

STEAM DRAGON: BOOK 1  
AXIOM  
BY TRAVERS JORDAN



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Steam Dragon: Book 1 - Axiom

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**For Mom & Dad,**

Who fostered my imagination,  
always pushed me to try harder,  
and willingly read even the most  
dreadful renditions of my prose.



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... And so came he, the great dragon Flametooth, Wizard King and Emperor of Atalant, to the Vale of Murgan. There he beheld the majesty of God's First Covenant: The sky stone, fallen from the heavens, whose coming had wrought no apocalypse. This edifice stood instead as the concrete proof of God's wrath, His love for creation, and the testament of his promise to never smite the Erth in fury again.

But in that holy vale, Flametooth, consumed with pride, defiled the word of God and sundered the stone into fragments. And from those broken shards he forged two terrible artifacts, known together as the Bands of the Shattered Covenant. Twin gauntlets: Axiom and Idiom. For with these weapons, he believed he could challenge the heavens themselves.

Then Murgan, in His fury, turned His back on the world, for despite this betrayal from the chief of His children, He would not break His own covenant. Filled with pity, but also loyalty to Her husband, Rosha could only weep for Her lost children.

And the Stranger laughed... for all of this had occurred according to his design.

- From the Bible of the Suns; Book of Atalant



## CHAPTER 1 – SOME ASSEMBLY

It was safe to say: there was nowhere else in the world quite like the factory floor of the Tevulon Enchantment Company.

As a rule: mana, the raw, untapped energy that fueled all magic, remained invisible to the senses. But here on the factory floor, as one passed the warded double doors, hundreds of wizards cast spells all day long. The ambient mana from their efforts filled the air like a damp fog, clinging to any untended surface.

Left to its own devices, the mana would pool, drip, and then vaporize, vanishing back into the aether in tiny snaps of energy. Each of these bursts tingled at the skin and hair, producing a nearly indescribable, heady aroma. An aroma that filled one with the distinct feeling of... potential.

So, to a layman, it was, for lack of a better word, a magical place.

A strange wonder, then, that to Ceria Berreni... there was nothing more mundane.

It was a weekday morning, and that meant that, as ever, Ceria stood in front of her little kiosk on the assembly line. With a small thump, a pickaxe clunked off the conveyor belt and dropped into the enchanting slot in front of her. The stamp on the handle designated a tier one enhancement. She sighed. Her jobs were always stamped for tier one enhancements.

Picking up the tool, the elf enchantress looked it over. Like all the others, it was a rather standard pickaxe, with a finely sanded and oil-treated pine handle. But the steel pry blade had a small dent in it. Such problems weren't terribly unusual; the forge work, further back on the assembly line, was more about speed than quality. And her supervisor would call the defect 'hardly noticeable.' Right. Not her job.

Retrieving a small quartz from the supply pile, she set the gem into the prepared indent in the T-shaped cross-section. Then, holding her hand over the tool, she wove the enchanting spell. She concentrated as the magics flowed through her, interweaving into the fabric of the pickaxe itself. To anyone watching, both gem and tool glowed brightly for a moment. To her own mind's eye, the physical nature of the pickaxe and the gemstone melded together, bound with the magic spell that became an intrinsic part of both.

This act was physical, too, for as the enchantment solidified into reality, the gemstone fused into the metal, shrinking slightly as parts of the crystal merged on a molecular level with the mining tool.

The glow faded. And now there was another low-end magic pickaxe for the Tevulon Enchantment Company to sell. To most people, the whole process was probably amazing. But Ceria did this dozens of times a day. Over and over again.

She held the pickaxe over the receptacle for finished work, but paused. That dent... It shouldn't bother her. But it did. She grabbed another chunk of quartz

## *Chapter 1 – Some Assembly*

and set it into one of the extra slots (pre-made tools always came with a few extra slots). Then, altering her casting into a slightly different school of magic (evocation), she imbued the tool and gem with the element of frost.

Now, on impact, it would impart that frost spell into whatever the pickaxe struck, making it much more effective as a mining tool. That extra enchantment, arguably, meant the pickaxe's retail price should increase, too. But... with that dent, it really WAS still damaged goods. So, she left the tag marked as a basic tier one enhancement and slid the tool down the factory seconds chute. It dropped onto the conveyor, sliding out of sight.

"What are you doing?" her friend, Nerre (a dark-skinned, sprightly elf), looked at her concernedly from her own spot on the assembly line; directly next-door to Ceria's. "You're not supposed to do custom enchantments!"

"It's a factory second," Ceria shrugged. "So I gave it a bonus spell... like a little surprise for whoever buys it."

"That's the only one you've done that on, right?" Nerre interrogated. Ceria responded by absently scratching her cheek while evasively looking at the ceiling and floor. "Right??"

"Done what on what?" Their supervisor, Mr. Huffuld, a burly human with a burlier mustache limped up behind them, his ubiquitous clipboard held tightly under his arm. His bad left leg had kept him from being drafted into the war, but it also had had little effect on his dedication to unimaginative work practices.

"Nothing, sir," said Ceria. "Just sending off damaged goods."

"Hm," he frowned. "In my experience, any damage that gets this far down the line is hardly noticeable. You're an assembly line enchanter, Miss Berreni. Not quality control."

Ceria gritted her teeth. "Yes, sir," she managed to say.

Nodding with satisfaction, Huffuld went on his way. Sighing, Ceria turned back to her crafting slot, but it was empty. Then she noticed the whistle blowing. Lunchtime. She headed for the locker room, Nerre followed along.

"He's a nedder anyway," Nerre said, meaning their manager. She pulled off her goggles. "He'll be stuck in middle management forever. You just need to be patient, wait for the big bosses to notice you. That's what I'm doing. And maybe it won't take as long at that! There's an opening in Special Projects, remember. You get promoted to that division, and then you'll have real challenges!"

Ceria removed her crafting apron without comment. She knew quite well about that opening. An enchantment experiment gone wrong had destroyed an entire lab and injured four researchers. She wasn't sure who any of the involved enchanters were, but she did know that two of them were supposed to recover. The other two were still missing. For over three months now.

Memos had gone out from the company downplaying the entire affair and their message to the press was simply ‘a problem occurred that we handled internally.’ But rumors held still for no man, and the tabloids were now claiming that Tevulon had been experimenting with an ancient artifact. Some posited it was a powerful weapon found in the ruins of Atalant under the ocean. Still others were certain it was simply the result of overenchanted a pistol. One claimed, with absolute certainty, that the item in question was a piece of one of Flame-tooth’s legendary weapons: The Axiom Gauntlet itself. Crazy stuff.

But that job opening... now that was real. And while the thought of it didn’t excite her as much as she thought it should, it still sounded a lot more interesting than enchanting pickaxes.

Ceria’s locker door was stuck again. She fed it a small jolt of energy. It blasted open rather more violently than she intended, scattering her meager belongings. The dwarf woman with the locker next to Ceria’s gave her a withering look.

“Sorry,” said Ceria, with as contrite a face as she could muster. The dwarf shook her head and moved on. Ceria bent down to pick up her books: *Bridging the Fossil Gaps* by Muldred Gussler, *Mission to the Moon* (the third rousing adventure of Calrad Darby!) by Nuwles Prust, *Geological Strata 101* also by Muldred Gussler, *An Introduction to Magic* by Nistral Veldorren, *Advanced Enchantment: How Not to Die* (also by Nistral Veldorren), *The True History of Atalant* by Yestern Cragrock, and *The Tevulon Enchantment Company’s Employee Handbook*. That last one had been in her locker since employee orientation, four years ago. Reading it once had been enough.

She put all the books back on the shelf, then frowned into her locker mirror as she took off her goggles and straightened her glasses. The goggles didn’t fit well over her glasses, but her supervisor got irritated if she attempted any enchantments without them.

Her shoulder-length, unruly, and curly strawberry blonde hair was sweaty from the heat, but it framed her roundish face and upturned nose and (according to Nerre) complimented her freckles. The tips of her long ears poked out through her hair on either side. She rubbed at her eyes. They were normally a light blue, but today the corners, and the edges of her irises, were red with strain. She felt tired. Or maybe just worn out. “I think I’m sick of this job,” she said aloud.

“You just need a change of pace,” said Nerre from behind her, looking into her own mirror. “You know, wear something nice, do up your hair, and go out on the town with me,” She ran her fingers through her own shiny, raven-dark hair, styling it rapidly with a minor glamour spell. “See? It’s easy.”

“That’s just what my pocketbook needs. Your idea of a good time,” Ceria dryly replied.

“If you’re buying your own drinks, you’re doing it wrong,” Nerre chuckled.

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“That’s half the problem. Every time we go out, you meet somebody and abandon me at the bar.”

“It wouldn’t be a problem if you met somebody, too.”

Ceria shook her head and held up Muldred Gussler’s book on the fossil record. “I don’t need that kind of trouble. And I’m on a really interesting part in this book! They’re delving into the theories on the repeated periodic fossil gaps in mammalian evolution, specifically related to early orcs and humans. Did you know scientists think all the humanoid races share a common ancestor?”

“I swear...” Nerre made a face. “You’re the only person I know who’d rather sit in a dark little apartment reading boring textbooks and absurd fiction instead of actually enjoying herself. Dating is fun, you know.”

“Maybe for you. I don’t get asked out,” said Ceria.

“You would,” Nerre observed. “If you took a minute to look after your hair. Do you even brush?”

Ceria gave Nerre a withering look. Of course, her friend was right... but she didn’t have to admit that. Or that the idea of dating... getting close to someone... kind of scared her.

But Nerre only picked up on the scowl. “I’m not trying to nag, I’m just pointing out facts. And I promise I won’t drag you all over town. Again.” She paused, looking contemplative. A rare thing for Nerre. “Oh, I have an idea!” she exclaimed. “Victor in shipping has been BEGGING to take me out. And they’re debuting that ‘Tale of George and Dawnfire’ production at the Central Gala.”

Ceria’s interest piqued for a moment. A stage performance of the oldest romantic adventure in mythological and literary history? But still... “Nothing more fun than being your third wheel.”

“No, no!” Nerre protested. “Victor has a friend. A single friend. We’ll double up! It’ll be great. Dinner, play, and maybe drinks after.”

A blind date? Even better. “I don’t know,” Ceria frowned.

“You’re not getting out of this,” Nerre insisted. “I absolutely won’t let you spend another entire weekend reading your dusty old books. You’ll become an old maid before you’re twenty-five.”

“I don’t just read at home, you know,” Ceria protested.

“Yes, you also do custom enchantments on your days off. I thought you were sick of this job.”

“Only the repetitive stuff.” Ceria replied, but her resistance was fading. The sad empty shelves of her icebox at home contained only leftover bronto ‘meat product’ and some canned yert fruit. A real dinner at an actual restaurant did sound rather appealing. “Okay. You win. I’ll go.”

Nerre’s face lit up. “That’s my girl! And I promise... it will be fun!”

Sheera's talons clung to edge of the cliff, the joints in her fingers turning white with the tension. And, as a stiff breeze caught her wings, she gripped even tighter. For a moment, she glanced down, and her face turned pale as she swayed slightly. Her eyes squeezed shut.

"You have to let go eventually!" Emberclaw called out from the air nearby. The skin flaps between his wing pinions billowed in the thermal updrafts from the lake below.

"No, I don't," Sheera shook her head, instinctively folding her ears back. Her crest of feathery tan 'hair' swished between the twin horns on the back of her head as she did.

To anyone looking on, the two dragons were clearly related. Their downy, hair-like feathers bore the same mottled, blue-green color. The skin underneath (visible mostly in their unfeathered wing membranes) was a slightly later shade. Emberclaw fairly dwarfed his little sister, though... at 16 years old, and twice her age, he'd already gone through his teenage growth spurt. Now he was close to fully grown at about 8 feet tall (when he stood on his hind legs), with Sheera a bit less than half that size.

Emberclaw frowned as he watched her. She was a little past the point when most draclings learned to fly. Most couldn't wait to get started. But somehow... she'd developed a fear of heights. He had to do something about that. Something... big brothery.

A clump of soil crumbled under Sheera's left front claw and she scrabbled to regain her hold on the crag's edge.

"C'mon," Emberclaw grinned. His hairy/feathery crest was starting to grow into his eyes. He brushed it to the side. He probably needed a trim, but one of the dracas at school had said she liked it last week, so he'd been stalling.

He flapped closer. "You said you wanted to practice. You're not gonna learn anything just standing there."

"I changed my mind... I don't need to fly. I like walking."

"You're thinking about it too much. Just dive off. The quarry lake is down there."

"Yeah, sure... we were just learning in school last week what happens if you fall into water from really high up."

"You're a dragon. You're built for this!" Emberclaw grinned mischievously. "Besides, you remember the easy way to land, right?"

Sheera nodded slowly. "Breathe fire. But just a little bit."

"Right," said Emberclaw, flapping hard backwards. "So... not like this."

With that, he spat a focused burst from the back of his throat at the cliff edge, a couple feet down from his sister. That burst was a small pocket of air from his

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gas bladders, encased in a bubble of saliva. On impact, the watery bubble broke and the gas inside ignited as it reacted with the oxygen in the air. As he'd planned, the shockwave from the resulting fireball blasted the loose rock and soil apart. Destabilized by the fiery impact, Sheera's craggy perch collapsed underneath her.

"You jerk!" she shrieked. But her wings instinctively sprang open and caught the wind as she flapped rapidly, waving her angry talons at him. Little bubbles dribbled out of her mouth, bursting into tiny sparks of flame mere feet from her head.

Emberclaw laughed as he continued his reverse maneuver, keeping out of range of his sister's fiery expulsions.

"Relax!" he chuckled. "And stop flapping so hard. You've gotta breathe normally or you're going to get too heavy. Sheera? Sheera!"

She was nodding, but she was also losing altitude more and more rapidly. As she realized that fact, her eyes popped open wider, and then a larger bubble, erupting quickly into a burst of fire, coughed out of her mouth. Now, at nearly her full weight, she was too heavy to stay airborne. She began to plunge. Emberclaw swore under his breath, tucked his wings tightly, and dove after the madly flapping dracling.

Stretching hard with his neck, he grabbed for his sister's tail with his mouth. But, in his attempt to gently grasp it, she lashed the tip at him sideways at the last second and smacked him hard over his eye crest.

Slightly dazed, but still coherent, Emberclaw recovered. Sheera's furious flapping did do a small amount of good; he was able to plunge faster than she fell. Now reaching with his fingers instead (claws retracted), he managed to grab her tail properly, spread his wings as widely as possible, and arrested their dive just in time to hit the lake at a less perilous speed. The two dragons still produced considerable splashes (and disrupted a few indignant ducks) before both bobbed to the surface.

"Thanks for that," Emberclaw muttered, rubbing his sore forehead.

"Sorry," said Sheera sheepishly. "I guess I panicked."

"If you breathe too much fire and get heavy, you can still glide, you know. I'm pretty sure I told you that earlier."

"Yeah... it's just, you know, my biology book said that dragons should be too big to fly. Because of volume weight, and um, cubes?"

"Cubic volume. But you didn't read chapter 2 yet, did you?" Emberclaw asked. Sheera shook her head. "We'd only be too big to fly if we didn't have gas bladders and hollow bones that have, um... floaty gas in them," he frowned, with a puzzled look.

“You forgot what kind of gas it is, didn’t you?” Sheera teased.<sup>1</sup>

“It doesn’t matter. We drink some water, wait a little while, and then we get lighter. Breathe fire, get heavier. It’s easy.”

She scowled for a moment, but then looked up at the cliff and grinned. “But I did fly, didn’t I?”

“Yeah... sort of. I guess.”

“Puvvel said the first time you tried you fell into a copse of brushberries.”

Emberclaw’s ears flattened out. “He told you that story, huh?”

“I knew he didn’t make it up! Did the thorns hurt a lot?”

Emberclaw was spared the need to answer by a reverberating ‘boom!’ that briefly produced ripples in the artificial lake as it echoed up the river valley.

“What was that?” Sheera pulled herself back onto the shore, climbing up onto a low cliff edge to get a peek down the hogbacks.

“Nitro, probably. Or maybe some kind of cannon. But I’m sure it was miners.” Emberclaw climbed out too, and shook himself off. He glanced up at the sky. Both suns were fully up and had climbed past the tops of the low eastern mountains. “Grugnuts... how long have we been up here, anyway?”

Sheera shrugged. “I dunno... I think it’s after eight.” She paused, realizing what that meant. “Uh oh.”

“Yeah,” grimaced Emberclaw. “We’re late for chores!”

\* \* \*

The ground was still shaking slightly from the boom that had caught Emberclaw and Sheera’s attention, even from several miles away. Grog Kralten lay on his back, a cook pot and some assorted odds and ends on top of him. He couldn’t quite remember how he’d gotten there, or why he was covered with dirt, rocks, and debris. Or why his ears were ringing.

Coughing, the big orc blinked his one functional eye slowly as his brain kicked back into gear. He ran his tongue over his teeth. All still there, including his big lower canines. Groaning, he levered himself to his feet. His left wrist ached as he did. Damn thing had never fully healed. He rubbed at it absent-mindedly.

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<sup>1</sup> When dragons drink water, some of the liquid does not reach the stomach, but is instead extracted by a special gland in the throat. This gland separates the hydrogen from the oxygen atoms. Oxygen then passes to the lungs while the hydrogen is stored in four gas bladders spaced near the lungs and kidneys. Dragons can reduce their weight by nearly 65% in this manner. These gas sacs can be voluntarily expelled at any time (much like breathing), which forcefully propels the hydrogen away from the dragon inside a bubble of mucus. When this bubble pops (usually about 10-20 feet away), the hydrogen reacts with free oxygen in the air, violently combining the atoms in a (relatively) small, combustible explosion.

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Finally reaching his feet, he brushed the debris off his longcoat, massaged his wrist some more, and checked around. He found his hat in some rocks, shook it off, too, and put it on over his dark black hair. The brim pressed down on the tips of his big, ragged-edged ears.

A mound of dirt next to him stirred. And coughed. Then it stood up, and ceased looking like a pile of dirt and more like his 16 year-old daughter, Frena. She'd inherited his orcish forest-green skin tone, stout, strong build, and wide face. But her long, pointed ears and narrow jawline betrayed her mother's elven heritage. She wore a bronto-leather duster over her v-necked gingham blouse and canvas trousers. Her short, light-brown hair (currently covered in a considerable amount of soil, as well as rocks and pebbles), just brushed the top of her coat collar. One long forelock hung down near her right eye. A popular style back east.

Coughing up some dust, she lifted the goggles from her mismatched eyes. The right was brown, the left a pale gray, de-pigmented by the old wound that scarred her face from her brow to her left cheek. Grog's nearly identical scar ran down through his eye patch. Frena had been luckier than he; her eye still worked.

"Did you see that?" she grinned, shaking dust off her coat and hair. A new cloud of debris formed as she did. "And that was only a 60% charge!"

Grog, who was briefly enveloped (and coughing again) in the new dust cloud, decided now would be a good time to clear his throat with a good belt from his hip flask. "Yeah... a little hard to miss, Frena," he guzzled down a fair-sized swallow and scratched some debris out of his big sideburns. (He kept his chin bare. The style was outdated everywhere, but he wasn't one to follow fads.) "You all right? Nothin' broken?"

Frena shook her head, producing more dust. She hopped over the debris field to a large machine lying on its side in the middle of it. "I told you the steam cannon could clear that mess ten times faster than we could with nitro. Didn't I, Dad?" She leaned over, straining to lift the machine back to an upright position. It rattled loudly as she succeeded.

Grog nodded. "You did say that. But you left out the part where it'd throw us twenty feet and bury us in the mountain." He looked around at what was left of their camp, erected near the top of a boulder-strewn dell near the summit of Hiram's Peak. Their tent was still half standing, at least, though the other half was buried in rocks. Debris covered the entire draw, from the camp to the hogback near the western edge that bisected the trail. To the north, steep paths headed up and down the mountain. To the south was an even steeper edge where Grog had been dumping their slag. Hopefully nothing important had fallen off of *that* in the explosion. It could take all day to clean this mess. Or even two if he had to climb up and down a scree slope to find their stuff.

“Right, well... I *may* have miscalculated the blowback a little,” Frena shrugged. “Nothing we can’t compensate for in the future, though, right?” As she said that, a few components fell off of her excavator cannon. “After I fix it, anyway,” she added, frowning at the new damage.

Grog shook his head. Then, noting something amiss, he patted the side of it. A couple pebbles fell out of the opposite ear. “So... did it really work, or did we just blow up the camp for nothin’?”

Frena looked down toward the mine entrance. The dust was clearing, but it was still rather hard to see anything.

Briefly searching through the rubble, they were able to retrieve their (fortunately unexploded) spelunking gear from their spooked, but unharmed mule, Bob. (He’d only run about a quarter mile downhill before stopping to munch on a flowering brushberry). Thus, donning their lights, the two orcs ventured into the mine’s mouth. Grog eyed the ceiling with a small amount of trepidation. He’d spent the last couple weeks shoring it up with timbers and rebar. But now they’d just bombarded the danged thing with what was literally a steam-powered concussion cannon.

“Relax, Dad,” said Frena. “The cannon’s sonic reverb was targeted at the back of the drift. Shouldn’t have affected the walls or ceiling at all. That’s why it’s better than nitro. It drills, cracks, and scatters all in one go!”

“Uh huh. It also wasn’t supposed to blow up our camp.”

“That was just a miscalculation.” She flipped on her headlamp. It flickered with a bluish stream of light as it powered up off the latent magical energy from her body<sup>2</sup>.

Grog powered his up, too, feeling the slight strain of using it. Simple enchantments, like this little beam of light, didn’t take much energy from their users when working, but they still took some. On the other hand, magically-powered lamps didn’t need to be refueled with kerosene.

He stopped at the edge of the new tunnel the cannon had blasted. A dusting of sparkly bits covered the floor. That was promising. He checked along the ceiling.

“We widened the silverite seam,” he frowned. “And looks like we half blew it up.” He followed it further. “But it dead-ends, too. Damn.”

“Good thing we’re not regular miners!” came Frena’s distracted voice from up ahead.

“Yeah, well... regular mining helps fund everything else,” Grog muttered. He carefully climbed over some boulders in his way. His spine sent a complaint to

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<sup>2</sup> Magical energy (or mana), is the omnipresent force that makes magic possible. All living beings generate it to some degree. Those skilled and trained in the practice (wizards) can intentionally manipulate it.

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his left knee. His knee concurred. His right hip told them both off. Damn, but he was getting too old for this, he thought to himself.

“Damn, but I’m getting too old for this,” he said, out loud this time, as he regained the floor.

“You’re not old,” Frena protested. “Forty-five? That’s nothing these days.”

“Say that when you get this far,” her father chuckled. “How’d we do?”

Frena stood at the back, in a mess of debris. “Hard to say for sure,” she frowned. “But we’d see a hole or feel a breeze if we’d broken through, wouldn’t we?”

“If we can trust that map,” Grog squinted. Their lights reflected off the airborne dust and made it almost more difficult to see than without. But at this depth, the light from the mouth of the mine looked tiny and far away. “We’re gonna have to clear this lot before we can use your cannon again.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” Frena sighed. “Maybe we should put in a mine track.”

“If we could pay for a mine track,” Grog coughed. “We’d better get back outside.”

“Or I could increase the charge... shatter all this debris into dust!”

“If you collapse the shaft, we’ll have to start from scratch.”

Frena scrunched up her face. “I’ll be careful! And anyway, I’m SURE we’re getting close,” she said. “I just wish we had the real map and not a copy.”

“Tefrin’ll be here soon enough with the real one,” Grog reminded her. “You did send him the supply list, right? When you commissioned that teleballgram?”

“Of course,” she replied.

Grog paused and scratched his chin. “You, uh... signed it ‘Love, Frena,’ again?”

“Yes? So what? I always do that.”

“Well,” he went on, his awkward scratching moving up to his sideburn. “You’re not, um, dating him or anything. So... it might seem a little strange.” He paused. “To some.”

“Dad!” her cheeks flushed, and now she got awkward, too, and stared at her feet. “I do that because we’ve always written that in our letters. Because Tefrin is just like family. Right?”

“Well, yeah,” said Grog, doggedly pressing on. “But um... I was also trying to say... that if you ever did want to, uh... date... someone. It would be okay. I mean... with the right boy. That is, um... it ain’t that I don’t like havin’ you around all the time. It’s just... you’re gettin’ older and, um, things change, and—”

To his relief, Frena interrupted him. “I do think about that stuff, Dad. But... you still need my help up here, you know?” She gave him a cheeky grin. “I mean, c’mon. How much of this mine would you have gotten dug without me?”

“A lot less,” he admitted. “Still. Seems like we never really had this talk before. And you’re gettin’ older. And did I ever tell you... how much you’re startin’ to look like your mom?”

She blushed again, and looked up at him with a smile. “I never really thought about that. Mom was really pretty. And I’m just... me.”

“Yeah, well,” Grog mumbled. He was really regretting starting this whole conversation, but he wasn’t sure how to end it, either.

She ran a finger over one of her big lower canines. “I do look a little bit like you, too, you know.”

“Well, still,” said Grog. “You’re gonna turn heads one day.” He realized suddenly what that would mean, and his face went stark. “Dammit... maybe forget everything I just said.”

Frena laughed. “Are you gonna beat up my first date, Dad?”

“I can’t rule it out,” he said, laughing too. This felt like a good spot to change the subject. “Anyway... what do you think our odds are of finishing this dig and finding that damn thing without those supplies from Thalagarat?”

“Not that great,” she replied. “I’m really hoping Tefrin got our letter.”

\* \* \*

A little over 2,000 miles to the east, a steamboat rocked as it bumped into Thalagarat’s South Dock. The steamer ship was a new design, and also newly built. The twin water wheels had fairly flown it across the lake to its destination. The two ferry men were quick, too. They leapt off the deck as the boat rolled and pitched in the wake, landed lightly on the dock, and tied off their vessel. But just before they could hop back across to retrieve the gangplank for the waiting passengers, a human man landed dexterously on the dock beside them with a big grin on his face.

He was on the tall side, but not extremely so. Not overly large or skinny, but seemingly built for action. He had a short, tannish beard and wore lightly dirt-stained denim pants, a collared undershirt, and a brown leather jacket. A holstered revolver hung from his hip, and a rifle was slung over his back, along with a large, frayed backpack. He tipped his wide-brimmed hat to the dockworkers before giving them each an actual tip, then sauntered up the boardwalk to the waiting street and the various vendors that lined the edges.

His name was Tefrin Swiftbow. And today was a good day. Even if that meant spending it in Thalagarat.

He’d never been fond of large cities, and Thalagarat was Oronia’s largest. But that wasn’t the only reason he avoided coming here. Originally built by Mogro-nian settlers some 200 years earlier, it had seen wars, famine, revolution, and prosperity. Most of that was long before his time. Only once had it almost been

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conquered, though... about ten years ago. And Tefrin had always felt partly responsible for that.

But he brushed those thoughts aside. He had good reason to be here today. And he wouldn't stay long.

A slight haze from numerous coal cook fires in the city clung to Flumet Lake, drifting like gray fog. It was thick today, but not so thick as to block the view of the still snowy Barrier Peaks to the west as the ten o' clock suns bathed them in a warm spring glow. Oronia's capital city itself loomed over the center of the lake, the taller buildings of the downtown casting their shadows across the legions of fishing boats plying the waters. The air smelled of fish and chimney smoke. And a faint dash of ozone from the elemental wind magics some of the fishermen conjured to speed up their trawlers.

Several large posters adorned the walls of the dock master's building. 'Vote for Vorazen Fireblood: Verithat of the Future' and 'A General in the Field, your Champion in Government.' Both posters depicted the dragon with a determined look on his face, gazing off into the distance (or, ostensibly, into the future). Tefrin snorted at the advertisements. The old general had always been ambitious.

Avoiding the crowd of dock merchants hawking expensive wares (and touristy knick-knacks), he took a side road away from the main crowd. And, after dodging a few street urchins (most likely pick-pockets), he continued toward the main waterfront district. Occasionally looking up to avoid plowing into a wall or street-lamp, he re-read the letter in his pocket as he walked.

|                                                       |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Dear Tefrin,                                          | STOP |
| I hope this letter reaches you quickly.               | STOP |
| Because we're not sure where to reach you.            | STOP |
| But the teleballgrapher is nodding at me, he said     |      |
| they can find anybody.                                | STOP |
| So I think that's good.                               | STOP |
| Anyway, we're in Dragon's Glint, and we have a        |      |
| lead on IT.                                           | STOP |
| We filed a mining claim, but need more supplies.      | STOP |
| Not available locally, hope in Thalagarat?            | STOP |
| List to follow. See you soon! Love, Frena             | STOP |
| PS: You should hurry, or we'll find it before you get |      |
| here!                                                 | STOP |
| PPS: Dad made me say to bring booze. I think he       |      |
| has enough.                                           | STOP |
| Wait, HOW much per word? No, don't                    |      |
| include that. Let me see it. What                     |      |

do you mean it's already sent?

STOP

The list did follow. Tefrin frowned as he read it. The determined postal worker who'd managed to track him down in the depths of the Taralon Jungle had also clearly dropped the whole package in a puddle. The watermarks on the letter page were fairly minor, but the list on the next page was washed out completely in some spots. The sixth item was especially hard to read. A... gauge scanner? That couldn't be right. He mentally counted his funds for the supplies. His last job, escorting a rich couple on vacation through the Taralon, hadn't been especially lucrative. And inflation was up. He'd have to go the discount route.

Tefrin looked up from his list as he neared the Tevulon Enchantment Company Factory Shop (the big ad in the window read 'Factory Seconds: Nearly like new for not nearly the retail price!'). Two elf girls paused briefly next to a window in a corridor connected to the shop. The second one, with reddish hair and glasses, glanced in his direction. Tefrin paused, their eyes met for a moment.

"Hey, buddy... in or out," an orc grumbled from behind him.

"Sorry," Tefrin stepped out of the orc's way with a tip of his hat by apology. He looked back up. The girls were gone. With a small sigh, he stepped into the shop.

A wave of cool air hit him, a considerable relief from the sticky humidity of the early spring outside. Wet, easterly winds from the Atlas Ocean frequently hit the Barrier Peaks in the spring, creating slowly rotating storm cycles. These storms served to feed Flumet Lake, but also left the city (built on the peninsula in the middle) hot and muggy for months. This year was no exception.

Tefrin doffed his wide-brimmed hat, letting the magically cooled air in the shop dry his ragged mop of sweaty brown hair. His face, dripping from the heat, appreciated the difference, too. A teenage draca at the counter drummed her claws lazily on the countertop. She gave Tefrin a nod.

"Help you, sir?"

"Yeah, maybe," Tefrin checked his list again. "You have any idea what a 'gauge scanner' might be?"

"Um," frowned the dragon, thinking. "We have a magic field scanner. It has a gauge on it."

"Hrm," said Tefrin. "That's... probably it. And I need an anti-magic containment box, I think, a new Hefty Pack, and a pickaxe +1<sup>3</sup>."

"The scanner's aisle three," said the draca. "I've got the containment box behind the counter here. Let's see... our backpacks and satchels are on the rear wall. And, um... enchanted tools are aisle six."

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<sup>3</sup> A colloquial term for an enchanted item with a tier one enhancement.

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“Thanks,” said Tefrin. He found the pickaxes readily enough, locating one with a good balance. He took a few minutes staring at two different field scanners, settling on the short range, somewhat more affordable one. Finally, he grabbed a Hefty Pack™ from the rear wall. You could stuff a cheap Hefty Pack with fifty pounds of gear and it would feel like you were only carrying ten. The mostly functional remnant of his previous pack was still on Tefrin’s back, but a hungry wyvern in the Taralon jungle had ripped out the bottom and shredded the enchantment, too. (The wyvern, however, had fortunately failed in its attempt to remove Tefrin’s head.) Juggling his selections, he headed back for the counter.

“Treasure hunting somewhere?” asked the clerk, as she rang up the items on a loud, new-fangled, mechanical cash register.

Tefrin felt a brief wave of paranoia at that question, but quickly dismissed it. His weather-beaten clothes and rough, tanned skin fairly betrayed him as someone who didn’t spend a whole lot of time indoors. And his purchases couldn’t be used for a whole lot else besides treasure hunting.

“I guess you could say that,” said Tefrin. “This scanner... it picks up signals from dormant magical items, right?”

“Yeah, the more heavily enchanted ones, anyway. You’d need the bigger model or a wizard to find something like that pickaxe or the Hefty Pack. If you’re just a regular person, that little scanner won’t even register items under tier 3 if they’re not in active use.”

Tefrin nodded. “No, that makes this perfect, then.”

“Looking for something powerful, huh?”

Tefrin frowned.

“Sorry, just curious. Folks don’t buy those things very often. Might’ve been more popular before enchantments got cheap. My gramps talks about those old days, anyway. Oh, I need an I.D. for the anti-magic box.”

“It’s all right.” Tefrin produced his identification. “Just gearing up for mining out west. Needed some stuff they haven’t got out there.”

“How far out west? Can you take the train? I hear they’ve laid track past Jedrow’s Junction now.” She stared briefly at his I.D. “Oh wow, you’re a veteran, huh? That’s 10% off, First Sergeant Tefrin Swiftbow.” She handed the card back with a grin. “Swiftbow... like Taralon Jack Swiftbow in those kids books! You must hear that a lot, though.”

Tefrin made a slight face. “Yeah, now and again.”

“I love war stories. But Gramps doesn’t like to talk about it. Did you see a lot of action?”

“Some.” Tefrin pulled out his wallet. “How much?”

The draca gave Tefrin a disappointed look at the evasive answer, but turned back to her register. “Lessee... \$55.86 with tax.”

Tefrin rummaged in his wallet, counting up sixty listras between the new-fangled paper bills and several gold and silver coins. His billfold was becoming distressingly light. “Sales tax is getting high.”

“Yeah,” the draca grimaced. “It’s supposed to be temporary while they revitalize the waterfront district. But my dad says ‘we’ll see.’”

Tefrin nodded his thanks and headed back for the street, stuffing his purchases into the enchanted storage space of his new Hefty Pack. He still needed to buy a train ticket and send a return teleballgram. If he had enough money left.

He cocked his head, noticing his new pickaxe had a chink missing from the pry blade. He checked his receipt. ‘No refunds on factory seconds,’ it read.

“Grugnuts,” he mumbled.