

Ethura: Birth of a Dragon

Apala was young, but he had travelled far. Far away from his small village, nestled at the base of one of the distant mountains on the horizon. He walked through the open field as a gentle breeze swirled around him, lightly brushing the grass against his knees. Every so often the thick blades would tangle together like hands, trying to pull him back and prevent what he was going to do. But he pulled free, shattering their long wispy fingers and continued to push his way through the valley.

He remembered the stories the village elder would tell the children. This land, Ethura, has a checkered history. The first known civilisation was 'The Ancients', who lived in advanced cities thousands of years ago. However, their reign crumbled when creatures they'd lived in harmony with for generations suddenly attacked, destroying the cities and killing thousands. These Ancient People called for help from their Gods and a great flood came, trapping the creatures and sealing them in a cave deep underground at the bottom of a canyon. The few surviving Ancients left the death and destruction of their civilisation behind them and faded into history.

Apala believed there was truth to this tale and had set out to find the cave and control the beasts. Anger boiled inside him as he thought of his village, and the way they excluded him in their conformity. They would pay for what they did; only then would he be happy.

Ahead of him, the land fell away into a deep canyon. As Apala neared the edge, he saw the large crack in the landscape, twisting and turning towards the distant silhouette of an enormous, ruined castle, surrounded by the remains of a beautiful city. Butterflies filled Apala's stomach and with a deep breath, he slid over the edge of the steep ravine and slowly climbed down. Despite his caution, he placed his foot on a small rock. It cracked and he lost his grip, sliding down the rock cliff. Desperately struggling to get a hold, eventually, his feet found a small crack and he came to a halt. He shuddered and gingerly continued to climb down the stone, even more, eager for flat ground. At the bottom, relieved to feel the hard stone floor of the canyon, Apala began to search for the entrance to the cave.

After walking for what felt like hours the sky began to darken and the canyon fell into shadow. In the fading light, he spotted a small gap in between two large boulders, just wide enough for him to squeeze through. Peering in, he could see a tunnel that led, deep into the darkness. Is this it? Apala wondered as the cold stone brushed his back and chest. The tunnel widened the further he walked, however, the dying sunlight seemed to retreat as if it feared what lay within the darkness. Blind, Apala felt his way along the wall, the surface was smooth as if had been worn down by the water. The cool stone soothed Apala's hands, which had been scratched and torn from the climb.

Hours seemed to pass as he walked through the darkness, endless black on every side filled with formless shapes that swirled around him. Until the floor suddenly ended without warning. Panic rushed through him as he tumbled down. The ground was completely gone. He fell through the air, down, down, down. His arm hit a boulder, pain shot like lightning through him and then the tunnel filled with light.

For a split second, he saw a wide cave, then he landed with a splash in a deep pool of water. Despite his screaming body, he fought his way to the surface and the edge of the pool. He collapsed, spluttering and gasping for air, every fractured breath, followed by a painful shock that ran through him. Tears ran down Apala's cheeks and his chest tightened. He lay exhausted on the cool stone shaking, questioning why he tried so hard to find this stupid place, only to die alone at the bottom of an empty cave. Despair surrounded him as his mind sank into darkness.

A whisper echoed through the dark. Apala shot up with a gasp, suddenly wide awake, his chest heaving. He searched around for the noise, blinking the world into focus and seeing the room for the first time.

He was in a large cavern roughly shaped like a pair of bone-white hands, cupping the water which lit the cavern with a greenish glow. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, while stalagmite reached towards the hole he had fallen through. On his side of the cavern, the giant stone fingers were carved into stairs and led deeper into the cave.

With a sigh, he began to climb. The steps were far too big for a human, reaching up to Apala's waste. They were too big for any Ethuran race.

At the top, was a wide chamber. Large stalactites and stalagmites created a path towards the back of the cave, were pressed into the wall, were three large, pale stone rings wrapped around a small circle. Strange writing was carved into the pale outer rings and long elegant lines formed a handprint on the inner circle. As Apala approached the stone, the whisper returned beside his ear. He wiped around to see nothing, but he felt it move towards the carving, the gateway. A call for help, drawing him closer. Apala pressed his hand against the carving.

He immediately staggered backwards as the walls shook violently and several rocks splashed into the glowing pool. With a deafening scrap, the three rings started to turn, sinking one by one deeper into the stone wall. A sound like the thud of a thousand hooves rumbled through the floor. Apala braced himself, covering his head with his arms.

Then suddenly it stopped.

The air stilled and Apala straightened up.

But, before he could take a breath, water burst out from in between the rings, crashing into him and shoving him back into the pool.

Water rapidly filled the cavern, chasing away the air. Dark smoky shapes flew out from the carving, wiping past him with ghostly screeches.

One stopped and swirled around Apala. It was a human figure, a silhouette of smoke and mist. Apala thrashed in the rapidly rising water as his throat burned, searching for air.

Then figure's ghostly whisper echoed in his mind. "The stories you believed were incomplete, these creatures entombed for destroying the cities were not monsters. They were corrupted by a force that still lingers in the corners of this land. You must tell the people of today, land that they should not all be feared. Thank you" The last few words were barely audible. As the figure began to fade, it reached out and touched Apala's chest.

The burning stopped as his lungs filled with air and he suddenly felt a burst of energy. He swam with ease, propelled by the raging current through the flooded tunnel and out into the flooded canyon. The rush of water was endless and he knew it wouldn't stop.

He clawed his way up the canyon wall desperate to reach higher ground. He bolted up the nearest incline, hardly touching the ground. He raced towards the closest mountain as the turbulent water pursued him. As Apala scaled the first cliff, he spotted a girl about his age, desperately scrabbling up the boulders. She looked up at him with sheer terror as when the water crashed into the stone. He reached down to her but she hesitated then grabbed his hand. Confused by her pause Apala examined his hand. Except it wasn't his hand.

It was a long scaly talon with long elegant claws. Stunned he lifted her up with ease and he realised towered over her. He placed his talon back on the ground and looked over his shoulder and discovered his body it long and winding, covered in sky blue scales with a strong webbed tail. Still fuelled by adrenalin he let out a nervous laugh, but the water was closing in on them. He shook himself and he lifted the girl onto his back and leapt up the mountain.

As Apala finally reached the top, he let the girl down and tuned to the valley, now almost completely underwater. "Thank you." the girl said in a small shaky voice the girl. He could see the lingering terror in her eyes, the same as he had felt in the cave. The same all-consuming hopelessness that everyone down there was going to face. I could help, as he did with the girl. Without another moment's hesitation, he leapt down the mountain toward his village.

The girl watched from the peak of the mountain as the long wingless dragon flew down cliffs and raced the destructive waves, as the world below her disappeared under the water.