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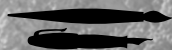
THE  
ERTH  
DRAGONS

THE NEW AGE

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BOOK THREE

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*The Whispering Forest, home to the people known as the Treemen  
During the second colonization of Erth by dragons*

When the burning of the scaled creature was done, and the rain had finally quenched the flames and stopped the fire ravaging deep into the forest, the Treemen came to look upon the savagery and mourn the loss of life, of wood. Where a gathering of ancient pines had stood, fully green and reaching tall to the sky, there was now nothing more than a filthy stubble of perishing timber. Charred stumps poked out of a forest floor sullied and dead and still daring to flicker. The damp was foul, the calm distressing. Nothing moved except threads of smoke and the scent of dying heartwood. No wild thing scuttled through the smoldering ash. No birds flew across it.

At the center of it all lay the wasted body of the creature, its form sketched out by what still stood of its desiccated bones. No bright green scales protected it now or held back the fumes from its cauterized innards. Not a claw nor a stig nor an eye had survived. And though toughened scraps of the vast wing canopy clung resolutely to the framework of the carcass, it was hard to believe that a thing of such bulk had once

soared easily over the forest. The beasts who had come to seal it in flame had done their work well.



Leif, daughter of Leif and Leif before her, had seen the whole drama unfold. On the day before the burning, she had been gathering brown-capped frooms, when a great flock of crows had descended on the trees. Crows were not forest birds, and the trees were soon irked by their grating cries and querulous shuffling. Leif put a hand on the nearest tree to calm it. She called high to the birds, asking why so many were present. The birds replied gruffly that they had been summoned.

*Who summons you?* Leif had wanted to know.

Being the belligerent sorts they were, the crows told her to mind her business.

They caarked in unison and warned her away.

And so Leif quickly cached her harvest, worried now that danger was approaching. The trees, having woken, were already sending restless ripples throughout their network of aged roots. The forest floor was bristling, the tree bark quivering. Creatures were diving for their holes.

Leif put her ear to the bracken and listened. Among the pattering drops of rain, she heard the tree roots crackling in fear. Something dark had invaded the forest, at the end where the hill flattened out toward the river.

*What is this something?* Leif asked the forest. Other members of the tribe would be kneeling with their ears to the ground by now. News would fly faster than a needle could fall, but Leif wanted it first from the trees themselves.

The forest breathed its reply. *The darkness has the shape of a child of the Kaal.*

Leif jumped straight up. The Kaal were not welcome in the forest. They took little from it and rarely left scars, but their home was the mountains—at least it had been until the scaled ones had driven them out to the flatlands, beyond a line the creatures had burned in the earth. The Treemen avoided the Kaal wherever possible. Their hunting men were swift to anger, and far too quick with arrows and scorn. They mocked the Treemen's fingers of wood, and laughed at the array of moss and flowers that grew across their earthy backs. But the Kaal had never caused trouble before, not the kind the forest was warning of now.

Leif pricked her ears and listened to the calls bouncing through the trees. A lone voice chipped by many growth rings told of smoke rising near the river, started by one of the flying giants. Leif felt her heartwood moan. Every creature of the forest lived in terror of the beasts she had heard the Kaal call skalers. Nothing bore destruction in its wake like them.

She started to run for the river's end. But barely had she crossed a single twig, when she heard the crows screaming, *Attack! Attack! Aark!*

Into the sky went the flock. Puzzled, Leif changed her mind about running and scrambled up the nearest pine instead. Faster than a nutterling could open a cone, she was at the top. Despite the rain slanting in from the mountains, the air was wild with waves of heat. To Leif's amazement, a bright green skaler was battling an army of crows. She saw a bird ignite from wing tip to wing tip as it gyred too close to a spurt of flame. Many more expired in the same lick of fire. They were falling all around like fizzing hail, spreading sparks among the branches as they hissed through the treetops. Leif had to leap to another branch as a half-blazed bird came hurtling toward her. She beat out its fire and looked up again. The death toll of crows was steadily mounting, but Leif could see that the birds were winning. One by one, they were landing on the skaler, pecking every part of its wiry body, until there were so many on its back that the green of its scales was fully obscured. The creature wailed and clawed at the sky. Leif thought then it would crash into the forest, but she could never have predicted the way it would happen.

A second skaler bore down on the first. It was blue, this one. Wide of wing. It flashed through the rain clouds quicker than anything Leif had ever seen. She heard the click as its jaws sprang open. A ferocious burst of fire lit the sky, driving a wall of steam at its head. For the crow-covered skaler, there was no escape. Leif squealed in fright as the fire erupted on its broadest side and spread to the farthest points of the body, engulfing the helpless creature in flame.

Down came the crow-covered beast, streaming incinerated feathers in its wake. The smell was horrendous, tarred and thick, cloying enough to choke the life out of any delicate, air-breathing flora. Leif dived for the safety of the lower branches, knowing that the impact would feel like thunder cracking in her breast. *Ba-whump!* The forest reeled beneath the huge entanglement of weight. Leif was flung sideways, almost punctured by a severed branch. She caught her breath and held on tightly, fearful of the small fires springing up around her. She could hear the lament of the injured trees but guessed the shock wasn't done with yet. The smitten trunks, though sturdy and strong, were struggling to hold the body aloft. The beast was going to fall.

Sure enough, as the forest steadied and the skies above cleared, the creature began to slide. Some of its less-scaled underparts had been speared in the impact and would never see the ground again. But the heavy tail had already found a downward course and was slowly dragging the rest along with it. Branches snapped like brittle leaves as the body gathered momentum and dropped in a hump to the forest floor, dead.



For one day, that was how it remained: a stinking mound of alien fauna, a swelling that was going to take years to seed and overgrow.

That was the first time any Tree People spoke of vengeance.

Leif and her tribe had gathered around the corpse, where there was talk of what they might do to fight back. Some voices were saying they should form an alliance with the Kaal and join them in their struggle against the beasts. One voice said they had met a Kaal boy who ran with a shrieking skaler at his breast and could send out shoots of fire from his hand. *Aye, his hand*, they insisted. They pointed to Odum's beard, which had been burned in the conflict, they said. But the old ones ridiculed this, and in the end, it was left to the wise ones to decide there was nothing to be done. The beasts were too powerful to fight. Let the next rings of wood record that the People of the Trees would mark this spot with healing flowers. All present would bend their heads and whisper to the Earth sprites. Pray that this beast would feed the ground, not poison it.

Spears were raised in agreement.

*Aye. Let the forest be at peace.*

And it was—for less time than the passing of a shadow.

As Leif started to make her way back into the forest, she saw the Kaal child who had caused the trees to quake. A pale-skinned girl with straggly hair. She looked plain enough to Leif, but there was blood all down her tattered robe. Black points marked the centers of her eyes.

Her teeth were very strange.



The trees begged Leif to stay clear of the waif, and Leif was glad she did, though she continued to watch the girl well. Not long after, a boy turned up. The girl drew him into a wide clearing. She called him “Whitehair”; he called her “goyle.” They argued, but Leif did not see it all. For one of them summoned up a dreadful phantom, a vapor in the shape of a snarling skaler. Leif was greatly afraid of vapors. She fled in terror and waited for the trees to tell her the rest. To her relief, no trees were harmed this time, despite the fact that some skalers had landed in the clearing and one had used fire against the boy.

*And the girl?* she asked. *What of her?*

*Taken,* said the trees.

*By the skalers?*

*By the boy. He left unharmed on the spirit of a whinney.*

Unharmed? Leif sank into the bracken, drawing her knees tight up to her chin. *Is he a sprite?* she asked.

The forest did not know.



The next morning, the burning began.

Leif woke to see shadows crossing the tops. Skalers! They had returned in force. Leif thought at first they might be looking for the boy, but they had come instead to burn to ash the skaler the crows had attacked. In doing so, they set a fire

so feral it ran like a pool of hot blood through the forest. Leif called on the rain sprites, begging their aid. Other Tree People did the same. The sprites answered as fast as they could, dragging dark clouds across the sky. In time, those clouds did quench the fire and later flaked the forest with snow. But many trees had been razed by then, whittled to black by a cruel and needless act of destruction.

The Treemen gathered again, though some never made it as far as the ruin. Their heartwood sobbed so much that their sap ran free and they fell to the forest floor in grief. Those who survived looked at the hole and swore they would not rest until the skalers were punished.

*There must be a way!* they cried.

But what use were a few crooked spears against creatures with claws that could tear down bark?

*Poison*, said some. *We have roots and wild frooms that would kill a strong man. Why not a beast?*

*Aye*, they said. *Poison.*

But how to deliver it? How to put venom in the mouths of the monsters?

*Bait*, said a voice. *Slaughter ten snorters and pack them with frooms.*

The tribe agreed. *Aye! Throw the bodies of the snorters over the scorch line and let the beasts feed on them, all they will!*

Now Leif was right at the front of this talk, and she spoke up loud and well. “Snorters have no grievance with skalers. I

would liken their deaths to the wasting of the trees. Would the Erth sprites not be angered by this?”

That made for a solemn moment.

The treeman Odum said, “The Kaal do not see sprites. They could set the bait.”

There were murmurs of agreement, but Leif shook her head. “If we ask the Kaal to do our work for us, I say we will yet have to answer to the sprites.”

But the ugly seed was sown. Louder voices began to water it.

*Who shall go?* they cried. *Who will carry this plan to the Kaal?*

A cold wind stirred the ashes of the trees. The silence tickled Leif’s throat. “Me,” she said quietly. “I will go.”

They did not mock her, for this was brave talk. Crossing into Kaal territory was dangerous. Even to step outside the forest for too long was a risk. Leif’s people revered the sun, for it warmed the soil and made the trees grow. But too much exposure to the Orb of Plenty could weaken a treeman and cause his skin to crack and dry out.

“I will pray to the sprites,” Leif said, unafraid. “I will ask them to show me fair passage—and beg them to forgive me if I do any wrong against the Erth.”

*But Leif, you are nought but a child,* said a voice.

“Aye, and fast across the ground,” said she. “Light enough to be lifted by the wind.” She raised her voice again. “I am no threat to the Kaal. I will carry no spear, only frooms and words—if that is what the old ones wish.”

The old ones rubbed their beards.

They nodded.

*You must take them something—to prove our bond,* said one.

“What?” said Leif. “What shall I take?” What gift would a murderous Kaal desire?

An old one gestured at the bones of the beast. Odum put down his spear and moved cautiously across the ash. He wrestled something off the corpse.

“Take this,” he said.

He held up part of the broken skull of the beast.

The skull of the Veng commander, Gallen.