

Thunder crackled off in the distance, a brilliant arch of light wove across the sky before landing on a nearby mountain peak with a resounding bang. He looked up at the foreboding sky as dark tumultuous clouds stretched out into the horizon. As other lightning bolts danced atop the surrounding peaks the sellsword Gregor swore, cursing his luck. He had hoped to be at the base of the mountain by the end of the day, but climbing the barren peak in this storm would be suicide. Even staying out here would be dangerous, these mountains reached too high into the clouds for any decently sized plant life to survive. This left the black-stone cliffs bare and naked and a treacherous place during a storm; he would need a cave, alcove, or some other form of cover if he wanted even an illusion of safety.

Gregor looked around worriedly, searching the black stone peak for any recess to take shelter in. Above him and to the right he saw an aperture in the rocks. He jogged upwards, his half-plate armor clanking with the rigorous motion he was performing. Sweat beaded down his forehead as he ran. “Last time I wear fucking armor at this altitude,” he grumbled to himself. He was lying to himself, even he knew that much. The stuff was heavy, but he had seen more than enough men die to ill preparedness.

Just before he had entered the sanctuary, a thunderous crash bowled him over. A bright flash came from his left as a lightning bolt struck a nearby rock. He lay there for a moment, clutching the sides of his head as his ears rung and the acrid scent of ozone filled his nostrils. He tried to call out, but found he could no longer hear himself, or anything for that matter.

All this could be dealt with later. He had caught a glimpse of death and would not wait for a second bolt to land. He hobbled over to the cave near collapsing through the entrance.

The ringing in Gregor’s ears was beginning to die down; he could once again hear the wind outside along with his own panicked breaths. With imminent death abated, he was able to inspect his surroundings fully. The cave was wider than it had first appeared. A carriage could have fit through the entrance and even ride a decent way into its penumbral depth. What was strangest was the pattern of the stones. Only a few feet past the entrance, the rocks lost their sharp, random, but natural shape. Instead taking on a carved, orderly form like a man-made tunnel.

Judging from the darkness and distance of the clouds, he figured he needed to spend the night in this cave. Were that the case, he would not want to catch his death from the cold winds roaring in through the entrance. Finding warmth also provided an excellent excuse for him to sate his curiosity. Leisurely standing, he walked down the dark tunnel, striking a torch on his way.

The tunnel was expertly carved, smooth and circular with lines of ancient text carved into the walls, ceilings, and floors. Dozens of other shafts branched off from the large main tunnel, but they were far too deep for the torchlight to reveal their contents and he chose to follow only the main corridor.

After a minute or so of walking, He found the tunnel split into two identical caverns. The right slopped upwards and exuded a slight warmth, as though a large fire burned within. Given the clear sign of inhabitants, Gregor pressed himself against the side of the tunnel and drew his bastard sword. Careful to keep his armor silent, he crept up the corridor. He soon saw a red-orange light glowing from around the corner a raging bonfire lay ahead. No longer, requiring light of his torch, he snuffed it out and placed it carefully on the ground.

Peering around the corner, he found the tunnel's terminal. At the end of the corridor was a large fireplace, an inferno still raging within it. Atop the mantel sat three large idols. A silver serpent rising from a pool of water, an obsidian meteorite falling from the sky, and a marble statue of a five-headed drake; Apsu, Dahak, and Tiamat respectively. The three warring gods of dragonkind. Gregor was a sellsword and a damn good one at that, back in his home country he was renowned as one of the few men brave, or foolish enough to fight and slay a dragon, if paid enough at least. That experience alone gave him enough expertise to recognize a dragon's den.

Walking up to the hearth and keeping an eye to the dark corners of the room, he waited for the slightest sign of an attacker. A few feet out from the fire pit, the floor dipped into a wide, shallow bowl, a layer of soft, durable cloth covering the sides of the indentation. At the center of the crater lay three dark-grey ovals. Eggs, unborn dragons, incubated by the warmth of the fire.

*There are more enough of these demons in our world.* Gregor sheathed his sword and unhooked the thing from his belt. His scabbard constructed fully from iron, its end given extra

weight to be usable as a bludgeoning weapon. With the mace-like weapon in hand, he raised his sword over his head to strike the fragile eggs.

Armor clicked slightly as his arm twitched, foreshadowing his attack. Just as his swing began, a powerful blow launched him to the side. He struck the wall painfully, clutching his side where the strike had landed. The attack had broken a rib or two, but he could still stand, he could still fight.

“You know, you have remarkable disrespect for a dying race,” mocked a booming voice. Gregor looked up to see a large black dragoness crouched and ready to pounce. Her long whip-like tail moving back into position to strike again. “That sword of yours, the pommel is bone, made from the corpse of one of my kind?” the creature asked, eyeing him up and down.

“It wasn’t the first. You won’t be the last,” Gregor explained, raising his sword for battle. The dragoness was small, weaker than some others he had fought in his time. She had caught him off guard and her lithe frame meant she was most likely quite fast, but he had fought against worse odds and survived.

“Perhaps today we can even the scales,” the dragoness chuckled, stepping back and forth. Her weaving movements made her next attack difficult to predict. He had to blink a few times to keep focused. Her graceful serpentine movements caused her sides to catch the light in perplexing ways. The dragoness had pitch-black scales, the edges of which were an iridescent red, giving her the appearance of a creature forged of burning coals.

The dragoness lurched forward, readying a bite like rattlesnake. He stabbed forward, ready to intercept the blow. Faster than he could react, the dragoness swerved her neck to the side, dodging the attack and butting him in the chest with her horns. Dragons were larger than humans were but weren’t as massive as some legends would have one believe. About the size of a bear, but much slimmer and longer. The force of her blow slammed him into the wall, his sword falling from his hand.

Gregor’s vision went dark for a moment as the force knocked the breath from his lungs. As his sight returned, he found himself staring down the blurry snout of dragoness, her hot breaths brushing against his face. He scowled, at the creature’s fang filled smile. *You don’t find many old dragon hunters.* He always knew he would probably die this way, just never thought

he'd be beaten by a sneak attack. "Just finish it," he muttered, struggling to inhale with so many snapped ribs.

"Does a knight find honor murdering innocent babes in their crib?" the dragoness spat. "I reckon this isn't the first time you've killed blameless children... Ending you would a token gesture for justice. But as I said, perhaps we can even the scales," the dragoness whispered. She snapped her jaws around his shoulder and dragged him along the tunnel floor.

Gritting his teeth in pain, he weakly beat at his attacker, her fangs finding the seams in his armor. She pulled him away from the large fire pit and the nursery. The dragoness set the sellsword down outside the room and hastily tore off his armor and clothes. He bit back a yelp as her claws ripped the half-plate armor from him, damaging the skin beneath in the process. With nothing more to cover his flesh, she began chanting some ancient spell.

He let out a sigh of relief as his body went numb. All the pain from his numerous wounds faded, followed shortly by any other sensation of touch he had been feeling. He tried to raise his hands in protest, but his limbs seemed deaf to any of his commands. As sensation faded, he closed his eyes and his body began to feel like liquid and a pleasurable warmth overtook him.

A falling sensation came over Gregor's head as his sense of proprioception was thrown completely off. His feet were seemed no longer to exist, not even a phantom knowledge of his body seemed to remain. This sensation of nothingness began to rise through his body, reaching his waist and soon his chest. Confused, Gregor opened his eyes to assess his situation. He saw that the dragoness was lying down atop him, as though she were slowly applying all her weight atop him.

Looking down, Gregor saw his body seeming to liquefy in contact with the dragoness. "The bloody hell," he shouted, watching himself seem to merge and disappear into the creature.

"Shh, shh little one, everything's alright," the dragoness comforted as she finally lay down flat upon him and finished the absorption process.

He would have closed his eyes and fallen asleep were he still capable. He lost all sense of time and gravity as warmth and peace saturated his every cell. Lying there, awash with serene bliss as he was moved into a curled position. His memories dripped away from him as though he

were a pail with a hole in it. They no longer seemed important, as a shell formed around him he felt an overwhelming sense of comfort and security. Nothing mattered anymore.

The dragoness felt exhausted, that powerful of a spell had sapped her strength. Before she could crawl back to her nest, a wave of nausea came overcame her. She heaved a few times and coughed up a sizable mass of blood and tissue. With a scowl, she let out a single breath of fire to burn away the foul taste. Excess biomass which Gregor would no longer need. After all, a dragon egg was much smaller than a fully-grown human. With a smile, she padded over to her nest and curled up, enjoying the soothing sensation of new life stirring within her.

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Months later, the dragon once called Gregor felt a spark of consciousness pass through him. On instinct, it twitched his snout, nudging the shell of the egg. A small crack appeared, the breaks spreading out as it broke through the wall of his warm prison. With a final push, it forced through the wall and into the comparably cold air.

“The mighty dragon slayer emerges,” the dragoness joked. Curled up in her soft nest, she clutched her four eggs close to her chest as she felt them stir. “I’m sure you’ll find your new life satisfying. Maybe bringing new life into the world will help repay the debt you owe our kind. Isn’t that right Vaeras, my little dragoness,” she cooed, looking lovingly at her four hatching eggs.

Vaeras pushed her black scaled head through the aperture in the eggshell. Exposed to the air she took her first breath, her new lungs inflating for the first time. Vaeras was the second to hatch, by nightfall she would have an older sister and two younger brothers. Being based on the genes of only a single dragon, she looked just like her mother.

With a few pitiful coughs, Vaeras forced a few drops of thick egg fluid from her young throat. With a light clatter, her egg horn fell to the ground as she stepped from her it. “Such a cute little one aren’t you,” the dragoness comforted as she began to lick the clear fluid from her daughter.

Vaeras chirped gleefully from the attention she was receiving from her mother. She could not understand the words spoken, her memories long gone, and her mind simplified by infancy.

Once finished, the dragoness used the tip of her snout to pull Vaeras close to her core. The warmth gave Vaeras an incredible sense ease and security. Her mother would protect her, so she snuggled up beside her newborn siblings and falling into a deep cozy sleep.