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Blackdragon Keep

by Lee Clark Zumpe

I was a small child when Szrael first lured the great gray dragon from its lair within the caverns of Ibei. I still recall that moonlit eve as if it were only moments ago when the black soot of Old Drax's breath came through the forests green. Oh, how I trembled when first I glimpsed the fire spew forth from that mighty beast's cavernous, dagger-tooth-rimmed mouth; how I shook with fear when first I saw how its spreading wings blotted out the kindly glow of the harvest moon.

That Old Drax slumbered beneath the white cliffs my village knew well, but not one suspected he would ever be roused from his age-old rest to soar again over the lands as did his ancient ancestors in the days of the Dragon Kings. Like all the other wingedworms and firelizards, Old Drax had settled in his nest long ago at the urging of benevolent mortal men. They warned Old Drax and his brethren that dragonkind would be hunted to the point of extinction unless they, with care, concealed themselves in places dark and deep where men nor elves nor dwarves would dare rove.

Alas, none knew then of the magics being harvested by beings such as Szrael nor of the power that he and his colleagues would one day wield.

Since that fiery night when the ivy trees atop the ridge were devoured by flames and when the face of Mount Ibei was broken like the shell of an egg, I have seen things that caused me much greater dread and terror than I felt in the first moment I beheld Szrael mount that awesome creature and take flight into the grim night sky. I cannot depict the wanton carnage that has gripped the lands since that evening, nor can I guess at the number of lives lost in the war against the wizards.

I have been told by the men of the Eastern Harak Kingdom that not a single dwarven community remains south of the River Tripoto, and I fear what may have become of my brothers and cousins who lived there. By the word of the Elf-King Trewit and his entourage, the fair-skinned quiet elves of Washcurry visit mortal villages to barter for wine no more!

I cannot allow these thoughts to trouble me now. As I prowl through the wilds surrounding the Blackdragon's Keep, pushing into thickets in the bed of deep grottos and clinging to the narrow traces climbing the steep stone bluffs, I struggle to keep from my mind the danger of the task at hand. I cannot help but shudder at the horror of that which awaits me in the heart of the wizard's hive. My company and I are racing into a plague of agony.

My younger brother Winsom trails me closely, and I know that he is weary and requires a respite. Sadly, our location does not allow for such a luxury. The elf-prince Daceel first caught sight of the green-hooded trolls patrolling the banks of a stream that we had recently forded, their hairless venom-hounds sniffing the rocks for our scent. Nerrad the Hunter of the Royal Dwarven Assembly sent two dwarves into the scrub where they shall await the clumsy footfall of the mindless trolls and sternly discourage them from following our trail.

"We are very close, now," comments Bahrad. Of the four noble men chosen to participate in this assault he is the only one surviving. Death took the others, as it also visited the three elven bowmen and my own close friend, Duke Herrus. Now, all is left to we five young warriors. "Feel the heat in the air, smell the smoke. I can hear the murmur of dragons sleeping in their stables not far ahead," I said.

"And the stench of dirty trolls hangs in the air!" whispers Winsom.

“We would all do well,” I remind my brave companions, “to bear in mind that neither the dragons nor the trolls are our true enemy—we have come to slay the wizards.”

Assassins, I believe, is the term that the mortal men use to describe individuals as ourselves. Neither dwarf nor elf can find a term in his native tongue by which to translate the word. A wholly mortal concept is this of plotting to slay a foe without warning and without engaging in a fair fight—though, sure enough, our elders were quick to embrace this notion. And what choice had they? For, on fields of battle, all of our armies have failed to quash the steady march of their legions; and, as might be expected, the wizards have no palate for diplomacy. They scoff at treaties, and all offers of peace fall upon deaf ears. And, so, to us it falls.

The trail dips suddenly, falling wildly along the rugged wall of a deep ravine. I fight to keep safe footing, and from the grunts and muffled curses behind me I know the others, too, are finding the terrain difficult to traverse. A false step here could easily bring death to a careless hiker; he would tumble first through thick thorny brambles before plummeting to the rocks of the boiling river below.

“I can hear the roaring of the Myrian Run below, brother—should not the passage lie somewhere along the throat of this ravine?”

“Aye, and not far along this path.” Looking up I spot the outcropping of rock referred to as the Devil’s Hammer, and I know that the opening to the caverns is nearby.

“Look there!” cries Nerrad, nodding toward a notch in the ravine wall not far ahead. There, set in the rock, is a small opening. Cobwebs spun over the hole are quivering from the fetid breath spewing forth from underground. “Smell that stench!”

“It’s sure to be dragons!” declares Winsom, who has never seen, heard, nor smelt a dragon in his short life.

“It certainly is a small tunnel,” Bahrad says.

“If you don’t think you can squeeze through, you can always await our return here,” remarks Daceel. “There is certainly no dishonor in being too large!” Whether the elf-prince had intended the words to sound sarcastic does not matter; the mortal took them as such.

“I would crawl on my belly through the darkest pit for a season’s length if it meant that I could face a wizard at the end!” He eyes the elf with contempt, and Daceel smirks.

“Enough of this...who shall be first in?”

“I shall,” insists Winsom, already pawing at the cobwebs and preparing to dive in headfirst.

“No,” counters Nerrad, much to my relief. “Perhaps I should go ahead of the rest—I am the smallest and quickest among us. And, at least among we three dwarves, I know myself to be the most skilled in combat.”

“I concur, you shall go first.” Winsom glances at me, clearly annoyed. Nonetheless, he does not question his elder.

After Nerrad follows Daceel, then Winsom, then Bahrad. Lastly, I plunge into the darkness of the narrow tunnel, grimacing at the foul-smelling wind that rushes by. Only Nerrad carries a torch, though the smoke from his alone makes me gag and choke. The going is rough; the tunnel often widens only to narrow further on down the way. My knees ache, and I have more than once dashed my head upon the low ceiling so that blood trickles down about my nose and eyes.

My mind wanders back to the Battle of Sarrahndale. I was not then old enough to join my father and uncles, so I watched from the village wall. Through an arrow loop, I spied for the first time one of the wizard’s minions—heavy armor-clad and ax-wielding, those red-faced long-fanged beasts rode upon the backs of lizard steeds. Ten thousand trolls, it is said, that day stormed the seven villages within the province of Tarroway Glen, and a dragon soared over each battle sight. In the skies above Sarrahndale flew Brown Gurmy, the fantastic winged-worm who once slumbered beneath the calm waters of Lake Corressa in the east.

Even then I knew that dwarves and elves and men could not hope to stand against the combined might of the wizards. Since that day, many years ago, there have been few battles—the wizards seem to care little of the speed with which their conquest progresses. But, since that day, in every conflict that has arisen between the Dragon Masters and the other races, not one victory can man or dwarf or elf claim.

“Nerrad has found something,” comes a whisper passed back through the members of the party. The torch is extinguished, and into utter darkness I am swept. I can hear only the voices of Nerrad and Daceel. I stay my ground, waiting for some further indication of what presently transpires precious steps ahead of me. Shortly, I am being pulled out of the ventilation shaft and down onto the floor of a dimly lit corridor. Winsom smiles, relieved that we gained entry to the Keep so easily.

“Quiet, fool—I am certain I saw a company of trolls patrolling this hall just before we arrived.”

“Bah!” Bahrad ignores the warning of Nerrad and peers carelessly about a curve in the corridor. “Had there been any trolls walking these halls they most certainly would have heard us—you made enough noise skulking through that tunnel to awake all the dragons in this Keep!”

“I grow less fond of you, mortal—your very face makes my stomach queasy.” Nerrad punctuates his words by grasping a short dagger at his side. Winsom, standing behind me, giggles.

“I grow less fond of both of you,” I cut in, hoping I can keep them both from each other’s throat. “Has each of you forgotten why we are here, in this cursed place? Have you forgotten that around any corner could be a dozen troll sentries, or a dragon-den, or even a wizard? We haven’t the time to squabble now...once our task is done, then—if you cannot take the time to celebrate—then, you can return to your petty fights.”

Both dwarf and mortal bow, embarrassed by their argument, and thankful for my intrusion. I had expected such quarrels to erupt eventually. Indeed, that mortal, elf and dwarf could travel so far and for so long without a violent disagreement was miraculous. Now that we are nearing the conclusion of our mission, I expect that the strain of it all will again and again bring to the surface those differences which has kept the three races from total alliance.

Through the corridors we race, weapons now drawn, constantly expecting attack. Into darkened chambers we peer, up narrow and spiraling staircases we climb, and into emptied dragon-dens we steal. Each and every troll we chance upon ends up beneath our feet, his crimson head severed and his green blood pooling. Each and every hobgoblin blacksmith or furnace tender or dragon-feeder we discover cowering in some dank hole finds his throat opened from pointed ear to pointed ear.

“Where are all the dragons?” a muted voice asks of me. Winsom runs alongside me, his curious eyes imploring an answer, his brow wrinkled in angst. “Where could they all be hiding?”

“I know not, brother. I know not.”

As onward we sprint, and down endless halls hurry, more and more are the number of trolls whose bellies we split wide, our blades hacking into their hides. Our steel goes unmatched and unanswered, and we leave only corpses in our wake.

At long last, we break from the winding corridor and out into a vast cavern: a yawning, cavernous dragon’s den. Here the scent is strong and thick, the air heavy with dragon breath. Nerrad and Daceel, first to race within, each turns and doubles over, gagging and spitting vomit from their twisted faces. I recall the words of an elder, before our long journey began: “Their very loathsome odor can a dwarf fall—tarry not long in the company of dragons.”

“Come,” I command. “Through this place, and on to the lair of the wizards...they cannot be far now.”

I hear no argument from my companions, yet a voice indeed speaks up to hold us all firmly still. It is not the call of a troll guard, nor the thundering voice of a spell-speaking wizard. Deep and raspy, down a long throat through which fire might as well flow, comes the voice. And, pitifully, it begs us: "Please...do not leave me."

In our very steps we freeze. My gaze turns firstly to Winsom, and then my eyes follow his to the belly of the cavern. Nestled snugly against the cold, black stone—curled about itself neatly, its tail wound up beneath its chin—there lies an ancient wurm. Its folded ebon wings twitch. Its broad chest expands and contracts rhythmically. Its sad, dark brown eyes stare at us.

"It's the Blackdragon!" shouts Bahrad, his sword ready but his feet carrying him no closer to the great beast.

And, of course, he is correct. Before us lies the eldest of all known dragons, the Blackdragon of Moorsett. Once, the Blackdragon inspired great terror in those who beheld it. In flight, it must indeed be an ominous thing, its great pitchy bulk set against the blue sky. Its sweeping broad wings kept it aloft, and created fierce winds that could scatter hardwoods like fragile twigs. Yet, no more does it seem the invincible, fearsome thing that tales of old had always claimed. Its features, so often described as nightmarish and sinister, seem to me beautiful and fantastic. And of the dragon's violent nature there is no immediate indication—after all, had the creature wanted us all dead, it could have snorted a fiery wind and charred us all from where it rested.

"Please, do not leave me alone."

"Are you dying?" my brother inquires, the first among us ever to address a dragon. His sudden interest startles me, and I am proud that he shows compassion for this awesome animal.

"I am old," it responds. I believe it chuckled a little at my brother's question. "But I am not yet dead."

I notice that about its immense head, and down its long neck, its obsidian scales have begun to fade. In some places, they have turned completely white. How old, I silently wonder, is the Blackdragon?

"I know why you have come, all of you." It shifts its weight a bit, freeing one of its short upper limbs. It points to us with a jagged talon, continuing, "You have come to slay the wizards."

We glare at it, silently, suddenly wondering if our quest is about to end short of its objective.

"Do not fear. I have stopped you to wish you luck. And to tell you that we dragons are not aligned with those black-hearted sorcerous wizards."

"Why, then, do you do their bidding? Why has your kind forsaken the treaties of old and taken the lives of men and dwarves and elves?" Daceel, the elf-prince, has just cause to question the dragon so; in the years since the wizards began their slow-progressing conquest, his homeland has thrice been attacked by the Blackdragon.

"I offer my apologies to the elves, and to the mortals, and to the dwarves as well. We are slaves of the wizards, and we cannot be anything more. We are their pawns, and we must do as we are told. Their hold over us is unbreakable."

"If what you say is true, then why do you not simply fly off? Surely they could not follow..."

"No mortal, they would not need follow—their spells would disorient us and bring us all back into their arms and under their yokes in time. I know this, for I have attempted escape."

"What sway do they hold over you—what keeps them from enslaving the mortals?" demands Bahrad, who clearly cannot believe the words of the Blackdragon. We all have feared them for so long that now their words to us can appear only as lies, their deeds as acts meant to bring harm to us.

"We—like the trolls—are different from you men, and from dwarves and elves as well. We are without souls, and therefore we are easily captured and easily enslaved. Were it not for your souls, you too would answer to the whims of the wizards."

Whether or not the Blackdragon speaks the truth matters little, for if we do not with haste resume our assault and locate the wizards, I doubt that any of us will survive to crawl out from beneath this mountain to offer up the revelations he preaches. Gently, I tap Nerrad on the shoulder and motion him to return to the corridors. The others silently follow, and I am briefly left alone with the Blackdragon.

"It was good of you to hear my testimony, dwarf." The Blackdragon stirs, uncoiling itself and spreading its vast wings. Its limbs stretch and its neck lengthens; its snout grazes the far distant ceiling. Looking down upon me, the creature bids me farewell. "Get on with your task, little one—futile though it may be. Perhaps an imagined victory here will bring you enough happiness to keep you warm the rest of your days."

I do not waste time trying to understand the final words of the Blackdragon. Instead, I rush back into the corridor through which the others have already sped. Trolls stand their guard outside a candle-lit chamber until our swords run them through. Within we find shelves lined with dusty tomes and weird instruments and the skulls of dragons. There are dark-themed tapestries affixed to the walls, and the five points of a chalk-drawn pentagram stretch outward across the black marble floor.

Through another door we creep, hearts racing and minds reeling. Within we find more old texts along rotting book shelves, more tapestries, and glass jars within which repulsive, unrecognizable things thrash and swim madly in thick, clear slime. Set in the center of the room is a round table, about which are positioned five chairs. Five chairs for five wizards.

"The elders were correct—there are but five of them remaining!" exclaims Nerrad.

"Five more than there shall be in little time..." declares Daceel, making ready his weapon.

"Listen!" I hiss. Voices ring out from the corridor behind us. The door through which we entered the previous room swings shut with a loud roar.

"They are in the other chamber!" whispers Winsom, cringing beside me.

"Quickly, all—behind the tapestry, there is a small room!"

Winsom and I duck behind the thin, silky cloth and into a short, dark storage room. The others follow suit, diving for cover—each finding a similar room behind other tapestries. Our luck seems flawless—concealed within these small alcoves we can wait for the five wizards to settle about their round table, then silently and with stealth we five shall slip from the shadows and cut their throats before the wizards can react.

I peer out, hoping the others have arrived at the same conclusion as I. Into the chamber comes the first wizard -- he is one whose face I readily recall. His name is Ewton, and he comes from the northland of Pyre. I do not recognize the second and third wizards who arrive: One is white-skinned and white-haired, and his eyes and lips lack color. He wears a snow-white cloak and carries a crystal sphere in his hand; the other wears a crimson robe, the hood drawn so low that I cannot see his face.

The fourth figure to enter is Szrael himself. His expression I shall not ever forget, for it is though the very concept of evil is therein contained—from the callous rage that ignites his eyes to the wicked twists of his sinister smile. So much pain has he caused, I must hold myself from bursting out of my concealment and thrusting my sword into his gullet.

These four gather about the table, their tongues now still, and I await the fifth and final wizard to take his place. I wait, as do my companions, but no others follow. Perhaps the fifth has succumbed to a natural demise, leaving us with but four to dispatch—what good luck have we! The gods of all the races must be watching over us this day.

I, sword in hand, prepare at last to carry out the will of my people and of the mortals and the elves. My trembling hand I raise, and I begin to part the thin tapestry that separates me from my

destiny. Just as I and my younger brother are about to plunge forth, the wizards speak, and we hold our blades still.

“It is as I had anticipated,” remarks Szrael. “They have come together to kill us in our beds! How easily played are these pawns.”

“Not so easily, Szrael. Not one among us believed them so skilled as to reach so deeply into our lair so quickly. Do you not, yourself, fear them now—even a little?”

“Fear them? We are wizards, what have we to fear?”

“I fear that they shall have words with a dragon before we have found them.”

“Only the Blackdragon lingers in our hive—and she, like the others before, shall take wing. Then, our seven unborn brothers—safe in the wombs of the seven dragons—shall be beyond the reach of these assassins.”

With that revelation burning my soul, I shoot forth from the shadows. Hazily, I am aware that the others have joined me, and that their swords too strike at the hearts of these baneful wizards. The wizards’ eyes grow wide, their mouths droop open, and they gasp in sudden horror. My own sword finds the flesh of Szrael and tastes his blood.

The deed done, I slump to the floor of the chamber.

“More of them—seven more with whom our children will someday be forced to contend. Is there no end to the madness?”

“We should go slay that beast, the Blackdragon, before she, too, flies off into the darkness!” cries Bahrad, starting for the corridor already.

But the mortal stops abruptly at the door, then staggers back into the chamber. Fear guts his face, and from his hands his sword tumbles.

“Aralazhou,” he mumbles.

Into the chamber tramps the fifth wizard. He is dark and gaunt, his black-eyes savage and cruel. His lips curl into a cynical grin revealing the green-colored fangs behind them.

“So, I see my colleagues sacrificed themselves before my arrival. Pity, I would have enjoyed to see their faces light up at the prospect of death.”

Bahrad crumbles to his knees, terror overwhelming him. The others, their courage seemingly drained from them now that the luxury of surprise has departed, lower their weapons and cower at the rear of the chamber. My brother, too, seems ready to accept defeat.

I stand, my sword still firmly in hand, and face the ruthless wizard. “We took the lives of these devils, as we shall now take yours.” My words, or the strength behind them, affected the wizard. His eyebrows raised, and his smile withered.

“There were no sacrifices made here—they were slain to avenge the lives their legions took and to avert the carnage of their future conquests.”

“You may believe that, if you so desire. But, in truth, you murdered a handful of weaponless, powerless old men.”

“Powerless?”

“You amuse me, little man.” The hideous grin returns to his face as he continues, “Yes, all of our power now rests in our unborn children. I couldn’t even summon up a wind to tickle your nose, let alone a flame to devour you!”

“Then the wizards are defeated!” shouts the elf-prince, his courage roused upon discovering his foe is harmless. “And the word shall be spread that all dragons must be slaughtered before the birth of a new brood of wizards!”

“Oh,” laughs the wizard named Aralazhou, “you know that the dragons are impregnated with our offspring? Your talents are evident. I applaud your efforts, truly.” His hands slap together, mocking us.

“Have you no fear, wizard?” I am puzzled as I listen to his wry comments, for he seems too comfortable. There is more behind that facade, there is more to the wizards’ scheme than that which we have deduced. “You stand before us awaiting your death; your conquests—which seemed destined to come about—are now at an end, and you offer up your respect for us?”

“Kill me, little man—it is in your best interests. You need not worry about whether our plans have succeeded or failed; you need not worry about the dragons for which your kind will hunt but never find; and you need not worry about the offspring, for they shall wait centuries before revealing themselves.”

My companions grow restless, fearful that something might crawl from the shadows and claim them all if the last wizard breathes an instant longer. My hand stays them, for the moment.

“But you want to know, don’t you? You, unlike the others, realize that in victory often lurks defeat. You are wise, little man.” Aralazhou kneels, bringing his face close to mine. His breath is rank, his eyes hideous. He whispers so that no other can hear his words. “Ages ago we knew that we wizards could not stand against three foes, and so we devised a plan to bring the three races together. Our little escapades into your realms served only to push the dwarves and elves and men ever closer. Knowing that there could never be peace among the races, we forced you to mingle and mix so that the conflicts between you would blossom. Know that the wars you shall fight amongst yourselves shall make all past battles seem minor and mild. And know that eventually, after the bloodshed has ended, all but one of the races shall be completely extinguished. Then, and only then, shall the wizards once more come forth, bringing magics and sciences the likes of which you cannot comprehend.” He pauses, standing up once more and eyeing the others waiting behind me, each eager to cut his throat. “That is our secret, little man. Go home now, and await the savage days to come.”

“Enough words!” screams Bahrad, stepping forward and pushing me aside. “This wizard I slay in the name of all mortals!”

“Nay!” cries Daceel, who races forward to face Bahrad. “I shall claim this wizard over none other! The elves shall see to it that our victory is final!”

“Stand aside, you cowards,” chimes in Nerrad the Hunter. My dwarven cousin, sadly, scrambles into the foolish fray. “Let a dwarf take the life of this wizard, for we are the mightiest warriors of the lands!”

I gaze into Aralazhou’s eyes, and I see the joy of his victory.



***Thuria* by Molly Kantz**