

## DRAGON-BROOD

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*"... But these dragons were more terrible than others of their kind, for every knight whom they vanquished, instead of killing and devouring him, they would magically transform into a dragon as evil as themselves."*

—Old Slavic Folk Tale

The frightened peasants round him stood  
Before he sought the haunted wood.  
The priest with trembling fingers poured  
The holy drops along the sword:  
"Now may this high aspersion bring  
Deliverance from the demon-thing!  
Avenge those others, no less brave,  
Whose bones bestrew the monster's cave.  
God keep thee dauntless, wise, and pure,  
And grant thy blade strike hard and sure!"

Where the gaunt heath rolls to the sky  
The knight casts down a searching eye  
To the black trees, misshapen, grim,  
That hide the fate awaiting him.  
Cross-hilt on high, he stops to pray:  
"Be with me, Lord of Light, today  
Down in that hellish wood, where I  
Shall conquer in Thy Name, or die!"

Down the bleak hillside winds the way  
Where willows droop their spectral grey.  
His footsteps pass without a sound  
Over the fungus-cushioned ground.  
From this dark dell all sound has died,  
And movement long fled terrified.  
Hard by his path he sees the dull  
Crushed roundness of a human skull,  
In whose eye-sockets seems to be  
Ironic curiosity.

Round hidden turnings of the track,  
He hears the rotted osiers crack  
Beneath a heavy, stealthy tread,  
And sees the dragon's waving head.  
Its lidless eyes of yellow glare  
A warning it has seen him there.  
Only an instant he delays  
For the last prayer he ever prays:  
"God and Saint Michael be my speed  
For knightly death or knightly deed!"

The dragon sees the shining blade,  
But, unprovoked and unafraid  
As the sword takes its backward swing,  
Enfolds him round with either wing.  
His sword has melted in his grasp  
Where he lies in the monster's clasp,  
Its face between him and the sky.

He sees no hatred in its eye:  
Those fires, with never a flicker burning,  
Glow with a dark and dreadful yearning,  
Glow with the lust insatiate  
Of coiling things that twine a mate.  
As its weight rolls upon his breast,  
His armour, that a bishop blessed,  
Beneath the rasping touch has grown  
To belly-plates that match its own.  
He feels, from hardening hand and foot,  
The cruel jagged talons shoot;  
Feels, with a shuddering ecstasy,  
Barbing of elbow and of knee;  
Feels the spine jerking, joint by joint,  
Out to its scorpionic point;  
And thrills to waves of python-strength  
That sweep the tail's convulsive length.  
His cheeks swell as their scaly backs  
House the distended poison-sacs,

And the cleft tongue's responsive hiss  
Welcomes the writhing serpent-kiss.

Now, no more shrinking from the touch,  
He grips with wild quadruple clutch  
Until the dragon's heartbeats draw  
His own within their rhythmic law.  
As claw and coiling intertwine,  
He hears a great voice: "Thou art mine!  
O child, and hadst thou never learned  
What dragon-nature in thee burned?  
Didst thou let puny shame of sin  
Belie the serpent-soul within?  
Lo, here I free what lay concealed  
Beneath thy self-deceiving shield.  
By this my lambent tongue today,  
Thy baptism be washed away!  
By the tumultuous tide that joins  
Thy life to these pulsating loins,  
Dragon, and Dragon-Maker, be:  
This day have I begotten thee!"