anxiety shot through Ruby. She hadn’t been on TV with the pendant showing, had she? Ruby looked down as she checked the chain of the pendant with her hand. No. The pendant was still safely tucked into her shirt.

“I believe I indicated I have some degree of the sight,” Pierce explained. “A mere layer of cloth will not hide the power in The Dragon’s pendant from eyes that know what to look for.” He put his hand on Grt’s head and scratched him behind the ears.

Grt rubbed against him.

“There is also a certain familial resemblance,” Pierce said as he patted Grt’s shoulders and ran his hands along Grt’s wings.

“So, you can see Grt?”

Pierce sensed her worry. “I am sure his disguise will fool most, but it will not fool all. Nor will yours Lady Ruby.” He stopped as they came to the wide double doors he had been leading Ruby to. “I would like you to see the results of your decree.” He paused. Behind his Elvin aloofness she sensed real desire when he said, “I hope this meets with the Lady Ruby’s approval,” and with that he threw open the doors.

#5

### These Changing Times

Ruby gazed into a giant hall. It was the size of several football fields. It was dimly lit by skylights high overhead. Pierce led her inside. Grt wanted to run and look at all of the marvelous things, but Ruby held onto his hand.

“Grt ‘plore,” he said pleadingly.

There was much to explore. Straight ahead was a giant pyramid structure that stood ten feet tall. On the top of the golden pyramid was a black sphere the size of a beach ball. Every few moments a colorful spark of color would zip out from the ball.

“It is an Orb of the Void,” Pierce explained. “It is much like a black hole without the gravity field. What you see are bits of matter falling onto the Orb.” As if that didn’t explain enough, he added, “It is shielded by a force field. It is in a near vacuum. If it were exposed to the atmosphere, it would shine with a dazzling brilliance, but,” he added, “it is much more beautiful this way.”

At that moment a chain of sparks shot out from the Orb.

“Grt ‘plore,” Grt said again as he tried to get away.

Ruby looked around the room briefly. The Orb on the Pyramid was in the center of the room. A crew of Dwarf craftsmen who were being directed by an Elf worked on the Orb. Only one

other work group was in the room, two Elves hanging reflective silver strips in the air. The slivers danced and shimmered as soon as the Elves set them in place. Other than those two groups the hall was empty of creatures.

It looked like this part of the museum was a work in progress. One section of wall was stacked high with empty display boxes. White tarps hid objects that would no doubt become part of some display. Groups of unopened crates were stacked around the room, waiting to be unpacked.

“What is this place?” Ruby asked.

“It is the old Weapons Hall,” Pierce explained. “At the moment of your decree all the weapons vanished. It caused quite a commotion at first.” He gestured with his hand. “This is what I wanted you to see. We have decided to turn the Weapons Hall into a Modern Art Exhibit. I hope this meets with your approval.” He looked at Ruby anxiously. This was a project dear to his heart. The Lady Ruby’s approval would guarantee its success. If she did not approve, then that would be its end.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea.” Ruby assured him. Pierce was gratefully relieved.

Grt tugged at her hand again trying to free himself. “Grt ‘plore.”

“Do you promise not to touch anything Grt?” Ruby asked him.

“Grt ‘plore.”

“But do you promise?”

Grt was looking around wide eyed. He tugged again.

“Rubies let Grt ‘plore.”

“Only if you promise to behave like a good, well behaved little boy.”

“Grt be good.”

“OK then.” Ruby let go of Grt’s hand. He started running and spread his wings, but Ruby called after him, “Remember your promise Grt. A good little, BOY.”

Grt didn't slow up any, but he did put his wings back down.

Grt ran around the room in a mad frenzy of excitement. He ran up to the railing surrounding the Orb and the work-Dwarves waived at him. He waived back and watched colorful trailers of wispy sparks shoot from the Orb for a moment before he ran off to the next exhibit. He ran to the Elves hanging silver strands in the air and then he ran to look under white tarps. He saw cast bronze statues poking out of the tops of crates. He was shocked when one of the statues introduced itself to Grt.

"Hello, I am King Korian, I ruled Kot'ch from...."

"I's Grt," Grt said before he ran off. "Grt, Grt, Grt," he sang merrily. He came to a large blank area of the room. The only thing here was a giant red button, so, of course, Grt pushed it.

The wall in front of him exploded in the colors of the rainbow. The rainbow drifted off the wall and encircled Grt. Grt reached out and grabbed a piece of the rainbow and found that he could stretch it. He went running with it. Then he noticed that another rainbow had drifted off the wall, so he linked them together and tossed them in the air. He looked around and found another rainbow donut that stood taller than he was and he rolled it across the floor.

Grt ran across the room pushing the giant rainbow hoop. It was headed for a giant display of haphazardly stacked cubes. When the rainbow hit the cubes, the rainbow shattered into a thousands shards of sparkly flakes that slowly disappeared.

"Dis fun placee," Grt said.

He jumped on the cubes and climbed to the top, where he stopped and rested. In the distance he saw an assemblage of musical instruments, more pieces of sculpture that he couldn't begin to understand what they were intended to represent, and crate upon crate of unopened work. He saw Ruby and Pierce looking at a creepy picture that was leaning against the old empty display cases.

“Rubies,” Grt said happily. He raced over to the rainbow generator and grabbed a rainbow as a present for her.

Ruby watched Grt run off. Pierce assured her he’d be all right. When Grt started running around with the rainbows he had created Pierce assured her, “The exhibit is designed to be interactive and enjoyable for small children. I don’t think he will be able to hurt himself and if he harms something, then it clearly wasn’t designed properly.”

Ruby wasn’t so sure. She winced in anticipation as Grt rolled the rainbow into the off balance stack of cubes, but as the rainbow dissolved harmlessly she relaxed.

She had noticed a painting stacked with the empty boxes and had walked over to it with Pierce.

The glowing red eyes in the picture had caught her attention from across the room. As she got closer, she could see the strands of manna the artist had used to create this effect, but it was still chilling. It was a large picture, forty feet wide by twenty feet high. Ruby walked to within fifteen feet of the picture and stopped. She felt like she was on a battlefield. She could smell the rot of decay in the air. A soft breeze blew her hair. She knew it was magic, but knowing this did not do anything to diminish the rank smell of death that now filled the air.

The painting was sitting on the floor, but Ruby still had to look up slightly to see the central focus of the picture, the eyes. The eyes belonged to a Warlord. He sat astride a great horse and held a bloody sword at the ready. It did not surprise her that the figure held a sword. It was only a picture of a sword. It was not an actual weapon.

As Ruby looked into the eyes again, a shiver went through her. She knew it was all caused by magic, but the artist had been very talented. She felt as if the Warlord had just spotted her and was deciding what to do with her. No, what to do with her was the wrong sensation. The Warlord was deciding how to kill her.



The background of the picture was amazingly similar to what she had seen on the news the other night, when Warlord Grave was giving his report on the Orcin front. Broken banners and bodies littered the field. Had so little changed in all these centuries since the painting had been made? Ruby noticed the horse's neck and feet where decorated with countless banners. Most of them were too muddy and ripped to be identified, but the artist had left a few intact. They were readily identifiable as Orcin war banners.

"Who is he?" Ruby asked.

"It is not known," Pierce answered.

"Some ancient enemy of The Dragon?"

"Perhaps."

Ruby pointed to the banners decorating the horse. "He's got to be an Orcin Warlord?"

"Perhaps," Pierce said again. "Sorry, My Lady," he said when he realized he was being too cryptic. "The vintage of the painting is ancient. The artist is unknown. Its original title is unknown, but it is referred to as The Eyes of Desolation." He paused for a moment. "There is much debate as to the artist's true intent and the subject of the work. At first sight, it appears to be a Human who turned renegade, choosing to lead the Orcs as a Warlord rather than fight on the side of man."

Ruby was following along, "But this is only at first sight?"

"By tradition, Orcs tie the banners of their fallen foes around the feet of their mounts, or," he added, "their own feet if they have no mounts. It is a sign of disrespect and a warning. No quarter is asked and none will be given. Literally, the banners and followers of the losing side are ground into the mud. It is not unheard of for Men and especially Dwarves to do the same thing. It has been said that the more one fights an opponent, the more one grows to think and act like them."

The Dragon had been fighting the Orcs and Goblins for as long as anybody could remember. Was Pierce insinuating something? She did not have to wonder long.

“I would not say this to just anybody, but you are the new Consort Lady Ruby, are you not?”

“I do not know what I am, but if someone is, then that someone would be me.”

“Then understand I say this only to you. There are some who say this is a portrait of The Dragon himself. Perhaps even,” he added after a moment, “a self portrait.”

She looked at the painting again. There was some similarity in the eyes. She tried to get some feeling from the pendant, but it gave her no clue.

She thought back. When The Dragon had looked at her he wasn't deciding how to kill her. He had enjoyed the ride as much as she had. True, he had set her to solve a difficult riddle, but he was hoping for her success. He wanted her to fly.

“The Eyes of Desolation will be given a place of honor.” Ruby was not asking a question. She was giving a command. The picture was the most potent anti-weapon message she had come across all day. It would be a remembrance of unhappier times.

“As you will,” Pierce said as he made a bow.

“Are there any other pictures of The Dragon?”

“Only one. It is not a picture. It is a sculpture. Ah, here comes Grt. Shall I take you to see it, Lady Ruby?”

“Yes.”

Ruby was distracted as Grt gave her the rainbow. It was a lovely rainbow. Grt showed her how to stretch it and wrapped it around her body. Finally they had stretched it too far and the rainbow shattered.

“Dis fun placee Rubies. Da rain-boweess go poop.” Grt noticed Ruby was distracted. “Rubies sad?”

“I'm just looking at this picture Grt. This might be The Dragon's true face.”

Grt looked at the picture. He quickly hid behind Ruby. “Dat one meeanie,” he said as he dared another glance at the picture from around her waist.

Ruby agreed. It was a picture of a cold blooded killer and nothing more.

# 6 #

Welcome to Mt. Doom

Pierce put on a cap as he walked down the hall and his features changed. He looked like a short young Human in his late teens. He wore ill fitting jeans and a shirt several sizes too big.

As he did this, Ruby thought it might be best to do some changes of her own. She readjusted Grt disguise slightly and changed her hair from brunette to blonde.

They left the old Weapons Hall that was now going to be a Modern Art exhibit and returned to the museum proper. Where the museum had been sparsely populated before, now it was jammed with visitors.

Ruby was thankful Pierce had chosen to make himself more discreet. She didn't want to be recognized in the crowd. As they passed by a large entryway, Pierce waved distractedly as he said, “That's the Android and Undead Hall of Automations. Your kid brother might get a kick out of that.” He rubbed Grt's hair as he added, “Everything you ever wanted to know about skeletons, harvesters, and kid brothers.”

Ruby thought Pierce must be used to giving private tours to visiting dignitaries who didn't want to be noticed. Surely there must be visitors from other vortexes who would not want to be recognized. A little disguise spell and even the most outlandish of Others could blend in easily.

Up ahead in the middle of an intersection, Ruby saw where Pierce was leading her. It was a giant blue-black marble statue of The Dragon. It looked like The Dragon had looked when she had ridden him. He was sleeping with his head on his paws. Families

waited their turn to take photographs next to his face. Young Gnome, Ogre, Troll, and Human children climbed on The Dragon's tail and back.

“Drag-goon!” Grt said with much enthusiasm.

It didn't look anything like the painting, The Eyes of Desolation. This dragon was calm, peaceful, and inviting.

There were food commissaries lining the walls around the statue of The Dragon. Pierce got a tray of food for them and they sat at a table watching the crowd.

“Is it really the same dragon?” Ruby asked.

Pierce slouched in the chair and idly dipped a French fry into some catsup. “Are you the same person that you were when you were born? Is your brother here the same as when you first saw him?”

It wasn't much of an answer, but it was all Ruby thought she would get. Pierce was done with his Lady Ruby routine. He was playing the role of a recalcitrant youth. He played the role well.

Ruby was hungry and was grateful for the food Pierce had gotten. Grt was eating everything in sight. French fries, pickled squid feet, jellied mushrooms, poha berries, an herb salad, hamburgers, sparkling water, and juice, Pierce had gotten a wide variety of food. Grt was trying them all and he seemed to like everything he tried.

“So, we'll go to The Dragon exhibit next,” Ruby said.

It was amazing how much Pierce acted like a teenage boy. He let his eyes follow girls whenever they walked by. He barely paid any attention to her. When she said something, he acted distracted and withdrawn. Ruby sensed this was exactly how an older brother might act if he was forced to take his younger sister to the museum for the day.

“Can't,” he said. “This is it.”

“What?” Ruby asked a little surprised. “This really can't be it.”

“Before last week The Dragon hadn’t been seen in... What six hundred years?”

“Twelve hundred,” Ruby corrected him.

“Whatever, six hundred, twelve hundred. I doubt we’ll see him again for a long time.”

“But there must be something. An entire museum about Mt. Doom and nothing about The Dragon?”

Pierced leaned in close and whispered to her, “I hear The Dragon is a bit secretive. Ever find it interesting that there isn’t a single book in all the Seven Realms written about him. No unauthorized biography. No history. No timeline. No nothing.”

“Nothing?” Ruby asked.

“Nothing,” Pierce assured her. “Rumor has it, if you write a book about The Dragon, he kills you.”

“That’s awful.”

Pierce continued in a whisper. “It’s probably not true, but you won’t find any written history. If you want to learn about him, you need to find someone who’s met him, and,” he added, “lived.”

Pierce got up leaving the trash from their meal on the table. He grabbed Grt’s hand. As he started off into the crowd, he called back to Ruby, “Come on. I want to show you something cool. Have you ever seen the map?”

Lady Ruby, indeed, she thought as she cleaned the table and threw the garbage into a trash receptacle before she hurried after them.

Pierced hadn’t waited. He rushed down the hall. Grt happily traipsed beside him. They wove in and out of Trolls. He cut right between a High Elf couple having an intimate conversation.

“Ex-cuse me,” Pierce said as if he was put out by having to cut through the couple.

“Coming around you,” he called out as he and Grt danced past something that looked like a cross between tumbleweed and a giant hairball with eyes.

Ruby wasn't so sure he wasn't trying to lose her in the crowd, so she struggled to keep up. She was lagging behind by a hundred feet when Pierce slowed down in front of a giant model of what looked like a volcano. A sign suspended from the ceiling identified it as the Multi-Dimensional Diffraction Image of Mt. Doom.

She squeezed into the crowd beside Pierce and Grt.

Grt gave her a hug. "Hey der Rubies."

"This is a map of Mt. Doom," Pierce explained. It looked like a giant model of Mt. Doom. It stood thirty feet tall at the top and was fifty feet in diameter. She looked at the surface. The relief had been done in amazing detail. She looked at a stream and it looked like water was flowing down it. In the air above the model, she could see clouds. The peak was completely obscured by the clouds where it was snowing. At lower elevations, the snow turned to rain.

Pierce guided her to a set of sightseeing binoculars like the kind they have in national parks and other tourist sites. It was aimed at the map. He put a coin into a slot and motioned for Ruby to look through the eyepiece. Ruby couldn't believe what she saw. The binoculars magnified the image. She could see individual trees. She could see people. She took her eyes away from the binoculars and back to the map. Was this really an exact replica of Mt. Doom? She returned to the binoculars. She found a road and watched the cars drive by. She found the stream again and found it was a raging river. She saw what looked to be a stack of boulders wading in the river and casting a fly rod.

"This is Mt. Doom?" she asked.

"The best map of it anywhere. It's not one hundred percent accurate." He pointed to an area on the model. "Look there through the binoculars."

She saw what appeared to be a parking lot.

Pierce talked her through what she saw. "There's a parking lot and down a path there is a big grassy knoll. That's the Tomb of Terror. In front of the knoll is an old Gra'gl Temple that has been

converted into a gift shop and on the other side is a long black wall.”

Ruby found the wall. She had discovered that she could control the magnification of the binoculars and she increased the resolution. She saw names written on the wall, Max the Mighty X, Max the Might XI, Max the Mighty XII, Maximillus, Maximillus the Brave, and on and on. “There must be thousands of names on that wall.”

“Millions,” Pierce responded. “It’s the Adventurer’s Memorial Wall. More heroes, adventurers, and fools threw their lives away trying to go through The Tomb of Terror than any other dungeon. Anywhere. Anytime. Period.” He paused before he added. “It’s also responsible for the most total party wipeouts of any location as well.”

Ruby had heard about the Tomb of Terror. It was legendary, but it wasn’t the most dangerous spot in all the known vortexes. She said as much to Pierce.

“True. Other places, other creatures, are more dangerous, but nothing has the total body count that the Tomb of Terror has.”

“Not even The Battle of Chin Deep or The Battle for Rigor Pass?”

“They were bloody, but they don’t compare with the havoc the Tomb of Terror has caused. It got converted to a National Monument a few years back.” Ruby shook her head in appreciation. She had no idea. “Now follow the wall all the way back to where it ends.”

“It is amazing. It seems to keep on going.”

“It’s just an optical illusion. It ends. A few names get added every day. The park rangers try to keep adventurers from going in, but some sneak past the guards. Virtually every last one dies. Entering the tomb is suicide. Do you see the end of the wall?”

“Yes. There’s a bench and a small hedge.”

“What do you see beyond that?”

“Trees, a forest... after a bit a shopping center.”

“At the end of the wall, right behind the bench is a gate and a path.”

Ruby looked at Pierce.

“Trust me,” he said. “It’s there. Go down that path and you’ll come to a mine. A Dour Dwarf is said to own the mine. It’s rumored that he obtained ownership of the mine directly from The Dragon himself.”

“But there’s nothing on the map?”

“Right,” Pierce agreed. “I’m sure that would be a National Security issue or something like that. Come on,” he said as he pulled Ruby away. “A tram leaves for the Tomb of Terror in a few minutes. I got a couple of tickets for you.”

Pierce gave her the tickets as he led Ruby and Grt to where the trams started. Before he bid his farewell and disappeared into the crowd, he warned Ruby. “It’s a LARK tour.” She had no idea what he was talking about. “Just play along and you’ll be fine. But remember, no matter what, don’t go into the Tomb of Terror. Entering the Tomb is suicide. Remember the memorial.”

# 7 #

George the White

or

On a Lark

The open sided tram sat three across. It was one of those long snaky tram like they use at zoos, amusement parks, and apparently old adventuring sites. A tram left for the tomb every few minutes, so Ruby and Grt didn’t have to wait long. Grt wanted to sit on the outside, so Ruby let him, while she sat in the middle. A boy about her age sat down in the seat next to her. Ruby liked boys. She had heard good things about them. She wanted to get to know them better.



All the same, she wasn't very optimistic about this particular boy. He was wearing a t-shirt, which read, Hate the Game not the Player Baby, and introduced himself as "Dark Portent."

Ruby stared at him.

"Dark Portent," the boy said again as he extended his hand.

Politeness won out and Ruby extended her hand to shake his. "I'm Ruby and this is my brother Grt." As she said this Dark Portent held her hand and slobbered a kiss all over it. When he released her hand, Ruby didn't know what to do with it. She didn't want to leave the slobber on it, but she didn't have anything to wipe it off with either. It took her a moment before she remembered she could get anything she wanted out of Grt's bag by modifying a strip of manna. She made herself a handkerchief and wiped her hand with it.

Dark Portent didn't notice. He was telling her about himself. His character, himself; it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began.

"Dark Portent is a 47<sup>th</sup> level Necromancer, but I'm expecting to level up by the end of the day." He looked around the tram. "There are too many experience points here not to, and," he said just to keep anybody listening guessing, "there's always the tomb."

Dark Portent was studying a piece of paper as he talked to Ruby. "I was real lucky when I rolled Dark Portent up, five eighteens and one sixteen in wisdom." He didn't look up. He didn't notice that Ruby's eyes were glazing over. "Naturally with a sixteen I thought about re-rolling the character, but then I thought it'd been a long time since I played a character with a serious defect. It could be a challenge. Good thing I did. On his first outing he rolling fifteen straight twenties and critical-ed a Depth Fiend. What a stroke of luck that was. The Depth Fiend gave him a Ring of Unlimited Wishes and a Rod of Total Annihilation, no saving throw."

Dark Portent paused for a second. He really was lucky to get a seat next to this cute girl. He hoped she'd be impressed.

“Of course, I traded the Rod of Total Annihilation last week to a Savage Fury for a Rod of Mind Control and a Staff of Changing all Things. It was lucky trade, just a day before the weapons ban.” Gloomily he added, “I lost over two thirds of my equipment.” Dark Portent still was bitter about the loss; a +15 Sword of Instant Death, +9 Dagger of Poisoning, +7 Mace of Heavy Bashing, and those were just the weapons he had at the ready. His reserve list had taken up two pages.

After another pause he added, “When the Nelk came, the first thing they did was take away the Grood’s swords,” as if that explained everything.

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Dark Portent admitted. “I heard it at an NFAA protest this morning, but it really makes you think. Doesn’t it?”

Ruby had no idea who the Nelk were, what happened after they took the Grood’s swords away, or what exactly the event made one think about. With a wave she dismissed the comment and motioned for the piece of paper in Dark Portents hands. He happily gave it to her. The sheet of paper was his character sheet. Ruby had heard about these game players. She would have thought when the boundaries came down, the popularity of fantasy games would have plummeted, but it had been just the opposite. The newest rage was a thing called LARK, Live Action Real Killing. Gamers took trips to their favorite fantasy sites and explored the actual settings.

She noticed his player sheet indicated a sole Elven Maiden Companion with an eighteen in looks. It didn’t surprise her. Nor did the list of magical items that took up the entire back side of the paper. She didn’t see how Dark Portent could even carry all that stuff let alone find it in a pinch.

Ruby listened. All around her on the tram similar conversations were going on. An Elf was telling another Elf about

his Centaur Fighter. A Dwarf was bragging about his 6<sup>th</sup> Level Magician. A family of Gnomes had taken up the first four rows of seats for themselves sitting one abreast. They had explained that they needed the room. They were Giants.

Dark Portent was showing her his LARK membership book.

“See, I’ve been to all the Orcin lands. I raised an undead army at Hang Tree Hill and defeated the Ga’reg Legion all by myself.”

Ruby paged through the book. She saw stamps in it, like you might get in a passport, indicating which sites Dark Portent had been to. Giants, Orcs, Goblins, Little Fortress, Slaver Mines, the book was filled with stamps and next to each one was a mark, completed, killed, success. He was quite the LARK’er.

“I’ve been on lots of these LARK tours. I did a Monty Haul Cruise. That’s were I got my Backpack of Endless Capacity.” He added wistfully, “They were just giving stuff away on that one, but they’re not all like that. Stay away from Lily Faire, lots of Bitter Black Widow Demons. With a name like Suzy, you’d think she’d be sweet, but she was just waiting to sink her claws into my treasure and take half of my equipment list. I’m lucky I escaped her evil clutches.” His eyes glared into the distance at the cruel memory of it all. The episode had set him back six levels, not to mention the emotional trauma.

After a moment the memory faded.

“Of course,” he said as he continued. He assumed Ruby’s silence was awe. He got that a lot. He was Dark Portent. Nobody had ever made 20<sup>th</sup> level before he had. He was twice the level of anyone else on the tram, “I also play a 31<sup>st</sup> Level Paladin/Assassin.”

“How can a Holy Warrior be an Assassin?” Ruby couldn’t help but ask.

“That was a hard one. The Brotherhood didn’t want to accept him.”

“I can imagine. Some of those religious sects have very demanding precepts.”

“I’ll say. The Assassins Brotherhood made him stop tithing, but that wasn’t enough. They weren’t satisfied until he looted the poor box and killed the head of the order.”

“Didn’t that ruin his chances of being a Paladin?”

“Naw, Thor had never liked that priest anyway. Everybody at the abbey thought he was a jerk.” After a moment he added, “Of course, he’s not a sanctioned character yet.”

When he realized Ruby wasn’t going to say anything like, “Wow!” or “Great characters,” he asked her, “So what are you?”

Ruby didn’t play. She knew a little about it, but she didn’t have a character. She just looked at him as if he were a little deranged.

“I understand,” he said condescendingly. “Dark Portent has taken the breath away from more than a few of the ladies.” He let this thought develop in his head. “Hey, you could be my slave girl.”

Ruby almost laughed at his suggestion. Instead she politely shook her head.

“It could work out great. You could walk ahead, carrying a torch and stuff. You know, when we go through the tomb, you could flush out any nasties, set off any traps, and I’d be there to back you up.”

“I don’t think so,” Ruby wasn’t going to go anywhere near the tomb, pretend or otherwise.

“The Tomb of Terror will be a cake walk. Without weapons the inhabitants are helpless. Think of the gold. Think of the experience. Think of the memories.” He fluttered his eyes trying to be cute. He failed.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Ruby remembered Pierce’s warning about not entering the tomb. She knew The Tomb of Terror was mostly traps. She had never thought of traps as weapons, but they must be. A land mine is certainly a weapon. What defines

something as a weapon is its reason for creation or use, not the exact method in which it is employed.

That didn't tell her why the tomb was still dangerous. The weapons ban would nullify its traps too. She thought on that for a moment before she found what could be the only possibly explanation. The Dragon's rule did not extend to the inside of the tomb. The tomb was outside of his domain. Therefore, the weapons ban did not extend to it. She suddenly felt very sorry for anyone who set foot into the tomb thinking it would be safe. Then just as quickly she realized this would be a way of determining the extent of The Dragon's rule.

Dark Portent interpreted Ruby's brooding as fear. It was understandable. She was probably only 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> level.

"I understand if you don't want to go into the tomb," he said after a while. He spoke to her softly, conspiratorially. "Maybe we could go off together and have a private adventure?"

Eww was all Ruby could think.

He didn't notice as he continued, "The Dragon is preoccupied with all the trouble this new consort is causing him. A weapons ban, what sort of stupid idea is that? Now would be the perfect time to organize a little hunt. Think of all the treasure, the glory." He flipped open his LARK book to a blank page where in pencil he had drawn in a picture of a dragon. "I always wanted to bag a dragon." He looked at her expectantly. He knew if they pooled their resources he could get that coveted dragon stamp.

Ruby looked around, she noticed the tram was nearing the end of the ride.

Dark Portent was continuing in his conspiratorial whisper. "You know, kill, maim, destroy... Kick him when's he's down. He's taken away everyone's weapons. The next thing he'll do is burn all the crops and destroy the land. You'll have nothing left. Everything you've worked for will be burned and destroyed.

Nothing but ashes. Now's the chance to finish the vile beast while he's preoccupied with his new consort."

It was all too familiar. "No thanks," she said. "I think I'll just go my own way."

Nobody turned an offer from Dark Portent down! Nobody! Who was this girl? Nobody. That's who. And she was off handedly turning down an offer to join forces with The Great, The Mighty, The Dark Portent.

"I could always just charm you," he said. He took a pencil out of his pocket that had a piece of paper taped around it. The words, Rod of Mind Control, had been written on the paper wrapper. He indicated the pencil. "I could just use this and you'd be charmed. Any judge would back the decision up. After my hello kiss and dashing conversation, you'd never make your save."

Oddly, Ruby didn't think being charmed by him would be such a bad idea. She could imagine herself being Dark Portent's slave girl. She could carry his torch, walk ahead, and flush out any danger as they went through the Tomb of Terror. Sure, she'd probably die, but that wasn't a meaningful concern compared to Dark Portent's greater glory. If she were still alive, maybe they'd go hunt The Dragon. That stamp in his book meant so much to him. It would be the least she could do.

"I don't know what to do about your kid brother," Dark Portent was saying. "He's awfully ugly... OW!"

As if coming out of a haze, Ruby noticed Grt had Dark Portent's finger in his mouth. "OW! Hey! Your kid brother is biting me," Dark Portent said in a whiny sort of voice that was unbecoming a 47<sup>th</sup> level Necromancer.

Ruby shook her head. She recalled the thoughts she'd had of waltzing into the Tomb of Terror carrying a torch to light Dark Portent's way. He had cast a spell on her. She thought this LARK stuff was just pretend, just playing. What was going on?

Dark Portent was making a scene. "He bit me. The kid bit me."

Jack Spearplow, a retired schoolteacher, sat in the seat in front of Ruby and Dark Portent. His whole body had gone tense when he had heard Dark Portent introduce himself to the girl. Dark Portent was infamous. It was said the Tomb itself was the only thing that had killed more LARK characters than Dark Portent.

Jack, who played Mercy Tobbins a 3<sup>rd</sup> level Wandering Monk, had listened to the conversation with a rapt ear. It was a moral quandary. He knew he should turn around and attack the evil Dark Portent, but he also knew such an action was even surer suicide than walking into the tomb. Besides, he thought, he didn't have a weapon, but he knew that was a poor excuse.

He sat. He listened. He gathered information and then he heard the fateful words cry out from Dark Portents lips. "He bit me." It was an admission. The kid had bitten him. He had won initiative, landed a blow, and drawn blood, if only figuratively, from the great, the mighty, the Dark Portent.

He had turned around. He was surprised how young Dark Portent looked. He had heard rumors that he was much older, but then there had been many rumors. No one could agree on what Dark Portent looked like. It was rumored he used a disguise spell, so he could surprise other players. It was true that he had been the first character to level up over twenty. It was also true that he had personally killed every other player who had gotten close before him. He was ruthless. He took the game a little too seriously.

Mercy Tobbins was hoping to make gaming history. He was hoping Dark Portent wouldn't kill him. "I see you got the drop on Dark Portent here. I hope," he noticed Dark Portents glare and quickly added, "for your sake, your bite packs a whollop."

Grt knew he had done the right thing. No body stuck their finger in his face and called him ugly. He was Grt. He was Cute. Clearly this Dark Portent was mentally unstable. Grt knew he had

to protect Ruby and so he had taken action. He had done the only thing that had come to mind. He had bitten the kid.

“Grt bitee da meanee kid,” Grt explained.

“What does your bite do?” Mercy Tobbins 3<sup>rd</sup> level Wandering Monk, who really wanted to make 4<sup>th</sup> level asked hopefully. “What are you playing?”

Grt didn’t answer, he simply said, “Grt drag-goon.”

“Powerful creature,” Mercy said.

“I always wanted to kill a dragon,” Dark Portent sneered. “And I do mean kill, as in kill, maim, destroy.” He wanted to tell them how he’d wear the little bugger’s eyeballs for jewelry and drink his blood, but Mercy cut him off. He was going to get that Mercy.

“Where’s your character sheet?” Mercy asked.

“You’re next,” Dark Portent said. “I’m whipping out my Staff of Changing All Things and changing you into a toad.”

“It’s not very original,” Ruby observed, “but you’ll have to wait. We have initiative.” She had reached into Grt’s backpack and pulled out his character sheet. Actually what she had done was reach into Grt’s bag, grabbed a piece of manna, and turned it into a character sheet, but nobody else needed to know that.

“Grt’s a Choas Salamander,” Ruby informed Dark Portent. “His bite changes your soft attributes into the exact opposite. So you are now a Good Healer. I think you would change your name to Happy Tidings and give away all your equipment.”

“NO!” Dark Portent screamed. “No!”

Thinking quickly Mercy said, “I could use a Ring of Unlimited Wishes. It would really help my work with the poor.”

“Never,” Dark Portent said defiantly.

“Actually you don’t have a choice,” Ruby explained as she showed him Grt’s character sheet.

“Don’t I get a saving throw or anything?” Happy Tiding beamed in a cheerful, eager manner. “Oh, why bother.” He had never considered the possibilities of being good. Happy Tidings, it



sounded so merry. He couldn't wait to give away his possessions to the needy. He handed Mercy the ring he had asked for.

The tram had stopped. Happy Tidings, who was really Dark Portent and who sounded a lot like Crazy George, was surrounded by a crowd of eager LARK players who had lined up to receive his gifts of charity.

“Who can do the most good with a Half Filled Glass?” Happy Tidings called out.

It looked like a glass of juice to Grt. He was thirsty so he eagerly grabbed it and gave Happy Tidings a goodbye hug.

Crazy George, who played Dark Portent disguised as a kid, screamed in the recesses of Happy Tidings mind. He couldn't help but hug Grt. He shuddered as he did so. Grt was so warm and friendly... NO! He was Dark Portent. He had spent dozens of years building this character up. It was the only thing that had kept him going during his dreadful divorce. With a final burst of will he found a voice to curse the wretched beast that had done him in and whispered into Grt's ear. “Watch your back vile beast. I don't know when and I don't know where, but in some gaming room, some ill lit corner where they throw dice and shuffle cards, I'll get even with you.”

Grt bounced his eyebrows and licked Crazy George's nose as he merrily sang, “Grt wins again!”

“Come on Grt we need to get out of here. A Chaos Salamander's bite only lasts a few turns,” Ruby said warning anyone within earshot.

“Hows longee dat?”

“I don't know and I don't want to find out.”

As she grabbed Grt's hand and raced off towards the Adventurer's Memorial, Ruby heard a not so Happy Tidings call out to the crowd of LARK'ers, “You're worse than divorce lawyers,” and then after a pause, “OK. Who wants a nice, new, never been used ten foot pole?”

## You Only Come This Way Once

Ruby ran along the Adventurer's Memorial Wall. As she grew tired, her run turned to a jog, which then turned to a walk.

She looked behind her and noticed no one was following her. In fact, she didn't see anyone around. She had long ago past the few people who had come to the memorial. The Tomb of Terror was the real attraction for the LARK'ers.

She stopped and looked at the wall. It was a smooth, solid black marble wall standing eight feet tall. It stretched in both directions as far as she could see until it faded into a gentle fog.

She ran her hands along the wall and felt the raised letters. The letters were made out of the same black marble as the wall and were hard to see. It was as if the names weren't important. The wall itself was what mattered. Ruby started walking again and both her and Grt ran their fingers over the raised lettering. She felt the bumps in her fingers as one name stopped and the next started. She got used to the pattern. She was startled when it felt like the names had shifted downwards. She stopped then and looked at the wall more closely. As she watched, a column of names shifted downwards one row. Then in a moment the column shifted again, by one row, then two, and then the column of names was still.

Ruby realized the movement meant a party of adventurers had just died in the tomb. She didn't know if they were real people or they were just LARK characters. She didn't know if there was really a difference. As she was thinking about this, she wondered if what the wall indicated would mean different things whether she was in the zone or not. It probably would she concluded and it would probably mean different things in different sections of the zone. She was beginning to realize the zone was not all the same place.

As if to confirm this belief, Ruby came to the end of the wall. Just like she had seen through the telescope there was a wooden

park bench here. Past the bench the path continued a few steps until it came to a revolving gate. The gate had metal bars running through it and Ruby could see how the gate rotated through the bars. She gave the gate a turn. It was a one way gate. If she left through this portal, and she was sure that was what it was, she would not be able to return.

She also did not know if the portal led to a different part of The Dragon's domain, to a whole new vortex, or back to the mundane world.

She couldn't see anything past the gate that would give her any clues. The path disappeared a dozen feet beyond the gate as it turned a corner. A hedge obscured everything after that. She noticed the hedge grew through a chain link fence. Just in case there had been any doubt in her mind, once she walked through, she wasn't going to come back this way.

She looked down the wall one last time. It stretched far into the distance. Even as she watched another half dozen names were added to the end of the list.

Ruby didn't see that she had any choice. She looked at Grt, held onto his hand, and together they went through the gate.

# 9 #

### Into the Slave Pits

Ruby walked down the gravel path between the hedges for a few feet before it opened up into a wide barren field. She stood at the edge of the expanse. A horse drawn cart loaded with rock raised a cloud of dust as it was being driven away from a small opening in the face of a cliff not too far away. The area between her and the opening was a flat, dusty, sun baked patch of land devoid of any life. Above the hole, which she took to be a mineshaft, Ruby saw poles and crucifixes silhouetting the sky. Next to the hole, she saw a small tin roofed shack. It must be the mine headquarters she thought. If she was lucky, that is where she would find the Dour Dwarf.

But... Ruby didn't know what to do. She didn't know if the Dour Dwarf would be a friend or foe. She looked to Grt for some advice. He was holding onto her hand and eating a piece of manna, which he offered to Ruby.

"Rubies Hungee?" he asked.

"No thanks, Grt," she said. She knew Grt must look like a five year old child. That wouldn't do for a mine. She took a few strands of manna and concentrated for a moment. He now looked like a Gnome accountant wearing a construction hardhat.

She fashioned a hardhat for herself out of a piece of manna and piled her hair, which she turned back to its natural red, underneath this. She changed her clothes into a smart looking business suit and imagined what she looked like. She was just missing one important detail. She took the pendant out and molded it into a black star with the words Mine Inspector emblazoned on it in big red letters. That should do it, she thought, and marched straight across the dusty field.

She had intended to knock on the shack's door, but as she approached, an ugly, scarred Dwarf opened the door. He put his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun and appeared to look at the sky. When he did this he noticed Ruby. He squinted his eyes for a moment to make her out in the glare.

He didn't like what he saw. He sneered as he exhaled a foul breath. He didn't take his eyes off of Ruby or Grt as he reached in the door and grabbed a battered Dwarven war helm. He put this on. Spitting at the ground in Ruby's direction he reached into the doorway again. When his hand emerged this time, he was holding a gigantic Dwarven war pick. He smiled grimly as he let it fall a few times into his hand. He seemed satisfied with its heft and feel.

He spit again as he approached Ruby.

She was only a few dozen feet away. Ruby was concentrating on the war pick. She thought she had done away

with those. Grt surreptitiously handed her a piece of manna and she held it idly in her hands, trying to decide what to do.

The Dwarf stopped a few feet in front of her, before spitting next to Ruby's shoes. "I expect you'll want to inspect the Mine." He tapped her badge with his pick. "This way."

He didn't look back. He talked over his shoulder as he indicated the crucifixes on the cliff above. "It was simpler in those days. No inspectors. No incentive plans. No bonuses. Simply fill the carts by the end of the month with ore or dead bodies." He looked at Ruby then. "The carts were always full. Simple, but effective."

"Sounds horrid," Ruby remarked.

"Bleeding Hearts," muttered the Dwarf whose name was Tring Ting ka'ala Svring of the Deep Pocket Vein, but whose friends called him Tring. "What do you want to see first?" He didn't wait for an answer. Ruby was noticing that few of The Dragon's friends seemed to wait long. "You'll want to see the safety certificate. It's inside. In a well lit place within a hundred paces of the surface, just like it's supposed to be." He spit again. "And, it's current. There was just one of you here yesterday. Wanted to make sure we were in compliance with the new weapons decree."

He stopped to look at Ruby as he twirled the War Pick in his hands. "It's a tool," he said daring her to disagree.

Ruby was relieved when he looked away to spit. At least she was still in The Dragon's lands. That was good news, wasn't it?

Tring ducked into the mine opening and Ruby followed him. She was surprised to find that the path sloped uphill and that there was a small stream of water flowing out of the opening. The walls were rough, unfinished stone about five feet apart, as was the ceiling. She walked crouched over. She hurried to catch up to where the Dwarf was waiting for her.

He pointed to a scrap of paper above a small candle stub. The piece of paper said the mine had passed it's safety inspection. Next to it was a poster that said, Slavery IS Illegal. That was good news. She saw that they had gone 927 days without a time loss injury and that no one had been whipped in 27 days.

"Somebody got whipped 27 days ago?" Ruby asked.

"It's an old sign." Tring paused as an Ogre went by pushing a wheelbarrow full of ore down the slope. "The old timer's find it nostalgic and it keeps the new hires in line." He looked her in the eye. "We don't whip nobody no more. No whipping. No crucifixions. No pounding a stake through feet. No tying anyone to an ore cart. Don't ask me how we still make the quota."

"Quota?" Ruby asked, but she knew right away that it was the wrong thing to say. When she said it, the Ogre had stopped cold and turned around blocking the exit.

Tring's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, quota," he said as he drove his pick into a crack in the wall next to Ruby's head. He had meant it to be intimidating and it worked. "It's not a weapon, if it's a tool, but accidents still happen," he explained. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Ruby was grateful to feel Grt reach up with a handful of manna. She held it in her hand. She didn't know what she would do, but if things got messy, she could at least do something.

Were all of The Dragon's friends going to act like this? But, then she realized she'd never really introduced herself to this Dwarf. She assumed he was the owner of the mine, the one Pierce had indicated she should talk to. Now was the time to find out.

"I am Ruby," she said as she let her hair fall down out of her hardhat. "I am The Dragon's Consort and I understand you obtained this mine directly from The Dragon."

"So, you're the Lady Ruby," Tring said as he took his pick out of the wall. He held out his hand and clasped hers. "We don't

get many visitors of any note down here in the mines. Who's this?" he asked indicating Grt.

Ruby asked Grt to take off his glasses. When he did, his true nature as a harvester dragon was revealed.

"Now that's the real competition Steve," Tring said to the Ogre. "Them harvester dragons will run us out of business eventually."

Tring started walking up the shaft again and indicated Ruby and Grt should follow him. Steve tagged along. He'd never been in the presence of royalty before. He was curious to find out what they acted like.

Tring gave Ruby a tour of the mine's operations. They walked uphill. The shaft kept on going higher and higher. Ruby always thought mines went deeper and deeper, but not this one. Maybe as they went higher, they got closer to the summit.

Tring explained that the mine had started as a tin mine. Not much of a mine really, but it was a mine and that was all that mattered. He was a Dwarf, a Dour Dwarf, but in the end not much different than a Dwarf. For some reason he could no longer remember, his clan had gone to war against The Dragon. Not so much The Dragon personally, as against The Dragon's empire. The Dragon was always expanding his reach and that reach had found it's way to the Deep Pocket Vein that Tring's clan had worked.

His clan had lost the battle against The Dragon. Not much of a surprise there. Most who had fought against The Dragon eventually lost. Tring wound up being taken as a prisoner of war and was brought to this mine.

It was a miserable existence. They were slaves. Actually they were worse off than slaves, they were prisoners of war. At least if you were a slave you might expect someone to keep you alive so they could realize some sort of economic value out of you. As a slave someone might buy your freedom from the mine, but as

a prisoner of war, it was simply a slow death. They weren't given enough to eat. None of them expected to live.

They were planning a revolt. That's when The Dragon showed up, or at least his agent.

"I've never really known," Tring said. "No one knows. Maybe it was him. Maybe it was someone else. Like you," Tring said indicating Ruby. "It would be just like The Dragon to show up in disguise and claim to be his agent, consort, or whatever, when in reality it was The Dragon himself."

"You mean you don't know if you have ever met The Dragon?"

"Right. I know I got the mine from his hand, but I don't know if it was him personally."

Tring continued his story as they walked higher into the mine. The type of ore around them had changed. Tring told her it yielded gold.

"That's why he gave me the mine," Tring explained. "Us Dour Dwarves can really follow a vein of ore. Most creatures start with a vein of tin and run it out, but not a Dour Dwarf of the Deep Pocket Vein. We'll follow that vein of tin till it turns to iron, then copper, silver, gold. Here we go," he said as the rock turned a blackish color.

"Coal?" Ruby asked.

"This is where the gemstones start." He winked at Ruby. "Why mine tin when you can mine gold and why mine gold when you can mine gems?"

"We had this whole slave revolt planned. The night before we were going to act this mean, cold, ruthless man wearing The Dragon's insignia shows up. Just like you're wearing. He took all the leaders of the revolt and hung them up on those poles. I was one of the leaders."

Ruby didn't understand.

"He killed all the leaders, but me. Killing them meant nothing to him. He hung us all up there in the sun to slowly die of dehydration. In the old days that's what they called a moral



booster,” he explained nostalgically to Ruby. “The Dragon’s agent didn’t care if I lived or died, but he wanted the mine to produce, so he made a deal with me. I could have my life and this mine in return for working it.”

“It sounds cold hearted. How could you take such a deal?”

“I am a Dour Dwarf. He knew just what he was doing when he offered me ownership in a mine, but I did it for everyone else in the mine too. I know it doesn’t sound like that...” He paused.

“The deal was twenty wagons of ore the first month, twenty one wagons the second, twenty two the third.”

Steve the Ogre jumped in. “The wagons had to be full of ore or he’d fill them with the dead bodies of slaves from the mines. There’s no way we could have done that without Tring. He saved everyone’s lives. Nobody in the mine has forgotten that Tring.”

Tring put his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “It was a long time ago Lady Ruby. The kingdom was a different place.” He indicated a shaft of light in the distance. “You came in at the start of the mine where we got the tin. Now we mine manna. Just a few strands are worth the same as a whole wagon full of the old tin ore.”

Ruby was still trying to make sense of what Tring had said about The Dragon as they walked into the light. She shielded her eyes as they got used to the sun again. She couldn’t believe what Tring had said. No she could believe it. She hoped The Dragon had changed.

As her eyes adjusted, Ruby saw she was in what looked like an oil field. Big drilling derricks stretched high into the sky, while pump heads bobbed up and down powered by revolving pistons.

She would have never been able to tell the difference between the scene before her and a mundane Texas oil field that is if she wasn’t flanked by an Ogre and a Dour Dwarf.

Tring was kissing his wife, a lovely pregnant Elvin girl. “Lady Ruby,” he said as he took a baby out of his wife’s hands, “this is my wife, Celeste.”

Celeste curtsied. “Lady Ruby, it is indeed an honor. Won’t you join us for something to eat?” Celeste noticed Steve’s look. “You too Steve.”

“Thanks, Celeste. You don’t want to miss this, Lady Ruby.” The Ogre said the words slowly to make sure he included the lady part.

Ruby was hungry. “Me and Grt would be honored, but only if you promise to call me Ruby.”

“It will be as you desire.”

“Yippies, we eats. Grt hungees.”

# 10 #

May You Live In  
Interesting Times

Celeste hadn’t wanted to live in a mine and Tring didn’t feel comfortable outdoors, so they had come to a compromise and Tring had carved a house out of the side of the hill next to the mine that overlooked the manna field.

The moment his kids heard Tring coming home, they had run to greet him. He was a loving, doting father. He had immediately handed baby Erika back to Celeste and started an impromptu game of tag with his children. Grt joined in and the children delighted in his flying around them, though they had decided it would only be fair if Grt stayed within five feet of the ground.

“And no magic,” Bobby had said to Grt, but he was really telling his sister June not to use any. She was the only one who could use manna and it wouldn’t be a fair game if she did.

They were playing the game in the front yard on a slight rise, while Ruby and Celeste prepared dinner.

“He’s very old fashioned,” Celeste had said about Tring. “He’s great with the kids, just look at him, but he never helps in the kitchen. It’s alright,” she added. “I never help him in the mine.”

Ruby figured whatever worked for them was fine. She'd never heard of an Elf marrying a Dwarf, but then anything was possible in these times. She was used to inter-race relationships. Her mother was attracted to the Others and had gone out with a whole string of them before she met Roger. Still Ruby was having some problems, not so much with Tring and Celeste's relationship, but with their children.

They were going to have a picnic and Ruby was bringing the food out to the table in front. Every time she came outside she would pause and look at the children. Ruby could see some of her mother in June and she could see a little of his father in Bobby, but if truth be told the both of the boys were just plain ugly.

Ruby put down the Candied Mushrooms she was carrying. She glanced at the mushrooms and shook her head. The Others sure were big fans of mushrooms, but thankfully it wasn't the only thing they were going to eat. Celeste was a Vegetarian and had prepared giant baked beans with a peltrin vinaigrette as the main dish, but since she also liked to put a big spread on the table, there were also jaspin cheeses, olives from K'rlit, an assortment of crackers, breads, jellies and jams, a potato salad made with vinegar, honey, and lemon, an herb salad from Celeste's own garden, ostrich berries, dragon fruit, yogurt, nuts, and just about everything else Celeste had in the ice box.

Ruby took another look at the kids. Celeste saw her staring again and thought it only fair to explain. "They're adopted. We don't mention it much. It seems unfair to make it a central point of introduction."

Ruby was relieved. "I didn't know what to say. They're so varied."

"I know. I constantly wonder what this one is going to look like." Celeste patted her growing belly as she made the admission to Ruby. "This is the only one that will be an Elf Dwarf mix, and a Dour Dwarf at that." She bit her lip. "It could be one ugly child."

"I'm sure it will take after you and be beautiful," Ruby said. She hoped she was right. She found that she was idling twisting a

bit of magic and held it up. "I'd be happy to say a blessing or something," Ruby offered.

"No." Celeste shook her head decisively as she held Ruby's hand. "It never works out. We agreed from the start no magic." She paused as she remembered what had brought them to this point in the conversation. She leaned close to Ruby so she would not have to talk loud and none of the children would be able to overhear. "Bobby is the oldest. He's seven. He's the one chasing Grt now. We think he's a Dwarf Orc half breed."

Ruby looked at her.

"They're all half breeds. That's why we adopted them. A purebred Elf with a fine eye for manna is easy to place into a home, but try to find a place for David. He's a Goblin Human mix. At five he hasn't seen much discrimination yet, but he will. I'm worried for him the most."

Ruby already knew who David was. "He's the cute guy hiding behind Tring." She didn't bother to add the brown furry one.

"Right," Celeste said. "June is lucky for a half breed. She shows some promise with magic. Maybe I'm prejudiced because she's half Elvin and half Gnomish."

"What about your baby Erika?"

"You may have noticed Steve took her into the nursery. I don't think there's any direct blood bond, but she's an Ogre Human mix. We're hoping that he will be like an uncle to her."

So did Ruby.

"I tell you only to be polite and, well, you're the Lady Ruby. You should be aware of what goes on. There are no provisions for such things in the zone. If it were not for Tring's great heart, these children would have no home.

"I think I understand," Ruby said.

"They are all of the Deep Pocket Vein," Celeste concluded. "They are of our clan," and Consort to The Dragon or not, she defied Ruby to test her. "We will defend them to the end."

How did that Dwarven Blessing go? “May your ore run deep?”

“Thank you, Lady Ruby. With your support I’m sure it will.”

At dinner it was clear Tring didn’t share all of Celeste’s opinions about keeping the children’s genetics under wraps.

“What? These mongrel half breed mutts? Tell me Bobby boy, what manner of creature are you anyhow?”

Bobby knew the answer to this. It was a test. “I’m a member of the Deep Pocket Vein Clan,” he said happily.

“And don’t you ever forget it.”

“I won’t dad.” Bobby knew that if he ever turned his back on one of his brothers or sisters, he’d have to answer to his father.

“There is nothing more important than your clan,” Tring added.

“Not decency? Not morality? Not The Dragon?” Celeste asked baiting Tring.

“If your clan doesn’t have morality or decency,” Tring looked at his children as he answered, “it’s the fault of every clan member. You don’t turn your back on a family member when they’re sick and you don’t turn your back on the whole clan when it’s sick. If the clan loses its way, it is your responsibility, each one of you, to correct that.”

“What about The Dragon daddy?” June asked.

Tring looked at Ruby when he answered this time. “The Dragon is a man of his word and so am I. I’ll keep my word till the day I die and I expect The Dragon will as well. If The Dragon ever has a complaint, I’ll answer to it. No need to bring my family into it.”

“I’m sure it will never come to that,” Ruby said and as far as she was concerned she was talking for The Dragon. “From what I’ve seen, I’m sure all pledges will be honored.”

From there the conversation had turned to politics. Celeste was in favor of the weapons ban. “Really, why did we ever need

machine guns going full blast on the borders anyway? We can just as easily give the Goblins all of S'cla."

Tring didn't think Ruby would fully understand his wife's comments. "The Goblin's call the continent of Taltor, S'cla. My wife likes to use the native words for things. She's a bit of a liberal."

"S'cla is their continent. Let them have it."

"It'll never work." Tring turned to Ruby. "I love my wife, but Elves are by nature Isolationists. Listen Ruby, Lady Ruby, we need to keep the battle going on foreign soil. We've been fighting these wars for countless eons. The enemy is not going to stop fighting just because we don't have any weapons. This is exactly the type of break they've been looking for."

Ruby noticed he didn't say Goblin or Orc. Ruby was looking at Bobby and David. A half Orc and a half Goblin. They were happy, well behaved kids. If they could behave, so could full bloods. Even if they couldn't, they deserved the chance.

"We could at least try for a while," Celeste said. "Who knows, after a thousand years, maybe they wouldn't mind peace for a few hundred years."

"We'll lose our positioning, our strength." Tring was talking to Ruby not his wife. "The arms industry is imploding. You must have read the papers or maybe you get some kind of written report? Drako-Hawkin and DragonHead Marlin are falling apart. United Militias has laid off 100,000 workers and there are plans to lay off more. Factories are shutting down and when they do it has a devastating effect on the towns where they are located." He turned to his wife. "Think about where we would be or even Steve here, if the mine shut down."

"I never worked anywhere but the mine," Steve added.

"Those are just transitory effects," Celeste countered. "Instead of swords and machineguns, wouldn't we rather have all those weapon smithies make something useful?" She turned to Ruby. "At least give it a few years before you back down."

“I’m not planning on backing down,” Ruby said. “I think it’s a good idea. I sit here watching your children and I become more and more convinced we can all get along.”

Tring just shook his head. “You can teach honor and respect to some, but to others it goes against their very being. There’s no peace with demons from the deep. Depth Fiends don’t understand the concept of mercy, peace, or surrender.”

“Maybe we could teach them,” Ruby said.

“Only someone who has never met a Depth Fiend would ever say something like that. They may talk like sentient beings, but inside they have the heart and soul of an insect.”

The conversation had died down for a moment. Ruby brooded over what Tring had said. It was a thorny issue. She didn’t like the idea of machine gun wielding Gnomes shooting down thousands of Goblins. It seemed wrong. Ruby felt strongly that if something seemed wrong, it probably was, but there still was the problem of what to do about the Orcs, Goblins, Depth Fiends, and whoever else wanted to attack The Dragon’s lands.

Ruby knew nothing encouraged a bully more than a weak target. If an enemy, or even a potential enemy, perceived The Dragon’s forces as weak, they were sure to attack. If what the Elf, Jeannette Stevens, had said on the news was correct, sooner or later the Goblin horde would overrun the borders by sheer numbers.

What they needed to do was develop some sort of defensive weapon. She knew it was the wrong word, but it was the first one that came to mind. She was born of a society prone to battle. A more peaceful mind might have called it a love delivery system or an aggression modulator. That was it she thought. She broke the silence at the table.

“Couldn’t The Dragon develop some sort of Love Ray, Apathy Bomb, or Passive Defense like walls?”

Celeste liked the idea. “I’ve read some ideas about this. There is a movement to create a large barrier around the kingdom.”

“It won’t work,” Tring said. “Passive defenses always fail.” He shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not saying I know what goes on in The Dragon’s mind, but I wager the whole reason he’s so into expansion is because he realizes the minute he stops, some other empire is going to envelope him. It’s the course of history.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Celeste disagreed.

“The Chinese built a Great Wall. It didn’t work. The Soviets built the Berlin Wall. It didn’t work. The Maginot Line in France didn’t work. The Germans went around it. And those are just examples from Mundane Earth history. In the end Isolationism fails catastrophically. A wall or barrier simply won’t work.”

Celeste was willing to concede Tring’s greater knowledge of military history. A castle might be a formidable defensive structure, but it could be surrounded and cut off. It was a central argument supporters for The Dragon’s expansionistic policies used. She wasn’t even opposed to expansion, despite what her husband believed. She was opposed to militaristic expansion. She would rather see the Seven Realms expand peacefully by cultural and artistic means... perhaps something in the way of literature...

“I like your idea of the peace bomb,” Celeste said. “It’s common knowledge hunger is one of the driving forces pushing the...” She caught herself just in time. She had almost said Goblins and Orcs. “The hordes exhaust their food supply. We could mix relief efforts with passive defenses. Say by dropping magical food packets over their troops which dissolved aggression and reinforced positive behavior.”

“Mind control has thorny issues,” was all Tring said.

“Maybe,” Ruby agreed, “but I think any soldier would rather be shot with cupid’s arrow of love than by a fifty caliber machine gun bullet through head.”

“How are you going to resolve the issue of freewill?”

“Luckily,” Ruby said as she suddenly realized the powers of delegation, “I don’t have to figure out the particulars. The Dragon and his forces will have to figure something out. In this short



amount of time, we've come up with a few possible ideas. Let the sages and scientists work out the details."

She was the Lady Ruby and if she said the sages and scientists would do something, she thought they just might. More importantly, she was tired of this topic of conversation, enough with the Weapons Ban already.

She turned to Tring. "The reason I came here in the first place was to learn about The Dragon. I don't think you have told me much."

Tring scratched at his chin. Ruby hadn't thought about it before, but she was surprised he didn't have a beard. She had thought all Dwarves had beards, but then she remembered Tring wasn't just a Dwarf, he was a Dour Dwarf.

Tring noticed her staring at his chin. "I never went for beards much myself." He paused. He was biding his time as much as anything else. "Now that I think about it, I don't remember my father or uncles wearing beards either."

Celeste rubbed Tring's face. "I like it this way."

Ruby didn't want the conversation to get sidetracked. "About The Dragon?"

Tring considered the question again as he scratched his chin some more. "I think I already told you what I know. Most of my dealings were with this man. I even went into battle with him once down the K'fr Road. It was a grim affair having to do with Depth Fiends and Cobalts, nasty little buggers. At first I didn't know he was The Dragon, but over time I came to believe he was. Now why was that?" Ruby couldn't decide if he honestly didn't remember or if Tring was trying to hide something.

"After we had achieved a victory of sorts, I went to the summit of Mt. Doom and I had a brief audience with The Dragon... or it may have been a dream. It was a long time ago," he said by way of explanation. "I have a hazy image in my mind of talking to a dragon and of him confirming my ownership of the mine as long as I sent an extra wagon load every month. That

would have been thousands of years ago.” He shook his head. That was all he remembered or all that he was going to own up to remembering. “That’s why the quota is so high now. Only one extra wagonload of ore every month, it doesn’t sound like much, but give it a few thousand years and it really adds up. We ship out a tanker load of manna at the end of every shift, three times a day.”

Ruby’s ears picked up at this last bit of information. She thought back to what had set this whole adventure into motion. She had wanted to meet The Dragon. She had thought if she followed the harvester dragons, they would lead her to The Dragon. She wanted to follow this trail. “Where do they take the manna?”

“Up the hill,” Tring answered.

“But where?”

“I’ve never been there. I’ve never given it much thought.”

“I want to find out,” Ruby said.

Tring looked at his watch and said to his wife, “Raging Bertha will be pulling up in a few minutes.”

“I think that will work out well for you, Ruby,” Celeste agreed.

“Raging Bertha?” Ruby said a little doubtfully.

“She’s a truck driver,” Celeste explained. “Maybe she can take you up the mountain to where all the manna we mine goes. She’ll be the only one at the storage yard, but Raging Bertha would stand out in a crowd. You’ll understand right away when you see her. You’ll want to hide who you are though. She doesn’t like The Dragon at all.”

“Nope. Not one little bit,” Tring agreed. “Her tribe signed a treaty with The Dragon thousands of years ago, but she still fights a private war.”

“She’s struggling to maintain her cultural identity, honey.”

“She’s fighting a war, dear. It’ll be good experience for you,” Tring said to Ruby. “You might get some perspective on how hard crafting a lasting peace really is.”

Celeste helped Ruby renew her disguise. Ruby was wearing the shabby clothes of a runaway girl and Grt looked just like her little runaway brother.

When Raging Bertha's tractor trailer tanker truck pulled up to the storage yard in the distance, Tring pointed it out to Ruby.

"It'll take her an hour to load up. So you'll have plenty of time to get down there. Just remember, she hates The Dragon. Keep your pendant hidden and your identity a secret."

Celeste added her own bit of advice. "She has a lot of anger. Don't confront her. Just let the anger run its course. She's working through a lot of Historical Trauma."

"Why would The Dragon even hire her if she hates him?"

"Affirmative Action," Tring answered. "Now go, it's farther away than it looks."

Before she left, Ruby took a moment to hug each of the children goodbye. She was glad to have spent an evening with them. She gave Celeste a hug and thanked her for her hospitality. She didn't know why, but she was surprised when Tring hugged her goodbye as well.

Then she took hold of Grt's hand as she had done so many times before and started down the dusty path that led into the field of manna derricks towards Raging Bertha's truck.

# 11 #

A Tale of two Hu'ats

It was a warm evening. Ruby could hear crickets chirping along with the other insects she could not place. She wondered idly what manner of creature lived in this field and even now hid in the shadows. She was not worried. She felt safe and secure. She was sure Tring would never have sent her across this plain unless it was safe and she felt equally sure he would not have sent her to see Raging Bertha, if she were not harmless as well. The walk was

fast and easy, and she welcomed the solitude, broken only by the chirping of insects and Grt's playful hum, "Grt, Grt, Grt."

Before she knew it, she had arrived at the edge of the illuminated compound. Dozens of dazzling lights lit the dusty ground. The lights were mounted around the top of a tall metal storage tank and on the side of a small tin roofed shack like had been at the mine. A hose was draped down from the tank to the top of the eighteen wheeler tanker truck. Presumably manna was being pumped through the hose. Ruby could not see any indication of this. She squinted in the night. Wasn't she supposed to have magic sight? Maybe the seals on the equipment were so tight that there was no leakage.

Ruby noticed Grt was drinking from his Half Empty Glass. He handed it to her. She took a sip. The cool water felt good in her throat. She handed the glass back to Grt and he drank some more. Ruby noticed through all of this that the level of water in the glass hadn't changed. That was some bit of magic she thought. Perhaps a Half Empty Glass was better than a full glass after all.

These thoughts did not pass through Grt's head. He sipped on his glass of water, as he smelled the air. Sweet spicy smells were emanating from the cab of the truck. "Grt hungee," he said.

"We just ate," Ruby said, but she understood the look in Grt's eyes. "It does smell good."

"Grt hungee," he repeated. It said it all.

The anger restlessly brewing in Raging Bertha's mind stopped for a moment as she took notice of Ruby and Grt again. She had been watching these two Hu'ats for a while now. That's what Goblin's called Humans, Orcs, Ogres, Trolls, and most other Goblins. They told everybody Hu'at meant stranger, somebody who was not a family member. That was accurate to a degree, but the term also meant food, slave, trade item, and something without rights. Raging Bertha thought Hu'at was a particularly good term for these two Hu'ats.

She had noticed them when they were a half mile away. They must have come from the mine. They looked ragtag. Bertha knew ragtag. Whenever she couldn't come up with an excuse to be anywhere else she was on the Goblin reservation. She thought, if the Humans ever came up with a nickname for Goblins, ragtag might be a good one.

Bertha had watched the pair as they'd crossed the field. On occasion the little one would grab a bite of food out of his bag. He had a voracious appetite. No wonder they're destitute, Bertha thought. He never stops eating.

She didn't understand why they waited at the edge of the light. She could see them as easily there in the darkness as under the light, easier really. She, like all other Goblins, had no problem seeing in the dark. Putting all these blinding lights up here in the middle of nowhere was just another example of the kind of stupid thing The Dragon was always doing. Why light up this loading tank? It was the only thing lit up in a five mile radius, maybe more. If someone was looking for something to borrow, break, destroy, or steal, the lights would point them right here. It was stupid, but more than that, it was another affront against the Goblins, and more specifically a direct assault on the honor of the Doomcrag Horde. The real reason The Dragon lit up this area was out of spite. The lights blocked out the stars and they made it harder for Goblins to see in the rest of the valley. There was no other reason for them.

It was just another way The Dragon showed his bitterness at having been forced to accept surrender. She recalled the mighty battle as had been passed down through the ages. The Doomcrag Horde had once numbered over a thousand thousand clans and had ruled over all of Mt. Doom. Goblin warriors had bravely fought The Dragon for centuries by hurling their bodies at his forces. It was a simple strategy, but it had worked. After centuries of fighting, the Goblin forces had gotten The Dragon on the run, but the fighting had taken a horrific toll on the Goblins. Out of a thousand thousand clans, less than a thousand Goblin warriors

remained. In the decisive battle of Battle of Lost Rock their number had fallen to a few dozen, where they were grudgingly forced to accepted The Dragon's surrender.

He was lucky he surrendered, Raging Bertha thought. Nobody can withstand the onslaught of the Doomcrag Horde. They had replenished their numbers now, centuries, millennium later. Goblins weren't really that good at keeping time. They were warriors, that's what they did. They killed Hu'ats, took them prisoner, and roasted them over an open pit after a few weeks. It was the natural order of things. It was Gra'gl's will.

Next to her in the cab of the eighteen wheeler one of her kids started to talk, but Raging Bertha raised her hand. The child fell silent in fear. Two other cubs were asleep. She didn't believe in day care. What self respecting Goblin would send their children to a Hu'at school? What could they teach you there, but how to be food? If one of her cubs wanted to learn how to be food, she could teach them herself.

The Humans were coming into the open. They probably didn't know how long she had been watching them in her rearview mirror. With her big beefy arm, she waived the Hu'ats towards the cab of the truck.

Ruby walked up to the tanker truck. She was surprised to discover Raging Bertha was a Goblin. She looked more like a heavily tanned Ogre than a Goblin. A heavily tanned Ogre with dreadlocks, tattoos, and a big bone nose ring, that is. Ruby was also surprised how large Bertha was. Bertha barely fit into the cab of the truck and she would have been happy to tell anyone who would listen how this was just another way The Dragon was trying to get even with the great Doomcrag Horde for the defeat he suffered at Lost Rock. He was lucky he surrendered.

Bertha had already forgotten about the Hu'ats. Good thing they spoke up.

“Can we get a ride?” Ruby asked. She didn’t really know how to go about hitchhiking.

“It’s against the rules,” Bertha responded. Just like The Dragon to try and get her fired. It wasn’t bad enough that he had snuck a clause in the peace treaty about how they had to haul his manna around for him, now he had to send spies in to get her fired.

“Whose rules?” Ruby asked. She thought if she could convince Bertha she wasn’t a friend of The Dragon, Bertha would give her a ride. Hadn’t Tring said something like that?

Bertha thought about that for a moment. Whose rules indeed? They weren’t her rules. She never followed The Dragon’s decrees anyway. His agents were always coming onto Doomcrag land and loading the cubs into wagons, saying they had to go to school. It was insidious. If you let your cub go to school just once, they’d want to go again. They’d start talking about education, betterment, and The Dragon Way. It was enough to make a Gra’gl fearing Goblin want to eat her young, but if the agents caught you doing that, then they’d take you away.

“We could give you something for the ride,” Ruby offered.

“What do you have?”

“How about some manna?” It must have some value the way The Dragon was mining the stuff.

Bertha threw open the door to the cab and jumped down. A great cloud of dust rose with her impact. The fat on her arms shook and her belly took a while to settle down. “Manna?” she asked.

“Yes, manna,” Ruby repeated. She took out a ribbon and handed it to Bertha. Bertha reached for it. It was worth a small fortune on the reservation. She could buy back the cub she had sold to Hank. She knew Hank would probably eat her young eventually... or a new dress. That might be a better option. She could always get another cub. The reservation was filthy with them. She’d lost count of how many she’d had, but a dress. Mary had come back from the city with a new dress and all the warriors

had shown an interest in her. Of course, all the warriors would have shown an interest in her anyhow, but that wasn't the point, a new dress was the point.

Bertha reached for the manna and it slipped through her fingers. She reached again and again it slipped away. It was a trick. A vile Hu'at trick, but before she could get a really good rage going at the injustice this Hu'at was inflicting on her, Ruby had wound the manna into a bracelet and placed it around Bertha's arm.

Bertha looked at the bracelet admiringly. This was even better than a dress. She was just like a medicine woman. No one in the Doomcrag Horde had woven manna in millennium. It was a lost art. Again, it was The Dragon's fault. He had outlawed manna weaving that was the only explanation for why no Goblins wove manna anymore.

"Get in," Bertha said as she unhooked the manna supply hose. "You bought yourself a ride."

As soon as they cleared the compound, Bertha shut off all of the trucks lights. This was her truck. No one was going to make her use headlights. They made the road hard to see and all they did was alert bandits and roving bands of thieves as to your whereabouts. She hadn't ever been hijacked and why? Because she didn't use headlights.

Nobody in their right mind would ask Bertha why she didn't wear a seatbelt. She looked at Ruby to see if she would ask.

It had taken some searching, but Ruby had found seatbelts for both Grt and herself. She noticed the three Goblin children weren't using seatbelts and neither was Bertha. Ruby asked Bertha, "Why don't you use seatbelts?" She was going to add that they were an important safety device, but Bertha didn't let her finish.

"They're torture devices," Bertha said. "Look at me. I'm squished into this tiny cab and now what does The Dragon want me to do? Wear a seatbelt. It chaffs. It makes it hard to breathe.



It's just another symbolic reminder of the binds The Dragon is keeping the Doomcrag Horde down with."

"I don't think..." Ruby began.

"That's the problem with you Hu'ats, you don't think. All you have to do is open your eyes and you can see all the oppression The Dragon keeps the Doomcrag Horde suppressed with."

Bertha took a breath.

Ruby knew this was why she was supposed to meet Bertha, so she asked, "What kind of oppression?"

Bertha was flabbergasted. "Just like a Hu'at not to see the obvious."

"What does Hu'at mean anyhow?"

"It means someone who's not a Goblin of the Doomcrag Horde." She smiled. "It means you and your brother."

"I no who-what. I Grt. I drag-goon," he said proudly.

"You and me both. The sooner The Dragon is gone, the better off we'll all be." She regarded her passengers again. "You really don't know about The Dragon's ruthless oppression of the Doomcrag Horde."

Ruby could honestly say. "It's all news to me. They never mentioned it in school."

School! "It's not a wonder that they don't mention it there. The Dragon runs the schools you know." She looked at Ruby briefly to make sure Ruby and her strange younger brother were paying attention. The truck slowly drifted off the road into the grassy plain as she did this. The boy was busy looking out the windows, watching the stars go by with one of her cubs, but the girl was paying attention. Satisfied she had an audience, Bertha pulled the truck back onto the road and started to, well, Rage.

"The real problem is the reservation. All this country we're going through, at one time this was all Doomcrag country. Now all we have is Lost Rock Pass, 25,000 acres of scraggy rocks and barren waste. You should see the place. It's a dump. Trash piled

high... The Dragon never comes to collect the garbage. The water is filthy and there is no sewage disposal. Sure, the place was a paradise a thousand years ago, but there were only a few dozen Goblins then. Now there's over a million of us."

Bertha took her eyes off the road and the truck swerved onto the shoulder again as she did this. These Hu'ats didn't look that smart. "A million Goblins on 25,000 acres, that's over 1,000 Goblins per acre."

Ruby nodded. The math didn't seem right, but she wanted Bertha's eyes on the road. Once Bertha was satisfied Ruby agreed with her she turned her attention back to driving and guided the truck back onto the roadway.

"That kind of overcrowding is not healthy. There's not enough food or water to go around. The place is a mess. No pride at all. You can't blame the cubs for leaving as soon as they can and the ones that stay do nothing but breed."

"I take pride," she continued. "I've not had more than fifty or sixty cubs myself and all but seventeen I know who their father's are... big strong warriors." She thought about this before she snorted in disgust. "Or, what passes for warriors these days. The Dragon has that all sewn up too. If you want to be a warrior, you have to join his army and fight his enemies. What kind of life is that for a warrior? It's disgraceful. Some of those 'warriors' go off, join The Dragon's forces, and when they come back they'll only take one wife. What kind of example is that for the cubs?" she asked Ruby as the truck drifted off the road.

It was clear this Hu'at didn't know what type of example it was. "It's a bad example," Bertha said shaking her head.

"The only employer is The Dragon. Can you imagine working for a conquered clan? It's not respectable. Even if you're willing to work for The Dragon, there are never enough jobs. Unemployment runs rampant, K'fr use is at epidemic proportions, and the traditions of the Doomcrag clan slowly wither away."

She paused before she continued. “You know why there’s no opportunity? No education. The system is designed to keep Goblins out of college. Don’t believe me? Look at the numbers. Goblins make up ten percent of the population of Mt. Doom, but less than one tenth of one percent of college graduates. Why is that? Bias in the admission testing. All the high faluting magic terms are derived from the Elvin tongue. It’s unfair. If the tests were written in Goblin, using the Goblin language, it would be a whole different story.”

Ruby was curious, “What’s the Goblin word for manna?”

Bertha looked at her in disbelief as the truck slowly veered off the road again clipping a small tree. The scenery had changed. No longer where they driving thru a plain. Now they were driving through wooded foothills. Bertha continued. “Haven’t you been listening to a word I said? There is no Goblin word for manna. There’s only the Elvin word. Why, because they outlawed the Goblin language, that’s why it’s not spoken on the reservation anymore. We only speak English and Elvish, so when a Goblin goes to take the admission test to get into college, it’s like he’s taking it in a second language.”

Ruby was going to ask how that made it a second language, but Bertha was long past that specific argument.

“It’s the futility of it all. Lack of opportunity, it’s why only one in a thousand Goblin’s ever graduate from second grade. There’s no point. No opportunity. Look at my kids. I’m not even going to send them to kindergarten. It’s a waste of effort. And why, because of The Dragon.

“Two thousand years ago he stole our lands. He should be delivering manna for us. We should get a royalty check or something every month. I’m a queen. You know that? My great great grandfather was the leader of the survivors at the Battle of Lost Rock. He was only a corporal going into the battle, but through The Dragon’s trickery, the casualties were so high, he ended up being the highest ranked officer at the end. If everything were in it’s rightful place, I’d be queen, Queen Bertha.”

She paused for a moment. “It’s only a matter of time. The new consort is going to approve our petition and reinstate the Doomcrag Horde’s rule over Mt. Doom.”

Ruby didn’t think that would be very likely.

For his part, Grt was hungry.

“Grt hungee,” he said every now and again. He knew the big Goblin lady had some good smelling food somewhere. His stomach was rumbling. It must have been an hour, probably more, since he’d eaten last. He took out a piece of manna which looked like a candy bar and offered it to the Goblin cub he had been looking at the stars with.

Bertha saw him. “What the heck is that?” She reached across the truck for the candy bar. The truck swerved madly off the road as it ran into tree after tree with its front fender. Bertha didn’t seem to notice. She had grabbed what looked like a piece of candy from Grt, but since it was a piece of manna, it slipped right out of her fingers. She reached down into the foot wells searching for it. As she did, the truck careened out of control.

“Watch out!” Ruby screamed.

The truck’s wheels went over a rock and the whole truck lurched into the air. The Goblin cubs bounced around the cab.

“Dis fun,” Grt said as he held onto the armrest and helped one of the cubs stay still.

Bertha looked at Ruby to figure out what this Hu’at was screaming about.

“The road!” Ruby yelled. “Watch the road!”

Bertha casually swung the truck back onto the road as she continued to fish for the candy bar. “Don’t be giving any of that candy to my cubs. It’s horrid stuff, rots your teeth.”

“Grt likes.”

“And you brain. It rots your brain. Now where is it?” Bertha said as she started fishing for the candy bar again and the truck veered off the road uprooting trees with its fenders.

Moonlight glistened off of a mountain stream to the side of the truck. There wasn't much of a shoulder here. Thinking quickly Ruby grabbed a piece of manna and turned it into a half eaten candy bar, which she handed to Bertha. "Here it is."

Bertha grabbed the candy bar. She sniffed it and then ate it. "Candies Good," Grt said as he munched on another candy bar looking piece of manna.

Bertha glanced towards Grt as the truck started to swerve, but Ruby was prepared and handed Bertha another candy bar she had already fashioned out of manna.

Bertha accepted the candy bar and in a moment held out her hand for another one. This kept up for a few minutes. She never thought about getting any for her cubs. Candy rots the brain. Anyone knew that. Look what it did to this Grt kid. "Grt," Bertha asked, "What's that short for? Gr'Trg'Arguth?" She didn't pause for an answer. "How old is he? Five? And he can't even say his own name. He should be running a regiment," or dead, she thought. Either one was a good and proper fate for a warrior. "Nothing worse than being five years old and not even being able to say your own name while hanging onto your sister's shirt tails."

"Grt Drag-goon," Grt said merrily. He liked Raging Bertha. She knew how to drive a truck.

"You can't always be blaming your problems on others," Raging Bertha snorted in disdain.

Grt nodded his agreement as the truck hit a rock by the side of the road and lurched into the air.

"Dis funs rides." He smiled.

The kid was soft. She'd seen it in Goblin cubs. She'd seen it in her own cubs. He was only a Hu'at, no need to get emotional about it. Dragon gone! Bertha thought. "It's not like he came and took your land, burnt you fields, and ruined your crops. Can't be blaming it all on The Dragon."

"Goblins grow crops? What do you grow?" Ruby was surprised.

The girl might be soft too, but at least she was listening. “It’s a figure of speech.” Bertha paused for a moment. “Somebody needs to do us all a favor and put a sword through The Dragon’s skull. But, with the weapons ban... You know, it’s just like The Dragon to outlaw weapons after he’s killed everyone. Did he outlaw weapons before the Battle of Lost Rock? No. But now that he’s killed everyone, he wants to outlaw weapons.”

Bertha looked at Ruby and once again the truck drifted off the road. This time it veered onto a rough gravel side road, but Bertha didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy telling Ruby, “When the Nelk came, the first thing they did was take away the Groot’s swords.”

“What does than mean?” Ruby asked.

Bertha just shook her head and drove the truck down the winding gravel road for a few minutes. She hadn’t slowed up any. The cubs were bouncing all around the cab and seemed to be having a wonderful time. Bertha didn’t have the slighted idea who the Groot were or why the Nelk had taken away their swords. It sounded like the Groot where Hu’ats, so did the Nelk for that matter. Taking swords or any weapons away from Hu’ats was always a good idea.

Ruby forgot the question as they bounced down the road. She held onto her seat. It was a bumpy ride.

Grt was humming to himself. He liked the bumps. It was like getting a massage.

They turned a bend and Ruby could see the road ended up ahead. A few trees were all that stood between them and the dark moonlit waters of a raging mountain stream. She was about to scream, when Bertha slammed on the brakes.

The truck slid sideways and stopped inches from the edge of the river.

Bertha’s teeth glittered in the moonlight as she said, “Now it’s time to eat, Hu’at.”

## A Feast fit for a Goblin Queen

Raging Bertha jumped down from the truck. The Goblin cubs reached for the latch on the opposite door and swung it open. The truck door was right at the edge of the river and the sound of rushing rapids filled the truck. The Goblin cubs scrambled out and dashed into the river.

Grt rushed in after them. Grt wasn't exactly sure how the game the Goblin kids were playing went, but it involved a lot of squealing and splashing of water. He was happy to join along.

Ruby carefully climbed down from the cab. She noticed Bertha was walking her way and carrying a couple of poles. They couldn't be spears, Ruby thought. She noticed the tackle box in Bertha's other hand and then she understood. They had stopped to go fishing.

Bertha took her fishing seriously. She led Ruby downstream from where the cubs played and handed her a pole. "You shared your food with me. It's only fair I return the favor. I've got some curried vegetable stew in the truck." That's what had smelled so good. "We'll get some fish to add to that and we'll have ourselves a feast."

That was all Bertha said before she waded into the stream and started casting her hook into the water. It wasn't long before she started reeling in fish. Ruby wasn't so lucky. She didn't know how to work the reel at first and when she had finally figured the mechanism out, she didn't know what to put on the hook.

Bertha didn't look like she wanted to be bothered out there in the stream. She'd stopped talking. She looked serene and content in the moonlight. All the same, Ruby didn't want to come up short. She felt that it was important to catch at least one fish for the meal. She gave the hook a few trial casts into the water, but without any bait she knew it was futile. She considered this for a moment and decided magic was the only way to go.

Ruby looked up stream and in the distance she could see the dancing shadows of the Goblin cubs and Grt. She didn't want to take Grt away from his game. He looked like he was having fun. Ruby felt her pockets for a stray piece of manna she might have placed there, but she didn't find any.

She was in the zone. She knew that. She looked around, but she didn't see any manna ribbons. George had indicated magic worked differently in the zone and Ruby was sure it also worked differently in different parts of the zone. Ruby took a guess. She visualized herself holding a piece of manna. She rubbed her fingers together and felt the silvery feel of a manna ribbon. She smiled to herself. She had called manna to herself out of thin air. She fashioned the manna into a long feathery yellow lure and attached it to her line. Then she cast it into the water.

She had thought that she would have to cast out the line a few times before she got a bite, but the moment her lure hit the water a large fish leapt at it. It was all Ruby could do to hold onto the line. She struggled with it for a minute, but it was too much. She called to Bertha for help.

Bertha wasn't happy to be disturbed by the Hu'at. This was her time to stand in the middle of a stream and gaze at the moon and the stars. When she spent a moment communing like this, she felt a bond with her ancestors. She could sense the blood of the mighty Doomcrag Horde, which flowed through her veins, draw strength from the night sky.

Then she saw the size of the fish the Hu'at was struggling with. It was a large Mountain Trout. She watched as it arced through the air struggling to get away. She raced downstream to where it was. It was too big for her net. She struggled to get a handhold on it before she fell into the water wrapping her arms around it.

Finally she got the better of the fish. It was almost as tall as she was, though quite a bit skinnier. She was beaming with delight



as she held the fish aloft by its gills and walked through the water towards the Hu'at. It was the biggest fish Bertha had ever caught.

Ruby could tell Bertha was delighted. She watched silently as Bertha showed off the fish she had caught, "with my own bare hands," to her cubs. Then she had them collect firewood. "You too Grt."

Bertha rubbed the fish with salt, roasted it over the fire, and then they all ate the fish along with handfuls of curried vegetables.

As Ruby savored the meal, she felt the long day catching up with her. It must be halfway through the night, she thought. She felt her eyes drifting closed. Grt put his bag under her head for a pillow and Ruby drifted off to sleep.

# 13 #

Gr'Trg'Arguth

Rubies was fast asleep. Grt didn't see the need to wake her as the Goblin lady drove off. Grt knew Bertha had been trying to figure out a way to remove his bag from under Rubies head without waking her up, but he also knew Rubies would not begrudge the nice Goblin lady a little something, so he had given her his Half Full Glass. Once Bertha realized what it was, it had satisfied her. She could start a freshwater concession on the Goblin Reservation. Between that and the manna bracelet, she was a rich Goblin.

She thought about grabbing the girl's backpack anyway. Who knew what treasures were in there, but in the end she decided against it. The Dragon took a dim view of thievery. She might get caught. If she left the girl whatever she had in the backpack, she could always say she had been given the manna bracelet and the Half Full Glass. It took her a moment to realize, if she said that, it would have the added benefit of being true.

With this in mind Bertha gathered her cubs up into the truck and told Grt, "This is as far as I can take you. Up the rode a bit is

the Edge Café. You shouldn't have any problems getting a ride there."

"Thankees Ragering Berta," Grt answered.

Raging Bertha considered Grt for a moment before she hopped into her truck and drove off. He had no fear this Hu'at. He was either too stupid to know what was happening or... but no that wasn't it. He knew she was going to steal the backpack. He had analyzed the situation, seen her obvious physical advantage and made a decisive tactical choice. By his bravery, he had averted a catastrophic loss of all of their supplies. He even seemed happy with the deal and as he should be Bertha realized. He didn't stand a chance against her, Raging Bertha of the Doomcrag Horde.

Yes, he would make a great warrior someday. He couldn't even say his own name, Gr'Trg'Arguth. She should have seen it sooner. It was a portent. None of the great Goblin warriors had ever been able to say their own names.

# 14 #

Dungeon Edge Café

Rubies had been sleeping a long time and the sun had already risen over the mountains, so Grt was standing over the Rubies. His wings and body shielded her from the Sun.

"Rubies," Grt said. "Ru-u-be-ees." That sounded nice. "Ru-u-be-ee-es. Rub-bub-bees."

Ruby blinked her eyes and looked up at Grt.

"Morn-ning Rub-bub-bees," Grt sang merrily.

"Good morning Grt." She looked around. "Bertha left in the night?"

"Da Bert-ta leavies long agos."

It didn't surprise Ruby. She was a heavy sleeper, but she thought she had heard the truck pull away. She let her mind rephrase that as she woke up. She thought she had heard wheels spinning on gravel as Raging Bertha tore off into the night. That sounded more like Bertha's style.

“She saya whees goes der,” Grt said as he pointed up the gravel road, which ran next to the river. “We goesa to da edgy cafay.” He bounced his eyebrows. “We eatsees der?”

Ruby hoped so. She felt her stomach rumble, as she remembered they had packed some food. A snack would be good before they set off, but an apple and a sandwich was all they had left. Ruby rubbed her fingers together for a swath of manna and was relieved to feel its satiny feel between her fingers. She could turn it into whatever they wanted, so she rolled it into a frosty glass of cold juice for Grt and then made another for herself.

“Tankees Rubies. Grt thirsty.”

She knew he must be. He was always hungee and he was always thirsty. After they had eaten their snack, they headed up the road.

They walked all morning without seeing anybody. It was a steep, uphill climb. Thankfully there was a cool breeze blowing down from the summit. It was a pleasant contrast to the heat coming off the road.

When it was getting near lunchtime, they saw a large sign in the distance that read EATS right at the intersection where the small gravel road they had been walking on dead ended into a larger paved road. Under the sign a half dozen semi-trucks and just as many small passenger cars were parked in a disordered array around a tin shack the size of an old time service station. There was even an old rusted out gas pump in front, but Ruby doubted they sold gasoline anymore.

As they got closer, Grt noticed the smaller signs that filled the dust covered windows advertising soda pop, potato chips, and candy bars.

“Dis lookees like good place Rubies,” Grt said as he thought, soda, potato chippies, and candy bars, dis place has it all.

On the door someone had painted a sign calling the establishment the Dungeon Edge Café, though the Dungeon part of the sign was hard to read.

Ruby rubbed her fingers again for a piece of manna and fashioned it into a bracelet. She was hoping to trade it for lunch. “Come on Grt,” she said as she opened the door.

Smoke billowed out of the door as she opened it. Her eyes watered. She tried not to cough. She heard a prissy voice yell from inside, “Shut the door.”

Ruby walked blindly into the building and shut the door. She could just barely make out a wooden bar in front of her. It took her eyes a moment to adjust. By the time they had, the smoke didn’t seem so bad, but the room remained dark and dimly lit.

She was still trying to get her bearings when the squeaky voice chirped out again. “Sit wherever you want, dearie.” She thought she saw something fly off.

It took her a moment to realize it, but this is what she had always imagined Lucky’s Tavern would look like inside. The room was full of rough looking men. Behind the bar a mean, cruel looking Ogre wiped greasy glasses with a dirty rag. He pushed a drunken Dwarf off a stool to make room for Ruby. He set the greasy glass he had been ‘cleaning’ onto the bar and grabbed a bottle of whiskey.

“What’ll ya have?” he inquired as he poured a shot of whiskey and pushed it towards Ruby.

“A glass of milk would be nice,” Ruby answered.

The Ogre laughed.

“Soda?”

The Ogre pointed to the display behind the bar. Every type of alcohol Ruby had ever heard of was there and plenty she hadn’t. The Dragon’s finest, Rigor Pass Special, Blue Mountain Schnapps, the list went on and on.

Ruby showed him the bracelet. “I was hoping to trade this for a bite to eat.”

“We don’t take trade. Gold on the barrel head. Nothing else.”

“But I don’t have any gold,” Ruby explained. She believed rightly that if she turned a strip of manna into gold, it would disappear after an hour or so. It would be just like stealing from the proprietors.

The Ogre glared at her with one eye as he downed the shot of whiskey he had poured. It was the way surly bartenders had acted since the beginning of speculative fiction. The tradition wasn’t going to end now. Not if the Ogre had anything to say about it... and he did. He poured himself another shot and downed it before he walked to the end of the bar and resumed a game of dice with a dark hooded stranger. A stranger with uncanny luck... but that is another story.

Steve laughed. “Don’t do it.”

Pete felt a strange compulsion. “I don’t think I can help myself.”

“Just fight it. It will go away.”

Pete didn’t think it would. He had watched the girl walk into the Café. This wasn’t a place for little girls. He looked down the rows of customers, Ogres, Trolls, Half-Orcs, and Human trash. He counted Steve and himself in the last group. None of them were fit for normal, decent society. Most of them were guilty of dozens of different crimes. Most of them were wanted in more than one vortex. Pete wasn’t. Neither was Steve. That was what made them different.

“If I don’t do it, you will.”

Steve laughed at him. “I’m done with that. I’m a truck driver now. It’s tough for the girl, but let it go.” He saw Pete was about to break, so he added hopefully, “What doesn’t kill you, only makes you stronger.”

“That Neitze?”

“I think Dark Portent said that.”

“Now you’re quoting Dark Portent?” Pete shook his head. “You have changed.” He waived Steve off and ignored what he

was about to say. “Little girl,” he called across the bar, “I’ll buy you lunch.”

Ruby looked down the row of patrons to the man who had offered to buy her lunch. He was wearing chain mail. An empty scabbard leaned against the booth where he was standing like it was an umbrella. The man sitting next to him was wearing a leather outfit with metal studs. He looked a lot like Robin Hood might, if Robin Hood was a seedy looking rogue eating at a roadside diner.

Ruby stopped for a moment. Had the whole room just gone quiet? Were they anxiously waiting to see what she would do next?

She looked around. She saw Ogres without arms, Trolls with patches over their eyes, Dwarves so drunk they couldn’t hold their heads up.

She was trying to decide what to do, when the decision was made for her...

It sounded all so predictable.

Grt casually walked towards the tall stranger. “Tankee Meester.”

Ruby followed him as if drawn by the plot of a poorly written novel. The man was still standing and he introduced himself as Ruby approached. “I am Pete and this is my friend Steve.”

“Friend? If she’s a damsel in distress or her lands need rescuing from some evil dragon, I’m out of here.”

“My name is Ruby and this is Grt.”

“Hey ya, Stevie, Petey,” Grt said as he hopped into the booth.

“Lunch would be great,” Ruby said. As she sat down she tried to reassure Steve. “I don’t think I need rescuing, not yet anyhow.”

“See Steve, just lunch no problem.” As Pete said this, he didn’t believe it and neither did Steve. It was never just lunch, but Pete couldn’t help it. He couldn’t resist the urge to help. Long ago

in a different age, when things were clear and simple, he had made an oath to fight evil in whatever form he found it. If that meant buying lunch for a hungry girl, that's what it meant. And if it meant, hunting a dragon that had burned her land and was holding her father captive after lunch, well then, he was going to do everything in his power to break that vow. He was sick of the vow. He was tired of the vow. It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but not anymore. He envied Steve. Steve would have let the girl walk out the door. He could never do that. He was Pete, Pete the Holy Warrior. He hated himself for it, but there it was.

Pete's reverie into self pity was cut short as Nellie, the slutty Pixie waitress, flew onto the table. She was wearing a low cut blouse, mini skirt, and fishnet stockings. She got bigger tips wearing this sort of outfit and she liked the attention. Steve had reached his hands out to feel the fabric of her skirt and was busy getting his hands slapped by Nellie.

"No touching the merchandise. You know the rules."

"When are you going to run away with me Nellie?" Steve asked.

"When are you going to tell me what you want to eat? Or should I just get you two drunks another round of whiskey?"

"Whiskey's good," Steve agreed.

Ruby smiled. She liked this place. Whiskey, cigars, the dark hooded stranger who was a little too lucky with dice at the counter was smoking a pipe. This is what Lucky's was supposed to look like.

"Yeah. Whiskey sounds good," Pete agreed as well. "How about whiskeys all around. Do you want a Special Steve?"

"No," Steve said. "Whiskey's good for me." He held his breath. Was Pete really going to do it? After all these years?

"So, three specials," Pete said. "Whiskey and Menthol for me."

Nellie tapped her order pad.

"They'll have the same," Pete said waiving her off.

Whiskeys and Menthol all around; it included the little girl and the little boy. It wasn't right. It wasn't proper. It wasn't legal. A deadly hush swept over the bar, diner, café, whatever this smoky room was. The hooded figure paused in mid roll, the Dwarf throwing axes into the wall paused mid throw, the Ogre pouring a whiskey at the bar paused mid pour. All eyes turned to Ruby, Pete, and Nellie.

Ruby noticed the hush. "Special's fine," she said. If this were a book, this is where somebody would die, she thought. Somebody would fall over with a knife in their back or a billow of smoke would appear over the bar and some fell creature would appear.

"That's it," the Ogre at the bar cried out breaking the silence.

"It was good while it lasted," the Troll with the eye patch said as he downed the last of his beer and stood up.

A badly scared Elf shrugged as he agreed. "It had to happen sooner or later."

The morose band of cutthroats, bandits, and thieves slowly got up to leave.

"You finally did it Pete. You broke that wretched vow. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Odd choice, but you gotta do, what you gotta do."

The Ogre flipped the sign in the window from Open to Closed.

Ruby didn't understand. "What's this all about?"

Nellie shrugged. "You're underage darling. That's it. You know how it is these days. Some overzealous editor or church group is going to get wind of this scene where you're in a bar and you get served whiskey. It's the end."

"And a pack of Menthols," Steve added. He was so happy. He didn't think Pete would ever do it. "It not just drinking it's smoking. Think of the long term health consequences." He was delirious with joy. His buddy Pete was finally free. Instead of hunting some stupid dragon, they could go fishing this afternoon.



A sudden shot of fear had gone through Pete. He felt the sudden loss of favor from his patron deity. No longer would his sword, if he had a sword, be guided by a divine force in battle. No longer would his hands heal the sick. No longer would he be compelled to hunt evil dragons, just because little girls asked him to. He was adrift in a sea of freedom. He felt sick. He had always thought he would feel better. "I think I'm gonna puke." Nobody listened to him. That's what the sawdust on the floor was for and that's why the sawdust was clumpy.

The patrons were saying their goodbyes, slapping each other on the back, and promising to stay in touch. They knew they wouldn't. Where would they go? Where would they meet?

It was a sad scene. Ruby had never intended to be the downfall of Lucky's or any tavern by any name. This is where the weary came after their adventures to share stories and comradeship. Sure, many of the creatures here had drinking problems and would benefit from any number of thirteen step programs, but now they would be drinking alone. More importantly, she would be responsibly for closing down a literary tradition. She didn't care what the sign on the door read. In her heart she knew this was the real Lucky's Tavern. She wouldn't let it go without a fight.

She did some quick math in her head. Twelve months times fourteen years is 168. "I'm 168," she said loudly and followed it with a qualifying months to herself. If George could do it, she could too.

"Nice try, you're obviously just a kid," Nellie observed.

Ruby didn't disagree. She merely pointed out, "I'm wearing a disguise spell."

"You can say you're 3,000 for all anybody in here cares. It's not me you have to convince," Nellie said as she fluttered over to the bar and tapped on a piece of paper nailed to the wall. "They've already revoked our license. It's not so much this little scrap of paper that says revoked on it, not many of our customer's can read

anyhow; it's the bottles of liquor that used to be behind the bar." She picked up one of the bottles. The labels had changed. "Now we stock...fruit juice." She wrinkled her nose as she grabbed another bottle. "Juicy-Juice Juice-Juice. What kind of crap is this?"

"It's a good disguise spell," Ruby said with mock pride, "but I don't want you to lose your license. I can prove how old I am." The patrons stopped. All eyes turned towards her as an expectant hush fell over the crowd. She knew this was the moment of truth. It was time to do or die. It was time to put up or shut up. It was time to draw out the suspense as long as the reader could bear and just as the tension reached a crescendo of unexpected proportion Ruby reached into her pocket. The patrons didn't know whether to gasp, ooh, or ahh, so they stayed silent... Deathly silent.

Ruby smiled weakly as she pretended to look for something in her clothes. Deep inside her pocket where no editor, church group, or board of censors could see, she rubbed her fingers together gathering the needed manna. She then fashioned the manna into a small plastic rectangle, withdrew it from the folds of her robes... er, pockets and smiled brightly as she showed the powerful, magical plastic square to Nellie.

Ruby Firehaven  
Mt. Doom ID Card  
168

All the eyes in the bar, which had previously turned towards her, now turned in well choreographed unison back to the bar.

"What are we looking for?" a particularly foul, if dimwitted Dwarf asked.

A Human rogue answered him. In better days the rogue would have stabbed the man in the back for his untimely question, but in the excitement he forgot who he was and helpfully answered. "To see if it worked."

It had!

The bar was stocked with liquor. The license said, Valid. A Dwarf took a drag from the cigarette, which had reappeared in his mouth. He took a moment to savor the sweet, smooth flavor of its acrid smoke. He hacked. He coughed. He spit something foul onto the floor. It was probably a piece of his lung. He wondered how many pieces he had left and if the Witch Doctor who had told him he had lung cancer was right. Many things passed through his mind in these moments before another coughing fit racked his body.

He was too busy coughing to join the crowd as a cheer went up from the patrons. The Dungeon Edge Café had been saved.

“Hip-Hip Hooray! Hip-Hip Hooray!”

The hooded figure at the bar who was just a little too lucky with dice added a heartfelt “Hoody Ho!” but the reference was too obscure for most readers.

“Drinks are on the house,” the Ogre called as Ruby and Grt were carried to the bar for a celebratory toast.

They were each given a double shot of rye whiskey as the crowd shouted, “To the old ways,” and they all downed their glasses of hard, vile, brain cell destroying, cirrus causing, rotgut.

Of course, Ruby changed hers and Grt’s to apple juice first.

Pete felt better. He hadn’t broken his vow to his patron deity. The blood flowed back into his face. He didn’t feel like he was going to die and by Karthrax, if this girl wanted him to kill a dragon after lunch, he knew he had absolutely no choice but to try.

“You almost did it Pete. Maybe next time.”

“No Steve. I’m one of the good guys. I can’t run away from it.”

“But you can have another drink?”

“That I can.”

## A Tale of Woe

The Edge Café had returned to normal. A game of daggers was being played against the far wall. A dark hooded figure rolled dice at the bar with the Orge Bartender. A Dwarf lay slumped on the ground where he had been pushed near the beginning of the last chapter. Really, if you had been paying attention, you'd know that. More importantly, three of the Specials arrived at the table in the back of the bar.

“Three specials,” Nellie said as she dropped the bowls onto the table. “Anytime either one of you do-gooders want to help me with this.”

“Let me take you away from all this Nellie,” Steve said. “Any week now I’ll be leaving this bar and driving my truck... somewhere.” He couldn’t remember his destination. He wasn’t sure they would still want delivery. He had been in the bar for a while, but time moved differently inside a fantasy tavern. Everyone knew that. He probably had a few more weeks... days at least.

“What and leave all this?” Nellie snorted. Leaving a bunch of drunks for one drunk wasn’t the dream she had been harboring. Someday, someone would come out of the dungeon, sacks bulging with gold and take her away. It had happened to her sister, her cousin, and all her friends from school. She’d waited too long. By the time she started working here, things had changed. Now the Edge Café was a truck stop. It wasn’t the same.

The special was a bowl of vile looking chili with a roll, a shot of whiskey, and a pack of menthol cigarettes. Pete grabbed the cigarettes and put them in his pocket as he handed Steve one of the extra whiskeys.

Pete and Steve toasted, “To the good ole’ days.”

As the rest of them dug into their chili, Steve downed his second shot and ordered another whiskey

Grt loved the chili. It was fiery hot and was seasoned with strips of manna. Ruby wasn't so sure, but after a taste she found it hit the spot. Pete was bent over his bowl like he didn't want to be disturbed. It was one thing to have to help maidens in distress, it was quite another to do it before you had finished lunch.

Pete was the last to finish. He hadn't looked up the entire meal. Ruby got a slice of strawberry pie for dessert and Grt got a slice of lilikoi cheesecake.

"Dis good," Grt said as he nibbled on his cheesecake.

"The food here is wonderful," Ruby agreed.

"It's not like the old days," Steve said. "Time was you could come in here and get half a cow for a piece of silver." He was disappointed when Ruby didn't seem impressed. "Sure, I know what you're thinking, inflation. You probably had to work three weeks just to make a copper, but that wasn't the case at all. Pete and me would just go to the dungeon. It's not even a quarter mile from here. Go in there and kill something and in five minutes we'd have a sack of gold."

"I hear they're going to turn the dungeon into condos," Pete said.

"Condos?" Steve couldn't believe it.

"Yeah, artist lofts or something like that."

"I guess it really is over."

Steve could see the lack of understanding in Ruby's face. "It's not just any dungeon. It's The Dungeon. It was great. We were just starting out then." He thought back. "Every week it would be the same. We'd start the workweek late Thursday afternoon."

"Sometimes even Friday," Pete added.

"But mostly Thursday," Steve continued. "Maybe three or four o'clock we'd get our gear together and head over to the dungeon."

"You know typically adventuring stuff, ten foot pole, spikes, bags for gold, a knapsack..."

“Lanterns, torches, ropes... Look it was ridiculous. We could barely walk with all the crap we carried in there week after week.”

“But we didn’t want to ruin a good thing. We were superstitious. We had a winning formula. We didn’t want to change even the tiniest detail. So, we’d walk the quarter mile to the dungeon. Walk down the steps. Go down a corridor and we’d come to a door. They’re going to keep the doors,” Pete added, “for the condos.”

“Why? They’re pieces of crap. All you had to do was lean against them and they’d open.”

“Authenticity. It’s some artistic retrofit thing. Go back to the roots of adventuring or something. Don’t ask me. The condo’s are priced so high it’s not like any real artist can afford them anyhow.”

“If you ever get over this doing good thing, maybe we could hit the condo just like we did when it was a dungeon.”

“It wouldn’t be the same.” Pete was talking to Ruby now. “See, what we’d do was come up to a door. We’d put our ears next to the wood.”

“Crappy soundproofing. Why would anyone want to keep those doors?”

Pete ignored him. “We’d listen. Just to get an idea if anybody was home or not.”

“Not that it made any difference. Pete here would have his sword out, and I’d have an arrow notched in my bow. I haven’t been able to find that sucker for weeks now.”

“Don’t you watch the news? There’s a weapons ban.”

“It’s just a bow,” Steve snickered. “I only use it for hunting. Besides, I never registered it.”

“Trust me. It’s gone. Anyway, once we’d listened at the door, I’d kick it down.”

“Cheap doors. They went down every time. It was amazing that not one of those monsters...”

Ruby cringed at the word.

“Listen, that’s what they were called back then, monsters. They weren’t too bright either. I mean week after week, same

time, same place, we'd bash down the same doors and surprise whoever had taken up residence.

"Maybe it was a family of Goblins, Trolls, whatever... Humans, Dwarfs, Elves. We'd run in and kill them all."

Ruby was horrified. "That's awful. I thought you said something about a vow to your god to do good?"

"It was a different time," Pete shrugged. "Look anybody who lived in the dungeon was evil. You didn't have to wonder about it. It just was. We were doing the good work by going in there and destroying evil where it lived and breathed. I never felt so good and alive as when I'd gotten the drop on some Goblin family having dinner. Slice off dad's head before he could reach for a meat cleaver and take your time with the rest."

"It was fun," Steve agreed. "Those half hit die creatures, what a joke. Then we'd search their bodies, ransack the place, and take anything of value."

"It was amazing how much money they would have and still live in such a crappy neighborhood."

"They must have been dealing K'fr."

"It's the only explanation."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" Ruby exclaimed again in horror.

Pete met her horror with a shrug. "It's easy to look back and say, 'Oh, that's wrong. Going into somebody's lair and killing them when they're asleep.'"

"That was the best," Steve agreed. "Full experience and no danger. Just slit their throats and reach into their pockets and take whatever money they had."

"It's sick!" Ruby said horrified.

"We washed the gold before we spent it," Steve explained.

"Actually, we never washed the money. Nobody cared."

These weren't good memories for Pete. At the time it had all seemed good and righteous. He had prayed to his god every morning, noon, and night, and ole' Karthrax had talked back. He'd tell Pete he was doing a good job. He'd give him his blessing and

let him work miracles on his behalf. Every once in a while someone would come along asking for help and he'd rescue a princess or kill a dragon, but mostly it was killing Goblins in their sleep. It hadn't seemed wrong at the time. "Everybody did it," Pete continued.

"That's no excuse," Ruby said indignantly.

"I'm not making excuses, Karthrax knows. That's one of the reasons I drink so much." Pete paused. "Look around you. Every one here was doing the same thing. It was a gold mine. We'd spend a couple hours going to the dungeon."

"Which they're turning into a condo," Steve added. He still couldn't believe it. Who would live in a hole?

Pete continued, "A couple of hours in the dungeon and then we'd come back here and party like mad for the rest of the week."

"Saturday night was wild. Natalie, Nicki, and Nicole, Nellie's sisters would dance on the bar. For the right price you could buy anything and I do mean anything."

"It sounds sick," Ruby declared.

Pete agreed. It sounded sick. He envied Steve. Steve didn't dwell on the past. He ordered another round of whiskey.

"We didn't stop doing it because we felt bad," Pete needed to get this off his chest. His therapist had told him that if he kept telling the story over and over the emotional impact would diminish. He had felt like driving his sword through the therapist's heart, self righteous college educated pencil necked geek that he was. What did he know about life in the deep? He had shared this desire with his therapist. Well, more accurately, he had held the therapist down as he pressed a sword to his throat and threatened to kill the bastard. The shrink had the nerve to tell him it was good to let the emotions flow. It was clear the shrink was insane. He couldn't kill the insane. Monsters: Yes. The Insane: No. He hadn't made the rules.

"The rules changed," he continued. "Slowly it became hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Housing was tight.



Goblins went off to college and returned to the horde. Depth Fiends found religion and crusaded for the cause of good. The whole world had turned upside down.”

“You had to parlay,” Steve added as if that explained it all. “Can you believe it? You’d get the drop on a family of sleeping evil Devouring Blight’s and you’d have to wake them up to determine if they were evil or not.”

“We even got a checklist of questions we had to ask them. Have you ever slaughtered the innocent? Are you now or have you ever been Evil? Are you now or have you ever been a member of the United Evil Front?”

“But even if they answered yes, you’d just have to ask them more questions. Maybe they had changed their ways.” The entire process disgusted Steve. “Like that ever happened. The one Depth Fiend they thought they’d rehabilitated killed his host family after three months.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“He couldn’t take the stress. He told the court being evil was easier.”

“So, we had to parlay. You can imagine the tactical advantage that gave the bad guys. They’d just lie. ‘No. No. I’ve never been a member of the evil front,’ they’d say as they poured poison over the blade they were getting ready to stick in your back.”

“But that wasn’t the worst.”

“No. What did us in were the work rules. All of a sudden we had to pay death benefits to our torchbearers. Give them full medical, dental, and vision. They were always slipping and falling into holes. For every torchbearer working, we’d have six on sick leave.”

“Then you had to make sure your party was multiculturally balanced, one Dwarf, one Elf, two Humans, a Gnome, and a Half Breed.”

“Always had to have the half breed. It came to the point where half breeds were in such high demand that they got ten times the pay. Tell me how that’s equality.”

“Then they made it so you had to have a weighted party. You know a spell slinger, a traveling missionary, and a rehabilitated rogue in every party. That’s what did us in. We’ve always been a two man team. We just hung it up.”

“The Dungeon was going dry anyhow. It was time to move on.”

“So we became truckers.”

“Good thing we quit when we did. It’s all over now.”

The therapist was right. Pete did feel better. He thought he’d feel a whole lot better, if he could have added to the story, how he’d killed his therapist, but he hadn’t. He had sworn an oath. He could no more have killed his therapist, than he could help himself from asking the girl. “So, what can we do for you?”

“Not we my friend, you?”

“We’re a team.”

“Were. Look,” Steve said explaining to Ruby. “I was a Ranger. Pete here was a Paladin.”

“Pete the Paladin,” Pete explained helpfully.

“The environmental crusade is over. Everybody is recycling, composting. The war is over. We won.”

“But the ozone layer, global warming?” Ruby prompted him.

Steve shrugged as he casually replaced the toxic nickel-cadmium-magnesium-sulfur-destroy-the-environment-every-time-you-use-it-death-to-all-life-as-we-know-it battery in his cell phone. He tossed the old battery over his shoulder. “Let’s not get zealous here. There’s no point in being fanatic about these things. It’s over. I drive a truck. You need a ride to Boise? Maybe we can work something out.”

“And you’re one of the good guys?” Ruby asked.

“Good, not great. Maybe only fair to middling.” Steve shrugged. He and Pete had gotten used to shrugging over the

years. “You need a dragon slain or something like that, Pete’s your man. He’s got a soft spot in his heart.”

“I’m cursed,” Pete explained. “I can’t say no to a damsel in distress.”

“Does that mean you’re finally going to settle your bill,” Nellie called as she fluttered over. “It’s been six weeks you know.”

Pete tossed a small bag of gold on the table. You could buy an entire cow for two silver pieces in the good ole days, he thought. Times had changed.

Once they were outside Ruby explained that all she really needed was to know where all the manna went.

“That’s easy,” Steve said. Even he knew that. It was down the path just past the old dungeon. He led her to where the path forked. Pointing one way a sign read, Dungeon Condo’s: Opening Soon. The other way was unmarked.

“Just up the hill a mile,” Steve said.

“You sure you don’t need anything else,” Pete asked. This was the easiest quest he’d ever completed. Times sure were changing.

“No, that’s it,” Ruby assured him.

“Tankees for eatees,” Grt said as he and Ruby walked up the hill.

Pete scratched his head. “Wow, that sure was easy.”

“I wonder how much experience we’ll get for that,” Steve asked.

“It’s not about the points. It’s about doing good,” Pete corrected him.

“You play your way and I’ll play mine.”

Ruby and Grt walked up the gravel path. It reminded Ruby of all the other gravel paths she had walked down recently. They were reminiscent of the paths in a well tended garden. She wondered how contrived all these encounters had been. Was she discovering The Dragon or was he showing himself to her.

She didn't have time to develop that thought. The path had been going quickly uphill away from the stream and after only two quick switchbacks the trees ended. Up ahead, cut into the face of the mountain, she saw verdant green terraces. It reminded her of pictures she had seen of Machu Picchu, Peru and the Incan ruins.

Before the terraces started, there was a short field fifty feet wide and at the end of that was a low white picket fence. A Warrior Woman stood at attention on the other side of the gate. She was wearing a low cut leopard print bikini. As Ruby got closer, she realized that it wasn't a print. It was a real leopard skin. The woman had probably killed the leopard herself. The warrior held a stick slantways across her body much like someone might hold a spear and stood rigid as Ruby approached. She had long hair with lengths of leather and feathers worked into intricate braids. She was breathtakingly beautiful. She looked like a model. She looked like the girl from the cover of every Garg, Bruce Brilliant, and Targor Novel Ruby had ever read.

Ruby waived and said, "Hello," as she approached.

"Hey der Ladies," Grt added.

The Warrior Woman was silent and unblinking until Ruby was mere feet away from the gate at which point she swung the gate inward and dropped to her knees. With her head bowed and her arm outstretched in a welcoming gesture, she said, "Welcome to The Peak, Lady Ruby. I hope your journey has been enjoyable."

"Yes, thank you," Ruby replied. "Please stand."

The Warrior Woman did as she was instructed. "I am Zay'ar'lyne. I will be your guide and humble servant during your stay." As she said this, she closed the gate.

Zay'ar'lyne? Where had Ruby heard that name before? She couldn't place it. "Where have I heard that name?" she inquired.

"I am named for my grandmother. She was a film star. Her most famous role was opposite Targor in his third movie, The Peaks of Passion."

Yes, that was it exactly, but she had been rescued from an evil dragon. Ruby said as much to Zay'ar'lyne.

"You know how it is in the Holly Woods. They didn't think the public would understand anything but an evil dragon." Ruby noticed Zay'ar'lyne had not contradicted Holly Woods' interpretation or called The Dragon good, but Zay'ar'lyne did not take note of Ruby's thoughts and continued, "We still get residual royalties. It all goes to The Dragon."

"Can I see him? The Dragon?"

"I can take you to where I would go if I was summoned."

Yes, Ruby thought. "Let's do that."

"It is this way up these steps."

Zay'ar'lyne showed Ruby the way. They walked up a steep staircase cut into volcanic rock. On either side there were thick well tended gardens. The soil was black, rich, and moist. The plants were packed close together, their branches heavy with large, ripe fruits. She saw many women tending the fields, but never a man.

Zay'ar'lyne pointed out plants as they passed, tomatoes, corn, watermelon, squashes, herbs, kola fruits, tril'g berries, all the exotic plants ever mention in a Targor novel, and countless more. Zay'ar'lyne handed them various fruits and plants to sample as they walked along. Soon Ruby was full, but Grt ate the entire trip.

"Dis goody stuff," he'd say.

At the top of the staircase, the fields leveled out into a plateau. Terraces lined the edges of the plateau. Across the field Ruby could see an adobe style village and beyond that an opening into the side of the mountain. It was a large cavern. In the sky

overhead, clouds billowed softly. A gentle mist covered one side of the field while a bright rainbow crowned the entire plateau.

They walked down a central promenade. To the side she saw scores of boys. In the gardens she had seen only women, but here she saw only boys and old men. Half of the boys sat in clusters around old men. They were learning the ways of victory and success Zay'ar'lyne explained. The remaining boys were running, throwing javelins, and twirling sticks. It looked like weapons practice to Ruby.

“Track and Field,” Zay'ar'lyne insisted. “The javelin throw is an important element of the decathlon.”

Ruby did not see any hurdles or high jump pits on the field. “Aren't there other events in the decathlon?”

“Our boys are training for competition against other vortexes. The decathlon degrades into a spirited javelin throw event in many worlds. As it is, very few return. Would you have even less?”

Ruby did not understand.

“You see no men about you, only women, young boys, and old men. When they come of age, the boys leave. They come back heroes or not at all.”

“Isn't that a bit old fashioned?”

“On the contrary, we are very modern, very sophisticated.”

Zay'ar'lyne led Ruby to one of the groups. An old man was presiding over a group of young boys.

“.... At a PE of 8 you're looking at a decent opportunity. What you want to do is drive down earnings from the preceding quarter, so the company looks expensive to an outsider...”

At another group a man was saying, “... They call it junk for a reason. Don't invest in it. You come back with a briefcase full of junk bonds and you'll be turned back at the gate. You'll have wasted your youth and disgraced your family...”

“I always liked this instructor,” Zay'ar'lyne said of the next man. “Rietchhaven is the ethics instructor.”

“... Until you insure your own personal survival you are in no position to insure the survival of others. Your first obligation is to yourself, then your family, your clan, The Dragon, Mt. Doom, this vortex, and other sentients, in that order. If you fail in your obligations, you are not the only thing that fails, so does your family, your clan...”

“I find him very inspirational,” Zay’ar’lyne commented as she led them away.

“It sounds like so much business stuff,” Ruby commented.

“It is. Even Rietchhaven. Expansion by capitalism,” Zay’ar’lyne explained. “Granted, two weeks ago, you would have found them tossing around spears. The old men would have been talking about battlefield tactics, but times change.” She paused for a moment. “The methods are subject to debate, but the overall policy of expansion is not expected to change. We’ve been sending our boys out for... fifty years now. Traditions that ingrained aren’t going to change overnight.”

Zay’ar’lyne saw a group heading for the edge of the plateau. She called out for them to wait.

“The Lady Ruby wishes to observe,” Zay’ar’lyne instructed the man who was leading three teenage boys towards a gate.

“As the Lady wishes,” replied the old man. “I am Max Targor.”

“Of the Targor movies?” He hadn’t aged well, but all the same, Ruby was excited. If he was Targor, she was in the presence of greatness.

“I am his nephew. Alas, The Targor never returned from the filming of the thirteenth episode.” Max recalled the memory with sadness. “We all told him not to do it. He had plenty of money, but he wouldn’t listen. It is presumed he died when he went over the waterfall, but...”

Ruby knew the story. The same thing was thought at the end of the first movie when a Blood Hawk had carried Targor away into the night, but it had turned out the Princess Y’lene had sent for

him. Then at the end of the second movie, he was crossing the sea when a great storm caught him by surprise. The movie ended as he drifted to the bottom of the sea, only to be rescued by a Mermaid at the start of the third movie. Targor could be dead or he could be waiting for the right producer to back another sequel. One never knew.

“I’m sure he survived,” Ruby said.

“We all hope so,” Max agreed. “As I said. I am Max. This is Bob, Kevin, and Courtney.” As he named them, each boy bowed in turn. “Today they will be starting on their journey to manhood.”

Max took a deep breath before he continued. “In accordance with the ancient traditions that date back to at least fifty years ago, on their eighteen birthday, the boys of The Peak are sent out into the world. All of your lives you have prepared for this,” he said addressing the boys. “You know about leverage buyouts. You know how to manage a small retail establishment and work your way up into middle management. You know how to invest your earnings, receive favorable terms on a home mortgage, and say no to telemarketers.”

He handed each of them a pen. “In days of old we would have given them a spear and told them it was to vanquish their foes. Now,” he said addressing the boys again, “we give you a pen. Every time you sign a contract you are either giving away part of your life or taking a little bit of the life force from someone else. Money is nothing more than a representation of time and power. Do not sell you life in vain.”

“We won’t,” the boys said in well timed unison.

Max was pleased. The words weren’t complicated. If a boy couldn’t even agree not to sell his life cheap, this would be the last Max would ever see of them. Most didn’t return. It wasn’t because of the pen. It was because of the briefcase. “In times of old this would have been a shield and we would not let you return until you had filled the shield with gold, jewels, and the blood of a hundred foes. Now, we give a briefcase. Do not return until it is



filled with tradable securities.” He opened the gate. “Now go!” he instructed.

They filed out the gate and started down the slope. He called out after them with last words of encouragement and advice. “Do not waste your youth. Buy blue chip stocks and bonds from well established companies early in life to take advantage of compounding. Buy real estate in upscale neighborhoods. Fill your briefcase with property deeds, land trusts, bills of sale, and other notes and collectables.” The boys turned a corner and were out of sight, but Max could not resist a final word, “and stay away from personal unsecured IOU’s!”

“They’re worthless,” he continued softly speaking to himself as much as anybody. “It should be easy, but so few of them make it.”

The day was growing long. They took their leave of Max and walked on.

“The Dragon?” Ruby prompted Zay’ar’lyne.

“The sunset is the time for The Dragon. There is no hurry.”

“Then tell me about The Peak’s history. You say you’ve only been living this way for fifty years?”

“Yes,” Zay’ar’lyne replied. “I am led to believe, it is a standard dragon tale. Our grandfathers learned that a dragon had taken up residence in the cave.” She pointed ahead towards the direction where they were walking. The cave stretched high into the side of the mountain. A dragon, no matter how large, could easily fly in there. “They were scared, afraid of the usual stuff,” Zay’ar’lyne continued, “that The Dragon would burn their crops, ruin their land.”

“Destroy everything they had worked their whole lives for.”

“Yes. See, I told you it was a familiar story. Our grandfathers thought the best way to appease The Dragon would be to tie a young maiden up outside the cave.”

“How awful.”

“Eet no sounde good,” Grt agreed.

“Be that as it may, it was done. The Dragon came and took the maiden.”

“The Dragon?”

“Yes. The one, the only, The Dragon, he took the maiden.” She paused for dramatic effect. It worked. Then she added, “The Maiden, the Lady Zay’ar’lyne, reappeared a month later across the stream from the village. She said The Dragon sent his greetings and since they did not value their children, he would be happy to take more of them off the villager’s hands. The Lady Zay’ar’lyne for whom I am named and who adventured with the great Targor told them in a month’s time they were to send another young maiden and a cart of their finest arrows as tribute. It is odd when you think about it that the villagers balked more at the arrows than the maiden.”

They had entered the adobe village. A few old men relaxed in doorways and at benches. They were surrounded by scores of beautiful women. Toddlers of both sexes played in the street, while the smell of freshly baked bread filled the air. Noticing Grt’s eyes searching for the source of the tantalizing aroma, Zay’ar’lyne found some rolls and offered them to her guests.

As they munched Zay’ar’lyne continued, “The Peak offers an unsurpassed retirement package for successful heroes. Few return, but those who do insist the trials are worth the reward.” They left the village walking up steps towards the cavern. The setting sun shown deep into its maw. “Back to the story of The Dragon. You have heard of the Lady Zay’ar’lyne’s skill with the bow?”

“Yes.” It was legendary. She could shoot the ropes off a drawbridge at a hundred yards. She could shoot a dagger down in mid-flight. She could shoot an arrow into the air and pierce it with another as it fell.

“Her father was a Fletcher. He was on the opposite bank. She shot an arrow into his leg.”

“Her own father?”

“We have always been a warrior clan. The Dragon played to our traditions of respect for strength and unflinching resolve. The

shot was a warning that all understood. The Lady Zay'ar'lyne did not stick around to negotiate. Next month, the maiden was there as was the cart of arrows. The next month brought another maiden and a cart of daggers." She reached for her belt. "Alas, I no longer wear a dagger. The weapons of The Peak were bows and arrows, daggers, and spears." She twirled the stick she was holding. It reminded Ruby of a Spear, but Zay'ar'lyne explained otherwise, "It is not a weapon Lady Ruby. It is a ceremonial walking stick, not made for battle, never intended to be used in a fight, a simple reminder of our cultural heritage."

"It looks like an attempt to get around the weapons ban," Ruby noted.

"Looks can be deceiving. Ask yourself, do our boys need to practice for other vortexes? Yes they do. Am I or any of the other mothers here willing to have all the 'sporting equipment' disappear?" She let Ruby digest that for a moment. "We are not. It is ceremonial and that is all. I would fight unarmed before I would put our 'athletic training program' at risk."

"I admire your dedication," Ruby said, but she didn't really know how she felt about it. It seemed like splitting hairs... All the same, the Dwarf in the bar had been throwing both axes and daggers into the wall. It had seemed harmless. It was a good bit of fun. At some point, someone might step over the line and then it would be handled. Certainly Ruby's intent had never been to abolish every walking stick, frying pan, steak knife, or rock in the kingdom. She could live with this interpretation of the rules. She didn't really know if she had a choice, maybe it was more important that The Dragon could live with this interpretation.

Zay'ar'lyne was continuing her story again, "Within a few years, The Dragon had gained control of all the young women of marriageable age in the village. You know how men are. Once The Dragon controlled the women, he controlled the men as well. He sent the men on dangerous quests and lifelong missions. He sent them down the mountain to conquer the neighboring lands.

His victories were fast and decisive. His control in these parts is undisputed.”

They were at the entrance to the cave. The sun was just above the horizon. The side of the mountain was a beautiful red and the sky was filled with brilliant color.

Ruby was understandably interested in all the maidens from the village.

“The Lady Zay’ar’lyne was The Dragon’s Consort till she died,” her granddaughter Zay’ar’lyne explained.

“But, she adventured with Targor?”

“As you adventure with Grt.”

“Grt drag-goon,” Grt said adding his bit to the conversation.

“That’s different,” Ruby protested.

“It is not for me to say,” Zay’ar’lyne responded. “It is said The Dragon rules with one consort for life.”

“And that would be me?” Ruby asked.

“You are asking me to guess?”

“If you don’t know, then yes.”

“You will be the consort. You are not yet. The Dragon is deciding if the match is right,” as an afterthought she added, “as are you.”

When Ruby did not say anything Zay’ar’lyne added, “Though I do not believe you have a choice, in your heart or in truth.”

Ruby understood. A vision of The Dragon’s first meeting with the Lady Zay’ar’lyne appeared unbidden into her head. She could see them talking and The Dragon deciding what to do. Tied up to a stake, the Lady Zay’ar’lyne would have been in mortal danger. The Dragon licking his lips and enjoying the game would not have been. If the Targor movies were only half true, the Lady Zay’ar’lyne was a special breed. She would have been able to convince The Dragon to spare her life.

Ruby was not so sure of her own abilities.

They had been standing at the mouth of the cavern. Inside, Ruby could see gold, silver, and jewels sparkling in the setting sun. It was piled high, carelessly, as if no one was ever going to spend it. She wondered what its function was. She knew Zay'ar'lyne would not be going into the cavern with her, but she had one last question for her.

“You say your grandmother... fifty years ago?”

“That is correct.”

“How? If this, The Peak, is the starting point of The Dragon's empire, if this is from where his domain originates, how did it happen in fifty years and why do they talk about not seeing The Dragon for 1,200 years down the slope?”

“This vortex, The Peak, The Dragon first appeared here fifty years ago. How long that was in other domains, other vortexes, I do not know. The heroes who return, they speak of a thousand different realms. For one Mt. Doom looks this way and for another that way. For one there are Goblins to the East and Orcs to the West. To another, it is the opposite. All paths are different Lady Ruby, yours, mine, and my grandmother's.”

On the horizon, the bottom of the sun dipped into the sea. It was breathtakingly beautiful, majestic, and surreal. There was no sea visible to the West from Russell View Estates or the Mt. Doom Ruby thought she knew.

Zay'ar'lyne indicated the cavern with her arm. “This way is yours alone Ruby.”

# 17 #

An-tic-i-pa-a-a-tion...

Ruby walked into the cavern a dozen yards and turned around. The sky looked different and Zay'ar'lyne was gone. She was no longer on the peak of Mt. Doom. She was by the ocean at sea level. She saw waves crashing into the mouth of the cave and heard the roar of the ocean. The inside of the cavern was filled with the reddish hues of sunset or maybe the sun was rising. No,

she watched for a moment. The sun was higher in the sky than it had been before, but it was still setting.

The sudden change had not surprised her. For her entire journey up Mt. Doom Ruby hadn't felt like she could retrace her steps or turn around and go back the way she had come. She didn't see any reason for that to change now.

She wondered if this was where The Dragon started or if this was just a vacation beach house. This cavern, like the first, was stacked high with gold and silver. Grt ran his hands through the coins and tossed them into the air. Ruby did the same thing. She threw great handfuls of golden coins high and watched as the setting sun's rays sparkled off them.

If the gold was real, and Ruby had a feeling it was, then Ruby was walking through a fortune. She wondered how many of these treasure troves The Dragon had or if they were all connected somehow.

She took a few more steps into the cave and called Grt back down to her. He had been climbing a stack of gold. He came back down wearing a jeweled crown.

"We shouldn't take any Grt."

"Joost a leetle?"

"No. I don't think The Dragon would mind, but there's no point in taking the chance." Grt seemed to think it was a waste not to take a little, so Ruby rubbed her fingers for mana and crafted a crown for him. "How's that?"

"Kingsy Grt. How's I looksies"

Ruby saw a jeweled mirror nearby and held it for Grt. Grt tried to get the candy residue off his face. Ruby looked in the mirror and noticed that she still had the disguise spells going. That would not do for a meeting with The Dragon. She brushed Grt off and all traces of a five year old boy disappeared. He resumed his shape as a baby dragon. Ruby looked at herself. She drew her hands thru her hair and changed it back to its natural red. You can never be too careful, she thought to herself.

When she was satisfied, they continued up the path. The ground was a gravelly sand and they wound thru several tall stacks of gold and silver. The sun was going down and the light was getting dimmer, but up ahead she saw a glow around a pile of gems.

The cavern had been growing narrower and she was expecting the glow to lead to another portal or an opening into a larger cavern. Instead, it lead to a small alcove into which was set a large four post bed draped with purple satins and linens. Generous handfuls of silver coins and large rubies were strewn across the sheets.

It was a let down. Ruby had expected to meet The Dragon. She walked over to the bed and inspected the room. Nightstands flanked the bed. On one side there was an unlit oil lamp like she had seen in so many movies. She wondered if it really contained a Djini who would grant her wishes, but it had a pack of matches next to it, so maybe it was just for light. On the other side there was an electric table lamp, complete with a sixty watt bulb burning brightly. That was what had made this area glow. Next to the lamp was a book, a little bedtime reading. She wondered if the book was placed there for her or it was an artifact left over from The Dragon's latest visit. After all, he said changing his size was a minor thing. Maybe he liked sleeping in a cavern by the sea piled high with gold and silver on a four post bed strewn with silver and rubies. Who knows? Maybe?

Ruby called out for The Dragon, but she received no answer. Time wore on, she smelled something delicious and realized she was hungry. She located the source of the smell in the cabinet under the nightstand. Inside was a silver service, which held warm grilled cheese sandwiches, hot tomato soup, potato chips, an orange, a pear, a wedge of cheese, and a brace of fruit juices being chilled in a silver champagne bucket.

It was enough for two, Ruby and Grt. The Dragon wasn't going to join her. Not tonight. Not here.

It had been a long hard day. She was tired. She yawned. She climbed into bed and tried to sleep, but she could not. Her mind was reeling from the day and the prospect of The Dragon. He was close, very close. Closer than she knew.

Unable to sleep she sat up and idly grabbed the book by the nightstand, Management Techniques for Dragons. There was an ornate pen clipped to the front and the pages were speckled with handwritten notes and yellow sticky paper.

Ruby flipped to a page at random. It was for a chapter entitled Management by Example. Big lines cross out the text which read:

Never underestimate the power of management by example. As a dragon, your rightful place at the top of the food chain will be constantly challenged by those who want to take your place and those who do not understanding the need for a strong hierarchy.

It is always best to start slowly. Try management by goal setting. Try management by incentive. Try management by fear and intimidation. Try management by burning their crops, ruining their land, and destroying everything they've worked their whole lives to create. When all else fails, try management by example.

Choose your example carefully. Ideally it will be the leader of the opposition, your strongest adversary, or your most incompetent underling. Make an example of them by cutting off their head and placing it on a pole next to your office, by the water cooler, or at a strategic meeting place. Crucifixion, drawn and quartering, and similar practices may be used to suit individual tastes and specific situations.

Ruby was only partially relieved to see that this was crossed out. In red ink down the margin someone (The Dragon?) had written, "Need to rethink this. Not working as expected."

Ruby shut the book. She didn't need nightmares.



She looked over at Grt and was surprised to see he was reading too... or at least holding a book upside down.

“What’s that Grt?” She hoped it was cheerier than Management Techniques for Dragons.

“Dis ‘mployee hand-e-booke,” Grt showed Ruby. “Da vision plan suckees.”

Ruby looked at the book, The MDM Employee’s Handbook and Operations Manual: Now with More Forms than Ever Before!

“Where did you find this?”

“Eet in Grt’s bagee.”

“Has it always been there?”

“Yeppies,” Grt said nodding his head.

“I’m going to have to read that sometime, but not tonight,” Ruby said. She really was tired now. She yawned, stretched, crawled under the blankets, and felt silver coins between her toes. In an odd way they were comforting. She fell asleep quickly

Grt held the book some more pretending to read, but it wasn’t fun unless someone else was reading next to him. He didn’t understand the words. He just liked to be doing what those around him were doing. Soon, he put the book away and started to wander around the cavern.

Rubies had been sleeping a long time. She slept for hours in a row, Grt thought. He had spent the night climbing towers of gold and silver. Presently, he was pretending he was a pirate captain and he had decked himself out with emerald rings, pearl necklaces, and diamond bracelets. He was wearing so much jewelry he jingled when he walked.

He imagined that he was up in the crow’s nest of his ship, which was in actuality a tall pile of gold in the cavern. The great pirate Grt surveyed the seas, gold as far as the eye could see, but the real treasure was on the bed. He pulled out the telescope he had found. It was inlaid with gold and gems. He looked thru the eyepiece at the Rubies. She turned in her sleep. Maybe the Rubies

would be waking up soon. It would be more fun to play with her. She always had such fun games. Then he noticed the Rubies was fading out of sight, becoming transparent.

Grt put down the telescope. Rubies was fading! He dropped the telescope and ran down the pile of gold with amazing speed.

“Rubies! Rubies! Wait Rubies!” Grt yelled in a panic as he ran as fast as he could.

He jumped onto the bed and reached for Ruby just as she faded completely away.

# 18 #  
Do or Die

The room opened into in a balcony that stretched the entire width of the room. There was no banister or railing on the balcony and the ceiling stretched high overhead. It was the perfect landing pad for a dragon. Inside, the walls were smooth barren rock, while the floor was a finely polished flagstone.

The balcony towered over a city, which spread far below and out into the distance. The stone and plaster buildings of the city glowed a dull red in the perpetual half twilight that was the sky of this vortex. Rolling violent clouds glowed yellow, orange, and red. Stars had not been seen in this vortex for eons. A breeze blew easily through the open expanse of the room.

“She is waking,” Katrinita said from where she knelt beside the Lady Ruby. Ruby was sleeping in Katrinita’s bed. Katrinita had spent the night, a long vigil, by her side. An observer would easily note the striking similarities in appearance between Ruby and Katrinita. They could have been sisters, Ruby with red hair and Katrinita with black. To match her hair, Katrinita wore a black dress, and like Ruby around her neck dangled The Dragon’s pendant, but unlike Ruby, this pendant had no clock on the back. The Dragon would not test Katrinita. She would not be his

consort, but she was lucky for even now The Dragon waited in her room. Few ever saw The Dragon. It was an honor.

Katrinita had been speaking to The Dragon. He had taken on a bipedal mannish form with scales, wings, and a dragonish face, but he was still The Dragon. He sat in a large stuffed chair overlooking the balcony away from the bed. He was sipping from a large crystal chalice, which contained ice cold glacier water. He held the chalice up and gazed into the sky through the goblet, but he said nothing.

They were in Katrinita's suite high in the Citadel, a city unto itself carved out of a mile high cliff face. Below them was Cliff City. The Citadel was the true heart of The Dragon's rule. Power emanated from here. It was not the oldest section of The Dragon's rule, but it was the most heavily defended. This was the center. His domain trailed out in all directions from here: north, south, east, west, up, down, sideways, thru the ether, past the Astral Seas, winding around countless vortexes, and threading through innumerable Worlds. The wild lands and untamed frontiers were farther from here than anywhere else.

Katrinita had been gifted to The Dragon at birth, much like third daughters were gifted to the church to become nuns in some vortexes or second sons were destined for a life in the military in others. The nobles of Cliff City and the surrounding lands lined up for the opportunity to send their sons and daughters into the Citadel. Katrinita's parents were lucky. Their gift had been accepted. Katrinita was even luckier. She had actually seen The Dragon.

For here, like elsewhere, The Dragon's rule was indirect by proxy. If someone wearing a pendant or similar mark of The Dragon gave an order, it was as if the order had come directly from The Dragon. Maybe it did. Maybe it did not. Failure to obey such an order meant instant death. Of course, giving a false order would lead to a fate infinitely worse, but then The Dragon so seldom

appeared, the temptation was great and bending the rules was expected. It was in fact the only way to succeed or even survive.

Future rulers were the ones who took matters into their own hands, who acted as if they had received an audience with The Dragon and were doing his bidding. The rewards of such action could be immense. Control of entire worlds and vortexes went to the bold. It was these few who The Dragon monitored. If they were loyal in their hearts and aided the kingdom, he gave them full reign. On occasion he would even visit them in person and commend them on a job well done. For those whose actions weakened the empire, judgment was harsh, swift, and without mercy. Failure was not tolerated.

In the Citadel, thousands wore the mark of The Dragon. It was a culling ground. There was no surer way to die young than to wear The Dragon's pendant. Some did not believe The Dragon still existed. He had not openly shown himself in centuries. Those who claimed they did his bidding said he sent them a note, came to them in a dream, or that he met them in a distant vortex for a midnight ride. Many simply lied.

Some thought in fighting was expected, backstabbing was the rule of the day, and success at any price was the watchword. These actions did not rule out success, though they often guaranteed failure.

What was perhaps least understood or known was that when The Dragon wished to rule directly, he took the form of a Human, Elf, or Dwarf who wore the mark of The Dragon and acted as his own proxy.

“She wakes,” Katrinita said again. For her part, Katrinita was not ambitious. She did not seek the rule of a kingdom or an outlying vortex. She did not know if the creature in her room was The Dragon or an imposter. It made no difference. She was compelled to obey. The rules were simple, obey all orders or die. Failure to follow even a blatantly self-serving order from another

was grounds for death. Who knew what the true desire of The Dragon was? It was said over the eons he had taken part in numerous revolutions against his own regime. The stories were so numerous in fact that it made one wonder if this wasn't in fact his favorite past time. Plotting the overthrow of The Dragon was, of course, punishable by death, as was refusing to aid in revolution if it came from a wearer of The Dragon's mark. It was not hard to be caught in a no win situation. Death came swift and young to pendant wearers.

Katrinita did not worry. She had accepted this fact of life and death a long time ago. She was a true believer. She believed in the rule of The Dragon, his power, and his sovereignty. It was for the few successes like Katrinita that The Dragon had crafted such a system.

"She wakes," Katrinita said again.

From nowhere a baby dragon appeared, as if from the sky, and landed on the sleeping Lady Ruby. The baby dragon was adorned from head to toe with jewels and wore an ornate crown.

"Rubies! Rubies!" Grt cried as he landed on her sleeping form.

Ruby bolted upright from the shock.

"She is awake," Katrinita informed The Dragon, "and she has brought you a son."

# 19 #

Stop it. You're killing me.

The Dragon laughed at Katrinita's words. He liked a good joke.

Ruby had shot wide awake upon Grt's landing, but the torpor of sleep had not yet left her completely. Grt was hugging her as he explained, "Grt go wit da Rubies."

Ruby held Grt distractedly. She noticed he was covered in jewels from head to toe. She also noticed that where she had woken up was different from where she had fallen asleep. A girl

kneeled next to the bed. Ruby gave a start. The girl could have been her twin.

“You are awake, excellent,” The Dragon said from his chair. Ruby recognized his voice and saw the corner of his form around the chair. “Come join me Ruby and watch the sun.”

“Hi,” Ruby said to Katrinita. She was going to add that her name was Ruby, but Katrinita was familiar with the drill.

Bowing her head Katrinita said, “It is an honor Lady Ruby. I am Katrinita.”

She helped Ruby out of bed and walked her towards The Dragon. As Katrinita did this, another chair appeared along with a table set for breakfast. The plates and glasses sparkled as if made out of the finest gems. The food was the most exotic delicacies the realms of The Dragon had to offer.

The Dragon did not move from his chair. “Ruby, sit, eat with me. Katrinita go tell Lord Xavier The Dragon has commanded him to put on a lavish ball for you cousin Corun’da.”

Katrinita moved to obey. She knew following the order was almost certain death. Lord Xavier would not believe her. Her time was at hand. So it would be.

“After you have told him that,” The Dragon continued, for he valued Katrinita, “tell him his dealings with the Or’tung are to be discontinued. Do not worry. You travel with my personal protection. Besides, if you did not return, who would escort the Lady Corun’da to this evening’s ball?” He mused to himself. “I hear it will be quite extravagant. Perhaps if it is extravagant enough, I will forgive him his little error in judgment.”

When Katrinita had departed, The Dragon added, “And perhaps I will not.”

Ruby sat down where she had been invited and looked The Dragon over. He appeared as he had in her dream when he had sat at the table by the spring and they had played chess.

She took the glass of juice he handed her. It had a sweet sour taste to it.

“Li’koi’koi,” The Dragon explained. “I trust your journey was enjoyable?”

“Yes.”

“You learned what you wanted to find out?”

“No. I don’t think I understand the slightest thing about how your world operates.”

The Dragon made no comment as he plucked yellow grapes from a bunch and casually ate them. He made no effort to continue the conversation.

Ruby sensed that if she was going to get any answers out of The Dragon now was the time.

“How am I supposed to pay off the bill?”

“How should I know?”

“Not this game.”

“You ask a question, but you do not know the answer,” The Dragon observed. “Why should it be any different for me? The bill is a riddle. I do not know the answer, but if there is a way to pay the bill, I am sure you will find it.”

“And if I don’t?” Ruby was surprised how quickly the anger came. Who was this dragon to toy with her?

“I would not dwell on that.”

“I’m dwelling on it. What happens?” She was working hard not to yell at his holiness The Dragon.

“If you are asking what happens, if you lay down the quest, forget about the bill, and wait until your eighteenth birthday comes around? If that happens, you die.”

“Just like that!”

“Yes. Just like that. There may be a way to survive and not pay the bill, but it would be better for all concerned if you simply paid the bill.”

“How?” This was ridiculous.

“If I knew how, you would have been given a different quest. What would be the point of having a consort if she could only solve the riddles I already knew the answers to?” He bit into a

purple looking pear. “Sit back. Relax. Enjoy the sky. Have an Azlan pear.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You are taking this too personal.”

“Too personal!” It was the most ridiculous concept she heard in a long time and that was saying something.

The Dragon shook his head as he bit into the pear again. “Lady Ruby,” he said, eyeing her reaction to the title. “You have made a decree that in all my lands,” he paused there before he continued. “You will note that they are my lands, not your lands, not our lands, but my lands.” He continued, “You have made a decree banning weapons in my lands, but yet you do not know the solution to that riddle. You have not looked at reports from the front. You do not know if the death toll has soared. A lesser dragon might be furious. I find it all so amusing. Countless ages, an endless string of consorts, and you Lady Ruby, will be the first not to wear a dagger at her belt.” He finished the pear with obvious delight. “It is why you will be a great consort. The bill should be but a trivial dilemma for one so bold as to outlaw weapons throughout all the land.”

After a moments thought he added, “Zay’ar’lyne would have held her dagger to Frank’s throat and if he hadn’t ripped up the bill, she would have killed him. Not very poetic, but effective.”

After a moment Ruby sullenly said, “I didn’t choose to play this game. You did. It’s different.”

“The only difference is that I have played this game before. I did not choose you to be the consort. You chose yourself.”

Ruby felt it would be futile to argue the point. She didn’t remember choosing any of this. She fell into her own brooding thoughts for a while. The Dragon was content to stare into the swirling clouds and nibble on fruit. She could feel her time with him drifting away. She couldn’t afford to waste these moments.

“Why do you need so much money? What’s with those caverns filled with gold?”



“Isn’t that what dragons do?” He paused before he continued, “But you do not like it when I answer your questions with more questions. There is a secret in great wealth that few understand. Once a big enough pile of gold is accumulated, once a critical mass is achieved, the gold attracts its own kind. No more effort need be made. It simply flows together. It is a sort of magic... There is perhaps a better explanation, though I wonder if you are ready to understand it yet. Sleeping on a pile of silver and rubies is the most powerful magic there is for attracting untold wealth.”

He could see she did not understand. “Look at Grt. Just one night and he is rich.”

Grt was hopping along the edge of the balcony peeling off sections of a large citrus fruit. Every time he hopped the jewels he wore clinked and chimed. As she watched him further, Ruby realized he was dancing and humming to himself as he ate the fruit.

Ruby remembered what Katrinita had said upon her waking. “Is Grt your son?”

“No, but he is my creation. He was but a construct, a harvester dragon. I gave him a bit more life and then you gave him love.” The Dragon had to consider what he had just said. “In the end Grt is a joint creation, between us. If I were going to make a traveling companion for myself, I would have given him razor claws, a stinging tail, and piercing teeth. I would not have given him the bite of a Chaos Salamander. I would have given his bite a deadly poison. If I had been riding on the tram next to Dark Portent, he would be dead... It is better that he is not. This is why you are to be the consort. Grt is better the way that he is.”

Upon hearing his name, Grt had walked over. “Grt cutes,” he said as he picked up a beet colored apple and added, “Grt hungees.”

After a moment The Dragon put his hand to his ear as if hearing distant voices. “I hear Lord Xavier is putting on a lavish ball in a few hours for you Corun’da.” He turned to Ruby. “I do hope for his sake you enjoy it. Did you have a last question before I leave?” He stood and grabbed a handful of dates as he said this.

She had many questions. Who was Crazy George? What was his role in this? Had he been the hooded stranger at the Edge Diner? Were the Trolls really going to own everything in twenty years? Where did the manna trucks go? Why did The Dragon trust Bertha with a manna truck in the first place?

And magic. She needed to learn more about magic. Why could she not see magic as readily in the zone? Why did it appear as manna ribbons? As she thought about this she rubbed her fingers together. Manna flowed to her easily. Her fingers had power at their disposal. Not just manna, but the power of The Dragon. She could make decrees. If she had one question left, what should she ask The Dragon? As she thought this, she felt the strip of manna transform in her fingers.

Ruby looked down. She held a folded strip of paper in her hand. On one side was written a series of numbers, 3, 10, 13, 18, 27 - 33, while on the other was written a fortune like one might find inside a fortune cookie. It read: Boundless Opportunities Await You.

It wasn’t much help.

The Dragon had walked to the edge of the balcony. He and Grt peered over the edge as he patted Grt’s head. He turned to where Ruby was and motioned for her to join them.

She looked cautiously over the edge. It was a sheer drop thousands of feet long. There was no railing. Ruby was uncomfortable this close to the edge. The Dragon’s clawed toes were literally hanging over the side. Grt seemed as precariously poised.

The Dragon formed a violet globe around Grt. Ruby watched horrified as Grt slowly shrank.

“No! Don’t hurt him.”

“He is fine,” The Dragon assured her. He held Grt in his hands. He was only six inches tall. He placed Grt on her shoulder as he explained, “He will be able to stay with you at the ball easier this way. Simply will him larger and he will change size at your command. Or, at your own command Grt,” The Dragon informed him.

“Grt be giantes? Big Drag-goon?”

“If that is your desire.” The Dragon turned to Ruby. “I shall leave you to prepare for the ball.”

“But I still get a question.”

“Which you have not asked. I shall take the liberty of providing an answer, though it may not match your question.” He smiled. He liked riddles, twists, and complications. “There is more than one way to work magic. You can take a bit of manna and change your immediate environment or you can go into yourself and change who you are, but sometimes the most potent magic comes from changing vortexes, changing which vortex you are in or actually changing the nature of a vortex.” As an afterthought he added, “It has always struck me as odd that it can be harder to determine, which method you have employed... Have you changed yourself or have you changed the vortex? Than it is to actually make the change.”

The Dragon did not wait to see if Ruby understood. He flapped his wings as he jumped over the edge. He momentarily disappeared from sight and when he reappeared he was a gigantic black dragon soaring into the clouds.

Everyone in Cliff City would know he had visited the Citadel and everyone in the Citadel would know he had come from Katrinita’s room.

Moments later Katrinita joined Ruby on the balcony and together they watched The Dragon soar in the sky and then swoop down low over Cliff City.

“You are lucky to have his favor,” Katrinita said.

Yes, Ruby thought to herself, she was. Riddles or not, she was happy to be playing this game. As she watched The Dragon fly off, she remembered her ride on his back and eagerly looked forward to the next ride and their next meeting.

# 20 #

Women are Riddles Unto Themselves  
The Lady Corun'da

After The Dragon flew over the horizon, Katrinita turned to Ruby and told her, "There is not much time." They then spent the next several hours preparing for the ball. The entire time, Katrinita told Ruby the gossip of the day and who was who in the Citadel. It was an endless whirlwind of information. Finally Ruby said, "Enough. I can't even remember the names, let alone the details. I am sure I will learn what I need to know in good time."

Katrinita did not change much for the ball. She combed her hair and wove in a few strands of silver, but she wore the same plain black dress. "They will not be looking at me, Lady Ruby. The Dragon has decreed a party in your honor. They will all want to meet the Lady Corun'da."

As such, Katrinita spent the majority of her time helping Ruby, or Corun'da as the case may be, prepare. Corun'da wore a dazzling green silk dress, edged with emeralds, and pools of glowing green light. Corun'da's hair was intricately prepared with areas of her natural free flowing red hair alternating with thin braids woven tight with gossamer strands of red, pink, and violet light.

Grt was done up as well. His scales were waxed and buffed, and he glimmered as he perched on Ruby's shoulder. He had a single red Ruby from his pirate hoard in his ear, and put the rest of his jewels in the manna bag he wore slung over his shoulder.

"Grt dashing," he said when he looked in a mirror. "Rubies perties toos," he added.

"The Lady Corun'da," Katrinita corrected him.

“Cor-run-da-num-m,” Grt said trying to say the complicated name.

At last Katrina said, “It is time to go,” and she led the Lady Corun’da to the top of a staircase, which overlooked a vast ballroom that was easily the size of a football field. Tiered balconies and halls surrounded the main room on two sides. Off of these areas Ruby could see even more rooms overflowing with additional courtiers, but there was nothing where the other two sides and the ceiling of the ballroom would be. Instead, they were open to the sky and the city beyond. The clouds looked as they had before and would continue to look long after Ruby had left. Swirls of orange clouds hinted at a coming storm, which would never arrive.

The main floor was packed with royalty, Lords, Ladies, Princes, and Princess. Many, Ruby was led to believe, wore the mark of The Dragon. Among the guests, Black appeared to be the color of choice. Some had added a bit of color or a white contrast, but none wore a dress of blue, gold, red, or green as Ruby did. The Lady Corun’da was alone in this.

At the top of the stairs, a squire shouted “The Lady Corun’da and her host Katrinita,” announcing their arrival while at the bottom of the stairs, Lord Xavier eagerly awaited her arrival. He bowed low and kissed her hand as a greeting and then quickly introduced Ruby to dozens of others whose names Ruby soon forgot. Ruby allowed him to escort her down a line of guests, but after she had been introduced to what seemed like the thirteenth Lord Viceroy Ruler of Blah, she said, “Enough!”

“You are boring her uncle,” a striking young man explained as he cut in front of Lord Xavier. As with the other guests he wore black. His hair matched, but his eyes were a deep swirling blue. He smiled as he took hold of Ruby’s hand and asked her permission with his eyes before he kissed her hand in homage. “I

am Trent,” he said, but he had needed no introduction. He wore a black tattoo of The Dragon on his cheek.

Katrinita had warned Ruby about Trent. She had said, “His word is poison. His touch is death. He has no heart. They say he has no soul.” She had said, “Stay away. He is dangerous.”

Like many at the party, Trent wore an empty scabbard. Ruby took a step back to look him over. He was handsome and well muscled, but she was looking for more empty weapon’s scabbards. She saw several... No, not several. His outfit was riddled with empty weapons compartments. She rubbed her brow as if thinking as she cast a spell over her eyes. She wanted to see how many empty weapons scabbards he had. She caused the areas where weapons would go to shimmer slightly. They were everywhere, in his boots, shirtsleeves, belt, collar, and buttons... even hidden in his hair. He was covered from head to toe with compartments for weapons, concealed and otherwise, as if the whole point of clothing was nothing more than to store armaments.

Trent rubbed his arms and Ruby’s spell dissipated.

“Why do you wear so many scabbards?” she asked him.

He was cocky, open, and defiant. “Weapons are hard to come by in these lands, it is true.” He wondered if the implication surprised her. They were still possible to obtain. “I travel to other vortexes regularly, not all of them controlled by The Dragon.” He said his name mockingly. “One minute I am unarmed, the next I am not.”

Trent led Ruby over to tables laden with food. “Food, wine, K’fr...? Whatever the Lady Corun’da might desire.”

Grt, who was still six inches tall, jumped off of Ruby’s shoulder. He grabbed a grape in one hand and a slice of cheese in the other. “Dis bestest, R...” He had started to say Ruby, but then he remembered, “Corundum.”

“I see you have a familiar,” Trent said as he put his hand down to pat Grt. Grt fenced Trent’s hand away with a celery stick. Grt did not like this Trent. He oozed evil, deception, and danger.

“Feisty,” Trent added.

“Grt,” the six inch winged reptile corrected him as he dodged Trent’s hands.

Ruby wasn’t hungry. She looked over and around Trent to see the rest of the party. Surely, there must be others to talk to besides him.

A dance had started in the middle of the floor. Trent mistook her gaze, perhaps deliberately. He bowed slightly as he looked at Ruby with his hypnotic eyes. His iris’s swirled as if they were vortexes unto themselves. He asked her to dance.

“I don’t know how,” Ruby said intending it to be a rejection of his request.

“It is easy,” Trent replied ignoring the implication of her statement. He grabbed her close as he looked into her eyes. His eyes were oddly compelling, magical. Ruby knew she was being beguiled, but once she realized this, it was already too late. Trent continued, “Dancing, like many things, is easy. All you must do is follow my lead,” and with that he twirled her onto the floor.

Trent led her quickly across the ballroom. Ruby could not help but follow. Her feet went where Trent led. It was as if she were captured, as if she were being held prisoner on the dance floor. She did not like the feeling. She did not care for his touch, his arrogance, or the aura of evil, which enveloped him.

“I heard you were soulless, that you had no heart. When I dance with you, I know they are right.”

“The Lady Corun’da has found her voice. I am honored that you would whisper sweet words of praise and admiration into my ear as we dance.” He swept her in a wide circle. “No doubt you heard this from Katrinita.”

Ruby felt the menace in his voice. She was surprised how easy the words came. “If you harm her, I will kill you myself.”

Trent twirled her again. He was unfazed. “With what my dear Lady Corun’da? There is a weapons ban or hadn’t you heard?”

Suddenly Ruby knew he was trying to rile her anger. In a moment of weakness, would she break her own ban? Her threat to

kill him had come from him as much as it had come from herself. “Your magic will not work on me,” Ruby said.

“Then you admit, you find the moment magical,” Trent said as he dipped her low and Ruby found her anger replaced by a more stirring passion.

As he lifted her up, he asked, “What does The Dragon have against the Or’tung?”

He saw she did not know or did not understand the reference. “Lord Xavier, Katrinita carried a message that he was to cease his dealings with the Or’tung. They are the best source of K’fr we know.”

“I have heard the name, but I do not know what K’fr is,” Ruby responded.

“K’fr is a powerful agent. In the outlands, it is used in spells and rituals. More commonly, it is simply abused for pleasure. Even to the untrained it gives visions and a sense of euphoria.”

“It is a drug?”

“It is a means to weaken our enemies. You should talk to The Dragon. It would appear that you have his ear. It would make the borders easier to defend.” Ruby could feel the magic of his eyes. The blue of his iris’s turned to purple to violet to red. He wished to control her.

Luckily at this moment Grt flew onto Ruby’s shoulder. “Dey gotta da fudgies, Rubies,” he said as he held up a piece for her. She wasn’t paying any attention. “Fudgies,” he said again before he noticed her eyes were locked on Trent’s. She hadn’t heard him. He climbed up her hair and held the piece of fudge in front of her eyes. “Fudgies Rubies.”

It broke the spell Trent had been weaving.

As she freed herself from the dance, his will, and those hypnotic eyes, Ruby closed her own eyes and turned away. When she reopened them, she was facing the open sky and was amazed at how much the swirling sky of this vortex reminded her of Trent’s eyes. Both seemed evil, malevolent, and constricting. She was at



the edge of the balcony overlooking the city below. The distant mountains glowed an eerie red. The clouds swirled violently at the edge of a storm.

“K’fr will not be utilized by agents of The Dragon,” Ruby decreed.

“This you say is The Dragon’s will?” Trent asked.

Ruby did not turn around to look at him. She did not look at the crowd in the ballroom who were watching. She looked at the sky and saw only evil. Faint threads of lightning flashed dimly.

“It is...” She did not finish the rest of her comment and indeed if she had anything else to say no one would hear it for at that moment Trent pushed her over the edge of the balcony.

As she fell, Ruby heard him explain far overhead to the crowd of onlookers, “The Dragon always said he wanted her to learn to fly.”

# 21 #  
Last Stop

As she fell, Ruby knew certain things instantly. She knew she wasn’t going to die. She knew Trent had acted in accordance with The Dragon’s will when he had pushed her over the side and she knew she wasn’t going to learn to fly in the next few seconds. She didn’t bother to try.

She took the piece of fudge Grt offered her and popped it into her mouth.

Grt adjusted his crown and settled in for the ride down. “Eet good stuff Rubies.”

She enjoyed its maple flavor. “Where should we go Grt?”

“Homies?”

“Not yet.”

The air rushed past them. Ruby thought about what Hazel had said long ago in critique of her diving style. She thought about diving for a moment, but dismissed the option. Ruby didn’t feel that a cannon ball or can opener was the right form either. She

settled back on a make believe cushion and relaxed. She held her head up with her arms as she neared a bank of fog that she was falling into.

“Last stop,” she said to the fog, she said to The Dragon.  
“Last stop.”

Her descent slowed and Ruby gently fell into the fog, which turned out to be only two feet deep. She looked up. The sky was gone. Two layers of thick fog bound her, one at her feet and one just out of arms reach above her head. In between the two thick layers of fog was a thin dry haze. It could have been mist, but it was insubstantial. Like magical smoke, Ruby thought. This place looked like what an old burned out shell of a vortex might look like after all the magic and life had been used up or was gone and all that remained was an ashy, foggy residue.

She looked around. It was a featureless expanse. It looked the same in all directions, but her vision was limited. She could not see more than a few dozen yards in front of her. It had not been like this when she had landed. The vortex had constricted further or perhaps she had finally arrived completely.

At first she thought this might be what hell was like, but then she quickly realized purgatory was a more apt metaphor.

“Which way do you think Grt?”

Grt jumped off of her shoulder and disappeared into the fog. Ruby saw him slowly reappear. It looked like he was pulling on his own head and growing larger in the process. When he had resumed his normal three foot height, he scratched his head.

“Draaaa-Gooooonie,” he called into the void.

“Oo-knee, Oo-knee, Oo-knee,” the vortex answered back.

“Dat neats,” he said before he yelled, “Draaaa-Gooooonie,” again.

The vortex answered him back again, “Oo-knee, Oo-knee, Oo-knee.”

Before Grt could yell again. A dog howled. Well, it was a dog, a wolf, or a Warg... or some creature like that. Neither Ruby nor Grt could be sure.

They waited a moment and then the creature howled again. Its howl was answered by a howl from another and then another still.

At the edge of vision, Ruby saw a large lumbering form. It was dark and black in contrast to the gray of the fog. It was too large to be a dog and also too shaggy. Whatever it was, it circled around them and howled. Two more of the creatures joined the first and together they howled. In the distance Ruby heard the howl answered again. The pack was growing.

Ruby looked around her. All directions looked the same. She was sure these creatures could out run her. Then a calmness overtook her. This was the last stop for her before she went home. In this burned out shell of a vortex was The Dragon's true beginnings. She smelled the air. It would have made more sense to her if the air held the smell of smoke, but it did not. She could imagine this being the place everyone was always talking about. He burned your crops, ruined your land, and destroyed everything you worked your entire life for. If there was a land of utter desolation, this was it. If The Dragon had left a trail of burnt out vortexes behind him, this was one of them.

Ruby called out to the growing pack of dogs and past them into the swirling mists, "I am Ruby. I am Corun'da. I am chosen to be The Dragon's Consort." They were not proud hollow words. Ruby believed them. If nothing else, that made them true. She rubbed her fingers together for a bit of manna, but found none.

Grt noticed her actions, reached into his bag, and filled her hand with precious ribbons of magic, all the more precious here due to their absence.

"You will show me why I am here," Ruby commanded the creatures.

A large dog like creature slowly lumbered forward. It stood taller than Grt and was almost as tall as Ruby. It had terrifyingly large teeth and slobbered great gobs of spit. It looked like a junkyard dog from some cheap horror movie.

It wagged its tail as it nuzzled up to Ruby to be petted.

“I bet you’re terrifying in a fight,” Ruby said.

The creature nodded its head in agreement before rubbing up against her leg. Ruby thought this was exactly the type of dog you didn’t want to greet you by jumping up on your chest. He’d knock you down without even trying.

After a moment, the dog walked a bit off and swayed its head indicating Ruby should follow him.

Grt ran ahead and jumped on the dog. “Giddey-yup doggies.”

The dog bucked in play for a moment, but let itself be soothed when Grt patted his neck and said, “Easies der boy.”

The dog led Ruby along, stopping to howl every few feet. His howls were echoed in response by a growing pack that circled around and surrounded her at the edge of vision. The Dragon’s forces came in all shapes and sizes she supposed.

They did not need to walk far. Almost before Ruby had even gotten into the routine of howl walk, howl walk, the dog stopped next to a door.

Grt hopped off the dog and knocked on the door.

Ruby had seen this type of door on the cover of numerous books. It was a simple door with jamb set in the middle of nowhere. She could see around it. There was no wall. She walked around to the other side. It was nothing more than a door standing in an empty expanse of a fog filled plane.

“This is what I am here for?” Ruby asked the dog. He nodded and nuzzled her again. She rewarded him with another pat and then fashioned a bone out of a strip of manna for him.

He grabbed the bone and trotted off into the distance. His work done, he faded into the mist. The pack trailed after him.

There was nothing to do but open the door. Conveniently there was a key in the lock. She opened the door and saw that the fog continued on through it. The door looked like it led nowhere, but Ruby knew this wasn't the case. Ruby took Grt's hand and stepped through the doorway.

Ruby hadn't known what she expected on the other side of the door, but this wasn't it. She was in an apartment. Next to the door stood a coat rack. A couch, TV, and dinner table were covered with white sheets, which in turn were covered with a heavy layer of dust. No one had been this way in a while.

She walked down the hall, past a kitchen. There was nothing special or magical about it. There was a microwave. In the sink was a bowl that had had food in it at one time, but it had turned black and crusty, like the bowl had been there so long that something had grown on the food and then even the mold or whatever it had turned into had died as well.

Grt smelled the bowl. "Dis no good," he said. Ruby had not needed his nose to tell her that. Grt put his hand on the refrigerator handle. "Grt wondees wat dey got?"

Ruby stayed his hand. She saw the food on the counter. She didn't want to think what the inside of the fridge looked like.

She didn't investigate the bathroom either as she walked past. It was a simple one room apartment. The back bedroom contained a desk and what would pass for a computer terminal.

Someone had been here recently. The sheet that had been covering the desk had been pulled back. The computer screen showed an image of the manna spring. In slow motion Ruby watched Roger working on the cottage. He was putting thatching on the roof. Ruby's mother Rachel was handing twined bundles of thatch up to him.

Ruby moved the mouse and the image on the screen moved slightly. Roger and Rachel moved out of view and Clarence came into view. He was sitting with his feet in the spring reading a book.

Manna drifted in piles around the pool as a slight breeze caught them and blew them around.

Ruby opened the drawers to the desk, but she found nothing. After the first two were empty she did not look any further. The closet was empty. She noticed there wasn't a bed.

Ruby went out into the front room. There wasn't much here. It didn't make a lot of sense. Was this the end of the quest? Was this the heart of The Dragon?

"Dis place messy," Grt observed.

Dust covered everything, thick, gray dust. It was as if the fog outside had seeped through unseen cracks and settled inside. Ruby noticed there were no windows. The computer screen had been the only outward looking item in the apartment.

She noticed there was another door in the front room, other than the one she had come in through, but it would not open. It had a grim, solid looking padlock on it. She was not meant to go through that door.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders. She did not know what to make of it. The apartment seemed so mundane, so ordinary. Was this the locus of The Dragon's control? No it couldn't be. The Citadel was that, but maybe years before?

There was nothing left to see. She headed for the front door and then she noticed the cloak on the coat rack. Through the hood she could see the swirling orange sky, which towered above the Citadel and Cliff City. The door would be easy. Going back to the Citadel would be hard. She knew which path she must take. She put on the cloak.

# 22 #

The Heart of the Matter

In putting on the cloak, Ruby was instantly transported to a mountain ridge. She saw the Citadel far in the distance. She recognized Cliff City in the valley below and the swirling burnt

orange sky overhead was unmistakable, as was Trent who sat a few feet away. He was idly twirling a bent metal cylinder between his fingers. “You really think K’fr is a bad idea?”

“Yes,” Ruby answered.

He tossed the metal cylinder down the mountain.

She recognized his red swirling eyes now. He didn’t need a dragon tattoo on his face. Trent was just another incarnation of The Dragon. She wondered how many incarnations he had.

“How many vortexes are there?” was his response.

“Why?” Ruby asked. It wasn’t much of a question, but it was what came to mind. “I mean it seems like a pretty uninspired quest to end up in an unkempt, unused, one room apartment.”

He shrugged. “The only real explanation is as you went further up the summit you came farther into my world and further from your own.” The Dragon turned his attention to Grt. “How are you doing Grt?”

“Dis funks meester. We do more?”

“You wanted to learn about The Dragon Ruby. Have you not? Here you see me at the peak of my being, as I truly am, brooding, solitary, alone, gazing off at the vast vortexes and infinite possibilities.” He stood up then and ran his hands through Ruby’s hair. “My world is much better with your presence,” but it had gotten too serious for The Dragon. He broke off jokingly. “Mayhap, you will do me the honor of sharing my reign and ridding these worlds of their evil blight?”

Ruby did not answer. She was not entirely convinced the evil blight wasn’t The Dragon.

“That may be,” The Dragon agreed. “You are young. You have read it in books, but you do not know what defeat on the field of battle tastes like first hand. What do you know of warfare and strife? Have you ever met even one of the Four Horsemen, Death, Slaughter, Desolation, or Pestilence in person? You have not. You are lucky to have come of age in a time when evil is so remote that you do not see the need to sleep with a sword under your pillow?”

Have you ever even held a sword? You see a man decorated from head to toe with scabbards and you see only evil, not knowing what monstrosities those weapons have kept at bay. You casually outlaw weapons, but you have never had to use one to defend yourself, your land, your family, or everything that you have worked your whole life for...”

The Dragon drifted to silence. “Am I evil?” In a roaring voice that echoed off the distant peaks he bellowed, “BE THAT AS IT MAY!”

“It is neither here nor there,” The Dragon continued after he had composed himself. It had been troubling to think that Ruby, his consort, might consider him evil, but then he had realized that was not an altogether a bad thing. It gave him something to work towards. “Everything you have seen, felt, and experienced we have created it all together. You view the riddle, the bill, as a burden, which I created for you to solve. This is not altogether true. A different person, a different consort would have gotten a different riddle. Not because I was in need of a different riddle to be solved, but because a different riddle would be appropriate for a different consort. It is a shared creation, a shared journey, and a shared riddle. There has never been a weapons ban on Mt. Doom before. It never was considered. Nor has a consort ever been presented with a bill to be paid as a riddle before. You think these things originated in me? You are a great sorceress. Your very presence changes the nature of any vortex you walk through.”

While Ruby was still digesting this, The Dragon added, “You underestimate your power, your influence on what you have seen. There is a reason you have been chosen to be my consort, my co-creator, my partner in crime. You ask yourself why did it end up here? Where else could it have ended? Your journey started in your world and ended in mine. The real question you should be asking yourself is why were you chosen in the first place. Or, perhaps, far more important, where do you want it all to go next?”



Then The Dragon, in the form of the despicable Trent with his swirling eyes that opened upon vortex after vortex, leaned over and gently kissed Ruby. She was stunned. She let the sensation flow through her. She didn't know what to make of it.

The Dragon did not wait for her to recover. As soon as his lips left her, he started to fade away. "Another thing I have been wondering about," he said with a smile of mirth on his face as he dissolved, "Is who are the Nelk and what exactly happened after they took the Grood's swords away."

# 23 #  
Homies

Ruby sat on the mountaintop for a long while. The Dragon did not come back. She fashioned fruits, sandwiches, and other food out of manna and contemplated the adventure she had gone on.

She was sure she had learned as much about The Dragon as he was willing or able to express to anyone. She napped and when she woke up she knew it was time to return to her own vortex.

She took off the cloak and was back in the dusty apartment. From there she opened the front door and stepping into the cool glade of the manna spring under the bridge.

"You're back early from the museum," her mother said as Ruby hugged her. Time went at different rates in different lands. It had been a much longer, stranger day for Ruby, than it had been for her mom.

"Oh, Oh, that is a pretty dress Ruby," Clarence said getting up from the spring.

Ruby was still wearing the green gown from the ball. She spun, modeling the dress for them. The emeralds danced in the afternoon light and her hair glowed with mystic intensity.

"That museum must have some gift shop," Roger said as he watched the display from the roof.

“It’s been a weird day mom,” Ruby said as she sought the comfort of her mother’s arms again. “It’s been a weird day.”

Thus Ends  
Dragon Bound

Book IV  
Boundless Opportunity

# 1 #  
A Little Light Reading

The pendant around Ruby’s neck blinked; 36:13:04:15:47, 46, 45, 44...

The bill in her pocket read, 799,000,000,000,000,000,000,000.53, and had remained unchanged.

Ruby was in her room reading a book. Grt sat next to her wearing the crown she had made for him and held The MDM Employee’s Handbook and Service Guide in his hands upside down.

Over a week had gone by since her visit to the museum, her trek up Mt. Doom, and her adventures through various vortexes. At last week’s meeting of the Under Belly Society, she had given a brief summary of her journey. The guys had all cheered at her ascent to the summit and success in meeting The Dragon.

It was now Monday night, one day before the next meeting of the Under Belly Society. She was relaxing. She was taking some time off to regroup. She was reading a book.

She liked how the book started mundanely and built up to a feverish magic laden crescendo. Except for the color of her hair the heroine could have been her. In the past, when she had read

books like this, she had always wished that something magical like what she had read about would happen to her. Now it had.

It was a good book. No. It was a great book. It was one of those rare books that cut straight to her heart and spoke directly to her soul. Well, some of it anyhow. Other parts she hadn't understood at all. She didn't know how she felt about the kiss the heroine had received in the last chapter. And what did the author mean by a kiss anyhow? Was it a romantic kiss? Was the heroine destined to become his lover? Or was it a platonic kiss? Like a father might give to his daughter? It didn't make any sense and the author didn't provide any clarity. In fact, as the book went on, it seemed like the author was just trying to tie the whole business up in an endless knot of ambiguity, as if he didn't know what to make of it either. In the end, Ruby decided it meant the characters were tied in a magical embrace that went beyond the physical, but she knew it was just a guess.

She was nearing the end. She glanced at the book for a moment and flicked through the remaining pages. It wasn't going to be long now. How could the heroine solve the riddle in only a few pages?

Ruby had till she was eighteen to solve her riddle, but she suddenly realized that if she took till her eighteenth birthday, with only a few pages left in the book, it meant her teenage years would flash by in a moment, a mere narrative expediency. What about her high school prom? What about learning to dance? What about her first kiss with a boy, who wasn't an extra-planar dragon, bent on the conquest of every vortex in existence?

Ruby knew there was a solution to the riddle. Nobody wrote a novel without having some kind of idea about how it was going to end. Did they? She hoped not. If she could solve this riddle in three years with multiple narrative gaps, she could solve the riddle in a week. If anybody wanted to find a single thing out about her adventures when she was fifteen, they were going to have to buy the sequel!

# 2 #  
Visualize

Style, Ruby thought. That was where the answer lay, style. It wasn't enough to merely solve the riddle. Ruby had to do it with panache, a little finesse. The solution had to be a bit of magical subterfuge in and of itself... but how?

The most obvious solution would be to rewrite the bill. She had altered The Dragon's forms at the MDM office, but Ruby knew this form would be different. It wasn't going to be altered by a little wisp of magic. It would be nice to change the decimal place on the bill, but she didn't think that would work either. She felt it was more likely a new line item would be added to the bill if she tried to change it... something called, bill modification and forgery penalty. It would only add a few decimal places to the bill. Not that a few decimal places meant anything anymore. A billion billion billion, isn't really all that much different from a million billion billion. There wasn't enough gold anywhere to pay off either amount.

She thought about trying to change the units on the bill from gold to copper, but again the same problem surfaced. Besides, even if it worked, it would only take off a few digits. She thought about turning manna into gold, but it lacked style. She thought about going to a vortex where gold was free and plentiful, but then she realized The Dragon would either already control that vortex or if he hadn't been able to wrestle control, it was unlikely Ruby would be able to either.

Suddenly, Ruby knew she had been approaching the bill in the wrong manner. The Dragon had never intended the bill to be paid off, put on a shelf, and forgotten about. The bill was never going to go away. Not now. Not in a week. Not on her eighteenth birthday. She knew she was bound to The Dragon. Like it or not, she had been chosen to be the consort. She had a feeling there was

only one way to turn down the job and that was to die. She didn't even have to think about that option to reject it.

Paying off the bill was the wrong way to look at it. Making it disappear was wrong. What did The Dragon always say? "I want you to learn to fly." She was falling now. The metaphor was clear. She had to pull out of this dive and soar into the heavens.

Dive? Maybe that was a clue. Do it with style. No belly flops. No can openers. No cannon balls. No flailing arms that made it look like she was trying to run in the air. Flailing her arms, that's exactly what trying to pay the bill was. If you find yourself pushed off the edge of a cliff by a psychotic prince who turns out to be The Dragon's alter ego and who later kisses you on a mountaintop, style is enjoying the fall. Style is kicking back, nibbling on a piece of fudge, and enjoying the scenery. Style is not worrying about the impact.

Well, she thought, I have a clear understanding of stylish falls from high places, but that still doesn't tell me how to fly. What Ruby wanted was to gather as much energy from the fall as possible. She wanted to pull her arms in tight, get as much speed, momentum, and energy as she could, take all that potential, and at the last moment spread her wings out and soar across the ground, grazing barns, rooftops, and fields of grain.

In short, Ruby wanted to ride The Dragon.

What this meant was, she didn't want to pay the bill. She wanted to somehow turn the bill around. She wanted that dragon, who thought he could sneak kisses on mountain peaks, to owe her. He already did. Didn't he? She wasn't going to pay that bill. She was going to turn it around and submit it to The Dragon! Let him figure out how to pay it!

She knew what she wanted. She could visualize the goal. Now all she needed to do was discover the steps required to accomplish her goal and then do them.

She traded books with Grt and started reading The MDM Employee's Handbook and Service Guide. The answer was in

there somewhere, but Ruby did not find it. Long boring hours later she fell asleep.

# 3 #

### Discover the Steps

“And then, Ruby pulls out a character sheet for Grt,” Chad Trailwarden, the Troll street sweeper, was recounting Ruby’s encounter with Dark Portent. “I would have liked to have seen his face then.”

“Oh, that would have been fun to watch,” Clarence agreed.

“Grt drag-goon,” Grt said, caught up in the excitement of the retelling.

“Tell us about your moonlit truck ride up the mountain again,” Bruce requested.

But, Rachel rejected the idea. “I try to keep an open mind, but the whole idea of careening all over the road with a Goblin... She wasn’t even wearing a seatbelt.”

“Or any headlights. They’re a courtesy to other drivers as well as yourself,” Roger added. “Every driver is supposed to turn on their headlights as they cross the bridge. Of course, we don’t ticket them if they don’t, but even in the daytime it’s a good idea.”

They could go on forever. Each one of them had enjoyed hearing Ruby tell her adventure last week. They all felt like they had played a pivotal role in it. Ruby knew the old business time period of the Under Belly Society would never be the same. From now, until they were old trolls five hundred years from now, they would recount her adventures whenever the chairman of the meeting asked, Is there any old business?

“It makes you wonder about those Targor movies. I mean how contrived are they and how much do they leave out? The Lady Zay’ar’lyne had children? They never mention that in the movies,” Bruce said. Who would have thought he was that attentive?

Ruby knew they would go on forever. She was already eating the pizza with her mom and Clarence, while the Trolls had already gone into the kitchen for bowls of a sloppy, vile looking concoction Roger had made called Curdled Potatoes. He had intended to make, Greasy Leek Surprise, but the store had a special on spoiled milk. It smelled rancid.

“There is new business,” Ruby announced breaking into the conversation. By the time they were tired of talking about her latest trip up Mt. Doom and meeting with The Dragon, it would be time for the meeting to adjourn. “As you know, I’ve met The Dragon.”

A cheer rose up.

“I’ve been in his lair.”

She let them cheer again.

“And went to the heart of the Seven Realms.”

“Way to go Ruby.”

“Oh, good show.”

“Rubies and Grt. We’s good teams.”

“I could never have made it without all of your support, and especially without Grt’s constant assistance.”

“Grt helpies.”

Ruby rubbed Grt’s belly.

“Grt, Grt, Grt.”

“But, there is new business. As you may or may not know, Grt is an employee of the MDM and as such he has a copy of the MDM employee’s manual.” This was news to them. They had never thought of Grt as an agent of The Dragon. Ruby continued, “I am convinced that there can be found in the manual a rationale for turning the bill around on The Dragon.”

Ruby walked around the room and handed everyone different sections from The MDM Employee’s Handbook and Service Guide.

“What we are looking for,” Ruby instructed them, “is a way to bill The Dragon for a billion billion billion billion in gold.

We're not going to just pay off the bill. We're going to turn it around on him.

"We'll be rich," Chad said.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Rachel responded. She liked the idea of The Dragon owing her a lifetime supply of gold, but the handbook was an endless maze of dead ends, nonsense, and misdirection. It was also apparently custom made to foil any attempt by Ruby to circumvent paying the bill. Rachel opened the stack of papers she had to a random page and read:

If a customer asks for assistance, tell them,

"It's good to want things."

If they persist repeat the phrase. Absolutely never direct customers to room 3401. It has been closed due to a medical emergency.

Rachel flipped forward a few pages to find:

Under no circumstances are bills to be paid in anything other than hard gold coin in hand. Employees are not authorized to accept payment in kind, furs, silver, copper, gems, jewelry, artwork, antiques, services rendered, promised future services, or IOU's.

Further on she read:

Tricking an employee of MDM does not relieve the Bill holder from paying the full and total amount owed. MDM employees are not authorized to negotiate a bill downward, but may increase a bill for any reason including: services rendered, services not rendered but should have been, services not rendered but should have been and have already been billed, line item duplication charge, or charge for deleting a line item duplication charge.



Employees are encouraged to increase a bill whenever speaking to a bill holder. Sample reasons for increasing a bill include: bill discussion charge, paperwork charge for adding the bill discussion charge, apathy charge for not discussing the bill discussion charge, FCC tax added to all bills to offset the bill discussion charge for Goblins, Orcs, and other protected creatures, personal whim and fancy, or because it's Tuesday. Employees who add a new and novel line item charge will receive a bonus of half the amount collected from the bill holder for said line item.

Finally Rachel came across a section, which read:

Please note: there is a bill collection and payment charge that will be added to all bills equal to the amount the bill holder is submitting for payment.

If the bill is paid in gold in hand, there will also be a coin handling charge equal to the amount submitted for payment, as will a coin verification fee, authentication fee, cleaning fee, fee for personal delivery of funds, and a receipt issuance fee.

Remember, as an MDM employee, if you add a fee, you get to keep half of any amount collected for that fee!

Rachel knew it was hopeless. Every time she turned the page, the rules got more and more restrictive. What was worse, when she turned the pages back to review an earlier section, she found it had been added to.

Due to increases in the cost of handling coins, there is now a coin storage fee and coin counting fee.

Good job Frank! Best of Luck!

Remember as an MDM employee, your job is to aid the consort in all her endeavors, unless it would more fun, convenient, or profitable to hinder her.

How could you win against a shifting set of rules? There was no way to pay off the bill. If Ruby paid a gold, ten gold would be added to the bill for processing the payment. It was hopeless.

Rachel shook her head. She felt like crying.

But, a mere moment later Clarence cried out, “Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, look at this.” He had found the solution.

He explained it to Ruby and the other members of the Under Belly Society. It was crafty. It was sneaky. It was brilliant.

It had style. It had panache.

And, It required a few million in seed money.

# 4 #

And Do Them

Ruby and Grt were on their way to Rigor Pass riding in Igor’s bus. Ruby was happy to be talking to Igor. She missed him and riding on his bus, but more importantly she had a plan.

She was the consort. She had The Dragon’s pendant, which meant that she had The Dragon’s authority. What better way to raise the few million in seed money that she needed than to use this authority to make a small withdrawal of The Dragon’s own funds from the Rigor Pass branch of the Mt. Doom Mutual Savings and Loan?

“You looked great on TV,” Igor was saying.

“When was this?”

“At the big NFAA rally down at the visitor’s center.” Igor stopped to let another passenger onto the bus. “Your hair was black, but I could tell it was you.” After a moment he added, “Is it true that you’re the new consort?”

“Yes.” Ruby had decided this over the last week as well. She was the consort. Her word was law. She could and had changed the nature of the Seven Realms. It didn’t really matter if she had solved the riddle yet or not. She was the consort.

“You’ve got the news agencies convinced you’ve got black hair. It was brilliant going on TV disguised. They’ll never recognize you.”

Grt wasn’t disguised as a five year old boy anymore. He was standing on the seat next to Ruby wearing his jeweled crown and looking out the window. “Doesn’t having Grt with me give it away? That I’m the consort?”

“I don’t know.” Igor hadn’t thought of that.

She took the pendant out of her shirt and put it on display. The consort was on official business. When she arrived at the bank, Ruby wanted to be recognized.

Ruby hadn’t told Igor where she was headed, but she wasn’t surprised when he went through the gate leading into the zone and started up the slopes of Mt. Doom towards Rigor Pass.

Ruby gazed out the window. Everything was so peaceful here. Sure, some of the Gnomes and Dwarves looked poor, dirt, rag poor, but they had smiles on their faces. They waived as the bus went by. Igor stopped to let a Goblin and his flock of sheep cross the road. Ruby was amazed at how happy and content the Goblin looked. He wasn’t anything like Raging Bertha. He was happy to be out in the sun, enjoying the fresh, magic laden air, and tending his sheep. The last thing it looked like the Goblin wanted to do was wage a war.

Yes, she thought. Peace was possible. This Goblin was happy or at least very, very good at pretending that he was happy. When he saw Ruby wearing her pendant in the window of the bus, he waived even more heartily. He even bowed slightly. If he was holding a historical grudge, he sure disguised it well.

Moments later Ruby saw a swarm of small Butter Cup Pixies fly through the air. They danced around the bus and flew under its wheels.

“It’s not a toy!” Igor shouted at them, but they only giggled as they flew through the window and dressed all the passengers in flower necklaces.

The sun shown brightly. Rainbows played on the hills. Not one rainbow or a double rainbow, but two distinct rainbows on two different slopes were busy trying to out dazzle each other. A cool wind blew. Here and there, rain sprinkled lightly.

They stopped at an intersection and Igor paused while an elderly Orcin vendor sold melons to one of the passengers through a window. A Gnome woman next to him offered kolai juice, but found no takers. Ruby felt sorry for her, so she offered the woman a manna bracelet for a glass of her juice. The Gnome was delighted to make the trade.

“Thank you, your Ladyship,” the Gnome peddler said.

“Please, just Ruby,” but she knew it was futile.

“I will treasure this always Lady Ruby,” the Gnome called out as the bus drifted away.

This is what the zone was supposed to be like. The zone wasn’t about crushing adversaries and dominating vortexes like they were trying to do in the Citadel. The zone was supposed to be a playful delight, a dream in which to lose one’s worries.

Ruby’s thoughts were interrupted as she watched a flock of Pegasus soar high overhead in the clouds. How could she worry, let alone think, as she passed Centaurs prancing in the fields? Ruby had not noticed when, but the bus had turned into an open, horse drawn cart.

“Mind the ruts,” Igor called ahead to his team of horses.

It was a wonderful day. Ruby decided a simple walk up the slopes of Mt. Doom would be delightfully refreshing. She could already see the outskirts of Rigor Pass.

“Let me off here Igor.”

“Whoah, boy,” he called to the horses. “Any time you need a ride Ruby, just call on ole Igor.” He paused a moment before he added, “You know, just twenty more years and this rig will be all mine. My wife will sit up here next to me. We’ll home school the kids back where you’re sitting and at night my sons can take the reigns.”

“Still twenty years Igor?” Ruby asked. “Not nineteen years, eleven months, three weeks, and two days or something like that?”

Igor scratched his head. “No. I’m pretty sure it’s twenty years. I’ve got the contract right here somewhere.”

He looked at Ruby like he suddenly had an idea. “It’s pretty complicated and I’m just a simple Troll. Maybe you could help me work it out someday.”

Igor didn’t wait for an answer. The sun was shining. The wind was in his hair. The Butter Cups were singing... even if they didn’t have a proper respect for the dangers involved in flying around moving equipment... and in a mere twenty years he would own his own bus, wagon, cart, or whatever it was depending upon the particular vortex he was in at the time. He was a lucky Troll.

And, now he didn’t even have to worry about armed robbery. “Thanks Ruby,” he called back to her. “Thanks, Lady Ruby.”

The walk to the Rigor Pass was pleasant. She had walked part of the distance with an elderly Elvin lady. They had both enjoyed the antics of some multicolored birds eating the fruit of an opelon tree.

At the city’s edge, the Elvin lady took her leave and entered Sylvia’s Teas and Crumpets for a bite to eat. She had invited Ruby, but Ruby was anxious to get to the bank.

She did not stop at Byron’s House of Candy for Grt either.

“Grt Hungees,” he had insisted, but Ruby had only fashioned a stick of licorice for him out of a twist of manna.

Ruby had never walked through Rigor Pass before. She was amazed at the number of establishments that there were, Wendy’s

Wands, Carl's Cards Greetings and Gifts, Tim's Toys and Diversions. There were scroll stores, books stores, lithograph stores... card, note, and map shops, shops that specialized in riddle books and one across the street that specialized in answers. Kathy's Crosswords sold nothing but crossword puzzles and word find books. The list of shops, which specialized in paper goods alone, was near endless, wrapping paper stores, tissue stores... craft, writing, and artisan paper stores. This was only one small subset of shops. In between Fred's Fiction Emporium and Betty's Better Books was a Gnome dry cleaning establishment, a Dwarven diner, and two competing letter opener shops, which both looked like they used to sell daggers.

Rigor Pass was much bigger than Ruby had ever imagined. At one point, she felt she must be going the wrong way and retraced her steps. She didn't recognize any of the shops as she walked down the same street she had just been down moments before.

Working on a hunch, she walked down the street to the corner keeping careful track of the stores. Then she turned around and retraced her steps. None of the stores were the same. The street name had even changed.

She thought about asking directions, but she was the Lady Ruby. She was The Dragon's Consort. She told Grt with an unprecedented degree of confidence, "The bank is just around the corner." She took hold of his hand and wasn't the least bit surprised when she rounded the next corner and saw a large marble columned building with a sign set tastefully at the bottom of the stairs indicating that Ruby had found the Mt. Doom Mutual Savings and Loan

# 5 #

Old Friends

But with Friends like these...

Stacey the Ogre sat on a stool behind the counter at the Mt. Doom Mutual Savings and Loan. When the MDM HQ building closed, both Stacey and Greez had been transferred here. Greez had tried to fire her for sending Ruby up to see him, but he had not had any success. Stacey belonged to a strong union.

There wasn't much business at the bank. In fact, Stacey had been working here two weeks and she hadn't had a single customer. She was reading Ogre Beat. She was a little old for the magazine, but she liked to stay in touch. It kept her feeling young. Ogre Girl was good too and she was planning on reading that this afternoon, but first she was going to finish her nails. She had gotten a new cherry red color. It complimented her green blush and mauve eye shadow in a wickedly provocative way.

She had been keeping her eye on Greez. She didn't hold a grudge against him for trying to get her fired. In fact, it had had the opposite effect. Before she hadn't really known for whom she was getting herself all pretty every morning, but now she did. Someday that big mouthful of teeth was going to notice her.

She wondered what type of children they would have. Interspecies marriages, even inter-vortex or cross syndication romances, were not unheard of these days. She had heard a rumor that the real reason Targor hadn't made a fourteenth movie was because he was having a secret affair with Garg, but Stacey did not put any stock in it. Everyone knew Bruce Brilliant had a secret second life behind the narrative and maybe Targor did, but there was no way Garg was anything more than he appeared. She had seen him on Good Morning Mt. Doom. She could tell these things. Garg was definitely a woman's man or a woman's Cro-Magnon, one of the two, but he was definitely not a Cro-Magnon's Cro-Magnon.

She idly wondered if there had ever been any Cro-Magnon's Cro-Magnon, but her musings were cut short.

Through the door walked the psychotic girl and her viscous dragon henchman. She remembered her. She was the girl who

looked all sweet and innocent, but who had threatened to hunt her down at home and chop her up into little pieces.

She bet this girl, what was her name, Ruby. It had to be Ruby with that wild, crazy red hair that matched the unpredictable tempest that was the mind of this psychopath.

Stacey was alone. Greez was in his office.

Stacey put away her magazine, her nail polish, and idle thoughts of Targor's, Garg's, and Bruce Brilliant's sex life. Her hands started to shake. She clasped them hard in front of her and tried to keep them still.

The mad girl had stopped at the podium where they kept the withdrawal slips and deposit forms. She had grabbed a withdrawal form. She was probably writing something like, 'I have a gun, give me all your money,' on it. It was the type of thing this girl would write. She was probably upset about the weapons ban. Stacey wished the consort had outlawed crazy little girls. She noticed the girl was keeping the pen as she walked towards her. She was probably going to stick the pen in her eye as she said, "Weapons Ban, Bah!"

"C-C-Can I-I-I Help-p, you?" Stacey asked. She was so nervous she couldn't see straight. She didn't notice Ruby was wearing The Dragon's pendant. Not that it would have mattered. If Stacey had noticed the pendant, she would have simply been convinced that both The Dragon and Ruby were planning on eating her together. It would be just like The Dragon to send his crazy consort and a little dragon to chop her up into little bite sized pieces. If Stacey had seen the pendant, it would have been easy for her to imagine Ruby, Grt, and The Dragon having a good laugh as they shared a juice and nibbled on Ogre cubes. But Stacey didn't notice The Dragon's pendant, she just thought Ruby and Grt were going to chop her up and eat her on the spot.

Ruby thought she remembered this Ogre. "Didn't you use to work at the MDM Headquarters?"



“Ack!” The girl remembered. She was going to hold a grudge. She was as good as dead.

“I heard there was a medical emergency. I hope you’re all right.”

That’s it, Stacey thought. She’s threatening me. In a moment, she’ll ask about my family to let me know that when she’s done with me, she knows where my family lives, and they’re next.

“Or, maybe it was someone in your family?” Ruby inquired innocently.

Enough! There was only one way to save her life. Give this psycho girl what she wanted. “What do you want?” The Ogre screamed in hysterics.

“I want to make a withdrawal,” Ruby said and then she added after a moment. “It’s good to want things, don’t you agree?”

It was good to want things. Stacey wanted things. Most especially she didn’t want to be chopped up into a thousand bite size cubes. She wanted to live. She wanted to love, sing, and dance. She wanted to finish her Ogre Beat magazine. After that, she wanted to do her nails. Then, she wanted to read Ogre Girl and if she still had time maybe read Teen Ogre. She also wanted Greez to ask her to dinner, marry her, and maybe have a few dozen little Ogre-blank thingies, whatever Greez was.

Stacey didn’t look at the withdrawal slip. She was so nervous she wouldn’t have been able to read it even if she had. “I can’t approve this.”

“Is that nice man who worked with you at the other place here?” Ruby asked helpfully. It was clear this Ogre, Stacey her nametag said, had some sort of severe mental disability. She looked like it was taking all of her mental ability to keep from falling off her stool. There was no sense burdening the poor girl with more than she could handle. In the end Greez had helped her before anyhow. “Is Greez here?”

“It’s good to want things,” Stacey called over her shoulder as she ran to get Greez. He had given her explicit instructions. “Do it by the book. If someone wants anything but to make a deposit, say it’s good to want things. Whatever you do, don’t send anyone back to my office.”

Stacey knew the psycho girl and her Ogre eating dragon were following her. Her legs shook as she traveled the dozen yards to Greez’s office. She didn’t bother to knock on his door. She knew he hated it when she barged in and she knew exactly what he would say. She was counting on this.

Greez was busy looking at his eye with a little hand mirror when the door to his office flew open. He quickly put the mirror in a drawer as he looked up. Stacey’s body filled the door, so Greez did not see Ruby and Grt standing behind her. Greez didn’t understand why Stacey had the hardest time following the simplest instructions. “I want you to close the door, knock, and then wait until I call for you.”

“It’s good to want things,” Stacey informed Greez. She had waited a long time to say that to him, something like fifty chapters, but who’s counting. “You want things. I want things. We all want things.” Stacey didn’t pause. She was on a roll. “You, for instance, want me to knock before I enter your office. I want you to invite me to dinner tonight. And, this psy...” she had wanted to say psychotic Ogre eating girl, but had caught herself, “customer wants to withdrawal some funds.”

Greez was stunned. He had never known Stacey was interested in him. Spouses, dependants, significant others, heck even casual friends of tellers were included in their medical plan. The union was that strong. Their plan, unlike the manager’s plan, included vision. He was considering the implications of this when Stacey fled back to her post at the counter. You never knew when there was going to be a rush of customers.

“Greez,” Ruby said with a smile.

“Greezer,” Grt added.

They walked into his office and sat down.

“Er, have a seat,” Greez said.

Ruby placed the withdrawal slip on Greez’s desk. “I would like to make a withdrawal. I am The Dragon’s Consort.” As Ruby said this, she took the pendant from around her neck and held it out towards Greez as a loose bracelet wrapped around her hand. “I think a million will do the trick.”

“I’ll just have to check the funds,” Greez said as he accessed a computer terminal that wasn’t on his desk a moment ago. “The Dragon doesn’t quite have a million on deposit right now, but I could give you what he does have?”

This was more like it, Ruby thought. A little show of authority and it’s amazing how the doors open for you. “That will be fine.”

Greez got up and crossed the room to a large safe. When he was sure Ruby and Grt were looking the other way, he dialed the combination, opened the safe, and took out a large chest, which he laboriously dropped onto his desk. He took a ring of keys from his belt and opened the numerous padlocks on the chest, looked inside, opened a bag, and satisfied that the contents were correct, presented the chest to Ruby.

Ruby looked inside. The chest contained a total of five pieces of silver and three copper coins.

Ruby glared at Greez.

“It’s a well known fact that The Dragon keeps his money piled high in his caves. He’s not a big fan of instruments of deposit. After all the fees, that’s all that’s left.”

“Fees? For The Dragon?”

“Of course,” Greez explained. “There’s the account opening fee, deposit fee, account inactivity fee, withdrawal fee, overdraft fee, maintenance fee, Special Greez Assessment Fee, building availability fee, ATM Access fee, split vortex fee, a general all inclusive fee to insure there are no additional fees, a fee to determine the fees, and then there are the taxes.”

Ruby bored into Greez with her eyes.

“Of course, on account of your being the consort and my fondness for life, I could waive the Special Greez Assessment Fee. Well, not so much waive, as simply give it to you as my humble gift to your Highness.” He reached into his pocket and dumped all that he had onto the table, one gold, seven copper.

“If the Lady Zay’ar’lyne were here, she would gut you like a pig.” Ruby was livid. The words came so easily. Maybe that was why so many things were killed in the average sword and sorcery novel. Fantasy worlds were apparently populated by annoying pencil pushers, bureaucrats, and rules lawyers.

“Yes. Yes,” Greez agreed as he looked around nervously. Ruby was between him and the exit. His next office was going to have two exits if he had to make the second one himself. He thought briefly about trying to run through the wall. He’d seen it on TV, but he didn’t think it would work. “We do have other accounts. Wendy of Wendy’s Wands, she’s got...” Greez tapped on his keyboard. “She’s got almost twenty three in gold. I’m sure she would let you have it.” Greez looked up worriedly at Ruby. “What am I saying? I could just let you have it. And Tim of Tim’s Toys and Diversions, he’s had a good year. He’s got seventy four gold stashed away. Almost a hundred right there.”

“I not going to steal the gold,” Ruby told him.

“No. No. Of course not. I’m just saying with your good credit rating, I’m sure we could work something out behind the scenes. I think they call it creative financing.”

“No. I’m pretty sure they call it stealing,” Ruby corrected him. “Are you saying The Dragon doesn’t have any money in his own bank?”

“He’s a stuff it in the mattress, pile it in the cave sort of guy. If he’s got a bank account, it’s not with us.”

Ruby sat back and thought. She needed money. The rest of the plan revolved around having a little bit of seed money. She

didn't really need a full million, but she thought she needed at least ten grand at a minimum, maybe more. Everybody was so greedy.

Ruby was lost in thought.

After a few minutes, Greez began to relax. "So, you're not going to gut me like a pig?"

"No," Ruby assured him. "I was just trying to scare you."

"It worked." After a moment Greez added, "Can you say, it's good to want things?" He was thinking about giving her a job. With The Dragon's Consort working for him, threatening to gut customers like pigs, he'd never have to speak with anyone ever again. If he made her an assistant manager, he could point out how she didn't have vision coverage and the next thing you know ole' Greez's eye problems would be history.

Ruby hadn't heard him. She knew about wanting things. How was she going to get this stupid countdown clock off from around her neck without any seed money?

If they were going to be here a while, Grt figured he might as well get comfortable. He put his feet up on the desk and took off his crown. It was hard work being the consort's manna bearer. He could use a rest and a cold juice.

"Grt thirsty," he said.

Ruby idly made him a frothy glass of orange juice.

"Tankies Rubies."

Greez was looking at the crown. "If you need money, why don't you just sell this crown?" He picked it up. "It's got to be worth several million."

"It not real," Ruby said distractedly, but then she remembered Grt had a bag full of jewelry. She had him dump the contents out onto the desk and asked Greez, "What are these worth?"

Greez got a jewelers loupe out and examined the pearls, rubies, diamonds, and gems Grt had been wearing when he had been playing pirate and Ruby had started to disappear.

"If you're not going to gut me and you don't want to steal from the people," Greez looked at her to make sure this was true,

“then we don’t accept gems and jewelry at the bank, but you’ve got several million worth here. I could put you in touch with an honest jeweler if you’re interested.”

Ruby didn’t need a jeweler. She needed wealth and now she had it. The next step was to find Crazy George and buy some manna from him.

“Eets still makees no sensey,” Grt said with a cup of juice in one hand and a stick of manna that he was nibbling on in the other. “We gotsa lotsa da mannas. Whys we needsees more?”

# 6 #

You can take the man out of the con,  
but not the con out of the man

Ruby was appreciating the layout of Rigor Pass. Lucky’s Tavern was just around the corner from the Mt. Doom Mutual Savings and Loan. How convenient was that? The Rigor Pass design development committee really knew its stuff.

Lucky’s Tavern looked the same as it had before in its 50’s style chrome décor. Milton the Ogre stood behind the bar wearing a white paper hat. A poorly dressed Elvis impersonator was talking loudly with a Gnome family. A gang of Elvin kids had spread out in the rear of the diner. They occupied two booths and the space in between. The male Elves hooted loudly whenever the Elvin waitress rolled by on her roller skates. The jukebox played Buddy Holly.

Ruby approached Milton and asked, “Do you know where I can find George, Crazy George?” Ruby thought she already had a pretty good idea who in Lucky’s might be Crazy George, but there was a way to do these things.

“Never heard of him.” Milton replied with a straight face.

“No cwazy georgies?” Grt asked puzzled. Hadn’t Ruby met Crazy George here before?

“Not him neither,” Milton answered. Tourists.

Ruby placed a pearl necklace on the counter. She didn't take her hand off of it. Greez had said it was worth a small fortune.

"What do you want to eat Grt?" Ruby asked him.

Grt was turning the menu around trying to make heads or tails of it. "What's goodies?" he asked Milton.

"Everything's Good," Milton replied with a well polished sneer.

"Den Grt havees da Ebery-tings den. Grt Hungees," he stated definitively before he started to spin around on the barstool.

"Grt will have everything," Ruby said as Milton growled his response. Ruby ignored him and continued, "I'll have a Lucky Burger, fries, a chocolate shake, and," she said as she pushed the bracelet over towards Milton, "which one of these customer's is Crazy George?"

Ruby could have guessed. Elvin street thugs, an Ogre, or an Elvis Impersonator, it had to be the later. She wasn't surprised when Milton confirmed this, but paying Milton for the information had served a purpose. Hopefully it had bought her some goodwill from the Ogre, but more importantly it assured her that the Elvis Impersonator really was George. She had a sneaking suspicion that if she had just walked up to him, it wouldn't have been Crazy George. There was no real logic to it, but then there wasn't any real logic to the layout of Rigor Pass. A store was wherever you wanted it to be, but you had to know what you wanted. Otherwise the stores danced in a strange way vying for the eyes and attention of window shoppers. Maybe the stores even knew what she was looking for, or thought they did. That would explain why she noticed so many paper goods stores on her walk up. She must have been thinking about paper.

The Elvis Impersonator was trying to intimidate the Gnome family. "Wizards of Omaha is the best casualty protection you can buy. Why, what would happen to your family if some maniac with a AK-47/5889 started shooting this place up?"

“There’s a weapon’s ban,” the Gnome father said. “I don’t need your insurance. If you’ll kindly go away.”

George wasn’t going to let up. He was paid on commission. It was a good racket. He got to keep 100% of everything he collected. Wizards of Omaha was very generous with their sales commissions. “It’s not just AK-47/5889’s, it’s shape changing potions, polymorph spells,” he paused. “You never know when you are going to be cursed by the dreaded bite of a Chaos Salamander.” Two whole sheets of miscellaneous magic items down the tubes. He waived the thought away. At least he got double experience for them. He leveled up three times that day. It was a new LARK record.

He hadn’t noticed the Gnome picking up his cell phone.

“Hey, Buddy, we’re having a conversation here.” George tried to resume his spiel, but he knew it was a lost cause. He turned to regard the rest of the patrons in the diner. Who here could use a little life insurance?

Even George knew he was having trouble concentrating lately. It wasn’t the same. How could he not notice that the miserable kid next to him on the tram was really a Chaos Salamander? A five year old kid got the drop on him and how? Distraction, that’s how. Random idle thoughts coursing through his brain when he should be concentrating on the matters at hand, paying attention to his surroundings, and preparing for the demon that was about to emerge from the billowing smoke in front of him.

He was blanking out entirely too much lately.

George sniffed. Sulfur with a mixture of perfume, what had that perfume been called?

“Enslavement Georgie,” the sultry voice of his ex-wife whispered through the smoke. “Its call Enslavement, of course I also wore Pure Hell, Torment, and Random Petty Annoyance on occasion, but Enslavement is my favorite. You bought me a bottle for my Birthday, if you remember.”



George remembered. He couldn't help but remember, even though he knew right now was exactly the wrong moment to remember. He remembered buying Suzy a bottle of Enslavement. It was a last minute thing. "Give me something that an overbearing demon of a wife will like for her birthday," he had told the clerk. Little did he know. It all was going so well. They went down to Jamaica that weekend. Suzy brought her younger sister Sasha along. It should be illegal to let Succubus wear thongs on the beach, George thought. No mortal stood a chance against such an enchantment. Suzy had gone swimming and her perfume had washed off in the water, but her devilish, and I do mean devilish, as in daughter of the depths, born to the blackness, having no soul but the ones she eats for breakfast, lunch, and dinner sort of devilish... Suzy's devilish little sister Sasha started putting the moves on George. OK. OK. Maybe he'd put the moves on her, but between the hot Jamaican sun, the thong, and the sweet smell of Enslavement wafting through the air, did he ever stand a chance? And those curves, they don't make curves like that in Detroit...

"George!" It was the bark of the demon Succubus ex-wife. "We didn't get divorced because of a moment on the beach. We got divorced because you can't stop thinking about a moment on the beach." Suzy posed. The Elvin boys howled with delight. She shook her head. Why couldn't George let it go? She was a Succubus. It was her birthday. She'd invited Sasha along. Did she really have to connect the dots?

Now there was a body, George thought. Hot, oiled, and tanned under the Jamaican sun...

"George! Let it go honey."

"I'm a well respected Gnome in the community," the Gnome Father was explaining to Suzy. "I run a shoe repair business. I pay taxes. And," he said as he waived a card in the air. "I have a fully paid DBI policy. Last time we were in here, he tried to shoot us. He's threatening me with bodily transformation. Now beat this guy up or something. Do your job!"

Suzy calmly patted the Gnome on the cheeks. He had a DBI insurance policy. She was a Devil's Brother's Insurance loss prevention agent. "You're in good hands." At DBI you got a devil of a deal. Suzy lifted the Gnome off the ground by his collar. "Don't ever tell me how to do my job or I'll gut you like a pig." Suzy set the Gnome down and turned towards Ruby. "Figure of speech."

"The Dragon's Consort is sitting right over there," Suzy said returning her attention to the Gnome. "She doesn't like violence. She thinks weapons are a bad idea. She thinks random bar fights in which the limbs are torn from little Gnome men is a bad idea."

The Gnome nervously waived to Ruby. "She seems like a wise woman."

"Lucky for you." Suzy leaned against the table next to George and neither one of them seemed to notice or care as the Gnome family snuck past them out the door. "You know George, I don't get it. Lucky's has a reputation for being the most violent, antisocial, dangerous bar in all the Seven Realms, why would a nice Gnome Father even think of bringing his family here." She leaned over and kissed George on the cheek. "You should give Sasha a call sometime."

George eyed her.

"It's OK. I've moved on. I'm making someone else's life a living hell now." She walked over to the bar and sat down opposite Milton. They held hands and stared deep into each other's eyes as they shared a malted milk.

Give Sasha a call. He'd never thought of that. It had possibilities. He slid into the booth and thought about the possibilities.

At the counter, Ruby saw that now was the time. She grabbed her food and walked over to the booth. Grt was surrounded by plates of half eaten food. He didn't see what else he could do. He stacked a dozen plates and carried them over to the booth. Then he grabbed a dozen more and carried those over as

well. The food here was good. From the chili fries and hot dogs to the onion rings and grill cheese sandwiches, it was all good.

Ruby was deep in the middle of negotiations with George as Grt brought the last of his food over.

“I need one ribbon of genuine MDM manna a month from you George for the next three years,” Ruby was saying.

George rubbed his hands together causing the table and Grt’s dishes of food to be covered by a large pile of satin, ribbony manna strips. Manna was easy to come by here. They were in the free magic zone.

Grt grabbed a dozen strips and added them to the burger he was eating. “Eberyting goodes here.”

“There you go,” George said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a call to make.”

“No,” Ruby said shaking her head. “I need genuine MDM manna. I need the strips that are stamped Genuine MDM Manna.”

“That will cost over a half million. I thought I told you, The Dragon has it in for me.”

Ruby dumped the rest of Grt’s jewels onto the table, everything but his ruby earring and his fake crown.

“Is it real?” George asked as he pulled out a jeweler’s loupe. He eyed the diamond bracelet. This was quality stuff. He took a pair of dice out and rolled them discreetly on the bench next to him. Eighty four, it was a bad roll. Luckily he had an eighty seven proficiency in Treasure Valuation: Gems and Jewelry, skill points that had come in handy over the years. He’d give Sasha a call. She could use a diamond bracelet. It would be all the sweeter to her if she found out he had tricked a little girl out of it. Much better than perfume, clothes, or candy. He could hear her now, “We should celebrate. I know. Let’s go down to Jamaica,” hot sand, oiled bodies, and Sasha in the sun.

The girl was looking at him. He recognized the vile beast next to her. Why hadn’t he noticed before? Grt. That was his name. He had an endless appetite.

George shook his head. Now was not the time. He needed to focus. If he was going to get Sasha on the beach, he needed to forget about her for a moment. No Sasha. No feuding with dragons. Just business.

“What are the terms?” It couldn’t be more business like than that, George mused. It was cut and dry. It was like saying, the honeymoon suite for Mr. and Ms. Portent and then laying your Vortex Express card on the counter. No question asked. You had the credit. You had arrived. The room would be yours and in mere moments you would be down on the beach...

“Ten percent,” Ruby said breaking into his reverie. “You get a ten percent margin over whatever the MDM bills for the base price of manna. I need a copy of their invoice to keep you honest of course. It’s a not to exceed contract, based on the jewelry on the table, and you’ll refund any difference.”

There wouldn’t be any difference. Ruby knew this. George knew this. Suzy knew this. Even the Ogre knew this. How could there possibly be anything to refund? A ten percent profit margin on whatever was charged. You could bet it was going to be a lot.

“I’ll wait here while you get the invoice,” Ruby said. “Their office is just around the corner.”

“So you’re right,” George said as he suddenly remembered.

# 7 #

### A Shrewd Bargainer

George was gone longer than Ruby had expected. She looked at the pile of gems, jewelry, and manna on the table. There was some real magic here she thought. What people would do for these things?

She idly took up one of the ribbons of manna George had created in one hand and a string of sapphires in the other. Which one of these items was more valuable? It didn’t make sense to her that a mighty wizard like George, and he was a mighty wizard,

would chase after a few trinkets when he had vast resources of magic at his disposal.

Then she remembered her own visit to the bank. There was something about gold, gems, and money that was resistant to magic. It must be a different form of magic or some force parallel to magic. Not the same, but not altogether different. Hadn't The Dragon said that? If you got a large enough pile of gold together, it spontaneously attracted more. Ruby wondered if manna worked the same way. She might just try an experiment. The Dragon was in for a world of hurt if manna worked that way.

The instant the thought came into her head though, Ruby knew that manna did not work that way. She got the feeling that manna was something that you always had just enough of, never too much and never too little. Gold was different. With gold you either had more than you needed or not enough. Other than that, both were surprisingly similar. Either one could get her a glass of juice or a tasty burger. Either one could be hoarded, controlled, or traded. And, either one could be used for good, evil, or something in between.

She tried to delve deeper into the thought, but she got nowhere. Grt had stopped eating. He was actually full.

"Eet good stuffs. Ebery-ting good." He was filling out a comment card. "Dat Miltee sure know how to cookery."

Ruby nibbled on a French fry. They were good. She noticed different dishes came with different styles of fries. Some had big ranch cut fries while others had skinny crispy fries. No matter how you liked your food, Milton could prepare it for you.

More important than the food though, Ruby could sense that she was nearing the end of her quest. It would be over soon. When it was, she was planning on throwing herself a big party both in celebration of solving the riddle and her fifteenth birthday. True, any number of things could go wrong, but she had a good feeling about it all. She thought briefly about having the party here at Lucky's, but in the end she decided that she would have it at the

new cottage by the manna spring. Roger would be done with the house by then. They could move in and throw a big party. She'd even invite George.

While she was planning the party in her head, George came through the door. He was trying to look sad, glum, and disappointed, but Ruby could tell he was ecstatic. The negotiations with MDM had gone badly, very badly. That was good news, very good news.

Without a word George slipped into the booth. "I told you The Dragon had it in for me." He could barely conceal the glee on his face. Frank had only wanted to charge him 10,000, but why get ten percent of 10,000 when you can get ten percent of so much more? With a false moroseness, he handed the invoice to Ruby and gathered up the jewels as she read the bill.

10	Manna Origination
10,000	Manna Delivery
200	Billing Charge
300	Certified MDM manna stamping charge
2500	Rebilling Charge
5000	Charge for discussing the Rebilling Charge
10,000	Frank's Special Charge for a new Pool
50,000	Frank's Special Charge for non-balking customer
250,000	Frank's Special-Special charge for non-balking customer
350,000	Special Charge to include s.c.'s in base manna cost
500,000	Safety Charge, for including s.c.'s in b.m.c w/o explanation
1,000,000	Crazy George Special Customer Service Charge
2,000,000	Non-Negotiation Fee
5,000,000	Receipt Duplication Fee

15,000,000      Account Balance Credit Waiver Fee

Base Manna Price      23,953,010

36 units extended price equals 862,308,360

Ruby thought it best to match George's false disappointment. "This is awful," she said. "I thought you said The Dragon had only charged you 10,000 in the past?" Ruby could not believe her good luck. It was almost twenty four million per ribbon of manna. It was thousands of times more per unit of manna than she had expected. Her instincts had proved correct. Giving George a ten percent commission based on his cost was a brilliant idea.

"The Dragon fears me. He fears the competition," George explained as he tried to sound beaten and whipped. He couldn't believe it. He had netted more than eight million in an hour. It had been hard getting Frank to increase the base price, but once Frank had realized he'd be getting half the fee of any charge he made up, he quickly jumped on board.

"Sorry I can't stick around. I've got a call to make," George continued. Wait till Sasha heard about this. He could see her now, hot, oiled, and wearing nothing but a diamond bracelet. He'd tell her, "I conned a little girl out of it." Sasha would be his, but before he went George had one last thing to say to his archenemy.

"I told you I'd win someday Grt."

"Cwazy Georgies, youse smartee guys," Grt agreed.

And with that, Crazy George snapped his fingers and was gone without so much as a puff of smoke.

"You think I should have told George that Sasha is dating a regiment of Depth Fiends?" Suzy lustfully asked Milton as she slurped the last of the malted.

"You're wicked honey," Milton agreed.

"Thank you. You're so sweet," Suzy said as she playfully stroked the Ogre's ear. "Tell me I'm evil again."

# 8 #  
Off the Grid

Just as Ruby had told George, the MDM's office was right around the corner. When she walked inside, Frank, the customer service dragon, hastily put away a pool brochure.

"Having a good year Frank?" Ruby asked. She was in a good mood. Frank got half the fee for fleecing George. It couldn't have happened to a nicer customer service agent.

"Did you want to discuss your bill?" Frank asked eagerly. He couldn't believe the last customer, George. What a rube. He didn't seem to get it that every time he said something the price kept on going higher and higher. It was almost like he had been trying to spend as much as possible. The only odd thing was that he had insisted that the manna be stamped with the words, Genuine MDM Manna. The MDM did that anyway. It was a quality control thing... or maybe it was a marketing thing. Whatever it was, Frank was a very rich customer service sales agent or at least he would be when that George paid his bill.

Frank looked Ruby over. He vaguely remembered this girl. She was a big customer. The credit boys had really gone overboard with her. They'd extended a million billion billion to her in credit. Somebody was going to pay for that mistake, but not Frank. He was going to be sipping chilled fruit juices, while he spent his days floating around in his new pool. He was going to retire early. He didn't need a 401K plan. He had it made. Still, why retire in luxury when you can retire like royalty.

"Sure you don't want to discuss you bill? Maybe file a complaint, lodge a protest, or grieve an expense?" He was salivating. He could taste the delight of adding a 'Grieving the lodging of a protest fee' to her bill.

Ruby didn't like to hold grudges, but Frank was the one who had presented her with the bill in the first place. It was only fair she resolved this with him.



“I want to make this easy for you,” Ruby began.

“Is that a request for the easy bill interpretation service?” Frank asked with a grim smile. Vacation home, here I come.

“No. It’s nice of you to offer though.” While Frank was trying to come up with the proper wording for an offering to proffer services fee, Ruby put her bill on the counter.

Ruby Firehaven	Expires 38 months
799,000,000,000,000,000,000.53	

“It’s a short form, simple, non-increasing bill.”

“Wow! I forgot how many zeroes were on that one.”

“There are a few.” She placed a copy of the invoice she had received from George onto the counter.

The important part of George’s bill read

Base Manna Price	23,953,010
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Frank tried to reassure her. “As you can see, you’ve gotten quite the deal compared to our recent prices.” It wasn’t true, but Ruby didn’t care.

“I’m not complaining,” Ruby said. “I’m so happy with the service I’ve received, I want to expand the business I do with the MDM.”

It wasn’t the sort of comment Frank was used to hearing.

Ruby put another piece of paper onto the counter. Clarence had found this form. It was the crucial piece of information Ruby had needed to pay her bill.

In conformance with Fed/US Small Operators Initiative, Utilities Operating within the confines of the US Territory will offer to buyback, purchase, or otherwise compensate independent operators for any manna these operators collect, transport, and/or make available to the larger utility. In an effort to promote the diversification of manna harvesting, Small Operators are entitled to the maximum base rate charged by the utility to any customer.

Applicant Rate	Current Max
Ruby Firehaven	23,953,010

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Frank didn't understand completely, but it didn't look good. This was exactly the type of paperwork The Dragon would pull out before he docked your pay for next fifty years.

"You're charging George 23,953,010 per manna, so I can sell manna back to you at that same rate," Ruby explained.

Frank thought his dreams of an early retirement, let alone a pool, would disappear if he didn't think fast. "I'm sure there's a processing charge when the MDM buys manna."

"I'm sure there's a clause that says all processing, restocking, buyback, or related charges are to be waived under the Small Operators Initiative." Ruby took out Grt's The MDM Employee's Handbook and Service Guide. "I could find the section for you if you'd like? Though I'm sure as a Small Operator I am entitled to a research fee, copy fee, documentation fee, and of course there is the special fee for dealing with annoying clerks, a harassment fee..."

"No. No. We don't need to look it up." Frank started to sweat. His day had been going so good. This Ruby file was

supposed to be all locked up, airtight. All those zeroes, how could anyone get out of that?

“Aha!” Frank said as he whipped out a calculator. “There’s no way you can come up with enough manna in three years. Even if you get 23,000,000...”

“23,953,010,” Ruby corrected him.

“Even so, your bill is too large. Your spring only yields one manna every second or two. Even if you got it to gush ten or a hundred manna a second, you’d never get enough to pay off your bill in the next three years.”

Poor Frank. You almost had to feel sorry for him. Ruby took off The Dragon’s pendant. It came off easily. She put it on the counter, just to prove she could do it. Then she picked it back up and peeled the count down clock of doom off the back. It had turned into a transparent sticker with numbers on it like they put on new clocks or watches in the store.

Ruby knew she had won. She had solved the riddle. The countdown clock agreed, The Dragon agreed, the vortex agreed, or whoever or whatever judged these things agreed, but she felt she owed an explanation to Frank, Grt, and whoever else.

“True,” Ruby said. “My little spring would never produce enough manna, but all I have to do is go out those doors and announce I’d buy manna for 23,000,000 a strand and the line of sellers would stretch across the next thirty vortexes.”

“It would drive up the price of manna. There would be a shortage. You’d still never get enough manna,” Frank protested.

“No,” Ruby agreed.

Frank didn’t like it when she agreed so readily. He wasn’t used to customers setting up new accounts of their own free will, adding services, and approving ridiculous fees without a fight.

“No?”

“No, but I would suck up all the available manna from every surrounding vortex. That would cause problems. More importantly it would drive up the price. Soon the MDM would

have to raise the price to restrict consumption and as soon as the MDM raised the price, the price the MDM would have to pay me would also increase.”

“It would spiral out of control.”

“Precisely. The MDM would have to increase its selling price to exceed the price I offered to others so folks didn’t buy manna from the MDM for the sole purpose of selling it back to me at a higher price, but as soon as the MDM did that, the MDM would have to pay me more for my manna and then I would be able to offer even more for the manna I was buying. In response, the MDM would have to raise the price again and the whole cycle would start over again. All the while I’d be making a small profit on each piece of manna I turned.”

“You would destroy the Seven Realms,” Frank protested, but then he thought it through. “The MDM doesn’t have to beat your price. We would only have to meet your price. If we sold manna at,” he looked at her bill. “If we sold manna at 23,953,010, we’d put you out of business.”

“And you’d have to buy manna from every vortex there is at that ridiculously inflated price. It wouldn’t work. Even The Dragon would run out of gold in a week if he, or I, offered to buy manna at 23,953,010 a pop. Anyway you look at it, it’s a losing deal for the MDM and The Dragon.”

Frank didn’t know what to say. The employee manual didn’t cover the eventuality of someone beating The Dragon at his own game.

“I’m not going to destroy The Dragon, the Seven Realms, or even the MDM. That’s why I’m the consort and that’s why I’m going to snap my fingers and all this paperwork is going to disappear,” and that’s exactly what happened.

Ruby put the pendant back on around her neck. It no longer had the countdown clock of doom on it. It was no longer a burden. It was proof she had solved the riddle. It was proof she was worthy to be Consort to The Dragon!

# 9 #  
Endless Possibilities

Ruby turned to Grt and took hold of his hand. The day was young and so was she. “Where would you like to go Grt?”

“Grt hungees.”

Yes, Grt was always hungry. They should go someplace warm, safe and dry, somewhere where the juices flowed freely and the salad was crisp and fresh, somewhere the creatures were happy, merry, and strong, the music played softly and the bards sang of peace and tranquility. It was time to see the kingdom as she always knew it to be, as she knew it was always meant to be.

Ruby snapped her fingers and was gone.

Through the swirling mists of countless vortexes, those with keen hearing could hear Grt refrain, “Dis placee nicey Rubiees. Why wees no go here before?”

“We didn’t know the way.”

“Wees come heres mores oftens?”

“We’ll make a habit of it.”

Thus Ends  
Boundless Opportunity  
The Final Book in  
The Dragon Bound Quartet

Appendix A  
Did Somebody Mention a Party?

“O-ow-hoooo! This is Jim Werewolf reporting for Mt. Doom News. O-ow-hoooo! O-ow-hoooo! We are at the blowout fifteenth birthday party bash for her Ladyship Ruby Firehaven, The Dragon’s Royal Consort! A Who’s Who of the Seven Realms has turned out for what promises to be the celebration of the season...”

Jim's voice faded out. Helicopters filled the sky. The coast guard was launching fireworks over Roger's bridge, while countless celebrities filed the small glade next to the cottage that they had all built. Ruby and her extended family sat back and watched the festivities from the comfort of a picnic table.

Ruby couldn't believe who had shown up. Bruce Brilliant had given her a signed set of his seven volume series. He had shown up with Garg, so maybe what they were saying was true. Garg had held his club up and posed with Ruby, but the appearance of Targor surprised her most of all. He said he had finally found a backer for his fourteenth movie and it promised to be the best one yet.

Many of her newfound friends from her adventure had shown up. Pete the Paladin was there. He had come early to help set up. He had said he couldn't help himself. He explained that Steve would have liked to come, but he was starting a new business venture and couldn't drag himself away. Hazel came and was happy to see that Roger had moved the bathtub from their old house in Russell View Estates into the yard. "It's a good place to raise Hazen Crots," she observed. "You're not thinking about going into competition with me?" But Ruby had assured her that she was not.

Pierce Mosswood, the Elf from the museum, showed up. He told her the new exhibit was going along fine, and yes, they had found Hook's famous implement when the collection was returned to London.

The list went on and on, but Ruby wanted to spend this special occasion with her real friends. Ruby had a gift for each of the Trolls. It might be a bit extravagant, but she was the consort. She could do what she wanted.

She gave each of them a scroll, Roger, Chad, Bruce, and Igor, and had them all open them at the same time.

Roger got the deed to his bridge. He wasn't going to have to wait twenty years after all. Neither were Bruce or Igor. Bruce got a deed for the dock where he worked and Igor got the title to his bus. Chad already had a street sweeper, so Ruby had arranged for him to get the coveted Rigor City street sweeping contract. It was difficult demanding work with the ever changing streets, but if any Troll was up to the job it was Chad.

Clarence insisted he didn't need anything. He had friends and a comfortably closet. What more could a Bogey Man ask for? But Ruby waived him off. His help had been instrumental. She knew he didn't want anything else, so she gave him a giant hug.

"Oh, Oh, this is the best gift of all," Clarence said with tears in his eyes.

Grt was so happy, he couldn't contain himself. He liked presents too. "What Rubies gets Grt? What Rubies gets Grt?"

Ruby hadn't thought about getting Grt anything. It hadn't crossed her mind. The entire adventure she'd been wondering about the Trolls and them owning everything in twenty years and so the Trolls had been on her mind... and then Clarence was a member of the Under Belly Society, but getting Grt or anyone else a present had never occurred to her

She thought it over. Grt deserved something special. Something he'd appreciate. Something Grt would remember. She reached over and grabbed one of the many takeout bags from Lucky's Tavern and handed it to Grt.

"Tankees Ruby!" Grt said excitedly. "Grt hungee," and then he explained to the rest of the table as he handed out burgers, "Eberyting good at da Luckees!"

Ruby had given presents to everyone else. She didn't want to leave her mom out. "I'll do your hair later," she told her as she leaned over and gave her a hug.

"And maybe spend a few weeks helping me in the garden before you go running off again?" Rachel asked hopefully.

It was a good fifteenth birthday party. For months they showed pictures of it in all the better celebrity, fashion, and news magazines.

Ruby was not sad that The Dragon had not shown up. She had not expected him to. She knew whenever she wanted, she could call and he would come or she could snap her fingers and in a flash she would be on his back soaring high above the clouds, but for now she was happy where she was, eating burgers with her family and friends.

It was a good place to be.

It was all the Lady Ruby could want.

## Appendix B Acknowledgements.

An epic quest as fantastically wonderfully extravagantly superbly unbelievably great, and I do mean great, awesome, fun, cool, a good read, the type of book you recommend to friends, family, distant relatives, and the guy sitting next to you on the bus; the kind of book you assign for your English Lit class, buy as X-mass presents for everyone on your list, start a book club about; the type of awesomely cool, can't put down, read till the end, and then start right back at the beginning, read over and over type book; live your life for, by, and around; buy every book in the series, buy the stationary, see the movie, wear the t-shirt; that type of awesome, cool, incredibly wonderful, inspiring book; a book like that, the kind of book that changed my life and made me the trans-dimensional interplanetary vortex hopping creature I am today, that type of book:

A book like that, a book like The Dragon Bound Quartet is never a solo effort. I would like to thank all the characters for their appearances.

Pierce Mosswood continues to be the head curator at the Mt. Doom Museum. His exhibit on abstract modern art is a great



success. Youngsters especially like the traveling displays of works by eminent chaos, shadow, and mirror world artists

Frank retired early from the commission he received on his sale to George. He sells handmade pottery out of a local craft market when he is not relaxing in his pool. Come to think of it, he doesn't actually sell a lot of pottery.

Stacey the Ogre went out on a date with Greez the whatever he was. During the date, Greez mention how if they got married, he would be covered by her vision plan. Neither of them had ever heard of a more stupid reason for getting married. Instantly they knew it was fate and eloped. Stacey is pregnant and expecting a child. We wish whatever it will be a long and happy existence.

Milton, the Ogre at Lucky's Tavern, has a full and busy life as Suzy the Succubus does everything possible to make his life a living hell. They have a trip planned to Jamaica for Suzy's birthday and she hopes her sister Sasha and her new boyfriend will be able to join them.

The Goblin Horde on the Western Front decided to bypass the middleman and declared war on the Orcin Menace on the Eastern Front. They happily slaughter each other from 9-5 with an hour for lunch. There is talk of starting a second shift, but no one takes these rumors seriously.

Raging Bertha met the Kreel at a Goblin separatist protest rally. He likes to antagonize her and feed off her emotional reaction by saying things like, "The Dragon isn't such a bad guy," and, "Maybe you need to help yourself first." Her shouts of rage and frustration fill the Doomcrag reservation. It is said she is a great Shaman. No one can match her fury.

Pete the Paladin has decided to live with his curse. He does Good whenever he can. He is counting on a cameo in the sequel to help ends meet, though he knows he'll just end up donating the money anyhow.

Steve the Ranger started an organic produce farm with Nellie, the Pixie waitress. They sell their fruits and vegetables to the Edge Café and other quality minded eateries.

Rumors abound that Targor has found a backer for his fourteenth movie, a reclusive man with a curious facial tattoo. Industry insiders say Zay'ar'lyne the granddaughter of the Lady Zay'ar'lyne who was in Targor's third movie will star in the new movie. Pundits say he is too old, that he will only kill himself, but fans know this is only part of the hype.

Katrinita used the influence she had gained from The Dragon's visit to start a book club in the Citadel. The first book was The Dragon Bound Quartet. Hint. Hint. If it's good enough for Katrinita and the Citadel, it's good enough for your book club mister and/or missy. Trent attended the first meeting, but quickly excused himself. It is rumored he is adventuring far beyond the Realms, "In Civilized Lands," where weapons still exist and differences are settled the old fashioned way.

Jeannette Stevens left the Mt. Doom News to star in her own show, The Jeannette Stevens Weekly Report. Her ratings have soared. Jim and Brad have perfected their witty repartee and mesmerize listeners with complete broadcasts of nothing more than O-ow-hoooo! - Yr'g - O-ow-hoooo! - Yr'g

Tring & Celeste spend their time raising their family and have plans to adopt several more children. Tring is a conservative Dour Dwarf and has never had much use for humor. He'd didn't see any reason to start now in the closing credits.

Clarence lives in the closet of the cottage where he does freelance security consulting work for the consort. It is rumored he works for small bits of praise, the odd hug, and pizza.

Roger, Chad, Igor, and Bruce being Trolls go to work eighteen hours a day. All of us in the greater Mt. Doom area would like to thank them for the long hours and hard work they put in to keep the city functioning smoothly.

Rachel spends her days working in the garden and running a small beauty salon out of her Hazen Crot bathtub. It is said she provides the best hair coloring treatments in all the Seven Realms. Hazel comes by on occasion to give her tips and the two have become fast friends.

Crazy George capitalized on the run away success and popularity of the Dragon Bound books by writing Crazy George's Guide to Cookery. It was on the top ten list at Betty's Better Books for eleven weeks before it was replaced by Gourmet Grt. Critics all across the Realms were heard to exclaim, "Grt Wins Again!"

Grt hosts his own TV show, Mornings with GRT, when he is not accompanying the consort. The producers continue to be amazed by the popularity of a manna eating drag-goan whose favorite phrase remains, "Grt hungees."

The Dragon wrote a series of best sellers, The Dragon's guide to Money Management, Management for Dragons, and The Complete Morons Guide to Dragon Hunting with advice that only a complete moron would follow.

While Ruby continued her dream of attending High School where everything was going fine until...

