

# **The Shortcut**

By

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This story is dedicated

To

Josh and Valerie.

Without them I would not have been

Inspired to write it.

It was one of those days. Outside, it was storming, while inside, with the electric out, there really wasn't much to do. Josh and Valerie were bored. Two young teenagers trapped inside their home on a Saturday afternoon with absolutely nothing to do seemed worse than any punishment they could think of. Then they saw Grandpa come in the front door. He always liked to sit on the porch when a storm was passing thru.

"Let's go ask Grandpa to tell us the story of the Dragon again" whispered Valerie. Josh peered to his left, toward the den where his Father was working on some project for work.

"Father told us not to listen to Grandpa's stories" Josh exclaimed in as low a voice as he could speak.

Valerie responded, "So, what else do we have to do. Maybe Grandpa will tell us something different this time."

"OK, let's go talk to him." Josh said while thinking they were about to get into trouble. They found Grandpa taking some food out of the fridge. "Well what are you two up to today. Can't be much with that storm going on. Can I make you a snack?" asked Grandpa.

"We'll have whatever it is your making", said Valerie.

"I'll just put a little more on the tray and we can go into the dining room to eat. Josh, can you get a couple of candles out of the draw and light them for us", asked Grandpa.

Josh got the candles while Valerie got them something to drink. They all settled in around the dining room table while the storm let rip a few good, loud peels of thunder and accompanying bolts of lightning. They lit the inside of the house up pretty good.

"To bad it isn't Halloween" said Grandpa. "This would be a perfect setting to tell some

spooky stories. I remember how you two used to love to get scared when you were younger”, mused Grandpa.

“That’s one of the reasons Father doesn’t want you to tell us any stories” Valerie remarked.

“True, but maybe we can sneak a couple of them in while he’s working in the den”, whispered Grandpa.

Valerie looked to her left, toward the Den, and said, “Actually, we were hoping you could tell us about the Dragon again”. Josh nodded his head in agreement.

“Well, I’m not sure. That is the worst story I could tell you, according to your Father”, Grandpa remarked. “Maybe I should tell something else”.

“No, no, we want to hear about the Dragon. Please Grandpa”, begged Josh.

Grandpa looked toward the Den again, thought for a moment and said, “Alright, it was a long time ago, way before either of you were born. I had gone to the FRP convention in Milwaukee by myself....”

Jason was doubting his decision now. Not to go to the convention. It had been a fun weekend, a few new friends were made and a good time was had by all. Some of the best junk and fast foods had been consumed in vast quantities. No, the bad decision was to drive all the way. By himself. After Richard and Mark had to back out at the last minute, he should have flown or even taken a bus or a train. Anything would have been better than this long, lonely ride with no one to talk to or take a turn behind the wheel.

It did not seem so bad on the way out but now with little sleep over the last couple of days it would be real nice to hear some voices besides his own. The radio wasn’t picking up

anything and the scenery was rather dull. In the past hour, there was nothing to see besides dirt, sand, rocks, and hills. It was hot out and Jason thought it might be better to suffer in the heat than tax the engine with the air conditioner. The last thing he needed was to breakdown in the middle of nowhere. He had only seen one truck pass him going the other way in the last hour.

In hindsight he probably should have taken the same route back that he used going to the convention. Taking shortcuts seem a good idea at the time, but they always end up causing some kind of problem along the way. Although, had he not taken the shortcut then he never would have seen the most incredible sight of his life.

Another hour or so of driving thru this desolate, lonely landscape and he should see some signs of life. Hopefully a gas station. He was starting to get concerned about the level of gas left in the tank.

Trying to take his mind off of things he began to look around at the hills, or were they really small mountains, to see if he could spot anyone climbing up them. Even seeing a mountain goat would relieve the boredom.

That was when he saw a dark speck high up in the sky. It definitely wasn't a plane or jet. He thought he could see the movements of wings. But this seemed a lot larger than any bird that might roost up in these small crags. Your larger birds would be nearer some real mountains and forests.

Giving it no thought, he began to blow the horn. Maybe the bird would be attracted to the noise and come in closer. Then he might be able to tell what type of winged creature it was.

Apparently the horn had attracted the bird. It was definitely heading his way and growing larger by the second. The size of the thing was becoming astounding. Why, if Jason didn't know any better he would have sworn this must be a giant Condor that lost its way. No wait! Jason

would now swear this was a ... No, it isn't possible!

Jason slammed on the brakes and jerked the door open. He practically leapt out of the car and stood staring up at the sky. He must be having heatstroke. There was no way, his mind kept saying, that he could really be seeing this.

Circling above and around Jason was a DRAGON!

It was the most beautiful, most awe inspiring sight he had ever seen. A huge blue and gold flying dragon. The creature was coming out of its turn and heading straight for the car. And descending quickly as well.

Jason suddenly realized that he was standing alone, without any shelter, while a Dragon came towards him. Fear did not paralyze his legs. Fear caused him to literally leap into his car, land on the front seats and roll onto the floor of the car.

The jolt from the Dragon landing on the road was not harsh at all. Jason thought the car would have shook apart when the great beast touched down.

After about a minute of thinking any second now the Dragon would rip the roof off of the car and eat him, Jason lifted himself up enough to peer over the dashboard. He saw the Dragon sitting in the road about 20 yards from the car. The beast was magnificent looking.

“Beast Indeed”! “Creature!” came a slightly high pitched voice. The voice did not come from around Jason, but rather from within his head. “I would not mistake you for one of the unintelligent animals of this world”.

Again the voice just seemed to be in Jason's head. Not very loud but definitely a little irritated. Could it really be the Dragon speaking to him?

“Of course it is I. Is there anyone else around here that could be talking to you” stated the Dragon.

Jason sat up, gripped the steering wheel very hard without realizing it and stared out at the cre..., er, Dragon. What should he do? If it wanted to eat him there was no way he could stop it. He wasn't going to get anywhere by sitting in the car so he slowly placed a foot out of the car door. Next he slipped out a leg. Before he realized it he was outside of the car standing next to the front fender. That was when his knees failed him and he collapsed onto the ground.

"Are you injured" asked the voice of the Dragon.

"No, No, I'm just having a nervous breakdown. Wait a minute! Did you read my mind" asked Jason.

"No, I read your thoughts. It is a little more difficult to read another's mind" replied the Dragon.

Jason picked himself up, stumbled a few more feet and collapsed to one knee. He realized that he was getting closer to the Dragon. What was he doing! He was about to become a snack to a mythological creature.

"I do not eat intelligent beings" said the Dragon, sounding a little miffed. "And I do not like being called a creature". Again, there was that slight note of irritation in the voice.

"I must admit, given provocation, I will kill you without a second thought. I hope you realize it is nothing personal, just a matter of survival" said the Dragon, while opening his mouth and showing a most impressive set of teeth.

Jason stopped breathing at that point and had to will himself to begin breathing again. He stood up, gathered his thoughts and addressed the Dragon.

"How is...? What...? You can't...! Dragons do not exist! They are just legends!" said Jason in a rather squeaky voice. He cleared his throat several times, took a couple of deep breaths and tried speaking again.

“Where did you come from? If you don’t mind my asking” spoke Jason, in a voice close to normal.

“I have come from Zagantu . I was on my way to the Gathering. My first visit going alone actually. I was in a great rush to arrive early and see all the preliminaries that I took a shortcut.” A great sigh seemed to emanate from the Dragon. “My Sire warned me not to take any shortcuts. To just head straight to the Gathering, since it was my first time making the trip alone. But I did not heed his advice. He will surely pin back my wings when he finds me lost out here.” Another sigh escaped the Dragon.

“My name, at this age, is Dranth” offered the Dragon. “What is yours?”

“I am called Jason. What did you mean by at this age?” replied Jason to Dranth.

“Dranth is my first name. As I get older and wiser, I will change my name or possibly, if I do a great deed, have another name thrust upon me by another dragon. I can only hope” stated Dranth. “That is, if I survive the punishment I am given by my sire. He was very adamant that I not take any detours or shortcuts to the Gathering”.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have taken a shortcut after leaving the convention myself.” offered Jason.

“Convention? What is a convention” asked Dranth.

“It is a place we humans go to play games and have fun. Usually with our friends or at least people we know who are going to enjoy playing games” responded Jason.

“What kind of games do you play? I enjoy a good game myself” said Dranth.

“Well, this particular convention featured a lot of FRP gaming opportunities. I won an award at the Convention last year for my portrayal of a Lizard man in a game” explained Jason.

“What is a FRP game” inquired Dranth.



“Well, the letters actually stand for Fantasy Role Playing. You play a certain type of character and other people in your group play characters that compliment yours. You are a team trying to accomplish a specific goal. You could be a magic user and someone else could be a priest while others could be fighters. You each have special abilities or powers and magic items to help you on your quest. One person runs the game and explains the situations and creatures you encounter” explained Jason.

“Actually, there was a game at the convention this year where everyone played a dragon. It was booked up with players and I could not get in to play” said Jason.

“Really. You humans play acting like dragons. I would love to see that” remarked Dranth.

“I think the video will be available to see in a month or so. Maybe you could come back after you get to the Gathering and watch it with me”. Now why did I offer to do that, thought Jason. Dranth is too big to fit in my house. Maybe I could rent the biggest TV I can get and we could watch it in the backyard. Right! I could just see how the neighbors would react to having a dragon near their property.

“You do not think they would like me?” asked Dranth.

“Hey, cut that out! Reading my thoughts is disturbing. A person’s thought should be private. Not shared with others unless you want to share them” responded Jason.

“My apologies. It is a natural thing for dragons to do. We know how to block our thoughts from being read by other dragons if we wish to do so” offered Dranth.

I think they would be scared of you. They would panic. Probably have the authorities or military come around to shoot you” stated Jason.

“You are not scared of me” replied Dranth.

“I am probably too curious to be scared. I should be scared. But how many chances does

a person get to meet a dragon? And talk to them. None on this planet” reasoned Jason.

“That is not true. I had several ancestors visit this world, many years ago. I do not think any have been here for hundreds of years. It is true that most humans were ready to fight as soon as they saw a dragon. But some few made friends with us. It is how I know your language” responded Dranth.

“Then that explains why we have never found evidence of dragon remains here in the past. You come here, stay awhile and go home?” asked Jason.

“Essentially. There really is not a lot to keep us here for long. It is a rather underdeveloped world for dragons. I mean no disrespect” stated Dranth.

“None taken” answered Jason.

“Are there other types of games played at this convention?” asked Dranth.

“Not normally. Someone might break out a board game or a chess game if there are not enough people to play a FRP game” answered Jason.

“Chess! You play Chess?” asked the dragon. He actually sounded excited thought Jason. “It is one of my favorite ways to pass the time” added Dranth.

“Yes. I enjoy a game of chess. I am just not great at it. It is a shame that I do not have a set with me” lamented Jason.

“That is not a problem. I always carry a small set with me when I travel.” Explained Dranth. He proceed to reach under a wing and pulled out the largest Chess set Jason had ever seen. It appeared to have precious gems of all kinds inlaid into the pieces. And the colors of the pieces reminded him of Jade and Ruby. They were also made to resemble things that Jason had never seen.

“Could you explain the pieces to me. I am not familiar with this type of set” asked Jason.

“Very well. Let me explain” answered Dranth.

The next few hours just seemed to fly buy. The Dragon had already beaten him twice and was about to win the third game. Jason noticed that it was starting to get dark.

“Would you mind if I take a few photographs of us before we lose the light?” asked Jason.

“What is photograph?” asked Dranth.

“A picture that I can have to remember you by. I probably will not show it to my friends. They will just think it is some kind of doctored image. They would never believe the story if I told it to them. Well, maybe Richard would believe me” mused Jason.

Jason walked back to his car and opened the back door. He proceeded to set up his tripod and then affix his camera to it.

“I will take a few photos and show them to you. I would give you some copies to take with you but I have no way of printing them out here in no man’s land” offered Jason.

“Thank you for offering. That was kind of you” said Dranth.

After the picture taking was over, Dranth began to get a little sad thought Jason.

“Is something bothering you, Dranth” asked Jason.

“I think I should be trying to find my way to the Gathering. Maybe I can get there before my sire finds out I got lost” explained Dranth. “I have been having a good time. I would like to stay longer but it is probably not wise to do so. I see the stars are coming out. Maybe I can figure out where I have to go” added Dranth.

“I think I am going to miss you, my friend” spoke Jason.

Dranth actually looked shocked. “You call me friend. A human calling a dragon friend has happened only twice that I know of. This will make an interesting story to tell the other

dragons. Humans playing at being dragons. I will not be believed” spoke Dranth.

“Bring them around and I will tell them myself” Now why did Jason say that? One dragon might be bad enough but a whole gang of them. The planet would go crazy.

Dranth held out his rather large paw/hand toward Jason. When he opened his hand Jason saw an amazing sight.

“That isn’t what I think it is, is it” asked Jason quietly.

“Yes it is. I would like you to have it. To remember me by” said Dranth.

“Oh I don’t think I will ever forget you” stated Jason.

“Still, I would be honored if you would take it. My friend” said Dranth.

Jason looked up into Dranth’s eyes. They seemed to be spinning around and changing color ever so slightly.

“I will cherish it forever. I can’t thank you enough for this gift” Jason said in an almost reverential tone.

When Jason finally looked up from the gift he had been given, he saw Dranth looking up into the sky. Examining the stars. Jason looked up as well, wondering what Dranth was looking for.

“I think I know how to get to the gathering from here. At least I hope so” said Dranth.

Dranth looked down at Jason. “I think this is when we part company. I will remember this time with fondness, Jason. Perhaps we will meet again” offered Dranth.

“I hope so” spoke Jason.

“Keep my gift with you and I will be able to find you. It calls to me. That is the best way I can explain it to you in your words” explained Dranth.

“I will carry it with me always” replied Jason.

Dranth began to rise up into the sky. His wings were hardly moving at all. Jason thought it would have taken a great effort and flapping of the wings for Dranth to get airborne.

“I am using some magic to get me high enough for the wings to function. Farewell” Those were the last words that Jason heard from Dranth. He watched for a long time. Trying to see the dragon up amongst the stars.

Finally Jason got back inside his car. He thought briefly of lying down to sleep but it would be impossible to do that right now. So Jason turned the ignition of the car and started down the road again to home. He was so glad now that he had taken a shortcut home....

The rain had begun to let up while Grandpa was telling his story. The thunder and lightning had ceased and now that the story was finished they could hardly hear the rain hitting the windows. Josh and Valerie just stared at each other, not sure what questions to ask of Grandpa. Suddenly the lights came back on in the house. The three of them could hear that the television was back on again.

“Well, it looks like the two of you can go play one of those video games or watch a DVD now” said Grandpa. He was looking at them with a peculiar expression on his face.

Valerie cleared her throat and said, “Grandpa, what about the pictures you took. Where are they? We want to see them.”

Grandpa looked at her for a moment and quietly said, “Val, do you need those pictures to believe in the Dragon?”

“No, I believe. But we could prove to Father and everyone that the Dragon is real. Please get the pictures Grandpa” pleaded Valerie.

“Yeah, we could make everyone believe in the Dragon if they saw the pictures” chimed in

Josh.

Grandpa stared at them for a long moment before speaking. “The pictures never developed. I never did find out why they came up so dark and out of focus. Besides, I don’t think this is something to share with the rest of the world” Grandpa grew silent for a time.

Finally Val spoke up, “Grandpa, can you give us directions to where you saw the Dragon. To the exact spot.”

Grandpa looked up and replied, “Why do you want to know that”

“Well, I’m going to be driving next year. Josh and I could go there and see if we can meet the Dragon. Maybe we could drive out every summer looking for it” Valerie answered.

The expression on Grandpa’s face was startling. They had never seen him look so happy.

“You do believe in the Dragon” whispered Grandpa. Both Josh and Valerie’s heads nodded quickly several times.

Grandpa looked toward the den and then leaned toward his Grandchildren and whispered. “I will give you the directions to where I encountered the Dragon but you must promise me that you will not go out there until you have gained some experience driving an automobile. And you must also promise me that you will not go on any trips unprepared. Make sure you take along a cell phone in case you break down or get into trouble”

“We promise, really we do, Grandpa. We promise, right Valerie.” stated Josh.

“Yes, yes, we promise Grandpa” agreed Valerie.

“Ok”, replied Grandpa. “I’ll write down the directions. But first I have something to give you.”

Grandpa reached inside his shirt and started to pull out a chain he was wearing. At the end of the chain he held something in his hand. It was wrapped in a handkerchief. He pulled the

chain over his head and held the wrapped item out toward them.

“It’s time I gave this to you. Now that I know you truly believe in the Dragon and understand that you cannot share this with everyone else, I can finally hand this down to you. Take very good care of it and pass it along to someone else when the time is right” Grandpa instructed them.

When Grandpa unwrapped the item they saw that it was oddly shaped. Six slightly uneven sides could be seen. It was about as thick as a finger. But what really stood out though was the color. It appeared to be a strange shade of blue with lines of faint gold running thru it. As Grandpa moved the item around the blue shown brighter at times and the gold lines seem to almost move about over the item as if they were alive. It was the most incredible thing they had ever seen.

Valerie opened her mouth and her hand flew up and covered it to stifle any sounds that might come out. Slowly she took her hand away and, without looking away from the item she said to Grandpa, “That has to be a scale from the Dragon.”

“Yes child, it is”, responded Grandpa. “The Dragon told me he had been carrying it around with him since the time he was a young hatchling, almost. I always considered it akin to us shedding our baby fat when we are young. Except they really shed.”

The two of them took the Dragon scale from Grandpa. Neither of them could take their eyes off of it.

“Oh, one more thing” mentioned Grandpa. “Make sure you take that with you when you go looking for the Dragon. He told me that he could always locate the scale and by doing so find me when he returns to our world. And don’t forget to take along a Chess set”

“Come on, Josh” Valerie said. “The rain has let up. Let’s take our bike’s to the mall and

buy the biggest Chess set we can find”

Grandpa smiled while watching them run out of the house. He was thinking how lucky he had been that day when both he and the Dragon had taken their shortcuts.

To Be Continued....