

Dragonslayer

Part of the Bloodstone Bestiary

For whatever reason, he had agreed to this particular job. He had a reputation to uphold, he supposed, but each one of these was trying his luck. He had found his way to a cave system where reports of a dragon sighting had originated. They told stories of fire bathing the farms outside of town, great wings blackening the sky, and a roar that could throw men off their feet. All of it sounded rather harrowing when you heard them say it. All of it seemed as if the town was at the edge of its rope. They desperately sought a hero. Of all the towns he had to wander into – theirs happened upon him at the wrong time.

His spelunking into a cave gave him ample time to think and put together what he had heard from the townsfolk. It was mostly outlying farms that were attacked. Very little was killed in the attacks, primarily beasts and often only single beasts. This dragon in the wilds had been picking off livestock one at a time. None of the townsfolk could give him a good description of the dragon himself, but he could see the damage. Outbuildings burned, fields turned to ash, and livestock lay slain. But only a few people were killed. Only three or four townsfolk died overall.

When he found the lair, his suspicions were confirmed. Townsfolk were superstitious folks and people that didn't have the experience needed to identify monsters. Peasants knew only a hand full. All undead were zombies or skeletons, all apparitions were ghosts, all otherworldly beings were demons – and all great lizards were dragons. Of course, how they had mistaken this thing for a great lizard was beyond him. He had spotted what it was from the cave entrance. Well, that was a bit braggartly. It had been evident to him as he walked through the caves. There were burn marks along the wall, from where this thing had brushed up against them. All along the walls and floors and ceilings. It was something else entirely - something that dripped fire.

The thoughts lifted when he arrived in a large chamber. His hooded lantern had cast just a dim light around the corner as he entered, but as soon as it breached the chamber, there was a flickering glimmer that rose from the ground. Then the color became clear. Silver and gold lay strewn about, piled next to a thick wooden chest marred and eaten away by the supposed fire of the beast within the caves. With that realization, he felt a smile cross his face. He was not disappointed. Foolish common folk thought a gift of coin would sate a great serpent like a dragon.

Then his heart sank. It even skipped a beat. There, tethered to the chest by manacle, was a young woman. She was unconscious it seemed, and it was clear that she had been left down here as part of the sacrifice to sate the dragon and stop the terror that had been rocking their township. He moved closer to her and watched her in the silent and dimly lit cave. Her chest rose and fell. She was breathing, at least. That gave him some hope that he wasn't too late. His relieved sigh fell on her face, though, causing her to stir just slightly.

Her eyes crept open and met his for a split second. She was tired, frightened, broken by her experience of being cast aside until she saw his face. He saw the light of life flash in her eyes. He knew

the realization that she had just made before she said it, but he could not react quickly enough to stop her from saying something.

“They sent a hero to save me?” She spoke; the woman’s voice a whisper at first, but the excitement of being saved grew. As it did, so too did the volume of her voice. “You, noble dragonslayer,” The adventurer shook his head, mouthing the words ‘no’ and ‘quiet’ to her as she continued, she either ignored him or couldn’t see them. “have my eternal thanks.”

“Be quiet,” The adventurer whispered harshly, pressing a gloved finger against her lips, “Don’t say anything.”

“But you are a dragonslayer, sent to rescue me. Surely you do not fear,” The woman spoke slightly muffled through his finger.

“Shut. Up.” He cut her off by putting his palm on her mouth as she spoke. It warranted a little squeal from her, surprised, and suddenly unsure what was happening. There was a hint of an echo of the noise that reverberated in the room. He kept his palm pressed hard on her mouth. He could feel his palms beginning to sweat under the leather and cloth, and his mind drifted from her to listen for any sound he could.

Aside, of course, from her mumbling under his palm. He listened close for a minute before he heard nothing that alarmed him, and then he gave a slight nod to her. He raised his other hand, still holding the lantern, to his mouth and shushed her again. Then he slowly moved his hand from her mouth.

“Did you not kill the dragon?” She seemed to realize something was wrong, but at least she wasn’t talking loudly now. She was whispering at least to the best of her abilities.

“There is no dragon,”

“Then why are we being quiet?”

“Because there is a monster. So. Shush,” He said before setting the lantern next to her. He moved over to where the manacles met the chest and set the lamp down next to them. He paused and took a breath before a hand reached one of the many pouches on his belt, and he pulled a small thin, and well-worn lockpick from the pack. He fidgeted, working the lock as a seasoned professional, and it seemed as if he had barely started before he finished, and the lock popped open.

“If it is not a dragon, what is it?”

“What part of shush don’t you understand?” He all but hissed back at her. He pulled the lock pick slowly back and released the manacles from the chest they had been attached to and turned back to face her. Of course, as soon as he had released the lock, she moved forward, dragging the iron manacles across the cold stone cave floor with a loud clanking sound. “Fucking really?” He hissed at her action. She stopped as soon as she realized what was happening.

“Sorry,”

“Just shut...” He paused midway through the statement. Something had caught his ear. It sounded almost like a struggling breath, a quick hiss of air. Then there was a crack. Creaking claws

against the stone of the cave. The woman backed slowly away from the sounds, while the adventurer cursed repetitively under his breath. The sound was still distant, but it was growing closer, and while she might not have realized it, it was clear to him that they were caught in its lair now. He finally snapped into action, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Look at me,"

She did what he said and turned to face him. "I..."

"Just listen. In a few seconds, one or two giant beetles are going to come through the entrance. Whatever happens, don't get close to them. Don't touch them, don't be near them. Even if one attacks you directly, keep moving,"

"What?"

"Trust me. Tearing your own skin off to get away from it is better than getting the fire on you,"

"Fire?"

"More like burning oil. Doesn't come off," The adventurer reached to his back and pulled the crossbow from between his back and backpack. "Have you ever used one of these?"

"No,"

"It's idiot-proof. Perfect for you," He grabbed the charging handle and pulled back the bow, yanking a bolt from its quiver on his belt and balancing it against the string. "Take it. Keep it flat. When you see the monster, press in this lever," He tapped the lever at the bottom of the bow lightly. "Aim for the big ass of the thing. Not its head. Just the bulbous ass. Got it?"

She nodded quickly.

"Okay. Wait until I say loose. You've got one shot," The adventurer said before bounding over towards the cave entrance. The sounds were getting closer, a deep rumbling hum growing ever louder, echoing through the cave - like a growling and rising roar. He worked diligently, while the woman stood frozen in place, shivering in fear.

He poured out pouches of something on the floor – sand or dust in a long repeating line between the sounds and the lair. He tossed the bag in the middle of the lines and twisted his arms to let his backpack fall to the ground behind him. He pulled a handaxe off the side of the bag and leaned his lantern against it, facing the hole where the monster would be appearing. Then he took a breath and steadied himself. He pulled back and stretched, preparing to throw the ax.

It took a few seconds before the lantern's light revealed the oncoming beast. It was massive, with an ashen chitinous hide. It stood twice the size of a horse, with rapid beating wings rising from its back and beating like a hummingbird – giving the nature of the sound of the roar. From its form, slick oils dripped to the ground with sizzling hisses as each hit the ground. Short moments of light would appear as the oils melted the rock, for split seconds, the heating rock glowing from the sudden hits.

"Now?" The girl sputtered with the panic in her voice rising. The beast turned its head towards her. Its massive mandibles clicked and dripped bile to the ground below, ready to launch after this newest threat.

"No, beasty," The adventurer barked at it, and let the ax fly. His entire body moved. Every ounce of strength he had pivoted on his hip, his arm arching wide to let loose the shaft. It spun across the cave room and stuck hard into the beast's side. It pierced the hide, chitin crumbling away from the impact point, and thick oily blood oozing from the wound. As the blood covered the blade, it began to glow, to warm. The handle burst into flame, and the beast itself had a new target. It turned away from the woman and rushed towards the adventurer instead. He cursed under his breath and twisted to one side, running away from the thing but watching its position closely. Once it hovered over the dust he had laid, he called out to the woman. "Now! Loose!"

She pressed the crossbow lever quickly, aiming to the best of her ability. Her eyes locked on the bulbous backside of that creature, where the glowing ax-head still rested. It gave her something to concentrate on – somewhere to focus her shot. The crossbow let off a resounding twang. The bolt flew from the crossbow. There was a sickening thud, and the creature let out an agonized hiss, and it crashed to the ground where he had laid his trap. Then it twitched, its wings falling silent, and its hissing stopped.

The adventurer stopped running. He turned back towards her and barked, "What the hell? I told you don't aim at the head! If you had..."

"I was aiming at the backside."

"Oh," He said, his tone calming from the earlier anger, "Good deal. Good miss. You are lucky as they come," He said with a deep breath. He stepped over towards the beast, just a pace or two. He held a hand out towards her, motioning for her to stay still. "Let's make sure it's..." As he spoke, a drip of the creature's fiery oil hit the dust. There was a flash of fire and light, and a loud thunderous noise before the dust erupted into a burst of fire around it and engulfed the creature. Parts were torn away from its body by the force of the blast. The oil-like blood and viscera rained across the cave floor. "Dead. Good. That went way better than planned." He clapped.

She lowered the crossbow and looked over to him. He gathered up his bag and lantern and moved over towards the chest. "What now?"

"Well," He spoke as he pressed up against the chest and opened it. There was a shimmer of gold and silver from within. "Normally, I'd worry about a second one. But they didn't hunt enough for two, so this was a young one still looking for a mate."

"That was a young one?" She squealed. "It's enormous,"

"I said young, not small. They grow fast." He put gold and silver into his bag without looking at her - as much as he could fit.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking payment?"

"From the town's offering? Not satisfied with what they offered you?"

He paused and shook his head, "No, not really. They did not pay well."

"Then... you came to?"

"No. I didn't know you were here."

"Then, why did you come?" She asked.

"Because they admitted they gave an offering to the dragon," He said with a sigh.

"So, you're going to steal it?"

"Yes."

"How could you even?"

"Look, before you get all high and mighty," He said, turning around towards her, "There are monsters out here. And they sacrificed you to try to appease them, so," He shrugged, "You can go back there and always know that they left you out here to die. Or," He pointed to the gold and silver, "You can stuff your pockets full of coin and make your way in life. Find somewhere safe and away from idiots. Your choice," He said with a wave towards the coinage before he moved back to collecting some for himself.

That realization sank in swiftly. The woman didn't know what they had thought that would accomplish now that she was thinking about the idea. She had felt that she was protecting the town. Even if it had been a dragon, how would leaving her have done anything but give it a snack? She swallowed and steeled herself a bit. Maybe he was right.

"And where will I go?"

"I don't know. What can you do?"

"Nothing. Cook. Clean."

"Well, there is a tavern in every town. I'm sure you can find work,"

She paused, "What about following you?"

"No. Not an option."

"Just to the next town."

He sighed, "No. I don't do charity,"

She paused for a moment, and then gave an option, "I can carry more gold for you if you take me."

He perked up at that thought – and so began their partnership.