

A Lesson in First Contact

By: Jonathan Kirsch

I go by many names. Some call me Raze. Others call me Morim. Many know me as Torvictus Darkheart. Ridiculous, you say? Many might think so. How do I make sense of it all to you? It would be like explaining atomic particles to a medieval peasant sowing his fields. Forgive me if I offend. The point was to illustrate your lack of knowledge and my mastery of it – or over some of it, anyway. I have my own limitations, although to you my power may seem limitless. But enough of that. I'll no longer talk in riddles.

I am what you would call (inaccurately) a god. God is such an imprecise word. You humans really should come up with something meatier, more concrete. We're not as ethereal as your angels or as insubstantial as the spirits in your hauntings.

It was a chill morning, the frost heavy in the air, and I surveyed the open plains from my rocky perch. I avoided the higher curls of the snowy peak, though to sit atop such magnificence certainly would have stroked my ego. No, instead I clung to a craggy ledge, the wind howling as if to warn me of the silver coil snaking its way up my mountain.

The people of Ghand call this place the Snowy Den, for it is my home, my fortress. Instead of battlements, it has sheer rock faces. Instead of a moat and portcullis, it has a wide, thrashing river, and beyond the glistening ribbon crouch the fortifications of the Orukai, my allies and fellow outcasts. They are not quite human, their temperament and skin being rough, like a fragment of sea glass when it washes ashore.

The Orukai named Jubei approached me reverently. Drawing his katana smoothly with a hiss, he pointed southward even as he knelt with head bowed. It was a sign of his devotion, his willingness to throw his life aside in case it suited my whimsy.

“My Master, the humans were too many. We could not hold the river. Please forgive your servant for failing you,” he said.

I tossed back my reptilian skull. My eyes flared an angry gold as I thought of the invaders, cooling to soft loam as I regarded my warrior. I looked at the well-muscled Orukai samurai with pride. His golden eyes bore me such love that my spirit was fiercely moved.

“There is no need to forgive,” I said. I looked back towards the column of glistening metal undulating its way up the ridge, a long and irritating umbilical cord with bright blue pennons and lances. The Host of Ghand had violated my lands, their legions of rearguard knights gathered on the near side of the river. Then I watched the mercenary horde which led the venture, Sir So-and-So’s from every petty noble who hoped to line his pockets with my bounty, perhaps 5,000 eager-eyed men all told.

Alas, such was the price of the form I chose to take in this world.

Dragons and men have never made for frolicsome companions. It’s one of the world’s great, divisive gulfs of understanding. When he saw man, the first dragon must have thought to himself, ‘what an odd little being, pink and so soft? Certainly it won’t be a bother! I may as well let it be.’ Of course, that was before the soft, pink things had learned how to bend iron. Towns arose, dirt roads connecting them like the veins and arteries of a giant man, and their domination gradually spread ever after.

However you may have heard dragons described in stories, they are not terribly majestic. When they're not flying they're actually quite clumsy, walking upright with that burdensome tail wagging back and forth like some domesticated canine. Sure, the fangs are sharp and impressive, and the golden glow in the eyes when a dragon's ire is up can be an eye-catcher. But at a whopping seven feet tall on average we aren't the towering behemoths you might imagine. Oops, now there I go again. Sometimes, if I give myself long enough, I forget what I am and slip into thinking I really am a dragon.

That would be hard, since dragons have been extinct in the land for close to 1,200 years. Now where was I? I can digress bad enough to put a toothless, old hag's finger puppets to shame. Stop that! It's not polite to agree when your host insults himself.

Ah yes...dragons and men. One of the land's great tragedies. You see, shortly after man's rise to dominance, things began to deteriorate.

To be fair, it had all started before men came. The dwarves had discovered precious gems of all shapes and hues beneath the mountains. The dragons for their part didn't appreciate having invaders poking through their caverns. The dwarves were a short and irritable lot too, and the dragons didn't approve of their language. You wouldn't believe how many times the baby dragons cringed as some dwarf bellowed obscenities trying to loosen some fist-sized emerald or amethyst from its rocky bed. Then came man. He didn't waste much time, war being his preferred method of diplomacy. Soon he enslaved the dwarves, and that was just as well to the dragons, who thought they might finally have some peace.

But men made dwarves seem like bearded saints. Men weren't just satisfied with gems. They wanted to climb the tallest mountains and pat themselves on the back for it

(nevermind that a mountain peak is the most sacred part of any dragon's home). Man insisted on mining the gems, but then he decided there were other things in the mountains he also liked. Man took game from the mountains and he chopped down mountain wood for his fires and homes. He drank from the glacial streams and wiped his bottom on the leaves from the bushes on the slopes.

Now I want you to imagine, just for a moment, what these dragons endured. Let's say someone randomly burst into your home and started drinking your water, eating your meat, and generally defiling himself all over your favorite rocking chair. You wouldn't like that, would you?

Villages started to burst into flame in the middle of the night. Angry screeches filled the star-lit canopy as the dragons decided enough was enough.

Leave it to man to make war a business. The men didn't much consider the dragons' moral perspective. Instead, they realized that dragon scales could be quite fashionable and practical for armor, and though their swords couldn't pierce dragon hide all that well, they devised other weapons. That's another thing they excel at.

Dragon eggs also became a commodity. By piercing the shell from the bottom, you could kill the baby while keeping the gorgeous eggshell intact. It made such a good decorative piece that soon all the noblewomen at court demanded their knight champion return with one if he truly loved her! The merchant town of Elgia became a trading center for the spoils of war and genocide.

The dragons became extinct, and men got what they desired. Not that it changed much of anything. Ever since then men have made other animals go the way of the

dragon and prospered merrily. I would almost pave all their roads in gold, if I thought it would give them lasting pleasure!

All of this has brought us to this point, with an army of knights and ne'er-do-well mercenaries at my mountainous doorstep. Apparently the local presence of a dragon as from the history books was enough to create quite a stir. I should have expected this reaction. I suppose carrying off farm animals in broad daylight and giving free rides to village children might have been a bit reckless on my part.

That approaching snake of men in their shining coffins should have known more fear than they did. What that army didn't know was about to kill them. As a powerful wanderer I've taken many forms, and this is just my current favorite.

I am alien, and on my planet no true forms exist. I adapt: an ever-changing chameleon. Though I have the appearance of a dragon, I have the handy survival tools of creatures found in the darkest places of worlds that no knight could've imagined. My dragon's breath is not fire but a gaseous cloud. My noxious fumes are more deadly than an ocean of molten lava. I'll exhale, and it will do the rest.

I'm protecting my home. Please forgive the slaughter and bloated corpses. Make yourself at ease, villager. If you're like all the others, your son or daughter or grandchild is sick with that troublesome dengue fever and you came here to me, desperately going through the hidden back trails.

My shedded dragon scales can indeed be ground up and used for a medicine that will heal your loved one's sickness. My servants will even ground it up for you and give you a to-go pouch.

After the slaughter of this day, though, you may want to tuck this note into your pocket. Do not advertise this mountaintop as your personal pharmacy. Do that and you might have an angry mob at your doorstep. While my talents are many, teaching you to breathe noxious fumes in order to protect your family is not one of them. Do we have an understanding? Good. I thought so. Fare joyously, stranger. Let this note be your keepsake. Let it remind you of the cost of what I provide.

THE END

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Bio: Jonathan Kirsch is the head librarian at the Pacolet Library in Pacolet, SC. He has published works through Cambridge Scholars Publishing and McFarland Publishing. When not writing or reading his favorite authors, Jonathan enjoys spending time with his wife, Breanne Kirsch, and their basenji dog, Jack.