

The Dragon Catcher

Time. It has a way of eroding the loose fibers of the heart, hardening wounds into scars and softening feeling into understanding, all the while washing the memories of their origins back, back, back ceaselessly into the oblivion of the past. I've been away a long time now. A long time. Looking back on it now, I like to believe that all that time away was necessary and not taken in vain, but that just shows how much more I have to understand. Necessary for what you ask? Even I'm not entirely sure. All I know is that it began with a tower, a child, an old man, and the Dragon Catcher.

It towered high, high above the tallest of heads. Shimmering with sheer excellence, the gold and emerald monstrosity that was Veneration had been the centerpiece of our otherwise pathetic village on the sand since before the elder's elders could remember. I remember the days when Razon, the eldest of the elders with a crooked smile and a flare for the dramatic, gathered us children around the shaded base of tower on summer afternoons so hot and so miserable that I thought the sun itself actually sucked the life out of everything that dared to move, and entertain us with the tale of the Dragon Catcher.

“Once—before the droughts and before the cries—we owned this land as much as we owned the skies” he began in a firm, singsong whisper. All ten or eleven of us village children had our tanned backs firmly pressed against the cool, gold-trimmed emerald of the tower with gangly old Razon standing crookedly before us. “This land belonged to no man, angel, demon, or beast, save *the* beasts, the Dragons...” His wispy voice flared loud enough to rival the cackling crows overhead. “Dragons: big ones as sharp as the

lightning, to little ones gentle as a strand. They danced in the skies and they grazed upon the land, before they fell into the fatal clutches of mankind's hands. One man in particular sent the Dragons on the path to their demise. And while the Dragons would subsist for some time after this man, their survival was dampened. They became paranoid, skeptical, and such an existence never lasts long."

Razon gracefully plopped down into the sand.

"The man I speak of was a man not unlike you, or you, or you, or I. He was a man with a mind bright as the sun and a will strong as the stone, and such men are content with nothing less than the stars as their prize. This man, uninterested in the stars, settled for an equally precious prize. A beast among beasts, a mercenary upon the earth and a king in the sky: a Dragon." Always and without fail, there was a collective gasp as Razon took a rehearsed cough: no matter how many thousands of times we had heard this story, no matter how well we knew the ending, the grit of a man who would actually try and *capture* a Dragon sent our young spines tingling with awe.

"One Dragon in particular caught his dark eye: one with emerald scales and golden wings, with a roar like death and an eye like fire, a king among the beasts of beasts. Out of the clouds the man fashioned his ship, and out of the gold of the very earth he fashioned his net—come now, there's no need to make that face—remember, this was the time of Dragons, and the time of Dragons was a time of magic. He slaved and he slaved till one day, too long ago to remember, yet not so long ago to imagine, the ship of the clouds was ready, and the man's heart pounded with anticipation."

By now, anyone who had fallen under summer's sleepy spell had stirred and was sitting bolt-upright, fearing for a Dragon we didn't know and anticipating the fate of a man we knew only slightly better.

“Dangerous was the night when our man met our beast in the skies. The rain hammered down, the thunder roared loud, on the night when the beast met the man. Out of the corner of its eye, it caught a glimpse of the ship made for the sky. White-hot terror absorbed the heart of the emerald Dragon, fueled the fire in its eyes and the speed of its flight. It shot up through the storm, slicing the sky in two and raising a wall of thunder and rain on either side as the man ordered his ship to mimic the emerald monstrosity. For many an hour the pair danced: Dragon soared with the grace of the birds and with the swiftness of the sea, while man awkwardly yet expeditiously mimicked each and every move but a moment quicker.”

Razon coughed again, a horrible, false cough like a squashed desert toad with some sort of lung disease; taking obvious glee in each moment of suspense with which he imprisoned our impressionable hearts.

“Single grains of sand can pile up and create a desert, just as single moments can clump together and create minutes, and minutes were all this man needed to secure his prize once and for all.

“Our man shook with glee as he shouted the order for the golden net that would end their dance to be lowered. But ... our Dragon was either far more cunning or far more idiotic than the man, in all his brilliance, ever dared to imagine. With one passionate glance traced with but a grain of fear towards the golden net, the beast folded

those golden wings to its sides and dropped like a dead bullet, with the man angrily barreling down after. Down, down, down. Not another breath, not another sound ...

“Terror consumed the heart of the man as a smile crossed the face of his prize... *Whoosh!*” Always and without fail, Razon surprised us by jumping to his feet with the grace of a man half his age, and fueling the fire to his voice so as to completely drown out the vexatious laughs of the crows overhead.

“Golden wings shot out and carried their emerald master to safety, as our man, pale with shock had not a moment to correct his course before BOOM! He crashed to his end beneath the storm. Right... here.”

He gestured to the base of the tower. The fire died down and Razon resumed the form of a crooked old man once more, slowly easing himself back onto the safety of the sand. “As for the Dragon, its fate is up to you. Some say it fled, some say it cried, some say it became the tower we rest beside. But let Veneration, wherever it came from, stand as a reminder to you: of the man who tried to catch a Dragon, and of the Dragon who caught the man.”

Razon looked up at us expectantly as he finished. Expecting what, I was never quite sure, but when all ten or eleven of us stared back at him like hungry birds, he chuckled to himself and closed his eyes.

“Haven’t you all had enough of an old man’s fantasies today?” He would croak. “Go on, the sun is shining and the world of real things has waited for you long enough. Go on, run and jump and leap, just be careful not to leap too high.” And usually, although we all had questions banging against the sides of our minds trying to get out, that’s exactly what we would do. We would leave the comfort of the shade and Razon behind

and go run and jump and leap across the blistering sand. We would all flap our arms and roar like Dragons, all of us at least, except the one unlucky soul who was chosen to be the Man. His job was to catch the Dragons, if he could, then fall dramatically to the ground to be the victim of a destined pig-pile. Most days I lucked out and got to be a Dragon. I would flap my arms so fast and so hard that I almost, almost flew away. We ran and we played and usually, we were all content with that.

Usually.

But there was one day in particular when I didn't run off leaping and roaring with the others. That one day when, as the others romped off, I remained where I was, watching Razon sit beneath the tower and breath with his eyes closed, just like the meditating monks from far, far away that I'd once heard of . That was the day I succumbed to my curiosity. That was the day that forged my destiny, whether I knew it then or not.

I waited for Razon to notice me, not daring to move. Not daring to move except to smack a fat old fly that buzzed over to lounge on my dirt-smudged nose. I don't know what I was thinking, trying to be noticed by hiding motionlessly in the shadows. But even when my hand slapped my nose and I dizzily stumbled back, hitting my head on the base of the tower with a loud smack, Razon's eyes remained firmly closed. His thin white hair remained draped over his sun-spotted cheeks, and his thin chest rose and fell steadily beneath his capacious sand-colored robes. Steadily, like the slow beat of a distant drum. I was an impatient child, which was a good thing then, since by the looks of things Razon was going to melt into the sand before he looked up.

I whispered “Sir?” or something to that effect. It was too long ago to remember every minute detail, yet not so long to be able to fill in the blanks. Whatever I said shook him from his meditation with a violent start as his spirit returned to its nearly forgotten body. His eyes darted around for a moment before locking onto me. I began to relax. He closed his eyes once more.

“So, my boy, out of all the boyish things to do in the sunshine, you choose to sit with an old man who’s run out of words. You must have a reason.” Razon croaked softly, as if it had been days since he last used his voice. He waited a moment for an answer, but when he saw that I had none to offer, he opened his eyes. Before then, I had never looked at his eyes except to notice their color: emerald.

“I—I don’t—I mean, um, I—I was just curious.” I stammered, using one thumb to violently fidget with the other as my elder simply looked at me. His emerald gaze was not one of hatred or annoyance; nor was it one of kindness, admiration, or even contentment. It was the gaze of the coyote that hunts upon the sands when all eyes have turned away. It was the gaze of the mourning dove that scans silently for a predator before letting her guard down to share her beauty with the skies. It was a gaze that did more than observe, more than penetrate the skin: it was a gaze that felt its way into the very soul. Mine.

After an eternity, he found it. And apparently, my soul was enough, for he blinked, and instantaneously the piercing glance was gone, replaced by the warmth of the lively, loving expression he wore during his stories. I’d never paid enough attention to his eyes before, but as I looked at him then, I couldn’t help but notice that Razon’s eyes couldn’t possibly belong to him. The eyes I looked upon were the eyes of a child, full of

life, full of love, not the eyes of the wise, crooked old man that breathed steadily before me.

“Curiosity is not a crime, child. And even if it was, I would be more than happy to break the law for such a precious thing. Keep yourself together, boy! You’re no good to anyone exploded all over the sand. I won’t bite, come, quit your needless nervousness and let us see if old Razon can shine light on those things dark to you.” Razon whispered with a slight bounce in his voice, as if he was sharing a particularly hilarious secret. My thumbs stopped twitching and I released the stale breath from my lungs I hadn’t even realized I had been holding in. I looked at him and he looked right back at me, ready for the first blow.

“That story, the one you just told, you—you tell it all the time. Why is that the story you tell us, sir? I—I mean, what does it mean?”

Razon looked up to the tower as if asking for an answer. Whether it gave one to him or not, I’ll never know, only that without averting his gaze from the gold trimmed emerald he croaked,

“Why must everything have a reason? The sand blows about without a care, just as the wind does nothing other than it pleases, and the idle-some clouds above float along simply because they can. Why then must my tale have a reason other than to tell a story? Take the advice of an old storyteller, boy: it is better for a child not to search for some elusive thing like reason, but to leave adults to such childish illusions.”

“But, sir” I argued, unwilling to accept such an elusive answer, “the clouds float off to gather the rain to give water to some thirsty land somewhere, and the wind blows the clouds to where they need to go, and maybe you’re right about the sand, sir, I can’t

find a reason for that, but most things have some sort of reason for what they do, don't they? I can only assume, sir, that the story does too."

I waited for him to snap at my insolence, to tell me to shut my mouth and show some respect, but the scolding didn't come. Razon's eyes closed as he laughed a full, hearty laugh.

"What's your name, child?"

"Ime, sir."

"I see you are not easily distracted, Ime." he laughed, "alright my boy, you came for an answer and for that, it's an answer I shall give you." He glanced toward the tower looming overhead, still casting a deep shadow over our two frail figures in the impenetrable heat of the day, before redirecting his gaze towards the sunshine and my friends romping about.

"The answer I give you is this, do with it what you will, but what you will is all that will be done with it." He whispered. His emerald eyes locked onto my grey.

"I tell you that story because it was the story that was given to me, and it was the story that was given to the one who gave it to me. It has served me well in my years, and I will not deny you the opportunity of allowing it to serve you."

With a creaking whine from his limbs groaning lazily awake, Razon slowly lifted himself from my side, his dark, sun-kissed feet digging a dip in the cool, shaded sand. My heart jumped slightly in my chest in an attempt to mimic my mentor.

“Stories are interesting creatures.” He croaked, his eyes returning to my friends jumping about. “They are in themselves the most elusive form of truth, for the truth found by one may morph and twist in another’s mind to be entirely different. If you allow a story to serve you, the meaning will make itself clear.” He looked down at me, ready to be done with answers. But I wasn’t.

“But sir, what’s that supposed to mean?” I queried. I knew I was pushing my luck, but I didn’t care. Razon’s crooked smile spread once more across his wrinkled, sun-spotted face. “It means, curious Ime, that I am not simply going to *hand* you the meaning behind the tale of the Dragon Catcher. It’s one of those things that, if you do not forget to remember, will reveal itself to you in its own time. You must be patient.” He was perfectly satisfied with leaving me in suspense, leaving me to sit there boiling in my frustration. I didn’t *want* to wait for words to suddenly jump up in frenzy and shout out a message my mind could understand. Nor did I want to mimic Razon and look to an inanimate building for answers.

The tower ... I pushed my luck one, final time.

“Can I ask one more question then, sir? You said that Veneration was a reminder, sir, of the Dragon and the man—“

“And you would like to know why.” He croaked not as a question, but as an assertion. I nodded, looking down at my tanned toes. He pointed up towards the peak of Veneration silhouetted just inches away from the sun. “When you look to that tower, where the Man met his death, and the Dragon earned his life, I ask only that you remember. Remember an old storyteller and his stories. Remember the stories, if ever one day you find their

reasons.” He smiled, still looking up toward the silhouetted peak of the tower. “Do not forget to remember. Yes, that is the greatest honor one could ever serve me.”

He looked at me, smiling his crooked old smile, his nearly translucent white hair in his young eyes.

“Old men grow tired quickly. But still, it seems, that I have some life left in me yet.

Forgive me, Ime, but I have a sudden urge to experience this excruciating heat you children so often complain of.” And with a final glance towards Veneration, he limped out of the shade and across the golden sand, away from my dangerous curiosity and into the sun and the safety of the crowds and the village.

I stayed there for a while, looking from the tower to the village to the dunes to the tower. I was old enough to know that some wisdom had been bestowed upon me, but I doubted that I would ever be old enough to know how to put it to use. At the time, most of me was just annoyed with the old man. It was obvious that he didn’t have anything within a dragon’s flight of a straight answer, so why didn’t he just turn me away? Why did he waste our time with a bunch of riddles and nonsense?

But there was one part of me that truly believed every word he uttered. A part of me that wanted to understand, that wanted to show Razon that his crazed wisdom and his stories weren’t in vain. But how? *It’s one of those things that, if you do not forget to remember, will reveal itself to you in its own time* he had said. *You must be patient.*

Patient. And so I set the thought aside and ran off after my friends.

I’ve been away a long time now. A long time. It didn’t take long for my ambitions to outgrow my small village, and so I escaped as soon as I was tall enough to pass for a

man to seek my fortune among the spoils of modern civilization: the land of noise and mountainous towers that made glittery Veneration a mere sapling in comparison.

The young man who flew from the village into the world beyond wanted glory, wanted all that the world had to give. I wanted my name to be remembered in the minds of men, and through years of struggle, I came as close as I could to achieving the glory I desired. I earned my keep as a doctor in this rushing society, won myself a magnificent girl with a flowing sea of gold hair and fiery blue eyes for my wife, and in the rush, managed to forget the blankness of the dunes and the heat of my childhood far, far away, beneath the tower where the crooked old man still sat in a shadow in my mind, with a story to hand out to anyone willing to rest for a moment and listen.

I like to believe that I made myself happy. For the sake of my own posterity, I had learned to ignore the shady corners of my mind where Dragons flew free and Razon smiled his crooked smile beneath the shadow of Veneration. I loved my work, my wife, and the prestige both brought me, so what did it matter what I gave up in exchange so long ago?

Yes, I like to believe that I had made myself happy. I was soaring on a cloud, above and beyond all the vexations of mortal life below, demanding the entire world to watch how I soar. But in my elation, I forgot that men weren't meant to fly.

I took one too many risks with the health of a crooked old patient with a poor, but functioning, heart, and inadvertently ended his life two months before its time. With my job went my wife, who ran off after an aspiring politician. It turns out that she loved the prestige of soaring in a ship made out of the clouds far more than she ever loved me.

I woke up in the cold and the dark one night to simply find her golden wings had flown out of my life, along with everything I had built up from the sand of what, until that moment, I had called a neglected childhood. And so I fell down, down, down from the clouds with a frightening crash that shot a crater through my whole world and sent me back, back, back from whence I came. Boom.

I had other places I could go. I still had my medical license, my apartment, blood in my heart, breath in my lungs. But with all that I, in all my brilliance, had created dissolved into nothing in what felt like a single instant, I couldn't help but be reminded of the man who tried to catch a Dragon, and of the Dragon who caught the man. What had I done? I had done exactly what wise Razon had warned against: I flew too high and too fast and I forgot to remember. With that, the bright shadows that lived so many years in the corners of my mind stretched out, grew wings, and flew me home.

I've been away a long time now. Too long. Time may have built me up and broke me down, but my village admirably resisted the erosion of time and remained almost exactly as it had been when I was just a curious boy burning with questions and longing to fly. Even after the might of skyscrapers, the simple elegance of the gold and emerald Veneration still shone with a brilliance brighter than the shimmering sand. The landscape was exactly as it had been: the vexation and glory of my childhood. While time left the land untouched, the people I once knew had eroded just as I had, some a lifetime out of reach. Some of my friends had been morphed by time as I was, had gone off chasing the same demons that had lured me out. I was the first of them to return, but there would be

others. The rest evolved into adults and were well on their way to achieving and embodying the wisdom of the elders.

But Razon was dead. Six years ago. The same year I got married.

Logic whispered it was so, but it took the words spoken aloud for the truth to exist in this reality. Crooked old Razon, who had taken so much delight in reliving the stories, would never utter another syllable, yet alone jump and shout with the excitement of a child within a story. He was just old, they told me. It was his time to go.

One of the first things I did was to revisit the shaded base of the tower where I'd spent my childhood days and sit with my sweaty back against its cool stone. No children rested in the shade. No one ran and played out in the dunes. The place was abandoned in every sense except for in my memories, which replayed that fateful day again and again and again, struggling to reawaken the child on the brink of understanding yet too impatient to see meaning when it must have been staring me right in my face.

What did Razon see in me that day?

I clearly remembered the way he looked at me. While everything else was slightly fogged by time, I clearly remembered the child in his eyes looking for another soul to confide in as a friend, looking for an extension of himself to release him from his guard. He saw something in me worth humoring. And I'd forgotten him—shrugged off his wisdom as easily as I'd brushed the sand from my feet. What did he see in me that I couldn't? Did I even still have it, whatever it was? I unstuck my back from the stone and moved into the sand so that I could see the peak of the tower reaching up towards a sun forever beyond its grasp.

Why couldn't I understand? What was I missing?

It didn't even matter at this point: it was only a story, a mere drop in the multitudinous seas of words that have washed over me in my lifetime. Just words. But yet they stuck with me, words hammering against my skull to form questions that I only once dared to ask, shadows in my mind for so many years, and now coming to a full boil once more in the fire of my lost soul.

Why couldn't I understand?

Answer me....

“Sir?”

Whispered from my memory, except so real he could have been fidgeting right in front of me.

“Uh—excuse me?”

Except it wasn't a memory.

I opened my eyes to find a boy no more than five standing on the brink of the shade. He pulled and twisted one finger with the other as if trying to slide off the stuck skin with soap, looking at me with the anxiety of a man prodding a nest, unsure whether it would be violent wasps or sweet songbirds that emerged upon provocation.

“Sorry to bother you mister, but it's hot, and I wondered if maybe, if it's, um, if it's okay, I could sit here with you, maybe, please—“ He blurted and stuttered as if the words were hurting the sides of his mouth.

I allowed myself a smile. It was almost as if time had reversed and I was looking at myself again, from all those years ago.

“What’s your name?” I asked, remembering the kindness that Razon used to calm my nerves.

“En—Enitan, sir.”

“Well hello, Enitan. I’m Ime. I don’t own the shade, and I don’t bite either. Please, you’re no good to anyone exploded all over the sand, and the stone tower is nice and cool against your back.”

Enitan looked around, as if a pack of wolves would jump out of the shade at any moment, then upon deciding that the wolves were in his mind alone, he shuffled over on his short legs and slid down against the base of the tower where I sat but minutes ago. I smiled and he stared and I noticed his eyes: emerald.

Do not forget to remember. Yes, that is the greatest honor one could ever serve me.

Why did that story, that day, have to mean any more than what it was? Of course it did mean more, I see that now after having built and fallen from my own pedestal, but why did it have to? My life took one meaning from the story of the Dragon Catcher, while my ten or eleven childhood friends each took different meanings as their lives diverged. Stories are meant to be remembered, and for that, they need to be heard. I looked to the top of the tower and I smiled again.

“Would you like to hear a story, Enitan?”

His little body sat up a little straighter against the fading stone of the tower. Curious.

“What sort of story?”

“Well, it’s an old story. It is the story that was given to me, and it is the story that was given to the one who gave it to me. It is the story of a man who tried to catch a Dragon, and it is the story of the Dragon who caught the man.”