

# SACRIFICIAL VICTIM



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A SHORT STORY  
TALES FROM THE READING DRAGON INN

Kelly R. Martin

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# Introduction

This is a short story which was created by me as a request from Drowemos the author of the web comic Blade Bunny ([www.bladebunny.com](http://www.bladebunny.com)). His artist Erwin Prasetya was wanting some dragon based stories to base his art around. Their plan was to create a short story collection using various the Erwin's art and stories from several sources. I offered to oblige with this entry in the Tales from the Reading Dragon Inn setting. Unfortunately the project fell through and I chose to produce my own cover art and put the story out as a stand alone short fiction piece.

This story also acts as another bridge between my novels Thomas the Poisoner and Triskaidekaphilia. It features a tale of Alvos the halfling assassin. I hope you enjoy it on its own merits, but for me its another little gift for the readers of my novels who may be curious about how Alvos operates on a mission when faced with a large yet cunning foe.



## Chapter 1 Reading Dragon Inn

The young wench with ruddy cheeks and red hair leaned over the burly muscular man wearing a scale mail hauberk. Her ample bounty threatened to spill from the top of her chemise as she set another cup of ale in front of him. The man's blue eyes seemed haunted, his dark brown hair was beginning to grey and his features were weathered by sun and wind. Anyone watching him could tell that he was well into his night of drinking

The younger brown haired man wore an eager look upon his face as he sat across the table from the older grizzled man with a much more weary expression. The younger man sat beside two of his friends. The first on his right was a young burly black bearded dwarf. The second was a young lean rakish half human half elven woman with hair of pale blond. The three youths appeared to be in their twenties, and obviously they were quite well off to be able to afford the rates charged for ale at the Reading Dragon Inn.

The younger man spoke up, "Halidor, we've bought you plenty of drinks now. We've agreed to pay your hireling fee as well. When will you tell the story you promised."

Halidor focused his attention on the ale mug for a moment taking a smooth long pull before smacking his thick lips in satisfaction, "The Reading Dragon always has the best ale. The best wine and liquor as well. By the way, I'm not a hireling, or a sell sword. I was a proud member of the henchman's guild. I henchd for a living. Henchmen don't kill or fight stuff. We carry stuff for the people who do. Mind the horses, maintain the carts and wagons, keep the baggage. That's the life of a Henchman. Sometimes you're into a dungeon, sometimes following adventurers into lairs of beasts, the wild races, and even monsters."

The dwarf snickered into his own mug of ale, "Rumor has it that you've even gone into the lairs of dragons? It seems a bit, improbable."

Halidor frowned a moment, "You don't understand. We would get paid top dollar for the highest risk. Even after our guild dues, a successful raid on something as loaded as a dragon's lair can set up a henchman for life. It's a risky way to retirement, but you have to understand that henching for adventurers is already dangerous work unlike the work of a porter. You get a portion of pay equal to half an adventurer's share if the job is both successful and dangerous enough."

The young half elven woman leaned forward trying out her pretty smile, "So tell us about this dragon lair you went to."

Halidor looked back at her with a sardonic lift of his eyebrow, "Look missy. You and your friends have said you're going to pay my bill tonight, but I'm not just some backwater rube. The tab has been rolling up, but I don't yet see that you aren't going to walk out and stiff me with the bill yet."

The dwarf snickered again raising his hand, "I'll get it Prissala. Waitress, over here please."



The wench came back over to their table, “Yes goodfolks?”

Prissala spoke up, “Could we have the tab for the table please. I had the two glasses of wine, Samlas there has the two summer ales, and Kanok Bitterbeard there had the three bitters as well as the four summer ales our guest has enjoyed.”

Samlas tapped his mug with his finger as the waitress departed, “The bills are on the way. You could at least get started on telling the story as we wait for her to return.”

Halidor peered drunkenly over at the dwarf, “Your name Bitterbeard sounds familiar to me for some reason.”

Kanok smiled genially, “It’s not an uncommon dwarf family name where I come from in the Bitter mountains. A lot of Bitterbeards live over that way.”

Halidor nodded, “That must be it then. We were hunting a dragon in those mountains. It began about twenty two years ago.”





## Chapter 2 Adventuring Party

Halidor was sweating inside the unfamiliar quilted gambeson and chainmail hauberk he wore. He looked briefly over at the wagon bench at the chubby curly blonde haired halfling sitting beside him. Halidor couldn't help but think something was wrong with this picture. He still couldn't tell if the halfling was a man or a woman after traveling with it for a week. The pudgy beardless nature of the halfling obscured all recognizable gender features. Halidor had been afraid of offending the halfling by asking, and nothing said in the last week had given him a definitive clue. Ahead of him on horseback rode three more people.

The first was a long brown haired knight in brilliantly polished full armor. The helmet of the knight had been removed and hung off the saddle in deference to the sweltering summer heat. His features were classically handsome, and his personality classically pretentious. The knight had insisted on calling him "boy", or "hey you" most of the trip so far. Halidor was pretty certain that the knight was about his own age. He kept occasionally fantasizing about an orc sticking the knight's pretentious head on a pike as a decoration.

The second person riding in front of his wagon was an even handsomer elf with flowing golden locks. The elf wore finely worked and elaborately detailed leather armor, and carried a gorgeous huntsman's longbow. The elf carried a quiver of over large "dragon killer" arrows. Halidor sometimes fantasized that the elf would get into a huge bar brawl after insulting a lady and have some thick muscled thug break his much too pretty nose.

The third person riding in front was a stout bald dwarf wearing a full chainmail suit riding a mule. His beard was long, black, and braided with plates of bronze metal to protect his neck. The dwarf grumbled a lot, and glowered and complained about anything and everything nearly continuously. Halidor fantasized that a priest of the White Raven would sew his newly dead lips shut to keep him quiet for more than ten minutes.

Behind them in the wagon rode the stuffy light brown haired priestess of the sun goddess. She was actually quite plain looking if you didn't count her embroidered brilliant white robes. She was obviously married to her faith because most men would rather pass her skinny flat chested body over in favor of a more womanly lady. It was beginning to bug Halidor how often she switched between gazing longingly at the elf riding in front of them, and then subsequently grabbing her holy symbol while quietly whispering confessions of her sinful nature to her god. Halidor fantasized that she actually had some boobs worth mentioning, and that she would let him squeeze them a bit.

Behind the wagon rode the final member of their seemingly impromptu group. He was their supposed party leader, and the wizard who was bankrolling this particular adventure. He wore dark grey robes, and had a cheesy looking thick black mustache, as well as a noticeably shaped widow's peak to his obviously fake



magically colored black hair. Halidor secretly scoffed at the older man still trying to pass as a younger one, and failing at the attempt. Halidor fantasized that the wizard wasn't leading them all from behind to their deaths. This fantasy was the hardest to successfully envision the more miles they traveled together.

The halfling sitting on the bench beside him thoughtfully patted his knee in a non-threatening manner, "You just keep close to me and do as I tell you when the time comes. I'll see you through this in one piece Halidor."

Up ahead the black bearded dwarf began another one of his loud rants, "You've got to know this weather is too hot for dragon hunting. Verithax is supposedly an ancient red you know. They thrive in this hot weather. The best time for hunting ancient reds is when they hibernate in the winter time. They go into a five month sleep, and catching them off guard is much easier you know."

The halfling whispered over to Halidor, "Not true of course. Dragons caught sleeping unawares are a myth perpetuated by dragons to keep adventurers thinking they'll have an easy time fighting them. They really don't sleep longer than we do, and they definitely sleep lighter when they are sitting on that much treasure to protect."

The knight spoke up in response, "Look Biter."

The dwarf grumbled in response, "Are you daft man, I've told you five times already my name is Bitterbeard, not Biter."

The knight glared over at the dwarf, "Be that as it may. We are hired to challenge this dragon to a fair fight, and to defeat it upon the field of battle. Sneak thieving our way to kill it asleep isn't sporting, and goes against the code of chivalrous behavior."

The elf chimed in at that point, "Dragons don't operate on the code of chivalry. They will cheat, and not fight by your idea of fairness if given the chance. That is why I shall find the weak point in its defenses, and pierce it with my dragon killer arrows when I have the chance."

The halfling whispered to Halidor again, "Both of them are partially wrong. Dragons are very intelligent, and they also look down upon lesser races as they think of them. For most races to fight them you have to either successfully trick them, or credibly challenge them in a way they can't refuse. Most dragons will not accept a challenge from anyone considered lesser. If challenged by lesser beings they will not feel a need to fight fairly."

The grey robed wizard rode his horse forward to join up with the three in front of the wagon, "Remember that I am the one calling the shots here. I was the one hired by our benefactor to lead this group. My brains will determine the strategy, and all of you will follow my orders to serve your intended roles."

Bitterbeard scowled at the remark, "I was hired because of my knowledge of these lands, not to follow your orders. I'll help fight the dragon, but I won't be doing anything foolish like challenging it to a fair fight. We'll get into the deep dweller's tunnel systems, and find a back door into its lair to catch it by surprise."



The halfling laughed out loud with a girlish tone, "That's just rich. There is no such thing as an unknown, unguarded entrance to a dragon's lair."

The four horse riding adventurers in front scowled back at the laughing halfling. Halidor decided then that the halfling was a she after all, and that she seemed to be the only decent person in the whole lot of them. Halidor liked her since she seemed to dislike the pretentious, pious, preening, pugnacious, and prickly others as much as he did.

The elf looked at the knight and the dwarf with a pretty grin before lowering his voice, "What is the most useless member of an adventuring party? A lard arsed sneak thief. Watch your pouches boys. The only thing more useless is a henchman. They are both good for bait only."



## Chapter 3 Night Assault

Halidor cowered beneath the overhanging rock where the halfling had led him minutes earlier that evening. The sounds of hooting and calling goblins filled the mountain valley as well as the sounds of combat coming from their camp that night. It was the fifth night in a row they had been attacked. The attacks kept coming in small waves every couple of hours. Three goblins here, four orcs there. Never enough to kill them, but they were all feeling ragged as the fifth night with little sleep wore onward.

The raiders had already successfully stolen some of their food stores while other goblins fought them. They had also slain the wizard's horse on the second night. Well truthfully speaking, the wizard had actually technically slain his own horse with magic in killing the goblins attempting to lead it away.

It also seemed that the goblins had focused on attacking the wizard and priestess when they could, and avoiding the knight, elf and dwarf as much as possible. The third night three of them had made a rush to kill Halidor himself. They had each dropped dead with a dagger in their eyes before they reached him. Halidor hadn't seen where the daggers had come from, but he was thankful for his deliverance nonetheless.

Halidor's mind snapped back to his present situation as he heard loud footsteps come pounding and crashing through the woods closer and closer. He cowered as far under the overhanging rock as he could manage. He peered out as he heard heavy breathing fairly close. In the moonlight he could see a hideous eight foot tall ogre stood less than five feet away smelling the air like a bloodhound.

Halidor was surprised to see a three foot tall barefoot ball of fury leap from the rock ledge over his head and kick upward from the chest of the ogre. A brief glint of flashing steel, and a savage kick later and Halidor found himself looking at the headless ogre with its lifeblood spraying from its severed neck. The ball of fury had disappeared once again into the darkness as the body of the ogre toppled backward away from him.

Twenty minutes later the halfling came back to the overhang, "It's safe to return to the camp for the moment."

Halidor looked at her in awe, "You're the one who's saved my life twice now aren't you?"

The halfling gave a subtle grin, "If you are actually counting such things, then I've saved your life fifteen times in the last five nights. They keep sending hit squads for you, the wizard, and the priestess. Without their support, the others would fall pretty quickly. Dragons are smart about how adventurers work, and how to best disable their capabilities by whittling down their weaker support mechanism."

Halidor spoke in surprise, "We've been attacked by wild races, not a dragon."

The halfling shook her head, "These are the cannon fodder to determine just what level of threat we are to the dragon. If we manage to survive these minor



minions, then even more durable forces like the ogre I killed tonight will be sent after us. If we severely deplete the wild races nearby, then the dragon itself will begin assaulting us directly. There is no surprising a dragon in their own territory. I told all of them this, but they didn't choose to listen."



## Chapter 4 Night Passion

Halidor awoke in his position sleeping under the wagon. His mind struggled to alertness as he attempted to determine what had woken him up once again in the darkness of night. The wagon seemed to be rocking slightly, and he detected a subtle muffled higher pitched moaning coming from above. Halidor started slightly at the feel of a hand on his arm.

Halidor looked over to see the halfling laying beside him awake. The reflected light of the moon let him see the halfling had a mischievous grin on her face.

The halfling leaned in closer to whisper in his ear, "The silly infatuated priestess has fallen to her sinful lust after all. The dandy elf is pounding away at her in hopes he'll secure first dibs on all of her most powerful healing magic with her gratified lust."

Halidor shook his head as he turned to whisper back into the halfling's ear, "We could be attacked at any time. This is a foolish and dangerous time for them to be frivolously enjoying themselves."

The halfling leaned over to look into his eyes, "Some might say it is the best time to let go. When the prospect of potential death is near, the excitement of satisfied lust grows even greater for some. You could try to see if you can secure first dibs on my protection if you like."

Halidor shook his head speaking softly, "No offense, but I'd rather keep things professional while I'm on the job."

The halfling smiled at his reply whispering back, "I may look you up after this job then. We'll see how it goes. This is the second and last night with no attack. Several of the tribal leaders of the wild folk have been killed these last two nights. They are in an uproar with the breakdown in leadership. Tomorrow we'll face the dragon itself. Sleep well while you can."

Halidor looked confused as he whispered, "Killed? By who?"

The halfling grinned evilly in return, "What do you think I have been doing after each attack? I've followed the attacking raiders back to their lairs, and quietly killed off what leadership they have."

Halidor looked shocked, "I thought you were a thief."

The halfling shook her head, "No. I'm not a thief. I'm an assassin. I'm a very talented assassin actually. It's a secret, so don't tell the others."

The shuddering and shaking of the wagon above them ceased after a little while. A contented sigh came from above. Halidor watched as the halfling slipped out from under the wagon to look into the back of the wagon above.

The halfling spoke loud enough to be heard over the entire camp, "If you two are done rutting like rabbits, then can we finally get some sleep around here?"



## Chapter 5 Verithaxothalumakantos

Halidor looked at the lightly dozing halfling sitting on the bench beside him. He realized that they had been together for a day longer than two weeks now, and he still didn't know her name. He then realized he only knew the last name of the dwarf actually. None of them had even considered exchanging names as necessary to go off on an adventure together as near strangers.

Over two weeks and their nerves had gone from frayed, to strained, to the creation of a strange bond formed in the trials they were facing. None of them tried to direct the others anymore. Each of them slid seamlessly into their designated roles now. Halidor was beginning to think they might all make it after all.

The halfling suddenly awoke to full consciousness and pulled back hard on the reigns of the wagon team. She then shoved Halidor off the seat to the ground as the wagon slowed.

The halfling pointed toward the woods as she shouted at him, "Run! Run as hard as you can."

Halidor looked past her briefly and saw a large shape eclipsing the sun beyond her. He scrambled to his feet and ran furiously as he could toward the treeline beside the road. He dove headfirst into a thicket and scrambled under a fallen rotting log. He turned around in time to see the one hundred foot long dragon swoop by over the party as the horses scattered. A blast of smelter hot breath and flames lit the elf up like a candle.

Halidor was amazed to notice the small detail of a now tiny seeming arrow poking out of the right foot of the dragon. The priestess was screaming and crying as she jumped from the wagon running toward the immolated elf and horse. The halfling casually tripped the priestess to the ground as she passed, and squatted on her shoulders in the taller grass to keep her down.

Then Halidor was surprised to see them disappear into a seeming blanket of shadows. The tail of the flying dragon whipped into the knight sending his armored form flying to crash into a tree. The knight dropped to the ground after the heavy impact, and didn't rise again.

Halidor heard the dwarf Bitterbeard cursing and swearing at the dragon as he waved his large axe in the air. The dragon flew up higher and circled around for another pass.

Bitterbeard swore an oath, "By the axe of my fathers you'll pay Verithax. You'll pay for our stolen treasure. You'll pay for all of the dwarven lives you've taken. Our vengeance will be terrible."

The dragon folded its wings suddenly dropping. It squashed Bitterbeard and his mule into a red pile of mangled flesh as it landed on the ground with a heavy resounding thud. Halidor gaped in shock as he looked on the ruins of their group.



Halidor looked for their wizard only to see the flash of grey robes riding hard a half mile back in the direction they had originally come. Halidor began silently praying to any god that would listen.

Halidor shivered as the dragon roared echoing throughout the mountains before it spoke in a loud voice of doom, “Come out assassin. I know you are still here. You left me your clear challenge, and I have come to respond to it.”

Halidor saw the halfling step out from the shadow of the dragon’s tail. The dragon quickly turned around to face the halfling who looked at the dragon without any hint of fear in her eyes.

The halfling spoke in a language Halidor did not understand, “Verithaxothalumakantos krelak, krethal madra. Dracos minoric. Shinigami Alvos krebalinac.”\*

Halidor stared in shock as the dragon rapidly struck it’s head down at the halfling. It just suddenly gobbled her up and swallowed her whole. The dragon gave a mighty heave of its legs, jumped into the air, and began beating its wings flying off towards the mountains. He watched from under his log until the dragon disappeared from sight.

Halidor then listened and heard soft sobbing coming from the direction of the wagon. He crawled out from under the log, and cautiously crept over in that direction. Underneath the wagon was the priestess crying and praying, crying and praying over and over again.

Halidor crawled under the wagon to hold her, “Listen priestess it isn’t safe here. We need to go.”

The priestess looked up at him, “My name is Prissanna. Oh sweet goddess Rayna what have I done. My sin has brought this upon us. My surrender to temptation has led to our doom.”



\* Translated from the ancient Draconic tongue: “Verithaxothalumakantos you asshole, you stupid fool. Little dragon. (I’m) Death Assassin/Grim Reaper Alvos your death.”





## Chapter 6 Lost Kin

Halidor looked at the three youths sitting at the table across from him. They no longer wore jovial faces. A sadness and even a hint of bitterness showed in their very serious young eyes. Halidor looked into the dregs left in his mug as he paused in his story.

Prissala spoke softly, "Is that it? That is how our fathers died?"

Halidor nodded, "They died bravely and futilely as adventurers tend to do."

Kanok looked at Halidor with a knowing look, "You knew we were their children didn't you?"

Halidor nodded sadly, "It was why I had to get drunk first. I figured you'd come looking for answers someday. Your fathers did speak of why they were doing this on the trail after all. They all needed money to help their families. They all figured their share of the treasure whether they were dead or alive would provide for those they'd left behind."

Prissala shook her head, "My poor mother. She never had a chance to tell me this. Her mind was broken by it, and she remains in the care of the sisters of our faith."

Halidor peered grimly at the surface of the table, "I'm sorry to hear it. I had hoped that a way could be found to comfort her."

Samlas looked at Halidor sharply, "So how did our families get paid each of our fathers' share of the treasure then? Surely no one was left to defeat the dragon afterward."

Halidor shuddered as he spoke, "Shinigami Alvos -part of the phrase spoken in defiance to the dragon by the halfling. I've learned since then it means The Grim Reaper Alvos in the ancient draconic language. That is also why I have to drink. So I can actually tell the part of the tale I can never repeat while still stone cold sober. Even twenty two years later the horror of it haunts my nightmares."



## Chapter 7 The Assassin Alvos

Halidor had spent most of the afternoon retrieving the bodies of the fallen adventurers. He had bundled them up in their cloth blankets, and tied them down with rope in the bed of the wagon. Prissanna sat on the seat of the wagon praying over the remains, then for her own forgiveness, and again over their remains as he worked to gather up the scattered remaining horses.

Halidor looked up suddenly to see a distant short shadow in the valley between them and the mountain where the dragon had flown. The shadow rapidly disappeared as Halidor peered at it.

Halidor jumped at the voice directly behind him, "What are you looking for?"

Halidor turned to see the halfling standing behind him wearing an innocent looking grin. He dropped and fell on his ass as if struck by a blow to the head. Halidor blinked at the what must be an delusion of a fear stricken mind standing before him.

The halfling reached out a hand to help him up, "Let's go. It is a ways yet back to the dragon's lair to recover the treasure. I don't want it falling into the wrong hands."

Halidor stammered, "Ya'you wa'we. Ya got et."

The halfling nodded, "All part of the plan. I told you before you have to trick a dragon or challenge them. I use a combination of both when I am hunting my prey. Dragons are both smart and elusive. It's why I had to dismantle Verithaxothalumakantos' minion support system to draw him out. I also needed an adventuring party to hide among so I wasn't seen as the actual threat until too late. That's why I hired Laminovski to hire the rest of you."

Halidor looked confused, "Laminovski?"

The halfling smiled, "Our recently fled wizard companion. He saw the size of the dragon heading our way from the distance and took off faster than, well, than a wizard seeing his own approaching death."

Halidor shook his head, "You're behind all of this?"

The halfling nodded, "I also protected your life. You didn't sign on for the same level of risk as the others, so I felt responsible for keeping you safe. The rest of them, well to successfully kill a dragon, some sacrifices usually have to be made. It's the only way to get them feeling confident enough to swallow me whole."

Halidor's eyes widened, "You wanted to be swallowed?"

The halfling nodded again, "It was part of the plan. Dragons tend to be poor sports, and will quickly flee a battle they are losing. If Verithaxothalumakantos had fled, then I might never have found his hidden lair. Now if he carries me into his lair in his stomach, then he can't very well escape my counter attack when I start cutting my way back out again. I've killed more dragons using that tactic than you can likely imagine."

Halidor swallowed hard, "How many?"



The halfling gave him an evil grin, “Trust me, you really don’t want to know. Come now, we’ve got dragon treasure to load, and a dragon corpse to dismantle for selling of the components. I think I’ll have the head mounted for my office wall. It will make a pretty nice trophy this time. Each of them will still have their full shares given to them for their families. Since Laminovski ran off and left you with the majority of the remaining work, you will get his share in addition to your contracted half share.”

Halidor shook his head as he followed behind the increasingly scary halfling before him.

