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opening extract from

No Such Thing as Dragons

written by

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published by

Scholastic

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1

So they went north, the man and the boy, and the roads narrowed, and big slate-headed mountains reared up ready to eat the sky.

The boy came from a softer country. He didn't like those hills. The hills he was used to were grassy, rounded things like green pillows, with houses on them sometimes, or sheep, and maybe a river at the bottom like a curve of mirror glass. These northern hills were so high he had to lean backwards to try

and see the tops of them. They were so rocky that his eyes kept snagging on crags and spears and spines of stone as he looked up and up in search of a summit, in search of an end to the hard confusion of them. Fields of snow showed white up there, spread like raggedy bed sheets across the gaps between black crags. The rivers were white too, spraying in skinny cataracts down the faces of terrifying cliffs. It was as if God had seized hold of this piece of the world in a rage and wrenched it up on end.

The boy's name was Ansel, the man's was Brock. In the lands they'd ridden from, it was already spring. They had seen spring's tokens there: new leaves on the trees and kingcups in the water meadows and sunlight flashing on millstreams and maypoles. But up in these mountains the winter lingered. There was snow on the steep slopes and sleet on the wind. It seemed to Ansel a bad time to be travelling in such country, but Brock had told him that this was the best season by far for the hunting of dragons.

Sometimes as they rode Brock sang old songs, and sometimes he talked. Jokes, stories, comments about the places they were passing. He seemed carefree for a man setting off to fight dragons. Most of the time he didn't even bother to look back at the

boy struggling along behind him on his weary pony. He just tossed words over his shoulder and expected Ansel to catch them.

Ansel didn't say anything in reply. He couldn't. "Cat got your tongue?" people asked him sometimes, but he had a tongue all right. It was just words he lacked.

When Ansel was seven years old he suffered two losses. First his mother passed away; then God took the power of speech from him. Before that he had talked as much as any other boy, and sung, too: always singing as he went about his chores, was Ansel. His father had thought there'd be money to be made from a voice like that. When Ansel fell silent his father had said he was just doing it from spite, to rob his family of the fortunes he could have earned by singing. He kicked Ansel, but Ansel wouldn't yelp. He whipped Ansel, but Ansel still wouldn't break his silence. After that, grumpily, he lost interest in the boy. Maybe it was God's doing, after all. He took himself a new wife, and soon there were new children to make plans for.

Ansel's father was a tavern keeper, but you'd have thought him a farmer, the way he reared his children up like livestock, fattening the girls to sell

off to the sons of rich merchants in town, the boys to farm out as apprentices and servants to wealthy men.

When Johannes Brock stopped at the humpbacked inn to water his horse and his pack pony and happened to mention that he was looking for a boy to serve him on a journey he had to make into the north, Ansel's father grinned and rubbed his big red hands together. He chivvied his sons into line like bullocks at market. "This one here's Ludovico, master; small for his age, but tough. Or what about Martin here? He'll serve you well; you'll serve the gentleman well, Martin, won't you?" He passed over Ansel without bothering to mention him. When Brock asked about the boy, he only shrugged and said, "Ansel's afflicted. Mute."

But it turned out that Johannes Brock was tickled by the prospect of a silent servant. "He cannot read or write, I suppose?"

"Oh no, sir!"

"Then a man's secrets would be safe with such a servant. And no chattering, either. I cannot abide chattering." He walked all round Ansel. He looked like a man with secrets: tall and dark-eyed, with his copper-coloured hair curling round his

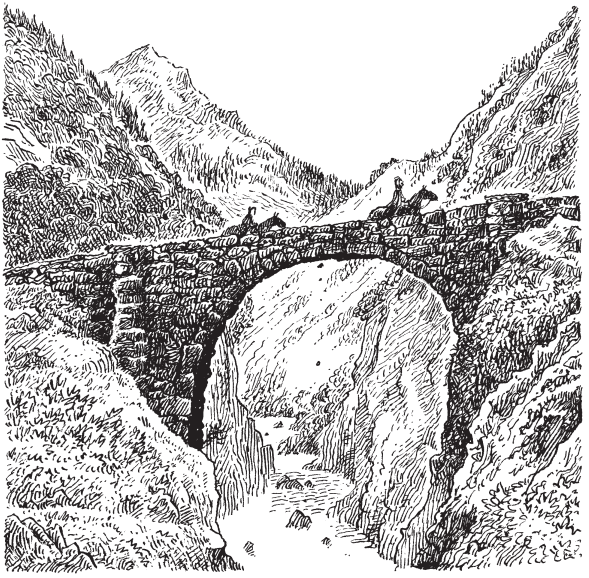
handsome face, and a thin pale scar like a snail's trail winding down one cheek and into the fair stubble on his jaw. His clothes were travel-stained but rich, the tunic with its pierced patterns of diamond and teardrop-shaped holes, the thick woollen travelling cloak. He smelled of horses and metal and far-off wars. If St Michael himself (thought Ansel) were to come down from Heaven to walk upon the earth, then he would take a shape like that.

Once Ansel's father saw that the stranger was interested, he started to remember Ansel's good points. "My Ansel's an obedient boy, sir. Ten years old. Strong and healthy. Bright, despite his affliction. His mother's favourite, he was, God rest her soul. Of course, it would break my poor old heart, sir, if I had to part with him. Unless the price was right. . ."

He was wasting his breath. Brock had already decided. A purse of money was passed over. In less time than it would have taken him to pour the stranger a flagon of beer, Ansel's father had gold in his pocket and one less mouth to feed. It made him affectionate as he bundled Ansel's spare clothes in a bag and packed him off with the traveller. "You take care of him, sir!" he called,

puffing alongside as they set out, with Ansel on the pony. "You send him safe home when your journey's done. Where is it that you are bound for anyway, if you'll pardon me for asking, my lord?"

"To the north country." Brock grinned down at him from the heights of his horse. "I am bound for the north, to hunt dragons."



2

It had sounded like a joke, back there in the lowlands, where spring was already prising open the pretty pink blossom in the orchards. There were no such things as dragons, were there? Only in stories. Only in tales told round the hearth on winter's nights, to set you shivering with cosy fear. Only in pictures.

Riding north with Brock, Ansel remembered the painting of St George he'd seen in the big church in

town. The saint had been all in armour, but bareheaded, with a golden halo balanced jauntily on his curls. The poor princess he'd come to save had a wide white forehead and yellow hair, and she looked surprisingly calm for someone who'd been sent out into the wilds as dragon food. She wore cloth-of-gold, and she carried a bunch of tall white lilies, perhaps as a sort of garnish. As for the dragon itself, Ansel recalled that it had looked like a bald green chicken with a lizard's head and the wings of a bat. Its wide-open mouth was vermilion red, and so was the blood that uncurled like red fern fronds from its breast as it leaned helpfully on to the point of the saint's lance.

He wondered if St George had had a boy to serve him, and if so, why the boy had not been in the picture. Was it that he was just not important enough? Or was it, perhaps, that he was in the beast's belly?

Still, it was hard to believe in dragons, hard to *really* believe in them during the first few days of the journey, as they rode in spring sunshine up the white, dusty road which rose almost imperceptibly through higher and higher hills towards the cloud-shrouded peaks ahead. Brock went in front, while Ansel booted the sleepy pony along in his wake.

The oil-cloth bundles that held Brock's armour bounced on the pony's flanks, sounding like sacks of kitchen pans.

Brock didn't speak much at first, except to say, "Fetch this", or "Bring that", or "Look to the horses" – much the same things that Ansel was used to hearing from his father and his brothers. But Brock managed to say it with that grin of his, which made Ansel eager to please him. Sometimes, when he did his duties well, the tall man would reward him with a pat on the head, and on one memorable day a slab of apple cake from a stall in a town they passed through. He tried pretending that Johannes Brock was his father as they rode along. It made him feel proud to see the way people's eyes followed the big man when they rode through towns and villages. Although he was still a little scared of him, he thought it would be better to have Brock as a father than his own. He couldn't imagine Brock selling off *his* sons for purses of gold.

Each evening, when they rode into some small town and found an inn to stop at, Brock's manner underwent a subtle change. He would sit taller on his horse, and pull back the scrag of blanket to bare the hilt of the big sword which hung from his

saddle. When anyone at the inn asked him his name he said, "I am Johannes Von Brock. I hunt dragons."

In those lands, far to the north of Ansel's home, people took talk of dragons seriously. No one had actually *seen* one, but everyone was eager to hear from someone who had. Fellow travellers invited Brock to dine with them so that he could tell them the stories of his adventures and all the dragons he had stalked and killed. "Worms" he called them, as if they were no more fearful to him than the pink earthworms that Ansel used to play with in his mother's vegetable patch when he was small. Brock seemed modest, but he had a way of talking that could silence a whole tavern. "I've hunted these beasts all over Christendom. Faced my first when I was not much older than my squire here. Transcarpathia, Haute-Savoy, the Hartzberg: now here. It's my calling, you could say. Every time I slay a worm I vow that one's the last, and I settle down with what I've earned. Yet every time the old itch returns to me and I find myself back on the road, trailing another damned worm. Still, I'd have no other life. It beats soldiering, or seafaring, or *working* for a living. . ."

The men among his audience always wanted to

know how he tracked the beasts, where they made their lairs and how they fought. Brock answered their questions patiently while the women gazed at the silvery scar on his beautiful face as if they were longing to kiss him better. Sometimes he opened the top of his tunic and pulled his shirt aside to show his listeners the curved ivory fang, as long as a man's forefinger, which hung on a thong around his neck. Then the women sighed, wide-eyed and wistful at the thought of the dangers the young knight had lived through. Brock basked in their adoration like a cat on a sunny sill.

And Ansel? Ansel made sure that the horses were safe in their stables. He liked the horses. Brock's big mare, Snow, and the stocky pony called Brezel who carried Ansel and the food and cookpot and the spare cloaks and clothes and Brock's armour. They were so big and powerful, with all those muscles and tendons sliding under their skin and those gaping, snorting nostrils. They were almost like dragons themselves, he thought (at least he did until the night he sneaked a look in Brock's saddlebag and caught a glimpse of what *real* dragons looked like). He groomed them and fed them, and he polished the saddles and girths and stirrup leathers and his master's tall travelling

boots, while the children of the place and the rougher men tried to make him speak, regarding his muteness as a challenge. “The dragon’s waiting!” they would tell him, pointing at the mountains which walled off the northern sky. “Big as a house, hot as an oven, huffing out flames and cinders and hungry for Christian flesh. What do you say to that, boy? Eh?” Then they would make munching sounds, and laugh.

And Ansel laughed with them in his soundless way, but he never really thought it was funny.



3

By then the road was climbing steeply, winding up and up along the course of a river which grew narrower, fiercer and louder with each day. The air smelled of the sap of pine trees which stood in dark congregations on the hillsides. The sky ahead was full of mountains, and the mountains were bigger than any mountain that Ansel had ever seen, even in his dreams.

"See that high one there in the middle, wrapped

up in cloud?" asked Brock one morning, pointing to it and half turning in his saddle to make sure that Ansel was looking in the right place. "That's where we're going. The reports I've heard all agree that it's haunted by a monstrous worm. The peasants live in terror of it. The landgrave who rules over them will pay me well if I can rid him of it."

An inn stood at the roadside in the lee of wooded crags. It had a fresh green bush hung above the door by way of a sign, and its landlady was a widow woman, youngish and red-cheeked, with a fat plait of fair hair coiled round her head like the rim on a pie crust. She enjoyed Brock's dragon stories so much that she took him to her own room that night so he could tell her more. Ansel, for the first time in his life, slept all alone, curled up on the floor beside the dragon hunter's empty bed.

Except that he could not sleep. The wind hissed in the pines behind the inn. It came in through gaps in the shutters and rummaged among the rushes on the floor. Mice scuffled in the thatch. The dragons which he found it so hard to believe in when the sun was shining seemed much more plausible as he lay there alone in the darkness. He

imagined them out there in the silence of the mountains, soaring over those pitiless summits on their leathern wings. He imagined burps of flame from their long jaws lighting up the cols and corries, splaying their bat-black shadows on the cliffs. Maybe one was above him now, wheeling above the inn, looking down with its cold black eyes. From up there the thatched roof would be a pale, shag-edged square on the midnight land, like a patch stitched on a blanket. . .

He said aloud, "There's no such thing as dragons," and shifted himself closer to where Brock's sword and saddlebags lay in the corner, hoping that they would give him some comfort. He lay with eyes open, looking at the shapes of the bags. They were leather bags, made hide-side out with the hair left on. In the dark room they looked like furry, sleeping dogs. The rest of their baggage was stored in the stable, but Brock trusted no one but Ansel with those bags. The larger one held Brock's spare clothes and shaving gear and other things a gentleman carried with him on the road. As for the smaller, Ansel had been told that he wasn't to look inside it.

He was an obedient boy by nature, and it had never occurred to him before to even wonder what

his master kept in that bag. Now, alone, he started to think, *What would it matter if I took a peek?* Was it treasure that his master was carrying? Some charm for the slaying of dragons? Or a souvenir of past victories?

The inn creaked. The trees sighed. The voices of Brock and the widow woman came indistinctly through the stone wall from a neighbouring room. Ansel threw off the cloak he had covered himself with and went quietly to the bags. He carried the smaller of them to a place where a big shard of moonlight came through a crack in the window shutter. He did not open it straight away but felt it, trying to read with his fingers the long shape which lay inside. A rounded softness with a hard heart, like a swaddled stone, but too light to be a stone. He drew a deep breath and unknotted the cords that tied the bag shut. The swathed shape was the only thing inside. He lifted it out. It was shaped like a giant's spoon.

He was very afraid lest Brock should come into the room and find him crouched there by the open bag, but it was too late now to turn back; he had to know what the thing was. Quickly, like someone eagerly unwrapping a parcel, he tore off the cloth that it was wrapped in.

It was a skull as long as Ansel's arm. A wedge of pitted bone that tapered to a thin knob of a snout. There was no doubting what manner of beast it had belonged to. The snout pointed jauntily upwards, as if it were still sniffing the air for prey, still hungry for boy-flesh, even in this bony, bodiless state. The wicked eyeholes were set high up on top, in front of the scalloped hooks and hinges which worked the jaw. The rest of it was all mouth: a self-satisfied zigzagging smirk stitched with white daggers. It had teeth enough for a dozen dragons.

Ansel stared at it a long time, but it didn't get any less frightening. He closed it back in its coverings and replaced the bag in its corner and slid back under his cloak. He was shivering slightly, and every time the old inn creaked or shifted he pictured a dragon settling on the roof. But after a while he must have slept, because when he woke a bell was clanging somewhere and he could see sunlight through that gap in the shutter and Brock was prodding him awake with the toe of his boot and telling him to go and attend to the saddling of the horses.