

Simon in the Dragon's Wood: Tale of a 21st Century Dragonslayer

Sixfold Submission

In the days of Charlemagne the vast Sylva Lida Forest stretched along the banks of the Seine forming a woody screen around young Paris, today now diminished to a few thousands acres in the neighborhood of St. Germain en Laye.

A refuge for deer, squirrels, and weekend park goers now harbors an escapee, dangerous, anachronistic. French scientists successfully designed a dragon. The methods of creation were unexplained to me, but the administration's message was clear: "Eliminate it, Simon." From what I gathered, initially the dragon was priceless. Self-absorbed, 'Draco' had little to share about dragon culture, preferably talking exclusively on her own habits. However, she had a precious gift for storytelling, which lured in anthropologists beyond the layers of security - then fried them to a crisp. After licking blood droplets and even swallowing recording equipment (to its obvious discomfort), if it weren't for the cameras she would've gotten away with it. The only animal it befriended in its new life was an iguana. What a sacrifice for science.

I had the luxury of a wealthy benefactor as a child - my father. His Norman blood fastened his interests to fencing,

money making, and arms dealing in that order. As such my interest developed within this mold of traveling and bloodsport. I've hunted misreportedly extinct birds in Nepal, captured dwindling rhinos for governments and unnamed terrorists. You could say I've fought with the borderline fictional my whole life; maybe that's why I was chosen for this job.

Two squads of similar composition to ours were deployed in eastern St. Germain, as well as two veteran French Army Light Aviation pilots flying new Eurocopter Tigers at the North end of the wood. Both communicated with our team leader Joffre; a serious man who took this job with the zeal of St. George - taking all the mysticism out of this incredible situation we found ourselves in. On my immediate left marched Anton: a buzzcut redhead with a high aquiline nose, trimmed mustache and slight hollowness in his cheeks showed a vertical line between his straight brows in concentration. On my right several paces away was Helen: a short, muscular American woman with luminous blue eyes. Her petite pale neck gave a feminine grace to her movements underneath body armor, flash grenades, a compact fire extinguisher adjacent to backpack and a Hécate heavy sniper rifle. Helen's French was a little stilted as if from disuse, "Simon can you remind me the size of this creature again?"

“Yeah its 18.7 meters long, 17.2 meter wingspan and around 6,100 kg.” I recited.

“You know that in pounds by any chance? It will be easier for me to visualize.” Helen asked with embarrassment.

“Thirteen thousand, four hundred,” Anton paused, “and forty eight pounds. Or around 6.7 tons,” then satisfyingly nodded to himself.

“Woah. That’s a thick lady.” Helen said, gripping her rifle tighter. “You know, Americans were going to switch to metric, courtesy of Thomas Jefferson working with the French government. Except on the journey over with the measurements pirates took them, and without his visual aids Jefferson scrapped the initiative. Tragic really, now the only countries with the imperial system are Liberia and Burma. You wouldn’t really think of those countries having their shit together but good on them.”

“Keep it down, we don’t know how good this beast’s hearing is. She may be able to hear you kilometers, or miles, away.” Joffre hissed at us.

We marched in silence. For me, boughs of oak are better refuge than ceilings of a bar. Hunting a far safer sport than conversation. I enjoyed the silence. We continued underneath the old oaks of the forest, which stood forward, stretching their broad branches across the path as to shelter from obtrusive rays

of sunlight. Sometimes, climbing the side of the hill would display a wide view of leafy ocean, towers, and houses of distant cities. Descending into the depths of a forest valley it would seem to lose itself among the wild groves of beech trees; straight with sparsely toothed leaves alongside mighty pines. The interchanging dirt paths were the only trace of man's labor in the wilderness. "Alright team." Joffre said breaking the stillness, startling me. I didn't realize how quiet it was until he spoke. No birds sang the past half hour at least. The savage tenants of the wood did not appreciate this newcomer. Our leader pulled out a map.

"The dragon must've stayed beneath the treeline. Satellite and the Tigers (helicopters) haven't spotted the target since 1100, a full hour ago. Thermal placed the dragon in this northwest quadrant of the forest, but it must've concealed itself somehow because we haven't seen it since crossing over this route. Let's fan out 150 meters apart, hunters Helen and Simon on the outside and I'll take center with Anton. The Tigers will be on the east side, we will close in together on its territory with the other two squads."

"How much you want to bet it can swim?" Helen said on short comm radio.

Anton responded, "I say it controls its body heat. If it can

produce fire, makes sense it can control its body temperature.” I looked to my right and saw Joffre nod appreciatively.

During this operation I expected a splintered forest, marred by scorched earth and lingering fires but this task proved far more subtle. The dragon was aware it's been hunted. An animal ahead caught my attention. Leaning on a pine was the rear of a brown boar. Not hiding the sound of my boots crunching the dirt underneath, I was suspicious of the lack of movement. On closer approach, the rear of the boar was all that was left – hip bones were snapped cleanly, the spine limp with coagulated blood on its fur but dripping steadily off its vertebrae. “Squad, I’m by a fresh kill of the target. Stay alert.” I warned.

Per Joffre’s orders, the helicopters flew ‘s’ turns alongside our three groups at a comfortable distance overhead. “This isn’t a milk run, keep on standby Tigers! We have spotted evidence of the dragon’s path. All teams be on alert we are within its territory.” He relayed. We advanced through a trail, and then took the left path until its conclusion at the Corra Pond, an underwhelming name for quite the beautiful lake. It was much bluer than its shallow waters would’ve implied.

I spied two swans and thought aloud, “Do you see the swan couple floating along the far shore’s current? They’re completely oblivious to the danger nearby. Or maybe they know, and instead

of running decided to spend their last moments together.” Helen looked at me while I spoke.

Joffre replied, “You’re giving them the benefit of the doubt Simon. They probably don’t-” Radio chatter from one of the other squad leaders interrupted, alerting everyone:

“Tiger 1 down just a click away. Checking out the crash site, over.”

Anton, Helen and I looked at Joffre. “It’s hard to say the details of what happened real time. It could have been maintenance issues, pilot error, or a combination of both were the cause.” Joffre stated. “In some operations helicopters fly close to the terrain. This mission was coordinated rapidly. Pilots plan ahead of time where they should turn, when to land or take off, in order to avoid one another and their surroundings. A mistake at any point could easily lead to a collision in addition to the altitude challenges. I wouldn’t give the enemy too much credit.”

“I wouldn’t underestimate any prey. I am not going start now.” I answered to Joffre.

A flurry of radio chatter synapsed through our comms.

“We have engaged the enemy in grid 8903! Requesting assistance from all available teams, requesting backup!”

Joffre calmly but precisely asked for an appraisal of the situation at hand.

“The beast laid a trap! There were some weird notches in a cluster of trees around the wreckage, as soon as we approached the ground shook and trees fell all around us! Over.”

Joffree bit into his lower lip, brows furrowing, “Where is your unit falling back to?”

“Rendezvous at-” the voice was silenced by two crunches I imagined as the sound of teeth in a hydraulic press.

To my wonder, Joffre took the news unflinchingly, “Base, what’s the update on the target’s location? Can anyone confirm that position?”

“Joffre we have a visual the target is heading westward towards your position. Team Alpha complete casualties.” I overheard on his comm.

“Squad we set up here. Helen take this viewpoint, Anton and I will dig in on the beach. Simon, you’re the sharpshooter. (Isn’t Helen the one with the Sniper?) Take the hill opposite this position and shoot on sight. Tiger 2 will hang back behind us and reinforce when the target arrives over the lake. If this creature escapes French citizens will be in danger, our country’s image will suffer accordingly. It will not escape.” Joffre paused emphatically, “Vive la France. Move into positions.”

This was too different for my comfort. I don't mind taking commands but I am not prepared for this. But then again, is anyone prepared for this? To fight a dragon? Focus Simon. I wiped sweat from forehead, comfortable on my stomach while I adjusted my rifle. The .458 Lott shoots a belted hunting cartridge designed for African game. It's designed for follow up shots after big game hunters had near-death confrontations with charging animals, overkill for big cats and perfect for heavily boned rhinoceros and buffalo. I checked my reliable MAC 50 semi-automatic, though questioned the sanity of bringing a 9. mm to shoot a dragon. Who knows how thick the hide is? If scales can deflect arrows and lances of old, how would they stack up against a pistol?

I glanced towards the noonday sun. She was coming in fast, slightly above me and heading in the opposite direction, so I actually only saw the dragon for a few seconds. When passing overhead the beast's wings powerfully flexed, the downdraft punch of air shook leaves off the tree overhead. There was a hypnotizing sensation, a tingling in my fingers that time passed in slow motion. I saw a dragon! It was burnt umber, with a pair of large horns above its eyes and six smaller horns evenly distributed on the back of its head resembling a crown.

As the dragon soared past, Tiger 2's positioning was favorable. Pivoting to face the dragon's backside, I watched as



the pilot shot tracers around the beast. The pilot pulled back on the yoke to gain some lead. But at that time the dragon saw him, suddenly reversing direction into an incredibly tight left bank back over the water. I don't believe any aircraft could turn that quickly. The pilot launched a pair of air-to-air missiles, hoping either to detonate off the water or island near the flightpath of the dragon. It took brilliant aim and true enough the missiles exploded, taking the back right foot of the dragon in the process. Now in my line of sight, I readied a shot for the wings, a large but dextrous target. The dragon breathed fire across the lake beneath Tiger 2, sending steam billowing into the air. The helicopter slowed down to fly above it, and vanished as the steam enveloped it. The dragon charged straight at Tiger 2, launching a stream of devastation into the steam cloud, which glowed bright red orange for an instant, dissolving back into grey mist. Tiger 2's crumpled remains splashed into the water, but not without its rotating blades clipping a slice of the creature's left wing. (focus on positioning of squad relative to lake)

My stomach dropped. The last of our air cover was gone. But then again, when have I ever had air support? I smirked, feigning confidence to build up my courage. It didn't work. I fired my rifle at the beast, striking the dragon's kneecap at 2,300 feet a second. Turning to face my direction, it charged

straight down the gauntlet with Helen on its left, Anton and Joffre in front of it.

Anton fired two bursts at the healthy wing, and back right haunch. The dragon stopped its advance, pressed itself into the shore on its right side, smashing Anton's legs with its tail. Causing him to skip on the water and eventually flip face forward into the mud. The dragon's left claw and leg rapidly kicked up a bank of sandy dirt and shrubbery to wall itself from Helen and Joffre's suppression fire. As it lay and its fortifications develop, only Anton and I had a clear line of sight.

"I'm advancing on target to grenade range. Helen, stay in the treeline and move south behind the target. Anton what's your status? Simon do not stop firing!" Joffre ordered.

The dragon uprooted a thick tree with its tail to reinforce the wall facing Joffre. Unfortunately, the roots lay directly covering its trench from my angle. It's going to be a messy couple shots. I unloaded three successive rounds without finesse: two bullets chipping the damaged overlapping wings on the dragon's back, another caught in the the tree roots. The dragon's head popped above its trench for a half second before disappearing for another, then reemerging with a fire stream flooding Helen's treeline. My vision blurred as the heat

distorted air, disintegrated trees and liquefied dirt. A bomb of steam from the lake blanketed Joffre's area.

"Helen!" I shouted while standing up. I focused on my target, sights aiming at the head but trigger finger lagging and only managed to pop off a horn.

"Take this!" Joffre voice carried across the clearing as I watched a frag grenade manifest out of the fog. The dragon used a mangled wing to bat away the explosive device, through sheer luck or intelligence I wondered. Not without entirely escaping the blast. The left wing, previously shred by the helicopter wing, did not act as a bat. Slight elasticity proved fatal as the grenade didn't bounce far enough -the explosion blew the shredded wing apart leaving a single skeleton appendage.

I ran over to Anton during Joffre's assault. Taking steps through the marshy section of grasses, I pulled my team member from the mud, his red hair undistinguishable and cheeks sunken further. As I put my arms under his to carry him to hard ground, the smell of... something raped my nostrils. Did Anton shit himself? Or was the near stagnant water that stinky? "Anton are you okay?"

"I can't feel my legs. But I can still shoot." In assertion of this statement, Anton started firing a full clip into the right flank of the dragon. It used its remaining wing as a

shield, making agonizing grunts. 20 rounds later, Anton went to reload. I propped him against a tree and began to reload my rifle during the respite. "Simon, move now!" Anton yelled and pushed me backwards onto a shallow puddle. A shadow passed over my head as a detached wing crashed onto Anton. In a barbaric move of self-mutilation, the dragon must've clipped and thrown its remaining wing at my ally!

I turned and watched the dragon puff a controlled fire to cauterize the clipped wing. Its lips curled in anger bearing rows of white teeth. The dragon inflated its chest, and stood gripping the top of its bunker. It blew. But not a fiery, ravaging breath but simply a gust of air that stripped away the steam/fog that covered our comrade. Joffre, naked of cover, was caught throwing a second grenade. The dragon didn't hesitate, flexing its powerful neck to bite at Joffre, sinking its lower teeth into him.

"No! Joffre!" I took Anton's loaded gun from underneath the wing, and unloaded its remaining clip into the bare beast's flank. The dragon roared in pain - a primal wounded cry. Empty, I tossed the weapon and reached for my last defense, the pistol. Its eyes locked on me, snake-like eyes of terrifying beauty with Joffre's struggling body kicking his feet and pressing his right arm against the face helplessly. The dragon smiled.

Shots rang from within its mouth, splintering molars and severing jaw sinew. The dragon reflexively opened its mouth, Joffre continue to aim at the jaw hinge for three more shots until the lower jaw hinge threatened to fall off. "Simon!" Joffre yelled, tossing me an ax previously strapped to his leg. Dark smoke billowed of the dragon's mouth, drool rolling off an reptilian tongue onto Joffre's now still body. Hopefully Joffre's last shots disabled its fire breathing ability. My next move depended on that gamble. I leveled my pistol and ran towards the dragon. My goal was to group my bullets tightly on the already wounded flank of the dragon, and use the ax to finish the job. To fire as effectively as I could, I needed to be at least 20 meters closer. Fuck it. I ran and yelled a bestial, desperate shout.

"Take up your tiny barbs of steel and fight. I will respond with all my valor. Pitiabile wingless meatbag." The dragon snarled soothingly in an archaic French. Previously all fangs and fire, the unexpected and terrifying voice dropped my guard. A boot stubbed a rock, causing me to fall. A claw filled the space I stood moment's before. I quickly rolled to the side before it crashed down, tearing easily through to my back. Pain, dominating pain, emanated from my backside; if I had a spine left I couldn't tell. I thought of that boar from before, of Helen, Anton, Joffre, home, and tried to move once more. I

leveraged my hands against my knees and stood. Aiming at the beast's previous wounds, I grouped my last magazine tightly while walking as steadily as I could manage. Bang. Bang. Bang. The dragon reflexively yelped. Pressing my advantage I took the ax, and buried it with all my strength in the gaping wound. I was fooled. The burnt umber dragon hide was actually mud camouflaging a brilliant vermillion. The ax remained. A balled fist, as large as tire uppercut swiftly into my gut lifting me to eye level. Bearing teeth, I winced as a mucus bubbling spit blinded my vision. I felt a hammer crack my collar and skull, throwing me to the ground on my back with arms and feet splayed at the dragon's mercy. Strong claws squeezed, ribs crunching and blood rushing to my eyes. Overwhelming pressure, the corners of my vision darkened, shoulders popped knees grated against another. The tension relaxed. I rolled out of the claw onto the shore. I wiped water, thicker than I anticipated against my face. Looking at my hands, black with acrid mucous slipping through my fingers painted crimson. Blood from the ax already created a small delta in the sand, defiling the lake into unnatural red hues. The beast collapsed, its proud neck straining towards me. The slit eyes focused into me stoically. I've seen this look before, when animals resign to their fate.

“What a base and trifling creature is man. Yet at once he is the master of empyreal desires, his kingdoms sprawl and weapons bite. What is your name warrior?” the dragon said.

I tried to speak, painful wordless air escaping my throat. I spelled in the sand:

S I M O N.

“Simon.” The she-dragon said, closing its eyes. In that moment I knew in all my years my name would never be spoken the same. “I should’ve continue to sleep. I blame my fate.” This wasn’t from a lab? What is going on? I watched as the creature breathed, at slower intervals, and then no more. My head throbbed, I couldn’t take any more thoughts. My eyes searched the blue, beautiful French sky. A sky free of dragons.

I heard both Helen and Anton were taken to the Hospital Center of Poissy Saint Germain, a short drive from my rented condominium in Paris. Exiting a roundabout my eyes lingered on sign marking four miles to Sylva Lida Park. It was reopened just 24 hours after the operation last month. Slamming on my breaks, I stopped the car just a meter before rear-ending the driver ahead. I sighed, “It’s been a long week.”

A nurse with a soft disposition led me to the ward Anton and Helen were kept, stopping by Helen’s room first. “You have a

visitor miss,” she knocked on the door, opening it slowly leaving the two of us alone. Helen looked relaxed, laying on her raised hospital bed like it was a cheap poolside lounge chair. Her fine brunette hair, only imagined under a helmet before, lay across bandaged shoulders. Toes ranging from an unnatural whiteness to merlot sausage peeked out from under grey sheets.

“How are you?” I asked. The simple greeting was all I could come up with.

“Bonjour Simon!” She smiled, “I am happy! As you can see, I am burned everywhere but my face. But, I would rather have this than be burned on my face and ok everywhere else. You know, eyes are the windows to the soul, not my toes.” She blinked exaggeratedly and wiggled her toes in emphasis. Followed by some expletives, “Ow! Should not have done that.”

“I brought you a gift.” I said optimistically. Pulling from my satchel a polished dragon tooth from our hunt together. The white fang was hollowed at the base for a silver chained necklace to be passed through. By every meaning of the word it was gaudy.

“Aww Simon! It’s beautiful! Thank you!” Helen smiled. “Put it on me please.” I leaned over her, catching a whiff of sweaty bandages. Meanwhile, as my hands laid the pendant’s chain over her neck she pecked my cheek with a kiss. I was caught off



guard, reflectively bringing my hand to my cheek and grinning in a pose that was less masculine than I intended to portray. Helen laughed, "Let's go out sometime. Coffee on me."

"Ok." I said, "I'd like that." I said some more. "I came here to visit Anton too."

"Alright." She bit her lip, "Tell him I have a problem for him! Add me to myself and multiply by four. Divide me by eight and you will have me once more. What number am I?"

I laughed, "Okay okay will do. Bye Helen." I walked briskly down the L shaped hall and to Anton's room, eager to see my comrade and elated from the visit with Helen. Turning the corner, two medical staff opened double doors to a heated room. The heat cascaded down my body, triggering shivers, raising my hair on end as my eyes widened and knees weekend. Draco's roar paired with Joffre's dying screams was immediately behind me, above me, I couldn't tell which direction.

"Sir! Are you alright!?" One of the staff asked as the larger one put their arms around me. "Calm down, take deep breaths, you're right here. What are you doing here?" The stranger's slow-paced, deep calming voice prompted me to obey. I took measured breaths and focused on him, kind eyes on a clean-shaven chiseled face.

"I'm visiting my... friends Anton and Helen." I said. "Thanks for calming me down sir." I could feel my blood return to my

hands, my shaking diminishing.

“No problem soldier, I recognize a PTSD attack when I see one.”

“Why is that room so hot?” I asked.

“It’s the burn unit, heated to almost thirty degrees Celsius. For the most severely burned, that’s still not warm enough. With so much skin scorched away the body can no longer keep up the temperature that internal organs need to function. Several campers got burned terribly in Sylva Lida last week. Tragic, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Jean! Patient confidentiality!” The other staff remarked.

“Sorry! Take care, soldier.” The larger staff said.

“Add me to myself and multiply by 4. Divide me by 8 and you will have me once more. What number am I?” I asked Anton Helen’s question. He was sitting at the edge of the bed, facing out the window that overlooked the Sylva Lida and Eiffel tower on the horizon. His brows characteristically narrowed.

“It’s any number. That’s a child’s question!” Anton smirked, reaching out his hand as I shook vigorously.

“It’s good to see you Anton.” I meant it. “After that thrashing from Draco’s tail I thought you were a goner.”

“I am glad to see you Simon. Yeah, when I came too I thought

so as well. Helen told me that apparently in Viking belief it was said that redheads are descendants from faeries. This makes them luckier and more fearsome in battle in the mornings. That's probably how I made it out. You know, after fighting a dragon, I'm inclined to believe that story." We laughed together. "What type of crazy person brings a hand ax to fight a dragon!?" Anton chuckled heartily until he coughed.

"A good leader, that's who," I responded.

After the last exchange silence pervaded, my thoughts went to Joffre. "Joffre will be given a full military honors burial, next weekend," I said.

"I'll be there. How's his family taking it?"

"Not sure. However I heard Joffre would be posthumously presented with a Legion of Honor award. His wife will receive his medal and learn the... circumstances that took his life."

"It's okay to say dragon, Simon." I looked at my feet. Remembering the fresh experience I had in the hallway recollecting the event. "It's no myth, it's not silly to talk about with me."

"Anton I had a flashback in the hallway. Nothing too serious but it felt like I was there. Stuck in those woods, the dragon's roar right in my head."

"Maybe you should see a psychologist?" Anton suggested.

“I do not want someone to have a crash course in my professional life, to then judge my opinions and shape how I view an event. I can heal on my own. I can do this on my own.” I declared.

“Again, you have me and Helen to talk about this. We are pretty hurt too, obviously.” He signaled to his legs.

“Sorry. The kill made me sad. I’ve never been sad about killing an animal before.”

“It was a dragon. Not just any animal. Be proud man! You’re a dragonslayer. That's something of legends,” with each successive phrase Anton poked my chest emphatically.

“Okay!” I said attempting to sound as proud as possible to not deflate Anton’s optimism, but missing the mark. He frowned. I switched topics, “I had the great honor of retelling our operation to President Macron.”

“What? Incredible! I voted for him twice I love our President. I appreciate his mind for economics.”

“After finishing the story I decided to give him Joffre’s ax, to his enthusiasm. Don’t worry I made sure to tell him of your brave distractions as I killed the dragon.”

Anton laughed. “As we killed the dragon!” he said half-jokingly half serious.

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Exhausted, I trudged up the steps to my condominium. After opening the door, I didn't bother with the lights as I jumped face first onto the sofa.

"Hssssss!" An angry Iguana slithered from underneath my face, rough skin scraping against my own.

"Ahh sorry for forgetting about you, Ghirardelli." I replied. Apparently, the group that didn't see combat found the makeshift cave Draco was hiding. That's how he evaded thermal! I thought to myself when I heard the news. In this cave, a solitary Iguana was feeding on some boar meat. They captured the scaly creature, taking it back to lab. I felt sorry for the thing. Whether out of remorse for hunting Draco, or something else, I couldn't tell. I decided to take it as a pet. "Maybe I am getting soft. I think I am going to retire." I told Ghirardelli. I closed my eyes, and peacefully fell asleep.

END