

# Miles the Dragon

by Michael Channing

## Part One

Once upon a time, there was a dragon who lived in a garage. His landlady, Miss Lewis, liked that he always kept quiet. The folks who rented the garage apartment before him played music at night and had people over who got drunk and trampled her rosebushes. Miles, which was the dragon's name, hardly made any noise at all, and he never mistreated Miss Lewis' rosebushes. In fact, because of Miles' particular contribution, her roses were the most beautiful and brilliant around. If you're wondering what Miles' contribution might be, just keep in mind that modern plumbing conveniences were not designed with dragons in mind.

Miles was living in Miss Lewis' garage because the book he was supposed to be in got destroyed. The town library burned down during the annual Halloween bonfire. A mouse, whose nest had been accidentally scooped up along with the leaves and logs used to build the pyre, ran out of the burning pile and into the library basement where he would often go to nibble on old National Geographics. The library quickly became a raging conflagration, and all the characters of the books leapt out of their tomes and raced for the exit.

The mouse survived the ordeal, though his fur never did grow back the same.

"Morning, Miss Lewis," Miles said as he sauntered around the corner of the house.

"Mornin', Miles." Miss Lewis waved with the pair of pruning shears she had been using to clip back her rosebushes. "You have a good day at work."

"Always do, Miss Lewis." Miles' tail swished happily as he turned down the lane and headed toward the bus stop. He whistled a jaunty tune between his teeth and let a spiral of smoke escape one nostril.

The bus arrived, and the driver came out so Miles could fish through the leather pouch that hung

around his neck and drop some bills into the driver's palm. Miles climbed up onto the bus, and it rolled on, its springs groaning under his weight.

"Howdy, Miles," the foreman said when Miles appeared at the construction site. "How was your weekend?"

"Pretty good, Frank. Pretty good."

"Good deal." Frank looked down at this clipboard, marked Miles as on time. "You ready to work?"

"Sure as sugar."

"All right. Let's get to it."

Miles hoisted girders and lumber, poured giant vats of cement. He even helped move one of the diggers when one of its caterpillar track broke.

Miles was handing materials to the guys at the top of the scaffolding when Quasimodo swung by. Hand over hand, the little man swung along the underside of the scaffolding carrying a satchel of nails on his back.

"Hi, Quasi," Miles said.

The little man scrunched up his already lumpy face and pointed at his ear.

"I know, I know. I just like messing with you." Miles drew a question mark in the air with a claw.

"What's brewing?"

Quasimodo, hanging by one arm, pulled a card from his shirt pocket and handed it to Miles. He pointed at the card, at himself, then at the dragon.

The card, written in tight, precise calligraphy, read "Sir Ascalon, the Pure: Special Representation for Storybook Rights." In the bottom corner was a drawing of a sword and shield.

"Anybody who calls himself 'The Pure,' is anything but," Miles said. "I've seen the type before."

Quasimodo pointed at him and made a come-on gesture.

Miles shook his head. "Have fun at the meeting, Quasi. But don't buy anything this guy is selling."

He tapped the card then circled a clawed finger around his pointy ear.

Quasimodo huffed then swung away.

The lunch whistle blew, and work stopped for an hour.

Miles was still full from a couple days ago, but he sat in the yard with the other guys and listened to their conversations. They talked about their wives, their kids, their girlfriends, their hunting trips, their weekend vacations to the bar. Miles drank it all in, only spoke when spoken to.

"What you do this weekend, Miles?" someone said. And Miles told about the barbecue he made for himself in his back yard. They asked what spices he used, and he told them he didn't use any. They pondered on that for a short bit and nodded their heads.

"What did you do before you started workin' here?" another asked.

Miles thought about it before finally saying, "I was a collector."

"What did you collect?"

"Different stuff. Swords and armor mostly."

"You mean like antiques?"

"Something like that."

Someone else joined the conversation. "My boy's got a sword hung on the wall in his room. Bought it himself when we went to Gatlinburg couple years ago."

"Does he use it?" Miles said.

"Nah, he just keeps it up on the wall."

"Smart boy."

Someone else said something about the President, and the conversational focus moved away from Miles. Miles looked up at the sky, at the trees, at the road that went by the construction site and the people in their cars on their way to wherever. Then he looked at Quasimodo, who sat by himself and ate a sandwich and sipped from a red thermos. The little man didn't smile once.

Part Two

It was still dark when Miles woke. It used to be he could sleep for days at a time, but ever since the library fire he found it difficult to make it through a single night. He looked at the tiny digital clock in the corner. "I guess I'd better go to this thing."

There were more at the meeting than he expected. A trio of vampire women sat together on the ground, whispering. A group of aliens seemed to be trying to hide behind the fliers that Quasimodo was handing out. An old woman who was surely a witch poked at a small fire with a stick.

Quasimodo finished handing out the leaflets then sat down with everyone else. A knight stood up and raised his hands. Miles didn't know this particular knight, but he knew the type. They liked rules and order. They liked prestige. This one wore his breastplate, a clutching fist painted above his heart, and a sheathed sword at his hip. The rest of his outfit consisted of name-brand dungarees and a pair of hiking boots. Stylish proletariat but with the unmistakable symbols of war and power. Knights were all the same. The fire in Miles' chest grew hotter.

"What brought us all together here," the knight said, "is a mutual need for respect and acceptance."

Everyone murmured their agreement.

"I don't know most of you," Sir Ascalon continued. "Some of you I wasn't even aware of until recently." He cast a wary look at the aliens, as did just about everyone else. Miles noticed something in the knight's eye. The kill-lust he'd seen before, usually from the far end of a sharpened lance. "But I am one of you."

Miles growled. The woman sitting next to him looked up and smiled, then edged away.

Ascalon gave a rousing speech. About how fictional folk had the same right to happiness as everyone. How they should be treated equally and fairly and be allowed to pursue their natural tendencies. The vampires, especially, liked that part. When he was done, the knight had the crowd

hanging on his every word, pumping their fists into the air and cheering.

Miles stood, and the cheering died down.

"When was the last time someone tried to put a stake in your hearts?" Miles said to the vampires.

The ladies found a sudden interest in botany, looking around at the grass and the trees, anywhere but at Miles.

"What about you, old witch? Been tossed into any ovens or drowned in any lakes?"

"Well, no. But I could do with a baby once in a while."

"You mean, you want them to give you babies to eat?"

"Not a lot. Just every now and then. I don't think that's asking for much."

"That does sound pretty good," one of the vampires said.

"Of course. What about you guys?" Miles said addressing the aliens. "Do you like babies?"

What sounded like a series of squeaks and clicks to Miles' ears revealed itself in his brain to mean ,  
"They do make good cloning subjects."

"Well, there you have it. We'll just order up a case of babies. Everybody pick a flavor."

His sarcasm didn't have its intended effect. Instead of hanging their heads in shame, the rest of the group was slowly approaching. And they all had something to say.

"I was a great warlord in my old life," one burly man said. "People feared me and paid tribute. Everyday I woke to the clash of battle. Now a little box wakes me up with people arguing about politics. I hate politics."

"I was a gunfighter," a woman said. "Nobody carries guns around here. Except the constables, and they're all fat and slow."

"I can fly," one man said. "But they don't let me. They told me if I did, they'd put me in jail."

There were samurai without shoguns; messengers made useless by telephones; neuromancers with nothing to plug into. All dressed drably and fearful of losing their purpose. Even the aliens and

vampires had on zippered pants and collared shirts. Miles looked down on the knight and his insignias of office.

"Are you happy now?" Miles said.

"No. None of us will be until we're allowed to follow our true paths and do what we were made to do."

"So what you're saying is, you want to be able to kill me."

A hush fell over the crowd. They backed away from the scent of brimstone.

The knight gripped the hilt of his sword. "What about you?" he said. "Are you happy fetching and lifting like a common peasant?"

Miles exhaled twin streaks of black smoke. "You know what happens when I wake up every morning?" He didn't wait for the knight to answer. "Nothing. Nobody tries to kill me. Nobody tries to stab me with spears or drown me in ice. Nobody tries to bring whole mountains crashing down on my head. I can put my money in a bank. I can sleep in on the weekends, and no one tries to steal anything from me. When I do what I'm good at, which isn't all that much, people say, 'Good job. Way to go.' So, yeah. I'm happy."

Miles pointed at one of the aliens. "Come here."

The alien approached with short, cautious steps, its thin arms crossed over its chest.

Miles motioned toward the hunchback. "Translate for me."

The big head nodded.

"I've read your book. I know what happens to you. Is that the life you want to go back to?"

Quasimodo listened as the words unfolded in his mind, then looked at the ground and shook his head.

Miles picked up the little man and sat him on his serpentine neck. Quasimodo held on to the dragon's horns.

"Come back here," the knight said. "Where are you going?"

"Home," Miles said. "Some of us have to work in the morning."

The next day was just like the one before, except Quasimodo was curled up in a corner of the basement when Miles awoke. The dragon hadn't slept all that well or for very long. He worried the whole time that he would kick in his sleep and crush the little man or sneeze and set him on fire.

Quasimodo opened his eyes, sat up and scratched his head.

"I miss them sometimes," Miles said. "The old days. Human flesh does taste mighty good."

The hunchback smiled.

"It never did agree with me, though. Come on, let's go to work."

Work was just like the day before, except at lunch Quasimodo ate with Miles and the rest of the guys this time. Quasimodo read their lips and joined in when he could. He described Esmeralda using hand gestures and got the guys laughing.

It was during lunch that Ascalon approached Miles and threw a gauntlet to the ground at the dragon's feet. "I challenge you, beast. To a contest of strength."

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me, foul creature. I demand satisfaction."

"So does Mick Jagger." Miles thought the guys would laugh, but they didn't.

Ascalon retrieved the gauntlet, reached up high on his toes, and slapped Miles in the muzzle.

Thick, black smoke vented through the dragon's teeth. A growl rumbled deep inside his chest.

Miles looked around at the others. They were all leaning forward, and in their eyes he saw the familiar thirst. Whether they carried pitchforks or lunch pails, there would always be a mob anxious for blood.

"When and where?" Miles said.

"Tonight at the pit."

Miles exhaled a black cloud, obscuring the knight. When it dissipated, Ascalon's skin was darkened

with soot. "Perfect," Miles said.

After lunch, Miles told the foreman, "I need to leave early, Frank."

"I'll have to dock you."

"I know."

Frank made some marks on his clipboard. "You got a reason?"

"I'm fighting a duel tonight. I need to get ready."

"A duel? With who?"

"Some knight who's made himself a bur in my scales."

"That organizer guy? Sir Ass-a-lot, whatever his name is?"

"That's the one."

"Can I watch?"

"Sure. Bring the whole crew to the pit around 11:30."

Frank crossed out what he'd previously put on his clipboard. "Don't worry about docked."

Miles reached down and patted Quasimodo on the back. "Him, too. He's my second."

"I'll see you fellas tonight."

### Part Three

The first thing Quasimodo picked up at the toy store was a doodle board. He had fun for a while, writing dirty words then shaking the board to make them disappear. Then he got a few more things.

The young girl at the counter gave his purchases an odd look. "Why so many?" she asked.

Quasimodo wrote one word on his new board and showed it to her.

"Brides?" The girl looked confused and a little scared.

Quasimodo saw what he'd written. He always had trouble with that one letter. He made a correction then showed her again.

This time she just looked confused.

Quasimodo considered his mission a success.

"They sure do make them lifelike these days, don't they?" Miles said when saw the items. He pointed at Quasimodo, pointed at the store, shrugged with his paws turned upwards.

"The shoppe girl likes me," the little man wrote.

The dragon cocked his head to the side.

Quasimodo shook his board then wrote, "Doesn't hate me." Beside that he drew a smiley face.

Miles patted his friend on the back. "I know what you mean."

Ascalon the Pure was at the gym, getting pumped for the duel that night. The workout kept his thoughts clean. Even when the pretty woman with the red rose in her hair brought him an energy smoothie, his only thoughts were of balancing his electrolytes.

"Thank you, my lady. Your icy beverage is quite refreshing."

"Thank you, sir. It's a special blend of my own."

"Pray tell, what is your special ingredient?"

"Passion fruit," she said and winked.

Ninety minutes and a few cold showers later, Ascalon was back at his humble abode, polishing his armor and feeling strange. The television was on, and he was watching a cooking show. When he needed to be hungry for victory, he began by being hungry.

The woman on the show was amply endowed and kept leaning over the stove, steam rising up to stroke against her cleavage. She had a delectable way of spearing a morsel of food with a knife and nibbling it from the point of the blade.

"You are one tasty little wench," he said to the television. Ascalon was surprised to find he was no longer polishing his armor but was, in fact, polishing his scabbard, running the cloth slowly up and down the length of the sheath.

He quickly dropped to the floor for some sit-ups.

Then the doorbell rang.

"Hi. Ascalon, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"We were at your meeting last night, remember?"

He swallowed audibly. The three ladies outside his door were tall and pale, their clothing black and tight. Certain places on their bodies seemed to be made to lay his hands upon.

"We never met a knight before, and we hoped we could come in for a talk. Wouldn't that be nice?"

He nodded. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek.

"Does your sword go in that?" She pointed at the scabbard in Ascalon's hand. "You must have a very long weapon. Doesn't he, sisters?" The other two giggled and exchanged glances.

"Well, I guess you could say that." He wiped his brow. It had been a cool night up until a few minutes ago.

"I'll bet you know how to use it, too."

"I have slain many a foe."

"I'm sure you have."

What followed was a tense moment of silence in which the inner thoughts and the outer needs of the knight tumbled like two waterfalls crashing into a single pool. Things that had hidden for so long beneath the waters were dislodged and brought to the surface.

"Would you ladies like to come in?"

"Why, sir knight, thank you for the invitation." It was a beautiful smile, lips red as apples, teeth sharper than sin.

#### Part Four

Quite a few people were gathered at the pit. The burned out library basement had never been filled

in and grassed over. Miles inhaled the faint scent of cinder and smiled.

The old witch was there, cooing to the infant in her arms. She looked up at Miles when he approached. "Isn't he just the most darling thing you ever saw?"

"He sure is."

"Say hello to Uncle Miles, Ivan. Hi, Uncle Miles."

"Ivan's a good, strong name," said Uncle Miles.

"He doesn't smell anything like the other babies," she said. There seemed to be both a longing and a thankfulness in the way she said it.

"I suppose that's for the best now, isn't it?"

"I reckon it is." She produced a small, plastic bottle from her pocket, and popped the hard nipple into Ivan's puckered mouth. He immediately began to suckle.

"That's a beautiful rose in your hair," Miles said. "You should meet my landlady. You could share gardening tips."

"I'll drop by some day," she said. Then she was lost in the cuteness of her baby.

Miles wandered around the perimeter of the pit. Some of the guys from work were there, drinking beers from a cooler. Some wished him luck. Others assured him he didn't need it.

The aliens were huddled together on the edge of the crowd. "We appreciate your gift of the pseudo-lifeforms, fire lizard." The words echoed in Miles' head as one of the aliens held its present up by the ankle.

"You're welcome. Thank you guys for helping."

"Will we experience the sensation you described to us?"

"Fun? You certainly should. I know I'm looking forward to it."

"Will our part cause any pain?"

"In the long run, no. But at first it might look like it."

The alien conferred with the others in a series of squeaks then turned and said, "That is an acceptable risk."

"See, you're having fun already. Now go take your places."

Without planning or guidance, the growing crowd had circled around a large patch of ground. Room enough to swing his tail, Miles noticed, but only if he stayed rooted in place. And any flame he might employ would surely singe a few hairdos. The assembly parted to let him enter then closed ranks. Miles sat back on his haunches and waited for the star of the show.

The star, however, was late. Rumors began to wander through the crowd. Some said the mighty warrior had chickened out. Others believed he was planning something grand and exciting, like in the movies. Then there was the peculiar but persistent bit of gossip that Sir Ascalon the Pure was hiding something from the public.

No one noticed him till he pushed through to where Miles sat. Who would have? Without weapon or armor, his hair tousled, he wasn't the hero anyone expected. A hush fell about the gathering as it became evident that Ascalon was drunk.

"I know what I look like," he replied to a man who hadn't said anything. The man looked around, and everyone shrugged, including the alien standing next to him.

Miles leaned in to inspect his opponent, paying special attention to the man's neck. Finding nothing that gave him pause, he whispered, "You smell like perfume."

"I did a bad thing," Ascalon said, his voice low and quavery. "More than once."

"How bad are we talking?" Miles said, keeping the conversation between them. "Did you wear your court sash over the wrong shoulder?"

"Worse." Ascalon whipped around and accosted a pair of men who had been drinking and keeping to themselves. "You will not berate me in public!" the knight said.

One of the men made a circling motion around his ear. The alien nearby picked up the gesture and

repeated.

"Are you okay?" Miles said.

"No. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. I've never been afraid before." Somewhere off to the side, someone said something only the knight could hear. He yelled in that direction. "That's a lie! I was forced!"

Ascalon felt their heavy, judging stares. "It was them!" He pointed at a trio of women dressed in black. One of them cradled something in a powder-blue blanket. "Those Jezebels tempted me. It's their fault."

All eyes shifted to the three ladies. They smiled and jutted and touched their long hair and manged to convey a sense of satisfaction.

"What did they do to you?" This time Miles spoke loud enough for all to hear.

Ascalon hung his head and said, "They stole my virtue."

"What do you mean?"

"They bedded me."

A murmur ran through the crowd as everyone interpreted the meaning of Ascalon's declaration.

Quasimodo, standing at the edge of the clearing, held up his board for his neighbor to read.

"You mean," the man said slowly, "all three of them? Together?"

The pale ladies smiled and passed a knowing glance between themselves.

Ascalon sighed. "Yes."

"Wow, man," Ascalon's new fan said. "That's pretty awesome."

Quasimodo nodded enthusiastically. The men standing around him caught his fervor, and when Quasimodo began to clap, they joined in. The applause spread through the crowd till even those too far away to have heard the knight's confession were rooting for whatever he had done.

Ascalon lifted his head, listened to the ovation. All around, people were cheering his actions, calling his name. In his heart, a new flame began to burn, hot as a poker left to glow in the fire. He grabbed one of the pale women and kissed her hard. A shout roared up from his audience as he bent the woman backwards and pressed into her welcoming body.

Miles excused his way through the onlookers. They continued to drink and revel despite there having been no actual battle on the battlefield.

Quasimodo joined him on the street. "That went well," his doodle board read.

"Plan B was I eat him."

One of the aliens, carrying its doll by the head, strode up to them. "Do you want me to translate that for your misshapen friend?"

"Go ahead. But don't call him misshapen."

The alien spoke into Quasimodo's mind. The hunchback laughed then grinned at the alien.

"He responded that you are too rotund to continue ingesting armored cavaliers."

Miles looked at the silently chuckling little man. "In that case, you can call him misshapen all you want. Speaking of, what's your name?"

"I am known as--" A sound like popping bubble wrap rippled across Miles' brain.

"How about a nickname. Something I can say and he can spell."

"I appreciate your approach, taking the name of one of the Earth people's great composers. So I wish to be called The Nuge."

"Alright, The Nuge, Quasi and I got work in the morning. But how about after work you and your company come over for some beers?"

"Will we partake in the firing of weapons at excrement?"

"You better believe it."

"I will observe the time and place of our meeting."

Miles and Quasimodo walked side by side down the street. The crowd at the pit was dispersing and heading to their homes. It was quiet and cool, and Miles couldn't think of anything to say that could possibly make the moment any better.

Quasimodo held up his writing board.

"You're right," Miles said. "It is."