

BRYAN DAVIS

THE  
SACRED  
SCALES

DRAGONS OF CAMELOT

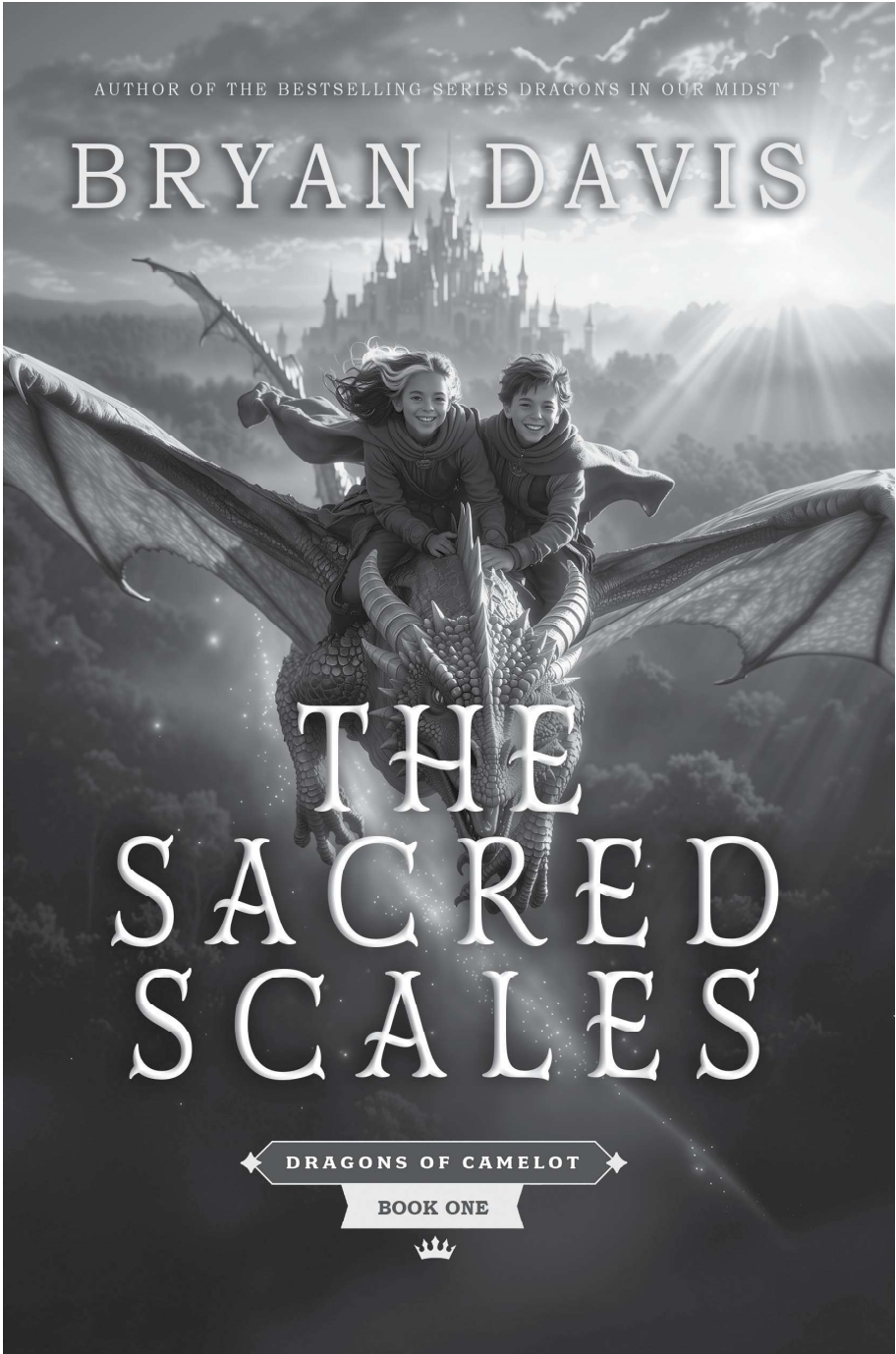
BOOK ONE





AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING SERIES DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST

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## *The Sacred Scales*

Book #1 in Dragons of Camelot

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ISBN Print: 978-1-946253-83-5

Printed in the U.S.A.

## CHAPTER 1

# HAWK'S SCALE

Hawk kicked through piles of hay in the horse barn loft, hoping his shuffling feet would stumble across the missing inventory book, probably a useless effort. After all, why would he bring the book to his sleeping area? Of course, he had already searched everywhere else he could think of, and now, with evening well underway and lit lanterns forbidden in the barn because of all the hay, he had to finish this search in near total darkness.

He stopped and tapped a finger on his chin. Was there time to conduct a final search in the house? Andrew's rules were clear. Everyone in the household had one hour after evening prayers before lights out, then silence until morning—no exceptions. By now, the hour had surely passed.

Hawk sighed. Either he could break the silence rule and get the whipping strap if caught, or he could tell Andrew in the morning that the market's inventory book was lost along with the inventory numbers he had asked for. That might also end in a whipping.

The thought sent a ripple of pain across Hawk's back. His old burn scars hurt badly enough, but Andrew's beatings always felt like heated spikes stabbing his skin, pain that lasted for hours afterward. And that pain raised vivid memories of when it all started—visions of flames consuming his village of Oakdale and the dark shadow

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of Goliath passing over charred rooftops, as if searching for any house his fire had not yet consumed.

Grimacing at the thought, Hawk kicked a clump of hay with all his might. It scattered through the air, blinding him for a moment as he staggered forward and lost his balance. He tumbled over the edge of the loft, dropped, and landed face up in the watering trough, raising a splash from the few inches of water at the bottom.

Two of the four horses whinnied in their stalls.

Hawk spat out a blade of hay. “Samson? Angel? Why are you laughing? I’m the one who feeds you.” When he tried to move, pain stormed across his back scars. Moaning softly, he waited a moment for the stinging sensation to ease. Holding the sides of the trough, he lifted himself up, rolled over the edge, and dropped to the floor with a thump.

As he lay there with his eyes clenched shut, something touched his hand. Hawk opened his eyes. Chloe, the barn cat, was licking his wet knuckles. He stroked her black fur from head to tail. As she arched her back, he whispered, “Have you seen the inventory book, Chloe?”

She stared at him with her amber eyes. As she meowed a reply, a woman’s voice rode with the sound, as if spoken from far away. “Have you looked in the store pantry?”

Hawk blinked. “Chloe? Did you . . . ?” He shook his head hard, slinging droplets of trough water. “No, of course you didn’t.” He looked around the dim barn. No one stood in sight. But that voice came from someone, and cats couldn’t talk.

Chloe meowed again, and the voice joined in. “Follow the bread burglar’s trail.”

A rat scrambled across the floor toward a wall. Chloe shot after it, and both disappeared into the shadows.

Hawk swallowed hard and spoke into the air. “What in the name of King Arthur is going on here?” After quieting himself for a moment, he whispered, “Who’s talking to me?”

Only a distant feline growl responded. Chloe had cornered the rat. She would have her dinner soon. Then Samson nickered and Angel answered. After that, all was silent.

Hawk climbed to his feet and shuffled toward the barn door, swatting the seat of his wet pants as he looked outside at the late twilight sky. That voice sounded like it came from somewhere fairly distant, maybe the house. Whoever she was, she obviously knew about the missing book, but how? And how could she call from that far without disturbing everyone in the house?

However she did it, she did have a good idea. He hadn’t checked the pantry because it was always locked. Thieves had been a problem lately, and Andrew kept a close watch over the food supply.

Hawk walked across the fifty-foot grassy expanse between the barn and the store, opened the back door to the kitchen, and crept inside.

Emma, the store’s baker, stood at the preparation table, wiping her thin hands on her flour-coated gray apron, a flickering white candle illuminating the area. Her blonde curls shook with her movements as she smiled, stretching her narrow cheeks. She set a finger to her lips and whispered, “Andrew’s in his room for the night. I think we can talk quietly.”

Hawk nodded but said nothing.

“I didn’t see you all day. You been busy coming up with new ways of counting Andrew’s money?”

“Not really.” Hawk let his gaze drift toward the pantry door. A closed padlock hung from the latch, as usual. “Mostly I’ve been counting stock.”

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“Why are you here in the house so late?”

“I can’t find the book to put the numbers in. Have you seen it?”

She shook her head. “No, I’ve been here all day baking bread and tarts to sell tomorrow, and that put me way behind schedule. Now I can finally sweep the floor and go home.”

Hawk looked at the floor. A line of crumbs drew a path from the pantry to the doorway that led toward Andrew’s living quarters.

Emma tousled Hawk’s hair. “And you should go to bed as well. Andrew will take the strap to you if you’re poking around the kitchen and raising a racket while he’s trying to sleep.”

Hawk nodded. “You’re right. I won’t poke around.”

“Good.” Emma took a broom that had been leaning against a wall and swatted Hawk’s backside with it. “Off with you, now. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She smiled again. “I’ll be baking pies, and someone needs to taste them.”

Hawk grinned. “I’ll be ready.” When Emma turned her back and began sweeping, Hawk tiptoed out and followed the line of crumbs to Andrew’s bedroom door. He raised a fist to knock but couldn’t quite urge his knuckles to move forward. What could he say to Andrew that wouldn’t make him erupt in anger?

The door opened. Andrew stood there, blinking at Hawk from his much taller stature. His frown dragged down the wrinkles around his bloodshot eyes as well as his short beard. “What are you doing here?”

Hawk fidgeted. “I . . . um . . .”

Andrew grabbed Hawk’s tunic and pulled him into the room. “Never mind. I need to talk to you.”

Hawk stood erect with his hands folded in back. “What can I do for you, Master Andrew?”

Andrew sat on his bed and lifted the inventory book from the blanket. “I’m guessing you came by to look for this.”

Hawk bowed his head. “I apologize for misplacing it.”

“Oh, you didn’t misplace it. I took it from your desk. I wanted to see how much I paid Legossi for felling those trees last year.” Andrew flipped through the pages. “But I couldn’t find the entry.”

“Because that’s my inventory book, not my labor costs book.”

Andrew cursed and threw the book. It hit Hawk’s chest before dropping to the floor. “Then bring me that one.”

“Right away.”

Hawk pivoted to leave, but Andrew grabbed his sleeve and roughly pulled him back. “Wait. Didn’t I tell you to figure out how much to charge for the new scales that dragonslayer brought in?”

Hawk balanced himself and nodded. “That’s why I was looking for the book. So I could report the numbers.”

“Yes. Of course. You’ve always been such a dependable apprentice.”

Hawk resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Although Andrew seemed sincere, and he definitely needed his apprentice to keep the store running well, a compliment was rare. It probably meant that he was lying about something. “Thank you, Master Andrew.”

Andrew picked up the book and scanned the last page. “You have two different prices for the scales.”

Hawk shifted nervously. Andrew wouldn’t like the answer. “A higher price for the real ones and a lower price for the fake ones. I think if we’re honest about which ones are fake, then shoppers will appreciate—”

“No, no, no.” Andrew slapped the book closed. “Mark all of them at the higher price. Put a sign up that says they’re genuine. Nobody will be able to tell which ones are fake.”

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“But that would be a lie.”

Andrew shrugged. “I don’t care.”

“But the commandment says not to bear false witness.”

“Don’t preach to me.” Andrew whacked Hawk on the back of the head. “Everyone lies. Get used to it. And you will do what I tell you, or I will kick you out. You’ll be a street urchin by nightfall tomorrow.”

Hawk cringed. An image of street kids came to mind, hungry orphans wearing rags and begging for food, often resorting to stealing to keep from starving. He shook the thought away and squared his shoulders. “I can’t lie, especially if it would cheat our customers. I follow the Lord Christ, and he’ll take care of me.”

Andrew spoke in a high, mocking voice. “The Lord Christ. The Lord Christ.” He laughed. “Why didn’t the Lord Christ keep your father from dying?”

Andrew’s nasty question stung, but Hawk refused to wince. Since he didn’t know what to say, he recited what his dear father often told him. “Better to die in his loving hands than to live a cursed life.”

“Cursed?” Andrew pointed at himself. “Do you think my life is cursed? Am I under a magical spell?”

“I didn’t say that, but if you follow the Lord’s will, you’ll be protected from the devil. Magical curses can’t hurt you.”

“That’s the least of my worries.” Andrew stroked his beard. “I have a proposition for you.”

Again Hawk managed to keep his eyes from rolling. This proposition was clearly the real reason Andrew wanted to talk to him in the first place. “Speak it, Master Andrew.”

“I’ll let you divide the real scales from the fake ones and price them differently if you’ll do something important for me. It involves

a bit of deception, though you would not actually lie. Can you do that?"

"Maybe." Hawk shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Um. What kind of deception?"

Andrew moved his hands as if forming a picture from his mind. "Lady Morgan Le Faye asked me to repair a wall around her house. Several of the logs are rotting, probably from a bug infestation. But the wood is beautiful, so she wants the same kind."

"Lady Morgan? I heard she's the king's half sister, but I haven't heard much else. She arrived recently, didn't she?"

"*Returned* recently. Before your time here, she and another sister, Elaine, were captured by a dragon, and Sir Devin rescued them. The king purchased a house that was once owned by a wealthy nobleman, and he gave it to them, though it needed repairs, including the wall I mentioned."

"Oh. Then you'll be sure to get young trees that aren't likely to have bugs."

"Of course. Lady Morgan already located the proper trees, but they are out in a remote part of the forest, so she hired me because I have the horses needed to pull the cart. When the cart is laden with logs, only the most powerful horses can haul such a weight."

Hawk nodded. It was certainly true that Samson was the strongest horse in Camelot, and Andrew's other horses were healthy and fit, even the older mare he kept for breeding.

"With my skill and tools," Andrew continued, "it will take only a day to get it all done, especially since Clefspeare the dragon has agreed to help me cut the trees. That's why I wanted to find out how many gems Legossi demanded. I'm hoping Clefspeare will accept less. After all, he should, don't you think?"

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Again remembering Goliath's attack on Oakdale, Hawk nodded, this time more firmly. "Since the dragons have done so much damage, people hate them now, and they stopped hiring dragons to work for them."

"Exactly. We can take advantage of that hatred by forcing dragons to accept lower prices for their work."

Hawk narrowed his eyes. "Isn't hiring dragons illegal now? King Arthur wants to keep them out of Camelot."

"True, but I won't be in Camelot. Technically, it will be perfectly legal. Besides, I also had information that Morgan wanted to know, something she couldn't possibly learn on her own. That's another reason she chose me to do the job. Now that I have given her the information, if anyone questions the legality of hiring a dragon, she will defend me."

"What information?"

Andrew lowered his voice to a whisper. "Recently I came across a child in the forest. A young girl about your age, eleven or so. When she saw me, she shouted for help, and a dragon stormed out of hiding, used its claws to snatch her up to its back, and flew away with her."

Hawk sucked in a breath. "So is the girl the dragon's prisoner?"

Andrew shrugged and continued in a normal tone. "Maybe. I couldn't tell if she was crying to me for help or to the dragon. Everything happened so fast. But whether the girl is a prisoner or a friend, the dragon can use her against us by threatening her if we don't do what it demands."

"What will Lady Morgan do with the information?"

"I don't know, but she seemed anxious to act quickly. Maybe we'll find out tomorrow. In any case, it might be dangerous for me to

go alone to face a dragon like Clefspeare, but I also don't want him to think I don't trust him. I need you to go with me, but in secret."

Hawk concealed a swallow. Going to see a dragon was pretty much last on his list of things he wanted to do. "In secret? How can I do that?"

"I'll drop you off before we arrive at the spot, and you can watch from hiding. That's the deception part. But since Goliath destroyed your village and burned your back to a crisp . . . what was it, two years ago? . . . maybe you could decide that it's all right to deceive one of Goliath's kin."

The memory sparked a new painful twinge on Hawk's back. "What would you want me to watch for?"

"An attack from Clefspeare. I might need someone who could go for help. The horses know you, and you're a good cart driver. One of the best I've seen, especially for your age." Andrew nodded as he let out a resigned sigh and spoke in a mocking tone. "But if you're too high and holy to simply watch for an attack from a dangerous beast, then I suppose I'll have to go alone. If I die, then I die. The store would close, and you would be out of work, a starving street urchin."

This time Hawk couldn't resist rolling his eyes at the obviously rehearsed speech. Andrew lunged and slapped him on the back. The impact burned, making him grimace. "That's for disrespect," Andrew said as he reseated himself on the bed. "Remember your place. You are the apprentice, and I am the master."

As the pain continued burning, tears welled in Hawk's eyes. How could he do a special favor for this mean tyrant? Andrew didn't deserve a bit of respect, much less agreement to protect him from a dangerous dragon.

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At that moment, his mother's parting instructions resurrected in his mind, the last words she spoke before he began the long walk to Camelot. *Son, remember the teaching of Saint Peter. "Servants, always respect your masters, not only the good and gentle but also the evil and cruel. For there is no credit for suffering a beating when you do wrong, but if you suffer a beating for doing right, then God sees it and will help you endure."*

Hawk mentally nodded. He had to keep doing good, no matter what, and simply watching for trouble wouldn't be a lie. He could offer help, even for this evil master. Besides, he didn't have much choice. Losing this apprenticeship would mean that he could no longer send money back to his mother so she could rebuild their life in the country.

Just as he opened his mouth to agree, Andrew spoke up. "I apologize for hurting you. My bad temper got the best of me. I have something to offer as an apology, and I give it to you freely whether you decide to help me or not."

He reached under the bed, withdrew a flat object wrapped in a towel, and set it on his lap. As he unwrapped it, he continued. "When a slayer sold a few scales to me for reselling, he also gave me this, saying it wasn't on the dragon he killed. Since he found it elsewhere, he couldn't say that it's a real dragon scale, so he offered it as a bonus. No charge."

When Andrew finished spreading out the towel, a shimmering scale-like plate lay in his lap. The size of two hands, curved on the left edge and somewhat straight on the right, it looked like most dragon scales, except for the shimmer. "I doubt that it's real. Maybe someone painted one of the fakes with a glowing substance. Either way, no one would believe it's real, so I could never sell it."

Hawk touched the edge. As Andrew said, the shimmer made it look fake, but it was still beautiful.

Andrew rapped the scale's surface with a knuckle. "It's as tough as a real scale, and I was thinking if you wore it under the back of your tunic, it might protect your scar from fools like me who might give you a swat. I even drilled a few holes near the edges so you could tie it on." Leaning forward, he extended the scale toward Hawk.

Hawk took the scale and looked it over. Although it seemed impossible for the glow to be natural, it didn't appear to have any kind of paint on it. Either way, since it would be under his tunic, no one would see it. "Thank you. I think it will help."

"Excellent." Andrew rose to his feet and crouched in front of Hawk. "So what do you think? Can you go with me in secret to help protect me from a relative of the foul beast that killed your father?"

Hawk nodded. "But who will mind the store?"

"Emma will."

"She said she had to bake pies in the morning."

"I'll tell her to skip the pies." Andrew straightened and mussed Hawk's hair. "Be up at the crack of dawn to help me with the horses. It's a long ride to that section of the forest."

"I will." Hawk turned and left the room, then hurried to the barn. As he stepped into the interior darkness, it seemed that a shadow passed over his mind, like that of a dragon looming in the sky. Word around Camelot was that Clefspeare was an unpredictable dragon, never showing rage or much kindness, at least none that anyone had noticed. Some said that he secretly delivered gifts to the neediest peasants, but since it was done in secret, no one could prove who the giver really was.

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Who could know what was true and what was false? Dragon haters and dragon lovers both lied at times to convince others to join their cause.

Hawk climbed the ladder up to the loft, rearranged his bed of hay, and lay down. In the morning, he would face one of his greatest fears, but maybe that was exactly what he needed to do to get some respect from the citizens of Camelot. Since his father had died in the village fire and his mother depended on his wages, getting that respect would help, especially if it meant earning a raise. But how could he defeat the fear? Just thinking about it sent an icy chill down his spine.

He closed his eyes and folded his hands over his chest. “God,” he whispered, “I need to be brave. Like Mother says, I have to look a dragon straight in the eye without trembling. But I don’t see how I can do it. I’m going to need your help.” He sighed. “By the blood of Jesus, I know I am safe in your love. The evil one cannot touch me.”

Chloe curled up at his ear and nuzzled his cheek, as always. Her soft purring sent a warm sensation across his body, chasing the chill away. Then, he fell asleep and dreamed about slaying dragons.