

serrated dirk. She walked into the room and to the wizard's robe. She shivered then smiled smugly. Saura crouched over the object of her greatest desire and considered the implications of her betrayal for the shortest of seconds. Then she pulled the tattered and burned remains of Nusair's robe over her sleek shoulders and walked to the closed book.

"You have underestimated my powers, Nusair. I learned the secret of The Scalamagdrion long before I ever returned," she said, speaking to the tome. She added, "Samas Kul cares little about my parentage, and he will be most pleased with your gift."

Saura strode from the room carrying the ancient artifact and cloaked in her coveted robes, however tattered.

FREEDOM'S PROMISE

Ed Gentry

Kythorn, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR)

The ancient blue wyrm rolled lazily onto his stomach, fully rousing himself from his long slumber. He shifted, and coins and gems embedded in his azure hide fell from his body and clanked in the pool of treasure upon which he rested. His enormous orbs peered around the cave as he took note of every precious item that sprawled around him. The titanic beast magically dismissed the remaining wards around his lair with a sigh, allowing the visitor entrance to this innermost portion of the cavern.

"Well met, Gerinvioch," said the unfortunate intruder as he finally came into view, brushing sand and dust from his violet cloak.

Dampened by sweat, short, graying hair was matted so tightly against the human's steeply sloped forehead that it almost seemed as if his face simply continued on into his hair, flesh becoming strands of gray. The emblems embroidered on the sleeves of the man's robes announced him as a citizen of Estagund.

"You are Gerinvioch, are you not?" the man said as he continued to primp his robe.

A long moment passed as the dragon considered the human who stood before him, a wizard to judge from appearances. Gerinvioch blinked and let out a slow yawn.

"Dragon! You will hear me!"

The old wyrm sprang to his feet, lunging forward, coming to a stop with his single-horned snout mere inches from the stunned human's face. A smile widened on his reptilian lips as he slowly pulled his head back.

"I would ask you some questions, dragon," the wizard said as his body slowly gave up its rigid posture and went slack.

Laughter erupted from Gerinvioch's belly, resounding off the stone walls in a cacophony of mirth. "Would you give audience to an ant?" the wyrm responded. He continued, not allowing the human a chance to speak. "Seeking to procure some of my treasure for yourself? Where are your fellow thieves then, bug?"

"Treasure? Why would I want a pile of such worthless refuse as this?" the wizard replied, extending his arm to sweep across the cache of riches in the cavern. "What I seek, you could never own. What I seek requires real power to wield."

Gerinvioch stared silently at the man, the anticipation welling up in him.

"The item is somewhere here in the Dust Desert," the man began after clearing his throat. "You have made your home in these lands for many years, so I thought I might be able to use one relic," the wizard continued with a beaming grin, "to find another."

Gerinvioch returned the human's grin and replied, "Truly, you believe this item is valuable since you have come to face me, a Great Blue" the dragon said, emphasizing his heritage. "What is this object you seek, human?"

"It is called the Evise Jhontil. It was a divinely inspired gift from Set to his disciples," he responded sanctimoniously, obviously doubtful of the item's ecclesiastical origin.

Gerinvioch quickly cast his eyes downward.

"You've heard of it," the man stated more than asked. "Where is it? You must tell me!" he exclaimed, his bottom lip quivering.

"You do not want that item, wizard."

"Where is it?" the man replied, almost lunging forward.

"The finest clergy of Set and wizards in their employ could not control it," Gerinvioch asserted, pleased to see the man's anxious reaction.

"Where they failed, Kinase Bronihim will succeed, as he always does."

"Bronihim?" the wyrm said, his booming voice trailing off sharply. "Of Estagund..."

"Yes," the wizard replied as his head gave a slow turn.

"You are the one who defeated the Ancient Green, Ronatsi-naderin?" the dragon said, hoping the man would take the bait.

"Yes, I dispatched the sniveling coward," Bronihim said, standing taller, his face flushing at the same time. "How did you hear of that?"

"All of my kind for hundreds of miles know of it," Gerinvioch replied, doing his best not to smile at the man's lie. The wyrm congratulated himself on the ruse. Ronatsinaderin's death—of old age Gerinvioch reminded himself—would serve an enjoyable purpose on this day. To be sure, the old green was no friend of Gerinvioch's, but no wyrm deserved to have his death attributed to some human peasant. "I battled Ronatsinaderin myself, once," Gerinvioch said, lifting one of his enormous wings to reveal a deep, pale scar of two long, jagged lines. If the human insisted upon lying, why shouldn't he?

"I see I fared better than you did," the wizard said, his arms wide, as he slowly spun around once in place.

"So it would seem," Gerinvioch replied.

"Where is the artifact? I did not come here to discuss the worthless carcass of that miserable beast," the man said, obviously anxious to steer the conversation back to his desired goal.

"Why do you seek it?" Gerinvioch asked, peering at the man closely. "For its power?"

"For the same reason you lust after treasure, I'd imagine. Because I want it, and it should be mine," the wizard said, sweat now forming on his face.

"Its power is too great, human. No one could control it forever," Gerinvioch said, closing his enormous eyes slowly and pulling in a long, haggard breath. "No one."

"I, unlike many," Bronihim said, casting a sideways glance toward the dragon, "am more than capable of mastering its secrets."

A soft growl began wafting from the dragon's throat, building to a grating rumble, though he wanted nothing more than to laugh. The human was perfect in his arrogance. The wizard's hands began the gestures of a spell. The dragon ceased his vocalization and took a slow step back. The man's gesticulations stopped.

Gerinvioch almost let slip his mirth, but chided himself and continued to slink away.

"You must tell me where to find it," the wizard said, his voice taking on a frantic velveteen quality as though he were coaxing a child.

Gerinvioch could enjoy his game for many hours, but reminded himself of the short attention span of humans. It was time to let the trap unfold.

"Leave this place and travel south, staying close to the mountain line. When you reach the tallest peak, turn east. After some distance, you will see an unusually large rock rising from the desert sands. It is near there," the dragon said, lowering his head slightly.

"Where from the rock?" the wizard shouted as he strode toward the creature.

"I left it near there long ago. I don't know exactly where," the dragon replied, recoiling from the man.

"If I find you have deceived me, wyrm..." the wizard trailed off as he turned to leave.

"You will find your end lies within its magic, Gruanthe," Gerinvioch said, relishing that his genuine warning would only spur the idiotic human on further.

"Is that a derogatory term for humans in your language, wyrm?"

"My apologies. It is a name," Gerinvioch replied, hiding a smile. "You simply remind me of someone."

The wizard threw one last scowl over his shoulder as he departed.

After the man left, the great dragon lay back down on his bed of treasure, luxuriating in its cold embrace, and began to chuckle. Gruanthe would have liked this Bronihim, Gerinvioch thought. Then again, perhaps not. Shared goals often seemed desirable among humans, though the wyrm guessed that lust for power would be a rather divisive one to have in common. No matter, he thought. It always ended the same for those with the foolish desire to wield that kind of power and the single-mindedness not to recognize their folly. Gerinvioch had ensured that of two such fools now.

Kinase Bronihim floated several inches over the searing desert sands as he crested yet another dune. Finally, he spotted the stone he had been seeking. Standing three times taller than Bronihim, its ruddy form erupted out of the sand. After a quick inspection of the area, Bronihim continued east from the rock, figuring it as good a direction as any to begin his search. He cast a minor detection spell but could find no magic in the vicinity at all.

Bronihim looked up to the blazing sun and muttered curses at the blue wyrm under his breath. It had been many hours since he had left the dragon's lair, and he was beginning to think he had been deceived. He continued on, averting his eyes from the sun and blinking the spots from them. Suddenly he shifted his weight to the left and stumbled to the ground to avoid walking directly into the wall of a small hut. He stood, brushing himself off, and blinked in disbelief as he saw brightly colored thatched-roofed huts all around. Where there had been only the open desert a moment before stood a small town.

He turned to see a woman on the street run away, screaming as she went. Doors to many of the homes creaked open slightly as their wary inhabitants peered out. Emerging from a side street, a dark-skinned, muscular young man approached him and offered a smile.

"What is this place?" Bronihim asked, still craning his head around to take in the sight.

"Please come with me and I will take you to someone who can answer your questions," the man answered.

Bronihim followed the man to one of the huts closer to the center of town and entered to find a dim room. The air was full of incense and a plethora of furniture sat strewn about. A woman sat wide-eyed on a couch near the center of the room. She nodded to the young man who had escorted the wizard, and he took his leave. Her sharp, angular face held pleasant warmth but seemed almost harsh when viewed in context with her exceedingly lithe frame.

"I am Moriandro of Lliress," she said.

"Kinase Bronihim of Chavyondat. What is this place? I know of no towns in Raurin."

"That you do not know it exists is not surprising," the woman said.

Bronihim considered her for a moment. Her eyes seemed to hold kindness and what he thought might be pity. Why this woman would pity him he could not imagine.

He said, "I came seeking—"

"The Evise Jhontil," Moriandro put in.

The wizard's face almost swallowed itself with an enormous grin. "You know where it is, then?"

"It is here, in the center of our town," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"Have you the authority to bargain for it?" Bronihim said.

The tall woman laughed, shaking her head. She motioned for him to have a seat.

Bronihim enjoyed bargaining, as did all his people. He doubted that the woman would be a challenge, but as he sat, he subtly began the gestures to a spell that would allow him to discern her honesty all the same.

"No! You must stop!" the woman shouted, lunging forward and grabbing his moving fingers with startling speed and force.

Bronihim sat in stunned silence for several moments as he watched Moriandro calm herself. He could not bring himself to mention what should have felt like an affront to him. Her touch was

genuine and warm. She stopped him for reasons other than wanting to prevent him from gaining the upper hand in their dealings. Of that he felt certain.

"You are from Chavyondat, in Estagund," she said after several moments. "Do you know the name Aniolon Gruanthe?" she asked.

Bronihim's eyes widened at the mention of the same name the dragon had used. "You do, don't you?"

Bronihim's brow furrowed and he found himself slowly sinking further into the chair opposite the lovely woman. "The wyrm used—" he began. "Gerinvioch," Moriandro said, interrupting Bronihim.

"You know..." Bronihim began but found that his throat was tightening.

"Yes, we know the name Gerinvioch here. We know it well. It does not surprise me that he taunted you with the name of Aniolon Gruanthe," Moriandro said, gritting her teeth.

"Who is this Gruanthe?" the wizard asked, his original goal unexpectedly seeming very far away.

"Let me tell you of him and those of our ancestors who followed him here to their end in the Year of Slaying Spells," she said.

"This town has been here for three-hundred and ninety-six years?" Bronihim said, the doubt clear in his voice.

"It has been that long, then?" the woman asked, her shoulders slumping. "A few generations ago people tired of keeping time, and without the records of those years we have found it fruitless to begin again."

"How could you not...?"

"I promise, I will explain, but you must let me do so in my own way," she said.

Kinase Bronihim nodded, not knowing what he would say even if he were so inclined.

Moriandro paused, drew a long breath, and began her tale.

Aniolon Gruanthe walked through the fledgling town he had so recently founded. He took in the sights of his people forging their new life in the wasteland. Workers dug foundations for homes, while mud for their walls was mixed with pigments of various sorts to make the new homes vibrantly colored. The short man ran his stubby fingers through his thinning black hair and smiled.

"Aniolon, are you sure this is the only way?" asked the redheaded woman behind him.

He turned to regard her, his eyes following the soft lines of her voluptuous curves hidden only by a few scraps of bright red silk that barely served to provide even minimal modesty.

Aniolon ran his fingers over her bared hip as he leaned into her and replied, "Lliira and Sharess have blessed our journey and our town. How can we be wrong?"

A tall, old man in robes similar to Aniolon's moved to stand next to the pair. "Aniolon, you do not devote yourself to either of those goddesses, so please spare me the divinely inspired oratory," he said, then sighed. "We are fools to do this. The rajah's cursed mercenaries are bound to find us, and the powers know it could be soon. We should face them."

"We must preserve our dream, my friend," Aniolon replied, acknowledging the old man's words though still staring into the eyes of the lovely young priestess of Sharess before him. "We cannot defeat the rajah's wizard mercenaries, the poor deluded souls that they are. They are interested only in what their cursed master tells them they are interested in and of course, in the coin he pays them. It is that persecution of a life of duty and obeisance to nobility that we have fled. You should know as well as I that they will never cease their hunt."

"The truth is that you have no idea what you're doing. You simply want to lead... to feel important," the old man countered. "Asking a wyrm for help? This is madness, Aniolon."

"I'm leading you to salvation," Aniolon replied, finally turning to look at the man.

"We can defeat these hired wizards," the old man insisted.

"The wyrm is one, the rajah's hirelings are many ... too many," Aniolon said, stepping away from the woman.

"What could we possibly offer this dragon for its help?" the old man inquired.

"We will offer it treasure, or whatever else may interest it," Aniolon replied with a wave of his

hand.

Aniolon turned and shouted to the working townspeople,

"We are off, friends! Pray to Lliira and Sharess that I will find our way to freedom!"

Those around the wizard shared a concerned glance at his exclusion of anyone other than himself in his declaration. A cheer rose from the crowd. Some of the people waved, others shouted phrases of well-wishing to the departing group, and still others simply took the opportunity to rest themselves.

Aniolon stared on as some of the people opted for more pleasurable endeavors during their break. He watched as a short man and a young woman many years his junior embraced, kissing deeply. Their hands explored one another, each slowly divesting the other's body of its minimal clothing. Many of the townsfolk stopped to watch the two lovers, some of them forming their own pairs or groups to pursue similar activities. Aniolon drank in the view before him and grinned. A scene like the one unfolding before him would have been akin to heresy in Estagund, he knew.

He had found these people and they had showed him a different way of living. In turn, he had promised to lead them to a place where they could practice their religions and lifestyles as they saw fit, free from Estagund's so-called noble rulers. All it had cost them was to include him in their ways. Aniolon had to admit to enjoying the deference these people offered. That was pleasant, indeed, he thought. He had railed against the tyrannical rulers of Estagund in his speeches to them, inspiring them to ask him to lead them. Freedom was precious, after all.

One of the other men standing near him tapped him on the shoulder. Aniolon nodded, sighing softly as he turned away from the lustful vista before him to leave on his journey. Leadership was a harsh burden, he decided.

Aniolon and those he had selected to accompany him arrived at the beast's lair a few hours after they had departed. The magically granted flight had made the trip rather expeditious. With him were two warriors formerly of Estagund, two priests of Lliira, the priestess of Sharess, and the old wizard who had joined her in questioning Aniolon's plan.

The imp that Aniolon had summoned days before, a devious little creature by the name of Quiono, had told him the whereabouts of the dragon and had warned him that the lair would be magically defended. Aniolon had expected no less. He and the old wizard inspected the entrance to the cavern. Much to their surprise, they could find no evidence of any active magical traps or barriers.

They entered, finding a single, large tunnel with walls so perfectly smooth that they could not have been naturally formed. Aniolon wondered how the dragon had carved them so perfectly. Magic? Dwarf slaves? The young wizard would pity any such workers. Fealty to something in which one does not believe deteriorates one's very being. Aniolon strode onward, more resolved than ever. They followed the tunnel for a long while as it twisted erratically, leading them ever downward.

Never in his hundreds of years of life, had a living human entered Gerinvioch's lair. True, a lich had once come in search of a stash of enchanted sapphires for some grand spell, but liches were hardly living. With the proper application of spells of controlling, however, they made excellent guardians for a lair such as this. Gerinvioch mentally dismissed the wards and measures of protection leading into his den, including the annoyingly incessant one that had alerted him to the presence of the intruders in the first place. Excellent indeed, but annoying nevertheless.

Motivation for their intrusion was obvious. The wyrm glanced around his home, the sparkle of the many treasures reflecting in his eyes from their piles. Humans and their greed. Gerinvioch shook his head and prepared himself for a bit of merriment.

Seven? Only seven of these visitors, Gerinvioch thought. It was insulting. He could smell their filth and knew they would be within view at the mouth of his cavern at any moment. The great blue wyrm set his front legs firmly and craned his thick neck. The scales covering his body verily hummed with power and a familiar smell emanating from his own body filled his nostrils. The invaders rounded the final corner and were, at last, in view. He doubted they could see him as well in the murkiness of his home.