

WELTHERON
THE WINTER DESTINY

By
J. J. P. THOMAS

This book is a work of fiction.

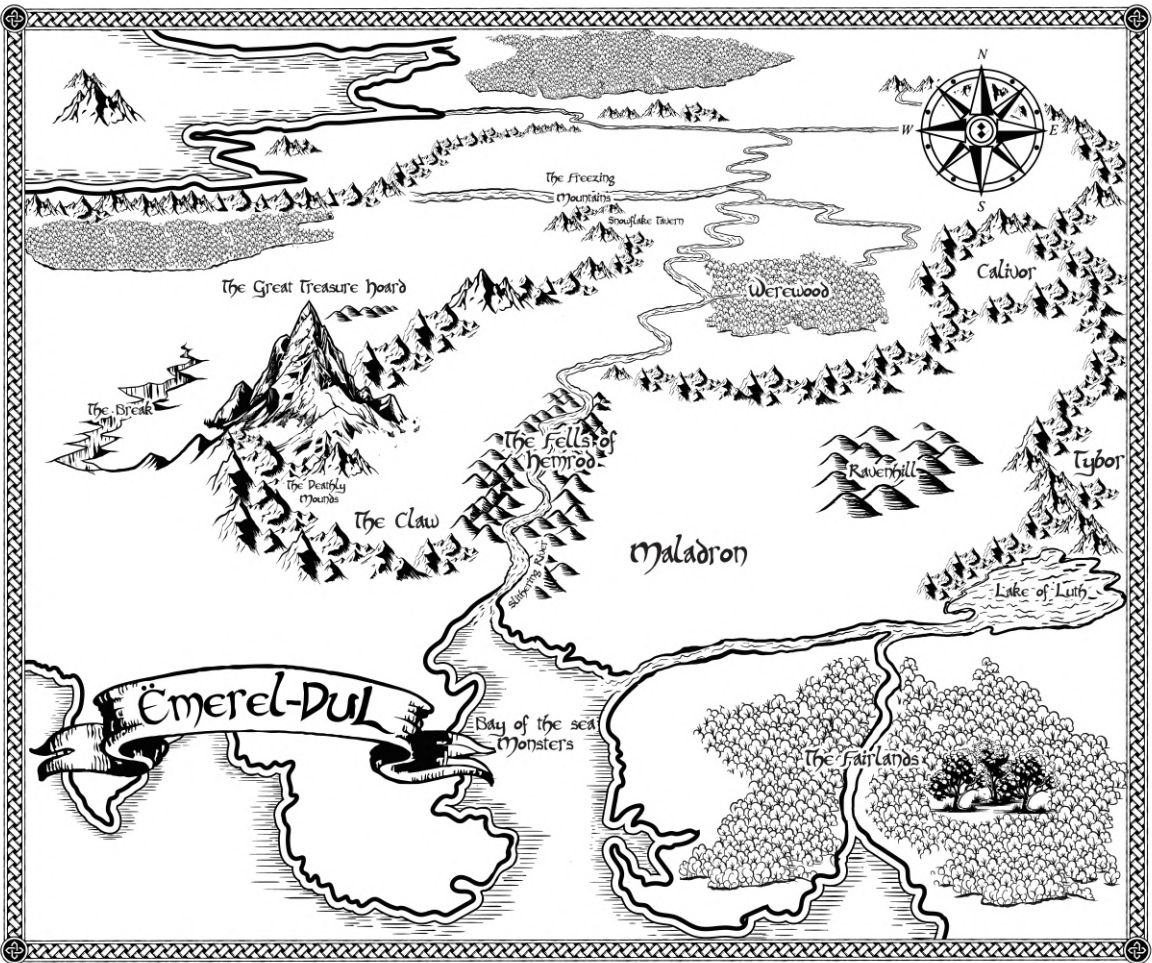
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I'm dedicating this book to my brother, John.



Author's Note

As a kid, there was a time when I felt pain and fear looking down on me like a bully. Self-doubt became a familiar companion as I sought to find my way in life. One of the ways I dealt with this was through my imagination, which, fueled by my desire to write, allowed my creativity to manifest itself and flow from my pen onto paper. What evolved was a far-off place, a world where I felt safe and where the creatures and beings became almost real to me. In this world, I witnessed tales of villains and protagonists who took me on adventures as they fought with swords, sailed the high seas, and nearly escaped dire circumstances. All these adventures continuously played out in my head, even as I grew older.

But then, there awakened another kind of creature in my world. This newborn did not immediately take shape; rather, what manifested itself afore was its voice, which breathed words of cruelty and malice. These burned like dragon fire, and that is exactly what this creature revealed itself to be.

Growing up, my parents always reminded me of the old saying, such as sticks and stones, and to be the bigger person when it came to facing bullies. But this time, I was dealing with an entirely different bully, one that, in my world, I called Emerel-DUL and was impossible to stop. "No, no!" I thought. "I can't have such a creature! It will destroy everything and cannot be tamed."

To make matters worse, a fairly similar creature had also begun to take shape. It was another breed of dragon, and the odds for the protagonists in my story now seemed all but hopeless.

However, to my astonishment, something unexpected started to unfold. This other breed of dragon wasn't like its predecessors. It did not breathe fire, nor did it lust after gold. Unlike other dragons, it exhaled a frigid and cold matter, like frost that turned to ice. Eagerly, I sought to figure out what spawned the idea of this eccentric beast.

I hoped there were more like it, but there was only one. *Why weren't there more? I wondered, and how did this benevolent beast come about if not from those like it?* Peering deeper into my thoughts that were meticulous yet unresolving, the only thing for me to do was go on this adventure and see what this dragon was about and what role he would play in my story.

—J. J. P. Thomas

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◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆

A SECRET MEETING

Snowflake Tavern was a place found up amid the freezing mountain slopes of Stone-Cold Pass. It was an establishment not many common folks visited or knew existed. The only customers that visited within a certain frequency were dwarves who had mines and those high up in the mountains. There were many of them, and most would trade their gold and silver for pints of ale or a warm, cozy bed at night. It was a great escape from the laborious and tiresome work their kind did on a regular basis.

The inn was hewn into the side of the mountain. Its exposed exterior was a hand-sawn beech with a limestone footing. Snowflake, as others called it for short, rose three stories high, clutching the side of the mountain. Above the entrance was a sign that obviously bore the mark of the snowflake, but now it was half frozen over with ice. The front door was hammered with iron hinges and a handle, with a neat, round window perched above it. Just inside was a large room with wooden walls and ancient beams angling up to the ceiling. To the right was a bar to purchase a drink, food, or room for the night. To the left was a stone fireplace with a kindled fire. Many were huddled around it, warming their hands.

There were all manner of voices throughout the chamber. All the dwarves sang the renowned lay that was oft sung in Snowflake Tavern. It went thus:

WELTHERON - THE WINTER DESTINY

The dwelling to stay, where the ale's an upgrade,
Is up in Snowflake Tavern!

For days and days, we've toiled away
Till we're all but spent and famished.

If it weren't for Jack, we'd be in shaft
In every hall and cavern, but instead, we're snug
With a cupful mug up in Snowflake Tavern!

What keeps the brutal cold at bay? One would say
It's as if it were magic.

It matters not; we're served with draught
And every comfort of home.

So if you're lost, it's worth the cost to stay
Up at Snowflake Tavern!

The dwarves of those mountains had a certain knack for devising lays and sang them merrily throughout the evening. Amidst the dwarves sat an old man cloaked in black. Some of his visage was not concealed by his hood. A long, hoary beard ran down his chest. He sat at a table by himself near a window covered in sleet from the outside.

It was half past midnight. The stranger had come a long way and signaled for a server who was a dwarf maiden. The old man asked if he could see the innkeeper.

When the server returned with the innkeeper, the old man stood up and, at the same time, drew back his hood. The innkeeper was immediately taken aback with dismay. "Casmin, is it verily you?" gasped the innkeeper.

"I'm glad you still remember me, Jack Winter," replied the old man, whose name was now revealed as Casmin. Once removing his hood, the old man too let fall his long grey hair. "Unlike me, I see you have kept your youthfulness in tact."

"That will be all, Frel," said Jack, nodding to the server. The innkeeper looked as if he had seen thirty or more years, but in truth, like his friend, he was ages old. Like his customers, he was the height and build of a dwarf, yet he was better looking. Jack had short, scraggly, blondish hair along with a unique mustache and goatee under his chin. His eyes, which held an intense gaze, were deep blue.

For an innkeeper, he often fashioned doublet clothing that went well with his brown leather pants. His shirt was made of wool and was royal blue. This was his favorite color, and the sleeves and collar of his garment were trimmed in white sheepskin. On his feet, he wore leather boots that came to a point on the toecaps of both.

Now facing up at Casmin, the innkeeper pitched his apron, and when he did, one saw that he wore a white belt around his waist with a golden buckle, and around his neck, he donned a vibrant amulet. This was of a silver-plated snowflake.

"Bring us back some ale," added Jack, who dismissed Frel. Casmin sat back down. To him, the seats were like stools, whereas to Jack and the rest of the customers, they were normal size. Taking a seat as well, Jack asked Casmin, "How did you find me?"

Now reverting almost to a whisper, the old man leaned down and remarked, "I figured the best place to find a 'Frost Master' is where things are bitter cold." Then Casmin's tone of voice turned to worry: "What have you done, Jack? You were only supposed to keep an eye on that hive. Instead, you go and alter one of these creatures' offspring. How and why did you carry out such a risky task?"

At hearing this, Jack leaned in to plead his case to his friend. "My actions may have seemed hasty, but don't worry, I only did it

to one of the eggs. I put it back in the nest without anyone noticing."

"Just because our creator, Semper, hasn't spoken to us in ages doesn't mean that he hasn't been watching what we magicians do down here as his wielding hands. You're playing with fire, Jack, and that is not safe, particularly for you."

"Maybe I am, old friend, or just maybe there is a chance that things will unfold as I have foreseen. What I saw in future outcomes was the renaissance of destiny—a rebirth, if you will. Don't you remember the ancient prophecies? There is one that describes my point best," and he began to recite such a truth to Casmin. *"For every age, there shall arise an offspring, naught from noble clan will the destined ascend nor from highborn throne will they stand, but from the weakened state to renew what has been flawed from whence their journey began."*

"How are we even sure what you've just told me is even related to the problem we now face? Asked Casmin.

Just then, Frel walked by with a jug of ale and two mugs. She poured both Jack and Casmin a cup. Jack took a long sip from his mug. "Thank you, Frel. You can leave the jug; I have a feeling we'll finish it before the night is over." Once the dwarf maiden left again, Jack continued. "If such a creature fulfills its destiny, this threat can be neutralized, and isn't that our job, to keep the peace in the land?"

"What I am against is gambling with the rest of the world hanging in the balance. If this creature does not heed its destiny once it is fully grown, it may become an even greater threat to this realm.

"Oh, don't be such a downer... But yes, if the offspring does decide to go rogue for the wrong reasons, then I will have to be the one to put it down."

"And why is that?" asked Casmin, taking a sip from his mug.

"Because now, such a creature shares my magic."

As he said this, Casmin choked on his drink and angrily retorted, "Are you mad?!"

"When last I checked, no, old friend," answered Jack, setting his cup down.

"Then you must be crazy! Our powers are sanctioned only for ourselves. All we are allowed to do is manipulate and enhance with our magic. Damn you, Jack! I fear you have just made things even more complicated. I also came to discuss with you another matter of great importance." Again gazing about to make sure no one was listening, Casmin whispered, "Regrettably, there is more than just altering destinies at stake here. One of our order has gone missing. I'm sure you remember Ganther, the one called Shadow Walker. When I came to call on him the same as you, his dwelling concealed in the east was abandoned. I fear something terrible has gone ill. I tried searching the past for him, but because of his magic concealment, all I could see was black and nothing more. Without Ganther, a great deal of questions are left unanswered. He is the only other piece we need to stand a chance at repelling this newly-hatched evil... and to figure out if your scheme, Jack, is a hindrance or a solution to the future. You may have seen promising things, but what really matters now is the outcome."

AN UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTER

A dark and menacing mountain rose higher than any other in the west and was seen by all for miles around—by men who feared that this dark fiend on the horizon held an abyss of lava. Lords in great halls and people in villages heard it roar like thunder, and others had seen it spit fire. No man, woman, or child lingered in that direction. None dared to cross what they called ‘The Fells of Hemrod,’ a terrain of peaks that shielded the lands east where this realm of men called Maladron lay. However, what the humans did not know was that this terrifying mountain was not of their world. It was, in truth, a giant meteor that had fallen from the sky ages ago, even before the first men in Ëmerel-DUL, but to them, that world was not called Ëmerel-DUL. It was Aranstand, the derivation of the name of King Aran, who was the first king to ever rule Maladron.

This vast mountain’s outer crust was a glassy black, similar to that of obsidian stone. It was, at one time, part of a planet—a dying planet, in fact. And now it was a hoard (a Great Treasure Hoard) and home to dragons. Yes, dragons had come to live within this mass of rock, in which caverns were hewn all across the outer face of its climb. Stone as rare as this mysteriously held rich deposits of gold and gems and was worth more than several kings’ ransoms.

A mountain of this magnitude sheltered a couple hundred firedrakes at a time. Each dragon had its own hold or claim, and it

didn't have to go on raids because it was already filthy rich. Every one of these beasts was neither monstrous nor small. They were neither foul nor ugly, and all of them bore webbed ears and fashioned armor—scales from the neck down.

Every year around autumn, this spawn multiplied (and not just a few, but dozens at a time). There was a particular household of dragons: Ranaer the Brown and Garthayn the grey, with Ranaer as the father and Garthayn as the mother. They were both mated together. This pair would mate for the eighth time, and over the years, they had borne over ninety young. Most were fully grown by now and lived in different sections of the mountain. This horde of dragons had not raided for a decade, and instead, they long sat on their existing treasure and chose to enjoy it.

With the passage of time, the eggs of Ranaer and Garthayn began to hatch, leaving only the last in line. Like the others, the shell of this last egg possessed a lustrous, glass-like exterior. Only it was white, and it tossed and turned until it finally hatched. From the shell emerged a small dragonling that was as white as snow. The parents were perplexed when they saw this. Dragon eggs bore a palette of colors—red, brown, orange, purple, green, and blue—but the pristine shade of white remained a never-seen rarity among them.

Garthayn went over to inspect their newborn. It was, without doubt, a male dragonling. Instantly, it sneezed, and when it did, it didn't spurt flame; rather, out came a cloud of frost that turned to ice when it hit the ground. The parents, upon witnessing this, were bewildered. They didn't know what to think of their newborn. Ranaer was anxious. "Should we tell someone?" he asked. "This has never happened before, and the horde might protest against a white, frost-breathing dragon."

"They will find out soon enough," remarked Garthayn. "It should not make any difference. He's one of us and is special. I

would never cast aside or maroon one of our own just because they are different.” And with that, Garthayn, taking hold of her newborn, said to Ranaer, “I will call him Aldasear the White, for that is a fitting name for him, and he wears it well.”

Ranaer concurred, and both parents cuddled with their newborn.

Several months passed, and all the dragonlings were now young dragons, including Aldasaer. Despite the fact that he was the runt of the clutch, he had grown considerably. The young dragon, since, spawned armor of his own that shimmered like that of silver-white, and the irises of his eyes were deep blue, like sapphires. One might say Aldasear was exceedingly passive by nature. When he realized he was different and not like other dragons, he saw this contrast as a weakness.

There was also the matter of when it came time to hibernate. This occurs every other month. The horde retreated into their holes for an entire fortnight before being subjected to the sun again. What made these beasts fall into a deep slumber was their wealth, which to them was like a blanket; without it, they could not rest fully and would instead dream shallow dreams and be restless, even during the night. However, for Aldasaer, there was a reverse effect. Whenever he would snuggle into a heap of treasure in his parents’ cave, his thoughts would race, and his heart would beat faster and faster. It soon came to the point where he could not sleep with any of it. This caused all of his siblings and parents to wonder even more. It also made Aldasaer feel worse inside, like he did not only not fit in with his family but with his own kind.

As the days followed, he became less intrigued with the thought of one day becoming a Raider, a name that meant maturity and honor in the horde. Every dragon had to prove his or her worth in order to gain such a title, which is why there were trials that were held every year for young offspring. Fire Trails,

they were called, and they molded and wrought a dragon into only the keenest and toughest Raider.

Aldasear, along with his father and eleven siblings, departed from their hold. Their destination was the Break, a dried-up valley. It was more like a canyon since it ran steep, trenching its way twenty miles east. Beneath the depths of this canyon were the dragons' training grounds. Aldasaer's mother, Garthayn, stayed behind to watch over their clutch. It was customary for the adult females to guard the holds while the adult males were away. The family of dragons looked like a swarm of birds from above, only they weren't birds but living terrors and flew at greater heights and altitudes than any other bird of prey. Aldasaer and his father, flying side by side, conversed most of the way to the Break.

"What is it that our kind fears the most, save for the peoples that dwell yonder?" asked Aldasear.

"What we fear the most, besides the peoples, is our leader. You'd best stand clear of him, son, if you don't want trouble. If you cross him, that is all you will get, and he will hurt you greatly. Your wounds will be deep if you challenge his authority in the horde. The 'Black Terror,' they call him, but his real name is Glayder, Lord Glayder the Black, and you should fear him. His wrath is like no other I've ever seen. His size is greater than any foregoing lord I have served. His fire echoes like thunder, and his patience is short."

Aldasaer wanted to know more and asked, "How did he become lord over us, and how long has it been so?"

"Long enough as I know it," remarked Ranaer. "He became lord less than a decade ago and won't be handing that title over anytime soon. I still remember the last lord who bore his weight in honor over the horde. He was called Thrarg the Green. A wise Raider, Thrarg was; not anxious and bloodthirsty like Glayder. He's the one who brought our kind to these lands and discovered the Great Treasure Hoard that is now our home. There was more than enough wealth to sustain our desires. We at last did not have

to go to battle with the peoples like we had done constantly at the old hoard. We finally could dwell in peace and satisfaction and did so for many years until Glayder unexpectedly showed up. A nomad he was and did not, in the least, resemble any of our kind. He tried to persuade the horde and Thrarg to go to battle against the peoples here, and when Thrarg refused, Glayder attacked him, and I watched this black fiend pick apart Thrarg limb by limb like he was nothing. What followed was fear that, like a plague, paralyzed the entire horde not to stand against Glayder. Where the likes of this nomad came from, no one knows. All I know is, you should never cross him, or else you will regret it.”

Aldasaer, pondering all this, did not ask his father any more questions the rest of the way, yet grew all the more nervous, the closer they came to the Break.

The family stopped only a few times over the course of the journey to rest their wings, yet kept a steady pace throughout. They had even flown through the night and through harsh weather that bombarded them with rain and lightning. Finally, the skies opened up again, and before Aldasaer’s eyes appeared from below, a sight he would not forget. Atop a vast cliff that was flat were gathered hundreds of firedrakes. There were so many that Aldasaer couldn’t count all of them. He and his family eventually touched down, landing amidst this vast swarm of birds. They were one of the last households to arrive. The majority of all the other households had arrived, and some, a day early, such as the elders, who were the ones in charge of leading the exercises.

All were presently caught up in conversation as Aldasaer and his family furred their wings from their exhausting flight. Renaer left his young to join a group of adults who stood nearby. One of Aldasaer’s sisters, called Lyhaera the Blue, at that moment whispered in her brother’s ear, “Come on, Aldasaer, let’s find potential mates,” she joked, walking past him to meet a number of other young birds. Not more than several minutes later, there arose a loud bellow from an elder, who stood aloft a large boulder

on the cliff. His voice echoed throughout, reaching the ears of every single dragon gathered there.

“All right, it’s time to begin!” roared the elder. “All young firebrakes will fall in line, and each will take his or her turn for every trial. There will be three trials, and each one you will complete, or you will have a bone to pick with me. Now, buck up and get a move on.”

“Go on,” said Renaer to his children. “Follow the elders down to the ravine. Me and the other fathers will remain up here and watch.”

When, at last, most of the young birds made it below the ravine, the trials quickly began. The first involved speed. It was a dragon’s job to catch falcons nesting nearby in the canyon, and they were judged based on how many of them they could catch in a certain amount of time. This test took skill, and for some students, it was difficult to catch one, if not any. The freefall of it also made it hard to see any falcons. Somehow, Aldasaer got lucky and snatched two at the same time as they crossed in front of him, flying in opposite directions. After this trial was over, Aldasaer ate these scores as snacks before starting the next. To him, falcon tasted all right, but his favorite was mountain goat, which he and his family hunted often.

The second trial involved being invisible. It was more of a hide-and-seek trial than anything else. Blending in with one’s surroundings was something all fire-breathers needed to master, and as for Aldasaer, since he wasn’t like other dragons, he could surprisingly blend in well with water, something dragons wouldn’t go near when trying to camouflage themselves.

From above, Aldasaer spied a small stream that eventually led to a large water hole. This part of the canyon fell beneath the shade of the cliffs. Diving once again, the frost-breather landed with a heavy splash in the middle of the pool. It was, of course, shallow as well as frigid. Working his magic, the scales on Aldasaer’s body transitioned and became as pigments, absorbing

wavelengths of light. These he then projected out again, making himself invisible to the naked eye. The dragon, bending as low as he could beneath the surface of the water, made himself appear as a boulder. This was an excellent choice and surprisingly worked better than any of the other dragons' camouflages. The elders not only had a difficult time finding Aldasaer, but it also took them longer than usual. Once succeeding in being the last one found in this trial, Aldasaer was proud of himself and started to rethink that he might have a place after all in the horde.

When, at last, it came time for the final trial, the echo of an elder was heard yet again throughout the valley. "Now is the time to prove that you are truly Raiders. You know the law of the horde, and that is that we Raiders not only take; we kill for what we take."

Every young dragon listened intently as the elder went on to explain what their new task involved, and that was to kill. Not kill, as in hunt, but kill peoples, as in beings that also lived in the mountains. These mountain dwellers were dwarves. Many of them had fallen prey to dragons, but some were kept alive for sports such as this. To Aldasaer, this seemed like a very unpleasant task. He again became nervous, and before he could question it, the command was given to attack.

Taking flight, the white dragon was off to a bad start. He purposely dodged three easy targets and tried his best to cover up his mistakes by bumping into his adolescents amid-flight, but eyes were watching everywhere, including a certain pair of eyes that peered out from beneath an overhang of rock that concealed a lofty cavern. This void was hidden and out of sight from where the other adult dragons stood. Aldasaer's father saw his son's noticeable mistakes. The frost-breather felt his heart pounding faster and faster. The dragon, spying another moving target this time, went into a dive. Aldasaer surged downward at a great speed.

His victim, whilst in a hurry to flee, turned sharply, and in that instant, he was met with a great impact, which sent him falling backward upon his back. Convinced he was on the brink of a gruesome demise, the dwarf clenched his eyes shut and braced

for agony. However, an eerie silence hung in the air, and as he cautiously reopened his eyes, he was horrified to find the beast looming over him, almost motionless. The dragon's eyes were half-lidded, and its head hung low. Was this the grim ritual of how dragons savored their victims, or did the dwarf perceive a glimmer of pity in his captor's gaze?

Withdrawing his grasp, Aldasaer released his talons from the dwarf's chest. Realizing the dragon would not harm him, the halfling scrambled to his feet. At first, he was confused; then, gazing about and spying a narrow crevasse in the rocks nearby, he immediately ran towards it as fast as he could. However, in the midst of his flight, an ominous shadow fell upon him.

In a single, savage swoop, a monstrous and malevolent figure snatched the dwarf up, devouring him almost in an instant, and landed a few yards from where Aldasaer stood. It was Glayder himself. With fury in his eyes, the alpha male changed course and strode back toward the smaller dragon. Like a dark cloud, Glayder hovered over Aldasaer, who bent low to the ground. The adult's eyes burned like fiery coals, and from his nostrils, he exhaled rays of blue flame. His black hide of scales, which were as dark as night, was bristly and grainy, mainly because of rock sediment that had formed on them over the years. The sediment buildup meant this beast rarely stirred from its hold, and the constant changing of weather in the mountains accounted for it. From this beast's head spawned a large pair of horns, and under his chin sprouted stubs like tusks. He looked as if he were a ridiculously monstrous bat, and unlike other dragons, he crawled about with arms and wings attached. Glayder fell upon Aldasaer with harsh words, and the young dragon became frightened and bent even lower to the ground.

"Do you defy the law of the horde?!" Glayder bellowed in a loud and somewhat gurgly voice.

Aldasaer, trying not to tremble, replied, "I, I don't, but I am afraid to kill an innocent creature."

“Innocent creature? They are peoples and enemies of our kind,” remarked the dragon lord. “You are a weakling if you bear even an ounce of remorse for them. Hmm, your scales are white, young fire Drake, which is unusual. Shower me with your harshest fire, and try to burn me with it if you can. I bet you will not even melt away the strands of thorn that have formed on me,” he scoffed. Now, demonstrate,” commanded Glayder.

Just as Aldasaer was about to reveal his secret, his father, Renaer, suddenly appeared between the two dragons. Pleading, he said, “Forgive me, my liege; my son is still young and doesn’t understand certain things, and I have not yet told him of the peoples who are a threat to our kind. Please do not hurt him, for his skills might prove valuable to this horde if given another chance.”

At hearing this, the stern lord, with a smug remark. “Well, then you had better teach him about the peoples, and quickly, for when the time comes, I expect all my birds to do my bidding without hesitation, or else they will suffer the wrath of my fire,” and with a grunt, Glayder departed, retreating to his concealed place up in the cliff.