

Dragon Slayer
By Brandon Taylor Strickland

Elizabeth stood in the bleak, depressing field of corpses. Granted, the corpses were six feet under, but it was still rather odd to think about how many there were. Looking up would showcase a smorgasbord of dark grey clouds, not the most unusual sight in a graveyard, but storms had become so universally associated with graveyards that it would be a surprise to see anyone visiting a grave on a sunny, cheerful day. It reflected Elizabeth's mood though; bleak and depressed.

One wouldn't necessarily tell on sheer appearance that she was these things: her short chestnut hair, big brown eyes and slightly smushed in nose gave her a somewhat cute appearance, almost making her look like a young adult and not a full grown woman. The only indicators of her age were her height (6 foot last she checked) and the premature wrinkles under her eyes; both of which made her look older than she really was. She liked to think it all averaged out to her actual age of 23. She didn't mind her appearance. She didn't mind the wrinkles. They were signs of her perseverance. She tirelessly worked day and night, protecting the city from the scum of the Earth, first as an officer of the law, then as a somewhat successful superhero. She didn't mind her appearance. Recently, she's not been minding a lot of things.

She wore a dark green trench coat, giving her a dangerous and forbidding appearance, expressing the message of, "Don't mess with me, or I'll find everyone you ever thought was cute in high school and rip off their legs without breaking a sweat or losing sleep over it." In her left hand she carried a bundle of roses. Under her right arm, she held her helmet. The same helmet that made her one of the most dangerous people on the planet. The helmet that could be used to destroy or to save millions of lives. Yet she couldn't have saved the one she cared for most.

She looked down at the squat, almost comically small and generic tombstone. *This is it*, Elizabeth thought, *this tiny tombstone is all that's left of my big brother. The nicest guy in the world, but all that anyone who walks into this graveyard and sees it will probably think of him as that guy with the tiny tombstone.* It was so small, in fact, it only had the barest essentials on it. **Ryan Hollister**, it read in already fading letters, **Born June 17, 2003, Died Sept 22, 2020.** Not even his middle name. Not even an initial. Her family had never been wealthy, even when her dad wasn't waisting his days drinking cheap scotch and beer that made catpiss taste like the Elixir of Eternal Life and before her mother became an addict. However, couldn't they at the very least get their only son a proper tombstone?

Elizabeth smiled, though clearly it was more pained and sorrowful than gleeful. "Hey Ryan...how are you?" Naturally, as any sane, rational human would expect (though Elizabeth had quite recently begun questioning any grip on reality she had), the tombstone did not answer back, nor did her brother's corpse jump out of the ground and say "Hey, Eli, miss me?" It just laid there, without response.

Elizabeth sighed, then laid down the roses. "I know you never liked roses," she stated, "but, well, it's the customary gift, so I thought, "Why not? He'd probably appreciate the gesture." Still no response. Sitting next to the chunk of rock as if it were an old friend, Elizabeth just sat there, holding her helmet in both hands and observing it silently for

what couldn't have been more than 30 seconds, but felt in her mind like hours. Then, deciding to break the monotony, she spoke.

"You remember Brandy? My friend you used to have a crush on?" It wasn't normal, talking to the dead, but considering that in the last few months she learned aliens, time travel, and even geomancy were real, she considered this probably the most normal thing she had done in a long time. "She's still around, don't worry. She's even got this new guy hitting on her all the time. David. It's almost hilarious watching them fight!" Clearing her throat and raising the pitch of her voice she mimics an old quarrel the two friends once had: "What kind of nut attempts to beat up a Kyronean Skin-Melter all by themselves?! They're called "Skin-Melter's for a reason!" And lowering her pitch and mimicking a classic "macho-man" voice she said, "Yeah, well what kind of perfect, angelic woman, pure as the finest diamond, can't understand that not only did I just take it down with minimal damage to myself AND the town, but that she's too perfect to waste her time questioning the well being of, or even hang around with, lowlife scum like me?" She suddenly burst into fits of giggles. "I'm sorry," she attempted to say through fits of laughter, "It's just that, well, he reminds me so much of you. Every time they get into an argument, she gets angry at him, and he can't do anything but put her on a pedestal! It's exactly like you used to do."

She calmed down a bit and grinned. "Gerald's still as much a goody-two shoes as ever, always trying to do the right thing." She smiled, thinking about the time when even though they were fighting some crazy self-destructing and self-repairing monster called BoomsDay, Gerald still found the time to help an old lady cross the street. She even thought he may have slipped a twenty to one of those charity drivers when the guy was running for his life. "He's a good man. And he still loves those stupid Superman comics you gave him. I swear, he reads those books every night. No joke." She was actually...happy. Not just smiling, not just holding back her rage, but actually, legitimately happy! It was an alien feeling. Not as alien as the ones who literally came down from the sky a few months ago, but alien, nonetheless. For the first time in weeks, she wasn't thinking about...

And then she remembered everything: Why she came to the graveyard in the first place. Why she was talking to a tombstone and not Ryan. Who made him do what he did that put him six feet under.... What Elizabeth did to that monster.

She sighed, then, placing the helmet on the ground in front of her, she fumbled in her pocket for a slip of paper. She pulled it out. It was crumpled, battered, and with small yet noticeable coffee stains scattered across it. However, as long as it was legible, Elizabeth didn't care. It was something she wrote just for this occasion. It was her first, and most likely only, story she would ever write. It was a work of fiction, at least as far as the setting. And quite honestly, she had to admit it wasn't exactly the most well written piece of literature, almost coming across as a bad prologue to a story that would probably never be written, but it was a story she needed to write. A story she needed to tell. The justification for...for everything....

"I wrote an epic fantasy recently," Elizabeth said. "I'm like that Tolkien guy you were crazy about." Looking at the top of the page, she saw the first two words bold, big and eye catching. **DRAGON SLAYER**, it read. Not the best title, but simple enough to know what you're getting into. Clearing her throat, she began.

"Once upon a time, dragons were big, reptilian beasts from Hell." As she spoke, her mind's eye showed her a lush, green field, with a clear sky containing a mighty dragon straight out of European folklore. "Now, dragons have a few misconceptions about them. Most people believe that they only kidnapped princesses, and that all the evil dragons were male." Her imagination pictured a powerful beast dragon, holding a screaming princess hostage. "But that was not the case," she stated. "Some vile, evil dragons were female, and sometimes they preyed on princes." Suddenly, her mental picture changed, showing a still strong, yet clearly heavy breasted dragon holding a prince....one she couldn't help but make out to be her brother. "Yet many brave men fought dragons, slaying them and sending a clear message: be gone, foul beasts. Man will not allow your kind to hurt us anymore..." She gulped and looked down, staring at the tombstone. This was it...if she read this next part, there would be no going back. She could never justify her lack of action ever again...She turned her head back to the paper and, with trembling hands and voice, spoke. "But one day...something...something changed. Suddenly, dragons weren't just monsters...they were people. Men and women. They were as cruel and...and evil as ever... They hurt others...they..they preyed on the innocent...they hurt children..they...they..." Then she wasn't thinking of dragons, or medieval fantasy, or anything of the sort. No, in reality, the story was not what mattered to her anymore. What mattered in her mind was what happened two weeks ago...

Hannah Gallow was running through the streets as if Hell itself was after her, which wasn't the worst approximation of what was happening. Behind her was a figure in a trench coat and a helmet that resembled a terrifying cross between a WWII gas mask, a European plague doctor's mask, and some kind of sci-fi space helmet. She didn't know what to do. This creep had just popped into her apartment out of nowhere, telling her to run. Gallow's would have laughed and thrown her out...if her assailant hadn't just tossed her onto the fire escape, destroyed her phone in front of her and said that she would kill her immediately if she tried calling the cops. "You have fifteen minutes to live," her mysterious stalker said. She hadn't been this scared since she was first put in prison for...

Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, something wrapped around Hannah's neck and she fell onto the paved streets face first. Her nose seemed to have been busted, but aside from a strange feeling of something wet pouring from it, she was too high on adrenaline to notice. Looking down, she noticed she had some kind of chain made out of....rock, or stone or something clasped around her neck. Looking up, though, revealed an even more terrifying scenario. The person who had been chasing her was standing above her, an imposing and dark figure, made no brighter by the near-complete darkness swirling around them. Gallow looked up, crying and scared. "What..what do you want from me?"

"Do you know why I'm here?" her assailant questioned. The voice seemed mechanically modified, but she could still feel hatred and venom dripping out of every word. Hannah shook her head, confused. Her assailant looked...familiar? Was it...yeah, it was! It looked like one of those four heroes she'd heard about in prison, the ones who saved Earth. But why would they want her? She wasn't some secret alien or terrorist. She was some small time teacher who did some...bad things.

"No?" said the masked figure. "In that case..." It pulled down its hood, removed the mask, and Hannah knew at that moment she couldn't save herself. "Elizabeth...oh God...how did?"

"SHUT UP!" Elizabeth screamed. "You think I'm just gonna let you talk?! After what you did to my brother?" Hannah noticed that the post and chain had disappeared when Elizabeth took off her bizarre helmet. If Hannah ran, maybe.... "Look," Hannah stammered, "I'm...I'm sorry. I didn't think what I did through...please. Yo-your brother, Lenard, I didn't want him to..."

The back of Hannah's head suddenly hit the same concrete her nose had a minute ago. She looked up at Elizabeth's hate filled, fury laden eyes. "His. Name. Was. Ryan." And with that, Elizabeth raised her fist...

Elizabeth suddenly snapped back to reality. She wasn't sure why she always saw the event through Hannah's eyes. A side effect of the helmet? A sign of insanity? She wasn't sure. A drop of rain smashed with its tiny, tiny force against her nose and by the looks of it, its brothers and sisters would be joining. She noticed that, during her sudden flashback she had apparently ripped her paper in half. Clean down the middle, really, with each side getting a half of the title.

DRAGON

SLAYER

Crumpling the papers up and flinging it away, Elizabeth curled up into a ball and cried, screaming at the uncaring downpour that had started seconds ago. "I'm not a killer!" she screamed. She knew what she'd done, but it was all in the name of justice, for her brother, for...

And she stopped screaming. She stopped crying. She remembered the last words of her story, and why she needed to say it. She looked up, breathed in deeply through her nose, and continued with her original story, calmly, but with a hint of rage in her voice "They didn't deserve to live." Elizabeth said. "Really, as humans, they seemed even more evil. But suddenly, people thought that just because they looked human, they needed to be treated like people." She grabbed her helmet and started examining it again. Outside of it, she felt cold, alone, vulnerable. Inside it, she felt powerful, almighty, as if no man or woman could hurt her. "Those who once fought to protect the world from dragons were now the cruel ones. Those who hurt those who hurt others were the bad guys." She slid the helmet over her head, looking out at the tombstone through its gas mask like eyes. "But now," she continued, her voice seemingly robotic with the voice modulator built into the helmet, "things will change. People will see dragons for what they really are. Soon, dragons won't be fed and kept safe from the outside world. Soon they'll get what they deserve."

She stood up and wandered away, giving one last glance at her brother's stone. "And I'm going to be the one who does it. Even if I'm all alone...I'll do it. In your memory. So no one else ever feels the pain you felt. The pain she put you through." With that, she exited the graveyard.

Elizabeth now knew her purpose in life. She now knew what was needed, what was right. David, Gerald, Brandy, they'd never understand, but she didn't need them to. Justice was needed somewhere. Swift, brutal, righteous justice. And wherever it was needed...wherever a dragon needed slaying...she would be there. One way or another, she would keep her promise. Dragons needed to be slayed. And she was the only person to do it.

Brandan Taylor Strickland is a student at PEAK and a member of TeenInk. Always wanting to be a writer of some sort, he wanted to create something that would make people wonder about justice, and whether or not murder is justifiable. He is currently working on an idea for his own science-fantasy television universe, of which Dragon Slayer is intended to be a part of.