

THE NECROMANCER'S DRAGON

Book 1 in the Armageddon Trilogy

By

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CHAPTER 1: THE GIRL AND THE DRAGON

The hatchling would soon discover a new world through a slow awakening, one different from its accustomed darkness filled with blurred patterns and colors. Instinctively, it wanted to uncurl its long, sleek, slender neck, only to be trapped and cramped in an unmovable emptiness.

With the sudden urge to burst from its prison, its head thrust upward, knocking its chipped nose against the cold cocoon. Several more taps and the eggshell began cracking. Fresh, amber-colored eyes brightened as its pupils dilated from the sudden seeping light welcoming the new creature; the glistening crimson dragonet's triangular head popped out, and suddenly, the two halves of its shell flung apart.

The slimy interior of the egg trailed behind the red dragon whelpling as it clawed and crawled its way across the pieces scattered upon a stone table, leaving a path of slime and blood. Sniffing and flickering its sleek tail, the dragon unfolded its five-spined golden wings like a lady's fan, phalanges delicate and thin, the texture like parchment. Specks of purple, red, and yellow ovals dabbed the trailing edges of both of its wings; its stomach burned a gilded glow, magnifying the hue of its sparkling amber eyes. Its newborn hide gleamed like polished rubies crafted by the world's finest jewelers.

The dragonet's face donned a formidable bone mask with two horns upon its head curving inward like a crown, and three tiny horns adorned its jawline. A long forked red tongue slithered from between its small but sharp fangs to taste the fresh air for the first time.

Senses awakening at once upon entering this new world, and the whelping extended its neck fully to take in its surroundings. However, its newfound existence did not serve as a grand welcome to its unearthly environment. The hatchling grew bored and impatient after absorbing the knowledge about this universe through dreams and visions; it wanted to escape, and dragons served no command.

Yet, the youngling snarled from the darkness that consumed its new prison. The slanted walls twisted together, holding the shadows and evil within. Soft red lighting entered the room, revealing the corrosive foundation of stone. Rotten and burnt flesh festered and laded the air, accompanied by droplets of red liquid dripping from tangled black roots of obsidian crystals breaking through the ceiling. Rats scurried across the stone floors, darting behind the skeletal remains chained to the walls.

Growling with hunger, the dragonet reared its head back, ember sparks igniting from its nostrils; it suddenly recoiled to the cold, thick splash kissing against its back, and the hatchling dove behind its nest made of dead grass. Upon shaking away its fear, it finally investigated its once lonely prison cell.

Yet, there was an itch the hatchling quite couldn't scratch; the baby dragon snaked its blood-red diamond-adorned head around when realizing it wasn't alone. Laying unconscious upon the stone table near its egg-shell-covered nest was another creature: a human.

There was no doubt in the whelping's mind that the female was human, as it learned much about her presence within the egg. The scale-less being had a patch of long, soft chocolate-brown hair—or fur as the dragon initially thought—

flowing across her thin and frail body. Dressed in only tattered rags, her dirtied and hair-covered copper-hued face still radiated with what the hatchling could assume to be human beauty; she was a lovely creature that lit up this dark and damp world.

Inching closer with caution, the whelping grew discouraged to see her eyes sewn shut, caught in a deep stupor. The human's only sign of life was the slow rhythmic motion of her chest as she breathed; she was alive, but barely. The dragon rubbed its snout into her opened left hand before noticing a mark etched into her palm: a circle with a crescent shape inside.

Instead of being frightened, the dragon was rather intrigued; she constantly swirled through its visions and dreams before hatching, and somehow, it felt at ease around her presence.

The human stirred; the youngling flinched and heard a soft mumble emanating from her breath. She was hurt and tortured from what the hatchling knew, and the foul, loathsome, vile creature responsible was nearby. Tucking in its wings, the whelping snuggled against the human, laying its head against her chest. The faint heartbeat ticked against the dragon's ears like a clock; the human would not survive long.

Yet, a sudden commotion followed by explosions thundered outside their prison chamber. The dragon hunkered down and hissed; pupils dilated with wings unfurled. It flexed out its four ivory claws—similarly shaped like a human hand—and swept its tail over the human's face, brushing aside her hair.

Tiny flames erupted from its clenched maw when a malicious voice rang like a grave's shrill. "Destroy them. They will rot in Oblivion."

The whelping curled its lips and backed away like a

cat with a raised back from the unpleasant sounds that exploded in the air, but the human remained undeterred by the ruckus.

Footsteps rattled against metal outside the prison cell, and for a brief still moment, there came a tapping against the door. Snarling, the dragon protectively slithered over the human girl, but the baby flinched when the metal blasted off its hinges.

Another human—male and more muscular—dashed inside with a mechanism the dragon had never before seen. His silver-streaked armor reflected against the eerie red light flashing across the obsidian walls behind him; his dragon talon-shaped boots clacked against the stone floor from each cautioned step he took towards the stone table.

The panting and sodden man lifted the visor to his dragon head-shaped helmet to better examine the dragon and unconscious girl. Out of reflex and defense, the hatchling bared its fangs and fanned out its wings in hopes to scare the stranger away. Was he a friend? Foe? It mattered not, and the dragon was overwhelmed with the desire to protect this human.

“Oi! Gromm, I found them.” Upon a second glance at the hostile hatchling, the man hissed through his teeth. “But there may be a change in plans.”

The dragonet could clearly understand what the human was saying: it learned the language through the shell.

The one deemed Gromm followed behind, holding the same device in his hands and wearing the same type of armor plating. “Finally. You got us lost in this bloody castle, Beck.”

“I did not.” Beck looked back and aimed his uncanny weapon at one of the cloaked figures following them, and an explosion erupted from within upon pulling the trigger. The

dragon flinched once more at the sound and hissed, digging its claws into the frayed remains of its nest and egg.

Gromm was the muscle of the two due to his size and bulk compared to Beck's leaner frame. Yet, the two shared the same brown hair and blue eyes, connecting them as brothers. "Damn it all. The dragon already hatched." Gromm went over and reached out, but the baby growled and attempted to bite his hand. The feel of his metal gloves left a copper taste in the dragon's mouth, but Gromm still recoiled. "Blimey, this bugger is feisty."

"We have to get the dragon, too." Beck fired another shot at their second pursuer. "We can't leave it behind."

Gromm reached out once more, but this time for the young girl. The dragon nipped at him again; swearing under his breath, he snatched a leather pouch near the egg fragments and swooped in, avoiding the hatchling's snake-like strikes.

Though Gromm's intentions were pure, the dragon had seen enough of this chaos and wished to remain in solitude, guarding the only real connection he made within its new existence. It backed away like a cornered rat, snapping its small dagger-like teeth, but Gromm was faster; he snatched the dragon and threw it into the satchel, avoiding its flurry of fangs. "Sorry, little one, but only for now."

Beck's head whipped around amidst reloading as their relentless pursuers multiplied, blindly following their previously issued command without further delay. "We better hurry, or else the Lich will catch us at this rate."

Known and feared as the most powerful undead necromancer among man, elf, and dwarf kind, the Lich claimed Death's throne in Oblivion before manifesting himself within the mortal realm; the underworld suffered from his ten-

thousand-year sovereignty. His actual name—no one would dare speak it as it brought bad luck and misfortune. The men chasing Gromm and Beck were his cultists wearing eerie silver masks and midnight blue robes: the Obsidian Order.

During their pell-mell rescue mission, the hissing dragon squirmed and clawed at its new confines, but the material remained resilient. It was trapped in darkness yet again, and this time its human was in danger, and the dragon couldn't protect her.

However, Gromm ignored the hatchling as it continued fighting through the sack while throwing the unconscious girl over his shoulder. After exhausting its strength, the whelping gave up but growled and snarled with every unexpected jerk from Gromm, dodging blasts of fire and tendrils of black lightning shooting through the air. Meanwhile, Beck stayed right on his tracks with his now readied pistol, gunning down one enemy after another with steady quick, and deadly precision.

The bickering brothers argued through the dark maze, avoiding the swarming cultists until they reached the massive courtyard overlooking the mountainside. To their horror, a horde of about twenty zealots surrounded their solid red dragon, its scales as jagged as the obsidian rocks forming the Lich's twisted castle.

"Vulcan!" Gromm and Beck screamed together.

The dragon's ruby eyes met their dismayed gazes. Though Vulcan was the size of two houses with a formidable wingspan to match, he wasn't immune to gunshot wounds and blade slices. Yet, magic bounced off his hide with no effect, as dragons were impervious to artificial magic—only a dragon's ability could harm another dragon.

The stars above watched the chaos that ensued through the brewing squall; before Gromm and Beck could intervene, Vulcan, ignoring the myriad of weapons attacking blindly, stretched open his maw and unleashed a deadly torrent of fire that incinerated his enemies.

As the flames died and dust cleared, Beck pointed at Vulcan. “Get those two to the saddle. I’ll watch your back.”

Gromm only grunted, shifting the girl’s weight; as thin and frail as she was, the burden grew heavier as time ticked away. The flailing dragon hatchling still trapped in the satchel wasn’t making his mission any easier.

The armed and ready Beck watched his brother’s back while ensuring the girl’s and the dragon’s safety within the large harness built to carry a crew of about thirty or more fully grown adult men.

As Vulcan and Beck kept the Order distracted, a few spell-casters broke rank, throwing their hands out and summoning ropes of lightning and fire that curled away from their fingers. Beck immediately spun on his heels and fired down the magic users within an eye-blink before Gromm could so much react.

Ensuring their new passengers were safely secured with straps, Gromm swooped over and grabbed Beck by the collar of his armor, pulling him on board. Vulcan let out an ear-shattering roar before sweeping his thick tail across dirt and rock, knocking over the zealots swarming like angry bees.

While the brothers took positions—Gromm grabbing the reins and Beck setting up his sniper rifle—the hatchling wriggled itself free of the pouch to see Vulcan unfurl his colossal wings and launch himself skyward in one massive leap.

Through wailing and snarling, the dragonet immediately dashed to the unconscious girl strapped to the saddle's corner and ensconced itself around her legs. Gromm only had enough time to look over his shoulder and curse, but he confirmed that neither passenger was in danger of falling overboard and continued focusing on steering Vulcan through his steep climb.

Sulfur polluted the air, and soot from the trailing mountain fell softly like the pitter-patter of rain. Black smoke clouds circled the volcano's peak occupying the border of Mirrorhold and Armageddon, Mount Blackrock, where the Lich built his fortress; thick smog writhed around the obsidian castle, swirling with the dark magic tainted atmosphere. Massive like a city capital, the black magma castle pierced the heavens with spiked towers.

A deathly shrill gripped the rescue squad; Gromm's knuckles turned white around the reins. The harrowing call faded away, leaving the brothers jolting from the hatchling's sudden cries and shrieks. The surrounding metal-hued clouds grew dark, and three wyverns emerged from the storm spires, racing in pursuit after Vulcan. Beck sighted his rifle, keeping a lookout for any followers.

Merely a quarter of Vulcan's size, the wyverns still possessed the advantage over speed and coordinated their attacks from this approach. Upon Gromm's hand signal, Beck swung around and unleashed two rounds at the first creature rushing from the side: one through the left wing and another in its exposed neck. Before its handlers could retaliate, the wyvern dropped like a fallen star.

Vulcan thrust himself forward, putting more speed between him and the remaining two; the wyverns slowed their

wing beats, and their riders used magic to conceal themselves within the darkened clouds.

Though he cursed himself for celebrating too soon, Beck couldn't help but release a sigh of relief. "I think we lost 'em."

Gromm relaxed his shoulders but immediately ducked when his eyes caught a faint glimmer of metal shimmering through the shadows following through the turbulence, and the bullet flew past. He swore under his breath for their sneaky use of silencers, but he maintained his demeanor for Vulcan, who nearly stopped midflight. His head thrashed about but reluctantly continued upon Gromm's request when further assassination attempts ceased.

For the moment, the world seemed quiet. The brothers checked on their rescues, relieved that the girl and the dragon remained silent and still throughout that ordeal. Only when Gromm made another pass to approach the pair did the hatchling stir, hissing like a cat. He frowned through the furrow of his brow, realizing that the dragon bound itself to the girl, choosing her as its new rider and handler.

Before Gromm could make his sentiments known, he and Beck saw a flash of red light lancing through the clouds from the magma castle, rays bursting from the Lich's hand as the necromancer trekked across the charred courtyard balcony. His voluminous cloak turned to plumes of black smoke with every stride, greatly contrasting his ghostly white swallow skin against his outstretched bony arm. A spine-chilling yet simple white mask glowed in the sinister mist surrounding his fortress.

"I've had enough of this childish nonsense."

The Lich's crimson eyes pierced the thick fog, chanting in words no longer known from this world, drawing

from past knowledge gained by forming pacts with demons inside the deepest circle within Oblivion.

Lightning cracked the darkened sky, revealing the two stealthy wyverns chasing Vulcan behind their cloudy veil; blackened clouds swirling like a super tornado swallowed the creatures and their handlers. Black and red flashes radiated from the center as anguished screams of pain thundered from the growing maelstrom. A bolt of energy shot from the clouds, revealing a monstrous creature, unlike any dragon the brothers had ever seen.

A gigantic two-headed wyvern, black as the void with flesh rotting from its very bones, bearing the symbol of the Lich—a serpent forming a circle as it ate its tail—roared with blind rage. As it flailed about wildly, its three golden eyes turned crimson red. Within the beast’s foreboding mind, its master’s voice echoed, *Destroy the two dragon riders and bring back their corpses.*

The Lich lowered his grisly hand, watching his beast at work. He knew the foolish mortals had no chance of defeating a creature of that caliber after forging the living souls of both wyverns and riders into one. Soon, his stolen property would return; this, he would ensure.

Beck nearly dropped his rifle as the terrifying beast unleashed an earth-breaking roar. “What in the name of the three Divines is that?”

Gromm regretted looking back as he nearly jumped out of his skin. “That is the Universe coming to kill us.” When Beck fumbled in preparing his weapons, Gromm nearly backhanded him for last-minute incompetence. “Shoot the damn thing, will ya? Use your pistol, use magic, do something!”

“I’m not good with magic.” Beck struggled to reload

his rifle but swore when he realized he had no ammunition left. Even his pistol was down to its last six rounds.

Upon hearing the news, Gromm could only say, “Then shoot it in the face six times.”

While Beck prepared his shots, Vulcan fought through the growing turbulence, determined to put more distance between them and the unworldly creature, but the shadow beast gained speed sailing through the clouds. The colossal wyvern roared and soared after them, its demonic aura threatening to engulf the rescue team.

Recovering from his initial fear, Beck managed to ready his pistol and fired two bullets, but to his dismay, the beast remained undeterred. An idea came to him, and, after aiming for an eye, he pulled the trigger a third time. The colossus immediately paused mid-pursuit, wildly thrashing about as it rubbed its injured eye, roaring in pain and agony.

Gromm’s gleeful face brightened the surrounding storm in disbelief over his brother’s success. “By the Divines, you shot it in the face.”

Turning a deaf ear to his sarcasm, Beck ruefully checked his pistol’s chamber. Three bullets remained, and two eyes left. He announced: “When it gets closer, I’ll shoot the others to buy us some time.”

Gromm wholeheartedly agreed with Beck’s logic. “Blind the bastard. It can’t follow what it can’t see.”

Meanwhile, the hatchling bobbed its head to the sound of Beck clicking the chamber in place, and the gunslinger patiently waited for the wyvern to reappear. The heavens trembled from its mighty roar, but the ghastly creature remained concealed within the shadows. The clouds, dark as

the void, christened by the eerie crimson glow, and two eyes like the gleaming moon fixated on him.

Suddenly, the sky started burning and bleeding as fireballs rained upon them, spewing from the monstrous creature. Vulcan zigzagged through the inferno chaos while the brothers did their best not to lose their bearings.

The dragonet latched itself to the thick leather straps that held steadfastly; to the hatchling's relief, the human girl didn't so much as stir. Her breathing, though still faint, was as steady as a beating drum.

Yelling for Vulcan to keep steady, Beck, with great difficulty, aimed his next shot. To his delight, he found the perfect moment where the beast emerged from its cloudy veil and flew at them in a straight line head-on. When its centered eye was in a direct line, and before it could unleash another blazing volley, Beck let loose a fourth bullet.

The sky shook from the wyvern's painful cries, and the beast vanished within the clouds once more to recover. Two more shots remained.

Vulcan climbed the tainted heavens, straining his wing muscles until they burned, but the wyvern's flaming attacks ceased. He relaxed and slowed his pace, but the indifferent and suspicious Gromm pulled out a spyglass to check for signs. Though the wyvern was gone for the moment, he would be ready for its return.

After confirming Beck's accomplishments, Gromm added, "Well, get on with it then. When it comes back, shoot its last eye, and we'll make it back to Alfheim."

Half-convinced that the wyvern finally gave up its pursuit, Beck's neck hair prickled and stood on end at the sudden silence; even the storm quelled its wrath.

“Something’s not right,” Beck began as his eyes scanned the skies, “I fear the worst.”

When he leaned over the saddle’s edge, he nearly fell overboard into the endless, swirling void threatening to devour them whole: the wyvern came at them from underneath, maw wide open. Lightning and poison mist boiled from the back of its throat, building to a catastrophic storm that would destroy all in its wake.

As the rotting wyvern approached for the kill, Gromm and Beck accepted their impending doom, believing there was no hope for Armageddon. Try as he might, Vulcan couldn’t outfly the monstrous creation; the wyvern moved too fast, drawing closer each second. Understanding this being their final hour, the dragon hatchling dug its head into the girl’s shoulder, ready to face the end.

At Mount Blackrock, satisfied watching the thieves receiving appropriate punishment, the Lich suddenly hissed and scowled. Only then did he realize it: a scent, a presence of someone he had not seen in many years. His voice became raspy, almost afraid as he muttered barely loud enough to hear, “No—it can’t be. I killed you—”

An ear-shattering screech spliced the air, leaving Vulcan and his crew no choice but to look at the sudden turn of events. A bladed chain shot through the swirling maelstrom, wrapping itself around its right hind leg like a snake constricting its prey. The metal links tugged and steered the beast away, but the wyvern quickly diverted from its vengeful course as it flailed in mid-air, and the creature attempted its daring escape.

Vulcan abruptly halted, hovering mid-air, and the rescue operation watched in awe and amazement; the brothers

couldn't determine the source of their savior at first, but a red flash zipped along the still tethered chain.

Beck pulled out his spyglass but clicked his tongue against his teeth when he couldn't get a better view. "What in Oblivion is going on?"

Gromm squinted through his glass until catching a glimpse of the zipping blur. "It looks like he's saving our asses."

Upon closer examination, their savior was a man donning a long, red regal jacket with gilt trimmings and a golden waist buckle to match. His raven-feathered textured hair swept past his pointed ears, but his face hid behind a black and white mask. Their mysterious savior moved quicker than any human could, running along the chain with no regard to the fact that the wyvern would devour him in a single bite.

The brothers and Vulcan observed in absolute horror; the hatchling broke away from its watch and stood upon its haunches to witness what happened next.

As the creature swung its massive head and opened its maw, the man backflipped off the chain, and, for a slight second, the stranger froze mid-air. Lifting his arms, he slightly flexed his wrists, and hundreds of steel-bladed chains poured from his sleeves, piercing and tearing through parts of the rotting beast's exposed flesh.

The creature's painful cry thundered across the heavens as it desperately retaliated, struggling to fend off this stranger's merciless attacks.

Seeking to defeat this beast, Beck bit his lip until he drew blood, swearing while working on his aim for the last eye. Yet, it proved difficult; the beast randomly thrashed about as the mysterious man did all in his power to distract it. While

uttering a prayer to the Divines for a clear opening, Beck fired his penultimate shot.

He missed. “Gromm, you and Vulcan have to get me closer.”

“Are you insane?” Gromm tightened the reins. “It will kill us if we go back.”

“We can take it down if we blind it completely.”

Gromm swore to himself but did not argue. Vulcan reluctantly dashed forward through Beck’s coercion and convincing, fangs and claws ready.

Gritting his teeth, Beck lined up his pistol once more. “Keep steady, Vulcan.”

Meanwhile, the chain master, through magic, kept himself aloft; his tangled mess of metal wrapped the beast’s front talons together.

Gromm’s patience was at its limit. “Just shoot the damn thing already!”

“Steady—I have to make this right.”

“Hurry!”

Whispering another quick prayer, Beck concentrated, drowning out the chaotic world around him, and when he believed the timing right, he fired his sixth and final shot.

The bullet screamed as it broke the tense atmosphere, and the monster roared in pain and panic as it tried freeing a paw to rub its third injured eye, but the man took this advantage. His chains multiplied and tore through every weak spot before wrapping the giant beast of darkness. As the struggling wyvern attempted to free itself of the metal cocoon, the web of metal began shining an ice-blue aura, their light lancing the ensuing blackened tempest.

With the simple parting of his arms and a small word, unable to be interpreted by mortal ear, the chains tore the beast asunder. They shredded through the rotting flesh and bone, crushing it, leaving only ash and brimstone wilting away to Oblivion.

The mysterious being withdrew his chains and flew with the destructive force, landing on Vulcan's saddle. Though Gromm was taller than his brother, their savior towered over him, peering through a fearsome mask that made the brothers quiver in their boots. One half was painted black, contrasting a flaring white design around the eye fading towards the edge, and the other side had the same pattern but reversed colors.

Emblazoned upon the forehead was a black fox head; Gromm squinted at it and gasped slightly, recognizing it almost immediately: the symbol Varathka Gundisalvus—a brilliant war general and writer—used during the One Hundred Years' War.

After the battle, Gundisalvus was charged with treason, endangering the Empire for failing to disclose information about a secret weapon the Lich sought, ultimately starting the war. It was a powerful sword called Ragnarok with abilities to destroy and create worlds. After all, Xyaxon, one of the Divines, blessed it himself.

Xyaxon, the Divine of life and creation whose sovereignty claims the spirit realm of Niflheim, was often portrayed as a lion made of fire, though his proper form remained unknown to mortals. The second, Death, the shepherd of souls—whose actual name was stricken from history after losing Oblivion's throne to the Lich—was a draconic beast with seven heads and ten horns. Ulrich—whose real name couldn't be annunciated by mortal tongue—the third Divine of war, destruction, and technology, roamed the

physical world as a giant emerald dragon. Together, the three Divines maintained balance.

Vulcan swung his massive head around, snarling through clamped fangs, but Gromm spoke softly to calm his nerves. Being the brave-hearted hero he was, Beck jumped into his partner's arms. Grumbling over his brother's foolishness, Gromm immediately dropped him.

Yet, the man turned a deaf ear to their bickering as he quizzically looked at the dragon hatchling and the unconscious young girl. Before Gromm could warn the stranger to be wary of the hatchling, the chain master held a hand but didn't speak.

The baby dragon inched to the man in the red jacket, wings unfurled and back arched. It paused when the man reached into his pockets, and suddenly, the dragon's tail began wagging like a happy dog when the man pulled out a bag of cured strips of meat as an offering.

Uttering his prayers to all three Divines, Beck cautiously stood up, shaking until Gromm placed a heavy hand on his shoulder, keeping him grounded. "H-how should w-we address our hero?"

The mysterious stranger finally acknowledged the two after the dragon ravenously accepted his gift and approached Gromm instead, deeming him the stronger brother. "Phantom Dust." They flinched from his stoic tone, but he lifted a hand in peace. "You have no reason to fear me, for you and I stand on the same side. I am here to ensure the completion of your task." He nodded towards the satisfied hatchling and the young girl. Yet, Phantom Dust paused when he took note of her near-death state, and his eyes shimmered behind the mask. If the brothers saw, they withheld their opinions. "You must hurry to Helshire Village."

“W-wait,” Beck lifted a hand for a chance to speak, “our orders were—”

“Your orders have changed. Per Her Imperial Majesty, Aryl Aurora, the Empress of Armageddon, you three will bring the girl and the dragon to Helshire Village. There, you will meet Chaliss, who will explain everything else.” Gromm and Beck exchanged glances at the sudden change of orders, but when Phantom Dust pulled out a parcel stamped with the royal seal of the Empress, the brothers immediately read what they recognized as her handwriting and agreed to change course. “I, unfortunately, cannot go much farther, so you two must inform Her Imperial Highness of all that transpired here. Other than to myself and Her Imperial Majesty, you two will not speak of the strange magic you have witnessed here again.” The brothers, pale and quivering, nodded in agreement.

Vulcan roared as he changed course to Helshire Village, maintaining a steady speed without tiring. Gromm and Beck understood that Phantom Dust knew the mysterious girl, but he neither explained how nor why, and it would be improper to pry. Instead, they flew in silence, grateful for still being alive.