

The Man Who Walked Beside Monsters

The Story of Taryn Vaelor,

Taryn Vaelor was born in the borderlands beyond the Ash Wastes, where survival mattered more than nobility and children learned how to track footprints before they learned how to read.

His village sat between deep forests and ruined kingdoms, a place constantly raided by bandits, beasts, mercenaries, and desperate men pretending necessity excused cruelty. Most people there died young.

Taryn almost did too.

When he was eight years old, a starving ash drake descended on the village during winter. Small compared to true dragons, but still large enough to tear through houses like paper. Men ran. Guards panicked. Hunters missed every shot they fired.

Taryn remembered watching his father stand his ground with nothing but a wood axe.

Not because he thought he could win.

Because someone had to buy the others time to escape.

The drake killed him in seconds.

But the image never left Taryn.

Not the death.

The choice.

Most people spent their lives waiting for someone stronger to save them.

Taryn hated that.

After the attack, his mother tried to leave the borderlands, but the roads were dangerous and coin was scarce. She died from illness before Taryn turned thirteen, leaving him alone in a world that rarely cared whether children survived.

So he adapted.

He learned how to hunt.

How to track.

How to disappear.

How to kill things larger than himself by being smarter, faster, and more patient.

By sixteen, Taryn had become a ranger for caravans crossing the wastes. Quiet. Reliable. Difficult to intimidate. He developed a reputation for surviving impossible situations through stubbornness and instinct rather than brute strength.

That reputation eventually drew the attention of a mercenary company called the Black Ash Legion.

At first, they offered him coin.

Then purpose.

Or at least the illusion of it.

The Legion specialized in hunting dangerous creatures across the fractured kingdoms. Wraiths. Giants. Ancient beasts buried beneath ruins. Taryn became one of their best trackers because he understood something most hunters did not:

Creatures were predictable.

People were not.

Monsters killed because they were hungry, territorial, frightened, or defending something.

Humans killed for pride.

For boredom.

For power.

That realization changed him slowly.

The older Taryn became, the less he feared monsters and the less he trusted men.

Years later, during an expedition into the shattered obsidian valleys of the Ashlands, Taryn encountered the creature that would define the rest of his life.

Morvath.

The black dragon.

The Legion had been hired to kill it after entire settlements vanished near the mountains. Everyone expected another mindless beast terrorizing villages.

What they found instead was a dragon chained beneath an ancient shrine.

Not physically.

Spiritually.

Runes carved into the mountain drained Morvath's strength while cultists harvested his fire to fuel weapons and war machines. The dragon was furious, starving, and half-mad from years of imprisonment.

The Legion ordered Taryn to put an arrow through its eye while it was weakened.

He refused.

The commander tried to do it himself.

Morvath tore him apart.

Chaos erupted instantly. Soldiers fled. Fire consumed the shrine. Taryn should have died alongside the others, but instead he cut through the remaining chains binding the dragon.

Not out of mercy.

Out of understanding.

A trapped predator is always more dangerous than a free one.

Morvath spared him.

Barely.

Their relationship was hostile for years afterward. Morvath constantly mocked him. Taryn constantly threatened to leave. But over time, something resembling trust formed between them.

Not ownership.

Never ownership.

Partnership.

That distinction mattered deeply to both of them.

Word spread quickly about the "Dragon Ranger" wandering the wastes beside a black dragon that should have destroyed entire kingdoms. Kings offered gold for Morvath's head. Cults worshipped them as omens. Mercenaries chased them hoping for glory.

Taryn ignored all of it.

He never wanted fame.

Only freedom.

It was during these years that he first met Xanotos Lunemora.

At the time, rumors described Xanotos as a cursed warlock wandering the Hollow Regions with purple fire beneath his skin and death following in his footsteps. Most stories painted him as either a monster or a madman possessed by something ancient.

Taryn expected another arrogant mage trying too hard to look terrifying.

Instead he found a man sitting beside a dying fire quietly repairing his sword while an unseen presence whispered through the trees around him.

Nyrielle noticed Taryn immediately.

Morvath noticed her.

Neither liked what they sensed.

The first conversation between Taryn and Xanotos nearly turned into a fight after Morvath instinctively bared his teeth at the eldritch presence surrounding him.

Nyrielle whispered from the darkness:

“Your dragon growls like he believes he matters.”

Morvath answered aloud:

“And your goddess hides because she knows she doesn’t.”

That alone almost started a war.

But Taryn noticed something strange.

Xanotos never tried to intimidate anyone.

He never boasted.

Never threatened.

Never demanded fear.

The dangerous ones rarely do.

Over time, mutual respect formed between them through battle after battle across the Ashlands. Taryn admired Xanotos’s refusal to surrender no matter how horrific the odds became. Xanotos respected Taryn because he treated monsters like living beings instead of trophies.

Together, they survived things that should have killed them both.

Ancient horrors beneath the Hollow Between Worlds.

Ash giants buried beneath dead volcanoes.

Warlords hunting Morvath for power.

Cultists trying to free things even Nyrielle warned against touching.

And through all of it, Taryn slowly became one of the only people Xanotos genuinely trusted.

Not because Taryn was fearless.

Because he was steady.

Then came Red Hollow.

A dying frontier village trapped beneath endless drought and violent storms. Rumors spoke of a katari sorcerer living near the mountains whose lightning split towers apart.

Storm IronPaw.

Taryn met him exactly the way most people met Storm:

Mid-argument.

Storm was trying to explain atmospheric pressure to terrified villagers while simultaneously threatening to destroy the weather tower beneath their town. Taryn interrupted halfway through the explanation with:

“You know normal people just say ‘big magic storm machine bad,’ right?”

Storm stared at him for a long moment before replying:

“You look like someone who loses arguments to doors.”

That was the beginning of their friendship.

Or at least their mutual irritation.

Taryn found Storm exhausting at first. Too logical. Too detached. Too obsessed with calculations while people were actively trying to stab them.

Storm found Taryn reckless and infuriatingly instinct-driven.

Yet despite themselves, they worked together perfectly.

Taryn excelled at understanding people.

Storm excelled at understanding systems.

One navigated emotion.

The other navigated patterns.

Together they uncovered the ancient storm engine buried beneath Red Hollow and freed the imprisoned skies above the Ash Wastes.

Afterward, something unexpected happened.

Neither of them left.

Taryn realized Storm needed grounding before he disappeared completely into logic and isolation.

Storm realized Taryn was one of the few people capable of standing inside chaos without being consumed by it.

And somewhere along the road between dragons, eldritch gods, storms, and ash-covered battlefields...

Taryn Vaelor became the thing he never expected to be.

Not a hero.

Not a king.

But the man monsters trusted enough to walk beside.

Dragons passed over the borderlands only rarely, distant shadows drifting over the clouds. Most people prayed they would never come closer. Taryn felt the opposite. He wanted to understand them.

At twenty-three, a black dragon descended into the volcanic wastes south of the borderlands. Villages burned. Trade routes collapsed. A king offered a mountain of gold for the beast's head.

Rangers were sent.
Most did not return.
Taryn did.

Not because he killed the dragon.
Because he refused to.

After weeks tracking the devastation across scorched valleys, he found the dragon resting among shattered obsidian cliffs. Enormous. Ancient. Terrifying.
And wounded.

A war spear, the size of a ballista bolt, had pierced the dragon's wing. Some army had tried to slay it before abandoning the effort. The beast was dying slowly, rage and pain turning everything nearby to ash.

Most hunters would have finished the job.

Taryn didn't.

Instead, he did the one thing no one had ever tried.

He approached.

Step by step. Calm. Unarmed. Speaking softly in a language older rangers used to calm beasts of the wild. It should have failed. Dragons are not wolves.

But pain changes creatures.

And the dragon listened.

For three days Taryn remained near it, removing the spear, tending the wound, bringing water from sulfur springs and prey dragged across the ash fields. The dragon could have killed him a hundred times.

It didn't.

When the wound finally closed, the dragon rose, wings unfurling across the burning sky.

Most people would expect gratitude.

Dragons do not think like that.

Instead, the great beast lowered its massive head until one golden eye filled Taryn's entire world.

Recognition.

Not servant.

Not prey.

Equal.

Since that day, Taryn Vaelor has walked the volcanic lands beside the ancient black dragon known as Morvath the Ash Sovereign.

He wears armor forged from shed scales, etched with runes learned from draconic memory. The gold around his arms and neck is not decoration but tribute taken from tyrants who tried to claim Morvath as a weapon.

They failed. Kings still whisper about the ranger who commands a dragon.

They misunderstand.

Taryn commands nothing.

He hunts alongside a creature as old as empires, across wastelands where only flame survives.

And when enemies see the ranger standing calmly beside a dragon whose wings blot out the sky, they finally understand the truth.

The dragon is not his mount.

The dragon chose him.