

# THE LAST BATTLE

JOHN CAMPBELL



THE CREATIVE NOW

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## CHAPTER ONE

# DESECRATION AND DESTRUCTION

The low-hanging sun hid the dragons until they were directly above the Elven city of Lyanthim. Then, as the first cries of alarm arose, seven massive forms fell out the dusk. Wings creaking like a fleet of venerable battleships, the dragons settled to the ground surrounding the Hall of Relics. Reptilian minds melding—black magic swelled, burst, and dark clouds billowed, submerging the entire structure behind a veil of seething, swirling, stygian smoke.

Seven scaly necks arched skyward and the silver threads of a silent spell materialized—hanging immobile in the still evening air over the evil clouds completely obscuring the hall. The elvish warriors rushing toward the scene felt the weight of that magic. They slowed their pace, wondering at the avalanche of tension. Then the enchantment overwhelmed their intent, infusing them with fear foreign to their stout hearts. The entire tableau held as immutable as a stone carving until, at another silent signal, mighty wings beating in unison, the seven dragons lifted back into the sky.

Their passage beat back the dense clouds surrounding the great hall and revealed only emptiness. Bare ground left no trace of the millennium-long weaving that showcased and protected the elves' most arcane and intricate treasures. The proud crafting of generations merging a simple grove of trees to crystalline arches in the protracted, tediously delicate fabrication that architected a space and place worthy of their precious treasured history—was simply gone.

The dragons rose back into the sky, rolled into flight, then spiraled outward into the evening. Their leader, Dreq, gave the mental command. *Burn everything! Break their will, so our elvish enemies never come after their stolen treasures*—and the white-hot dragon fires fell like rain throughout Lyanthim, a once fine city constructed entirely of living trees.

In every home, it was the hour of the sacred table. Elves ate once a day, but they ate well. Families were partaking of the most recent harvests of fruits and vegetables when without warning, thatched roofs caught fire, burning bright or simply collapsing under the weight of flames. Lucky ones made it out alive. The unlucky were buried and burned to death.

Every able citizen of Lyanthim was out on the streets when the dragons made their second pass and charred them all. The elves were too proud to run. They twisted into blackened husks where they stood. Mothers held their children tight as they froze into ash, and the city's few wizards, who had been shouting ineffectual counter-attack spells at the marauding nightmares, were reduced to shielding those nearby as the magical fires fell.

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Dreq felt the fiery liquid bubbling up his throat. He distended his jaws, and flames sprayed the street, catching on every house. It was a delicious magic, a burning pleasure unleashing exquisite devastation. By the time he looked back, he could see dozens of homes already ablaze. *Good!* He thought. *The war with the elves had dragged on far too long. Maybe this night would finish it. If not, it was at least partial payback for the loss of his daughter.* The thought did not diminish the pain in his heart, and his dragon roar filled the night, warning the puny humans in his path that retribution was upon them.

He was in the middle of his return run when a blast of light far more potent than the prior attacks rattled his scales and stunned his reptilian reflections. He faltered, then recovered before he could fall and managed to reinforce his shields an instant before another blast swallowed his massive form in a maelstrom of white lightning. Furling his wings, Dreq dove hard toward the wizard before he could unleash a third attack. A nimbus sprung up around the tall, angular form, and it made the dragon angry to see that the beardless elvish sorcerer standing against him was not even an adult. He unleashed his hottest, most destructive fire, hurling it toward the youth, determined to repay the naïve wizard with a swift and painful death.

The sorcerer stood firm and raised his staff higher, his shield brightening. As Dreq swooped close, continually bathing the magician in a pounding cascade of deadly fire, he caught sight of the wizard's mouth moving through the haze of firelight. The big beast had a moment to wonder how the elf could resist his flames and still have spare awareness to enchant—then a wall of force struck him from the sky, tumbling him over and over, crushing the burnt homes and pillars of dead ash in his path.

Dreq regained his feet, raised his horned head to the heavens, screamed in pain and rage. Then he felt the physical shift in his world and blinked

his snake-slit eyes open. His anger became bewilderment as he found himself staring at the first in a series of mountains ranging into the distance. The city of elves had disappeared, but he knew where he was. The peak was called Humpback—and it was home to the thrice-damned dwarves. His predator senses shouted trap, but he was too upset to heed. Elf, man, or dwarf, none could stand against him.

Dreq spread his mottled leather wings and scales shimmering like rippling iridescent streams in the moonlight, shot straight into the sky. A lightning bolt barely missed his trailing tail, ravaging the landscape instead. Bolstered by black magic, Dreq climbed swiftly until he was a tiny dark point in the starry heavens. Then he turned and shot toward the wizard—a plummeting meteor of infuriated dragon flesh.

Far beneath, his sharp sight saw the wizard smile and unseen by the sorcerer, Dreq's tongue flicked out once, then again as he prepared himself. When the wizard's bright spell of destructive energies flashed toward him, the dragon slid into, then out of the timestream. The wizard's attack safely past—he spread his wings above the elvish youth and landed hard, crushing that fragile flesh and blood being under a living mountain.

Dreq should have considered that only moments before, the wizard had teleported them a great distance. Even as he folded his wings, in no hurry to move from the spot of his victory, lightning lit his scaly hide with a wide web of piercing agony. It locked him to the ground where he helplessly writhed, lost in a brutal torment that—every time he fought it—intensified unbearably. It didn't take the pain long to convince him, and the dragon subsided. As still as defeat, his cold-as-death, black-slit green snake eyes pierced the night.

From out of the darkness, a slim, broad-shouldered elf approached the dragon fearlessly. His smooth cheeks betrayed his near adolescence, but his grey eyes were steely. Wearing a pale nightshirt that hung to his knees and carrying a rune-encrusted staff that emitted a soft white light from the jewel in its crown, he stood before the subjugated dragon, a shadowed frown marring the otherwise clean lines of his youthful features.

The gigantic creature's silent regard was as merciless as deep space. "I am Dreq." The dragon spoke mind to mind, and the sorcerer started, then drew back and rubbed his brow. It appeared he had never had a conversation with a dragon—probably never even heard mind talk. Dreq was reasonably confident the few elves interrogated by dragons hadn't lived, and while waiting for the elf's response, he pondered the new thought that their war may have been prolonged because neither side understood the other.

A surprisingly rich, cultured voice spoke a tentative, "Hello?" in his thoughts. Then more firmly, "My name is Marlevaur, and I want to know why." Dreq stared at him, unmoving and unblinking. The wizard's frown returned, fiercer, more deeply stamped on his otherwise unetched

babyface. “Why have you destroyed our cities and stolen our history? What do you gain by annihilating our race?”

Lost in pain, the dragon shrugged mentally. *What does it matter? Any deeper meaning escaped Marlevaur. What the wizard heard was the dragon dismissing his elvish people and their sacred past—but then Dreq went on to mindshare his own unwilling marvel, You are stronger than the rest.*

His ramping anger momentarily distracted by Dreq’s unexpected admiration, the wizard’s thoughts turned to his father. The dragon cocked his massive head. *Yesss, I understand. What will you do now?*

The storm gathering in his heart clouded Marlevaur’s grey eyes and put all wonder at their strange conversation out of his head. His response was flat and final. “Eliminate the threat. Recover our sacred history. Help my people rebuild.”

Dreq snorted fire, then his thick, forked tongue flicked out and back. *Even held, I am not so easy to kill, and I feel the limits of your magic. I will repay your insolence soon enough.*

The wizard smiled grimly and considered the dragon. Dreq was as much a youth as Marlevaur himself. Although he was enormous—more massive than the grandest spreading Karamiss tree—by the immature length of his horns, the wizard saw his foe was not yet fully grown and Dreq’s scales shone with a brilliance untarnished by time. Even in bondage, the dragon’s enormous green eyes held the undefeated confidence of an apex predator in his prime. Marlevaur spoke to their strange mental connection. “I have one question more, dragon.”

Dreq replied, his mental tone fraught with menace. *You have time.*

The wizard smiled nastily. “You don’t, so I’ll make this quick. Why do you hate us so much?”

*Hate?* Dreq paused, gathering himself, then continued, *Do I hate you?* He considered his daughter, but that precious truth was not to be shared with his enemy. Instead, he answered the wizard’s question with a question. *Do you hate the other elves because you were born to a higher station?*

Marlevaur’s eyes widened as he understood and he shook his head. “My mother was an elf. I am an elf. If, because of my father, I have gifts others do not, I am responsible for being so blessed.”

*Very proper.* Dreq rumbled, sounding pleased. He was silent for a long moment, then told the wizard, *Like you, the race of dragons is the creation of an angel. If, unlike you, we were an experiment, that does not negate our birthright. We have fled our nursery yet must obey the dictates of our creation. We are feared and solitary creatures, and we horde.*

“You horde?” Marlevaur asked, intrigued despite himself.”

*Your treasures make the beds comfort us to sleep. Without a proper resting place, sleep would be more than difficult—and slumber is the*

*blessed relief.*

The wizard shook his head. "I don't understand."

*When we sleep, we dream, and in dreaming, we are free of our bloody waking lives. Free to simply be.*

The wizard started, sleeping one's life away—what a forlorn hope. To Marlevaur, the universe was his playground, and rest merely a required respite. He shook aside the distraction. He could feel the dragon's spell nearing fruition but his plans were equally close to completion. All he had to do was step away from this surreal meeting with a living nightmare. He told the monster, "If it's oblivion you seek, I believe I can help."

He bowed to the chained beast, turned away, and left the ground for the night sky, missing the slow blink, the wink of one eye as the dragon activated his hastily constructed spell, and his scales began to glow. A ghost fire playfully chased itself about the dragon's form—nimbuses of light that haloed, then intensified, leaping from one scale to another—meeting, dancing apart, then melding again.

Something in the air—some subtle sound or flicker from behind made the wizard look back down. He immediately levitated high above the glowing dragon and gave the signal. A portal to other worlds shimmered to life between dwarves and dragon—and began growing. It steadily expanded from the rough shape and size of a doorway, keeping its form but rapidly increasing in volume. Almost instantly, it overshadowed even the massive beast.

Simultaneously, Dreq forcibly expelled his black magic, corrupting the chains of light that held him prisoner. With a hissing cry of triumph, he thrashed his mighty wings and lifted—a potent engine of destruction aimed at the ascending wizard. Dreq had heard the chanting, seen the portal, and realized the accursed dwarves were using their ground magic to create a gate large enough to swallow him. Determined to reach the wizard, he ignored the threat. Nothing could stop him. He would kill Marlevaur, then burn the dwarves.

Suddenly, the same wall of force that had knocked him to the ground in Lyanthim slammed into him again. Dreq hissed in pain and was thrown sideways—to plunge helplessly through the enormous gateway between worlds. He was teleported from temperate mountainous terrain to dry desert in one wild second, with no chance to make it back to the portal before the great door shimmered out of existence.

## CHAPTER TWO

# FIGHTING DRAGONS

Marlevaur gravitated gracefully to the ground, touching down lightly to stand before the seven dwarves instrumental to his plan's success. He bowed formally, then turned to the empty space where the outsized path between worlds had faintly pulsed moments before. Raising his wizard's staff, he spoke a word, and energy blossomed from its tip, arcing toward, then outlining the reshrunken portal. The door's shape shimmered—shading from white to ultraviolet, and finally black. His rod dimmed, and Marlevaur slumped slightly, sighing. "The way is locked now. The dragon cannot return through this gate."

Garum, head of the dwarves' ruling committee and leader of his small group of sorcerers, took a step forward and spoke. "Wizard, I might be doubting because of ye tender age, but the plan be working fine. Ye be doing our entire race a good tonight we be never forgetting."

Marlevaur let a pained look cross his face. "Garum, Lyanthim was attacked by seven dragons. There are six more I must kill or figure how to permanently imprison before I can begin to consider my race or yours safe."

Garum harumphed. "We be ready. Ye be counting on us."

Marlevaur's smile was meant to reassure the older dwarf. "I know these dragons. Fortunately, none are as strong as this first one. My elvish brothers are putting out fires and looking for victims, but I will be hunting dragons this night." The young wizard paused, then had a thought. "The dwarves' ground magic is powerful. Can you make it rain in far off Lyanthim?"

Garum looked around at his brothers, got nods from all, snorted dismissively, and said, "For you and your people, it be done."

Marlevaur bowed even more deeply a second time. "May our two people's relations remain ever fruitful." His belly got in the way, but Garum folded himself officially deep for this most amazing young elvish

wizard. With the slightest smile but not another word, Marlevaur disappeared from sight.

Marlevaur was tired beyond belief. Although fed by a never-ending cosmic stream, the abundance of magic typically stored in his body had drained to a shallow trough fed by dry-as-desert reserves. He was ready to collapse, but as he appeared in a private grove outside Lyanthim, he eyed the inviting grass then pulled deeply, taxing his celestial wellspring. Approaching from the hill above his ruined city, he gazed upon the swathes of ruin that etched the dragons' paths and cursed the beasts with each new indication of life lost.

He stared mesmerized by the pillars of ash that stood like dark statues in the windless night—fitfully hidden, then revealed by the shadows randomly tossed from burning dwellings. In fact, he saw fires throughout his city. He had more than a modicum of hope but prayed Garum would prove as good as his word—supplicating his father rather than his god—his father being more likely to respond and potentially more potent than his god. When big raindrops suddenly began to fall, he sent a silent *Thank you* under his breath, then laughed and thanked Garum and his comrades out loud. He turned his face to the rain and fervently promised the dwarves return value for their goodwill.

Marlevaur walked until he came to the hole in the ground where the Hall of Relics had stood. Despite his youth, he too well grasped the immensity of the loss confronting his people. Knuckles tightening, pale against his dark staff, he used their standard whistle, calling out to his only means of swift justice. "Setherim, Ryla, are you there?"

Two low whistles sounded in return. The elves that were both his eyes and ears, and his best friends, glided like wraiths out of the dark. Ryla was shorter than the average elf, with black tresses tapering at her neckline and smudges below amber eyes that more typically danced—but not tonight. Setherim was tall, thin, and serious—the deadly light in his green eyes a fact not only of this night.

Setherim was never anything other than calm, but Ryla had an intensity about her that gave him hope. She didn't wait, breathlessly reporting, "Marlevaur, the Hall of Relics is intact only a short distance from here."

Electric current snapped through the wizard's veins. Abruptly he was no longer tired. "Is there a nearby landmark?"

Setherim spoke up, "You remember that large flat rock used as a meeting spot when our city was still trading with the river elves?" Marlevaur nodded. "Take us there."

The young wizard eyed them both to ensure they were ready, shielded all in an invisible bubble of energy, then teleported them to the abandoned outpost. It looked like no one had been there in decades. All traces of temporary occupation had long since faded. There was only the crack in the cliff where a few might sleep comfortably or a dozen crowd together

to get out of the elements—and the outcropping jutting over the forest below.

Marlevaur stepped to the cliff's edge and saw the faint outlines of the crystal arches reflecting the moons' light in the near distance. "Wait here," he told his friends. Shielded by another bubble of magic, he overflowed the Hall of Relics. The grove of trees was alive, the delicate crystal spires undamaged, the treasures he could see still in their settings. The entire hall had evidently been transported intact. It was a magical deed beyond elves, possibly beyond dwarves—and six of the seven dragons responsible for that feat now slept guarding the perimeter.

Marlevaur was beyond joy but knew he had only a short time. These dragons were recharging their dark energies while they waited on Dreg. Once awake, they would desecrate the grove at their leisure and disperse the loot to their lairs. After that, it would become a lengthy and haphazard process to recover their history, if it could be done at all—and the sacred hall would be gone. But if they gathered their forces and attacked the dragons now, the grove was as good as demolished.

Marlevaur rubbed his brow and headed back to his companions. He hoped three heads might be more astute than one weary wizard's brain, but when he queried his friends, they had only negative head shakes for him. His own solutioneering skills buried under a thick pile of blankets, the wizard finally realized six dragons was too complex a problem for any obvious answer. Setherim went back to get whatever help the city could spare while Ryla stood watch. Marlevaur, falling-over-tired, had just enough awareness to give Ryla orders to wake him two hours before dawn. Then he stumbled into sleep on the hard rock face of the escarpment.

It felt like she shook him awake as soon as he closed his eyes, but his young body was stiff, so the wizard's second thought knew he'd slept deeply. His third was a revelation. He asked Ryla to wait, then teleported back to Humpback Mountain and used the lever in the mountain's side to open the not-so-secret way. He pounded on the iron door, demanding to talk with Garum. When the old elf appeared in his robes yawning, Marlevaur realized he was still in his own nightdress. He told the dwarf what he wanted, and Garum agreed to help, a twinkle in his beady black eyes. The wizard then begged a bite, a bowl of water and a towel, fresh garb, and a place to wait while his host reassembled their troop of dwarvish wizards.

Once everyone was present, Marlevaur wasted no time teleporting them to the ledge where Ryla watched and waited. At his raised eyebrow, she shook her head. No, Setherim had not yet returned with the expected help. Marlevaur passed her the cloth in which he'd wrapped several slices of buttered bread. She knew what he wanted and tucked the nourishment in her jerkin. Then she was off, bouncing up the rocks and out of sight. A

lessening of the gloom promised morning was almost upon them, and the young wizard sat down with his fellow sorcerers under the shield, looking out over the forest to where he knew the Hall of Relics now stood.

Creating a new doorway to Gadona was his first order of business. He'd watched his father build a portal with his will once before when the two of them were on Ryeria—the great flood almost upon them. But seeing and doing were two different things. He chided himself. If he hadn't been reasonably sure he could do this, throwing a party in the path of a potential firestorm was a really bad idea. Marlevaur took a deep, calming breath. The time for doubts had passed. Time to do.

A river ran along the base of the cliff. Beyond that, a high grass meadow stretched for a good ten-minute walk until the forest took over. The young wizard muttered to his dwarvish friends, "Get ready. Once I start, things are going to heat up fast." He picked a spot about halfway across the meadow and seeing the glowing portal in his mind's eye brought his will to bear, breathing a word more elemental than any spell. He watched white fireflies swarm as the gate appeared out of thin air—mote by mote—reality bending to his wizard's wish, nothing evolving into something.

There were gasps as the portal activated, the dwarves awed by the minor miracle. It was an impossibility that even a city-full of their sorcerers couldn't have overcome. Intense satisfaction roiled Marlevaur's ego until the first two dragons appeared above the treetops and flew into a protective rage, hissing and burning the sky with fire before dropping horizontal, the thunder of their wings hurling this world's most fearsome creatures straight toward the ledge where he and his wizarding party waited.

Solid as granite, the dwarves neither flinched nor paused, simply began chanting. The portal grew until it covered the sky between the dragons and his group of diminutive warrior wizards. As the big beasts drew close, they began to slow, the wrongness of the still stretching portal penetrating their anger. They came to a complete halt as they reached the tunnel in the sky. Marlevaur tsked, "That will not do," and flicked his wrist. The two dragons shrieked in helpless frustration as they were slammed through the oversized doorway, disappearing from sight.

Marlevaur immediately cast a spell—only an instant before three more dragons appeared above the forest and launched themselves toward the now invisible portal. The young wizard stood as firmly planted as the dwarves, stray magical energies coruscating in waves of bluish-white light from his staff. Focused on the wizard, they never knew what hit them. Two of the dragons flew directly into—disappearing through the doorway to Gadona.

The third dragon squealed a high-pitched scream of fury and dove beneath the trap. Marlevaur cursed as his hastily thrown spell passed over

the dragon, and the beast popped up on their side, beating his wings furiously, propelling himself through the fast diminishing distance. The creature appeared to be in his prime. An awe-inspiring monster of a beast, he had black-slit evil emerald eyes and armor-plated metallic scales more ebony than red. He came at Marlevaur and the dwarves like a marauding nightmare spawned by an unholy hell. An instant before crashing into the ledge, the dragon pulled up and passing scant feet above the rock shelf, grasped a dwarf in each claw. The dwarves' chants stopped, and the portal rapidly shrank back to door-sized as their fellow's screams disappeared into the distance.

Fresh hate filling his heart, Marlevaur shot into the air, intent on giving chase. But a large dark shape instantly blotted out the sun. More competent or cautious than the rest, the sixth dragon had taken a circuitous route and now swept the wizard into his deadly embrace. Wind knocked out of him by the force of their encounter, Marlevaur felt the giant claw compress his ribs—but his arms were free, and his hand still held his wizard's staff. He tried to dredge up one last desperate spell but could not draw breath against the grip crushing his chest.

The beast seemed to intuit what was in his heart because the great head came down, jaws gaping wide, razor-sharp teeth ready to close around his throat. He felt the heat from the burgeoning fire deep in the dragon's belly and knew he was a dead man. In his last instant, unable to draw breath, he silently willed his spell in existence—and it activated with the power of a death curse. Marlevaur felt the claw's grip loosen, and he was falling through the air. Slowing his descent, the wizard began drifting more gently toward the ground. A moment later, a headless dragon's body hurtled past him.

Looking down, he saw a party of elvish wizards, two with staffs raised to guide the dwarves the other dragon had dropped safely toward the ground. Harassed by the same lightning bolts that freed the dwarves, the last dragon dove again on the pair of falling forms. Marlevaur intuited that the rescue party's attack had surprised the dragon, but as the creature opened his jaws to spit flames, Marlevaur also knew he would kill the dwarves before they could get to the ground. The wizard instinctively hurled the dregs of his magic at the massive creature. Then still high in the sky, he fell into unconsciousness.

Relieved of their fight, the other wizards guided Marlevaur's unconscious form slowly to the ground and into the middle of their group. They surrounded him with a defensive shield and made ready for the next attack. The young wizard regained consciousness in time to see the dragon thrashing away the last of his vitality on the nearby rocks. He watched with weary satisfaction as Setherim's arrow found one of the dragon's eyes, finishing the great brute's life. Turning toward the now quiescent portal to Gadona, Marlevaur expended the last of his energy to

close the doorway to a prison he hoped would hold his race's enemies forever.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ALONG WAYS DOWN THE ROAD

**I**n the centuries to come, Marlevaur had a chance to share the tale with his father of that final battle that ended the dragon wars. He mentioned the extraordinary effect of the spell he'd shouted in what should have been the moment of his demise and his father told him about an angel's death curse. He allowed it was rare for the ability to be passed to a mortal but seemed pleased that his son had inherited the power. "Thank God it kept you alive." was his only comment.

From that day forward, the female dragons disappeared from the sight of most mortal folk—and the fearsome tales of rampaging black magic monsters receded into myth.

On another note, Bune, the fallen angel, eventually came to investigate the unexpected and prolonging peace that bespoke the absence of his dragons. He had created the dragons, then let them escape to create mayhem on Yngvi, fulfilling his responsibility to his fellow fallen's Celestial War—leaving him free to return to his experiments. He tracked the dragon's disappearance all the way to a young elvish wizard residing in Lyanthim and, finding his opportunity, surreptitiously searched Marlevaur's memories. Once he discovered who the young man's father was, he wisely decided to leave that planet's inhabitants to enjoy their serenity for as long as they could.

Over the centuries, the dwarves and elves created a profitable trade, coexisting peacefully with each other. The elves rebuilt Lyanthim in the forest surrounding their precious Hall of Relics, and their city grew prosperous—ever-guarded by the elvish sorcerer who himself became a living legend.

And what of the dragons exiled to Gadona?

The four who had been driven through Marlevaur's self-constructed portal fought, and the weakest became food for the stronger—until only one was left. Then on a cloudless day, while that lone dragon slept, a sandstorm arose. He dragged himself high into the wind-tossed

atmosphere, trying to fly above, then beyond the storm. Finally, giving in, he landed in the blowing wind and sand, curled into himself, and endured. When the years became centuries, he despaired and died—as alone as he had lived.

Dreq, who had been the first exiled dragon and was now the last, lay beside his shuttered portal for a week, never taking his eyes off the empty doorway. Then, disgusted, he explored. There were vast populations of white worms and nothing else. The poison they spit splashed harmlessly against his scales, and they screamed every time he made a meal of them. But when that short-lived satisfaction paled, and his belly was full of bursting, Dreq returned to lie next to and glare at the dead portal, sure that his magic could activate and grow that obstinately dark doorway once he determined its reality.

One day, while he watched, the portal suddenly glowed to life. Dreq focused his will, but the door didn't grow. Instead, the very air about him began to vibrate. Then the wind churned the sand and did not stop. The door turned dark again, and Dreq, angry but helpless, continued his vigilant hope. But even anger must fall to time. The greatest of the seven dragons grew bored and eventually took refuge in his dreams.

A black magic dragon and the son of an angel have one thing in common—they both live very long lives. Two thousand years after the fight that ended the great Dragon Wars, Dreq and Marlevaur would meet again—but that is a tale already told in the chronicle, *Waite on the Hero's Journey*.

**The End**