[Given by Connor to Peter on 9/25/2006, before Peter started his first draft.]

STORY SCAFFOLD — I'M AFRAID YOU'VE GOT DRAGONS

PROLOG SCENE

Something that establishes time and place, and the extremely problematic relationship between men and dragons (especially the bigger ones, sweeping through human lives without much noticing they are they are there, and causing a lot of damage in the process). Could be a scene in which forest folk get overrun themselves, and come running into a larger village to warn people what's coming, and how the village responds to try and turn the dragon in its path — only the normal tricks aren't working, which can be our first hint that Something Is Wrong here. We do need some sense of the evil wizard's presence in this prolog, without overtly revealing him.

He's a lurking but not overt background presence from here until we do meet him, not through his actual presence, but by what he is making the dragons do, and the subsequent spread of that news.

Dragons, small to large, are various levels of annoyance. And the larger they are the more dangerous they can be. But men and dragons have shared this world for a long time, and people generally know how to stay safe s possible, same as with any other wild creature. But lately the dragons in this area have been acting differently...and that's fodder for gossip.

ACT ONE

Setting: a small backwater kingdom next door to the action in the prolog.

We open in the kingdom's one and only castle, which has seen better days.

Cued up in the main hall are a number of suitors for THE PRINCESS'S hand in marriage. We meet them before we meet her. The contrast should be amusing.

It's just another day in the kingdom. All the suitors are there, lined up, looking at each other warily...they aren't the highest quality princes, and they know it...trying to check out their chances, looking at the new guy ("take a number!"), and then SHE comes down. "Gooood morning, boys...what have you got for me today?" And they just start offering her presents and recounting their deeds and one-upping each other and one of them says something which is a clear lie, because he's embarrassed about the reality of what he is offering, and all the rest launch in with "You never — !" And she just loves it. It's Scarlett O'Hara time. She's not as shallow as Scarlett, of course, and she gets better over the course of the story, which Scarlett never does, but there's still some of that flavor. Total dominance with but a glance or flick of that well-turned wrist.

In the end, bored to tears, she just has to get away. So she goes tearing off into the forest on her own. Some of them pursue, but she loses them handily because she's a damn good rider.

On her own in the first she's going to be pursuing her secret hobby. I don't know what it is. Fencing? Archery? Knitting doilies? Teaching herself to read? Whatever you want. But it's something she keeps secret from everyone.

Meanwhile, just entering the forest, cue PRINCE REGINALD and HIS NOT ENTIRELY TRUSTWORTHY GROOM/VALET. Reginald is a Big Time Prince. The Prince of Princes, in fact, from the biggest, grandest kingdom around. He's passing through the outskirts of this local kingdom, on his way to the Princess's castle. No specific short-term goal. He has been sent out by his Kingly dad to GROW UP. To get a little seasoning and experience. (Reginald's dad is extremely disappointed in him, since he is all surface and no substance, or at least mostly surface and no substance. This particular groom/valet wasn't Reginald's choice. He's one of his dad's men, and has been charged

with the specific task of making sure Reginald comes back a seasoned hero instead of a flashy lout.)

The scene in which Reginald and the Princess meet should be a slightly askew parody of the classic romantic meet-the-charming-prince moments in fiction and film. He looks GORGEOUS and everything goes twang inside her.

[Not only is Reginald THE prince of princes, from the place of places, and that's one reason she flips out; but one reason she never flipped out before is that she never saw him in person, just represented by bad cameo paintings. No photos back then. "You're much taller than in your painting..." "Yeah. We fired that guy."]

Very romantic from her POV. Not so much from his, though he's making moves on her out of habit. He doesn't find out immediately who she is; she's being mysterious. Then she'll discover that he is coming to her castle and suddenly she is OUT of there, running/riding hard to get back and get things in order. His reaction to this sudden interruption in his standard seduction act: "What an odd girl!"

She comes in scattering scullery maids and chickens, all a'panic. She is deeply embarrassed, because she isn't a really big princess from a big kingdom, and there is all this stuff they've just been letting slide because it was friendly and funky and they kind of liked it that way. Now it doesn't look very good to her at all. Now that she has her eye on...Reg.

Our hero Robert enters the story in a big way when the local King & Queen hire him at the princess's behest to exterminate the castle prior to Reginald's arrival. They want to impress him and currently can't. And he's coming, so they have to hurry!

Robert is at home, sleeping. His mother is cooking for the troops (there are a lot of mouths to feed in this house), and their tame trained dragons are doing various things around the house. Nice little domestic scene. Mom has been encouraging Robert in his fantasies of becoming a groom for a prince, because this would really be living out his mom's

fantasies. Her son, working for royalty! And she could be prattling on and on about royal events and the gossip from other kingdoms, even while Robert is sleeping in that first scene, talking to the dragons instead of to him...

Then comes the knock on the door. The King's representative, come to hire him.

This gives us the nifty "hide the dragons!" scene. We don't know he is an exterminator at this point. We just know he's somebody who likes sleeping and dragons...so the call goes out, the castle guard/king's rep/whoever leaves to collect the exterminator, and we cut to this sleeping guy with the weird home life...and suddenly they have to keep the dragons hidden from the very people who are coming to hire him. Wouldn't exactly look good for business if the dragon exterminator were too chummy with the things, now would it?

Robert takes the commission after a bit of haggling.

He then goes to collect his BEST FRIEND and assistant, plus all the bizarre necessary tools for the job, even as the king's rep is putting pressure on him about the immediacy of the job. But Robert moves at Robert's speed, and always has.

Loaded down with gear, Robert and his friend go to the castle and start on the job. Robert has never been inside the castle before and is impressed despite himself. And envious. If only HE could be a groom/valet and live in a place like this...

Robert's dragon exterminating at the castle is taking a lot of time both because it is reasonably well-infested and because he doesn't really want to hurt them, just get them out. So it is taking time, and the princess is pushing everyone to work harder/faster to get ready...

Too late. Reginald is here. He arrives, with groom. Much to-do.

TIME PRESSURE ON THE EXTERMINATING SHIFTS TO DO-IT-BUT-STAYOUT-OF-SIGHT PRESSURE AFTER REGINALD ACTUALLY ARRIVES.

Which doesn't work out, of course. First there is our meet-cute, when Robert literally comes crashing through a wall into the princess's private life. Cliché would be bedroom, so that's the right place. It's whatever unusual thing the Princess is doing there that plays with the trope. (Interrupting a fencing lesson? Throwing knives at an annoying suitor's picture? Trying to exterminate a pesky little dragonlet herself?)

She does see a first glimpse of Robert's gentle heart at work in this scene, in how he handles what he catches, and it does strike her somewhere inside, even as she is flamingly focused on Reginald.

Meanwhile the prince is in the castle. You stay with the local royalty when you pass through. All part of the pomp and circumstance of it. So the princess is doing her damnedest to bump into Reginald and generally be in his way. Plenty of room there for interaction pushed and interaction avoided. And there's also room for all three of them to interact, if there is still some exterminating going on. That could also be how Robert comes to the groom's attention, which will be important later.

Possibility: a dramatic everybody-meets-everybody scene which Robert interrupts or comes wandering through or can't get away from in time? Whatever it is, it should make Robert look as clumsy and hapless as reasonably possible in both her eyes and the eyes of the prince. And it should make her feel embarrassed in front of the prince, because it reveals how badly the castle was infested.

It occurs to me that Robert, knowing Dragon ways as well as he does, and having some abilities of persuasion with them, may well have found a lot more than anyone knew were there. A LOT more.

After the extermination is over Robert takes the collected dragonlets off to be dealt with, and now we see more about him: about his relationship with the villagers, who don't respect him much but he's all the choice

they've got in this job; about his relationship with his mom; about his friend, and the girl he loves, who THINKS she loves Robert but has never said so; about the dragons he secretly keeps at home and has trained (THEY WILL COME HELP HIM AT THE RIGHT TIME)...

...and we definitely see the dragon market. It's a short chapter all by itself. Not a nice place (dark, but not evil). Combined slaughterhouse and manufacturing site and sales ground. There are parts of Robert's job he really, really hates, and he doesn't fully understand why they have to be this way. The Dragon market is one of them. But there ARE nasty dragons who need to be dealt with, and its his job, so...

The DM is also a clearing house for local dragon information, and Robert will be plugged in and conversant. Sightings here, rumors there, possible jobs to be done.

As for the prince himself, we finally discover he's all surface and no substance after he has settled in to sleep at the castle, in his private conversation with his groom. They are arguing. Royal dad's orders were to make the rounds, but stay in the stables with his horse and generally live a knightly life instead of a flashy prince's one, and here he is breaking drill...

Cut to princess, plotting how to get closer to Reginald.

Cut to Robert, who would like to get away from home, where he won't be taunted by all these people, and his past won't be remembered, and his name won't be a source of humor to everyone, and he can be some prince's man. Robert decides to suck up to the Prince's groom a little bit. Maybe there's an opportunity here to be at least assistant groom, or to work for someone else in that kind of context. He sees these two guys as a way out. He won't have to be a dragon exterminator any more. And if not actually working for the prince, when all is said and done, maybe he can at least get some useful contacts to someone else? Maybe if he works as an assistant for 10 years he might be able to get a little closer to his dream...

More of daily life as suits. We need to see Robert in some non-quest-related, day-in-thelife extermination scene, most likely a hunt for a bigger dragon. A reported potential mankiller.

Normally this would automatically fall to Robert. I think actually that the princess will step in, with Dad and Mom, so that Daddy gives the task to the prince, rather than throwing it open to the general mass of suitors. Some of the suitors might not take that lying down and want to waylay the prince, or go off on the dragon hunt anyway to try and impress the princess. A few might just go along to see how a Real Prince does it. All kinds of possible comic material in their different reactions.

The groom likes the way things have fallen out, but knows Reginald is going to need help. So he hires Robert to come along "just as a tracker."

Eventually they all find the dragon they are looking for, and some chaos ensues. But before that, in the tracking, Robert sees all kinds of signs that things aren't right. He is very disturbed by this. What he is seeing is against all his knowledge of dragons.

Because they are so many and it is such a mess, they all get in each other's way and the dragon escapes. Only Robert and Reginald pursue, the one because it is his job, the other because form requires it.

When they catch up, the prince is useless with the dragon. Robert has to do the actual catching, which probably involves a least of *hint* of his ability to control/talk to/influence the creatures. In doing this Robert impresses the hell out of Reginald's groom and embarrasses Reginald.

On the way back the groom sweet talks Robert so the prince can take public credit for the capture. Doesn't offer money -- does offer access and a possible way out. We'll talk more about that later, hmmm?

In the course of their return, they meet various grateful locals, among them an old hermit type. This is the evil wizard, though we don't know it yet. He is really, really, really pissed off to see Reginald.

ACT TWO

Being more than a little paranoid, wizard concludes that Reginald was sent here by his father specifically to hunt the wizard down. He's just been in this out-of-the-way corner of the world attempting to get ready for his comeback...because they have such good dragons here, great breeding stock, and he'd like some real power on his side next time he goes up against the king. Plus there's a long sleeping Great Dragon here that he plans to awaken...

[Backstory: The wizard used to work for the king. Tried to take over. Lost. Badly. He's been plotting his comeback ever since, rankled deep in his soul that his name has become a joke, a boogeyman that parents use to scare their kids into doing the right thing. Now, you might well ask "How could a mere king triumph over any decent level of wizard?" the answer is that the wizard wasn't as strong, then. he has acquired more power, since, and paid a great price for it. he's made some bad bargains. not necessarily Faustian, but bad.]

Anyway, the discovery of Reginald's presence accelerates the wizard's plans, which are (1) BREED KILLER DRAGONS. AN ARMY OF THEM.

(2) WAKE UP THE GREAT DRAGON.

(3) UNLEASH THEM ALL, UNDER HIS CONTROL, ON THE KING'S KINGDOM.

(4) MAKE THE REGINALD'S FATHER DIE SLOWLY.

All the stuff that has been hinted at in the boonies has been testing, getting ready. Now he does even more — a crash course to fruition of his plans. Caution thrown to the winds.

While that is going on we spend some more time back in the princess's little kingdom, as she tries and fails to get closer to the prince. Noting that Robert is somehow unaccountably in good with the prince and groom, she starts hanging out more with Robert, trying to use him to get

closer. Her parents are more than slightly embarrassed about this. And Robert's friends are put through their own loops by it, too. Not to mention the tangles of what they are and aren't saying to each other.

The Princess's attitude by now, of course, is that she'll do anything at all to get closer to this prince, and if the guy is working for the prince now...hey! The prince is ignoring her but she can use her contact and royal/peasant power over Robert — being unaware of his real affection — to go for her goal. She's never NOT gotten what she wanted, and she isn't going to let this be the first time, no matter what.

Under the influence of the wizard's incantations, the Great Dragon is waking. Not there yet, but waking. And as his other plans accelerate, the wizard starts sending sets of dragons out on tests. His big new ones, never seen before, bred for battle. Some of them are fliers, too, even though they are twice as big as any fliers previously seen.

SETS of dragons, working together, deliberately attacking things? And whole new species? Really big flyers? All unheard of. The news travels fast.

The tests are all about control — low flying, turns, check flame, precision attacks...the essence is that it is a checklist of things which establish how much control he has over the beast and how precisely he can make use of it.

Needless to say, people are upset. Some of them blame Reginald's presence in the kingdom (and they are right, though they don't know the real reason why). This new dragon is the big local fear: Big time prince comes through, big time danger follows, clearly a causal link. "There's a prince here now, a prince on a quest! Sure-fire dragon lure, I calls it!" Others disagree, but EVERYBODY gets swept up in demanding he do something about it.: the locals, the gentry, the King and Queen, the Princess, his groom...he's stuck. He has to go.

But of course the groom knows Reginald can't possibly do anything, really, so Robert has to be brought along.

Princess joins in on the trip. She is really throwing herself at Reginald and it is NOT working.

Word of the quest quickly circulates, of course, and the wizard/hermit hears all about it. Works great for him. Here's the perfect chance to snuff his enemy's son and get the first bit of his revenge.

Meantime Robert has tracked the dragon straight back to the wizard. "Go back where you came from!" There could be other clues coming back to him through this. Maybe something his dad said that he remembers. Maybe something his mom taught him. Maybe a child's rhyme. Clues that helps him build his theory he isn't quite sure of regarding the wizard...or maybe because he has the Dragon Heart he has some sense of the mind that is controlling the dragon? In any case, as the party gets nearer and nearer the wizard's lair, Robert is getting braver and clearer and the prince is getting more and more scared.

The questing party gets attacked by one of the big new firebreathing fliers, and Robert saves them all, not realizing before the actual event that he even had the power to do so. Has to be some dramatic moment with all weapons failed, no shield left, just him and the dragon and imminent destruction....and a plain verbal order sends the thing away, to everyone's amazement.

In this moment, in which he saves the princess, she feels a real attraction for him, though she's still not admitting it. There have been hints earlier, which have gnawed at her, but she shoved them aside.

The dragon comes back and when he "tells" the wizard what happened (through whatever control magic is at work), that exchange is the clue that tells the wizard there is a Great Dragon Soul at work here. Unable to get names and details, though, because dragons don't see us as terribly different from one another, the wizard assumes it is the Prince that has the power. He changes his plans accordingly. He NEEDS to get command of this soul, because the man with a Great Dragon soul can control all dragons effortlessly, unlike him. Such a man threatens his plans. He either has to get control of this soul, or kill its owner and take the soul for himself.

The questers head home fast.

Robert goes to his mom to ask questions. Lots of questions. And she has things to share that she has never shared. This is when the truth of the Dragon Soul comes out.

The prince goes back to the castle and is about to bug out.

The groom wants him to stay and actually do something about this. With help from Robert -- easily persuadable Robert -- he won't actually be in any danger...

Robert hatches a plan and leaves in the middle of the night to do what he knows he has to. Alone, without endangering anyone else, since his friends are more than ready to dive in with him and he can't allow that. The groom and Reginald attach themselves to him. He resists, but the groom offers him something much too tempting and in the end he yields. What is that something? An official hiring. "Include Reginald in this, make him look good, and you will be my assistant and eventual replacement."

Of course, his real motivation is that he is planning a double-cross after Robert succeeds in making Reginald look good. He's concluded that Reginald will never be what his dad wants him to be, so the best he can do is fake things enough to justify finally coming home. (They've been on the road a while, and he hates these backwater kingdoms.)

So. Robert has a theory he definitely doesn't like the look of. He thinks there's a chance that the boogeyman of his childhood might actually be real and doing things with the dragons. Nothing else makes sense. Some of this is factual inference, some of this is his feelings — stuff coming to him through his dragon soul. (The whole notion of which is bugging the hell out of him. One reason he said yes so fast to the groom's offer is he sees it as a chance to avoid this fate that his mother seems to have finally succeeded in laying off on him.)

They go out together to seek the answer to the mystery. Just the three of them, they think. What they don't know is that the princess, on her

dad’s best horse and wearing his best sword and armor (which isn’t that great, and doesn’t really fit her) is following them. Like she’d let them shut her out. Hah!

Robert suspects there is a bigger threat here than anyone knows, so he wants to sneak up on it. To infiltrate and find out. Which he does, and is there in the caves to see the hundreds and hundreds of recently-bred attack dragons, and the Great Dragon’s awakening (which he actually triggers, via his presence, just as his presence tends to excite or unsettle all the other dragons unless he specifically exerts his abilities, which he barely understands).

Meantime, back at the camp, the Prince — who has been arguing about this infiltration thing all along, and thinks it bloody unprincely — does something stupid (perhaps spurred on by the princess, who has joined up while Robert was away) and gets himself captured in a direct confrontation with the wizard.

In that confrontation, by the way, the wizard realizes that Reginald is a buffoon and NOT the owner of the Dragon Soul. But he’ll still make good bait, and a hostage to use against the father...

[Reginald refuses to act in a non-princely fashion whenever that pose serves his cowardice or his image, and preferably both. In front of the Princess it is both. "My father is not going to accept me sneaking around in caves and spying. That's not manly." Maybe the groom is an arbiter? "This is an unacceptable procedure." Or maybe he's pointing out that the kid should shut up, his dad was skulking in caves before the kid was born, in fact that's how he met the kid's mother..."What?" "I've said too much."]

[This whole thing is a fakeout. Readers should be expecting the Princess to be captured, so that Reginald and Robert can subsequently be in competition to rescue her. But we flip it around.]

Robert returns to find Reginald captured, the Princess pissed and guilty and scared, the groom frantically rearranging his plans...

...and as they try and sort all this out, the wizard's huge dragon army launches from hiding and starts rumbling/flying toward Reginald's kingdom, ready at last to attack.

The wizard is riding the Great Dragon (which is not a flier, by the way: but damn fast -- the track of destruction he is leaving in his wake is not unlike that of the Red Bull).

Robert, the princess, and the groom follow as fast as they can.

ACT THREE

The wizard communicates with the king long-distance. Wants him to know he's coming. Wants to make sure he is prepared.

How he communicates with the king is up to you. Magically amplifying his voice, or doing some wizardly trick with voices so he can communicate over greater distances...or in some other unusual way. Just appearing or disappearing in ghostly fashion, like a sending? Whatever is cool.

Anyway, he finally shows up riding the biggest dragon at the front of this army, which hits the target kingdom like a tidal wave.

It's a hell of a fight, but it can't last that long, and doesn't. Strong as the king's forces are, the dragon army and the wizard's spells are way the hell too much. Might as well joust with a hurricane.

The King is taken captive when he gives himself up rather than let the wizard kill Reginald (which he wouldn't, because he is bait for Robert, but the King doesn't know that.)

Personal confrontation scene between wizard and King in main courtyard. High walls all around. The wizard turns the king into a static-but-living statue of gold. When the time is right he will execute the king by having the dragons ranged across the battlements all hit him with their fire at the same time, melting him down — and he plans on using the gold for his scepter, his crown, and his throne. Plans are put in

motion to consolidate control, and the clock on the execution begins ticking down.

Why not kill him right away? Because the wizard wants him to see Reginald die first, and he can't kill Reginald until he has Robert.

Cut back our intrepid rescuers, who are not even vaguely a team. Total cross-purposes. Total competition. They all want to rescue Reginald and stop the wizard, but they don't want to do so for the same reasons or the same final outcome.

This portion has to go fast. Stakes are high, imperative is intense. Robert's going to have to find a way to get them there quickly, taking control of some dragons for him and the groom to ride, while the Princess ties to keep up on her horse.

And yet, the interpersonal conflicts also reveal more than the people involved can hide. Especially the nagging sense the Princess has that this Robert guy is more interesting than Reginald any day...and he admits what he is feeling for her, although he thinks she's being an idiot about Reginald. There are things he tells her now about him that she didn't know.

But no dawdling. There's an attack already on and they have to do something about it.

ROBERT'S OWN DRAGONS MAY JOIN HIM AT ABOUT THIS POINT, CALLED BY HIM IN WAYS HE DOESN'T YET FULLY UNDERSTAND... (which would imply a scene at home with Mom, suddenly alone in the house and wondering why.)

Now, the wizard is going to know that Robert is coming. Now that he is aware of the Dragon Soul, he can feel it, at last vaguely. So he's going to be getting ready, and he doesn't know what Robert is actually capable of.

For that matter, neither does Robert...

We move forward.

It is definitely the prince's own tower that he is trapped in, and the quest is to go into his kingdom which has been assaulted by these dragons...you have to get past the refugees, you have to get past all the human angles on that, protecting the dragons who are with you to help (since the humans are REALLY going to hate dragons now, having just been victimized by an army of big ones). Then you have to get past the besieging dragons, who are firmly under the wizard's spell and can only be diverted, not taken over. Then you have to get into the castle and hope that his castle is something like the one you are familiar with. And this is actually a chance for the princess to discover a little bit about royalty and all the things she has taken for granted, since lower-class life in this kingdom is a LOT nastier than in her own..

Once inside, the groom and princess and Robert separate. The groom's off to try and get something by way of philters and potions to help them deal with the wizard, leaving the princess and Robert to try and rescue Reginald. The princess and exterminator are both extrapolating from the differently-gained knowledge of standard castle secret passages and such. Might be some fun in encountering local variations, or even signature riffs by certain castle architects.

The action in this act is vague, and we need to think it through.

Obviously everyone gets rescued and the kingdom freed, but the details aren't clear yet.

I do know where we're aiming at it ending up.

1) Robert becomes fully aware of his true nature when he has to save the woman he loves more than he has to protect the life he lives.

2) The wizard's hold on the dragons is broken, and Robert is in complete command.

3) The dragons kill the wizard. They let him run first, but they kill him. Robert tries to order the dragons not to kill the wizard, and there is some kind of telepathic contact or whatever between him and the Great

Dragon, and the answer that comes back is "We will obey any request you make, save that."

4) He doesn't fight it. He understood when he had to kill certain dragons himself. This is just the same in reverse. And of course, he also understands that if the wizard were around the dragons might never be safely free. The king of dragons would certainly understand that in his bones.

5) Part of the big climax is not just that he takes control of the dragons from the wizard, but that he frees them and *sends them away*. Far away, never to be seen by humans again. The two should never interact, for both their safety. (Shades of St. Patrick, but from a very different angle.)

6) There have to be some cheerful/tearful almost-farewells from his own pet dragons,. and we have to decide whether they are staying or going or apparently going and coming back, etc. Or maybe staying but rejoining their fellows after Robert dies, SINCE dragons live longer than men...

DENOUEMENT

Big celebration in Big Kingdom. Everyone from the princess's kingdom there (Mom, too). Robert being celebrated. Robert turns down the chance to be adopted by Reginald's father and made royal ("My son is a yutz! I can't hand my kingdom over to a yutz!"), even knowing it would make it easy for him and the Princess to be together.

He might accept staying on as general manager, but probably still WANTS to be a groom. He also gets the King to free the serfs and peasants of the kingdom, making it friendlier and more like the place he comes from. He's going to have some good impact on Reginald's dad.

Princess only truly realizes she's in love with Robert after he refuses this chance.

BY THE WAY. THERE'S A SPARK OF ROMANCE BETWEEN THE PRINCE'S FATHER AND ROBERT'S MOM AT THE END. But it isn’t reciprocated. HERE WE GO AGAIN... [The King says "I'll marry your mother -- then you'll be royal anyway, even if you don’t let me adopt you!" and mom says "Uhh, excuse me? Widow woman here, I have an opinion of my own, thank you. I wouldn't have you on a bet." "How about if I proved myself worthy of you with a quest?" "No!"]

A thought from David R. One of Robert’s reasons for turning down adoption — perhaps voiced, perhaps just internal — is that to accept becoming the king's prince would be a step down for Robert. He is the king of dragons, after all — even if he is sending them far, far away and is therefore retired.