

To Slay a Dragon Save a Kingdom

There are dragons. That is the truth. All the so-called facts about how dragons can't exist? *They* are the lies. All the stories that you say are fictional, all that you call fairytales? These are the things you should believe, at least, for the most part. But over time, even the truth fades to legend. I hope my story shall not have that fate.

Valiant knights battle the magnificent dragons. They always win. They always get the dragon's treasure, save the village, or rescue the kidnapped lady. Because the knights are the ones who win, they get to tell the stories of their triumph over the vicious, gruesome, cruel dragons. There are two sides to every story, but it's the winner's version that is told. So the winner's version becomes the truth, and the loser becomes the evil one.

See, dragons are anything but vicious, gruesome, or cruel. They are beautiful, yet as fierce as the knights who slay them, and they are very real. Has anyone ever considered how the dragons would tell their story, if they were allowed to? They would see us as the enemy, and they would beg us to stop hunting them down for their treasure, or the people they guard. The only reason they raid villages—

Maybe I should just tell you the story of how a dragon saved my kingdom.

I was once a knight myself, and I admired the bravery of the Dragonslayers. That is the name my small valley kingdom gave to the elder knights, and to be an elder knight, you simply had to slay a dragon. Because of this, some regular knights were very, very old, if they hadn't managed to defeat a dragon when they were a bit younger, and some Dragonslayers were the young age of 20. Being a Dragonslayer meant that you didn't have to do any more work, everything in the market was free to you, and the village treated you like gold. So, naturally, every knight dreamed of being a Dragonslayer.

Dragons were a somewhat regular bother for us. About once a month, a group of five dragons flew in from the mountains and raided our villages, stealing our cows, pigs, and turkeys. I think I was the only one in the entire kingdom who noticed there were only five dragons who raided the village. Most of the people in my village ran around screaming as if there were millions. The knights (including me) tried to shoot them down with arrows, or cut off their talons as they reached for our livestock. However, the dragons' scales were so tough that none of our efforts made a real impact. We knew that the only way to kill a dragon was to jab it with a spear right where its chin met its neck, but the dragons were too high up for us to use that tactic. Instead, we swung our swords around uselessly.

The trouble increased when the dragons stole the king and queen's stash of gold. But the last straw was when they kidnapped Princess Presilen. Word came in the night that a dragon had taken her, and flown up to the mountains surrounding our valley. But the real shock came when the queen herself arrived at my village and asked me to go slay the dragon that had done this.

The queen fit me with armor, a sword, shield, and spear, and put me on a horse. All young knights at some point between their twenties and thirties were given the chance to slay a dragon. But I had never expected this to be my chance! The king and queen gave me a huge incentive, for they desperately wanted their daughter back. If I succeeded in killing the dragon, and brought the princess back, I was to become king of the whole kingdom, with the rescued lady as my wife. If I didn't defeat the dragons, but still rescued the princess, then I would have her as my wife, but would have no kingdom,

and the position of king would go to her younger brother, one day when he was a bit older. The king and queen did not care whether or not I found the treasure, so if I did find it, they said I could do whatever I wanted with it. But if I came back with nothing, then I would get nothing, except the label of a failed knight who would have to work until he got another chance, if any chance, to try again and slay a dragon. But I thought to myself that I would rather have that title and my life than neither one...

So off I went, to slay the beast that had kidnaped the princess. My horse was a fast, sturdy, dapple gray. He cantered along at a good pace, and I let him, for he had much energy, and at this rate, we would reach the foot of the mountains before sunset, and I would have time to set up camp for the night. As we rode, I thought of the beautiful princess, how her golden hair tossed gently in a light breeze, and how her blue eyes sparkled like a pond reflecting sunshine. Everyone knew of the princess's beauty. However, not many, not even I, knew her true character.

As the sun began to set, my horse drew near to the edge of the valley, and I looked around for a cave in the mountainside. I quickly spotted one that appeared suitable for a campsite. I tied my horse to a tree at the edge of a small wood, conveniently located very near my cave. Then I went into the forest to get some kindling for a fire.

When I came back, I noticed that my horse was gone. The rope tying him to the tree had been neatly severed, and because I had never heard of dragons being neat, I called out to whoever had freed my horse.

"Hello? Who's there? Could you please bring back my horse? I came all the way from the bottom of the valley, and I will need him to return there."

"It is best if we leave the horse out of things," said a rumbly voice from the depths of the very cave I had been planning to camp in. "I have freed him, and he is now on his way home."

I quickly drew my spear and shield. "Who are you? State your name and purpose, or I will attack." I had never heard a voice quite like this one, but I was sure that dragons couldn't talk. They were just vicious beasts, after all.

But I knew I was mistaken when a red-scaled dragon stepped out of the cave and gave a mighty roar. The sound filled me with terror and wonder, all at the same time. Then it spoke. "I am Verrion, and I have come to defend my tribe against you. They knew that a knight would be sent, for one always is, whenever we do something drastic. But before we fight, for I suppose that is inevitable, let me tell you a story."

Of course, I wasn't about to wait for the dragon to persuade me not to kill her with a tale of woe. I leapt at her and tried to jab under her chin with my spear, as I had been taught. But she dodged me easily.

"Stop! I need to explain!" cried Verrion, but again, I ignored her. I rolled between her front legs and jabbed at her belly, but my spear shaft broke.

"Fine!" said the dragon, and she really started to fight. Verrion reared up, then slammed down, almost on top of me, but I rolled away just in time. Then she twisted and brought her front talons down on my chest. The air was knocked out of me, and I gasped for breath. A great head came down and stopped inches from my face. Yellow eyes narrowed, and I felt as though she knew all of my thoughts. Perhaps Verrion was reading my mind.

"I know you think we are the bad ones, but there are reasons why we stole your gold, your princess, and some of your food. Did you ever think of that?"

“When you first started hunting in the valley, you left some prey for us. We dragons don’t need much, and can live well on one large catch every two or three weeks. But then you started hunting more and more animals, save only for the pigs, cows, and turkeys, which you tamed, and brought to live with you. You left us with nothing to hunt, no source of food. So we began raiding your villages, once a month, which was and is not enough, but we knew that we couldn’t take all the food, for you needed some, and if all was taken, there would be none for later.

“But you see, we can read minds, and on one of the raids on the village near the castle, a dragon called Camalone heard the princess thinking murderous thoughts. So he stayed there, hidden in the forest behind the castle, listening. He realized she was planning to take the gold from her parents’ treasury, and use it to hire an assassin to kill them. That way, she would become queen, for she was the oldest child. So Camalone stole the gold, in an attempt to foil the plot, for dragons were always supposed to be guardians of the humans. That’s why we know your language. Although being your guardians didn’t work out, Camalone cared about your people. He knew that if the princess succeeded, the kingdom would be thrown into turmoil.

“But it wasn’t enough. When he came back to make sure that everything would work out, he read the princess’s thoughts again and discovered that she was now planning to murder the king and queen herself. So he kidnapped her, to save the kingdom, and now she is locked in the dungeons of our mountain lair. So that is what you should consider, before you wage war on the dragons.

When Verrion first started to speak, I had thought only of killing her, for now she was distracted and her weak spot was very near me. But as I listened, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I suddenly understood the dragons’ actions, and I felt myself slipping over to their side. So when Verrion finished speaking, I simply said, “Is there anything I can do to help my people understand you?”

Just then, a dark blue dragon ran out of the cave, smoke curling around his nostrils. I began to wonder how many dragons were in that cave. He bowed, and then spoke urgently to Verrion. “Verrion, I thought you should know, since you’re a warrior, that the human lady whom we had captured has just escaped.”

“Oh, great!” exclaimed Verrion. “We do *not* need this trouble right now. You say she *just* escaped?”

“Well, I mean we just realized it,” responded the dark blue dragon. “The last time we checked on her was... yesterday evening?”

“So she could be anywhere. At least we know where she should have gone. But she could already be there, so we have to move fast. Little human, do you know how to get into the castle?”

Verrion seemed to mistake my look of panic for a look of certainty and determination. “Great, let’s go.” She crouched low, and looked at me.

“Am I supposed to get on?” I was not at all sure about flying on a dragon. Verrion could tip me off and let me fall to my death at any point of the trip.

“If I had wanted to kill you, I would have done so already. I had you pinned for about ten minutes. Now climb on, unless you want bad things to come to your kingdom.”

I decided to trust the red dragon, and climbed on to her back. She turned toward the distant castle, spread her great wings, leapt into the air, and sped away. We arrived in a matter of minutes, as night darkened the castle.

Verrion turned her head around back towards me. “Okay, so how do we get in?”

I had only ever been to the castle once, when I was made a knight. But I knew that the front entrance was heavily guarded, even after dark. Why did it have to be the only entrance large enough for a dragon? Then I smiled. I was forgetting that I had a giant armored weapon with me. “We should be able to fight the guards at the main entrance. Then you can burn through the wooden doors.”

Verrion nodded, and circled down to the entrance.

I instantly realized... that this was probably the best idea I had ever had. Verrion landed and whirled around, sweeping her tail in a large circle. She knocked down all the soldiers in one go, and then charged at the wooden doors. She smashed into them, and they shattered like glass. We entered the castle.

“Where is the princess’s room?” Verrion asked me.

“I don’t know, I only got a quick tour when I was here before. Verrion, why didn’t you b—”

“Do you have any idea where the king and queen sleep?”

“Yes, they sleep up in the tallest tower, over on the left. Why didn’t you bu—”

“We’ll go up there and wait for the princess.”

“Okay. Why didn’t you bur—”

“You watch for any guards who come up behind us.”

“I will, but why didn’t you burn the doors down? That was the plan.” When Verrion didn’t respond, I knew she was ignoring me, although I didn’t understand why. I made note to ask her later, when we weren’t in the middle of trying to save a kingdom.

Verrion ran up the nearest staircase. She continued to head up, and whenever there was a choice of left or right, she chose left. Soon enough, we found ourselves at the double doors leading to the tower. They were already open. Through the doorway we could see the princess, with a crossbow aimed at the king and queen, who were cowering together in bed.

We rushed in, which happened to be a big mistake. A large, heavy, metal cage crashed down from the ceiling right on top of us. Verrion tried to lift it, but it was no use.

“I’ve been expecting you,” said Princess Presilen in a smooth voice, with a nasty grin on her face. “I knew you would try to come and rescue my parents, ever since you dragons kidnaped me and explained how you were trying to ‘protect the kingdom from my evil reign’. But now, you are here, trapped in a cage, and I am the only one here with a useful weapon, a loaded crossbow, in fact. Swords and claws do no good in a cage. Just so you know, I’m ready to kill anyone who gets in my way. Also, let me mention that you are the ones who got yourselves into this mess. You two can’t call for help, because you technically just attacked the castle, even though you meant to save the king and queen. If anyone happens to find us, they’ll think you cornered me here, and I grabbed my father’s crossbow to defend myself. Thank you for your splendid bit of work. Now, let’s get this job done.”

“Breathe fire at her!” I begged Verrion. Presilen heard me.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you? My, oh my. That dragon *can’t breathe fire!* She’ll do no harm to me. Besides, if you kill me, you’ll be just as bad as I.” Presilen turned to her mother and father, crossbow raised. I looked up at Verrion, *Why didn’t you tell me?* written on my face. Verrion’s look answered my question. It was a shame for a dragon to have no fire, and she had only been made a warrior because she fought so well.

But we had to do something. As Presilen’s hand moved toward the trigger, Verrion forced the bars of the cage apart. I drew my sword, but before I could do anything, the red dragon picked me up

and threw me at the princess, just as Presilen pulled the trigger on her crossbow. I crashed in to her with my sword raised out of the way, for as she had said, if I killed her, I would be as bad as the murderous princess. When I hit her, I disturbed her aim, and the arrow hit the wall near the tall ceiling. We fell to the floor, and her crossbow was knocked free of her grip. My sword stabbed just above her head, pinning some of her now wild golden hair to the floor. I rolled off her and got up, but Presilen could not. A moment of silence passed.

Suddenly, there was cheering.

What none of us had noticed was that a crowd had gathered by the door. It consisted of many soldiers, servants, councilors, and all other kinds of people who lived in the castle. The commotion had drawn them there. All who had watched had realized that dragons were good, and now they were cheering for Verrion and I, and calling us heroes. The king and queen thanked us, and said there would be a ceremony with medals, and I heard the king mutter that they'd also be getting braver guards as well. Then the king ordered some soldiers to work together to lift up the cage, so we could crawl out. But all this felt like a haze to me. Oblivious to everything else, I turned to Verrion, with only one thought on my mind.

"Can I come live with you in the dragons' mountain lair?" I ask Verrion.

"Of course, dragon-friend! Hey, you don't happen to have a name, do you?"