

The Dragons of Summer Gulch

by Robert Reed

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A hard winter can lift rocks as well as old bones, shoving all that is loose up through the most stubborn earth. Then snowmelt and flash floods will sweep across the ground, wiping away the gravel and clay. And later, when a man with good vision and exceptional luck rides past, all of the world might suddenly change.

"Would you look at that," the man said to himself in a firm, deep voice. "A claw, isn't it? From a mature dragon, isn't it? Good Lord, Mr. Barrow. And there's two more claws set beside that treasure!"

Barrow was a giant fellow with a narrow face and a heavy cap of black hair that grew from his scalp and the back of his neck and between the blades of his strong shoulders. Born on one of the Northern Isles, he had left his homeland as a young man to escape one war, coming to this new country just in time to be thrown into a massive and prolonged civil conflict. Ten thousand miseries had abused him over the next years. But he survived the fighting, and upon his discharge from the Army of the Center, a grateful nation had given him both his citizenship and a bonus of gold coins. Barrow purchased a one-way ticket on the Western railroad, aiming to find his fortune in the wilderness. His journey ended in one of the new prairie towns—a place famous for hyrax herds and dragon bones. There he had purchased a pair of quality camels, ample supplies for six months of solitude, and with shovels enough to move a hillside, he had set out into the washlands.

Sliding off the lead camel, he said, "Hold."

The beast gave a low snort, adjusting its hooves to find the most comfortable pose.

Barrow knelt, carefully touching the dragon's middle claw. Ancient as this artifact was, he knew from painful experience that even the most weathered claw was sharp enough to slash. Just as the fossil teeth could puncture the thickest leather gloves, and the edges of the great scales were nastier than any saw blade sharpened on the hardest whetstone.

The claw was a vivid deep purple color—a sure sign of good preservation. With his favorite little pick, Barrow worked loose the mudstone beneath it, exposing its full length and the place where it joined into the front paw. He wasn't an educated man, but Barrow knew his trade: this had been a flying dragon, one of the monsters who once patrolled the skies above a vanished seacoast. The giant paw was meant for gripping. Presumably the dragons used their four feet much as a coon-rascal does, holding their prey and for other simple manipulations. These finger claws were always valuable, but the thick thumb claw—the Claw of God—would be worth even more to buyers. As night fell, Barrow dug by the smoky light of a

little fire, picking away at the mudstone until the paw was revealed—a palm-down hand large enough to stand upon and, after ages of being entombed, still displaying the dull red color made by the interlocking scales.

The man didn't sleep ten blinks. Then with first light he followed a hunch, walking half a dozen long strides up the gully and thrusting a shovel into what looked like a mound of ordinary clay.

The shovel was good steel, but a dull *thunk* announced that something beneath was harder by a long ways.

Barrow used the shovel and a big pickax, working fast and sloppy, investing the morning to uncover a long piece of the dragon's back—several daggerlike spines rising from perhaps thirty big plates of ruddy armor.

Exhaustion forced him to take a break, eating his fill and drinking the last of his water. Then, because they were hungry and a little thirsty, he lead both of his loyal camels down the gully, finding a flat plain where sagebrush grew and seepage too foul for a man to drink stood in a shallow alkaline pond.

The happy camels drank and grazed, wandering as far as their long leashes allowed.

Barrow returned to his treasure. Twice he dug into fresh ground, and twice he guessed wrong, finding nothing. The monster's head was almost surely missing. Heads almost always were. But he tried a third time, and his luck held. Not only was the skull entombed along with the rest of the carcass, it was still attached to the body, the long muscular neck having twisted hard to the left as the creature passed from the living.

It had been a quick death, he was certain.

There were larger specimens, but the head was magnificent. What Barrow could see was as long as he was tall, narrow and elegant, a little reminiscent of a pelican's head, but prettier, the giant mouth bristling with a forest of teeth, each tooth bigger than his thumb. The giant dragon eyes had vanished, but the large sockets remained, filled with mudstone and aimed forward like a hawk's eyes. And behind the eyes lay a braincase several times bigger than any man's.

"How did you die?" he asked his new friend.

Back in town, an educated fellow had explained to Barrow what science knew today and what it was guessing. Sometimes the dragons had been buried in mud, on land or underwater, and the mud protected the corpse from its hungry cousins and gnawing rats. If there were no oxygen, then there couldn't be any rot. And that was the best of circumstances. Without rot, and buried inside a stable deep grave, an entire dragon could be kept intact, waiting for the blessed man to ride by on his happy camel.

Barrow was thirsty enough to moan, but he couldn't afford to stop now.

Following the advice of other prospectors, he found the base of the dragon's twin wings—the wings still sporting the leathery flesh strung between the long, long finger bones—and he fashioned a charge with dynamite, setting it against the armored plates of the back and covering his work with a pile of tamped earth to help force the blast downward. Then, with a long fuse, he set off the charge. There was a dull thud followed by a steady rain of dirt and pulverized stone, and he ran to look at what he had accomplished, pulling back the shattered plates—each worth half a good camel when intact—and then using a heavy pick to pull free the shattered insides of the great beast.

If another dragon had made this corpse, attacking this treasure from below, there would be nothing left to find. Many millions of years ago, the precious guts would have been eaten, and lost.

"But still," Barrow told himself. "These claws and scales are enough to pay for my year. If it comes to that."

But it didn't have to come to that.

Inside the fossil lay the reason for all of his suffering and boredom: behind the stone-infected heart was an intricate organ as long as he was tall—a spongelike thing set above the peculiar dragon lungs. The organ was composed of gold and lustrous platinum wrapped around countless voids. In an instant, Barrow had become as wealthy as his dreams had promised he would be. He let out an enormous yell, dancing back and forth across the back of the dead dragon. Then he collapsed beside his treasure, crying out of joy, and when he wiped back the tears one final time, he saw something else.

Eons ago, a fine black mud had infiltrated the dead body, filling the cavities while keeping away the free oxygen.

Without oxygen, there was almost no decay.

Floating in the old mudstone were at least three round bodies, each as large as the largest naval cannon balls. They were not organs, but they belonged inside the dragon. Barrow had heard stories about such things, and the educated man in town had even shown him a shard of something similar. But where the shard was dirty gray, these three balls were white as bone. That was their color in life, he realized, and this was their color now.

With a trembling hand, Barrow touched the nearest egg, and he held his palm against it for a very long while, leaving it a little bit warm.

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At one point, the whore asked, "Where did you learn all this crap?"

Manmark laughed quietly for a moment. Then he closed the big book and said, "My credentials. Is that what you wish to have?"

"After your money, sure. Your credentials. Yes."

"As a boy, I had tutors. As a young man, I attended several universities. I studied all the sciences and enjoyed the brilliance of a dozen great minds. And then my father died, and I took my inheritance, deciding to apply my wealth and genius in the pursuit of great things."

She was the prettiest woman of her sort in this town, and she was not stupid. Manmark could tell just by staring at her eyes that she had a good, strong mind. But she was just an aboriginal girl, tiny like all of the members of her race, sold by her father for opium or liquor. Her history had to be impoverished and painful. Which was why it didn't bother him too much when she laughed at him, remarking, "With most men, listening is easier than screwing. But with you, I think it's the other way around."

Manmark opened the book again, ignoring any implied insult.

Quietly, he asked the woman, "Can you read?"

"I know which coin is which," she replied. "And my name, when I see it. If it's written out with a simple hand."

"Look at this picture," he told her. "What does it show you?"

"A dragon," she said matter-of-factly.

"Which species of dragon?" Manmark pressed.

She looked at the drawing, blowing air into her cheeks. Then she exhaled, admitting, "I don't know. Is it the flying kind?"

"Hardly."

"Yeah, I guess it isn't. I don't see wings."

He nodded, explaining, "This is a small early dragon. One of the six-legged precursor species, as it happens. It was unearthed on this continent, resting inside some of the oldest rocks from the Age of Dragons." Manmark was a handsome fellow with dreamy golden eyes that stared off into one of the walls of the room. "If you believe in natural selection and in the great depths of time," he continued, "then this might well be the ancestor to the hundred species that we know about, and the thousands we have yet to uncover."

She said, "Huh," and sat back against the piled-up pillows.

"Can I look at the book?" she asked.

"Carefully," he warned, as if speaking to a moody child. "I don't have another copy with me, and it is the best available guide—"

"Just hand it over," she interrupted. "I promise. I won't be rough."

Slowly, and then quickly, the woman flipped through the pages. Meanwhile her client continued to speak about things she could never understand: on this very land, there once stood dragons the size of great buildings—placid and heavily armored vegetarians that consumed entire trees, judging by the fossilized meals discovered in their cavernous bellies. Plus there had been smaller beasts roaming in sprawling herds, much as the black hyraxes grazed on the High Plains. The predatory dragons came in two basic

types—the quadrupeds with their saber teeth and the Claws of God on their mighty hands; and later, the winged giants with the same teeth and Claws but also grasping limbs and a brain that might well have been equal to a woman's.

If the girl noticed his insult, she knew better than show it, her face down and nodding while the pages turned. At the back of the book were new kinds of bones and odd sketches. "What is this tiny creature?" she inquired.

Manmark asked, "What does it resemble?"

"Some kind of fowl," she admitted.

"But with teeth," he pointed out. "And where are its wings?"

She looked up, almost smiling. "Didn't it have wings? Or haven't you found them yet?"

"I never work with these little creatures," Manmark reported with a prickly tone. "But no, it and its kind never grew particularly large, and they were never genuinely important. Some in my profession believe they became today's birds. But when their bones were first uncovered, the creatures were mistakenly thought to be a variety of running lizard. Which is why those early fossil hunters dubbed them 'monstrous lizards' ..."

She turned the page, paused, and then smiled at a particular drawing. "I know this creature," she said, pushing the book across the rumpled sheets. "I've seen a few shrews in my day."

The tiny mammal huddled beneath a fern frond. Manmark tapped the image with his finger, agreeing, "It does resemble our shrew. As it should, since this long-dead midget is the precursor to them and to us and to every fur-bearing animal in between."

"Really?" she said.

"Without question."

"Without question," she repeated, nodding as if she understood the oceans of time and the slow, remorseless pressures of natural selection.

"Our ancestors, like the ancestors of every bird, were exceptionally tiny," Manmark continued. "The dragons ruled the land and seas, and then they ruled the skies too, while these little creatures scurried about in the shadows, waiting patiently for their turn."

"Their turn?" She closed the book with authority, as if she would never need it again. Then, with a distant gaze, she said, "Now and again, I have wondered. Why did the dragons vanish from this world?"

Manmark reminded himself that this was an aboriginal girl. Every primitive culture had its stories. Who knew what wild legends and foolish myths she had heard since birth?

"Nobody knows what happened to them," was his first, best answer.

Then, taking back the book, he added, "But we can surmise there was some sort of cataclysm. An abrupt change in climate, a catastrophe from the sky. Something enormous made every large animal extinct, emptying the world for the likes of you and me."

She seemed impressed by the glimpse of the apocalypse. Smiling at him, she set her mouth to say a word or two, perhaps inviting him back over to her side of the great down-filled bed. But then a sudden hard knock shook the room's only door.

Manmark called out, "Who is it?"

"Name's Barrow," said a rough male voice.

Barrow? Did he know that name?

"We spoke some weeks back," the stranger reported, speaking through the heavy oak. "I told you I was going out into the wash country, and you told me to be on the lookout—"

"Yes."

"For something special."

Half-dressed and nearly panicked, Manmark leaped up, unlocking the door while muttering, "Quiet, quiet."

Barrow stood in the hallway, a tall man who hadn't bathed in weeks or perhaps years. He was grimy and tired and poorly fed and mildly embarrassed when he saw the nearly naked woman sitting calmly on the edge of another man's bed. But then he seemed to recall what had brought him here. "You mentioned money," he said to Manmark. "A great deal of money, if a hunter found for you—"

"Yes."

"One or more of them—"

"Quiet," Manmark snapped.

"Eggs," whispered the unwashed fossil hunter.

And with that, Manmark pulled the dullard into the room, clamping a hand over his mouth before he could utter another careless word.

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Once again, the world was dying.

Zephyr enjoyed that bleak thought while strolling beside the railroad station, passing downwind from the tall stacks of rancid hyrax skins. The skins were waiting for empty cars heading east—the remains of thousands of beasts killed by hunters and then cleaned with a sloppy professional haste. It was a brutal business, and doomed. In just this one year, the nearby herds had been decimated, and soon the northern and southern herds would feel the onslaught of long rifles and malevolent greed. The waste was appalling, what with most of the meat being left behind for the bear-dogs or to rot in the brutal summer sun. But like all great wastes, it would remake the world again. Into this emptiness, new creatures and peoples would come, filling the country overnight, and that new order would persist for a day or a million years before it too would collapse into ruin and despair.

Such were the lessons taught by history.

And science, in its own graceful fashion, reiterated those grand truths.

"Master Zephyr?"

An assistant had emerged from the railroad station, bearing important papers and an expression of weary tension. "Is it arranged?" Zephyr asked. Then, before the man could respond, he added, "I require a suitable car. For a shipment of this importance, my treasures deserve better than to be shoved beneath these bloody skins."

"I have done my best," the assistant promised.

"What is your best?"

"It will arrive in three days," the man replied, pulling a new paper to the top of the stack. "An armored car used to move payroll coins to the Westlands. As you requested, there's room for guards and your dragon scales, and your private car will ride behind it."

"And the dragons' teeth," Zephyr added. "And several dozen Claws of God."

"Yes, sir."

"And four dragon spleens."

"Of course, sir. Yes."

Each of those metallic organs was worth a fortune, even though none were in good condition. Each had already been purchased. Two were owned by important concerns in the Eastlands. The other two were bound for the Great Continent, purchased by wealthy men who lived along the Dragon River: the same crowded green country where, sixty years ago, Zephyr began his life.

The spleens were full of magic, some professed. Others looked on the relics as oddities, beautiful and precious. But a growing number considered them to be worthy of scientific study—which was why one of the Eastland universities was paying Zephyr a considerable sum for a half-crushed spleen, wanting their chance to study its metabolic purpose and its possible uses in the modern world.

Like his father and his grandfather, Zephyr was a trader who dealt exclusively in the remains of dragons. For generations, perhaps since the beginning of civilized life, the occasional scale and rare claws were

much in demand, both as objects of veneration as well as tools of war. Even today, modern munitions couldn't punch their way through a quality scale pulled from the back of a large dragon. In the recent wars, soldiers were given suits built of dragon armor—fantastically expensive uniforms intended only for the most elite units—while their enemies had used dragon teeth and claws fired by special guns, trying to kill the dragon men who were marching across the wastelands toward them.

Modern armies were much wealthier than the ancient civilizations. As a consequence, this humble son of a simple trader, by selling to both sides during the long civil war, had made himself into a financial force.

The fighting was finished, at least for today. But every government in the world continued to dream of war, and their stockpiles continued to grow, and as young scientists learned more about these lost times, the intrigue surrounding these beasts could only increase.

"This is good enough," Zephyr told his assistant, handing back the railroad's contract.

"I'll confirm the other details," the man promised, backing away in a pose of total submission. "By telegraph, I'll check on the car's progress, and I will interview the local men, looking for worthy guards."

And Zephyr would do the same. But surreptitiously, just to reassure an old man that every detail was seen to.

Because a successful enterprise had details at its heart, the old man reminded himself. Just as different details, if left unnoticed, would surely bring defeat to the sloppy and the unfortunate.

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Zephyr occupied a spacious house built on the edge of the workers' camp—the finest home in this exceptionally young town but relegated to this less desirable ground because, much as everyone who lived in the camp, its owner belonged to a questionable race. Passing through the front door, the white-haired gentleman paused a moment to enjoy the door's etched glass, and in particular the ornate dragons captured in the midst of life, all sporting wings and fanciful breaths of fire. With a light touch, the trader felt the whitish eye of one dragon. Then, with a tense, disapproving voice, the waiting manservant announced, "Sir, you have a visitor."

Zephyr glanced into the parlor, seeing no one.

"I made her wait in the root cellar," the servant replied. "I didn't know where else to place her."

"Who is she?" the old man inquired. And when he heard the name, he said, "Bring her to me. Now."

"A woman like that?" the man muttered in disbelief.

"As your last duty to me, yes. Bring her to the parlor, collect two more weeks of wages, and then pack your belongings and leave my company." With an angry finger, he added, "Your morals should have been left packed and out of sight. Consider this fair warning should you ever find employment again."

Zephyr could sound frightfully angry, if it suited him.

He walked into the parlor, sat on an overstuffed chair, and waited. A few moments later, the young aboriginal woman strolled into the parlor, investing a moment to look at the furnishings and ivory statues. Then she said, "I learned something."

"I assumed as much."

"Like you guessed, it's the barbarian with all the money." She smiled, perhaps thinking of the money. "He's promised huge payoffs to the dragon hunters, and maybe that's why this one hunter brought him word of a big discovery."

"Where is this discovery? Did you hear?"

"No."

"Does this hunter have a name?"

"Barrow."

Unless Barrow was an idiot or a genius, he would have already applied for dig rights, and they would be included in any public record. It would be a simple matter to bribe the clerk—

"There's eggs," she blurted.

Zephyr was not a man easily startled. But it took him a moment to repeat the word, "Eggs." Then he asked, "More than one egg, you mean?"

"Three, and maybe more."

"What sort of dragon is it?"

"Winged."

"A Sky-Demon?" he said with considerable hope.

"From what they said in front of me, I'm sure of it. He has uncovered the complete body of a Sky-Demon, and she died in the final stages of pregnancy." The girl smiled as she spoke, pleased with everything that had happened. "He didn't realize I understood the importance of things, or even that I was listening. That Manmark fellow ... he is such a boring, self-important prick—"

"One last question," Zephyr interrupted. "What color were these eggs? Was that mentioned?"

The girl nodded and looked about the room again. Then, picking up a game cube carved from the whitest hyrax ivory, she said, "Like this, they were. They are. Perfectly, perfectly preserved."

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Manmark was an endless talker, and most of his talk was senseless noise. Barrow treated the noise as just another kind of wind, taking no pleasure from it, nor feeling any insult. To be mannerly, he would nod on occasion and make some tiny comment that could mean anything, and, bolstered by this gesture, Manmark would press on, explaining how it was to grow up wealthy in the Old World, or why bear-dogs were the most foul creatures, or why the world danced around the sun, or how it felt to be a genius on that same world—a grand, deep, wondrous mind surrounded by millions of fools.

It was amazing what a man would endure, particularly if he had been promised a heavy pile of platinum coins.

There were five other men working with them. Four were youngsters—students of some type brought along to do the delicate digging. While the fifth fellow served as their protector, armed with a sleek modern rifle and enough ammunition to kill a thousand men. Some months ago, before he left for the wilderness, Manmark had hired the man to be their protector, keeping him on salary for a day such as this. He was said to be some species of professional killer, which was a bit of a surprise. A few times in conversation, Barrow had wormed honest answers out of the fellow. His credentials were less spectacular than he made them out to be, and even more alarming, the man was extraordinarily scared of things that would never present a problem. Bear-dogs were a source of much consternation, even though Barrow never had trouble with the beasts. And then there were the aborigines; those normally peaceful people brought nightmares of their own. "What if they come on us while we sleep?" the protector would ask, his voice low and haunted. "I am just one person. I have to sleep. What if I wake to find one of those miserable bastards slicing open my throat?"

"They wouldn't," Barrow assured him. Then he laughed, adding, "They'll cut into your chest first, since they'll want to eat your heart."

That was a pure fiction—a grotesque rumor made real by a thousand cheap novels. But their protector seemed to know nothing about this country, his experience born from the novels and small-minded tales told in the slums and high-class restaurants left behind on the distant, unreachable coast.

In his own fashion, Manmark was just as innocent and naïve. But there were moments when what he knew proved to be not only interesting but also quite valuable.

During their second night camped beside the dragon, Manmark topped off his tall glass of fancy pink liquor, and then he glanced at the exposed head of the great beast, remarking, "Life was so different in those old times."

There was nothing interesting in that. But Barrow nodded, as expected, muttering a few bland agreements.

"The dragons were nothing like us," the man continued.

What could be more obvious? Barrow thought to himself.

"The biology of these monsters," said Manmark. Then he looked at Barrow, a wide grin flashing. "Do you know how they breathed?"

It was just the two of them sitting before the fire. The students, exhausted by their day's work, were tucked into their bedrolls, while the camp protector stood on a nearby ridge, scared of every darkness. "I know their lungs were peculiar affairs," Barrow allowed. "Just like their hearts, and their spleens—"

"Not just peculiar," Manmark interrupted. "Unique."

Barrow leaned closer.

"Like us, yes, they had a backbone. But it was not our backbone. There are important differences between the architectures—profound and telling differences. It is as if two separate spines had evolved along two separate but nearly parallel lineages."

The words made sense, to a point.

"North of here," said Manmark. "I have colleagues who have found ancient fossils set within a bed of fine black shale. Unlike most beds of that kind, the soft parts of the dead have been preserved along with their hard shells and teeth. Have you heard of this place? No? Well, its creatures expired long before the first dragon was born. The world was almost new, it was so long ago ... and inside that beautiful black shale is a tiny wormlike creature that has the barest beginnings of a notochord. A spine. The first vertebrate, say some."

"Like us," Barrow realized.

"And lying beside that specimen is another. Very much the same, in its fashion. Wormlike and obscure. But in other ways, it is full of subtle, very beautiful differences."

"Different how?"

"Well, for instance ... there is a minuscule speck of metal located in the center of its simple body."

"Like a dragon's spleen?"

"But simpler, and made of ordinary metals. Iron and copper and such." Manmark finished his drink and gazed into the fire. "This dragon's lungs were very different, of course. Instead of sucking in a breath and then exhaling it out the same way, she took the air through her nostrils, into the lungs and out through a rectal orifice. We don't know enough to be certain yet. But it seems reasonable to assume that our dragon did a much better job of wringing the oxygen out of her endless deep breath."

Barrow nodded, very much interested now.

"And then there's the famous spleen," Manmark continued. "Have you ever wondered why these beasts needed to collect precious metals? What possible advantage could they have lent to the beasts?"

"I've thought about it some," he confessed.

"Gold and platinum and sometimes silver," said Manmark. "They are precious to us because they are rare, yes. But also because they barely rust in the presence of oxygen, which is why they retain their lovely sheen. And for the newest industries of our world, these elements are increasingly valuable. Were

you aware? They can serve as enzymatic surfaces for all kinds of impressive chemical reactions. Perhaps our lady dragon would mix her breath and blood inside the spleen's cavities, producing all kinds of spectacular products. Even fire, perhaps."

Barrow nodded as if he understood every word.

"One day, we'll decipher what happened inside these creatures. And I suspect that knowledge, when it arrives, will revolutionize our world."

"Someday, maybe," Barrow conceded.

"In the distant future, you think?" Manmark grinned and took a long drink from his mostly drained glass. "But not in our lives, surely. Is that what you are thinking?"

"Isn't that the truth?"

"The truth." The self-described genius stared into the campfire, his gold eyes full of greed and a wild hope. "This isn't well known. Outside of scientific circles, that is. But a few years ago, an immature egg was dug from the belly of a giant tree-eating dragon. Dead for perhaps a hundred million years, yet its color was still white. The oxygen that had fueled its parent had been kept away from the egg in death, and some kind of deep coma state had been achieved. Which is not too surprising. We know dragon eggs are exceptionally durable. It's perhaps a relic trait from those days when their ancestors laid their eggs in sloppy piles and buried them under dirt and then left the nest, sometimes for decades, waiting for the proper conditions. Since these creatures had a very different biochemistry from ours ... a much superior physiology ... they could afford to do such things—"

"What are you saying?" Barrow interrupted. "I'm sorry, I don't understand half your words."

"I'm saying that the dragons were exceptionally durable."

The dragon hunter glanced at the long, lovely skull and its cavernous eye sockets. "I have never heard this before. Is there some chance that those eggs over there ... in that ground, after all of these years ...?"

"Remember the immature egg that I mentioned?" Manmark was whispering, his voice a little sloppy and terribly pleased. "The egg from the tree-eater? Well, I have read the paper written about its dissection. A hundred times, I have read it. Diamond blades were used to cut through the shell, and despite everything that common and uncommon sense would tell you ... yes, there was still fluid inside the egg, and a six-legged embryo that was dead but intact ... dead, but that looked as if it had died only yesterday, its burial lasting just a little too long ..."

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Three eggs became four, and then five, and quite suddenly there were seven of the treasures set on a bed of clean straw, enjoying the temporary shade of a brown canvas tarp. It was a sight that dwarfed Manmark's great dreams, marvelous and lovely as they had been. Each egg was perfectly round, and each was the same size, their diameter equal to his forearm and extended hand. They were heavier than any bird egg would be, if a bird could lay such an enormous egg. But that was reasonable, since the thick white shell was woven partly from metal and strange compounds that were barely understood today—ceramics and odd proteins laid out in a painfully delicate pattern. The shell material itself contained enough mystery to make a great man famous. But Manmark could always imagine greater honors and even wilder successes, as he did now, touching the warm surface of the nearest egg, whispering to it, "Hello, you."

The students were standing together, waiting for orders. And behind them stood a freight wagon, its team of heavy camels ready to pull their precious cargo to town and the railhead.

Barrow was perched on the wagon's front end, leather reins held tight in both hands.

Manmark took notice of him, and for a moment he wondered why the man was staring off into the distance. What did he see from that vantage point? Looking in the same general direction, Manmark saw nothing. There was a slope of gray clay punctuated with a few clusters of yucca, and the crest of the little ridge formed a neat line dividing the rain-washed earth from the intense blue of the sky.

The dragon hunter was staring at nothing.

How peculiar.

Manmark felt a little uneasy, but for no clear reason. He turned to the students now, ready to order the wagon loaded. And then, too late by a long ways, he remembered that their very expensive security man had been walking that barren ridge, his long gun cradled in both arms, haunted eyes watching for trouble.

So where is my protector? Manmark asked himself.

An instant later, the clean crack of a bullet cut through the air, and one of the large camels decided to drop its head and then its massive body, settling with a strange urgency onto the hard pan of clay.

Manmark knelt down between the great eggs. Otherwise, he was too startled to react.

The students dropped low and stared at the sky.

Barrow remained on the wagon, yanking at the reins and braking with his left foot, telling the surviving three camels, "Hold. Stay. Hold now. Stay."

Something about that voice steadied Manmark. Something in the man's calmness allowed him to look up, shouting to Barrow, "What is this? What is happening?"

Next came the sound of hooves striking dirt—many hooves in common motion—and he turned the other way, seeing six . . . no, eight camels calmly walking down the long draw, each built to race, each wearing a small saddle as well as a man dressed in shapeless clothes and heavy masks.

Manmark's first thought was to deny that this was happening. Hadn't he taken a thousand precautions? Nobody should know the significance of this dig, which meant that this had to be some random bit of awful luck. These were raiders of some kind—simple thieves easily tricked. A few coins of debased gold would probably satisfy them. He started to calculate the proper figure, filling his head with nonsense until that moment when the lead rider lowered his fat rifle and fired.

A fountain of pulverized earth slapped Manmark in the face.

He backed away, stumbled and dropped onto his rump. Then in his panic, he began digging into his pockets, searching for the tiny pistol that he had carried from the Old World and never fired once.

"Don't," said a strong, calming voice.

Barrow's voice.

"Give them what they want," said the dragon hunter, speaking to him as he would to a nervous camel.

"I won't," Manmark sputtered. "They are mine!"

"No," Barrow said from high on the wagon. "They aren't yours anymore, if they ever were ..."

The riders didn't speak, save to wave their weapons in the air, ordering him to back away from the eggs. Then each claimed a single white sphere, dismounting long enough to secure their prize inside a silk sling apparently woven for this single task.

The final pair of riders was dressed as the others, yet they were different. One was small in build, while the other moved like a healthy but definitely older man. Manmark stared at both of them, and with an expertise garnered from years of imagining flesh upon ancient bone, he made two good guesses about who was beneath all those clothes.

"Zephyr," he muttered.

How many candidates were there? In one little town, or even at this end of the territory, how many other men were there who could possibly appreciate the significance of this find?

"And you," he said to the whore, his voice tight and injured.

She hesitated, if only for a moment.

Through the slits about the eyes, Zephyr stared at his opponent, and then he made some decision, lifting a hand and glancing back at the lead rider. For what purpose? To order him shot, perhaps?

The next blast of a gun startled everyone. The riders. Zephyr. And Manmark too. The concussion cut through the air, and while the roar was still ringing in their ears, Barrow said, "If we want to start killing, I'll start with you. Whoever you are. Understand me, old man? Before they aim my way, I'll hit your head and then your heart."

Barrow was standing on the back of the wagon now, holding his own rifle against his shoulder.

"Hear me, stranger? The eggs are yours. Take them. And I'll give you your life in the deal. Is that good

enough?"

"It is adequate," said the accented voice.

Under his breath, Manmark muttered grim curses. But he stood motionless while Zephyr claimed the last of his eggs, and he swallowed his rage while the riders turned and started back up the long draw, the final man riding backward in his saddle, ready to fire at anyone with a breath of courage.

Manmark had none.

When the thieves vanished, he collapsed, panting and sobbing in a shameless display.

Barrow leaped off the wagon and walked toward him.

The students were standing again, chattering among themselves. One and then another asked no one in particular, "Will we still get paid?"

All was lost, Manmark believed.

Then the dragon hunter knelt beside him, and with an almost amused voice, he said, "All right. Let's discuss my terms."

"Your what?"

"Terms," he repeated. Then he outright laughed, adding, "When I get these eggs back to you, what will you pay me?"

"But how can you recover them?"

"I don't know yet. But give me the right promises, and maybe I'll think of something."

Manmark was utterly confused. "What do you mean? If there are six of them, and if they defeated my security man ... what hope do you have ...?"

"I fought in the war," Barrow replied.

"A lot of men fought."

"Not many did the kind of fighting that I did," the dragon hunter replied. "And few of them fought half as well either."

Manmark stared at the hard dark eyes. Then, because he had no choice, none whatsoever, he blurted, "Yes. Whatever it costs. Yes!"

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Here stood the best locomotive available on short notice—a soot-caked machine built of iron and fire, wet steam, and rhythmic noises not unlike the breathing of a great old beast. Since details mattered, Zephyr had hired workmen to paint dragon eyes on the front end and little red wings on its sides, and when the job wasn't done with the proper accuracy, he commissioned others to fix what was wrong. Two engineers stoked the fire, while a third sat on top of the tender, ready to spell whomever tired first. Behind the locomotive was the armored car hired to move spleens and scales—a wheeled fortress encased in steel and nearly empty, carrying nothing but seven white eggs and six mercenaries armed with enough munitions to hold off a regiment. And trailing behind was Zephyr's private car, luxurious and open in appearance, except for the small windowless room at the rear that served as a bath.

The original plan for the dragons' spleens was to travel east. But the eggs were too precious to risk losing among the barbarians. Which was why Zephyr ordered his little train to head for the mountains and the Westlands beyond. A telegraph message dressed in code had been sent ahead. By the time he arrived at the Great Bay, a steamer would be waiting, ready to carry him back to the land of fables and childhood memories.

"I haven't been home for years," he confessed to his companion.

The young woman smiled at him, and once again, she said, "Thank you for taking me."

"It was the very least I could do," Zephyr allowed. "You were wise to ask, in fact. If Manmark realized you were responsible—"

"And for this," she interrupted, letting her fat coin purse jingle in an agreeable fashion.

"You have earned every mark. For what you have done to help me, madam, I will always be in your gratitude ..."

There was only one set of tracks, with the occasional sidings and rules of conduct between oncoming trains. But Zephyr had sprinkled the world before them with bribes, and for the time being, there might as well be no other train in the world. As they picked up speed—as the engine quickened its breathing and its pace—he looked through the thick window glass, watching a hand-painted sign pass on their right. "You are leaving Summer Gulch," he read. "The fastest growing city between here and there."

What an odd, interesting thing to write. Zephyr laughed for a moment, and again mentioned, "I haven't been home since I was a young man."

"I'd love to see the Great Continent," the aboriginal girl reported.

What would become of this creature? Zephyr was of several minds on the subject, but his happy mood steered him to the more benevolent courses.

She slipped her purse out of sight.

"Do you know why we call it the Dragon River?" he asked.

"I don't," she replied.

Somehow he doubted that. But a prostitute makes her living by listening as much as anything, and this old man could do little else but talk with her, at least for the moment. "Of course there are some substantial beds of fossils along the river's course, yes. Dragon bones and claws and the great scales are part of my people's history. And we are an ancient nation, you know. The oldest in the world, perhaps. From the beginning, our gods have been dragons and our emperors have been their earthly sons and daughters."

The woman had bright, jade-colored eyes and a pleasant, luring smile.

"My favorite story, true or not, is about a young emperor from the Fifth Dynasty." Zephyr allowed his eyes to gaze off to the north, looking at the broken, rain-ripped country. "He found a flying dragon, it is said. The bones and scales were intact, as was her heart and spleen. And behind her spleen were eggs. At least two eggs, it is said. Some accounts mention as many as six, but only two of her offspring were viable. After three weeks of sitting above the ground, in the warming sun—and I should add, because the emperor was a very good man—the eggs finally hatched. Two baby dragons slithered into the world. Brothers, they were, and they belonged to him.

"The emperor had always been cared for by others. But he made a wise decision. He refused to let others care for his new friends, raising them himself, with his own hands. A mistake took one of those hands from him, but that was a minor loss. He refused to let his guards kill the offending dragon. And for his kindness, the dragon and its brother loved the emperor for all of his days."

Zephyr paused for a moment, considering his next words.

"It was a weak time for my great nation," he reported. "Barbarians were roaming the steppe and mountains, and peoples from the sea were raiding the coasts. But it is said—by many voices, not just those of my people—that a one-handed emperor appeared in the skies, riding the winged monsters. They were huge beasts, swift and strange. They breathed a strange fire, and they were powerful, and they had to eat a thousand enemy soldiers every day just to feed their endless hunger. An unlikely, mythic detail, I always believed. Except now, when I read scientific papers about the biology of dragons, I can see where they must have had prodigious appetites."

The woman nodded, listening to every word.

"As a skeptical boy, I doubted the story about the emperor's warrior dragons. Great men didn't need monsters to save their nation, I believed. But I was wrong. I realized my error some time ago. Two monsters could save my people then, and think what seven dragons could do today ... particularly if several of them are female, and fertile, and agreeable to mating with their brothers ..."

The young woman gave a little shrug, saying nothing for a long moment.

The train continued to churn toward the west, the locomotive sounding steady and unstoppable.

"We have a story," she muttered. "My people do, I mean."

"About the dragons? Yes, I suppose you do."

"Since I was old enough to listen, I heard how the world holds thousands of dragons in its chest, and

from time to time, for reasons known only to the gods, one of them is released. Which makes sense, I suppose. If what everyone tells me is true, and their eggs can sleep for an eternity in the ground."

Even from a single fertile female, only one egg at a time would be exposed by erosion. Yes, it was a reasonable explanation.

"The freed dragons die of loneliness, always." She spoke those words with sadness, as if she knew something about that particular pain. "They kill and burn because of their longing for others like themselves, and then they fly too high in order to end their own miserable lives, and that is why the dragons cannot come back into this world."

"This is a very common story," Zephyr assured her. "Maybe every place in the world tells fables much like that."

"But there is more to my story," she said, her tone defensive.

"Is there?"

"Much more," she promised.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment. The young woman didn't want to say anything else, and Zephyr wasn't in the mood to let another people's legends distract him. He looked out another window, toward the empty south, and then from somewhere up ahead came a dull *whump* as a heavy block of dynamite detonated. Instantly, the brakes were applied, and the little train started to shake and shiver, fighting its momentum to remain on the suddenly unstable tracks.

The young woman was thrown from her seat, as was Zephyr.

He stood first and heard the early shots coming from inside the armored car. Again he looked to the south, seeing nothing, and then he hunkered down and looked in the other direction. A solitary figure was approaching on foot, armed with a rifle that he hadn't bothered to fire. He was marching steadily across the stunted grasses, allowing the mercenaries to fire at him. And while most of their bullets struck, each impact made only sparks and a high-pitched snap that seemed to accomplish nothing. Because the attacker was wearing a suit made from overlapping dragon scales, Zephyr realized. And with an impressive eye for detail, the man had gone to the trouble of stretching cloth between his arms and chest, as if he had wings, while on his masked face were painted the large, malevolent eyes of an exceptionally angry dragon.

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This was what Barrow did during the war. With a platoon of picked soldiers, he would squeeze into his costume and pick up a gun that was always too heavy to carry more than a few steps, and after swallowing his fears as well as his common sense, he and his brethren would walk straight at the enemy, letting them shoot at will, waiting to reach a point where he could murder every idiot who hadn't yet found reason enough to run away.

This was the war all over again, and he hated it.

His suit wasn't as good as the one he wore in the war. Manmark's students were experts at arranging the scales and fixing them to his clothes—a consequence of spending weeks and years assembling old bones—but there hadn't been enough time to do a proper, permanent job. The scales were tilted in order to guide the bullets to one side or the other, but they weren't always tilted enough. Every impact caused a bruise. One and then another blow to the chest seemed to break a rib or two, and Barrow found himself staggering now, the weight of his clothes and his own fatigue making him wish for an end to his suffering.

That old platoon had been a mostly invincible bunch, but by the war's end, those who hadn't died from lucky shots and cannon fire were pretty much crazy with fear. Barrow was one of the few exceptions—a consequence of getting hit less often and doing a better job of killing those who wanted him dead.

Through the narrow slits of his mask, he stared at the firing ports built into the armored car. Then he paused, knelt, and with a care enforced by hours of practice, he leveled his weapon and put a fat slug of lead into one man's face.

Two more rounds hit Barrow, square in the chest and on the scalp.

He staggered, breathed hard enough to make himself lightheaded, and then aimed and fired again, killing no one but leaving someone behind the steel screaming in misery.

The surviving men finally got smart. One would cry out, and all would fire together, in a single volley.

Barrow was shoved back off his feet.

Again, there was a shout followed by the blow of a great hammer.

They would break every bone inside his bruised body if this continued. Barrow saw his doom and still could not make his body rise off the dusty earth. How had he come to this awful place? He couldn't remember. He sat upright, waiting for the next misery to find him ... but a new voice was shouting, followed by the odd, high-pitched report of a very different gun.

The dirt before him rose up in a fountain and drifted away, and left lying between his legs was a single purple Claw of God.

Damn, somebody had a dragon-buster gun.

If he remained here, he would die. Reflexes and simple panic pushed Barrow up onto his feet, and on exhausted legs he ran, trying to count the seconds while he imagined somebody working with the breech of that huge, awful gun, inserting another expensive charge before sealing it up and aiming at him again.

When Barrow thought it was time, he abruptly changed direction.

The next claw screamed through the air, peeling off to the right.

Three engineers were cowering on the dragon-eyed locomotive. Plainly, they hadn't come here expecting to fight. Barrow pointed his rifle at each of their faces, just for a moment, and then they leaped down together and started running back toward town.

The men inside the armored car fired again. But Barrow kept close to the tender, giving them no easy shots. A few steps short of them, he reached behind his back, removing a satchel that he had carried from the beginning, out of sight, and he unwrapped the fuse and laid it on the ground, shooting it at pointblank range to set it on fire. Then he bent low and threw the satchel with his free arm, skipping it under the car before he stepped back a little ways, letting the guards see him standing in front of them with barely a care.

"There's enough dynamite under you now to throw that car up high and break it into twenty pieces," he promised. Then he added, "It's a long fuse. But I wouldn't spend too much time thinking before you decide to do what's smart."

An instant later, the main door was unlocked and unlatched. Five men came tumbling out into the open, one of them bleeding from the shoulder and none of them armed.

"Run," Barrow advised.

The mercenaries started chasing the train crew down the iron rails.

The fuse continued to burn, reaching the canvas satchel and sputtering for a few moments before it died away.

Barrow stared into the windowless car. The seven eggs were set inside seven oak crates, and he didn't look at any of them. He was staring at the man whom he had shot through the face, his mind thinking one way about it, then another.

A breech closed somewhere nearby, and a big hammer was cocked.

Barrow turned too late, eyes focusing first on the cavernous barrel of the gun and then on the old foreign man who was fighting to hold it up. At this range, with any kind of dragon-round, death was certain. But Barrow's sense of things told him that if he didn't lift his own weapon, the man would hesitate. And another moment or two of life seemed like reason enough to do nothing.

"I am a creature of foresight," Zephyr remarked.

"You're smarter than me," agreed Barrow.

"Details," the old man muttered, two fingers wrapped around the long brass trigger. "The world is built upon tiny but critical details."

Behind him stood one detail—a rather pretty detail, just as Barrow had recalled—and using a purse full of heavy gold, she struck Zephyr on the top of his skull, and the long barrel dropped as the gun discharged, and a Claw of God came spinning out, burying itself once again inside the ancient Earth.

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Manmark had the freight wagon brought out of the draw, and he used a whip on the surviving camels, forcing them into a quick trot toward the motionless train. But there was a generous distance to be covered; open country afforded few safe places to hide. There was time to watch Barrow and the aboriginal girl with his binoculars, a little dose of worry nipping at him, and then Zephyr was awake again, sitting up and speaking at some length to the dragon hunter. All the while, Manmark's students were happily discussing their golden futures and what each planned to do with his little share of the fame. They spoke about the dragons soon to be born, and they discussed what kinds of cages would be required to hold the great beasts, and what would be a fair price for the public to see them, and what kinds of science could be done with these travelers from another age.

What was Zephyr saying to the dragon hunter?

Of course, the crafty old trader was trying to top Manmark's offers of wealth. And if he was successful? If Barrow abruptly changed sides ...?

"Look at that cloud," one student mentioned.

Somewhere to the south, hooves were slapping at the ground, lifting the dust into a wind that was blowing north, obscuring what was most probably a small herd of hard-running hyraxes.

Manmark found the little pistol in his pocket, considering his options for a long moment.

If it came to it, would he have the courage?

Probably not, no. If these last days had taught Manmark anything, it was that he had no stomach for mayhem and murder.

He put the pistol back out of sight and again used the binoculars, the jumpy images showing that Zephyr had fallen silent for now and Barrow was gazing off to the south and all of the talking was being done by the prostitute who stood between the two men, arms swirling in the air as she spoke on and on.

The worry that he felt now was nebulous and terrible.

Again, Manmark struck the big camels with his whip, and he screamed at everyone, telling them, "We need to hurry. Hurry!"

But the wagon was massive and one camel short, and there was still a long, empty distance to cover. The curtain of dust was nearly upon the motionless train, and inside it were dozens, or perhaps hundreds of aboriginal men riding on the backs of the half-wild ponies that they preferred to ride—an entire tribe

galloping toward the treasures that Manmark would never see again.

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She spoke quietly, with force.

"My favorite fable of all promises that the dragons will come again to this world. They will rise up out of the Earth to claim what has always been theirs, and only those men and women who help them will be spared. All the other people of the world will be fought and killed and eaten. Only the chosen few will be allowed to live as they wish, protected beneath the great wings of the reawakened gods."

Zephyr rubbed his sore head, trying to focus his mind. But really, no amount of cleverness or any promise of money would help now. Even with a splitting headache, he understood that inescapable lesson.

Speaking to the man wearing dragon scales, she said, "Your ugly people came into my country and stole everything of worth. You gave us disease and drink, and you are murdering our herds. But now I intend to destroy everything you have built here, and my children will take back all the lands between the seas."

She was a clever, brutal girl, Zephyr decided. And she had done a masterful job of fooling everyone, including him.

Barrow turned and stared at the oncoming riders. He had pulled off his armored mask, but he was still breathing hard, winded by his fight and terrified. He might defeat half a dozen mercenaries, if he was lucky. But not a nation of wild men and women armed with rifles and a communal rage.

"You need me," he muttered.

The young woman didn't respond. It was Zephyr who said, "What do you mean? Who needs you?"

"She does," Barrow announced. Then he pointed at the riders, adding, "If they want to help themselves, they should accept my help."

The woman laughed and asked, "Why?"

"When I was a boy," said Barrow, "I kept baby birds. And I learned that my little friends would take my food and my love best if I wore a sock on my hand, painting it to resemble their lost mothers and fathers."

The rumbling of hooves grew louder, nearer.

"I'm a big man in this big costume," he remarked. "This costume is bigger than anything any of your people can wear, I would think. And I'm brave enough to do stupid things. And you will have seven dragons to care for now ... to feed and protect, and to train, if you can ... and wouldn't you like to take along somebody who's willing to risk everything on a daily basis ...?"

Zephyr laughed quietly now.

Clearly, this Barrow fellow was at least as surprising as the young woman, and maybe twice as bold.

The woman stared at the man dressed as a dragon, a look of interest slowly breaking across her face.

Zephyr had to laugh louder now.

Dust drifted across the scene, thick and soft, muting the sound of their voices. And then the woman turned to her people, shouting to be heard.

"I have dragons to give you!" she called out.

"Eight, as it happens! Eight dragons to build a new world ...!"

The End

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