

# THE LAST ROLL



BY SCOUT PRIOR

# The Last Roll

A short story with meaning

by Scout Prior

**Crit**

/krɪt/

noun INFORMAL

In a tabletop roleplaying game like Dungeons & Dragons an exceptionally successful attack will deal more damage than a normal blow and is typically achieved by rolling 20 on a 20-sided die, also known as a D20.

“he rolled a crit”

— ● —

Matthew lay in bed, frowning at his phone as its ringtone buzzed through the room. It was late, and the number was unknown.

“Can you *get* that?” Nicole asked from behind a pillow on the other side of the bed.

“Sure honey, sorry,” he whispered back. He picked up his phone, tossed the sheets aside, and walked into the ensuite, closing the door.

Nicole listened to the one-sided conversation — alternating between silence and her husband’s muffled voice. She waited. She couldn’t hear the words, but she could hear the tone. A knot of fear rose in her throat as the sleep cleared from her head. *No one calls this late with good news.* She sat up and turned on her bedside lamp.

After a few minutes, Matthew returned to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, facing away.

“Who was it?” she enquired in a quiet voice.

“It was Jaime.”

“Jaime?”

“You wouldn’t have met him, he was from back home, we grew up together.”

He crawled back onto the bed and leant back on the headboard. “We used to play DnD together.”

"Dnd? Like Dungeons and Dragons?" asked Nicole with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah." He turned to look his wife in the eyes with a smile, "In fact, I was the Dungeon Master."

She laughed. "And just what does being a Dungeon Master entail?"

"I used to create the adventures for the other guys, and ran the game," he replied. "We played right up until my family moved here, my last year of high school. It was Dom, Leon, Jaime and me. It was great." He stopped talking, his eyes lost in the past, and fiddled with the hem of a bed sheet.

After a few seconds of silence, Nicole moved in closer and rested her head on his chest. "What did Jaime want?"

"He wants one last favour," Matthew replied. "I'm gonna need to book a flight."

— ● —

Jaime's chest rose slowly as he breathed in. He paused, then exhaled, his chest lowering at a similar pace as the breath left his body. A feeling of peace – the calm before the storm.

He looked around the table. His oldest friends. *God, why had it taken so long?*

Matthew sat with a faded DM screen in front of him, edges frayed. His eyes cast downwards with a slight squint that showed some crows-feet at the edge of his eyes, as he thumbed through books and wrote in the infamous notebook that had birthed so many monsters and so many great memories.

Dom, hair now all grey, had added a beard to his trademark ponytail, as well as a fair amount of weight. He sparred with Leon across the table, who retained his glasses and thin physique, but much less hair.

"I'm just saying," Dom said, "if it wasn't for the dwarves, then the elves wouldn't have any mithril to work with."

"Sure," Leon replied with a smile, "but what you're really saying is – dwarves can't be trusted to craft beautiful objects."

"I can't believe you went there." Dom chuckled.

Jaime smiled. *I'm gonna miss this.*

"Okay," Matthew announced, looking up at Jaime. "Are we good to go?"

Dom and Leon also turned to regard Jaime, who held up two thumbs, causing the IV line attached to one of his hands to jerk violently. Seeing their alarm, he said, "It's okay guys. I'm good to go."

Holding his gaze at Jaime, Matthew held his mouth open like he was going to say something, but then stopped and looked down at his notes. "Okay, let's recap," he said. "On my left, we have Dom, playing Balorin the Fighting Dwarf, gladiator supreme, and champion..." with a grin, he added, "of his own imagination."

"Never insult a dwarf," Dom warned, shaking a finger at Matthew in good nature.

"And on my right," Matthew continued, "we have Leon playing The Sylvanian, a legendary Elven Ranger, strong of bow and fleet of foot."

Leon nodded in acknowledgement. "Thank you, and can I just say that Balorin is very good – for a dwarf."

Before Dom could retort, Matthew spoke again. "And opposite me, we have Jaime playing Sir Aldrec, Defender of the Weak, Hero of the Western Realm, and commonly known to be..."

All but Jaime combined to declare together in loud voices, "The worst roller in DnD."

"Okay, okay," Jaime said, nodding. "Get it out of your system. Today's the day it all turns around."

"You say that every time!" Dom exclaimed.

"Yeah." Leon added. "Remember your very first roll – you rolled a 1 and tripped over!"

They all laughed, and Jaime joined it, but then his face grimaced, and he clutched at his side.

"Are you alright?" Matthew asked, half-standing.

"Just give me a sec," Jaime said, breathing through clenched his teeth. *Goddamnit! I don't know how much longer I can handle this pain.* After a few moments, he started breathing normally again and removed his hand from his side. All three friends looked at Jaime with concern. "You'll just have to get used to that, guys – it's not going away." He blinked away a few tears and grunted. "Let's game."

"Okay," Matthew said, and they all returned their eyes to the paper and dice in front of them. The room noticeably more quiet.

Matthew consulted his notebook and continued. "So, where we ended last was with...Balorin. You had heard word of a strange creature preying on the villagers of Shadowmoore. There had been several deaths, and you convinced the others to travel with you to investigate. The Sylvanian, using your ranger skills, you had scouted the surrounding

area, and had found some tracks leading to an old cave system nearby. You had all just reached the entrance when, according to my notes, Leon's mum called him home for dinner, so we packed it up."

"Seriously?" Leon demanded, his eyebrows raised.

"Seriously, I literally wrote it down," Matthew said, pointing to his dusty notebook.

"Alright, alright," Leon said, holding his hands up in defeat.

"So what do you do?" Matthew asked.

"We go in," Jaime said in a firm voice. "For justice!"

"For justice!" cried his companions.

— ● —

The three adventurers crept through the dark cavern. Each step was carefully placed – who knew where a trap might spring, or a threat might lurk. All had the ability to see in almost full darkness, but as they descended further and further into the cave system, the darkness neared a point where only the truly nocturnal could see. They could risk a torch, but that would alert anyone or *anything* to their presence.

The Sylvanian stopped and held up a hand. The others moved no further, frozen in place.

The elf sniffed the air, and leaned in close to whisper, "There is a creature close by, let me scout ahead."

After a quick nod from his companions, the elf moved forward with bow drawn, eyes peeled, ears pricked. To Aldrec and Balorin, he seemed to vanish into the darkness without a sound.

Human and dwarf crouched, sweat trickled from their brows. And they waited. Darkness in front of them. Darkness behind them. One friend for company, earth and rock for blind spectators.

Aldrec drew in a sharp breath as The Sylvanian reappeared. Balorin let out a breath, unaware he had been holding it. Even for a dwarf this underground space was troubling.

The Sylvanian again leaned closer and whispered, "I think I know this beast, but I could not see it. If I am right, it will be able to see better than we can in the darkness. I recommend we light the torch."

Aldrec nodded and lit the torch, and as it flashed into brightness, he held it high.

The Sylvanian said, "I think we might be facing a—"

"A Black Dragon," Balorin whispered, his face pale as he looked behind the elf.

Illuminated by the torch, the dragon drew up to its full height and shrieked its rage. The firelight made its black scales shimmer and revealed its impressive claws.

Aldrec jammed the torch into the soil and the party readied their weapons.

Now their mettle would be truly tested.

"You made a mistake in disturbing me, feeble creatures," the dragon hissed. "Now you will perish."

"Not today, you murderer of the innocent," Sir Aldrec shouted. "For justice!"

And with that bold statement hanging in the air, the knight went to charge forward, then tripped, and fell.

For a moment, the dragon seemed confused, but was then met by a pair of dangerous objects flying towards him. The Sylvanian struck with an arrow, while Balorin hit with a throwing axe. The dragon did not react well.

With a sudden dart of his head towards Balorin, the beast let forth a stream of yellow acid. The dwarf, while agile enough to avoid the full blast, was caught by the edge of it. His armour and exposed skin hissed and sizzled as the acid burned. The sturdy dwarf roared in pain.

Not yet done with the pair, the scaled terror turned on the elf. Two quick slashes with its talons each drew blood, and a bite took a chunk from the elf's arm. His bow fell to the ground, and he held his arm, gritted his teeth.

It took them both a beat to clear their heads. The Sylvanian drew his shortsword, using his left hand, as blood ran down his right arm. Balorin pulled his great axe from over his shoulder, and held it in both hands, with only a slight tremble.

"We may have bitten off more we can chew with this beastie," Balorin said.

"It may well be," The Sylvanian replied.

With their focus taken by the dragon, they did not hear Sir Aldrec until a ritualistic chant echoed through the caverns. They both looked over their shoulders at their knight companion.

The Paladin had used a single drop of blood to mark a cross on his breastplate, and now weaved a symbol in the air with the same finger. Now, he chanted aloud with rising intensity and volume, finishing with a finger pointed directly at the dragon.

A wave of energy swept past the elf and the dwarf, energising them, and they stood a little straighter. When it reached the dragon, however, it had the opposite effect. The dragon seemed to shrink a little and even whimpered.

Sir Aldrec was not done, not even remotely. Twice more he called aloud to summon ethereal aid to his cause. And with each shout, the dragon flinched. Then, eyes fixed on his enemy, he grasped his longsword, and began to move.

“Cometh the hour.” The Sylvanian breathed.

After a few steps, Sir Aldrec began to run.

He did not stumble.

He did not fall.

Soon, he had passed his companions. As he charged the dragon, he raised his sword aloft and leaped forward.

“Cometh the man.” The Sylvanian concluded in wonder.

The black dragon shrank back, but to no avail. The Paladin struck down with an overhead strike, his blade now blazing a white light. As it struck, the blade cleaved through scale and bone, searing flesh. A bright light accompanied the strike, reaching the dragon’s eyes. Then, a moment after the flash of light, a clap of thunder rang out, echoing across the cave walls. The dragon was pushed backwards and toppled over. It blinked, looking around in shock, its sight now taken by the magical strike.

The Paladin strode forward and, with a mighty hew, struck the dragon one last time, and again, the light flashed, and the thunder rolled. All movement stopped and the murderous beast was a threat no more, the thunder rumbled away down dark passages of the cave.

“By my beard,” Balorin exclaimed, “you *ended* it!”

Sir Aldrec turned to face his friends and said, “It’s been an honour to fight with you, gentlemen.”

— ● —

The three friends stood in silence by the open grave. The coffin had been lowered inside, dirt scattered by mourners covered the top. They were the last to pay their respects, so they were alone.

“Can’t believe he critted twice in a row,” Dom said.

“Dragons-bane.” Leon added.

“What?” Dom asked.

“That’s the title you get when you kill a dragon,” Matthew said.

They stood silent for a moment, then Matthew retrieved something from his pocket and held it out in his open palm.

“He gave me his lucky D20 after that last game,” Matthew said. “Said he wanted me to throw it to him. Said it brought him luck. Said it brought him us.” Matthew’s voice caught at the last.

Tears appeared all round. After a few moments, Matthew cleared his throat, and threw the dice into the grave. “Good luck, dragons-bane.”

Expecting a sound as the dice bounced off the hard wood of the coffin, there was only silence. It had, in fact, fallen onto the dirt on top and remained atop the coffin. One side faced up true.

The three companions bent over together to see the result and smiled.

— ● —