

MERLIN

A golden staff with a glowing gem at the top, set against a background of golden, ethereal flames or smoke.

BOOK 7

DOOMRAGA'S REVENGE



T. A. BARRON

Originally published as *Merlin's Dragon: Doomraga's Revenge*

Do not underestimate Basil!

The colliding dragons shrieked, while bones cracked and scales splintered. When all the clouds of ash finally cleared, Lo Valdearg lay sprawled upon the body of his leader. Moaning in pain, he rolled over and slammed to the ground. The orange dragon, whose back had been broken, never moved again.

Confused, distraught, and thoroughly frightened, the other dragons scattered in all directions. They leaped into the air and flew away as fast as they could, not daring to look back, lest the bold green dragon decide to pursue them.

At the scene of the battle, Basilgarrad surveyed the remains of the attackers. Just beyond the crushed corpse, Lo Valdearg, unable to fly, crawled away in anguish. After watching him for a few seconds, Basilgarrad delivered the most humiliating blow of all: He simply turned away.

Swinging around to face Merlin—who, along with Hallia and Krystallus, gazed at him with grateful admiration—the green dragon narrowed his eyes. With gusto, he declared, “Let that be a warning to anybody who dares to call me a pet.”

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Dedicated to the five little dragons
with big spirits
who shared our home



LOST ISLAND

THE

Ruins of Varigal

be there giants?

Lake of the Face

living stones

Tuathat & Grave

dwarves last seen here

crossing

Crystal Cave of the Grand Elusa

orchards

THE MISTED HILLS

Cobblers Rowan

Arbassa, Home of Rhia

DRUMA WOOD

The Last Shomorra

Trouble found here

shore of the speaking shells

dunes

Forgotten Island

Traveling once lived here

Emrys' Landing



strange peoples live here
L A N D S
 where
 is
 the
 Otherworld
 well?

The **LEGENDARY**
ISLE OF
FINCAYRA

Slantos
 caverns
 The Shrouded Castle
 Dance of the Giants
 is prophesied
E A G L E S
C A N Y O N
 ruins
 Goblins' Encampment
THE DARK HILLS
 Home of Cairpre
 The Notch
 be there treasures?
THE
HAUNTED
MARSH
 Town of the Bards
 Teilean and Garlatha
 Domnu's Lair
 the Colator
 may lie here
THE RUSTED PLAINS

Ever mist surrounds the ISLE

TO THE UNEXPLORED
REGIONS OF
Upper Avalon
TRUNK, BRANCHES,
THE STAGES BEYOND
KNOWNS PORTALS—
EVER FLOWS ELAND



Swirling Sea
(Site of the
Creeky
Ending the
Wave of
Storms)

Elurien (Woodroot)

Village of Prosperity

Deep Forest
Bogins

Roostward
Shrine of
DAGON
the
LIFE
SHARING
CLAN

INTERMUNDINE OF ANIMAL MAGIC
CREATED HERE
SIVER, BELANDESS

Forest
Family

White City
LITTLE
LITTLE

HALL'S
PEAK

AMELNY
STAGGERING
STONE

HUNTS OF
MARSH
GHOULS

MYSTIC
FOREST

THE SEVEN
RIVERS
OF COLOR

HIGH
DIALS

LEGENDARY
MAGIC
PLACE
BE HERE

FOREST OF
THE GIANTS
LAKES

NEW
TOWER
SNOWPEAK

HIGH
BRYNCHILLA

Olanabram
(Stoneroot)

VILLAGE
OF
BULLS

BRINCHILLA
(Waterroot)

Great
Dance
of
the
Society
of
the
Whale

Althea

Cave of
the
Diver

Waters
of the
Withered
Springs

Thaliborn's
Bellage

The Seven Root-Realms
of the Great Tree of
AVALON

Roots of Merlin's MAGICAL SEED PLANTED IN THE FINEST YEAR



T.A.B. 40 2002

LOSE CITY OF LIGHT

PALACE OF THE FLAMELONTS

CRAFTED FROM THE BEST AVAILABLE SOURCE
YEAR OF AVALON 1002
BY THE COLLEGE OF MAPMAKERS

1: NOT SO SMALL ANYMORE

Having been very small, I can truthfully tell you that size doesn't matter at all.

Except when it does.

The wrathful roar exploded—so forcefully it toppled a grove of ironwood trees, emptied a flowing river, and blew an entire waterfall sideways. Fierce winds slammed into the pinnacles high above Lavadon Lake, breaking off towers of rock that plunged over the cliffs encircling the lake, hitting the water with tumultuous splashes. Not that those splashes could be heard, however. The roar filled the air, overwhelming every other sound.

When, at last, the roar faded away, another sound remained. Higher and thinner it was, yet every bit as arresting—a frenzied chorus of shrieks.

The shrieks of children about to die.

Atop those sheer cliffs huddled a band of young dwarves. Like all their kind in Fireroot, curly red hair hovered over their heads like fluffy clouds. Yet their typical expressions of mischief and playfulness had given way to something else. Terror.

No adult dwarves stood by to protect them. All those who had tried, their mothers with sharp eyes and powerful hands and their fathers with brawny arms and thick beards, now lay in the dirt, their lifeless bodies smashed or shredded or incinerated. Not far away, glaring at the children, was the monster who had done this: Fireroot's most ferocious dragon.

"Tell me!" he commanded, scraping the ground with his murderous claws, slicing boulders as easily as a knife would cut a melon.

Lo Valdearg was the name he had chosen, hoping to link himself to Valdearg, the most dangerous dragon of ancient lore who had terrorized Merlin's isle of Fincayra. Although he'd only recently started causing havoc in Fireroot, the mere sound of this dragon's name, like his roar, made people quake in fear. As did the sight of his gigantic form, which was impossibly large, covered with scarlet scales that shielded his head, neck, chest, tail, and wings.

"Tell me!" he repeated, lifting his gargantuan head high above the cowering dwarves. To them, his massive face loomed as huge as a hillside. But this hillside had fiery red eyes and a vast mouth with rows of pinnacle-sharp teeth. Not to mention the ability to breathe fire hot enough to melt any stone.

Steaming hot air blew down on them from his cavernous nostrils, making the children shriek loudly and forcing them to move back to the very edge of the cliff. They stood there, some of them holding hands and others covering their eyes, while the youngest children sat on the ground and wailed. Meanwhile, Lo Valdearg's ragged black beard, sprouting from the tip of his chin, slapped the air as he shook his massive head. From the beard fell drops of fresh blood, as well as a few remains of his late victims—a severed arm here, an empty boot there.

"Tell me!" he demanded again, his voice rising to a roar.

"Never," cried an older girl, still clutching her father's charred ax. She raised the heavy ax as high as she could before her arms couldn't hold it any longer. As the double-edged blade slammed back to the ground, she spat, "We'll never tell you where to find the flaming jewels."

"Our people discovered them!" yelled a boy at her side.

"They belong to dwarves," called another. "Not dragons!"

Lo Valdearg's eyes glowed like molten lava. A ferocious rumble gathered in his chest, while his eyes seemed to burst into flames. "They will soon belong to me, you stubborn little insects."

The scarlet dragon drew a deep breath, preparing to blast his prey into ashes.

The shrieks rose louder, piercing the air. Many children shrank back, nearly falling over the edge. Only a few, including the girl with the ax, stood motionless before their foe.

He roared. Out of his mouth poured an avalanche of flames, so intensely hot that even the air itself seemed to flee, rushing away in a superheated wind. All this fire, smoke, and wind shot toward the young dwarves—

But never reached them.

At the instant the dragon's flames blasted forth, a great wing reached down from the sky and blocked the onslaught. Protected by thousands of bright green scales, the wing deflected everything right back at the attacker, smothering him with smoke and fire.

Lo Valdearg roared—this time not with rage, but with surprise and pain. The sudden blast of flame had singed his eyes and burned away most of his beard. He rolled backward, away from the cliff, clawing at his wounded eyes.

At the same time, the creature whose wing had saved the children landed between them and Lo Valdearg. Smashing down with a resounding crash, his weight shook the ground violently—so violently that hundreds of boulders broke off from the cliff and rained down on the lake far below.

Gazing up at their savior, the children seemed frozen, too startled to speak. Partly because he was so huge—even bigger than their attacker, more like a mountain than anything alive. And partly because he was, to their utter astonishment, another dragon.

The great green dragon turned his head toward the children, still keeping one eye on the writhing body of Lo Valdearg. Lit by the stars of Avalon above, the scales on his brow sparkled like emerald. "Do not fear me," he declared, his voice as loud as thunder yet somehow not so frightening. "I am Basilgarrad."

Still none of the children spoke. Their faces full of awe and disbelief, they merely continued to gawk at this enormous being who had appeared so suddenly. Some of the youngest dwarves continued to sob, while others started to crawl away from the edge of the cliff. At last, the girl with the ax thumped its blade on the ground. Peering up into one of the enormous green eyes, she shouted to be heard.

"Are you *the* Basilgarrad? Who saved Merlin from an evil kreelix?"

The titanic head nodded ever so slightly. But the dragon's eyes narrowed as he remembered his battle with the kreelix—whose power to devour magic often meant death for wizards . . . as well as dragons.

The girl glanced down at her ax. The sudden recollection of her father, who had wielded it so bravely until the moment of his death, filled her eyes with mist. Lifting her face again to Basilgarrad, she asked, "Why did you help us?"

Turning from the other dragon, who had rolled even farther away and was still clawing at his eyes in agony, Basilgarrad lowered his head a bit more. As his immense shadow covered the girl, many other dwarves backed away nervously. But she stood motionless, staring up at him.

Finally, the green dragon spoke, his voice surprisingly gentle. "Because, little one, I was once very small. Even smaller than you."

She blinked, unable to comprehend such a thing, let alone believe it. How could a creature with wings that could stretch across a valley ever have been small?

Sensing her doubt, Basilgarrad chuckled, a rich, bubbling sound that echoed deep in his throat. As his enormous lips parted, they revealed teeth sharper than spears, arrayed in rows, packed together like thousands of sentries. Except for one place, at the front of his mouth, where a prominently placed tooth was missing—the result of his battle with the kreelix.

A sudden roar burst upon them, flattening the girl and the rest of the dwarves with its force. Basilgarrad whirled around just as the scarlet dragon leaped at him, wings spread wide and dead.

claws extended. Fire still glowed amidst the embers of the singed beard. Yet the attacker's angry eyes, swollen from burns, glowed even brighter.

"How dare you challenge me?" roared Lo Valdearg, spitting flames as he charged. "How dare you defy the greatest dragon of all time?"

With a single deft movement, Basilgarrad spun to the side. Whipping his enormous tail skyward, he slammed it into the attacker's belly, with such force that Lo Valdearg bellowed in pain and flipped upside down in the air. Then, before the dragon could recover, Basilgarrad swung his tail again, wrapping its length around his foe's neck. With a mighty roar of his own, so loud it was heard leagues away in the Volcano Lands, Basilgarrad hurled the scarlet dragon over the cliff and down into the lake below. A huge splash erupted, reaching even the highest rim of rock, spraying the young dwarves with water.

Silence slowly returned, broken only by the fading echoes of dragon roars and the slap of waves against the shore far below. Basilgarrad turned again to the girl with the ax. Her cheeks glistened with water from the splash, as a lone drop rolled down her nose. Though she was smaller than the smallest scale on his body, she gazed up at him without fear. Her upturned face glowed with gratitude.

"Thank you," she said. Basilgarrad gave a nod, while folding his immense wings against his back. She watched him for a moment, then added, "But I really can't believe you were ever small."

"Oh, but I was," he rumbled. His great green eye gave her a wink. "It does come in handy, though that I'm not so small anymore."

2: WHISPERS

Revenge, for a dragon, is sometimes sweet, sometimes sour—but always tasty.

Fireroot was not Basilgarrad's favorite realm. *Too much sulfur in the air, too few trees on the ground* as he'd once told Merlin.

Nevertheless, Basilgarrad stayed there long enough to help the young dwarves rejoin their people, guiding them to a tunnel entrance a few leagues away. Elder dwarves emerged and took the orphans into their homes; a few even thanked the dragon for his service. But when he offered to help dispose of the bodies of Lo Valdearg's victims, they refused, stubbornly insisting that only dwarves could do the grim work of a traditional burial.

Last of everyone to leave was the brave girl who carried her father's scorched ax. As she thanked him, she revealed that she'd been named after her grandmother Urnalda—a powerful leader of the dwarves long ago, in the days of Merlin's youth. Meanwhile, her eyes shone with a glint that assured him they would meet again. Then she raised the ax in a salute and followed the others into the tunnel.

Flying home over the blackened lands of this realm, he gazed down at a row of lava-spewing volcanoes. Sulfurous fumes clogged the air, making him crinkle his snout. Those charred summits and smoking ridges, ringed with noxious clouds of ash, seemed a fitting home for a murderer such as Lo Valdearg. But why had the scarlet dragon started that rampage? Why had his long-smoldering green fire for the dwarves' precious jewels suddenly burst into deadly flames?

Banking sideways to avoid a towering cloud of ash, Basilgarrad grimaced. Not just because of the rancid smell, but because of something else on his mind. Lo Valdearg was, indeed, a problem—but not the only problem. More and more, outbreaks of violence were appearing around Avalon: raging dragons in Fireroot, thieving gnomes in Mudroot, tree-strangling snakes in northern Woodroot. Merlin, for his part, had been spending much more time recently dealing with such problems, doing his best to restore peace—and asking his friend to do the same. Still, the wizard didn't seem troubled by the outbreaks, merely shrugging his shoulders and calling them “the growing pains of a young world.” The great green dragon wasn't so sure.

He beat his wings more slowly, gliding above the dark, fire-blasted hills. His thoughts, meanwhile, traveled far away, across the seven realms of Avalon. His world. For all its bizarre and sometimes dangerous inhabitants, Avalon thrived on its wondrous diversity—and from the beginning had seemed the true home of peace and harmony.

Until now, that is. Why am I feeling so uneasy?

His huge wings beat the air, sending reverberations across the ashen hills. “You worry too much,” he grumbled aloud. “If Merlin isn't concerned, why should you be? Time to stop—”

A piercing shriek cut him off. His green eyes opened wide, and he veered sharply to the left, pumping his enormous wings to fly straight toward the source of the terrifying sound. For he knew that sound all too well.

He plunged into a cloud whose fetid odors stung his eyes and assaulted his nose. But he kept flying straight ahead. That shriek meant that every second mattered. Again it came, this time joined by several more shrieks—equally cacophonous, equally terrifying.

Bursting out of the fetid cloud, he saw them: a gang of deadly dactylbirds. Scraping the air with their dagger-sharp talons, they flapped their large, leathery wings in unison. Nearing their prey—a flock of tiny, blue-winged mist faeries—they shrieked boisterously, as if they were already celebrating their kill.

Their wings slapped at the air, while their heavy-lidded eyes gleamed in triumph. Just ahead, the mist faeries flew in a frenzied panic, trying desperately to escape. Their delicate blue wings, each thin as a wisp of mist, already showed tattered edges. Soon they would shred completely, leaving the faeries at the mercy of these predators.

The dactylbirds' shrieks grew louder, ripping at the air as violently as their talons often ripped flesh. Then, without warning, their shrieking ceased.

An enormous green wing suddenly swept through the air. Catching all the killer birds by surprise, the wing folded over them and hurled them down—straight into the mouth of a fiery volcano. They had no time to resist or change course. Their raucous shrieks returned, though only briefly, before the volcano's bubbling hot lava swallowed them whole.

Basilgarrad stretched his wing again, soaring on high. As he watched the dactylbirds disappear, he recalled his own terror when others of their kind had pursued him in his younger, smaller days. He gazed for a while at the fuming volcano, then nodded with satisfaction. A new gleam in his eye, he muttered dryly, "That'll warm their hearts."

A cloud of blue mist blurred his vision. The faeries! They swarmed all around his face, wings whirring, calling to him in their thin, whispery voices.

"Friend of Faeries!"

"Great Heart, Great One."

"Basil the Brave."

"Dragon Unrivaled."

"Wings of Peace."

Names, he realized. They're giving me names.

His massive lips curled upward. "No need to give me new names, my friends. I am simply Basilgarrad—and I am always glad to help you."

The faeries' whispers swelled, now more like a gust of wind than any form of language. He could no longer make out their words. But he couldn't mistake their adoration.

At last, the blue cloud started to dissipate. The faeries departed, leaving Basilgarrad's face. The wings now moved more relaxedly; the flock seemed to be floating rather than flying.

He watched them go, hardly stirring as he glided over the scorched terrain. Cocking his huge ear, he strained to hear the last of their soft, whispery voices.

Those voices reminded him of someone else, a dear friend who moved with the grace and constancy of the wind itself. For she was, in fact, a wishlahaylagon—a sister of the wind. She had traveled far with him, and always called him "little wanderer" . . . even after he'd grown into a mighty dragon. But finally the day came when, like the wind, she had to move on, and nothing could convince her to stay.

His ears trembled slightly as he wondered, *Where are you now, Aylah? In this world . . . or some other? The ears swiveled. Dragons are too big to miss anyone. Certainly anyone as flighty as you! But I suppose I wouldn't mind hearing your airy voice again, or catching your cinnamon scent on the breeze.*

A whiff of sulfurous smoke, belching from a volcano below, made him cough. And brought him instantly back to the present. Who could ever stay for long in a realm that smelled so bad? Time to return to the sweet glades of Woodroot!

As he raised his wing, banking a wide turn, he caught a final glimpse of the departing mist faeries. With a rumble of amusement, he said, "Wings of Peace? Not half bad, really. Not half bad."

Then, with a mighty slap of his wings, Basilgarrad headed for the wooded realm he called home.

3: AN EXCELLENT TIME TO DO IT

A good sleep—such a treasure, it shouldn't be wasted on the weary.

Curling his gargantuan body into a circle, Basilgarrad filled almost the entire bowl-shaped valley. This had long been one of his favorite places to sleep—partly because it held no trees, so he wouldn't be tickled by their trunks snapping under his weight. And partly because it lay in the deepest forest, the innermost Woodroot, a place so remote that he wouldn't be disturbed. Except, of course, by Merlin—who could find him anywhere.

As his lids drooped, covering the bright green fires of his eyes, he produced a smell of marsh lilies and pond water—one of his most favorite, most soothing aromas. Soon the scent of lilies filled the air, and he sighed contentedly.

He thought back over the experiences of the day. His battle with Lo Valdearg, that murderer who had dared to take the name of Basilgarrad's own father, the most powerful dragon of ancient lore—and who couldn't contain his hunger for the dwarves' flaming jewels. His conversation with young Urnalda, who couldn't believe that he had once been small, even smaller than she. His brief encounter with the dactylbirds, and the grateful embrace of the mist faeries.

None of these things, he reminded himself, could have possibly happened before he changed from the scrawny little creature he'd been to the gargantuan one he was now. Life was entirely different these days! *And yet . . . he mused, most of the time I still feel the same down inside.*

He yawned, showing his cavernous, tooth-studded mouth, as his eyes closed completely. Sleepily, he thought about one more experience of the day: a minor scuffle with an ogre he'd met on the way home, somewhere in the western reaches of Stoneroot. The hairy fellow, who had body odor as repulsive as his manners, had developed an annoying habit of ripping the roofs off houses. Before eating all the people inside.

When Basilgarrad stopped the ogre from destroying yet another house and warned him to leave quietly, the fellow didn't exactly respond well. He tore off an especially big roof and threw it at Basilgarrad. So what else could the dragon do but throw this nuisance all the way to the next realm? He'd heard, a few seconds later, a distant thud combined with the squelch of mud—or, perhaps, the ogre's body.

Yes, he thought, drifting into sleep, it's been a big day. Nothing unusual, though, for a dragon. Especially one who's called . . . Wings of . . .

He snored, making a gentle, soothing sound that could have easily been confused with a landslide slamming down a slope or a tornado crashing through a forest.

At that instant, he heard a voice, clear and loud. Not in his ears, but in his mind. He snapped awake, opening his eyes and growling angrily at the sound that had so rudely interrupted his slumber. Yet even as he did so, he knew that all his growling wouldn't help.

For this was the voice of his friend Merlin—a good wizard, mind you, but someone with no sense at all about when to call telepathically. Wizards, unfortunately, have horrible manners.

“Basil!” called Merlin, sounding a bit out of breath. “How are you, old chap? Hope I didn't disturb you.”

“Not at all,” the dragon thought grumpily. “You merely wrecked my first good sleep after—”

“Glad to hear it,” interrupted Merlin. In the background, something exploded violently. “Er, I just wanted to say, old chap . . .”

“Say what?”

Blaaamm! Another explosion echoed in the dragon's mind, followed by the unmistakable sound of something sizzling.

"Just wanted to say," Merlin went on, "that if you'd like to"—*Blaaamm!*—"save my life . . ." The wizard paused while something crackled and something else slammed into the ground. "Er, Basil . . . this would be an *excellent* time to do it."

Having given up on sleep, the great green dragon shook his head. "In trouble again, are you? When is this time?"

"The upper reaches of Fireroot, near the"—*Blaaamm! Blaaamm!*—"gobsken fortress. In the middle of erupting—"

"Volcanoes, I know." Basilgarrad sighed. "Back to Fireroot! Just my luck. Sweet Dagda, I hate this smoky realm."

"You'll come then, old chap? I'll be glad to see you. And so will"—*Ssss-zzzaappp!*—"Hallia."

"Hallia?" Hearing the name of Merlin's wife, the dragon stiffened. "She's there with you?"

"She is, though not—" The rest of his words were drowned out by an explosion.

"Right." The dragon lifted his head out of the valley, stretching his wide wings. "Just try to stay alive until I get there."

"Will do my"—*Kablaaamm!*—"very best."

Glancing up at the stars overhead, Basilgarrad noted the location of the brightest constellation—seven stars in a straight line known as the Wizard's Staff. Since the very creation of Avalon, those stars had radiated powerfully, guiding night-time travelers. They had also inspired many years of speculation about what, really, were the stars of Avalon: Were they other worlds, or perhaps something more mysterious? But tonight he had no time for speculation. Trouble had erupted—once again. And this time, he felt sure, Merlin couldn't just dismiss it as "growing pains."

His green-tinted tongue pushed against the gap in his teeth, souvenir of his first real battle. This time, he knew, there would be no magic-eating kreelix to fight. Who would it be, then?

"All right," he declared. "Time to fly."

Taking his bearings, he stretched his neck due east—toward Fireroot. With several powerful beats of his wings, he rose out of the valley. His long, sinewy form lifted toward the stars, as gracefully as smoke from a candle flame.

4: FOR THE GOOD OF ALL

When you think of life as a meal, and imagine yourself as the chef in total control—that's usually when you get cooked.

Flying by the light of Avalon's stars, Basilgarrad beat his wings so fast they were just a blur of motion. No creature could fly more swiftly than a dragon—and he was a dragon in a hurry. A great hurry.

"Merlin," he grumbled as he streaked across the sky, "for someone with such awesome powers, you certainly have a knack for getting into trouble!"

His eyes, glowing green in the night, narrowed. Those troubles had been growing more frequent, as well as more dangerous. For both Merlin and Basilgarrad. And also for the world they loved, a place unlike any other. Avalon—the magical world within a tree, grown from a seed planted by Merlin himself.

It was a seed, the dragon knew well, that had held something more than a new and wondrous world. Something, in its own way, even larger—and even more remarkable. An *idea*. That somewhere in the wide universe, there might be one place where all creatures of all kinds could find a way to live together in harmony. To share their world with mutual respect. To draw strength, rather than conflict, from their differences. And to protect the many beauties of these realms.

The Avalon idea, Merlin liked to call it. It was a notion that stirred the heart as well as the mind. A notion that seemed increasingly at risk. Which was why, despite all his grumbling, he was glad that Merlin had called—as the wizard had recently been doing more often. So often, in fact, that Merlin was spending much more time with Basilgarrad than with his wife, Hallia.

Basilgarrad roared, even as he flew at dragonspeed. There was only one place he wanted to be—a place that had seemed impossible for the tiny little fellow of his youth, a place that now felt more like home than anywhere on the land. *By Merlin's side*.

Looking below, his great scaled wings beating steadily, he recognized each of the seven root realms. Soon after leaving Woodroot, whose forests smelled so fresh and sweet, he spied Waterroot—where seas gleamed, even in starlight, with all the colors of the rainbow. A few moments later Stoneroot, whose bells he could hear chiming at any time, day or night. Now Mudroot, whose soil Merlin had enriched with the magic of life. Next came Airroot, called Y Swylarna by the sylphs, where he could see the layered clouds that were the dancing grounds of the mist maidens. In the far distance—the eternal darkness, blacker than black, that was Shadowroot. And now, just below him, the volcanic realm of Fireroot.

He veered north, toward the mountainous terrain where the gobsken had recently built a fortress of stone so thick that even dragons' fire could not penetrate. Despite their antipathy toward the gobsken for whom fighting was as natural as breathing, Merlin and Basilgarrad had decided to let the fortress stand. So long as the gobsken didn't use it as a base to conquer other peoples, no problem. And if the gobsken's long-standing feud with the fire dragons kept those two groups busy battling each other, the fortress could be a useful distraction. Was it too much to hope that this ongoing feud could occupy the dragons so fully that they would forget about their obsession with the dwarves' flaming jewels?

Passing over a line of volcanoes, Basilgarrad searched for any sign of Merlin. Through the sulfurous fumes and eruptions of boiling lava, he spotted a troop of marching gobsken. A field of sizzling hot lava pools. A forest of dead ironwood trees, their trunks and branches blackened by flames.

But no sign of the wizard.

He turned slightly, ~~skimming over the craters of an old volcano. The fetid clouds that clogged the~~ air made his eyes burn, but he stared at the fire-scorched terrain. Something about those craters didn't seem right. Almost as if . . .

There! Topping a ridge on the volcano, he spied a new eruption of flames. But this wasn't the fire of molten lava. No, it was the fire of *dragons*. A whole circle of them, directing their deadly flames toward one person who stood in the center.

Merlin!

Standing on the rim of a crater, the wizard hurled blasts of lightning from his staff and golden balls of fire from his free hand. Constantly whirling and spinning, while dodging the attackers' blasts of flame, he looked more like a dancer than a warrior. But this was no mere entertainment. He was fighting for his life.

Seventeen, eighteen, *nineteen dragons!* Basilgarrad's mind whirled. How could one man, even a wizard, have held off such an overwhelming force? And how should he, as the lone dragon on Merlin's side, best help his friend?

He slowed his flight enough to scan the scene as he drew closer. Lit by the flaring volcanoes as well as the stars above, the attackers showed all the colors of Fireroot's dragons: red, orange, and amber. And yes—among them was a huge scarlet dragon Basilgarrad recognized.

Well, well, Lo Valdearg, he said to himself. *Feeling strong enough already to fight again?* He snorted, nostrils flaring. *How unlucky for you.*

Focusing on the wizard, Basilgarrad noticed right away that Merlin's face looked unusually haggard. His thick black beard had been singed, the hem of his cloak torn. Suddenly the dragon saw a figure hidden inside the crater, another figure.

Hallia! Though he recognized her, this huddled figure barely resembled the woman who had won Merlin's heart long ago, whose grace and kindness and ability to transform herself into a deer were famous throughout Avalon. Wrapped in a tattered blue shawl, she leaned against the crater's rock wall, dodging stray bursts of sparks and flame. Her auburn braid was coming apart; her eyes, as large as a doe's, were filled with fear.

Something stirred within the crater and moved toward her. Another person! Basilgarrad strained to see through the volcanic haze—then recognized who it was: Krystallus, the son of Hallia and Merlin. In recent years, he'd grown into a strapping young man. As tall as his parents, with a mane of pure white hair, he seemed quite regal—despite the fact, to Merlin's disappointment, he showed no sign of magical ability. As the dragon watched from above, Krystallus took his mother's hand, trying to comfort her.

Basilgarrad then noticed something else about the crater. It held, in its center, a cluster of green flames—not the fire of battle, but the same magical fire that burned in his own green eyes. The fire of *élan*, the most powerful magic of all, the essential sap of the Great Tree of Avalon.

A portal, he realized in awe. Here in the remotest part of Fireroot! Had Hallia come here through that portal? Surely Merlin wouldn't have brought them here intentionally—to this scorched wasteland where no one lived besides warlike gobsken and wrathful dragons.

Just as he shifted his wings, preparing to land, Basilgarrad understood why the craters on this ridge seemed so odd. Unlike the craters he'd seen elsewhere, they were perfectly round. Circular—as if they'd been . . .

Carved, he realized. Hollowed out—by people with the skills and tools to do so. People such as the dwarves!

In the final seconds before touching down, he put it all together. *These aren't craters, after all. They are entrances! To the dwarves' underground tunnels. Maybe even to—*

Before he could finish the thought, he saw Merlin deflect a new, terribly fierce barrage of flames from the dragons. ~~*Time to announce my arrival*~~, he decided—and landed with a thunderous crash, slamming into the blackened ridge right next to the crater.

The force of his impact nearly toppled Merlin from the crater's rim, but the wizard managed to steady himself with his staff. Instantly, all the surrounding dragons halted their blasts of flame. In that moment of silence, the eyes of Merlin and Basilgarrad met.

“What took you so long?” asked the wizard, his voice gruff but affectionate.

“Oh, I took in some of the sights on the way.” Then the dragon's eyes narrowed with concern. “What's your plan?”

“Plan?” Merlin scowled. “I thought *you* would have a plan.”

“Green dragon!” boomed a powerful voice from the ring of attackers. “Whose side do you choose?”

Basilgarrad spun his massive head around to face the speaker—an enormous dragon whose orange scales were almost completely blackened by soot. Columns of smoke poured from his nostrils; rage burned in his amber eyes. Though one of the largest dragons in the ring, he was still only two-thirds the size of the green dragon who had appeared so suddenly. Standing beside the orange dragon, Lo Valdearg started in surprise. Then he grimaced in rage. Smoke curled from his nostrils, and he angrily clawed at the remaining charred stubs of his beard.

“Which side?” demanded the orange dragon. “That of your brethren, the dragons of Rahnawyn? Or this ragtag wizard who tries to keep us from our jewels?”

“*Your* jewels?” called Merlin, his voice booming nearly as forcefully as the dragon's. “They belong not to you, but to the dwarves! Who are, even now, underground as I instructed them—but who would bravely answer your attack if necessary. You do not own the jewels just because you crave them as a mosquito craves blood.”

“Soon we shall!” Sparks of flame flew like spittle from the orange dragon's mouth. “Just as we dragons will soon control every part of this realm, crushing any foes who stand in our way.”

By his side, Lo Valdearg nodded and glared at one foe in particular, the only dragon who had ever defeated him in battle.

The orange leader thumped on the ground with his foreleg, sending up a cloud of ash. “Choose now, green dragon, for tonight's battle begins anew. And before it is over, any allies of that wizard will be dead.”

From within the crater, Hallia said something to Merlin, too quietly for anyone else to hear. The wizard frowned grimly in reply.

Moving his vast bulk slowly, Basilgarrad raised his tail into the air. All of a sudden, he brought the tail's clubbed end down with a resounding crash. Rocks and dirt and ash flew skyward. Vibrations shook the ridge like a powerful tremor. Three or four of the dragons in the ring lost their balance, rolling into their neighbors. As the explosive sound faded away, he spoke—not only to the orange dragon, but to everyone in the ring.

“I am Basilgarrad.” From deep in his throat came a terrible rumble. “And I stand with Merlin.”

Instantly, the orange dragon—joined by Lo Valdearg and most of the others—shot a barrage of superheated flames. Basilgarrad swung around, protecting the people in the crater with one wing and his eyes with the other. But he didn't retaliate. Not yet.

As the withering volley of flames subsided, he raised his head high. “Is that all you have?” He taunted. “Nothing more?”

Another blast of flames erupted—strong enough to melt the black rock of the ridge, forming sizzling rivers of obsidian. But once again, Basilgarrad's wings deflected the fire. When at last the onslaught ceased, he lifted his head again. Surveying the ferocious dragons, he declared, “Flames you

have, my cousins. Flames and power! But I ask you—what good are they? Are such great gifts worth no more than this, to spend them on lives of thieving and murdering? Is there no greater calling for dragons, the most wondrous creatures in any realm of any world?”

He paused, letting his words hover on the night air. Lowering his voice to a deep rumble, he asked, “Why not use your great power for something else, something more worthy? Why not use them for the good of all?”

A few of the dragons, including Lo Valdearg, snorted with contempt or laughed out loud. But Basilgarrad’s steady gaze did not waver. Over on the crater, Merlin nodded in agreement, while Halla and Krystallus poked their heads above the rim to watch.

“I ask you, fellow dragons,” continued Basilgarrad, “what is a life of conquest but an empty egg? Everything you own has been stolen from others or ripped from the land, what value have you created? True value—and yes, true greatness—lies not in what we take, but what we give.”

Surprisingly, a few of the dragons looked anxiously at each other. Another few, feeling the sting of his words, cocked their heads in thought. A small but growing murmur of uncertainty began to rise around the circle.

“Ignore that treachery!” Lo Valdearg’s voice thundered, echoing on the volcanic ridges around them. As the largest dragon in the ring—even bigger than the orange leader, though still smaller than Basilgarrad—he spoke with commanding authority. All the other dragons turned his way. “For treachery it is.”

Emboldened by the vastly superior numbers on his side, Lo Valdearg took a few steps forward. Facing the green intruder who had dared to challenge the dragons’ ways, he roared, “You are nothing but a tool—a pet of that wizard over there. He controls your life, not you! And a dragon should be free. Or he is not really a dragon at all!”

Almost all the dragons around the ring nodded their heads. Several banged their huge tails against the ground, thumping their approval.

Looking straight into the intruder’s eyes, Lo Valdearg sneered, “You dishonor all your kind. Look at you, green pet! Why, you can’t even breathe fire.”

Several of the surrounding dragons grunted in surprise. Though only Merlin noticed, Basilgarrad himself winced ever so slightly.

“That’s right,” Lo Valdearg went on. “He may be big, but he’s still just a Green from Woodroot. He couldn’t light a little campfire, let alone make a powerful blaze. No wonder he preaches peace—he’s not fit for war!”

Without warning, the scarlet dragon blew a raging breath of fire straight at his foe. So great was the hot blast that Merlin was nearly blown over backward into the crater. But Basilgarrad did not retreat. He merely turned his face away momentarily and took the full force of the attack on the scales of his neck and chest. When the flames died down, he slowly turned back to face Lo Valdearg.

“You really are stupid.” Basilgarrad shook his head. “Even more stupid than you look. And that’s nearly impossible.”

At that, Lo Valdearg blew another searing blast at his face. At the same time, he charged with frightening speed, aiming to sink his teeth into any part of Basilgarrad’s body. If only one of those teeth cracked a scale—that would be a grievous wound.

Simultaneously, the orange dragon called to the others, “Help Lo Valdearg! Vanquish the enemy!”

Heeding the command, every dragon in the ring rushed forward. Teeth bared, they blew a torrent of flames. So fast did they move, they were on their enemy in a flash.

Not fast enough, though. Basilgarrad spun away from Lo Valdearg with surprising speed, then did something completely unexpected. Bracing his immense body, he whipped his mighty tail—and wrapped it around the scarlet dragon’s neck. With a deafening roar, Basilgarrad used his enormous

strength, along with Lo Valdearg's momentum, to lift the other dragon off the ground. He whirled his foe around and around, clearing the circle and using the bully's body as a shield.

Lo Valdearg, taken by surprise, could only release a strangled gurgle from his throat. The other dragons, pushed back by this huge whirling club, gazed on in fear and astonishment. No dragon in history had ever done something so bold in battle!

"Kill him! Rush him!" commanded the orange leader. "You cannot be defeated by a single dragon!" His soldiers, however, wavered. Only a handful of them charged, and each met with a painful slaughter by the whirling body. Two were struck so hard in their heads that they toppled over, unconscious. And still Basilgarrad's tail kept spinning.

"Charge him, you fools!" The orange dragon shouted louder than ever, spraying sparks from his mouth. "Charge him now!"

Just then, Basilgarrad arched his broad back and lifted his tail straight up—and with it, the helpless dragon who had become his weapon. Using all the strength he could muster, he brought down Lo Valdearg—right on top of the exasperated leader.

The colliding dragons shrieked, while bones cracked and scales splintered. When all the clouds of ash finally cleared, Lo Valdearg lay sprawled upon the body of his leader. Moaning in pain, he rolled off and slammed to the ground. The orange dragon, whose back had been broken, never moved again.

Confused, distraught, and thoroughly frightened, the other dragons scattered in all directions. They leaped into the air and flew away as fast as they could, not daring to look back, lest the bold green dragon decide to pursue them.

At the scene of the battle, Basilgarrad surveyed the remains of the attackers. Just beyond the crushed corpse, Lo Valdearg, unable to fly, crawled away in anguish. After watching him for a few seconds, Basilgarrad delivered the most humiliating blow of all: He simply turned away.

Swinging around to face Merlin—who, along with Hallia and Krystallus, gazed at him with grateful admiration—the green dragon narrowed his eyes. With gusto, he declared, "Let that be a warning to anybody who dares to call me a pet."

5: FLAMES

Words are like knives. They can spread butter and honey—or pierce a beating heart.

Peering over the crater's rim, Basilgarrad glanced at the portal's mysterious flames, so like the green fire of his own eyes. Those flames could magically transport anyone around Avalon almost instantly—a dangerous way to travel, but very useful for creatures who weren't lucky enough to be able to fly at dragonspeed. This particular portal had, apparently, brought Merlin's wife and son to this fire-blackened realm. But why?

"Oh, Basil," said Hallia, her doe eyes full of gratitude. She lay her hand on the crusty black pumice of the rim. "You were marvelous. Truly marvelous."

He raised his enormous clubbed tail, then let it slam back to the ground, sending up ashen clouds on every side. "Fighting is just one of those skills you pick up," he said modestly. "Of course, it helps your opponent has a brain the size of a speck of dust."

"You didn't have just one opponent," countered Krystallus. He shook his head vigorously, which made his long white hair—so unusual in such a young man—swish against his shoulders. "You had nineteen! And you bested them all!"

"That's right," agreed Merlin. He tore some tattered shreds of cloth off his sleeve and threw them aside. "That kind of fighting skill isn't something you just pick up. It's a rare gift that—"

"I wasn't talking about his fighting!" interrupted Hallia. She climbed a step higher on the rim to look a bit closer to the dragon's face. Though her whole body could have fit inside the pupil of his eye, she gazed at him confidently, as his equal. "No, something else entirely."

"Not his fighting?" asked Krystallus, bewildered. "Then what were you talking about?"

"His *words*." Hallia continued to peer straight into the enormous green eye. "*True greatness, you said, lies in what we give.*" She beamed at the dragon. "That was marvelous."

Lowering her voice, she added, "It doesn't matter at all that you can't make fire in your belly . . . when you can make such fire with your words."

Basilgarrad's eyes blushed slightly.

Merlin, standing atop the rim, grinned at the dragon. "Better watch out, old boy, or you'll find yourself an adopted member of the deer people."

Hallia gave his leg a shove. "We'd be honored to have him. Especially since the last person we adopted was a clumsy young wizard with a terrible habit of getting into trouble."

"Well!" the wizard replied, feigning insult. "That description of me is entirely out of date. Now I'm a *fully grown* wizard with a terrible habit of getting into trouble."

Her doe eyes, usually so warm, seemed to freeze over. "Not only with dragons," she scolded. "Right now you're in trouble with *me*."

Merlin's face fell. He averted his eyes, as if he felt guilty about something. Turning back to her, he started fumbling for words—something Basilgarrad had never seen him do before.

"My love, I know that—I, well, you . . . ah, well . . . you must understand. But no, of course you don't! Not yet. Just let me . . . I've been wanting to, ah, tell you, but—no, no, not here! Not now."

"Why not?" she demanded, her gaze still icy. Like an impatient deer, she stamped hard on the ground.

Merlin waved his torn sleeve, making it flap in the air. "Because it's . . ." He glanced over at his son, and then at the dragon looking down at them. "Private! That's why. It's private. Between you and me." He reached out his hand, hoping to take hers. "I promise you, as soon as we have time—"

“Time!” she said frostily, pulling away from him. “That’s what we *don’t* have anymore. Time together. It’s gotten to the point I have to beg Krystallus to take me through a portal just to see you—and then only until the next crisis takes you away!”

Merlin cringed visibly, and Basilgarrad felt a sharp pang of sympathy for his friend. But something inside the wizard seemed to snap. His expression suddenly changed from guilty to angry. Very angry. But instead of exploding at Hallia, he directed his rage at Krystallus.

“You never should have brought her here! Don’t you know how dangerous portalseeking can be? How could you risk your mother’s life that way?”

The young man scowled. “I know about portals! More than you, probably. Don’t talk to me like I’m three years old.”

“Hard not to, when you act like—”

“Stop changing the subject!” broke in Hallia, stamping her foot again.

“The subject is your safety,” retorted the wizard.

“No, it’s not.”

“It is!” Merlin twisted his staff into the ashen ground, grinding its tip forcefully. Turning back to his son, he declared, “Risk your own life, if you must—traveling all over Avalon, for whatever reasons. But not someone else’s! And especially not *hers*.”

“What would you know about my reasons?” The young man’s fists clenched, turning his fingers almost as white as his hair. “When I was small, you never cared, and when I left home early, you never even noticed.”

Both his father and mother winced at those words. But Krystallus merely shrugged, as if none of that mattered anymore. “The fact is, I love exploring. Finding new places. Drawing the first maps. What’s wrong with that? What’s so irresponsible about exploring—compared to abandoning your family?”

Hallia touched his shoulder. “Wait, now. That’s too strong.”

“No, it’s not.” Krystallus glared at his father. “He cares a lot more about his work—those chances to show his famous wizardry—than he does about either of us.”

Silence fell over the group. Except for the crackling flames of the portal, and the occasional skittering of a pumice pebble that rolled down the volcanic ridge, no sound could be heard. Basilgarrad watched his friends with dismay. And with growing frustration: He had no idea how to stop this argument, and no idea where it might lead. For the first time in a long while—only a few moments after he had vanquished an army of dragons—he felt totally powerless.

Merlin was the first to speak again. To the dragon’s relief, his voice was calm, even kind. “Look, son,” he began, searching for the right words, “I know I haven’t . . . been much of a father. I suppose . . . I thought, when you grew up, we could find—”

“When I grew up!” spat Krystallus, quaking with rage. “Once you decided I didn’t have any wizard’s magic, you forgot all about me. Not that I care! Just don’t pretend you ever wanted to be a real father.”

Merlin staggered, nearly losing his balance on the rim of the crater. His complexion, lit by the flickering flames, whitened again with anger, and his eyes flashed. “I could have done better, that’s certain. But I didn’t have much material to work with.”

Ignoring Hallia’s gasp, he added, “You never showed any sense. Never! Which is why you think nothing of trying to impress your mother by dragging her through a deadly maze of portals, right in the middle of a battleground.”

“I didn’t drag her.”

“You could have killed her! Portalseeking isn’t child’s play. Surely I at least taught you that!”

Krystallus stared at his father. In a voice as hard as iron, he said, “You never taught me *anything*!”

Except how to be a terrible father.”

Hallia bit her lip, glancing from one of them to the other.

Merlin’s eyebrows, thicker than brambles, lifted. “And you never taught me anything except—”

“Stop,” cried Hallia. “Say no more!”

But her husband ignored her. “How to be a miserable son.”

Krystallus slowly sucked in his breath. Then, without another word, he spun around and strode straight into the green flames of the portal. A loud crackle split the air—and he was gone.

Basilgarrad slowly shook his gargantuan head. How, he wondered, had the evening’s victory turned so quickly into defeat?

Hallia drew her blue shawl closer, as if a chill wind had blown through the desolate lands around the crater. She looked up at the stars for a few seconds, hoping to find some guidance or, perhaps, some comfort. But the deep lines on her brow showed she had found neither.

Merlin, meanwhile, stared into the shimmering flames that had just swallowed his son—and a chance of an ongoing relationship. Slowly, his coal-black eyes lowered, until he was gazing morose at his boots.

Hallia turned to him and snapped, “You foolish, foolish man! Don’t you know that he’s become one of Avalon’s boldest explorers? That he’s been through more portals than even Queen Serella of the elves?”

The wizard frowned. “No . . . I didn’t know. I’ve been too—”

“Busy, yes, I know.” She snorted.

Defensively, Merlin grumbled, “I still say it was reckless to bring you here! Even if you did ask, I should have known better. Why would he do such an idiotic thing?”

She strode closer. “Don’t you see, you brainless oaf? By bringing me all the way here, he was trying to impress someone—the person whose opinion matters most.”

“You, of course.”

“No!” She glared at him. “*You*. His father.”

Merlin looked into her face, genuinely taken aback. “Me?”

“How else, without any magic of his own, does he prove himself?” Her voice dropped to a quivering whisper. “How else does he make himself worthy of being the son of Merlin?”

The wizard didn’t answer. He merely turned and gazed into the restless, shape-shifting flames.

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