## A Stark and Wormy Knight

## Tad Williams

“Mam! Mam!” squeed Alexandrax from the damps of his straw-stooned nesty. “Us can’t sleep! Tail us a tell of Ye Elder Days!” “Child, stop that howlering or you’ll be the deaf of me,” scowled his scaly forebearer. “Count sheeps and go to sleep!”

“Been counting shepherds instead, have us,” her eggling rejoined. “But too too toothsome they each look. Us are hungry, Mam.”

“Hungry? Told you not to swallow that farm tot so swift. A soiled and feisity little thing it was, but would you stop to chew carefulish? Oh, no, no. You’re not hungry, child, you’ve simpledy gobbled too fast and dazzled your eatpipes. Be grateful that you’ve only got one head to sleepify, unbelike some of your knobful ancestors, and go back and shove yourself snorewise.”

“But us can’t sleep, Mam. Us feels all grizzled in the gut and wiggly in the wings. Preach us some storying, pleases—something sightful but sleepable. Back from the days when there were long dark knights!”

“Knights, knights—you’ll scare yourself sleepless with such! No knights there are anymore—just wicked little winglings who will not wooze when they should.”

“Just one short storying, Mam! Tale us somewhat of Great-Grandpap, the one that were named Alexandrax just like us! He were alive in the bad old days of bad old knights.”

“Yes, that he was, but far too sensible and caveproud to go truckling with such clanking mostrositors—although, hist, my dragonlet, my eggling, it’s true there was one time...”

“Tell! Tell!”

His Mam sighed a sparking sigh. “Right, then, but curl yourself tight and orouborate that tail, my lad—that’ll keep you quelled and quiet whilst I storify.

“Well, as often I’ve told with pride, your Great-Grandpap were known far-flown and wide-spanned for his good sense. Not for him the errors of others, especkledy not the promiscuous plucking of princesses, since your Great-Grandy reckoned full well how likely that was to draw some clumbering, lanking knight in a shiny suit with a fist filled of sharp steel wormsbane.

“Oh, those were frightsome days, with knights lurking beneath every scone and round every bent, ready to spring out and spear some mother’s son for scarce no cause at all! So did your wisdominical Great-Grandpap confine himself to plowhards and peasant girls and the plumpcasional parish priest tumbled down drunk in the churchyard of a Sunday evening, shagged out from ’cessive sermonizing. Princesses and such got noticed, do you see, but the primate proletariat were held cheap in those days—a dozen or so could be harvested in one area before a dragon had to wing on to pastors new. And your Grand-Greatpap, he knew that. Made no mistakes, did he—could tell an overdressed merchant missus from a true damager duchess even by the shallowest starlight, plucked the former but shunned the latter every time. Still, like all of us he wondered what it was that made a human princess so very tasty and tractive. Why did they need to be so punishingly, paladinishly protected? Was it the creaminess of their savor or the crispiness of their crunch? Perhaps they bore the ‘bookwet,’ as those fancy French wyverns has it, of flowery flavors to which no peat-smoked peasant could ever respire? Or were it something entire different, he pondered, inexplicable except by the truthiest dint of personal mastication?

“Still, even in these moments of weakness your Grandpap’s Pap knew that he were happily protected from his own greeding nature by the scarcity of princessly portions, owing to their all being firmly pantried in castles and other stony such. He was free to specklate, because foolish, droolish chance would never come to a cautious fellow like him.

“Ah, but he should have quashed all that quandering, my little lizarding, ’stead of letting it simmer in his brain-boiler, because there came a day when Luck and Lust met and bred and brooded a litter named Lamentable.

“That is to say, your Pap’s Grandpap stumbled on an unsupervised princess.

“This royal hairless was a bony and brainless thing, it goes without saying, and overfond of her clear complexion, which was her downfalling (although the actual was more of an uplifting, as you’ll see). It was her witless wont at night to sneak out of her bed betimes and wiggle her skinny shanks out the window, then ascend to the roof of the castle to moonbathe, which this princess was convinced was the secret of smoothering skin. (Which it may well have been, but who in the name of Clawed Almighty wants smoothered skin? No wonder that humans have grown so scarce these days—they wanted wit.)

“In any case, on this particularly odd even she had just stretched herself out there in her nightgown to indulge this lunar tic when your Great-Grandpap happened to flap by overhead, on his way back from a failed attempt at tavernkeeper tartare in a nearby town. He took one look at this princess stretched out like the toothsomest treat on a butcher’s table and his better sense deskirted him. He swooped scoopishly down and snatched her up, then wung his way back toward his cavern home, already menu-rizing a stuffing of baker’s crumbs and coddle of toddler as side dish when the princess suddenfully managed to get a leg free and, in the midst of her struggling and unladylike cursing, kicked your Great-Grandpap directedly in the vent as hard as she could, causing him unhappiness (and almost unhemipenes). Yes, dragons had such things even way back then, foolish fledgling. No, your Great-Grandpap’s wasn’t pranged for permanent—where do you think your Grandpap came from?

“In any case, so shocked and hemipained was he by this attack on his ventral sanctity that he dropped the foolish princess most sudden and vertical—one hundred sky-fathoms or more, into a grove of pine trees, which left her rather careworn. Also fairly conclusively dead.

“Still, even cold princess seemed toothsome to your Great-Grandpap, though, so he gathered her up and went on home to his cavern. He was lone and batchelorn in those days—your Great-Grandmammy still in his distinct future—so there was none to greet him there and none to share with, which was how he liked it, selfish old mizard that he was even in those dewy-clawed days. He had just settled in, ’ceedingly slobberful at the teeth and tongue and about to have his first princesstual bite ever, when your Grandpap’s Pap heard a most fearsomeful clatternacious clanking and baying outside his door. Then someone called the following in a rumbling voice that made your G-G’s already bruised ventrality try to shrink up further into his interior.

“‘Ho, vile beast! Stealer of maiden princesses, despoiler of virgins, curse of the kingdom—come ye out! Come ye out and face Sir Libogran the Undeflectable!’

“It were a knight. It were a big one.

“Well, when he heard this hewing cry your Great-Grandpap flished cold as a snowdrake’s bottom all over. See, even your cautious Great-Grandy had heard tell of this Libogran, a terrible, stark and wormy knight—perhaps the greatest dragonsbane of his age and a dreadsome bore on top of it.

“‘Yes, it is I, Libogran,’ the knight bellows on while your G’s G got more and more trembful: ‘Slayer of Alasalax the iron-scaled and bat-winged Beerbung, destroyer of the infamous Black Worm of Flimpsey Meadow and scuttler of all the noisome plans of Fubarg the Flameful...’

“On and on he went, declaiming such a drawed-out dracologue of death that your Great-Grandpap was pulled almost equal by impatience as terror. But what could he do to make it stop? A sudden idea crept upon him then, catching him quite by surprise. (He was a young dragon, after all, and unused to thinking, which in those days were held dangerous for the inexperienced.) He snicked quietly into the back of his cave and fetched the princess, who was a bit worse for wear but still respectable enough for a dead human, and took her to the front of the cavern, himself hidebound in shadows as he held her out in the light and dangled her puppetwise where the knight could see.

“‘Princess!’ cried Libogran. ‘Your father has sent me to save you from this irksome worm! Has he harmed you?’

“‘Oh, no!’ shrilled your Great-Grandpap in his most high-pitchful, princessly voice. ‘Not at all! This noble dragon has been naught but gentlemanifold, and I am come of my own freed will. I live here now, do you see? So you may go home without killing anything and tell my papa that I am as happy as a well-burrowed scale mite.’

“The knight, who had a face as broad and untroubled by subtle as a porky haunch, stared at her. ‘Are you truly certain you are well, Princess?’ quoth he. ‘Because you look a bit battered and dirtsome, as if you had perhaps fallen through several branches of several pine trees.’

“‘How nosy and nonsensical you are, Sir Silly Knight!’ piped your Great-Grandpap a bit nervous-like. ‘I was climbing in the tops of a few trees, yes, as I love to do. That is how I met my friend this courtinuous dragon—we were both birdnesting in the same tree, la and ha ha! And then he kindly unvited me to his home toward whence I incompulsedly came, and where I am so happily visiting...!’

“Things went on in this conversational vain for some little time as your Great-Grandpap labored to satisfy the questioning of the dreaded dragonslayer. He might even have eventually empacted that bold knight’s withdrawal, except that in a moment of particularly violent puppeteering your great-grandsire, having let invention get the best of him while describing the joyful plans of the putative princess, managed to dislodge her head.

“She had not been the most manageable marionette to begin with, and now your Great-Grandpap was particular difficulted trying to get her to pick up and re-neck her lost knob with her own hands while still disguising his clawed handiwork at the back, controlling the action.

“‘Oops and girlish giggle!’ he cried in his best mock-princessable tones, scrabbling panicked after her rolling tiara-stand, ‘silly me, I always said it would fall off if it weren’t attached to me and now look at this, hopped right off its stem! Oh, la, I suppose I should be a bit more rigormortous about my grooming and attaching.’

“Sir Libogran the Undeflectable stared at what must clearful have been a somewhat extraordinate sight. ‘Highness,’ quoth he, ‘I cannot help feeling that someone here is not being entirely honest with me.’

“‘What?’ lied your Great-Grandpap most quickly and dragon-fully. ‘Can a princess not lose her head in a minor way occasional without being held up left and right to odiumfoundment and remonstrance?’

“‘This, I see now,’ rumbled Sir Libogran in the tone of one who has been cut to his quink, ‘is not the living article I came to deliver at all, but rather an ex-princess in expressly poor condition. I shall enter immediately, exterminate the responsible worm, and remove the carcasework for respectful burial.’

“Your Great-Grandpap, realizing that this particular deceptivation had run its curse, dropped the bony remnants on the stony stoop and raised his voice in high-pitched and apparently remorsive and ruthful squizzling: ‘Oh, good sir knight, don’t harm us! It’s true, your princess is a wee bit dead, but through no fault of us! It was a terrible diseasement that termilated her, of which dragon caves are highlishly prone. She caught the sickness and was rendered lifeless and near decapitate by it within tragical moments. I attempted to convenience you otherwise only to prevent a fine felon like you from suckling at the same deadly treat.’

“After the knight had puddled out your grandsire’s sire’s words with his poor primate thinker, he said, ‘I do not believe there are diseases which render a princess headless and also cover her with sap and pine needles. It is my counter-suggestion, dragon, that you thrashed her to death with an evergreen of some sort and now seek to confuse me with fear for my own person. But your downfall, dragon, is that even ’twere so, I cannot do less than march into the mouth of death to honor my quest and the memory of this poor pine-battered morsel. So regardless of personal danger, I come forthwith to execute you, scaly sirrah. Prepare yourself to meet my blameless blade...’ And sewed on.

“Clawed the Flyest, thought your Great-Grandpap, but he is deedly a noisome bore for true. Still, he dubited not that Sir Libogran, for all his slathering self-regard, would quickly carry through on his executive intent. Thus, to protect his own beloved and familiar hide for a few moments languorous, your Pap’s Pap’s Pap proceeded to confect another tongue-forker on the spot.

“‘All right, thou hast me dart to tripes,’ he told the knight. ‘The realio trulio reason I cannot permit you into my cavernous cavern is that so caught, I must perforcemeat give up to you three wishes of immense valuable. For I am that rare and amnesial creature, a Magical Wishing Dragon. Indeed, it was in attempting to claw her way toward my presence and demand wishes from me that your princess gained the preponderosa of these pine-burns, for it was with suchlike furniture of ever-greenwood that I attempted pitifullaciously to block my door, and through which she cranched and smushed her way with fearsome strength. Her head was damaged when, after I told her I was fluttered out after long flight and too weary for wish-wafting, she yanked off her crown and tried to beat me indispensable with it. She was a pittance too rough, though—a girl whose strength belied her scrawnymous looks—and detached her headbone from its neckly couchment in the crown-detaching process, leading to this lamentable lifelessness.

“‘However,’ went on your Great-Grandpap, warming now to his self-sufficed subject, ‘although I resisted the wish-besieging princess for the honor of all my wormishly magical brethren, since you have caught me fairy and scary, Sir Libogran, larded me in my barren, as it were, I will grant the foremansioned troika of wishes to you. But the magic necessitudes that after you tell them unto my ear you must go quickly askance as far as possible—another country would be idealistic—and trouble me no more so that I can perforce the slow magics of their granting (which sometimes takes years betwixt wishing and true-coming.)’

“Libogran stood a long time, thinking uffishly, then lastly said, ‘Let me make sure I have apprehended you carefully, worm. You state that you are a Magic Wishing Dragon, that it was her greed for this quality of yours which cost the unfortunate princess her life, and that I should tell you my three wishes and then leave, preferably to a distant land, so that you may grant them to me in the most efficacious manner.’

“‘Your astutity is matched only by the stately turn of your greave and the general handfulness of your fizzick, good sir knight,’ your Great-Grandpap eagerly responsed, seeing that perhaps he might escape puncturing at the hands of this remorseless rider after all. ‘Just bename those wishes and I will make them factive, both pre- and post-haste.’

“Sir Libogran slowly shook his massive and broadly head. ‘Do you take me for a fool, creature?”

“‘Not a fool creature as sort,’ replinked your Grandpap’s Daddy, trying to maintain a chirrupful tone. ‘After all, you and your elk might be a lesser species than us Draco Pulcher, but still, as I would be the first to argue, a vally-hooed part of Clawed the Flyest’s great creation...’

“‘Come here, dragon, and let me show you my wish.’” Your Great-Grandpap hesitated. ‘Come there?’ he asked. ‘Whyso?’

“‘Because I cannot explain as well as I can demonstrate, sirrah,’ quoth the bulky and clanksome human.

“So your forebear slithered out from the cavernous depths, anxious to end his night out by sending this knight out. He was also hoping that, though disappointed of his foreplanned feast, he might at least locate some princessly bits fallen off in the cave, which could be served chippingly on toast. But momentarily after your Great-Grandpap emerged into the lightsome day, the cruel Sir Libogran snatched your ancestor’s throat in a gauntleted ham and cut off that poor, innosensitive dragon’s head with his vicious blade.

“Snick! No snack.” This treacherness done, the knight gathered up the princess’ tree-tattered torso and emancive pate, then went galumphing back toward the castle of her mourning, soon-to-mourn-more Mammy and Daddums.”

“But how can that be, Mam?” shrimped wee Alexandrax. “He killed Great-Grandpap? Then how did Grandpap, Pap, and Yours Contumely come to be?”

“Fie, fie, shut that o-shaped fishmouth, my breamish boy. Did I say aught about killing? He did not kill your Great-Grandpap, he cut off his head. Do you not dismember that your great-grandcestor was dragon of the two-headed vermiety?

“As it happened, one of his heads had been feeling poorly, and he had kept it tucked severely under one wing all that day and aftermoon so it could recupertate. Thus, Libogran the Undeflectable was not aware of the existence of this auxiliary knob, which he would doubtless of otherwise liberated from its neckbones along with the other. As it was, the sickened head soon recovered and was good as new. (With time the severed one also grew back, although it was ever after small and prone to foolish smiles and the uttering of platitudinous speech—phrases like, ‘I’m sure everything will work off in the end’ and ‘It is honorous just to be nominated,’ and suchlike.)

“In times ahead—a phrase which was sorely painful to your Great-Great-Pap during his invalidated re-knobbing—your G-G would go back to his old, happy ways, horrorizing harrowers and slurping shepherds but never again letting himself even veer toward rooftopping virgins or in fact anything that bore the remotest rumor of the poisonous perfume of princessity. He became a pillar of his community, married your Great-Grandmammy in a famously fabulous ceremony—just catering the event purged three surrounding counties of their peasantly population—and lived a long and harpy life.”

“But Mam, Mam, what about that stark and wormy Sir Libogran, that...dragocidal maniac? Did he really live hoppishly ever after as well, unhaunted by his bloodful crime?”

“In those days, there was no justice for our kind except what we made ourselves, my serpentine son. No court or king would ever have victed him.”

“So he died unpunwiched?”

“Not exactly. One day your Great-Grandpap was on his way back from courting your Grandest-Greatmam-to-be, and happened to realize by the banners on its battlements that he was passing over Libogran’s castle, so he stooped to the rooftop and squatted on the chimbley pot, warming his hindermost for a moment (a fire was burning in the hearth down below and it was most pleasantly blazeful) before voiding himself down the chimbley hole into the great fireplace.”

“He couped the flue!”

“He did, my boy, he did. The whole of Libogran’s household came staggering out into the cold night waving and weeping and coughing out the stinking smoke as your Grand’s Grandpap flew chortling away into the night, unseen. Libogran’s castle had to be emptied and aired for weeks during the most freezingly worstful weather of the year, and on this account the knight spent the rest of his life at war with the castle pigeons, on whom he blamed your Great-Grandpap’s secret chimbley-discharge—he thought the birds had united for a concerted, guanotated attempt on his life. Thus, stalking a dove across the roof with his bird-net and boarspear a few years later, Sir Libogran slipped and fell to his death in the castle garden, spiking himself on his own great sticker and dangling thereby for several days, mistaked by his kin and servants as a new scarecrow.”

“Halloo and hooray, Mam! Was he the last of the dragon-hunters, then? Was him skewerting on his own sharpitude the reason we no longer fear them?”

“No, dearest honey-sonny, we no longer fear them because they no longer see us. During the hunders of yearses since your Greatest Grandpap’s day, a plague called Civilization came over them, a diseaseful misery that blinded them to half the creatures of the world and dumbfounded their memories of much that is true and ancient. Let me tell you a dreadsome secret.” She leaned close to whisper in his tender earhole. “Even when we snatch a plump merchant or a lean yet flavorful spinster from their midst these days, the humans never know that one of us dragons has doomfully done for the disappeared. They blame it instead on a monster they fear even more.”

“What is that, Mam?” Alexandrax whimpspered. “It fears me to hear, but I want to know. What do they think slaughters them? An odious ogre? A man-munching manticore?”

“Some even more frightfulling creature. No dragon has ever seen it, but they call it...Statistics.”

“Clawed Hitself save us from such a horridly horror!” squeeped the small one in fright.

“It is only a man-fancy, like all the rest of their nonned sense,” murmed his Mam. “Empty as the armor of a cracked and slurped knight—so fear it not. Now, my tale is coiled, so sleepish for you, my tender-winged bundle.”

“I will,” he said, curling up like a sleepy hoop, most yawnful. “I s’pose no knights is good nights, huh, Mam?”

“Examply, my brooded boy. Fear not clanking men nor else. Sleep. All is safe and I am watching all over you.”

And indeed, as she gazed yellow-eyed and loving on her eggling, the cave soon grew fulfilled with the thumberous rundle of wormsnore.