

## Henrietta, the Dragon Slayer

By Beth Barany

Steel demands subtle discernment  
Of shadow and light  
Hidden amidst vapor  
And smoke.  
—*The Fire Annals*, Book V

From Rafania, a valley town born  
The Dragon Slayer walks  
In strong, determined, steady strides.  
As the crow flies west down the river ways  
The Dragon Slayer walks  
In strong, determined, steady strides.  
Tempered at the castle mount  
Tested on battlefield and cave  
The Dragon Slayer walks  
In strong, determined, steady strides.  
The Dragon Slayer walks  
—From Ode One of the *Song of the Dragon Slayer*

## Chapter One—Invitation

Battle-hardened and brave  
Ready for the fight  
Henrietta the Dragon Slayer  
Swings with all her might  
—From the chorus of the *Song of the Dragon Slayer*

Henrietta strode away from the tavern, fists clenched so hard they hurt. At two paces from the forest edge, the ground crunched in the black night behind her. Even with her ale-fogged brain, she sensed the presence of a man, smelled on him soot, leather and metal, and knew he was armed, but wore no armor.

She didn't have time for this.

“What do you want?” Henrietta whirled to face the thrill seeker, her long sword drawn, her long red hair whipping across her chilled cheeks. Above her head, the bitter wind keened through the forest trees.

The man hovered five feet-lengths away from her, out of sword reach, his face shadowed by the light of the tavern behind him. “I heard your story back there.” His voice, thick with a foreign accent she couldn't place, held no compliment. “I hear you're looking for a new quest.”

“Who gave you that idea?”

“The Song of the Dragon Slayer.” The man's tone was flat.

So he wasn't a fan. She didn't care. She cared that he didn't move any closer. Empty hands at his sides, a sheathed long sword at his belt, he was broad shouldered and taller than her by half a head.

She re-sheathed her sword reluctantly. “So? What does that have to do with anything? It's only a song.”

“A song about you. That is why you must come with me now.” He stepped toward her, his face still hidden by darkness.

“No, I must not go with you. Leave me be!” she said annoyed and angry. There was a thrill seeker in every town. Facing him, she stepped back to have room to swing her sword if necessary, her hand waiting on her sword pommel. “There's plenty of others in that tavern to harass.”

She didn't want to play “who's the best warrior” just now. The drink had touched her head more than usual, without its usual lovely numbing affect. “Who are you anyway? No, I don't want to know. Just leave me be.”

“I am a knight, doing his duty. Assessing.” He didn't move any closer.

Like she needed to know that. Then she opened her big mouth.

“If you're a knight, where's your armor?” As soon as she heard herself, she knew that was a dumb question.

“I do not need armor for this.” He said the words as if she wasn't worth a gnat on sheep's berries. “You will come with me now,” he repeated.

He dared to order her?

“I will do no such thing. Weren't you listening in there?” She gestured toward the tavern where she'd just told and re-enacted her tale. A thrill seeker who ordered her? What was this nonsense? “I did my quest. Now leave me to my peace.”

He didn't budge his bulky frame. What was he waiting for? A royal invitation to depart?

Heaviness pressed against her chest like an anvil, preventing breath from fully entering her lungs.

She'd done her dragon slaying and military campaigns. Done. Finished. Fini.

“There is much coin and glory for the one who takes the Emerald Dragon’s Dracontias,” the stranger knight said, disdainfully.

How much coin? But that didn’t come out. “The what-ias?”

“Thought you knew everything there was to know about dragons.”

Politeness wasn’t this man’s strength.

“Yah, that’s me. A walking, talking dragon-spouting slayer, at your service.”

The man snorted. Very elegant.

Her stomach churned the ale. She knew what the Dracontias was, but didn’t want to be drawn in, though her coin purse was flat.

What was wrong with her?

“Listen, uh, Can we talk in the morning? I need to—.” Henrietta gestured to the woods. Her need wasn’t that urgent, yet. She just needed an excuse to make him go away.

“I’ll wait.”

Great. She had to make good on her words, so she did her best to stomp through the spindly underbrush, ready to move fast if she had to. She had taken no more than two steps when the man spoke again, his deep voice booming at her back.

“You can’t do it anymore, can you? Dragon Slayer.” He drew out the word “slayer” as if it were an insult.

Fear coursed through her at his words, and that made her angry. “I don’t have to listen to this!” A cold sweat broke out under her tunic and across her forehead. She shivered but kept walking, her greatcoat and hat back in the tavern.

“You can’t do it,” he repeated louder. “You have grown soft, weak. That’s what I told my king. You are but a shadow of your former self, if you ever were that Dragon Slayer. I don’t

think you killed the Fire Dragon of Britham's Keep after all. Your story back there was all show. It was your so-called partner who did the deed, and you stole his glory."

Henrietta froze. She brushed away what little truth he said, and focused on his lies. Anger fired through her body and gave her strength. She turned and stomped back toward the knight. "My partner was a she. But what do you know! I don't have to listen to your insults."

"You don't have it in you," he said again, holding his ground. "A fool's errand I was sent on. But duty is duty." He spat.

Enough. It was time to show this disrespectful knight who it was he insulted.

She didn't have the advantage of the light, but she was fast. As she feinted toward the trees as if to walk away again, she grabbed the daggers from her belt and slammed them into the frozen ground at the man's feet, neatly slicing boot leather, hopefully hitting a toe.

He didn't say a word, but clapped slowly, mocking her, probably smirking. She couldn't tell. The night shadows still covered his face.

"Fine. Show's over," Henrietta said, leaning down for her blades. As soon as she did so, she knew she'd made a stupid mistake. For once she really had had too much ale.

He dug his huge hands into her shoulders, trying to knock her down. The fire of rage washed over her. She ignored the pain and stepped backwards, slipping out of his grasp to head-butt him in the stomach. He fell to the ground with an "oomph." She had a dagger at his throat before he could open his eyes. She pressed hard, but not enough to draw blood. He got the point. No pun intended.

He glared back from his position flat on his posterior.

She glared back. "Did I pass your test?" She let up the pressure on his neck, but didn't remove the dagger.

At least he wasn't sneering anymore. For the briefest of moments, the knight scrunched his face in pain. The tavern's meager light showed her a warrior's beat up face, full of picturesque scars, browned from sun, and the angled, dark eyes of an islander, glaring at her. Even with his scars, the knight looked younger than he sounded, perhaps only five or six suns older than her seventeen. He was from the Rocks, or the Oro islands, as the islands called it, far across the Western sea, the second one she'd meet that evening. The first one being the jester who'd paid for her ale and dinner in the tavern.

Satisfied for the moment that he wouldn't test her again, she stood and sheathed the dagger.

"Not bad. For a woman," he said. Then he stood and stepped back, barely hiding a limp from the knife wound to his foot.

He didn't bother to brush off his fur cloak. "Your partner just got lucky. I still don't think you're capable. No woman is." But the fight didn't sound so strong in his voice now.

"Well, you're obviously wrong," she said and turned to leave.

Just then the back door of the tavern opened. The light blinded her momentarily, and a familiar voice called out her name. It was Jaxter, the jester. He walked toward her like a colt unsure on its legs, but he didn't fall over and moved quite fast. In the frigid wind his satiny purple and yellow cape flapped against his skinny body.

"Henri, I was just coming to see if you were alright. When you didn't come back right away, I was worried. You forgot your coins, and your coat and hat." He paused for breath and handed her her beaver fur-lined coat and elegant forest hat.

"Thanks." She slipped them on casual-like. Her long thick gloves were right where she'd left them in the coat pockets.

“We liked your tale! Very much!” Jaxter said. “Will you come back in and tell us another? How about the one about the Blue Cave dragon?”

She didn't respond. She hated to disappoint Jaxter, he'd been nothing but kind to her, but she had no intention of telling more tales this night. She needed solitude and the oblivion of sleep.

He didn't seem to notice and galloped on with his words. “You left so suddenly. I didn't get a chance to thank you.”

Henrietta took the silver he handed over and tucked it inside her cloak without counting it.

Jaxter glanced from Henrietta to the big man. “I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I can just go back inside, where it's warm.” He smiled at Henrietta and turned back to the knight. “Do I know you? You look familiar. But then again many people do in my line of work.” He chuckled.

“You do know who I am, Jaxter Renaldo,” the knight said, softly.

Henrietta strained her ears to hear. His accent had thickened and his tone was different, more gentle. Was he the same man who had insulted her and attacked her moments ago?

“I do?” Jaxter stepped closer to the bulky fighter with no fear. “How do you know my family name?” His voice trailed off as he focused on the big man's face. “By the Phoenix's Brightest Feathers! Frankie! I haven't seen you in so many seasons! You were in the tavern all night and didn't come over to say ‘Hallo’?”

“I am Sir Franc de Plumare de'Oro now, old friend,” the knight said gruffly, but gently.

“Oh.” After a moment of uncertainty, Jaxter grinned and held out his hand.

“Congratulations, Sir Franc de Plumare de'Oro!”

“Wonderful. A reunion.” Henrietta snorted in disgust and turned to leave. She had no more friends. They were either dead or lost.

“Dragon Slayer,” the knight boomed. “I’m not finished with you. We have two days less than one moon.”

“So?” She didn’t turn around.

“So? In less than one moon, you must face the emerald Dragon for my king. You are to come back with me. King’s orders. We leave at false dawn. I have wasted enough time tracking you down.”

She turned back to him. “And just who is your king? I don’t recognize your colors.” She’d never seen the royal colors of the Oro Islands, but she doubted brown and black goat fur was it. Too earthy. The king and lords she’d known had dressed even their soldiers in bright colors and fine fabrics, like blue velvet and brushed suede.

“My king is the Royal and Mighty King Singfan de Plumare de’Oro, the First,” Sir Franc said reverently.

“Wonderful,” Henrietta said again.

Jaxter turned to Franc. “Yes! Wonderful! How fares the king? You know, there's not many of us from Plumaria here. I wonder why that is.”

“It's too cold,” the knight scowled.

Jaxter laughed. “You just need to dress for it.” With a big grin, he waved about his velvet cape, the plush purple and yellow panels looking less gaudy in the dim light.

Henrietta didn't think all this chatting in the frigid night air was refreshing, even with her coat on. She had to find a bed-now. And the facilities, for real. “Uh, Jaxter, about the room—.”

“I’ll take you there.”

“No need. It appears you have much to discuss with Frankie.” Henrietta turned to go.



“That's Sir Franc to you,” the knight corrected. “My king demands your services immediately. A matter of life or death.”

She heaved a sigh. Though his persistence was admirable, it was also tiresome. The knight wouldn't give up, even in the middle of a reunion.

She turned back to him. “Are you my commanding officer? Because that would be impossible. I don't have one anymore, by choice.” She'd messed up. They demoted her. She left soon after. Just walked away from a two-sun long military career. She didn't miss the army. She was happy with her troubadour life.

A matter of life or death.

She gritted her teeth until her jaw ached. “And whose life?” Those last words slipped out, without her meaning them to.

The knight frowned and glared at her, but said nothing.

Fatigue suddenly pressed on her like a double quilt. “Look,” Henrietta said, “If it's so important to you, we'll have to discuss it in the morning. I must sleep. Jaxter?”

Jaxter looked at Henrietta and then at the knight. He pulled off one of his jeweled rings and handed it to her. “Go around the corner to the first door, down three steps to the inn's sleeping quarters. It's this same building. Tell the night guard that Jaxter of Duke Bettin's court said you could have a room.”

“Thanks,” she said. Jaxter was a trusting fellow.

“He'll want that back in the morning,” Sir Franc growled.

Henrietta was too tired and too drunk. The man wasn't worth a response.

“That's my gift to you, Henri,” Jaxter said.

Henrietta bowed her head in thanks. And, despite her fatigue and her need for the facilities, swaggered toward the sleeping quarters.

She could hear them as she walked away.

“You shouldn’t have helped her. She’s a thief, you know.”

“What are you talking about, Franc? Didn’t you hear her tale? It’s one of my favorites. I tell it as often as I can. But I don’t do the acrobatics like she did tonight. She was fabulous, wasn’t she? Such a great storyteller! I tell her other adventures too.” Jaxter clapped. “I actually met one of my ballad heroes! She is better than I imagined. How she cut down Britham’s dragon with such ferocity, such bravery—.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Uh?”

“Can’t you see?” Franc said.

Henrietta was glad when she turned the corner of the building and couldn’t hear the knight’s insults anymore.

She was not a thief.

And all her dragon treasure, the little she’d received for her acts of bravery, was gone. Troubadoring her own adventures was how she earned her coin now.

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Henrietta took the three steps down to the inn’s sleeping quarters and entered. A sputtering, smoky torch barely illuminated a small entry hall. At an opposite doorway, an old woman in black hunched over her hands, muttering.

“Missy, where have you been?” the old woman said.

“What? I was told I could get a room here.” Henrietta rubbed her temples. She vaguely recalled seeing the old woman at one of the tables in the tavern. There had been so many faces, so many smells.

“I don’t know anything about that.” The old woman’s voice scratched at Henrietta’s ears like uncut iron being rubbed against itself.

“You’re not the night guardian.” Henrietta squinted in the torch smoke.

“No.”

Henrietta was alone to find a solution, as usual. That suited her fine. The small entry hall held only them, a bench and two closed doors.

The old woman moved closer to Henrietta and craned her neck back to peer up at her with her clouded white eyes. She smelled of damp wool and moss. “You must return home,” the old woman said in a low voice.

“What?”

Why was everyone telling her where to go and what to do? This is why she preferred the road. No damn orders to follow.

Ignoring the old woman, Henrietta tried the handle of the first door. The flickering torch light of the entryway danced across a wooden bucket and a mop. She closed the storeroom door and stepped back. The old woman stood too close behind her and Henrietta almost trod on her feet.

“The other way is obstructed,” the old woman said.

Henrietta skirted her. “Okay, if you know so much, grandma, tell me where the innkeeper is.”

“She went to the outhouse.” The old lady smiled a toothless grin.

“Why? There should be indoor privies in a building this size.”

And she needed to find one. Henrietta tried the handle on the other door. Locked. She knocked. No one answered.

Obstructed. The old woman was right about that. Yet the rooms for hire must be through there. She knocked again and swore when there was no answer. Sheep’s berries.

“Your Master Chen is dying and needs the Dracontias,” the old woman said.

“What?” she squeaked.

“You must retrieve it for him in the Ritual of Completion. In the Right Way with the elements aligned, before the Mitte Winter Moon rises.”

Henrietta could barely hear the old woman's words. *Master Chen ill*. No. Her heart rushed to her ears. The walls squeezed her. Darkness approached at the edges of her vision. She clenched her hands into fists to keep steady.

The old woman stepped closer, wiped her hands on her black robe, and held them out as if there was something to be seen on her palms. Her round, milky eyes blinked up at Henrietta, expectant.

Henrietta didn’t want to look, but she couldn’t prevent herself from staring, horrified. The old woman’s palms seemed to be dripping with a dark substance.

No. It couldn’t be.

She tried to breathe. The darkness filled her vision and the light suddenly dimmed.

Blood on her hands. Not the old lady’s. Those were her hands she was seeing.

It was her fault her scouting party was dead. All dead. Their blood on her hands.

“Sit, child.” The old woman pushed her down onto a bench.

Henrietta couldn't protest, couldn't ask for more details, nothing.

No air. No light.

"Head between the knees," the old woman ordered.

Henrietta did as the witch bade and gasped for air. For only a witch could conjure such images from bad memories mixed with bad dreams.

She managed to gasp, and finally, air whooshed into her burning lungs. Light exploded behind her closed eyelids. Her chest expanded and contracted like great bellows.

"Are you all right, m'dear?" The voice was smooth, female, and entirely different from the old woman's sing-song. Henrietta squinted up to see a woman in a high-necked smock holding a lantern and peering at her in concern.

Where had the old woman gone?

Henrietta sat up, breath coming in bursts, her head spinning at the sudden movement. "Uh ... hello, ma'am. " She had to think of something to hide her weakness. Now was not the time to worry about an old soothsayer. "I lost something ... on the floor. One of my knives."

"Greetings. I see you are a Traveler." The woman gave her the standard Traveler's welcome. "Now look for it in the morning when the light's better. I have no candle or lantern to spare."

Her breath coming evenly once more, Henrietta requested her room. Her voice shook with nerves. As promised, Jaxter's name was golden. The door now opened easily without a key, and she followed the woman up to the third floor. After a stop at the floor's privies, just where she guessed they'd be, she was led to a room with a fire already blazing and a large bed heaped with furs and wools.

Left in peace. Finally. And with a key she could use from the inside. She did.

Releasing a deep breath, she dropped her sack on the clean hardwood floor and shed her boots, without giving them the daily quick polish. She barely had the energy to place them beside the bed for easy access. Her head spun with the effort. The witch's mess of words echoed in her mind. What was the Ritual of Completion? What did the witch mean by “the Right Way with the elements aligned”? And the Dracontias, again.

The Mitte Winter Moon was only twenty-six days away. Whatever the witch was ranting about had to happen soon.

One thing the witch had said was clear. Master Chen, an indomitable village blacksmith, her mentor, was ill and dying. The man who cared for her when no one else would, not even her own family. The man who taught her blacksmithing, blade-smithing and fighting skills. The man who had saved her from...

No. She didn't want to think about that. Her dreams haunted her enough.

How could Master Chen be dying when he never was sick? He'd always seemed so invincible to her. When she left three suns ago to join the king's army, he was hale and hearty.

And very angry at her.

She'd been happy to leave that tiny mountain village, and happy to never see it or him again. In the three suns since her abrupt departure, she'd only ever thought of Master Chen through a haze of righteous anger. He hadn't wanted her to join the king's army. He yelled at her at the well in front of the whole village, had called her immature, and foolhardy. And then he told her that once she left, she could never come back. She'd left him then and there.

Henrietta ignored her shaking hands and carefully unbuckled her sword and dagger belts, loosening her rust-colored tunic and breeches.

She was older now. Seventeen suns.

She lobbed across the room the overly engorged goose down pillows and blankets, and wished they made more noise when they hit the floor.

She was more experienced now. Too many battles.

She jammed her belts under her coat forming her preferred pillow, and clenched her fists to try to stop the shaking that rippled through her body.

She killed dragons for a living.

She stared at the stripped bed.

She killed the last known dragon in the Kingdom of Bleuve six moons ago.

She sat at the edge of the bed.

The low fire flickered and hissed. She tried to force her breathing to calm, but it wouldn't.

Why should she quit her comfortable troubadour life to pick up the sword again?

Though coin and adventure had always been good enough reasons before, they weren't good enough anymore.

A deeper-pressing reason made her hand tingle for the weight of her sword. Her heart surged with a sharp ache, and her stomach clenched with fear. Despite everything he'd said to her the day she left, she owed him everything.

Her master was dying. She had to do something.