

DRAGON'S BARD
EVENTIDE
An Exclusive Adventure in Fantasy
by Tracy and Laura Hickman

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PROLOGUE:
THE DRAGONBARD'S MOST SINCERE OVERTURE
&
CHAPTER ONE:
THE INNKEEPER'S GLORIOUS SERVICE

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PROLOGUE

THE DRAGONBARD'S MOST SINCERE OVERTURE

I know what you're thinking! You've never seen a dragon at all – let alone any Dragonking named Khrag. You'd be right, friend, and it's my calling day and night to see to it that you don't! Now you can discern with your own eyes that I'm no dragon-slayer ... but I keep old Khrag from burning down your door and savaging your town more surely than any knight that ever tilted a lance!

How? Why, good friend I'm Edvard the Just! You've no doubt heard of me...

No?

But surely you've heard of the renowned Dragon's Bard, purveyor of peace; the Minstrel of Mystery who wanders the land in search of places, people and their tales. The tales that save all innocents from the

dragon's wrath. That old and terrible monster Khrag, King of Dragonkind, lies atop his horde of inestimable wealth deep among the roots of Mount Okalan – the accumulated treasure of a hundred wars beneath his deadly, ancient claws. It is as desirable a place as any dragon might long for all his long days but dragons are creatures of adventure. Khrag lives for the stories told of the sun-lit world so far above him and grows restless and angry when he is bored. So long as his curiosity is satisfied, he'll rest at his ease in his dark home deep in the ground.

I chanced upon Khrag quite by odd circumstance. The humorless brothers of a discomfited young lady took umbrage at finding her name prominently featured in a fictional story of rejected love and unthinkingly threw me into the lair of the Dragonking. Khrag was then and remains an imposing creature who, upon my rushed acquaintance, was quite prepared to eat me at once. As he raised his razor-toothed head to strike, I said to him – for dragonkind all understand the language of men – I said:

“It is entirely too bad to come to so quick an ending – for this would have made an excellent story.”

I stood humbly before the dragon, believing that I had told my final tale.

Yet the dragon – to my amazement and yours, too, I see – did not eat me! Instead he sat me down before him, surrounded by the gold of unnumbered kingdoms and asked me with his great eyes gleaming, “You have stories? Perhaps I shall eat you later...”

Khrag hungered for stories and I began at once to tell him all the tales I knew. I told him all the great tales – those same epics and sagas you yourself have known since your youth. Tales of the House of Eldris – how Aubrey and his companions rallied the shattered and dispirited army of

Duke Jonas the Unyielding in the Great Epic War and led them against the Nightmare Warriors of Xander the Shadowmancer. Khrag became annoyed and there is nothing more dangerous than an annoyed dragon. The tales were old to him. Indeed, Khrag had participated in many of these tales himself and was, I must tell you, frankly bored to dragon-tears with the same old legends of the great and powerful. So I switched at once to the tales from places of which no one has heard and of creatures whose stories are sung and praised only around small fires. Day and night were uncounted in the cavern for my knowledge of stories is voluminous.

At last my tales ran dry. By this time I was haggard, thin and quite worn out. I gazed up at the dragon with horrible expectation.

The dragon blew a puff of smoke from his left nostril then spoke. “Good story – but now you have grown too gaunt and eating you is no longer appealing to me. I think I shall find a nice village to terrorize with flame, burn to the ground and utterly destroy.”

Now, I did feel significant relief at not being eaten at once and the inclination of any lesser man would have been to flee at once. I nearly gave into the impulse when a thought came to me. What of those villages, towns, ports and cities? What of the women and children who lived their lives peacefully, not knowing that this Dragonking was planning to sweep all that they held dear away from them forever?

What a great story THAT would make!

But, no! My great heart swelled within me and courage took hold in my breast.

“Great Khrag,” I said. “There are many more stories across the land round about your lair. If you savage the countryside they will be lost to you – to everyone. They are growing like unseen sweet truffles all about

– all you need is someone to sniff them out for you. But if you go stomping about the world, you might ruin many quests and spoil their stories.”

“I want more stories!” The dragon’s great, greedy tongue flicked across his massive jowls as his eyes gleamed nearly as golden as his belly. Khrag reached forward, hooking one talon through my coat and drew me closer as he growled. “You bag of bones! I’ll leave your precious villages alone if only you come back every midsummer with your skinny carcass, a bag of truffles and a head full of stories.”

So it is that now I travel the face of our land, going from village to town, experiencing the lives, sights and sounds of each place so that I might take them back to Khrag and...

I beg your pardon? Who? Oh, THAT! That is my apprentice, Abel. He is not terribly promising as a bard but he is a faithful scribe – his ability to write and bind books is proving a somewhat useful addition to my already celebrated skills.

Oh, so you read? But of course you do! I knew at once that you were of that learned and educated class that has been trained in the art. Then perhaps I might interest you in this volume of mine, a true and accurate portrait of a village that might amuse you. You may have occasion to visit this charming locale and such a book would serve you well for it would acquaint you not only with the hamlet itself but the inhabitants who live there, too. You would know where best to dine, where best to take your lodgings, the important eccentricities of its broken wishing well, the peculiar customs regarding gnomes, pixies, haunts and who best you might trust there should occasion arise.

And the citizens of that village! This book will acquaint you well with them all: Tomas Melthalion and his tragic confrontation with the Highwayman Dirk Gallowglass over his daughter, Evangeline; the dwarven blacksmith Beulandrus Drudgeon whose arts extend beyond iron and anvil; Jep Walters and the haunted adventures of the Black Guild Brotherhood; the gentle farmer Aren Bennis whose past is a mystery; my good friend Jarod Klum whose love will drive him to desperately glorious deeds; and, of course, Caprice Morgan who keeps the wishing-well supplied along with her two sisters. Indeed, Khrag himself said just before he fell into a satisfied sleep that he felt that he knew them so well as to make the collection on the whole a treasure of inestimable worth.

And I have many such volumes now, each of different places where I have travelled which may be made available to you at price so trivial as to...

My pardon! The name of this town? But of course, you may read it plainly for yourself on the cover. Upside down? Really? Allow me then...

It's called Eventide.

CHASING ONE'S OWN TALE

*Wherein Jarod Klum meets unlikely confederates
who threaten to help him win his true love ...
even if that means turning him into a hero.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE INNKEEPER'S GLORIOUS SERVICE

Accounts Apprentice Jarod Klum sat at his desk in the dim, chill confines of the counting house and dreamed up plans for his escape.

It is not just from the counting house itself that he wished for his release, although he did think it appropriate that the counting house also doubled as Eventide's village lock up. Jarod considered himself a prisoner of his circumstances, held in the shackles of his trade, bound by the chains of his family traditions and enslaved by fate. Here at this wooden desk and tall stool he spent his days learning the trade of counting other people's wealth sitting among scrolls and ledgers as dusty and quiet as his own life.

Whenever possible, Jarod gazed out beyond the wavy glass panes of the window next to him and saw himself leaping over the snow-encrusted Cursed Sundial just across the Wanderwine River to the center of Charter's Square. He would be brandishing a sword or a yardstick or

whatever weapon was at hand. Caprice Morgan, the beautiful, green-eyed daughter of Meryl Morgan would happen to be standing in the square, petrified with fear. A terrible monster with seven heads – or maybe nine – would be attacking the village up the frozen river as he takes her protectively in the crook of his arm...

Or sometimes he imagined swinging from a rope out of Bolly's Mill just at the north end of Market Square, sweeping up the vivacious form of Caprice Morgan out of the clutches of marauding pirates who would somehow have gotten lost and wandered up the length of the Wanderwine River's frost-coated shoreline from the Blackshore Coast...

Or occasionally he would be at the head of a triumphant parade, with the enemies of the town in chains behind him as he rode a warhorse up Cobblestone Street. His crimson cape would billow in the winter wind as all the townsfolk of the village turned out to cheer him – especially Caprice Morgan who would look up admiringly through her grateful, tear-filled green eyes. He would reach down easily despite his brilliantly polished armor, grasping her waist and lifting her to sit in front of him as he...

The bell above the door banged into life, jarring the young accountant back to his dreary world. A man with a narrow jaw and high cheekbones entered with a pronounced flourish of his very real if somewhat threadbare velvet cape. The chill winter air rushed past him into the room, billowing snow around his slight figure. His black moustache and beard, carefully trimmed to a point only accentuated the general angularity of his appearance. His voice sounded too loud and his manner was far too flamboyant, but it was obvious to Jarod that excess in performance was never considered to be a bad thing by this man. His hat

was an outrageous leather affair with a too-wide broad brim and a feather from a Roc in its band that came nearly to the center of his back. He wore a thick, padded coat, kid gloves and tall boots – the later two items showing great fashion and being completely unsuitable for the weather. A bright doublet of red occasionally flashed through the open front of the coat with each gesture as he spoke. “I am Edvard the Just!” he cried as though the counting room were filled with an appreciative audience instead of the one miserable accountant apprentice. “I am ... the Dragon’s Bard!”

Jarod just stared at him. “Close the door.”

“Surely you’ve heard of me,” the outrageously costumed man said through a beaming smile.

“Nope,” Jarod answered simply.

Instead of disappointment, Edvard bestowed upon Jarod a look of honest if misguided pity.

The biting wind swirled icy snow into the room through the open doorway. The ‘Dragon’s Bard’ was followed into the room almost at once by a short, slightly underweight young man who was nearly overwhelmed by a shouldered pack. He was followed at once by Xander Lamplighter, Eventide’s Constable Pro Tempore for the last eight years. The large constable with the intimidating scowl was known as one of the gentlest men in all of Windriftshire but one who also has an uncanny knack with catching pixies ... a very troublesome local menace.

“Morning, Xander,” Jarod said with as much warmth as the room would allow.

“‘Taint nothing good about it,” Xander replied as he pushed the door forcefully closed against the wind behind him. “Where’s Ward?”

“Gone over to the Widow Kolyan’s Bakery,” Jarod said though his eyes were on the pair of strangers and the growing pool of melting snow on the floor at their feet.

“Again?” Xander said, pulling off his thick gloves. “What’s her problem this time?”

“She keeps claiming that pixies keep magically changing her account balances no matter how many times father goes over it with her. He could be quite a while,” Jarod shrugged then reached over for an enormous leather bound journal on his father’s desk next to his own. He opened the book atop his own and pulled a fresh quill from a collection he kept in a mug on his desk. Sharpening quills often took his mind off Caprice on long winter afternoons. It was becoming difficult to find an unsharpened quill anywhere in the office. “You here for the lock up?”

“It’s not necessary at all, I assure you,” Edvard spoke quickly before anyone else’s thought might intrude on his own. “I am Edvard and this is Able, my apprentice. We are mere travelers passing through this charming village...”

“Vagrancy...” Jarod muttered half to himself as he carefully dipped the quill in the ink well.

“No, good sir! I assure you we are but storytellers...”

“Liars,” Jarod said to himself.

“We go from town to town spreading cheer and wonder...”

“Ah, Rogues...” Jarod noted on a parchment he had pulled from his desk, not wanting to risk the velum of the Arrest Ledger until he had all the particulars.

“Never! We are honest men who take it upon ourselves to gather stories from everywhere we go...”

“Thieves,” Jarod commented. He was writing as quickly as possible on the parchment, trying to catch up on the litany of evils he was concocting for the official record.

“Begging your pardon, Jarod, but that ain’t why I arrested ‘em,” Xander spoke up.

Jarod looked up, suddenly relieved he had not inked any of this onto the precious velum just yet. He had intended to make a more careful copy in the book so that his father would not have any further excuse to criticize his work. “Oh, of course, Xander ... sorry. Constable, of what are these men accused.”

Xander straightened up and squared his wide shoulders. “These men were arrested by me – Constable Pro Tempore Xander Lamplighter – on charges of suspicious activities and annoying behavior.”

Jarod looked up from his scratch parchment sheet. “Is that a crime, Xander?”

“Tis so far as I’m concerned,” Xander said with the conviction of a man who had no idea that he was wrong. “The complaint were lodged by the Widow Merryweather and several other ladies of Cobblestone Street at the insistence of Ariela Soliandrus.”

“The gossip fairy?” Jarod smiled. “She’s the one who’s behind this?”

Xander blushed. “Well, this here gentleman...” the Constable gestured at the Dragon’s Bard “...He were asking the ladies all sort of questions ‘bout they personal lives and pasts and such.”

“Which,” Edvard interrupted, “they provided most graciously and freely, I might add.”

“Free or no,” Xander continued with a cold glance in the Bard’s direction, “when Miss Ariela arrived and heard what were happening, she flew straight away to each lady’s ear and told ‘em that this here stranger were a bounder and were using his wiles and magic and such to ruin them all and most likely murder them in their beds this very night and steal they best clothes!”

Jarod has stopped writing. “The gossip fairy told them this man would murder them in their beds?”

“Aye,” Xander nodded then blushed again. “That or – well, you know – ravish them mercilessly.”

Now it was Jarod’s turn to blush. “You mean..”

“Well, that were what the gossip fairy said,” Xander sputtered. “It were a good thing, too, or I might not have gotten these two free of them women without them doing some harm to ‘em. Widow Merryweather were ready to do ‘em in with her hatpin right there in the street and Mrs. Taylor swore if someone would point her to a cutlass she’d run him through on the spot. But then the ladies fell to arguing about which among them were most likely to be ravished and that gave me time to get ‘em here to the lock up whilst they were still debating among themselves.”

Jarod closed the Arrest Ledger. He had thought briefly of the strangely dressed man in front of him carrying off Caprice Morgan and how he might rescue her. In that moment he knew he could not possibly write any of this in the ledger. Better to leave it to his father who, he considered wisely, might be able to keep a steadier hand about such things than he could. “This is a matter for my father to consider,” Jarod said as officially as he could sound. “You’ll just have to wait until he returns.”

Xander groaned.

“Is that a problem?” Jarod asked.

“Well, look here, Jarod,” the Constable whined. “I’ve got to see ol’ Drudgeon about that new banded-iron door for the lockup in the basement, see. That’s where I were going when all this started and you know how he gets about folks what’s late. Look here, these two are considered prisoners now, aint they?”

“Aye,” Jarod nodded. “You arrested them, so I don’t see why they wouldn’t be.”

“Well, it be coming up on noon as it is,” Xander said. “These prisoners are under the care of the village so as they need to be fed.”

“I don’t see what...”

“Well, you could take ‘em over to the Inn while I see the blacksmith ... get ‘em both some lunch and a bit for yourself as well,” Xander’s voice seemed to gather speed as the idea began taking form in his head. “You can tell the Squire I said to put it on the village accounts.”

Jarod grinned. He would do about anything to get out of the Counting House, stretch his legs and let some time pass with a more pleasant speed. “Why, that would be our duty wouldn’t it, Xander! I’d be glad to help.”

The assistant to the Dragon’s Bard had said nothing, but rolled his eyes as the conversation came to its mutually beneficial conclusion.

“Yes, I think that should just about solve everyone’s problems.” Xander smiled back as he reached for the door. A cold blast of wind, snow and bright light burst into the room and Xander was gone, the door closing firmly behind him.

Jarod hopped off the stool and walked across the fitted floorboards to a row of pegs fitted with careful and equal spacing into the wall. He

plucked a heavy, hooded cloak from the peg on the wall. Jarod was all arms and legs, tall and muscular but not yet grown into his grace. He had a handsome face that was still a little soft with no real beard to speak of. A few stray hairs along the ridges of his jaw line made a valiant if lonely effort at a beard but their population was not yet sufficient for a reasonable quorum to convene. He was a man striving to break out of being a youth. He was not quite free of his chrysalis; a butterfly who did not know that his wings were still wet.

Jarod pulled the cloak about his body, turned to his two charges and said, “Well, come on. Let’s get ... oh, bosh! I almost forgot!”

Jarod rushed past his prisoners to the desk next to his own. There, hanging from a hook at the side of the desk was a set of keys on a looped steel ring. Jarod snatched the ring from the hook a little too quickly, pulling the desk slightly across the floor with a grating sound. The young man gave a quick look of exasperation, stepped back to the desk and carefully pushed it back into its accustomed and carefully aligned place.

“My dad is very particular,” Jarod said with a quick, nervous smile. “Come on.”

“Indeed, we shall,” Edvard chimed in with his usual over-warm grace and exaggerated charm. “Show us the way, my good friend Jarod, and we shall follow in your steps as boon companions!”

“What?” Jarod was not sure what the man was talking about but ushered both the bard and his companion, who obviously suffered in silence, through the door.

The bright sun shown down through a clear winter sky, its light reflecting off the snow that still covered areas of the square. A bitter wind cut through the town out of the north, blowing stinging snow – ice crystals

formed from the previous partial thaw – that caused Edvard to grip the brim of his hat against the moaning gale and Jarod to hold the edge of his hood so that he might protect his eyes. It was of little help since any moisture had been frozen out of the air and Jarod was forced to blink anyway just to keep his eyes moist. The apprentice gently pushed the Bard and his servant out of his way, as he turned to the door of the counting house and, using one of the keys on the enormous ring, locked it behind him.

“So, my good man, tell me,” Edvard began, pitching his voice to carry over the wind. “Have you lived in this charming town all your life?”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Jarod glanced at the Bard then started walking northward across the large square.

Edvard quickly fell into step next to him leaving Able, with a weighty and overstuffed backpack, struggling to keep up. “Then perhaps you might acquaint me with your village. This square, for instance, what is its history and what deeds have been played out upon its surface?”

Jarod shrugged as he walked, his head turning slightly toward the Bard as they walked. “Well, this is Trader’s Square. There’s a lot of selling that goes on here during the spring and through fall harvest. It’s not actually a market because the village elders don’t want to become a township so they just call it Trader’s Square rather than an actual market, see?”

Edvard nodded with a smile but it was obvious that he had no idea what the young man was saying to him. “What’s that large building over there?”

“That?” Jarod glanced up at the long architectural hodge-podge that lined the north-west side of the square. “That’s the Guild Hall. That

road to the west of it goes to Meade, maybe five leagues to the west. South, back there,” Jarod pointed behind them, “that’s Cobblestone Street and Chestnut Square – but then you were arrested there so I guess you know all about those. Up there,” he pointed ahead of them this time, “is Bolly’s Mill. It’s just above Bolly Falls there on the Wanderwine.”

They came to the north-east edge of the square which was defined by the steep banks of the Wanderwine River. A low wall of fitted stone ran from the mill all along the river bank on both sides with a stone bridge crossing just before the falls and connecting Trader’s Square to another square line with buildings on the far side of the river.

Edvard stopped on the bridge for a moment, gazing at the wide waterfall just to his north. “So that is the famed Bolly Falls!”

Jarod looked back at him. “No.”

“But you just said...”

“We call it Bolly Falls but that’s not its name,” Jarod replied.

“Ah,” Edvard replied, but Jarod continued walking over the bridge and the bard and his companion were again forced to catch up.

“This is Charter Square,” Jarod continued. “Cooper Walters is there on the right. Across the square are a lot of smaller shops – Charon’s Goods is nice and Mordechai will treat you right. King’s Road is there just left of the shops ... that way takes you to the smithy if you need something repaired. There in the middle of the square is the cursed sundial and over here on the left is the Griffon’s Tale Inn where...”

“A cursed sundial?” Edvard exclaimed as he quickly strode over to the pedestal, gazing at the charred and cracked surface peeking out from beneath the snow. “What deep mystery is there here, my good friends!

How came this place to become cursed? What tragic story unfolded at this very spot where time itself was assaulted by...?”

“Come on,” Jarod urged as he crossed the square to the north where a building nearly three stories tall looked down over the street. A large ornamental sign swung noisily from the iron bracket; a crest with a griffon emblazoned on it with a long tail winding around its body. The lettering proclaimed it ‘The Griffon’s Tale Inn.’ “Let’s get inside.”

Jarod opened the door and Edvard, seeing another chance to make an entrance, rushed into the opening and flourished his cap as he bowed deeply.

“Good day and good morrow to one and all,” Edvard proclaimed, his voice carrying past the great room in which they stood and probably well past the kitchen beyond. “Let no fear enter your hearts, for I have come to ward off the evil that is nigh upon you ... I am ... *The Dragon’s Bard!*”

There were two humans in the great room and a gnome in one far corner. Each looked up at the interruption in mild curiosity. A third human near the large fireplace in the far wall did not even move.

Harv Oakman squinted for a moment. “What was that again?”

“Tis I,” Edvard crowed once more. “The Dragon’s Bard!”

Harv shook his head. “Sorry, don’t know it.”

‘Squire’ Tomas Melthalion broke the awkward moment as he hurried into the room from the kitchen, slamming the door shut behind Jarod and his charges with his shoulder even as he wiped his wide hands on an already filthy apron. “Friends of yours, eh, Master Klum? Well, welcome to the Griffon’s Tale Inn, which – as the proprietor of this here

establishment I can tell you – has been in this location since even before the founding of the village itself.”

“Thank you, good Squire Tomas,” Edvard replied in sudden earnest. “But I come on a matter of great urgency which...” Edvard stopped and pointed at a dark, hunched figure seated by the great fireplace.

“Oh ... him! Do not concern yourself with Lord Gallivant over there – no one knows his real name – he just sits in the corner talking to his own memories. But as you’ll no doubt be needing a place to lodge, have you heard the story of the great service which I, myself, did for the King when he passed by the village not far from this very spot?”

“Ah, and you touch on my very point at last,” the Dragon’s Bard began. “This beautiful village of Ever-tide...”

“Eventide,” Jarod corrected.

“Of course ... Eventide ... this very self-same beautiful village is in the gravest of danger. The great and terrible Khrag – King of Dragons – has sent me here to collect stories for his amusement and unless...”

“Stories! Oh, I’ve a story for you!” Tomas exclaimed.

Jarod groaned. Tomas pressed the stranger down into a chair.

“Here, sit you down next to our resident Lord Gallivant and let this Squire tell you about it! Of course, he was not the King then and some might have said that the service done was nothing of any real importance but when you hear how...”

“Squire,” Jarod spoke up, “These men are hungry – please bring them dinner.”

“Now?” Tomas sputtered. “But I was just about to tell these travelers...”

“Yes, but they have both been arrested by the Constable Pro Tempore and I must get these dangerous men back under lock and key soon,” Jarod explained. “Of course, if you don’t want the village’s coins for their dinners then I can take them right back and...”

“No bother! No bother” Tomas replied as he hurried off.

“Are you getting all of this?” Edvard said sotto voce to Abel.

Abel only nodded, not quite keeping up.

As Abel scribbled furiously on a large parchment scroll, Edvard wanted to know why Jarod stopped the Innkeeper from telling him the story.

“Look, Mister Dragon’s-Beard...”

“Bard,” Edvard said through a tight smile. “Dragon’s Bard.”

“Well, if you’re really interested in hearing the Squire’s story,” Jarod continued, “then I’m sure that the Squire would be more than happy to tell it again while dinner is served ... then refresh your memory of the telling by telling it again while you’re leaving the Inn and again anytime for that matter that you come within earshot of the Squire. Believe me, there’s practically no avoiding it as anyone in the town can pretty well attest, including me.”

“And this fellow here – this Lord Gallivant?” Edvard asked, gesturing toward the gaunt and grizzled man who sat muttering to himself near the fire. His clothing was old and nearly threadbare. He wore a military cape older than the Epic War itself.

Jarod shrugged. “Don’t know ... nobody knows. He’s been here as long as I can remember.”

“So what about your story, eh?” the DragonBard asked.

“Don’t have one,” Jarod answered with a deep-felt sigh.

Abel stopped scribbling at once, glancing up questioningly.

“Then we shall write you one,” the Dragon’s Bard offered cheerfully. “No! Better still! We shall help you to live one! Tell me ... are there any women in your life?”

Jarod eyed him with suspicion. “Why do you ask?”

The Dragon’s Bard smiled. “Because every young man’s great story begins with a woman!”