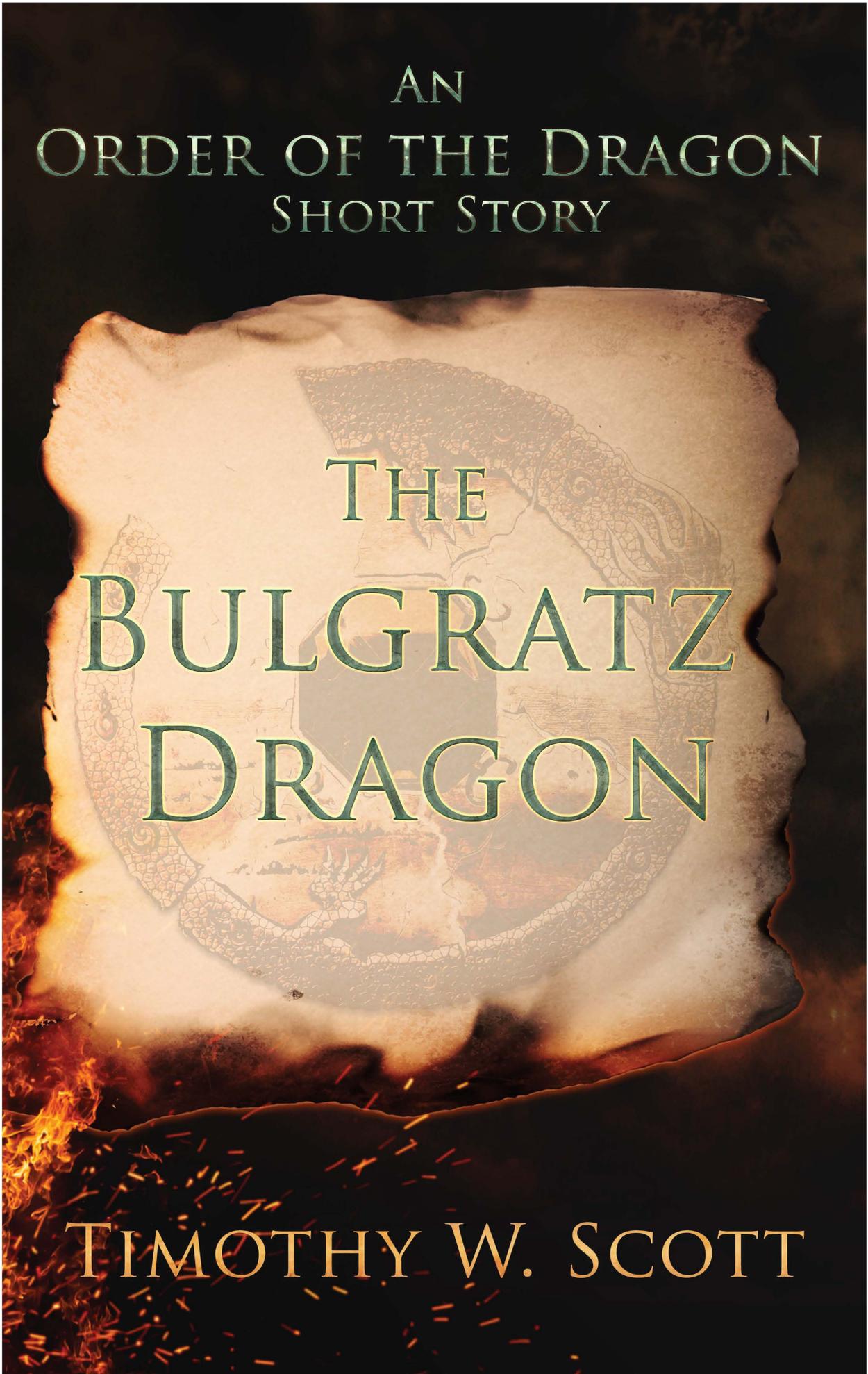


AN
ORDER OF THE DRAGON
SHORT STORY



THE
BULGRATZ
DRAGON

TIMOTHY W. SCOTT

The Bulgratz Dragon

An Order of the Dragon Story

35.858061, -83.526000

*Gatlinburg Pigeon Forge Airport
Seveirville, Tennessee*

The Drake Archaeology jet was parked outside a hanger at the far end of the airport. A Gulfstream G550, it was by far the largest and most expensive aircraft at the single-runway airport. Pepper and Wyatt Drake walked toward a custom Jeep. It had oversized tires and was painted a matte-finish Tennessee Volunteer Orange. *Rocky Top Outfitters* was emblazoned in white across both front fenders. It was clear Pepper and Wyatt were related. Wyatt was in his late thirties, and was tall enough, with keen brown eyes, scruffy hair and a week's worth of stubbly beard. Pepper was definitely older than sixty, but the light in his eyes and the smoothness of his movements made his age hard to pinpoint. Both men had the confident air of a gunslinger from the Old West.

A man in his mid-twenties stood beside the Jeep, swaying casually on the balls of his feet. He was intentionally thin, his untucked orange and green flannel shirt fanned over his brown denim jeans. He had a thick but neatly kept beard and wore a flat-billed cap. He met Pepper and Wyatt with an outstretched hand and a smile.

"Y'all must be the Drakes," he said in his slow, syrupy East Tennessee drawl.

"Yep," Pepper replied, shaking the man's hand.

"I'm Braden," the man said, looking past Wyatt and Pepper to the Gulfstream. He noticed the long *Drake Archaeology* logo painted along the fuselage. "Archaeologists? Y'all up here looking for fossils or something?"

"Something like that," Pepper replied. "This the rig?"

“Yes sir, best we got. The deluxe package. Thirty-five inch tires, skid plates, locking differentials, AMC four liter high output inline six cylinder under the hood. It’ll take you wherever you want to go in these mountains.”

“Perfect,” Pepper replied.

Braden thought these two didn’t look like his usual customers, the typical weekend warriors and recreational off-roaders wanting to climb the rocks or tear up the mud-holes of the Great Smoky Mountains. There was an element of seriousness in their microfiber tactical clothing, bulging bags of gear, and strong, tanned jaws. Braden sensed there was something different about this pair. They had grit. He never would have guessed he had just rented the deluxe package to dragon hunters.

Wyatt was already loading the bags of gear into the rear of the Jeep as Braden produced a folder attached to a clipboard.

“Couple of signatures, and y’all are on your way. You said y’all wanted the extended insurance coverage?”

“Yep. Everything you got,” Pepper replied.

“Can’t be too careful,” Wyatt added.

“Ok, sign here and here,” Braden said, pointing to the paper on the clipboard. “Take good care of her. She’s all yours until tomorrow.”



35.757195, -83.283196
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Seveirville, Tennessee

Wyatt drove while Pepper flipped through images on his smart phone. They were headed East on Highway 321, into the the thick of the fog of the Great Smoky Mountains. The ride on the thirty-five inch tires was loud and rough.

“This guy named kingjupiter23 uploaded another picture,” Pepper said, tilting the smart phone screen toward Wyatt. The picture was of a narrow hollow in the flat ground of the top of one of these mountains. The grass was tamped down and several small hickory trees around the perimeter of the hollow were snapped and leaning. “He thinks it’s an alien landing site. Says it has the classic pattern of a small craft, like an advance scout team.”

“Freaks,” Wyatt mumbled.

The Drakes were members of the secretive Order of the Dragon. They were tasked with finding and eliminating fire-breathing dragons across North America. They received periodic alerts and assignments from the faceless central headquarters of their Order, known only as Control. But they also held the responsibility of monitoring any and all potential dragon activity they could find. And they had learned that the best place to find dragon activity was in the forums and message boards of conspiracy theorists, hardcore survivalist types, and alien hunters.

Pepper smirked. The true-believers like kingjupiter23 were right—something unusual had landed in that hollow and knocked over those trees as it came to rest. But it wasn’t a flying saucer. It was most likely a dragon.

Pepper and Wyatt had left their California home immediately after Pepper had seen the first picture posted by kingjupiter23. The last thing the Drake’s needed was one of these relentless true-believers poking around looking for aliens and accidentally stumbling over something more dangerous. *Secrecy demands silence*, as the oath of the Order went.

The Drake’s were quickly on-location in Eastern Tennessee to do what they did best: locate the dragon and kill it before it could kill them and, most importantly, before anyone else saw the fire-breathing beast. It was imperative that no one outside of the Order realize that dragons were real. The world needed the luxury of sleeping soundly in ignorant bliss.

“Kingjupiter23 lives in Mesa, Arizona, so he isn’t a threat to be stomping around in these woods this quick. A guy who goes by CtheSkyTruth says he’s in Paintsville, Kentucky, about four hours away, but his dumb boss at the transmission shop won’t let him off until the weekend. He plans on checking it out on Saturday.”

“We’ll be long gone by then,” Wyatt replied.

“Better be.”

Wyatt hadn’t done much field work with his father the last ten years or so, since his wife Abby had found her place in the family as a dragon hunter. Wyatt and Abby worked well together. She was smart and quick. And beautiful. They were a strong team. But this morning, Abby had an important mission of her own to complete, leaving Wyatt with Pepper.

Wyatt and his father had been on countless missions together when he was younger. He felt his father still saw him as a clumsy teenager and would treat him as such. He expected that on this trip, Pepper would bark the orders, and he would end up doing all the work.

They climbed higher into the mountains. Pewter-gray fog filled the low spaces and ringed the trees. Pepper swiped across the map on his smartphone.

“Around this next bend there’s a trailhead for hikers, and about a mile past that is a Park Ranger maintenance road. Let’s take that. From there I think we can wander up the mountain.”

Wyatt looked at the thick forest covering the mountains. This was perfect country for a dragon. Limited visibility, almost no human population and plenty of dark, rocky corners and hidden caves. A dragon could find a thousand places to stay lost up here. Dragons knew how to disappear. They had a keen sense of smell and a natural aversion to being seen. Plus most could fly, making them almost impossible to chase. But the Drakes knew the secret to dragon hunting. Even dragons had to eat.

“Let’s find a bear,” Wyatt said.



47.660574, -122.310597
Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture
Seattle, Washington

Abby Drake slipped a small umbrella into her oversized Burberry bag as she entered the lecture hall, a square room with bland walls and a dozen rows of simple, pale wooden chairs. Abby was tall, in her late thirties, wearing a white blouse and a smart turquoise skirt beneath a knee-length khaki raincoat. Her shoulder-length sun-blond hair danced as she moved toward a metal canister trash can in the rear of the room, across the back wall from the door she had entered. The trash can was directly beneath a half-dome security camera affixed to the ceiling. She deftly removed a thick metal disc the size of a yo-yo from the Burberry bag slung on her elbow and discreetly stuck it on the back of the trash

can near the floor. The disc contained a magnet and instantly adhered to the trash can.

She walked to the front row of the lecture hall and took a seat. The lecture hall was half-filled with a handful of university professors, pale-skinned student researchers, and frumpy newspaper reporters. Everyone present was there to hear the big announcement: the first dinosaur fossils ever discovered in the state of Washington.

Abby's chosen seat was directly in front of the display case on the dais. The case was wood and glass, and would soon contain the items at the center of everyone's attention: a chunk of fossilized bone and two petrified eggs.

Abby had arrived extra early, hoping to be in her seat before the museum curators placed the section of femur bone and two petrified eggs into the display case. She wanted to see how the case opened. If her suspicions were correct, completing her mission would require speed, precision and skill.

Dr. Edith Rutledge emerged from a door behind the dais. She was a serious-looking woman with a severe face. She had out-of-style gold-framed glasses perched on her narrow, protruding nose, sunken cheeks, and a pronounced jaw line. Her black hair was neatly pulled into a tight ponytail. She was enveloped in a lab coat several sizes too large; her knuckled hands barely escaped through the cuffs of the sleeves. A shortish, mousy girl in a beige sweater and pleated navy skirt followed after her. A badge with her picture and the name "Marisol" hung from a lanyard around her neck. Marisol carried a tray with a white towel draped over it. Abby watched closely as Dr. Rutledge lifted a door on the back of the case. She noticed the hinge was along the top edge, and the door opened from the bottom.

Dr. Rutledge removed the towel from Marisol's tray and gently lifted the bone and two eggs into place in the case. She closed the case door, then nervously opened a file folder and fanned out several sheets of notes on the flat glass of the top of the case. Marisol motioned for everyone still standing to find a seat. Dr. Rutledge cleared her throat.

"No dinosaur bones have ever been found in Washington State. A fact that makes this recent discovery all the more significant, and vital to our understanding of the factors that shaped our prehistoric world."

“Just get to the good stuff,” Abby thought to herself as Dr. Rutledge droned on for what seemed like half an hour. She had sat through boring lectures like this many times before and knew exactly what she was looking—and listening—for: clues from the doctor that would confirm her suspicions.

“There are some anomalies with the carbon dating as this bone fragment appears to be much younger than we would expect, and that age isn’t consistent with what we know of the diplodocus genus of diplodocid sauropod being primarily found in the Jurassic period and the late Kimmeridgian age,” Dr. Rutledge said.

There it was. This bone was much younger than Dr. Rutledge wished it to be. Abby raised her hand confidently. “So you are saying with absolute certainty that the bone is from a Diplodocus?”

Abby’s brisk New Zealander’s accent caught Dr. Rutledge off-guard.

“We believe so,” the curator replied with hollow confidence.

“Even though your own dating process is inconclusive?”

“As I said, we believe the carbon dating data is merely an anomaly, and...”

“And the eggs?” Abby interrupted.

“We have no way of knowing exactly what species they belong to, but we surmise they are from the same species.”

“*Surmise* isn’t science,” Abby whispered under her breath.

“Excuse me?” the curator replied.

“Sorry, had a bit of a hiccup,” Abby said pointing to her throat.

Abby knew how much the discovery meant to the Paleontologists of the Burke Museum. She realized how significant an actual dinosaur find was to the State of Washington University system. She knew it would mean grant money for the academic researchers to scour through the woods and plains of outer Washington to search for more, and fund a myriad of new programs for the museum and the university. That chunk of bone and the two eggs were more than a fantastic academic find: they were a pay day. Abby also knew a dragon bone when she saw one. That grayish hunk of ancient femur was not from a Diplodocus. She was certain it was from a dragon.

Abby pulled her smart phone from her skirt pocket and typed a text to her husband Wyatt. *Call 206-543-7907, Dr. Edith Rutledge, IMMEDIATE family emergency.* She hit *send* on the message, then opened an app called *Boom*. She

held the smart phone in her right hand, her thumb on a large red button in the center of the screen. Her left hand hung loose at her side, her fingers wrapped around the straps of her oversized bag.

After several more minutes of Curator Edith Rutledge's monotone nasal whine, a museum docent in a navy blazer and high-water gray polyester slacks shuffled through a doorway behind the dais. He was older, one of the legion of retired volunteers that ensured the museum remained quiet and clean. He stood behind Curator Rutledge awkwardly, waiting for her to complete her winding sentence on the unique sediment properties that had kept the fossilized bone in its rather pristine condition. As she paused for breath, the docent leaned into her ear, his chin resting on her shoulder. Edith Rutledge's eyes shot wide in confusion and surprise.

"An emergency?"

The docent nodded, and pointed his empty palm toward the open door behind them. Curator Rutledge looked at the door, then at Marisol, and then at the sparse crowd shifting in the uncomfortable chairs.

"My apologies, I must interrupt my presentation. Um, Marisol, can you try and answer any remaining questions in the meantime? I hope to be right back," Curator Rutledge said.

Marisol nodded. Edith Rutledge followed the docent out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Marisol had just begun to move to the space behind the display case when Abby pressed the red button on her smart phone. A short hiss emanated from the rear of the room, followed by a loud bang. Gray smoke poured out of the disc behind the trash can, quickly rising and engulfing the security camera.

Marisol panicked. Her breathing stopped and her face shot hot with fear. She saw the smoke billowing out into the room and the alarmed look on the people's frozen faces, unsure what to do next. Her subconscious mind worked to her benefit. The security training she had sat through on her first day of employment flashed through her mind. *In case of fire, move everyone as quickly as possible out of the building.* She needed to get these people out of the room, she thought to herself. Now. Marisol gulped and stepped away from the display case, toward the crowd being consumed by the growing smoke.

“Everyone out into the hallway! Please! Into the main corridor!” Lillian shouted, straining her quiet, dampened voice.

Abby moved in the opposite direction of the crowd. She deftly slipped behind the display case and lifted the hinged door on its back side. With one motion, she scraped the bone and the two eggs into the mouth of her oversized Burberry bag, then eased the display door closed and took her place in the exiting crowd. The smoke was now thick in the room, burning Abby’s eyes and reducing her visibility to near zero. She pushed her way into the middle of the tangled mob of scientists, students, and journalists shuffling slowly through the narrow door.

The air cleared in the high-ceilinged corridor. The wide hallway allowed the mob to separate and fan out. Another elderly docent was waiting in the hallway, holding a handkerchief over his nose and mouth. He was pointing toward the main exit. “This way! This way!” he said, his voice muffled by the fabric.

The heavy objects in her bag bounced against the side of Abby’s thigh as she walked with the crowd toward the museum exit and the morning rain. Abby lifted her smart phone to her ear.

“Yeah?” she heard Wyatt say in the phone’s speaker.

“It’s done,” Abby replied.

35.757195, -83.283196

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Seveirville, Tennessee



“It’s done,” Wyatt said, lowering his smart phone from his ear.

“She’s the best,” Pepper replied. “Gotta be a creek or stream around here. Let’s find water, then wait for something delicious to wander up.”

“Yeah, like us!” Wyatt replied.

Pepper reached into the back of the Jeep and pulled a four-barrel shotgun and a bandolier of shells from his bag. He cracked open the hinge of the gun and slid four shells into place. The shells were yellow and covered in crude drawings of dragons in black marker.

“You let Jake help you load those shells?”

“A boy has to learn.”

“Be careful with him around gunpowder, Dad. He likes blowing things up.”

“What ten-year-old doesn’t?”

Wyatt guided the Jeep around a boulder jutting out of the ground, and brought it to a stop on the outside edge of the clearing. “This looks like the place,” he said.

The grass of the clearing had begun to straighten and reach again toward the sun, but the saplings around the perimeter were cracked and drying. The clearing was twenty feet wide and thirty feet long, and definitely a landing spot for a dragon. At its far end, the underbrush leading into the forest was trampled and pushed aside.

“It went that way,” Pepper pointed.

“It’s big, too,” Wyatt replied.

The pair got out of the Jeep and grabbed their gear, including their armor. Wyatt’s armor was a single piece of rugged black dragon scales that slipped over his head, covering the chest and back and his arms to his elbows. The scales were trapezoid-shaped, from the Zumodu river dragons of deepest Africa, and formed an alternating, interlocking pattern that allowed for free movement. He wore matching gloves that extended up his forearms almost to the elbow. Pepper’s armor was simple in its design—a tight vest of brown scales, held together by leather laces up the front, with matching coverings on his forearms and leggings akin to a cowboy’s chaps. Pepper’s armor was covered in gashes, scrapes, and powder burns.

They walked across the clearing and stepped onto the fresh path cut by the dragon. Not far down the path, they heard the soothing sound of gurgling water. Pepper lifted his good ear to the air.

“There’s our creek,” he said, pointing to his right, toward the sound of the water.

They pushed into the thorny tangle of underbrush. Not far off the path they spied a narrow creek of clear water, running gently down the mountain.

“Let’s disappear,” Pepper said, sliding into the bushes.

“I hope we don’t have to wait long,” Wyatt replied, taking his place next to his father.

Wyatt quickly got his wish.

Several minutes later, Wyatt saw the bushes on the far side of the creek rustle and shake. He slapped Pepper on the shoulder and pointed toward the disturbance in the underbrush.

“That’s a bear,” he whispered.

Pepper sat up, training his eyes on the rustle in the undergrowth. He was surprised to see a young dragon emerge through the black and purple chokeberry bushes. The dragon was the size of a rottweiler, with overlapping blue scales, streaked with orange. Short wings extended from its shoulders, just below the neck. “That’s not a bear,” Pepper whispered back through the corner of his mouth.

Both men instantly recognized the dragon as a Bulgratz. Adult Bulgratz dragons weren’t overly large, but were incredibly dangerous. Bulgratz were considered “standard class” dragons - usually no more than ten to twelve feet tall at the shoulder, and about sixteen to twenty feet long. They could fly, but not exceptionally fast. But Bulgratz dragons were smart. Cunning. And they liked to fight.

Wyatt looked over his shoulder, surveying the dark shadows surrounding them. “Mom can’t be far behind.”

The young Bulgratz toddled to the creek. It dipped its nose below the surface, lapping the cold water with quick strikes of its narrow, forked tongue.

Pepper pointed to a raised outcropping of rock that knifed out of the trees. “Looks like we’re not the only ones hunting dragons today.”

Wyatt turned and watched a medium-sized black bear stalk out of the darkness onto the ledge. Its teeth were bared and its narrowed gaze was fixed on the young dragon. Wyatt’s first thought was to scare the bear away, yelling so that it would run to the safety of the woods. It thought it was stalking a hearty meal. It didn’t realize it was the one on the menu.

“The mom’s using the wyrmling for bait,” Pepper said.

Pepper and Wyatt knew that dragons were the most ruthless kind of creatures. A dragon’s small, reptilian brain did not have space for a maternal instinct. Mature dragons didn’t keep young dragons close to help them grow up or teach them how to survive. They kept them close to attract larger prey.

Pepper cocked the the top two barrels of his shotgun.

Both men were startled by the sudden sound of a thick branch cracking on the other side of the creek. They looked and saw curling columns of steam wafting from among the leaves, and two burning red eyes glowing in the shadows.

“There she is,” Wyatt said.

“Wait until she shows herself,” Pepper replied.

Wyatt looked to the bear. It was unaware of what lurked in the darkness.

“That bear’ll make its move, then the dragon will pounce,” Wyatt said. He reached for a compact pole strapped to his back. It had trident blades on either end.

Wyatt tensed at the sound of more branches cracking. The battle was close.

“You handle the big one, I’ll grab the wyrmling,” Pepper said.

“Huh?”

“You take down the momma, I’ll snatch the little one.”

“Why don’t you just shoot the small one, and then we’ll both take the big one?” Wyatt replied, incredulous.

“You can handle it,” Pepper said.

“You want to keep it, don’t you!”

“The kids need to practice. This little wurm is perfect.”

“You’re not easy, you know that?”

“I hunt dragons. Shouldn’t be anything easy about me,” Pepper replied.

The black bear jumped off the rock formation and landed on the soft ground directly behind the young dragon. Its fur was black as coal, and its large, rounded hips gave it a soft, comfortable look, as if it were a stuffed children’s toy. But this dangerous bear was no toy. Just steps behind the unsuspecting Bulgratz, it stood on its hind legs and raised its meaty paws. The young dragon turned and saw the bear. It met the much bigger bear with a hiss and a fierce look of defiance.

“It ain’t scared,” Pepper said. “Get ready.”

Wyatt pushed a button at the center of the pole and the blades extended telescopically from either end, becoming an impressive, ten-foot-long weapon.

As the bear made its move, the mature dragon slid out of the shadows to Wyatt and Pepper’s right. It was big for a Bulgratz, just over twelve feet tall at its

shoulder, and over twenty feet long. The orange streaks in its well-worn scales were dark with age. The edges of the webbing of its wings were torn and frayed.

The young dragon stood on its back legs, hobbling uneasily. It inhaled deeply, and then shot a quick, short burst of fire toward the bear. The flame was small and quickly evaporated into the atmosphere.

The bear looked past the small dragon, and saw the giant one. The snarling lips of the big Bulgratz revealed rows of razor-sharp teeth. Its claws were extended and gleamed in the few beams of sunlight that managed to penetrate the canopy.

The black bear froze at the sight of the giant dragon. It shuffled backwards on its hind legs. It lost its balance, and tumbled to the ground in a heap. The young dragon—proud of itself—let out an emboldened squeal.

Wyatt's fingers were tight around his weapon. He was crouched on the balls of his feet, his knees flexed. Ready to strike. Pepper cautiously lowered the hammers on his shotgun, before slinging it over his shoulder. He reached into his duffel bag and removed a roll of silver duct tape. He locked the roll of tape onto a hook affixed to his belt.

The big Bulgratz moved first, sending the entire scene into motion. The dragon hopped over the creek next to the bear. Pepper dashed for the young Bulgratz, throwing his shoulder into the dragon's side and wrapping his arms around its chest. His momentum and the fight of the dragon carried them into the cold, clear water of the creek.

Wyatt ran toward the giant dragon, his trident fully extended above his head. He plunged the dragon-teeth prongs of the trident into the side of the dragon, burying it deep in its chest, just missing its heart. The dragon shrieked in pain, a high-pitched cry that sent the birds flying out of the surrounding trees.

The dragon grabbed the pole of the trident with its claw and tried to rip it out of his chest, but the barbed ends of the prongs were anchored strong against the walls of its muscles and its ribs. Raging, it flicked the pole skyward, sending Wyatt into the air. Wyatt landed hard on his left shoulder against a rock in the bank of the creek. A sharp pain shot across his chest from his shoulder to his neck.

The raging dragon shot a bolt of fire toward Wyatt. He rolled away from the torrent of flames onto his injured shoulder, sending a searing pain across his chest and down his arm.

Wyatt let go of the trident and stumbled to his feet. He held his left arm close against his side. He drew his knife of pressed dragon teeth with his right hand, and ran toward the dragon.

Pepper managed to keep his clutch on the slick blue scales of the dragon as it thrashed in the water. The dragon wiggled and shook, trying to force its torso free of Pepper's grasp. Pepper tried to stand while holding the dragon, but the soles of his cowboy boots slipped against the smooth rocks at the bottom of the creek.

The survival instincts of the black bear kicked in. It bolted away into the woods. The Drakes allowed the bear to escape. Bears can't tell anyone that they've seen a dragon.

Pepper lurched forward and dropped the young dragon onto the bank of the creek. He laid on top of the smaller Bulgratz, using his full body weight to keep the dragon in place. He took the roll of duct tape from the hook on his belt and wrapped the tape tight around the dragon's back legs.

Wyatt ran beneath the adult dragon. Blood from the trident wound gushed from its chest and splashed across Wyatt's forehead. Wyatt slashed the beast's hamstrings as he ran behind it. As the dragon spun, Wyatt turned and ran back from where he came. He dropped his knife and grabbed the pole of the trident as he passed. The pole of the trident pressed against the dragon's chest, and the force of the lever-action pushed the blade back through its chest, splintering two of its ribs and ripping through the skin from the inside. The dragon's legs buckled as blood gushed from the gaping wound.

Wyatt was close to his father, who was busy wrapping tape around the young dragon's snout. He snatched the shotgun that was slung around Pepper's back, and turned it toward the teetering dragon. He raised the barrels toward the dragon's chest, and pulled all four triggers, sending a curtain of razor-sharp dragon teeth shards into the open wound. The dragon wheezed and choked. It tried to shoot a burst of fire, but only a murky mixture of smoke and blood spilled out of its mouth. Its legs went weak and the dragon sat down hard on its tail. Its head waved on its jelly-neck. Wyatt let the shotgun fall back against

Pepper's back, and grabbed the trident from the ground. He plunged the trident into the dragon's neck just below the base of its lower jaw. He set the other side of the trident on the ground. The tines of the trident sank into the soft earth. The dragon slumped forward, forcing the sharp ends of the trident through its brain. The barbed tips of the trident peeked out of the scales at the top of its head. The adult Bulgratz sat motionless, skewered and dead.

Pepper finished wrapping the duct tape around the fore-legs of the young dragon. "Got him!" He said, standing up and wringing water out of the bottom hem of his shirt.

"Yeah, thanks for the help dad," Wyatt said.

"I told you you could handle it," Pepper replied. He pulled the trident out of the dragon, and pushed the button in the center, retracting the tines. He handed the weapon to Wyatt, who was retrieving a bundle of dynamite and a timer from his bag. Pepper cut a gash into the side of the dead dragon with his knife. Wyatt turned the dial on the timer to two minutes, and handed the bundle to Pepper, who jammed the dynamite deep into the bloody wound.

"I think my collarbone is broken," Wyatt winced.

"Again?" Pepper replied without an ounce of sympathy in his voice. "You gotta be more careful."

Wyatt looked up at the majestic Hickory trees. "Sorry we're gonna lose a couple of these."

"The scorch this explosion's gonna leave will convince those internet guys that aliens landed here for sure," Pepper said, dragging the bound Bulgratz dragon behind him as he made his way back into the woods.

"Freaks," Wyatt replied.



34.072703, -118.793473
Latigo Canyon
Malibu, California

A black suburban backed into a wide, eight-car garage. It stopped, parking adjacent to another identical black suburban. Pepper sat in the drivers seat, Wyatt slumped in the passenger seat, his left arm in a sling.

“Help me get the wyrmling unloaded?” Pepper asked.

“No time, dad,” Wyatt said through tight lips, in obvious pain. “Abby’s flight was delayed, and I gotta pick up Rocki from basketball practice. I’m late already.”

Pepper slid out of the driver’s seat as ten-year-old Jake slung open the garage door directly behind the vehicle.

“I can help!” Jake exclaimed. The boy’s eyes were ice-blue, bright, and wide. His caramel-colored hair was pushed toward the top of his head, gelled into a short-standing, faux-hawk.

Wyatt tussled Jake’s stiff hair as he passed.

“Hey Jake. Looking good.”

“You’re not! What happened to your arm?” Jake replied.

“He let a wurm knock him over,” Pepper said, grinning.

Wyatt walked past the other suburban and a black four door Jeep Wrangler. “I’m taking the Sting Ray.”

“Why?” Pepper replied.

“Because you made me do all the work and my clavicle is broken.”

“How are you going to shift gears without a good arm?”

“I’ll manage,” Wyatt said.

Wyatt gingerly slid into a beautiful 1963 Corvette Stingray. It was red, with peaked fenders and Texas plates. It had a split rear window, with two identical panes of glass curving artfully down the sides of the car. The big v-8 engine roared to life, reverberating through the garage and rattling Jake’s teeth. The Sting Ray exploded into the driveway, its tires squealing against the smooth concrete floor.

“Get the ramp,” Pepper said to his grandson.

Jake dashed to the far side of the garage and pulled a diamond-plated metal ramp off a row of hooks on the wall. Pepper helped him fit it into place on the rear deck of the suburban. Pepper reached into the vehicle and slowly rolled a square cage of thick steel down the ramp. Inside the cage a sack of rough burlap flopped and rolled.

“What is it this time?” Jake asked anxiously.

“She’s a Bulgratz,” Pepper said.

“A Bulgratz,” Jake repeated breathlessly.

Jake loved dragons. He was obsessed with them. Everything about them was intoxicating: their intricate scaling, their razor-sharp claws and even sharper teeth, the elaborate spikes that adorned some species’ heads, necks, and tails. He loved the exotic yellows and reds of their eyes. And he was mesmerized by their ability to shoot fire from their lungs. Jake wanted to be a dragon killer like his parents and his grandfather, and he knew they were supposed to kill every dragon they could find. But nothing was as exhilarating as standing close to a dragon. Being close to a dragon made him feel alive.

Jake pulled the rope that closed the garage door behind them as Pepper pushed the cage into the expansive basement. The basement was about the size of a basketball court. Medieval weapons lined the walls: spears and lances and pikes and pole axes, with blades forged and formed of pressed, razor-sharp dragon teeth. In the corner to their left sat another steel cage, about the size of a suburban family’s minivan, with hay scattered across its floor.

Pepper opened the small cage on wheels and yanked the burlap sack out onto the floor. He untied the rope at the mouth of the sack and peered inside. “You ready to come outta there?”

Jake laughed, giddy with delight and anticipation. He felt like he was about to jump out of his skin. He was so excited to be this close to a real dragon.

“Never let me see you do this without gloves,” Pepper said to Jake, reaching his gloveless hands into the sack. He pulled the dragon out of the sack by the duct tape around its fore-claws. Jake pressed himself close to the fantastic little dragon. Pepper took a short knife from his boot and cut the tape from the dragon’s front and back legs. The dragon opened and closed its claws repeatedly, working its stiff joints to life.

“Step back,” Pepper said to Jake.

The young dragon lifted its fore-legs to its face, and easily sliced through the tape around its muzzle with its sharp claws. It shook the shredded strips of tape to the floor. It hissed at Pepper, then lunged at him. Pepper raised his leg and planted the heel of his cowboy boot in the dragon’s chest. The awkward, stiff-legged dragon lost its balance and tumbled to the floor.

Across the basement, Pepper's dog Sparky trotted down a staircase into the room. Sparky was short and sturdy, with a speckled merle coat, pointed ears, and a black patch of fur around his left eye. He wore a collar of a simple strip of tan saddle-leather, with a dangling round tag of blue metal. The young dragon spied Sparky. A hunger pang shot through its stomach, rumbling loud enough for Jake to hear it. The dragon's eyes narrowed. It lowered its head and let out a low growl from deep within its chest.

"Its going after Sparky!" Jake exclaimed.

"Bad idea," Pepper replied.

Jake looked toward Sparky. The little dog saw the dragon across the room. Jake watched the hair on Sparky's haunches bristle and his top lip curl up in a taunt snarl.

The young dragon lowered its belly to the floor and crept slowly toward its perceived prey. Sparky stood firm, daring the dragon to come closer.

"Should we catch him?" Jake asked Pepper.

"Spark can handle it," Pepper replied.

The Bulgratz crept steadily toward the dog. It was close. It rocked back on the big muscles of its hind legs, ready to spring on its prey, but Sparky jumped first.

With surprising quickness and power, Sparky head-butted the dragon in its fore-leg, causing it to fall on its shoulder. The dog raced around the dragon and clamped its jaws down on its back foot. His teeth were unable to penetrate the dragons scales, but he refused to let go.

"Been thinking about making some fangs out of dragon teeth for ol' Spark. Bet I could find a vet dentist who'd replace a few of his teeth with 'em." Pepper said to Jake.

"That would be awesome!" Jake replied.

"Yeah, it'd be something. It'd make him the best wurm fighter of all of us."

Sparky held tight to the dragon's foot. He tried to pull the dragon across the floor, but the young Bulgratz dug its front claws into the concrete and fought against the dog. Sparky let go of the dragon. It lurched backwards and landed clumsily. Sparky ran toward it, and jumped toward its face, burying the crown of his head into the eye socket of the young dragon. The Bulgratz tumbled

backwards and let out a whine. Sparky landed on his feet and glared at the dragon, a raspy, guttural growl rolling deep inside his chest.

The dragon looked at the small dog staring back at him with one blue eye and one green eye. It raised its gaze past the dog and saw Pepper walking toward it from the far side of the room, carrying a pair of heavy shackles connected by an iron chain. Its small reptilian brain told it to flee. It whirled around and bounded up the staircase.

“Durn it!” Pepper called after the dragon. “I didn’t think it could climb the stairs. Catch her, Sparky!”

Sparky exploded after the Bulgratz, who was bounding up the staircase with alarming quickness. Jake raced past his grandfather on his young legs, and crashed up the stairs after the dragon and the dog.

“Is the door closed?” Pepper called after Jake.

“Don’t think so!” Jake called back.

The Bulgratz reached the top of the stairs and turned hard-right into the hallway. The dragon slid against the slate tile floor, bouncing into the walls which were lined with dragon bones, petrified eggs the size of footballs, and artwork of dragons and winged serpents from civilizations across the globe. Sparky and Jake weren’t far behind. Jake paused his pursuit to make a sliding catch of a dragon egg that slipped off its shelf. He set the egg on the floor and renewed the chase.

The young dragon turned left at the end of the hallway and darted into the family room. A long, overstuffed leather couch faced a 72-inch television mounted over a stone fireplace, and was framed on each side by two wide, high-backed leather recliners. The Bulgratz hopped onto the closest recliner, its sharp claws ripping deep channels in the supple leather. Sparky barked as he leapt toward the dragon in the chair. The dragon climbed up the high back, digging his claws into the cushions. The chair toppled over, sending Sparky crashing to the floor. The Bulgratz flapped its young wings, and knocked Jake off his feet as it half flew, half hopped back into the hallway.

Jake looked at the recliner laying sideways on the floor, a shredded mess of leather and stuffing. It was his father’s favorite chair.

Jake pushed himself off the floor and followed Sparky out of the room and back into the fray. They caught up with the Bulgratz in the kitchen. The kitchen

was rugged and beautiful, with cabinets of reclaimed barn wood reaching to the ceiling and midnight black granite countertops. The dragon leapt onto the island in the kitchen's center, knocking a stack of cereal bowls and several bags of chips to the floor. Sparky encircled the island, barking, not allowing the Bulgratz room to hop down.

Pepper stormed into the kitchen, twirling a lasso at the end of a stiff cowboy's rope. Another rope was slung over his shoulder. Pepper tossed the lasso onto the top of the island in front of the dragon's back foot, then pulled tight as the nervous dragon stepped into the loop. He handed the rope to his grandson.

"Keep it pulled tight!" Pepper commanded. He took the other rope from his shoulder, twirling another lasso high. He tossed the second loop over the dragon's head and pulled it tight around its neck. The dragon shot a puff of fire toward him, but Pepper easily ducked beneath the weak flame.

Grandfather and grandson pulled in opposite directions, stringing the dragon out wide. It twisted and turned against the ropes, but Pepper and Jake held tight.

"Let's walk her back to the cage," Pepper said.

They pulled the dragon off the island. It landed on the slate floor with a thud. They drug it down the hallway, past the dragon bones, petrified eggs, and artwork, then down the stairs into the basement. Sparky nipped at the dragon the entire trip.

"Are we going to name it?" Jake asked.

"Nope," Pepper replied flatly. "It's not your pet. It's a dragon, for crying out loud."

As they neared the cage in the far corner of the room, one of the garage doors flung open. Wyatt walked in, favoring his arm in the sling.

"Look dad! A dragon!" Jake exclaimed.

"Are y'all just now getting that thing caged up?" Wyatt asked, incredulously.

"We gave it a chance to stretch its legs a bit," Pepper replied, shoving the young Bulgratz into the large cage in the corner with the heel of his cowboy boot. "Where's Rock?"

"She wanted to go to Hannah's, study for a test or something. I dropped her off there," Wyatt replied. He took a long, deep breath, exhaling the stress of the

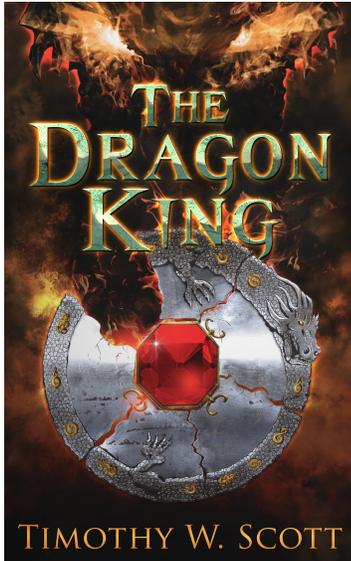
day. “If you need me, don’t bother. I’m going to grab a hot shower, take some painkillers, and plop down in my chair and watch the Lakers game.”

“Um, dad?” Jake said cautiously.

“Yeah?”

“About your chair...”

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