

Dragon's Oath

A tale of Henren the Bloody and the Cat

"It's too far for me to walk," the Cat said reluctantly.

"Yes."

"And you're not going to carry me."

"I need my hands free. Sorry." I reached down and stroked his head. "And before you ask, I'm not taking the horse out there. Too skittish. Unpredictable. You know that."

"I know that," he agreed glumly. "I just wish I could go with you."

Together we stared out across the dusty plain to the low ridge where the dragon waited. "Are you sure?" I asked. "I don't even want to go, and I'm supposed to be the hero." His only reply was to nudge my leg with his head.

Being a hero comes with responsibilities. When the city you're in is under attack from a dragon, for example, you're expected to step up. The frightened populace look to you to protect them, or at least die a spectacular death and provide them with something to talk about as they rebuild their city from the rubble.

On this particular occasion, the dragon had shown up the previous afternoon. It had flown around for a bit, screeching and blowing flames, before settling on a rocky outcrop about half a mile from the city's main gate. The implication was clear: give me gold or I'll torch the place. Dragons, for all their devious cunning, tend to adopt a simple approach. Of course, who needs complicated strategies when you're fiery death on wings?

I lifted the leather sheath covering my spearhead to check the weaponsmith's handiwork. Unnecessary of course; I'd watched closely as she attached the head to a new hardwood shaft, and I'd carved the binding runes myself. I was putting off the inevitable, I realised, and I tightened the cover. "Right then. Off to face the dragon."

The Cat twisted himself around my legs once before turning back into the city. "I'll talk to the Princes again. If they think you're not coming back they're likely to promise more gold."

"Good idea," I grunted, and I stepped out from under the gate onto the plain. "I look forward to disappointing them."

I knew better than to expect a reply. Even with my back turned I knew the Cat wouldn't have lingered. So I didn't look back, but just started walking. Behind me the gates closed with a thump.

It felt like an eternity, that trek across the sand and rock with the sun rising over my shoulder. I could feel eyes watching me from on top of the city's walls, from every tower, and I could feel other eyes – slitted, reptilian eyes – watching my approach as the distance closed. It got so bad that I almost found myself unable to walk naturally, that strange sensation when you start to think about the motion of taking each step. Fortunately this took my mind off the task waiting for me at the end of the walk.

As I neared the pile of rocks where the dragon had made its perch, however, it became impossible to ignore. I could see the scaly head resting on a large stone, its eyes unblinking despite the glaring sun.

Its body, covered in dull sand-coloured scales, blended into the rocks. The bulk of it was hidden, but from what I'd seen the day before it was about thirty feet long, from its snout to the whiplike end of its tail. Not too big, as dragons go, but when you're standing before one they're all big enough.

A stone's throw from the rocks I stopped. "Dragon!" I called. "Do you want to talk, or fight?"

For any would-be heroes out there, there are a few ways to deal with a dragon. Besides the obvious one of turning into a heap of charred bones, of course, and without giving up all your gold.

The hard way is to best the beast in combat. It can be done, but no matter how great the hero, you're never guaranteed to walk away alive. Hence the willingness of the city's Princes to promise me fistfuls of gold to get rid of the dragon.

Even harder is intimidating the dragon. If you have a solid reputation – for example if your name is Henren the Bloody, hero for hire – you might be able to convince the dragon to look elsewhere for easier pickings.

The almost impossible way is to use the dragon's name to control it. Yes, the old tales of the power of a dragon's name are true. And there aren't so many dragons around that you can't learn all their names. The problem, you see, is that a dragon's name contains its actual essence. Every experience that shapes the dragon is reflected in its name – and not in extra letters or syllables, but in a depth of tonal sound that's impossible for the human throat to pronounce. I once spoke to a sorcerer who swore he'd devised a spell to pronounce a dragon's name properly. "Next time you see me," he boasted, "I'll be soaring across the skies on the back of my own pet dragon." In fact the next time I saw him he had turned into one of those heaps of charred bones.

I wondered again if I wasn't being spectacularly stupid. It wouldn't take much, as the Cat had remarked that morning, for Henren the Bloody to go down in legend as Henren the Bloody Fool. And as the great head rose from its rocky pillow and reached forward, I thought perhaps I'd be doing the charred bones thing too. The jaws opened, a long brown tongue flickered out – and a deep voice spoke.

"Talk then," it rumbled. "We can always fight after. I see that you come armed."

Trying not to sigh in relief, I leaned on my spear. My shield was on my back, still covered by a light cloak, and from my belt hung a short sword – but hopefully it wouldn't come to that.

"You should leave this place," I called across the sand. "The people of this city have done nothing to harm you. You have no cause to terrorise them."

The scaly body reared up at that. A sound that could have been laughter boomed out into the sky. "No cause? What cause do I need? I am Fornox, I do as I please! And it pleases me to terrorise these people, as you call it."

So I'd been right, it was Fornox. That made my job a lot easier. "Then I'll have to stop you," I spoke aloud, trying not to sound too pleased with myself.

The head on its long neck stretched down towards me. "Stop me?" Fornox hissed. "Who are you, puny human, to threaten me? Who are you –" The great voice broke off suddenly as I uncovered my spearhead. "What is that?"

I smiled up into its face. "Oh, you know it. You probably recognise this too." I unslung the shield from where it had been hidden on my back. "And that means you know who I am."

The dragon recoiled. The spearhead was carved from a vast shiny tooth, the shield formed from dull gold scales. I'd taken both from this Fornox's mother – now that was a tale for the ages, and the fight had left me barely standing. But in the end I'd beaten the great she-dragon into submission, and I'd taken tooth and scales as trophies.

"Henren the Bloody!" the dragon facing me roared. "Now you will die! I will avenge my mother!" Beating its huge wings, searing the air with its breath, it clambered up until it was standing on top of the rock looking down at me – but it made no move to attack.

"Your mother swore not to seek vengeance, and her word binds you just as strongly!" I had to shout over the noise of the wind rushing about. "So unless you think you can succeed where she failed, you'll settle down and listen to my terms. We can always fight after," I added with a menacing jab of my spear.

Fornox took the hint and settled down. I breathed easier at that. Young dragons are hot-headed, and their temper can often get the better of them. This one apparently had listened to its parent's wisdom, though, and decided not to do anything rash.

"If you don't want to die with your own mother's tooth in your throat," I continued, "you'll swear to leave this place. To fly off and not trouble this city or its people for a hundred years."

The dragon huffed and puffed and bluffed for a while, but eventually it swore. Well, it swore and cursed a good deal, but it swore the oath too. "In a hundred years," it roared, "I will come back with fire and fury! Tell these people that you think you have saved, tell them that their children's children will pay dearly for your insolence."

I wasn't too worried. For a start, that wasn't my problem. In a hundred years' time there would be another hero standing here, second-guessing their desperate plan to stop a dragon. But it probably wouldn't come to that. When they aren't lying on piles of gold, absorbing the metal into their bodies, dragons are usually flying around making enemies. A century down the road Fornox would likely be dead or preoccupied with some other grudge.

So I returned in triumph across the sandy plain while the city's people crowded on the walls and watched the great form rise up and fly away into the distance. The gates, closed so resolutely when I departed, were thrown open, and throngs of folk waited to welcome me. Amid their cheers and kisses I made my way to the Princes' Palace to collect my reward. When I got there, I found the Cat sitting in the Second Prince's chair, pretending to be asleep.

So it was that a few days later we were on the road again. The Cat had managed to negotiate an excellent reward from the Princes, and the saddlebags of the horse I led were bulging. The Cat was sitting up in his cot, watching as the plain gave way to rolling hills and arguing about his share of the loot.

"It's thanks to me that we got all this gold," he was saying, when suddenly he broke off. "That rock looks –"

Too late I saw it as well. The next hillock slowly started shifting, revealing itself to be my old friend Fornox. What can I say? You can't be on your guard all the time, especially after facing down a dragon.

Before I had my spear halfway out of its straps on the horse's flank the dragon was upon us. It planted itself on the road, great head stretching down until I could have spat in its eye, if I'd wanted

to try the charred-bones approach. The horse, despite the blinkers I'd fitted it with, whinnied and stepped nervously. I reached out my free hand to reassure it.

"Henren the Bloody," Fornox rumbled, its tongue flickering in and out. Even without fire its breath was like a furnace washing over me. The Cat was hunched down on the horse's back, looking three times his usual size, his ears flat against his head and his tail lashing back and forth.

"Fornox," I greeted the dragon in return. "Your oath binds you by the power of your name, and you swore to leave these parts."

"Did I?" the dragon seemed to smirk. "I remember swearing to leave the city and its people alone for a hundred years. But you, Henren the Bloody, you are not one of the city's people, are you? You, Henren the Bloody, you are fair game."

Was it going to be Henren the Bloody Fool after all? My mind raced as I tried to find a way out. All I needed was a moment's distraction to finish drawing out my spear. But with that great maw in my face I knew I'd be dead long before then. I'm fast, but not that fast.

"How about I give you gold?" I began. "I can give you loads of gold!"

Fornox had been eying the Cat, but now turned its gaze back to me. "I smell gold on you, yes. The ransom that those cowardly city dwellers should have paid to me, no doubt. Tell me, Henren the Bloody, how are you and I different? I at least am honest about extorting fools." Its breath was starting to feel like a firestorm. The horse gave a loud wicker. Beside me the Cat gave a low growl from deep in his throat. Whether about the heat or the insinuation that he'd not got the gold honestly, I couldn't tell.

The dragon gave the Cat a quick glance, then leaned in closer until its snout was almost touching my nose. "But don't worry, Henren the Bloody. I'll take my gold from your smoking remains. One breath is all it will take. You, your horse, this small creature. You won't —"

There was a flash of movement beside me, and Fornox recoiled with a sudden cry. In an instant my spear was in my hand, pointed at the dragon's exposed throat. "Don't move!" I shouted. "Stay there!"

Fornox froze, then slowly turned its head down to stare at the razor-sharp tooth — its own mother's tooth — pointed at its jugular. Now I could see that one of its eyes was torn and bloody. The Cat, I saw from the corner of my eye, had settled back and was washing his paw, though he was keeping his eyes on the huge form before us.

I fought back a grin. "Well dragon, it seems you won't be taking any gold from me just now. Time for another oath."

Later the Cat and I stopped to rest in the shade of a large tree. I sat down with my back against the trunk, and the Cat made his leisurely way over and stretched out on my legs. "So, your first dragon," I said. "What did you think?"

For a moment he didn't answer. "Slow," he said at length. "Boastful. Not very clever."

I reached out to scratch his ears, then I stopped. "You're going to make some comment about it being right, aren't you? About me being no different?"

The Cat made no reply. After a moment he rubbed his head on my leg. I sighed. It was probably true. Slow, boastful and not very clever, that sounded like me. One difference, though: I would never have taken my eyes off an angry cat.