

NICOVAR

by

Peter Robert Scott

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Nicovar

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NICOVAR

being the first part of

TALES OF HONOUR

As told by Aspian Savakin in his youth and age,
arranged in four books, entitled:

Nicovar

Castan

Valeric

Aspian

Book One

The Tales of Nicovar

Comprising:

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Preface

When I began this book it was with the simple idea of retelling our ancient tales in a style more accessible to the modern reader. I've no intention of disparaging the Heroic Mood - in the Drama I am one of its foremost admirers, and indeed I have used it fulsomely in the telling of the First Tale - 'Too much,' my wife complains, 'too many *thees* and *thous*' - but I well remember in my youth hearing the tales of Valeric from my high father Gannoby whose style was so informal, so naturalistic somehow, that for the first time in my life Valeric the Wise became a real person to me, and his labours seemed suddenly the more awful. And this, remember, from one of Valeric's proudest companions. Other than that I have no pretensions to any literary style, and the tales must stand as they have always done on their own merit.

Likewise when I began I had no foreknowledge of the great events which have so recently overtaken us, nor indeed the part in them which I have been privileged to play. I will be criticized, I know, for delivering my memoirs in such a conversational tone, but I had rather do that than add yet one more unread tome to the shelves of the military museum. Nor do I shrink from adding my own tale to those of the old heroes, for to do so would be to commit the error of humility.

I have included some episodes which may be new to you, but in the main the tales will be familiar if not the telling. I should perhaps have revised the earlier manuscripts more fully in the light of later events, but I claim the extenuation of age, and to those of you with a craving for footnotes I recommend the official histories. Finally, in the interests of readability, I have kept the use of patronymics and honoronymics to a minimum; I make no apologies for this, for if without dishonour I can refer to Var Nicovar drad Ganel odrad Aldragon, the Twice-Drowned of Pengemmen as simply Nicovar then I can refer to others as briefly too.

I have dwelt most on those tales which involve my own family, but as time stretches back beyond even the nest of Savakin I have begun with the great myths. The distinction between myth and tale is a subtle one, and some modern history is already mythical in the retelling. That is as it should be, and although in my own tale I have kept as closely as reasonable to the facts it would be a poor dragon who could not add something of his own to all but the oldest yarn.

Aspian Savakin, Pennor, 1517.

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The First Tale

Concerning gods, godlings and the beginning of things

The first god is the great light whom we call Sun, and all other gods live in his shadow and owe him their first being. The Earth is his best work and all the things upon it are his, and no creature may look upon him and keep his sight.

Now when the Sun was alone in the universe he was naked and all light, and in all the vastness of the heavens there was nothing for him to delight in, and because he longed to share the beauty of his being there grew in his heart a great loneliness.

And because he was the source of all life he brought forth an egg from within himself and hung it in the heavens and called it Cian, which means first-born. And from within the egg there sprang oceans and mountains and forests and plains which spread over the whole surface of the globe until it became the first world, ready for life. And the Sun peopled his new world with living creatures of such beauty that he could not but smile on them with the full force of his love. And for a time Cian flourished in his sight, until it could no longer bear the brilliance of his face and it shrivelled and grew black and became as a great cinder, bereft of life. And from all this world there survived but one creature, called Rougn, who had been

the ruler of Cian and the best loved of the Sun's creatures, and the Sun took him as his companion and a fellow god.

And Rougn was loud in the Sun's praise, for he was thankful to be spared the death of his world, and the Sun gave him part of his great light, and Rougn was able to live in the full glory of the Sun. And for a time the Sun was content, for he had fellowship in the heavens and could share his great love. But Rougn grew so fulsome in his praise that the Sun began to tire of it and to crave further companionship.

And he brought forth another egg which he called Mian, which means second-born, and hung it as a sphere in the heavens. And there sprang out rivers from the egg, which wrought valleys and hills and spreading meadows and glades. And the Sun peopled it again with all the fairest creatures of his imagination, and again the world flourished, but again it was soon reduced to embers. And among the embers there was left alive but one creature, called Yoal, who had been the mightiest prince of Mian and the chief worshipper of the Sun, and he too was taken as a companion and another god.

Yet, though the Sun gave him too some of his great light, Yoal was saddened as he looked upon the embers of his world, and although he loved the Sun he no longer praised him. And the Sun grew saddened too, and he gave the tenderer part of his love to Yoal.

Now there arose a fearsome jealousy in Rougn, for he had been the sole companion and had praised the Sun, and he bore Yoal great malice for his favour with the Sun although he praised him not. But Rougn hid his malice in his heart and the Sun and Yoal knew nothing of it; and yet it pained him sorely to hide it.

And when the Sun asked, 'Why, when I made these worlds, were they too frail to look upon me?' Yoal knew not how to answer, but Rougn replied, 'Great Sun, no creature may dwell in your light undimmed. You should prepare an unlight in creation where all may learn to long for your new-coming.' And the Sun found wisdom in Rougn's counsel, and he wrapped himself in a great cloak woven from the last strands of the loneliness in his heart, and the cloak hid the wide spread of his wings and the body of his tail, and while at his head all was light as before in the cloak there was great darkness. And in this darkness Rougn hid the malice from his heart. And from a third egg the Sun created another sphere, called Fian, which means third-born, with all the marvels of the other worlds and with creatures in it every whit as wonderful. And the Sun travelled in joyful circles around Fian so that no place on it should be forever in his gaze but that it would be followed for a like time within his cloak's shadow. So Fian flourished and became not as an ember, and the earth was seasoned and brought forth new generations of its own, and all the creatures that sprang from the earth

praised the Sun for his each new-coming. And as Fian engendered new life from itself the Sun new-called it Earth in its own honour and gave it the centre place of all the heavens. And when he saw this Yoal was no longer sad and praised the Sun for his good work.

Now when he heard all creatures praise the Sun, Rougn bethought himself, 'Was it not I who bade the Sun prepare the great unlight? Wherefore do not these creatures praise me too?' And though he was at the right flank of the Sun there arose a new envy in his heart and he was pained more fiercely than before. And the envy grew so great that Rougn was unable to hide it even in the darkness of the Sun's cloak, and he hid it instead among the cinders of Cian.

And Rougn dwelt alone on Cian for many long ages and forsook the companionship of the Sun, and all the while grew more jealous of Yoal's place in his favour and more desirous of the praise of all creatures. And as the envy grew ever blacker in his heart and as Cian was filled more and more with the distemper of it, Rougn grew ever darker of countenance and of body till he was blacker than the blackest ashes of Cian and no longer a creature of light, until finally the gift of the Sun went out of him altogether.

And when the pain in his heart grew so terrible that he could no longer abide it he flew in the face of the Sun and stood between him and the Earth, and the shadow of Cian blotted out the light of the Sun and the Earth was in all-shadow. And Rougn called out upon all the creatures of the Earth to praise him and forsake the Sun as the Sun had forsaken them. And then there was ice in all the regions of the world, and so it remained for a great age.

And the creatures of the Earth cried out in torment, and many believed that the Sun had indeed forsaken them and they praised him no more, and praised instead the new darkness in their fear. And Rougn's malice grew ever stronger and more terrible with their praise.

And Yoal was sorely vexed and said to the Sun, 'Let me strike Rougn into utter nothingness for his great error, that you may look upon the Earth again.'

But the Sun said, 'Nay, whatever is once created it cannot be stricken into nothingness, for it is all body of my body, for as Cian is still with us as a cinder, and Mian is still as an ember, and whatever is made cannot be unmade, Rougn is now and so must remain for always.'

'But if he be not stricken,' said Yoal, 'you will never gaze upon the Earth again and all its creatures will forsake you.'

'Therefore,' said the Sun, 'Rougn shall be banished until he better learns the measure of his wrong. I shall send him beyond the shadow of my cloak into that great place far from the world where all is still radiant with the light of my body, but from where the grace of my

countenance is hid. And the fierceness of that light will burn the blackness of envy from his heart and he will return to us new-lit with lovingness, and I will smile upon him once more.’

So with a great clamour of his cloak the Sun wafted Cian with Rougn upon it into the burning regions of the greater light. And for his loyalty the Sun took Yoal and showed him the dying ember of Mian, and he breathed a new brightness upon it that it might glow for ever, and he gave it to Yoal for his own, and new-called it Moon, which means guardian, and he set its face to shine for all times on the Earth, so that Yoal could set guard upon the Earth for the Sun’s grace.

But after a time of stillness, when all but a few of Earth’s creatures had new-learned to praise the Sun, Rougn burst from the nether regions upon his dark chariot, Cian, and masked by the folds of the Sun’s cloak he came once more between the Sun and the Earth, and again there was an age of ice. And the Sun was troubled that Rougn still called upon Earth’s creatures to praise him, and he saw that even the all-brightness beyond his cloak could not burn the hatred from Rougn’s heart, but rather it was more hardened than before. So in sorrow he drew his cloak round about his body and hid its light forever from any part of the universe, and he strove with Rougn and thrust him aside, and Cian was new-called Styche in his dishonour, and was cast into the new darkness beyond the Sun’s cloak with Rougn upon it.

And the Sun made a placket in his cloak and bade Yoal keep watch through the placket lest Rougn should escape again. And Yoal still travels constantly within the placket and without again, gazing now upon Earth, now upon utter night.

Yet still at times, when Yoal is gazing full upon the Earth, Rougn slips his exile and hides in the folds of the Sun’s cloak, and then darts as a shadow in the face of the Moon. And sometimes, when the Moon is gazing upon utter night, Rougn flies between the Sun and the Earth; but at these times Yoal in the Moon pursues him and ushers him back into the great dark. But such times are the ill seasons of the Earth, and all the calamities that befall us have their beginnings there.

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Now for the first time Yoal was the chief god after the Sun, and the Sun loved him every bit as much as he had once loved Rougn, for Rougn was no longer worthy of the name of god and he was new-dubbed by the Sun as a hecol, or ungod. But for ever after there was a sorrow in the Sun’s heart for the loss of his first companion, and he swore that there would be no more gods till they had first proved their love for him as Yoal had done.

And those whom the Sun thought to make gods became first godlings, and they lived upon a mighty peak called Attal in the middle of the greatest ocean of the Earth, and he decreed that there only the divine might dwell. And at his life's end each creature was spirited towards Attal, and if he was to be a godling he was taken upon the lower shores, and if not he fell into the ocean's deeps. But of all the godlings none was worthy enough in the Sun's eyes to take his place as a god in the heavens.

And the Sun said, 'Is there no place on all the Earth where there dwell creatures fit enough to become gods?' And he searched for many long ages, and Yoal searched too, and though there were many godlings taken upon Attal none was ever taken as a god.

And the Sun saw that no place was fit enough to rear a god, for the Earth had replenished itself of itself and was now no longer divine; and though the Earth was blessed there was no part of it still of the first making. So the Sun took from his heart some of the great sorrow he felt for Rougn and threw it into a northern sea, and there it boiled for a while like a great volcano, and fire burst from it and it spread wide across the sea and became the islands we now call Bryggne; and after several ages the rocks became earth, but earth from the Sun's heart, tempered with sorrow and split with fire.

'Now,' said the Sun, 'whatever creature can live in this terrible place he surely will be worthy to be a god.' And he watched as the first creatures sprang from the earth and crawled into the light. And though they were creatures of great splendour and many became godlings, and few were thought unfit enough to fall into the ocean's deeps, yet not one of them became a god.

And the Sun looked upon Yoal in his bewilderment, and he saw that Yoal was now a creature of surpassing beauty and of a lightness near even unto himself, and he called him Dara which means white, and Giron which means companion, and he said, 'Would that I had another such as you.'

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Now when Rougn had lately slipped his exile for a further time and had been sent back howling into Dimnach, which is the name of the great unlight, the Sun said unto Yoal, 'Now that the Earth is for a time safe again, go you and visit all the lands of the Earth and find for me a creature fit enough to be a god and share the heavens with us.' And Yoal asked, 'How will I recognize a creature to be worthy of such honour?' and the Sun replied, 'You will do so, for your love is the test such a creature must undergo.'

So Yoal descended from the Moon and lit upon the central mass of the world near to the northern seas, and he went among all the creatures of that place in search of one who was godworthy. And all the creatures when they saw him were filled with admiration, for he was now more beautiful than ever he had been in his life upon Mian, and there was none who saw him but did not fall down and praise him as the first god in creation. And Yoal chid them, saying, 'The Sun is the first god, and I am but a creature of his making, still in flesh, and you do ill to praise him not.' But even those who had lately praised the Rougn-cast dark turned faith and praised Yoal instead.

And Yoal began to fear that all creatures would turn from the Sun and praise him, the lesser god, and he cried out to the Sun, 'The task is hopeless!' and he returned straightway to the Moon lest he cause more wrongworship.

And the Sun said, 'Why do you return so quickly and name our search hopeless?' and Yoal replied, 'I had rather perish guttering within the Moon than cause your creatures to abandon you.' And the Sun was stricken with a joyous grief, for he saw how much Yoal loved him, but he saw not how to find another such a god.

And as they watched from the heavens and their task seemed ever the more hopeless, the Sun and Yoal saw how the confusion of worships began, for there were those who still worshipped the Sun and would worship no other, and there were those who praised the oft-coming darkness of the night, and there were those who called upon Rougn as the first god and delighted in his treachery, and there were now those who worshipped Yoal as the Earth-walking god.

And hatred flourished among some creatures of the Earth, and creature rose up against creature and many were slain, and few were taken thereafter as godlings.

And one creature above all was most hated upon the Earth, and that was the creature which lived within the edges of the sea and upon the margins of the land and grew great in numbers and was called maldocil. And the killing of maldocil was the chief sport among the other creatures of the Earth, and all who killed such a creature were credited as heroes at that time.

'Now,' said Yoal, 'how if I return once more to Earth, but in the shape of a maldocil, and find if there is any creature who will love me for the love within me, for that creature would be certain to be a god?'

And the Sun replied, 'Nay, if you should be killed in the wise of another creature I cannot unkill you, even as Yoal once more. I am not worthy of such a stretch of love.' And he forbade Yoal to attempt any such adventure on pain of losing his first place in the heavens.

But Yoal was consumed with a desire to serve the Sun and he begged him to abate his hest. And when the Sun saw how set Yoal was upon his quest he relented and made for him the body of a maldocil to abide in, and Yoal descended once more unto the Earth and slid into the northern sea.

Now there was a place on the shores of Bryggne that was free from maldocil, for the creatures there were ever vigilant in their destruction and no maldocil could remain there undestroyed. And here Yoal first came ashore in his loathsome guise.

And upon a crest of sand there stood a wondrous creature, great of wing and neck, whose beauty was more than Yoal had witnessed before upon the Earth. And Yoal stood fixed in adoration of her, and after a time she caught his gaze.

There was silence between them, till the creature asked, 'Why, maldocil, when you should run from me do you bear me such gentle gaze?' and Yoal replied, 'It is because I had sooner die at your hands than wrest my eyes from your sight. Tell me your name and what manner of creature you are?'

And she told him her name was Athresa, and she was one of the egyptyn, and they conversed for a long while in quiet tones.

And Yoal asked, 'Is it not the practice of the egyptyn to kill all maldocil, and wherefore do you not kill me?'

'I could not kill such a grace in anything,' she said, 'for I believe it is for love of me that you look so kindly.' And indeed it was so, for all Yoal's love was given to Athresa at that time. And long they stayed there at the sea's shore and spoke of the glories and wisdom of the Sun that had brought them thus together; and though Yoal never told her he was aught but a maldocil yet Athresa loved him nonetheless.

'But if you love me,' said Yoal, 'how will the other egyptyn love you? Will you not be despised among your own kind?'

'And if I am,' she answered, 'it will be a kind unkind to me, and I shall leave them and live with you alone.' But Yoal persuaded her to live still among her own people and to visit him by day upon the lonely shore. And so it continued for a great while, with Athresa quitting the egyptyns' company by day and quitting Yoal's by night, for Yoal knew this was a creature near enough unto a god and he would not sully her.

And there was one among the other egyptyn called Nagan who was youthful of blood, and he too loved Athresa and longed to lie with her. And it had been the wisdom of the elder egyptyn that these two should be wedded and bring forth princes for that place, and the time of the wedding drew nigh. And Nagan saw that Athresa drew more and more from him, and

returned not his affections as she was wont, and that by day she went her own way and would not walk with him.

And after a while, though it is a thing despised among the nobility of the egypt, he resolved to follow her and see what it was that thus employed her.

And when she came to the sea's shore and called out upon Yoal's name, and Yoal emerged onto the land in the detested guise of a maldocil, Nagan was rent with fury and he screamed aloud that he would slay Yoal and after slay Athresa. And he flew at Yoal with his beak whet and terrible and struck at him. But Yoal was filled with anger that any should so threaten the life of Athresa, and though he would willingly have died for her sake he could not leave Nagan alive to harm her. So he clasped shut Nagan's beak in his own jaws and fought long and cruel with him in the shallows of the surf, and all day as they fought Athresa wept for she saw naught but sorrow in any outcome.

And at length Yoal rose victorious from the sea, and the body of Nagan was broken beneath his. Yet though Athresa loved him not any the less, she loved not herself for she saw she was the doer of this ill thing.

But Yoal said, 'Nay, it was I who slew this creature and it is I that shall grieve for it, for although I am in the form of a maldocil yet I am in truth a god, and remorse shall cut me quick for this.' And although he was still in a vile form, yet Athresa knew from his remorse that he was a god, and she fell down in praise of him. But he lifted her up, saying, 'Never worship me. We two shall walk together always, and the great love I bear you will cure you of this grief, as I hope your love may cure me of mine, and we shall come at length to our own true happiness.' And they wandered forth along the shores towards the northern lands. And the spirit of Nagan fled his body and sped westwards over the mighty sea, and came at length to the shores of Attal and was taken readily upon it.

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Now there was even upon Attal at this time a sort of godling that had shunned the light, and the worship of Roun had found entry even there. And when these godlings heard the tale of Nagan's death, and that he was killed by a maldocil which should never slay an egypt, they asked, 'How could an egypt of such comeliness fall victim to so loathsome a foe?' And Nagan told them of Yoal's words, that he was in truth a god and that he desired Athresa for his own. And these godlings said, 'How is it just that Yoal, who has the wide meadows of the

Moon to sport upon, should sport also upon the Earth?’ For in truth there were many jealous of their so long waiting, never to become a god as Yoal was.

And chief among the worshippers of Roun at that time was Asir, a godling of many a long age, who praised the Sun to his face but secretly rejoiced at each new violation of his light. And Asir close-questioned the spirit of Nagan about the circumstances of his death, and where he might most readily encounter Yoal and Athresa in those northern lands. And when he knew all there was to know he gathered about him all those godlings who bore Yoal ill and set Nagan at their head as captain, and they stole from Attal and drifted towards Bryggne in a thundercloud. And there were left in Attal only those godlings who still praised the Sun, and they were sorely anxious at the others’ going. And some said, ‘We must hence and warn Yoal of this coming treachery,’ and others replied, ‘Nay, let us abide in Attal, for there is darkness in every other region of the world and we must have no part of it.’ And between them they did nothing.

And in the far north of Bryggne still wandered Yoal and Athresa, and though their love still flourished yet there was still a sorrow in their deepest hearts. Nor would Yoal quit his form as a maldocil until the sorrow was assuaged, and Athresa was still chaste.

And they knew not of the cloud that bore their enemies down upon them, for they were still gazing one upon the other. And as the cloud drew nigh the spirit of Nagan was at the head of the godlings and he saw the lovers first.

And he was stricken suddenly by the witness of their love and he saw the true nature of their union. And the form of maldocil was no longer loathsome to him, and he longed to forgive Yoal his death and bless them both. And in that moment he was a demigod.

And Asir cried, ‘Is that not they, and shall we not strike them before they wot of us?’ And Nagan said, ‘Nay, that is some other maldocil. We will search further on.’ But Asir said, ‘It is he, for he walks with an egypt and she slays him not.’ And he wrest command from Nagan and sped down with all his godlings upon Yoal’s head, and in the turmoil Athresa was stricken to the ground and the warmth of life went out of her.

And when he saw this Yoal cried out in such anguish that the godlings sprang back from their dreadful task. And the Sun heard Yoal’s cry and saw in an instant all the long story of his trial. And he lifted from Yoal the form of maldocil and he was shown terrible in the sight of the godlings.

And with a great cry he pursued the godlings over the face of the ocean, and none was left but the spirit of Nagan, and he wept by the body of Athresa on the shore.

And those upon Attal saw the flight of the godlings back towards that place, and beyond them the following vengeance of Yoal. And there was a great howling and a bending back of claws, and they saw that the end of things was nigh.

And though the evil godlings reached Attal and hid among their fellows, hoping to hide their error from Yoal, yet it profited them not for Yoal paused not to treat with any there, but in a whirl of torment he lifted up the waters of the world into a spout that towered almost to the Moon, and came again upon the Earth with such a force that it took all the godlings with it into the belly of the seas and trapped them in the ooze whence they had sprung. And of Attal there was no trace left above the waters, and the oceans were in such amazement at Yoal's anger that they still rise to this present time to do him homage as he passes.

And of the godlings, those who rose against Yoal and those who went not to his aid, all were laid low, and tarls were set to trammel them. And none except Asir came again to the surface. And when he saw Asir, Yoal took him up in his wings towards the Moon, and went with him through the placket in the Sun's cloak and thrust him into the bosom of Dimnach, where Roun found him and took him upon Styche as a hecolan.

And when he had done all these things Yoal wept for his beloved Athresa and for all the sorrows he had wrought. And the Sun said, 'You rust return and do obsequy for your love,' and he gave him some fire for her funeral.

And Yoal returned to the northern land where Nagan still sat weeping by Athresa, and they formed a pyre on the sea shore and lifted Athresa upon it, and Yoal lit it with the Sun's fire.

And Athresa rose from the flames with a new-leasing of life in her, not as a spirit but in her own body, and Yoal and Nagan praised the Sun for his blessed gift. But when Athresa spoke to them they saw she had a tongue of fire, and that each word however sweet was a mortal torment to her, and that she longed again for death. But the Sun spoke to her from on high, saying, 'Live Athresa, and you shall bear gods of your body, and you shall be among the first loved for your pains.' And though Yoal pleaded with him to mitigate her anguish, yet the Sun would not let her die.

And Nagan said, 'You are both still in body and must make gods between you. I am but a spirit and must join my fellows in the deep.' But Yoal would not let him go, and for the love that had new-formed in Nagan's breast and to expiate his own wrong, Yoal begged the Sun that he might build a place worthy of such a demigod. And the Sun allowed it, and so Yoal created Eyl above the skirting cloud, and Nagan was its first demigod and lived there ever after.

And Yoal lay with Athresa and she bore him the egg of a male child, and hatched it was called Aldragon and bore the beauty of both its parents.

And when she had suckled him and Aldragon was the wonder of all creatures' eyes, she begged the Sun in words of agony, 'May I not now enjoy death?' But the Sun replied, 'Not death, but better.' And for the great service she had done him he let her slip the bondage of her body and she arose fresh in spirit and with no pain. And she was the first spirit to soar beyond the hightops of Eyl, for she was given a place in the Moon to be with her husband always. And although she was never a god she was a joul, and she is remembered above all others as the first of the beloved.

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Now Aldragon was the mightiest creature of Earth's creation and in him were all the generations of the dragon. After the departure of Athresa into the Moon he grew strong of his own nature and was soon praised by all who met him as the Beast of Beasts. And wherever he went became his kingdom, for there was none that looked upon him but they wished to lay down their lives in his honour. And there was peace in all the regions of the Earth that knew of him, and in Bryggne especially, where he was called king.

And he took to wife a dywivern of great beauty, named Esia, and she bore him offspring sevenfold, five sons and two daughters, and these were the first generations of the dragon. The sons were named Sabel, Ganel, Hanje, Vish and Stroh, and they were the founders of the five tribes of dragon, and the daughters were named Weffa and Gria, and these begat the tribes of wyvern and griffin. And while he lived there was peace among all the families that bore his blood, and at his life's end the lamentation was terrible. And there are stories told of his justice and wisdom enough to fill all the books of the world.

And at his death he was taken by Yoal his father into the Moon and shown unto the Sun. And the Sun said, 'This is a creature worthy to be a god,' and he took him and set him in the heavens in the northern height, and his brilliance still shines upon the world, for he is the great star of the north, the first star, the one true constant light.

The end of the First Tale.

Note

All versions of the First Tale describe Aldragon as the bringer of peace, and it is not for me to depart from that here. However, creatures of peace are seldom written about to the same extent as warriors, and one need only flip through the first few pages of ‘The Acts of Aldragon’ to realize that this peace was a qualified one. But war is not only the best bringer of peace, it is the best bringer of honour too, and no dragon had more honour than Aldragon.

It is said that he lived for almost two hundred years, which is no great age for a dragon nowadays but was considerable then. His issue extended to the seventh generation while he lived and must have numbered more than twenty thousand at his death in dragons alone, and all draganity can claim descent from him.

And of his sons, all inherited equal shares of his great honour, and all but one of them enjoyed its grace throughout their lives; that one was Ganel, Aldragon’s second son, for whom the gift of honour proved elusive, and I shall continue the tales with that one which concerns him most.

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The Tale of the Burning Stone

Concerning Ganel, his torment, and the wisdom of Aldragon

Aldragon wedded Esia in the thirtieth year of his age and they made their nest in Pengartel on the forest coast of Bryggne. This was in the days before all creatures called him king, and he drew tribute then only from the dywiverns and egyptyn, and both paid him great honour and loved him.

And the pitting of their nest must have been glorious, for it is still sung about by every tribe of the dragon and by all others of their kin. Even the maldocil still sing of it, and one of them was welcomed at the nesting in honour of Aldragon’s father, and the killing of maldocil was unlawful from that time.

Aldragon bore all the colours of the dragon on his back and all their wisdom in his head. Esia gave them gentleness and the gift of pause. But at this time, remember, not even the Sun

knew the fall unfolding of their generations, and they were lonely creatures of his hope, taming a hostile world.

Their first-born was Sabel, who took the darkest colours of his father's back, brown and black, which are still the colours of the afdragons of Fagran who sprang from him. When this dragg was three years old Esia bore Weffa, the first of her two draheens, and two years after that Ganel was born. His colour was red, the russet of our nordragons of Bryggne, and he was always the best beloved of his parents.

All the creatures of Pengartel assembled for his naming, and the Sun rose high above the trees to witness it. Even those creatures that burrowed through the earth rose into the light that shone upon the infant and offered him their dumb blessing. The maldocil brought gifts from the sea, fish for the naming feast and fine coral for the dragg. The egyrn gave him feathers from their own breasts to line his nest when he should build it, and the dywiverns brought him saplings of their sacred tree that would grow with him and become the main timbers of his dwelling.

And when all was ready and every leaf in the forest was hushed and still, Aldragon took his son up in his claws and held him for all to see; and he cried out, 'This is my son, Ganel, born to help us bring peace.' And at that moment the primal mischief occurred.

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When he had taken up Asir from the foaming waters of the newly drowned Attal and gone with him through the placket in the Sun's cloak and thrust him into Dimnach, Yoal had deemed it a just end for the godling's ill-doings. But the happenings of Dimnach were closed to him, for he was tempered in the light and could see no further into that great hollow than the cast of his own brilliance. And when he next came into Dimnach on his constant vigil he saw no sign of Asir and deemed him lost in the unlight and so forgot about him. But as we have cause to know Asir was not long lost.

Now when Yoal on the Moon turns his face full towards the Earth then the Moon is lost to sight in Dimnach, and there is no light there of any kind. But when those parts of the Moon that show dark to us occur then those same parts shine in upon Dimnach, and only those parts that show light to us on Earth are not seen there. And in the hours when Yoal is lost to us and shows only as a dark globe against the heavens, then he is seen whole in Dimnach. And so he is seen as much in that place as he is here, but there he is the only light, for the Sun's countenance is for ever turned from Roun.

But Dimnach is so large in creation, and indeed there is no far boundary to it in the wit of dragonkind, that the light of the Moon is but a small speckle in the great darkness, and at some far places it is almost invisible.

And when he had been first thrust into Dimnach by Yoal and was circling in the great void, aimless and alone, Asir saw the light of the Moon lessen as it waxed upon the Earth, and soon he knew utter darkness for the first time. And in that first whole-dark, as he cried to the Sun to forgive him his wrongdoings, Asir heard a gusting of wind as something unseen scented him in the darkness. And when again Yoal began his visitation of Dimnach, Asir saw his light only as a halo hidden beyond a great globe of blackness, blacker than anything in his blackest imaginings. And as the Moon travelled into Dimnach and then out again, time after time, the globe grew larger and more fearsome until it blotted out his knowledge of the Moon completely.

And in that utter, endless dark he heard the voice of Rougn, saying, 'Who are you that I should not twist your soul with such a slowness that a million Moons will be but a flicker of your agony?'

Asir cried in terror of the voice and swore eternal service to the speaker if he should spare him.

'Spare you?' asked Rougn. 'What service could you render me that I should spare you? I have heard you call upon the Sun for his forgiveness. If you love the Sun you cannot love me, and if you do not love me how can you serve me?'

'I will not love the Sun,' said Asir, 'if you command it, and I will love you readily if you allow it.'

'Wherefore,' asked Rougn, 'have you been thus shunned by the light? What mischief did you perform to warrant this?'

And Asir, seeing his chance, told him of his great treachery upon Attal and his designs against Yoal and his slaying of Athresa.

And when Rougn heard this it brought him great joy, for the sorrows of others were now his chief delight, and he said to Asir, 'If I spare you, you must serve me in just another such a wise and be the chief tormentor of my enemies.' And Asir agreed, as indeed he had no choice but to do.

For to speak truth there was still within Asir's breast at this time some of the spirit which first sped him towards Attal, and evil had not consumed him entirely. And he was afraid of that unseen spirit and thought his bargain dreadful.

But Rougn took Asir from the void and let him abide upon Styche on that side which is turned away from the Moon, and he told him the tales of his own disappointment and of the Sun's ingratitude and Yoal's villainy, and he shared with him the dark comforts of that place, and gave him one of its chief treasures, and laughed with him at the torments he proposed with which to blight his enemies, until Asir took nearly as much delight in evil thinking as his master did and was pleased to be dubbed hecolan.

And they talked in this way for many long years, until the last shred of kindness was blinded within Asir's soul and he saw nothing but night.

And at that time Rougn sped with him to the other side of Styche where the Moon blazed full, and the light seared in upon Asir's shrunken eyes and stabbed him to the root of his mind and sealed in him forever his hatred of the light. And he begged Rougn to let him turn from the Moon's glare, but Rougn denied him.

And when the Moon had disappeared from Dimnach and was beaming upon the Earth, Rougn caused Styche to float through the empty placket in the Sun's cloak, and hid with it in the starless folds of the true heaven. And even though he allowed Asir to hide his face from the Sun on the far side of Styche, nevertheless the hecolan was in dreadful torment from the light.

And as he watched unnoticed from above, Rougn saw the naming of Ganel about to begin, and he said to Asir, 'Go, blight the Earth for yonder dradgefing, and find me another worthy to be called hecolan before I shall allow you again into the dark balm of Dimnach.' And Rougn flew between the Sun and the Earth, just as the Sun rose highest in Ganel's blessing, and he hurled Asir towards the Earth as his shadow spread blackest across Bryggne.

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It was the first time in their memory that the day-dark had been seen, and all the creatures at the naming shrank to the ground in horror of it. Aldragon knew only too well what was happening, and he cried out to all around to hide their eyes from the burning evil and to pray for the return of the Sun. Soon his father Yoal in the Moon pursued the shadow, for though he had been within the placket staring full upon Dimnach he heard the wailing of the creatures of the Earth and returned in the unnatural darkness and wrestled with Rougn and bore him back to his own kingdom. But Asir was already upon the Earth, where he hid his face in the darkest hollows of the forest and sobbed in agony at the return of the Sun.

Though nobody said as much to Aldragon it was deemed by all to be an ill-blessing for Ganel that his naming should be so darkened. And Aldragon himself, though he kept his fears from Esia, was troubled for the honour of his son. And Esia, though she never showed it, trembled for the safety of her dragg.

And at that time Rougn-worship began again in the forests of Bryggne, and although at Pengartel their love for Aldragon kept all creatures in the true worship of the Sun, even there the shadow of evil was cast in some hearts.

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But Ganel grew strong and healthy, and was beloved not only of his parents but of his brothers and sisters too. After him was born Hanje, who took the white of his father's back; Vish, who took the blue; Gria, the second draheen; and Stroh, of the yellow of the Sun. And that was the full hatch of Aldragon's nest, and he never in his life took any other wife, nor had issue in the nest of any other creature, nor looked upon any creature but Esia with his body's love. And the borders of Pengartel grew ever wider as his children ripened into age and spread the word of their father's wisdom into the surrounding forests.

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And when Ganel was aged about nineteen and grown almost beyond dragghood to his full pride there had been no further showing of ill-omen in his nature, and although all Aldragon's children were loyal and true Ganel was accounted by all to be the best of them. He was long of mouth and high of snout, features then as now of great distinction, and there was no other colour in his whole hide but russet red. His wings were as wide in their widest span as was his length from snout to tail, and that to within one leaf's width, which is the proportion most desirable in the nordragons of today. His claws were black as ebony, and he could scythe a path in the forest faster even than his father could. He was much given to jesting and to foolery, but even those who were the butt of his wiles laughed merrily at their discovery and loved him only the more for it, saying only that trickery should play him back one day.

Though he was yet too young for such things his parents had singled out Dysa, a dywivern of Esia's own tribe, to be his wife, and she looked upon him even in their childhood with the dearest grace, and he had in her the best of friends before ever love began. In them

was all the happiness that Yoal had looked for with Athresa as they walked the long shores of Bryggne before the godlings struck at them; and promised to them was all the love that those two now enjoyed upon the Moon; and shielded from them were all the harms of the world by the great good-wishing of creation.

It was Ganel's habit to tread the northern forests of that part of his father's domain called Abeen, which is half a day's flight from the site of Pengartel, and one evening as he spread the word of his father's peace and called upon all dwellers there to do Aldragon homage, there arose from a shadowed dell a voice calling to him, saying, 'Dear child of Aldragon, do not smite me with the mercy of his love. I am but a poor unlooked-on creature, frightened of the light.'

And Ganel called aloud to the voice, saying, 'Show yourself. No harm will come to you. The light is the fountain of all goodness and you should not fear it.'

'But I do,' said the voice, 'for I have stolen a treasure from the light, part of his own fire, and hidden it within the earth, and the light bears me ill for this.'

Although Ganel did not fully understand this he cried, 'Why then, return what you have stolen to the light and he will forgive you in his great mercy.'

But the voice from the dark said, 'Nay, though what I have stolen is still a thing of light it is also now a thing of the earth, and it can only live in the darkness of this place, and I may not return it.'

'What is this thing you have stolen?' asked Ganel, 'and how can it be a thing of light and yet a thing of earth?'

'Draw near and you shall see,' said the voice. But Ganel held back and would not enter that dark place until the creature showed itself. 'Well then,' said the voice, 'meet me in the halfway glade beyond the broken trees where it is yet dim enough to comfort me, and I shall lead you to the earth-light.'

So Ganel went into the dark place where the broken trees threw shadows almost as thick as night upon the world, and there was waiting for him a creature, maggot-pale, with eyes as narrow as a crawling worm and a body all-over mould. Ganel had never seen a being so ungraceful, and he paused in horror of it.

But the creature beckoned him closer, saying, 'Be not afraid of me, for I am a vile thing only to the eye. My heart which is now leaden with guilt was once as buoyant as your own before my great error, and had you known me then you would not have so recoiled from me.'

And Ganel felt great sorrow for the creature, and asked him his name. And the creature answered that its name was Koik, and that it was a sloud.

Now the sloud led him farther on into the dark to bring him to the earth-light, and when they came to a place deep within a toppled forest where all the trees were tumbled in decay, the sloud burrowed for a while in the soft body of a long-dead tree and brought forth the light.

Ganel was dumb in admiration of it, for even in that dark place it glowed like the fire of a thousand lantern-worms and lay in Koik's hand like a red pebble of flame. And it became in an instant the most desired of things in Ganel's soul, and he begged Koik to let him hold it.

'Nay, and by all means,' said the sloud, 'for if you can once return it to the light perchance the light will pardon me, and I may emerge from this dreadful place and bring my brood into the world again.'

And Ganel promised to return the earth-light if he could, and he left Koik and went into the light again. It was now full evening and the unspeckled darkness of the Sun's cloak was spreading from the east, but as he drew further from the toppled forest, even in that night-shadow the brilliance went out of the stone and it sat lustreless within his claws. And Ganel thought, 'The light has fled the atone and sped into the west towards the Sun.' And though he was glad for Koik's sake yet he was sorrowful that he would no longer see the earth-held light.

He returned into the deeps of the forest to bring the glad tidings of his release to Koik, but even as he reported what had happened and held out the stone to the sloud, the light returned into the stone and it glowed red as ever. And though Ganel was saddened at Koik's disappointment, nevertheless he rejoiced once more to witness the light.

And Koik was in dreadful sorrow and begged Ganel to take the stone hence again, for even if it would not release its light to the Sun yet he would be pleased to be rid of it. And so Ganel took the earth-light and returned towards Pengartel. And as he travelled, even in the dead of night, the stone showed lustreless and the red fire of it was only a memory fixed inside his head. And when he arrived home in the hour before the Sun's new-coming he hid the stone near the place where he slept and would not afterwards speak of it to any of his family, for he felt a sort of shame about it, though wherefore he knew not.

And thereafter, at many seasons of the year, he would return by night to the toppled forest of Abeen and take the earth-light with him to marvel at its brilliance as it shone once more in that fell place. For he could find no other place in the world of whatever sort of dark where the stone showed anything but dead, and only in Abeen could he observe its majesty. And at such times he would hear the low cry in the woodmould which he knew to be Koik, new-tormented by the stone's being nigh; and though his shame grew ever greater at the

misery he brought, yet Ganel came ever more often to that dark wood to revel in the sight of the burning stone.

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After some years, when Ganel was fully grown into a dragon and Dysa was the comeliest of all dywiverns, a time was allotted for their wedding. And as the time grew nearer their love grew ever stronger, and it was their fondest wish to establish their nest together and to bring forth a family. In the days before the ceremony Ganel began the task of building his nest, and he used for it the strong sinews of the sacred tree planted for him at his naming by the dywiverns, and he lined it with the feathers given to him by the egypt, and ornamented it with the coral of the maldocil, and he built it in a glade north of Pengartel on the flight towards Abeen.

And during the last days of its building, when the feast was being set in the clearings about his father's nest, he flew once more to the toppled forest and took with him the earth-light.

But it glowed not as before, and Ganel cried aloud in anguish. Even in the uttermost deepness of dark there was no trace of its red majesty, and Ganel was for a time distraught.

Then, from the messes of the forest floor, Koik crawled bellywise towards him and said, 'If you still seek the stolen light you must follow farther on.'

Ganel rose and followed him without question, and he was led through the dark tunnels of the fallen trees into a place where no light penetrated and where the smell of decay clamped his nostrils. And from the dark he heard Koik say, 'Give me the stone,' and he gave it to him and waited.

And after a while he saw a faint redness as if in remembrance of the great stone, and the redness grew greater and greater until he saw that it was the stone, strung now as a pendant on a circlet of vine, rising about a head-height from the floor. And as the redness grew to its full Ganel saw the pendant fall about the shoulders of a creature so beautiful in the reflection of the stone that her beauty almost outshone the stone itself.

And Koik said, 'Return you here upon your wedding night and you shall have the stone forever, and my daughter with it.' And Ganel promised to return and went out again into the forest as if stunned.

And when he returned to Pengartel for his wedding all were amazed at his new quietness, and only Dysa was able to bring a smile to his face, and that a shadow of one. But

when the ceremony began and the visions of the forest cleared from his brain, he gave her his love in the full honour of his heart, and there was feasting in Pengartel greater than at any time.

And Ganel flew with Dysa to their new nest in the northern glades and they lay together and became one. But as Dysa slept thereafter, Ganel crept from his nest like a guilty thing and flew silently towards Abeen, for a madness was upon him and he had to possess those things the sloud had promised him.

And Koik led him again into the bitter pit of the forest, and there Ganel lay with Koik's daughter and had union with her in the red cast of the earth-light. And when it was done his brain squirmed for a moment in the horror of it.

And Koik whirruped loud from the darkness in his triumph, and tore the earth-light from his daughter's neck, and she was vile and loathsome in its beam, a sloud more monstrous even than her father, and like her father she laughed aloud at Ganel's shame.

And Ganel rose in a terrible roar to smite at them both, but Koik threw the earth-light from him and its beam was extinguished, and Ganel fought the dark air in his torment and felt disgrace flood in upon him.

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He returned by morning to his nest, and Dysa still slept and knew nothing of his going. But Ganel woke her gently and told her all, and though the grief of it nearly killed her he would not hide anything from her, for he was determined to kill himself to rid the world of his terrible doing and he wished her to know why he did so. But she persuaded him to go with her to Pengartel and hear what Aldragon could determine of it in his wisdom. And Ganel agreed, though he had no wish to see again the pleasance of his father's nest.

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Ganel confessed his fault boldly in the full assembly of Pengartel, telling them all the measure of his folly and what manner of creature it was with whom he had lain, and he swore that if he were given leave his dearest wish would be to slay himself. And when he had heard this Aldragon gave a silence more terrible than any wrath as he considered the matter. He harkened back now to his fears at Ganel's naming when the day-dark had struck everyone into terror and he guessed this mischief practised by the sloud had its beginnings there, and he

knew that his son's honour was blotted now forever. After a while he asked Ganel, 'Which in your deepest heart would you rather do, die presently or see this earth-light once again?'

And Ganel quaked in horror at the memory of the stone and all the folly it had fostered in his brain, and cried aloud, 'I ask only for death.'

And Aldragon looked sorrowfully at him and said, 'This then is your doom. You must return to that dark place where you last saw the stone and search for it three days. If after that time you do not find the stone I shall put you to instant death with my own claws. But if you find it you shall live, and the stone shall be hung around your neck as a badge of your dishonour for the rest of your days.'

And Dysa fainted at this judgement, in sorrow of having brought Ganel to Pengartel.

His father and four brothers flew with Ganel to Abeen and alit at the edge of the toppled forest, and as he prepared to enter the dark passages of his shame Ganel asked, 'How will I know the ending of three days, for this is a place where no light comes?'

Aldragon replied, 'At the first midday you shall hear our clarion, and at the midday following our clarion shall be sounded twice, and on the third midday three times. When that time comes you must return to us whether you have found the stone or no.'

So Ganel entered the wood and trod the soft pathway into the shadows until he came to the place where the Sun was hid. And although he had no desire to find the stone and wished only for death he would not shun his dishonour and sought to find the stone if it was there to be found. And after he had searched a great while he heard the first clarion call.

And in the time that followed he searched more slowly, rooting with his claws in all the dankness of decay, and a dread feeling of hopelessness grew upon him. For even there, where misery had found him out, he remembered the joys he had thought promised to him and his bride. And his wish for death abated and tears welled out of his eyes, and he craved for only some small shred of that lost happiness, and he was undecided whether to search or no. And there came two calls of the clarion.

And on the third day the desire for life had grown great in him, and with it the desire to find release by finding the burning stone. Yet he had too much honour to scrabble after what he knew to be undeserved, and so he sat in silence and forbade himself the search, and felt cruelly the approach of death. But at last he could no longer bear his torment and he cried out to the Sun to forgive him, saying, 'Let me look but once more on my dear wife's face and I will sacrifice anything, lose any joy, suffer any woe.' And as if in answer there came the first call of the third clarion, and he sighed bitterly at the sound of it.

And in the unseen vault above him a leaf stirred at the blast and came away from the matted roof and fell to the cavern floor, bringing mould and a few pebbles and a slither of earth in its wake, and at the second call of the trumpet a beam of the Sun's light was cast through the hole in the vault and struck the floor by Ganel's feet for an instant in a spread no greater than a mushroom's back, and at the third call Ganel saw in the light the stone at his feet, all its brilliance gone.

And as the hole in the vault tumbled back into itself and shut out the light, Ganel reached out into the darkness and found the stone, and held it tight as the last clarion call ebbed away.

He returned with the stone into the midday light in a stupor of mixed agonies and joys to where his father and brothers were waiting. He held out the stone and said, 'I have found my dishonour,' and though it was a poor triumph he heard his brothers rejoice at the deliverance.

And as his eyes grew accustomed to the light he saw with wonder that the other dragons were red of claw and splattered all over with blood, and he smelt the reek of death about the place. And in a great heap by the edge of the toppled forest he saw the bodies of unnumbered sloud, foul in the high Sun, as loathsome in death as in life. And though he was made to search by Aldragon for the remainder of that day he could not swear that any among the heap was the sloud he had lain with, and of Koik he saw no sign.

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He wore the stone on a circlet of good vine and never sought to hide it. He returned with Dysa to his nest in the northern glades, yet though they lay together they had no further union. Five seasons later she bore him Nicovar, the child of their wedding night, and at his naming feast a distraction overcame her and she tore the stone from Ganel's neck, crying, 'Enough!' and swallowed it and died in monstrous agony. Thus was a second naming blighted in Pengartel.

And though they never discovered it to Ganel, the surgeons of the dywivern when they opened Dysa's body found all her middle organs burned away, but of the stone there was no trace.

The end of the Tale of the Burning Stone.

Note

Some say Koik was Asir in disguise, but I do not think so. There is no doubt that the creature Ganel lay with in Abeen was Koik's daughter, nor that she was a sloud, but if Koik was Asir he would've had to have taken the form of a sloud and got himself a daughter; and although there was time enough for it Asir was only a spirit, for his body had died in the first generation of the Earth, and spirit can no longer make union with flesh. Yoal on the other hand had never died, and he was made into a god which gave him life everlasting, and so he was able to lie with Athresa and bring forth Aldragon. But gods and godlings are as similar only as the Moon is to his reflection on the water, or as hecol is to hecolan; and if Yoal, who was a god, could not transform himself into a maldocil without the Sun's allowance how then could Asir, a mere godling, transform himself into a sloud?

As to the burning stone, how the surgeons missed it I cannot say, but it had a peculiar power to confuse. Certainly it was not of the Earth but came from the pits of Styche where the last fires of ancient Cian still smoulder, and it was the treasure given to Asir by his master Roun.

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The Tale of the Tyggen

Concerning Nicovar and his love of Honour

Dysa was given the first funeral of Pengartel, and her pyre was built as high as the treetops on the shore, but her body did not rise from the flames as Athresa's had done. Afterwards Ganel bade farewell to his family and left Pengartel, and he was not seen there again for seven years. The dragg Nicovar was given into the keeping of Ganel's sister Weffa, and she kept him among her own hatch.

Nicovar was small throughout his early dragghood, with wings too wide for the rest of his body which gave him a clumsiness in his walk, and although Weffa showed him all the love due from an aunt she saw he was a poor thing. His pelt was dull, uneven in colour and too stubbly about the neck. A cough in his infancy had left him weak-winded, and his eyes

seemed always too large for his head. He was in all ways dissimilar to his father Ganel, excepting in his smile.

Weffa had married an egyrn named Arych of the same nest as Nagan, and their hatch was the first of the wyverns. Nicovar's cousins, all older than he, played with him at their father's insistence and showed him as much kindness as they could, but in truth they preferred their own company and tried to avoid him as much as possible. The older he grew the more he was given to solitude, and although his smile was always warm he developed an abiding melancholy.

The other creatures of Pengartel had a tendency to shun him too, though they were unaware of it. Perhaps it was because of the blight of his naming and fear of what might come of it that they so avoided him, or perhaps they each assumed he had friends enough among the other creatures, but however it happened he became practically an outcast.

He knew none of the details of his mother's strange death and no one had explained to him the cause of his father's self-exile, so he began to think that all the fault lay within himself for his unpopularity, and he became reluctant to speak with anybody.

He delighted in pretty things and kept a hoard inside a hollow tree - ferns, shells and finely coloured stones - and he tramped the low shores when the sea had stooped from its praising of the Moon searching always for new delights to make him smile. And when the sea was high he went instead into the woods around Pengartel and searched there.

At one such time in a northern glade he happened upon the great nest where he had been born, now closed in with creepers and knotted vines, and although he had no idea what place it was he felt a great happiness at the sight of it and explored all the marvels of its structure. And when he saw the coral which decorated the walls his heart sang in admiration of it, and he took the best piece of it for his own.

He hid this treasure with his others in the hollow tree, and returned often to the nest in the woods where the air seemed to him always sweet and the sound of the woodlife ever mellow.

One evening as he trod slowly homewards towards Pengartel he heard the sound of laughter coming from near his grandfather's nest, and when he came into the wide clearing all the dragons and wyverns were gathered in a group around Aldragon who was clasping to his bosom a mighty dragon Nicovar had never seen before. When the others noticed him standing lonely at the edge of the group they spread back and Aldragon spoke something to the newcomer. The dragon turned with a smile of joy towards the tiny dragg, but when he looked

at him he seemed puzzled for an instant and looked back to Aldragon. The elder dragon nodded and beckoned Nicovar to come forward.

He stood trembling by the tall stranger, not knowing what to say, not daring to guess and yet half knowing who he was, and suddenly the dragon reached down and lifted him into the air and hugged him to his breast, and he knew then for certain and it was the best moment he had known in his whole life.

Later he sat at a great feast next to his new-found father while Ganel told tales of adventure such as the young draggs and wyvels could hardly credit, and he exulted in reflected pride. There was laughter and jesting from the elder dragons, and good-natured disbelief about the wilder tales, and as he looked at all this great good spirit it was impossible for Nicovar to think that there had ever been a moment of sadness in his father's life. And he sat longing for each moment that his father looked at him, which he thought far too seldom.

During the weeks that followed Nicovar was forever in his father's shadow, and for a while Ganel was content to share his time with the dragg and be questioned about his great doings. But soon he took to other company more readily than to his son's, and was most cheerful with a dywivern called Espel, and these two began to shun Nicovar and he grew perplexed. He began to bring gifts to his father, some from the seashore, some from the forests, some from his own hoard, and he could not understand why his father took such brief delight in them.

He lived still in the nest of his aunt Weffa, but it was his greatest dream that he should live alone with his father in the nest he had discovered in the northern glade, and he went there more often and pretended the nest was his own home and that his father would return at any time. But his father never came near that place and Nicovar did not dare ask him to.

Then, in the height of summer when Nicovar was barely ten years old, his father summoned him to walk in the forest and he told him that he would wed Espel, and that though he was always his father it was better that Nicovar continue to live with Weffa in her nest. Nicovar felt desolate, but he said nothing and wished his father joy of his new wedding.

It was a bitter feast for him but Nicovar kept his smile radiant for his father's sake and spoke prettily to his stepmother, though the tears welled close within his eyes. He had brought his finest treasure for a wedding gift and he waited until all the others had presented theirs before offering it. Ganel was in high good humour and smiled joyfully upon his son as the young dragg tenderly proffered his gift.

It was a piece of coral of exquisite frailty, and Ganel remembered it from the building of his nest, and it allowed back into his mind all the woes that he had hoped to shut from it and he arose with a terrible roar and cast the coral far into the night.

Nicovar was again caught up in his father's arms, but this time ungently, and he felt his heart loll sickeningly in his breast as his father shook him. 'You half-dragg!' he cried. 'You changeling! You wasted shell!' And with that Ganel threw him to the ground and Nicovar fled into the forest with his tears huge and scorching in his eyes.

He lay in the quiet of the woods, too stunned to weep for long, and he silently begged the gods to explain his fault to him. And after many hours he heard the noise of someone searching in the woods and he sat quietly in the shadow on the moonlight hoping not to be found.

But Aldragon found him there and sat beside his young grandson and took Nicovar's claw in his own. Although the young dragg had never before been so close to his mighty grandfather he felt strangely unafraid and spoke first after their silence. 'Why am I so despised of my father?' he asked. 'What harm have I done to him?'

'No harm,' said Aldragon, 'but the harm of letting him harm you. You are ten years old, young Nicovar, and I had not wished to burden you with this tale for some years yet, but you must listen now and understand your case.' And he told him the full, sad tale of his father's torment and his mother's death, and he left nothing out to spare the young dragg his blushes, and indeed Nicovar did not blush but understood everything as if he'd been fully grown. 'And when you were new born he went away,' said Aldragon, 'and what he sought I know not, but I do know that he never found it. And he looks for it now in a new nest with Espel as his bride, and if it is not there he will look for it elsewhere. Your gift burned him as deeply as the burning stone that killed your mother, and your little dowdy stature mocked his pride. But you will not always be so dowdy, Nicovar, and your claw is of a fine edge. You may one day live to be the new-finding of your father's honour, for I fear he will never find it for himself.'

Nicovar considered what he had heard in silence but Aldragon knew that he understood. And the only question the young dragg asked was, 'How shall I know a sloud if I should see it?' and Aldragon said, 'Come, walk with me awhile and I shall tell.'

*

Ganel apologized to his son, but with a gruff cheerfulness rather than any real show of love. He took Nicovar hunting now and again and kept his patience at all the dragg's mistakes, but Nicovar knew he was only doing it as a form of penance.

The marriage with Espel went quite well, and she bore him a fine dragg which was named Melivar and was adored by everybody. Nicovar especially loved him and longed for the time he could show his young brother all the wonders of the forest.

Ganel and Espel built a splendid nest to the south of Pengartel, and on feast days it was always a place of laughter and light. But after Melivar's hatching Ganel became more withdrawn even from his new family, and wandered sometimes from the nest.

On occasions Aldragon would seek out Nicovar and walk with him beyond Pengartel and question him about his doings and his thoughts; and Nicovar was always happy to relate them, especially those concerning honour, and whether it is born into a dragon or must be achieved, and whether if lost it can ever be found again.

And so Nicovar grew, still awkward in body and dull of coat, but as clear in mind as Aldragon was and as hungry for honour.

*

When Melivar was three years old and Nicovar nearly fifteen they had grown as close in their affections as the best of brothers, and if ever anyone mocked Nicovar in Melivar's hearing the dradgefiling would hop angrily into the air and give them defiance. While he could still barely fly he sank his teeth into his cousin Alom's ears because the wyvel had called Nicovar an unkind name, and although Alom was then sixteen years old he still ran off howling.

As soon as Melivar was strong enough for a half-day march Nicovar was allowed to roam with him into the surrounding forest or show him the secrets of the lower shore. They would leave together at the new-coming of the Sun and return only at his going, and often Melivar would stay with Nicovar in their aunt Weffa's nest, especially when his mother was in brood.

One day Nicovar took his brother to see the great nest he had discovered north of Pengartel. It was a long march, even for the elder dragg, but the dradgefiling was much too young to fly such a way for the trees were high and dangerous. It was the middle of the morning as they approached the glade, and Nicovar was pleased to be sharing his best treasure

at last. But there was someone already at the nest, and Nicovar yelped in surprise at the sight of him.

It was a dragg of about his own age, handsome and high-nosed, with a head and neck of bright orange and with eyes dark and heavy-lidded. All about its body it wore a cloak of closely knotted vine decorated around the collar with feathers and green leaves. There were two slits in the cloak through which his arms appeared, and his claws were perfect, black and even. He smiled at the sight of the two brothers, and his teeth were white and strong.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Melivar, assuming Nicovar knew the stranger, and his brother went forward into the glade keeping Melivar in the cover of his wing.

‘Well,’ said the stranger, ‘here’s an unlikely pair. What are you two doing so far into the wild? Lost, I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Nicovar, ‘I often come here.’

‘Not on your own, I hope?’ said the other dragg. ‘You don’t look as though you’d be up to much if it came to a fight.’

‘Yes he would,’ piped Melivar. ‘He could fight you easily one claw tucked into his wing,’ he said, then added grandly, ‘I’d help him, too.’

‘You might have to,’ said the strange dragg scornfully, and he smiled at Nicovar with a supercilious lift of the chin.

But Nicovar was not discomfited and asked politely, ‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’

‘My name is Danodel,’ he replied, ‘and I live here.’

‘No you don’t,’ said Nicovar, ‘I live here - at least, I shall.’

‘You’re too late,’ said Danodel, ‘I got here first. I’ve been here all morning.’

‘And I was born here,’ said Nicovar, much to Melivar’s surprise, ‘and when I marry this will be my nest.’

‘Well, you’ll have to fight for it,’ said Danodel. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘I’m Nicovar, and this is my brother Melivar - half-brother I should say - and if it comes to a fight I’m ready, don’t think I’m not.’

‘Pooh,’ said Danodel, ‘shows how much brain you’ve got if you’re ready to fight over an old place like this.’

‘We are,’ said Melivar, ‘so just watch out.’ He’d worked himself up into such a fury now that he was ready to spring at Danodel and bite his ears.

Danodel looked at him and then at Nicovar, and then suddenly he burst into laughter and said, ‘My word, he’ll be fierce enough when he’s grown. I think perhaps I will watch out after

all.’ And as he grinned at them both they realized he’d only been jesting with them, and they relaxed and smiled back at him.

When Melivar had explored all the makings of the nest he sat with the others on the floor of the clearing and listened to their talk.

‘I didn’t know there were any other dragons near Pengartel,’ said Nicovar. ‘I thought we were the only ones.’

‘I suppose you would, living out here in the backwoods like this,’ said Danodel, ‘and I suppose this Pengartel place must seem all very fine to you, but you wouldn’t think anything of it if you came from Cordocor.’

‘Cordocor?’ asked Nicovar. ‘Where’s that?’

‘Where’s that?’ spluttered the other dragg. ‘Where’s Cordocor? Bless me, haven’t you heard of anything?’

‘Well, I haven’t heard of very much,’ said Nicovar, ‘but I’m sure I would’ve heard of Cordocor if it was anything important.’

‘I can hardly believe my ears,’ said Danodel. ‘It’s only the most important place in the whole world, that’s all. It’d make your Pengartel look like a couple of thorn bushes. Good grief, it’s where I come from.’

‘And does everybody in Cordocor wear those things?’ asked Nicovar.

‘My cloak you mean? Yes, everybody wears cloaks there. Everybody of any importance that is.’

‘But don’t they get in the way of your wings?’ asked Nicovar. ‘I mean, how do you fly with that on?’

‘I don’t, of course,’ said Danodel. ‘I wrap it up into a scarf when I’m flying. I’d have thought that was obvious.’

‘It’s very handsome,’ said Nicovar. ‘May I try it on?’

Danodel looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘Perhaps later,’ he said.

Nicovar smiled gratefully. ‘Cordocor must be a very wonderful place,’ he said. ‘How do you get there?’

‘Well, you don’t for a start,’ said Danodel with sudden tartness, ‘neither of you. They only allow proper dragons in there.’

‘But we’re proper dragons,’ said Melivar, ‘aren’t we?’

‘You might think you are, but there’s more to being a proper dragon than just thinking it. I mean, what have you ever done to prove it?’

‘Prove it? How do you mean?’ asked Nicovar.

‘What have you done in proof of your honour? No one’s allowed into Cordocor unless they’ve proved their honour, and anyone born there gets thrown out if they can’t prove theirs. It’s one of the laws.’

‘Have you proved your honour?’ asked Nicovar uneasily.

‘Oh yes,’ said Danodel, ‘dozens of times.’ Then he lowered his voice and said proudly, ‘I’ve trapped a tyggen.’

‘A tyggen?’ said Nicovar. ‘What’s that?’

Again Danodel burst into merry laughter. ‘Really,’ he cried, ‘such ignorance! They’ll never believe any of this when I tell them.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Nicovar a little hotly, ‘but I can’t help my ignorance, and if you just want to be rude all the time I don’t think I want to hear about your stupid tyggen.’ And he got up as if to go.

‘Wait a minute,’ said Danodel, ‘I’m sorry. Don’t go. I’d like to tell you about it, if you don’t mind.’

‘Very well,’ said Nicovar, pleased by Danodel’s sudden contrition, ‘but any more of that scoffing and I’m off.’

‘Me too,’ said Melivar, fearing he’d been forgotten.

Danodel told them the tale of how he’d caught the tyggen, and even allowing for the obvious exaggerations they were both wide-eyed in admiration of him. They’d never heard of such a fearsome creature, with its teeth longer than ten claws’ length, its skin of orange and black like living fire, its mouth as wide as any dragon’s and its speed and strength impossible to comprehend. And for a young dragg to catch such a thing single-clawed - here was honour indeed! ‘Simplicity itself,’ said Danodel, ‘for a dragon of my brain.’ And he told them how he had dug a pit seven statures deep in the heart of the forest, and how he’d matted it over with vine and leaves until it was as much like the forest floor as any other place, and how he’d then taunted the tyggen and run before it into the clearing and hovered over the trap, and how the tyggen had fallen roaring into the pit and tumbled down into the darkness.

‘And was it killed,’ asked Melivar, ‘and did you eat it?’

‘Oh no,’ said Danodel, ‘it’s there still, roaring away to be set free.’

‘And what are you going to do with it?’ asked Nicovar.

‘Well, I have to get it home to Cordocor somehow, and then when the others see it I’ll be given a nest of honour and be counted a full dragon.’

‘But you can’t be any older than I am,’ said Nicovar, ‘and you’ll be a proper dragon?’

‘I am already,’ said Danodel. ‘I’ve only got to show the evidence.’ He sighed with helpless self-satisfaction. ‘That’s how it is in Cordocor. It’s the sort of way we spend our time.’

Nicovar felt stung with envy and he knew he could never do anything as brave as catch a tyggen, and he felt he would never have any honour.

‘And what about you?’ asked Danodel. ‘What have you ever done?’ The question was quite simple, quite unmocking, but desperately hard to answer.

‘Nothing yet,’ said Nicovar, ‘but I shall do things.’

‘What things?’

‘I have a sort of job to do,’ said Nicovar. ‘There are some creatures, you see, and they stole something from my father and I have to try to get it back for him, and I suppose it’ll mean I have to do some killing. I’ve never killed anything except for food and I don’t really want to do it, but if necessary I will.’

‘And what sort of thing is it you’re going to kill?’ asked Danodel.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of them,’ said Nicovar. ‘We call them sloud.’

Danodel looked indifferently at him. ‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘I’ve never heard of them. Doesn’t sound much like an honourable quest, but if there’s some tooth and claw to them I suppose it’ll be all right.’ Then he smiled hugely. ‘Would you like to see my tyggen?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes,’ said Nicovar and Melivar together, ‘we would!’

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He led them a little northwards through the forest until they came to a high place of grey stone where the grasses and trees were thin. ‘There,’ he cried, pointing to a cleft in the rock which fell steep and straight into the earth, ‘he’s down there.’

‘Did you dig this?’ marvelled Nicovar.

‘Well, I didn’t dig it exactly, but I did clear a lot of junk out of it. So, what do you think?’

But the bottom of the pit was lost to sight even in that bright midday, and Melivar said, ‘I can’t see anything. I don’t believe there is a tyggen after all.’

‘There is,’ cried Danodel. ‘He’s down there.’

‘Anybody could say that,’ said Melivar, ‘but I don’t see anything.’

‘Well of course not,’ said Danodel. ‘Of course you can’t see anything from up here. You have to go down inside.’

‘What?’ cried Melivar. ‘Not me.’

‘Scared?’ asked Danodel.

‘Yes,’ said Melivar.

‘You can’t expect anyone to go down there,’ said Nicovar, ‘especially if there really is a tyggen.’

‘There is,’ said Danodel, ‘and naturally I don’t expect you to climb down there. We have to go through the cavern.’

‘The cavern?’ asked Nicovar.

‘Come along.’ Danodel strode off towards a thicket of trees and stopped when he realized the others weren’t following him. ‘It’s perfectly safe,’ he said, ‘even for you.’

‘But what if the tyggen should eat us?’ asked Melivar.

‘He would if he could,’ said Danodel, ‘in about one bite. But he can’t. He’s caged.’

‘How?’ asked the insistent dradgefing.

‘Look, I didn’t go into this just any old how,’ said Danodel indignantly. ‘He’s properly caged behind two rocks at the end of the cavern, with a tree trunk lashed tight in between. There’s no way he can escape without cutting the tree trunk free, and tyggens haven’t enough brain for that. Anyway, if you’re afraid there’s no need for you to see him, is there? You can fly off home now for all I care.’

‘No, we’d like to see him,’ said Nicovar, ‘so long as you’re sure it’s safe.’

Danodel led them under an overhanging slab of rock and down a long gully to a place where there was an opening in the rock-face about as large as the rim of a nest. They went into the blue half-light of the great cave and along beside a fast running stream towards a far shaft of daylight which hit the opposite wall. ‘There,’ said Danodel.

In a narrow opening between two blocks of stone, penned behind a heavy trunk of wood, they could see in the shadows of the pit bottom the dark figure of a dreadful beast. When it saw them approach it leapt up and sprang forward, snarling angrily and stretching its giant arms through the narrow gaps of its cage to try to claw them. The two brothers were terribly still and afraid, but exhilarated too, and they stared in wonder at the monster as it roared at them.

‘Your brothers seem suitably impressed,’ said a voice behind them, and they turned to see Danodel standing beside a strange and wizened newcomer. Nicovar remembered his grandfather’s words, about the narrowness he should look for in the eyes, about the mould-

encrusted paleness of the body, about the plump soft middle of its crawling belly and about the dankness of its scent, and he knew as if he'd seen a thousand such vile things before that this was a sloud.

He looked at Danodel in puzzlement and the other dragg smiled cruelly and raised his chin. Melivar, transfixed by the sloud, held tightly to his brother's claw and said, 'Kill it, Nicovar.'

And Nicovar, although deeply frightened, asked steadily, 'What do you want with us?'

The sloud snorted wetly in derision. 'With you, young Nicovar, nothing but a little sport and a quick end. But there is much that we want from the rest of your kind, and much that we shall have.' And in all the dark corners of the cavern there appeared other sloud, and they crowded like lice towards the two frightened draggs, and some held sharpened staves in their podgy little hands, and they laughed low and mockingly.

Nicovar stared at Danodel and asked, 'Why did you bring us here? These are the creatures I am sworn to slay.'

Danodel laughed, and he loosened the cloak of vine and let it fall from his shoulders; and where there should have been a crested back and a great sweep of tail there was instead a body half as vile again as a sloud's, blotched white and orange, and where there should have been fine spreading wings there were grotesque canopies of folded skin, swollen and fungus-pale.

The elder sloud cried aloud, 'We gave your father the best of our kind for his ravishing and the chief of our treasures for his delight, and in return his father came and tried to slay us all. They left our dead corrupting in the Sun and destroyed all our pleasant burrows and damp ways. Well, our master has promised us revenge, and you are the first part or it. Let your death be a foretaste of our greater vengeance.' He slid forward and grabbed Melivar in his swollen arms. 'You are spared,' he cried, 'to season awhile and to tell the tale of your brother's misery. Run back and warn your father of his doom, and tell him the blight is only half begun.' And Melivar was taken out of the cavern by two sloud, a straggling bundle of oaths and tears, swearing to pay death for death.

Nicovar was held fast in a dozen spongy arms and led towards the caged tyggen, which growled low at his approach. 'I told you it was a fine looking beast,' said Danodel. 'We've not fed it for a week or two on the off-chance that you'd call. Farewell dear brother.'

'Brother?' cried the anguished Nicovar. 'Were you truly born of my father?'

'Truly born?' said Danodel. 'I was not truly born at all. But I was born of your father, and born like this. You see how my pretty body has been marred and how all the comeliness

of my dear mother's face has been lost in vile remembrance of your father? You see how I have been spoiled and set apart from my sweet fellows? This is what your father did for me, and one day he shall witness this work of his and die for it.'

And Nicovar was taken up onto a ledge of rock level with the top of the tree trunk that was lashed in the mouth of the cage, and as all the sloud around him hubbubbed in cruel satisfaction he was thrown down to the bottom of the pit where the tyggen roared in frenzy, and the staves were pointed in at him to prevent his flight.

The tyggen turned to face the bruised and frightened dragg, and sniffed the air with unexpected calmness. Then it turned to face its tormentors again and struggled to tear the tree trunk from where it was lashed to the rocks, and as it roared it glanced back towards Nicovar as if to ask for help.

The sloud were amazed and Nicovar, swifter of mind and body, leapt to the tyggen's aid and slashed at the binding vines around the trunk with his long claws. Now as the tyggen shook the tree it rocked further and more freely, and when the sloud saw their danger those standing above threw their sharpened staves into the pit where one of them stuck fast in the tyggen's side. But still he struggled for freedom and sent the tree trunk crashing to the cavern floor and burst out among the sloud. And he killed more of them in a minute than Aldragon and his sons had done in three long days.

Nicovar killed some too, and although he never saw the escaping of Danodel he did manage to catch the elder sloud who had tormented him, and he slit his throat with one measure of his claw. He could not be certain of it but he hoped dearly it was Koik.

When the killing was done Nicovar and the tyggen bathed in the running stream and Nicovar drew the staff from the tyggen's side as the beast stood motionless, and then they walked together out of that dreadful place. And when they were in the Sun again the tyggen looked silently at Nicovar for a little while and then made a gentle growling in his throat as a kind of salutation and walked off into the forest.

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Melivar used all his strength and wit to fly the long way home and he fell exhausted to the ground at Ganel's feet and gasped for him to come quickly to Nicovar's aid. But his childish babblings soon ran headlong into tears and his father could get no sense out of him.

Nicovar, stronger of wing, arrived home shortly afterwards and Melivar ran sobbing to greet him. Ganel grumpily asked his elder son what all the fuss was and Nicovar, too tired to

explain, said it was a game they'd been playing and took a cuff about the ear from his father for upsetting the younger dragg.

Later, when he told the tale to Aldragon, he asked, 'And if it was Koik that I killed, will that be sufficient to return my father's honour?'

And Aldragon replied, 'When you have found your father's honour, Nicovar, you will know it without asking.'

The end of the Tale of the Tyggen.

* * * * *

The Feast of Honour

Concerning Ganel's sacrifice

Nicovar, not wishing to increase his father's woes, told him nothing of these happenings and asked Melivar not to mention them either. The dradgefling seemed happy to forget everything once Nicovar had assured him of the sloud's death, and their lives returned quickly to normal. They still walked together in the forests and on the shore examining each new pool and woodland bed, but while Melivar searched only for the miracles of life Nicovar was searching for something darker, and he began to search more often alone. The overriding purpose of his mind was to meet with Danodel again, and once they'd met to kill him. There seemed no other route to the new-finding of his father's honour, and he could imagine no terror dreadful enough to drive him from it. But even in that clear purpose there lingered one insoluble doubt: how could it be honourable for him to kill his own father's son, however ill-conceived?

Ganel grew more estranged than ever from his eldest son, and whenever they spoke his eyes were always fixed anywhere but on Nicovar. His tone grew solemn and his manner curt, and it seemed that Nicovar's mere presence was enough to knock all spirit out of him. He remained boisterous with Melivar, but even to him he gave shows of affection rather than any true feeling. At about this time he began indulging immoderately in sacaco root and was often intoxicated.

And so the years which never abated Nicovar's resolve thrust Ganel and himself ever further apart, and this estrangement was the main cause of grief at Pengartel during that time.

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When Nicovar was of marriageable age his father should have been in the best years of his early dragonhood, and yet he was already stout and stiff-limbed, slack of chin and unwontedly dull of eye. Where he had been simply garrulous before he was now plainly tedious, and where he had been witty he was now coarse. He slept long hours into each new day, and not always in his own nest. He had issue from three other dywiverns in the neighbourhood of Pengartel, and how many other than that nobody ever knew.

While Ganel's behaviour embarrassed all his kin it mortified Melivar. As the dragg grew into his wisdom his father's boisterousness became offensive to him and, while Ganel shunned Nicovar, Melivar shunned him.

Yet all this while Nicovar had still sought Danodel. No matter how roundly Ganel abused him, no matter what pleasures he had to forgo, his father's honour was still his chief concern. Wherever the forest roof closed out the light of the Sun, throughout all the deep corridors of Abeen, within each fissure of the high rocks, each cave of the sea cliffs, wherever darkness congregated and shadows multiplied there he had sought and there he sought still. Few of the sloud could have escaped that second killing as Danodel had, and yet there were still some alive for he would scent them in the dampest places or see their trails in the matted leaves; and where the sloud were there he might find Danodel and reckon claws with him.

But after ten long years of searching, when his patience was still unrewarded, Melivar drew him aside to counsel him. 'Nicovar,' he said, 'all Pengartel honours you for your loyalty and admires you for your patience, and all creatures know the object of your quest - all creatures but one, that is - but now you must cease. You have sought every manner of way and the trail is dead and cold. It is time for you to think of other things.'

'Melivar,' said his brother, 'I know you love me and wish to see me happy, but I cannot be happy until my task is done. Have patience with me a little longer. I shall succeed.'

'But for what?' asked Melivar, 'and for whom? There is no one in Pengartel but thinks you fitter to lead our father's nest than he is. You are ranked in estimation with Aldragon's own sons, and yet you seek the honour of a creature that is beyond its saving. Look at our father, see what he has done to himself; what can it profit him or you if you do find Danodel and kill him? Our father's honour was not stolen from him - he killed it himself.'

‘And I will help him unkill it,’ said Nicovar, ‘somehow.’

Melivar became suddenly embarrassed and said, ‘I have been asked to speak to you, as nearest in age and love to you, about... well...’

‘What?’ asked Nicovar.

‘The others think you should marry.’

‘Marry?’

‘Our father’s nest is blemished. You are his only true stock. You must continue the line.’

Nicovar smiled at his young brother’s blushes. ‘These others that you say think I should marry,’ he asked, ‘were none of them dragon enough to tell me themselves? Did they send you to talk to me of wooing?’

‘Nobody sent me,’ said Melivar, ‘but it’s only right. Our father is finished and best forgotten. You are his honour now.’ His embarrassment gave way to sullen anger. ‘What right has he to honour anyway, after what he did to your mother and what he’s done to himself? What use has he for it?’

‘More use than anybody,’ said Nicovar, ‘and I must find it for him. Nevertheless,’ he added smilingly, ‘I shall take your counsel to heart, dear brother, and search also for a wife, and a wife, I hope, to help me in my other search.’

‘Myka’s keen,’ said Melivar, ‘I expect.’

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It hadn’t really needed Melivar to bring them together. Nicovar had smiled on Myka for some time, and she on him, and he wooed her now in earnest and won her. She was as beautiful among the dywiverns as Nicovar was dowdy among the dragons, yet he felt less dull in her company than in any other, and she thought his plainness handsome. Melivar cheerfully gave them wide berth as they trod the woods together deep in talk and growing deep in love. Nicovar still took scent of any sloud and was always ready to engage with Danodel, but life was sweeter now than before, and his quest less wearisome.

Even Ganel seemed more easy in his son’s company if Myka was by, and as the courtship progressed he grew less quarrelsome and indulged less in sacaco. Eventually he was even reconciled with Espel, and she took him back into her nest and among her children. And when Nicovar and Myka began to plan their wedding nobody was happier than Ganel.

One bright morning Ganel sought out Nicovar and asked to walk with him, and when they had gone a little way into the woods he asked, ‘Where will you and Myka nest?’

Nicovar was perplexed and unable to speak for a while, for it had always been his hope to settle in the nest of his birth, the one his father built, yet to say so might cause his father distress. Finally Nicovar said that he had not yet determined a place.

And Ganel said, 'Let us fly over these woods and seek a likely spot.' And they flew northwards, as Nicovar knew they would, and came to the nest in the northern glades.

Ganel stood in silence for many minutes, his eyes suffused with inexpressible sadness. Then he trod the circumference of the nest and tested its walls and stood in its great well. The coral was still embedded in the side walls, overgrown with creeper. 'I did not expect to come here again,' said Ganel. 'I quitted it once to do something evil, and quitted it again to do penance, and I didn't wish to remember the happiness I had hoped for here. I thought, stupidly, that if you and Myka nested here it might fulfil its purpose, and your happiness might do measure for mine; but I would not want to blight your marriage by such a piece of folly. I shall burn it and have done with it.'

'No,' said Nicovar, 'please. For as long as I can remember this has been the one place I hoped to nest. I've always sensed happiness here, contentment and love. I'd not dared to tell you this, but if you thought it too, even for a passing moment, then let us fulfil that dream. Don't burn it. Bless it. Name it now for me.'

Ganel stared for a long moment at the ground, and then a huge tear welled from his eye and splattered the dust. And as his eyes began to flood he said, 'I gave your darling mother one instant of my promised love, and then I killed her as surely as if I'd reddened my own claw. I have profaned this place. How can I bless it now?' Nicovar led him a little way from the nest and sat with him, and when Ganel had recovered his composure he told his son all the bitter detail of his life. It was an even more hopeless tale than he'd heard from Aldragon, and Ganel's whole being seemed wrung in the telling of it.

And what was new to Nicovar, and most dreadful, was the bargain his father had made in Abeen when, waiting for the final clarion, he had offered any sacrifice, foresworn any joy, welcomed any woe if only he might live to see his wife again. 'What path can I tread to my honour now?' he asked. 'When the sacrifice was newly made and my joy was dead I trod every path I knew in search of it. But the one path I should have taken was closed to me. It was closed when I sued for life in Abeen. And so I allowed myself to forget; I'd chosen life and so I returned to the life I yearned for. But when I saw you, a plain little dragg with awkward wings, I saw in you all the torment I'd heaped upon your mother, and I shunned you for it. I've always known your love for me; I've known all the pains you've taken on my part; I've known how much my honour means to you; and I've despised you for it. Even when your

grandfather upbraided me with the story of your loyalty I wished only to escape the accusation of your eyes. I know there was none intended, but that only made the accusation more bitter.

‘And when at last it seemed you were tiring of your quest, and purposed marriage, I was able to forget again; I was able to blot the horror out and soothe myself in your new happiness. And when my love for you returned and its mask was sheltering my eyes, my guilt crept up on me unawares and made me bring you here.

‘I know all that I have done, and I know all that you have done for me. I have not deserved such a valiant son, and I beg you if you must search further for my honour to let me search with you. I am a poor companion for such a task, for I have come a long way in the dark and my eyes have been turned from graceful things.’

Again he wept, and when he’d finished Nicovar said to him, ‘Name this place. Sanctify it for me.’

And Ganel said, ‘I was too quickly gone from here to name it for your mother, but if I had named it then it would have been called Pengemmen, for of all the forest flowers she loved the gemmen most, and the marriage bed I crept from was strewed with them.’

‘Then name it so for me,’ said Nicovar, ‘for it is a blessed name.’

*

Nicovar and Ganel restored the nest to some of its past glory, and as the wedding neared Nicovar began to think his father’s honour had already been new-found, for he bore penitence like a badge of courage and never afterwards sought to forget his disgrace. All Pengartel rejoiced in the change, and the blight of two namings appeared ready to be lifted.

During these weeks Ganel often walked with his son in the dark places, and they even sought the innermost caverns of Abeen; but whether it had become pressed into the earth or had new-opened to the Sun they never found it. Ganel had not asked what manner of creature his son Danodel was, saying only, ‘When I see him I shall know him,’ and Nicovar was pleased to spare him the description. But look as they might they could find no trace of him.

While Nicovar found solace with his adored Myka, Ganel refound the friendship of Melivar and new-fashioned his joy with Espel. Aldragon smiled on all this, and he too thought it a sort of honour in his son.

The marriage was held at Pengartel, as Ganel’s had been, and the wedding feast surpassed in richness any other ever held there. The rarity and beauty of the gifts astonished

everyone, particularly Nicovar who had never fully appreciated that he was loved. Ganel brought his gift last and laid it before his son; it was the same coral he had hurled into the night at his own wedding feast, broken now but still as beautiful, and it was the most eloquent tribute he could pay. Nicovar was saddened at the sight of it and wept in helpless gratitude. Ganel looked ready to weep too, and marched off into the night.

Nicovar lay with Myka at Pengemmen and they blessed it with their love, and they were awoken in the morning by the gentle roaring of a tyggen which stood in the glade before their nest as if on guard. And when he saw the scar in the tyggen's fur and felt the warm snuffle of his snout upon his claw, Nicovar knew this was his tyggen and that it came to honour him and his new bride. And since that time of all dumb beasts the tyggen has been the most faithful to the dragon.

*

Ganel was not seen after the wedding, and Espel dreaded that he'd again wandered from the nest. It was a full seven days before Nicovar learned of his father's going and although he was perplexed by it he was not concerned, for he knew some of the great burden that his father carried and that he trod his own way.

But when another week had passed his anxiety grew and he began to search their familiar haunts hoping when he found Ganel, whether wrestling with unkind remembrances or oblivious in a stupor of sacaco, that either way he would find him safe.

And when at the finish of a third week there was still no sign he decided to make a great flight over all the forest to find him.

*

He was three days gone from Pengemmen and drinking in a cool brook when Danodel burst from the cover of the trees and stood rearing up at him. 'Nicovar,' he screeched, 'there is a debt of blood owing to me and I have come to claim it. If you dare put it to the claw, come, face me now!'

Nicovar rose slowly and offered his claws, and as they circled in silence he observed how much more monstrous his brother had grown both in bulk and evil.

Danodel taunted him: ‘You were forward enough to cut the throats of those poor, crawling sloud. Can you not face a proper enemy? Must you do all your killing among the weak?’

Nicovar disdained to answer him, holding his snout high and proud. They circled closer and came within an arm’s stretch. But as he lunged at him Danodel rose and hung in the air on his foul wings, blotting out the Sun. His claws searched for Nicovar’s eyes, but the dragon was too quick and he rose also into the air.

Danodel flew screeching into the forest, piloting a hazardous course for his pursuer, brushing the tearing boughs of broken trees and gliding on wingtip between standing rocks. And all the time he cackled mockingly, deriding his brother to the passing trees.

And they came to a place of high cliffs slotted with long caves, and Danodel sped into the darkness of the tallest cave bellowing for Nicovar to follow if he dared. Nicovar flew unhesitatingly into the cave, easing his pace in the sudden gloom.

There was no sign of Danodel, but his voice echoed in the deepness of the dark, saying, ‘Nicovar, follow and find your death.’ And Nicovar followed the voice, cautious but unafraid, determined on his vengeance.

The dim paths honeycombed before him, lit haphazardly by thin shafts from above, and he followed the echoing voice as best he could far down the passages and into the belly of the cliffs. But even in the closest dark Danodel would not stand to meet him.

And after a while other noises intermingled with the leading voice, the noise of the sea-wind howling in the hollows and of the waves buffeting the shore. And when he came again into the daylight it was through a cavemouth opening onto the shingled beach.

There, stuck fast in the shingles, stood a stump of wood standing a little higher than a dragon, lashed all about with strong vines. Nicovar trod the shingles to the seaward side of the stump and felt his heart lurch at what he saw there. Ganel was tied to it with the sharp vines bedded in his flesh and with his proud head curved as if in death. Over his lower body seaweeds clung and water creatures were encrusting him.

Nicovar cried out in terrible woe and his father woke at the sound of it. But as Nicovar leapt to sever the vines and free him, Ganel said, ‘Leave me, Nicovar, do not set me free. If you love me leave me here to die.’

‘What sort of love could leave you here like this?’ asked Nicovar. ‘Who has done this to you?’

‘I, myself,’ said Ganel, ‘and there is one sort of love that could leave me here, your sort of love, the best love, honour’s love.’

‘No,’ said Nicovar, ‘I will take you home.’

But as he went again to cut his father’s bonds Ganel said, ‘I am on the path I strayed from in Abeen. Do not drag me from it, Nicovar. I couldn’t bear another loss of honour.’

‘Honour?’ cried Nicovar. ‘There is no honour here. To be eaten by fishes and made a nest for parasites, that is not honour.’

‘It is the best sort of honour for me,’ said Ganel, ‘for it is the creature which took my honour that has put me here.’

Nicovar glanced about him. ‘Where is he now?’

‘I cannot tell,’ said Ganel. ‘After each new rising of the waters he comes to me again and curses me for what I’ve wrought on him, and he urges life to linger in my body to prolong my agony; and I am grateful to him Nicovar, more grateful than I ever was to you. This is the reward I’ve searched for since I got him. You must not rob me of it now.’

Nicovar saw the desperate pleading in his father’s eyes and he knew he could not release him; so he sank to the pebbles by Ganel’s feet and began to weep.

‘Don’t weep for me’ said Ganel. ‘Rejoice. I shall soon be with my beloved wife once more. I cannot live much longer, for although the waters never rise above my neck yet my strength is ebbing and I am near to redeeming my pledge of life.’

And as Nicovar covered his eyes to weep, Danodel swooped on him from the darkness of the cliffs and struck him cold with a mighty blow.

*

When he awoke Nicovar was lashed to the other side of the wooden stump, facing the gathering darkness of the cliffs as the evening rushed in on them. Danodel stood before him, cock-winged in triumph. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s been worth waiting for. So many times over the years I could have struck at you as you strutted self-importantly after your miserable honour. So many times I could have killed our father in the full bloat of his disgrace. But how much sweeter to find you both in the high flood of your friendship, both proud enough to die for one another. Well, I shall give you leave to die, for one another and with one another, and to be the slayers of one another.’ And while Ganel wept and begged him to release Nicovar, Danodel scuffed away the pebbles from the base of the stump and dug it clear from the soft sand below and sent it toppling onto the shingle so that Ganel and Nicovar lay gazing opposite ways up the long beach.

Then Danodel taunted his father a last time. ‘You spawned me in this loathsome shape and set me apart from the rest of creation. Death is not sufficient punishment for that. But now you take your other son to death beside you. Soon the Moon will make passage overhead and summon the waters to glorify your vain grandfather Yoal, and as he gazes down upon the Earth thinking to banish evil from the world the great pomp of his passing will draw you both to destruction. The moment you had set me in my mother’s womb you struck at her and tried to kill her, and the hatred you engendered then has bloomed to vanquish you. Drown in the full horror of your doing and take the last seed of your happiness with you.’ And he left them on a rush of dark air and sped into the sanctuary of the cliffs.

*

While night hid even the white spray of the approaching sea from their eyes Ganel begged Nicovar’s forgiveness a thousand times and then lapsed into mournful silence. The Moon rose swathed in cloud as if unwilling to witness their end. ‘I thought I’d found my honour in my death,’ said Ganel, ‘when all it was was a poultice for my pride. And in my pride I spurned your help and turned your eyes from your danger and killed you as I killed your mother. It seems that everything I love is forfeit to my great folly. My pact with death is green.’

‘No,’ said Nicovar, ‘I should’ve left you when you asked. I came between you and your death; I am the cause of your lost honour; I’ve earned destruction too.’

Ganel laughed softly. ‘Even at the coming of your death you seek to comfort me. But what of your beloved wife? who will comfort her? Was my honour sufficiently important to blight her poor young life? Oh, if I could make another bargain now I’d save you for her if it meant a hundred thousand deaths, and die them all gladly.’ He stretched to the limit of his arm and held Nicovar’s claw. ‘If we meet again in spirit,’ he said, ‘shun me, for I am the bringer of bad fortune and all paths of honour are closed to me.’ Then they were silent as the high Moon burst from his cloud.

And as the waters rose up the shingle towards their feet Ganel cried, ‘Your mother tore the burning stone from my neck and tried to quench my shame by swallowing it, and I’ve heard whispers that her middle body was burned away. Why should she do such a thing for me? Everything I’d promised her was spoilt, and though I only longed to see her smile again I brought her nothing but misery and dreadful death. Her spirit will not smile on me for

bringing the same to you.’ Nicovar didn’t know how to comfort him, for it was a bad and wasteful death that surged towards them.

Yet when his father spoke again Nicovar sensed a new lightness in his tone. ‘So many miseries,’ he said, ‘all in one little stone; enough, I thought, to outweigh all the world; and yet...’ There he broke off again and spoke no more all the while the Moon traced his path in the heavens. And when the sea closed around their legs and began to lift the great bulk of the stake Ganel said, ‘Nicovar, let your goodness buoy you up and bring you to safe haven, and let the weight of my dishonour drag me down. There may be absolution yet, for the way your mother showed me has been opened to me again, and I have feasted fully on my shame.’

The sea tugged at them and tried to twist them from their anchorage, and as the swell pivoted them for the last time Nicovar cried, ‘Farewell, dear father.’

‘Farewell, beloved Nicovar,’ said Ganel. ‘Drink to my honour sometime.’

And they floated clear upon the surface of the sea.

The stump rolled heavily in the swell and Nicovar found himself facing up towards the Moon with the water slopping around his ears. He waited for the log to roll about and drown him by degrees but there was no greater movement than the rocking of the sea. He felt his father’s claw tighten in firm and resolute farewell, and though he cried out in dismay to the passing Moon, ‘Drown me, drown me too!’ he was held high from the water, until after a little while his father’s claw fell free.

Nicovar wailed long into the night as the white Moon trailed overhead, and the shadows on the Moon seemed to him like a great dragon rising with spreading wings from its nest, and in his confusion he called upon that shadow either to free his father or to thrust him beneath the water too. But the shadow dragon never stirred, and the Moon disappeared from the scope of his eye. What force it was that kept him safe he knew not, but at the new-coming of the Sun he still lived.

He was seen by a flight of egypt who dragged the wallowing stake to the shore nearby Pengartel and tore his bonds from him. Ganel was cut free too and he lay on the beach, his belly horribly distended but his features frozen in a kind of smile. When Aldragon arrived and ordered him carried back to Pengartel his brother dragons tried to lift him, but his weight was so great that it would’ve torn his body to carry him; and when he was opened for his funeral they found double his weight inside him of pebbles and great stones.

Though Nicovar wept at his father’s death he rejoiced at the manner of his dying, and all the dragons praised the Sun and Moon for showing Ganel his path back to honour; and since

that time his name has been celebrated by all the tribes of the dragon, and the night of his death is still called Ganelnight and is our chief festival of honour.

*

And his spirit went to Eyl where Dysa slept and he awoke her with a kiss, smoothing the furrow of agony from her brow. And they took up their joy again and lived peacefully in Eyl for all time.

And when later his father Aldragon had been made a god and was set in the heavens as the first star, Ganel's grandfather Yoal said, 'You too are worthy to be a god; the Sun will find a place for you in his great cloak.' But Ganel replied, 'Let me dwell here in Eyl with my sweet wife, for I had rather be a demigod with her than even the greatest star after my father.' And the Sun allowed it.

The end of the Tale of the Feast of Honour.

* * * * *

The Gift of Fire

Concerning the Sun's covenant with Aldragon and his great test

Aldragon was the original of all the darigs and the begetter of all others. All draganity issues from his blood and the wisdom he learned of his father is the true wisdom still.

When Athresa had suckled him and he was of a strength to support himself the Sun gave her release from her great torment, and when Yoal descended again to the Earth to convey her spirit to the Moon he first drew Aldragon into his counsel.

And when Yoal saw that Aldragon wept for his dead mother he said, 'Do not weep for her, for a heavy burden is lifted from her. Weep rather for yourself, for that burden now falls on you.' And he told Aldragon the tasks of the dragon, and gave him the first laws and the gift of the Sun.

And the tasks of the dragon are these: as Yoal stands watch on the world from the height of the Moon and keeps all creatures in remembrance of the Sun, so the dragon is his sentinel on Earth, and as Yoal banishes evil from the heavens so the dragon must banish it from Earth. Of all the beasts the dragon is the first beast and his word is law unto all the lesser creatures, and he must speak that law for the good of all creation. And among those creatures that have wit, whichever of them praises the Sun may live beloved of the dragon, but whichever of them praises darkness instead then if he cannot be brought into worship of the light the dragon must slay him.

And Yoal said, 'You are a small thing, Aldragon, as yet unlooked for in the host of the world; but you have all the generations of the dragon in you and all the hopes of the Sun; if you fulfil these tasks during your lifetime and pass the burden on unbroken at your life's end, then you will be worthy of the Sun's high honour; but if you fail a place of dishonour shall be prepared for you, and all who fail after you will follow you there. The worship of the Sun is a joyful worship, but the path to his honour is sometimes hard.'

And Aldragon asked, 'How will I know if the words I speak are worthy to be made law for other creatures?'

'If you are worthy within yourself,' said Yoal, 'then your words will be worthy also. Yours is the hardest task, for all other dragons will have your wisdom to defend them, and those that make laws after you will have your laws to guide them.'

'Are there no laws already,' asked Aldragon, 'or must they all originate in me?' And Yoal gave Aldragon the first laws.

'When you are of an age you must wed with a dywivern,' he said, 'for of all creatures after yourself the dywiverns are most dragane. And your male issue shall be first called draggs and they will grow into dragons, and your female issue shall be draheens and shall grow into drahens. No dragon may wed again with the female of the egypt for that was a union reserved for me; but drahens may wed with male egyptns, for that will produce a race of cousins to the dragon and friends to him in battle. Your sons and grandsons, like yourself, must wed with dywiverns, but when you have issue beyond the fourth generation then dragons may wed with drahens unless they are of the same nest as their grandparents. And your lives shall be long, longer than any other of the Sun's creatures, and you shall have dominion over them.

'And these are some of the creatures you may kill for your sustenance: the horned oor and the woolly-coated maeh which feed on the long grasses, and the snuffling skwee which roots beneath the soil; the long-tailed yappe that swing through the trees, and their ground-

dwelling kindred the mogoot; all the great fishes except the holy tarl, and all the smaller fishes and ocean shells; the gnawing creatures like the sleek-skinned eik and the round-tailed bibu; any creeping thing which is wholesome, and any other creature which is neither holy nor blessed with wit.

‘And the chief creatures after the dragon shall be the dywiverns and the egypt, and they shall be numbered equal with the cousins of the dragon. Next in honour shall be the maldocil if they will worship the Sun. Of the great beasts unblessed with wit the following are holy: the garm, the trotting starrop and the long-toothed thrump; and all other beasts that will serve the dragon deserve his blessing.’

And when he had given him these laws Yoal told Aldragon of the gift of the Sun. ‘When the Sun rekindled life within your mother to spare her for your birth he did so with a dart of his own fire; that fire was the pain she bore for you, and if needs be it is the pain you must bear for others. That fire is bred into you, and there are words of flame that you must learn. If you speak those words in honour and in defiance of the Sun’s foes then the vengeance of the Sun will spurt through your mouth, and though it pains you it will not burn you. You must pass on this lesson at your life’s end to one you think worthy to become the darig after you, and so it must be passed to succeeding generations, and all who speak the words worthily will speak with the full wrath of the Sun. But if ever the words are spoken unworthily or in dishonour or false faith, then the words shall burn the speaker unto death. Take care the dragon does not lose this gift, for it is the sign of his covenant with the Sun, and if it goes out in him it may never be rekindled. And if ever the dragon loses the love of the Sun, his words will spread like an ocean of flame and swallow the whole world.’

And Yoal taught Aldragon the words of fire, and Aldragon promised him their safe-keeping.

*

Aldragon wedded Esia and she bore him five sons, and he filled them with the love of the god of light. But when Ganel, his second son, was nearing dragonhood, he fell victim to dark longings and his behaviour vexed the Sun. And when he had lost himself in utter disgrace Ganel made a pact with the Sun for his life, and the Sun kept him to it even to the bitter extinction of all his joys. But when at last Ganel had found his way again the Sun forgave him and reunited him in death with his lost happiness.

But there was left living in the world the force of evil which had tempted Ganel, and Aldragon puzzled how to extirpate it.

*

After Ganel's funeral, as Nicovar recovered at Pengemmen, Aldragon summoned Melivar to walk with him. Aldragon was nearing his ninetieth year and Melivar was then fourteen, yet Aldragon saw in him not only his own lost clarity of youth but a rare courage and fierce loyalty.

They talked of Ganel's torment and of Nicovar's great goodness, and at length Aldragon told Melivar about the gift of fire. 'I have not yet had cause to use it,' he said, 'but it's a darkening world and the time may well be at hand. I am in about my middle years, yet death may always take me beforetimes as it has taken my son. I am sworn to pass on the secret of the fire at my life's end, yet how can I tell when my life's end will come? And who shall I find worthy of this great burden?'

Melivar was perplexed. 'Why do you ask me this? I am only an uncounselled dragg. Shouldn't you talk of this to your own sons?'

'My sons have work enough to occupy them,' said Aldragon. 'They must people all the continents of the Earth and bring the worship of the Sun to all creation. No, I must find one with better leisure to bear this burden. My son Ganel trod a path through the Sun's anger and back into his mercy, and his sons trod some of the way with him. Isn't it fitting that I should pass this secret on to one of Ganel's sons?'

'Indeed,' said Melivar.

'Which one?'

'Why, Nicovar of course.'

Aldragon was greatly pleased. 'Yes Melivar, if I am spared my life's full span Nicovar shall be the inheritor of the fire, for he is wise and good and true. His mother bore as much agony in an instant as my mother had in bearing me, and he will know the rightful season of the fire. But he has undergone a dreadful torment and he must be given time to heal. I cannot burden him with it yet awhile and I need a steward for my secret now.'

'Now?'

'This very day.'

Melivar looked pale. 'You will not ask me, grandfather?' he begged.

'Why not? Are you afraid?'

‘Oh yes,’ said Melivar, ‘horribly afraid. I’m unworthy to know even what you have told me so far. Don’t tell me any more of this secret, I beg you.’

‘Why Melivar,’ said Aldragon with gentle mockery, ‘I took you for more heroic stuff. They are but a few simple words I have to tell you. You may never even have to utter them.’

‘I’d much rather never even know them,’ said Melivar, ‘even in stewardship.’

‘Your reason?’ asked Aldragon, ‘for I know there is little in the world that frightens you, and I’ll need to make a long search for a better steward.’

‘How if I grow wrongly then?’ asked Melivar. ‘How if I take this secret for myself, holding it for my own glory rather than the Sun’s? How if I betray your trust? And if death does take you beforetimes what will become of it and me? Or if you live your rightful time and give the gift to Nicovar yourself, can you then ungive it to me? It’s folly, grandfather. I am not wise enough for such a secret. I am too young.’

‘We are always too young, all of us,’ said Aldragon. ‘Even at the limit of our lives our whole experience will be less than the Sun’s most fleeting thought. Our uttermost wisdom can never be more than the sum of our own mistakes, and our knowledge would not outstretch at its widest one thread of the Sun’s cloak. Yet even in our swift flight through this world we cripple ourselves with doubt, and the whole process of our lives is a falling off of our best hopes. You are in the best time of your hopes. There is a sort of harmony in you that I once had, but I fear even in me it is jangled by the touch of my experience. You are fresh in spirit Melivar, and you’ve barely begun the grim calculation of your life; at your age I deemed nothing to be beyond my strength; and yet you doubt your future self; that argues greater wisdom in you than I had, and your wisdom will safeguard the gift of the Sun.’

‘But if I am in the best time of my hopes this doubt can only grow, and how can there be harmony in me and doubt as well?’

‘Your doubt is only the descant to your wisdom. Neither could harmonize without the other. I took this gift unwillingly from my father, and I’d rather you took it against your will than see you snatch it eagerly.’ He stopped and grasped his grandson by the shoulders. ‘I have a journey to make beyond Pengartel, perhaps even beyond Bryggne, and I cannot tell how long I shall have to travel or what mortal perils I shall meet. Will you take custody of my secret while I am away and keep our covenant with the Sun?’

Melivar lowered his head in anguish. ‘Yes grandfather,’ he said.

Aldragon remembered the day-dark of Ganel's naming and saw how the mischief engendered then had blighted his son's life; and he reasoned that such mischief was beyond the conception of the sloud. Some other agent must have fostered their malevolence, but what?

At such a time as his father in the Moon had entered into Dimnach again, he took leave of Esia and travelled by night to Abeen. Hidden against the unflecked blackness of the sky he flew low over the tracks of the toppled forest until he scented sloud. Then he alit and hid himself in a tangle of dead trees and covered himself all over with mouldering leaves. He lay there for five full days, heedless of thirst and hunger and of the creeping ground-life which swarmed over him, and in all that time he moved no more than it required to breathe. Twice in that time he thought he heard the slithering passage of his quarry, but neither time did anything cross his sight.

Then at the beginning of the sixth day, as the Sun was dragging his cloak-tails over the sky and the Earth was preparing for his new-coming, Aldragon caught an unmistakable scent, and in the last dim traces of the passing night he spotted a sloud creeping swiftly towards its lair.

He sprang upon it with such a suddenness that the sloud fainted before it could scream, and Aldragon lifted its quivering body and bore it out of the toppled forest into a place of rolling grassland, bright in the morning Sun.

When the sloud recovered its wits Aldragon stood towering above it with his wings spread wide to mask the Sun. The sloud shrieked in panic and despair and then began an insistent little bobbing as it begged for life.

'Foul hecolite,' cried Aldragon, 'do you dare ask me for mercy? I am the Sun's justice and I will smite you into pieces.'

'Oh spare me, great and glorious sir,' snuffled the sloud, 'I am not a hecolite. I don't even know what a hecolite is.'

'All ye who worship not the Sun and praise instead his dark enemy are worthy to be branded hecolite. Repent ye. Your death is at hand.'

'I can see that, beloved conqueror,' cried the sloud, 'and your majestic words strike terror in my tum. But if I am a hecolite I'm truly sorry for it, and I can only say in my own defence that it's the first I've heard of it.'

'Now, unsightly, malvolute worm, least-blessed of creeping things, arise and face your death; for as you still refuse to worship our lord the Sun, so I must strike you for your ungodliness.'

‘But I don’t refuse, I don’t,’ wailed the sloud. ‘I’ll praise anybody, anybody at all.’

Aldragon peered uncertainly at him and withdrew his claw from under the sloud’s chin. ‘What,’ he asked, ‘will you truly praise the Sun?’

‘Most willingly,’ said the sloud, ‘if you let me live.’

‘Why then,’ said Aldragon, ‘behold his blessed light and thank him for it.’ He stepped back and let the Sun’s light burst upon the sloud, which squealed as if it had been spiked through and tried to shield its eyes with its stubby arms. ‘Praise him,’ insisted Aldragon, ‘praise our lord the Sun.’

‘Many good welcomes, handsome sir,’ whimpered the sloud, ‘truly unspiteful, undespised Sun.’ Then it scuttled back into Aldragon’s shadow.

‘Why, truly,’ said the dragon, ‘you do love the Sun. And I was told the sloud praised only the dark.’

‘Some do,’ said the sloud, ‘but not me.’

‘Then have I been in error all this while?’ asked Aldragon. ‘Sweet mercy, can it be that I have struck at the Sun’s friends and not his enemies? Are all the other sloud as sweet as you?’

The sloud purred suddenly. ‘Some are,’ he said, ‘only not quite.’

‘What is your name?’ asked Aldragon.

‘Thuleke,’ answered the sloud proudly. ‘I’m a schnaa.’

‘A schnaa?’ asked Aldragon. ‘What’s that?’

The sloud suddenly became agitated, as if embarrassed. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I got it wrong. I’m not a schnaa. I never have been.’

‘Well,’ said Aldragon, ‘it must be an unworthy thing to be if you are not one.’

‘Oh, it is,’ said Thuleke, ‘horribly unworthy. The schnaas are the chief servants of our dark lord, and they may bite all who disobey him.’

‘Will they not bite you, then,’ asked Aldragon, ‘for praising our lord the Sun?’

‘I shan’t tell them,’ said the sloud.

‘Then neither shall I,’ said Aldragon.

Thuleke purred gratefully and bobbed his head, and his lips curled upwards into a ghastly smile. ‘Dear mighty thing,’ he said, ‘may I go now, for I am already late for my rest?’

‘Your rest?’ asked Aldragon. ‘This is no time for rest. The Sun is up and we must glorify his works. Time enough for rest when the dark of his cloak hides the wonder of creation from all good creatures’ eyes and only the vile worshippers of night are at their sport. Sit now and tell me all the manners and habits of the sloud, and how I may identify such worthy ones as yourself.’ And Aldragon made Thuleke describe to him the society of the sloud, and Thuleke

glistened miserably in the morning Sun and buried his eyes in his squat shoulders. 'And to think,' said Aldragon, 'that in my unwisdom I slew so many of these sweet creatures. How will your people ever forgive me for it?'

'Oh, they do,' said Thuleke, 'more than happily.'

'You must take me to them,' said Aldragon, 'for if you are so ready to worship the Sun many of your brethren may be so too. We must deliver them from the bondage of night and slay all their oppressors, the schnaas.'

Thuleke golluped. 'I would take you to them, great unhorrible one, but they will all be asleep in their pitiful ignorance. Come back another unnight and I'll take you then.'

'No,' said Aldragon, 'we must go now, or I shall begin to doubt you truly love the Sun.'

'Oh, I do, I do,' said the sloud, 'lovely Sun, dear lovely Sun.'

'Then take me to your king and I shall bring him the Sun's mercy.'

'Alas,' said Thuleke, 'our king is dead, and our prince is gone from us again.'

'Your prince? Who is he?'

'The mighty and unmerciful Prince Danodel,' said Thuleke, 'first among the slouds of Cordocor, next only after our Dark Majesty.'

'Danodel?' said Aldragon. 'The half-dragon?'

'He is but half a sloud indeed, but we love him nonetheless for it,' said Thuleke. 'His head is very much like your own, very unugly.'

'I wonder that you speak so well of him,' said Aldragon, 'for it was he who denounced the sloud to us as ungodly, and he who led my warrior grandson to where he might slay you all.'

'Indeed, there was a great slaying,' said Thuleke, 'and Danodel was by; but he loves us; he calls us pretty names.'

'Not so to us,' said Aldragon, 'for he calls you vile, unwholesome, ignorant, easily moved and witless. He says there is no folly that a sloud will not commit, no friendship that a sloud will not betray and no trap that a sloud will not blunder into.'

Thuleke looked thunderstruck. 'When did he say these things?'

'Why, every night,' said Aldragon, 'as we sit at feast.'

'He feasts with you? That cannot be. Prince Danodel feasts with us.'

'Aye, when he has to,' said Aldragon, 'but only to hear the heart of your council and determine better how to betray you.'

'If that is so,' said Thuleke, 'we will unprince him when next he comes, aye and unlife him too.'

‘Come then,’ said Aldragon, ‘lead me to your people, Thuleke, and we will bring them into the light.’ The sloud hesitated. ‘Either that or offer your throat to my claw.’

‘Come, sweet glorious person,’ said the sloud, ‘I’ll take you to them.’

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Thuleke trailed sweatily back towards the trees with Aldragon pacing slowly beside him, and as they drew near to the first mess of undergrowth he tried to wriggle swiftly from his captor. Aldragon had leisure to walk into the path of the escaping sloud and show him the length of his claw, and the sloud cried, ‘Dear and formidable beast, I tripped, that’s all, I tripped.’

‘A thousand pardons,’ said Aldragon. ‘I should’ve known better than to doubt you. Lead on, oh honourable sloud.’

They came to a shaded avenue in the forest near to where Aldragon had captured Thuleke, and the sloud said, ‘There is my burrow. If you’ll give me leave I’ll just pop in and tell the others that you’ve called.’

‘Better we summon them out here,’ said Aldragon, ‘so that they may sooner see the Sun.’

‘Very wise, majestic being,’ said Thuleke, ‘but they may take a bit of persuading. If I could go inside for just a tiny moment...?’

‘Let us both go inside,’ said Aldragon.

‘Forgive my forwardness, imperialness, but you are somewhat largely built for my poor burrow. You may get stuck on the way to the sloudane.’

‘What is this sloudane?’

‘The meeting place where all our burrows join.’

‘Then let us go to this meeting place and bring the good word to your brethren.’ And before Thuleke could protest further Aldragon lifted him beneath one arm and with the other tore the roof from the burrowmouth. Kicking aside the walls and tearing up the topgrowth with his claws he carried his blubbering captive down the slithering route of the burrow as it dipped gently beneath the soft-pressed forest floor. Abruptly the passage widened into a kind of vault where the skeletal roots of massive trees were standing free of the earth, tented over with leaves. Aldragon’s claws quickly tore back the roof, and the sloudane stood open to the Sun.

Thirty or forty of the sloud were trapped in the daylight, still too dazed with sleep or surprise to move before Aldragon had trodden all their bolt-holes flat. They huddled together in a moaning cluster, each trying to hide his eyes in the press of bodies, biting and punching one another in their fear.

‘Rise up,’ said Aldragon, ‘and face the Sun, for either I shall hear you worship him or you shall taste his anger through my claw.’ There arose a confused and woeful hubbub from the sloud, and Aldragon said to Thuleke, ‘Go counsel them to make their peace with me,’ and he plopped him into the middle of the heap.

There was much biting and squealing, whispering and earnest council, some high-pitched excuses and several blunt words, and at length Thuleke was pushed to the front of the group, scratched and bruised and horribly squeaky. ‘My people say they’ll happily praise the Sun, and most of them do anyway,’ he said, ‘especially the schnaas, and many thanks for calling.’ Then he led a thin chorus of, ‘Undamnation to the Sun. Unblight all his worshippers. Unall-praise to the Majesty of Night.’

‘A happy alteration,’ said Aldragon. ‘Now, bring me to the place where you were wont to worship the dark and let me see this Majesty of Night.’

‘See Night’s Majesty?’ gasped Thuleke. ‘No one may look on him and live. Prithee, ununpleasant one, let us begone now, for we’ve already broken all Night’s laws.’

‘Not until you bring me to his temple,’ said Aldragon, ‘for I must see you truly abjure his love.’

The sloud went into an anxious inner huddle and conferred what best to do. Aldragon heard whispered phrases, like, ‘Capture’, and ‘Spiked staves’, and ‘Knotted vines’, and ‘Who will ask him?’, and ‘You, it’s your idea’, and finally Thuleke said, ‘Our worthy brother, Bulik, the elder schnaa has a plan, unvileness, which may please you.’

A narrow-featured sloud came forward from the group. ‘Dear sir,’ he said, ‘we will take you into the Cavern of Praise and show you the passage to the Night Lord’s abode, but in order to allay his suspicions... I mean, his anger... we must all enter there unseen.’

‘Unseen?’ asked Aldragon.

‘Yes,’ said Bulik, ‘it is our custom to close our eyes in the presence of the Lord, so that he may not see us.’

‘Then I too shall close my eyes,’ said Aldragon, ‘and hide myself from him.’ And he went with them to a place at the opposite end of the sloudane and waited while the debris was cleared from a wide cavern mouth. Then they all entered behind Aldragon and trod the high tunnel to the Cavern of Praise. Here and there on the way a sloud would dart for a moment

into a side passage and emerge again at the tail of the procession concealing a length of vine-rope or a staff. The cavern itself had high stone walls running with forest damp, and the light there was almost extinguished. When they reached the centre of the cavern Aldragon stopped, and the sloud widened round him in a circle. 'Where is the passage to the Night Lord's abode?' he asked.

'We are near it,' said Bulik. 'Will it please you to close your eyes?'

'With all my heart,' said Aldragon, 'so long as you do too.'

'Of course, of course,' said Bulik, 'we shall all close our eyes, just like always,' and he ostentatiously screwed his face shut.

Aldragon too made great show of closing his eyes and then stood absolutely still. Even in that unaccustomed dark he could see through his prised lids the agitated shapes of the sloud as they moved in upon him, looping the vine-ropes in wide circles around his legs. 'Now,' he said, 'I am invisible. Take me to his Dark Majesty.'

'Indeed we shall,' said the excited Bulik. 'Seize him, schnaas! Tie him! Pounce on him!'

Aldragon felt the ropes tighten around him, and when he thought them secure enough to struggle against he opened his eyes in delayed surprise. 'Alas,' he cried, 'what, have I blundered into a trap?'

'A lovely trap, a happy trap, a clever clever trap,' cried Thuleke. 'Oh, brave Bulik, how wise and ripe you are!'

'And how unwise you are!' cried Bulik. 'To bring this monster here again! Had I not had wit enough to outwit him you'd have borne a great biting for this I fear.' Then Bulik faced Aldragon, who was set about with sharpened staves, and said, 'All-hated, foul and merciless assassin, I was a looker-on when you slew my mother and her cubs, and I have served the darkness all these years in the hope of bringing you to confusion. Now you will prove a pretty sacrifice. Our high Prince Danodel shall furnish us a death fit for you.'

'Alas,' said Thuleke, 'Prince Danodel is an unfriend to us, for it was he who led the dragons to our slaying, and he feasts with them and mocks us most unkindly.'

'Be still,' said Bulik, 'talk not so unadvisedly about the prince.'

'It's true, it's true,' said Thuleke. 'He called us witless, nasty, unnice and unbrainy. Ask the dragon.'

'Is this true?' asked Bulik.

'Aye,' said Aldragon, 'Danodel is my devoted grandson, and he will be here to free me from this treachery ere long.'

‘He said that we were foolish and unfriendly and fell easily into traps,’ said Thuleke. ‘He is not worthy to be our prince.’

‘Indeed, if this be so he will not long be our prince,’ said Bulik. Then he looked amusedly at Aldragon. ‘So we fall easily into traps, we sloud? Not as easily as some, I dare swear.’ And all the sloud began to chuckle with delight and taunt their helpless victim. ‘He thought he’d be invisible,’ they said, ‘He thought if he shut his eyes we couldn’t see him. Such ignorance! Such dreadful lack of sense!’

‘Well, he’s discovered his folly too late,’ said Bulik. ‘Let us take him to sacrifice now. We will not wait for Danodel.’ And they forced the loosely bundled dragon before them with their staves, and he walked warily into the increasing dark.

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The darkness became so dense that even the sloud lost sight of one another, and even when all was totally black new layers of blackness seemed to unfold one upon the other till all but the shadowed memory of sight was lost. The staves pressed irritatingly into him, prodding him further along the passage, until the very distance from the daylight made night’s terror complete. ‘Here,’ said Bulik, ‘this is the place.’

Despite his self-capture Aldragon felt fear rise in his throat, and the temptation to break his loose bonds and run back into the light almost overcame him. But he stood unstruggling as Bulik went on:

‘You have dared profane our holy places with your talk of the Sun; you have slain all the best of our kind; you have planted a traitor in our inner council, and you have scorned the Night. Go, explain this to his Unseen Majesty, and let him deliver you your death.’

Aldragon felt himself being pushed forward by the staves, and before he could prevent it he was tumbling down into the dark. The slack-noosed vines began to tighten as he fell, restricting his arms and wings, and his descent was sharply halted as the ropes ran taut. He swung in the void, unable to move, listening to Bulik’s elated chant:

‘Now unbind yourself and fly to your freedom if you can, but be soon about it for our Dark Lord will come for his supper anon, and this is a feast he has long had a longing for; and if you should fly free take care to fly the right path, for there are many paths to choose from but only one that leads into the light. Fare ill, and talk not to us again of easy trapping!’ The sloud chorused their derision and contempt, and their voices gradually ebbed away into the dark.

Aldragon hung in the pain of midair, listening, trying unsuccessfully to gauge the distances around him, waiting, dreading. There was no measuring of time in that place, but after a wait that seemed as long as his wait beneath the forest leaves he gave a sigh of irrepressible anguish.

‘So,’ said a small voice from the air, ‘there is some period to your patience.’

‘Who’s there?’ asked Aldragon.

‘The one you seek.’

‘Seek? I seek no one.’

‘No? Then did those witless innocents truly capture you? Were you powerless to avoid their feeble bonds? Are you now not able to break free of them? And do you seek to delude me as easily as you would a sloud?’

‘Who are you?’ asked the dragon.

‘My name is Asir,’ came the reply, ‘and I am your father’s bitterest foe.’

‘Rougn is my father’s foe,’ said Aldragon, ‘and are you bitterer than he?’

‘Rougn is my beloved master, my preceptor and my guardian. All that I do is for love of him and for hatred of your father.’

‘Why my father? What has he ever done to you?’

‘He took me from the light and my just expectations, and in his cruel envy cast me into the void, much as you are now cast. Blessed Rougn rescued me and taught me the love of night. I am at pains to repay that love, and when I have found one fit enough to dwell with us in evil Rougn will rewelcome me upon Styche as a fellow hecol over hecolans.’

‘There cannot be another in all the world so great in evil. Your search is vain.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Asir. ‘But even I was not always evil. In my time I was called a godling and was chief of the Sun’s worshippers upon Attal. Only when your father cast me from the light did I change my true worship, for although I had covertly praised Rougn I still hated him, and I was made to learn to love him.’

‘Made to love? Not willing? That is not love.’

‘You will see,’ said Asir. ‘It took Rougn many long years in my schooling, and it may take me as long with you. But you will see.’

Aldragon laughed scornfully. ‘You think to make Yoal’s son your hecolan? I should die a million times before I hate the Sun.’

‘But a million times and then a million more and you will hate him, I dare swear.’

‘You can only slay me once,’ said Aldragon. ‘My soul is my own.’

‘Aye,’ said Asir, ‘but souls are vulnerable when they are still in flesh. We spirits have a way with them.’

‘Spirits? Are there others here?’

‘Yes. And such as have cause to remember you. My poor servants that you have slain, you and your issue, they are here beside me. And each spirit of them still has teeth enough to tear a living spirit with. Show him, pecols.’

Aldragon felt the spiteful grip of many hundred jaws, not tearing his body but his inner being, jaws upon jaws all round him, twisting his soul a hundred different ways; and there were voices, tiny but triumphant, saying: ‘That’s for my daughter’; ‘That’s for my little cubs’; ‘That’s for my wife, my brothers and myself’; ‘That, that, that, that!’ He cried out in startled agony and thought only of escape, and when the tearing ceased he began to struggle with his bonds, wriggling one claw free.

‘Be still,’ said Asir, ‘for every time you move I shall send my spirits onto you again. You see nothing here, but even these fine particles of light that drift through the unbroken earth are daylight to my eyes; and when I see you struggle I shall dispatch my pecols.’

Aldragon was still, the pain gone from his spirit as sharply as it had arrived. ‘You cannot win me,’ he said. ‘If I must stay here till my body perishes I will have my revenge on you, for though I am still in flesh, when I die my spirit will tear you and your pecols for the love of the Sun.’

‘Bravely spoken, but stupidly I fear, for I will punish your insolence as well as your struggling.’ And the pecols bit him deep again, and he screamed aloud in torment. ‘You cannot think so now,’ said Asir, ‘for the love of the Sun is too fresh within you, but in a year or two you will surprise yourself, for you will no longer even wish to remember him.’

‘I shall not live a year or two,’ said Aldragon, ‘and death holds no terrors for me.’

‘I think we can persuade you to sustain yourself,’ said Asir. ‘Our devoted sloud will be at pains to bring you anything you wish, and my pecols will serve you gladly. And until you have learned to love the dark I shall show you the jewel of the night, and like your son Ganel you will learn to desire and to covet it. It will seem a small thing to you now, but it will grow in glory with your pain; and when you have learned a proper love of it, it shall be yours.’

And at a distance he could not reckon there appeared in the sway of Aldragon’s vision a tiny point of red light, smaller than a floating speck of dust upon the eye.

He could not tell how long he hung in the vault, but many times over he starved himself near to death, and would eat only when the torment in his soul became unbearable. Whether it was months or years or merely weeks he cared not, for the agony when it came was always as bad as the first agony, and when it went it was as if it had never been. And the only thing that changed in all that time was the brilliance of the stone, for from being a tiny spot of distant light it grew gradually in Aldragon's vision until it reflected off the far sides of the vault, describing ever so faintly the limits of his prison. At length he had a dim awareness of all but the blackest bottom of the pit and could even catch the fleeting shadows of the pecols as they struck at him; yet even though Asir spoke softly to him during each new torment and bade him remember the mercy of night, Aldragon could catch no sight of him.

And though Aldragon remembered all the mischief of the stone and how deeply it had poisoned Ganel's mind, and although he struggled to resist the deadly lure of it and keep his hatred of it bright, yet as it grew in brilliance it began to worm a path into his deep and unexplored desires, until there was a part of him that hungered for it, loved it, worshipped it, and would have turned forever from the Sun to own it. He felt the seeds of frenzy grow to overtake his mind and tried to cling fast to the better part of it, but it took all his efforts and endurance.

And at a time when he was at the end of all his strength Aldragon said, 'What must I do to keep the stone?'

Asir's voice was stirred. 'You must praise almighty Rougn,' he said. 'Then you shall have the stone and I shall give you leave to die, and we shall go together back to Styche. But first you must come to love the night.'

'I do love the night,' said Aldragon, 'and I am ready to go to Styche now.'

Asir chuckled. 'If you hope to escape by the stone's light once you are released, abandon it, for it glows only in your mind, and there is not light enough in all this place to lead you to the Sun.'

'I no longer wish to see the Sun,' said Aldragon, 'I only wish to see the burning stone.'

'Then let your desire wax for a little longer,' said Asir, 'until I am more certain of your love.'

Aldragon begged him for release, but instead the pecols bit again, deeper into his soul than ever before, and his supplications gave way to screams. Again a great time passed, and often Aldragon came close to death, and all the while he cried out his worship of the night and his desire for the stone; yet still Asir was uncertain.

And there came a time of silence when neither hecolan nor pecol stirred and Aldragon was still. He no longer wept nor called for mercy, nor cried in adoration of the stone; he only stared unblinkingly at it as his desire overcame him and his love of it grew real.

And at length Asir asked, 'Now are you ready to forswear the Sun?'

And Aldragon replied, 'I am ready to cast his name from my lips into the uttermost darkness of the pit.'

Asir was satisfied. 'Descend,' he said, 'free yourself and glory in the stone.'

Aldragon hardly dared to move for fear of the pecols, but they did not bite him as he stirred his claws. The cramps in his body unwound with a slowness as slow it seemed as his long torment, and after an age of agony his tired claw severed the first strand of his many bonds. He worked to free his wings and spread them painfully to ease the flood of life back into them, and then released his legs until he was suspended only by the vines around his middle.

'Take care not to tumble into the pit,' said Asir, 'for that is bottomless. Fly well, beloved Aldragon, and your life will soon extinguish itself in the glory of the stone. Our master Rougn is impatient for our departure.'

Aldragon flapped his aching wings and tried to lift his weight from the knotted vine, and as he felt his bulk rise into the air he cut the last strands of the vine.

He hovered weakly over the pit and Asir called to him, 'Fly, fly into the stone. Let it burn away your broken body and come to me fresh in spirit.'

And the stone had grown so great in Aldragon's mind as to consume him utterly. He looked in helpless horror at it, longing to embrace it and let it wash away all his hurts. He was slave to it, beyond all rescue of the Sun. He was part of it, as Ganel had been, and death seemed beautiful in its reflection. He set his wings to fly to it and erase himself.

And it was another dragon deep within him, patient, unconquerable, hidden from the stone, who sensed from its glare where the pit gaped below him and with a faithful, long-pent anger spoke the words of fire.

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The pecols screamed and fled towards the pit, and as the flames spouted from his mouth Aldragon saw at the brink of the pit the startled shape of Asir trying to shield the light from his eyes. Again Aldragon spoke and the hecolan snatched up the burning stone and sped with all his pecols into the dark middle of the earth, shrieking in terror and despair. Aldragon flew

towards the pit and tried to illuminate it with his breath. The rocks around took flame, and all the coals within the earth caught fire, and the mouth of the pit was ringed with a sweeping flame which lit the gaping cavern above and kept the spirits of evil trapped below.

And Aldragon flew above the flames and called down all the curses of the Sun upon that place, so that those imprisoned there might stay imprisoned forever and that those who died thereafter without worshipping the light might have to pass through the flames into the pit of everlasting damnation.

Then he paused in his weariness and saw where the strands of vine hung through a high passage; and he saw there were many vines, with many tortured skeletons tangled in them that might've been egypt or dywiverns. And even in his great weakness he rose wrathfully through the passage and fell among the cloud that clustered to hear the commotion; and some he slew and others he thrust alive into the flames, and he did not rest until he had rooted out every burrow in Abeen and slain every occupant. Then he fell in great exhaustion to the forest floor, bathed in the blessed agony of light, and closed his eyes in sleep.

And while he slept he dreamt of a great evil that was sent rushing past him out of the world and consigned to the flames above the bottomless pit; and though it was a joyful dream it had a tremor of sadness in it.

*

He travelled slowly back to Pengartel and was taken into his nest where his wounds were bathed and anointed and his poor body was nursed back to health. He was delirious for a time, as if the peccols still bit at him, but after a while his tranquillity returned and he was able to smile on his family and greet each one of them as they visited him. And when he was fully better and Nicovar had come to visit him, he asked him, 'Where is Melivar?'

The end of the Tale of the Gift of Fire.

* * * * *

The Cloak of Wrath

Concerning Melivar, and the treachery of Danodel

Danodel watched from his dark perch in the cliffs as the egyptian dragged the stake onto the shingle, and when Ganel and Nicovar were cut free he exulted to see their bodies sink heavily onto the beach. But when he saw the egyptian fussing around Nicovar, bathing his head in fresh water and drying him with the waft of their wings, spiteful despair arose in him and he longed to fly down and scatter the egyptian and strike Nicovar dead with his own claw. He resolved never again to chance his vengeance to any hand but his own, and his hatred focused narrowly upon his brother.

During the following days he was never far from where Nicovar lay recovering; when he was borne at the head of the sorrowful procession to see Ganel cremated, Danodel was again a looker-on from the cliffs; while he lay sick at Pengemmen, Danodel haunted the nearby glades; and when he first walked from the nest on the arms of Melivar and Myka, Danodel shadowed their stumbling progress. Soon, he knew, Nicovar would tread the forest alone and he was determined not to fail for a third time.

When he heard it whispered among the dragons that Aldragon had departed on a journey beyond Pengartel his impatience heightened, for while Aldragon was away it would be easier for him to strike at Nicovar and escape unpursued. But still the days dragged on and Nicovar did not venture out alone.

Then, one bright morning as the brilliant blue of the Sun's collar billowed across the whole width of the world, Nicovar arose from his nest and walked alone into the forest. Danodel attacked him with spears. It was in a part of the forest where the trees crowded close and Nicovar was taken unawares. The first spear glanced his shoulder and flew on through the dense intergrowth, and as he threw his arms and wings wide the second spear pinned him to a tree through the tender centre of his wing. He roared in anger, but as he turned to free himself a third spear pinioned his other wing at its furthest stretch and a fourth missed him only by the turning of his head. He saw Danodel leap from hiding with his teeth bared and claws erect, and he knew he must fight or die.

Danodel rushed headlong towards him, hoping to finish him off in the still shock of surprise, but Nicovar bellowed in warlike fury and whipped his wings free of the long spears, tearing wide gashes through the thin flesh; and as he rose into the air his assailant skidded to a halt in the dust beneath him.

They locked teeth and claws and fought for many minutes, testing the utmost of their strength, thrusting for one another's eyes and throat. Slowly Nicovar stretched his great tail around his brother's wide body and when he had a safe grip he squeezed until he heard the breath burst from Danodel's mouth. He held secure, fending off the other's wild claws till with a shudder of rage Danodel fell back in a faint.

Nicovar was swift to secure him, thrusting the spears deep into the earth through Danodel's plump wings, setting him like a skin in the Sun to dry. As the half-dragon began to recover consciousness Nicovar flew into the clear air above the trees and gave a shrill hollo of alarm, and before long help arrived from Pengemmen.

Danodel was tied and led back to Pengartel where the whole community came out to stare at him. Nicovar's torn wings were sewn and dressed, and the next day Danodel was brought before him. 'You have tried three times to kill me,' he said, 'and you have been the death of our most honourable father. My brother Melivar and all my uncles are of one opinion: that you should instantly be put to death; and I don't doubt that mighty Aldragon if he were here would be of the same mind. But I will not commit the deed you sought to, however justly, for the slaying of a brother is a foul crime in any race. We will await the judgement of Aldragon, for he is the law-giver and only when he has given word will you be put to death. Until then you will be confined in the main clearing of Pengartel and guarded constantly.'

And so a woven cage of saplings was prepared, lit around with torches every night, and Danodel was watched over at all times by at least two keepers.

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But though they waited till the year's end Aldragon did not return. The snows of winter fell through the bars of Danodel's cage and his hatred grew in bitterness with the cold. And although spring came to melt the snows it did not melt the bitterness in Danodel's heart.

In the spring the tyggen returned once more to Pengemmen and Nicovar led him to where Danodel was penned. The tyggen's memory was sharp and he roared angrily at the half-dragon, rearing menacingly towards the cage. Danodel shrank in terror to his tethering post in the middle of the cage, but the tyggen fell silent suddenly and sank to the ground. Thereafter in the evening hours and throughout every night the tyggen sat his watch over Danodel, and though everything around him slept his eyes never strayed from his captive.

Summer returned but still there was no sign of Aldragon. The elder dragons tried to persuade Nicovar to let them put Danodel to death, for they all resented the time spent in guarding him; but Nicovar was resolute that he would not kill his brother, for he had resisted the temptation in the high anger of his triumph and he would not succumb to it coldly now. However, since the tyggen stood his uncomplaining watch for half the time, only one other was left on guard alongside him.

And so for almost a year Danodel remained caged, his rantings and wild oaths ignored by all his captors and his desperate attempts at escape disdainfully rebuffed.

*

Melivar was now fifteen and he stood watch as often as the others. Danodel hated his high spirits and his cheerfulness almost as much as he hated Nicovar's dour solemnity. Mostly he hated him for his popularity with all the others, whether dragon, wyvern or griffin, seeing in him the contrast to his own loathsomeness.

Now one day as Melivar sat watch with his cousin Alom their cheerful banter changed suddenly to high words, and though he could not hear the subject of their quarrel Danodel saw his two captors stand angrily face to face exchanging shout for shout. Alom was now thirty years old and had wyvels of his own, and Melivar was still little more than a dragg, yet at the height of the quarrel Melivar struck Alom across the face with the closed back of his claw and stormed off to the far side of the glade. Neither of the cousins spoke for perhaps an hour, until Melivar burst into an agony of apologies and ran back towards Alom with his arms stretched wide. Alom seemed less ready to heal the breach, but after a few moments he too found the courage to apologize, and the cousins sat their watch again in subdued companionship.

After some days more Alom sat the night watch alone with the tyggen, and he noticed Danodel peering at him with a curious intensity. 'Why are you staring at me?' he asked.

'To see if what they say is true,' said Danodel.

Alom laughed abruptly, not deigning to be drawn so easily into a taunt. Yet still Danodel peered fixedly at him until Alom could no longer ignore it. 'Stop,' he cried. 'I'll let the tyggen in on you if you don't.'

This time Danodel laughed, low and far back, and continued staring at Alom as unblinkingly as the tyggen stared at him. 'Yes,' he said at length, 'it's true enough.' Then he looked away indifferently.

‘What?’ asked Alom sourly. ‘What is true enough?’ But Danodel would not answer him. Eventually Alom shook the bars of the cage in anger. ‘What is true enough?’ he cried.

‘That you bear the mark of the craven on your cheek.’

Alom snorted derisively, but the insult hit home.

*

It was a fortnight before Alom again watched Danodel at night, and for a while Danodel ignored him studiously. Then he looked briefly at the wyvern, laughed merrily and looked away. Alom could bear it no longer. ‘What mark? What mark?’ he cried. ‘There is no mark. Who spoke to you of this?’

‘No one speaks to me,’ said Danodel, ‘they only hunger for my death. But I have heard the name of Alom mentioned and seen the smiles even among your fellow wyverns.’

‘What smiles? Why do they smile? Why should they talk of me?’

‘I know not,’ said Danodel, ‘for the dragons say all wyverns are base and cowardly, and you seem no more cowardly than most. And yet the mark is plain.’

‘There is no mark!’ yelled Alom. ‘There is no mark!’

*

Again a fortnight passed, and Alom’s brows were black with anger as he stood his night watch. He glared at Danodel and asked, ‘Who spoke to you of this mark?’

‘All speak of it,’ said Danodel.

‘I have seen my face in the waters and I see no mark,’ said Alom.

‘It’s but a faint blush,’ said Danodel, ‘but you could see it if you dared open your eyes.’

‘I dare anything,’ said Alom. ‘I’ll dare all that a dragon dares. Who dares call me a coward?’

‘All dare, excepting only you. Your brother wyverns are ashamed of you. They say when you were fully grown you had your ears bitten by a dragg-in-arms and ran off howling.’

The gall rose in Alom’s throat as he remembered his humiliation. He approached the cage and stared hard into Danodel’s eyes. ‘Who spoke first of this mark?’

‘What mark?’ asked Danodel. ‘You say there is no mark. Why concern yourself over something you cannot see?’

‘Who spoke first of this mark?’ thundered Alom.

‘My brother Melivar.’

*

Summer turned to autumn, and Aldragon had been absent for a year. Everyone remarked on the change in Alom, for he spoke to few people, and when he did he broke off quickly or stood scowling angrily in all directions. More and more often he would find people huddled in whispers as he approached, only to see them fall silent and smile awkwardly at him as he passed. It was not long before he could confide in no one.

Then, as he sat watch beside the tyggen in the dead of one night, Danodel said to him, ‘I too was reviled. I had all the dark longings of the dragon bred into me. I am the sacrifice they hunger for, the blood with which they hope to wash away their guilt. But when they kill me they will mark out their own destruction, for my spirit is the Night Lord’s promise of revenge and I will hound them all to their graves, dragon, egypt, dywivern and all, wyvern, griffin, maldocil, every living thing. The great god Roun has promised this. Already he has taken the prime blasphemer Aldragon and cast him to his death. Soon, when they tire of waiting for him, the others will kill me too. Then all the hordes of sunken Attal, all the pecols of the deep dark, even the great hecolan himself will rise up to do vengeance for me. And do not look for mercy at the Night Lord’s hands, for those who praise the Sun will not enjoy the tranquillity of death’s shade, but they will be thrust back into the face of the Sun to burn there for always.’

‘Silence,’ said Alom. ‘Do not insult the Sun.’

‘Why not?’ asked Danodel. ‘Do you not insult Night? And who instructs you which of the gods you must worship? Aldragon and his sons and grandsons. Why should you worship a dragon’s god? You are no more a dragon than I am. They wish to kill me because I am but half their kind, and why if they kill me should they not kill you too? Dragons hunger for the universe, it’s in their natures; they envisage a world laid down according to their laws. What place will there be in such a world for you?’

‘Do not insult the Sun.’

‘The Sun has insulted you. He has sired a race of self-appointed godlings to lord it over you, the least of whom may scorn the best of you. Well, stick with your masters then and share their downfall, and spurn the blessed sanctuary of night. But revenge is at hand and you will share the fruits of my death: either the bitter fruits of Night’s vengeance or the sweet ones of his love.’

Alom sat silently by the patient and watchful tyggen, and all his jealousies and resentments fused and turned his reason. ‘What promise have you of this Night Lord?’ he asked, ‘and how can you know that Aldragon is dead?’

‘I hear the whispering spirits of those the dragon has slain, and they speak of a dark and dreadful death in which he has forsworn the Sun and joined the regiments of Night. If Aldragon can so forswear in death think of the terrors death will hold for you.’ He stared earnestly at the wyvern, who tremblingly returned the look. ‘Alom,’ he said, ‘we are both reviled by the dragon. Forswear his god and accept the mercy of mine. What has the Sun brought you but the contempt of others? Come with me and taste the esteem of Night.’

‘Come where?’ asked Alom.

‘There is a place where we can live out our time, and at our deaths enjoy the everlasting love of Roun. Come with me now and I will take you there.’

‘But how can I release you? The tyggen watches you always.’

‘Dull, uncomprehending Alom, are you no more witted than a tyggen? Look into its simple eyes. See the deep glaze of its stupidity. Now, while it stares at me in dumb malevolence, sink your spear into its heart.’

Alom looked horrified. ‘Kill the tyggen?’ he cried. ‘I would not dare.’

‘Then the mark of craven is upon you still and it will single you out for the bitterest of deaths.’

Alom stood by the tyggen with his spear poised in his claw, uncertain whether to strike. ‘I’m not afraid to kill,’ he said, ‘but how will I be esteemed by Night?’

‘Among the bravest of his followers,’ said Danodel. ‘Kill, Alom, kill the beast.’

The tyggen had never taken its eyes off Danodel and was dead before it knew it had been struck.

Alom shook at the horror of what he had done, but he worked quickly to cut a hole in the cage and then began to free Danodel from his bonds. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘this is a road there’s no going back on. Where do we run to now?’

Danodel stood loose of his shackles and looked at Alom for a moment in silent contempt. Then he struck swiftly with his claws opening the wyvern’s chest to his ribs, snatched up the dropped spear and thrust it into Alom’s belly. He left him for dead and disappeared into the night.

Alom lived long enough to confess himself and repent his folly, and no one wept at the tale more heartily than Melivar. Weffa and Arych were allowed to mourn their son, but he was not given a high cremation of honour and they had to bury him instead in an untrodden glade of the forest.

The tyggen was afforded the full rites of the dragon and his pyre was raised on the same site as Ganel's. Then Nicovar led his uncles and cousins in pursuit of Danodel while Melivar stayed to guard the nests.

*

Danodel fled straight back to Abeen, and when he came to the wreck of the sloudane he cried out in anguish. Even in that sweet dead of night none of the sloud came forward to greet him, and he began to fear they'd all been slain.

Yet after a little while he sensed their presence in the shallow darkness of their lairs and he called to them. 'Bulik,' he said, 'it's Danodel. Come forward if you live and tell me how this has occurred.'

There was a low humming in the dark as if the sloud purred in anger. 'It has occurred through treachery,' said a voice, 'the treachery of the dragon.'

'Aldragon?' asked Danodel.

'Aye, and others.'

'Others?'

'We were unwise to trust the dragon, even a dragon who was half a sloud. No dragon, half or whole, shall come among us again.'

'You dare call me half-dragon?' asked Danodel. 'I have done more to destroy the dragon than you ever could.'

'What you have done you've done to destroy the sloud,' said the voice. 'We see no rotting heaps of dragons hereabouts, but twice now our poor bodies have rotted in a pile. It shall not happen again.'

'Why you witless, ungrateful imbeciles, you dolts, take care what you say to me!'

'See,' said an excited little voice, 'I said he was our unfriend. Listen to the unnice things he calls us.'

'And we have done our share in destroying the dragon,' continued the other sloud. 'Even now Aldragon's bones stand sharp in his flesh, and the Night Lord prepares to feast on him. If we can destroy an Aldragon we can destroy a Danodel as well.'

‘Destroy me?’ scorned Danodel. ‘All the wit of all the dragons in the world cannot destroy me, and if I chose I could destroy all of you in one night’s reckoning. Thank the beloved remembrance of my mother that I do not strike you now; but when I come again to this place either you will bow to me or I shall enter in such an anger as will destroy you all. I returned only to share with you the triumph of my escape; in future I shall triumph alone.’ He rose above the forest and flew away into the dark, leaving the sloud purring meditatively.

*

The dragons flew over all the northern forests, centring their search around Abeen. They tore up as many burrows of the sloud as they chanced upon and slew all they found; but their search was mainly for Danodel and when they failed to find him they shifted their attention further west.

Danodel listened from the safety of well trodden catacombs until his pursuers moved on, and then he flew back towards the south. He chose a well hidden space beneath wide-spreading trees and began to gather a great heap of dry brushwood and fallen boughs, and he piled it high around the base of a tall tree. Then he fashioned ropes from the vines which clung fast to the forest trunks and secured them carefully to the tree. When he was satisfied he flew by night towards Pengemmen.

*

Myka was fat with child, four seasons gone, and Melivar guarded her more closely than he did his own mother. He made the swift flight between Pengartel and Pengemmen a dozen times a day, resting chiefly at Pengemmen in the interim.

Myka was always fretful during Nicovar’s absences, and now particularly so. She confided to Melivar: ‘We were only three weeks married when he went in search of his father, and they brought him home to me near dead with grief. I’ve not slept easily since that time. Then, when he was recovered, on his first walk through the forest the half-dragon almost slew him. He never made any noise all the while they sewed his poor wings, and he hid his agony even from me; but I could willingly have screamed for him. Now he is gone again, and who knows whether he will live or no? I want my dradgefling to know its father. I want some end to all this misery. Why did he not have Danodel killed while he could?’

‘If they find him again they will kill him,’ said Melivar. ‘No one can deny Arych his proper justice. But Nicovar is too close in blood with Danodel. They were sired in the same night. He cannot bring himself to give the word.’

‘Then Danodel will slay him,’ said Myka. ‘He might as well lay open his own throat. Oh Melivar, Danodel is as much your brother as Nicovar’s, yet you would slay him, surely?’

‘In the first instant that I saw him.’

‘There’ll be no more joy, no happiness until it’s done. Oh, why did he delay? And why has Aldragon deserted us?’

Melivar shook his head. ‘He’s not deserted us. Even if he lies dead at the far borders of Bryggne he will have died for our sakes. Everything he does is for our comfort; Nicovar too: he seeks only to rid the world of evil without resorting to another evil. The dradgefing that you bear him will have the best of fathers, whether he lives or no.’ He sat with her in silence some moments longer, then flew off towards Pengartel.

He had barely risen above the treetops when he heard a shriek of dismay from beneath him. He wheeled about to see Danodel struggling with Myka, binding her arms back over her wings and looping vines around her throat and belly. By the time Melivar had sped back to earth Myka was helpless in the half-dragon’s arms and his claw was at her throat.

‘Kill him, Melivar,’ screamed Myka, ‘kill him now.’

‘My little brother is too noble for that,’ said Danodel. ‘He knows that if he makes one move to stop me I shall kill you and the dradgefing you carry. Doubtless then I should kill him too, yet though he might hazard that he won’t dare hazard you.’

‘Let her go,’ said Melivar, ‘nothing can save you now. Let her go or I shall hound you to death.’

‘Big brother Nicovar and all our uncles have promised much the same, and they are still about it. I think I can tolerate the vain trumpeting of a dragg.’ He held Myka closer to him and indented her neck with his claw. ‘Tell Nicovar to fly from here tomorrow towards the beacon in the far north-east. Tell him to fly alone, nine treetops high, until he hears my call. I shall be waiting for him until the end of morning, and if he fails to arrive or brings others with him I shall slay his wife instantly. But if he comes his wife shall go free and I shall make account with him alone. But do not think of rescue, for I shall not free her until the account is made. All will be reckoned by the going of the Sun. Make haste and fly to him. Remember: alone, before the end of morning.’ He dragged Myka off into the glades leaving Melivar frozen in helpless dismay.

*

He found the others a half evening's flight to the west of Abeen, and he fell to the ground in front of Nicovar and wept. 'I've failed,' he cried. 'Let me die for it. Danodel has taken Myka. He means to kill you for her. Please let me die.'

Nicovar raised him to his feet and made him go over his miserable tale. Then he said, 'This is my doing. I was afraid to brave the terror of a brother's death, and now I have brought death to my wife, myself and our poor unhatched child. I must go to him come what may, and we must observe all his conditions.'

'If you die,' said Melivar, 'then I'll die too. No one shall deny me.'

'I shall deny you,' said Nicovar. 'You are the living retribution. You must seek out this evil when I am gone. You must do penance for my stupidity. Come, let's return to Pengemmen. If I can save Myka then I will; I've faced death often enough not to be afraid of it; but this is my task now; none of you can help me, except to sing out my name to the Sun.'

*

Nicovar rested at Pengemmen and rose with the new-coming of the Sun to take his leave. He solemnly forbade anyone to follow him and then flew straight into the morning air, nine treetops high.

As the others peered up after him, Melivar slipped into the shadow of the wood and ran towards the north-east. When he was out of sight and sound of Pengemmen he glided on a path a little below the treetops, keeping sight of Nicovar high above him. They progressed slowly, Nicovar on a straight high path and Melivar pitching and swerving beneath him. After about an hour Melivar thought he heard a high-pitched holla from somewhere up ahead, and he perched gently in the top branches of a tree. Nicovar too had heard the call and he was wheeling in a wide arc above; then he plummeted on back-spread wings towards the forest and Melivar took note of where he vanished.

*

Five torches were set at intervals around the pile of brushwood and Myka was tied to the stake at the high top of the pyre. Danodel had a sixth torch in his hand and stood holding the pyre with one claw as if for protection. Nicovar alit in the glade and stood facing him. 'I knew

you'd come,' said Danodel. 'We have a small amount of totting up to do: your life for all the injustices done to me. But fear not, I shall be magnanimous in my victory. See: I've already raised a funeral pyre in your honour.'

'Fly at him, Nicovar,' said Myka weakly, 'deny him his triumph. Kill him.'

'Before he reaches me the flames will have risen to encircle you,' said Danodel, 'and even if he kills me easily he will not be in time to rescue you. No, there is only one way to save you, and he knows it.'

'If I surrender to you,' said Nicovar, 'how can I be sure you will release my wife?'

'My quarrel is only with you,' said Danodel.

'You've killed others.'

'Only to get to you.'

'Then release her,' said Nicovar, 'and I will take her place.'

'First you must surrender yourself,' said Danodel, 'then I shall release her.'

'Release her first.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Danodel. 'You have nothing to bargain with. You simply have to trust my word.'

'Strike, Nicovar,' said Myka. 'There's no saving me. Don't sacrifice yourself as well. Strike and avenge my death.'

'Do you swear to release her?' asked Nicovar.

'I swear.'

'By all you hold most holy?'

'Yes, I swear.'

Though Myka sobbed protestingly Nicovar walked forward towards his brother and put his arms behind him to be bound. Danodel worked swiftly and efficiently, and soon Nicovar was trussed all about, unable to move anything but his feet. Danodel made him climb the steep pyre and stand with his back to the other side of the stake. 'Now,' said Nicovar, 'release my wife.'

'I shall release you both,' said Danodel, 'to the mercy of the fire.' Despite his struggles he tied Nicovar firmly to the stake. 'The more you struggle the more your bonds will cut through your own wife's flesh,' he said. 'Be gentle. Death will release you soon enough.'

And while Nicovar bellowed wrathfully at his own folly Danodel leapt back to the ground and took up one of the torches.

Melivar burst into the glade and boomed aloud, 'Stand back and drop the torch, or stand to face me.'

Danodel was only momentarily shaken. 'So,' he said, 'you've broken my conditions. Even more reason to have done with you all. And how convenient that you should join us here: when I have dealt with these then I shall deal with you, and all my father's honourable issue shall be finished at a stroke, cut out forever from the generations of your kind.'

'Stand away,' said Melivar. 'Let me fight you for your safety. If I win, release them; if I lose, I die too.'

'Win or lose you die too,' said Danodel. 'What should I have to fear from a scrawny dragg?'

Melivar was consumed with impotent rage and he lifted his head towards the Sun as if to beg his counsel. And before he'd even considered the matter he heard himself speak the words of fire.

Flames shot high from his mouth, and Danodel gaped in wonder at it. He stumbled back against the pyre almost setting light to it, and he felt his spirit quake within him. The others too were hushed in admiration.

Melivar stood silently in the glade, eyeing his enemy. At length he said, 'There's no escape. The vengeance of the Sun speaks through my mouth. Resign yourself.'

Danodel trembled, but his voice was still defiant. 'If the Sun wreaks his vengeance upon me I will have my vengeance too. If I must burn, these others will burn first!' He raised his torch as if to thrust it into the pyre.

'Wait!' said Melivar. 'Release them and you shall live.'

Danodel was scornful. 'For how long shall I live?'

'Till your life's proper end, I swear it.'

'I'd rather die now than live at your mercy. Come, spit your fire again and save me the trouble of setting my torch to the pyre.'

Melivar raised his hand in pause. 'Release them,' he said, 'and you shall be at liberty to go wherever you please. No one will follow you. You will be at nobody's mercy.'

Danodel stood silently considering these words. 'I will release them,' he said at last, 'if you tell me the secret of the fire.'

'No,' cried Melivar. 'It is a trust between me and the Sun. I may not tell the words to anyone.'

‘Tell them to me,’ said Danodel, ‘or your brother and sister die.’ He was quite calm now, knowing the exact balance of his chances.

Melivar trod a wide circle in his contemplation then halted at the far side of the glade. ‘I will fight you for the secret,’ he said. ‘If I win I shall slay you, but if I lose you may throw me on the pyre beside the others and use the secret of the Sun to burn us all to death.’

‘An excellent proposal,’ said Danodel, ‘except the odds are rather heavily on your side. One small whispered word of fire from you and I should be roasted out of the ring.’

‘I will not use the fire.’

‘You swear it?’

‘I do.’

‘An honourable oath, no doubt, but I’ve learned not to lay much store in honour or in oaths.’

‘I swear by my hope to die in the Sun’s grace that I will not use the fire to vanquish you.’

Danodel was certain that he meant it. Melivar was still small for his age, and although he was wiry his strength was not one half that of his own. The temptation was very great. ‘You must bind your mouth,’ said Danodel, ‘here, in full view, where I can see you make the knots; then I shall fight you.’

‘Agreed,’ said Melivar.

Myka and Nicovar protested helplessly, but Melivar was determined. He bound his own mouth about with rope till his teeth were locked tight together. Then he stood back in the centre of the glade.

Danodel stuck his torch into the earth and walked forward to meet him. The outcome was obvious from the first blow, for though Melivar was quick in spirit and strategy his weight was insufficient to tell against his bulky brother, and he was snorting for air through his bound nostrils before Danodel had even begun to pant. The contest lasted for less than five minutes, and when Melivar sank to his knees with the blood running from a hundred wounds Danodel stood malignantly above him bearing no cut longer than a single claw.

He stood with his back to the pyre and sliced through the ropes which bound his brother’s mouth, slashing his lips as he did so. ‘Tell me the words,’ he said. ‘As you hope to die in the Sun’s grace, tell me the words.’

Melivar found breath enough to speak and whispered the words to him as he had promised.

Danodel dragged Melivar to the pyre and threw him at its base. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘here is an end to all my disappointments. When I have done with you I shall deal with all your kindred: dragons, griffins, wyverns, everyone; every creature that is beloved of the dragon; every living thing that worships the Sun; all of them shall perish in the Sun’s own fire. But not every death of every one of them totted up together shall be as sweet as the deaths of you here now. Go, follow my hated father. Let your ashes mingle with his in the farthest winds of the world. And rejoice in the knowledge that the gift of the Sun has found a worthy home.’ He smiled broadly and stood back about a flame-shot from the pyre, and after a great intake of breath he spoke the words of the Sun.

Flames licked white from his mouth, but they’d only sped a claw’s breadth from his face before they turned about and streamed back on him. He cried out in surprise, then tried to shut his mouth; but still the flames issued from him and spread down around his body. In seconds his wings were covered to their wide tips and before he had wit to move the flames cloaked every part of him and his body was beginning to blush black. His eyes were visible through the flames, sharp with desperate madness. He seemed to cry aloud from within the fire, and already he was beginning to crumple. But when he looked at Melivar and saw the light of triumph on his face, he stumbled forwards towards the fire to set himself as a brand to it.

Melivar leapt up despite his agony and intercepted him. The flames burned him too but did not envelop him, and he tackled his dying brother to the ground and kept him from the pyre.

Danodel’s strength soon faltered and Melivar stood back from him and watched as he burned to ashes at his feet. Then he turned and stumbled back towards the pyre, and the others saw the huge burns on his arms and chest and the bare sinews of his wings. He tried to speak but he was at the limit of his strength, and he fell unconsciously to the soft forest floor.

*

He awoke in the cool shade of Pengemmen, all feeling dulled. He could hear his mother sobbing outside the nest, just as she had sobbed for Ganel a year before. Nicovar and Myka sat near him, smiling anxiously. ‘I was going to release you,’ he said.

‘The others arrived,’ said Nicovar. ‘They helped us bring you home.’

‘When?’

‘Last sundown,’ said Myka. ‘Sleep again, Melivar.’

He lay in silence, regarding almost casually the great swathes of bandage all about his body and wondering why his wings felt so uncommonly light and free. Then a sudden dizziness overcame him and he began to search for breath.

‘Lie still, little brother,’ said Nicovar. ‘Rest, rest.’

‘Did he die? Did he die?’ he gasped.

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, thank the Sun. I thought I’d ruined everything.’

‘No,’ said Nicovar, ‘you saved everything: Myka, myself, our child, all dragonkind; you saved them from the ruin of my folly.’

‘Not folly,’ said Melivar, ‘goodness, honour.’

‘Too much hunger after honour to be good.’

‘Don’t tire him,’ said Myka.

But Melivar was calm again, and the hot flush of agony had passed. ‘I think I’m too sick to live,’ he said. ‘Dying is a lot easier than I imagined.’

‘You’re not dying,’ said Nicovar.

‘Perhaps,’ said Melivar, ‘but my wings...’

‘They’ll mend,’ said Myka. ‘Just rest now.’

Melivar smiled. ‘I don’t mind, really. I should’ve minded if things had been different, but the Sun has kept his bargain.’ Then he held out his claw to his brother. ‘The words I gave to Danodel,’ he said, ‘the Sun’s words, I held them in trust for you. Aldragon got them from Yoal himself, and I knew they would destroy Danodel for they can only be spoken in perfect faith. I must give them to you before I die, for if Aldragon does not return you must keep our covenant with the Sun.’

‘He is returned,’ said Nicovar.

‘When?’

‘This morning.’

‘And is he well?’

Nicovar and Myka exchanged glances. ‘He is delirious,’ she said, ‘and his body is weak.’

‘How, weak? Wounded?’

‘No, but ravaged.’

‘Will he live?’

‘You will both live,’ said Nicovar.

But Melivar persisted hotly, ‘Will he live?’

‘Yes,’ said Myka, ‘we believe so.’

Melivar lay back, but again he began to breathe uncomfortably. ‘Perhaps this is ordained then,’ he said. ‘The words shall go with me into ashes. You shall be spared the burden for a while. Aldragon has returned to give you the words himself.’ But then he shook his head and said, ‘You’re sure he will live?’

‘Almost certain,’ said Myka.

‘Delirious? And weak?’ He looked tearfully at Nicovar. ‘If we both die the secret may go out of our race forever; but if I tell you and Aldragon lives you will be burdened before your time. If only I could be certain he will live.’

‘Don’t talk so much of dying,’ said Nicovar, ‘I can’t bear it.’

‘But you must,’ said Melivar. ‘You will be the Sun’s justice one day. You must know all there is to know about dying.’ He closed his eyes and began to gasp heavily. ‘Is my mother there?’

‘She’s outside,’ said Myka, ‘I’ll fetch her.’

‘Let me hold you first,’ said Melivar. Myka embraced him then fled the nest. Nicovar was leaving too but Melivar drew him closer and whispered something to him. Then they hugged gently and Nicovar went outside.

Espel hid her distress as much as she was able and went into the nest. No sound reached the waiting crowd outside, and Nicovar sat on a fallen tree with Myka curled beneath his wing, both of them crying freely. At last a long, bruising call of pain; echoed out into the air.

*

‘He is dead,’ said Nicovar.

The blood drained from Aldragon’s ears and he shook his head uncomprehendingly. ‘Dead?’

Nicovar told him the whole story, breaking off several times to weep. Aldragon wept too, but in silence, listening to every bleak word. ‘My father died to save me,’ said Nicovar at last. ‘He gave his life for mine. I’d sooner he’d not bothered, for now Melivar is dead too for my sake. Why should they die for me? What good did I ever do either of them?’

‘Oh, Nicovar,’ said Aldragon, ‘you do all things great good. There is a huge store of honour in you, the heritage of all who will spring from you. That was enough for them to die for.’ Nicovar shook his head doubtfully, but Aldragon continued, ‘I gave Melivar the power which killed him and he did fine work with it. His death was wonderful and I cannot regret it

however much I grieve for him. It may be you will never do anything in your life as noble as this he has done for you, but you must not betray his dying. Rejoice in it. Remember what he died for, and teach the lesson of his honour to all your sons.'

'Better he'd had sons of his own,' said Nicovar.

'All dragons shall be his sons,' said Aldragon, 'for he gave his life to save them.'

*

It is said that Danodel never lost his cloak of fire, and that it burns him in spirit as much as it did in flesh. He dwells in the ring of flames beneath Abeen, and those woeful spirits that pass that way at their lives' ends meet him on their passage through the fire, and some he allows through to be tormented by the pecols, and others he keeps to abide with him forever.

The end of the Tale of the Cloak of Wrath.

* * * * *

The Tale of the Tarl

Concerning the end of Nicovar's quest and the making of Argironel

In the days before the death of Aldragon, before the foundation of Argironel, the burning of dead heroes was a salutation to the Sun and none could say where the spirits of the departed found rest. So when Melivar was consigned to ashes and his name was sung aloud by the whole family of dragons the Sun gave no token of his blessing. But the love of the Sun is a strong love and the dragons knew that Melivar was cherished by him.

Myka's child which Melivar had died to save was named Kormelivar in his honour, and at his naming Aldragon spoke a new law that the tyggen of all unwitted beasts was the most holy and that Kormelivar should be its patron.

So for a while the world waxed bountifully, and Myka bore Nicovar many handsome dradgeflings.

But the years of the dragon are long, ordained by Yoal himself, and no other creature can match their strength in age. So when Aldragon was little beyond his hundredth year Esia took sick of wasting age and died. There were then perhaps only a hundred dragons and twenty or so each of wyverns and griffins in the whole world, but she was the mother of them all.

Aldragon slept alone from that time, taking no other creature into his nest, remaining true to his one love. But his sadness was tempered by sweet remembrances, and although he slept alone he was still the loving father of his kind.

And so, as dragons increased in strength and numbers, the laws of Aldragon became the laws for all creatures, and he became the Beast of Beasts.

*

When Yoal pursued the godlings back to Attal and lifted up the waters to drown that place, all but Asir had been trapped in the ooze of their creation; and before he took Asir into Dimnach Yoal commanded the great fishes which inhabited those waters to guard the godlings and prevent their escape. And for this office he named the fishes holy, and they were the tarls he spoke of to Aldragon. And as the shallow waters rose and fell at each new passing of the Moon the tarls swam above their captive godlings, and if any attempted to struggle free of the clinging ooze the tarls stirred the seabed with their tails and heaped new depths of it upon their prisoners.

But of all the godlings there was one which even the ooze could not enclasp. He was named Vispe, and in his life he had been of the first generation of the spiz, the long limbless ones who wriggle upon their bellies and kill by squeezing. His body had the length of a dragon but the thickness only of a slender young tree, and his skin had the smoothness of ice. He was taken upon Attal for his pride and his spirit was as loud as Asir's in the praise of the Sun.

But like Asir he tasted the sourness of disappointment, and he was forward in the party which struck at Athresa and Yoal upon the shores of Bryggne. He fled with the others back to Attal and was confined with them into the deeps; but when Yoal had departed and only the tarls kept watch he slipped easily through the slimy ocean floor and darted up towards the surface of the sea. The tarls spotted him and drove him back towards the seabed with mighty thrashings of their tails, and Vispe cowered there not daring to move. But the tarls had many godlings to guard and they were unable to be always vigilant with Vispe, and anon he slithered swiftly beneath the shifting sea-floor.

There he hid for a long time and wriggled blindly through the slime until he gauged he was beyond the watchfulness of the tarls. But when he burst again from the mud and tried to swim into the air there was one tarl quick enough to intercept him, and he gripped him fast in his mouth.

The tarls brought a huge shell creature to that place, called a jow, whose mouth was half as wide as the stretch of Vispe's body, and Vispe was clamped fast by the shell, trapped more cruelly than any other godling.

And so it remained for over a hundred years with the waters sometimes running high over Vispe's head, sometimes shallow enough for him almost to see the Sun unrippled. And as his torment lengthened his hatred of the Sun grew more intense, and he swore vengeance upon Yoal.

There came a time when hatred so suffused his spirit that he could have born any torment to secure his freedom; so, with dreadful resolution, he stretched himself around the centre of the jow and squeezed until its jaws snapped shut. As his tail was bitten off he screamed so loudly that the tarls sped back towards that place, but they were too late to prevent his escape into the upper air. He raced through the thin clouds back towards Bryggne and hid in the cool forests; but although he grew another tail, as the spiz can still in life, the agony of his self-wounding never left him and it fuelled further his hatred of the Sun.

In the days following the death of Esia he began to haunt the forests around Pengartel and observed the Yoal-like creatures of that place. Although hungry for revenge he made careful study of their society and pondered how best to wound them. He soon learned that Aldragon was the son of Yoal and that after him Nicovar was the first dragon of honour. He determined to revenge himself first on these two as the best likenesses of Yoal himself. But a spirit can only wound the spirit of the living, and although he sometimes assuaged his spite by biting the dragons' tender souls he searched for a way of wounding them in flesh.

*

The issue of Ganel's first nest was to become the greatest of the tribes, for although they lacked a generation except for Nicovar, his nest made haste to multiply its stock. Nicovar first sired Kormelivar, who first sired Koroal, who first sired Hovordo; and when Hovordo was newly named Nicovar was then near to ninety years of age and Myka was close to death. Already the russet dragons were half as numerous as any other, and when Myka died they lamented her as much as they'd lamented Esia.

After her death Nicovar grew steadily more solemn. Although he had fulfilled his promise to Aldragon and kept the memory of Melivar sharp in his sons' minds, he still felt bitterly the lesson of his own folly. As time passed and the great evils failed to reappear his yearning for some test of valour became ever more hopeless. Now, without Myka, the years stretched empty ahead and it seemed to him a hollow stock of honour that Ganel and Melivar had died to preserve.

His one delight was young Hovordo his great-grandson whose simple joy in living echoed Melivar's and whose laughter was careless enough to lighten even Nicovar's darkest mood. They explored the peaceful woodlands together and trod the shores, and Nicovar glimpsed again some of the world's wonders, and wished he had eyes young enough to marvel properly.

Hovordo grew strong and proud and worshipped Nicovar for his great fame and honour; yet however much he begged him, Nicovar would not tell his version of the tales, but would shake his head and dismiss them as foolishness.

One day, when Hovordo was ten years old, he ran a little ahead of Nicovar on a walk through the forest and hid in playful ambush. It was a favourite game and Nicovar called after him unworriedly, waiting for the sudden shriek of laughter and the tumble of childish wings. But no laughter came, and soon Nicovar began to search earnestly.

He heard a distant rustling in the bushes and glided silently towards it. There was a group of creatures just vanishing over the brow of a ridge, bundling something between them, and he swept after them faster than the wind.

They were mogoots, five or six of them, and they were carrying Hovordo by his arms and legs with his wings trailing through the grass and his head lolling heavily backwards. Nicovar gave a strident cry of rage and the mogoots looked up at him in terror. They dropped Hovordo to the ground and began to back away into the trees, waving their heavy wooden clubs before them. Nicovar, teeth bared, alit by Hovordo and found him unconscious but alive. He looked around for the mogoots who had disappeared into the forest and snarled majestically after them. Then as he bent to examine Hovordo a shower of stones came shying at him through the trees. He rose in indignation and flew noisily up into the air.

He could see the mogoots crowded together in an open space a dozen trees away and he flapped his wings powerfully, thrusting full tilt at them. They saw him coming but they never moved, and he spread his wings wide to fell them at one blow.

His head was thrown back and all the muscles of his wings were jarred, and he found himself arms, jaws, wings, legs, all entangled in an unseen mesh. Suddenly he was being

twisted around, wound inextricably in the netted vines, and mogoots were appearing all round him, all bearing clubs and advancing cautiously. He could tear through the tangling vines easily enough, but the mogoots were encircling him with stouter bonds and he was being dragged from his balance with his feet held high and his head circling in the dust. As he was spun around it seemed to him that dozens of the creatures were loping towards him, and before he remembered to speak the words of the Sun they were striking at him with clubs.

*

Salt water lapped his jaws and slopped into his eyes. He lay on the hard ribbed bark of a tree and the wet scent of it stirred his memory. It was gathering night overhead and he tried to shake himself into consciousness, and as he did so the pain awoke all over his body.

He raised his head and saw that he was on a narrow raft of three trunks, wallowing in the ocean. There was a strange sensation around his feet, not pain exactly, but gripping, heavy. He tried to focus in the disappearing light but he could see nothing. He heard a stirring from behind him and twisted his neck to see the standing shadows of two mogoots brandishing their clubs above him. The last light of day echoing over the horizon gleamed off their worn fangs as they grinned malevolently at him. The larger of the two raised his club high enough to shatter a tyggen's skull, but before he'd brought it crashing down Nicovar had spoken.

The mogoot burned like a feasting fire with the hair of his body clasping the flames to his skin. He screeched long and loud and tried to beat out the flames while the other mogoot stood in dumb amazement. Again Nicovar spoke and the second mogoot was also wreathed in fire. Whether because they were of too simple an intelligence to leap into the water or because they were as afraid of the ocean as of fire, they stood clutching one another in their dying agonies like children in the night. Nicovar watched in cold satisfaction until their struggles ceased and then he turned away. In the light of the flames he saw at his feet a great round-backed shell creature with its jaws clamped fast around his legs. He tried to pull free but although the creature's grip was not crushing it was secure, and however hard Nicovar tried he could move neither his legs nor the creature itself. Soon the ocean spray slopped over the smouldering remains of the mogoots and the light went out entirely.

Nicovar lay back in bleak exhaustion, amazed and mortified. Again he had leapt unwittingly into a trap; again he had mistaken folly for valour; again the sea was clutching for him. He was only thankful that there was no one here to step in and die for him, and if Hovordo still lived the race of dragons would only be the better for his own loss.

Suddenly he felt a sharp inner pain as if his spirit had been wound about with wire, and he screeched aloud into the darkness. Then he heard a little voice, speaking as if from within himself, quick and excited: 'Nicovar,' it mocked, 'shadow of vainglorious Aldragon, foremost of the hated sons of Yoal, arbiter of hollow pride, trumpet of the Sun!'

'Who's there?' asked Nicovar.

'Death,' said the voice. 'Kinder than was meted out to me. The body enjoys a sweet and passing death, but a spirit can drown forever and never die. You will have one brief inkling of how I fared, a few swift minutes in place of a hundred years. But not so swift as my poor murdered slaves. Linger here until the seas rise and tip you towards the ooze and learn for yourself the great injustice of the dragon.'

'Who are you?' asked Nicovar.

But the spirit only laughed, and Nicovar felt the pain unwind from his soul and vanish with the laughter into the night.

Yoal arrived in the Moon but gazed unseeingly upon the water. The Sun followed from below the ocean's rim, but he was soon hidden in rushing cloud. The seas tipped and tossed the raft, and Nicovar lay helpless as the great shell inched closer and closer to the edge. He craned in all directions trying to catch a sight of land, but everywhere was endless sea, wave mounting upon wave. He tried to grip the raft beyond his head, anchoring himself with his claws, but each time the shell moved his claws tore deeply through the sodden wood and he was dragged further towards the edge. At length the shell rocked for a while on the far tip of the raft, half buoyed in the water half resting on the wood, and then it slid at a gentle angle into the sea dragging Nicovar in its wake.

It sank with dreadful slowness and for a moment Nicovar thought he could support it as he swam, but eventually its weight told and the dragon was pulled beneath the surface. He'd sunk only a few feet from the sea-top by the time his breath was clamouring for escape, and he could still see the grey clouds scudding overhead.

Blackness overwhelmed him suddenly and he was conscious of a surge of power. Daylight burst in on him again as if through a cave mouth, and at the lip of the cave there were rows of white teeth with seawater swirling around them. He seemed to be racing across the waves in a closed chariot, peering out through its raised canopy. It was some hours before the journey ended, and he felt himself being tipped suddenly onto his side and falling roughly downwards after the heavy shell.

He found himself lying on a flat, raised rock near to a familiar shore with the shell creature still gripping his ankles; and there by the deep sheer side of the rock swam a tarl. Its

eyes sparkled cheerfully at him and its great high mouth was open in a grin. It raised its tail in salutation and then closed its jaws.

There was a sound just on the edge of Nicovar's hearing, high and melodious, like a sweet song. The tarl was looking at the great shell and nosing in upon it. Slowly the shell's grip eased, and as if in response to the tarl's song its jaws began to open. Nicovar dragged his legs clear and crouched on the rock in amazement as the tarl turned and seemed to caress the shell with its tail and tip it gently back into the sea.

Nicovar would have blessed the tarl but he saw it was blessed already, and instead he leant forward with his snout and nuzzled its smooth chin. The creature gave a hollow whirp of farewell and swam away.

*

Nicovar returned safe to Pengartel where Hovordo lay bruised but not otherwise hurt. The tale of his rescue served only to increase his honour among the dragons, though he himself thought it a dishonour. Four times he had been saved from his own rash folly; first by the tyggen, then by Ganel, then by Melivar, now by the tarl; always he had been rescued from some extremity; never had he made resolution by himself.

He conferred long with Aldragon and between them they divined that it must have been another godling from Attal that had moved the mogoots to this atrocity. Yoal had spoken of Asir's banishment into Dimnach, yet Aldragon had met Asir in Abeen; likely another godling had escaped and had caused the simple-witted mogoots to worship him. However it was it had opened again the pot of evil which Aldragon had thought to close beneath Abeen.

The dragons were vigilant from that time whenever they scented mogoots and that creature's meat, which we call fleen, became the chief item of their diet. Mogoots multiply swiftly, as we know, but constant hunting during that time kept their numbers low. Sometimes a foray of dragons would surprise a horde at worship and find roughly hewn fetishes in the shape of spiz scattered amongst their kill. But whatever spirit it was that moved them it was many long years before they struck again.

*

Aldragon was found at the foot of a high cliff, trapped by a rock, his right wing crushed beyond healing. Around him lay the charred remains of a dozen or so mogoots. He was then three years short of his second century and no one expected him to live.

His strength returned however and by the autumn of that year he seemed hale in all but his wing; but the winter began hard and turned harder, and it was clear he could not survive until spring.

He called the elders of his family together into council and gave them his dying laws, and then he made division of the realms according to his wisdom.

‘All dragons are brothers,’ he said, ‘from now until the ending of the world, and when they cease to be brothers that will be the world’s end. But I will give them realms, distinct and separate, where they may hold sway over the lesser of the Sun’s creatures. Let all dragons be welcome in all realms, except those that are the destroyers of realms, and let there be freedom of intercourse between you all. Sabel,’ he said, ‘you were my first born son and you have carried my word beyond Bryggne even to the borders of Fagran. Let Fagran be your dominion then, yours and the afdragons that spring from you. Hanje, you have spread light as far as Miggria, and the ildragons of your blood shall have that land to rule over. Vish, you have flown over Jacho in the farthest east, and your jadragons shall have it for their own. And Stroh, the hot deserts and green valleys of strange Syppia are for you and your wendragons for ever.’ Then he turned to Nicovar. ‘I give you my beloved Bryggne,’ he said, ‘for it is a small region and the nordragons are yet the smallest of the kin. But though it is small it is the first home of all dragons and the seat of honour, and I give it to you even before my own sons because you shall be the first darig after me.’ He turned to his sons. ‘There is not one of you who has not lived nobly and fought bravely, and I could wish to give you all the gift of fire; but it is a cruel gift and Nicovar has it already from his brother Melivar. He shall have the disposing of it and his word is now the justice of the Sun. I shall soon be summoned from this place to go I know not where, but I hope to carve a path for you in the heavens as we have all carved our paths together upon Earth. If the Sun wills it I will watch over you as my father Yoal has watched over me, and I will fly with you all again in spirit.’

He lay swathed in deep furs that night and passed away with the new-coming of the Sun.

*

The great nest at Pengartel was fired for his funeral and the flames rose fiercely into the winter dusk at his death feast. All creatures bent back their claws and it was as if the ending of

the world had already come. But when the flames began to die, high in the unblemished dark above them about a quarter sky-width from the Moon a tiny spark appeared, no greater than a tear-drop from Yoal's eye. It grew no larger but became brighter and whiter as the night deepened, and it remained fixed in a single place, and the Moon glided through the Sun's shadow in an arc about it. The dragons gazed in wonder throughout the night, and they sang the song of Aldragon's long life and holiness, and at the ending of the song the Sun arose to greet the new god, and the lamentation of the dragons was seasoned with joyfulness.

*

There is no adequate translation of the Song of Aldragon, and the rhymed versions of it we sing today cannot convey the outburst of poetic fire that so illumined that old language. It is best to leave the poetry to the scholars and catch what we can of that historic joy in plain prose. Here is the valedictory stanza:

Hover on mended wings, First light of the Sun's new-making, Spirit of constancy, Spirit of valour, Observe us in our want And lighten our ignorance; Carving a path for us, Being a path for us, First star, Best star, May your wings beat for ever.

*

The dragons dispersed slowly. Aldragon's sons were all too old to build new nests in untamed places, and while the younger generations of their blood colonized the far-flung world they dwelt on in Bryggne. The griffins and wyverns were granted freedom of movement throughout all the realms by general consent; likewise the dywiverns and egyptyn, although they tended not to wander far from Bryggne

When Hovordo was a grandsire in his own nest Nicovar said to him, 'The host of stars assembles. My uncles and my grandfather echo the Sun's brilliance in the night sky. It is my best hope soon to be one of them, and I must choose the darig after me. While I still have my strength I must adventure once more from Pengemmen, and I must leave the Sun's words in dutiful custody. You shall be the next darig. Great Aldragon himself saw your wisdom of youth, and his voice would second mine in your acclamation. Keep your knowledge of the secret safe, for while I live I shall hazard mine in one last throw.' Then he told him the words of fire and walked forth from Pengemmen.

He came to the sea coast near to where the flat rock stood where he had been landed by the tarl and he gazed out over the ocean. But though he stood there for three long days hoping that by some miracle the tarl would return, the ocean bore up nothing but waves.

Then, as he walked sombrely along the coast, he met a maldocil who lay wallowing in a pool. 'Can you speak the tongue of the tarl?' he asked.

'I can speak a tongue the tarl will understand,' said the maldocil, 'but the tarls live in a far region of the seas and it is beyond my strength to swim there.'

'For the love of Yoal,' said Nicovar, 'find some fish ready to bear a message for me, and bring a tarl to the flat rock near Pengemmen.'

'Willingly,' said the maldocil, 'and for the love of Yoal I shall return with the tarl and interpret your words to it.' The maldocil floundered into the surf and disappeared.

After another span of days as Nicovar sat on the flat rock beyond the shore he saw a sudden commotion in the far off calm of the sea as a great tail burst high from the water in greeting. The tarl came to the surface by the high rock and upon his back Nicovar saw he bore the maldocil.

'Is this the tarl that saved me?' asked Nicovar, 'for his eyes have the selfsame sparkle and his mouth wears the same grin.'

'No,' said the maldocil, 'for that tarl is now too old for such a journey, and he has sent his son to do you honour.'

'Honour?' asked Nicovar. 'Do they remember me?'

'You are sung of in their favourite tale. They call you the Son of the Moon and they sing of your bravery at the brink of death.'

Nicovar nuzzled the chin of the tarl, which lilted softly in reply.

They spoke for many hours, the maldocil translating every word into song, every song into word, and Nicovar learned what he had already guessed: that a godling had slipped his bondage by Attal and flown off into the sky; that after many years the tarls had heard the whisper of the godling's voice within the waters; and that when they had sped in pursuit of the voice one of the tarls had found Nicovar trapped by a giant jow, sliding grimly towards death.

They spoke too of the other godlings and how they were still trammelled by the ooze, and how some still called aloud their hatred of Yoal and how some remained always silent. 'How can I make a reckoning with these godlings?' Nicovar asked at last, 'for but one of them has yet escaped and he has brought misery enough to my race.'

The tarl mulled silently for a time, then sang something to the maldocil.

‘He begs us to ride with him back towards Attal and he will make council with his elders what can be done.’

So Nicovar flew onto the tarl’s back beside the maldocil, and the tarl swam with them towards the west.

*

They came to a place in the ocean where the tarls swam close and Nicovar counted many hundreds of them within a small scope. One tarl came near and despite the milky blindness of its eye it sparkled cheerfully at Nicovar. This tarl swam beside the other and sang gently, and the maldocil led Nicovar onto the old tarl’s back. They swam into the centre of the host where the water was calm and shallow, and after they had lain still for a while Nicovar could see by the shafting of the Sun’s light many hundred faces gaping up from the grey sea bed.

The faces were bathed in slime and small sea creatures crawled unhindered over them. There was still a stabbing hatred in some eyes, but in others there was a hollow depth of gloom. The faces spread in a great circle over a wide high mound within the sea, and the tarls were gathered in an outer ring around them.

‘May the Sun’s blessing forever be upon you,’ said Nicovar, ‘and I hope your loving vigil will soon be at an end. I have come to deal the Sun’s justice to his enemies, and I beg you to deliver them to my judgement.’

The maldocil translated, and the tarls sang softly one to another for a great while. Nicovar began to feel despair for he could not see how the godlings could be delivered to him. But at length he saw the tarls begin to form a perfect circle round the sunken peak and press their bodies in upon each other. The waters were now so shallow that the tarls could rest their bellies on the seabed and still raise their tails into the air; and they began to beat with their tails, forcing the water away from Attal, stemming back the sea. The waters drained from within the circle until Nicovar could see the grey ooze emerge into the light, and as the sea ran back he gazed in wonder at the huge circle of the many hundred tarls standing like a bulwark against the ocean.

The godlings looked in startlement towards the sky, and some shook with fear and others strove to wriggle from their beds. And because the sea had withdrawn at such a rush it had swept much of the ooze after it, and Nicovar saw to his dismay that many of the godlings had already climbed free and were darting high into the upper air.

He felt again the sharp pang of his folly, and although he flew high in all directions stemming the escape, hundreds of the godlings sped beyond his reach into all the corners of the world. Many were burned, for Nicovar spoke the Sun's words mightily, but though they burned without slackening they still fled into the air and disappeared beyond sight.

Nicovar was in self-rage and would have scorched himself to ashes if he could. But after the godlings had vanished he turned to where Attal still stood free of the waters, and he saw where many hundreds of the godlings had not striven to move but were stuck fast in the extremity of despair. Nicovar swooped from the high midair, inflamed to finish them, and he aimed his fiery muzzle at the centre of the throng. But something about the godlings' manner gave him pause, and before he spoke the words of fire he cried, 'Face the bright damnation of the Sun!'

'Yea,' said a godling, 'bless us with eternal damnation, for we have done eternal wrong.'

Nicovar hovered above the godling and tried to catch the line of his eye. 'Why do you not escape like the others?' he asked. 'Why do you accept this retribution?'

'Because it is deserved,' said the godling. 'A fiery torment or a watery one: whatever is worst in creation that is our just lot, and we welcome it.'

'You welcome it?'

'We have blighted all creation by our neglect, and we are unworthy to be spared.'

Nicovar flew down and took the godling up in his arms and flew with him to where the tarls still beat back the waters. He bade them cease for a while and sat with the godling on the old tarl's back as the waters flowed once more over the sunken peak.

*

'My name is Couril,' said the sombre godling, 'and in my life I was a jein, as beautiful as any egyrn, as strong as any grarn. I was of the first hundred upon Attal and my words were counted wise among the elders. But when Asir led sad Nagan and many other discontents to strike at blessed Yoal, those who stayed with me in worship of the Sun did nothing to prevent it; for though many wished to forewarn Yoal of the coming treachery I counselled against it, for I saw the world's darkness crowding even upon Attal and I was pleased to see it vanish for a time.

'But it was for love of myself not for love of the Sun that I spoke, and when the darkness returned to overwhelm us I saw too late the hideousness of my error. Let me return to my

torment, for there is not enough water in all the world to drown out my wrong, nor enough fire to burn the blemish from my soul.'

'Wait,' said Nicovar, 'let me look into your face.' Couril raised his head and Nicovar saw within his eyes an endless passage of woe. 'I am the Sun's justice,' said the dragon, 'but I am his absolution too. I can plead an ending to his retribution.'

'Do not,' said Couril, 'for if there were another paradise as blessed as was Attal, I should unbless it by my presence. Let me return to my fellows.'

Nicovar held the godling's hand, and although he could not sense the touch of it he could feel the restlessness of his spirit. Here, he knew, was the ending of his quest, and he spoke kindly. 'There shall be no other paradise for you,' he said, 'nor for any of your fellows, nor indeed for me; for I have work for us to do. Amend for me the rashness of my deeds; arise from this place, you and your brother penitents, and follow the spiteful spirits I have released into the world. Counter their hatred with your benignity and guard my people from their malice. Thus your hardships will be endless and you can make a handsome retribution to the Sun.' The deep coldness in Couril's eyes blurred softly for a moment. 'And if you bear this burden for me,' said Nicovar, 'I shall bear an equal one for you; for I will not take my place in the heavens when I die, even if the Sun reserves for me a star as bright as Aldragon's; I will roam the midway air between the Earth and the stars, and I will guard you from evil as you guard my fellows upon Earth.'

Couril smiled brightly, and his spirit seemed lit within by a thin wash of light. 'Oh, blessed misery,' he cried, and Nicovar saw where the woe within his eyes had turned to fire.

And that was the beginning of the coura, who do battle against the vispa for the dragon's sake; for wherever the vispa lodge the coura will drive them thence, and if ever a visp takes hold of a dragon's soul a cour will fight him for it.

*

Nicovar lived to be two hundred and twelve, and though the nordragons had settled all the far stretch of Bryggne by his death they returned to Pengemmen for his funeral. His nest was lit beneath him as Aldragon's had been, and as the flames began to die the dragons watched for the coming of his star.

But when Nicovar faced the Sun he begged, 'Let me hold faith with the coura, for they hold faith with me. Set me in the midway air to roam above the Earth, and only when all evil is banished let me become a star.'

‘Well,’ said the Sun, ‘you shall become a var, and wander as you wish; but you shall be as holy as the stars and every whit as wonderful. But first awake your brother Melivar, for he sleeps in Eyl and it is time he too was a star.’

So Nicovar went to Eyl and woke his brother. And when Melivar heard that Nicovar was to wander the midway air he asked, ‘Let me wander too, for I have much to see and much to learn.’ And although he was a star the Sun allowed it.

And the dragons saw no white star arise at Nicovar’s death feast, but there arose instead a point or red light above the low horizon; and the light moved not as the stars moved but took its own watch over the world.

And later they saw a moving star, trailing a great following of flames on its rush through the heavens, and though it soon vanished on its endless quest it returned after a long period of years, again and again, two or three times in each dragon’s life.

And so Argironel held stars and also vars, and as the legion of the ages marched the heavens grew bright with them.

The end of the Tale of the Tarl,
and of the Tales of Nicovar.

###

About the Author

[Peter Robert Scott](#) trained at RADA and during a long career has written many plays, eight of which have been produced professionally in theatres throughout England. Currently living and working in France.

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