

THE GNOME, THE KNIGHT, AND THE WYRM

The Present

“How in the name of Thynk, father of gnome-kind, do I get into these situations?”

Geordus Wordweaver, humble scribe from the great gnomish city Gudron’ac-tol, hailed as one of the heroes of the Battle for Liberation, was totally and completely terrified beyond all expression. Of course, invading a cave that was reputed to be inhabited by a fierce and powerful dragon can have that effect on even the bravest of warriors, something the humble gnome would readily admit he was not.

With great care, Geordus trod gently deeper into the cave, pausing with every sound he heard. This resulted in a lot of pauses, as the dragon was making quite a bit of noise.

Two Weeks Ago

Barely had the gnome Geordus Wordweaver the Scribe ventured forth from the gates of the gnomish city of Gudron’ac-tol, did he have an adventure on the site of the great Battle of Liberation. While hiding in the hollow of a tree, the gnome espied a group of rogues picking over the season old battlefield when a Slime Ghoul set them upon. Geordus, armed with poisoned arrows and a book,

Tublat's Bestiary, succeeded in destroying the vile creature, though it was too late to save the rogues.

Emboldened by his victory over the vile Slime Ghoul, Geordus chose to walk the open paths greeting all he met, occasionally engaging other travelers in polite conversation, learning whatever he could about the cultures of the peoples he met.

Though very little information came his way about the barbarian, Bloodwolf, who was going to be a focal entity in his research paper, Geordus was enjoying his trek through the countryside in spite of himself. When last he ventured forth from the great city of Gudron'ac-tol, it was as a refugee seeking a champion. He had been tired, hungry, ragged, without funds and frightened. This time, he was well rested, well-fed, well clothed, well to do and well armed. His knowledge of the terrain was much better as well, having traveled this way twice before.

There were still dangers to be wary of, but at least this time there wasn't an invading army of ogres and trolls and crippers. Surviving his first night out and slaying the Slime Ghoul served to boost the little gnome's spirits to new heights. However, he could not help but think he might have saved a few of the rogues he had encountered if had he known how to deal with the Slime Ghoul without having first to refer to Tublat's Bestiary. Geordus decided he would not be caught short, so to speak, again. Each night, before retiring, the gnome read a few more pages in the book. He also devised a quick-reference system,

should he need to look up something quickly. By marking each chapter with a dye in the edge of the pages, he could find any section of the book instantly.

Geordus also occupied his time looking over his newly acquired maps. One detailed the way to the treasure willed to him by the rogue Mug-tak, the ork-kin leader of the roguish band. Geordus had another map thought of unknown language and origin, which he found among an ogre's remains. Mug-tak was a pleasant enough fellow for an ork-kin rogue, considering he was dying of numerous injuries. The other rogues were dead before Geordus could learn more than some of their names. All were dead now, leaving Geordus all they had possessed.

The map of Mug-tak was of a large city called Etrice, and much of its surrounding wilderness. Geordus knew a little about Etrice from his readings at the library. The name was derived from the elfish word *etricea*, meaning 'gathering place'. Etrice boasted a population of thousands, all of different races. Gnomes, dwarves, humans, elves, beggans, kobalds, senrats and even saurans were said to reside there. No doubt there would be a number of ork-kin and elf-kin, as well. The city would be at least three weeks travel on foot, and it was in the direction he planned to travel, anyway, so he decided to look into his inheritance while he was there.

No doubt Etrice would also boast a small population of barbarians he could interview for information on his friend Gunost Bloodwolf. Geordus was quite fluent in the tongue of the Barbar, having learned it from the barbarian hero, Bloodwolf, as they traveled back to Gudron'ac-tol during The Siege. He reflected

on the vagaries of languages that had a word meaning “of the people” in one tongue, while the same word meant “uncultured primitive” in another. To a gnome, it would be a great insult to be called a “barbarian”, while the people of the Barbarlands accepted the word as simply meaning “people”.

As the third evening of his journey approached, the gnome found himself in a small village called Cuchul Mak Torn. When last Geordus passed this way, he avoided the small village for fear of being waylaid by unfriendly townsfolk. At the time, he did not even know what race of people inhabited it. The street was deserted, but the height of the doors and general architecture suggested humans inhabited it. Now, armed and emboldened, he elected to visit the village and learn something about it for future reference.

The signs and shingles where all written in the common tongue, also known as Tradespeak. One such shingle proclaimed the establishment to be an Inn called the Bloody Minstrel. This told the gnome two things: there were lodgings to be had, and the proprietor possessed a singular sense of humor. The gnome, while no stranger to sleeping in the open, preferred by far the comforts of a bed with clean sheets. After three nights in the open, he was quite ready for more civilized comforts. He glanced again at the shingle.

“Well, a bed, anyway,” he said to himself. “I may have to supply my own bedding!”

Inside the inn, the air was full of the smells of food cooking, stale ale, and sweat. The room was half-filled with humans, as Geordus expected, talking low

to themselves. When the gnome entered, every head turned in his direction, and then returned to their conversations. This was a relief to the scholar; as such places were occasionally anti-social to non-humans. The gnome took a table in a dark corner of the room and waited for someone to take his order. While he waited, he took in his surroundings. Like the gnomonic tavern he visited prior to his departure from Gudron'ac-tol, this Inn was furnished with wooden furniture, and a bar at the back of the room. Unlike the gnomonic tavern, the ceiling was very high, the walls unadorned by murals, and a little shabby looking. Shields and crossed swords of various designs hung on wooden plaques on every wall. Hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room was a battered lyre.

Perhaps, Geordus considered, these people are not fond of music.

An attractive (by human standards) maiden interrupted the gnome's musings as she approached his table.

"What would be thy pleasure, sirrah?" inquired the maiden.

"The house ale and some roast boar would be good. Are lodgings available?"

"Indeed, sirrah. All too available of late."

A warning bell went off in the gnome's head. All too available? He thought.

"Surely a pleasant place like this does a good trade. In one direction there is the gnomonic city of Gudron'ac-tol, and in the other is the metropolis of Etrice," said Geordus.

“True enough, sirrah, but gnomes are a stay-at-home lot for the most part, yourself being the exception, of course...”

“Of course,” smiled Geordus. Clearly, this maiden possessed an understanding on the nature of gnomes.

“...And traffic from Etrice is greatly reduced for fear of the dragon,” concluded the maiden.

Dragon? That was just so...so...cliché! One would think dragons grew on trees!

“Surely, you jest! Dragons avoid the places of men, as a rule. It is my understanding that too many humans try to kill them as a right of manhood, or some such,” Geordus said. He, of course, knew of a human who had done exactly that; Bloodwolf, who did slay V’nom.

“Maybe in the Barbarlands that is the case. Not so this far north. Besides, this is a Golden dragon,” came a voice from a near-by table. A large human, warrior by trade, judging by his attire, was standing up and coming over to Geordus table. “Golden dragons possess magical powers, in addition to flaming breath and near impenetrable hides. No man without serious magic will even dare to try.”

“Surely there is a hero that will face the beast,” Geordus pressed. “I know of a barbarian that defeated a great Wyrms in the Barbarlands.”

“Tr’ogg!” came a voice from yet another table. This time it was evidently a barbarian, complete with loincloth and bone jewelry. He also joined Geordus at

his table. "You speak of Bloodwolf, also called Tr'ogg. Aye, he would make short work of the dragon, but he is far to the south across the great sea."

"Gentlemen, if you will be joining me at my table, perhaps we should make our introductions?" said the gnome, seizing the opportunity to gather more information on Bloodwolf, as well as humans in general.

"I hight Dethstroek Homingraev of V'rogg," proclaimed the warrior.

"I be Laughing Bear of the Muzlok Clan," stated the barbarian

"I am Geordus Wordweaver of Gudron'ac-tol," returned the scholar.

"Then you must have seen Bloodwolf last season. He was up here fighting for your people then," said Laughing Bear.

"Oh, yes. I came to know him quite well," replied Geordus.

"I saw him at a Soaring Hawk's funeral some years back," said Laughing Bear. "He was the Pyre-man. Chief Dark Cloud had commanded the entire clan to attend, as Soaring Hawk had saved the life of Tr'ogg on two separate occasions, and aided in the slaying of S'nark-lak, the barion."

"Bloodwolf told me of how he slew V'nom, but neglected to mention the barion," said Geordus. "Though he did mention how Soaring Hawk stopped an ork from stabbing him in the back during a war in the Barbarlands."

"My grandmother was rescued from a band of orks during the Ork Wars by a barbarian called Soaring Hawk," said Dethstroek. "He took her back to her parents, but they refused to accept her...personal reasons. So he escorted her to Rennibister where she met my grandfather, after demanding a healthy price."

“It might be the same man,” nodded the barbarian. “Soaring Hawk was very old when the barion killed him, far older than any save Tr’ogg had ever been, and he was in the Ork Wars. From what I have heard, he was prone to acts of selflessness. When his younger brother died, he took in his mate and eventually married her.”

“Soaring Hawk sounds very familiar to me,” said the gnome. “Bloodwolf was the first barbarian I had ever met, as far as I can remember. He and D’ohgg, another Barbarman he was helping when we met. It was I who found him and brought him to Gudron’ac-tol to be our champion against Skullsmasher the trogre. But I seem to recall having met another Barbarian by that name...”

“I smell a story!” roared Dethstroek. In moments, all within the room took up the chant, “Story! Story!”

“I confess, I would like to hear how Tr’ogg fought for the gnomes,” added Laughing Bear.

“Tell your tale, good Wordweavor, and your tankard shall not see its bottom ‘ere you finish,” said Dethstroek.

Stories were important to people in small villages where news comes infrequently. Bards make a living by traveling from town to town singing and telling tales. Geordus was hardly a Bard, but any gnomish scholar worth his quill could spin a good yarn. Especially if he feared a riot would ensue if he didn’t. He decided he could learn more about humanity later, provided he survived.

“Very well! Gather ‘round, ye worthies, and I shall tell you of the great battle against the vile trogre, Skullsmasher, called a Crippler by human-kin, and

of the fierce barbarian hero known as Bloodwolf the Mighty, scourge of evil, champion of the Barbarians and savior of Gudron'ac-tol..."

Geordus related the tale of how he found the hero and brought him to the city, and all the events that followed. Like any good storyteller, he downplayed his own role in the historic events, omitting how he nearly shot the trogre with one of Bloodwolf's own arrows. After all, heroes do not need rescuing, as a rule, and Bloodwolf managed well enough on his own. As his story progressed, he became more animated in the telling, even to the point of acting out some of the scenes.

All were aghast when he told of Bloodwolf's arm being ripped from his body, and all cheered greatly when the hero used his own severed limb to pummel the evil Crippler! He did not add anything extra to his tale, as it was quite an amazing story without need of embellishment. Laughing Bear was particularly animated in his cheers, and even acted out some of the parts with the gnome as he described them.

Dethstroek, true to his word, kept the tankard of ale full as the gnome related his story, which was fortunate, for, as any Bard knows; story telling is thirsty work! By the end of the tale, the scholar had consumed a considerable amount of the brew. This was to have unfortunate consequences, as he had not had the opportunity to eat.

"So you are really the one who brought Tr'ogg to your city?" inquired another barbarian. "You must be very brave for your kind!"

“Tr’ogg? Oh, yes...another name for Bloodwoof...um...Bloodwolf. Yes, yes. I found him. Not as brave as I was desp’rate! Many were the hardships I endured to bring Gunost Bloodwoof to Gud-Gud-...”

“Gudron’ac-tol,” said Dethstroek.

“Right. Thass the place!” Geordus was full of ale and fully inebriated by this time, for, unlike their dwarfish cousins, gnomes are not normally heavy drinkers

“And he really gave you some of his arrowheads, made from the teeth of V’nom, soaked in the Wyrms own venom?” inquired another patron of the Inn.

“Indeed he did! He did, he diddidid! An’ he ga’ me gloves to handle ‘em safely, too, he did! Made from the copp’ry hide of the monster cat W’ehl!” Geordus burred. In his drunkenness, the gnome became overly free with certain facts.

“Truly, he had great respect for you and your kind,” said Laughing Bear. “Such gifts are a true sign of respect among my people. Tr’ogg must regard you as a blood brother.”

“Oh, he’da done it fer anybody. Thass what makes ‘im such a great hero!” stated the gnome, who was now having great difficulty keeping his head up. “He’sa great guy! I miss the big Bar-bar-bar...Hoomahn!”

“Such arrow-heads would pierce even the hide of a Golden dragon!” roared another warrior in the Inn.

“Yep...prolly could! Nasty stuff, that venom, it is! Rip th’ hide offa barion, it could. I even killed a slime ghoul wif it jus’ three night passed,” Geordus was barely conscious by this time.

“A gnostic hero!” cried a voice.

“You could end the threat of the dragon!” came another voice.

“That I could! One shot and ‘plop’! Dead dragon!” Geordus said, just before he passed out.

The Present

Tell your tale, good Wordweaver, and your tankard shall not see its bottom ‘ere you finish, thought Geordus as he recalled Dethstroek’s words back at The Bloody Minstrel Inn.

“Ale got me into this mess,” muttered the gnome silently. “Henceforth I drink only goat’s milk...provided there is a ‘henceforth’.”

Two Weeks Ago

The next morning found Geordus in a large bed in a small room. His possessions were neatly placed on a stand next to the door. At first he could not understand how he came to be in this place. As he sat up, the gnome’s head felt

as if it would explode. He struggled out of the bed, which was higher off the ground than he liked, and took stock of himself.

Well, he thought, you made a bloody fool of yourself last night, no doubt. Try as he might, he could not recall all the events of the evening. Indeed, he could only remember starting the story of his meeting with the barbarian hero, and a lot of ale. A LOT of ale! Just thinking about all the ale he had drunk made him dizzy.

It suddenly struck him that he could have been robbed while he was unconscious. A quick inventory of his possessions revealed that he still possessed the Arrowheads, the two maps, his purse and all its contents, his gloves and his Bag of Great Volume. The rest could wait, and was not important. Anything else could be easily replaced.

There came a soft knocking from the door.

“Enter if you will, but beware, the floor is most unsteady,” called the gnome. The door opened to reveal the comely maiden from the night before.

“Is all-well, sirrah?” asked the maiden.

“My head feels as if the Battle of Liberation was being fought within it, and my stomach is making noises never before issued from such an organ, but I am more or less in one piece, thank-you,” Geordus answered. He quickly realized that his normal civility was lacking, and amended his statement. “You are very kind to inquire, and I regret my poor manners, fair lady. If I could wash-up a bit and break my fast, I will be well and truly grateful of your hospitality.”

“Oh, you are a fancy one with the words, you are, sirrah. The whole Inn loved your tale from last night, and your friends are waiting on you in the tavern.”

With that, the maiden skipped out of the room.

Friends? I am traveling alone, thought Geordus. He quickly gathered his things together and went down to the tavern. There, he saw Laughing Bear and Dethstroek, his companions of the previous evening. At least he hoped it was the previous evening, as he had no idea how long he was asleep.

“Well met, Geordus!” said Dethstroek. The human seemed none the worse for ware, but Geordus could have sworn the warrior had matched him drink for drink.

“S’lar’s blessing, friend of Tr’ogg,” added Laughing Bear. Like Dethstroek, the barbarian was bright-eyed and, apparently, in good spirits.

“Good morn, to you, as well,” replied Geordus. “Pray tell, did I make too great a fool of myself last night?”

“Nay, my friend! On the contrary, you were very entertaining,” replied Dethstroek. “Join us as we break our fast and we can fill in any events that may have been washed away by drink.”

“Gladly!” returned the gnome with feeling. A night of drinking on an empty stomach left the gnome feeling weak. A good meal was very much called for.

The maiden approached the table with a tray of steins.

“Ale?” she inquired.

Dethstroek and Laughing Bear readily accepted a stein each, but Geordus politely refused in favor of goat's milk. The maiden took the trio's breakfast orders and rushed away to the kitchen.

"Your story was well received by all, friend of Tr'ogg," said Laughing Bear. "You truly made the events come to life for us all."

"As I recall, a certain barbarian assisted with some nice acting," smiled Geordus. The night's events were slowly returning to him.

"Aye, you two would make a good pair on a stage, I think," laughed Dethstroek.

"I think I will stick to being a scribe. I have not the constitution to be a bard. Oh, but that ale was powerful stuff!"

"What you lack in the stomach, you more than make up for in heart," stated the warrior. "All were especially impressed when you said you could slay the dragon. The Inn-keeper has given you free lodging in gratitude," stated the warrior.

Slay the dragon? This morning was not looking too good. Geordus' stomach began a slow dip to the left.

"Um, at what point did I make so great an offer?" asked the gnome weakly.

"After you told us of Tr'ogg's gift to you," said the barbarian. "Right before you took a nap."

A nap? Thought the gnome, I was out the whole night! And what gift? The Arrowheads! Geordus silently made a vow to himself to never mention the

things again. The gnome's stomach altered course and began to creep up into his throat.

"Ah, is anybody going with me?" Geordus suspected he would be in big trouble should he disavow his claim, and tried to find a loophole. Maybe he could claim the Arrowheads were stolen as he slept.

"I will accompany you to the dragon's lair," said the warrior. Geordus' stomach reversed direction and began to sink.

"What of you Laughing Bear?" Geordus asked the barbarian.

"I regret I have other plans. Burying a foolish rogue, for one thing."

"Rogue?" Geordus said softly. He had an even worse feeling about this.

"Somebody thought to take advantage of you as you, ah, rested. Laughing Bear and I explained the error of his ways to him. A bit too forcefully, as it turns out," said Dethstroek.

"Truly, northern rogues tend to be a bit fragile," added the barbarian.

"True," replied Dethstroek. "But what can you do?"

Game, set and match. Geordus was stuck for it and his stomach assumed new positions never before attempted by such an organ.

After the map, or the arrowheads? Geordus wondered, or just taking advantage of a situation? In any event, he was trapped. Dragon was on his to-do list. He just hoped he didn't end up on the dragon's menu.

"When shall we be on our way, good Wordweaver?" asked the warrior.

"After the mother of all breakfasts. One does not slay dragons on an empty stomach!" Nor almost any other way, the gnome silently added.

The road to Etrice was a long one, so Geordus and his companion had time to learn about each other. Dethstroek, it seemed, had an uncle in V'rogg who was a count. Dethstroek was a knight, but had fallen into disfavor.

"How was I to know the snotty little braggart was the Duke's second cousin?" complained the warrior. "And anyway, it's not like I killed him. He'll be fine. Granted, his nose will never point straight, again, nor his right hand hold a sword..."

"From what you tell me, that hand will never hold anything, again. I can understand cutting it off in self defense, but did you have to feed it to the wolf?" Geordus asked.

"The poor beast was sick for days, afterward! Ah, bugger it all anyway. The Duke can well afford a regeneration spell for the little twit," laughed the warrior.

"Frankly, I am amazed you were not executed!"

"Near thing, that!" admitted the warrior. "But he did challenge me, and my uncle, Grimmoer, has some pull in the Royal Court."

"Well, it is V'rogg's loss, I dare say."

"Enough of my story, my friend. Tell me of yourself."

"Well, my father was a gnomish scribe, my mother a dwarfish weaver..."

"Forgive me for interrupting, but your mother was a dwarfess? But you are a gnome."

“Quite so. Males tend to have the racial characteristics of the father, and females favor the mother’s characteristics,” explained the gnome.

“Are such unions common among your kind?” asked the warrior.

“Not at all. Normally, they are the result of politics among the nobility. My father met my mother during a royal visit from a dwarfish delegation. She was the royal seamstress, my father the counsel’s scribe.”

“But you are two separate races, are you not? I mean, I know unions between humans and elves occur, as well as humans and orks, though that is usually against the human’s will...”

“Actually, we used to be all one race.”

“Indeed? How did you come to separate?”

“That is a bit of a story...”

“A good tale shortens a long road.”

“Hmmm...I like that expression. May I use it?”

“Be my guest. However, my curiosity grows...”

“...And shall be satisfied. I will tell it as it is told in our scrolls.

“First came the High Dwarves, as we call our original ancestors. The god Ovann, Shaper of Clay, called Kilnor by the dwarves, and Almad of the Ocean, called Aludma by the dwarves, created them in the image of Yentor, Shaper of the Earth, called Yemtyr by the dwarves.”

“Gnomes and dwarves have different names for the same gods?”

“Oh, yes. We possess a different language, as well, though there are numerous similarities. Anyway, to continue:

“The male, called Fhursste, and the female, called Nhexxte, were molded from the clay of the earth, then baked in an oven until hard as stone. After they were removed from the oven, Ovann blew into each of them the breath of life.

“After some time, Yentor asked three of his gods to go among the High Dwarves and spread their seed, that they might achieve greater heights.

“First was Anfil, the Blacksmith, called Anvar by the dwarves, who traveled over many hills following Suhn until he came upon a house. There, he met Oren, the digger, his wife Jemm and their three daughters, Ahna, Ahnya and Ahnla. The women were strong and stout, able workers with nimble fingers and keen eyes. There he was given lodging for the night, meat to eat and ale to drink. Ere the night was over; he gifted the three daughters with his seed. The offspring of Anfil became great miners and smiths, warriors and hunters. These became what we now call the race of dwarves.”

“So your Gods mated with your mortal ancestors? Are you all demi-gods, then?” inquired Dethstroek.

“Oh, not by any means! The Gods withheld the power of divinity from their seed! Rarely do they bless any mortal with their true essence!” replied the gnome.

“Pray continue your tale, then.”

“Well, second was Thynk, keeper of Wisdom, called Fillisof by the dwarves, who also traveled over many hills following Suhn until he came upon a house,” Continued Geordus. “There, he met Gnomad, the teacher, his wife Gnora, and their three daughters, Bara, Bala and Bassa. These women were

bright and curious, with quick minds and keen ears. There he was given lodging for the night, vegetables to eat and wine to drink. Ere the night was over; he gifted the three daughters with his seed. The offspring of Thynk became teachers and writers, philosophers and seekers of knowledge. These became the true race of gnomes.

“Third was Kre’ayt, the Craftsman, called Kraft by the dwarves, who also traveled over many hills following Suhn until he came upon a house. There, he met Korrakk, the worker, his wife Kora, and their three daughters, Gala, Gara and Gamma. The women were slow of mind and dull of wit, but clever with their hands and willing to do labor. There he was given lodging for the night, stew to eat and water to drink. Ere the night was over; he gifted the three daughters with his seed. These offspring of Kre’ayt became wanderers, craftsmen and day laborers. These became the true race of kobalds.”

“So you are related to kobalds as well? Are there many unions among them and your kind?”

“Not that I have ever heard. Dwarves regard kobalds as pale versions of themselves, and gnomes have no tolerance for the relative ignorance kobalds enjoy. We freely associate with kobalds and often hire them for labor, but no gnome or dwarf has ever mated with one, as far as I know. Though, there is evidence that Goblins have mated with kobalds, giving us the race of Hobgoblins.”

“I see. Are there any other divergent races derived from the High dwarves?”

“Well, yes, but we rarely speak of it,” admitted Geordus.

“Why is that?”

“Because they are so vile!” said the gnome with great feeling. “You see, Sokain, the evil one, called Sloaktain by the dwarves, also sent down three of his offspring to spread their seed.

“First was Eytmy, the Cannibal, called Fehl by the dwarves, who traveled over many hills following Muhn until he came upon an old shack. There, he met Orrgon, the brutish, and Grya, the wicked, and their three daughters, Orkia, Okla. and Okra. The women were tall and strong, but vicious and ugly. There he was given lodging for the night, scraps to eat and murky water to drink. Ere the night was over; he cursed the three daughters with his seed. The offspring of Eytmy became the vile race of ogres.”

“Ogres!” exclaimed Dethstroek. “Vile indeed! I understand your people’s reluctance in speaking of their relationship to those monsters.”

Geordus nodded and continued, “Second was Fuhl, the Stupid, called Duhmy by the dwarves, who also traveled over many hills following Muhn until he came upon an old shack. There he met Rohr, the misshapen, and his wife Gag, the foul smelling, and their three daughters, Hoer, Hoard and Horrid. The women were short and squat and vile of temperament. There he was given lodging for the night, dog meat to eat and muddy water to drink. Ere the night was over; he cursed the three daughters with his seed. The offspring of Fehl became the vile race of Goblins.”

“Goblins,” repeated Dethstroek shaking his head. “Your family has many black sheep.”

“The worst is yet to be told,” said Geordus. “Third was Myynny, the Cruel, called Myyni by the dwarves, who also traveled over many hills following Muhn until he came upon an old shack. There he met Trogg, the withered, and his wife Trola, the hideous, and their three daughters, Ugga, Uglah and Ugjug. The women were hideous and evil and vile of manner. There he was given lodging for the night, tripe to eat and animal blood to drink. Ere the night was over; he cursed the three daughters with his seed. The offspring of Myynny became the vile race of Trolls.”

“Ogres and Goblins and Trolls,” said the warrior. “Oh, my! It is good Laughing Bear is not hearing this. He might confuse Trogg the Withered with Tr’oggg the barbarian and take insult.”

“Yes, it is curious how similar words and names can have such radically different connotations in different languages,” agreed Geordus. “The dwarves also have an evil god called Fuhl, but he is called Dhoep by gnomes. By the way, gnolls are said to be the result of trolls raping gnomish women. Trogres, of course, are the vile offspring of troll and ogre mating,” added the gnome.

“Aye that I knew. We humans call them ‘Cripplers’,” added Dethstroek. “I understand that orks are descended from degenerate elves.”

“Indeed. It is also said that orks will mate with anything.”

“Aye. Usually against the desires of those they mate with,” said the warrior. “I shall have to tell you the tale of my uncle, Grimmoer, sometime. What of the High dwarves, themselves? Did none survive?”

“Well, we are not altogether certain. Some believe that they were susceptible to sunlight, turning into stone when struck by the light of the sun, much like some species of trolls, unless they wore a Tarncape, which not only protected them from sunlight, but rendered them invisible. Others maintain that they were absorbed into the newer races. A few believe that Yentor took them to a place where they could live on as they are, without being absorbed into the newer races.”

“For my part, good Geordus, I hope the last be truth.”

“And what of your gods?”

“I am a follower of Lugh, the master of many skills.”

“Ah, I did a paper on him at University. It is said that he proved himself the master of every skill possessed by a group of gods, and was made king because of it.”

“You studied human theology?”

“Oh, yes. It is required at University. I wish I studied more about dragons, though!”

“Fear not, friend Wordweaver. My strength, your arrows, and our wits will win the day!”

The Present

I wish I had taken Dethstroek up on his offer to sneak in here, thought Geordus, but oh, no, I had to insist that it was my task!

Geordus fingered his ring. He doubted it would provide much protection should the dragon become aware of him, but it eased his mind to have it on. The gnome found himself wishing he took more after his mother's side of the family. Dwarves were strong and brave and would no doubt think facing down a dragon a wonderful challenge. Gnomes tended to be more pragmatic. Painted renditions was as close as Geordus ever wanted to get to a dragon.

One Week Ago

Despite the danger awaiting him, Geordus was enjoying himself and the company of the warrior a great deal. Whenever the pair stopped to rest, or make camp, Geordus would put quill to parchment and write down the tales Dethstroek related. They also looked over the various rings and talismans that Geordus acquired during his adventure with the Slime Ghoul. Through careful experimentation, they learned that one of the rings allowed the user to alter his form. Dethstroek briefly became a gnome using the ring, but he still possessed his own strength and knowledge. The magic was superficial, changing appearance, but not ability. Another ring granted invisibility, though the bearer's shadow was still visible. The rest of the items were either mundane or defied their efforts to identify.

The pair had become fast friends. Geordus taught the warrior how to read and write a little, and Dethstroek instructed the scholar on the finer points of swordsmanship. Dethstroek's ability to teach was only exceeded by his ability to learn. He grasped the alphabet and basic spelling rules quickly. Geordus marveled at Dethstroek's ability to memorize every detail, and never had to be taught the same thing twice. Dethstroek was equally impressed with the gnome's quick grasp of swordplay. Though far from expert, he grasped the basics and possessed surprising speed for an amateur.

"I dare say, with a few months practice, you could hold your own with all but the best swordsmen of V'rogg, friend Geordus," stated the warrior.

"I dare say you would have made a great scholar, had not the arts of war first captured your imagination, Sir Knight," returned the gnome. "Your grasp of letters and numbers is quite amazing, especially for one learning for the first time."

"Perhaps when I retire, I will find a quiet position as a scribe," jested Dethstroek.

After two weeks of travel, the pair came upon a sign.

"Here...there...be...dragons," read the warrior, proud of his new ability to read.

"Good to know," Geordus was less than enthusiastic. It was common belief among his people that dragons found gnomes to be particularly tasty. Come to think of it, it seemed every other monster had gnomes at the top of their menus. "We need a plan, if we hope to survive this encounter."

“We call the dragon out, you shoot him with your arrow, he dies,” said Dethstroek.

“And if he blasts us with his flame before I shoot?”

“Shoot first,” added the warrior.

“I think we should be a little more clever than that,” Geordus was becoming exasperated.

“I am joking, friend Geordus,” laughed Dethstroek. “A warrior lives as much by his wits as the strength of his arms. I know we need to be better prepared, or we will be the prey, not the hunters.”

“And I thought the Innkeeper had a singular sense of humor!” laughed the gnome.

“Why is that?”

“The name of his Inn. How did he come by it?”

“Oh, that. A bard of poor ability sought to sing for his supper, one evening. His voice was so bad it curdled the ale! By the time the patrons had finished with him, he was a sorry sight, indeed. The inn has been called the Bloody Minstrel ever since, much to the chagrin of his daughter.” The pair roared in laughter. “You may have noticed his lyre hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room.”

“Ah, this is a good way to go to ones death, laughing in the company of his fellows,” said Geordus gamely.

“Today is a good day to die...but not for us. We will plan well our strategy and put paid to the Wyrms,” boasted the warrior.

“Tell me, Dethstroek, why did you come? I am here because my mouth was enchanted by ale. But you have no onus to be on this mission,” said the gnome.

“Well, truth it be that the innkeep paid me to accompany you, to be certain you kept your word. I would have come anyway, though. To help slay a dragon would regain my standing in V’rogg, provided I brought proof of the deed. And I have come to respect you, Geordus, for your honor and courage. Had you claimed the drink emboldened your tongue, none would have blamed you for breaking your word, for no man is responsible for an ale-loosened tongue! Yet here you are, ready to meet death rather than tarnish you good name. This speaks volumes for your character. It is easy to see why that barbarian fellow, Tr’ogg, holds you in such high esteem! It will have been an honor, whatever the outcome of this mission, to have stood at your side,” proclaimed the warrior knight.

Geordus was deeply touched by the human’s words, and a little annoyed at not knowing he could have used the ‘ale loophole’.

“We shall live to tell our tale, Dethstroek, or my name is not Geordus Wordweaver of Gudron’ac-tol. Let us plan for our battle.” If he was to die next to the warrior, he was going to do so with courage, so as not to embarrass the brave knight. With that decision, a strange calm came over the gnome. With death all but assured, his fear abated.

“It would help if we knew a bit more about our prey,” said the warrior absently.

“Dethstroek, you are truly brilliant! I had forgotten my book.”

“Book?”

“Tublat’s Beastiary. It may provide a clue how best to attack.” Geordus almost dived into his backpack in his enthusiasm to retrieve the book. Withdrawing the tome from its place in the Bag of Great Volume, the gnome opened it and quickly rifled through the pages.

“Lessee...Demon...Doppelganger...Dorendor...Dragon, black...Dragon, blue...Dragon, copper...Here we are! Dragon, golden.”

“What does it say?”

Dragon, Golden

Occurrence: Very Rare

Group size: 1-3

State of Existence: Living

Life form: Animal/Reptilian

Intelligence: Highly Intelligent

Diet: Carnivorous

Size: Large to Gigantic

Subclass of Great Wurm. Like most dragons, it is prone to gather treasure for purposes unknown. Goldens' use fire, teeth, claws and tail when doing battle. Goldens' possess magical ability equal to most middle-level

Arcanists. Capable of speech, the Golden will often try to lull its victims into complacency before attacking. Non-magical weapons have been known to fail against the thick armor-like scales. Caustic acids, magical weapons and spells are of limited effect against a Golden.

“Still looking forward to the honor and glory, Dethstroek?”

“It is somewhat daunting, I agree, but the mission has been accepted. Death before dishonor, my uncle Di’yong, always said.”

“How is he doing, these days?”

“Decomposing,” replied the warrior with a strait face, “But, decomposing with honor.”

“Cheery news, that,” said Geordus wryly.

It took some hours, but finally, they came upon a plan that was dangerous, but had the best chance for success. All that remained was to find the dragon’s lair.

Dethstroek was an experienced tracker and soon found evidence of the Wyrms location. The trail led to a large cave that went down into the earth. From the cavernous opening, they could hear the great snores of the dragon, plainly sleeping. Geordus considered whether the dragon could be slain as it slept, but suspected it would go against Dethstroek's honor. Even dragon slaying must have certain rules one did not go against.

The plan itself was very simple. Dethstroek took up a position behind some trees, where he would have a clear shot at the cave mouth with a bow.

Dethstroek was an expert archer, so Geordus loaned him his bow with three arrows, with a caution to not touch the arrowheads. Geordus, though deeply frightened, put on the Ring of Invisibility and entered the cave. It was the gnome's job to be the bait. Something about being invisible and entering a dragon's lair seemed familiar for some reason, but he dismissed the notion.

Inside the cave, the scholar could hear the sleeping dragon's snores quite clearly, and followed the sounds to their source. The cave was large with a high ceiling. Geordus tried not to imagine the size of the dragon that could fit in so large a cavern. It would not do to lose my nerve now, he thought to himself, the idea is to draw the dragon out of the cave while Dethstroek is waiting at the entrance. As soon as the Wurm poked his scaly head out, 'thwip!' poison arrow *du jour*.

The Present

It was uncertain if the venom on the arrowheads would be sufficient to kill the Wurm, so Dethstroek and Geordus would attack the wounded spot with their swords and hope the Gods were watching out for them.

Geordus had volunteered to enter the cave for two reasons: he presented a smaller target, and Dethstroek was a much better shot with the bow. The warrior wanted to enter the cave himself but saw the logic of Geordus plan. However, they had not counted on the monster being asleep when they arrived. Legend had it that dragons could sleep for weeks, or even months at a time.

Well, Geordus was not going to sit around for an eternity waiting for the dragon to wake up and die.

Despite the darkness, Geordus had no difficulty maneuvering in the cave. Like their dwarvin cousins, gnomes possessed excellent night vision, as well as the ability to sense body heat. To his eyes, the cave was alive with the red glow of insects, lizards and small animals, most of which quickly scurried out of his way.

Geordus turned a bend and stopped short. There, barely a dozen paces away, was the bright red glow in the shape of a dragon, or at least, what Geordus assumed a dragon would be shaped like. There was also glowing moss covering the walls of the cave, so Geordus adjusted his vision back to gnomic-normal, allowing him to see the dragon as more than a glowing red silhouette.

There was precious little illumination in the depths of the cave, even with the glowing moss, but Geordus could make out the dragon fairly well. The dragon was much smaller than he had expected, scarcely three times the size of a large horse. The golden shine on the scales seemed a little off-color, as well. It appeared gold-like, but not really golden.

Well, thought Geordus, time to do my part. Screwing up his courage the gnome took in a great breath.

“Wake up, Wyrml!” Geordus shouted in gnomish, then quickly moved to a different location. He didn’t know exactly how good a dragon’s hearing and sight were. Tublat’s Beastiary simply said they were ‘superior’. Geordus had no idea

how good 'superior' was, or if it could penetrate the magic invisibility his ring provided, and did not wish to be roasted in the learning.

The dragon woke instantly and moved his head back and forth searching for the source of the noise he heard

"Who is there?" spoke the dragon. Its voice was surprisingly high and melodious.

The dragon spoke? In gnomish, yet! Of course, thought Geordus, the Beastiary said he could speak.

"I had forgotten you could speak, let alone in the tongue of the gnomes," said Geordus in surprise.

"Oh, yes, indeed. And why shouldn't I? I speak many languages, in fact. I can read, as well," the monster raised its snout and sniffed the air. Geordus became worried that it could find him by scent. "You are a gnome, yes? You smell of parchment and ink, but also of leather and earth and...and...DRAGON VENOM!" the beast leaped up suddenly and flew, literally, to the end of the cave, where he began clawing at the dirt in apparent panic. "Go away! Leave me alone!" cried the beast.

Geordus would be the first to admit he knew nothing of dragon behavior, but this seemed completely wrong. If this was 'lulling' its victim, it was a unique method of doing so!

"What are you doing?" asked the surprised gnome.

“Trying to escape, of course!” cried the beast, still frantically clawing at the dirt and rock. Impressive amounts of the cave wall fell to the ground, but failed to provide any egress for the panicking dragon.

“I do not understand. You...are afraid...of me?” Geordus’ surprise was near overwhelming. He would have laughed had he not been so amazed.

“YES!” wailed the Wyrms.

“Why?” asked the amazed gnome.

“Why? WHY? Do you like to toy with your victims? Oh, me!” the beast stopped clawing the wall and fell to the cave floor. It was almost comical the way it sat with its long neck curved down, hanging its head in obvious despair. “You are either a gnome who kills dragons for sport or profit, or a dragon out to eliminate the competition!”

“Dragon? Me? I assure you, I am a gnome, not another dragon.”

“Small consolation!” whined the beast. “You still intend to kill me!”

“Um, well, yes, but I assure you, it is nothing personal,” Geordus found himself relaxing. Moments ago, he thought he was going to die horribly, now he thought he might die laughing. What kind of dragon was this?

“If I may be so bold as to inquire, what kind of dragon are you?”

“I am not a ‘dragon’,” said the beast. “I am a Drogan.”

“What is a Drogan?”

“We are distant cousins to dragons, but somewhat smaller and weaker. However, I like to think we are far more cultured and refined. I mean, really! Have you ever seen a dragon’s table manners? Appalling! Chomp, chomp, and

belch! It's embarrassing to watch!" replied the beast. "And don't get me started on the whole 'Damsel in distress' shtick! I mean, really! There are far better pastimes than kidnapping a princess in the hopes of attracting healthy knights to come and rescue her. Which brings us back to their horrible table manners. And then there is the whole issue of their BREATH! It's amazing they can get close enough to each other to perpetuate the species."

"Ah, yes...I see. Well, why are you terrorizing the local region?" inquired Geordus, trying to get a word in, edgewise.

"I haven't done anything of a sort! I fly in one day, looking for a nice place to live. Something seemed to call me to this land, though I can't imagine what! Next thing I know humans and dwarves and what-have-you are all running around screaming 'Dragon! Dragon! Hide your daughters! Hide your gold! Call a dragon slayer!'"

"Well, you do look like a dragon, and people hardly want their homes razed and daughters eaten," Geordus pointed out.

"Eat their daughters? How REVOLTING! I am a strict vegetarian. I don't even eat fish," yelled the Drogan. "Do you have any idea how bad red meat is for the hearts? I had an uncle that ate red meat and he died of a hearts-attack. Barely lived to five hundred years old, he did. Struck down in his prime by poor eating habits, he was. And then there are the farmers with their horrible terrible grooming habits. How could anybody eat that kind of junk, I ask you?"

"Um, well, I never actually tried to eat a far..."

“Look, if you intend to kill me, would you at least become visible, so I may see the face of my destroyer? I mean, that would be the very minimum of proper etiquette!”

“Oh, sorry! Wait! How do I know you won’t fry me with your flaming breath once you can see me?” demanded the canny gnome. Tublat’s Beastiary was very clear about the whole ‘lulling’ thing.

“I hadn’t thought of that. However, it takes a few minutes to build up a good flame. Anyway, a gnome armed with dragon venom is more than a match for any Drogan, I fear,” admitted the Drogan. “I am calm and ready to meet my end, at any rate.”

Geordus almost laughed at the Drogan’s acceptance of his doom, so like Geordus’ anticipation of his own death.

Geordus removed his magic ring and re-appeared. “I think killing you may not be necessary.”

“Well, I should think not. I mean, the loss to the world would be terrible,” said the Drogan. “Ah...who are you, anyway.”

“I am Geordus Wordweaver,” said the gnome with a slight bow.

“I am called Pehnn,” replied the Drogan as it extended a clawed hand. Geordus jumped a little then realized the Drogan wanted to shake his hand, like humans were known to do. The grip, which encompassed his entire forearm, was surprisingly soft, though firm.

Pehnn continued, “Despite your stated purpose, you are very well mannered. I suppose if I must be slain, I would prefer to be killed with kindness.”

“Well, it is unfortunate you resemble a golden dragon, so,” said Geordus. “People are inclined to judge a dragon by its scales, you know.”

“Gold dragon? I am a Pyrite Drogan,” Pehnn inflated his chest a bit. “I am rare, even for my kind.”

Pyrite? Fool’s Gold! thought Geordus in amusement.

“So, George, what do we do now? If you won’t kill me, what are your intentions?” asked Pehnn.

“My name is Geordus.”

“Right. That is what I said. George.”

Geordus let the matter drop. “Well, we need to find a way to let you wander about without everybody fainting at the sight of you.”

“Am I so hideous as all that?” inquired Pehnn. The Drogan raised his head and covered his eyes with a long scaly forearm and wailed dramatically, “Oh, me! Mother lied when she said I was the handsome one of the family!”

“What? Oh, no. It’s just that you look very much like a golden dragon and people tend to...”

“Relax, George. I was making a joke. Trying to ease the tension and all that,” smiled the Drogan, displaying an impressive array of teeth and fangs. At least, Geordus hoped it was a smile. “I am quite the looker, as Drogans go, you know.”

“Um, yes, I can see that.” I seem to miss a lot of jokes, these days, he thought to himself. Geordus began to wonder if he lacked a proper sense of

humor. “It is said that some dragons can alter their shape. Is this true of Drogans?”

“Not in the least,” replied Pehnn.

Geordus extracted a ring from his purse. “Put this on.” The Drogan did as he was bid. The ring expanded itself to accommodate Pehnn’s huge digit. “Now think of yourself as a gnome.”

The Drogan instantly became a gnome.

“What have you done to me? My scales! My pretty, pretty scales. All gone,” wailed the transformed Drogan.

“You can change back at any time. This ring will allow you to walk among men without causing a riot,” Geordus explained.

“Oh, thank-you, George! How may I repay you?”

“Well, we have to think of some way to convince my companion outside that you are not a danger. Hmm...I fear he may be honor-bound to slay you, regardless.”

“But why?”

“He is a warrior and a knight, and has given his word to, and I quote, “End the menace of the dragon”, unquote.”

“Affairs of honor can be a real pain in the...”

“None-the-less, we have to satisfy his sense of duty without slaying you.”

“Can’t you just say I wasn’t home?”

“We both heard you snoring from well beyond the cave-mouth.”

“I do not snore. I breathe loudly. It’s a congenital condition on my sire’s side...”

“A little focus, here? Please?” interrupted the exasperated gnome. “Do Drogans hoard treasure?”

“Well, no, but this used to be some sort of thieves hide-out, I think. There is a substantial amount of gold and jewels in the side chamber.”

“What happened to the thieves?” asked Geordus.

“Oh, they left some weeks back. I heard them saying something about looking over a battle site near some gnomish city. ‘Good Actor’, I think it was called,” said Pehnn.

“Gudron’ac-tol?” asked Geordus.

“Why, yes, that was it!”

Geordus pulled out one of his two maps. Sure enough, this was the location of Mug-tak’s hideout. This was where the rogues stored their ill-gotten goods until they could move it into the city. It was an odd coincidence. Or was it?

“Wonderful! Any dragon scales?”

“None that I know of. But I have an idea,” said the Drogan. In an instant, he transformed into a great golden dragon, easily three times his previous size. “If this ring only alters my appearance, then I should still possess my Drogan nature in this form, yes?”

“I would think so. Why?” asked the gnome.

“Because Drogans can shed their hides at will, allowing them to create a distraction that helps us to escape hunters.” Pehnn began to remove his outer layer of skin and scales, until he was literally beside himself. He then returned to gnome-form.

“Would it be okay if he ‘killed’ this?” asked Pehnn.

“It’s hollow. Dethstroek is no fool. He will know this is not a real dragon.”

“Well, I am not a ‘real’ dragon, either,” grumbled Pehnn. “Still, we should put something in it. I have some berries and my tail is detachable...”

“Your tail comes off? Are you able to put it back on?”

“Oh, no. But it grows back quickly.”

“Well, a real tail on a hollow dragon still won’t do much to convince Dethstroek.”

“Well, I could inflate the hollow skin with my flame-gasses. I just won’t turn on the flame. It is these gasses that allow my kind to fly, as well.”

“How so?” inquired the gnome.

“There is a magic in it that makes us buoyant. It is also highly flammable, which accounts for our ability to cast flame,” explained the Drogan.

“Can you generate enough gas to fill that hollow skin?”

“Oh, no! That would take days!” said Pehnn, “But it will not need that much. Normal air with a little gas will do the job. After all, a simple lungful is enough to reduce my own weight, and I am far from hollow. I’ll just fill it up with air, then add enough gas to make it float.”

“Excellent,” said Geordus. “You said you can light fires. How quickly can you do this?”

“If I have a few minutes to build it up, pretty fast, indeed, George.”

“Excellent. Then here is what we will do...”

As the gnome spoke, the Drogan’s smile grew...

Dethstroek was becoming impatient as he waited for Geordus and the dragon to come out of the cave. The gnome was in there far too long, he thought. The big warrior hoped the little scholar wasn’t injured or dead...or eaten! He silently cursed himself for not going into the cave instead of Geordus, though the gnome was quite correct in his assessment of the situation. The scribe had a good grasp of tactics, reflected the warrior, unconsciously using the past tense.

He heard the dragon’s snores, then a lot of screaming in a language he did not understand then it became very quiet. He did not recognize the voice from the screams, but knew it was not Geordus. Perhaps the stout little gnome defeated the dragon by himself, but was too injured to come out, considered the warrior. It took all of Dethstroek’s resolve not to run into the cave. He had to trust that Geordus was alive and well and the plan was still in effect. If not, the dragon still had to come out sometime, and Dethstroek would wait forever to avenge his friend, if need be.

Dethstroek, with time to think, reflected upon some of the oddities of the situation. The local countryside bore none of the usual signs of dragon damage; no scorched trees, no scarcity of game, for example. Dragons were not known

for subtle or stealthy behavior. Stories of the dragon V'nom reached far and wide, and spoke of the monsters destructive behavior. Then there were the stories regarding this particular Wyrms. They were all of the "my cousins son's girlfriends father's brother said this or that" variety. No direct witnesses to any dragon attacks, though many clearly saw a dragon fly overhead. As dragons go, this one seemed to be remarkably well behaved, thought Dethstroek.

The warrior wished he could take a pull of ale, but it was duty first, then celebration.

"Pity it didn't occur to me that we could slay it as it slept," Dethstroek said to himself. "Oh, well. I doubt Geordus would have gone along with it. Lacks honor and glory to slay an opponent in such a manner."

Movement! Geordus came running out of the cave as though his backside were on fire. Indeed, great amounts of smoke and flame were issuing forth from the cave's mouth.

"He's coming! He's coming! Aim for the chest!" screamed the running gnome.

No sooner had the gnome run past him the dragon appeared at the cave mouth. It was hard to make out the beast with all the smoke, but the head and chest were clear enough for a shot. Without hesitation, the warrior loosed the shaft. His aim was true and the shaft struck the monster full in the chest. At first the beast was still, as though stunned. What happened next shocked and amazed Dethstroek; the dragon exploded!

Dethstroek was at a loss for words. Geordus came up beside him and slapped his back.

“Magnificent. You hit him in the gas chamber as he was about to flame us. The sudden expanding gasses and the flame he was in the process of spewing forth interacted and obliterated him,” Geordus was explaining rapidly as bits and pieces of the monster rained down from the sky. A large section of the wyrm’s tail landed near the pair, still thrashing about.

Telling the warrior he struck a hollow dragon filled with flammable gasses and ignited by the Drogan’s breath was not an option, thought Geordus.

“There...there is naught left but pieces of his hide,” said the stunned warrior. “How is this possible?”

“The venom on the arrowhead must have increased the power of the flame and destroyed all within the monsters skin. All that of the dragon’s innards remains is dust and ash,” added Geordus, improvising. “You have won a great victory, this day. Bards shall sing of this.”

Dethstroek sat down and tried to collect his wits. “WE have won a great victory. Mine was the easy part. Still, I’ll need a trophy...proof of the battle...”

Geordus had not counted on that. Trophies were usually the heads of the beast, but that was not possible in this instance. He inspected a fallen scale closely. It looked like an authentic golden dragon scale. The scholar was no expert on dragon physiology, but he had seen many varieties of dragon scales on display in the museum of Gudron’ac-tol. He presented it to Dethstroek.

“Ah. Tis not the head, but it will make a fine trophy, indeed. I will gather more of these and present them to the Duke of V’rogg. I shall be restored to my position with honor,” proclaimed the warrior.

Dethstroek stopped speaking when he noticed another gnome issue forth from the cave, totally naked save for a large sack it, or rather *he*, was carrying. The gnome approached the pair quickly and set the bag at Dethstroek’s feet.

“Oh, thank-you, great warrior! You have saved me from becoming Drogan...”

“Dragon,” whispered Geordus to the new gnome.

“Uh...right, dragon kibble!” amended the gnome. “How are you called that I might speak your praises?”

“I hight Dethstroek Homingraev of V’rogg,” proclaimed the warrior distractedly.

“Geordus Wordweaver of Gudron’ac-tol,” said the scholar.

“Sir Dethstroek...” started the pseudo-gnome.

“Gunost,” whispered the real gnome.

“Gunost Dethstroek,” amended the pseudo-gnome. “A fine name for a great champion. I am called Pehnn...um...Pehnn Drogan.”

Pehnn Drogan? thought Geordus. Well, A rose by any other name, etc.

“Er, yes. Pleased to make thy acquaintance,” said Dethstroek. “Are you not...um...cold?”

“Eh? Oh!” Pehnn had just realized he would need cloths, as the ring failed to provide them along with the gnomonic body.

“I have extra cloths you may have,” offered Geordus.

“Thank-you, George!”

“George?” asked the warrior.

“Let it drop,” said Geordus.

“Now both my life and my dignity have been saved! And here is the dragons hoard, recovered from the cave.” With that, Pehnn emptied the contents of the sack onto the ground. It was a handsome quantity of gold and jewels.

“Dragon hoards are usually much larger,” observed Dethstroek. “Or so I have heard.”

“Well, the dragon did just move into the neighborhood. I imagine it would take some time to build up a really impressive hoard,” cut in Geordus. “At any rate, you two may divide this two ways. I have little need of treasure.”

“You must take something,” insisted the warrior. “It would be highly unfair to go empty-handed after risking your life so.”

Rather than argue, Geordus selected three fine gems, a ruby, an emerald and a diamond, and three purses worth of gold.

“I can scarcely carry more, Gunost Dethstroek,” insisted the scholar.

Pehnn, uncertain what gold and jewels were for, since Drogans do not hoard treasure, accepted Geordus’ advice that he would need such wealth in the world of men.

Satisfied with the division of goods, the three set out for Etrice. During the remainder of their trek, Geordus quietly instructed Pehnn on proper gnomish behavior and the finer points of the gnomish tongue. The pair of them instructed

Dethstroek further in reading and writing, and Dethstroek resumed his instruction of swordplay to the gnomes.

When the trio occasionally passed other travelers, Pehnn loudly proclaimed the courage and valor of his new companions. Geordus found it embarrassing, but Dethstroek accepted it as his due.

“It is part of the game,” he explained to the scholar. “Soon all will hear of the dragon’s demise.”

When the trio at last reached Etrice, Dethstroek and Pehnn had become good friends and chose to travel together to Rennibister. Dethstroek claimed he received a dream casting that demanded he visit his family there.

“I hope to expand my understanding of humans, and Dethstroek is a very good place to start,” admitted the faux gnome to Geordus. “One day, I may even reveal my true nature to him.”

“Wait until he has slain a real dragon, or his shame could be great,” cautioned Geordus.

“Agreed, George,” said Pehnn. “In fact, I can think of a few very much in need of slaying.”

After a few days of relaxing in Etrice, Geordus parted company with the warrior and the disguised Drogan. Shortly after they parted, Geordus discovered a note in his backpack. It was from Dethstroek, using his new ability to write.

Friend Geordus,

Therr was some thing very odd about the dragon we slew with your arrow. I fear we may have been the targets of a desepshun but no not by whom. In any kase, the dragon is gone and we have satisfide our obligashun to remoov it. Be careful, and be safe.

Your frend and ally,

Dethstroek Homingraev

Knight of V'rogg

P.S. Pehnn claims to no where we can find another dragon to slay.

“I knew Dethstroek was no fool, despite his atrocious spelling,” smiled Geordus as he placed the letter in a book for safekeeping. “I hope Pehnn Drogan makes good on his promise and finds Dethstroek a real dragon, soon. Pehnn Drogan...that name sounds like it should mean something, but on my life, I have no idea why,” Geordus wondered to himself.

Epilogue

Some weeks after Geordus reached the city and parted company with Dethstroek and Pehnn, a package arrived in the gnostic city of Gudron'ac-tol. In the package were three golden scales and a letter explaining their unusual

source as well as brief dissertation on the nature of drogans, and a second letter that chronicled his adventure with the warrior and wurm.

The scales, debris from the destruction of the ersatz golden dragon, were added to the museum exhibit, as well as the chronicle. Tublat's Beastiary was henceforth appended with the new information Geordus provided featuring drogans.