The door of the portal shuts behind us and for several alarming moments we are immersed in gloom. But then a light bursts into illumination in front of us. When I get used to the sudden brightness, I see that Ratzi has placed his hand on an organic-shaped crystal, which is glowing with a pearly lambency.

‘Glowstone, Guv!’ He grins.

As we make our way deeper into a cave, Pappa touches another crystal and a second light bursts into luminescence. Val and Teri scamper forward to join her.

‘Let me do the next one!'

‘Me too! I want to touch a glowstone!’

And so our journey underground is intermittently illuminated to the squabble of argument and squeals of delight.

‘Ratzi and Pappa – where are you taking us?’

‘The old man wants ter meet yer – on the eve a yer dragon ‘atching, Guv.’

‘And Daddy too, Sir!’

Eventually we enter a gargantuan chamber. I’m astonished by the sights, and sounds – and the smells – that greet us.

‘Look at the size of this place!’ I exclaim to Val and Teri. ‘You could fly a passenger jet here with room to spare!’

It must have started out as a natural cavern since there are stalactites dangling from the roof hundreds of feet above us. I stare into the smoky distance, where the floor rises steeply for hundreds of feet to meet the ceiling and where, in a wide open window, I glimpse the light of day. The sounds of waves on rocks must come from here, and the briny scented-air. I have to presume it opens widely onto the shore above.

The cavern walls are the creamy white of Portland Stone – limestone. Sea water might have sculpted the original chamber but skilled hands have reworked it into an underground town of naturalistic beauty. Nothing is square. The streets wander in curves and spirals and the flanking buildings take their inspiration from the wonders of the shore, the spiral beauty of a nautilus shell, or the radial symmetries of sea urchins and star fish.

As we wander deeper into the town, a thought is now obvious that wasn’t at all obvious before. The Bottomy Baggems and Strewth Blastems are fisher people, who, for some reason, have become hunters of dragons.

In the town centre we arrive at a small Roman-style amphitheatre encircled by the interlocking skulls of whales. Tiered seating has been fashioned out of the bare rock amid decorative pillars fashioned from whale vertebrae. On top of the pillars I see evocative shapes, dried and withered.

‘Are those what I think they are?’ I whisper to Ratzi.

‘Nah! They ain’t the real thing, Guv. Dragon flesh is too precious to waste – even the bones’n skin!’

He’s right for when I look more closely I see they are not the mumified bodies I first imagine but organic-shaped driftwood sculptures. The amphitheatre is filling up with hundreds of Baggems and Blastems, each tribe keeping strictly to once side or the other. Ratzi ushers us to seats of honour, between the two gentlemen I recognise from earlier journeys to this shore. I am introduced to Old Man Baggem and Daddy Blastem and encouraged to enjoy some forthcoming spectacle. A tankard of an alcoholic concoction smelling distinctly fishy is put in my hands and the festivities begin.

A conch shell sounds out and two warriors, a representative from each of the tribes, enter the gladiatorial arena, naked apart from loincloths. The corpulent Baggem’s skin is hairless and shiny. The tall and sinewy Blastem’s skin is bone-white but astonishingly hirsute. Their bodies are scarred with bites and gouges from previous encounters.

The Baggems roars, in a single thunderous accolade, ‘Lanky pissers!’

The Blastems roar back, ‘Fatty backsides!’

The eye-gouging, ear-chewing and groin-crushing begins.

I turn to Baggem on my left. ‘May I ask what they’re fighting for?’

‘First dibs at yer ‘atchling, beggin’ yer pardon, Guv!’

‘First dibs?’ I catch the lascivious grin on my right matching the toothy grin on my left. I get the message. The fight will literally
'First dibs?' I catch the lascivious smile on my right matching the toothy grin on my left. I get the message. The fight will literally decide the pecking order for the feast after they have dispatched my dragon.

Several members of the two tribes have invaded the fight, nutting, biting, scratching and gouging. As roar and counter roar from the crowds cheer them on, I try to dissuade my companions from their sport. Somehow, don’t ask me how, I have managed to down the tankard of the fish-smelling brew with only a tiny spill.

My dander is up. ‘Why can’t you leave the poor dragons alone?’

‘Lor’ a’ mercy, Guv! We couldn’t do that.’

‘Out of the question!’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s wot we do.’

‘Tradition, old sport.’

‘But there can’t be much in the way of meat on one tiny carcass!’

‘Wait ’till yer tastes it!’

‘I have no intention of tasting dragon flesh.’

‘It’s yer privilege, Guv, to be allowed the last lick o’ the spoon.’

‘After we’ve feasted on the ambrosial flesh!’

‘Gnawed on the bones!’

‘And made a consommé of the entrails.’ Blastem makes delicate licketty sounds with his tongue under his top teeth.

A fat tongue smears the outline of Baggem lips. ‘Luvely-jubbly!’

‘Book!’ I exclaim. ‘I take it you’re listening?’

I hear the waspish tone emerge from close to my spillage of the fishy brew, where the pink sliver of tongue is at work. ‘Slurp! Indeed – at your service, Sire!’

‘Kindly interpret this bullshit!’

‘It would appear that to these simple folk, dragons are sacred.’

‘If sacred why kill them?’

‘To partake of the magic, Sire.’

I beckon to Ratzi and Pappa to accompany me as I slip out of the amphitheatre for the relative quiet of the surrounding streets. Here we spend a few minutes in conspiratorial conversation about an idea I have for a diversion tomorrow.

‘Well?’ I demand. ‘Do you think it will work?’

‘Yer can rely on us bofe, Guv!’

‘Sounds like jolly good fun!’

I take new heart from the enthusiasm on their youthful faces. ‘Book,’ I cry, ‘it’s time you took me home!’

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Busy once again in my evening-shrouded study, it seems peculiarly appropriate I put the final touches to the e-book version of The Doomsday Genie on what, after all, is St Patrick’s Day. The interim problems of moving the website to Mr Site continue. I want the site-based e-mail to route through Outlook Express. I go through all of the motions, but nothing works. Meanwhile, I work for several more hours on completing the pages. The shopping cart cannot be completed until I have the final cover of Doomsday Genie.

Hi, Mark – how’s the cover going?

Hi, Frank – I’ll get it right if it kills me!

I move on to the music:

Hi Jamie – how’s the composition going?

Aaaargh! One more week!

A tiny waspish voice intones: ‘Well, what did Sire expect? It’s Saint Patrick’s Day!’

I hurl myself into working on the free downloads. I try uploading a series of book covers. Three attempts fail. I write a plea for help to Mr Site, under the subject heading, “urgent”. I open an online dialogue with aol, which will be my outgoing mail server.

All problems aside, amid the usual pandemonium on the eve of publication, I have in truth made a useful discovery. I have learnt the art of constructing e-books. Now I apply this to marketing others of my books. I begin with my science book, Darwin’s Blind Spot. In 15 minutes I construct a 130-page attractive e-book download, including cover and page formatting. I upload it – gotcha!

Bejaysus! Things are starting to look good.

Book urges, ‘You should take the opportunity for rest, Sire! Get some sleep in anticipation of battle tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow there will time for sleep, my friend. Perhaps for eternity. Tonight there is important work to be completed!’
We find ourselves in a torrid landscape that would have been familiar to Dante, bordered by spuming magma and the river of blood. Val and Teri are frightened by the crowds of naked souls, all weeping miserably. But I don’t have time for grief. I lead our small party towards the roaring furnace, from which broad flakes of fire are rising into the leaden sky to settle all around us like an apocalyptic snow.

The hammer blows are loud as thunder when we approach the forge where Prometheus, wearing just the bangles around wrists and ankles that once tethered him, is plunging tongs the size of a tree trunk into the magma. When he withdraws the tongs, they carry a single link of his former chains, blazing white hot.

‘Grandad,’ Val shrinks to a position behind me, ‘what’s he doing?’

‘It looks like the Fir Bolg blade won’t be cast from Sheffield steel after all.’

We all stare as, in a flowing arc of movement, the titan carries the glowing metal to Vulcan’s anvil and the thunder of the mighty hammer reverberates through the seventh circle of hell.

Shades glide in silence among us. Wraith-like fingers measure my throwing arm, from finger tip to elbow and from elbow to shoulder.

With half a dozen blows, the oval link is flattened to a more linear shape, which is plunged, cracking and spitting, into the bloody Styx. Then, once quenched, it is returned to the magma to begin another cycle of forging and annealing.

One shade, bigger and bolder than the others, appears to threaten us. But the cindery ground trembles, as if struck by the haft of a leviathan staff, and a tiny figure appears between us. I glimpse the face of an impossibly ancient crone, with skin like trout skin and a bedraggled head of frosty white hair that tumbles down over the filthiest collection of rags that ever passed for clothes. In a gravelly rasp, she confronts the shade: ‘Begone, Capaneus! Lest I add my rage to the fitting punishment of your arrogant pride?’

‘Who is she, grandad?’

‘Her name is Granny Dew! The Earth Mother from the world of the Snowmelt River.’

My two assistants are fascinated by the stranger, taking in her dense, triangular shape, from the narrow, almost pointed top of her head, to the heavily sloping eyebrows, the widening nose, which poked out through the folds and creases of her face.

‘Phew, Grandad – she smells.’

She ignores the children to address me. ‘Weaver of Tales! You brought me into being so I might create a world – yet one that is as yet incomplete.’

‘Then help me to survive so you can complete your task!’

‘Yonder weapon, however fearsome, will not suffice to save you. The Demos has more guile than you imagine. No armour, not even one forged in Hades itself, will be proof against its siren song.’

‘What’s she saying, Grandad?’

I, her creator, can hazard a guess. ‘Take a closer look at her dress. I hope you brave warriors aren’t afraid of spiders.’

They laugh in unison: ‘We catch the spiders that scare Mummy!’

‘Well, done!’ I acknowledge, as Granny Dew rests her staff on my shoulder and croons a song, like a hymn born in some sepulchral cathedral of shadow. The children squeal as the myriad spiders that inhabit her dress move, in a creeping and crawling wave, to my shoulders, fanning out over my entire body to fashion their living loom.

‘Am I allowed to poke holes for my eyes and nostrils?’

Her staff raps against my ankle. ‘Not so much as a pinhole. You will breathe without difficulty. And through its fine weave you will see the treachery that would otherwise have been invisible to mortal sight.’

‘Thanks!’

‘You will best reward me by living. Above all else, observe the starlight in the eyes of the raptor.’

Even as she fades from our presence, Prometheus begins a new round of hammering:

Teri suddenly exclaims: ‘Grandad – he’s farting!’

‘Maybe he’s casting the runes from both ends?’

Both my companions dissolve into laughter. It’s a welcome distraction in this terrible landscape. I can see from the contortions that ease their faces that they are attempting to emulate their hero.

I suggest we sit down and rest before reaching out to hug them both, causing more squeals of panicky laughter as the army of spiders spread to them too, to progressively envelop us in mantles of silken web. Val and Teri are surely exhausted and only one of us needs to keep this vigil. So it is, through the long hours of darkness, as the ringing of the mighty hammer punctuates the night like a Hadean heartbeat, I lull my youthful fellow warriors to sleep with the saga of Ree Nashee, King of the Wildwoods, and the duel of riddles between Balor’s earwig and the last little wren.

(To be continued...In the next and final episode, the dragon will rise...

Blade of Destiny You have helped Ash complete his quest to become a Knight! The Blade of Destiny is yours. (No DA Required). Blade of Destiny allows you to control a party of 6 characters, plus an NPC, from a first-person pseudo-3d view of the world. Apparently it's quite similar to Eye of the Beholder or Dungeon Master but when the first combat starts, you immediately notice the difference. Blade of Destiny compensates the not-so-advanced 3D implementation with several other features such as auto-mapping, a complex character generation, a lot of stats and a party management that will require you to pay attention to food and rest, otherwise your heroes will get sick. The game received very good reviews and was followed by two sequels, the first of which was Realms of Arkania: Star Trail. See All Downloads. Screenshots. See All Screenshots (28). Download Realms of Arkania: Blade of Destiny - DOS Version.

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