

A Quiet Knight's Reading
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Her wounds ached and drops of green blood occasionally splattered the stone floor, but the dragon was determined not to let that ruin her evening. With exquisite care, she licked one claw and turned the page of the thick book on the reading table before her. Her other claws peeled back a nicely blackened suit of armor, making a sound like the foil coming off a chocolate bar, only a great deal louder. The movement made the scratches and gouges on her body cry out and she had to pause until they stopped.

When the pain passed, the dragon took a juicy bite, careful not to let anything drip on the book. She knew very well that it isn't a good idea to eat and read at the same time, but tonight she really deserved the treat.

Besides, everyone needs a vice.

Something this Chaucer person seems to understand completely, she thought, chewing carefully and turning to another page. So much more compelling than anything that other pompous, puff-headed poet could come up with. Spenserian verse indeed! No wonder he was never admitted at court.

A pang jolted the dragon's heart and her head automatically snapped around, creating a corresponding jolt of pain. Someone else was in her keep-in the courtyard, to be exact. The dragon could feel stealthy footsteps on her stones, sense ripples wafting through the air as the intruder moved.

Another knight? She looked down at her meal. I haven't even recovered from this one yet.

Step step step. The intruder was getting closer, though the pace was cautious. An odd, unfamiliar feeling rose in the dragon's chest.

The dragon set down her dinner, closed the book, and undulated stiffly toward the courtyard of the keep.

The keep itself was blocky and fairly small, with cold, empty corridors and dusty doors. The great hall ran down the center, with human living quarters above and cellars below. Scrubbed wind-swept hills surrounded the place, and the nearest human town was almost seven days of human travel away. Unfortunately, almost two hundred years of successful hoarding invariably gives one a certain reputation with treasure-seekers-no matter how far away the closest human might be.

Step step step. The dragon's odd feeling intensified.

Every idiot who can wave a sword thinks he can conquer the mighty dragon and steal her hoard, she growled to herself. As if they deserve it-or could even carry it away.

The dragon slid over a pile of loose rubble and hissed sharply when the stones ground in her still-bloody wounds. She braced herself against the wall until the world stopped spinning.

I can't do this, she thought. This is the fourth knight in five days. Where are they all coming from?

Step step step. That odd feeling increased again. The dragon's heart was pounding, her lungs were working like hyperactive bellows, and she was shivering, even though she wasn't cold.

Fear, she realized with a start. I'm afraid!

Then anger entered her emotional mix, giving the world a reddish tinge. How dare they? These humans had reduced her to this? To being afraid of tin-foil knights? The anger grew like poison ivy and she bolted forward, intending to rush down to the courtyard with a sky-shattering roar and disembowel the fool with a single swipe of her claws.

The pain stopped her cold. Her sudden movement had torn open partially healed wounds and sent white-hot spasms coursing through the others. The dragon sat in the corridor, concentrating on her breathing until the pain eased.

The roof, she decided. I'll take a look from the roof.

The intruder was female. She was clad in the jingling mail so popular with human warriors and the obligatory sword was out and ready. Her hair was black and bound tightly on the top of her head. She was quite tall by human standards.

The dragon peeked down from the roof of the great hall and shifted restlessly on her perch. She considered incinerating the woman from above, but that last knight's final gouge must have slashed something vital for fire-making-it was difficult to get her flame going. It would be claw-to-hand or nothing, something the dragon didn't at the moment relish.

And then there's the Beowulf factor, she thought fretfully. "The female of the species is always more fearsome." I can't go through this again. What am I going to do?

The woman looked cautiously around the courtyard. The dragon's heart began beating faster and she found herself nervously picking at the dry thatching. Fear again. The dragon wanted to scream with frustration. Innis Gorath, the human who had been banished to this prison of a

keep, had been dead for almost two hundred years now, and it wasn't as if he needed aveng for heaven's sake. He'd almost murdered the king's infant son. Gorath and his men had been ripe pickings for a young dragon looking to settle down and start a nice little hoard. So why couldn't the humans leave her alone?

Maybe she should take human shape and pretend to be the dragon's captive. It would be to lure the intruder close, and it would be satisfying to see the look on the woman's face when the poor, helpless princess exploded into a roaring dragon.

Then the dragon shook her head and sighed. That wouldn't work. In her current condition would take several hours to shift her shape.

What am I going to do?

Impulsively, the dragon leaned over the edge of the rooftop and cleared her throat.

"Go away!" she bellowed.

The woman jumped with a satisfying yelp and spun about, trying to look everywhere at once, sword at the ready.

"Didn't you hear? I said, go away!" the dragon shouted. Her voice echoed around the courtyard, impossible to localize.

"Who are you?" the woman yelled back. "Where are you?"

"I own this keep, human," the dragon boomed, "and you aren't going to take it from me. So why don't you just get on that horse you've probably hidden in the hills out there and ride away before you get hurt?"

"Do you give all your victims that warning?" the woman countered, still unable to locate the dragon's voice, "or am I the first?"

"I could fry you where you stand, human!"

The woman cocked her head and lowered her sword. "Then why don't you?"

The dragon didn't know how to answer that, so she remained silent.

"Listen," the woman said, "my name is Lilibet and I'm not here to kill you."

Now the dragon cocked her head. This was a new one. "You can't have my hoard, either," she warned.

"Don't want it. Look, can I see you? It feels strange talking to empty air."

It would have been gratifying for the dragon to spread her wings and swoop down on the courtyard, stirring up great gouts of air and letting her scales glitter like liquid emeralds in sunlight. But any attempt of the kind would certainly end in a bone-jarring splat and leave a liquid emerald pancake.

Maybe she could land on Lilithe.

In the end, the dragon simply slithered down the wall, claws anchoring her firmly to the stone. The movement hurt like hell, and the dragon suppressed a grimace. She coiled herself a safe distance away and levelled a hard look at Lilithe, who was visibly steeling herself not to run. The dragon found that vaguely mollifying.

"What do you want?" the dragon hissed. "Make it quick."

Lilithe swallowed. "I need some scales. Just a few."

"Scales?" The dragon would have blinked if she had eyelids. "What on earth for?"

"The king. He won't promote me to lieutenant unless I prove myself by getting him some dragon scales. You know how it is." Lilithe hawked and spat. "Men in charge."

The dragon didn't know, but found herself nodding sympathetically.

"And then there are the men in the army." Lilithe spat again. "Military men are pigs, you know? They think any female they see is just dying to bowl over backwards with her legs for them."

The dragon nodded again. Now that she thought about it, Chaucer seemed to take that attitude. The matter bore exploration. Once this human was gone, at any rate.

"All right then," the dragon said. "If I give you a few scales, will you go away?"

Lilithe bared her teeth and the dragon automatically drew back. After a moment she remembered that teeth-baring was a sign of pleasure among humans and she relaxed.

"Happily," Lilithe said. She sheathed her sword.

The dragon rubbed her back against the rough stone of the keep, careful to keep her injury away from the rock. A moment later, she flung a clawful of glittering green scales at Lilithe, each one the size of a human hand. They bounced and clattered on the cobblestones. Lilithe gathered them up like a child gathering autumn leaves, put them in a large pouch, and thanked the dragon most kindly.

"Before I leave," she said, "may I ask a personal question?"

The dragon narrowed her eyes. She had never talked this much with anyone, let alone a human, but she found it oddly intriguing. "Ask. I won't promise to answer."

"I couldn't help noticing that you're wounded," Lilitre said, clutching the fat pouch at her waist as if she feared it would sprout legs and scamper away. "Badly. How did it happen? Other knights?"

"Other knights," the dragon agreed wearily.

"After your treasure?"

"Yes."

"Creeps. Only things on their minds are gold and sex-and they want gold only because it can buy sex."

"Gold?" The dragon cocked her head. "They're after gold? But I don't collect gold."

"Silver, then. Or gems."

"No."

"But all dragons collect treasure, don't they?" Lilitre replied, puzzled. "What else could it be?"

The dragon chuckled in spite of herself and some of her pain actually eased. "Dragons collect valuables," she said.

"Like what?"

The dragon looked at Lilitre for a long moment. She liked this human woman. This woman knew what it was like to be wanted for only one thing.

"Leave your sword and knife," the dragon instructed, "and I'll show you."

"Incredible," Lilitre breathed. "And you have more?"

"Rooms full," the dragon said proudly. "Most of them are in the original authors hand."

Lilire shook her head in amazement and went back to staring into the storeroom. Books were everywhere-stacked in the corners, on tables, upside-down, right side up, everywhere. The room smelled sweetly of vellum, parchment, and ink.

"Do you know how much this is worth?" Lilire asked, then caught a look at the dragons. "Never mind. Stupid question. And this is why these knights keep coming after you?"

"It is," the dragon grimaced. "And frankly, I don't know how long I can hold out. You're fourth person to... visit in five days, and you know how long it takes your kind to get here. don't get time to rest and heal between attacks anymore."

"You're getting quite the reputation," Lilire told her. "Bards sing of you all over the country. The mighty dragon and her fantastic hoard."

The dragon winced.

"Most of those pigs can't even read," Lilire said. "They'd probably rip the bindings apart looking for the bars of gold they're sure you've hidden inside."

The dragon's eyes widened in horror.

"Why aren't they on shelves?" Lilire continued, not noticing the dragon's distress.

"I don't know how to build them," the dragon admitted. "I take human shape once in a while so I can write, and until lately I could dry out the rooms with puffs of hot air to keep mold and rot away, but I'm not much good with human carpentry tools."

"My father was a carpenter," Lilire said wistfully. "He liked books, too." She paused for a long moment, lost in thought. "You know, I think we could solve your problem very easily. I could hide you and your hoard where no one would ever think to look. I'll even stay and help if you like."

The dragon gave her a quizzical glance. "What about becoming a lieutenant?"

Lilire spat again. "I'm really tired of living with pigs."