

Some years back, a young ranger named Krios was chosen for a daring mission to infiltrate Balkon's tower, which was said to be imprisoning victims for horrific experimentation and foul rites connected to the necromancer's quest for immortality. Krios was able to sneak in and liberate a group of halflings. And to his surprise, he also discovered a young wyvern, half-starved and cruelly chained by its neck. At first Krios was inclined to leave the beast to its fate -- for he'd heard of wyvern savagery and didn't trust the creature. But the wyvern's woeful plight and its humble demeanor inspired him to make a leap of faith. His reward was a new, steadfast friend and earnest protector.

Thus began a partnership that spanned several years. Krios grew increasingly attached to Sohatobe, warding the naive wyvern from the dangers of the wilderness as well as the more insidious perils of civilization. For his part, Sohatobe wielded his growing divine power to bring solace to the suffering wherever they went.

Fast forward twenty years into the future. Here we find Krios and Sohatobe together again -- this time to try to liberate some slaves in a seaside city.

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In the dead of night, young Alden and his sister whimpered as they were wrenched along in shackles. They and a dozen other halflings were being herded helplessly toward a stealthy slaver ship -- a vessel that would wrest them away from their homes and families forever.

Salvation came abruptly as a pillar of flame smote the ship from above. Under the weight of the blast, the craft creaked and its sails burst into fire. Alden fell to his knees and cringed away from the heat, wincing his eyes closed against the brightness. Screams of agony pierced the night as scorched slavers collapsed into smoldering heaps or leapt overboard.

As the flames receded, Alden opened his eyes. His gaze was drawn upward above the stricken ship. There he gasped at a most astounding sight! A winged reptilian figure descended, bigger than a draft horse. A wyvern! Its scaly hide gleamed in a swirling patchwork of brass and ebony. Its fanged jaws were partly agape, still trailing flame and smoke from the gout of fire it had just unleashed.



The wyvern -- an unlikely savior

Amazingly, a man sat astride its neck. Taking aim with an ornate bow, the figure began to unleash a swarm of arrows that pelted the surviving slavers with a wrathful, deadly hail. As the wyvern swooped toward the ship, its vast membranous wings pounded the air, and the entire vessel lurched as the growling beast slammed onto the charred deck. With a menacing hiss, the creature lashed out with its wings to fling overboard the two swordsmen who were creeping up on it.

As if in retaliation, the door of the ship's cabin crashed open. A towering male ogre lumbered forth; the ship's captain! The brutish giant roared a challenge and brandished a vicious, serrated sword. From the ogre's sneering lips spewed a stream of vile words, and dark energy began to gather around him. Abruptly, purple tendrils of malice lanced out from his blade, streaking toward the wyvern and raking its flesh open in cruel rents that sprouted bright blood. The wyvern roared in pain, but did not relent. Instead it hurled itself at the ogre, rapidly closing the gap. The beast's rider sprang off its back, landing nimbly in a crouch and immediately bringing his bow to bear to unleash a volley of arrows. The shafts sank feather-deep into the captain's bearskin armor; but the ogre seemed unfazed.



The wyvern's rider

Just then the snarling wyvern crashed into the ogre, lunging in to bite savagely with jaws big enough to envelop a halfling. Before the teeth could connect, the ogre clubbed its skull aside with a mighty fist. The captain again began to chant ugly words of power. The wyvern snapped its head back up, awareness of its impending peril keening in its eyes. For the first time, the dragon-like creature spoke, its male voice young and desperate. He wove his words in with those of the captain, shouting them reverently. "Apsu, troth seanf arcanis!"

At first, the wyvern's words seem to have no effect. Instead, incandescent purple blades of hatred spewed from the ogre's sword, enveloping the bleeding wyvern, wrapping around his throat and beginning to squeeze the life out of him. But now a brightness surged in retribution from the drake's lustrous hide. For a few perilous heartbeats, light and dark sorcery seethed against each other, vying for mastery. At last, with a crack of a whip, both energies burst apart into a shower of sparks.

The wyvern was saved!

Thus began a knock-down, drag-out fight. The valiant wyvern strove incessantly to maul his foe with wings, teeth, and barbed tail. Meanwhile the ogre, thews bulging and meaty mitts gripping his wicked, serrated blade, slashed relentlessly at the wyvern. But so agile and hearty was his reptilian foe that blows that seemed likely to sever head or limbs instead merely left raw, bleeding gashes in its scaled hide.

Even so, it soon became apparent that the wyvern was losing. The slaver captain smirked gloatingly, pressing his assault and delivering additional grievous wounds. Desperately the wyvern chanted in supplication, "Majakar, dronilnr ve lapir!" At once, glimmering otherworldly energy stanchd some of his wounds. At the sight of his foe's healing, the ogre's ugly brow furrowed with worry. The tide of battle began to turn. The wyvern fought with renewed strength, beating back the ogre doggedly with tail, wings, fangs, and claws. All throughout, arrows from his human ally pincushioned the giant; at least a dozen shafts all told.

At last, with a cry of despair, the ogre slumped to the deck, his cruel blade clattering from limp hands as he died. The victorious wyvern closed his eyes, sighing and drooping with relief. His companion sprang over to him, flinging his arms around the beast's serpentine neck in a fond embrace, cheering him. "Sohatobe, you did it!"

Sohatobe opened his eyes and enveloped the man with one torn wing, returning the hug. "Aye. We both did it!" He scowled down at the ogre's body. "Raxer's slaving days are over!"

The man nodded and turned to look ashore. Seeing the shackled captives, he led the way across the ship's gangplank. He approached the halflings, speaking in a soothing tone. "I am Krios. Please be at ease. And let's get those chains off you all!"

Sohatobe prowled up to stand beside Krios; but most of the little people cowered away from the imposing creature. By contrast, young Alden was so struck with wonder and admiration that his fear seemed distant. As the wyvern cast his fiery gaze over the captives, the only one who would look him in the eye without wavering was Alden. Thus Sohatobe approached him, stepping close enough that the lad could feel the warmth of his ravaged body and smell the brimstone on his breath as he spoke. "Do not fear. Your peril is over, and your freedom is at hand. Soon you will be back with your loved ones."

Looking up at the saurian beast looming over him, Alden could see that its head was battered and bloody, yet still somehow majestic and valorous. At last the lad found the courage to speak. "Sir, what might I do to repay you?"

Sohatobe blinked and regarded him kindly. "Your freedom is reward enough. It is our cause."

"But... I wish to... How can I help in this cause?" asked Alden eagerly.

Sohatobe hesitated, gazing intently at the young halfling as though measuring him. Alden breathed deeply to calm himself, staring with wonder into the creature's nearest fiery eye. Coming to a decision, the wyvern replied, "Those who were once slaves often make the best champions of liberty." He glanced mirthfully at his rider. "Krios and I should know!"

Sohatobe raised the clawed fingers of one of his wings up to a pendant he wore at his throat. He lifted the fine chain over his horned head and presented it to Alden with a formal air. The lad could see that the amulet was a carving of a dragon's foot. Then the wyvern leaned in closer, its teeth harrowingly near. As it spoke to him softly, its sulfurous breath eddied warmly against him. "You might need this more than me. Perhaps the Waybringer will breathe light and meaning into your soul as he did mine." As Alden took the pendant reverently, Sohatobe continued, "Bring it to the shrine of Apsu a mile south of the city. The elder there will guide you."

And so the torch of liberation was passed on to a new aspiring champion!