DRAGON QUEST

 King Rathgar summoned his loyal Court Wizard, Argentus, to Castle Mourne's imposing gray-stoned, torch-lit audience hall.

 "My dear friend, credible rumors still persist. Although no man has seen a living dragon for more than two generations, there is talk that a few may still exist on the Isle of Tyrann."

 The widowed king paused to cough repeatedly, his face flushed, then, with some effort, caught his breath and continued.

 "As you can see, my physician tells me that my health is slowly fading. But if I can obtain a few drops of purple dragon's blood and mix it with rare Sunblaze wine -- which I have lately acquired -- and consume it, I will be guaranteed immortality by the gods. My son and heir is sadly too young and weak to rule after me at present. I therefore command you to journey to the Isle and try to bring me back that vital blood. The place is forbidden to visit except for witches and wizards, which is why I can send only you. Any dragon discovered need not be killed -- just slightly cut the beast under its scaly skin and capture a few drops from the wound in this..."

 The once mighty but now frail and white-bearded king handed a small crystal vial to a royal attendant, who, in turn, carefully carried it to the waiting wizard.

 "Go at once, faithful Argentus. Make contact with the Sorceress Ursalla, who is known to live alone on the Isle, guarded by her vicious white wolves. She may be able to direct you further. There is yet hope and a chance for me and my kingdom. If you are successful, your reward will be beyond imagining, my friend. Make haste!" King Rathgar commanded, as a new coughing spell hit him, and he dismissed the wizard with a feeble wave of his hand.

 It was a two-day and two-night journey on horseback through thick forest trails before Argentus reached the coast. The wizard slept rough on the ground, using his cloak as a blanket. The weather was raw, with dark skies threatening the first November snows. He had been provided back at the castle with enough bread, meat, cheese, wine, and apples for at least a fortnight.

 The seas were angry when Argentus arrived, and the waters were churning with whitecaps. This was a bad time to attempt a crossing to the Isle of Tyrann, but he had no choice. He stabled his horse in a barn adjacent to the modest coastal town's only inn. By previous arrangement, a lone sail had been provided by the King, ready and manned by a crew of four. They set off into a blustery north wind.

 Near sunset, after sailing all day, they approached the mysterious forbidden island. The crew could go no further, so they anchored a short distance away, then provided a small boat for the wizard to row himself ashore. They would return at the next full moon to retrieve him, they vowed.

 Argentus made it to the forlorn, rocky beach in the fading light, just as snowflakes began to swirl. It was too late to hike to the center of the island where the cottage of the Sorceress Ursalla was purported to be located, so the wizard made his way as far as the nearest woods, made a fire, and went to sleep. But his rest was fitful, and his dreams troubled.

 After breakfast the following morning, Argentus was relieved that no snow had accumulated. The temperature had risen overnight, to just above freezing, under calm winds.

 He began walking into the forested interior, towards the center of the island, which was dominated by a large, dark cone-shaped mountain, probably an ancient volcano.

 Suddenly, in a forest clearing around mid-day, a pack of five snarling white wolves surrounded Argentus. These must be Ursalla's specially-trained protectors, he assumed. Showing no fear, he slowly removed his wizard's wand from under his leather and fur outer-garment, and directed it towards the wolves. He stared into their wicked eyes.

 *"Canis Lupus...Pacificate!"* he commanded.

 The five white wolves immediately halted in place and calmed down, and quickly retracted their angry bared teeth.

 "Impressive! There, there, my pets...all is well," a lone female voice abruptly called out from the forest shadows. "I see we have a distinguished visitor...and a skilled wizard at that, it would seem."

 Stepping forward, Argentus beheld a bent, gnarled crone dressed in assorted scraps of animal skins, her gray hair gathered untidily under a coarse blue woolen skullcap. She clutched an aged staff to support herself. The knuckles and blue veins in her hands were pronounced and protruding.

 "I am called Ursalla. I am officially a sorceress -- practicing only white magic, never black -- but some still call me a witch. And you be?"

 Argentus formally introduced himself. The sorceress bowed, then dismissed her wolf pack. "Go play or hunt now, my children!" she urged. "I am safe and in no danger." The white beasts eagerly obeyed and ran off.

 "Shall we retire to my cottage and enjoy some hot tea, or perhaps some mulled wine?" Ursalla offered. "There we can enjoy a warm fire, and you can tell me the purpose of your journey here. You see, I get very few visitors."

 Her abode was indeed cozy, and the wizard was rather happy to be under a snug roof once more. He explained to her in detail why he had come. They enjoyed mugs of heated and spiced red wine while seated near the crackling orange and yellow flames of her fireplace.

 "So it is dragons you seek? Well, I have never seen one, but when I was a girl, my grandmother told me about a living dragon she had seen in her younger days. It was a formidable creature, dark and powerful and fire-breathing. She said it was more than a hundred paces long from snout to tail-tip, and as tall at its shoulders as my chimney here. She saw it fly too, with immense, bat-like wings. Whoosh! She said she would never, ever forget that sight," the witch explained.

 The wizard shared with the crone how rumors swirled on the mainland which hinted that any dragons left in the kingdom might be hiding somewhere on this, the forbidden Isle of Tyrann.

 "Maybe yes, maybe no...In my conjuring visions, I have seen large caves at the base of the Dark Mountain. My inner sight tells me that is where the dragons once lived on this island. The females certainly laid their eggs there too. But it is a difficult, three-day journey from my cottage over steep and rocky terrain, and I never attempted it before, nor can I attempt it now because of my age," Ursalla confessed. "But you can, my brave Argentus. Your hair and beard is still thick and brown, and your face is not withered and wrinkled like mine. Your blue eyes are clear, and you have your good teeth too!" she grinned, displaying her few remaining blackened incisors and bicuspids. "Come, I will draw you a map."

 The sorceress took up quill, ink and parchment and gleefully went to task.

 "Now, if you see a living adult dragon there, you must put a spell upon it while it is asleep. Make it ignore your presence when you nick under its scales with your dagger for a few drops of purple blood. However, if you find a dragon egg and the mother dragon is missing, you must quickly hunt a stag with no less than twelve points on its antlers and slay it. Then you must place the egg inside the still-warm trunk of the gutted beast until the egg hatches. Lastly, you must find a ruby-berry bush and feed its fruit to the hatchling before seven nights have passed. Failure to do any of these things will cause the orphaned baby dragon to die," the wise witch warned. "When dragons mature, they are basically meat eaters, but they also need to crunch and digest certain small rocks for their mineral content, which in turn allows them to make and exhale fire. But any orphaned babies must start with ruby-berries."

 "Exactly what, then, do dragon eggs look like?" Argentus wanted to know.

 "I have seen visions a few times in my dreams," she replied. "Being reptilian, the eggs are scaly, not smooth like a hen's egg. In color, their appearance is blackish-purple, with subtle, glittering sparkles. Their size and weight is that of a typical man's head. Legend also says that un-hatched eggs can survive for up to one thousand moons if kept in near-freezing conditions."

 "And what are these ruby-berries that you speak of?" he asked. "I have never heard of them."

 "They are very scarce and difficult to find, especially this time of year. But wait...I have a few to show you." Ursalla rose and went to a dusty wooden cabinet and returned with the tiny rare fruit. They glistened like their gem's namesake, and were a deep, dark red. "When I can find them, they are useful in brewing various potions," she added. "Here...you may keep these five berries as samples."

 The wizard thanked his host and placed her offering carefully in a soft leather pouch attached to his belt.

 "There now, my wizard friend. You must sup with me and stay the night. Your quest begins in earnest at sunup." the witch decreed.

 Later, over a steaming cauldron of rabbit stew with root vegetables and a basket of fresh warm biscuits, the sorceress told of how she was banished to the Isle by old King Wargut, who was furious when she failed as commanded to turn base metals into gold. "He had lost his mind by then, poor fool, so I was actually relieved to keep my head and simply be banished into exile. That was some sixty winters ago, so here I am and here I must stay until I die."

 "Perhaps King Rathgar can pardon you and release you from such forced isolation," Argentus suggested. But Ursalla explained that she was happy where she lived with her white wolves now, and declined his kind proposal.

 The wizard left the next morning. The sun had finally broken through the dense clouds which had plagued Argentus since he had departed Castle Mourne. The hobbling crone had generously assembled some additional foodstuffs to help supplement her visitor's earlier supplies. She also gave him a spare bow and quiver of arrows that she had saved. ("For hunting the stag, should you need to.") Leaning on her ancient staff, she bid Argentus a fond farewell. He promised he would stop back her way if he discovered anything on his important dragon quest.

 "Good Luck!" she cried out as he vanished over the horizon, with him following the crude map to Dark Mountain that Ursalla had drawn.

 Three days of rough travel -- through forests, bogs, and up and down perilous rocky passes, moving from a sunny day to a rainy day and finally to a snowy day -- brought Argentus at last to the base of Dark Mountain. There he found the immense caves that he had been searching for.

 Carefully, the wizard explored the mysterious environment with tenuous, soft footsteps. After a long while, he determined that no live dragons were anywhere about, and probably had been gone for many years. He did, however, notice some enormous skeletal bones in some of the caves, and a strange unknown odor like something burned from long ago. Were both clues remnants of the once-feared, now-vanished species? he wondered.

 However, in the final cave he examined, Argentus found a natural tunnel leading downward into the cold, dark rock. (He had unwittingly stumbled upon a lava tube from the extinct volcano.) Going back outside, he fashioned a torch and lit it, then returned inside and followed the tunnel into its now illuminated yet shiny blackness. It grew increasingly cold. The wizard could see his exhaled breath hanging like mist. He surmised that he was descending into a kind of ice cave. There, when he arrived at the end of the tunnel, appeared to be a kind of nest made of piled rocks. And upon said nest lay a single, scaly, blackish-purple egg with subtle, glittering sparkles. The wizard was astonished when he realized that he might have lucked upon an actual dragon egg...

 Argentus gently lifted the unusual object and slowly examined it. Its heft was surprising. Its scales were smooth and regular. It appeared intact, with no signs of any cracks. The wizard had no idea how long the egg had been resting there, or if there was any possibility of life left inside it.

 Remembering Ursalla's instructions, he replaced the egg in its rock nest and went out to search for a stag with his gifted bow and quiver of arrows. The weather had since turned even more nasty, with heavy, wet snow falling. This made tracking any deer easier, of course, but it also made the wizard's marching and searching much more arduous.

 Over four hours, he spotted several female deer but no stags. Finally, a magnificent brown male with enough points on his antlers came into view on a rising hill. The wind was fortunately in the wizard's favor. Breathlessly, Argentus notched an arrow, raised and steadied his bow, and let fly the lethal projectile towards the silhouette of the proud, stately, yet unsuspecting beast.

 The hunter hit his target behind the stag's front leg, in the side by its heart. The surprised stag faltered a moment, then collapsed in the snow, its dying breaths exhaling huge puffs of steam. The wizard went to his fallen prey and slit its throat to mercifully end its suffering. Then he gave thanks to the gods, and gave his respects to the spirit of his animal victim. Argentus then dragged the dead beast back to the area where the dragon egg waited. That exhausting effort took more than an hour, but the slippery snow helped somewhat.

 After making a fire near the entrance of the cave, the wizard deftly gutted the stag, then gathered the egg and placed it inside the animal's still-warm trunk. He had no idea how long it would take the dragon egg to hatch in its new incubation, so he sliced off a slab of fresh stag meat and roasted it for a late meal for himself. Somewhat warm, rested and nourished by now, Argentus went out next to search for the all-important ruby-berries.

 But this requirement for the newborn dragon was virtually impossible to find, because the heavy snow had completely covered every bush and low-lying plant for many leagues in every direction! The forlorn wizard trudged back to the cave area in defeat after more than two hours of futile searching, as the snow continued to come down.

 Yet when he checked on the egg inside the stag's flank upon his return, he noticed that it had begun to crack. The egg's blackish-purple scales had peeled themselves back toward the egg's center. A few moments later, Argentus was amazed as he witnessed an infant dragon struggling to emerge...

 The baby dragon's skin was the same basic color as its egg, except for it being covered with glistening and sticky but clear mucus. A man with a large hand could hold it, such was its newborn size. It had four legs and a tail, and two tiny horns on its head. Its bat-like wings were neatly folded alongside its body. Its face somewhat resembled that of an alligator -- its mouth when opened could be seen filled with tiny, needle-like teeth. The baby dragon's eyes were deep green and seemed rather wary as it looked around its new environment. Then it looked at Argentus and made a small noise like a squeak. The wizard assumed that the remarkable, tiny reptile was hungry, even though Argentus had never married or fathered a child and hence knew nothing of caring for babies, of any sort.

 Recalling his five ruby-berries, he offered one to the baby dragon, who sniffed it, then gobbled it up. Although it wanted another, the wizard decided that only one a day for five days would have to do until he found more of the rare red fruit. But he knew the urgency of finding more, for the baby dragon needed some for the first seven days of its life to survive.

 So each day he fed the dragon one berry, and each day he went out to search further for ruby-berry bushes. But he could never find one, even when the snow had stopped. The surrounding landscape was entirely blanketed in white, with only tall evergreen trees visible above the wintery covering.

 Although they had moved out of the frigid ice cave by now and set up a crude home in another, more appropriate cave, the baby dragon was clearly weakening. The wizard kept a fire constantly going for warmth for both of them, and melted plenty of snow for their drinking water, and offered the infant bits of meat, or little pieces of bread, cheese or apple, but the dragon always refused. When the ruby-berries ran out after the fifth day, Argentus was frantic and even tried some magic spells to try and prolong the baby dragon's life, which was ebbing away. Nothing worked, however, and the wizard was truly helpless. If only the temperature would rise and the snow would melt! He gently stroked his tiny ward with his fingers like a beloved pet, and the baby dragon seemed to trust him and understand. And still, he had no idea if it was even male or female.

 After the seventh day, shortly after sunset, the tiny dragon sadly closed its eyes forever, never having made it to maturity to fly or breath fire or mate.

 A defeated Argentus wept.

 Using his knife, he then made a small cut in the dead infant reptile's side, and squeezed a few drops of its rare purple blood into King Rathgar's special crystal vial. At least the wizard would not fail His Grace.

 Rather than bury the baby dragon near the caves of its fabled ancestors, Argentus decided to wrap up and carry its cold little body back to Ursalla's cottage, to show her what a real dragon actually looked like. He also returned to the ice cave and gathered up the empty dragon egg shell shards to bring back to the witch. He then journeyed the three days back to her cottage, quite miserable in a chilling rain.

 "Such a shame...such a tragedy!" Ursalla exclaimed after Argentus wearily told his tale. She respectfully examined the infant dragon corpse. The wizard then asked the crone if she could tell if this dragon was a boy or a girl.

 "Legends say that dragons are born asexual, and only exhibit their gender after they achieve maturity, so we will never know," she explained. "Hence we cannot even add a fitting name over its grave."

 "Well, I think we should bury it here, and honor its spirit with a ceremony," Ursalla announced the following day. And so they did.

 The wizard stayed with the witch until the full moon, when he had to leave to catch his sail back to the mainland as previously arranged. The vial of precious purple blood had to be delivered back as soon as possible to Castle Mourne. It was a crucial matter of life and death for the King.

 As a parting gift for her wisdom and kindness, Argentus gave Ursalla the broken shards of dragon egg that he had saved. "Maybe something magical can come of this some day," he mused. The wizard and the sorceress embraced, and he left.

 Once again on the mainland, the wizard retrieved his horse and rode like the wind back to the castle.

 But two shocks awaited him.

 King Rathgar had died two nights earlier.

 And when Argentus took out the crystal vial to show the precious dragon blood and relate his story to the court officials assembled in the torch-lit audience hall, he saw with horror that the rich purple blood had turned a pale yellow!

 Although no one knew it at that time, the purple dragon blood -- being mixed with rare Sunblaze wine, and promising immortality to its desperate, awaiting consumer -- had to taken from a still-living dragon, not a dead one. So the captured blood had changed into something inert and useless...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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