

The Meaning of Power

Prologue, 1473

For a month, the slumbering Dragon had been uneasy, grumbling in his sleep. Then one morning, after days of stirring the ground, He woke up.

It had started with a curious lilt in the ground under foot. A juddering, that swiftly rose to a rumble sharp enough to knock men from their feet, and tumble the rolled offering leaves full of fruits and meats off of the stone pedestals within an immediate six mile radius.

In the near distance, the Dragon roared, full and throaty. The ground opened as if cut in half, dragon fire spurting up in small puffs before the world split and slid away to let the God free. Rock and ash shot into the air, mushrooming into the sky and slowly turning day to night.

For the tribesmen gathered in the clearing by the great river, praying desperately over the hastily gathered sacrifices, all was in vain. As the beast God roared, long and low and loud, the sound was felt as much as heard, louder than any noise the peoples of the jungle had ever heard before. Ears popped as the wave of noise rushed over them, and many never stood up again. Those few who did, the strong and the fit, added their terror to the roiling noise as blood poured from their noses, and the fear took over.

They ran. Ran as the roar, hot and boiling, smashed trees to the ground around them, invisible claws pressing the trunks into the soft earth, and into the flesh of once-screaming men, silenced in an instant. Like corn before a gale, the forest laid down in supplication to the great Dragon, and the northern tribe was no more.

Ash fire tore down through the forest, stripping leaves and boiling sap. Miles away, between the great river and the small river, another tribe ran as the Dragon's cloud obscured the trees. Yet the roar was ongoing, still coming, trembling hearts and minds even as the shock-wave tumbled people from their feet. The Dragon's voice squeezed their chests, held their hearts in His talons, filled them with fear, so that they ran as the rabbit and the gazelle, in terror and without thought.

Then, the cloud too began to fall. The Dragon's breath tore forwards, across the crushed ground, roiling and turning over the fallen trees, caressing and burying broken bodies and creatures, snarling and surging forwards faster than any man could have imagined possible.

The ash continued to fall. The first smuts had rained down like a dirty snow, smearing the dark faces of the terrified men and women scrambling down the southern cliffs towards the small river. For a few moments, the dry rain formed gaunt beauty in the skies, and dark seasoning to the hair of the fleeing, then... the sun went out.

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Normally this river, like all others in the jungle, was dangerous and home to animals made of teeth and speed and cunning. Yet still, instinct drove men towards it, away from the heat of the Dragon's roar behind them, in spite of the danger.

In the mighty grips of the Dragon... the river had become so much worse. No beasts greeted the men as they splashed into the murky water, dirtied with ash. The beasts had already long since fled. A few leading figures made it across and scrambled up the far bank, running blindly into the territory beyond the Great Wet.

Behind them, for a moment, the other men and women swam and struck out for the far shore in cool water... but then the roar came anew, as the river answered the angry God, and reversed its flow.

Rushing, roiling water smashed around the north river bend, carrying trees as tall as ten men and bigger in its tumbling waves, smashing over the beleaguered tribe, the scalding water ending life in an instant, and ferrying the dead with expedience, far, far to the south, encased in mud and ash. The southern tribe was almost wiped out, those few who made it far enough away left as shocked, broken shadows of themselves.

For two days, the Dragon roared and thrashed. For another three years, the heat of his rage sweltered in the rock, above the ridge of crushed trees, across the barren ashen plane. And then, as suddenly as His rage had burst forth, the Dragon cooled, and returned to sleep.

In time, the minds of men forgot, though the story, as stories are wont to do, lived on.