



Dragon Weather (Obsidian Chronicles)

By Lawrence Watt-Evans

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Arlian had never left his home village in the Obsidian Mountains. The green hills, white peaks, and black glass were all he had ever known of life, and though he dreamed of travel and adventure, he knew deep in his heart that he would probably never leave.

Until the dragon weather came. Incredible heat, oppressive humidity, dark and angry clouds . . . and dragons. Dragons with no feelings, no empathy, no use for humans; dragons who destroyed his entire village and everyone in it. Everyone, that is, except Arlian.

Orphaned and alone, Arlian the child is captured by looters and sold as a mining slave. Seven years later Arlian the man escapes, fueled by years of hatred for the dragons, bandits, and slavers that took his youth away--and a personal vow to exact retribution from those who have wronged him.

As Arlian makes his way through life, he is obsessed with the concept of justice, and that obsession informs every task, every decision. Even Black, the man he befriends and grows to love as a brother, has little influence against Arlian's obsession. His entire life has one purpose, and one purpose only: to mete out justice.

But can one righteous man change the entire world for the better? Or is he doomed by his own actions to become as unjust as those he seeks to destroy?

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Editorial Review

Review

"An epic tale."--*Tulsa World*

About the Author

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Lawrence Watt-Evans has been a full-time writer and editor for more than twenty years. The author of more than thirty novels, over one hundred short stories, and more than one hundred and fifty published articles, Watt-Evans writes primarily in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and comic books. His short fiction has won the Hugo Award as well as twice winning the Asimov's Readers Award. His fiction has been published in England, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, Poland, France, Hungary, and Russia

He served as president of the Horror Writers Association from 1994 to 1996 and after leaving that office was the recipient of HWA's first service award ever. He is also a member of Novelists Inc., and the Science Fiction Writers of America. Married with two children, he and his wife Julie live in Maryland.

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I

Dragon Weather

The sky to the west was dark with heavy black clouds; Arlian didn't like it at all. He was eleven years old, almost a man by the standards of his village, but right now he felt much younger, and very unsure of himself--his father was away, and the weather seemed threatening and unnatural. He stayed close to his mother as she stood staring down the slope of the mountain, watching the men of the village haul the heavy water wagons back up the winding, stone-paved road.

Oxen would have made the hauling much easier, but the village had no place to graze oxen on the rocky mountainside; what little arable soil they had was all reserved for human needs. That meant that the men of Obsidian had to use their own muscles to fetch water up from the river.

In another year or two Arlian would be big enough to join them, but for now he stood beside his mother and watched.

Arlian's mother fanned herself with one hand, while the other clutched at her black-and-gold brooch, holding her collar open; the air was thick, hot, and stagnant, and her gray dress was soaked in sweat. "I can't stand weather like this," she said. "I'll almost be glad to see winter come this year!"

Arlian looked up at her--though not far up, as he was almost as tall as she, now. He always liked winter, and had never entirely understood why the adults didn't. In winter the mountain was covered in snow--well, except right up by the crater--and he and the other children of the village could go sliding down it; there was plenty of cold, clean water available for the melting, without having to haul it up from the valley when the streams ran dry. He could play outside for hours, then come in and warm up by the fire, and no one would order him out of the way or ask him to help with the chores. Even the adults had less work to do in the winter--so why did they all hate it? Yes, there was less food and it wasn't fresh, and the cold seeped through everywhere, and the fire had to be kept up, but still, Arlian thought that winter was wonderful.

And *anything* was better than this stifling hot, humid summer, when the sun didn't seem to want to show its

face and hid behind a thick haze or clouds. This wasn't how summer was supposed to be--there should be bright days and rainy ones, not these endless smothering gloomy days when the clouds hung overhead but the rain never fell. This was ugly and exhausting.

It hadn't rained in weeks, and the crops were suffering--the water the men were hauling up from the river would help, but a good cistern-filling rain, splashing down the mountainside and pooling in the rocks, would have been better.

Those clouds in the west looked even uglier than most of this year's skies. Maybe they would bring storms, and put an end to this nasty heat--but their appearance was not promising, and Arlian didn't trust them. His grandfather--his mother's father; his father's father was long dead--stepped out on the rocky ledge beside them and looked, not down the slope at the water-haulers he was too old to assist, but out at the clouds.

"Dragon weather," he said with a frown.

"Oh, nonsense," Arlian's mother said. "You've been saying that for weeks. It's just a hot spell."

"Isn't that what dragon weather is, Mother?" Arlian asked. "A hot spell?"

His mother glanced at her father.

"Not just the heat," the old man said. "Look at that sky--hot as a furnace and days dark as night, *that's* dragon weather. You need the heat *and* the dark. If those clouds move in and settle here, that's *really* what we'll have."

Arlian looked straight up at the sky overhead. It wasn't dark as night, but it wasn't very bright, either; the summer haze was thick and foul with the gasses from the smoking peak of the mountain. The fumes had been thicker than usual lately, but whether that had any connection with the weather no one seemed to know. Arlian had heard the adults arguing about it, but the arguments were never settled.

"Why is it called dragon weather, Grandsir?" he asked.

"Because it's the sort of weather that brings the dragons out of their caves," his grandfather replied. "They can't abide cold or light, Ari. In the days when the dragons ruled over our ancestors the world was warmer than it is now, and the great beasts darkened the skies with their smoke so that they could come out by day, as well as night. When the weather's dark and hot now, old and tired as they are, they still stir in their sleep, and sometimes they awaken and come out to feed."

Arlian stared nervously at his grandfather. The old man spoke in a deeper voice than usual--his storytelling voice. It made his words seem more important, and more ominous.

"Don't mind him, Ari," Arlian's mother said, patting Arlian's shoulder reassuringly. "That's just stories. No one's seen any dragons in hundreds of years."

Her father shook his head.

"No, Sharbeth, you're wrong," he said. "When I was a boy I saw a village where a dragon had been not long before. I may be old, but it wasn't hundreds of years ago."

"Tell me about it!" Arlian said.

His grandfather smiled down at him. "Are you sure? They say it's bad luck to talk about the dragons, just as it's unlucky to speak too much about magic."

Arlian nodded. "Tell me about it, Grandsir!"

Grandsir looked up at the sky and frowned, then back down at Arlian, his smile reappearing. "I was a year or two older than you are, and my uncle Stirian had taken me on a trading journey down to Benth-in-Tara, to meet a caravan that was passing through," he said. "We saw the ruins on the way. We'd had a hot summer the year before, weather something like this, and for a few days the smoke from the mountain had been much thicker than usual and had collected in that valley over in the Sandalwood Hills." He pointed over the shoulder of the mountain; Arlian had never been to the Sandalwood Hills, but he had seen them from the crater rim and knew where his grandfather meant.

"The dragon must have come out late that summer," the old man continued, "and no one discovered it over the winter. When we got there in the spring, there was nothing left but charred ruins and bare bones."

"And how do you know it wasn't human raiders who destroyed it?" Arlian's mother asked. "Those bandits in the south are surely bad enough without worrying about dragons!"

"The Borderlands bandits never get anywhere near this far north," her father said, "and human raiders don't leave six-foot claw marks."

"And neither do dragons," Sharbeth said, her hands on her hips, "because the dragons, if there are really any left alive at all, stay asleep in their caves, deep beneath the earth. You must have just *imagined* those claw marks, Father, or misinterpreted sword cuts or wagon ruts."

"They were real, and they were claw marks," her father insisted, but without much vehemence; Arlian realized that the two of them had undoubtedly had this argument many times before, as they had so many others, and had worn the passion out of it. His mother and grandfather argued often, and had done so ever since Grandsir had first come to live with them while Arlian was still a small child. He could barely remember a time when Grandsir had not been there--or when his mother did not argue with him.

"I'm not going to listen to your nonsense," Arlian's mother said, with no great anger. "I'm going to go see that those men have something fit to eat when they get those wagons up here, something to keep their strength up!" She turned and started back toward the house.

Arlian hesitated. He wanted to stay close to his mother, and help out when the water wagons arrived, but he also wanted to hear his grandfather's story about the ruined village--it wasn't one he remembered hearing before. He wanted to know more about the dragons and what had become of them.

"Are you coming, Arlian?" his mother called. She paused and looked over her shoulder.

"No, Mother," he replied. "I'll stay here for a while, with Grandsir."

"Hmpf." She marched on across the rocky yard, toward their thatch-roofed home.

Grandsir looked down at Arlian. "Eager to see your father and brother back?" he asked.

Arlian nodded. "tell me more about the dragons," he said.

His grandfather laughed. "That's my boy!" he said. "What do you want to know?"

"Have you ever *seen* a dragon, Grandsir?"

The old man shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "I'm still alive, am I not? There aren't many who see dragons and live to tell of it!"

"There must be some people who see them, or how would we know *anything* about dragons?" Arlian asked.

"A fair question," his grandfather said, smiling. He glanced at the water-haulers, judged it would still be a while before they reached the village, and settled down cross-legged on the ledge, into a better position for storytelling. Arlian settled beside him.

"Yes," Arlian's grandfather said, "there have been a few people who saw dragons and lived to tell about it. Most of them were at a safe distance, and the dragons simply didn't notice them, but there have been a few..." His voice trailed off as he looked to the west, at the approaching clouds. He frowned.

"A few what, Grandsir?" Arlian looked, trying to see what his grandfather was staring at.

The old man shook himself. "Nothing," he said. "I just don't like this weather." Then he smiled at Arlian, and said, "Of course, there were a few who got a good *close* look at the dragons. There might even be some of them who are still alive today."

Arlian nodded. "From that village in the Sandalwood Hills, you mean?"

"Oh, no." Grandsir shook his head. "Nothing like that; I saw that village, and there wasn't so much as a rat left alive there, just bones and cinders. But there are old stories, *very* old stories, about dragon venom."

"Venom?" Arlian frowned. As Grandsir had said, most of the adults in the village didn't like talking about the dragons; there were so many superstitions about them that most people thought it safer not to discuss them at all. Dragons were magical, and magic was wicked and untrustworthy, and speaking too much about it could attract misfortune.

Still, Arlian had thought he had a reasonable understanding of what a dragon was, and he didn't remember anything about venom. "I thought dragons breathed fire!" he said.

"Well, they *do*, after a fashion," Grandsir said. "Or so I'm told. But the older stories, the ones from the early days of the Years of Man, say that dragonflame isn't so much fiery breath, as some people would have it, but a spray of burning venom, like a snake's spit of poison. Except dragons somehow set their poison ablaze, and thereby spit flame."

"Ooooh!" Arlian shivered at the thought. It seemed somehow more *real* to know that dragonfire was burning venom, rather than some sort of magical breath. It made dragons seem more like actual beasts, rather than spirits, or illusions like the little images the village sorcerer sometimes conjured up.

"Whether it's the truth or not I can't say," Grandsir continued, "but there are stories, very old *stories*, so old I don't know where they came from, that say that sometimes the venom doesn't catch fire properly. It's still deadly poison, of course, a poison that will burn the flesh from your bones--but supposedly it quickly loses some of its virulence when once it's been sprayed, and a mixture of this dragon venom and human blood is said to bestow long life on anyone who drinks it. *Very* long life. There are tales of men who lived centuries after surviving dragon attacks in which blood from their wounds was mixed with dragon venom and then swallowed--though many of them had been horribly mutilated in the attacks, their faces burned away, arms or legs lost, so that such a life would hardly be a blessing."

Arlian shivered again. He looked at the clouds. The dragons seemed so terrible that it was hard, sometimes, to believe that they were ever real.

Everyone knew they were real, though, or had been once, at least. The dragons had ruled all of the Lands of Man, from the eastern sea to the western wilderness, from the Borderlands in the south to the icy wastes of the north. People had resisted their rule sometimes, fought great wars against the dragons, but to no avail--until one day, about seven hundred years ago, when the dragons had all gone away, leaving humanity free. Arlian's mother said the dragons had all died, perhaps of some plague, but most people insisted they were still alive, deep in their caverns, and might come back at any time.

And sometimes, according to Grandsir, they *did* come back, briefly.

"That village in the Sandalwood Hills," Arlian asked. "What do you think the people there did to anger the dragon? Why would it destroy them all?"

"I don't think they had to do *anything*," Grandsir said. "The dragon simply felt like destroying something, and they were close at hand."

"But that's so unfair! You mean they didn't do anything to deserve it?"

"Not a thing," Grandsir replied.

Arlian absorbed that unhappily. He didn't like it at all. He knew life wasn't always fair, but he felt, deep in his heart, that it *should* be. He always tried to be fair to his brother, Korian, and to their playmates in the village--even the giggly girls. In the stories his mother told justice always triumphed in the end. Why was the rest of life so messy and unjust?

His father said it was because the gods were dead, and only Fate remained, and Fate had its own plans for everyone.

The village sorcerer--the only person in the village of Obsidian whose name Arlian didn't know, because he said names had power--had said that justice was as much an illusion as any of the little tricks he did to entertain the children.

Arlian wondered sometimes if it might be the other way around--maybe everything *did* work out fairly in the end, somehow, and the apparent injustices were the illusions. He wiped sweat-damp hair away from his eyes and looked down at the approaching wagons.

Maybe the dragon *did* have a good reason for destroying that village. Maybe the dragons were part of Fate's plans.

"Do you really think it's dragon weather?" he asked

His grandfather put an arm around Arlian's shoulder and gave him a reassuring hug.

"I hope not," he said. "Come on, let's go give your mother a hand."

Together, they turned away from the ledge and ambled toward the house.

Users Review

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Noah Cale:

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