

Roger Zelazny. Here there be dragons

Illustrated by Vaughn Bode

Chapter 1

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a king who was king of a very small country. Indeed, his kingdom was so small that most people were not even aware it existed.

The king thought that it was a fairly large kingdom, though, as kingdoms went. This was because there were many mountains around the place, mountains which were difficult to climb. Because of these mountains, travelers would just go on around the kingdom, rather than go through it. And very few people ever left the kingdom, to come back and tell of other lands. People were pretty much afraid to do that.

They were afraid of the dragons.

They never saw any dragons, mind you, but they were afraid of them. This is because all the maps in the kingdom showed that they were surrounded by dragons dragons here, dragons there, dragons all over the place, all because of Mister Gibberling.

Mister Gibberling was the Royal Cartographer. (That means he was the official mapmaker.) Mister Gibberling was the Royal Cartographer because his father and his grandfather had been Royal Cartographers. Mister Gibberling had learned his profession from his father, who had learned it from his father.

Since people did not visit the kingdom very often, and the king's subjects seldom crossed over the mountains themselves, it was difficult for the Royal Cartographers to know exactly what to put down on their maps to show what was outside. So, as he had learned from his father (who had learned it from his father), whenever he did not know what to show as being in any certain place, Mister Gibberling picked up his quill, and with a great flourish of the feather wrote (in fancy letters):

-HERE THERE BE DRAGONS-

Then he would smile, because he had explained a new territory. Of course, since he did not really know what lay beyond the mountains in any direction, it soon came to appear that the entire world was infested with dragons. (And he would draw little pictures of fire-breathing dragons, roaring and flapping their wings, beneath what he wrote which certainly didn't help to promote tourism.)

This is why everyone was afraid of the dragons they had never seen. If your father were to drive into a gas station and ask for a road map, and it said, "HERE THERE BE DRAGONS" and it showed a little picture such as the ones Mister Gibberling drew, your father would take a different route. So, since all the maps in the kingdom showed dragons everywhere, breathing flames and being mean, all the people in the kingdom stayed at home, because there were no other routes.

Chapter 2

BUT THEN ONE DAY the king's daughter, the princess, was

going to have a birthday, and the king wanted to celebrate it in a special way.

"I want fireworks!" he said.

"Yes, sire. A good idea," said his first adviser.

"Yes indeed, sire. A very good idea," said his second adviser.

"Oh yes, great sire! A very, very good idea," said his third adviser.

"Uh, where will we get them, sire?" asked his fourth adviser, who was never too popular around the court (but his dowager aunt was a good friend of the queen, so the king kept him about, despite his habit of asking uncomfortable questions).

"The man who used to manufacture fireworks died some ten years ago," he explained, "and he never trained anyone to take his place. This is why there have been no fireworks displays in recent years."

"We shall simply have to get them," said the king, "because I want them."

"Yes," said the first adviser.

"We shall simply have to get them," said the second.

"Because the king wants them," said the third.

"How?" asked the fourth.

"Well we could, ah import them," said the first.

"Yes, import them," said the second.

"Import them, yes," said the third.

"From where?" asked the fourth.

"Well, uh we could get them from . . . Hmm.

"Yes, we could get them from Hmm," agreed the second.

"I was only humming, not naming places," said the first.

"Oh, pardon me, I thought you meant the city of Hmm on the Mm river. It is too far away, now that I think of it."

"Why don't we get a map and look?" asked the third.

"An excellent idea," said the second. "Get a map and look."

So they did. They gathered around the map and studied.

"There are dragons to the east," said the first.

". . . And dragons to the west," said the second.

". . . And dragons to the north," said the third.

". . . And dragons to the south," said the fourth. "They

seem to be all around us. In fact, there is only our kingdom and dragons on the map. Consequently, we cannot import any fireworks."

"It would seem to follow . . ." said the first.

"But the king wants them!" said the second.

"But where can we get them?" asked the third.

Then the first adviser had an idea. "What is a dragon, anyway?" he asked.

"Oh, big!" said the second.

". . . And mean," said the third.

". . . And ugly and scaly and strong and fire-breathing," finished the fourth. "There is a picture on the map‹ many pictures, as a matter of fact."

"Well," said the first, "dragons spout flames, don't they? Like Roman Candles, Vesuvius Fountains, Cannon Crackers, Whirlagigs, Blue Angels, Normandy Lights?"

"So I've always heard," said the second.

"Yes, exactly," said the third.

"When is the last time any of you has seen a dragon?" asked the fourth. "Well . . ." said the first.

"Ah . . ." said the second.

"Er . . ." said the third.

"I was only curious," said the fourth. "I have never seen one myself."

"Oh, you. That doesn't prove anything," said the first. "Now then, listen: If we can't import fireworks, why can't we import a dragon to do the same job? Fire, colored lights things like that?"

"A stunning idea!" said the second. "Import a dragon!"

"Congratulations," said the third. "It is a brilliant idea. Dragons are available everywhere, while fireworks are not."

"Yes," said the fourth. "I would like very much to see you import a dragon."

"I shall suggest it to the king immediately," said the first adviser. He went and suggested it to the king.

"Oh, my yes!" said the king. "Won't it be jolly to have a dragon for the princess' birthday! Why didn't I think of that?"

"That is what advisers are for," said the first adviser.

"Send for a dragon immediately," ordered the king, "medium-sized, and with colored lights."

"Very good, sire," said the first adviser. "Send for a dragon," he told the second.

"Send for a dragon," the second adviser told the third.

"Send for a dragon," the third adviser told the fourth.

"Who shall I send, and where?" asked the fourth.

"That is your problem," said the third. "I only relay orders."

"But I have no one to relay them to," said the fourth.

"Then do it yourself," said the third.

"This is ridiculous!" said the fourth, whose name, incidentally, was William.

"It is the order of the king," said the third. "Your place is to obey, not to question."

"Very well," said William, sighing. "I'll give it a try. But I still think it is ridiculous."

"It is the king's order. Go, import a dragon!" And they laughed, as the fourth adviser went away to seek a medium-sized dragon with colored lights.

"I wonder," William wondered, "who I can send to fetch me a dragon? A knight! Of course! I'll send a knight. They are supposed to be accustomed to doing brave and bold and courageous things like that."

Chapter 3

HE WALKED up the street to the local inn, where the knights spent most of their time eating and drinking. He went into the inn and looked for the captain of the King's Guard. The captain was seated at the first table, a huge platter of beef and a tankard of ale in front of him. He was a fat man with a red face and a wart on the left side of his nose. He kept eating while William talked to him.

"Captain," he said, "I need a brave and courageous knight or three for a brave and courageous deed."

"All of my knights are brave and courageous," said the captain, without looking up from the table.

"The king needs a dragon," said William, "medium-sized and with colored lights. So, will you kindly supply me with someone brave and courageous enough to go after one? The captain choked on his ale and looked up suddenly.

"A dragon?" he said. "You want me to send one of my men after a dragon?"

"That is correct. One, or two, or three, or as many as you feel would be necessary." The captain scratched his head.

"Well, I don't know," he said finally. "Most of my men are out of practice when it comes to dragons. . . ."

The inn was suddenly very quiet. At the mention of the word "dragon" all the clattering of platters and tankards and dice had stopped. All the laughter and the sounds of table-pounding and chair-scraping had stopped. William felt everyone staring at him.

"Are you trying to tell me that your men would be afraid to go after a dragon?" he asked.

"Afraid!" snorted the captain through his mustaches (which were quite large, and blew up almost as high as his ears when he snorted). "My men afraid of dragons? I should say not!

"Are any of you men afraid of dragons?" he called out in a loud voice.

"N-no," came several soft answers. "But of course, we're out of practice when it comes to dragon-slaying. . "

"Not slaying, just catching," said William, "and I can see that I'm getting nowhere this way. So I'll just ask for volunteers. Do any of you men want to volunteer to go get a dragon for the princess' birthday party and bring it back alive?"

No one answered.

"Come, come!" cried William, jumping up onto a table. "Surely a few of you brave fellows would be willing to do this thing to make the princess' birthday a happy and memorable occasion. Who will be first to volunteer?"

Still no one answered.

"Then I think you are all cowards!" said William.

"Not so, not so ! " cried the captain. "Consider, if you please, the circumstances. All of these men are fearless and have done many brave deeds in the past, or they would not be knights today. They are, as I said, just out of practice when it comes to dragons. They do not know the meaning of the word 'fear'."

"Doubtless," said William, "and a good many others besides.

"You there," he said to one man. "What was the last brave deed you did?"

The knight looked at his captain, looked at William. Finally, he said, "I saved the princess' poodle from a large and ferocious rat one day, sir, and the king knighted me on the spot."

"I see," said William. "And you?" he asked another knight. "What was your brave deed?"

"I escorted the queen to a ball, back when the king had an attack of the gout. He knighted me for it."

"I see," said William. "How about you?" he asked another. "Have you ever captured a dragon?"

"No, sir," answered the knight, "but I caught a boy

picking flowers in the palace garden and the king knighted me for it."

"A small boy?" asked William.

"He was pretty big for his age," said the knight.

"That was my nephew Louis," said William. "I remember the incident. He is short for his age.

"Have any of you knights ever seen a dragon?" he called out.

No one answered.

"How about you, captain?" he asked.

The captain looked back at his platter and reached for his tankard. "I do not choose to answer that question, because it is none of your business," he told him.

"Then no one here knows anything about dragons, and no one here will help me?"

No one answered.

"All right. Then you are all cowards, and I will go by myself to seek a dragon." He turned away and walked out of the inn.

Chapter 4

ON THAT AFTERNOON he got his horse from the stable, put on a suit of armor, picked up his sword and shield and rode toward the mountains.

The only one who missed him was his dowager aunt, who was a friend of the queen. She waved a pink handkerchief from a window of the highest tower in the castle, and he waved at her once and then did not look back.

For three days he made his way through the mountains, but he did not meet any dragons. On the fourth day he came to a valley. It was marked on the map he carried, and slightly beyond it were written the words,

-HERE THERE BE DRAGONS-

He dismounted and looked around. He looked for a long while, but there were no dragons. Then he sat down on a rock.

After he had been sitting there for some time, he felt as if he were being stared at. He turned his head slowly. A small lizard was watching him from beneath a bush.

"Hello," he said to the lizard. "Any dragons around?"

The lizard kept staring at him. It blinked once, slowly.

"I wonder if you could be a baby dragon?" he said. "I think I'll capture you for practice." He grabbed at the lizard.

It dashed away. He threw his shield, aiming carefully. The shield, which was curved, came down over it, trapping it in the

hollow place beneath. He reached there then and seized the lizard. Then he lifted the shield. The little lizard was silver, the same color as the metal.

"You were green a moment ago," he said.

"That is because I was under a green bush," said the lizard.

"You can talk!" said William.

"Yes. There are lizards and there are lizards," replied the creature. "I am an educated lizard. Now, if you please, release me."

"No," said William. "You are the closest thing to a dragon that I've found so far, and I am going to keep you until something better comes along."

"That might not be wise," said the lizard. "Supposing I am a baby dragon, and my parents come looking for me?"

"Then I suppose I will have to try to take them back, too," William sighed.

"What?" said the lizard. "You do not look like a young knight out to make a name for himself. What do you want with a dragon?"

"I don't want a dragon," said William. "My king does. I am only following orders."

"What does he want with a dragon?"

"He wants it to provide a fireworks display for his daughter's birthday party," William explained.

"That is ridiculous," said the lizard.

"That is what I said, and what I still say," said William. "But mine is not to reason why. I just do what I am told, if I want to keep my otherwise easy job."

"Well, I am glad that someone has good sense," said the lizard. "My name is Bell. Maybe I can help you."

"How might you do that?"

"Stop squeezing my delicate sides so tightly and put me down on that rock. Then perhaps I'll tell you."

"How do I know that you won't run away?"

"You don't. You take my word for it. Otherwise, I don't talk, no matter how hard you squeeze me."

"All right," said William. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"That's better," said Bell, after William had set him down. "What's your name?"

"William."

"Great. Okay, now here is what you do. . ."

"You just turned gray!" said William. "Like the stone!"

"Yes, I have some chameleon blood in me from my mother's side of the family. Now about this dragon business: I am anxious to see your king and his court and his kingdom. I am also anxious to know how it is that you came to this valley to look for dragons."

"I have a map," said William. "See? 'Here There Be Dragons' is what it says about this valley."

"Who drew that map?" "The Royal Cartographer, Mister Gibberling," said William.

"Aha! A Gibberling map!" said Bell. "An original! I'll tell you what. If you take me back with you to the court, and arrange for me to meet Mister Gibberling, I promise you that I will produce one real, live dragon upon demand."

"How?" William wanted to know.

"That is my business," said Bell, "and that is my proposition. Take it or leave it."

"Are you sure you can do it?"

"Yes," said Bell.

"All right," said William. "You produce a dragon when I ask you to, and I promise that you will get to meet Mister Gibberling."

"It's a deal," said Bell, turning brown as he jumped into the saddlebag. "Let's get going."

William mounted his horse and they rode away together.

Chapter 5

The princess' birthday party promised to be a gala affair. The great dining hall of the palace resounded with music. There was dancing and wine and big platters of food. There were whole roasted pigs with apples in their mouths, and there were chickens and dumplings and great roasts of beef.

All the ladies and gentlemen of the kingdom came, and the ladies wore dresses of red and yellow and blue and orange and green and violet. There was a great birthday cake, the size of an elephant and a half, and it had ten candles on it, because that was how old the princess was. Everyone brought her wondrous gifts. There was everything that a person could possibly want at a birthday party. Except for fireworks, that is. Or a fire-breathing dragon.

"Do you think he will really produce a dragon?" asked the third adviser.

"Of course not," said the second. "How could he have gotten a dragon? And if he did, where is he keeping it?"

The captain of the King's Guard laughed. "You were going to seek a dragon all by yourself, eh?" he said. "Well, where is it?"

William did not answer him. Instead, he tapped his glass with his spoon until the room was quiet. Then he cleared his throat. He appeared to be a bit nervous.

"Uh, the time has come for the fireworks display," he told them all, "in honor of her young majesty's tenth birthday. Happy birthday, Princess. This is going to be a very special and rather unusual display."

The king laughed and slapped his leg. "Yes, yes!" he cried out. "Bring it on, William! Bring it on! Medium-sized, and with colored lights, mind you!"

"Yes, your highness," said William, taking a tiny package from beneath the table and placing it before him. It is in here."

"It seems a pretty small package," said the king.

"Yes," said the first adviser.

"Yes indeed," said the second.

"Much too small," said the third.

The king opened the package. Bell jumped out and stood upon the table.

The three advisers laughed. The knights laughed. They laughed and laughed until the tears came into their eyes.

"That is supposed to be a medium-sized dragon, with colored lights?" they asked. "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

And they laughed and laughed and laughed some more, until Bell stood up on his tiny hind legs and turned to William and asked, "Now?"

"Now," he said.

Then something happened. Bell had been the color of the oakwood table, but now he was dark, red-green in color and seemed slightly larger than he had been. He opened his mouth, and a tiny spark came out of it.

Then he was bigger than the package he had come out of. He was twice as big as he had been only a moment before. He opened his mouth again, and the king drew back away from the flame that emerged.

Then Bell was as big as a man, and the platters rattled as they fell upon the floor, pushed away from him while he grew.

And he kept growing. He grew and he grew, until the table broke in half beneath him. He grew until he filled half the great banquet hall.

He opened his mouth and roared with a sound like thunder. Flames shot forth from the windows of the palace and lighted up the courtyard outside. Tapestries were scorched. Women screamed and backed against the wall. Seven knights fainted, and the captain of the King's Guard ran and hid himself behind the

throne.

William felt something crawling across his foot, and he looked down under what was left of the table. The first three advisers were crouched there, shivering.

"Well?" he asked them. "Yes, it is a very good dragon," answered the first.

"Only it is not a medium-sized one," said the second.

"No, it is a large, economy-sized dragon," said the third.

"He was the best I could manage on such short notice," said William, smiling.

The king pushed the princess behind his back and stood facing the dragon.

"My, you're a big one," he said. "Please do be careful with those flames. There are expensive tapestries and people and things like that about."

The dragon laughed. No one else did.

"I am Belkis," he roared, "king of the dragons! You are only a human king, so do not give me orders!"

"But I am sovereign majesty of a mighty kingdom," said the king, "and my word is law. I order. I really do order. And I am always obeyed. So please do not go about burning tapestries and people and things like that."

Belkis laughed again, and the flames danced about the rafters.

"No one orders Belkis to do or not to do anything. I am only here for one reason. I want to meet your Royal Cartographer, Mister Gibberling. Produce him!"

Chapter 6

AND THE KING BACKED AWAY.

"That is Mister Gibberling down at the end of the table you just broke," he said. "The man with the white beard. The one still holding a glass in his hand."

"Aha! Mister Gibberling! So we meet at last!" snarled Belkis. Mister Gibberling, who was indeed an old man, rose slowly to his feet.

"Uh I don't quite understand . . ." he began.

"You are the one who is giving dragons a bad name," said Belkis.

"Wh-what do you mean?" asked Mister Gibberling.

"Your maps! Your stupid, nasty little maps!" said Belkis, burning the edges of Mister Gibberling's beard as he spoke.

"'Here There Be Dragons'! That is absurd! That is cheating! It is the refuge of a small mind!"

"Yes ! Yes !" agreed Mister Gibberling, putting out his beard by emptying his wine-cup over it. "You are right! I have always felt mine to be quite small!"

"I want you to know that over the past several thousand years we dragons have taken great pains to stay out of the way of humans," said Belkis. "We have even taken to assuming other forms such as that of the little lizard Bell, which you saw a bit earlier. We do not want people to know that we are still about or they will be forever pestering us. Take any foolish young knight out to make a name for himself: What is the first thing he does?"

"I don't know," said Mister Gibberling.

"I will tell you," said Belkis. "He looks for a dragon to kill. If he can't locate any, though, he finds something else to do. Perhaps even something constructive. But you with your dragon-filled maps! - you are keeping the old legend alive when we want it to die. We want people to forget, to leave us alone.

Every time some young squire gets hold of one of your maps, he has visions of heading for the mountains around here in order to make some rank, to get to be a knight by killing dragons. This leaves dragons with the choice of eating them all or trying to ignore them. There are too many and most of them pretty tasteless, not to mention hard to clean. So we attempt to ignore them. This is often very difficult, and it is your fault. You have been responsible for maintaining a thing better forgotten.

Also," he stated, "you are a very poor geographer."

"My father was Royal Cartographer, and his father before him," said Mister Gibberling.

"What does that have to do with you?" asked Belkis. "You are a poor geographer."

"What do you mean?"

"What lies over those mountains?" asked Belkis, gesturing with a scaly wing.

"Drag Oh! I mean more mountains, sir," said Mister Gibberling.

"Admit it! You do not know!" said Belkis.

"All right! I don't know!" cried Mister Gibberling.

"Good," said Belkis. "That's something, anyway. Have you quills and ink and parchment handy?"

"No," said Mister Gibberling.

"Then go get them!" roared Belkis. "And be quick about it!"

"Yes, sir!" said Mister Gibberling, stumbling over his cloak as he dashed from the hall.

". . . Be very quick about it!" said Belkis, flaming. "Or

I will take this place apart, stone by stone, and drag you out by your whiskers like a rat from a brick heap!"

Mister Gibberling was back in record time. While he was gone, though, Belkis ate three roasted pigs and a dozen chickens with dumplings. Then he roared again and scorched the ceiling and charred the throne.

"You have them now?" he asked.

"Yes, yes! Right here! See?" "Very good. You are coming with me now."

And with that, he seized Mister Gibberling's cloak in his talons and flew out through the great double-door at the end of the hall, through which the Honor Guard sometimes entered on horseback. He took him high into the sky and they both vanished from sight.

"I wonder where he is taking him?" asked the third adviser.

"It is probably better not to think about it," said the first.

"We'd better get to work cleaning up this mess," said William.

Chapter 7

AND THEY FLEW far beyond the kingdom, and Belkis pointed out to Mister Gibberling that there were other kingdoms, and that there were rivers and lakes and other mountains, and valleys and plateaus and deserts, and ports and pastures and farms and granaries, and ships on the ocean and armies in the fields.

Every now and then he would say, "Are you getting that all down on paper?" and Mister Gibberling would answer, "Yes! Yes!" and he would scratch away with his quill and record all of the places which really existed in those spots where he had always been accustomed to write HERE THERE BE DRAGONS.

Much later, they returned. Belkis set Mister Gibberling down in the courtyard, perching himself upon the wall like some great, red-green bird.

"Have you learned your lesson?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, sir, great Belkis, sir," said Mister Gibberling, clutching his maps close to him, as if for protection.

"Then I will leave you now," said Belkis, "and I expect you to make good maps from now on. And remember this," he added, "I want you to forget about dragons."

"Yes, I promise," said Mister Gibberling. "I will forget all about dragons."

"See that you do," said Belkis, "or I will hear of it and I will return. You would not like that."

"No, no I wouldn't!"

"Then good-bye." And Belkis spread his great wings and rose into the sky. No one in the kingdom ever saw him again.

After that, though, the king came to listen to William more than he did to his other advisers, and soon William became his first adviser and his old first adviser became his new fourth adviser.

And Mister Gibberling went on to draw beautiful maps, showing all of the things he had seen other kingdoms and rivers and lakes and other mountains, valleys and plateaus and deserts, ports and pastures, farms and granaries. His maps were quite good, and after a time people were no longer afraid of dragons and they began to go over the mountains and to trade with people in other kingdoms, and to learn of them, and to have other people come to visit them.

After a time, the king came to realize that his kingdom was not so large as he had once thought it to be, and he encouraged commerce, to make his kingdom prosper and grow.

One day, though, while he was studying one of the new maps, the king said, "My, but there are so many seas in the world!"

"Yes, sire," said William. "That appears to be true."

"I wonder what lies beyond them?" asked the king.

"Perhaps they go on forever and ever," said William, "or perhaps there are other lands beyond them."

The king nodded. "I believe I will ask the Royal Cartographer," he said, "since he has recently had a postgraduate course in cartography."

So he went to the chambers of Mister Gibberling and asked him, "What lies beyond all those seas which your maps show as bordering the lands?"

Mister Gibberling stroked his beard (which had grown back in again) and he studied a map for a long while. Then he picked up his quill, and with a great flourish of the feather he wrote (in fancy letters) in that place at the farthest edge of all the waters:

-HERE THERE BE SEA SERPENTS-

Credits