

The Courage of Sir Talion the Terrified

This wasn't what he had intended.

When Sir Talion of Digan had observed in the Prince's council that someone ought to do something about the dragon that was marauding the northern province, he had not intended to nominate himself for the task. Not himself alone, at least. He wouldn't have minded riding along in a well-appointed company of knights and playing some small part in a dragon-slaying adventure, like in the old stories. He could have carried the banner.

He hadn't had a plan for dealing with the dragon. If the Prince had given him time to form one, this would not have been it: to ride alone, west and then north around the Fae Wood to the edge of the Dragon Waste. To ride north while everyone he encountered was fleeing south with horrifying tales of the destruction behind them. To actively seek out a dragon with nothing but a sword and a lance and the slowest horse in the kingdom to protect him.

"It's almost as though they wanted to get rid of me," he muttered. The horse snorted. Talion sighed.

Evening approached. Rays of weak sunlight slanted between leafless trees and lost themselves on the winding track. Winter had retreated but spring had not yet come, and all Talion could see in every direction was soggy brown leaves on the ground and dripping gray branches overhead. A bleak landscape, devoid of all save promise. Talion wrapped his cloak more tightly around himself and tried to kick the horse to a faster pace. He wanted to find a village with an inn before sundown.

He didn't find a village. He found the dragon.

He saw the maiden first. She stood alone and proud in the center of a natural clearing, white raiment glowing in a last ragged gleam of sunlight. For one mad moment, Talion mistook her for the Princess. He forgot his quest; he forgot the dragon; he didn't pause to wonder why the Princess would be standing alone into the middle of the sodden forest. He spurred the horse for all he was worth, desperate to approach her, but the horse wouldn't move. It had stopped cold just behind the last screen of trees and it would not budge. The horse had seen the danger.

Or smelled it, more likely. The dragon was hardly visible snaking its sinuous way through the trees, but its stench grew stronger every moment: rotting carrion and dead swamp water and charred flesh. The air grew stifling with the dragon's heat. Breathing became difficult. Beads of sweat broke out on Talion's brow.

The dragon emerged into the clearing, too intent on its prey to notice the knight hiding in the shadows. This was no ordinary dragon. It was huge—taller than the horse, with a neck and tail that stretched the length of a man or more. A courageous man might have thought to attack quickly, to take the monster off guard. Talion was not a courageous man. He sat frozen on the horse.

He watched, mesmerized, as the dragon began to pace around the maiden. It circled her once, twice, inspecting her from head to foot. The wind from its breath stirred her hair and swirled her skirt. She clenched her fists at her sides and raised her chin a bit higher. The beast continued to pace, wrapping its tail and its long, spiny neck around the maiden in ever tightening coils until only her face was visible. She paled, but she did not faint. She did not even flinch.

At last the dragon spoke. "Why are you not chained?" Its voice hissed like thin wind through dead branches.

“I need no chains. I have come here by my own choice, for the sake of my village,” the maiden replied. Proud words. Courageous words. She would have made a good knight.

“Choice,” the dragon sneered. The foul wind of its breath smote Talion in the face, and he flinched away from it. “This is what you would choose in life? To be consumed by a dragon?”

The maiden did not falter. “You gave your word,” she said steadily. “My life in exchange for my village.” The dragon laughed, a biting noise with no mirth in it.

“And you trusted me? You fool,” it hissed. It uncoiled its body with whiplash speed and drew a breath that sucked the air from Talion’s lungs.

Run! Talion screamed soundlessly at the maiden. And perhaps she would have run. Perhaps, given another moment, her instinct for life would have taken over and she would have lost her courage and scrambled for an escape. But she never had that moment. She caught fire in an instant. Talion had a brief, searing vision of her body engulfed in flames and then she was gone, and all that remained of her courage was a small pile of ash.

The dragon let out a roar that shook the trees and took flight with a foul and furious wind. A few branches that had caught fire at the edge of the clearing smoldered a bit and went out. Talion dismounted, trembling, and vomited into the underbrush.

When the first rumors of this dragon had reached the capital not long after Midwinter’s Eve, they were received with overwhelming indifference. Dragons, after all, were a long-accepted risk of farming the northern province. They could be a nuisance, burning gardens and consuming stray chickens, but left to their own devices, they rarely stayed long.

But this dragon seemed unusual. Reports of it continued to arrive throughout the long winter. *It’s so big*, they said. *Big enough to kill a horse. Big enough to kill an ox with one blow.*

Hot enough to burn an entire village. The courtiers laughed. “Peasant rumors,” they scoffed. “No Truly Fearsome Dragon has been seen for generations. Why would one suddenly appear now?”

There hasn't been a Princess for generations, Talion thought. *The old stories could have warned us.* But the courtiers never put much stock in the old stories, or the people who believed them.

Tales of the dragon grew stranger. *It's a clever dragon,* they said. *It speaks to us and makes demands. If a village sends out their fairest maiden, it will sometimes spare the village.* The courtiers laughed again. “Let the peasants deal with it,” they said. “It's not bothering us.”

But the Princess paled.

That was when Talion made his foolish suggestion that somebody should do something about the beast. And that was when the Prince had offered the task to Sir Talion. The entire council room had exploded in laughter, and Talion's cheeks had burned with shame. Ridding the kingdom of a garden nuisance: the perfect task for Sir Talion the Terrified. Talion knew what they called him behind his back.

Only the princess had not mocked him. She had met his eyes across the table in a silent plea. *You believe the old stories,* her look said. *If this is a Truly Fearsome Dragon, I'm what it wants. Please, Talion, help me.* In an unprecedented moment of mad courage Talion stood, accepted the prince's challenge, and swept from the room with the courtiers' hoots and howls still ringing in his ears.

The maiden in the woods had had a great deal of mad courage. Now she was ash.

Talion woke up early the next morning and surveyed the endless, dripping wood. *On or back?* he asked himself. *Shame or death? Ash now or ash later?* He had no answer. He mounted the horse and let it decide where to go.

They emerged from the forest at mid-morning and encountered a village soon after. It was a small hamlet, just a dozen or so huts scattered around a cattle enclosure. At the moment, there were no cattle in the enclosure.

The dragon had arrived.

It loomed over the gathered villagers, looking even more monstrous among the houses and gardens than it had in the wild wood. The villagers huddled together in its shadow, pale and trembling. A few wept openly. The dragon surveyed them without pity.

“I want another maiden!” it demanded. Sparks flew from its snout and sizzled ominously on the damp ground.

“We gave you one yesterday.” One of the villagers stood a little more defiant than the rest. “We gave you the best of us.”

“She was unacceptable,” the dragon hissed. “This time, I will choose. And I choose... *this* one.” It thrust out its neck until it came nose to nose with a young girl, hardly more than a child. She clung to her mother and began to wail.

And what will you do? Talion asked himself. *Are you truly such a coward that you will watch another maiden die to satisfy a monster’s whim?*

“Halt! Halt in the name of Digan!” he cried suddenly, astonished at the sound of his own voice.

The dragon whirled to face him with terrifying speed. “Halt?” it bellowed. “Who dares command me halt?”

“It is I, Sir Talion of Digan, and I tell you that you shall molest the people of Digan no longer. Prepare yourself for the doom that awaits you.” Inexperienced though he was at issuing threats, Talion was acutely aware that his challenge would have sounded more intimidating if he had thought to draw his sword before speaking.

The dragon forgot about the villagers. They began to edge away to a safer distance while the beast’s attention was fixed on the knight. One or two of them looked inclined to cheer.

Meanwhile, the dragon’s initial rage turned to interest. “Talion?” it said. “Are you the Talion that defeated the mighty Black Dragon of long ago? Then you shall be a worthy adversary.”

“No, that wasn’t me,” Talion confessed. “I was named for that Talion.” The dragon cocked its head.

“Then you must be the Talion who fought in the battle of Guelph. They say he killed a hundred enemies in a single day.”

“No, that was another Talion,” Talion admitted. The dragon narrowed its eyes.

“Then you have confounded me,” it snorted. “What impressive acts of valor have you performed, that you should be chosen among all the knights of Digan to face the great dragon Dredasmin?”

“You have a name?” Talion asked, genuinely surprised.

It was a foolish question.

The dragon howled at the insult and spewed forth a sudden burst of flame. The horse swerved to dodge it, and then bolted. Talion, terrified once more, didn’t even to try to stop it. The dragon snorted its derision again, and spent the rest of its irritation on the village; this knight

wasn't worth pursuing. By the time Talion had mastered himself and his mount, the village was in flames and the dragon was long gone.

So much for courage.

Talion had earned his nickname on a bright, crisp day in early fall, several years before the dragon had arrived. It had been a beautiful morning of dappled sun and wood smoke. Talion ran crashing through the golden forest, shouting and laughing with the other boys his age in the thrill of their first boar hunt. He took his place in the bristling circle of spears surrounding the cornered tusker, heart pounding as he faced the giant beast.

Afterward, in his bitter moments, Talion sometimes tried to blame the whole incident on the dog—the ill-trained cur that broke rank and jostled him, knocking his spear to the ground. When he was feeling more honest, Talion recognized that the spear wouldn't have fallen if his hands hadn't been slick with nervous sweat. The boar, a wily old veteran of many hunts, sensed weakness in the ring and charged instantly. Talion, defenseless, scrambled backward as fast as he could and then (he nearly died of shame whenever he remembered it) he turned to run away. But he lost his footing in the slippery leaves and fell flat on his face. In a mud puddle. Naturally.

His fellow hunters returned to the castle with a mighty prize—and a hilarious story. A young minstrel heard the tale and set it to verse. The song, “Sir Talion the Terrified who Turns and Trips,” made the minstrel's career.

Nobody ever invited Talion on another boar hunt.

All told, Sir Talion of Digan was an indifferent knight at best. He had never fought in a real battle; he had never won a tournament; he didn't spend his evenings boasting and bragging in taverns. He knew in his heart that he deserved his nickname. In his ordinary life, Talion served

as a night watchman on the Princess's personal guard. It was the sort of honorable position the Master of Arms could assign to a man of high birth and low talent. Every night, through rain or snow or under perfect summer stars, Talion spent the hours between midnight and third watch staring north to where the border of the Fae Wood came within a hundred paces of the Princess's private tower. It was probably the safest place in the kingdom.

He didn't mind much. The job had its own reward. The Princess was often awake late, and she liked to walk in the garden between the castle and the Wood. He spoke with her, if she seemed inclined to conversation. They told each other the old stories. He made her laugh when she needed to laugh. He always knew when she needed to laugh.

The Princess had met him in the stable as he was preparing to leave on this mad dragon-slaying quest her brother had given him. "Take my horse," she told him, and even though the Princess's word was more than law to Talion's heart, he hesitated. She smiled, understanding. "I know he isn't fast," she told him, "but he is wise, and strong, and faithful. He will protect you." She was dressed as if for court, white silk glimmering in the dusk. A tear glistened on her cheek, brighter than the diamonds at her throat.

"I'm a coward," Talion said, forcing the words out in a sudden need for honesty. "What will I do if this really is a Truly Fearsome Dragon?"

She raised her hand to his face. It felt warm through his beard. "Slay this dragon, Talion," she whispered. "Slay it, and come back to me."

"I don't think I can slay this dragon," Talion told the horse. Another day had broken, brown and damp. The guilt and indecision that had wracked him after the maiden's death in the wood had tripled in the wake of the village fire. His courage, alas, had not.

“The prince should have sent twenty of us. Fifty, even. I could have carried the banner.”

The horse ignored him.

“I could go back,” Talion continued. “I could tell the Prince that this is a Truly Fearsome Dragon, and ask him to send more knights.” The horse flicked a contemptuous ear. Talion imagined the scene: he saw himself striding into the council chamber and announcing the arrival of dire Dredasmin, who really could destroy a village with its breath. He saw the courtiers laughing, the Prince shaking his head, the Princess trying to hide her disappointment.

The horse was right. The tale of a Truly Fearsome Dragon wouldn’t sound any more convincing coming from Talion the Terrified than it had coming from peasants.

Besides, it was a long journey from here to the capital, and a long journey back. How many more maidens would be lost to the dragon while he traveled? How many more villages would be sacrificed to his cowardice? Eventually, when it got close enough to the capital, the courtiers would have to acknowledge the dragon for what it truly was, but how much of the kingdom would have burned by then?

And how much courage did those courtiers really have? They could hunt boar and bully weaklings, but when they saw a Truly Fearsome Dragon, would they fight it? Or would they stay warm and comfortable inside the castle, and send the Princess out to meet its demands?

Talion mounted the horse and turned its head toward the Dragon Waste.

That night, as the sun set and a few stars began to glimmer in the sky, Talion removed his armor and tied the princess's horse to a tree. Tonight he needed secrecy and speed, not protection. Taking his sword, he climbed over the last ridge into the Dragon Waste.

He paused a moment at the top and looked down into the barren and blasted valley. Under the white moon, every hillock, every boulder, every hollow showed stark in awful contrast, a graveyard of unquiet dead. The stench was overwhelming. Talion took a last deep breath of relatively clean air and tried to imagine what the Princess would do to him if he succeeded in killing the dragon. It was easier to imagine what the dragon would do to the Princess if he failed. One last blink, one last vision of the burning maiden whose image was forever seared on the inside of his eyelids, and he began the descent.

The dragon slept in a cave near the bottom of the valley. Talion crept toward it with all the stealth he possessed. He paused for a moment at the lair's entrance, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness within. Slowly he began to discern the shape of the monster curled up on the ground, spiked tail wrapped around horned snout. Talion drew his sword silently and tiptoed into the cave.

"I hope you weren't planning to surprise me," the dragon whispered. Talion started and cursed, whipping his sword up in front of his face. The dragon laughed, a menacing noise that echoed off the walls until it seemed to come from every direction. Talion glanced around him, half expecting another monster to emerge from the shadows.

"Worthless knight," the dragon scoffed. "I smelled your fear the moment you set foot in my valley. You should not have come." It opened its mouth and drew breath. Talion had just enough time and wits to run out of the cave and around the corner before the dragon released a blast of fire. Even so, the hair on his arm was singed.

That was a strategic retreat, Talion told himself over the frantic pounding of his heart.
That was wisdom, not cowardice.

He was committed now, in any case. The dragon would not ignore him this time. It was already scratching and slithering its way out of the cave, looking for him, and there was nowhere in this ruined valley he could hide for long, no way to outrun the beast. He must either kill or be killed. The thought calmed him somehow. His heart slowed, and for the first time it began to beat with real courage.

Fortune favored him: the dragon turned its head to the right as it emerged. Talion had gone left. He seized his narrow chance, leaping out from the shadows and stabbing the beast in the soft place behind its knee, where its armor was weak. Then he turned and ran with all his speed to the shelter of a nearby boulder.

The dragon howled with pain and rage and twisted toward Talion, who would certainly have died except that its injured leg buckled. It screamed again and began limping toward Talion's hiding place. "Come out and fight me," it snarled. "Come and prove yourself a worthy adversary."

Talion did not respond. His heart and lungs were both working furiously now, sending hot blood to his brain. The boulder that sheltered him was jagged and uneven—climbable, in fact—and the dragon had paused to inspect its wounded knee. Talion didn't have time to make a plan or even wonder what he was doing. He simply began to go up.

Just as he reached the top, the dragon spewed another fiery blast. Flames curled around the boulder and licked up the sides, searing Talion's ankles. He jerked away from the heat, and moonlight glinted off his sword. The dragon saw it. Snapping its head up, it opened its mouth to send the flames that would turn Talion to ash.

And then came a truly unexpected sound: thundering hooves and a challenging neigh. The horse—the Princess's horse—had broken its tether and come to his aid. The dragon turned

its head, distracted. Without a thought, Talion leaped from the boulder onto the beast's back and drove his sword with all his might into its neck, right at the base of its skull.

The dragon screamed again, but not so loud as before. It writhed its neck, shaking Talion loose and flinging him to the stony ground. Talion landed hard and felt something snap. The dragon opened its mouth one more time, and Talion, defenseless, prepared himself for the final blast.

But the final blast never came. Talion's blow had been fatal, and all that spewed from the beast's mouth was a fine spray of blood. The dragon uttered a gurgling growl of surprise and fell dead.

Talion stared at it, shocked.

"I did it," he said aloud.

"I did it," he said again, as if repeating the words would somehow make them more believable. "I just killed a Truly Fearsome Dragon." And he had nothing worse to show for it than a singed arm, and a few bruises, and—he took a deep breath, and winced—a broken rib. The Princess's horse approached and nuzzled him affectionately in the shoulder.

And the relief welled up inside Sir Talion until it broke out in pure, triumphant (and slightly hysterical) laughter.

Talion and the horse, dragging the huge, spiky dragon's head behind them, returned home through fields of spring flowers to a hero's welcome. He stuffed the head, and hung it behind his seat in the council chamber. The minstrel composed a new song about Sir Talion the Terrible, Dredasmin's Destroyer. Nobody laughed at him. The prince saluted him. The princess kissed him, right there in front of everyone.

That wasn't what he had intended, or even imagined. But sometimes, Talion reflected sagely, as he took the princess by the hand and pulled her away toward her private garden, sometimes it's not so bad when things don't go as you intended. It's a good way to discover what—and who—is most important to you. And sometimes, when you just do what must be done, you find your courage along the way.