ALASTAIR CHISHOLM

DRAGON STORM

Tomas and Ironskin



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Tomas and Ironskin

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DRAGON STORM

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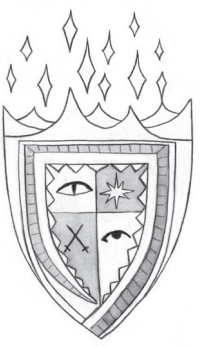
In the land of Draconis, there are no dragons.

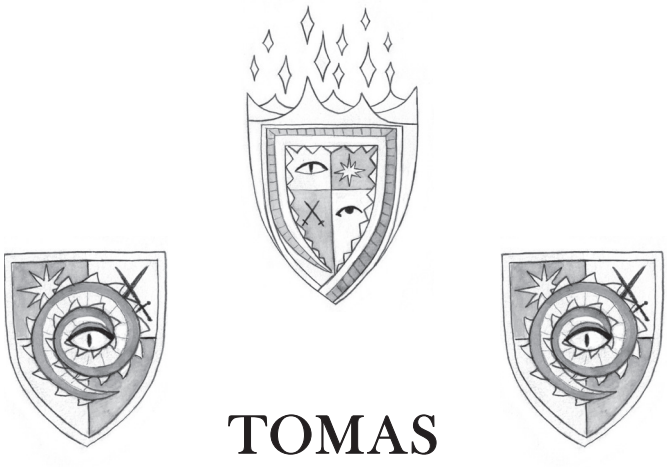
Once, there were. Once, humans and dragons were friends, and guarded the land. They were wise, and strong, and created the great city of Rivven together.

But then came the Dragon Storm, and the dragons retreated from the world of humans. To the men and women of Draconis, they became legends and myth.

And so, these days, in the land of Draconis, there are no dragons…

…Or so people thought.





TOMAS

Tom worked the bellows, blowing air into the fire until it glowed a fierce yellow. Beside him, his dad hammered at a long piece of metal. He moved quickly, holding the piece in a pair of pincers. Sparks flew with every clang.

"Ready, Tomas?" he roared.

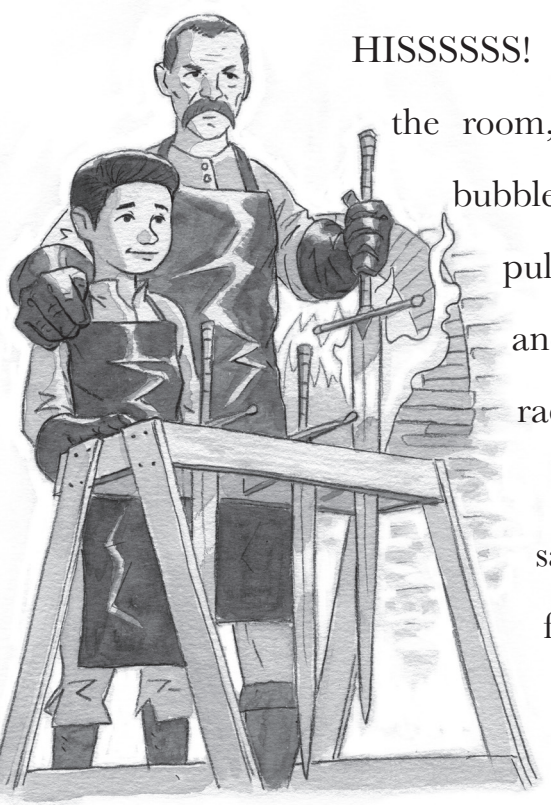
"Yes!" shouted Tom.

Dad plunged the metal into the fire, ignoring the spitting flames. He kept it

there until it softened and then removed it, gleaming orange, and hammered again at the edges until it was the shape of a sword.

Tom gasped in the heat.

"Get ready!" Dad warned. He lifted the sword and sank it deep into a water trough, and there was a ferocious HISSSSSS! Steam filled the room, and the water bubbled and spat. He pulled the sword out and placed it on the rack beside the fire.



"There," he said, wiping his forehead. "We'll

let that temper, and it will be ready to polish. Good work, son."

Tom grinned. His face was hot and his arms ached, but he loved helping in the smithy. He loved working the forge, and the way he and Dad started with lumps of ugly metal and turned them into tools, or horseshoes, or swords. Now Dad looked at the rack, where eight swords lay ready, and nodded in approval.

"Time for lunch."

Dad prepared some food and Tom laid the table, finishing just as Mum arrived from the marketplace.

"Goodness, look at you!" she scolded. "Covered in soot in my lovely kitchen! Shoo!"

"Sorry!" said Dad. "Come on, let's get clean." He squeezed past Mum, giving her a big kiss and smearing soot over her face.

Mum spluttered. "Out! Out, or you'll be eating with the pig!"

Laughing, they went to the water pump to wash, then came back and sat down.

"How was the marketplace?" asked Dad, wolfing down a huge piece of bread.

Mum sighed. "Quiet. King Godfic has raised the grain tax again. Mildred Foxton says it's because of dragons burning the crops."

Dad grunted. "Maybe he just wants more money to add another tower to his palace."

"Shush," said Mum, glancing at Tom.

"Keep that talk to yourself, Felipe."

Dad glowered but said nothing.

Tom said, "Are there really dragons?"

Dad sighed. "A long time ago," he said. "They were all over the kingdom, and here in Rivven, too."

"They were terrible," said Mum. "Enormous! And they breathed fire! It was a wild age."

"But that was centuries ago," said Dad. "There hasn't been a dragon in Rivven for a thousand years."

Tom frowned. "If there aren't any dragons, then why do we make dragonswords?"

"The king insists, in case they ever come back." Dad shrugged. "Which is good news

for us! Business is poor. The gold from this order will pay for food until spring comes."

He finished his lunch.

"Let's push on, Tomas. Captain Hork wants to collect them tomorrow."



The forge had cooled, but after the chilly winter air outside it still seemed incredibly hot. Dad brought the swords down from the rack. They didn't have handles yet, and they were black, with rough edges. Tom and Dad got to work.

Dad added the handles, and Tom sharpened the blades with a special grinding stone that spat sparks, scraping away the rough edges until the swords were smooth

and sharp. The metal had a strange, swirling pattern, like oil. Dad said it was because of the secret ingredients he mixed into the ore, making them not just swords, but dragonswords, able to cut through a dragon's hide.

Tom placed each sword carefully back on the rack. But as he reached for the last one, he glanced at the forge – and gasped!

There was a face in the fire!

A long face hung in the flames like a shadow, dark and shimmering. It wasn't human; it was longer, and bony, with a crest at the top of its head, and its eyes were two circles of fire.

Tom gazed at it as if in a dream. The eyes

burned! Its mouth opened and showed rows of sharp, vicious teeth.

"Tomasssssss," it hissed.

Tom's mouth fell open.

"Be ready, Tomasssssss…"

"Tomas! Tom, what are you doing?"



Tom blinked and looked up. Dad was frowning at him.

"Are you all right, son?"

"I-I thought…" Tom peered into the fiery forge, but there was nothing there. "I thought I saw something," he muttered.

Dad smiled. "It's been a long day. Let's finish tomorrow."

Tom nodded, and they went in for supper.

That evening, tucked into his tiny bunk, he thought again about the face. The bony head, and the teeth, so sharp. And the eyes…

He woke in the dark with a start. Then he laughed to himself at his imagination, and went back to sleep.



They finished the last sword the next morning. Tom checked the flames several times, but today there was nothing – just crackling wood and white-hot charcoal.

He held up the sword, watching it glitter.

Dad inspected it. "Good job, son. Let's finish up. Captain Hork will be here soon."

They packed them into crates by the doorway. But as Dad left, Tom looked again at the fire – and the face was there! Unmistakable, dark and fierce, with eyes of flame…

"Be ready, Tomasssss," it hissed. "He's here…"

"Tomas!" bellowed Dad. "Come on, he's here!"