



Vorthrax's Demand

It was just another day for Sir Aldric. The sun was setting behind the jagged peaks of Eldewoke, casting long shadows across the valley as he trudged along, his sword heavy at his side. Roland, the squire, was practically skipping, full of naïve excitement and nervous energy.

"Do you think the dragon will have, you know... treasure?" Roland asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Or maybe a cave full of gold, jewels, maybe a powerful ring to rule them all, like in the tales?"

Aldric glanced sideways at the eager youth, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Roland, I sincerely doubt Vorthrax will be offering us anything other than a quick death and a smoke-filled goodbye." Roland's eyes widened. "What, you think he'll—"

"He'll what?" Aldric interrupted, voice dry. "Greet us with a cup of tea, a lecture on diplomacy, and tell us he needs more money? He's a dragon, not a polite politician."

"Well, I—"

"I don't care if he's got gold, wisdom, or wears a dress," Aldric muttered, more to himself than to Roland. "We're here to either kill him or be killed. No sense in getting sentimental over how he decorates his lair."

At that, the ground suddenly trembled. The trees shook. Roland stumbled, eyes wide. Aldric didn't flinch. He'd seen enough dragons to know when one was near.

And then, a voice like thunder shattered the stillness.

The air smelled of scorched earth and fear. Sir Aldric, a knight of the old kingdom, tightened his grip on his sword as he and his squire, Roland, stood before the great beast. **Vorthrax the Eternal**, a dragon whose scales shimmered like molten gold, loomed over them, his enormous wings casting a shadow that stretched across the valley.

"Men of iron and flesh," the dragon's voice rumbled like a vibration of sound then suddenly thunder rolling through the mountains, "you stand before me, not merely as warriors, but as something more-**witnesses**. Before I burn you to cinders, before I feast upon your bones, you must **acknowledge** me. Acknowledge my greatness because I say so that I am great."

Aldric narrowed his eyes. "Acknowledge you? You're... Great?"

"Yes," the dragon hissed, lowering his massive head, his slitted eyes gleaming with expectation. "You see, I am not merely a beast. I am **beyond** your simple notions of good and evil, of predator and prey. I am Vorthrax, and I am... *they/them*."

Roland blinked. "What?"

"You shall **not** address me as 'he' or 'him,' or even 'her,'" Vorthrax declared, his voice booming across the valley. "If you wish to die with dignity, you must first **recognize me as I choose to be recognized**."

Aldric turned his head slightly, giving his squire a look. Roland's face was a mixture of confusion and barely contained laughter.

The dragon's eyes narrowed. "I see your hesitation. I see your insolence. **You will not be allowed to die until you comply**."

Aldric sheathed his sword. "Is that a fact?" Aldric now rolling his eyes. "Oh very well," he said, voice complaining. "But before we discuss... *titles*, I must ask-would you mind **toasting that tree over there?**" He gestured toward an old oak nearby. "I have heard tell of dragonfire, but I wish to witness its power firsthand."

Vorthrax snorted, sending a puff of smoke into the air. "Hmph. If it is proof you seek..." With a mighty breath, a torrent of flames erupted from his maw, reducing the oak to smoldering embers in seconds.

"Impressive," Aldric admitted. "Most impressive, but now that I see the heat of your flames... I wonder, could you melt **that boulder as well?**" He gestured to a jagged rock nearby.

The dragon huffed but complied, releasing another blast of infernal breath. The stone glowed red-hot, fissures forming across its surface.

Roland scratched his chin. "And, uh... how far can you fly without landing? Surely a dragon of your stature must have unparalleled endurance?"

Vorthrax flexed his wings. "Fools! I am endurance **incarnate!** Watch!" And with that, the dragon launched into the sky, circling the valley three times before landing with a thunderous boom.

Aldric clapped his gauntlets together, joyfully sarcastic-like. "Astounding, truly! Such power! Such majesty!"

The dragon smirked. "Ah... so you do see it. You are beginning to understand. My greatness..."

Aldric nodded. "Indeed, indeed. But before I respond to your earlier request... **one last thing. Would you mind burning that fallen log? It's quite an eyesore.** I feel like it just doesn't belong there and it could hurt you by mistake if one was not paying, close attention."

Vorthrax's tail flicked in irritation, but he exhaled another searing breath, setting the log ablaze. "Enough of these distractions! You **will** acknowledge me now! I will be praised."

Aldric exhaled slowly, stepping forward. "Let me explain something to you, oh not so mighty Vorthrax." He met the dragon's gaze without fear. "You have strength. You have power. You have breath that can turn armies to ash. But despite all that, **you are more concerned with how I speak your name than with the kingdom trembling at your feet.**"

Vorthrax blinked, stunned into silence.

"You want recognition," Aldric continued, voice unwavering. "Not respect. Not fear. **Maybe obedience? Perhaps just validation.** And that is why, despite all your strength, you are weaker than I. For I value honor, respect, hard work and love. And what do you do? Waste your amazing abilities to gain obedience and control without honor, without respect, without hard work and without love."

Vorthrax recoiled as if struck.

"You could have burned us where we stood," Aldric said. "Yet you stalled. You pleaded. You demanded acknowledgment. **Because deep down, you fear being ignored more than you fear defeat.**"

The dragon let out a furious roar, wings unfurling, shaking the very earth. But in that moment, Aldric did nothing. He did not cower. He did not fight.

He didn't even reach for his sword.

He simply turned his back.

And that, more than anything, drove the dragon mad.

As Aldric turned his back, the air grew thick with tension. Vorthrax let out a shrill, ear-splitting screech that sent the birds scattering from the trees. His wings beat the air violently, and the ground trembled beneath him. The flames in his maw flared wildly, but he did not unleash them. Instead, he hovered, seething in fury, as if wrestling with something deeper than his rage.

Aldric walked calmly toward the edge of the valley, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Roland, wide-eyed, looked from Aldric to the dragon, then back to his master.

"Are you not afraid, Sir Aldric?" Roland asked, his voice trembling.

Aldric shook his head, never turning to look at the dragon. "Afraid of what? A beast that craves attention more than destruction?"

Vorthrax's screech grew louder. "You will **acknowledge** me! You will **respect** my authority!" His voice reverberated through the valley like a thunderclap, shaking the rocks beneath their feet. "**What can be, unburdened by what has been!**"

Aldric raised an eyebrow but still did not turn. "That's the thing with power, Roland. It doesn't need recognition." He glanced over his shoulder, his tone calm. "What you give to others, out of fear or obligation, is never truly earned. Power that demands validation is not real power. **It's... Hollow. It's shallow.**"

Vorthrax let out another scream, this time more frantic, as though his very existence was crumbling. "You mock me!" the dragon roared. "You would **never** ignore a creature like me! **I love lamp!**"

Aldric remained steady, his back still to the beast. "No, Vorthrax. You are not eternal and you are certainly not immortal. You go ahead, love that lamp and be unburdened by what has been. You just never learned how to fade without the attention of others."

"**I am UNBURDENED! I AM ETERNAL!**" the dragon bellowed one last time, but this time, the voice was shaking with the weight of his own failure. With a final, explosive flap of his wings, the dragon shot into the sky, vanishing into the clouds.

Aldric took a deep breath and turned toward Roland, who stood frozen in awe.

"Well," Aldric said, clapping Roland on the shoulder, "there goes the dragon. Flying off in a huff because we didn't give him the reaction he craved. That's all the power he, cough, 'it,' ever really had."

Roland blinked, still processing what had just transpired. "Sir Aldric... I don't understand. Why did he, ah, it, care so much about being acknowledged? What does it even matter to 'it' if we don't recognize 'it?' And why didn't 'it' burn us down?"

Aldric chuckled softly, a faint smile on his lips. "Ah, Roland, that's the crux of it, isn't it? Power, strength, fear—they can all be impressive, but without one thing, they mean nothing. **Respect is earned, not demanded.**" He looked out across the valley where the dragon had once stood, now empty. "The dragon had all the power in the world, but 'it' didn't realize that no one will fear you if you're more concerned about being noticed than being respected."

Roland looked confused. "But... 'its' a dragon! Shouldn't we be afraid of 'it?'"

Aldric shrugged. "Not if 'it' can't control 'it's' own desires. '**It wanted recognition more than 'it' wanted victory.**' And that made 'it,' him, whatever, weak. The moment you let someone dictate your actions by the reaction you give them, they have power over you. But if you refuse to give them that reaction? They're powerless. And it drives them mad. Also, Vorthrax said we would not be burned down till we acknowledged him. Since we did not acknowledge him and if he did burn us down, he would never get that acknowledgement or respect by going back on something he said."

Roland's eyes widened as the meaning sank in. "So... he's been playing a game, trying to get us to react, to give him what he wanted?"

"Exactly," Aldric said, turning to begin walking back toward the castle. "A dragon is no different from a man. It doesn't matter how powerful you are if you are more concerned with being validated than doing what you're meant to do. We're still not sure about that one. Dragons and such, Roland..."

Roland laughed nervously. "I suppose we didn't give him the reaction he was hoping for."

Aldric's smile grew wider. "No. And that's what made him retreat, Roland. A creature that craves power but can't control his desire for validation is just a creature that is bound to fall. And he'll fall harder than any knight ever could. That is Vorthrax's burden by what has been..."

Roland walked alongside him, his steps lighter now. "So, what now?"

Aldric glanced over at him. "Now? We learn. Every day, in every challenge, you have to recognize what really matters. A knight must earn respect with his actions, not demand recognition. In the end, it's what you do that will speak for you-not how loudly you shout for attention. But right this second. We are going to eat, drink and be merry my dear Roland. Maybe you can tell me that joke again about the rich genius that travels to the stars."

The squire nodded, a newfound glee of wisdom in his gaze. "Got it, Sir Aldric."

As they continued their journey, the sounds of the valley grew still, the dragon's cries faded into the distance of oblivion. And with each step, Aldric was more certain: **True strength lies in the quiet.**

