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Opening extract from

The Fire Ascending

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The Fire Ascending

Chris d'Lacey



for Zookie

"Time is like water, it finds its own levels…"

the sibyl, Gwilanna

And men will say to themselves, "What became of the last true dragon, Gawain? Did he die in flames upon the sword of a warrior? Did he spread his wings and fly into the sun, leaving naught but his perfect shadow behind? Did he cloak himself in the ash of a volcano ready to emerge in glory one day?"

These stories, I can tell you, are all an invention. The truth is he died of loneliness. Solitude clawed at his aching heart and drew his fire to the cusp of his eye. His auma gathered in a single tear drop. And when he could no longer bear to look upon a world untouched by the beauty of dragons, he closed his eye and his fire tear fell.

Herein lies the way of it…

from *The Book of Agawin*
A History of Dragons

Part One
Voss

I was a boy of twelve when I watched a dragon die. It was during the season of winterfold, when every morning the hillsides were brittle with frost and the peak of Kasgerden shone bright with snow. I was a cave dweller then, in the keep of Yolen the healer and seer. One morning, while I was tending a goat, the earth shuddered and the pointed shadow of the beast swept over the valley, bending every blade of grass to its will. The goats were disturbed and came together in a flock. They knew better than I that a dragon was near. I jumped up, spinning about. Between the clouds there was only pale pink sky. But I could hear the quiet scything of wings and smell the burnt sulphur trail the beast was leaving, falling all around like unseen drizzle. Swiftly, I gathered my robe about my knees and hurried for the cave as fast as I could. Behind me the goat bells rattled. There was nothing I could do to protect the flock. If the dragon had wanted them, it could have had them all.

But killing was not on its mind that day. As I ran up the scree, calling out to Yolen, he was already standing at the mouth of the cave, staring hard across the yawning valley. His lips were drawn. There was a thoughtful look in his watery eyes. He raised a hand to tell me I should stop my panting. "Be calm, boy, there is no danger."

"But it's…a *dragon*," I blustered, my youthful voice overflowing with wonder. The beasts were so rarely seen

these days. This mountain range had once been a breeding ground for them. They were legend here. Yolen himself had taught me this.

I saw him nod. His gaze narrowed slightly. "Then be quiet and *observe* it. This might be the only chance you'll get."

And I understood perfectly what he meant. Whenever men spoke about dragons these days, they spoke of them as if they were a finished breed.

So I sat upon the scree and I peered at the mountain. On the tip of Kasgerden I saw the beast in frightening silhouette. It was standing on a pair of stout hind legs with its wings stretched fully and its long neck funnelled at the drifting clouds. I saw no flame, but out of its mouth came a cry I was sure would sever the air. I wanted to press my hands to my head, but Yolen had not moved to do the same and I did not wish to seem weak in his presence. So I bore the beast's rippling wail in my ears and tried, instead, to listen to its voice and make sense of its call.

Long ago, Yolen had taught me that all things natural to the earth had *auma*. The great life force, Gaia, moved within the most inanimate pebbles as well as through the river and the mountains – and me. Even the smallest grain of earth was aware of its presence in the universe, said Yolen. In essence, we were all one being, born from the fire of the true Creator (though he had yet to teach me who or what that was). This was a truth all men possessed but few knew what to do with, he would say. That day, I relaxed my

thoughts and gave my auma up to the earth so I might *commingle* with the dragon on the mountain. I built a picture in my mind from that distant silhouette and let the squealing enter my head. And long before my master had dropped his confident hand upon my shoulder, I knew what Yolen knew already.

"It's come to Kasgerden to shed its fire tear."

"Go to the cave. Gather food and clothing. There will be a pilgrimage," Yolen said.

I looked once more at the creature. It had not come hunting, it had come here to die.

And I was going to witness it.

That day, I became a follower of Galen. I had no idea when we set off down the valley that this was the dragon's true or real name. That I would learn from the mouths of other followers. The sun had barely moved through the narrowest of arcs when our path began to cross with a host of them, all making their way, like us, to Kasgerden. Yolen had led us straight to the river, which ran in a curve through the forest we called Horste. From between the Horste pines the pilgrims were descending, as if the trees themselves had lifted their roots and were moving as one towards the water and the mountain. They were simple folk, dressed in robes or common tunics. They wore sandals made of goat hide, and furs around their shoulders. I envied their children, who grew their braided hair far longer than mine and wore necklaces and bracelets made from cones and other seeds. Some of the men, I noticed, bore spears.

The name 'Galen' bubbled up as we joined their throng. The last dragon from the Wearle of Hautuuslanden. A male. A bronze with white undersides – a feature that marked the beast down as old. Three hundred years at least. Maybe more. The men argued constantly about this fact. I heard one of them suggesting that the beast might not be old, but weakened. That its scales were losing their colour due to some unusual condition or disease. (Yolen, I saw, took note of this.) But there was one thing they were in agreement on. There would be *fraas*, they kept saying. Fraas. Fraas. The sheer thrill of it glinted in their hungry eyes. They shook their spears and gave praise to Gaia. There was a dragon. And there would be fraas.

This word, like the dragon's name, was new to me then. I tugged Yolen's sleeve. "What is 'fraas'?" I asked him.

He drew me aside, close to the riverbank, a little away from the body of the followers. "It has been known," he said, "for a dragon to shed sparks when its tear is released or first strikes the earth. The older the creature, the more likely this becomes. A spark might travel far before it lands. At the place where it lands, its energy will linger. If a follower can reach that place before the spark descends into the crust of the earth, he might briefly connect with the dragon's spirit. There are benefits and dangers associated with this. A dragon's fire, as you know, has been said to cure ills."

"And what are the dangers?" I asked. I looked nervously at the men with spears. Would they fight amongst

themselves for the right to have fraas? Or were they simply wary of the dragon itself? Would its spirit rear up and haunt them forever if they dared to commingle with its untamed soul? The creatures, in life, were terrifying enough. How much more fearful would their spectres be?

Before Yolen could reply, there was a sudden disturbance amongst the followers. Those at the rear began crying out a warning. I looked back and saw people stumbling and falling, children being picked up and rushed aside. The ground rumbled to the sound of galloping hooves. Horses were upon us. Arriving at speed. The crowd parted like a flock of startled birds and I saw an old man knocked brutally sideways by the leading horse. It was as black as the unlit cave with a mane that flashed around its neck like a blaze. Its eyes were full of blood and anguish. In the centre of its forehead, at the level of the eyes, I thought I saw a stump of twisted rock, rough hewn at its point and oozing a kind of syrupy fluid. But my gaze was mostly on the rider, not his mount. Astride the horse sat a thumping brute of a man, with hair as long as the children of Horste. The menace in his eyes was as dark as the fists that gripped the black reins. And though I had no reason then to be afraid of him, a fateful chill still entered my heart. For even I, a boy of twelve, could tell he was mesmerised by the prospect of the dragon. He was hunting more than fraas, I was sure.

As he and at least six others swept by, the force of their gallop blew me quickly off my feet. I tumbled down the

riverbank with panic in my lungs. Like the land, the river was harassed by the winter. The water broke my fall; its coldness, my voice. "Yolen-nn!" I cried, but he was already there, aided by another, stouter, man. Their sandals gouged lengthy channels in the earth as they clambered down the muddy riverbank after me. A hand took my robe and pulled me from the water. I slithered, legs blue and exposed, into the shallows. Yolen grabbed me and I grabbed him. I held tight to his body while his hand caressed my head. "W-who were they?" I chattered. I was struggling to keep my teeth clamped together.

"They were Premen," said the man who'd come to help.

"That's not possible," I heard Yolen say, but the fear in his voice contradicted his words.

"Trust me, seer, they were Premen," the man repeated. And he left us to recover ourselves back to the path.

I was too cold then to care about questions. Too shocked to ask my keeper what 'Premen' meant. All I yearned for was the fur that the Horste man offered and that Yolen had wrapped around my quivering shoulders. But as we scaled the riverbank I quickly put away my own misfortune and turned instead to the people of the forest. The old man knocked down by the strange black horse was lying motionless on the ground. A woman was kneeling beside him weeping. A tall man, rugged and handsome as the hills, looked at the body and touched the woman's arm. Then he rose up straight and called out loudly, "My father by marriage lies here, murdered. Who will support me in

my rightful claim to vengeance?"

All of the Horste men shouted, "I!" Those with spears raised them high above their heads.

But as quickly as their roar had shaken the forest, their voices fell away to an anxious mumble. Out of the crowd stepped forth a woman, a dark green cape flowing off her shoulders. I felt Yolen's hand tighten slightly on my arm. It was a measure of protection, but I didn't know why until the woman dropped her hood and I saw her face. Her skin was as pale as the shimmering moon, the rims of her eyes so heavy with shade that the weirdly violet points within them looked as far removed from me as stars. Bones and bird feathers hung in her hair. There were more around her neck and ankles and wrists.

"What is she?" I whispered.

"A sibyl," said Yolen. "You must stay away from her."

The handsome man drew a sword from his belt. "Hilde, I beg you, put an enchantment on this humble blade so I might take that villain's head from his shoulders."

The sibyl walked slowly around the body. "Put away your sword," she said.

"But the honour of my family is—"

"You will have no *family*," the sibyl hissed, "if you lunge at this man with bloodlust and steel. He will shred you like a pine cone and hang you from a tree."

"Who is he?" someone shouted.

And I heard the word 'Premen' on their lips again. The sibyl hushed them in dramatic fashion. With a sharp cry,

not unlike the screech of a fox, she began to flap her cape. Yolen looked toward the forest. Four dark shapes had come out of the trees. Ravens. Birds I had always admired, though the followers, I noticed, huddled back in fear. The bereaved man drew his grieving wife aside.

The ravens landed by the old man's body and emptied their raucous *caarks* at the sibyl. She opened her hands and rasped at them in a language I did not know or understand. One immediately leaped onto the dead man's chest. It tottered to his face and hopped onto his chin. Without warning, it leaned forward and plucked out an eye.

All around us, the Horste made sounds of revulsion. Even the man who had lent the fur winced.

I pressed myself back against Yolen's body. *What kind of woman*, I asked myself, *instructs a bird to pluck out a dead man's eye?*

Hilde crouched down. She looked at the staring, muscle-torn orb, held tight within the raven's curving beak. "Find the rider," she said. "Drop it in his open mouth while he sleeps. Make sure he swallows it – whole."

And away went the birds on their grisly mission.

"He will be dead by morning!" Hilde cried. She fanned her arms and spread her fingers like talons. "Tormented by visions of his own sickly end."

The forest men muttered their approval for this. Justice, albeit gruesome, was done. They gave praise to Gaia and set off along the river again.

My stomach was churning and my knees felt colder than

they had in the water, but I could not take my eyes off the sibyl and her stance. What's more, she had now seen me. She crooked a finger and beckoned me forward.

Yolen ground his teeth. He did not want this. But he could hardly turn me away. Whatever powers my seer could lay claim to, they did not match those of a woman who commanded birds. "Go to her," he whispered, nudging my back.

I stepped up bravely, trying not to look at the disfigured face of the body on the ground.

"Cave dweller," she said, thumbing my robe. "Seer's apprentice. Milker of *goats*."

How did she know this? "Yes," I said.

"What is your name, boy?"

"Agawin," I told her.

"Interesting." She cupped my chin. "A name that embraces the voice of dragons." She spoke it herself, forcing it against the roof of her mouth. *Aagg*-a-win. I smelled her choking breath and half thought I might see fire on her tongue. She glanced at Yolen. "I like this boy. What do you want for him?"

Yolen stood forward. He shook his head. "I do not wish to give the boy up."

"What you wish has nothing to do with it, seer. Are you training him in your ways?"

"Slowly," said Yolen. "He is a simple boy. No use to—"

"Let us see how far he's progressed." The sibyl let go of

my face and took something from a square-shaped pouch at her waist. It seemed to me nothing but a short piece of bone. But when I looked at it closely I saw it was etched with a number of symbols, the most prominent of which was a three-lined mark that twisted right around the shaft of the object.

Yolen sipped a little air through his teeth.

"Take it," Hilde the sibyl commanded. But as I reached forward she gripped my wrist with the strength of a hawk. "Choose your hand carefully, boy. This is a *tornaq*, a talisman of fortunes. Your death and your destiny are both within reach." Her piercing eyes stared into my soul. "Hold the charm tightly. Shake it three times with your eyes closed. Then you will tell me what you have seen."

So I took the charm. And I thought about death and destiny and hands. I milked with both, but favoured the right for all other forms of manual work. Now and then, however, when a mood came upon me, I would dip a piece of wood into the embers of a fire and with the finely charred end draw images on the walls of the cave. This I always did with the opposite hand. For reasons I could not explain to myself, that was the hand I chose to hold the talisman of fortunes.

With the first shake, my head began to spin. By the second, I was flying down a tunnel in my mind. Images rolled before me – people (strangely dressed, and none of whom I recognised), land (a green hill surrounded by water), animals (a staggering *host* of animals, including

a pack of bears not unlike the huge brown brutes that roamed the woods of Druuvendier, but *white*, crossing vast sheets of ice). I saw birds formed in the likeness of dragons, but kinder looking with a softer eye and blessed with astonishing varieties of colour. I saw an egg – large and glowing like the sun. Out of it I knew would hatch a true dragon. But the oddest sight of all was reserved until last. My journey came rushing to an end at the image of another, still stranger type of dragon. It was small, even compared to the birds, with pretty oval eyes as violet as the sibyl's and a wide, stubby snout. It sat upright on its tail and two flat back feet. In its paws it held a pad constructed of some kind of parchment and a writing implement that I thought for all the world was a larger dragon's claw. As I watched, I saw it make a mark on the pad. The same mark that ran around the shaft of the tornaq. When it was done, it held up the pad and in a voice that hurred like a sweet summer wind it spoke a brief translation: *Sometimes*. All of time seemed crushed into that moment. I sensed death, destruction, evil, darkness. I felt the auma of the universe turning.

I sensed a battle coming.

I dropped to my knees in front of Hilde. My hand was weak and my brain even weaker. But as I opened my fingers and the tornaq tumbled out, somehow it turned itself in the air and made its way back to her pouch.

Once again, Yolen threw his arms around me. "Are you done?" he spat at the sibyl.

"Speak, boy, what did you see?" she demanded.

Nearly all of it had blurred, like mist upon the mountains. But I remembered the dragon and what it had said. As my breath came back I described the dragon's shape. All she did was sneer and say to Yolen, "You were right, the boy *is* simple."

Then she placed her foot upon the body by her feet and with one kick sent it rolling to the river. As it tumbled, the limbs began to crack and break away. By the time the water took it, the body had split into ash and small parts. They fizzled on the water before they sank.

Yolen and I looked in terror at Hilde.

"He was old," the sibyl said. And with the briefest of laughs, she pulled her cape around her and melted into the background of trees.

Yolen quickly took my head into his hands and used his thumbs to prise my eyes wide. "Whatever you saw was a fantasy," he said.

"But—"

"You must let go of it. These women are deceitful."

"But I saw a dragon *writing*," I said. And I bent down and drew the symbol in the earth. The wind stirred the tall green pines of Horste. Yolen spoke fiercely under his breath and put his sandal across the marks. He rubbed them out and pulled me away. "It was a fantasy," he said. "Do not speak of it again."

And I had to ask myself as we set off down the path, *If there was nothing unnatural about my vision, why does my*

master wish me to be silent?

We walked through the morning and into the afternoon, this time with only the river for company. I wanted to talk, about Premen and the horse and the vision I had seen. But if I opened my mouth to muse upon these things, Yolen threatened to fill it with river mud and grass. So I did what my keeper wished of me. I walked straight and tall towards Kasgerden, now and then hearing Galen's soft roars as he sang his lament to his oncoming death.

By the late afternoon we arrived at the old stone bridge of Taan. The followers from Horste had made their way across it to the fertile farmlands on the other side. The Taans, like many of the ancient tribes, dwelled in places constructed of wood, usually cut from the forest of Horste. There was no thievery or conflict among the two peoples, but there was a sharp and persistent trade. What Horste gave in wood, Taan gave in sheep. One tribe slept among needles of pine; the other within timbers from the trees that dropped them. As we came upon the first of the kroffts, I noticed that the people, even the elderly, were leaving their dwellings and joining the Horste on the grassy undulations that were a feature of this land. Many of them were lying face down upon the earth with their hands and feet spread out like stalks.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

Yolen shook his head and muttered to himself, "This is not right. Why are these people still here?"