

Humphrin's Tale

Air Devil

Very well youngsters, I will tell the tale again, though most here have heard it:

We sighted the smoking island eight days south of Specularum and turned towards it, hoping to replenish our water. A dragon came from the island, flying to meet us, red as blood and thrice our length. We four companions stood to arms whilst the Alasians wailed. Well, if you haven't seen one, count your blessings – this worm would have withered you like leaves in a furnace. His wings were wind and flame, his body a barbed and glowing arrow. His eyes – we did not see his eyes. But we felt them. Yes! He passed over us once.

I had my magic ring, Paulelless his crossbow, Barlu his wizard's staff and Janus his shield. The dragon turned. He flung out his foreleg, talons raked the air. The world went black. Daylight turned to dark and out of the darkness the dragon struck. A gale of fire swept from stern to stem. I saw boards, rope, cloth, the bodies of men blossom into flame beneath his breath. I saw his wings outspread, lit up from the fires below. Then he was gone. The darkness filled with screams and flames.

Barlu spoke a counter-spell. His staff blazed and he opened a window of light with his outstretched arm. We saw the dragon high ahead, mounting the air with measured strokes. Paulelless lifted his bow and sent a bolt climbing after. The aim was true, but before it grazed his hide the missile vanished in a puff of flame.

"Alas" said Barlu, "Your weapons will not avail. Shelter yourselves. Withstand him while you may. I summon help." He raised his arms, palms outward, and spoke words of power. The dragon swept down on us again.

Fires leapt up, fanned by his wings and breath. Janus fell fainting to the deck. Paulelless, cursing, helped him to shelter. Sails fell blazing from the yards, the ship drifted. The terrified Alasians were scrambling into the sea. The dragon came again. Playing with us now, as cat plays with mouse. Hovering huge above us, I saw his hideous neck and head arch back while his wing beats fanned the flames. Then he spat venomous fire and the lookout fell headlong from the crow's nest, a living torch.

Through all this I felt only a warm breeze, since I wore the ring – the same that is still on my hand. But sight and sound scorched me that day, and while I live I shall not forget the sulphurous reek of the dragon, mingled with acrid smoke and the salt sea air. As the evil worm rose skyward I swore vengeance on him, I, Humphrin, smith of the dwarves. I called aloud that I would follow him to his lair, if I lived, and destroy him.

None heeded my words for I spoke in the dwarvish tongue. Men were screaming and crying all around. But Barlu stood, his arms still raised, staring into the sea. I followed his gaze. Half a bowshot from the ship the waves ran back in a welter of foam and a whale's back broke the surface, two dolphins close behind. Strange green figures grasped their glistening sides. Figures scaled like fish, with webbed feet and pale staring eyes – nay, doubt me not! Who among you has sailed the southern ocean where Tritons dwell? The tallest of the three, he who rode the whale's back, stood up. In one hand he held a shining trident, studded with pearls, trailing weed from the sea. His other hand he raised in friendship. Then he spoke. I heard no sound but his message formed in my mind. **"Leave the ship!"** he commanded. **"Into the sea at once or you will die!"** I stared. Paulelless too. Our armour would drag us down. Then the dragon swooped again. With a cry of rage he assailed the sea creatures with breath and claw. From the trident came a radiant blast and the monster turned aside. Deftly he plucked one dolphin rider from its mount, clutching it in taloned claws. Great wings bore him up. The triton writhed like a fish in a hawk's grip. Then the snake neck coiled back and teeth like iron bars fastened in the body, it was devoured. A hideous croak floated back over the water.

Once more the dragon turned. Where whale and dolphins were before now only the Sea King's head and trident topped the waves and again I heard his voiceless cry - **"Jump! Into the sea! Make haste!"** Immediately Barlu plunged over the side and I followed. Strange – from a blazing daylight of noise and fear we sank into a cool green quietness where every movement made a graceful dance. In that moment I forgot the dragon, my companions, even forgot to breathe. I looked up and saw the belly of the ship, boards, barnacles, just above, and all around stretched a wondrous roof – a circle of blue and gold, which moments before had been the floor of my world and my horizon.

I looked below and saw a marvel. Light slanted downward through the shining canopy above and in its beams I saw the great whale, majestic, dark. Upon his back the Sea King stood erect. Beside him and behind rank upon rank of dolphin riders formed his royal guard. Then from the enchanted sceptre that he bore there came a glittering cloud. It rose around us like a veil, hiding the scene below. A thousand tiny bubbles burst against my face, my mouth opened and I gasped in air. No ordinary air, but fresh, invigorating, every limb tingled.

The cloud passed. I looked about me and saw two of my companions. Barlu floated above, black robes billowing. My helm and armour drew me down, and Janus sank beside me, still clutching his tarnished shield. Others were all around. We passed out of our world and into another by the power of the Triton King. Still he glided below us, and from his hand clouds of air rose to fill our lungs. The ship's hull floated far above and as I watched the water round it churned to fury. Slowly she rolled, turning belly up. Then, as the dragon savaged her again, the charred hulk opened, spilling cargo and ballast after what was left of her crew. Only broken timbers remained, and long after they were lost to sight I saw the dragon's fire flicker over them like summer lightning.

Sea People

How shall I describe that city? It rose around us like a submarine forest, towers, arches and domes. Strange and wonderful to a dwarf, or to any traveller from the world above. The soaring turrets of many coloured stone seemed to hang like ropes in the luminous twilight. Great pillars rose hundreds of feet, then blossomed like flowers into platforms and galleries, marvellously carved. There were bridges and spires seemingly woven of gossamer, but as we passed close I saw they were wrought of stone like polished jade, green or coral pink or gleaming pearl, and each column was formed of delicate filaments interwoven in bewildering patterns. Beauty was there to gladden any craftsman's heart, and yet such strangeness that I felt for the first time the wonder and terror of our position. We had escaped the dragon, to be sure, but what were the true intentions of our rescuers? Would they suffer strangers to gaze on their hidden city and live? We had not long to wait for an answer.

In a great courtyard shaped and patterned like a shell the Sea King waited. His subjects thronged the arena, Tritons of all kinds, their warriors, their women and their young. They wore no garments, only the scaly armour which seemed their natural skin. Some bore weapons. Many were mounted on dolphins or on the strange and beautiful sea horses called Hippocampi. A space was left open before the royal dais and in it we alighted one by one. Soon we were gathered, those that were left of us, a score of frightened men and one wondering dwarf. Only Barlu seemed unperturbed. I saw him reach into the billowing folds of his robes and draw forth an indescribable lump. It was his pet raven, Crow. I had forgotten the bird, and had I not I would have supposed it roasted in fire or fled far away. But a Wizard and his familiar are seldom parted. As things turned out, that was fortunate. His long sensitive fingers gentled its neck until it lifted its head and made a vain attempt to ruffle its feathers. My human companions and I were out of place underwater, and it was worse for the raven. Sensing things were not as he might wish the bird gave a convulsive leap, attempting to fly, with feathers streaming around him like lank hair. He managed only a few despairing flaps

before colliding with a nearby Triton who respectfully returned him. Barlu inclined his head with thanks and held the raven firmly to his chest. Then the Sea King spoke.

"People of Air, you are welcome here." As before, it was a voice without words, but we all knew it for the King's. His round eyes rested on us and we did not stir.

"Our sceptre has protected you until now, and made the water safe for you to breathe. Now you must breathe differently, for the airy water is a discomfort to my people." He motioned with his hand and young females came gliding towards us, each bearing a glistening ball the size of a plum. "These are Pearls of Power. As long as you hold them you will not drown, and no subjects of mine will harm you. Guard them well." A pearl was given to each of us and at once the vaporous clouds of air ceased to flow from the King's trident. I held the pearl close to my lips lest his promise proved false, but I breathed as easily as before. Without the mist of bubbles clouding our sight we stood spellbound in that unearthly place. All around us hung a multitude of sea creatures, more numerous and varied than you could imagine. He spoke again.

"We have broken our long custom to answer your summons. Sea people and air people can only mingle at time of great need. In this hour we will do what we can for you, but soon you must return to the waterless waste above. The great Devil of Air that assailed you is also our enemy. His home is a black mountain, which rises higher than the sea six leagues to the east. The creature delights in murdering our people, so we seldom dare to dance among the waves by moonlight as we used. He strikes without warning from above, and his magic is greater than our own. You saw how he took and killed my servant. Such deeds go un-avenged. Were it possible I would lead an army to drive him from his dark hall or destroy him. But we cannot leave the sea. Now even the waters around his dark mountain grow dark. Evil things dwell there and our people venture there no more. So you may understand that we rejoice to cheat him of your lives, even at a price. A choice is now before you:

Three days journey to the south stand more of the wave high mountains you call islands. Air people live there, though their skin is darker than your own. We can take you there, if so you choose, or deliver you to a ship faring north if you now wish to return whence you came. We have knowledge of all that pass over our kingdom, for our messengers are many and swift. Which way will you go? You cannot stay here."

"We do not wish to."

A new voice, strange and yet familiar. I realised with a start that it came from Barlu, his lips were still, but it was he. The King motioned him forward and he took three cautious steps, one arm out-thrust for balance while the other still clasped the miserable raven. "Your Majesty, we are more than grateful, we have no wish to trouble you further. I am Barlu, a wizard. Since my companions speak with the voice alone I think I must answer for us all." The King shook his head.

"They may choose for themselves. They have only to speak into their pearls and their voices will be heard." There was a moments silence, then a babble broke out from the Alasians, evidently quick to test his words.

I paid them no heed. I held the shining globe to my lips and said what was in my heart.

"Lord King, you offer us escape, either north or south. There is another choice. I, Humphrin, smith of the dwarves, have sworn vengeance on the foul dragon you call a devil of air. Whither my companions now go is for them to say, but my way is clear."

A hush had fallen and my words seemed to fill that vast arena. "Show me the way to the devil's mountain."

Valdan began gabbling to the rest of the crew, doubtless translating my words to their tongue. I glanced at my friends and spoke in a lower tone.

"Shall I go alone?"

They made no answer. Janus shook his head in astonished horror. The King spoke.

“Son of Earth, choose again. You are valiant, but how could you, alone, hope to defeat such an enemy?”

I had made my vow, and would not turn aside. A fire was in my heart, banishing fear.

“My choice is made. Barlu, Paulelless, are you with me, or must our ways part here?”

After a moments hesitation Barlu answered. His voice was quiet.

“I am with you, Humphrin. Our ways will not part yet, for I think you may need me.”

I turned to Paulelless. The fighter stood, balancing his scabbarded sword in his two hands.

“Not without my robe” he said at last. “I left it on the ship.”

Barlu faced the King.

“The dwarf’s plan is not as hopeless as it may seem. We three are champions of our kind, with skills and magic items which could help us to victory. I have spells with which to challenge the monster’s own. Humphrin has a magic ring to protect him from fire. Paulelless has a magic sword of great power. Perhaps we were sent to deliver your people from this enemy, as you delivered us. One thing is wanting, to give us the best hope of success. A magic Robe of Blending, also belonging to Paulelless.”

“Let the fighter speak. Where is your magic robe?”

“It was in the ship, in my sea chest. I was not wearing it when the dragon struck. Perhaps it has sunk to the sea floor. Can you take me to where the cargo now lies? It may be there.”

“The King’s hands moved in silent command. A squadron of dolphin riders rose and darted off through the still water, so swiftly that in twenty seconds they were lost to sight.

“If it has not been destroyed, the robe will be returned to you. Now hear us. Humphrin and Barlu, you shall go to Devil’s Mountain, and if his robe is found the fighter shall go with you. The others will wait. Some are wounded and all need rest. You must go at once, and none of my people will go with you. I deem this folly. It is against my counsel. If you should succeed, the devil’s hoard is great, and the people of the sea will not leave such a deed unrewarded. But I fear you will fail. If by next moonrise you have not returned, we will suppose you slain, and those remaining will make the choices of which I spoke. Do you agree?”

I nodded and there was a mutter of assent from the rest. The Sea King seemed less than grateful for my resolve, but I cared not, my business was with the dragon. I remember a Triton maiden pushing some strange undersea fruit into my mouth, and I bit and sucked the juice. It was not unpleasant, but strangely flavoured, like sour wine. They were all around us now, the sea people, gazing at us with their pale eyes. One of them pressed a scarlet weed to Janus’ blistered arm and his face softened in relief. A maiden brought green and purple flowers to hang round my neck. I tried to show her I was unhurt, but she paid no heed. Then the dolphin riders returned. They brought no cloak, only two tarnished steel hinges, the only remains of a sea chest. Paulelless examined them without a word, and his face was that of a man struck a sudden and mortal wound on the field of battle. I went to him and held out my right hand, while my left pressed the pearl to my lips.

“Comrade, fate would have it so. Look after Janus. If I don’t return, go to my people. Tell them how I died.”

He nodded. Then slowly unbuckled his magic sword, the heirloom of his house, and put it in my hands.

“Good luck.”

I belted the scabbard across my back, as it was overlong for my waist.

“Thank you.” We embraced and parted.

Although he would not allow his people to be our guides the Sea King gave us swift dolphin mounts, which carried Barlu and I east until we saw the mountain rise ahead. Here and there the sea floor was covered with a thick growth of matted weed, similar to kelp. Our dolphins avoided the weed but stayed close to the sea bottom. Perhaps they were afraid of being seen by something – we did not find out what. At the base of the mountain they halted and would go no further. As we dismounted I noticed their sides were trembling. Barlu stroked his dolphin’s back, then turned to me.

“A spell of Fear has been laid on the waters around this mountain. It affects them but not us. And there is something else, they are trying to warn us, I must concentrate.”

He knelt for a moment, gazing into his dolphin’s small and frightened eye.

“It is the weed”, he said at last. “Something to do with the weed. We must avoid it.”

He dismissed the dolphins with a wave and they vanished like ghosts in the shadowy sea.

Avoiding the weed did not prove easy. It formed a great ring around the base of the mountain as far as eye could see. There was no time to search for a gap. Instead, Barlu jumped upwards, then swam, intending to pass over it. He had tucked Craw into his voluminous robe so that both hands were free. But the heavy folds hampered him. He only just cleared the weed, brushing lightly against its swaying fronds. A shiver ran through the whole clump and several snake like arms shot out to coil round his legs. I was in mid jump and swiftly drew my sword. My descent seemed much too slow. Several fronds were already groping towards me. Then Barlu lifted his hands, which had been busy at his belt. I noticed he grasped some small round objects. His lips moved. At once the menacing tentacles lost their air of purpose. They seemed confused. He was able to struggle free as I alighted safely nearby. With all my strength I struck with my sword at the nearest fronds. To my surprise, I overbalanced, falling flat on the sandy ocean floor. Barlu caught me by a leg and pulled me clear of the quivering weed. Ruefully I sheathed my sword and as we laboured together up the mountain I silently swore to attempt no more swordplay till my feet rested once more on dry land. Underwater I was as helpless as the wizard’s crow.

Fire and Ice

Up on the black slopes of Devil’s Mountain, the wind was sharp and cold. Our wet garments clung to legs and arms, hindering our movement. Before us the summit reared against a grey and threatening sky. It was evening and on the western horizon bands of dark cloud were rimmed with red like fading embers. The icy wind and the heavy clouds piling above us spoke of gathering storm, but wind and water were not the elements we feared. My fingers strayed ever to my ring, seeking reassurance. Somewhere ahead of us the fire Drake lay in wait.

Ever since I dragged myself out of the water and began the aching climb, dread had been growing on me. Barlu’s face was a white mask in the dim light, and his shivering, I thought, was not all from the cold. Terrible as the dragon had seemed in full view and broad daylight, he was yet more daunting at the days end, lurking unseen, as we stood at the very threshold of his lair. It seemed his eyes were already on us, that he watched every step we took, waiting only the perfect moment to attack. There was nowhere on that

barren slope where such a huge beast could lie concealed, but our foreboding grew. Eventually Barlu halted, leaning on his staff and breathing hard. Then he spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"We have come far enough. The dragon is aware of us. I feel his malevolent regard. He is near us, very near..."

He drew another shuddering breath. Despite my lower stature I had set him a hard pace. We now stood far above the wind lashed sea and the slope had grown less steep. Looking up I saw a great shelf or terrace some way ahead, and behind it a patch of deeper darkness. I pointed without words. Barlu peered uncertainly in the gloom. His eyes were sharp enough, but they were no match for mine.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Not the dragon?"

"Not the worm, but his hole!"

Even as I spoke my night vision grew sharper. I saw it clearly now, hardly sixty paces ahead, a dark crack in the mountainside. Hot coils of vapour issued out and were borne away on the wind.

"The worm must be inside. I see his reeking breath."

My fear and uncertainty fell away.

"He sleeps, Barlu, he sleeps! We have him!"

My voice had risen in hope but my companion silenced me with a warning hand. His reply was a worried whisper.

"If the monster sleeps, let him do so. If he is awake, the quieter we keep the longer we may live. Something is near. Nearer than the bottom of that black hole, and wide-awake, or I'm an apprentice.

"Then let us at least make for a place of shelter!"

All my former unease had come rushing back, and I longed for the safety of that narrow opening as a drowning man longs for solid ground beneath his feet. Desperately I clutched at the wizard's robe, and something moved beneath my hand. There was a muffled croak, and suddenly Barlu was rummaging at his breast, his face twisted by mingled exasperation and relief.

"Of course!" he muttered, and offered me a smile. "I was forgetting Craw. He should be our scout, he has the wings for it."

Barlu lifted the raven on his wrist and the unlovely bird carefully shook out each bedraggled wing. He cocked his head, apparently delighted to be on dry land once more. As Barlu murmured softly to him, he fastened beady eyes on his master. Then, as the wizard threw out his arm, Craw spread his wings and flew. A moment later he was a dark speck, borne high on the rising wind. Then he screamed, one harsh cry of fierce defiance, and like a terrible echo there came a croaking roar that shook the mountain underfoot. A monstrous head with eyes like blazing coals was lifted against the sky, and what I had taken for a ridge of black stone suddenly shook itself free and became a red gold dragon, glowing like a beacon.

There he had lain, concealed above us, guarding the entrance of his lair. Another ten paces would have taken us onto the open shelf at his feet, and there he would have lashed us with a gale of fire, which Barlu would never have survived. We were forewarned, but his rage was dreadful. From his jaws a jet of flame shot upwards and we saw Craw silhouetted in its glare. He turned and veered away with a derisive screech, speeding down the wind towards the far side of the island. If the dragon had been intent on us he seemed now to forget us. Shouting in fury he opened huge wings and sprang into the sky. For one instant every

standing stone was bathed in lurid light, as if a comet came to earth. He swept after the raven. The glow faded. The shadows swung, lengthened and were gone.

“Now!” shouted Barlu. “Run for it!”

He raced for the black opening, and I sprinted after. A ghostly radiance gathered around his staff, lighting our way. Never has sixty paces seemed so far. As we neared our goal, I saw the orange glow on the rocks heralding the dragon’s return. At the same moment a yawning gulf opened before us. The ground had run level to within a spear’s throw of the cave. Then, as a final barrier, a wide ravine blocked our path. It was eight feet across, and its depth could not be guessed. I have never loved to jump. Barlu cleared it in one giant bound but I came to a sudden halt.

A furnace glare lit the mountainside and I saw the dragon above me stooping like a fiery bird of prey. With every ounce of strength I hurled my body upward and out. My legs fell short, but my fingers caught and clutched the further side. Barlu dragged me up and into the mouth of the cave even as great talons clashed where I had been. Then the gust of awful wings sent us sprawling. A hideous scream pealed in our ears and scorching flame filled the cave mouth. Barlu dived for cover. What had become of the raven I didn’t like to think, but certainly we now had the monster’s undivided attention. My courage rising in the narrow entrance, I turned to face him, drawing my sword. I meant to buy a little time at least for Barlu to find shelter.

The worm had alighted on the shelf of rock we had just crossed. Such was his length that while his head thrust over the ravine his barbed tail reached the further slope fifty paces behind. His huge eyes fastened on mine and for a moment I was frozen, helpless. His jaws opened, as if to engulf me in flame, but there came only a gust of foul air. Briefly his brightness dimmed, and the charm of his gaze was broken.

“The fool!”

Barlu was calling from behind.

“His fire is spent! Now there is hope indeed! Back Humphrin! I will bar his way!”

As I fled back the wizard drew from his garments a piece of white quartz and held it high. The stone sparkled and grew. I reached his side, as, with a phrase of sonorous command, he hurled it into the opening I had just left. As it flew it seemed to vanish - then air itself turned white. A wall of ice ran from roof to floor, blocking the dragon’s way. I stared in wonder. Barlu spoke now with grim satisfaction.

“That will hold him for some time. He must break the ice without his fiery breath, which will cost him pain, or wait while it returns. Fourteen years I have spent perfecting it. The wall is thick.”

As we watched, the orange glow of the dragon loomed bright against the far side of the wall and a huge claw beat upon it. The sound of the blow echoed like thunder in the cave and outside the monster screamed with pain and fury.

“Let’s explore while we may!”

Holding his bright staff high he set off down the sloping tunnel. Sheathing my sword I followed.

The Heart of the Mountain

The passage ran dark and narrow, deep into the mountain’s heart. I would hardly have believed that great beast could have squeezed his way in, were it not for his stench all about us, and the rocks on either side

worn smooth by his passing. At last it opened wider, but the way grew steep and we were forced to hug the walls to avoid slipping. Below us was no longer darkness but a baleful glare growing ever brighter. As we stumbled and slithered we heard the dragon still snarling above and the muted thunder of his blows against the ice. Then a cold trickle at our feet caused me to check in alarm. I reached down to discover the cause. Barlu also paused, but just for a moment.

“Only water”, he said. “The ice melts. Make haste”

At last we entered a huge cavern, its walls vanishing in darkness far above. Here was the source of the strange glare. A pool of bright lava lay between mounds of ash, casting a red light round. Between it and us was a level floor more than a hundred paces wide, and covering that whole expanse was the dragon’s hoard.

Words cannot convey it. You could not imagine it, not in your utmost dreams of avarice. I gaped and Barlu stood spellbound, leaning on his staff. A great armada might have been looted to lay that costly bed, or an imperial treasury despoiled. On every side lay coins, goblets, coats of mail, helms, daggers, necklaces and precious stones, like gravel on a beach.

Even as we stared there came a rending sound from the tunnel above, followed by a clear triumphant cry. The barrier was broken. Now a rumbling and rustling came from the tunnel, growing louder.

“He is coming” said Barlu. “What now?”

“Another wall?”

“The spell is not easy to repeat. If it succeeded at all it would not hold him long.”

“Then I will fight him here!”

“I see no other way. Strike as the head emerges, before wings and forelegs are free. Aim where he is weakest, put out an eye if you can. I will aid you.”

I nodded and waited. The cold trickle of water from the tunnel was now a warm torrent swirling at my feet. A hot wind came in my face. Barlu found shelter behind a buttress of stone twenty paces off and began searching the components at his belt. The rumour of the dragon grew to a thrumming roar, the tunnel wall glowed bright and the flow of water at my feet abated. Then he came.

As his head shot out, just level with my own, a huge yellow eye came at me, slitted like a cat’s. I swung my sword and felt the blade bite deep. The weapon was almost snatched from my grasp, but I hauled it back and heard him cry in pain. Whether I lived or died, I had wounded the monster and was glad.

His first rush carried him clear of the tunnel’s mouth. I had little time to wonder at his speed, for in a moment his whole body was clear and he sprang far out onto the cavern floor, his huge body pulsing with flame, his tail lashing and his wings outspread.

Behind him came another rush of water.

He screamed again, with one eye darkened. His head lunged toward me, but not within sword’s reach. A storm of fire surrounded me. I stood unharmed. Realising the power of the ring he called on magic of his own. Sudden darkness, in which the mountain heaved beneath us and I blindly awaited death. Then a luminous globe appeared in the air behind the dragon’s head. Barlu had used a spell of light. It had not blinded the creature, but at least I saw him now, almost close enough to strike.

From the far end of the cavern came a pall of steam, and an enormous sound that drowned the dragon's rage. As I fought him, water was fighting fire, and the cavern reeled.

The dragon seemed alarmed. I advanced and reaching his flank I lunged two handed, burying my blade in his glowing hide. Great talons seized me, and teeth like swords descended. Blue lightning seared the air and struck the gaping mouth before it could reach me. Barlu again. The talons opened, spilling me among treasures. Then the floor tilted. A fissure opened, filled with livid light. A mound of coins sank in and vanished. Lava flowed out, running around me as I staggered to my feet.

It is well that the ring protects not only flesh and blood, but the wearers clothes, armour and weapons. Around me gold and steel were dissolved while oaken chests burst into flame. Still I defied him, sword in hand. Then, as the chamber tilted back the flow of lava ceased, and I felt the cooling stone harden around my ankles. I was trapped, and the dragon, recovering his wits, eyed me again with hatred. I do not know which pained him more, his lost treasure or the wounds I had inflicted. It was clear he was angered now beyond caution.

He came at me again - again blue lightning flared. The spell was weaker now, and the dragon seemed unscathed. Seeing the direction from which it came he turned on Barlu, withering him with a fading jet of flame. Once more his fire was spent. And somehow my friend found strength enough for one last spell. The stone that held my ankles changed to yielding mud. The dragon sprang to where he lay, to rend and devour what remained. Freed from the stone I pursued. Then the mountain spoke its own last word - Annihilation!

I cannot know for certain how it happened. But Dwarves know earth and stone, as elves know leaf and forest. I guess some of the melted ice trickled down, through cracks and fissures in the rock, till it reached deep chambers of fire. The sudden rush of steam could not be contained and shook the mountain, opening a sudden path for those great furnaces below to vent their awful rage. Dragon and hoard were gone. The mountain was destroyed.

By a strange chance, or by the saving powers of the ring, I lived to tell this tale. Sea People found me, floating, took me back to their city and healed all my hurts. They rewarded me richly for the death of the dragon, as the Sea King had promised. I shared their gifts with Janus and Paulelless. The fighter had given up his sword for lost, since I was found without it. But he grieved more for Barlu. And then the sword was found, lying undamaged on the ocean floor.

That is the whole tale youngsters. Don't ask for it again too soon. Let others talk awhile. There are many tales.

Robert Jenkin, 2003