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The Dragon's Apprentice

Written by

Dugald A. Steer

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The Dragon's Apprentice



The Dragonology™ Chronicles

by Dugald A. Steer

from templar publishing

A vicious attack; a mysterious kidnapping; an ancient society shrouded in mystery...

In this, the third volume of the fire-breathing Dragonology Chronicles, intrepid young dragonologists Daniel and Beatrice need to do all in their power to save their young dragon chick, Torcher, from the clutches of a sinister organisation known as Dragonsbane. With help from the Guardian's Apprentice, the children must uncover a traitor in the Secret and Ancient Society of Dragonologists, rescue Torcher, and defeat Dragonsbane once and for all.

From the creators of the international bestseller *Dragonology*.



For Max, Cameron & Toby

Dugald A. Steer



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Prologue

On the morning of 1st June 1883, Major Cyril Wilson, a broad-shouldered, upright man, entered the Tower of London. Once inside, he made his way towards the ruins of the Lanthorn Tower, which were being excavated before they could be rebuilt. As he approached the scaffolding around the excavations, a figure stepped out of the shadows.

"Good morning, Major." The man raised his top hat in greeting.

"I take it that my equipment has arrived safely?" the Major said.

The man nodded and led the Major down some steps, then lifted a trapdoor to allow his visitor into an underground chamber.

"Knock when you're ready to come back up." The man handed the Major a burning torch and left him to his business.

The chamber was roughly hewn and empty but for a

long, gunmetal-grey box, which was propped against one wall, and a bundle of unlit torches. On the other wall, carved into the stone, was a massive shield, embossed with three lions. The Major studied the shield for a moment and then pressed two fingers into the eyes of the topmost lion. There was a click, and the tongue of the second lion sprang out. The Major gave it a sharp tug; with another click the whole shield swung open to reveal a dark tunnel. As he held his torch aloft, the Major's eyes widened. The flickering light revealed the tunnel to be stacked, head-high on both sides, with colossal bones. Fanged skulls jutted into the darkness, their shapes and outlines bearing little resemblance to the skulls of humans. These were the bones of monstrous beasts. Above the entrance were carved the words, "*Bienvenue au Royaume des Dragons Morts.*"

"'Welcome to the kingdom of dead dragons,'" the Major murmured, translating the words to himself in a whisper. He drew out a map and studied it for a moment by the light of his torch. Then he picked up his box and strode purposefully into the bone-filled labyrinth.

An hour later, the Major reached a lofty chamber. At the far end, a massive pair of double doors swung open on his approach. An unexpected waft of sulphur

made him wrinkle his nose in disgust as he stepped into a huge, circular hall lit with blazing torches. Paintings and carvings of dragons decorated every surface, but the Major's attention was drawn immediately to the opposite end of the hall, for there, rearing up on its hind legs – as though about to leap into the air – and towering above him, stood a life-size statue of a magnificent dragon, its wings outspread like a canopy just inches beneath the vaulted ceiling. The creature had giant rubies for eyes, scales of gold and a protruding red tongue – a full three feet in length – that lolled from a mouth lined with vicious-looking silver teeth. But the statue was incomplete. Its right foreclaw was missing.

A sudden voice seemed to come from the very mouth of the statue: "Welcome! So you have come to join us?" The words echoed around the chamber.

"What is this place?" the Major set down his box and gazed around in wonder.

"It is the grand lodge of the most Secret Order of Dragonsbane Knights," the voice replied. "Since the original knights are no longer with us, it now falls to others to continue with their quest."

"Their quest?" The Major knew little about the task he had been summoned to perform.

"Look at the book."

By the foot of the dragon statue stood a lectern. It held an ancient book, covered with black leather and engraved in gold.

"*Malleus Draconis...?*" The Major read aloud.

"The Hammer of the Dragons! It was written by King Edward the First. To the knights, its word was law. Do you see the motto above the statue?"

The Major studied the sculptured scroll above the head of the statue, and a shiver ran through him as he read the words, "*Mort aux Dragons.*"

"'Death to Dragons'! That was their battle cry!" The voice sounded eerie now. "Their mission was to kill every single dragon in the kingdom. They failed."

"So the bones in the labyrinth really are those of dragons?" The Major had difficulty disguising the doubt in his voice.

"You are perceptive, Major."

"But dragons are creatures of myth."

"Of myth?" A man in a black frock coat stepped from behind the statue. His face was so hideously disfigured that its expression was impossible to read. "Behold!" He swept back an arm, dramatically, gesturing towards a heavy iron portcullis that hung beneath a

faded portrait of Saint George.

The Major stepped closer. The sulphurous odour filled his nostrils now and he clasped a hand to his mouth. Gazing drowsily up at him through the bars was a small green creature with furled wings. It stood upright and looked strangely human, though it was unmistakeably a dragon. Its whiplike tail slapped the ground. The Major lost a little of his usual composure and let out an audible gasp. "It is much smaller than I would have imagined." He studied the creature more closely, and stiffened a little. "Can it really breathe fire?"

"Yes, but this variety does not often choose to do so. This is an infant gargouille dragon – hardly worth killing at all. But dragons grow bigger – much bigger. For an experienced soldier such as yourself, full-grown dragons are a great deal more satisfying to kill." The man gave a cruel, knowing smile. "When I sought you out, you told me the government was soon to take delivery of a powerful new artillery gun. For mountain warfare, you said. I believe you also claimed to be responsible for... testing it?"

"I have brought the weapon," affirmed the Major, lowering his case to the floor.

"Then let us test it now." The man pulled a lever and

the portcullis retracted into the ceiling. The dragon stirred, slowly rose to its feet and pulled feebly on the chain that attached it to the wall. The Major undid the clasps on his case, lifted out a small field gun and unfolded its legs. He placed the gun near the entrance to the hall and inserted a tapered shell into the muzzle.

"Stand behind me," the Major ordered, more fiercely than he had intended. He cleared his throat and softened his voice a little. "This thing packs quite a punch."

The disfigured man did as he was told. The Major knelt behind the gun and sighted along the barrel. The dragon blinked at him.

"It hardly seems sporting to kill a captive," the Major protested, in the vain hope of appealing for a little compassion.

"Please proceed, Major." The man's eyes glinted, but the expression on his face remained impossible to read.

Finally, the Major grimaced and pulled the trigger. Instantly there was a blinding explosion, resulting in a rising cloud of thick smoke. Silence followed. The smoke lifted. On the floor lay the motionless body of the dragon chick, its eyes staring, its acid blood fizzing out onto the flagstones.

The man approached it cautiously and prodded it with his toe.

"Is it dead?" the Major asked.

"Yes." The man's face drew into a cold, lopsided smile and he held out a gloved hand to the Major.

"Now, Major. We have friends, but we also have enemies. Let me tell you about the Secret and Ancient Society of Dragonologists."