

## “The Pleasure of Predation”

In a city still fresh from a ravaging, the king and his advisors gathered around a large table in the castle. The advisors rose their voices against one another, not even realizing that their king had not said a single word. His heart felt too heavy to join the debacle. While the advisors debated over the reconstruction of their fair city, the king called over his pageboy, “Have you any news about The Earnest Knight?”

“None yet, your majesty,” The boy replied, “I’m sure he will be here forthwith.”

“Prepare to fetch him again if he is not here by the time my advisors finish arguing.”

In truth, the Earnest Knight was taking his time on his way to see the king. He stopped along the way to help a woman calm her crying children; to help a girl find her feline; and to help some laborers repair a shop’s sign. But he eventually granted the king his presence after the pageboy found him feeding cattle. The Earnest Knight kneeled before his king and kissed his hand. “My liege,” the knight says, rising to his feet. “How may your humble knight serve you?”

The king dismissed his pageboy and advisors so that he could speak clearly with the knight, “Sir Knight, as you know, a vile dragon attacked our city. This dragon burned our homes, feasted upon our flock, and murdered our people. Worst of all, the

damn beast took to the skies with my sweet daughter, our princess. You have served me faithfully for many years, and I trust no one else with her recovery but you.”

The Earnest Knight frowned, “My king, my career has brought me enough trophies already. Have one of the fresher knights retrieve her and establish themselves.”

“Yes, but I do not just require you to bring her back to me. No, for the pain and embarrassment that this creature has caused me I desire more. To quench my anger, I want you to slay the beast as well.”

This piqued The Earnest Knight’s interest and he agreed to the task requested of him. After the king dismissed him, he departed for the barracks to prepare for his journey. The other knights heard the news and they, too, went to the barracks. They praised him and patted his back with glee. A young knight reminded the knight to bring home some treasure from the dragon’s lair. “Oh, forget that!” an older peer intervened, “Make sure you bring her home to her handmaidens before taking her reward.” The Earnest Knight, however, gave his peers no mind. He felt no need for jovial celebration or brotherly banter. He especially didn’t need any fictional treasure. However, he was thankful for the older knight for reminding him about the princess. It wasn’t his fault though, for his mind only thought of that grand beast. He bid his peers farewell then left the city to begin his journey.

The knight began his journey through a gnarled thicket just a few kilometers outside of the city. Here the grass was long and wild, leaving it the road less traveled. In fact, many citizens requested the king to burn the grove. "Its ugly and hard to travel through," they would complain, "and if we get rid of it, we can make way for more farmland!" But the king, either from idleness or apathy, did not heed their request as of yet. The Earnest Knight, however, did not mind the trek through the thicket. In truth, he enjoyed it. He pushed through the long pampas grass with his large hands. The grass tickled his hands as he moved it aside, and that light sensation from the blades stimulated his senses. The thicket began to recede, revealing a proud oak. The knight marveled at the build of the tree. He approached it and gently caressed the bark while looking up into the sky. He saw the leaves above him tinged with the colors of autumn. Some were perfect and shapely while others were browned from decay or eaten by insects. The sunlight shined through every single crevasse of the leaves, reminding him of the stain glass from the church back home. Upon closer examination of the trunk, the knight noticed the large gashes towards the base. He touched the exposed flesh and thought it looked similar to his old war wound on his shoulder. He took a step back and looked at the tree entirely. "What a beautiful tree!" He exclaimed,

and then turned around to leave. The Earnest Knight was anxious to see what awaited him next on his journey.

After three days of traveling, he reached the base of a mighty twin peaked mountain. It was not the largest mountain that he had ever seen, but the knight admired it nonetheless. From where he stood, The Earnest Knight could easily distinguish the larger peak. Seeing that the smaller peak did not have a cave, he took the path towards the larger peak. It was certainly a longer walk, but it gave the knight time to appreciate such a majestic view.

At last, The Earnest Knight finally reached the dragon's lair: an old dwarven ruin. He had seen many in his career, but this one was by far the most impressive. The ones he had seen before looked pristine, as if the city had just been built. This ruin instead looked rough and worn from age. Rocks protruded from both the ceiling and floor of the cave, appearing much like teeth. Many of the buildings collapsed, and the ones that still stood looked more like crumbling walls. At the very end of the ruin laid the dragon, curled up like a hound. The knight could see the tips of the beast's teeth peeking out of its mouth. He guessed that the teeth must have been the size of a child. Smoke escaped its nostrils with each exhale, causing the ruin to have a charcoal aroma. The creature's spiked crimson armor looked as if it had seen centuries of

battles. Instead of shiny and bright, the scales appeared rather worn and dull. Behind the dragon stood a large building, which the knight guessed was once an embassy. From the open windows, he could hear the hysterical pleas from the princess. The dragon never stirred despite her impressive volume.

With a smile growing on his face, The Earnest Knight's body shivered at the sight of the beast. What a mighty creature indeed! He unsheathed his sword and began towards the dragon, expelling vibrant war cries with each step. The dragon wrestled in its slumber at first, then opened its golden eyes once the sounds became louder. The knight, once before the dragon, roared louder and louder until the beast was on all fours. The dragon bellowed back and flapped his vast wings at the knight, forcing him to halt and cover his face from the projectiles. He locked eyes with the beast, and the beast did the same. The dragon then stood on its hind legs and braced its claws, consenting to battle. The Earnest Knight tossed aside his shield, grasped his longsword with both hands, and lunged at the beast. The battle had begun.

The dragon bared its teeth at the knight as it thrashed its claws about. A frightening sight to anyone else, but the knight was an experienced one. Despite the weight of his armor, he swiftly evaded the dragon's assault. He observed the dragon's temper rising, and began to drive his weapon towards the beast. He first performed a

basic slash, testing the scales on its thigh. The dragon yelled, but did not bellow. It again attacked with its mighty claws, and knight once again dodged.

Once some distance was put between the two, the dragon turned its back towards the knight. Over and over again the beast slammed its tail, trying to hit its target. Its tail was so heavy that rocks began to hail from the ceiling of the ruin. They simply bounced off of the dragon, but the knight was struck harshly on his brow. The blood from the gushing wound felt hot on his face. He removed his gauntlets to wipe his brow, watching the tail before him. Left. Right. Right. Left. He noted the seemingly unconscious rhythm of the beast. At the perfect moment, he rushed the tail and clung to it. The creature growled and gnashed its teeth. It scampered around the room, shaking its body so vigorously that the tired scales hailed from its body. Despite the tantrum, The Earnest Knight kept a firm hold onto the tail and slowly climbed towards the body. However, he did not remember the spikes protruding from the beast. They clashed with his armor, making it far more difficult to keep his hold. One especially violent gyration from the beast flung the knight rather violently. The spike he gasped hold of broke from the body and he was thrown off of the beast. His armor protected him from the impact of the floor, but left him very sore.

While its prey was just starting to stand, the dragon slashed a claw again at its target. The knight took the hit and was thrown against a wall. The dragon stopped its attack and eyed its target. The knight's shaking legs made it difficult, but he managed to stand on his own. He unstrapped his shiny breastplate and removed it from his body. The dragon swayed its tail from side to side as it purred. Plumes of smoke rose from its nostrils as the knight also removed the greaves from his legs and cast them aside. The knight stood before the dragon, with only his steel boots remaining as armor.

The Earnest Knight saw the hilt of his sword laying among forgotten scales beyond the dragon. He really needed that back. The dragon had shed so many scales from its rampage that only its spikes provided any protection for its rough skin. The knight was pleased by this. He charged the beast and the beast again used its claws to keep its prey away, but the knight was much quicker and more confident now without his armor. With seemingly no effort at all, he dodged the claws and made it past the dragon. He recovered his sword amongst the littered scales, and presented it against his foe. Irrate by such a firm display, the dragon exposed its teeth and growled. Before the knight could attack, the dragon opened its titanic mouth and bit down on the weapon. Surprised by such a bold move, the knight pulled back on his sword. His face

felt hot from blood and effort. The strength of its mouth was too powerful though, and the dragon claimed victory over the sword and swallowed it whole. The knight has seen many dragon's in his career – some have bitten off the tip of his longsword, or even swatted it away – but he has never seen a beast as magnificent as this one. Such an impressive creature had to be slain by someone just as impressive, and he was willing to take up the challenge.

The knight noticed the broken spike near him, so he took it and put it between his teeth. The dragon did not like this and began to thrash its tail around again. The rhythm seemed to be different this time, but the knight was able to find an opening again. He grasped the tail and clung onto it tightly. Without the armor, the spikes pierced his skin, but climbing up the tail was much easier. Again, the dragon galloped about in an attempt to shake off his passenger. The Earnest Knight reached the base of its neck and wrapped his legs around the beast's throat. He took the spike with both hands and drove it deep into the dragon's neck. The dragon roared so viciously that it shook the ruin. It began to gasp to catch its failing breath. Over and over again, the knight pierced through the dragon's skin. The creature snapped its neck from side to side and threw the knight off.



The knight braced his landing, but hit the wound on his head again. He managed to get back to onto his feet, but he had to muster together so much strength to do so. The accumulated abuse has taken its toll on his body, so he only had a little strength left. The dragon, too, was reaching its limit. Despite its wound, the beast still stood its ground. It dipped its head and began to shake. The knight braced himself to dodge a stream of flames, but the dragon instead coughed up the longsword. While the dragon wheezed in an attempt to breathe, the knight reclaimed his sword. It was finally time. In one swift movement, the knight pierced the creature in the heart. The dragon arched its neck back, screeched, and expelled a large pillar of flame. Its eyes began to blink slowly as its body fell to the ground. Its final words before death were but a few soft moans. The Earnest Knight, full of exhausted breaths, sheathed his sword. He had done it: the dragon had been slain. He had completed his mission.

Of course, The Earnest Knight still had to complete the king's orders and retrieve the princess. The princess, who had witnessed the entire battle, cried out to her savior. She instructed him on how to enter the embassy, and promised him a reward for saving her. "There's much gold and jewels here, Sir Knight!" She exclaimed, raining a few treasures down to her savior.

The Earnest Knight watched the precious jewels and coins rain around him. He looked down at one particular golden coin. It was indeed beautiful, but he had no desire to trek back to the castle catering to not only the princess, but also the mound of treasure. He kicked the coin aside, knelt beside the corpse of his worthy foe, and placed a hand on its head. He thanked the lifeless body, "You were indeed worthy to die by my blade." He then went back to the window and spoke to the princess, "Ah, my lady, I am more than happy to escort you home, but I need no reward. I am satisfied enough as is."