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Opening extract from

The Dragonology Chronicles: The Dragon Diary

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Published by

Templar Publishing

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PROLOGUE

Beyond the dunes, beyond the scrub, three red sunsets and three orange dawns out of the city of Jaisalmer, far away across the Thar Desert, the vultures wheeled high in the air. A man sat back on his camel and looked up at them. He drew his hand across his face to shade it, peering into the sun to watch the vultures dive, then flap upwards again with agitated, frustrated movements. A hot wind had been blowing from the east all day. Now a sudden change in its direction made his camel start. It flared its nostrils and looked around. The man patted its neck and spoke to it soothingly. But his face, under his slouch hat, looked grim. He set off again.

It wasn't long before the man spotted the first carcass. Sand was already starting to cover it. The man climbed down from his camel and covered the last hundred yards on foot. He saw that what had looked like eight small dunes were, in fact, eight more carcasses, all half-covered with sand. The smallest carcass was about eight feet long; the largest, over forty,

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its scaly bulk disappearing underground. Along the length of their bodies, the creatures were like snakes. But at the top end, each looked almost human, with a torso, a head and two arms. On closer inspection, it was clear that they were not human at all. They were dead nagas.

The man bent down to examine the smallest naga more closely. It was still only a baby. Dried yellow spittle trailed from its mouth. The man frowned. He put down his pack and took out a notebook and a small bag. Then he unclasped a pocketknife and reached down to take a small sample of the spittle on the blade. Being as careful as possible, he lifted the knife up towards him very, very slowly until...

A rifle cocked behind his ear. The man froze.

A cockney voice said, "Give 'em a break, mate. They're dead." The man turned around slowly to face his assailant.

The cockney, who was wearing a dirty black jacket that was streaked white with desert dust, grinned at him with yellow teeth.

"You're Noah Hayes," he said. "I know your name. And I know your game, too. You can call me Shadwell."

The man put away his pocketknife, then took off his hat and used it to wipe his brow. He put it back on his

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head and spat on the ground.

"You're *Shadwell*?" he said, speaking in a Texan drawl. "I've heard you're a dealer in dragons. That is one *ugly* profession. What do you want from me, Shadwell?"

"If you're so interested in dead dragons and all, maybe you'd like to see a live one," replied Shadwell, grinning again.

Keeping his gun pointed at Noah Hayes with his right hand, Shadwell unbuttoned his jacket with his left. As he did so, a puff of smoke came out of the inside pocket, and a small, scaly creature climbed out and looked at Hayes with hard, beady eyes. It was a dwarf dragon.

"Say hello to Flitz," said Shadwell.

The dragon peered around and bared his teeth at Hayes. But as soon as he saw the dead naga, he recoiled and looked very much as though he would rather climb back into the safety of Shadwell's jacket pocket.

Seeing Flitz's discomfort, Shadwell gave a harsh laugh.

"That's right, Flitz," he said. "The poor nagas all got sick and died. But don't worry. You don't have to touch them. We've got some kidnapping to do instead."

Shadwell gestured towards Hayes. Flitz turned to fix his eyes on the Texan. Then, not looking away from him for a moment, the dragon climbed up onto Shadwell's

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shoulder. Shadwell didn't move, and he kept his rifle aimed at Hayes.

"Go get him, boy," he said.

At Shadwell's command, Flitz flew straight at Noah Hayes with his claws outstretched and his fangs bared, at the ready.

Hayes screamed and tried to cover his face. Just as he did so, out from behind a dune stepped the most sinister-looking woman he had ever seen...



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Chapter I
The Egg

Dragons cannot help but find the sounds humans produce, when they attempt to speak Dragonish for the first time, incomprehensible, no matter how much they roar, gurgle or hiss.

—Liber Draconis, 'First Wintermoon'

Looking out of the classroom through the rain, I noticed that Dr. Drake's garden seemed strangely empty. Usually there were birds sheltering in the branches of the magnolia tree, but today there were none to be seen, and instead I watched a single fat rabbit hop out of the beech forest and onto the lawn. Inside the classroom, Dr. Drake himself was standing in front of the small blackboard, teaching us the rudiments of dragon grammar.

My sister, Beatrice, and I had been enrolled in Dr. Drake's school some months earlier and had already learned a great deal about dragons and the little-known science of dragonology. We would have learned more had our studies not been interrupted by all manner of

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adventures, albeit ones instructive in themselves as far as learning about the ways of dragons was concerned. In comparison, being back in the classroom was a bit of a bore, though normally I would have been fascinated by Dr. Drake's lessons. The trouble was that for nearly three weeks we had spent every day inside because of incessant downpours. Now all I wanted to do was to head out into the forest and study a real dragon again.

I looked back out across the lawn. Suddenly, the rabbit looked up. It paused, and then it was gone, streaking away behind a flower bed and into the orchard. At the edge of the forest, the leaves of the magnolia had begun shaking wildly.

Jamal! I thought.

I leaned sideways in my chair, trying to catch a glimpse of the playful wyvern that Dr. Drake was taking care of until he was old enough to be returned to his native home in Africa. But instead of Jamal, I spotted a long, leathery, snakelike body scurrying down out of the tree and slithering away into the ferns beyond. It was only Weasel, a knucker dragon that lived in the forest near Castle Drake. No doubt she had been out hunting rabbits and had been using the tree for cover.

But the tree continued to shake, and I decided that

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there was a good chance that Jamal was there as well. I turned to tell Dr. Drake, but then I realised that he was already talking to me. I only managed to catch the end of what he said, which had something to do with stopping daydreaming and concentrating on the job at hand. Beatrice, who was sitting at the next desk, glared at me.

"Er, I'm very sorry, Dr. Drake," I said. "But—"

"Forget the forest for once, Daniel!" said Dr. Drake. "You are no longer a mere Dragonological Apprentice. As an Alumnus, you will do much better in your studies once you can speak Dragonish. And you won't be able to speak any Dragonish if you can't conjugate verbs."

"But Jamal has—"

"Never mind Jamal!" he cried. "Mademoiselle Gamay is looking after him, and I am sure she is doing an excellent job."

Dr. Drake turned back to the blackboard.

"Now!" he said. "The verb meaning 'to fly'. It is a regular verb, like all verbs in Dragonish. Who can remember what it is — Daniel?"

My mind went blank. I had been terrible at languages at boarding school, and this was no different. This wasn't dragonology — it was torture! Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the tree had stopped shaking.

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Where had Jamal gone now?

I looked down at my desk and could feel Dr. Drake looking at me, waiting for my answer. Any chance that I might ever grow up to be a Dragonologist First Class, let alone a Dragon Master like Dr. Drake, was slipping further and further away.

"Beatrice?" said Dr. Drake at last.

"*Algrrrrai*, sir," said Beatrice, giving the *r* in the middle what I felt to be a deliberately annoying roll.

"Good," said Dr. Drake. "*Algrai*, 'to fly'. The command form, 'Fly!' Darcy?"

"The same," said Darcy. "*Algrai*."

"Good. 'I fly'. Beatrice?"

"*Algroo*."

" 'You fly'?"

"*Algrow*."

"You see, Daniel," said Dr. Drake. "It has the same form as the verb we learned yesterday, 'to see'. *Ivàhsi, ivàhsoo, ivàhsow, ivàhsi, ivàhsumble, ivàhsumple, ivàhsarch!*"

"Yes, sir." I said.

"So can you conjugate *algrai*, Daniel?"

I fiddled nervously in my pocket, where I kept my most prized possessions: a piece of flint and a piece of iron pyrites. The last time we had managed to do some

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dragonological fieldwork, Darcy, a fellow student who was staying at Castle Drake like ourselves, had given Beatrice and me a set each. He had shown us how dragons use these stones to make the sparks that light the flammable venom in their mouths. But my knowledge of how dragons produce fire was not going to help me in my current predicament.

"Daniel?" said Dr. Drake.

"Algrai, algroo, algrow, algri, algrumble, algrumple, al — er —"

"Algrarch!" said Dr. Drake. "But of course, it's not like an *r*. It's more like a..."

"Like a what, sir?" I said.

"You have to roll your *r*s, Daniel, like a dragon. Like this! Like—"

But just at that moment, a deafening roar from outside the classroom drowned out Dr. Drake's voice. The walls shook. Darcy, Beatrice, and I all turned around to look out through the window at the back of the classroom and saw a large but very familiar dragon's head pressed sideways up to the glass, staring in at us with one eye.

"Oh!" cried Beatrice. "It's Jamal! Jamal has come to visit us!"

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"PRRRRAISICH HOYARRRRI!" roared the adolescent wyvern in greeting.

"That's the way to do it!" shouted Darcy. "That's the way to roll your *r*s!"

We all laughed, including Dr. Drake, who laughed so hard that he actually had to take off his flat cap and mop his brow with it.

Jamal bobbed up and down like a gigantic plucked turkey right outside the window as the rain bounced off his scales. And there, behind him, was Mademoiselle Gamay, holding a torn umbrella in one hand and lifting up her long, damp skirt with the other as she dashed across the lawn.

"Oh, dear," said Dr. Drake. "I believe that Mademoiselle Gamay needs a spot of help, after all."

By now Mademoiselle Gamay had dodged inside the door and was shaking the broken umbrella frantically.

"I am so sorry, Ernest," she said. "Jamal is very nearly ready to fly, and I just could not keep him at the compound. He has been missing the children, I think."

"I expect that he has, Dominique," said Dr. Drake. "But we had better take him back straight away. We must not encourage him to keep escaping. I shall come and help."

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"Can we help, too?" I asked.

Dr. Drake looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Darcy can help," he said. "But I think that you two ought to go and check up on the egg. It should be ready to hatch any day now."

Normally I would have been happy to do as he asked, for it wasn't any ordinary egg we were looking after. It was the egg of a European dragon; Dr. Drake had put us in charge of it until it hatched. But I did long to go outside.

My face must have grown longer, since Dr. Drake added just as he left, "Cheer up, Daniel! It can't rain forever. By my estimate, your parents ought to have reached Suez by now. The dragon chick is sure to hatch before they come home. I dare say you and Beatrice are rather looking forward to showing them how well you've been doing with it!"

Dr. Drake was right. I *was* looking forward to it, very much. I hadn't seen my parents for four years, since they had travelled to the mysterious Indian city of Jaisalmer to work for the city's ruler, the Maharawal, as dragonological investigators. They had been engaged on an urgent mission among the nagas of the Thar Desert, but now, at last, they were coming home.

Beatrice and I picked up our dragonological record

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books — in which we wrote down anything we learned about dragons — and, huddling together under a black tarpaulin, we splashed our way along the garden path to the old coal shed, where we had prepared a lair for the new dragon chick. We had collected a large pile of shiny objects to use as a nest and had laid out next to it the long tongs that we used to turn the egg, as well as the heavy sledgehammer that we would need to crack it when the time came. The egg itself was lying on a charcoal brazier to one side. It had been four weeks since Dr. Drake had been given the egg to look after by its injured mother, Scramasax, and each day we had watched its colour change very gradually, from a sort of ruddy brown to a bright purple.

"How long do you think it will take Mother and Father to get home?" I asked Beatrice when we had got inside.

"I don't know, Daniel," said Beatrice. "I suppose another couple of weeks."

"Will the chick have hatched by then, do you think?"

"Let's see," she said, and turned to look at a chart on the wall that showed how the colour of a European dragon's egg changed during the course of its incubation. Each week, we had made a mark on the chart after comparing our egg to it. Now there was hardly any

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difference between the colour of the egg before us and the shade of purple right at the end of the chart.

"It might hatch any day now," said Beatrice.

I picked up the tongs, lifted the egg to one side for a moment and piled more charcoal on the brazier.

*

I didn't have any hope at all that the weather would improve by the afternoon, and so it was no surprise to find myself back in the classroom after lunch. But instead of Dr. Drake, Mademoiselle Gamay, who had managed to dry out and change her clothes, was standing at the front of the class.

"I am afraid Dr. Drake has some important business to attend to," she said. "And so I shall be teaching this afternoon's class — on the city-dwelling dragon known as the gargouille."

This did not come as much of a surprise, either. Since he had become Dragon Master and the head of the Secret and Ancient Society of Dragonologists only a few weeks before, Dr. Drake had become increasingly busy.

"Perhaps he has heard news of Ignatius," I whispered anxiously to Beatrice. Ignatius Crook was Dr. Drake's sworn enemy and had nearly caused all three of us to be buried beneath a mountain earlier in the summer.

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"Daniel," she hissed back, "as far as we know, Ignatius Crook is dead."

"Dr. Drake doesn't seem to think so," I replied. "He said it was quite likely that Ignatius escaped."

Before Beatrice could reply, Emery Cloth, a dragonologist friend of Dr. Drake's, came bursting into the classroom.

"So sorry to interrupt the class," he said. "But I need Beatrice and Daniel right now! Dr. Drake says to come at once! The tapping noises have begun!"



Soon we were all crowded into the coal shed along with Dr. Drake and Emery. Beatrice and I stepped to the front by the charcoal brazier.

Tap, went the dragon chick, hitting the inside of the shell with its egg tooth as it tried to crack it.

Tap! Tap!

TAP! TAP! TAP!

The egg was rocking backwards and forwards in the flames.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

TAP! TAP! TAP! TAP! TAP!

"Right, Daniel," said Dr. Drake. "Take hold of the egg with those tongs, as I showed you. You needn't be

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gentle, and you must *not* be slow."

I quickly picked up the long pair of tongs, reached over the flames and grasped the egg. I could feel the heat travelling up the iron handles from the fire. The egg was heavy, but I had expected that. I lifted it up and placed it on the stone floor.

The tapping grew even louder, and the egg began to roll about wildly.

"Well done," said Dr. Drake. "Now, Beatrice, do you think you can manage the sledgehammer?"

"I think so," said Beatrice. But she looked very small as she took the handle of the heavy sledgehammer and raised it over her head.

"Wait until the egg has stopped moving," said Dr. Drake.

Beatrice waited, the head of the sledgehammer tottering above her. I moved out of the way.

"Now!" he said.

SMASH! Beatrice brought the sledgehammer down on top of the egg as hard as she could. It did not seem to have made an impression, but the tapping inside stopped.

"Again!" cried Dr. Drake.

SMASH! Beatrice brought the hammer down again. And *SMASH!* And *SMASH!* And...

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"Stop!" cried Dr. Drake.

Beatrice just managed to stop herself.

A patina of cracks formed across the top of the egg. I stepped forward eagerly.

"Wait, Daniel," commanded Dr. Drake. "The egg is still red-hot!"

We waited. The tapping started again.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

TAP! TAP!...

Suddenly, a piece of shell from the top of the egg dropped off and fell onto the floor. Then another piece followed it, and another. A dragon's snout with a tiny horn struck upwards out of the shell. A head emerged, followed by a thin neck and a scraggy, red, scaly body, two sharp little claws, and two folded-up little wings. A tail with a large arrowhead at the end flicked out. The chick fixed us with its beady eyes. It sneezed twice in a jerky motion, and a lot of green, phlegmy stuff came out of its mouth and nose. Then it looked up at us, gave a faint little roar and stretched out its tiny wings for the first time.

"Ooooh!" said Beatrice. "It's a boy! Isn't he adorable?"



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