

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE RAGE

THE YEAR OF ROGUE DRAGONS

1
book

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PROLOGUE

12 Flamerule, the Year of Moonfall
(1344 DR)

The world changed in an instant.

Before that moment, it seemed to Dorn Graybrook that life was perfect. The nine-year-old boy rarely escaped his round of chores in the master's cheerless house, and it was only to run errands through the city with its surly crowds and high gray walls that blocked the sun. Today, though . . .

Open expanses of tall grass, shimmering in the summer heat, rolled away on either side of the dusty road. The snow-crowned Dragonspine Mountains rose far ahead, and sometimes Dorn caught a glimpse of the purple-blue waters of the Moonsea to the north. He was outside, truly outside, and he loved it.

The best thing of all, though, was the change the journey evoked in his parents. At home, they often seemed sad and weary, worn down by their years of servitude.

Mother, who'd opted to walk for a time among the half dozen guards, sang songs. As Father drove the wagon, he joked with the boy seated beside him and told him things about the countryside. Sometimes the balding bondsman with the wry, intelligent face even let Dorn take the reins and guide the two dappled horses himself.

Priam said, "Look!"

He pointed up at the western sky. The leader of the guards, Priam was a lanky mercenary with a fierce trap of a mouth. He'd slain many a bandit and goblin in defense of the master's trade goods, and everyone admired his courage. But his voice was subtly different, as if he had to struggle to keep it steady.

Dorn peered upward. At first he couldn't see what the fuss was all about. Then he spotted the specks streaking along against the blue. When he squinted, he could make out the long tails, serpentine necks, and beating wings.

"Are they dragons?" Father asked, reining in the team. His voice was different, too, quavering, higher-pitched, and though he was a clerk, not a warrior like Priam, somehow his fear alarmed Dorn even more than the mercenary's had.

"Yes," Priam said.

The other guards startled babbling all at once.

"Weeping Ilmater," Father said. "What do we do?"

"Get off the road," Mother suggested, her braided red hair glowing like flame. She seemed a little calmer than the men. "Hide in the tall grass, and keep quiet."

"The grass isn't likely to hide us from something soaring overhead," Priam replied. "Still, it's worth a try. The Storm Lord knows, we can't outrun the things." He cast about, then gestured with the broad steel head of his spear. "That spot looks as good as any. Everybody, move!"

They moved, and Dorn saw that Priam was right. It was a bad hiding place. People could crouch down in the grass, but the horses and wagon stuck up over the top.

Father applied the brake, then climbed down to stand with the team. He stroked them and crooned to them, trying to keep them calm. Every few seconds, he fingered the hilt of

the broadsword hanging at his side. He always wore it when he traveled, but Dorn had never seen him practice with it or even draw it from its bronze scabbard.

Mother led Dorn away from the wagon to hunker down on the ground.

“Now,” she said to Dorn, “you just have to be very still.”

The boy’s heart pounded in his chest, and his mouth was dry. He had to swallow before he could speak.

“Are we going to die?”

“No,” she said. “The dragons may not come this way. Even if they do, they probably won’t notice us or take any interest in us. We’re just being safe.”

“All right,” he said, though he could tell she was acting more confident than she felt.

“One of them’s swinging this way,” said a black-bearded spearman.

“Bugger this,” said another guard, a sharp-featured young man named Janx. “Let’s scatter. It can’t catch all of us.”

“Yes, it can,” Priam said. “It’s fast enough. So, would you rather fight it by yourself or with your comrades beside you?”

“I’ll wind up just as dead either way,” said Janx, but he stayed put.

The next minute or two crawled by, and everything started happening very fast, or at least it felt that way. The approaching dragon changed course again to fly directly at the travelers. It swooped lower. Shivering despite the hot sun, Dorn could make out the color of its glinting scales—red like blood.

“When I tell you,” Mother said, “I want you to run away through the grass, and whatever happens, don’t look back.”

“Priam said—”

“That we mustn’t scatter. But you’re small, and you’ll have a head start. The creature could easily overlook you.”

“What about you and Father?”

“We’ll be fine,” she lied. He thought she’d never lied to him before that day, and suddenly she was doing it over and over. “We’ll find you when the trouble’s over.”

“You aren’t guards. You could run, too.”

“Just do what I tell you.”

Like some terrible shooting star, the dragon plunged down to just a few yards above the ground.

Until then, Dorn hadn’t been able to tell how huge it actually was—huge enough to make the humans before it look like mice scurrying about below a scarlet lion. Its amber eyes shone like molten lava, and its neck frills and wings were ash blue at the edges. It stank of sulfur and burning.

Despite Father’s efforts, the horses went mad. They wrenched themselves free of his hold and nearly knocked him over as they wheeled to flee, dragging the wagon with its locked front wheels jolting along behind them. He let them go and unsheathed his sword.

A couple of the guards panicked and likewise tried to run. The red dragon turned its wedge-shaped head almost lazily, regarded them, then puffed out a jet of yellow flame at them. They dropped instantly, without so much as a scream, to lie withered and black among the beginnings of a crackling grass fire.

Priam threw his spear. It bounced off the scales on the wyrm’s neck.

“Bring it down!” he shouted to the other guards, and they started casting their own lances.

“Now!” Mother said. “Run!”

She gave Dorn a shove, and he obeyed her. He was too scared to do anything else.

Yet he didn’t run far. Perhaps he didn’t have it in him to abandon the only people he loved in the whole world, the only people who loved him. In any event, after a few strides, panting and shaking, he turned back around to see what was happening.

The scarlet dragon was on the ground, but not, as best Dorn could tell, because anyone had “brought it down.” No one had yet succeeded in hurting it at all. It had simply chosen to land. It slashed with its claws and pulled Janx’s insides out of his belly. Its gigantic jaws bit Priam’s head off.

After that, there weren't any more guards. Just Father, holding his sword in an awkward two-handed grip, and Mother, sprinting to join him without any weapon at all—spending their lives to buy their son another moment to run.

Dorn couldn't bear such a sacrifice on his behalf. He had to stand with them, die with them. He ran back toward his parents and the dragon.

He was a fast runner, but not fast enough. Before he could close the distance, the wyrm caught Father in its fangs. It chewed him up and swallowed him down, spitting out the broadsword a moment later, the blade bent from the pressure of its jaws.

Mother snatched up the ruined weapon and hacked at the dragon with it. The reptile puffed malodorous flame into her face. She staggered a step and collapsed, her hair burning, the flesh of her head and shoulders running like melted candle wax.

Fists clenched, Dorn hurled himself at the wyrm. He never got a chance to hit it. It met him with a flick of its talons and hurled him to the ground.

To his surprise, he wasn't dead, but when he tried to get up, he couldn't. The throbbing pain started a second later.

He'd fallen with his face pointed toward his mother. He watched the dragon eat her, not gobbling her all at once as it had his father, but rather picking her apart and devouring her a piece at a time.

He could have shut his eyes. He still had that much control over his damaged body. But he chose to watch.

Something had changed in him. Agony and grief wracked him, but he wasn't afraid of the dragon anymore. Terror had given way to hatred, and he glared at it as if in the hope that his malice alone could kill it.

When it finished with his mother, it pivoted toward him.