

# Dragon Hunt

by Sarah Prineas

I knew who I was, and I knew my place. I knew why the king's chattering courtiers cast me sly looks from the corners of their eyes when I walked past; I knew why the king's brave knights fingered their daggers when they looked my way.

I was an assistant to a junior deputy archivist in the moldy, dusty rooms full of books and maps the king called his library. I was sixteen years old. My mother died at my birth.

At dinner, the great hall of the king was always loud with talking and jests, the tables slick with grease and spilled wine, the rushes underfoot crawling with vermin. On the walls, smoke-clotted tapestries displayed the crimson-threaded death of the last dragon at the hands of the king.

At the highest table, King Kenneret sat surrounded by his bravest knights and most gentle nobles.

I sat at the lowest table, and I had already spilled a goblet of wine down the long, embroidered sleeve of the lady sitting next to me. She glared; I didn't bother apologizing. Amid the noise, I sat quiet, reading a pocket-sized copy of Volume XXXII of *The Encyclopedia Draconis*.

Looking up from the book, I noticed a peasant enter the hall, escorted by a guardsman. I squinted through the smoke to get a better look. The guard was half drunk, of course, but the peasant glanced around wildly, frightened--as he ought to be--stumbling over the rushes until he stood before the high table. He was ignored by His Royal Majesty, who was trading jests and toasts with his knights.

The drunken guard whispered to a servant, who scurried to a more senior servant, who in turn pulled the sleeve of the king's counselor, Prickett, who rose in white-bearded state from his place at the high table, went to the king, and bent to whisper into his ear. The king paused in the midst of a bellowing laugh. He listened. He nodded, then answered.

I found myself leaning forward, straining to hear. The lady beside me was laughing shrilly; I gave her a nudge. "Shhh." She shot me a venomous glance and edged away from me on the bench.

But silence was passing in waves over the great hall. The king shifted his bulk in his chair, then spoke to the waiting peasant, his deep voice rumbling through the growing quiet. "We are told you bring us news. Our counselor says it warrants interrupting our dinner. What say you?"

The peasant bowed, gripping a shapeless hat. "Y-your Majesty," he quavered, bowing again. "I am the headman of West Cornhold."

The king shrugged. "What news do you bring us from West Cornhold?"

The peasant fell to his knees on the rush-covered floor before the high table. "Your Majesty, it is a dragon!" He dropped his hat to gesture widely with his hands. "We-we've seen it, My Lord! Huge it is, breathing great gobs of fire, shining in the sun, flying over our fields and houses, sharp c-claws, teeth, and--"

"Silence!" Prickett shouted. In a sharp voice, he continued. "To talk of dragons, sirrah, living ones, in the court of King Kenneret Death-of-Dragons, is to talk treason. It cannot be a dragon."

The peasant stared. "It bloody well is a dragon," he shouted, climbing to his feet, spittle flying from his lips. "Claws! Wings, great wide wings, like sails! Stealing sheep, and--"

"That's enough," ordered the counselor.

"--And goats!" the headman added.

Well. There was going to be trouble. The court held its breath and stared at his Royal Majesty. Someone was for the headsman's axe.

The king, his face flushed from the wine he'd drunk with dinner, pushed himself to his feet and looked around the hall with a display of great good humor, as if selecting somebody to be the butt of an excellent joke. The court let out its breath in relief. The king had decided not to be offended. "Who shall slay me this Cornhold Dragon?" asked the king.

I leaned forward to see what the knights and nobles at the high table would do. My elbow hit the lady's wine-filled goblet and over it went. She leaped up, shrieking, brushing at a blood-red splash down the front of her embroidered dress.

The counselor's gaze fell upon me, sharpened. He leaned over to whisper to the king. After a moment of hesitation, the king nodded. "Your Majesty," Prickett said loudly, "a dragon of such doubtful provenance should be dealt with by the very least of your knights." He extended a long, bony finger.

At me. I was not a knight; I was a librarian. Slowly, I got to my feet.

The nobles at the high table tittered; the gentle knights fingered their daggers.

I offered a bow, and with typical grace knocked my book from the table into the rushes on the floor.

"Yes, very good," said Prickett. "You will go and slay for the king this Cornhold dragon."

\* \* \*

Four days later, as a chill sun rose behind a veil of sober clouds, I readied myself to ride out from King Kenneret's castle on a swayback, piebald horse named Rosie, wearing a few bits of rusty armor, a helmet two sizes too large, and a sword newly sharpened by the castle blacksmith.

I didn't expect to use the sword. Not against a dragon, at any rate. I had read every book in the archive about dragons, and they all agreed that there were no dragons left in King Kenneret's lands.

As I fumbled with the straps of my saddlebags, the king's counselor crossed the courtyard to speak with me. Prickett's wrinkled face was pale in the early light. He wore a dusty grey robe and slippers, as if he'd come straight from his bed. "So you're going."

I looked at him over Rosie's back. Obviously I was going.

"Hmmm. Kim, is it? Your mother was Lady Darlyn, I believe."

I nodded. Rosie shifted, her hoofs scraping the cobblestones.

Prickett pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. "A great favorite of the king at one time, was your mother, as I recall."

So I had surmised. My waterskin had a leak; there was a wet patch on the saddlecloth.

"Hmmm," Prickett said. "Well, no matter. All that matters is this: There is no dragon."

"What?" I looked up.

"No matter what you find in West Cornhold, there is no dragon. To suggest otherwise would be treason against the crown. Do you understand?"

No. There was no dragon; the king had killed the last one twenty years ago, a fact verified by every book in the castle library. On the maps, *here be dragons* was crossed out.

"What am I supposed to do, then?" I asked.

"Ride out," the counselor said. "Come back when you've been away for long enough."

I watched Prickett make his way across the courtyard. He didn't actually think there *was* a dragon, did he? I shook my head and climbed onto Rosie's broad back.

After I gave her a few kicks in her ribs, the horse ambled toward the main gate of the castle. The guards sniggered as I passed. I'd just crossed the bridge onto the main road leading out of the city, when the castle's witch accosted me.

She was an ancient crone with a face like an apple with a bite taken out of it and then left to rot. I pulled Rosie to a halt as the witch scurried out into the middle of the road.

"Beware!" she shrieked. She looked over her shoulder and then laid her finger aside her nose, coming closer. "Beware, young knight!"

"Yes?" I asked. "Beware what, my lady?" Surely it was best to err on the side of politeness when speaking to a witch.

"Beware the compelling spells of the dragon," she replied with a cackle. "The dragon will spin around you a web of words. It will weave around you a tapestry of words until you see not the real world but a vision of gold thread and flying banners, knights a-horseback doing great deeds, fair princesses with white hands and welcoming smiles."

As I rode along the rutted roads that led away from Kenneret's castle, I considered the witch's words. *The compelling spells of the dragon*. Interesting. But I knew well enough that dragons and great deeds and welcoming smiles existed only in books, and not in the muddy, cold real world.

\* \* \*

So I would ride to West Cornhold, identify the wolf or crafty poacher who had been stealing the farmers' sheep, and then ride back to the castle and my dusty books and maps.

In the meantime, I had plenty of mud and cold to deal with. The armor, rusty chain mail made

for a bigger man than I was, chafed, and it was heavy. The helmet kept slipping down over my eyes. The sword, scabbarded on my saddle, bumped against my knee every time Rosie took a lumbering step. And then the rain began.

I slopped into West Cornhold muddy to my eyebrows, planning to see the headman, to ask him where the depredations of sheep and goats had occurred. It was late afternoon, and the rain had brought on an early twilight. The village was quiet but for the squawking of chickens and the patter of raindrops on the thatched roofs. I knocked on the nearest door to ask my questions.

*A dragon? No, young sir, we've seen no dragons here, certainly not, of course there are no dragons because the king killed 'em all. But if you were to seek one out, you might try the river where it runs through the Stalkfleet Forest.*

And not one of the villagers offered me a place to stay for the night. I sighed and turned Rosie toward the Stalkfleet Forest.

\* \* \*

I had read about forests like this. Moss grew on the trunks of trees that looked like hunched, ancient crones reaching out with gnarled, clutching fingers. Fog crept along the ground. The air smelled of swampwater. The forest was quiet but not peaceful. It was listening.

Rosie and I went on, her with her eyes rolling and ears twitching, me with my eyes wide and my hand on the pommel of my sword. The path was narrow, and moss-draped vines hung down across it and the bushes crowded in, brushing Rosie's flanks.

Then I saw, on the trail ahead, a wide, deep impression in the mud. I climbed out of the saddle and clattered to the ground, clinging to Rosie's bridle until I found my feet. Squelching through the mud, I went forward and knelt down to look closely. It was the length of my arm, with a deep well in the middle and four slashing gouge marks. A footprint of some kind; a clawprint, rather, of some strange beast.

I looked up, and quickly around. The forest kept absolutely still. Slowly, watching the undergrowth, I went back to Rosie and climbed into the saddle.

As the night drew on, the forest grew darker. I leaned forward, over Rosie's neck, peering through the gloom. At last, she stumbled to a halt.

I was tired, too. Fog rose from the ground and surrounded us.

"All right," I said, and my voice sounded quavery and thin. I climbed down out of the saddle. "Come on, Rosie." Pulling her by the reins, I led her along until we came to a place where the path widened into a clearing. I looped Rosie's reins around a bush and unsaddled her, and rubbed her down with a fistful of moss; then I wrapped myself in my holey blanket and, leaning against a tree, went to sleep.

\* \* \*

In the morning, when I woke up, Rosie was gone, my blanket was gone, and I was pinned to the muddy ground by a huge, clawed foot. One talon was thrust through the shoulder of my over-large chain mail; another talon was plunged into the mud, right next to my neck. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and, heart pounding, looked up. And up. I saw the claw itself, cracked and knobbed, then a muscled, dull-scaled leg, and up to a huge head: a narrow, gap-fanged muzzle, deep-set smoldering eyes, and a horned crest. A wisp of

smoke trickled from one nostril.

A dragon.

The books and the tapestries and the maps were wrong. Kenneret hadn't killed them all, had he?

The dragon gazed down at me. I wriggled a little, to see if I could get free, and it leaned forward, its claw pressing me further into the mud.

"Keep still," said the dragon. Its voice was hollow and rumbly-deep, like a shout in a bottomless cave.

I kept still.

It brought its head down closer, looking me over, first with one eye, then tilting its head to look with the other eye.

"Well, well," it said. "Say they still *Childe* for Knight?"

I didn't answer. In the old poems, though, the knight was always called *Child*, or *Childe*.

"They do, I suppose," the dragon said.

I gathered my courage and cleared the fright out of my throat. "Where's my horse?" I asked.

The dragon blinked, first a membrane flicking across its deep eye, then an eyelid sliding down and up. "The horse has been eaten," it said. "You would be, too, *Childe*, were you a bit more plump."

My sword occurred to me. It was not far away, on Rosie's saddle--poor Rosie--where I'd left it.

The dragon huffed a foul-smelling breath down into my face. "But I shall not eat you today, *Childe*. For I have a curiosity about the world outside. What say you? Wish you to talk with me a while?"

I nodded.

"If you run away," the dragon said. "You will be caught, and you will be eaten."

"All right" I said. It was a fair deal.

The dragon leaned close again and put its eye up to my face. I gazed into it. The eye was like a still pool of water with a flame burning deep within. "It is a strange kind of knight you are," the dragon breathed.

I wasn't a knight at all, of course.

The dragon leaned back and took its foot off my chest, the claws pulling out of the mud with a sucking sound.

Slowly, I sat up, then inched back to lean against the tree. The dragon hunkered down, lowering its belly to the ground, folded its wings flat along its back, then rested its muzzle on a foreclaw. Its head alone was as big as a horse, and its flanks were like a muscular wall. Its spiked tail curled around behind me; I was encircled by the dragon.

"Well then," the dragon said. "Childe, from whence do you come?"

I considered lying. But somehow, lying was not appropriate. "From the court of King Kenneret."

The dragon lifted its head at that and stared intently at me. "Well. From the dragon slayer." Its voice stayed even; it didn't sound angry. "Were one to judge the state of Kenneret's court by the knight sent here by the king, one might draw certain conclusions."

I had no answer to that. The dragon was perfectly correct, after all.

"So, so, so," the dragon said, and snorted out a puff of grey smoke. "Dragons, Childe, are interested, above all things, in genealogy. So I begin with this. What is your name, Childe?"

"Kim," I said.

"Kimmeee," rumbled the dragon. It gave a slow double-lidded blink. "Kim. Is there more?"

I shook my head.

"There must be more," the dragon said. "What is the name of your mother?"

The early morning air was cold and clammy. To stay warm, I pulled up my legs and wrapped my arms around my knees. "Lady Darlyn. Her family was from Far Learning."

"Ah." The dragon shifted, its belly scales scraping against the ground. "Her family but not yours. And the name of your father?"

I shrugged. I didn't actually want to answer that question, at least not for this particular questioner.

The dragon talked with me for the rest of the day. I grew stiff, sitting huddled by the tree, so I got up to walk along the dragon's massive haunches and its belly stretched out along the ground, then gingerly past its toothy snout, and past the tail and around again. I knew a lot about dragons, from my reading. This one was an Evetrix Gloriosa, the noblest of all dragons. Its scales, I noticed, were dull, and it had patches of moss growing on its back. Its claw and foot-joints were knobbed with age. Every now and then it shifted, as if in pain. On one of my circuits I paused and rested my hand against its leg; its scales felt cool and brittle.

In its compelling voice it told me stories of great kings and queens, and glorious waving flags, and ladies with white hands beckoning their knights home after battle.

The dragon, I realized, was very, very old.

At last, as the sun set and the grey clouds gathered overhead, it grew tired. My own voice was hoarse from asking questions, and answering them.

"Well," the dragon said. "I will sleep now, Childe." It cocked a bristled eyebrow at me. "And I do not think you will run away. For on the morrow I shall need you to do something for me."

"I won't run away," I said.

The dragon sighed and laid its head on the ground, closed its eyes, and went to sleep.

I was cold, and damp, and I hadn't had anything to eat since the day before, and my horse was dead. I leaned against the tree all night, thinking, wondering what the dragon wanted

from me, exactly. Someone to listen to its stories? They were wonderful stories; I would listen as long as it wanted to tell them. As the sky lightened, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the forest around us was quiet and a light rain sifted down through the brown leaves, dropping from the ends of twisted branches.

The dragon was watching me through half-lidded eyes. "Know you, Kim," it said, "how Kenneret became king?"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. My stomach growled. "I--Yes," I said. "He slew a dragon that had settled at the castle. The last dragon that ever lived."

"You know this how?"

"I read it in the *Encyclopedia Draconis*. 'And Kenneret brave, killed the foul beast, that clawed serpent, who ravaged the land.'"

"This is not how it happened," the dragon said.

No, I supposed not.

"Hmmm," the dragon hummed. It sighed and flexed a claw. "You did not run away during the night, Kim."

"I said I wouldn't," I said.

"You are very brave."

I shook my head. I wasn't brave; I was a librarian. I was just too tired and hungry to run away. And I wanted to hear more stories.

"An issue could be made of your paternity," the dragon said.

I blinked. "What would be the point?" I asked. I knew my place in the court of King Kenneret.

"Ah," said the dragon. "Brave, noble, knowledgeable, wise. A perfect knight you are. It is good that you were the one he sent."

I was none of those things. "You expected him to send a knight?" I asked.

The dragon flexed its claws. "Sheep I have killed, and goats, too. This would be noticed, I thought."

So the dragon had wanted me to come. Or, not me, but somebody.

"So now," the dragon said, and it stretched its neck along the ground before me. "The knight you are, sent by the king. You must slay me."

I stumbled back until I was pressed against the tree trunk. "No."

"I am old," the dragon said. "And tired. A knowledgeable Childe are you, Kim. How must dragons die?"

I knew the answer to this question. Dragons did not die naturally; they just grew older and slower and wracked with pain, and they died only when they were tracked and killed by knights. And the knights who killed dragons, often enough, became kings.

“Kenneret did not adequately slay me,” the dragon said. “And you must finish it.”

I shook my head. “But you’re the last.”

The dragon blinked. “Think you so? Kenneret’s kingdom is small, Childe. Many are the dragons of the world.”

Many? I thought of all the dragons I had read about in the *Dragon Chronicles*, and in the *Kingdoms of the Wyrms*, and in the *Encyclopedia Draconis*.

“And this dragon’s time in the world is past,” the dragon went on. “My fires are going out and I grow cold. You must release me.”

I didn’t want to do it. But the dragon’s hollow voice compelled me. I stepped away from the tree and crossed the clearing to fetch my sword. Then I went back to stand before the dragon. Its neck was surprisingly slender, just a sapling of a neck; a sharp sword could cut through it in two, maybe three, blows.

I laid the bright edge of my blade against the dragon’s neck.

“A little to the left, dear Childe,” the dragon said.

I shifted the blade to the left.

I closed my eyes, and I saw myself lift my sword and bring it down on the dragon’s neck, chopping off its head, and after the blood drained away and stood in great stinking pools on the ground, going back to the village for a wagon, then returning to the clearing with a few stout men and loading the head--after shooing off the carrion birds--into the wagon bed, then trekking four days back to Kenneret’s castle, the head a stinking load, the flesh melting off the bone, the scales dull with death, the eyes sunken pits.

And at the court, what? Joy and welcome? Would the king mount the dragon’s head on a spike over the castle gate? Would there be feasting? Would I go down on one knee to feel the blessing of the king’s sword as it tapped first one shoulder, then the other, and rise a knight?

Opening my eyes, I lifted the blade and brought it down. The edge bit with a meaty *thunk* deep into the dragon’s neck. Carefully I raised the sword and struck again. This time, crunching through the neck bones. Black blood gushed out, splashing over my boots. I struck once more, and its head was freed from its body. Its tail twitched and its great hump of a body shifted, then settled into death.

After wiping the tears from my face, I took off my rusty chain mail and piled it on the ground; then I knelt and laid the bloodied sword before the dragon’s head.

I walked out of the clearing. At its edge, I stopped to look back. In the dim light, the dragon had already become part of the forest, its moss-covered back blending with the undergrowth, its tail like a fallen tree. I bent and wiped my bloody hands against the mossy ground. Then I walked out of the Stalkfleet forest, and I walked away from King Kenneret and his castle and his brave knights, and instead I went out into the wider world, to find the places where the dragons lived.



**About the Author:**

Sarah Prineas has a thing about dragons. For more proof of this, visit [www.sarah-prineas.com](http://www.sarah-prineas.com).

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