

Mellengroth Mere

Bleys said to the dragon, "Hello, Spait. My little bird told me why you're here. It told me the hunger of dragons is slow to arise and sleeps deeply. You sleep on gold like embers of banked fires. But when your hunger arises, you must leave your gold because you want something. I know what you want, dragon. You want to feast on a Prince of Amber."

"Dear sir, you are cruelly mistaken. I want only peace."

The dragon smiled out from the cobwebbed pond, and Bleys, standing on the shore among wasp nests and centipede hives, smiled back.

"Why have you left your gold?" asked Bleys.

"I don't yearn for treasure." Spait shook his huge head, injured by Bleys's foul insinuation.

The two smirked at each other, flame-haired Bleys and black-scaled Spait. The vale behind them was white and dead, and vile things scuttled in the background. Those vile things stayed clear of the Prince of Amber and the dragon.

"Oh, dragon! I implore your forgiveness for my mistake. You would have no interest in a son of Oberon, an ancient, old, and powerful one, in Amber. You wouldn't be interested in knowing that my brother, Benedict, has set foot in the Lower City. He is alone and unarmed."

"Benedict vulnerable?" asked Spait.

"Vulnerable? For Benedict." Bleys put his smirk aside for a moment, just a moment, as with a monumental act of will, he held a straight face. "Oh, I think he'd kill you. But I don't know if you think that." And Bleys smiled in infinite self-satisfaction.

"You mistake me, sir. I am a creature of peace," whispered the dragon.

Bleys winked at him.

"Good," said Bleys. "I knew I could trust you. My little bird tells me events have been put into motion that will bring Benedict into conjunction with a twisted little thing that had been a ring bearer. It's name is Obrecht, and there is some power on it. He is particularly susceptible to it. The power bears a stink of malice and watchfulness, no doubt foreign to so kind and estimable a creature as yourself. However lesser things might be able to follow the stink to Obrecht, and from Obrecht to Benedict."

"You wear many rings, fine prince."

Bleys held his hands up and wiggled his fingers. He wore three, each with a stone: ruby, sapphire, and emerald. None were slim and unadorned.

"I don't think rings are what you desire."

Again they stared at each other, smiles harder than before.

"Because you desire peace!" exclaimed Bleys.

"Of course," agreed Spait.

They nodded to each other comradely.

The pond distended and bulged. A mound rose in the center like a growing mountain of water, but that was only the spider-work aiding surface tension. The webs broke, the mound collapsed, and Spait rose from the small mere.

He was much bigger than Bleys expected. Many times he'd curled within the mere. His body had blocked the river. As Spait slithered up onto shore, Bleys moved aside. They looked at each other, and smiled, but Bleys did not let Spait come within striking distance. The dragon entered the white forest much as he swam, slithering more than crawling, and broke through the cobwebs and dead trees, heading to Amber. In that direction, the sky was heavy with clouds, and the air might as well be sea.

In the mere, icy water was only cobwebs and the icicles in the trees dead arachnids hanging from their behinds or bound up prey. The whole pond was lower and thick with filth.

Once the dragon was gone Bleys took a few deep breaths into his cupped hands. Opening them, he held a small thing like a metal hand, only instead of a wrist it had a great brass ring. Its fingers were black as iron, its nails white as silver, and its body carbon steel. It sat on his hand patiently as he took a bit of cord from his pocket and put the metal hand on a leash.

Bleys threw the thing into the water and sat down with the patience of an old fisherman. The cord dropped, pulled this way and that, and began a slow expanding circle. With the dragon's departure the webs were thrown against the banks, trapping even the lily pads to the sides. The Prince of Amber discovered he had a bit of gum in one pocket, Barron's Spearmint, and he popped it in his mouth while the underwater hand searched Mellengroth.

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Benedict found the captain of the watch, got a briefing, processed information, and came to several conclusions.

1: "Rain" was a phenomena wherein water fell from the sky. It did this from time to time completely without interference of the Courts of Chaos.

2: Rain also made the sky dark. The water got in the way of sunlight. Furthermore the sun was setting, and the period of darkness that would follow was called "Night."

3: Human beings made poor decisions while stressed.

4: Captain Armist, who had joined them on the expedition to Middle Earth and currently lead his mental list of officers to bring back, had been murdered. This had nothing to do with the rain.

"How did she die?" asked Benedict of an MP Lieutenant JG, the one briefing him.

"Beaten to death in the hospital. Terrible, really. She got attacked the day after she got back from the float and almost died. She hadn't even made it home yet, attacked leaving the Navy Yard. They took her into the hospital and that's where she got it. Beaten to death with a fire poker."

"Who took her to the hospital?" asked Benedict.

"Lieutenant Admiral Dracken. He's been visiting her."

LtA Dracken had been their Fleet Commander on the float to Forochet, and now lead Benedict's list of officers to call in preparation for Gerard's float to find Cirdan.

Benedict asked, "Where is Dracken now?"

"Maybe the hospital?" The lieutenant hesitated. "I can find out."

"What hospital?" demanded Benedict.

He was on the road in seconds, striding quickly through the rain.

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Dracken screamed, an inarticulate, wordless shriek of terror as Obrecht slithered out of the oven. He descended with hands and feet spread out. His fingers grasped anything he touched, staining the floor and old, dusty carpets with ash mud.

The LtA fled upstairs and slammed doors behind him, but these interior doors had privacy locks not heavy bolts. Near mad the fat man dumped chairs in front of doors. He kicked apart Sarise's little hall-table when he fell over it, and dashed up another flight. In the top floor he dragged the cauldron from the servants' room and managed to wedge that into the stairway door. It couldn't be opened.

Rain battered the shutters. Dracken drew his pocket knife and waited.

Utter darkness took the old master bedroom. Dracken had no wax candles here, and roaches or rats had eaten the tallow ones years ago. There was nothing else. Fists of rain beat the shutters, and Dracken heard his own breathing. He heard himself panting and gasping. He waited.

The doorway to the stairs rattled. The hinges groaned. Something heavy pressed the stairs and Dracken heard another set of breathing. It sounded like it was in the bedroom with him. It stopped, and silence returned. The door didn't creak any more.

As Dracken waited with his short, utilitarian knife clutched in both hands, he realized he didn't know if the door was open or not. Visions came unwelcome of Obrecht crawling through the bedroom with him, and he attempted to dispel them with an act of his own will. But fear and something else stopped him, and fear and something else brought the feeling of movement to him. The short curly hairs on his neck felt wind from Obrecht crawling behind him. In the beating of weather on the roof he heard the verminous dock-worker's hands and feet on the floor. Nearly unmanned with fear Dracken clutched the ring which had brought him his vigor back, and his panic intensified a thousandfold.

He crept towards the door at the head of the stairs. In the dark he knew every inch of this house. He knew this room like his body. He took steps barely lifting his feet and put them down slow. He eased around a corner where the pipes ran from the ceiling down through the wall and listened. Rain pounded and distant thunder roared. He heard nothing inside.

For a moment his fear diminished for he was doing something. With the knife he reached out and poked the door. It rested closed against the frame.

Lightning finally arrived and broke the sky into fragments of daylight. They fell, leaving darkness and the roar.

Fingers and toes climbed over Dracken's shutters, outside, and probing for weakness: long thin fingers and toes that climbed like a lizard. Lightning came again, and the toes were gone. Next door the dogs of the old mad hatter sent up a terrified baying.

Dracken cried, quietly.

A splatter of rain fell into the bedroom fireplace and splashed ashes in the hearth. It stopped a moment later. Dracken thought of the hats on top of his chimneys that kept the rain out, narrow metal things with vanes to ward against the wind. He listened.

Something slithered down his chimney.