

DRAGON SLAYERS



A JOURNEY OF THE SOUL
RANDALL A. TERRY
PRE-PUBLICATION ART

Dragon Slayer Letters

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To: Dr. Christopher Kerry
Curator
New York Museum of History

June 9, 2012

Dear Dr. Kerry,

It was a pleasure speaking with you by phone last week. The parchments we discussed are inside the airtight container that accompanies this letter. I passed on your greeting to your old comrade in excavation, Dr. Gary Humphry. Gary has played a key role in our company as we have expanded to purchasing and renovating ancient structures. He exudes a love for antiquity and its architectural remains, at times reigning in those who are perhaps too eager for demolition.

As a side note, Gary had us laughing with stories of some of your joint adventures and pranks in Rome during your PhD research. Perhaps one or two fewer beers on those late night outings would have been advisable...especially when scaling walls into the Forum or the Coliseum, then balancing on crumbling ruins...but who I am to judge?!

As I mentioned on the phone, the enclosed parchments were discovered near Leeds in an abandoned castle that our firm purchased to renovate and convert into a Renaissance-style resort. Our team found them under the main structure, in one of two small rooms that escaped water damage and vandalism. In addition to the chest that contained these parchments and other items, they found several pieces of medieval-era furniture, some weaponry, and a stringed instrument with highly ornate inlays. We intend to place these items on display in the finished complex.

Gary assures us that you are a premier authority on medieval artifacts and literature, and that you will be able to date these parchments, and perhaps even ascertain their authorship. Gary's estimate is that they were written in the early 900's, but he insisted that your expertise, both in analyzing and preserving, far surpasses his.

If you deem them of sufficient interest and value, we would consider donating the originals to your museum, with certain provisions we can discuss later concerning the publication of their content.

Thank you for your time in studying these. I leave them in your hands, and look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Timothy Henderson Shearer
CEO, Chief Architect

P.S. Personally, I will be the most interested to hear your opinion on the identities of the writer and recipient of the letters. We did not leaf through each piece of parchment due to their delicate condition. However, in the brief excerpts that I did read, I was struck by the passion and emotion in the words, as well as the references to the specific branch of knighthood devoted to dragon slaying. In my limited knowledge of the Middle Ages, I have not heard of such an occupation, and it seems to me, that if authentic, these letters could shed light on an aspect of medieval life unknown to modern scholars. But I leave it to your expertise, and eagerly await the report of your findings.

Letter I

Am I Normal?

Hello Dragon Slayer.

Though we have never met, I am certain we have a kindred spirit.

Reports of your exploits have reached me several times over the years. In fact, news of your recent battle reached me a fortnight ago, even in this seclusion. I am always thankful to heaven when I hear of your name, and of your contests for Justice.

I received your letter inquiring about my recovery from the attack of those who sought to kill me. Thank you for your kind words.

Your concern for my recovery and current situation are received in the spirit you gave them. Let me answer your questions about my health and safety with speed...

I confess that recuperating in a monastery – with walls as high as any castle I have known – was at first a frustration to me. But in the six weeks that I have spent here recovering, I have become fond of the seclusion and quiet. I do not miss the pretensions of Court or the company of prattling mediocre men who fancy themselves great.

Those who tend my wounds and care for my soul are like angels of Mercy. They tell me my recovery proceeds better than they could have hoped, and better than many have seen. For this, I am thankful to heaven. Several of those charged with my care told me privately they did not expect me to survive when I was brought here. I doubt not that those who sought my death expected my demise as well.

My physicians believe, heaven willing, that I will make a full recovery. They also insist that quiet and rest alone – both of them strangers to me for many years – are the path to wholeness. The solitude that at first agitated me has begun to enrich me.

This is the state of body and soul in which your letter reached me.

Concerning the safety and wellbeing of my dear wife, and our beloved sons and daughters, I will only say this: they are safe, and have been moved to a secret place of refuge for the foreseeable future. I love them more than I love life itself, and for the love of them, I cannot and will not answer any more queries about them in this (or any) correspondence. If any dispatch from me (heaven forbid) was intercepted by an enemy, my Love and the fruit of our union could be in mortal danger. With that, I leave all discussion of them.

Though I am many years your senior – I may well be old enough to be your progenitor – I consider us peers in spirit and mission. Courage knows no time, her champions know

no clock; your manifest valor ranks you among those who must be feared by Dragons, and revered by the just (in whose ranks may we both be found.) Being familiar with your valor, my heart was doubly stirred by your words.

I receive many letters from well-wishers, for which I am grateful, and a few from Dragon Slayers, which have strengthened my soul. But your letter...the cry of your heart...arrested my attention, and evoked something deep within me...memories of my own wrestlings from a lifetime ago.

The questions you posed about yourself, your life, your struggles, and what it means to be a Dragon Slayer have often racked my heart.

And so...since you requested my musings...I will take the time to recount some memories and struggles from my journey that might illumine your path. Perhaps hearing some of my own struggles and experiences will help you, or at least reassure you that you are not entirely alone.

Though I am hostage to my healing and bound to solitude, I will redeem some of these brooding hours by answering you with clarity that is equal to the frankness of your questions. My lingering under the shadow of death has not only given me pause, but (I pray) lucidity.

But before going further, I must tell you what is known by very few souls: my wounds came at the hands of friends. Those who ate my bread, and fought beside me in battles past, in time sought to destroy me. This is a truly bitter cup. I could bear the attempt on my life much more easily if it were not for the treachery of old familiar friends.

Perhaps I will discuss this more, but I think it wise that you know from the start that I was betrayed, nearly unto death. Some of these conspirators may travel in circles of your own, so in view of your safety, I have enclosed a list of their names. Once a man becomes an assassin, he will likely remain an assassin, and I could not forgive myself if you fell at one of their hands.

Enough of that for now...back to your letter. Let me be frank: we both know that even should I fully recover, and I take up sword and shield to enter the sacred fray, I cannot pursue Dragons forever. Whether I fall in battle, covered with blood and mire, or I simply go to my grave in peace...I will go the way of all flesh. I will die.

But before that day, and while I have my wits about me, I should like to give to a young Dragon Slayer a treasure that another great Dragon Slayer gave to me: honesty...candor...and clarity.

As I ponder the struggles, fears, hopes and doubts that

you expressed, the stark nakedness and honesty of your thoughts drew me back in time to a critical moment in my own quest many years ago...a chance meeting that helped forge my soul.

As a young warrior, my heart was plagued by doubts, fears, and questions that echo yours. By good fortune one evening, I was in the company of a renowned and dreadful Dragon Slayer. We were at the castle of a great lord, with a band of valiant men of various ranks, celebrating the recent defeat of a hated Dragon. After a leisurely time of feasting mingled with wine, Providence granted me the chance to speak with him privately.

I laid before him questions that burned in my heart and doubts that burdened my soul. He stared at me intently for a few moments; his face then told me that his heart had judged me worthy of his time. I venture that he perceived that his wisdom and experience might take root in my turbulent but fertile heart. He bade me fetch us a new jug, and to join him in his chambers.

He held me in no contempt for my youth, nor for my human frailties. As the night and the bottle waned, his words were balm and light. I poured out a torrent of questions and struggles. I asked of tactics and principles of war; of family, friends, and enemies; I listed the Dragons I knew and sought to slay. I laid bare my uncertainties, fears, desires, and dreams. I sought to know from him if my view of life and war was in fact sound.

The power and simplicity of his answers overwhelmed me. His transparency and lack of guile completely disarmed me. He told me of his fears, joys, his family, his adversaries, his triumphs and his failures. In bearing his heart to me, he reached deep into my soul; I sat before someone who understood who I was as a Dragon Slayer, the struggles I faced, and what troubled me about myself.

With piercing clarity, his words at once clasped and freed me. Our conversation went long into the night, and his words took deep root in my soul. When we parted company, I still had all my struggles and many of my fears, but I was ready to embrace the destiny that had been given to me: I am a Dragon Slayer.

His admonitions, his clarity, and his sense of courage have remained with me from that day to this. But I never saw him again in the flesh. He died of his wounds after slaying a dreadful Dragon two years after we met.

And now, while I recuperate and rest, I've reflected on my life, my battles, my scars...and the lives and battles and scars of our contemporaries. I have thought long on the lives and motives of those who sought to slay me, as well as those who rescued me from my enemies. I have meditated on the lives of valiant Dragon Slayers who have fought and fallen in battles centuries past.

I confess: if not for the Truths which that great warrior planted in the depths of my soul, I would have died of despair, or perished needlessly in battle, or worse; I might have forged an unholy peace with Dragons.

The Truths told me by that great Dragon Slayer have played out in my life, and in the life of every Dragon Slayer I

have ever met or studied, on innumerable fields of battles.

For the debt I owe to him, my heart demands that I speak to another young Dragon Slayer with the same clarity in which he spoke to me. I will be as honest with you as he was with me, so that perhaps I may help you face the tempests that fill your horizon.

But beware young warrior: if you desire further communication with me, I intend to be as transparent with you about myself, and as frank with you about yourself, as that great hero was with me. I owe it to him, and to our Master.

You wrote much of family and friends, of foes and fitful nights spent wrestling over duty and desire. I smiled at points, because your torrential thoughts reminded me of my younger self, when I too was fatigued and exasperated by my own heart.

And then you asked a simple, desperate question... almost as an afterthought.

You asked: "Do you believe me to be normal?"

I have queried my own heart many times: "Am I normal?"

This question taunts and torments us. It raises its nagging head at totally unpredictable times.

We are haunted by this question when we watch a farmer at work in the field, or see a man fish. Men who sit and talk for hours about insignificant things perplex us. The Dragons that curse the land do not vex them. They appear happy, content, at ease...normal.

And we wish – for fleeting moments – that we could be like them.

We wish that we could be normal.

We wish we could be satisfied with the world as it is. We wish we weren't vexed by tyranny and anxious for Justice, Freedom and Truth. At heart-wrenching moments, we wish we could turn our backs on who and what we are, and bury our knowledge of Dragons in the deepest sea.

At times I weary of standing out, standing up, always standing for something. I grow fatigued of standing and fighting in the middle of the coliseum. I want to sit in the stands, to blend in, to watch.

But I cannot linger long in those shadows. And neither can you. You may even have (I confess that I have) made some solemn resolution to be a part of the crowd, to blend in, to avoid conflict, to be "cultured," and to not stir up trouble. But again and again, it proved an unbearable resolution. Here is why.

A crowd, by definition, is made up of people. And where there are people, there are always stories, hatreds, pains... and Dragons. Always Dragons. And since you are a Dragon Slayer, your resolution soon lies in tatters.

Let us say that you are in a crowded hall at some festive occasion. The conversation turns to some great battle between good and evil, yet those present politely waltz around the edge of what is good, or what is evil. You sit and slowly burn in your heart and soul (whether in bewilderment,

anger, contempt, dismay, passion for the innocent – whatever it may be). Your eyes, your face, your very body will betray the fact that you are ready to draw your sword. And even if you hold your tongue for a while – a long while – inevitably someone will sense the volcanic activity of your soul, look at you, and say loud enough for those present to hear: “Well... what do you think?”

You are trapped. But for your resolution to blend in, you are ready to lunge into the fray. Hence, you only have three options: Option one is to lie. Lie to yourself and to the crowd. Tell them you are not sure how you feel. Option two is to hold your tongue for the sake of those in the room who are captives to some Dragon. Option three is to be authentic. Pour forth the Truth. Be who you are. Be a Dragon Slayer.

If you choose the second option, you will probably fare well. You can tell those gathered that you could cause much trouble if you were to speak candidly, and therefore you wish to leave the topic alone. If you hold your ground (to not fight), the wise in the room would understand, and might even respect your temporary silence. (I say temporary, because we both know that on another day you will not keep silent.)

If you choose the first option...to lie...you betray yourself. Later you will accuse yourself of cowardice, of loving the praise of man more than the praise of the Master, or worse yet: of betraying your Master for 30 pieces of silver, or 30 minutes of peace...like Judas. In other words, you will draw your sword on yourself. This (as you know) is hellish.

Sometimes self-pity will emerge, saying, “Poor wretch that I am! I only want to be normal and blend in!” However, self-pity will only seek to silence your true Dragon Slayer nature, and the strain of such silence is far too wearisome and painful...like fire shut up in your bones. It is intolerable to look in the mirror and accuse the viewer of cowardice.

So, as a matter of course – considering how our souls are fashioned – the most fitting choice for the sake of our integrity is option three: tell the Truth.

Now, when we tell the Truth, it separates us instantly from others. When we speak, we speak with passion, with authority. We know, therefore we speak. And when we are done proclaiming the right side, those present know there is a wrong side. The very manner in which we explain the two sides is a declaration of war, and a call to those on the wrong side to surrender. And of course, some of those who are on the wrong side – and should therefore surrender – are in the room, merrily drinking grog...until you “spoil the affair.”

And so, once again, you prove that you are not “normal.” “Normal” people don’t do this. “Normal” people don’t leap from the stands into the arena to defend the innocent. “Normal” people watch the innocent suffer or die, feel sad, breath a prayer, and console themselves by telling themselves that there was nothing they could have done.

And perhaps for them, they’re right. Perhaps there is little or nothing they could do. They do not thirst for Justice, nor are they fit for battle or seasoned in war, because they are “normal.”

And you, my friend, are not “normal.”

You are a Dragon Slayer.

When you see a conflict unfold before you, when you see a Dragon rise up in your presence, you do not ask, “How do I feel?” You do not say, “How dreadful! Someone should do something!” You ask yourself, “What should I do?” You know how you feel. You see the situation clearly. The Dragon must be driven back, or better, slain. Your only question is “What, if anything, can I do this very moment?”

So when you find yourself at that festive occasion (perhaps pondering if you are “normal”) and someone asks your opinion, or when you are in a situation where evil threatens the good or the innocent, you do not hesitate. You raise a flag of war...a banner of Truth...a Battle ensign that flaps in the wind. You jump out of the stands, into the arena, and call others to join you.

This is what instantly, and forever, separates you from the “normal.” You lunge into battle, and in word and deed you call others to join you. And happily – to the joy of the oppressed, the shame of the slothful, and the terror of the wicked – some will indeed follow you into battle. Some will leave the safety of the stands and fight alongside you because they hate Dragons, and because you are a Dragon Slayer. They were simply waiting for someone to lead them in battle. You call out of them the courage to fight Dragons, and in time, they may even encourage others to do so.

You also discourage and demoralize those who are on the “wrong” side. They probably will not recant their evil, and join forces with you at the moment, but at least they will not stand against you. Your very passion intimidates them, and calls enough doubt (or fear) into their hearts to move them to “neutrality,” at least in that situation. Some may even reconsider their position, by virtue of your courage and passion. Others will speak later (when you are not present) to undermine and harm you, but that is another discussion.

And when the wine is spent, and the guests journey home, most shall be speaking of you. Some will talk of your passion. Some will mistake your confidence for arrogance, some will be entertained, others will be outraged, but they will all agree on one point – you are not “normal.”

And when you finally lie in your bed, your mind may reel, your soul may rage like the sea. You will think of a hundred different ways you could have answered. You may feel at peace, or you may be tormented until you sleep...until the plaguing doubts awaken you, and accompany you in the new day.

You will continue on this endless road of self-examination, always returning to the haunting question: Why can’t I be like other people? Why can’t I be normal?

The answer is simple: You are not normal.

And you will never be normal. You will never “fit in” with the gray, faceless sea of humanity that neither risks nor accomplishes much. Even if today you vowed to take off your armor, melt down your sword, and retire from all confrontations with Dragons, the Master’s call to war would be like fire shut up in your bones. You would be tormented. You would be a fugitive, running from your true self, futilely fleeing your purpose in life. And you would soon grow weary

of running and hiding, because you would know that you are running from the Master and from your true self.

For us, an attempt to be “normal” means surrendering, and joining ourselves to mediocrity. It means limiting the song of life to one octave, blinding our eyes to the beauty and horror of life, and denying the danger and deliverance of death.

Take your leave...look with envy on the peaceful farmer. You will never be as he. Even if for a season you “take up farming,” you will never be a farmer; you are a Dragon Slayer. You cannot escape who you are.

If you buy and sell and become wealthy, it will simply be to fund the costs of your battles. Every warrior knows it takes fine steel to slay a Dragon...which in turn takes treasure. But never be confused; you are not a farmer, or a merchant. You are a Dragon Slayer.

And though you are not normal, and will never be so, you must love the normal. Do not despise them, or avoid their company. And certainly do not insist on making them in your image. Laugh with them, dance with them, sing with them, and thank Heaven for those times of external ease and internal repose.

You must embrace who and what you are, and then raise your soul, your mind, your spirit, your heart, and your body to the Lord of all Dragon Slayers and say: “I will love and serve You with all that I am. Please lift me when I fall, and forgive me when I fail. I will serve You in life and in death.”

And then...do your duty as a Dragon Slayer.

Learn to be led by the Master, not driven by the Dragons.

Keep soft; keep supple. Do not allow the cold scales of the Dragons you have slain cleave to your skin.

Learn the wisdom of when and where and how to strike.

Forgive those who have wronged you or hurt you or betrayed you; sometimes the very ones you seek to help, or worse...those who broke bread with you.

Learn to be both Dragon Slayer and surgeon. Be hard enough to resist evil, soft enough to laugh with children.

Emulate the great King David – perhaps the most glorious, beloved, poetic, musical, dreadful, fearless, and totally human Dragon Slayer that man has ever seen.

And in those moments when we stand beside the sea, with the sound of crashing waves or rich winds wash over our souls, let us remember that we are dust.

We must remember that before we are warriors, we should be poets. The greatest Dragon Slayers are the greatest lovers of Truth, Justice, Music and Beauty...who cling to their Master, not to war.

I leave you with this word of cheer: This life of yours, filled with passions and battles and hills and Dragons, is in fact “normal” for you. It is normal for me. It is normal for those who are Dragon Slayers.

So be at peace, my friend. You are a Dragon Slayer, and

as a Dragon Slayer, you are normal.

Forgive me...look how long my letter to you has become. I shall stop here, for fear that I have taken more of your time than was desired.

If my poor musings have helped, please feel free to write me again. I shall be able to devote myself to your letters as long as I am captive to my recovery.

And now I leave you with the blessing my grandmother sang over me as a child:

May all hell know you,

May the Angels protect you,

May the wicked fear you,

May the Master hear you,

And may Dragons loathe the sound of your name.

Letter II

Courage and Cowardice

Hello again, good Dragon Slayer.

I received your latest correspondence three days past. I was gladdened by the swiftness of your response to my letter.

More importantly, I am pleased to know that it touched a chord deep within you, and that by your testimony, you have been strengthened and calmed by my words. Yes, you are normal...for a Dragon Slayer. Our challenge is to keep our interior balance. I assure you...it is a struggle that scarcely ceases.

As a great Dragon Slayer once mused:

He who conquers his own spirit

Is greater than he who conquers a city.

I am delighted that you accepted my offer to correspond with you while I am convalescing. I pray I am able to paint pictures for you that continue to free and temper your fiery soul.

In truth, I wept at points as I read your latest letter; I know how vital it is to have a handful of souls who understand how we think and what we feel, to have fellow warriors who can help us weed out our own hearts. Your stress was palpable, as well as your relief.

Concerning my health in body and mind, those who tend my wounds assure me I will again bear sword and shield, I will again ride my mount into battle. But they also insist it will take months, not days. Thus, I have set my heart to observe several new moons from this sacred abode.

However, having made a commitment to you and our Master to be candid with you, my gravest concern is not for my body. My apprehension – and the concern of the resident friar who visits with me frequently – is the impact of the wounds on my soul.

Those who sought to slay me – and therefore lost the right to bear the name of Dragon Slayers when they broke our Creed and sought to slay one of their own – have become a source of bitter grief to my soul. The fact that those who broke bread with me conspired to destroy me causes pain far greater than that of my corporal wounds.

This paradox vexes me...in my hour of physical trial, I find my greatest challenges are internal...the warring of heart and soul. A wise matriarch told me long ago, “Bitterness is the poison we drink in hope that it will slay our enemies.” I must not let bitterness eat away at me, for if I do, I will destroy myself. And the irony is that my enemies will have achieved their goal...by my own hand.

I must now use greater discernment regarding whom I can trust. Our scouts tell us that my enemies know I

miraculously survived their attempted assassination, and that their dismay is seconded only by their fury and fear. We can be sure that another attempt will be made on my life. So I begin the next season of my life as a Dragon Slayer...as a man...warring against Dragons without, but also standing against the temptation to bitterness, and at the same time being wary of the plots of my would be slayers. It is a difficult path to walk.

With the exception of the grief caused by my betrayers, my spirits are up, my hope is intact, and I embrace this recovery as a providential window to assess my journey thus far, and happily, to aid you on yours. Perhaps I can help spare you some of the mistakes I have made, protect you from our common enemies, and thus (if Heaven wills) help lengthen your days and successes in battle.

I now turn to your latest questions.

I was again moved by your torrent of musings, questions, exclamations, and exasperations. (I hope it is helpful to clarify your thoughts with ink, pen, and parchment.)

Your account of the battle you led several months past was splendid. To wound a Dragon, but then lose him is dreadful. A wounded Dragon is often more dangerous than a healthy one (if one can ever call a Dragon “healthy”), because the wretched creature knows that its days are numbered. As its life ebbs away, it lashes out in chaotic fury, sometimes resulting in greater loss of life, limb, and property.

So I honor you for your lengthy pursuit. You never gave up...even when others despaired of victory. This is part of what makes you a Dragon Slayer. After weeks of travel and near misses, I rejoice that you finally hunted down and dispatched the monster. Is it not amazing the places that a Dragon can find refuge? I have found them in the dark cold caves one would expect, but I have also found them in Universities and Cathedrals, and in the castles of great men. Sometimes the Dragon was unknown in the castle, other times an honored guest. Heaven have Mercy on us.

Your account of the courageous souls who helped in your search revealed a great love, respect, and concern for those who risked their lives to aid you in destroying the Dragon. You also displayed a deep contempt for the cowardly knaves who had it in their power to destroy, or at least uncover the wounded Dragon, but refused. (The excuses certain village folk gave you when they denied your requests for aid were particularly amusing, albeit in a pathetic sense.)

Your concern for those who helped you is noble, and your anger with those who stood mute is wholly just. Allow me to help you clarify the source of your heartache and joy

with two simple questions.

The first question is: "What is the worst sin?"

The second question is: "What is the chief virtue?"

Allow me to discuss the first question, "What is the worst sin?"

I understand that philosophers and mystics (who are probably more qualified to answer the questions I posed than I am) would tell us that the failure to love our Maker is the worst "sin." And I have also heard from learned men that murder was the worst sin a man could commit against his fellow man, because no restitution or Justice can bring back the life robbed from the victim. Hence, before I explore the question, "What is the worst sin?" please know that I submit to those who are more learned than I when giving a precise catechetical answer.

My question concerns the great battles we wage. When you are on a field at battle, fully clad with sword drawn, what is the worst sin? What causes you to feel unalterable contempt, and vehement disgust?

Some might say, "Treachery!" or, "Betrayal!" While I agree these are close to unpardonable sins, I have concluded that they are mere shoots of the great root: Cowardice.

Cowardice is the worst sin.

In the heart of a Dragon Slayer, cowardice ranks alone as the most vile and villainous of evils.

Cowardice forsakes women and children in the face of danger. Cowardice bids one to live as a slave rather than to fight and die as a free man. Cowardice reasons; cowardice calculates; cowardice not only counts the cost before doing battle, but deems the cost of freedom and Justice too high. Cowardice is the handmaid of tyrants.

Cowardice urges a man to flee from battle before the battle has been joined. (We both know that at certain points, a tactical "regrouping" is required...but it is with the goal of launching another attack on the Dragon, not surrendering to it.)

Worse still, cowardice provides cunning arguments why flight is not actually cowardice, but wisdom. Cowardice falsely carries the air of reason. Cowardice quotes from Sacred Books and Writings. Cowardice insists its' reasoning is prudent.

Perhaps worse yet is that cowardice urges a man to convince others that flight is not only prudent, but right. It is right to surrender. It is wrong to resist the Dragons. Cowardice leads men in an insurrection against valor and duty.

At other times cowardice doesn't call for full retreat, but rather a treaty with the Dragons. Cowardice takes to itself the trappings of dignity and influence: "If we can just have a place at the table...to discuss the issues at hand."

Cowardice takes on the noble air of "mutual disarmament" and "peace talks," being willfully forgetful of the nature of Dragons. Every schoolboy knows that Dragons cannot disarm. They not only breathe fire, they contain fire. They cannot extinguish the fire and villainy that burns within

them. They cannot change what they are. They devour young virgins. They terrify and destroy villages. A leopard cannot change his spots, and a Dragon cannot shed his scales. When the cowardly attempt to negotiate with Dragons, they willfully blind themselves to what Dragons are, and the darkness of their deeds. Dragons are not to be trifled with, they must be destroyed.

But cowardice is not limited to the sons of Adam; Dragons also become afraid.

There are times when a Dragon senses danger. Perhaps a young St. George and a force of warriors have arisen, and the Dragon senses that it is threatened. He will ask to parley with the Dragon Slayers, and if no meeting is possible, the Dragon will send emissaries.

What I now tell you, you must always remember: the emissaries of the Dragon will often wear the garments and speak the language of our friends. They may wear the uniform of our allies; they may wear vestments; they may quote our Sacred texts. They may bear an Ichthus or some other ensign of the Master on their chariot. They may praise the way of the Dragon Slayer with their lips, but they despise it in their hearts. The Dragon, not the Master of Dragon Slayers, has sent them.

And in the end, their mission is always the same...to induce you to retreat...to leave the Dragon in peace...and in power.

Now, we both know that making war on a Dragon is deadly serious business, and when possible, fields of battle should be strategically chosen, and campaigns planned in detail. I say "when possible," because oftentimes a Dragon flies in, burns a village or captures a virgin, and thereby chooses the field of battle. At that point honor and duty compel us to respond, however rushed our plans might be. So whether a Dragon, or we, choose the field of battle, it is to theatre we must fly and fight with all our hearts.

So, when one who claims to be your ally interrupts your campaign, or someone swearing friendship approaches you and says, "I agree with you, but..." and then tries to advise you on how to negotiate a peace with a Dragon, ask for his credentials.

If he be a true friend to Dragon Slayers, and a proven enemy of Dragons, His credentials will appear in one of two forms: first, his scars; second, his enemies.

Ask him to show you the scars of war, scars from the battles in which he fought; scars of some hapless defeat over which he has wept bitter tears. Any man who has endured much conflict has suffered wounds, and bears scars. If he has no scars, he is suspect.

Second, ask him to name those who count him his enemies. Does the enemy camp dread him? Do they hate him? Do they even know him? A dreadful demon once told a pretender: "Jesu I know, Paulos I know, but who are you?"

A true warrior for Justice has real enemies...and he has the right enemies.

I realize that a young warrior may have neither scars nor enemies, but his youth would preclude him from being

in your tent as high-level advisor or negotiator. But if a man of mature years comes to you, and has neither scars nor enemies, he is not a trustworthy advisor, negotiator, or ambassador to you or from you.

But the Dragons will send the duplicitous. And cowardice will inspire them. And as I said, these emissaries will assure you that they are on your side. But the cowardice at work within them seeks to justify their lack of scars, their lack of enemies, and the fact that they live under the Dragon's rule. They do not want to join you in war, they want you to join them under the wing of the Dragon.

One of the most damning things about cowardice is that it refuses to abide alone. It wants others to follow its "prudent" lead. Cowardice can infect and poison whole armies. That is why the Master commands that on the verge of battle, the fearful be sent home. If they are allowed to remain, they will spread their fear to others, demoralize the troops, and the battle will be lost.

Remember the story from long ago of two great Dragon Slayers, Joshua and Caleb. They were about to bring an entire wandering nation into a land flowing with milk and honey, yet ten spies – spies who wore the Master's colors – spread the cancer of fear amongst the army. On the verge of battle – and the brink of certain victory had they only fought – they became hopeless cowards, and refused to fight.

But it was far worse than that: they made plans to return to slavery. They chose unjust servitude over just conflict. They chose chains with peace over freedom with war. They chose comfort over conflict.

And this, of course, is the essence of cowardice: slavery. Cowardice would rather submit to slavery than risk open war. Why? In war there are losses; the loss of time, the loss of treasure, the loss of property, and most importantly, the loss of life. The fear of loss fuels cowardice. This fear gives cowardice its strength, and makes it a powerful and malignant force.

Cowardice is the bond-slave of villains, the handmaid of oppressors, the bodyguard of tyrants. In fact, tyrants cannot exist without cowardice. One only has to study the great Dragons of history to see that they could not have flourished without the silence and inaction of those who had the power or the duty to resist them. Even if resistance seems futile, duty demands action at some point – a raising of the standard of war or even a token or symbol of resistance – so that other scattered Dragon Slayers and potential warriors might see the ensign, gather for battle, and in time, fight for victory.

The great tyrannies of our own time are sustained by a cursed cowardice that disembowels those who have a duty to fight, and shackles prominent men who should lead troops into battle, or at least openly support those who do fight. They fear defeat, or scorn, or ridicule, so they do not fight, nor do they praise just warriors.

Yet my study of war tells me this: if we who fight are not victorious, the testimony of our courage and fidelity of our actions will provide the inspiration for a future army to fight on to victory. In that manner, our "defeats" are indispensable

links in the chainmail of victory.

I remain convinced that we have the resources to prevail against the Dragons of our time, but due to cowardice, with all its lofty excuses and equivocations, many of our troops and potential warriors have been castrated, disarmed, disemboweled, and otherwise rendered useless for war. Cowardice has become the chief advisor in many Generals' tents.

Permit me to give you a word or two more. Treachery, as I told you earlier, is a branch on the trunk of cowardice. Treachery betrays out of fear of being on the losing side. Preserving station, respectability, wealth, access to princes, personal well being – these hold more value to the treacherous man than justice and freedom – and thereby propel his treachery. Treachery is cowardice applied.

Ponder this: both Dragon Slayers and the slaves of cowardice are "seers." They both see the future. And their vision of the future is what compels them. The Dragon Slayer sees freedom, Justice, and the death of the Dragon, so he is willing to fight. The coward sees war, conflict, blood and carnage, so he yearns to flee.

And as I alluded, both Dragon Slayer and coward call men forth. The Dragon Slayer calls warriors to the field of battle; the slave of fear calls men away.

This leads me to another point: The fierce weight of anger you feel about cowardice must not be brought to bear very often on the potential foot soldier. Frequently, the soft and flabby are not in battle, because some cowardly Friar used Sacred Words – used them corruptly, that is – to disembowel him of courage and his sense of duty.

Our anger should not be focused on those who believe the false/bad report as much as those who give the false/bad report. The saying is true: "As goes the shepherd, so goes the sheep."

Even as I write to you in my weakened state, I am freshly agitated by this vile irony. If cowardice spoke with a cursed hiss, in open defiance of the Master, few would listen. Instead, cowardice finds its way into the hearts of those who should be Heralds of Truth, who then in turn falsely use the language of Truth, even stealing and corrupting phrases from the Book of Truth, in order to convince listeners that fear and surrender are the true and prudent path. But the proof of their deceit lies here: the Dragon agrees.

The Dragon gives a hearty "Amen!" to the directives of cowardice. The Dragon somberly agrees that all Dragon Slayers should leave the field of battle. The Dragon agrees that the words and actions of Dragon Slayers are extreme, or intolerant, or militant, or counterproductive, or divisive...and that they lack "prudence" and "charity."

And of course, the Dragon is right. A Dragon Slayers loyalty to Truth and Justice is extreme; we are intolerant of the Dragon terrorizing the innocent; we are militant in our demand that the Dragon be dethroned and slain; we divide the Dragon from his prey.

I give you this solemn warning: If the Dragon agrees with a supposed emissary of Truth, the emissary is probably

an imposter, or at best, an unwitting servant of the Dragon.

Now, let us pause. I have focused on the horror of cowardice and exposed the treacheries that cowardice employs, but I must serve you better than this.

The glory and beauty of the truth outshine the false light of the foul and the fraud. So for a moment, let us revel in the splendor and glory of courage.

The answer to my second question, “What is the chief virtue?” is this: Courage.

Courage is the chief virtue.

Remember this, for it is an axiom you can live and die by. Courage is the chief virtue.

Now, I again speak as one Dragon Slayer to another. Some would argue that charity is the chief virtue (speaking of course of true charity, not the wretched counterfeits that masquerade as charity.) If heaven decrees charity the chief virtue, then I submit. As in the case of cowardice, my assessment is visceral, and pertains to what I have witnessed in scores of conflicts on the field of battle: Courage is the chief virtue.

Ponder well my words.

If a man knows the Truth, but he does not have the courage to say the Truth in the midst of a hostile throng, or even to a handful of neighbors or misguided kin, what good is his knowledge of Truth? Or if a man knows what is Just, but he does not have the courage to fight for Justice in the face of an angry mob, or even stand against his mercurial wife’s mother, what good is his knowledge of Justice? If a lady knows Mercy, but does not have the courage to show Mercy when a self-righteous rabble is ready to throw stones, or even in the midst of a gossiping gaggle of girls who torment some wounded soul, what good is her knowledge of Mercy? In fact – regarding the glorious virtue of true charity – if a man or woman knows what charity demands, but they do not have the courage to be charitable, charity miscarries... or worse...she is a barren womb.

So here I take my stand...

Courage is the chief virtue, because courage propels other virtues to action in the time and place they are most needed.

Courage is the Guardian of Truth, the Handmaiden of Justice, and the servant of Mercy. Courage is the midwife of charity (when that beautiful child is most want). Courage gives wings and life to all other virtues. Without courage, all other virtues lie in the dust, like weapons without a warrior, or balm without a surgeon.

You must also always remember this – for yourself and those you lead – being afraid, or feeling fear, must not be confused with cowardice.

I will define Courage in two simple ways.

First, Courage is not the absence of fear; Courage is doing what is right in spite of our fears.

On many occasions I have been afraid, but did my duty. Sometimes we stand and fight to hold our ground, or better yet, to advance against the enemy – trembling in part, valiant

in part – with our heart filled with determination to prevail, or die. Surely you have felt this exhilarating and chaotic combination of fear and courage; doubt and determination.

Hence, we must stand abreast with those who are partly afraid, yet remain willing to fight. If they do what is right in spite of their fears, they have true courage.

Also, we must not be bombastic. Heaven forbid we strut around like fearless wonders, projecting a false image of confidence concerning ourselves – or worse – a false example of an unattainable height of courage.

If we insist that being unswerving, undoubting, and undaunted is the true standard for courage, those who are honest with themselves about their failure to attain such unalloyed courage will be demoralized. Worse yet, they may falsely identify themselves as cowards, condemn themselves, and abandon the fight. At the right moments, be honest about your fears, and you will liberate others from the grip of their fears, as well as endear them to you.

All that said: I have trained many men for war. I have led many men in battle. I give you this axiom, witnessed hundreds of times in my short life: It is easier to temper a bold man, than to embolden a timid man.

I say it again...that the words may fuse into your soul: It is easier to temper a bold man, than to embolden a timid man.

If a man has the courage to lay down his life for Truth and Justice, you can easily give him marching orders from which he will not shrink. He may be bold and fierce – in the best sense – yet lack the wisdom of years mingled with sorrow and defeats – and thereby be a shade too boisterous and overly self-confident. But the knocks of battle, the scars of war, the rebukes inherent to his follies, and the wise words and reproofs of a good master will temper him as life proceeds. He will mellow. He will mature. He will become sharper with each turn of the grinding stone.

But if a man is timid – if he fears battle – he will halt and retreat at the first sound of the Dragon’s bellow, or the first sight of the demon’s smoke. And no matter how you try to inspire him, no matter how loudly duty cries to him to fight, he will shrink from battle. He will prove a splintered reed if you lean on him in need. Mark this well.

The second definition of courage I alluded to – I believe a higher definition of courage – is this: I am prepared to die on this hill. I am prepared – at this moment in time – to literally die for this battle...this cause...this conflict between good and evil.

I know that I only now warned you against bombastic declarations, so this definition of courage is sometimes better kept to yourself as a resolve of heart between you and your Maker. But it is the epitome of courage, nonetheless.

So I tell you again...the highest, clearest definition of courage is simply this: I am prepared to die on this hill.

Now when I say this, I mean (forgive me for being redundant), that you are willing to literally, physically die in battle – whatever that battle may be. You are willing to fall by the sword; to be burned at the stake. You are willing to

lose your life in battle to a Dragon for the sake of Truth and Justice and Freedom. You are willing to be torn limb from limb by an angry mob rather than deny the truth, or forsake the innocent.

Once you are truly prepared to leave this life; once you are ready to die in battle, you become free. Truly, completely free.

The fearful will say you are reckless. But the captives whom you seek to rescue will herald you as their hero. When you are prepared to die, you are a far greater dread to Dragons. Because as our peerless hero, the great Dragon Slayer St. George proved, Dragons must be slain in close contact. Hence, to slay a Dragon, you run the risk of being slain.

If you are afraid to die, you will keep a safe distance from Dragons. From a distance, you can yell belligerent defiance, make threats, and posture yourself as the inevitable victor when the conflict begins in earnest, etc., but you cannot thrust your spear down the throat of the Dragon.

To kill a Dragon, you have to be prepared to die. As our Master taught us:

They overcame the Dragon by the blood of the Lamb,
The word of their testimony,
And they loved not their life unto death.

I am certain that the most dreadful and effectual people in the world – whether for the sake of righteousness or evil – are those who are prepared to die in battle for what they believe.

My friend, have you reached that place of the heart yet? If you have, then you know it is a fortress for your soul, the keeper of your resolve, a guiding light in thick darkness.

Another thought: one act of fear does not a coward make. When you are a leader – and would-be warriors trust you – they will let you know of their fears and failures, to see if this disqualifies them in your eyes. Remember the great Dragon Slayer Petros.

Petros denied our Master in a moment of frailty – with cursing and swearing – because of his fear. He was sifted like wheat by the Prince of Dragons. Yet his faith did not fail, he was restored, and was given the keys to the Master's Kingdom, which he ever used with great courage. He grieved his failure – with bitter tears – and was restored. He never repeated or justified his betrayal. Hence we can learn from his example that cowardice is defined by repetition, calculation, and justification.

So, my friend, remember yourself. Remember when you denied our Master with silence, or held your tongue for cowardice, or stood by and did nothing for fear. Remember your bitter remorse...and then remember the Mercy of the Master. Remember yourself, and do your best to restore and encourage your brethren who stumble.

I will end here. I am weary, and I know that I must rest to aid my wounds to continue healing. But oh...allow me a final word to steady your soul...

Our actions, our words, and our unyielding defiance to

Dragons may cause us to lose our good reputation with the fearful. We may lose friends. We may lose our home. We may lose our freedom. But even if we lose all these, if we still have the breath of life, as long as we are faithful in battle, we have been victorious at some level.

Remember our Master, who endured such contradictions of evil men against Himself, lest you be weary, and faint in your mind.

Gird yourself with courage, and then take great care to keep an accurate account of the cost of battle. Do not overstate or overvalue the difficulties you must endure. If you are prepared to lay down your life, but you only have to lay down your trade, or your friends or your reputation, rejoice! You're still alive!

And when the Dragons, their knaves, and false friends malign you, curse you, mistreat you, separate you from their company, and say all manner of evil against you falsely... do as the Master enjoined us, rejoice. Leap for joy. Great is your reward at the Master's table. That is the way our Master's enemies have always treated Dragon Slayers.

I hope these words are a benefit and a balm to you. Until I hear from you again, I remain your faithful servant.

Letter III

The Love of Battle

Hello Again, Dragon Slayer.

I just received your latest post. Let me answer the culinary question first. No, I have never eaten a stag prepared with wine and herbs and smoke in the way you described, but my mouth watered at your description. I have passed on your report to the scullery, and have been assured that such a recipe will soon be put to the test in these hallowed halls.

I was happy to learn that you were strengthened by my musings on Courage. I have studied warriors who are in the crucible of trial and danger for many years. In the direst of moments, one spark of genuine Courage can inflame whole armies to stand fast on a field of battle. This is why I place so much value on the virtue of Courage.

We seek Justice, but it is Courage that propels us in our sacred quest.

You are correct in your observation that Justice does not always prevail immediately (though we trust it will prevail over time, for the Master has decreed it). The failure to speedily obtain Justice is not due to any deficiency in Justice herself, nor is it because the Dragons and their servants are stronger or more numerous than the just.

The seemingly sluggish progress of Justice is often due to the cowardice of her guardians. I wish this were not so, but I too have seen tyranny and oppression prevail for no other reason than the refusal of good men to fight. Victory and Justice were within their reach had they only the Courage to draw their swords.

In this I have found a constant maxim: The preservation of Justice depends on the Courage of her guardians. Heaven have Mercy on us, and give us more men and women of Courage.

Thank you for your ongoing inquiries about my health. I am slowly progressing towards full recovery...but I grow more frustrated as the weeks pass. I find that the more whole I become, the more I disdain inactivity. I want to resume my place in battle, but I am not yet fit to be armed and ride my mount into the fray.

So I am left with my private battles – the conflicts and wrestlings of my soul. Thank heaven! This monastery provides the sounds and smells and images to help me search more deeply into my soul; deeper than I possibly can when charging into battle, and not confined to this sacred solitude.

Ironically, the scars of treachery I bear in my frame of dust have in some ways become an elixir of health for the deepest parts my soul. Is it not a great mystery that suffering can produce a sweet fragrance in one's soul, if we allow it to do its thrice-holy work?

I know that you wrestle with your own questions and inner struggles. Of this you may be certain; some of your struggles will continue until you leave this life. But take cheer, the inner Dragons – if I may call them that – that you face today will not be present forever. The burdens that trouble your heart this morning may be a distant memory in two or three winters. However, new struggles, new questions, new Dragons may emerge with which you must contend. This is our lot until Eternity claims its right to our souls.

In response to the musings of your recent letter...it is clear from the battles you have fought that you love Justice. Moreover, you have demonstrated great courage. You have shown that you will risk your life in battle to rescue the innocent and divide the Dragon from his prey.

But even as you recounted the relish of your most recent exploit (I heartily applaud you for slaying the infernal beast), a growing cloud of uncertainty crept over your words. I was glad you focused squarely on the essence of your nagging doubts. You wrote, "The truth be known, I love the battle. I love the sounds and smells and sights of war. I love the epic drama of which I am a part. But I fear that I may love it too much...am I a danger to myself and others?"

Ahh...the love of battle...is this not a perplexing sentiment? Why do we love it so? You have displayed both courage and wisdom by facing this aspect of your soul. I will do my best to answer you without guile, and perhaps give you the means to divine your own heart as you approach different battles in the years to come.

Let us start with who and what we are. In many ways, all of the sons of Adam are alike. We toil, we grieve, we live, we love...and we die. Our bodies came from the dust, and are sown into the dust to await the Master's final call.

But even in those things we hold in common with all men, Dragon Slayers are different. Yes, we love and toil and grieve...but the things we love, what we toil for, the losses we grieve, and those epic struggles for which we are prepared to live and die – the objects of our devotion and sacrifice – unfold like chasms separating us from our fellows.

It took me well nigh thirty years to understand that in the core of their being, Dragon Slayers are simply not like other people.

I wrongly thought that every decent living soul had the same love of Justice, the same hatred of tyranny and oppression, the same desire for freedom, and the same willingness to sacrifice and take risks in the pursuit of Dragons that all Dragon Slayers possess.

I was wrong...very wrong.

I thought that if men simply saw the Truth, and heard the report of the havoc and horror that Dragons were inflicting on the innocent, they would spring to battle with us against the enemy.

Again, I was wrong.

I found that many souls only crave Justice when they have been abused. They hate tyranny, but only when they feel its heel on the back of their neck. Many arrogant lords and oppressed serfs want freedom for themselves, but care little about freedom for others. As long as the Dragon is not presently in their castle, on their lands, or near their hovels; as long as he is devouring the daughters of other regions, they are content to leave him alone, existing in an uneasy and unholy peace...their consciences numbed to the suffering of others by bread and circuses within their reach.

You know these self-consumed souls by this token: they take no risks nor make any sacrifice to pursue a Dragon for the sake of others. They howl when they are the victims of injustice, but they are docile and silent when someone else is ground beneath the iron wheels of oppression.

You and I view this as an unsigned treaty with hell. In many ways, this treachery is the reason why our realm has been more afflicted by Dragons in our lifetime. The Dragons know that prey is more easily obtained where men do not value their neighbor's life and liberty.

And then there are others who simply do not want to fight, no matter what the cost of their submission. They choose an unjust peace above a just conflict. They crave peace more than they hunger for freedom and Justice. They are content to live under the shadow of the Dragon. They are willing to abide tyranny, oppression, the loss of freedom – even the loss of others' lives – if only they don't have to fight.

Therefore they are prepared to live as slaves, as long as they have their daily bread to sustain them...and circuses to distract them.

Again, this attitude confuses us, bewilders us, and even enrages us...mainly because we love Justice more than we love our own lives. But also in part (and this goes to the heart of your question) because we love battles for Justice.

In some mysterious way, I believe we are forged by our Master to love the battle for Justice and Freedom. We relish the preparation: the sharpening of our swords, the drilling in arms, the fine-tuning of our strategies, reason and rhetoric.

We love the march onto the field. We love the specter of two armies facing each other, and of banners bearing our Sovereign's insignia flapping noisily in the wind. We love the sound of horses snorting and the ominous clatter of their armor. We love the clash of arms.

And when we face a Dragon alone, we are equally exalted in spirit. We say our prayers with more clarity; we face death deliberately; we charge our foe with a holy, reckless abandon.

We are unconquerably convinced of the rightness of our cause, so we neither flinch nor flee. We will use the enemy's heroes, arguments, and armorments as our fodder and weaponry. We will use their lies and folly to batter down

their fortress of deceit and oppression. One of us can put a thousand to flight; two of us can put ten thousand to flight.

We simply love battle.

In my younger years, I truly thought everyone did. Again, I was wrong.

That said, most people – even those living in uneasy submission to Dragons – want to fancy themselves as Dragon Slayers, or at least as one who would fight and die alongside a Dragon Slayer. Very few actually view themselves as knaves or cowards. Most men love the romantic ideal of valor in righteous conflict.

This explains bravado, exaggerated boasting, and the repetition of old war stories.

I know you have encountered people like this in your travels. They tell one story – a story where they displayed true courage – over and over again. They are justly proud that their personal heroics helped someone. The sad thing is that it is the only story they have. Thus, they repeat it in perpetuity.

We should not hold them in contempt. Thank heaven for whatever act of valor they displayed. The world is better off because they stood true at that moment. Perhaps one Dragon was wounded or felled by a lucky throw of the spear. Any time a Dragon reels or falls, we should rejoice. Furthermore, the underlying theme of their story – the value of courage – is an inspiration to the young, who begin to yearn for their chance to be heroic.

But while we must never hold one time heroes in contempt, neither should we over exalt them before other would-be Dragon Slayers. We must be careful, lest erratic or one-time warriors are held as models of the courage and virtue of a lifelong Dragon Slayer.

No, a true Dragon Slayer must have the stamina and courage for a lengthy, sometimes lifelong conflict. Evils are conquered, nations are liberated, and Dragons are defeated by repeated efforts. There will be victories, followed by courageous missteps, punctuated by moments of defeat and even despair. The victories are intoxicating wine, but failures are knives that slashes a man's soul. If a man does not have the long-term vision and perseverance of a Dragon Slayer, he will be drunk (and hence useless) with his own success, or he will collapse under the burden of his doubts, sorrows, and defeats.

A champion is one who continues the fight – or retires for a season to plan his next sortie – even when his prospects of victory are thin. He continues to fight even after he has been injured, or has lost a limb or an eye, because he has not lost his heart.

Champions of this caliber must serve as our examples and heroes, not one-time lucky shots.

So – and forgive me for the repetition, but this is a key lesson – we want Dragon Slayers who will fight over decades. Perhaps this is why part of being a Dragon Slayer is the love of battle. Sometimes we are reluctant warriors. But in truth, we also relish the contest. Hence we must find and cultivate those who love the battle for Justice...those who will fight

over a lifetime, not minutes and hours.

So, the answer to the first part of your question is no; you are not in danger because you love battle. It is a part of who and what you are. As we already discussed, you are not “normal.”

But the lesson does not end here. I must warn you how this part of your character could cause harm to you, or those you serve.

First, beware of loving battle simply for the sake of fighting. A Dragon Slayer must never cause quarrels for the mere pleasure of it. We are warriors, not brawlers. Our battles have clear objectives. For a Dragon Slayer, the purpose of battle is to attain Justice. The end we seek is the death of a Dragon. A man who simply loves to brawl has no objective. He merely wants to fight.

Second, your love of battle must never produce in you contempt or any other ill will toward those who do not love battle. You are fighting, in part, for them. And it is difficult to fight enthusiastically for those you secretly despise.

Furthermore, I am certain that it is a part of the Master’s plan that those who are Dragon Slayers be aided by those they seek to help. On the many occasions I have pursued Dragons to distant lands, I have been greatly aided in arms, food, lodging, and information by those who themselves shy away from battle, but who earnestly desire that a Dragon be dispatched. They have proven a vital part of many victories.

When people follow or aid us, they must be assured that our judgment can be trusted. They must know that we do not view them as fodder for our conflicts, but rather that our conflict is in part for their protection, and the protection of their children.

For you to be trusted, respected, and followed into battle, your love of battle must not be seen as a love for trouble, but rather a love for the innocent. We pursue Justice and seek to slay Dragons because we want the oppressed to find Justice, and to be free from the terrors of the Dragon. We bring honor to our Master by honoring and serving the objects of His care – the needy, the innocent, the oppressed.

A man who does not love humanity – especially the young, the frail, and the needy – no matter how skilled he is in war, is not a Dragon Slayer. Sadly, he may later prove a traitor to our cause. Mark him; for the day may come when he will seek to slay you or those you love on the field of battle, or assassinate you at some moment of rest.

But, be at ease, my friend. It truly is our Master that teaches our hands to war, that enables us to rush into a troop, who gives us a stout heart to love the battle. But beyond that, those who have the heart of a Dragon Slayer must be nurtured, matured, and cared for by us, and always taught to put the love of souls ahead of the love of battle.

I commend you to Heaven’s care until your next post. One other matter...you mentioned the possibility of journeying to visit me while I mend. My hosts tell me that you are quite welcome here. I know it is a great distance, but if you can come before winter falls, I would be overjoyed to see you. I venture that the quiet solitude this sacred place

affords would be a blessing to your war-weary soul.

Letter IV

Rest, Inactivity, and Détente.

Hello again, My Friend.

On the very day that we began our Advent celebrations, barely after we had lit the first candle to honor the coming of our Master, I received your post informing me that you would not be able to join me during this Holy Season.

I must confess, the rising joy in my spirit was dampened by the news, but I understand why you have forestalled your visit to accept a different invitation. The lord who has invited you to spend a fortnight at his castle is a noble and just man who has feared our Maker and served the poor honorably since his youth. I have spent many nights in his castle, and he has aided me greatly in the pursuit of three deadly dragons. Spending time with him will certainly refresh your soul.

Please send my greetings to him, and inform him privately that my “illness” was in fact an attempt on my life by those I trusted. I have enclosed a parchment with the names of the traitors, and the regions from which they come. Please give it to him; I am certain he knows several of them. In doing so you may protect him from future designs and deceits employed against him by the very ones who sought my life.

The fact that he resides in the same region as many of your kindred and lifelong friends will make this time a treble joy. Laugh long, and enjoy drinking the health of your oldest comrades and newest acquaintances.

As you approach this festive time, allow me to encourage, and warn you. This Holy Season, unlike any other time of year has singular joys and heartaches, unique prospects and dangers.

In keeping with your request that I speak freely to you, I do so now concerning three things: Rest, Inactivity, and Détente. Mark these words well, for they may spare you great heartache when you see old kindred and friends.

During my convalescing I have pondered the difference between inactivity and rest. Rest can be a tremendous gift from heaven, while inactivity eats at us like a cancer. We chafe under the yoke of idleness.

True rest may come when we remove our armor after prolonged conflict, and recline at table, laughing and feasting with fellow warriors and friends. Or we may crave solitude, ambling alone in a forest or by the sea. We may yearn for still waters.

But all of this is an interlude. The grand closure of a symphonies first movement must have a quiet, haunting solo from a lute or bagpipe to lead us into the next movement. And likewise, the dropping of the curtain after Act One is a

pause to prepare for Act Two.

This is often how a Dragon Slayer views rest. Our rendezvous with peace is a bridge between our last conflict and the next. Whether we are granted a month-long holiday, or a three-day feast, they both point back to the front.

At the beginning of rest after pursuing Dragons, a Dragon Slayer relishes the quiet. He may rest extra hours; he might sit by a lake and read illuminated texts, or enjoy any numbers of leisures with the lady who charms and holds his heart. But after a while – when his strength has returned – his inner compass points him back to battle.

Why? Because this is how we are made. We loathe an unjust, unholy peace. And as long as Dragons are devouring virgins or terrorizing villages, we can never be at total peace or rest. It is our duty and calling to rejoin the fight.

Moreover, should we remain out of battle for too long, we would wither. We need to pursue Justice like a great tree longs for sun and rain. If we do not have a righteous cause before us, we slowly waste away.

Even while we rest and recover from our last battle, our eyes scan the horizon...looking for Dragons.

Hence, we are ready in season and out of season. If some poor soul is the victim of injustice in our presence, we rise to their defense. When a Dragon raises his head, while others wring their hands in confusion or make plans to treat with the Dragon, we arm and poise for battle. We will have identified and engaged the enemy before some men have held their first council.

The readiness of ours pervades our very being. We generally do not count the cost, because we have already counted it. We live day and night with the accoutrements and mechanisms of war, for we determined long ago that we are willing to lay down our lives in battle...at any moment. The cost has already been counted, the decision is made, the last will and testament sealed. We will slay Dragons, or we will die on the field.

This is why when small or great are in danger – when a Dragon threatens them or a loved one – they turn to us for help. And ninety-nine times out of a hundred, we will fight for them. It is our calling and duty to defend the weak from Dragons.

Take note that they do not rush to the idle or fearful for help, and they certainly do not rush to those who criticize Dragon Slayers. Ironically (on a personal level), it sometimes occurs that one who has criticized and dismissed you begs for your help in his hour of need. And sometimes, he will also ask for forgiveness.

It is a seminal moment when a man simultaneously asks you for favor and forgiveness; forgiveness for thoughts held or words spoken against you (which you may or may not have known.) Their request for forgiveness is more for them than you, more for their conscience than your consolation.

Let it bless you, not grieve you. And then – if possible – do all that you can to help them.

Now let me turn to the cautionary note of which I spoke. I would do you a disservice to let you think that the love of battle in the bosom of every righteous warrior was always borne in a pure or whole heart.

While a righteous warrior's quest for Justice should always be guided by the demands of Justice in a given situation, there can be more at work.

Too much inactivity can agitate the restless heart. I mentioned that peace (the absence of war) and rest are merely a bridge between conflict past and conflict future. Some Dragon Slayers are so agitated with a prolonged peace that they may create a conflict in order to resolve it. Have you ever done this? I pray not, my friend, although I know the temptations of the Dragon Slayer's heart. I confess...I have fallen into this dismal trap.

For example, we may leave a mission to the last minute, in order to feel the thrill of danger, the challenge of conquering an insurmountable mountain against all odds.

We may be bored enough that we pursue a Dragon outside the realm in which we are called to fight. The Master has charged others to stand and conquer in that realm, and with Heaven's grace they will succeed. But in our quest for the thrill of battle, we will cross national borders, with or without a passport or safe passage, and we will tread (and perhaps trespass) into unfamiliar territory in order to slay a Dragon.

In situations like this, it is often unclear whether or not we should be there, and uncertain whether we will prevail. When pursuing Dragons into new realms, I beg you to weigh such journeys carefully.

If possible, plumb your own heart to discern its motivation. How much of this fight is a quest for Justice and how much of your desire is a simple longing for battle? Do you crave battle because of the agitation of inactivity?

Let me ask you a confusing and difficult question: Are you prepared to hear the Master tell you to not fight? Some of my greatest inner trials, the most violent wrenching in my soul, occurred when I was commanded to not fight.

This leads me to one of the most tortuous aspects of the life of a Dragon Slayer: "Détente."

Détente is non-war...non-fighting. It is not surrender. It is not comradeship. It is not an alliance. It is just non-war. It might mean that my enemy and I both have a sword at each other's heart, but neither of us plunges. It might mean that a Dragon has us in his squinted eyes and our sword cries for his icy blood, but neither the Dragon nor we make a move. He wants his life, and we want someone else's life to be spared. So we wait.

We despise Dragons, and have no desire to show them

mercy. But sometimes, for the love of another, you must accept a temporary détente, because your duty of obedience to the Master outweighs your hatred of the Dragon. Somehow – in a way known clearly to you and for reasons known only to Him – the Master has shown you that you are to keep your sword sheathed. And because you love Him more than you hate Dragons, you obey.

But even in obedience, you chafe. Don't be surprised at your agitation. And no matter what, obey His command. Do not pursue the Dragon. The Master alone has all knowledge and power; He alone can mete out perfect Justice and Mercy.

Another reason you may settle (with great distress) for détente is the love of the innocent. If you pursue a Dragon, you may overtake him and prevail, but those near the Dragon may perish as he flails in his death throes. You may decimate a family, or provoke some other calamitous side effect because of an ill-timed or ill-advised attack on a Dragon, or some evildoer. Count the cost not only for yourself, but also for those you mean to rescue, or those near the Dragon or oppressor.

Détente could happen because you love someone, or a cause, or a friendship more than you hate a Dragon. There are circumstances when a blow from you against a Dragon could trigger reprisals from other Dragons. And those reprisals may come not against you, but against the ones you love.

This is a Dragon Slayer's private hell. Striking the Dragon would be just, but could unleash a storm of injustice against innocents completely beyond your ability to control; reprisals that you could not foresee, prevent, contain, or avenge.

The poetic strains of our hearts can be so knit to a situation, a friend, a loved one, that if repercussions engulfed the object of our love, it would tear our hearts out. It would wound or kill us to see our loved ones wounded or killed. To strike at a Dragon in this situation is to strike at oneself. To lance his heart would pierce your own.

So we freeze. We neither advance nor retreat. We do not strike, nor do we disarm. We have the Dragon within our reach, but we do not strike because we love others more than we hate him. The Dragon may not even recognize the danger from which he was spared in that moment. This restraint is strength, not weakness.

If a warrior would strike knowing the pain and calamity it could inflict on the innocent, then he does not love. His desire to be right, to slay Dragons, to oppose the wicked, has bewitched him. Dragons are slain and tyrants dethroned in order that the oppressed might live in freedom and peace. Not for personal glory, nor to bring personal vengeance on Dragons.

Détente is a painful reality for Dragon Slayers. But we must have the discipline to not strike in some circumstances. If a man would needlessly destroy what he cherishes in order to slay Dragons, he ought to lay down his arms. If he would kill everything he loves to conquer everything he hates, he is a threat to himself and others, and not fit for battle.

I took the liberty to address these issues because you will be at table with many souls during this Blessed Season, some whom you have not seen for years, some who may be slaves to Dragons, and some who may even harbor Dragons. It is not your duty (nor is it in your power) to right every wrong, nor root out every injustice. Beware that you do not start a fight that leads another to suffer after you have left that realm. Do not be dismayed: those Dragons will someday be felled. All *détentes* are temporary. The Master has decreed that all Dragons shall ultimately fall by the Sword.

Strive to be tender, do not be provoked, and let the sacred miracle of these Glorious Holy Days shine like the sun in your heart, and beam from your face. The True Light of Freedom and Justice came with the birth of our Master.

We can give hope and faith to those in bondage, and our very presence will cause Dragons to tremble with rage and fear, for they know that our Master has determined their doom, at the hands of Dragon Slayers.

Well, my friend, I again confess that I will miss meeting you at this season. Nevertheless, I hope these thoughts are of assistance to you, especially in your upcoming engagements.

I pray you have much laughter and feasting with old friends and new. May you be refreshed by the rest, not overly agitated by inactivity, and ever discerning of the need for *détente*. And may the Dragons of those realms recoil at your presence.

Letter V

Grief and Glory, Youth and Age

Hello again, Dragon Slayer.

I received your post, delivered by our mutual friend, with great joy. He brought the kind gifts from your hand: the holy relics, the scroll, and the delightful musical instrument. You must have guessed how much the relics would mean to me, due to my love of that holy place. The scroll is one I have coveted (with a holy covetousness, I hope) for years.

And oh, this instrument! The craftsmanship and inlays are astounding. Its visual beauty is only surpassed by its sound. I have rarely enjoyed such tone. In truth, for two days I have hardly ceased to play, save to sleep or sup. Even now it lies beside me while I write -- a nearly enchanted instrument, I daresay. Perhaps I shall name her...

Of truth, she (this instrument) has called forth tears of sorrow and joy from my healing heart. Even the friar – God bless his wise, crusty soul – had pools of tears in his eyes as he sat and listened to me play, and sing a Psalm of David. The musical strains she pours forth weave their way into and around the tapestry of a man's soul.

The music has called forth happy memories, long forgotten, and revived my hopes for the days ahead. I found myself also crowded by memories of grief and regret, old scars from long ago. I pray this too is for my further recovery, and that perhaps my melodic musings will be of service to you as well. I thank you – with all my heart – for this most precious gift.

I was grieved to read of the heartache you endured from old friends and family during Advent. I knew you had high hopes of a time of unalloyed joy and refreshment. It pained me – as I know it did you to a much greater degree – to hear the harsh words that passed from the lips of those you counted as friends in your youth.

Your sorrow and confusion in your letter was palpable as you recounted the unexpected encounter with the “lost love” of your youth. I know this maiden's family, and I have heard reports of her beauty...as well as her acid tongue. Evidently the reality is equal to the report, on both counts. I commend you for neither responding in kind, nor trying to defend yourself.

There will always be those who challenge your honor, question your motives, belittle your intentions, and dismiss your goals. It is a part of our lot that when we enter the sacred fray, that some of those we thought would support us instead explode with hostile rants. qBut when accusations or insults are tuned by the voices of family and friends from our youth, those words and tones are most painful. For in truth, they know the sins of our youth,

our follies, and the mishaps and missteps of our early years in battle. Their accusations, true or false, sting acutely, because their very voice sounds the first note in the dirges we hear in our souls.

The maiden's voice is not an echo...it is the cannon that gave the first report; the very source of the echoes that resound in our soul. To see, to hear, to touch those with whom we share a painful, joyful or mingled past is to swim in the tossing sea of our youth. The ice and heat can shock our hearts.

Due to some heartrending experiences I have endured – similar to that through which you have just passed – I pondered this much over the years. Let the words I now write comfort and instruct you, and let the bitter-cold words of old acquaintances melt away.

Our Master warned that a great Dragon Slayer will have honor everywhere, except in his own town...the village of his youth. It is in this cradle of his soul that he is held in disregard, or even contempt, by the faces and voices he knew and loved as a child. This produces a grief that is unique.

Hear well what I say: I believe that the source of their harshness and cruelty is the contempt in which they hold themselves.

After all, you have ventured forth, while they have remained. You have pursued Dragons, while they have settled for an unjust peace. Your daring, your successes, your valor, all rise before them as accusers of their mediocrity.

They do not, they cannot believe that you hold them in fond memory, as you clearly do judging from your letter to me. They do not know that you would take them with you to another realm in an instant. They have no idea the lengths to which you would go to help them in any way that you could – all from a simple love spun from a common past. They falsely imagine that you hold them in contempt, so they respond in kind.

But beyond that – and I speak with care about the mysterious workings of our souls, so mark these words well – the reason their unkind words vex us so is because the joy of any of our glories or triumphs is often tethered to grief from our past.

Still others – from other traditions or families – rarely speak a kind or ill word, for they rarely speak. They show no interest. Their silence and perceived indifference can also grieve the soul.

Whether they speak ill words or none at all, those who view us from afar might fancy that we bask in almost perpetual glory. They have no idea about the troubling

voices that rise with the moon in our soul. Our hearts are an inseparable blend of grief and glory.

It gives us great joy to return to the land of our youth, as you did, and have a venerable, gray bearded instructor take us aside and praise us, recounting his pride over our past and our present. This is a glory.

However, to be dismissed by an older neighbor whom we remember fondly, or accused by a childhood friend, or berated by a lost love can ignite grief fueled by shame or humiliation.

In truth, we are prey to this grief because the furnace of regret always lies warm and ready within us. The embers are still hot from the times we have berated ourselves. The cruelty of their accusations dwarf in comparison to the accusations we have hurled at ourselves.

And so, the courtyard of our soul is at once entertained and haunted by the minstrels of grief and glory. Sometimes they sing and dance together as if husband and wife; sometimes they war as if implacable foes.

The minstrels of grief and glory lead us on from Cathedral to catacomb, now ascending heights of glory, now descending ravines of grief. We simply do not live our lives on level plains or plateaus. We cannot. It is not in us to do so.

We climb and descend the howling peaks and the wild valleys of life, exploring them to the fullest. Even now I recall a man who once told me he got dizzy just from talking with me, because we sometimes plunge into depths and ascended heights with such haste.

Our journey generally finds us on one of three mountain ranges: Past, Present, and Future. Your age will in part determine which mountain range you traverse more.

If you are young, you will tend to be more agitated and excited about the Present and the Future, for the past holds little currency. Your mission, your duty, and the burning fire of valor that cries out, "Where are the Dragons!" all point to the rising sun. Your prayers, your musings, and your holy daydreams lead to the battles that yet lay before you.

If the days left to you are few, you will journey to the mountains of the Past more frequently, communing internally with friends and reliving battles with foes. The times in the present are often spent preparing for the next life, and leaving behind some level of instruction for family, friends, and young Dragon Slayers who will live on after you are gone.

But in middle years, one tends to live on all three ranges – Past, Present and Future – at once. To this treble-range I now turn, for it is where most Dragon Slayers spend the majority of their years.

Our connection to grief and glory is not merely like armor to be put on or off. The life of grief and glory is part of the very fiber of who we are, part of the air we breathe, the meat we eat, the nectar we drink.

We muse on past conquests or courageous stands, moments of courage and wisdom – the victories – with deep gladness. We thank Heaven for any good we have done, and

for the honor of such memories. We glory.

But for some reason, we can just as quickly open the records of heartaches, heartbreaks, and bad judgments. We remember the times we fell prey to our own Dragons, and we plunge from the rocky heights of glory into a chasm of sorrow. "If only I would have..." or, "I wish I would not have..." These thoughts and a hundred other "could have, should have" scenarios plague our souls.

We Dragon Slayers tend to live our lives in the framework of great poetic romances, tragedies and comedies...simultaneously. Our memories of the past, our assessments of the present, and our projections of the future, can besiege us with such speed that we grow excited, then forlorn – hopeful, then despairing – faster than most people prepare a meal for travelling guests.

The future can exhilarate and terrify. We thrill as we imagine ourselves in pursuit and conquest of Dragons. We can feel the adventure of battle, we taste the danger of the fight, and we feel the fierce heat of the Dragon as we approach close enough to strike. The felling blow, delivered in a hundred different ways, burns bright in our imaginations. We can see the Dragon stumble, lurch and fall, writhing in a mighty death throes.

As if in a vision, we see ourselves standing with one foot on the slain Dragon's head, chest heaving as we gasp for breath, sword held high as a sign of triumph and defiance to all Dragons.

We can see it...hear it...feel it...smell it...and taste it... all in our minds. This vision helps propel us to battle. It emboldens us.

But the future also terrifies, as with equal force of imagination, we can see and hear and feel and smell and taste defeat. Not just defeat in one battle, but being held hostage for years, maybe for life, by the evil Dragons we face... or worse yet, by one of our own Dragons.

We are old enough to know that the Dragons of yonder hill command respect as much as contempt simply by virtue of their power to destroy life and limb. But to the Dragons within, we may experience a far more visceral reaction – yay, even a fear. We know intimately the threat that our own Dragons pose to us. Hence, we see the pain of the past, and we project that pain into the future.

The future can also grieve us as we consider the day when we cannot fight...a day when our strength abandons us, mental prowess forsakes us, and we are left captive to our human frailties. To be unable to fight Dragons in some way – even as an ancient oracle, or a venerable silver head sought for advice – to not be of use in the Great Conflict...this lurks before us as a fate worse than death.

And perhaps the blackest fear of all Dragon Slayers...the fear of dying alone.

Not alone in some glorious battle, but alone because our Dragons, our decisions, our missteps drove away our companions, or alienated us from those we love, or because all our comrades simply died before we did.

I confess to you: I do not want to die alone. I will if I

must, and I will say the prayers I was taught to prepare my soul to face our Master. But dying alone is not my desire.

All this to say, we can live in the glory and grief of an imagined future in vibrant living colors, even with music (such as comes from this beautiful instrument you gave me) that shakes our very soul. We can taste the joy of victory and the bitterness of defeat before we even reach the battlefield. We are watchmen and seers. Our ability to “see” helps us discipline ourselves, hone and focus ourselves to fight the Dragons before us; it also paints the picture of hardships those we cherish will face if we fail.

Permit me just a few more thoughts about the years we possess...the differences between the young Dragon Slayer, and the warrior more advanced in years.

You, as a younger Dragon Slayer, wonder how many battles you will encounter. I wonder how many battles I have left.

A young Dragon Slayer’s challenge is to discern where and when to engage a Dragon in battle. He must avoid those hideous traps that have consumed other Dragon Slayers – the paramount traps being the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. But to strengthen and hone his skill in battle, the wise warrior will deliberately seek out those who are seasoned in battle to further his training. This is what you have done by seeking my council; this is why I am transparent with you.

An older Dragon Slayer with wisdom looks not only for Dragons, but also for younger Dragon Slayers whom he can train to fight, or who can fight alongside him. Thus, they can see him in battle, learn from his strengths and weaknesses, and be trained how to confront evil with valor and precision.

It grieves me to say so, but it is true. An older Dragon Slayer who does not deliberately look for opportunities to train the young does not serve the Master well in his final years. I have seen this sad situation for well nigh thirty years.

In my youth, I met several aged and venerable men who had reputations as Dragon Slayers. As news of my successes reached them, many sought me out, and requested I be brought before them. I was delighted to be summoned, grateful to be thus honored.

Whenever I could, I used that audience to ask for any training or wisdom they could offer me. What did I need to know – or to do – to be more effective against the enemy?

Many toasted me, many praised my valor, but sadly... very few offered any advice or guidance. This perplexed me. It no longer does.

As the years have passed, a clearer picture emerged. I have watched these same men – and many men like them... men who had the reputations or trappings of Dragon Slayers – desert critical fields of battle, or remain silent while Dragons ravished villages and entire provinces. Once the battle was past, they would storm against the Dragons in word, but when their sword was needed most, it remained in its sheath.

I was at first confused and heartbroken...then sickened. My grief grew to indignation as I watched many of these

men levy great taxes, and raise great sums of silver and gold from various guilds, artisans, and even peasants, solemnly vowing that they would use these treasures to build an army to slay Dragons.

More often than not, the silver was used to line their private castles, the gold to gild their passive citadels. These castles and citadels – rather than being used as outposts of war against Dragons – became museums...and mausoleums. They possessed the accoutrements of war, but not the pathos and plans and movements of battle. There was no pulsing drive to ride forth to slay Dragons, but rather an aloof and slovenly spirit, untested by Dragon’s fire.

These citadels became insignificant in the epic battles of the day. The Dragons and their minions had little fear of these lords. One by one, these men have faded to insignificance, their fine citadels decayed into ruin.

Many lords sought to transmit the citadel to their sons – which is indeed natural – but rarely have I seen a son exceed or even equal his father in acts of valor. A son is due his patrimony from his father – as heaven ordained – but a citadel built for war is for the common good, and bears with it a debt of honor to Maker and man. A castle may justly be bequeathed to the fruit of our loins, but a citadel should not be left to an incompetent or unproven son to hold as a fiefdom. Rather, it should be spent in the battles for which it was erected. I would sooner see a citadel lost in open war with Dragons, than sit idle like a rusting sword.

At this point in my life, I see these lords weakened by age, dying one by one. Who have they trained to take up the battle? It grieves me to say it, but most of their sons and servants have been pampered; they are passive, soft, and incompetent. They know little or nothing of the cold caves of war and exile, nothing of the heat of the dragon’s breath, or the rage of evil men on an open field of battle. The Dragons neither dread nor respect them. They roam about freely, devouring whomever they desire.

Thus it is now. Many Dragons move freely through our lands due to the negligence of these princes and lords. This grieves our Master deeply. And the artisans, guilds, and the peasants who opened their purse and poured out their treasure because these lords promised they would fight for their protection are confused and disheartened.

Age and death overtake us all. Those who erect passive citadels – or who convert them to memorials to their own memory – will be forgotten.

True Dragon Slayers (such as the great Dragon Slayer who so deeply affected my life) rarely have citadels – or if they do, they are spartan and scarred by war – and they usually possess a modest castle, if one at all.

Dragon Slayers pour their hearts, souls, wisdom and strength into their sons’ and daughters’ souls (if God grants them progeny). However, what marks them as Dragon Slayers is that they have also poured their hearts, souls, wisdom and strength, and their worldly goods into great battles as well. Their worldly treasure is not squandered, nor harbored when it should have been spent. They are faithful in word and deed, silver and gold, in body and mind to their

sacred duty to family and neighbor. Thus they live – and die – dreaded by hell and its servants, and praised by the just.

Or put another way, if I left my sons and daughters an enormous inheritance of silver and gold, but also left them the subject of Dragons – Dragons who could have been dispatched had I but used the treasure at my disposal – I would have failed my offspring. I should rather see my sons live as honorable warriors and my daughters prepare their sons and daughters for war – and die as half starved free men and women – than live as well fed slaves.

I have heard of a great assembly of Dragon Slayers – determined to dethrone the Dragon who oppressed them – affirm in a sacred pact, “To overthrow this Dragon, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our Sacred Honor.” They were successful. And the cost was every whit as high as their pledge. Many paid for victory with their lifeblood. Many were maligned and vilified. And many died as paupers, offering their treasure at the altar of Freedom and Justice. Though they had little earthly treasure to transmit to their heirs, they left them free from the terror and rule of Dragons...a treasure far greater than silver and gold.

Now, let me quickly touch on more pressing matters before I close this letter, and return to this beautiful instrument you gave to me.

As we know, Dragon Slayers possess a gift to “see” the future. But, being made of dust, sometimes we are wrong... sometimes very wrong about what we see.

Let us be honest...most of our fears never come to pass. Moreover, many of the glorious battles we have fought (or will yet fight) do not unfold the way we foresaw.

We must be very careful that unreasonable hopes or fears of the future do not adversely affect our judgment and plans in the present.

This leads me to the most painful mountain range of grief and glory: the Present.

The present for us is always the most tempestuous, because our minds work at such a furious pace. The grief and glory of the Past, and the uncertain grief and glory of the Future, collide in our soul in the Present.

Our grief and regrets over the past can make us fearful for the future. Or, our fond memories of past joys and glories can make us unreasonable in hopes for the future. This can render the present turbulent and unstable, our souls forlorn.

Because we are seers, even visionaries as some have called us, we see ourselves playing a leading role on the stage of past, present, and future dramas. We envision ourselves in epic conflicts, wrenching tragedies, bittersweet romances, irony and comedy. We heave with laughter and flow with tears on the continuum of past, present and future dramas, each pulsing in turn with grief and glory.

It is like riding three separate horses, in three separate competitions, with each horse going both directions (grief or glory) at the same time. It has the capacity to tear us apart from the inside out, like being drawn and quartered by horses to which we have willingly tied our limbs.

Because of this multi-faceted nature of our souls, we

are often tempted in the midst of a great and glorious battle to be distracted by worry or speculation. We can not focus on (and dare I say, enjoy?) the moment we are in. We think ahead to when the battle will be no more. We think back to other joyful moments we wish would have lasted forever, and it pains us that this blessed moment will also soon be gone.

Of Grief and Glory...these two intoxicants of the soul – for this is what they surely are, if allowed to rule us without control – I contend that Grief is the most debilitating.

If a man is intoxicated with past successes and glories, he may swagger and he may boast, but one well-placed slash on his face from an enemy’s claw will bring all of his prowess and skill into sharp focus. His prudence will usually outweigh his pride, and he will remember that he is but dust. In that moment, most Dragon Slayers will come to their senses, and comport themselves properly.

This proves an axiom I often tell young men in training...which I believe I wrote to you in an earlier letter: It is easier to temper a bold man,
Than to embolden a timid man.

The man intoxicated with glory is bold to a fault, but he can be tempered. The counsel of friends, the slash of an enemy, the sudden remembrance of his own frailty – all of these can sober him quickly from the intoxication of glory.

But when a man is intoxicated and poisoned in his soul by Grief, his judgment and vision become clouded with tears of sorrow, and he may welcome death more than life.

Hence, he will view the slash on his face from the Dragon’s claw or an enemy’s sword as a promise of deliverance rather than a pronouncement of danger. Rather than flee death, he may welcome it. His Grief will carve out his heart, and leave him incapable of making successful war on the Dragons.

Perhaps you have worn this terrible garland of emotion – not unto self-destruction necessarily – but in such a way that Grief mars the moment and clouds the future. We see the beautiful flower in our hand...already wilted. We shed tears for a past we lost while we are yet in the middle of enjoying it. We stand peering into a grave not yet dug, grieving the loss of the love yet alive. It is a hateful curse.

The antidote for the intoxicant of Grief is one that must be repeatedly administered to our souls by us.

For the past grief and regrets prompted by our own folly, we must find solace and comfort in the Master’s Mercy. Herein alone lies hope. And the Dragon Slayer must forgive himself (which may be much harder) for his own failings.

For grief outside our control, we must forgive those who have wronged us, let go of hopes that died, and learn from the poor judgment of ourselves or others that we trusted. We must be instructed by opportunities lost or misspent.

In this way, our grief for the past can act as our tutor, rather than our tormentor, in the present and the future. When possible, we can help others avoid the same valleys of weeping.

Concerning Glory, let the victories and joys of the past be a blessing to you. Relish them, but do not live in them. Keep them, but do not allow them mar the present by constantly comparing “then” and “now.” May they serve you by giving you confidence, not arrogance. What battle is before you now? What comrades now? What opportunities now? Focus on those. Love those. Relish those. Pour out your heart and soul in those.

As to the future, the Master’s instructions are clear: fear not. The only grace for future terrors is the grace to leave them alone. Yes, we should plan. Yes, we should assess where a current course of action will take us. Yes, we should make provision for the future when possible. But each day has enough trouble of its own.

So when you are gripped with fear or dread – or when you are quite certain of victory and prosperity – open wide your hands and lift your empty palms up to heaven. Both your fears and your confidences may be misplaced. Only our Maker knows the future, and He can give you the grace to open your hands, surrender the future, and leave it in His hands.

Yet still, the most difficult place to apply this antidote is the present. As the past and the future bear in on us, we feel under siege. We forget that today is yesterday’s future and tomorrow’s past. Only yesterday we yearned for this day... or dreaded its coming. And generally this day is neither as dreadful as we feared, nor as beautiful as we hoped.

So I give you this pointed counsel: in your times of grief, commune with the Master at the very point of your grief. Do not look forward...or backward...instead, look upward. Do not waste your sorrows. Let them enlarge you, make you more tender and caring. Let them make you supple, not bitter.

When you are in times of joy, do not spoil it by false or real comparisons. Savor the moment.

At times you must silence the voices of past and future, and listen to the song that now sings. Revel in it. Sing it. Hold the flower of the moment in your bosom and consume the feast before you. Then it will be a blessed memory in the future, having force and strength, rather than being diluted with the wines of the past and future on the day it was poured forth.

Remember this: wine is never made from the grapes of three harvests, but only one. Only the present season’s grapes are crushed. Enjoy the fruit of this season, and savor every drop of the fruit of the vine that you can.

I close this letter with this last thought. All Dragon Slayers know those happy moments where we abide in a seemingly unassailable haven of hope. In that moment, we know that all will be well. Defeat is inconceivable. We see clearly, we think clearly, and we are certain that we will retain that clarity for the rest of our lives.

We also know those tumultuous moments when we are caught in a tortured torrent of despair, when we believe the rescue of our soul is nearly impossible. We may even be tempted to think we shall spend our days in darkness, in a dungeon of dread, beyond hope of redemption.

Both extremes are mere fantasy.

The haven and the torrent, as well as the inflated sense of victory and defeat they bring are a part of a life marked by Grief and Glory, as we traverse the Mountains and Valleys of Past, Present, and Future. It is simply the nature of our journey.

And because you are called to be a Dragon Slayer, you must keep marching. You must keep moving. The havens and torrents will come and go, and come and go again, because you will come and go through them. They are part of your landscape...but only part.

The heart and soul of your life is to cling to the heart and soul of your Master. Reach out your wounded hand to clasp His wounded hand. In His wounds is your healing.

I have learned to allow the minstrels – the apparitions – of Grief and Glory to have their moment. I do not bid them enter, nor do I bid them stay. They come and go with a sound, or a smell, or a name, or a dream. Hence, do not overexert yourself to keep them out, and surely do not seek to imprison them in your soul. Perhaps one day we can render them as powerless as a mouse, by letting them come and go without effect.

I bid you farewell. As to the heartrending words you spoke to me about your father, I have deliberately not addressed them. As I considered what my words to you should be, it came to me that the pain you have disclosed is so significant that I needed to first discuss Grief and Glory with you as a foundation for a further letter concerning your father.

When the time is right, I will share with you some of my similar experiences, and the painful lessons I have learned which may aid you on your journey.

In the meantime, I bid you our Master’s peace, and the promise to hold you in my heart and remember you in my intentions before the Altar. I ask you for the same.

I now return to enjoy the exquisite instrument you gave me. And again, I thank you for this fountain of music, this muse to my soul! I remain your affectionate servant, and await your next post.

Letter VI

Why Do Dragon Slayers Seem to Have So Few Friends?

Greetings to you again, my friend!

I have received your most recent letter, again with great joy.

As to your first question, yes...upon my soul! I mean every word about the musical instrument you sent to me. In fact, I now call her Guinevere. (I trust you are not scandalized by the poetry of this naming!)

I truly believe that my convalescing has proceeded more quickly, in both body and soul, as a result of the music that has poured out of me thanks in great part to this precious gift. My spirits are up, my body continues mending.

It has struck me with great force, that although the great Dragon Slayer King David of sacred writ (he who felled Goliath) was warrior and champion and king, it was his music that brought him to the Royal Court to drive out tormenting spirits. And it is his music – at least his lyrics – that is sung in well nigh every Holy Celebration we have for the living or the dead.

David even sang of what has become my plight...of his friends betraying him...and conspiring to slay him. To sing his words (with grief for the treachery and thanks for Heaven's deliverance) is both balm and elixir for my soul. Again, I thank you for Guinevere. Long life to you, my friend...long life to you.

Now to your recent letter.

I am pained, but not surprised, that the grief and conflict you endured during your Advent visit to your home country is still with you. Or more precisely, the questions and soul-searching provoked by your experience are still close enough to the surface to overflow through your quill and onto your parchment.

It is a curious part of our natures that even though we risk death by the sword of great foes or hazard being devoured by Dragons, the greatest sea of pain and grief to the Dragon Slayer usually comes from those who are no threat to our physical safety.

Those who pain us the most will never draw swords against us. They will never charge us with a lance, nor will they breathe fire at us, or seek to devour our body. Nevertheless, kith and kin may be the greatest danger to us, for while they may never pierce our flesh, they can draw swords that surely pierce our souls. They may never capture us, but they might enslave us to servitude – not of body – but something far more incapacitating: a prison of the mind, heart, and soul.

So my advice to you, my friend, is that you do not fret

over much. Do not think some strange thing has happened to you. Be at ease, and be wary of the inner dread that you are somehow to blame for their cruelty and spitefulness.

Your temptation to blame yourself was evident in your most forlorn question: “Why do Dragon Slayers seem to have so few friends?”

The question is complex, and so my answer to you will cover several regions of mind and soul. Most of the answers are simple, but not easy to bear. Let me proceed apace, and lead your anxious mind beside what I hope will be calming waters.

First of all, your question has within it a part of the answer. You asked, “Why do Dragon Slayers seem to have so few friends?” Your complaint is far more of a perception than a reality. Even as I answer the question, we will see that we also must define friendship in a way that perhaps you have forgotten. But before we focus on such nuances, let me lay bare the facts, as I have grown to see them.

We have few friends because of the way we view life and the world around us. We see almost everything in terms of good and evil. Hence, for us, there is no neutrality...save on something inane such as whether we prefer our peas with salt and butter! We function comfortably and aggressively in the world of black and white, and we perceive the overall scheme of right versus wrong in many situations that others would ignore, or be blind to.

This wearies those unaccustomed to war. They simply cannot keep pace with us in heart, soul, and mind. And if they have raced against footmen and grown weary, how can they compete against horses?

In truth, those in discussion are anxious for their daily bread, and ponder ways to secure their provision. We, on the other hand, are anxious for the welfare and Justice of those who grind bread in slavery, and we ponder ways to secure their freedom.

The average soul, clasped firmly in the shackles of self-love or mediocrity, is forever consumed by what will benefit and sustain them. Alternately, the Dragon Slayer is consumed by the quest for Justice, by what will benefit the Truth, and by what will liberate and sustain the oppressed.

The Dragon Slayer only need hear once of a grave evil or an oppressive tyrant, and his mind begins to work on how to right this wrong. Almost without thinking, we begin to imagine, then strategize ways to engage, or at least expose, the enemies of Truth, Justice, life and freedom.

Many dear souls who watch us in this process also see the injustice, but they're shackled by fear. Others are

consumed with sorrow from a tragedy that has befallen them, and are therefore unable to rouse themselves to aid their fellow creature. Still others – and I fear that this group encompasses a great many souls – care mainly for their own comforts and pleasures. After many years of disciplined neglect, they have trained themselves to forbid the sufferings of the innocent to interrupt their pursuit of comfort and mirth.

And so we become disturbers of the peace. Many a good man or woman is content to bemoan the evils that befall others, while never imagining that he or she has a duty to intervene against such evil.

Think with me on this. Many are prepared to enjoy a warm mug of grog with neighbors, gathered at the hearth of a local inn, and together bewail the evils that corrupt and mar the horizons of life.

They are content to converse on the evils that trouble the realm, while leaving those evils completely unchallenged and unconquered. They talk, but they do not act. In conversation, as well as in life, they can flit about from the murderous to the mundane, for both have equal interest to them, and neither lays hold of their soul.

The proof is in this: if the happiness and comfort of the hearth at which they are gathered is threatened by an impassioned discussion, they will happily cease the discussion. If a man leaning on the mantle is offended by declarations not to his liking concerning the suffering innocent, or the crimes of a tyrant, they are all prepared – for the sake of harmonious fellowship – to forsake that line of discussion, as well as abandon the innocent who suffer under the heel of that tyrant.

This distresses, even enrages the Dragon Slayer. For us, Truth and Justice are paramount, not the shallow mirth of the hearth. We are quite content to divide a room if need be for the sake of Justice. Because we fear our Maker more than we fear man, we put duty and honor ahead of pleasant bantering. We will therefore defend the innocent...to the chagrin of those content to pass by them on the other side of the road to Jericho.

Beyond our stand for Truth and Justice, we want others to declare their solidarity with the innocent. We call to the better angels of our neighbors and families, asking them to stand with us as sentinels for Truth and Justice, to fight alongside us to rescue the innocent. We insist – with our words and deeds – that bystanders choose sides.

But of course – and this is the very thing that quickly limits our circle of friends – they know that our defense of the innocent involves more than words. We call them to action...to sacrifice...to take risks.

We are not content to simply draw sides...we draw battle plans, and ultimately, we draw swords. We must fight for Justice and Truth. We must help the innocent in some real, tangible way. Those close to us – in family relationships, or simply close at heart – fear that we will call upon them to join us in a crusade.

The force of logic we present, and the Justice of the cause we lay before them, obligates all men to join the battle

at some level. Our mission is a universal mission, and the resulting call is clear: they too have a duty to act.

Hence, the cautious and timid shy from us, because they fear we will try to recruit them for battle. Some of them are terrified of any conflict. Others are afraid of what people from their hamlet or clan will think or say about them (they dread gossip). A few are afraid that they will be drawn to the life and call of a Dragon Slayer, but they fear the disruption it would bring to their lives. These shrink back from battle, and from us.

Now, you and I both know that neither we, nor our Master, expect all of these dear souls to actually clad themselves with armor, mount a steed, and ride with us into battle. They have neither the strength nor the mettle, and (between you and I) they would be a pain in our saddle to nurse during the privations of a war.

But others of them will indeed hear the trumpet blast in their soul and will answer the call to arms. They will beat their plowshares into swords, and ride forth with us, heedless of the cost. It is our duty – by passion, clarity, Truth and example – to beckon them forth into this calling, and to train and lead them to the best of our ability.

But others will not forsake their plowshares, nor should they.

No, our desire and their duty are far simpler. We want their heart, their prayers, and their declaration of support for the innocent. And more to the point, we want their unflinching support and fealty to us as we seek to slay Dragons, and secure Justice for the oppressed.

Please mark this carefully, as it particularly pertains to your question. The issue is not simply if they will publicly align themselves with a cause. If they support that cause, will they publicly align themselves with you?

I put it to you plainly: some timid souls have been at a hearth when you were not present and listened to others deride you unfairly – in words that they knew were unjust or untrue – yet they did not defend you. If they publicly defended or befriended you at that moment, they fear it would call down on themselves the judgment of their “friends,” the judgment they hear poured out on you. They do not want to be linked to you, even though they agree with you, because of the curse of cowardice. I don’t mean to be unkind, but as I have written you, cowardice is a cursed taskmaster. It is precisely the duty to stand with you that they fear and flee.

When you take a stand for Justice – when you put on your armor, draw your sword, and raise your banner for battle – you become the embodiment of that cause. You are the flesh and blood representation of Justice and Truth. If someone will not identify with you for fear, or jealousy, or any other reason, they will not long serve your crusade. They will not risk the contempt of their neighbors – those they see, day after day – to stand for innocent strangers, who they may seldom or never see.

I know what I am about to tell you is hard to bear, but you must remember this: once you show your colors as a Dragon Slayer, and you rise to fight some Dragon, you are

marked;

marked by your family, your village and your province;
marked by meddling men and women who traffic in rumors;
marked by bards and criers;
marked even by the knights, dukes and sheriffs of the whole kingdom.

Some mark you as a hero, fighting for right. Others mark you as a troublemaker, who desires the affection of young maidens or the attention of rabble-rousers. Some mark you as a fool who has lost his wits. No matter what tale is woven, you are marked. And as such, you will be praised and ridiculed, both openly and secretly.

And without question, you are marked by Dragons. You will be known on earth, and you will be known in Hades. From there, you will be marked to be assailed. Fear not; the angels fighting at your left hand and right are mightier than the scions of the Netherworld.

Now I will bring this all back to your question about friendship. You must understand that you are a frightening prospect as a friend for the timid.

Thus, you must beware. A timid friend, often of recent acquaintance, who is wrestling in the core of his soul about his own duty, may pull you secretly aside (so no one knows he is speaking with you), and advise you on how to “speak with less passion.” He may encourage you to change your battle plan, or explain why your cause is not winnable. When he then asks you to keep this conversation between just you two, remember this:

He is a splintered reed that will pierce your hand if you lean on it.

The great lawgiver, who received the Sacred Tablets on the flaming mount written with the finger of the Almighty, gave distinct orders concerning the fearful in times of battle. The Almighty – through him – commanded that all who were afraid in a time of battle must be sent home. They were forbidden to fight, by reason of their fear, because fear could spread through the camp and weaken the hearts of their brothers. A man in the grip of fear has great difficulty gripping spear and sword, and his fear spreads like a cancer.

So, if you are to stay clear of those in bondage to fear, this will limit your friends. But trust me – it is for your own good.

Isn't this odd? I began to explain why certain people would not have you as a friend, and now I tell you why you are better off without them. Nevertheless, when they are part of the tapestry of our youth, it is still difficult to bear as they fade away from us in the twilight of their fear.

After all this, it should be clear to you that it is difficult for Dragon Slayers to have many close friends because fear rules their hearts.

People fear our vision, they fear a call to action, and they fear the division we sometimes provoke, and the disapproval we engender.

This fear, and the strength it holds over the souls of those we know – while painful to behold – cannot be altered by you without peril to your life or soul. Their fear must be subdued by them; they must learn to fight for Truth and Justice. You did not wound them, and you cannot heal them. The cancer and the cure rest with them...and the Master.

However, what I now tell you does rest squarely on you.

This final reason why some Dragon Slayers have so few friends is the fault – whether perceived or real – of the Dragon Slayer himself. I pray you ponder this at great length...and with earnest devotion.

Some dear souls who are not Dragon Slayers live in quiet terror of us because of our devotion to Truth and Justice. Let me explain.

They know who we are. They know what we are. We are Dragon Slayers, through and through. And they know (by reputation, or by witnessing for themselves) that when we find a Dragon, we draw swords.

And some of them know what they hide inside themselves – Dragons. Others – who simply have genuine questions – are afraid of approaching us for fear that we will mistake their honest inquiry as being in league with Dragons.

Sometimes those who love and respect us are terrified of getting too close to us. They fear that if they whisper the wrong word about something, we will see it as a whisper of smoke from a hidden Dragon's nostril and we'll spring to arms against them.

Some are genuinely held hostage to their own Dragons. They grieve, they weep, and they pray, seeking deliverance. Their soul is a scar-filled room, marred by the vestiges of hand-to-hand battle, agonizing conflict, torment and torture. Their interior battle rages on; they have not surrendered, but they have not found victory.

Part of them wants to be near us, because we give them hope that Dragons may be conquered. But part of them is terrified: they have seen us in battle, and they fear us making war on them.

This brings me to the heart of the matter...one that is critical to Maker and man. Can people trust us with their failings? With their doubts? Their fears? Their missteps and transgressions? (I am not suggesting that you play the role of a friar and hear confessions, because you do not have the power to absolve.)

Nevertheless, people will confide in you, and they must know without doubt that they can trust you with their failures. They must know that you will neither betray their trust, nor draw your sword on them.

Remember my words from a former letter: sometimes our personal Dragons become so enmeshed with us, that to suddenly slay my Dragon would be to slay me – to slay hope, to slay redemption. There are people who fear you because they fear that you'll pounce on their Dragon before they are ready or able to separate from their Dragon, and you will slay them in the attack.

This is where we must remember the words of the great

Dragon Slayer who first wrote the phrase, “the Sword of the Truth.” He solemnly warned us that as we deal with those wrestling with dark forces, we must remember ourselves, and therefore deal with struggling souls gently. Remember – you, I, all our friends, most of those we know (except for the holiest of saints) – we all have wrestlings, or Dragons at war within us, whether of the mind, with our tongue, with our flesh, heart, or soul.

For someone to be your friend, he must know that you love him – more than you hate his struggle or Dragon. This is where we must learn to be warrior and medic; Dragon Slayer and surgeon. We must be able to slowly, tenderly, carefully separate the warring from their struggles. And at times we must recognize that some small Dragons may never be conquered in certain people, but we are loving and loyal enough to not draw our sword. We remain a friend.

I know that, in some ways, this is an untenable stress to maintain for us; a balance that cannot be kept. How can we be Dragon Slayers, and not slay Dragons?

The perfect illustration of this paradigm is, of course, our Master. The Prince of Glory, the King of all Dragon Slayers should always be our example.

He is perfectly holy, and irreversibly committed to destroying all Dragons. And yet He was so gracious and kind; so approachable and merciful...that the prostitutes and tax collectors (God knows I loathe them), and sinners of all kinds felt safe in His presence.

They touched Him, they held Him, they kissed His feet and clung to Him. They invited Him to their homes, to their parties, to the very center of their lives...in spite of what they had done, and who He was. It brings tears to my eyes as I ponder this. I pray it does to you as well. Do those held captive by Dragons smile when they see us? Do they invite us to their parties?

The point is clear my friend. If everyone dreads us, something is wrong with us. We must learn to show love and Mercy, not to Dragons, but to those whom have Dragons deeply attached to them. Always remember that you too have been fighting certain Dragons from your youth until now. Our Master has not left you nor forsaken you. No matter what, He has kept you with and in the very wounds He received while making war on The Prince of all Dragons.

Allow me to close this letter by offering some attributes of a friend. You may find that you have more friends than you know, or you may find (God forbid) that some who you perceive to be friends are in fact not.

Imagine again an evening of wine and merriment around the hearth of an inn. Do you really believe that all of those gathered there to feast and drink and laugh together – even calling each other by familiar names – are, in fact, friends?

Shallow acquaintances, perhaps. Co-laborers in some field or blacksmith’s shop, yes. They share common stories, common landscapes, and often times, common lords. But does that make them friends? Listen to the banter – how shallow it is – and ponder if this is the stuff that forges inseparable bonds.

As I have told you, everyone at the hearth is comfortable with the trite banter, because everybody has agreed to trite rules. At this hearth, nobody is going to divide the room, call men to action, or declare certain Dragons and tyrants worthy of destruction. Abiding by these rules, a man or woman has the appearance of having a large circle of friends.

But let us explore a deeper, truer definition of friendship. A friend is one who will embrace us, who will open home, purse, and storehouse to us without reservation in the hour of trial, the hour of our need. Many of those lads and lasses at the hearth do not have one true friend in the group, or perhaps in their whole world. They choose being alone in a group to being alone in solitude. We should not mistake this for friendship.

A definition of friendship was told to me years ago...I believe it the best I have ever heard: A friend is someone who walks into the room, when the rest of the world walks out.

When you are forsaken by neighbor and kin, and fear being left with no human comfort, who is it that comes to you? Who are those that risk their reputation, and the contempt of the rabble, to approach and comfort you when all others forsake you? Those are your friends.

Let us go a step further: our Master said, “Greater love has no one than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends.” Like a beautiful echo of the virtue of courage, for you and others to be friends means that you would lay down your life for each other. This is a glory; an honorable, venerable fortress of the human soul.

And on rare occasion, the bonds of both blood and friendship unite men. I have fought side by side with four brothers in several battles – sons of the same father and mother – who enjoy such fraternal bonds. Their paternal and maternal fountains were united in vision and purpose for their offspring – encouraging and overseeing the their development and training in all things holy, common, artistic, musical, militant...and fraternal.

At table one night they laughed heartily as they recounted the measures their mother and father took to insure they were not merely brothers, but friends. The measures clearly worked. A patriarchal and matriarchal fortress of such strength and character is a dread to Dragons; these sons were taught to love good, hate evil, and to make war on injustice from their cradle...as brothers, and as friends. Now that they are men, and a common lineage as well a kindred spirit unites them in laughter or battle, their bonds and friendship are the stuff of legends. May heaven grant Long Life to them, and their father and mother as well.

With these words, I bid you to comfort yourself. For I am certain that you do have two or three such friends, and that you are such a friend to them. If indeed you have those who will open home, purse, and storehouse to you when you are in danger or need, who will lay down their very life for you, then you are a wealthy man; a man with friends.

Until we correspond again, I remain your faithful servant.

Letter VII

When We Are Wrong About Friends and Enemies

Hello, Good Warrior!

I have received your latest post.

During this season between Epiphany and Lent I find myself in steady reflection on our nature, as well as decisions I have made in wisdom, or in folly.

I assess the costs of my battles and choices thus far, as well as count the cost for the battles that await me when my healing is complete. My convalescing has made me more tempered, slower to speak, and quicker to listen. As is the way of Heaven, my physical wounds prove a boon to my soul.

Even though false friends and true foes have exacted a toll from my body and soul, I declare my readiness (with Heaven's help) to pay whatever price I must to see as many more Dragons slain as possible – either at my hand, or by the hand of my sons (they are in good health, as is their dear mother, thank heaven) or others I help train for war – before I leave this life.

Beyond all else, when I face our Master, I yearn to hear His approval for how I employed the talents He bequeathed to me. I desire – more than I desire life itself – to hear His orchestral voice declare, “Well done, my friend; you have been a just and faithful Dragon Slayer. Enter into the joy I have prepared for you.”

Those words, should I hear them in the next life, will make all the hardships and sufferings of this life seem light and transitory. Our burdens are but for a moment; our rewards for faithfulness are eternal. (If only I could remember those Truths when I am tempted to be troubled, or I murmur over hardship and want!) But alas, the years have taught me that it is easier to slay the Dragons without than to dispatch the Dragons within.

Now let me turn to your thoughts...

I rejoice with you that you healed any breach (more perceived than real) that existed between you and the great Dragon Slayer from the nearby province. He is a magnificent man...full of valor, hospitable to the just, gracious to the poor, and intolerant of oppression and tyrants.

On several occasions, I've had the joy of reclining with him at his table and mine, and the honor of fighting alongside him in two great conflicts, the legends of which grow larger with each passing year. Of truth, in the first battle, he saved my life; and in the second, I his. In memory of these triumphs, when we raise a glass together, he will declare: “We exact no debt!” To which I reply, “No account is owed!” Then, with thankful mirth, we announce in unison, “A toast then! All debts are paid in full!”

Thank you for stirring these happy memories. But I turn now to your thoughts about this great man...and how you had misjudged him in the past.

As you now know, both from my testimony, and surely from your time with him, this great Dragon Slayer is every whit as wise and courageous as you now believe him to be.

The words you penned gave proper vent to the terrible remorse you suffer for your past opinion of him. Yes, your prior estimation of him was largely misinformed. Your heart was rightly smitten when you lamented, “How could I have been so mistaken about such an excellent man?”

I wish (for my sake) that I could indeed answer from a place of ignorance or astonishment; “Yes, how could you have been so mistaken?!” But alas, I cannot. I too have trespassed against the character and intentions of great men and women.

Use the refreshing fellowship between you and he as a backdrop to reassess other fine men and women you may currently view askance. And more importantly – and this is where I shall aim my quill right now – I pray you are able to find freedom from the foolish and arrogant judgments passed against honorable warriors by those who are not worthy to saddle their horses.

With Heaven as my witness, in my youth, I too was marred in my judgment of valiant men due to the prejudicial instruction of my mentors. In certain fundamentals of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, my teachers served me well. But in instructing and exemplifying discernment, they did my soul harm, as others have done to you. They gave me an unworthy and inaccurate rendition of the beliefs and character of those who were not in full relations with us.

Sadly, the force of our character and our predisposition to hold all opinions fiercely amplifies this flaw in our training. In my youth, I fear (as my Jester has often taunted me) that my motto could have truly been: Often in error, never in doubt.

And so, as you have recently learned afresh, when we are wrong... we are very wrong. And worse yet, when we are wrong, we are almost never wrong alone. We lead others into our folly.

Because of our nature, when we identify the enemy, we launch an attack. Whether the enemy be man or Dragon, creed or decree, we use our mental prowess, rhetorical skills, battle training, knowledge of history, love of Truth, logic, and every other weapon at our disposal to dispatch or dethrone the perceived foe.

The problem is – as you have just painfully learned –

sometimes the “enemy” is actually an ally. At times our early instructors (may God forgive them) did not properly train us to distinguish between servants of the Dragon and Dragon Slayers.

Or worse yet: at times (I say once more, may God forgive our instructors) the ill-advised or misguided in our Master’s camp have trained us to label someone an enemy who is a potential ally. Those would-be friends serve the Master... albeit in another tongue, with traditions and trappings strange to our mind and taste.

And even worse still – Heaven have Mercy on the reckless and foolish teachers who teach from a fortress of ignorance and arrogance – a few of the more rash and misguided of the Master’s camp have wrongly trained us to slay the Master’s own who serve Him in another tongue, or with different traditions.

Unfortunately, my early years were marred by this instruction in madness. My deliverance from this fortress of folly came in a most unexpected manner. I will recount it to you in hopes of strengthening your newfound liberty of mind and soul.

My expeditions into enemy territory have on several occasions resulted in my being held prisoner, trapped in wretched dungeons. (Thank God, I was not given up to the gallows, nor fed to Dragons. My release was always negotiated.)

I know the baseness and humiliation of being stripped and searched, of surrendering my fathers’ honorable name for a moniker of contempt, of being harassed and belittled by jail keepers whose fathers I would not deign to keep my herds. (And thank Heaven, I have known honorable jail-keepers who treated the prisoners in their charge with dignity, in spite of the abject circumstances in which they exist.)

In those imprisonments, I found myself shackled with some whom I had been taught to believe were my enemies. To my amazement – and to my shame and the shame of those who taught me – I found these fellow prisoners to be allies, friends, and fellow Dragon Slayers.

As you might imagine, this perplexed me, and caused me much anxiety. At first, I held them at a distance in my heart due to my prejudice. But as the days wore on, chained together as we were, boredom and proximity mingled with curiosity opened a great hall in our hearts for communion between us. My chains led to my freedom in this matter, and I am certain helped make me a more formidable Dragon Slayer.

Yes, their customs and heritage were different than ours. Yes, their garb and their Friars and their altars were different than ours. Some of our feast days were in common, others different. Some of our saints and heroes were common between us; while others they cherished bore names I have never heard, and fought in battles of which I had no knowledge.

But their devotion to Truth and Justice was equal to mine, and that of all my tutors. I found that they held to all the chief Creeds of Dragon Slayers. They loved the Master and His words.

Now, to be clear, I also found irreconcilable differences in some treasured tenets. But in truth, my fellow prisoners were in harmony with all the major doctrines of our creed that I learned from my youth until now. They did not deny the Master’s Sacred Person, nor His authority, nor His victory over death; they did not shrink from battle or suffering for the Master.

But in truth, what caused my pride to shrink and my heart to swell was this: even though I was not of their tribe, they tended my wounds, and shared their paltry rations of bread with me while we were together in chains.

I was smitten then, as you are now.

How did we get to this place? How have we become so divided that you would view askance such a great man with whom you have just begun the bonds of affection? Ah...this is due to the quarrels between our fathers, quarrels that raged fierce and even, at times, bloody. Some of the venerable gray heads who instruct our youth teach that those quarrels are still paramount...above all things in heaven and earth.

Therefore, many of our holy men (to my horror and amazement now) taught me that the brave souls with whom I was imprisoned were actually my enemies. The shrillest of my instructors ventured that they actually were Dragons – or at least wolves in sheep’s clothing – those with whom it was our duty to make war. Therefore it would be a very righteous and valiant deed to draw my sword, and disarm or dispatch one of these separated brethren.

But oh, how difficult it is to draw swords on someone who is a prisoner with you in the dungeon of a true enemy for fighting the same Dragons you pursue! It is harder still to count them your enemy when they bandage your wounds.

And it is impossible once you breathe the aroma of their souls. They do not reek of the Dragon, but rather have the pleasing fragrance of our Master’s house. And as I said, they speak the Master’s words. Those words have a different accent, yes; but they are Master’s words nonetheless.

You can imagine how, as the days of my captivity ground on, I came to see that my knowledge of these great souls was in fact ignorance, and my ignorance was only outstripped by my arrogance when I ranted and railed about who or what they were. My bigotry fell from my eyes like scales, and I saw them as they were, allies and brothers; Dragon Slayers... every one.

And I was ashamed.

I was ashamed for off-handedly repeating the lies and half-truths I was taught about them from my teachers, or gleaned from the unlearned, the poorly learned, the bitter, and the petty. I was ashamed for having maligned them and crossed swords with them rhetorically; ashamed for having condemned them, belittled them, and horribly misrepresented them on many occasions in the past.

I was most ashamed because those I had maligned were tending my wounds, and giving me (when they were able) a cool cup of water in our Master’s name.

At one point I was overcome with sorrow and shame... and I wept under the crushing weight of my past foolishness.

And then something truly liberating happened... something wonderful for my calling as a Dragon Slayer... yet painful to my old and cherished relationships. I found I had more in common with these imprisoned Dragon Slayers than I did with those who taught me to despise and separate myself from them.

To my sorrow and horror, I began to suspect that many of those who taught me to treat these great souls as wolves and Dragons weren't Dragon Slayers at all. As I searched my memory for the answer to this conundrum, pictures flashed into my mind of my instructors on high feast days, clad in their armor and marching in grand procession. I remembered how the grandeur impressed my young mind.

But now, with many years, battles, and wounds to my account, I can see that something was amiss with some of them. Their armor was as flawless and unscathed as the first time it was worn.

Some of them wore armor that had clearly seen battle. They wore it with upright pride. Others, often those who maligned the very men with whom I was imprisoned, wore armor that had no stain, no evidence of a marring blow... not even the slightest scratch. Its owner had never been in a real battle against a real enemy.

Due to some corruption of logic, some pettiness of soul, or perhaps simply a fear of real battle, they chose to ignore the real Dragons, and instead fight those who weren't Dragons at all. It takes much less courage to do so. One only need wear the helmet of arrogance and the breastplate of ignorance, and be able to wield the corrupt and corroded sword of half-truths.

Hence – as honorable as their intentions may have been – some of my mentors completely misidentified the enemy. And far worse: they taught me (both in word or deed) to strike at fellow Dragon Slayers and to leave the real Dragons alone.

Even now I recall some of the conflicting nonsense I was taught. The Master Himself, some of them said, wanted his servants to leave the great Dragons of our time alone. So, wishing to please my superiors, I disregarded Dragons, and even encouraged others to do the same. Even now, to my shame, I recall berating a fine man who was attacking a real Dragon as best he could.

For a short season in my arrogant youth – thank Heaven it was a short season – I was a vocal adversary of real Dragon Slayers, and a chaser of phantom Dragons. Heaven forgive me. Fortunately, the Master shone through the veil of my ignorance, and gave me an overwhelming and compelling call to make war with real Dragons.

Now, in case you are worried, you needn't be. I hold steadfastly to certain beliefs about our Blessed Master, beliefs for which I would lay down my life. But there are certain disciplines and traditions of our faction over which I am not prepared to fight a brother Dragon Slayer. They are hills on which I will neither die nor kill.

Let me use this illustration to close on this point. If a Dragon carried off your daughter – your own flesh and blood – and you needed the help of three stouthearted men to

rescue her from death...men who rushed to you and offered you their aid – would you question those men on every aspect of their creed and discipline? Would you insist that their friars use the same rites as yours before you accepted or allowed their assistance in the rescue of your daughter? Would you refuse their help if they held a slightly different view on some issue that was not essential to saving your daughter's life? Surely you would not.

If the life of your daughter is worth fighting side-by-side with those who differ from you in certain points in order to slay some hideous Dragon, is not the life of every other maiden in the kingdom worth the same unity in battle?

Let me also warn you of another trap we lay for ourselves. I wrote to you before that by nature we Dragon Slayers view most things in black and white. Left to ourselves and without proper training, our tendency would be to fight and die on almost any hill. Only a youth or a fool would think this courageous or principled.

If a man feels every hill is worth dying on, he should go ahead and fight. He will die soon enough. And he may die alone, because early on, those who admire his courage will not trust his judgment, and they will not follow him into battle. And sadly, once he has perished in a battle that was of little or no use, others who might have fought Dragons will be discouraged – not inspired – at his ruin, while the fearful and cowardly will use his demise as the example of why fighting Dragons is a foolish waste of life.

Beware of these traps as well: Beware of times when you are tempted to choose sides before you know all the facts. Beware when brothers are quarreling, or when an enemy being pursued is not worth the time and troops. Beware of letting a trivial quest distract you from the dreadful Dragon for whom you will need all your strength and resources to engage in battle.

And always remember: when we are wrong, we are often very wrong. We can hurt those who trusted our judgment. This is our burden: we neither live nor die solely to ourselves. When we have victories, others share in the spoils. When we falter, others share in the pain.

This leads to my next critical advice: we have a vital need of advisors. If we live by our own counsel, we will perish by our own counsel. Sometimes, through the fog of my mind, my emotions, my pain, I cannot clearly identify the size or movements of a Dragon. I need wise counsel to make war.

Seek and take counsel from fellow warriors who you trust. Develop a core of compatriots who will advise and stand beside you through victories and defeats.

It is a difficult but critical discipline to follow the counsel of advisors on some occasions. Remember, I speak of advisors who love you, love Justice, love Truth, and hate Dragons. Once you have found wise counselors, weave them into the very fabric of your life as much as possible. But secondly – and this is the balance that must temper and guide your soul – you must remember that you alone will give account on that Dreadful Day for your decisions, no matter how they advised you. Never imagine that the counsel of others can free you from duty or obligation, nor the

inevitable moment when you will answer before our Master's throne for what you have done, or failed to do.

And when others seek your advice, take heed to the strength of opinion you project regarding what another soul should do. I have made enough errors in judgment about my own life to be very unsure about the will of our Master for someone else's life.

There is great danger in possessing too much influence in the decisions of others' lives. This can cause great harm, because as I told you repeatedly – when we are wrong, we can be very wrong. We must take treble heed to not hurt someone who trusted our judgment more than they should have. Let each discern his own path. The temptation exists in others – due to the force of our character – for them to put too much trust in us. They may be unwise to do so; we are fools to accept it.

When you are wrong, admit it. If you have attacked or harmed a friend, humbly ask forgiveness. If you launched an ill-advised or ill-timed attack, don't rationalize and explain away your mistake: state it. If you have come to see that a certain hill is not worth dying on, declare so. If, like you and I have experienced, you come to see the ignorance and foolishness of labeling your friends and brothers as your enemies, or if you learn that those you thought were allies are in fact your adversaries, recant quickly and clearly, whether privately, in the public square, or in the hall of a great lord.

It may be humbling for a moment, but such humility on your part will purge your soul, make those near you trust you more, not less. It will inspire those you train or lead to love you more, not less.

Finally, if you – by heaven's good graces – can help mend some of the unnecessary divisions that exist between Servants of the Master who speak with different tongues, or who were born to other traditions, do so with grace, vigor, and good cheer. Peacemakers do a great service to Heaven and earth.

Now, as you surely know, there are some well-meaning souls who would condemn this counsel as treachery. They insist that the defense of every aspect of the truth (as they see it today) is more important than slaying Dragons and fighting oppression. And to my shame, there was a season when I would have joined them in berating the very counsel I now give.

But all of my journeys and battles defy their counsel and their condemnation, and confirm my conclusions. Frankly, their lack of victory and the fact that they are no threat against the Dragons of hell renders their judgment in this matter meaningless. It rather serves to confirm my attitude.

While it grieves me to say this, I believe those so inclined to constantly war with their separated brethren over their specific traditions of "the truth" actually aid Dragons. Hell rejoices when they expend their years, their weaponry, their resources and their strength to fight with the Master's servants from different traditions, leaving Dragons to plunder and slay the innocent of every tradition and creed.

These misguided brawlers rejoice when they wound a man who loves the Master from a tradition different than

theirs, while they ignore the cries and pleas of those suffering under the Dragon's terror, or the malice of truly wicked men.

I leave it to you to ponder my judgment in this.

I must tell you – and I tell you this only so that I can maintain my commitment to be transparent in matters such as these – it was false friends from my own tradition that sought to slay me. This blessed Abbey, and the Masters' servants who live here in quietness and reflection, took me in, though I did not adhere to all their rituals and customs. Those of my own customs sought my lifeblood, while these dear ministers of grace have restored my life. Who, I ask you, is in the Master's service regarding my survival?

Finally, I bid you ponder the lesson of the Good Samaritan. The hero of the drama is a Samaritan – a heretic – who was denounced by the orthodox as a betrayer of Truth. Yet this heretic – this poor, noble soul – was the only one who saved the beaten man's life. He poured oil and wine on his wounds; he soiled his hands, his clothes and his beast with the blood of a wounded man; he spent his treasure at the Inn for a total stranger. The priest and the Levite – though Orthodox in their creed – were content to leave the wounded victim to die. Which do you think gave the Master more joy in that moment? Those who loved orthodoxy, or he who loved his neighbor as himself?

And so, as the years pass, I pray you engage in great battles, riding flank to flank with Dragon Slayers from various traditions in our Master's service, to rescue the innocent from death. If you do, your unity in battle will bring dread in the halls of hell.

While all warriors will not be able to agree on every point of traditions, we can nonetheless hold up the Master's holy banner together in the face of grave and murderous evils, and storm the Dragon's lair. Heaven knows and hell fears what such unity in battle can accomplish for Truth and Life and Justice.

May your efforts, example, and unifying leadership in the battles of this life cause the Heavens to shine upon you, and bring rage, fear, and confusion to the sulfuric nesting places of Dragons.

Letter VIII

Why We Are at Home in Conflict

Hello Fellow Warrior, Blessed Creature of Dust.

I received your recent post on Ash Wednesday, barely an hour after the friar took ashes to make the sign of the Cross on my head, and whispered those thunderous words:

From the dust you came,
To the dust you will return.

Year by year, I grow closer to the grave, these words serve as both warning and promise.

They warn me to be intimate with my Master, and a stranger to injustice and iniquity. They urge me to keep a vibrant union with Truth and the beauty of holiness. They promise us all the offer – made with the Master’s wounds – a life in the Next World free of the tears and pain and isolation that often plague life in this world.

In this is a paradox. More than anything, I long to stay and slay Dragons, free the oppressed, and most importantly, to grow old with my dear consort and see our children’s children if heaven wills. The great Dragon Slayer Paulos declared that he would prefer to depart this world to be with the Master, but knew that his presence in our world would better serve the living. I confess – I have not risen to that level of detachment from this life – nor do I seek it. I pray to remain in this frame of breathing dust as long as possible. (I am certain that Paulos did not have a wife, sons, and daughters.)

That said, a part of me ruminates on the eternal joys promised to the faithful; to shed this earthen vessel, and be done with its limitations and heartaches and temptations, would certainly be a glory. May God one day grant me (and you, and those we love) entrance to the Heavenly City where no enemy dwells, no Dragon lurks, nor death again seen or endured.

This is the first Lenten season that I have spent in a cloister. I am certain that were it not for my injuries and need for recovery (which, thank God, is proceeding apace), I may have never spent this blessed season within hallowed halls such as these.

I happily confess that the tempo of the day was at first strange to me. I was unfamiliar with the prayers and the meditations; I was unaccustomed to the hours in which to walk and ponder, or to make music with Guinevere (thank you again!). But I now enjoy this rhythm of the soul, and I know I greatly needed it.

I began a fast on Ash Wednesday, which I intend to keep for 40 days. I will consume mostly broths and liquids free of fermentation or spirits, and small amounts of bread and greens. I was told by the dear friar that this shall sharpen my

senses in spirit, mind, and body – and of truth, even though it is only the seventh day of the fast – I can already bear witness to the veracity of his claim.

In the seven days since I received your post, I have read it each morning, pondering and musing over it at points throughout each day.

In an earlier letter, you mentioned some painful memories concerning your father and mother. In your latest post, you confided that your youth was marred by experiences no child should be forced to endure.

I tell you the truth; your latest letter brought more pain to me than all the others combined. The reason is twofold; picturing the hellish nightmares that you endured from the hands of those who should have only protected you is a burden for the strongest soul. But beyond that, your letter provoked in me a flood of bitter memories concerning my own youth and birth.

In various seasons in my life, I have reflected on the weakness and sorrow surrounding the circumstances of my birth and the trials of my youth. I have studied the connection of those trials to the strength of steel that I have in my soul for battle, which is a source of strength and joy to others and myself.

I began these days pondering your grief, and found my own childhood brought into sharper focus.

Like any man who studies an object through a looking glass or a crystal – shifting the lens this way and that – I can see myself in different ways and lights...some with joy, others with grief. I confess: I was perturbed at the intrusion into my fasting, contemplation, and musical musings with Guinevere. But as the days have unfolded (made sharper by my fast), I can see that your letter about yourself proved a surgeon’s blade for my soul.

So I have contrived a plan. Forgive me if it does not meet with your approval, but I believe it will help you on several counts.

Rather than an attempt to address every hurtful point of your past, allow me to honor my promise of transparency. I would like to share openly with you some of the details of my beginnings. Some of the pain and heartache you divulged echoed so closely with my own – and stirred such tremors of pathos – that giving vent to my heart may help unburden yours. I pray that telling you my tale, as you have told yours, will illumine your own mysterious maze.

Let me declare concisely at the outset; I stand convinced that our Master can take a furnace of pain, and in it fashion a weapon for holy war.

Now to my tale, the very beginning of which was heartache.

I was conceived outside of the bonds of marriage.

My coming into this world was through the union of two young lovers, Francesco and Angelina. After I was conceived, but before they knew of my life, they quarreled, and refused to lie or speak with each other. Had circumstances been different, they likely would have never spoken again, and married others.

However, in due time my mother learned she was with child, and secretly told my sire.

While far from uncommon, their situation was nonetheless scandalous. My mother's family is Navarrian and Sicilian. For them, honor often means more than life or death.

Hence, they speedily arranged a wedding, with festive colors and holy rites. Under great duress, my parents wed. Six months later I was born. And I declare before God and men: I am thankful that I was conceived, however undesirable my beginning may have been.

As I said, I tell you this in hope it will help you make sense of your own heartache...and your role as a Dragon Slayer.

First, my existence was rueful to my father and mother. My presence meant a certain level of shame. Their folly would be found out, and they would have to be responsible for their deeds.

The words, "Me Lady, you are with child," were the worst words my mother could hear. She feared. She did not embrace the village midwife, nor look to heaven and thank God that a child had been conceived. She wept, and braced herself, and commenced the search for her estranged lover to tell him the dreadful news. "Francesco, quickly – we need to talk..."

My father had mingled sentiments of joy and dread. Hence, he did not exult like a drunken field hand, nor shout or dance for joy. He did not clasp the young maiden's hands and look toward heaven and say, "Thank God! May it be a man-child!" Rather, he looked down and said, "What are we to do?"

But he knew what he had to do. The rules of our village, and the rules of our people were clear.

He would follow his little unborn son to the wedding altar. He left the happy haunts of reckless freedom at a fine university, to enter the duty-bound marriage with his ex-lover, turned mother of his child, turned wife.

My coming compelled my father to live the life of a grown man; to work bitter hours while barely continuing his studies at the university. My birth constrained him to be a husband and father before he was prepared. In a way, I brought him to the end of his dreams and youthful folly, and the beginning of a stark new world.

Likewise my mother – a beautiful maiden – was bound by my presence to abandon all her daydreams of a life of contentment and plenty, and to embrace a life of want and

hardship...tinged with regret.

Simply put: I was unwanted. I brought unwanted news, and an unwanted life. This was the world into which I was born.

That said, I must honor them with all my heart for this: they did not seek out a foul purveyor of pessary to end my life before I saw the light of this world. Many a child in such circumstances had their mother's womb for a tomb. They could have discarded me like an unwanted child in the Roman times. I am ever thankful they did not slay me.

The young couple lived in a wretched hovel in the University Quarter, a structure that was infested with rats. It was destroyed by order of the village court shortly after we departed. This was home until I was a child of perhaps three years.

In the midst of this new family was the constant reminder of its origins...me. I was the harbinger of bad news, as well as the bad news itself. Surely, an unhappy role for a child. (Even now, I think of the painful memories you recounted as your role as well. Heaven have Mercy on us all.)

However, I am also happy to confess that nature took its course. My mother adored me, coddled me, and nursed me at her breast. She would sing to me, and tell me stories of valor and love for hours on end.

My father loved me as well. He told me he did.

In truth, I doubt that few, if any of those in my clan spoke often of the conflicting emotions and messages that surrounded my existence. But no one had to say it. I felt it. The conflict and tension came out in many ways, which I will shortly describe.

I grew accustomed to the stress and pain. This was home. As time passed, a brother was added to our number. I was nearly four years at his birth.

I remember distinctly – I was perhaps a boy of eight or nine years – when I learned that unmarried lovers conceived me in their bed.

But far worse; at that young age, I remember the bitter words – they seemed as violent missiles launched between my parents: "I would forsake you if not for these boys!" Or, "I would sail to another realm if not for these sons!" My father hurled such invectives at my mother; my mother in turn raged at my father.

These two struggling souls came to the altar because of me, and from a sense of honor, lived out a serial tragedy because of my brother and me. Whether my insights or passions as a child were as prescient as I would like to think, what follows are the contradictory sentiments I retained.

I am your beloved son. I am your worst nightmare.

I am the miracle that led you here. I am the chain that binds you here.

I make you laugh. I am the cause of your sorrow.

I am the joy and the burden.

This was the conflict that was home.

The conflict, the quarrels, the alternating joy and grief between them of that first month, or first year, can only be imagined. As the years passed, the cup of my father's rage would spill over on my brother and me. The turmoil of the first dreadful decade is etched in my memory.

The weight of their conflict was welded to my young soul; in some ways, it affects me to this very day, for good or ill.

Of this I am certain: the pain and conflict that plagued my youth formed part of the mettle of my very soul; they helped forge me into a warrior.

The irony is both bitter and sweet. As a child, I sought refuge from the storms that surrounded me; as a man, others seek refuge in the fortress that the hardships of my youth helped build.

And now, as I fast and muse on your letter...and as I ponder my wars and my scars, my sins and my triumphs, my past and what may lie ahead, the fact is not merely that we were unwanted by some, but that we are still unwanted by some. We accept this of the past, and anticipate it in the future.

So now to you, dear friend. Whatever else may be true, it is clear that you suffered much injustice as a child, and this injustice came directly from the hands of those who sired and raised you. And perhaps more damnable, those charged to protect you turned their eyes askance while evils were committed against you.

For the sins committed against us, we should grieve, but not overmuch. Truly, you or I could lie down in sorrow; we could, like others we have seen, wither and die from the wounds of our past. But what end would it serve for us, or for others? Sadly, there are many souls who have been marred in their youth, as have we. But more grievous than their wounds is the fact that they allow the scars of their youth to distort the present. Those who despoiled them pollute their past, rule their present, and unchecked, will poison their future.

My heart breaks for such as these, for they waste their sorrows.

Let me explain. I (as you, and like others thus wounded) have wept bitter tears as I stood over the grave of certain memories.

But over time, I not only wept...I laughed. In moments of piercing Divine clarity, I laughed through the tears, for I saw how the furnace of sorrows and the bellows of injustice were used by the Master to forge me into a weapon for His Justice.

I then embraced what I had despised.

This last step seems to elude many of those who bear burdens similar to our own. They grieve, they weep, but rather than allow the Master to use their anguish to transform them into a warrior for Justice, they become bitter. They wallow in self-pity; they calcify; they never escape the clutch of their tormentors.

They refuse to allow the injustice of their past to be touched, then redeemed, the fused by the Master's hand with a quest for His Justice – not simply for them, but for

others. They consume themselves, and the good they might have done; as a result, the usefulness of their heartache for themselves and others is lost. This is a great tragedy.

They could be useful to God and Angels, dreadful to Dragons and villains, and a marvel to victims and supplicants. But tragically, the currency of their pain and redemption is squandered. They are little or no use in battle against Dragons. Or worse...they become a villain or a Dragon themselves.

But lest we think all is well with those of us whose journey into battle commenced in a kiln of injustice, I am obliged to serve you a warning that will raise one more potentially acrid topic. I must caution you of a dark side in the soul of many warriors and Dragon Slayers, and implore you to reflect on my words, while you question – with holy fear – what compels you to fight.

And please know this...I do not presume that what I am about to write applies to you; I do not know you well enough to form any such a judgment. But I have seen this woe in other worthy souls, and have searched my own heart to discern the extent that this malady has moved me in times past.

My fear is that at times some Dragon Slayers have a bent part in their souls, a part that wants to be unwanted.

Some broken part yearns for it. They may crave it... because it is what they are accustomed to.

It is home.

I have also witnessed this warping of the soul at work with the gathering of kin, far from any field of battle. Many a good man or woman instigates low-level conflict, or escalates minor offenses into grand quarrels with family, due to the patterns they learned from a child. Heaven save us from passing on the sins of our fathers, or our mothers for that matter.

But familial musings and mishaps aside – as truly connected as they may be to the questions in your letter – let us focus our thoughts on more distant fields of battle.

When others are terrified by confrontation, we are not overwhelmed, because we are at home in conflict.

We are not surprised when Dragons and their knaves despise us. We are not stunned when the hostages of Dragons reject our help, nor are we dismayed when those who profess a love of Justice and hatred for the Dragon censure us.

I have asked myself repeatedly; why do we walk into a great hall, and declare the Truth – the devil be damned if those present do not like it?

Why do so many others enter the same hall, yet hold their tongue?

Why do we speak the Truth, even when we know the Truth will estrange some and infuriate others?

Some who profess a love of Justice and Freedom become angry with us when we dare to declare what they themselves believe. They hold their tongue, or turn in flight, in the hour of trial, while we march without hesitation into battle. Our

testimony berates their souls...chides their timidity.

Do Dragon Slayers speak because they love Truth and Justice? Yes.

Do they speak because they yearn for righteousness and freedom? Surely.

However, after hearing the stories of a hundred different Dragon Slayers, I am certain that one key explanation why some Dragon Slayers march into battle while other men flee is this: when most approach a Dragon, they head for enemy territory. When some approach a Dragon, they are headed home.

They are not alarmed. The Dragon does not bewilder them. He beckons them.

The voice of rejection is not foreign to them. It is the language they learned in the cradle.

I ask you (and the answer to these questions will reveal much): When you are in the midst of a small retinue or a cheering throng – that is singing your praises – do you rejoice, or wince?

Do you feel at home in a peaceful garden, or would you rather return to a decimated land of conflict, pain and rejection?

I have seen Dragon Slayers who are far more at home with war than with leisure and comfort. They are often more comfortable with the contempt of enemies than the praise of well-wishers. While at ease in armor, they appear awkward and uncomfortable in linen or silk.

Let us trust that we prefer peace to war. Nevertheless, war is sadly at times the only means of obtaining peace with justice. So this part of who we are can serve as a great tool when war is the only recourse for the just.

It is then that the redeemed parts of our pain can serve with distinction. As in the home of our youth, our very presence is at once good news and bad news when we take the field of battle. The good news is that Mercy, redemption, and freedom – a full pardon – can be received from our Dread Sovereign Lord for all who bend the knee... except, of course, for Dragons. The bad news proclaimed by our presence is that Dragons and their company will be confronted and perhaps punished for their deeds.

We are the fragrance of life to those who believe. We are the scent of death to those who rebel. This is a heavy burden to bear, an holy yet dreadful role to play.

I often thought that any soul could fulfill this role. I was wrong.

I asked that venerable Dragon Slayer on that fateful night: "Cannot anyone be an ambassador? Cannot anyone be a bold herald of Truth that denounces evil? Could not anyone, with the proper training, be a Dragon Slayer?"

"No." He assured me, they could not. He explained to me then – and I understand it more fully now – that our mettle must (in part) be forged in our youth.

Clearly many Dragon Slayers did not emerge from a furnace of pain and injustice from their youth, from

which they now seek to exact justice. Many great warriors and Dragon Slayers are the result of proper training and discipline in their youth, coupled with one "yes" after another to the Master's biddings.

King David proves a glorious example of this. His father and mother spent the time and treasure to insure that he mastered letters, music, husbandry, and arts martial in his youth. When he felled Goliath with a sling and one stone – as a boy in his teens – he already possessed great skill, discipline, and valor...and an abiding sense of duty to and faith in the Master's cause.

All this occurred with no record of marring to his soul in childhood.

However, once Saul set his heart to destroy David, David lived in relentless trial, fleeing from one cave to the next... enduring a life of privation, false accusation, and nearly constant conflict under the shadow of death.

The unlikely heroes that gathered to him – men in distress, discontent, or in debt – became his Mighty Men over time, forged with him into great warriors as they passed through the furnace of injustice. These righteous vagabonds became seasoned warriors, ultimately prevailed, and ruled the kingdom in justice.

Likewise our offspring – thankfully spared the pains we endured in our youth – will and must nevertheless endure hardship and injustice at certain points if they are to grow into Dragon Slayers. I pray that my paternity and training – and the magnificent instruction and example of their dear mother – has supplied much of what they need to become formidable men and women, but it does not in itself guarantee their entrance into, much less triumphal success in battle. Trial by fire must be their lot at certain key moments.

But for others – such as you and I – the heat that in part made us what we are came from the injustices of our youth.

Allow me one more word for you to ponder. For some of us our strength – and our weakness – is that we relish our role. We revel in it.

Before we throw down a gauntlet, we insist on silence in the watching throng. We are not content to quietly warn a tyrant, and then wait for him to consider our demands. We will insist that the entire room and realm know that the tyrant has been challenged, by us. We were born into and grew up in the middle of conflict, and in our vocations as Dragon Slayers, we will live there, take center stage there, and perhaps die there.

These words will trouble some, but in truth, the Master has use of this nature. Like Jehu son of Nimshi who rode furiously, such a valiant and fearless spirit is critical when the kingdom languishes under the tyranny of Ahab and Jezebel. Such fierce temperament is indispensable to overthrow oppression.

Our Master knows we will uphold His banner in the midst of His friends, but more importantly, on an open field in the midst of His enemies. As long as we have breath and strength, the Master's ensign will flutter in the face of the Dragon.

But as I referred to a moment ago, there lingers a sad and potentially dangerous side to this character. Some Dragon Slayers not only expect to be villainized and hated, some seek it. They want to be loved, but they also want to be hated. They want conflict.

I have sighed and grieved as I pondered the stories from your youth, and the memories of my own. But as sure as the sun rises in the East, I am certain that no Dragon Slayer would not have the temperament for war without the smoking black furnace of heartache in which they were forged...whether in the home of their youth, or in the caves of their flight and exile.

And as I have told you before, I tell you again:

It is easier to temper a bold man,
than to embolden a timid man.

Your bold spirit – forged in fire – is of great value to our Master, as it is to all Dragon Slayers.

As long as the Seed of the Woman is at war with the seed of the serpent, we shall be the first to rush with relish to the call to arms. The clatter of the horses battle-tack is as music to us.

But as much as we love righteous conflict, we need an even greater love of Mercy. We are commanded to do justly and to love Mercy. If we love conflict and Justice, but grieve like Jonah when the Master showed Mercy to Nineveh, we are bent. If we want our dark predictions to come true more than we want the hearers to turn and be redeemed, we are twisted.

Well, good sir, I grow weary in body. So I shall close this post.

Your sorrows and tears have not been wasted, as your character and valor in battle clearly testify. May the days ahead of you be filled with kindness and Mercy from our Master's hand.

I urge you to do everything in your power to spend extra time in solitude, inviting the Master to give you insight and understanding in these matters of the heart.

If it meets with your approval, we shall return to these themes in future correspondence.

Until then, remember these two things:

In a furnace of discipline and pain, mercy and wisdom,
we are forged into men of valor.

And this one more time:

It is easier to temper a bold man than to embolden a timid man.

I look forward to our next correspondence. Until then, I remain your servant. May heaven keep you.

Letter IX

My Father

Hello my friend.

I am in receipt of your latest post.

I was truly happy to hear that my words concerning my youth and yours were of some benefit to your pensive mind. And yes – I believe your comment is true – the same taproot of our early family conflicts can benefit us in our wars against Dragons, while it can also disturb us under our own roof. Again I pray, heaven save us from the sins of our fathers and mothers.

To be at peace in one's soul – and in harmony with those we love and with whom we dwell – yet to be able to make war on the Dragons of the realm...well, this is the whole point, is it not? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our Master.

When I poured out my soul and opened my heart to that Blessed Dragon Slayer years ago, I was strengthened and braced by his stories of woe and weal. To know that another Dragon Slayer had passed through turbulent waters like my own poured hope into my soul.

If my recollections of heartache and healing bring any level of peace and hope to your soul, I will happily tell you of my personal wrestlings much sooner than my public exploits. For of truth, I believe it is our hardships (and how we face them) far more than our victories that define us.

Hence, at your request, I will continue this line of thought. I pray my next musings are half as helpful as you hope they will be. We must proceed down painful paths into the valley of heartache slowly; for if we are not careful, like a child running down the face of a steep hill, we can gather speed that causes us to stumble and fall into a ravine of despair.

The details you penned concerning you and your father grieved me, but did not surprise me. Your grief and anger are fully warranted. The love you yet retain for him (which seems to startle you) is natural to most of the sons of Adam.

You are blessed that your father yet lives, for the possibility to heal certain breaches yet remains. You may or may not desire it – that decision is yours. But nevertheless, it is a great blessing for you that this door of opportunity yet exists. I would gladly trade one day of my life if only I could have one more day with my father. But alas, I cannot.

So let us go forward, loosely examining the past and leaving the future for another day. I will resume where I left off – with a discussion about my sire.

My father resides with the departed, God rest his soul. He left this life suddenly over ten years ago; I pray he

entered eternal rest. I still grieve his death. At times waves of distress still wash over my soul. How could he have left us so soon?

In my last letter, I gave you a small glimpse of my youth. Knowing what you do, you may be astonished at how much I miss my father. I loved him dearly...though he caused me much pain.

I will again bare my soul to you in the hope that you find peace between your past and your present; your father as he was then, and is now.

The life of any Dragon Slayer is radically attached to, and strengthened or provoked by his relationship to his father. These matters are part of the very fiber of who and what you are. Do not despise or disdain giving great attention to this theme.

First, let me state this observation: some Dragon Slayers enjoy a sturdy and long-lasting bond with their fathers, unmarred by violence to body or soul. I have sat at table with father and son, and could see from their countenances as well as their unfeigned words that they loved and respected one another deeply. Having a wretched sire is not a prerequisite to becoming a Dragon Slayer (and certainly no guarantee.) I hope my sons and daughters grow to achieve great feats of valor, and I pray that my paternal role, meager though it is (and yours to your sons) is one of light and joy and strength, not darkness, grief and injury.

Having said that, in my study of Dragon Slayers, I have observed that many had fiercely troubled waters with their fathers, sometimes their mothers, and occasionally both. This Dragon Slayer's father was enslaved to wine; that one's father abandoned the family; this one's father was cruel; that one's father was unjust, and lacked natural affection. This Dragon Slayer endured a procession of "uncles." That Dragon Slayer's father died young, and left his wife and offspring in rags.

Some stories I have learned rend the heart; others break it. The point of this letter is to help you see the connection between your father and your valor in war.

I will begin with the dark and painful, and proceed to the light and medicinal. First of all, I again pray my father is with the angels. Before he left this life, he praised my life and valor, and repented his sins against me; thankfully, we had mended many breaches. I believe that he would desire that I teach others what I might from our stormy times, as well as the happy. Thus, I will honor his memory, but also examine his impact had on me...for your sake...and mine.

Let us wade into these troubled waters.

My father was a like a paternal Zeus and menacing

Hades bound in one man. He was jovial, affable, lovable. Yet he had a violent temper, which could explode at any moment. An accident, childhood carelessness, any number of scenarios could become the channel to vent the anger that lurked below the surface.

As a child, I am certain I was precocious and mischievous like many children, and needed discipline from time to time. (Do not admire the father who does not discipline his son – the ancient proverb declares that a father who does not discipline a son surely hates him.) But my father's punishments were chaotic, and often unjust to the extreme.

When we are young, we accept the verdict of our progenitors with little or no question. They speak to us as deities; above reproach or appeal. But over time, as reason, logic, and a desire for justice take root independent of paternal decrees, we recognize injustice...especially when dealing with a father. A child begins to lament, whether in word or mournful heart, "This is not right. This is wrong. My father is an unjust man."

I, like you, can recount many wretched stories of injustice. On one occasion when I was a youth of middle years, I provoked the wrath of my father. He flogged me so severely that I sought justice from the village sheriff. My father was rebuked, but nothing more came of it. At that point, I left my home for a foreign land, despising my father. (My experiences in that land are for another story.)

Throughout my childhood my mother knew the injustice, and at times served as a barrier between this angry father and his scapegoat sons. She would placate him, calm him, yell at him or curse him...anything to cause him to shrink from his volcanic anger.

But more often than not, she would simply withhold information from him. She became my confessor, and shielded me from the wrath of my father. What he did not know, he would not punish.

My mother spent herself shielding my brother and me; but there was no one to shield her.

Suffice to say, they battled. They fought bitterly. And when my father could not prevail verbally, he used brute strength.

I will leave it to your experience and imagination to picture the mistreatment she suffered from time to time at his hand.

For a child to see his mother thus harmed, and then – at the behest of the victim and the villain to be instructed to hide this violence – this is a robbery of innocence, a crime against the senses and soul of a child.

At points I hated my father. Later in life, I begged our Master: "Please, no matter what, do not let me become like that man." (Thankfully, that prayer He has answered.)

So...I have likely stoked your anger and your sympathetic cry for Justice, and perhaps triggered your own memories...memories that summon your ghosts and phantoms beside your bed.

I am sorry to tell you that I can offer no elixir to deliver

you from your pain, no formula to mix and drink thrice daily. I can only direct you down certain paths.

But do not despair, and do not rail against your Maker (however sorely tempted you are to do so) for your heartache. For as surely as you are a dread to all Dragons – and therefore to Hell itself – the Dragons that torment your soul, and those that seek to slay your body, while relishing in the pain of your childhood...are also terrified by the fruit it has born in your vocation.

Here is a maxim that is true for many: the greater the injustice endured when young, the greater the potential quest for Justice when grown. (I say potential for many, but not for all. In another correspondence, perhaps we can discuss why some people emerge from the furnace of heartache dreadful and free, while others perish in the flames or come out with bitter fruit.)

Now, if I ended my account here, I would do you and my father a grave injustice. I owe it to you and to him to show the path of reconciliation and healing that my father and I traveled together. My poisonous memories, and the ones you bear in your own mind and soul, cannot be abandoned to fester. They cannot be erased, nor denied, so they must be faced and brought to heel.

I would also do my father a grave injustice to leave you with this sole impression of him. If you had been at his funeral, you would have heard testimony of a beloved, spirited, companionable man. These testimonies were not the deceitful words of a hired friar who did not know my father. These were the memories of friends, kin, co-laborers, and sons; memories filled with life and laughter. My dad was half scoundrel, and half saint. My mother wept and wept at his death.

He was a complex man; a Minotaur in ways. He was both a valiant, handsome man, and a dreadful creature.

Please know this: my father was not a hypocrite. No one can retain a façade for that many years. It was as if my father was two people, with two different natures. I saw and studied both.

He could sing with the voice of an angel. In fact, he was offered a scholarship for voice training at the University in the Eternal City. When my brother and I were young, he would sing us to sleep, night after night. I remember him lying on the floor of our hovel, or sitting on the edge of our hay bed singing...simply singing. His beautiful voice was woven into our souls.

He also loved the art (as he called it) of angling. He knew every brook, stream, pond, and lake within a day's journey of our village. He would tell us sons: "The fish of every fin dread the sound of my name!" He was a skilled and vigorous angler, and maintained a reputation as a premier guide for trawling. The dukes and lords loved him, for they usually caught a great catch when with him, and were thus often pleased.

Due to the generosity of a lord (who was particularly happy with my father's guide work), my family was granted perpetual use of a small, yet charming cottage on a beautiful lake. Even though when he sought fish he was in earnest,

he also made sure that guests at this lakeside “camp” (as he called it) thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Whether children, great city men and their damsels – who couldn’t so much as bait a hook – all were taught the fisherman’s arts, helped to cast a line, and taken to the best holes on our lake.

He would bait the hook, remove caught fish from the hook, clean the catch, and finally prepare a most spectacular feast with the culinary skill of a royal chef. All who came left entertained and sated, praising his angling and culinary skills.

He loved the games...games of chance, or games of wit; board games, card games, word games. He loved to play, and he loved to compete. We never doubted that he played to prevail. A game could produce hilarious laughter. It could nearly produce a war.

In time, due to my parents’ labor and the favor resulting from their knack, they were able to purchase a cottage in the country. They would often host modest but pleasant feasts, and my father would ensure the guests were amused. We had tournaments of arrows and spears; we competed in lawn bowling until it was so dark one could not see the ball. After night fell the party would turn to cards or other games of chance.

Though often unjust, my father did not fear a fight for Justice. In the hamlet of our Lake cottage, my father cried out against the bribery of the sheriff and a petty judge. This was a great risk, but he did so bravely – insisting that we townsfolk were victims of corrupt proceedings. The Governor of the province ultimately removed the corrupt officials, and praised my father’s bravery.

In our cottage, when my sires would battle each other, my father would often come in our room weeping, kneel in our hay, and convey that he loved us, or that he was remorseful, or that we sons were not the cause of their quarrels. My mother and father had fierce conflict, but they sought (poorly) to resolve or at least about the conflict for many years.

We are tempted to only speak of the good side of someone if we loved them, or to speak only ill of someone who pained us. The reality is this: my father hurt me much, but he loved me much as well.

I have given you an overview my father and my youth. I share these accounts in the hope that you may ponder yourself in these matters of the heart, and find some relief and guidance in your mind concerning your father.

Allow me to voice some final thoughts.

First, I had to release the furious anger I bore toward my father. I shall not delve into more depth or detail, but as you can surmise, my father harmed me in many painful ways. Fortunately, he and I grew to love each other as men, and enjoyed a great friendship the last years of his life. I thank Heaven for this with all my heart.

Second, the mixture of tortured pain and singing love I experienced in my youth are part of what the Master has used to forge me into who I am. The same holds true for you.

You are a Dragon Slayer in part because you have a father who has been unjust. You know the anguish, the sense

of betrayal, the pain. But you also hold a chance at some reconciliation. I advise you, to the best of your ability – over time – reconcile with your father if you are able.

If you are so inclined, I advise that you do not wait too long. Death could forever alter your options. You do not want to pour out words of confrontation or regret, forgiveness or reconciliation, before a cold body prepared for burial.

Finally, remember this: From some men, we learn what to do. From some men, we learn what not to do. From some men, we learn both.

I wish my father had not been unjust to us on so many occasions, but he was. I wish your father had not so grievously injured your soul, but he did. These things we cannot change. But we can change how we relate to those pains and evils.

Heaven willing, I shall discuss this with you in another post. Until then, I commit you to Heaven’s care.

I say again: you may want to find an Abbey in which to abide for a few days during Lent. Let your mind be cleared, and your heart be quieted, as you search your soul on these matters.

No matter what, may long life be your portion.

Letter X

My Lifelong Friend

Greetings to You Again, Fellow Warrior.

The 16th day of Lent has dawned clear. Your last letter, and my response to you concerning my father still weigh heavily on my mind. I have not received a post from you since I sent that letter, but something has fallen into my hand that has shaken me deeply. I thought might be of interest to you, so I write you again.

A fortnight ago – barely a day after I sent you my last dispatch – a lifelong friend brought me a chest full of my personal effects; it contained letters and accounts and personal relics that covered over a 30-year span of my life.

Over the years, my adjutants and I had steadily added a relic here and a parchment there, to this chest as a matter of course – almost without notice. Since the attempt on my life and my entry to this Abbey for recovery, I have not given this private treasure a single thought. Hence, you can imagine my astonishment when it arrived at the Abbey three days past.

I immediately opened the chest and plundered its treasures. I laughed over happy memories and grieved over tear-stained letters. The steady introspection in which I have been engaged since arriving here for my recovery has been helped and fueled by studying items that were precious to the man I was 10, 20, and 30 years ago. I fancy I should attempt to piece together a kind of internal map of the road that brought me to be the man that I am. I cannot fully express my thankfulness to Heaven that these possessions were accumulated, and that they made their way back to my hands and heart intact.

I found insignia armbands from fathers and warriors from the departed. I laughed over peculiar potteries from my youth, the meaning of which is lost to me now. I paged through copies of sacramental events, title deeds of honor, awards for cleverness from my instructors, and a veritable library of letters from long-lost associates. (Even now it grieves me -- how is it that we lose friends with whom we had no quarrel?)

But enough of my distracted pen and prose; I now take the liberty to send you a parchment that echoes and amplifies certain issues in our last correspondence.

What follows is the fruit of my novice quill from a quarter century past. During the final year of my training, it was required of me to write an allegory or a metaphor. (Of truth, I could never keep an allegory and a metaphor separated in my mind. Was it the allegory that served as a parable? Or the metaphor that had shadows of meaning representing something else? Ah! To have the life of the scholar and writer!)

Genres of literature aside, I was deeply startled – and troubled – by the content of this piece.

The tone of my words reflects my youth (too self-confident, as you will see), but neither I nor any sage can deny that most great conquests are at the hands of the young. Alexander the Great, Constantine, King David, Gideon, even the Master himself provide a procession of testimony that many great victories are gained by warriors in their youth.

I forgot I wrote the piece I now share with you. That makes it all the more ironic – and disturbing to me. I shuddered when I read the well-nigh prophetic picture of the attempt to snuff out my life. And I thought of you, as you deal with anger toward those who harmed you in your youth, and seek to more tightly harness your anger now.

When I wrote this allegory, I was in the pride and fury of young manhood. No assassin had ventured to slay me. Few, if any, would have thought me worth the time and trouble. I wrote these words thinking of the demise of Alexander the Great, the treacheries of Brutus and Marcus, and the betrayal of Judas himself.

Though it be the work of a novice, yet reading it afresh after 25 years have passed, I found that it even now cut me at points with the healing edge of Apollo – if only because of the foolishness I displayed by not taking my own counsel. I also wept afresh for the harm I brought to those I cherish. Heaven forgive me.

Please read it as it was written; words flowing from an angry young man with a Dragon Slayer's heart churning within him, passionate for Truth, zealous for Justice, and ardent for liberty throughout the realm. Glean from it that which might feed, strengthen, and warn your soul.

I now copy it for you as I wrote it over a quarter century past.

I would like to put pen to the praise of my best friend.

We've been intimate associates since I was a little boy. He has goaded and guided me, inspired and invigorated me more than any sergeants or officers I know.

Unfortunately, there is also a calamitous side to this friend, in addition to his genius.

In addition to good advice, he has also given me much bad counsel. He has misguided and maligned me, disabled and practically disemboweled me. At times he has adversely affected my judgment, and made me more miserable than I care to remember.

I have reached passionate warrior heights, and been

pushed into seemingly bottomless pits of despair, all because of the help of my best friend, who unfortunately at times is also my worst enemy.

I present to you my kindred spirit: Anger.

I would not be a Dragon Slayer without Anger. And I venture that neither would any Dragon Slayer be a Dragon Slayer without a friendship with Anger.

Frankly, I don't know where I would be without Anger. I almost don't know who I would be without Anger. He's with me when I rise up, and when I lie down. From time to time, he goes on short trips, and I enjoy life without his company, but only for a season. Perhaps that is what best friends are all about.

Outsiders can never really know the depths and bonds of a friendship, but if anyone has their own companionship with Anger, they are both an "outsider" and "insider" - someone outside of my friendship with Anger, but possessed of his own inseparable bond with the villain-saint of anger.

I stand in a rare moment when Anger is not present, so I shall write some thoughts about him. Some of my words cause pain, others chaos, still others doubt. And I suggest that if you are a kindred spirit of Anger, you read this when the Apparition is not peering over your shoulder, telling you how this or that is not true. Anger can be quite self-defensive.

I met Anger when I was very young. My father introduced me to him. And if my memory serves me, the occasion of our meeting was some gross injustice where my father was the villain. My father and Anger were also very close. I later learned my dear mother had developed a secret affinity with him too - but she usually hid their relationship.

I divined that Anger had his own room in our house - and often wreaked havoc in the entire house. Since we were both trapped under one roof, we frequented each other's company. (Children are like that - they make friends with whoever is around.) Over time, we became very close friends.

Even though Anger and I became friends, I did not like the way he and my father colluded and conspired, so I determined early on that I would have the upper hand in our friendship. I would not let him "control" me. I now know what an incredibly wearying battle this is for supremacy in our relationship. He is persistent and has incredible stamina. When he appears at swordplay or a jousting event, he is always the last to leave, always taunting, calling for more.

I have peered at Anger...studied the patterns of Anger. Anger always made strong his claims after gross injustice. I was wronged. My mother was wronged. My friends were wronged. The injustice might be physical violence or merely the torment of the tongue. The wrong might be isolation and haunting loneliness, abuse of a carnal nature, the abuse of a superior, and so forth.

As a child, I witnessed injustice within my reach; I felt it. I sipped on it in my soul. And because of injustice, Anger stayed by my side, becoming a soul mate. The causes and progression for the strength of my relationship with Anger are quite painful. I have shed many tears pondering the

origin of our relationship. Only those who understand will understand. And when Anger became a kindred spirit...a very part of me if you will, he needed to be vented...please heaven, in pursuit of Justice.

So my soul mate Anger and I plunged into life, looking for a cause. Fortunately, the Master found me, and retrieved my life from destruction when a youth. I had already caused and seen much trouble, but my folly could have been much worse. I informed Anger that if we were to remain close, he must convert to the Masters cause as well, which he did. Or at least he said he did. And so I began my journey in the faith of our fathers, accompanied by Anger.

I was angry at iniquity;

I was angry with Friars for their cowardice in the face of Dragons;

I was angry with professors for their treachery in the face of Dragons;

I was angry at a thousand points of injustice, at a thousand wrongs. I was wronged as a child, and I resonated in furious sympathy with other wrongs, and other victims.

And then I collided with the Great Wrong, the Great Injustice of our time: human sacrifice.

Yes, human sacrifice; the offering of innocent blood to demons.

I learned of the pagan deity Molech, whose bronze image - half bull, half man - stretched out brazen arms, holding a hammered basin. After white-hot flames were stoked beneath it, innocent infants were thrown by evil priests (those miserable monsters; those demonic bastards) into the basin where they perished in ways beyond the description of any human tongue.

The above-mentioned priests of this murderous abomination became the especial object of my wrath. Here I found enemies - and a field of battle - equal to and worthy of Anger.

I launched with furious ardor into battle. But alas, I had to face the deficiency of my training...which also stoked my rage. Why wasn't I taught and prepared to gird my sword for battle and end this hateful shedding of innocent blood? (Anger at my early mentors would surface later.)

With the leading of the Master, Anger and I, bound in soul like Jonathan and David, pursued the Great Dragon Molech on hill after hill. We cut and slashed. We snatched thousands of innocent victims from his demonic jaws. And Anger helped me to keep focused; helped me to keep marching against all odds. When I grew weary, I focused on the innocent victims being devoured by the Dragons, and Anger would once again stoke the fire of my resolve, and in spite of weariness or injury, I would rise to new battles.

I must tell you that my relationship with Anger was not exclusive. No blood oaths were taken. I demanded that he allow me to maintain other relationships and friendships.

For example, I have had a great and holy intimacy of the soul with Music, and her sister Poetry. We would walk or dance together under the sun, or the moon and the stars,

or simply sit under big spreading trees. We would laugh and cry together often. My closeness with these delightful sisters proved a saving grace to me.

Those darling sisters – Music and Poetry – probably kept my soul from death more times than I will ever know. Oh heaven, how I love them. And as it turns out, Mercy had been following me closely, protecting me even when I was unaware; even protecting me from Anger.

I also developed a deep relationship with Mercy. She always followed me...was always close at hand...always. I would regularly and quickly introduce her to the wounded – those “wronged.” I even introduced her to my enemies, some of whom reached out and were touched by her. They in turn loved her, and became my friends.

Here is a truth: If I remained with Anger much (it pains me to say), I became fierce and remote. And (this is also painful) I would often despise myself. That may be the biggest problem of having Anger as a close friend.

The glorious side of Anger (when he is behaving properly) is his valor. He hates injustice and evil; he speaks eloquently and forcefully; he confronts Dragons; inspires his hearers. But later on, when I am alone with him, he sometimes turns on me. He tells me what is wrong with me, why he despises me. It is painful and perplexing.

Worse yet is when Anger is bored. After he tires of devouring me, he might turn on one of my friends. He will pick a fight just to have a fight. It grieves me to confess that this has happened with me, and I have witnessed this folly in other Dragon Slayers.

We must beware. When we get angry, especially at little things – “spilt milk” as they say – not epic struggles of good and evil, right and wrong – but the little things; situations close to us that ignite in us an internal reaction beyond the moment at hand, we must cry out for Mercy. Anger is trying to rule us with his uncontrolled flame. Life is too precious and short to be scarred unnecessarily by the foolish or chaotic whims of Anger.

Anger demands to be fed, demands Justice, demands a response. It always demands something. That is why it must be our servant – otherwise we will be Anger’s slaves.

So the frightening truth is this: Anger is the Ultimate Dragon Slayer. But Anger can be the Ultimate Dragon

Anger is an inferno; a river of fire. Anger can sweep away his enemies. He is fearless. He is dreadful. He is a magnificent warrior in the cause of right.

But beware – he is an oppressive tyrant if not checked and ruled by Heaven’s counsel.

Unbridled, Anger is a pitiless taskmaster. He is hard to control. He has murdered his friends, injured his loved ones, and trampled the innocent.

Anger can be an upright counselor in the halls of Justice, or a brutal general in the tent of the Hun.

And so I swing wildly in the pendulum propelled by anger.

I hate Anger; I adore Anger; I need Anger; I abhor

Anger; I fear Anger; I crave Anger.

Anger is an intoxicant, and then a great sobering agent. Anger is one moment the disease, the next moment the cure.

I confess...I look in disbelief at the throng who do not seethe with Anger at gross injustice. I stand in dismay of those who can see a great wrong and do nothing. It baffles me. It angers me.

And then I wonder: Is their silence or submission because they have rarely suffered unjustly? Is the reason they don’t resonate with victims, and rise to defend them from Dragons, because they have seldom or never felt the cruel wrath of a Dragon’s breath?

We must carefully mark the difference between suffering and unjust suffering. Suffering – such as illness, or the illness or death of a loved one – is a cross that all must endure. Such heartache can produce a depth of soul and corresponding sympathy and kindness for others in anguish or loss. This is a precious gift.

But unjust suffering – a suffering at the hands of an evil “someone” or “something” or “system” – where human will is employed for the ill-treatment of victims – this unjust suffering produces a depth of pathos in the soul, and a corresponding thirst for Justice.

This is when we rejoice at the appearance of Anger.

He enters majestically, yet without pomp. He walks in simple sturdy strides, and takes the judgment seat in our soul. The scales of right and wrong are brought forth – for yourself, for your friends, and for strangers. And then, when we see an innocent victim endure unjust suffering, Anger demands that we take action. We obey. We rise to the occasion, and prepare for battle.

However, I must not only display a holy devotion to the judgments of Anger against oppressors, but also a hearty contempt toward those content to watch evil rather than resist it. Moreover, I have genuine pity as well as disdain toward those who would rather be trampled by injustice than learn to stand, fight, and prevail against it.

Dragon Slayers will defend this hapless lot, but we are highly agitated that they won’t defend themselves. I imagine this agitation is partially rooted in the fact that when we were trampled or threatened, we finally learned to resist. To us, surrender borders on treachery – to our neighbors and ourselves.

Here is yet another troubling thought: Why are some victims trampled, and emerge as Dragon Slayers, while others are trampled and remain beaten down their whole lives. Or worse yet, they emerge as demons and Dragons?

Here is an interesting story: St. Patrick emerged as a Dragon Slayer in the early 400’s. He was one of the first Clerics to fiercely denounce slavery, to actively fight to end the slave trade.

That great Dragon Slayer had swallowed and convulsed on the bitter fruit of slavery as a young man...he was captured, and made a slave. Later in life, when he saw others thus treated, he rose like a warrior sage in their defense. He denounced this abhorrent evil, and plunged his sword deep

into the Dragon of slavery. Like our Master – who used a whip to scourge corrupt moneychangers as He overturned their tables – Patrick overthrew the slave trade in Ireland, which was a great victory for Justice. (Ireland had been entrenched in the slave trade for centuries.)

My point grows ever obvious for we who are Dragon Slayers. The injustice, the pain, the domestic terror we endured in our youth, has fitted us with a warrior spirit, able to employ Anger in the cause of Right.

But what others may or may not know...in fact, what we may or may not know is this: Anger alone would consume and destroy us.

Music and Poetry, like breezes by the sea, or wind whistling through tree houses in dense forests, do more to keep a just warrior from becoming a tyrant than we will ever know. The song in our hearts and the songs in the night are the oil of gladness that save us from turning to stone.

Anger is often involved in intrigues, secretly engineering a coup d'état of our hearts. As in the days of King David, Anger is Joab and Absalom at once – too valuable a military asset to banish, too dear a son to punish or slay. And yet again – just as Joab and Absalom did to King David – Anger may ignore, manipulate, or rule me...or seek to kill me whenever he is able, due to my lack of vigilance of his machinations.

If Anger dominates our life too much, he (through us) will lash out at those we cherish, in words and deeds that reflect more Dragon than Dragon Slayer. Beyond this, he will make us terribly lonely; lonely, because others don't enjoy his or our company...especially those who love peace. To be without them would be a great loss.

Please do not misunderstand me. Some crave peace because they fear battle; others love peace from an upright heart.

The one who craves peace more than Justice has lost his way; he will submit to slavery...if it is but peaceful. We have a certain pity and contempt for such a soul, as is just. But there are the upright, who love a just peace; a peace defined and guarded by Justice. These have a balanced mind concerning the indissoluble bond between peace and Justice, but they may not have the furnace of anger to forge the weapons of war needed to obtain Justice and peace.

We must not alienate those worthy souls because our lives are guided by Anger. We want and need them as friends and collaborators.

But thank Heaven, we also find true kindred spirits. These tend to be those who know Anger or pain, and want to slay Dragons and dethrone tyrants. Herein lies a dreadful strength, and a grave danger.

The dreadful strength is this: What could be more frightening than coming face to face with an Anger-empowered, fully-clad Dragon Slayer? I will tell you: Coming face to face with two of them, or six of them, or ten of them. (Rarely will more gather – because they are so few. Also, pride exists as to who is the best or chief Dragon Slayer, who called for this meeting of the Dragon Slayers, at

which field of battle will the convocation be held, etc.)

The terrifying danger is this: Who can slay a Dragon Slayer? Well, obviously a Dragon might. Many great Dragon Slayers have fallen before their fire-breathing foes. But an additional danger to the life of a Dragon Slayer is another Dragon Slayer. Fellowship around the common bond of a just cause with Anger produces a certain euphoria, a unique, delightful intoxication. But it is precisely in that euphoric, intoxicated, and dare I say bored state – free of the rush and clatter of battle – that some friend of Anger hungers for battle, and two Dragon Slayers begin to joust “just for sport.”

And then, to the horror of all present, once swords are drawn, one or both are injured seriously, or even critically. Many epic poems have been written bearing this tragic theme.

This is why all friends of Anger who unite in common cause should keep Music and Poetry in their constant communion, even singing as they march to battle. These illustrious sisters will keep our hearts in balance, and keep friends of Anger from turning on each other. And the lady Mercy can never be far from those who seek the friendship of Music and Poetry.

This leads me to a final point: if you meet a servant of Anger who has proven his valor in battle, but is not a friend of Music...and Poetry...and Mercy, beware. I say it with solemn warning: beware.

A warrior who does not love Music and Poetry is a danger; a danger to you, to me, to all.

Send them in battle, applaud their successes, give them a mission, but do not take them into your heart, your counsel, or your tent.

For in time, if they believe it useful to “the war”, or to their own future, they will betray you, and perhaps seek to kill you.

Or said another way, a man who loves battle, but does not love Music and Poetry and Mercy, is an assassin in waiting.

I end my professions of devotion to my Friend, Anger, and my confessions of fear of him as well, with this note: Anger will seek to rule the world.

The fundamental issue at hand is whether the world will be ruled in righteousness or malice. If unholy Anger seduces the powerful, and becomes the first minister of the kingdom – let all beware. The hearth is not hallowed, nor the altar sacred.

But Anger, broken and harnessed by charity and a love of Justice, can serve with great valor and distinction. Like a mighty stallion going forth to battle, it can bear the warrior and weapons of just war. And after victory, that same stallion can bear the heralds of victory, and serve in a just peace.

Let the wicked be forewarned,

Kiss Justice, lest Anger flare up in a moment, and you be consumed in the way.

Well my friend, I have copied this allegory in my own hand, just as I wrote it, a young man's lifetime ago. I copied it faithfully...though with trepidation.

I am tempted to say farewell till our next post, but I would be remiss – and betray my promise of transparency – if I did not give you a more clear warning...and confession. For as you might surmise, the water stains and blurred ink you have seen on this parchment are from my tears.

First, I chide myself for not having embraced my own counsel regarding warriors who have no love of Music and Poetry. For in truth, of the assassins who sought my life, to the man...none had a true love of Music or Poetry; and to a man...they despised Mercy. I saw this on certain occasions, but chose – of my own folly – to blind my eyes. I was a fool to take them into my counsel, my heart, and my tent. It nearly cost me my life.

I pray you do not imitate my madness. Though a warrior be mighty with the sword – if he love not Music and Poetry and Mercy – be warned that he may turn his sword on you at the hour he deems in his interest. Beware. He may be an assassin.

But what troubles my conscience worse than my folly is my sins committed after I penned this, fueled by Anger.

In my early years, I became fierce and unapproachable. At times I lashed out at petty offenses or the accidents of life committed by those near and dear to me. Whether my retinue, my consort, or my flesh and blood, at times I flashed in unjust anger against those I loved. I injured those I cherish, driven by the foolish and chaotic whims of Anger.

Even now – as I recall those moments – I shake my head in shame and disbelief, and thank heaven for our Master's forgiveness and redemption...and that he rescued me from the clutch of Anger, as well as my loved ones from its dreadful fruit.

In short, six or seven years after writing my ode to Anger, a conflict arose in which Anger – rather than helping – served to bring harm to the innocent through my words. When I clearly saw what I had done, I was horror-struck...sick at heart...and well rebuked.

Our Master commands us: "Be angry, but do not sin." I had failed miserably. Thus, the Master allowed me to fall on the Sacred Rock to be broken and healed, before the Rock fell on me, and crushed me without remedy. I was healed of the sepsis in my soul that I carried from my youth.

Hence, although Anger has served and fueled me (and many other Dragon Slayers) on many righteous quests, Anger could also have consumed and destroyed me, and driven me to destroy all that I love.

Thus, Anger is surely not my lifelong friend. Mark this well, for on it I would pledge my soul: Anger is an unstable propellant, an unruly servant, and a dreadful master.

I tell you all this – having no notion that you are in such a state – but merely to be honest to my pledge of transparency, and if helpful, to warn you of the dangers that Anger – the sometime servant...the sometime dreadful companion of your soul – could bring to your life.

I shall wait to hear from you when you respond to this and my last post.

Until then, I remain your affectionate servant.

Letter XI

The Christos Shrine and the Temple Of Anger

Hello again my friend.

Two days past, I received your post responding to my last two letters.

As is your custom, you were overly gracious in your appreciation of my thoughts. And again, your candor regarding your internal struggles with your father and anger touched me deeply. I have not ceased to seek Heaven's grace for you on those two points.

Regarding my allegory on Anger, and my confessed regrets – and your concern to keep that dreaded fire of Anger in its proper place – may our Master grant you every grace to master your own soul. I have oft bemoaned the veracity of the proverb: He who conquers his own spirit is better than he who conquers a city. I have found that I could sooner dispatch a nest of Dragons than dispatch the darker shadows of my own soul.

And now, to your father.

Let me state it clearly; in a situation such as yours, it is my judgment that a happy interaction with your father is possible. (I should clarify that my opinion is based solely on what you have told me. I am neither your confessor nor physician, and I do not know nor seek to know more than you have freely offered.) And I fully acknowledge that some situations are so dire, that no earthly hope exists for healthy relations between father and child. But given what you have told me, yours does not rise to the level of irreconcilable.

My counsel is this: when you are ready, say to him what you must to unburden your soul and perhaps jar his, and see where the path leads you. If he has common decency coupled with a conscience, he will acknowledge the wrongs he has done, and seek your pardon...and perhaps seek reparation. But even if he does not, your own interior health would be helped by your candor with him regarding the issues you addressed. But in truth, you may find that the healing of the breach is more substantial than you presently hope.

That said, I give you this advice: Always remember, you are his son...not his priest, nor his confessor, nor his father, nor his superior in things temporal or eternal. The authority of those offices you do not possess, so you cannot exert the sanctions they wield. Beware of seeking to play a role in his life that you can never play.

Concerning your plans, I rejoice that you will take some days during Lent to abide in the Abbey of the southern province. You will not regret your decision. The set prayers, the times of reflection, the study of the movements of your heart and soul will all be enhanced by the quietude, the images, the smells, and the sacred mysteries that surround

you.

If my counsel were law, I would require (when possible) that all Dragon Slayers go to some place of solitude and quiet before and after all great battles, because such places provide the safety of perspective. The clash of arms must not permanently drown the voice of angels; the sounds and smells of prayers and incense must ever be sweeter and more alluring than the sounds and smells of war.

I believe I told you in an earlier letter that as my years have progressed, I believe that the wounds to our souls are of more danger than those we receive to our bodies. As a child, avoiding corporal wounds was my paramount concern. But as a man, I have a far greater concern for interior wounds. Whether for you, others I love, myself (or for that matter, even the betrayers that seek my life), I find myself asking questions about clashes with the heart, and slashes to the soul...those events that may define, or mar, or cripple a man internally, and then compel his external actions or inactions.

But before I answer your latest letter in earnest, let me thank you for the kind review you gave my creativity on the "person" of Anger. It was painful to write half a lifetime ago: it was far more painful to read half a lifetime later.

And on a poetic note, if I received a blow that left me alive and with my wits, but unable to ride forth to war, and I was forced to choose between the vocation of scholar or poet, I should choose poet. For the poet, though perhaps untrained in the trivium or quadrivium, reaches forth and strums the harp of a man's soul.

The scholar may remain detached, unaware or unconcerned with the songs, or movements, or weepings of a man's soul. But the poet – driven by his song and pain – weaves them all together in a magical tapestry. He entwines the threads of tragedy, beauty, Truth, love and mystery that fall from the loom of a man's life, and with it binds fast those who imbibe his prose. He knows he must touch their mind if he is to find entrance to their inner chamber, and deliver some healing elixir or haunting tune, or tear-stained eulogy. He must find a door to the heart if he is to share the bread of hope to a soul half-starved by despair.

By contrast, I fear the interior of a man could die of starvation in the presence of many scholars. They will chart his decline, but seldom play the melodious strains that could feed or restore his soul.

A broken man can partake of the bread of sorrows aplenty – and consume all the wisdom that attends his forlorn banquet – if he could have but one poet who speaks to his soul.

Now to your letter...and I pray that my musings have the force and healing power of a poet for your soul.

I was grieved again, but again not surprised, by the shaking effect that our discussions about our fathers and Anger had on your soul. Please remember, the seasons of contemplation and reflection are just those – seasons. It is not a permanent state, neither could it be. If we dug about forever in the recesses of our souls, studying the remains of our past, we should never answer the Master's call to slay Dragons, and we should become forlorn and pitiful men by virtue of the subject of our focus. (Our own soul.) What a horror!

But nevertheless, in the pursuit of our vocation, it is sometimes necessary to take a journey of the soul. And so to respond to the pressing questions you asked about the role of Anger and pain in our lives and story, I shall paint one more word picture for you.

As I was meditating on your letter in the chapel this morning, I again marveled at the connection between our past grief and our quest for Justice. Be assured: this mysterious link is in no way unique to you and me.

Whether king or priest, commander or prophet, from Homer to the Hebrews, magnificent men and women endured bitter trials, pains, and rejections – and were then moved to greatness, propelled in part by the very heartaches that had oppressed them.

The poet laureate of my soul – the great King David – penned these words:

“You have enlarged me when I was in distress.”

The enlargement of King David as a man came not in the pleasant environs of the kingly court, but in want and need, flight and caves...in distress.

As I have perused great warriors and battles, mythic heroes and the dreadful lessons of their lives, one pattern emerged consistently: They all endured stress and hardship – as children, as men, or both – and they all carried within them an internal furnace of righteous, fearless Anger, able to strike dread in the heart of enemies.

I know I repeat myself – please forgive me – but as Dragon Slayers, our prowess can never be separated from our trials. We can (and must be healed) of the pain caused by those trials, treacheries, wounds, etc. We can be whole. Yet we must remember that like those who came before us, those now with us, and those who will come after us – like the peerless King David – we have grown into who we are because of distress and trials, healed and redeemed by our Master. It is in that light that the great Paulos said he would not boast in his successes, but rather in the trials and hardships he endured.

Now, not merely for your sake, but for the sake of those who you train or with whom you may one day be transparent, let me give you a key point of difference between Dragon Slayers and those who collapse and perish under the weight of injustice.

Pain or trials are not enough to make one a great warrior. Nor, for that matter, is righteous Anger. Many people endure

horrid pains, and are possessed by seething Anger, but never emerge as Dragon Slayers. Their pain breaks them; Anger embitters them. They consume themselves in bitterness.

That said, Dragon Slayers are not born merely from pain...but rather, from their response to pain and trials and suffering.

A Dragon Slayer has met the Master at the very point of his pain.

Somehow – whether in soul-searching agony, in meditation, or in some form of prayer – the Dragon Slayer has invited the Master to walk with him through the remnants of his pain, through the twisted nettles of his interior, to grieve and weep with him. The Dragon Slayer has communed with His Maker at the very summit of his suffering.

I am neither mystic, nor Friar, nor Saint, so my words on this matter will surely come in awkward paces. But nonetheless, the truth I now share with you is indispensable to understanding yourself, and these great souls we call Dragon Slayers.

Two children are raised in the same family; both have the same unjust, or abusive, or wandering father. Both have sad memories, profound pains, hurtful scars, and deep anger.

But one of them weeps alone, nursing on the poison of bitterness, slowly destroying himself.

The other weeps bitter tears as well, but he does not continue to weep alone, nor with sympathetic souls who merely fuel his bitterness. He invites the Master – the Man of Sorrows – to weep with him.

One child grows into a man who cowers and hides, who slinks away into the internal shadows of the soul...and never emerges to make war on evil. Or worse, he becomes the source of harm and evil to others.

The other child emerges over time as a crusader, a Dragon Slayer.

Again I say it: what separates the Dragon Slayer is that he has journeyed with the Master to the points of his sorrow. And there he weeps...with the Master. As the Master has enjoined us to do, so He does with that grieving soul: He weeps with those who weep.

The thought of the Master weeping with us – the sense that He truly understands – has a healing effect on us. We may be betrayed, abandoned, abused, broken, and alone. And then, perhaps through our tears, we look beside us, and see our Master. We see Him betrayed, abandoned, abused, broken and alone; betrayed by a close friend, abandoned by his closest friends, abused verbally and broken in body, and finally crying out as he hung alone on the tree: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Worse yet, we may have played the role of Petros. We may have denied our Master at the moment of His passion; we may have failed to bridle Anger. We may have caused pain to others or our Master, and we weep the bitter tears of our first frail Patriarch. The cock crows for our soul.

Somehow – and I confess it is as undeniable and

authentic, as it is mysterious and inscrutable – we meet God at the point of our pain, and even our failures. His wounded hand touches our wound. The infection is healed; the pain no longer terrorizes us internally, or the guilt no longer immobilizes us. He may leave a thorn in our flesh, so that we lean on His grace all the more, but the wound is no longer a source of general infection, producing a spiritual sepsis that cripples or even kills us. The wound itself – after we have met the Master at that point – becomes a part of what He uses to forge us into warriors.

Some souls run forever from their pain. They never meet the Master at the point of the pain, and hence, they never become whole. They are angry, yes, but their anger is never resolved, and Anger's energy is never channeled to a holy use. They are drunk with Anger. Thus intoxicated, they lose sound reason and judgment, depth perception, co-ordination, and so forth. They strike out randomly, chaotically, unsuspectingly. In such a state, they can never become faithful Dragon Slayers.

They forever remain in this haunted state. In truth, many of these wounded, wandering slaves of Anger still yearn for communion with the Almighty, albeit they want to meet with Him outside of their pain or guilt, and apart from their anger. I speak from experience and observation.

Allow me to paint another illustration.

Those grasped in the clutch of Anger and pain often set up an ornate shrine. Let us call it the Christos Shrine. The Christos Shrine has sacred songs and icons, and perhaps words from the Psalms of David etched in stone. The Shrine is located in a distant chapel, nestled in a lovely wood.

But the Temple in which they worship daily – the place they keep vigils, the Temple attached to their souls – is the Temple of Anger. And the Master is not allowed to enter.

Those possessed of Anger will go to the lovely chapel in the woods to pay homage to the Master. They may profess sorrow for their outbursts of rage. They may acknowledge a severe detachment from the tenderness of human affection. Or they may weep, and confess the chaotic sins and brawls their anger has instigated. They may even ask His forgiveness, but it will end there.

They will not invite the Master to journey back with them to enter their Temple of Anger.

Why? Because the Temple is where they abide. It is the center of their lives. They fear that to invite the Master could be disastrous. He is the Ultimate Dragon Slayer, and He is beyond human control. That soul believes it is too fearful, too perilous, to invite the Master to the Temple of Anger. So they keep Him far away from their hallowed, foul fount of Anger. In such a state, they can never become Dragon Slayers. They may even become Dragons.

The inner voice of one thus enslaved wrestles:

I must meet with the Master, but I fear giving him entrance.

As we approach the gates of my temple, or as I walk with Him through the painful relics of my past, at any moment I could turn in rage on Him. In fact, it is inevitable.

I will turn on Him. I will accuse Him. I will pass judgment on Him. I may hate Him.

As He enters, I will hurl accusations at Him:

“This is Your fault!”

“Why was I born into this family?!”

“Why did You let such evil things happen to me?!”

“Why didn't You warn me?!”

“Why did You allow them to do what they did to me?!”

“You had the power and the foreknowledge to protect me, but You didn't. You left me in the hands of my abusers!”

“They lied about me, they nearly destroyed me, and You didn't stop them!”

“You could have spared me this agony. You could have made things different. You could have protected me, or rescued me sooner. But You didn't. You let me suffer. You watched me suffer. You had the power to intervene in my suffering, but You didn't. At least, not as soon as You could have.”

“You put me through this!”

“You took my wife in death!”

“You took my mother in death!”

“You took my father in death!”

“You took my child in death!”

“You took my beloved sibling in death!”

“You betrayed me!”

“I hate my life, and I hate You, for making me this way!”

And so it proceeds. The bitter, wounded soul accuses the Master of being the friend of Dragons, the forsaker of the innocent. Good people – trapped in the prison of their pain – often turn in fury on the Master if He gets too close to the source of their pain and anger.

Have you ever thus railed against the Master? I confess, I have.

Of course, this reasoning is corrupt. It impugns our Master's character, and ignores one of the most cherished and yet volatile gifts He has given to the sons and daughters of Eve: free will. Obviously, a child trapped in a prison of abuse has little free will to stop their torment; I am speaking of grown men and women in this context.

I will not here discuss the sovereignty, Justice, foreknowledge, decrees, and Mercy of our Master. It is not my purpose to open a twisted path of questions that have taunted mystics and plagued philosophers since time immemorial.

I stake my ground on this: the hidden things belong to God, but things revealed belong to us and to our children.

It is a mystery beyond my ability to plumb how His Divine sovereignty and holy decrees mingle with our choices and the choices of others to bear in on us. I know that I shall give account to Him for my choices, begging Mercy for my failures and sins, and praising His grace for any good that emerges from this frame of dust.

Some of the pictures I will now paint in this final illustration will apply to you. Others will not. I urge you to retain them all, for they shall enable you to understand certain friends and enemies, and you may well be able to help snatch a writhing soul from the snare of despair.

I will paint this picture saying “I” rather than “you” as I write, for I do not want the slightest hint of presumption on my part to touch your heart, or give you an unwarranted burden. If what I say does touch on you on any point, walk away with whatever incision or balm for your soul this narrative may provide.

Let me begin.

Whether I can admit it or not, in my Temple of Anger, almost all the weights and measures are corrupt. (And the Master hates unjust weights and measures.) If the Master were given entrance into this Temple, perhaps He would make a scourge and overturn the tables, as He did in Herod’s Temple. Perhaps He will smash my scales of justice. Perhaps He will smash the relics and icons of my sufferings.

So I fear granting Him entrance.

Another reason to keep Him out is that once He has passed from the outer to the inner court, He will certainly disrupt my offerings and sacrifices.

To keep the Temple filled with the pungent, yet soothing aroma of Anger, the altars must have incense frequently; the incense of the steady remembrance of the wrongs suffered long ago. Their fragrance must be ever present.

And when the Master passes through that veil of bitter tears into the “holy of holies,” He will find a throne. On that throne, He will see the unholy deity. He will see Anger.

But I dread that when His eyes look upon the face of Anger...

...they will see me.

It will be my face He sees

His eyes will meet my eyes.

I fear that Anger and I are so connected that to look on Anger is simply to look on me.

Anger is my very fiber. And if He dethrones the deity, I fear that I will be undone.

If the Master comes into this wicked, unholy place, He will not allow Anger to stay seated on his wretched throne. There shall be no other gods besides Him. Hence, like Dagon before the Ark, Anger must fall. I fear that the Master will say, “Your house is left to you desolate. Not one stone will be left upon another.”

I fear He will tear down the whole structure. And in the core of my being, the very thought of such an event feels like the end of my world. Who am I without Anger?

And so I keep my strolls with the Master far away at the Christos Shrine in the chapel in the woods, and keep my Temple in full operation without granting Him entrance. When I need to visit Him, I will. I will bring Him fresh flowers and sanctimonious words. I will invoke His help and blessings. But I will not bring him to my Temple of Anger.

It is far too perilous.

I end this dark illustration here. But I must tell you, the reasoning of this poor trapped soul seems logical, but it is surely not sound, for it presumes knowledge of what the Master would do.

I have discussed these pictures and musings with the resident friar for many hours. He insists – and I believe his judgment is true – that we don’t know what the Master will do, nor what we will do if we meet him at the point of our pain. My own experience confirms his judgment.

Perhaps the Master will walk into the dark “holy of holies,” look up at me, and reach out to me with his hand. When I see His scars, and when I look into His eyes, my icy heart might melt. I might cling to Him. I might beg his forgiveness, and plead with Him to take me out.

Or He might walk with me through the relics, the shattered dreams, the smoking sacrifices, holding my hand, and show me in an instant how these sorrows were necessary for the steel I now have in my soul. Rather than accuse him, I might thank Him for taking me through certain heartaches (but not all, to be sure), because they were part of what will make me a Dragon Slayer.

We simply do not know what will happen with each person. But this we know: a bruised reed He will not break. A smoldering wick He will not extinguish.

So, it bears on us that we must take the risk. We must meet with the Master at the point of our pain. If one refuses, he will ever walk with a limp, he may even be crippled.

This is why some people pass through pain, but never become Dragon Slayers. Their pain has never been touched and redeemed by the Master. Their Anger has never been calmed and broken and sanctified and harnessed by His scarred hands.

Therefore, they never reach true battlefields, where Dragons terrorize communities and nations.

They are forever trapped, fighting against themselves, fighting their personal Dragons, until death does that union part. Oh! What a tragic waste of days and months and years; of giftings and talents and energy. Heaven, spare us from being a lifelong hostage within the Temple of Anger.

I would prefer – as I know you would also – to die fighting real Dragons, rather than die fighting myself.

I shall now leave this tear-stained but necessary topic. I will not return to it again in our correspondence. You have enough musings of the soul for yourself and others – as well as your own wounds and trials – to last a lifetime.

I would like to leave you with a happier note.

First, I thank you for the joy and privilege (for that is what I count it) to have been able to correspond with you. Your declaration that these missives have helped you is a true joy to my soul.

And in truth, the crossing of our paths – albeit only in pen thus far – has been a great strength to me. Putting my experiences and lessons onto parchment has aided in the recovery of my body and soul, and helped me repay a

debt of honor. I sought to serve you and our Master by my transparency...and the recounting of painful stories...as that great Dragon Slayer served the Master and me many years ago.

And the beautiful instrument you sent me – Guinevere – is now a joyous and blessed part of my daily musings. The music that pours forth from her at my hands has renewed my youth, and fed my soul. And so – no matter how much I have helped you – for this journey of the soul, I am in your debt.

If my current words seem like a farewell, they are...at least in part. The physicians for my body and those who care for my soul have told that I will be able to leave soon, and resume my station.

My intention is to depart these environs after we celebrate our Master's Passion. The good friar here, who has become my spiritual guide and friend, jokes with me that after the Master's Resurrection, I too will come back from the tomb my enemies sought to put me in.

You are free to use any of the missives I have shared with you with any who you think may be helped on their journey of the soul. And you certainly need not give credit to me by name.

Given the speed of these posts, I venture that I may be able to write you one more time from this blessed refuge, should you respond in haste to this letter. Whether this is my last correspondence or not, let us here commit that we shall continue our exchanges, and endeavor to see each other in the flesh. May God grant that we strengthen our bonds of friendship and valor over bread and wine – both sacred and common.

I pray your time at the Abbey is a fountain of Life, and that the Passion Week brings healing to your soul, and gives you fresh resolve and strength to seek and slay Dragons.

Letter XII

Freedom

Hello My Friend!

I have received your latest post, and was again overjoyed by your kind words.

As one who has marched many days and miles alone, I know the dread of isolation...the fear that “so few know who or what I am...” (I thank God for my dear consort – my soul mate – and long to be with her and my sons again soon, their safety permitting.) Worse yet, I know the anguish that fills the heart when worrying, “I should not have allowed my relationship with this Dragon Slayer to slip through my fingers. He was one person I am certain understood me...”

So, before proceeding further, let me answer the more anxious parts of your letter.

I would be honored to leave this place and travel straightway to your castle. I am doubly bound to do so, since you framed the invitation as a repayment of the debt I declared to owe you! Of course, the blessed instrument you gave me will be with me; I would be delighted to enjoy music and mirth with you and your court musicians far into the night.

My plan is to leave this Abbey shortly after the octave of Easter. (I have a sense of sorrow in this...so great has been this time of healing.) I will soon be fit again for full battle. For the last two weeks, I have been at swordplay and riding my mount – at a leisurely pace, be assured – which has delighted my heart.

And so, sometime within a fortnight of Easter, you can expect to see my small retinue and me. We can discuss many of the things you wrote to me when I arrive. I shall return to my thoughts on our joyous meeting in a moment.

But as I have a few moments now, allow me to respond to one or two matters in which you pressed me.

Very few – if any – of your letters since the first you sent me contained such fretfulness. I fear that my overly descript musings about Anger, the pain we have endured from the hands of our fathers, and our need to walk with the Master through the shadow of our rage may have wrought in you an overanxious spirit.

In that light, I pray this final letter provides some liberty for your heart and soul.

For as a Dragon Slayer, as a servant of the Almighty, and as one redeemed by the stripes of our Master – I wish you to be free.

In freedom, you will be the greatest service to the oppressed and downtrodden. In liberty of the soul, you will be a champion in the cause of Truth and Justice. With an

unfettered interior, you will be a dread in the halls of hell and counsels of Dragons.

So I write to you of freedom; interior freedom...the freedom of the soul, and by contrast, what can enslave us.

Mark my words as one who has slain many Dragons, and spent many years on the front lines of battle or in preparations for battle. Nothing – I repeat – nothing can shackle a Dragon Slayer like unforgiveness. Unforgiveness, with its paternal twin bitterness, will enslave a Dragon Slayer, making him the hostage of his own wounds.

The enemies and Dragons we pursue normally reside far from us, in the outside world. We make defenses to keep them out, or to alert us of their presence. But unforgiveness, lurking in the shadow of our heart, cannot be walled out. It beds with us, rises with us, dines with us, and trains with us. If unforgiveness is not captured, subdued, and banished, it slowly walls us in...it enslaves us.

When you do not forgive, you become a prisoner and a slave. This is one of the many bitter ironies and horrors of unforgiveness. The one who has betrayed or violated us in some specific act, or in a series of ways, times, and places, has left a marks and wounds on us. We cannot erase history, and we cannot deny the reality of the pain or anguish of these acts.

But when we don't forgive, the wound stays fresh, tender, and then becomes infected. When we don't forgive, we carry bitterness around like a satchel full of rocks; it weighs us down. And when we stumble and fall under its weight, the bitter contents of our satchel spill out, and the innocent nearby can be injured or defiled.

We are simply not free. We have become a prisoner to that injustice, and an ongoing slave to the one who hurt us.

And again – oh bitter irony – the one who betrayed us may never think twice about our grief and wrestling. They might even be happy, while we are miserable! Worse still, they are in some way...inadvertently ruling us. The one we despise, we bow to every day. The one who injured us is he to whom we report to every day. By not forgiving their deeds in the past, we make them the master of our present.

This is a vexing paradox. Righteous Anger can propel you to great deeds. But unforgiveness will destroy you from the inside out.

Unforgiveness will color your judgment.

Unforgiveness will eat at you like a cancer.

Unforgiveness will sap your strength.

It is a truly debilitating force.

The Master made clear that if someone sins against you, and turns and says, "I repent," you must forgive them. Would to heaven that all forgiveness was so neat and tidy. Life would be so much easier if the guilty would say, "I have sinned. Please forgive me." In the instance that this does happen, restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, as you are able.

But what if the guilty has not repented or asked for forgiveness? What if they have died or disappeared and we have no way to have a direct confrontation or even a conversation with them?

Again -- The Master also made it clear that we must forgive those who trespass against us, even if they don't ask for forgiveness.

Oh...how I have chafed under this admonition!

I want the guilty to acknowledge the evil of his ways. When I was a youth, and my father was cruel or unjust to me or my brother or my mother, I wanted, nay, needed him to show signs of grief. I want those who have injured me to look into my eyes and see the pain they have caused, to be struck with remorse, and to ask my pardon.

But so often, they are just looking after the details of their own frail existence; or worse, they may be bringing harm to another.

This infuriates me.

Why am I to forgive the one who not only hurt me, but now hurts others? I want to draw my sword and dispatch the guilty -- not forgive them.

Why am I to forgive them?

I must forgive them for my sake...because I want to be free. I want to be free of the bitterness, the hate, the pain and the grief. I weary of being chained to that person. I must be free.

When you refuse to forgive someone, you become their warden as well as their prisoner. They may be your prisoner, but so what? Whether you are the prisoner or the prison keeper, you are still chained...still in prison...with the one who wronged you. Do you really want to live in prison? Do you really want to give them that kind of power over you... that kind of connection to you?

Would you not rather be free -- free to live and love and laugh? Free to roam the countryside in search of Dragons?

A man enslaved by unforgiveness cannot be much use in fighting Dragons. Shackles keep him from moving about freely and focusing on the Dragons without. He is forever distracted by the clanking chains within.

Furthermore -- depending on how much unforgiveness is rooted in his soul -- he mistakes the enemy too easily. He sees the face of the one who harmed him in the face of others. A voice, a word, a phrase, a smell, will trigger his memory, and tempt him to draw a sword on the innocent. To unleash the revenge lurking in his heart, the tormented man will sometimes punish the innocent to seek revenge on the guilty.

I said the "tormented" because that is what we are when

we are in the grips of bitterness. The word "torment" is the word the Master used. He said that if we did not forgive, He would hand us over to the tormentors.

Again, this seems harsh to our frail souls, but He has designed us, and made the rules. He knows all Truth. His scales of Justice and Mercy are flawless. Our duty is to obey...for His glory and our good; His scars prove the depths of His commitment to our welfare.

I speak to you of freedom, as opposed to simply forgiveness, because I want you to think of forgiveness as not only releasing the guilty, but also freeing yourself. When you forgive, you free yourself from their company, from the prison, from the darkness.

Yes, we still bear the scars of the injury, and as we have discussed, those scars are part of what make us who we are. However, when you forgive someone you free yourself. You are free to come out into the crisp, clean, morning air...free to enjoy the waving of trees or wheat in the wind.

You are free to see children and adults simply as people, not potential oppressors and potential victims. They no longer take on the hue of your own anguish. The sounds you hear in the open air are no longer mingled with the shouts and demands of the prisoners you hold. You are free.

So I urge you to release those who have wronged you, and so free yourself.

For clarity's sake: by forgiving them, it does not mean they become your comrades, or your counselors in war, or that you should trust them, or even be near them. I speak from the shadow of fresh wounds. As I indicated in my earlier letters, the pain of my corporal wounds was surpassed by the anguished pain in my soul from the horror of my comrades seeking to slay me.

Wrestling through many tears with my need to forgive these treacherous men -- and to free myself from the captivity of bitterness -- was a fierce internal battle. But for my own sake, I had to prevail. I had to forgive them, and free them, and thus free myself. And thanks be to Heaven, I have. And when the need arises -- as it sometimes does -- I continue to forgive them. As you know, from the deepest wounds come the greatest pain. And when the pain comes again -- though we thought we were done with it forever -- we again need the balm of forgiveness.

But -- to emphasize this point for your sake -- I can assure you that I will never again let my betrayers into my tent. I cannot conceive of a scenario in which I would trust those who sought to destroy me. Nor am I required to. (The Friar with whom I have spent many hours helped me discern the difference between forgiveness and trust. One is required of me; the other is not.) Moreover, when needed, I will warn others of the ignoble character of these men. They are not to be trusted.

In like manner, you may not see or speak with those you forgive. If you must be in their presence for some reason of state, or gathering of kin, be polite, and keep at a safe distance. You are not required to subject yourself to further injury. You are simply required to forgive them from your heart.

Then you will be free. And it is possible that your painful experience may be turned into a great blessing to others. For unforgiveness holds millions hostage right now; bitterness is clawing at the heart and soul of some of those near you. It is an insidious and vicious tormentor with agents scattered throughout the realm.

As you know by now, unforgiveness is an interior Dragon; one of the most deadly of all Dragons. And if you would remain a Dragon Slayer, able to slay Dragons and to rescue others, then you must conquer this Dragon in your heart.

Slay him, or be devoured by him. In this hand-to-hand combat with the Dragon of unforgiveness, there can be no truce, no love-ordained détente. There can only be one victor, one Master. One will be the vanquished, and one the conqueror. Take heart my friend; I'm confident you will prevail in the struggle.

I must bring two or three other thoughts to bear on this critical subject.

Perhaps the most troubling and outrageous part of this equation is that unforgiveness will inhibit our relationship with the Master. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." If we don't forgive others, our Maker will not forgive us. I recall many hours wrestling with this seemingly unjust decree of our Master.

But the more I pondered it, and the more I looked at my own trespasses, the more it made perfect sense. One of the ancient confessions says:

Through my own fault,
Through my most grievous fault,
I have sinned,
In thought, word, and deed,
In what I have done,
In what I have failed to do.

And I often add my own thoughts when I confess under my breath;

I have sinned,
In what I have said,
And what I have failed to say,
In those I have wounded
In those I have failed.
Agnus Dei, Miserere Nobis.

At times, as the great King David lamented, I feel weighed down and crushed beneath the burden of my own faults. As he said, I have too many transgressions of my own to worry about...more than the hairs of my head. The thought of not being forgiven for my wrongdoing by the Master simply because I would not forgive those who sinned against me...this is an unbearable burden.

As our Master shrewdly taught: if He has forgiven me a debt of ten thousand talents, how can I not forgive my fellow human being for a debt of five talents?

Finally, we must forgive ourselves. For some Dragon Slayers, this is nearly an insurmountable task...yet vital to our souls' health and peace. We must forgive ourselves.

My whole life, from the time I was a small child, I wanted to be a good man as well as a great man. Great men are defined by great deeds of valor or charity, and this is as it should be. Good men are defined by things external and internal; by words and deeds of wisdom, mercy and justice... by kindness, goodness, and uprightness.

As I grow old, I ever face my human frailty. Why, as the great Dragon Slayer Paulos lamented, do I do the things that I hate, and fail to do the things that I love? This anguished mystery is one that vexes and perplexes. It weighs down a man's heart and soul. If he allowed, it would be a constant siren of sorrow, overwhelming his senses.

And so the simple yet difficult duty is this: we must forgive those who have committed wrongs, even when it is we who have committed those wrongs. If the Master has pardoned us, then we must not live under the crushing weight of our failures. If the Master has separated us from our sins as far as the East is from the West, then while we are tracking Dragons from East to West, we should not be distracted by the howls and echoes of our sins and follies.

Like all unforgiveness, to refuse to forgive oneself is debilitating. The shackles must be broken, and the shame erased. Lessons learned, yes, but we must not become prisoners of our own guilt. In many ways, we all offend; we all need mercy; and in many ways, we can all do good.

And for whatever reasons that belong to the Master, He has chosen to call us servants and friends, despite His knowledge of our failures and struggles.

When I consider the crimes and villainies of the Great Dragon Slayer King David; or the treachery and betrayal of the Great Rock Petros, who was sifted like wheat ere the cock crowed twice; when I consider these men and the fact that even after their failures they remained beloved servants of the Master, and leaders in his army...I marvel. It mystifies me. And I must confess, it delights me and gives me hope. If David and Petros can be forgiven, restored, and sent back into battle for the Master, so can you and I...and anyone else.

So...be free my friend. Be free from the shackles of unforgiveness and the prison of bitterness, against others, or against yourself. Be free to love and laugh and serve, free to make war on Dragons. I pray these truths add length of days to you...days spent in joyous liberty.

Now, on to lighter topics! As I said in my opening, I heartily accept your gracious invitation to abide with you for a season at your castle.

I shall have four men with me to care for my horses, armor and weapons, and to serve as my personal guard, for unfortunately there is yet concern of a plot to destroy me. Any modest quarters for all of us will suffice.

I have these few simple requests...

I should like to be permitted some leisurely hours in the great library of which you spoke. (We must feed our souls and sharpen our minds if we would continue to slay

Dragons);

I heartily request that we have times when several of us gather to play our musical instruments. I long to play and sing the ballads of love and war with fellow warriors (Guinevere shall be in my hands, I assure you.);

I ask that at times thought wise by you, that your table be open to younger warriors of your choosing, and to any who you believe might be strengthened by our fellowship and emboldened by our memories. I have found that one of the greatest things we can do for the next generation of warriors is to simply give them time with us without pretensions or agenda.

And, finally, I ask that you would honor me by studying and critiquing plans I have sketched for a campaign against a Dragon that rages in the south. Forgive my enthusiasm for your ability to make war, but I believe that with the help of the Master and His angels, you and I could raise a force that could dispatch this foul creature of hell, making his cave the haunt of jackals, and his memory the taunt of dancing children at play.

I look forward to toasting your health, and discussing future forays into battle. I am anxious to turn my sword outward again.

Until we see each other in the flesh –

May the Angels protect you,

May the just honor you,

May the innocent extol you,

May the evil revile you,

May all hell know you,

And may Dragons loathe the sound of your name.

A Closing Note from Randall:

I hope you have enjoyed *Dragon Slayers*, and I hope you will help us get this book published. Please feel free to write an endorsement on the book, and contact me if you have any other thoughts. We hope to have the finished book by late April. You can email me at DragonSlayerBook@voiceofresistance.com.

God bless you,
Randall Terry.

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