

## Benedict vs the Wurm

A madness gripped Dracken as the scuffling thing fought its way down the chimney, a weight of fury and derangement. Dracken felt fey in a way unlike anything before. Even in the bloodlust of old battle when death had not stalked him but lined up in ranks and files to wreak his doom, fury and terror had not been so intertwined as within his old bedroom where his wife and he had lain together.

Rain beat the shutters. No lights burned. No daylight made it through the deep storm, though already the sun would be behind Kolvir, heading west. The struggling thing hit the log basket and bolted free, and Dracken fell on it with his tiny knife slashing.

The thing thrashed, and Dracken stabbed. He cut; he slashed. It screamed and bit, but the fey wildness of knife-work in the dark overcame the Admiral. He cut it until it was ribbons, and the last yelp died. Only then did Dracken notice it was furry.

Part of the Admiral's soul died. Obrecht hissed horrible, deep laughter from up above, and his malice and glee slipped down the chimney to Dracken's horror.

The LtA knew what had happened, but a need consumed him. He opened the shutters a sliver, and waited for the lightning.

One of his neighbor's dogs lay slashed apart on his floor. It was one he knew, a kind and gentle thing that hadn't barked. Outside, beyond the lightning, the other dogs howled as if they knew.

"I'm going to tell," sang Obrecht. "I'm going to tell! I'm going to tell them all you killed the dog, I'm going to tell, I'm going to tell, you killed the dog." His lizard-rasp slithered down the chimney, and the poor animal lay shredded. Its fur stuck to the carpet with blood.

Like a whipsaw the madness returned, but now fear vanished. Dracken needed to kill Obrecht: to keep the secret, to survive himself, because Obrecht needed killing. The fat man threw open the hoisting window, the central bay window that protruded into the street. He tore the shutters aside and let them bang in the wind. He wanted Obrecht to know. Above the window a post stuck out, and from it hung an old, unused rope. Dracken threw himself up, caught the post, and climbed. His arms were still mighty, and his legs recalled their strength. He saw death and bloodshed. Dracken hauled himself onto the steep roof with the knife in his teeth, and the bitter iron-taste of dog blood burned like the fire in his mind.

Obrecht waited on hands and feet, curled around the chimney with an empty leash. Lightning tore the sky.

"Got you out," whispered Obrecht.

Dracken stood upright on rain-slicked shingles. The roof canted steeply and dumped rain like the flood. He palmed the knife in his hand. Dracken remembered knifework from long ago, before the lance, before his hips were ruined, before Sarise had left, when he was field-commissioned and his wife still loved him. When he had lived by the knife and sword.

The old, fat man stepped wide and stayed low, and kept the knife behind him, slipping it up and down, forward and reverse grip, so Obrecht wouldn't know what was coming. Dracken scrambled up the roof on two feet and one hand, bent over like a bitter, twisted thing. Obrecht waited and hissed, sticking his tongue out to lick the rain. He spun the leash like a lasso. Thunder and lightning made war in the sky.

The old man charged, Obrecht slithered aside, and Dracken slashed underhanded, a great power shot driven by strength beyond even Dracken's memory. The hand with the ring leaped at the twisted dockworker and

threw sprays of splattered rain. He missed. The twisted man lurched wide and jumped, crashing into Dracken's head. They crashed together and rolled. Dracken stabbed again and again, sometimes hitting flesh, and sometimes in his madness tearing shingles from the roof. Obrecht screamed and bit. He wrapped the leash around the Sailor's throat like a garrote, strangling and biting. They rolled down the precipitous roof.

The hoisting pole smashed Dracken's face and made him spin. He lost his grip on Obrecht and knife, and flipped with the impact. The leash caught him, devilishly worked around the hoisting pole. Dracken fell, the leather thong snapped, and the old fan man broke the leash with his neck.

Obrecht had no such luck and plummeted to wet earth, smashing onto cobblestones and breaking bones. Dracken smashed down beside him, trailing the dogleash like a comet's tail. For an instant of impact, the rain seemed to stop as if the storm itself wanted to see what ruin had happened. Then it dropped rain like it wanted to smite them and drown their bodies from memory.

Dracken sat up. He gasped and wheezed, but his eyes opened wide. Nothing but hatred existed in him. He looked at Obrecht.

The dockworker slithered into curling, like a fetal position but with erect head. He hissed.

Dracken's legs were broken, but he crawled. Obrecht could not make himself flee. He retreated, lifted up, and struck Dracken while the other clawed at him, and the Admiral caught him by the throat. Obrecht tried to bite the ring off, and Dracken stabbed and stabbed until he couldn't recall the difference between the man and the dog. Rain drowned them both. The wildness left with Dracken's senses and possibly his life, and two twisted bodies wrapped around each other in the street, bleeding.

A lean man in orange and brown, a sealskin cloak, a hook for a hand on his right arm and a ball of wrappings and bandages on his left, came looking for Dracken's old house. Benedict strode uphill as rain cut the warmth out of his clothing, seeming to find holes and crevices like enemy knives and jumping in to chill his flesh. Where it struck his face the droplets felt like tiny bullets, and where they dribbled under his clothes they felt like blood. With his wrapped right-hand in front of his face like a shield, Benedict lurched up the hill and checked house-numbers on either side of the street.

He found the one he was looking for with inert bodies in the street, an open-window banging overhead, and part of a broken dog-leash wrapped between the two forms. He yanked Dracken over with his hook, and the sailor gasped. He blew bubbles as he breathed, and the other end of the leash wrapped his neck. Benedict turned on Obrecht and rolled him over. The worker lay still.

If anything the rainstorm grew worse, and became artillery, battering earth and houses. The gutters flooded. Mud surged downhill. The rainstorm was a roar.

If nothing could be heard, then Benedict must have heard nothing, yet he lifted his head and stared to the north, towards the row-houses such as Dracken's. Beyond them lay a hillside. Beyond that Kolvir. Beyond that Garnath.

Benedict stood up straight and dropped the Admiral. He looked into gated archway the old knight had bought and the darkness beyond. He looked through the courtyard in Old Broke's old house.

"Hello, Lord of Amber," whispered another voice, a true dry lizard's voice that defied wind, rain, and creation. This was the low, deadly murmur Obrecht's broken lungs had attempted. It was a voice deep as the spaces under mountains and dark as the halls of Utumno's forbidden corridors.

"Hello, wyrm," said Benedict.

In spite of darkness black-eyes of Spait looked through the iron bars at Benedict. For the first time those eyes showed color. Orange and red embers burned within, and yellow and gold fires reached upward, ignoring wind and rain as lesser forces. The dragon's teeth glistened like bars before a terrible cage as the beast whispered.

"Rejoice, Prince of Amber. I mean you no harm," whispered Spait. "The thought of hills lies topmost in your mind. You think of battle up and down the hill. I do not seek to fight you. You may go."

Benedict glanced at Dracken. The LtA lay insensate, and only occasional splatter of his breathing under the relentless deluge indicated he was alive. The other man lay still as well, and Benedict wondered if he was the one the hospital staff named Obrecht. That patient had disappeared soon after Dracken arrived, and now they were together. Armist was dead. One of Benedict's sailors was dead, soon after the patient Obrecht appeared at the hospital, and soon before he disappeared. Now Dracken, Benedict's Dracken through Army and Navy, Land and Sea, lay on the edge of death.

"You think of land, but remember talking to your sister of hills. Be the smart general, Lord Benedict of Amber, and do not seek a fight uphill. Be smart. I mean you no harm," whispered Spait.

Benedict guarded his thoughts and clicked his hook. Its two pieces tapped each other as he adjusted the muscles in his stump. A few years on since Lintra took his hand, and he had a wrist again. A knob on his arm held bumps that might become fingers.

"Be smart, Prince of Amber, like those who saw Armist and left her." The dragon's eyes burned, and his snake-smile stretched wide.

Benedict lifted his eyes slowly and let the rain fall against him.

"Be smart. A yearning lives within you to undertake some effort, and it will heal your arm. All you have to do is wait. This one is just a shadow of an old broken man." The dragon's words put images in Benedict's head, pictures of Armist bleeding in the street as her charts had told him, and of Dracken, fat, broken, bleeding Dracken, who lay in a pile like tenderized meat. The dragon purred and even in the rain his breath stank of something acrid like bile.

Benedict clicked his hook twice. "Come, beast. Come."

The dragon charged, and Benedict hurled himself at it.

Smashing iron-wrought gates as it tore them from the stone, Spait rushed forward. It struck as snakes do, all speed. Yet Benedict's charge was a feint, and he flapped his cloak before the beast as it struck. Huge teeth ripped the sealskin apart. The Prince of Amber floated sideways as his feet slid on slicked paving-stones, the dragon passing him like a dance partner gone too far, and Benedict hooked Bley's sword from the wyrm's haunch as it passed. He drew it along the beast and flayed Spait's side from shoulder to the ribs as the dragon went.

Spait roared. Benedict's hook couldn't hold the sword's handle, and he let it hang by its crossbar. The wyrm formed an S with his neck and struck again, staving in the stone walls of Dracken's tack room.

The prince partially dodged. He didn't get hit and nor did the dragon smash him through the wall, but in dodging, Benedict underestimated the terrible force of the dragon's strike. Stones flew like shrapnel. He had been too close, swinging the sword on the edge of his hook. Spait tore through the building and thrashed his tail, catching the lean Master of Arms at the midriff nearly accidentally but still throwing him a hundred feet up

the roadway. A lesser man would have died. Benedict merely fell, as mud between the great flat paving stones betrayed his footing.

The prince got up. His ribs were bruised, maybe broken. Spait slithered up and over the house as dogs went mad. The rain proved no cover. Benedict couldn't see, but suddenly a red fire raged into brilliance, staring right at him. The dragon only had one eye, and the handle of Bleys's sword stuck out of the other.

The dragon came running, and Benedict retaliated again.

It snapped, he dodged once more, and as teeth crashed together with clatter of bone on bone, Benedict reached out with his hook and ripped open the dragon's gums. It tried to scream, and Benedict leaned away, turning to run for cover.

His hook betrayed him. It got stuck in the dragon's jaw, and somehow the releases jammed. Baffled, for a moment the Master of Arms of Amber yanked at his arm as his stump stuck into the very mouth of the beast. Spait spasmed and threw him. Again Benedict flew and this time landed poorly, crashing to the flagstones on his side.

Spait struck. Its eyes were fire, its breath poison, and everything went wrong for the lean prince. The dragon evaded his ripostes and snapped at his head. It used its great bulk to swim over the wet road while the prince struggled and clawed for every bit of footing. He lost his effortless movement and struggled until Spait caught him with his tail, striking him down. On the ground the prince tried to roll, and again partially dodged the wyrm's snake-strike. This time one of the little legs caught him, tore his clothes and skin, and threw him spinning across the street. The harness for his prosthesis broke.

I'm going to die, thought Benedict. I have no weapon. I cannot move in the rain. The serpent moves too well. There is a power working against me, and I need a weapon.

I am in Amber. There are weapons to be had. I should flee and get one. A lance.

For no particular reason, the moment Benedict thought 'weapons' he happened to glance at Dracken. Bitemarks marred the Lieutenant Admiral's hands, and one was gloved. The other glove was ripped away. That hand wore a ring on its ring finger, and Benedict recalled Dracken had given up his wedding ring when Sarise divorced him. The slab of the Admiral's flesh lay desolate and alone in the street.

An image came to him, an image of what would happen if he fled. His siblings were weak. They could not fight. If Benedict ran, the dragon would attack the castle and kill everyone. None of his lesser kin could fight Spait.

Only Benedict had a chance. He needed a weapon. Like that ring.

He ran for Dracken.

Spait charged again, Benedict evaded, but the bloodprice of the dragon was slashes on his back. The wyrm's tail beat him. Already his muscles rebelled where Spait had smacked him. Benedict risked greatly and dashed across open ground, through a veil of rainwater thick as a brick wall, with his eyes locked on the tiny band of gold on Dracken's finger. His own numb hand burned. Spait missed a charge and that was enough, for Benedict stood up with his ruined hand unwound, a gold band around his fingers.

The Master of Arms flexed his hand. The numbness vanished. There was a power on him, and it promised him glory. He saw himself, triumphant, the eldest son of Oberon. It was as it should be. Wasn't he better than everyone else in Amber?

All he needed was a sword.

He stared at the dragon and calculated.

Form: long serpent. Body-type meant better footing.

Primary danger: head.

Front right foreleg injured: Bleys's sword.

Bleys's sword: ruined. Either the dragon's eyes were filled with flame or some combustible fluid, but Bleys's sword was melting into slag.

The dragon has evil magic. So be it.

Hind legs intact, but exhibited a stiffness at the right hindlock. Where the hip would be if it had them, there was a region of immobility. The scales were pushed up, like they didn't fit quite right. Like something was in there.

Spait rose and hissed.

"You've been stabbed before," observed the Master of Arms. "And that sword lies within you. Does it eat at you, dragon? Does it cut within your flesh? Do you still burn with an old injury, one dealt by an old enemy, who remains to haunt you—"

"Enough, Lice of Amber!" screamed Spait, and the dragon made a mistake. He charged, roaring so houses shook. Kolvir roared back with echoes, The dragon came too quickly and too straight, and Benedict stepped forward, leaned down, and walked through the twisting coils.

His hand reached into a dimple on the scales and drew an elvish sword from the dragon's side, severing flesh and scale as the weapon emerged. On the blade's side, old runes of Noldor read Telcrim, the name of an elf from the War of Wrath. He had perished in the breaking of the Girdle with his blade lodged in his enemy's flank. Almost Telcrim had survived, but even then a younger Spait had been too much for him, and the elf who had seen Valinor died under Melkor's gloom.

The runes of the High Elves were Thari, and Benedict spoke the name of the dead elf. His hand knew a sword. He threw off the weight of darkness and lightning burned the sky behind him. Spait arranged himself to attack, but he bled black fluid that smelled of filth. Years hence, this part of the street would turn black and stink when it was wet.

Benedict waited. Spait roared. Shouts of fear echoed from nearby houses, and behind Dracken's neighbor the dogs fell silent, struck by fury and terror beyond their understanding. Only Kolvir roared back, throwing echoes of the dragon's below back at it.

Benedict stood tall as the mountain and waited.

Spait charged, Benedict swept his jacket off to throw as a diversion and tried to slip aside. Yet at the last moment something caught his leg. The dragon came on!

Benedict looked away from his target and saw Obrecht, broken and nearly dead, but sprawled on the ground behind him with his bent hands wrapped around Benedict's leg.

Spait struck, Benedict blocked, and the blade Telcrim betrayed the hand that wore the ring of Sauron. In the moment of the parry, Telcrim fell from Benedict's grip.

Spait bit Benedict from hip to shoulder and tore the Prince of Amber apart. His arm tumbled free with the sword. Spait swallowed his body without chewing, throwing his head back and engulfing him. Then it turned and snatched the legs off the ground. It wolfed them down.

Under the curtain of rain Obrecht slithered to the sword, yanked it from the hand, and pulled a plain gold band from the dead finger. Grinning madly, he put it on his own finger and threw the arm to Spait. The dragon caught it out of the air and consumed it.

The thing Obrecht and dragon Spait regarded each other.

"You are a twisted, poisonous thing," whispered Spait. "And it pleases me to see you suffer. But there are more tempting morsels here. Begone, thing. Begone."

The dragon turned and ripped open the first house, crushing rocks with his teeth. Screams filled the City of Amber, but under the veil of the rain, no one heard.