

The Dragon Sword
Chapter 1 A Dark Place

-Eric Halpenny-

<https://www.erichalpenny.com/>

Cold, dank air permeated the stairwell, which dipped and turned towards the passageway below. The fading dark grey light filtering downward from the rapidly descending dusk was swallowed up by the inky pool of darkness waiting underground. The well-placed stone steps soon gave way to irregular and misshapen blocks as the descent continued. She placed her feet quickly and confidently on the uneven stairs and broken passage floor, perfectly familiar with each step—light was unnecessary. Rapidly descending toward the dungeon, she left the tower above her stretching upward into the night sky.

Her left hand clutched a weighty bundle wrapped in an old, thick cloth. Although the chill air penetrated her thin cloak and tunic, she hardly noticed. Her thoughts were elsewhere.

Undiminished by the darkness, came a strong, clear, anguished scream that pierced the dark wooden barrier of the closed door ahead. It was a cry of pure pain. As she reached the dark door, blackish moldy wood hanging firmly on dark iron-wrought hinges, the sound became ear-piercing. An inescapable feeling of despair washed through her, although she made no sound herself. The feeling was both a wave of cold dread and a flaming arrow of pain—it penetrated her body—invaded her bones—engulfed her mind. She recoiled momentarily at its power.

Quickly regaining her hold on her feelings as she struggled against a strange panic mounting within her, she heaved open the dark door. Her hand tingled with hot, searing, angry energy at the touch of the black metal handle. The hinges squealed as the door opened—the wood creaked and groaned as it scraped over the cobble threshold separating her from the room beyond.

She gripped the burden in her left hand more tightly as she stared into the room, pausing for just a moment to take in the scene. The room had long ago been a dungeon cell—a torture chamber. A pile of straw and a tattered blanket lay in the far-right corner. A black chain and manacles hung high up on the wall in the far-left corner as a reminder of the former purpose. A long table had recently been placed against the left wall, two candles at each end dimly lighting the squarish blocks of stone. Mold and fungus covered the walls—black and slimy growth near the floor connected to long tendrils that stretched upward until they were lost from view in the darkness of the high ceiling. The smell was old, disgusting, rotten, and wet. Coupled with the cold air pressing at her back and with the foreign emotions that she could almost feel running over her skin, it was most unpleasant.

The piercing screams of pain emerging from the dark mass of cloak, armor, boots, and hair that lay crumpled on the floor just inside the door were diminishing little by little. The man that lay there she recognized as the king, but only by the hilt of his sword, which was of a familiar and unique workmanship. The rest of his clothing was unrecognizable, coated in dried mud, blood, and dirt. His face was buried in the cold stony floor, and he writhed there suffering. But even as she had stood for just a moment at the threshold the king's cries had lessened until they had all but ceased. She had never known him to be weak or even acknowledge his own physical discomfort. She knew his suffering must have been beyond comprehension to cause such sounds.

Despite his apparent respite, the intensity of the pain in her own body increased as she crossed the threshold of the cell doorway. The feeling was tangible in the air. The source of it was on the table to her left. It felt almost like the heat of a fire that had grown too large. She had to steel herself to advance farther into the room.

As she stepped past the king, she noted that he was crouched on his knees with his back toward her and his head hung low. It appeared that he was cradling his left arm. She had no time

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to observe him more closely as she now focused on the table and on a second individual, a tall man. An ancient scroll apparently cast down in haste lay on the floor by the hem of his long cloak. The scroll was partially unrolled. The writing on it was ancient, small, and faint, but she knew exactly what it said, having studied it for hours on end—such was the only way to learn the secrets it held. The man was bent over the table, a fleshy, yellow orb resting on the table before him. His mouth moved soundlessly as he worked incantation after incantation, the palms of his hands unflinchingly cast toward the rounded object. This was her husband, and the orb was the source of their suffering. He and the king were the only occupants of the room.

Neither of the men looked toward her or even so much as acknowledged her arrival as she entered. She let fall the cloth that she had gripped tightly in her hand. Her muscles ached but she had not loosened her hold on it since she had left her chambers. Within the cloth had been concealed a large, green jewel—an emerald of notable rarity considering its size. It was this oblong jewel that she now cupped in both hands as she strode purposefully to the table. The dull gem, held out at shoulder height, was balanced in her palms while her fingers were curled upward hovering near but not touching the smooth surface. Her lips began to form silent words as she walked. Rapidly she pronounced each syllable while channeling her thoughts toward the emerald. Very quickly, even before she had reached the table, the emerald had changed from cool to warm, and a very faint light seemed to grow within its core.

Her husband's hands were still suspended over the yellow orb. She noted thin tendrils of smoke issuing up from the table and curling around his fingers as she approached the table. The orb was nestled in a small silver platter balanced on an iron tripod. An identical, empty tripod stood near it. The tripods opposed each other, one in each end of a shallow, rectangular, iron vessel that glowed red with heat. It was from this vessel that the smoke arose. She placed her emerald on the empty tripod opposite the orb.

* * *

It was the first time she had seen the eye. From the doorway, she had not been able to make out its features, but now she could clearly see the pupil, thin and long, surrounded by a deep red iris. Veins were evident all over the surface, stark spider webs against the pale filmy background. Vestiges of blood and strings of flesh were visible thinly coating the surface. It was much larger than she had expected. The candlelight flickered strangely over the pale, shiny surface. As she looked at it, the eye almost seemed to focus on her, its gaze capturing hers.

She quickly averted her gaze and noted that her husband's eyes were clamped tightly shut, tears leaking out at the corners from the effort. The glow from the eye mingled with the candles illuminating his face in pale yellow and orange. His face was hard-set in a grimace, his teeth clenched. His lips were barely moving, mouthing the words of his spell. At each syllable the intensity and power of the eye seemed to increase. Every so often, intense waves of pain coursed through her, seemingly shooting outward from her very bones. At each wave, her husband's body tensed and swayed slightly in their wake, although his hands remained steady.

Even though his face was slightly shadowed, his traveling hood hung on the back of his head partly covering his ears, she could still discern the burns on his face, revealed by the menacing light of the eye. The burns were blistering white in the middle and dark at the edges streaking

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across the left side of his face like a starburst. The burn—which had obviously received some hasty treatment—still oozed some fluid, which stained his cheek. His cloak, once dark crimson, was blackened, singed, and torn. His dagger hung at his side, shoved thoughtlessly into his belt, still unsheathed, and covered in dried blood past the hilt. The part of his cloak against which the dagger lay was also stained dark. His boots were muddy. Their traveling packs had been thrown heedlessly in a heap on the floor at the end of the table.

She held her hands perfectly flat and rigid, just above the emerald, which was now perched on the three prongs of the tripod. She mouthed silent words in ever increasing cadence until she matched her husband. Their words gradually became more similar until their mouths formed words of a silent chant in perfect unison. Their faces were firmly set and their minds were united and focused on the two objects before them. The yellow eye glowed more intensely with each word and the feeling of pain increased within her. It was practically unbearable and all the energy not focused on her spells was spent keeping herself upright with her eyes closed to escape the powerful aura of the eye.

Under her commands, beads of liquid began to form on the surface of the green jewel. The tiny drops seemed to worm their way from within the heart of the emerald until they breached the surface where they spilled outward like ants exploding from their nest. They coursed over the surface until they formed tiny teardrops on the underbelly. Soon, the jewel was covered with a bright sheen of greenish liquid flowing thickly and dripping heavily into the pan below. The liquid glowed with a harsh white light from deep within. Beginning as drips, then increasing to rivulets, and finally flowing as streams into the iron vessel, the emerald completely liquefied and filled the waiting pan below.

The greenish fluid pulsed like a viscous ocean beneath a yellow moon.

As the last drop of the jewel fell into the iron pan, her husband's hands became tense and he began to slowly raise them up, inch by inch, over the yellow orb. The white light from the molten emerald shone upwards at the eye. Her husband's hands were now cupped as if the eye was expanding and he was trying to hold it back. Her fingers were rigid, pointing at the emerald ocean, sending tiny waves coursing along the length of the iron pan.

The orb shuddered under her husband's spell. The silver platter underneath it seemed to tip upwards on one side and the eye fell from the tripod into the liquefied emerald without a splash. At the moment it touched the liquid, the emerald began to lap up the sides of the orb. She and her husband interlocked three fingers of each hand over the iron pan and silently chanted together. The liquefied emerald engulfed the orb, licking slowly up the sides and over the top like flames. The eye was rapidly coated in a glistening green sheath.

The speed of their chant slowed as the final drops adhered to the surface of the eye. They formed an arch with their joined hands. The emerald coating began to dull as they spoke their silent incantations. The coating hardened, and the white light it had emitted slowly faded, replaced by a dark yellow glow. As the emerald hardened, the pain she felt, which had seemed unending, finally began to subside. And then at last it was gone completely.

The spells were complete.

She noticed her husband straighten slightly when the last tendrils of pain withdrew, as if he had suddenly set down a large weight. His face cleared a little from shadow and his eyes opened slightly. He glanced at her for just a moment and then fell towards the table, barely catching

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himself with trembling arms. She quickly moved to his side and helped him to the pile of straw in the corner. His legs were weak, and she bore most of his weight herself.

It was then she noted that her own face was wet with sweat and tears—she felt exhausted. Her hands had traces of blood on them from her husband's fingers. She trembled at the loss of the energy she had expended. She turned back towards the table on the far side of the room.

There, a hard, green, oblong shape lay in the iron pan, illuminated by the four candles. Their illumination had seemed to increase slightly with the imprisonment of the eye. The red glow of the iron had cooled to dull black. She took a few steps back toward the table to examine the eye. The exterior was dull, but within the translucent coating, the yellow orb seemed to pulsate. The pupil of the eye had not lost its powerful, entrancing gaze. She was careful not to look too deeply as it seemed search for her. The surface was perfectly smooth, not a trace of disfigurement, crack, or blemish was visible. Her spell had been well wrought. The yellow glow of the eye had faded—its light was trapped just beneath the surface of the emerald crust, a reservoir of lava seemingly on the verge of eruption.

She was careful not to touch the eye as she cleared the iron vessel of the tripods and placed them to the side.

It was then she thought of the king. She turned back towards the cell door and saw that he had moved but little from his spot on the floor. He was still on his knees, completely bent to the floor, his forehead resting on the cool, moldy stones. He clutched his left arm to his chest, his right hand supporting some of his weight against the floor.

She noted the ringing of a blacksmith hammer echoing in the hallway, distorted by the twisting passageways—one would have thought the sound came from a far distance, although she knew it was only a few doors away. The next task would not be long in coming now. She made no move to help the king. Her strength would be needed all too soon along with her husband's. The king would need to recover without their aid.

The king rolled slightly onto his side and groaned. It was then she could see the extent of his injuries. His left arm was blackened with blisters and burns, similar to those on her husband's face, but far more deep and severe. The burns extended upwards to his shoulder from his wrist. His left hand was completely gone—a charred black stump was all that remained. His cloak and tunic on the left side of his body were burned off completely, and his skin seemed now to be only a mass of char, blood, sweat, and pus.

But as horrible as his arm appeared, his face caused her to gasp. The left side was burned black, and the eye was gone. Three long gashes extended from his eye socket back past his left ear, which was mangled. The claw marks still bled, and his face, neck, shoulder, back, and arm were coated in dried blood. His face was contorted in suffering. His right eye was shut tightly and his teeth were bared and clenched. No doubt the tale of obtaining the eye itself would not be a pleasant one to recount. She would hear it soon, no doubt, but not before the final task could be completed.

She turned from the king and moved towards one of the walls of the room, opposite from the table, near the foot of the pile of straw on which her husband lay. In an attempt to regain some of her strength, she rested her back against the wall and slid carefully to the floor. She clasped her hands in her lap and closed her eyes. She willed her thoughts to slow down in meditation. If they were to succeed in the final step, she needed to rest.