

THE SERAPH'S BLADE

by Shane M.K. Rooks

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A very wise man once said nothing at all, thereby avoiding a whole lot of bother and only inconveniencing a handful of mid-tier government bureaucrats.

This, however, had no impact on the impending Apocalypse nor did it grant him anything more than a self-smug sense of satisfaction while he enjoyed his tea.

Chapter 1

Don't eat Yellowstone

Can you hear me?

It was warm. Comfortable. Dark. For a very long time the only sound had been the gentle pulse of the earth, fissures filled with hot water bubbling upward, effervescent with mineral salts and the heartbeat of hot liquid rock moving below, circulating in its own implacable currents.

Can you hear me? Are you awake?

Now new sounds were dripping into his dreams. Buzzing. Humming. Grinding. Unfamiliar.

You need to wake up. Now. There's no time.

And this voice. Bold in its address. Urgent in tone. Somehow in his head and not. In a language also unknown, but understood. That, in itself, piqued curiosity; demanded investigation.

Someone is coming for you and you are in danger. Wake up. Ask questions later.

A white blur flickered through his consciousness. An introduction? He listened closer. Many unfamiliar sounds. And voices, barking. He knew this tone if not the language. These are sounds he knew from conflict.

I can only do so much here. You need to move.

And so, he did.

—

An assault helicopter surveilled the Yellowstone Plateau. Beneath it a small convoy of three armored vehicles moved slowly, casting long

afternoon shadows across the snow of late January. They had come up the road from the south, turning off into the field. They progressed with some caution, mindful of areas clear of snow cover, indicating geothermal activity and possibly thin crust that could collapse under the weight of a truck. In the jeep leading this foray, a man wearing a very important looking uniform sat in the front passenger seat, planning to have a very good day.

“Sir, what is it exactly we are looking for?” The voice of the pilot, compressed by the radio, squeezed through the mechanical beating of the chopper blades.

The man with the important looking uniform picked up an intricately carved box. It was embellished with gold, and bore markings in a script he couldn’t and didn’t care to read. He had gone through great lengths to track it down. The monks at first denied its existence and then were unwilling to lend it to him, much less accept an offer for its outright purchase. A sizeable donation to their order and a promise of significant political influence went a long way toward securing the agreement which put that box and its contents in his lap at this moment.

Saying a small prayer to himself to no particular god he undid the clasps and tilted the lid open. Inside, carefully nestled in soft red velvet, lay an equally ornate cylindrical frame wrought in gold and set with a sparse glitter of gems. Anchored in this was a perfectly formed sphere of almost supernaturally clear glass crystal. He understood that this presentation, which he found unnecessary and ostentatious, was meant to convey the rare and priceless nature of the contents of that vessel: a splinter of bone suspended in holy water. Whether or not a true piece of a saint or some other artifact he was not qualified to say. Right at this moment however, that splinter spun violently on its axis in a frenzied choreography of apprehension.

“You’ll know it when you see it, Major. We’re sweeping again with ground radar now. The LiDAR survey and other intel suggest this is the most likely location. The relic seems to confirm it is here.”

Another voice crackled through the radio. “Sir, it looks like we have a point of entry. Radar has pinged a soft spot we can exploit.”

“That’s a go, team. Let’s hit it.”

Turmoil. An explosion rocked the back of the convoy and a rocket propelled grenade soared skyward. The assault helicopter exploded in flames, spiralling to the ground.

“We’ve been hit! We’re under at...” Panicked voices clipped through the static that overwhelmed the radio. Gunfire erupted and rolled across the convoy in an unstoppable wave.

The man in the important looking uniform frantically slammed and clasped the lid of the box. Clutching it to his chest, he turned in time to see a white blur, a phantom. Then a thick splash of red across the windscreen obscured his view.

The body of his driver collapsed onto him. Blood splashed from the open neck, terror filled eyes looking into nothing. The radio filled his ears with screams and shouting. With one hand the man in the important looking uniform fumbled at the door for an escape.

The ground lurched, rocking the vehicle. He grabbed onto anything and braced himself as the vehicle rolled to one side.

He lost his grip on the box. It landed with a splintering thud somewhere in the back corner of the jeep. Out the side window, he could see smoke from the downed helicopter smudging the sky.

There was an explosion. The earth trembled again.

The man in the important looking uniform wiped the blood off the windscreen as the sky continued to darken. Subterranean waters roared. A geyser of burning water and steam split the earth some distance away. The air filled with hot, sour-smelling fog.

And then, the earth gave birth. A shadow emerged, crawling into the haze. Chaos boiled around the jeep. The man in the important looking, now blood-stained, uniform felt the cold and unfamiliar breath of fear on the back of his neck. Pushing the body of his driver away, he turned to

search for the reliquary. Instead his attention was broken as a white blur flickered in the rear view mirror.

Pain. But only briefly. A deep red darkness. Then death.

—

Are you ready? We need to get to anywhere but here.

Awake and above ground for the first time in centuries if not longer he asked: "What is all this? Who are you?"

After we're someplace... a little quieter. I am sure we both have questions.

—

Two figures moved hastily toward the snow frosted conifers at the edge of the field of hot springs. As they encountered deeper drifts their pace slowed, hindered by the cold, sound-muffling, powder.

"A dragon was not at all what I was expecting to find in the middle of Yellowstone. I also somehow thought dragons might be... larger." The smaller of the two men had noted the deep reddish brown skin, set with scales. Horns and a thick tail aided in the presumed identification.

The dragon certainly wasn't small by any means and was quite powerfully built. Breathing in the dragon's scent he could taste the minerals and mud of the geyser still clinging to the dragon, but buried in that scent he also found deeper tones of earth and warm, exotic spices.

The muscles along the dragon's back rippled, perhaps annoyed or bored by what might have been an insult. "And you are a talking dog." The accent was unfamiliar to the smaller man. Maybe hints of Eastern European. It was hard to tell.

"I am very much a wolf, thank you" the lupine figure responded back, fur bristling.

The dragon sniffed. He stood a half meter or so taller. He looked down at the wolf-cum-man whose white fur was liberally stained various shades of red. "You seem quite domesticated for a wolf. And you smell like a dog. And blood stink. Not that I mind the blood, but you might want to wash off," the dragon said, looking sideways at the wolf.

At this point they had hiked some distance from the carnage. Another helicopter could be heard in the distance.

"We need to seek cover and get out of the snow. They'll be able to track us from the air, especially against the cold white background. There's a more temperate hot spring nearby and something of a cave we can shelter in," the wolf said, leading off ahead.

"From the air? Is that the sound I am hearing? Some sort of flying machine?"

"Yes. Exactly." The wolf stopped and looked at his large companion. "Just how long have you been asleep?"

The dragon paused, "hmm," he thought, then replied, "The year I buried myself... I believe it was around what was called 1049 in the 'Year of Our Lord' or something."

"Oh... wow. That's quite a while. Just so you know, you have been asleep for a full millennium. I'll try to catch you up on the important details when we are sheltered and can rest."

The hot spring was as the wolf had described. About the temperature of a hot bath, it filled the area with steam and the water temperature alone would likely confound any attempts to search in the infrared spectrum. The adjacent cave, however, was less of a cave per se and more of a deeply set overhang, which was probably better.

The dragon was eager to be useful, and helped the wolf set up a small camp fire in a ring of stones they collected, set toward the back of the overhang. The wolf found a larger pool where he could easily slip into the mineral rich water and sit while working the blood out of his fur.

Some of the blood had frozen during their hike. This rinsed out easily as it thawed. Other areas had dried and caked. These took a little more work. Most of this was on his front and flanks.

"Would you like some help with the couple spots on your back and neck?" The dragon slid into the water next to him.

"That would be helpful. Yes. Please." Despite being unexpected and maybe awkward the wolf felt quite grateful. His body ached.

The dragon began to work through a patch of matted fur on the wolf's back then paused. "It keeps occurring to me and, well, with everything, I have not asked. I can hear you speak. It is not a language I recognize but still I understand what you are saying. And I am reasonably sure you do not know my tongue as well, but we have no problem communicating. That, and I heard you before I was fully awake."

"Ah, yes. It's one of the Talents I was given." The wolf answered.

"Talents? So... of the Fae? I apologize for calling you a dog earlier. And your fur is quite beautiful." The dragon resumed working the blood-stained patch of wolf fur.

"To be honest, as you get to know me, you might go back to thinking more dog than wolf.

"Yes. I can understand and communicate with most thinking creatures, including animals. I actually learned of this spring from a helpful elk. But the communication has to be directed. Even though it happens in the mind, it is only connected to conversation. I can't 'hear' your thoughts if that's what you're wondering."

"It had not occurred to me, actually. But is good to know. So... an elk?" The dragon's eyebrow lifted in skepticism.

"Yes. You were not the only one who noticed I 'stank' of blood. And she was kind enough to suggest bathing but I think more to keep us from exciting the local predators. As to my 'what'. I'm more specifically a fae beast or monster. Faebethir in the old tongue, so I've learned."

The wolf winced as his groomer's fingers probed a previously undiscovered tender spot. "Some of this blood appears to be your own. You have been injured. A not so small cut on your right side. And here is another? A small hole." The wolf flinched again. "Did you not notice?"

"There was a lot going on. Maybe some shrapnel or just sharp fragments. I might have been shot. I have cuts on my forearm from punching through some glass. Nothing serious. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish the different sources of pain in the intensity of a fight."

The dragon nodded, understanding from personal experience. The dragon's grooming quietly transitioned to an examination, "Your attitude is pretty casual about injuries. Another 'Talent'? Is iron not lethal to fae?"

"Lethal? Not outright. It burns, painfully. And only if it breaks the skin. It wounds deeper, on an existential level, and takes longer to heal. But no-one uses straight-up iron anymore. It's all alloys and other metals now. And that's perfectly safe. No one believes in faeries anymore anyway. Not until somewhat recently. Other than that, I know I'm not indestructible but I have something of an ace up my sleeve," the wolf replied.

The dragon felt the wolf's body flitter like butterfly wings beneath his hands. A shimmer and for a brief moment the white fur was replaced by bare and tender human skin. Yet before he could perceive the form entirely, shimmered again, and the wolf returned.

"Ah! That is a clever trick." The dragon reacted as he examined where the wounds had been. "There is only a little bit of blood still to clean out."

The wolf spoke, "I suppose now is as good a time as any for proper introductions. My name is Clarence. Clarence Saint-Michel. Most people call me Clary. By profession, I am supposed to be a data analyst. But I'm also... this."

Clary, the wolf, gestured at himself.

"And who should I be thanking for tending to my wounds?"

The dragon smiled to himself. "I have been alive long enough to have been called by many, many names. Would you like to know those, or should I begin with a new one?"

Clary looked over his shoulder at the dragon, "I wouldn't know you from Adam, so maybe... your favorite of those names."

"Favorite? Hm. A curious suggestion." The dragon paused for a long moment. He had not really considered what might qualify a name as a favorite. The aesthetics of sound? How it plays in the ear? On the tongue? Or the memories associated with it? After giving it some thought he replied.

"During one of my more pleasant lifetimes I was called Dmitri Ambrosios, or Dima."

"Greek? With a ring of nobility. It suits you." Clary smiled.

"So, tell me, Dima. How does an old-world dragon such as yourself find himself taking a one-thousand year nap beneath hot springs in the middle of Yellowstone National Park?"

The dragon leaned back in the warm water, steam curling around a wry smile. "It is a bit of a story, but I will try to keep to the important parts."

—

"Around the turn of the first millennium, Anno Domini, there was a lot of religious fanaticism over End-Time prophecies, second comings, and a renewed interest in the story of the Fall, when the archangel, Michael, 'slayed' Lucifer, portrayed as a dragon, and cast them and their legion into Hell.

"I was enjoying a peaceful life in the mountains around Altomonte in Italy. The farmers were kind enough to leave a sheep or two in the fields occasionally for me. But in Europa, hunting dragon folk became fashionable means for young nobles to prove the depth of their Christian fervor. No matter that demons and devils, who are really just angels, are in no way related to dragons and their kin.

"Dragons, like you fae and of course humans, are of the earthly plane. Angels and demons belong to another. But the legend was 'Saint Michael and the Dragon'... so dragons it was! And every young Tommaso, Riccardo, and Enrico wanted to be Michele. A young fellow named Georgios became all the talk in Byzantium after saving a princess or some such thing. Emulating the myth, the 'weapon of choice' was a spear crafted for this purpose which they called a 'dragon pike'.

"However, a local young noble somehow got his hands on a very special armament: an actual Spear of Saint Michael. Probably not *the* spear of legend, but still. Michael could create these as needed from the pinions of his many wings. A pretty but simple weapon. Quite effective against other angels. Not so much against dragon kin.

"He lasted, I think, two minutes.

"At this, I knew that my story in bucolic Altamonte had come to a close. So I found his squire pissing himself outside my cave. I took the knight's unused sword and cut off my own left hand. Giving it to the boy, I told him to scurry back to whatever lordship claimed him and tell them the dragon was slain and his sire had died a hero. That if he failed to do so, I would hunt him down by the scent of his piss and eat him.

"He must have told a very good story because I heard they commissioned a statue of the archangel in his honor. Those, too, were fashionable.

"The wound I gave myself was hurting. Europe had become decidedly unfriendly. I chose to make my escape. Seeking calmer country I knew flying East was not an option. So I flew West across the ocean and found country not yet discovered by Europeans and their Christian fanaticism. I met some very nice local peoples. Spent some time amongst them. Wandered the country. And healed."

Clary lifted Dima's left hand. "The hand grew back, I see."

"A dragon thing. Like when a lizard sheds its tail. Still aches a little when rain is coming."

Clary continued, "And the thousand-year nap?"

“Eh, one gets tired. I needed a rest. The hot springs were very cozy. This might also be dragon thing.”

Clary climbed out of the steaming pool. As he stood up a violent shake rippled across his body from the ground up to his ears. Dima raised his arm shielding his eyes as salty water sprayed in all directions.

Clary stretched, eliciting a small chuckle from Dima. “What?”

Dima smiled, “You are so fluffy.”

“Is it also a dragon thing to flirt so shamelessly with strangers you have just met?”

Dima smiled again, “Maybe. And maybe it has just been a thousand years since I have had any such company, and very good and interesting company at that.”

“Well, my new friend, Dima. May I be the first to welcome you to Armageddon, USA.”

Thank you for reading!

If you would like to read the rest of the story the full novel is available on both Amazon and Barnes and Noble by way of the following links.

Amazon Kindle ebook.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CW8KHSBZ>

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About the Author

Shane M.K. Rooks is a first-time fiction author whose creative voice has been shaped by a diverse background in technology and the visual and the performing arts. A lifelong student of world religions, folklore, and mythology, Shane forges his stories with a particular interest in the mystical and the mythical, his narratives spun from the unseen threads that bind cultures, histories, and human imagination.

Growing up in the storied Green Mountains of Vermont, Shane developed an early appreciation for narrative through imagery and performance. As an adult, Shane's academic career took him across the country, from the Northeast to the moody forests and vibrant communities of the Pacific Northwest, before eventually settling in Vancouver, British Columbia. His transcontinental travels underlie the themes of transformation, displacement, and community that permeate his stories.

With his debut novel, Shane M.K. Rooks invites readers into a world where the ancient haunts the modern, imagination takes center stage, and storytelling is a ritual of discovery.

Shane drinks his coffee black.



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