

"Stray"

by Ashley Andrews and William Dilbert

The stars glittered above dead streets, locked doors, and a quaint village, on the verge of saying something profound but never quite able to form its words. It didn't look like anything special when compared to the next such place on any such journey. Stone-tower homes stood in neat, parallel rows and well-worn paths traced the space between them. Yet, to everyone's surprise, it also held a single stranger, whose peculiar form lingered amidst the cool night air. The stranger had been locked out of every dwelling, and not a soul would lend an ear to hear of this wanderer's tale. Alone, he stretched his long, tired neck to the jeweled sky above. The dark of night gave rise to a renewed sun, and the stranger thought back to the previous day's happenings.

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The sun shone across the Welsh valley. The warm orange glow brightened snowy mountain peaks, sparse fields of wilted crops, and faded stone houses, with walls crumbled at their corners.

Where the sun did not tarry, shadowy and shaded, lay a cave gouged from stone and plunging deep beneath the mountain's side. Its cavernous mouth overlooked a quaint village some ways below. Argol stretched, his joints popped, an audible reminder borne from a long hibernation. He took a few calculated steps, halting under the cave's aperture, and tilted his head down to the valley before him.

Sparse congregations of people gathered throughout the cwm, and children chased each other across fields. Laughter carried across the breeze; the sound birthed a small sigh from

Argol's mouth. He paced back and forth, but his eyes lingered on the view of distant children engaged in acts of amusement down below. Before he knew it, his legs moved, and his journey had been set. Argol knew he couldn't keep playing games by himself, so off to find a friend he went.

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Argol shook his head. The long trip down the mountain had worn at his heels and toes. He thought of the contraptions the villagers wore on their feet and wished for a few pairs of his own. Anything to lessen the burden of his journey. He blocked the sun from his face and squinted his eyes in the direction of another village in the distance. Men hefted buckets of water from a dark and murky stream. Its banks wound like a venomous serpent through the village's heart. Sullen grunts exchanged between the passing men on their way to and from their homes.

Argol hoped this village would be more welcoming than the last.

The stone buildings in this village appeared less faded than those from the previous night's setting. While cracks occupied each home's recesses, none seemed to have yet given way to the ravages of time.

Workers tended sparse fields and built dirt mounds around the crops to hold the water they brought from the stream. Every person within the village had a job, and every person contributed with the energy of a drowning man, arms outstretched for aid destined never to come.

The sound of laughter once again filled the air. The joyous chorus reached Argol's ears. His head traced the sound to an open field where women sat scattered across the grass, patching together drab linens with needle and thread. Their children ran about, kicking a wooden ball between them.

Argol took a deep breath and walked up to the jovial villagers.

The children stopped, frozen in place, like the mere act of having occupied Argol's gaze had turned them all to stone.

His mouth stretched into a big, tooth-filled grin, an attempt to ensure his intentions showed clear.

Project confidence, this goes double when you might not feel it, he thought, echoing the words of his father. Though his back cried out in protest, Argol stood straight and walked toward the villagers imitating their strange gait. The sound of his footsteps echoed like a drum through the near-silent field, punctuating the erratic beating of his heart.

A scream cut through the village when one of the absentminded mothers glanced up at Argol when he made his way into their company. Flames danced in her wide eyes. She yanked a child to her breast and ran. One after another, the rest followed suit until the yard sat empty and silent, save for lone Argol. Head down and heart tender, he turned away, continued his path, and trotted into the woods, leaving the village at his tail.

Drops of rain slipped through the canopy and tapped on his sun-soaked back. Village after village, it all ended the same. Had no one any love for an orphan? A traveler with whom none would play games or indulge in conversation? Leaves crunched, and trees swayed while Argol stomped through the woods. His mind grew cloudy; an echo of the sky above turned dark. He couldn't remember what companionship felt like. He found he craved the warm embrace of his mother, the wise words of his father, and the infuriating fights he used to have with his sister. She would always slither her way into a wrestling match. But they had all long since passed.

At the edge of the trees, Argol looked upon a large castle surrounded by a moat and sturdy red-stone walls on all sides. The place looked more alive than any of the villages he had

passed along his journey, and the way the wall shaded parts of the palace reminded him of his cave. He strolled up to the castle's entrance, emboldened by this sense of familiarity.

A shout echoed out among the guards atop the walls, and the portcullis slammed shut with a thunderous clang.

Argol recoiled, his face a mask of confusion and fright. He stared up at the guards. Each stood with crossbows at the ready. He paced the length of the wall in one direction and then turned and paced back. Why did everyone greet him with the same wide-eyed expression? He wasn't even allowed to speak before doors slammed shut in his face at the mere sight of him. *If they would listen*, he thought. *They'd understand*.

The steady rain gave way to a downpour.

Argol narrowed his eyes, dug his nails into the exterior wall, and began to climb. Once he had reached the top of the sturdy wall, an entire column of guards greeted him. Their helmets, spaulders, and plate armor became slicked with rain. Each stood with their weapons drawn while their greaves rattled at their tremors.

Argol pushed past the minor impediments; the sound of the rain swallowed their grunts. Then, with a damaging thud, he leaped onto the castle grounds. The men and women who worked within the walls abandoned their posts when his form thudded down before their wide-eyed countenance. His feet felt instant relief. Their worn soles sank deep into lush, vibrant grass. Crystal clear water flowed from various stone outlets and into a garden that brimmed with produce. Piles of over-ripe fruit and vegetables sat stacked near the garden's abrupt edge.

Argol's feet rumbled over the soft earth. He came to a slow stop at the garden's edge and plucked a damson plum from the pile. It turned to mush, gushing over his hand while he shoved the astringent fruit into his mouth, pit and all. He grabbed another handful of abandoned produce

and filled his maw, no mind to the type or quality of the food. Argol lifted his head to the sky and drowned the flavor in the rain. His eyes danced around the yard once more before coming to a pause. He noticed a young child in purple garments sat under a tree.

Argol's head tilted, his nails tapped into the ground, and he watched the child. There lingered no other children around the castle he could see, nor had there been any adults, not since they had witnessed him scaling the wall. Everyone else had been terrified of him, yet this child sat and watched him.

Strange.

Argol cleared his throat.

"Halt!" a dry, commanding voice declared from behind Argol. "Whatever manner of foul creature you are, and whatever it is you have come for, I'll see you denied."

Argol turned to face a man of average height and pale skin who stood atop the castle ramparts. The man wore a golden crown, weighted by inlaid jewels. Strange purple garments draped from his bulging form while golden chains hung tight around his flabby neck and arms. Argol took a step toward the man but halted when the immaculate figure scrambled backward and fell to the ground. The man jumped to his feet on shaky legs and lifted his chin in Argol's direction.

"By my right as sovereign of this land, King Henry Danforth, first of his line, I order your departure at once," Danforth cried out, his voice shaky and fevered.

Argol glanced behind him. The child had gone. He turned back to the king and then looked toward the castle. Danforth followed Argol's gaze and called his guards to arms. One by one, the armor-clad soldiers moved into position around the garden. Their heavy treads imitated the claps of thunder above. Metal struck the stone-paved courtyard around the squared-in garden.

Each soldier carried a ready weapon, from jagged poleaxes to short, cruciform swords. Those still perched atop the city wall and newcomers populating the castle ramparts readied crossbow bolts and leveled their weapons.

Argol's heart pounded like a drum. Each echo of his pulse rammed into his throat and boomed louder than the growing storm which darkened the skies. His eyes darted across the scene, passing like an undulating whip over every armament hefted in his direction, their silver shine scattered in the cascading raindrops. His feet caught him in a stumble.

"I beg of you..." Argol spoke with a rasp. So long had he lived without a voice, his weak words died in the rain and claps of thunder. His thoughts built in his throat, and he tried again. "I beg of you!" he roared.

The guards halted. They gazed upward at Argol with wide-eyed wonder at his words which resonated through the air and shook their bodies. The king stumbled, brow furrowed and mouth agape.

"What manner of devilry is this?" Danforth spoke. His voice thrummed with a tremor and lacked composure. "How dare one such as you speak a language ordained by God!"

Argol pushed forward. The ground shook with every step taken from the garden and onto the water-slicked cobblestone before the castle. He turned his gaze to King Danforth and spoke once more, pleaded, with a voice born anew. "Pray, hear me! I do not come seeking to bring strife. I come to you seeking to satisfy my desire to talk."

Argol made his best attempt at a bow, but the king gazed down upon this beseeching visitor, with a face twisted in an expression with but one, singular, purpose--to revile.

"I have been alone for so very long," Argol continued, "I wish for nothing more than to live amongst others. To play the way your children do. To partake in literature parallel to your scholars. To toil and commune with your fellows. I beg of you. That is all I desire."

As the rain fell, bathing the world in its melancholic wake, the king's men loosened their rigid stances, mouths agape. Lost in awe, some even dropped their weapons altogether. Danforth stood on his rampart. His form swayed in the growing storm, rain sagged on his clothes, but his eyes remained fixed, his clenched hands trembled.

"It speaks with the tongue of a serpent! It has broken into my city. It has destroyed my garden. It has eaten *my* produce! And now, this beast of unknown origin claims to seek such mundane trivialities?" the king cast his arm to the side. He stumbled backward. "This is a creature borne of the Black Death. Yes, that must be it. It seeks to spread its disease within my walls!"

Argol's mouth dropped, his forehead furrowed, and his head tilted by the weight of his confusion. "No. I know nothing of this 'Black Death,' I—"

"Lies!" King Danforth drew his sword from its sheath. Its jeweled hilt shined in a flash of lightning, whose brilliance cracked the sky in two. Danforth's army returned to the ready. Their weapons and stances regained their hostile presence. Danforth cut through the air with a downward slash and leveled his blade at the panicked visitor. At this signal, the guards pressed their attack.

The men filled the air with shouts and charged forward. They brought their poleaxes to bear and plunged their razor-edged spike tips at the stunned Argol. Crossbow bolts whizzed through the air like hornets, and steel-bladed swords sliced at their unflinching target.

Argol froze. His mind raced. It flooded with thoughts of his journey, flooded with thoughts of rejection. At every turn, he had tried his best. He had been kind. *If the others had opened their doors, they could have seen.* He embodied gentle. *If the people hadn't run away, he could have shown them.* He wanted someone to talk to. *But these humans wouldn't give him a chance.*

As the spear-tipped poleaxes struck against Argol's azure scales, their shafts turned to splinters. The rain of steel-tipped bolts cascaded down, and they bounced away like pebbles against a mountain. When the tiny swords collided with his trunk-like arms, they deflected back with all the force of the strikes they rode.

Argol bowed his horned head. He reared back on two gargantuan legs, up from all fours and to his imposing fifty-foot height. Lightning turned the black melancholy storm into a brilliant display of terror and sound. The flashes cast long shadows of great, leathery wings down on the shallow world below, like the wings of a fallen angel sent to deliver the mortals from the realm of the living.

Argol snapped his wings, a mighty gust of wind burst against his attackers, their weapons and helmets sailed along with the draft. His mighty tail drove against the earth. Its force dislodged the neat cobblestone and launched shrapnel arcing in every direction.

On his hind legs, Argol bore witness to the creatures beneath his form. He watched the once-brave soldiers quake beneath his smoldering ire.

The oh-so-verbose Danforth fell back once more. A trembling cry occupied his voice. His crownless shape crawled back toward the castle's interior.

The sight of the fleeing king, the one who had acted with such callousness toward Argol's intentions, fanned the mighty being's anger. A burning pressure built in his gut while a bright

orange glow grew from his chest. The glow pushed its way up along his serpentine neck—its light escaped through the ridges on his scales like the sun through leaves—before leaping from his tooth-filled mouth in a jet of roaring flame, it burned like Greek fire and chased back the rain before it licked the walls of the puny castle.

Such represented the might of a dragon. Such embodied the might of Argol. A being who had never once sought conflict. A being whose life spanned five centuries.

With a mighty roar, Argol drowned out the raging storm in a sorrow-tinged dirge. He thrust his wings against the earth and took to the sky with the force of a falling star. Wind and rain battled with abandon through the air with every beat of the dragon's blue wings. Argol hovered above the fragile workings of the beings below, his crestfallen eyes filled with fire. Tears stung their way to the surface.

What had been the point of this journey if this undesired conflict is all it had amounted to? Argol couldn't understand the humans and their ignorance, nor did they understand his desire for company. In the end, his mind mirrored the darkened clouds above, and the humans, much like their structures, cracked and crumbled and fell apart. He looked out over the burning fortress and hung his head low. A moment of desperation had led to this moment of destruction.

Argol wished he had never departed from home. Lightning blinded the world. Masked by the brilliant flash, Argol turned away, eager to withdraw from the scene of his wrath. In his sorrow, he knew of one place to go—his cave in the mountain of Snowdon.

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Argol arrived at his home after three lonely days. The calamitous storm had yet to relent. Rain cascaded against the mountain and echoed off the cavernous depths while Argol settled onto the floor. After his long, fruitless journey, his eyelids felt their toll. A shallow huff escaped

the azure dragon's lips. He wrapped his wings close against his body and swung his tail beneath his neck. Once his head found its perch, his eyes shut, and the world fell away.

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Argol awoke to a new sound. It distinguished itself from the cackle of falling rain with a faint, struggling shuffle. The soft sound grew ever closer and ever more distinct from the torrent beyond the cave's threshold. He opened his eyes and raised his head from the floor with an ever-so-subtle tilt. His eyes grew bright with anger and fire; the strange sound became clear now. A human had come. *They've come for their revenge, no doubt.* Argol readied fire in his gullet, illuminating the cave with a muted orange glow.

As the sound of water-soaked footfalls turned the rounded hollow, a small form came with it. A minuscule child, soaked in strange purple garments, with a jewel-weighted crown fixed atop their head, stood alone before the great, azure dragon whose head held firm to one side.

The child looked up at Argol. Their eyes glistened in the orange glow, and their lips held wide. Argol recognized this child. This child appeared to be the same one from within the castle walls. Questions swirled inside the dragon's head. *How had they gotten here? Why had they traveled here? Who dared enter this cave?*

Before he could ask his questions aloud, the child raised their hand, water dripped off their skin, and they spoke with an affable tone.

"Will you be my friend?"

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