

Dragon's Wish

The egg stood there one morning, among dirty tents and piles of trash, on the burnt ground within a circle of stones. It was as tall as a grown man, and suitably wide, its smooth jade-like surface criss-crossed by meandering veins of gold that swirled into ever more intricate patterns, smaller than the eye could see. High above, the tops of fir trees swayed in the wind, but under the forest canopy the air was still and almost warm.

Presently a man emerged from a half-collapsed tent on the edge of the clearing, wearing only a loincloth and a layer of grime. He stretched, knotted muscles coiling like snakes around arms as thick as an elephant's trunk, and walked groggily towards the boulder that stood watch off to a side, where a footpath started downwards among giant roots. Someone was sleeping there, bundled in a fur, and he prodded the prone shape with an impatient foot.

"Get up, you green brute. You were supposed to wake me at dawn."

The orc snarled, showing big yellow teeth made to crunch bone. "So? The sun's not up yet." She wobbled to her feet and faced him, taller yet more lithe than the human, scarcely more clothes on her scarred body.

"Cranon's gonna be pissed," he said. "We're not that safe here."

"Cranon can kiss my hairy green ass," she countered, pushing past him to trundle towards the river that gurgled nearby. "And would it kill you to take a bath?"

She found him again in the middle of the clearing, hands on his hips as he stared at the egg, mouth agape. It seemed to come alive in the growing light, golden ridges acquiring a depth previously unseen. The orc made a warding sign before approaching, fingers on the curved dagger at her hip.

"What in Gurdun's Heaven is that?" she asked.

"You tell me. You were on watch since midnight."

She looked hesitantly towards the largest tent in the semicircle behind them.

"Don't bother," said the man. "Cranon is missing. Besides, no mortal power could have carried this through the hills without waking us all."

"You think the King's mages caught up with us?" The orc took a few steps around the egg, tilting her head like a cat.

"Looks rather too fancy for a magical trap." He didn't sound entirely convinced.

"It's a dragon's egg." The teenager crawling out of another tent was dressed in tattered grey robes, blonde hair stringy from neglect, his naked wrists and ankles still carrying the trace of shackles. "They say it can grant wishes."

The man quirked his eyebrows at the orc. "What was he doing in your tent last night?"

"Why, you wanted to borrow him?"

The teenager blushed hot red, freckled cheeks catching fire.

"Ha ha ha! Don't mind her, boy. Come here. What else do they say about dragon eggs?"

"Many things. Crazy things." The teenager's voice dwindled to a whisper as he eyed Cranon's empty tent. "They say... But no, that's impossible."

The man dismissed his worries with a handwave. "So... This thing grants wishes? What do you wish for, Green?"

"Wishes come at a price." She looked him in the eye long and hard before averting her gaze. "Wish I could take back the things I did. To not be an outlaw anymore. And you?"

He grinned. "I'd settle for being too rich for the King's men to touch me. How much do you suppose dragon eggs sell for? ... Har har! What about you, boy? Any wishes?" He wrapped a huge arm around the teenager's shoulders and squeezed hard enough to make him wince.

The teenager lowered his eyes. "O-only to go home, sir."

"If wishes were fishes..." The orc sighed. "Where's Cranon, anyway?"

"Maybe he left early to fetch the others," the teenager offered. "They'll have loot to carry if... You know."

"Without a weapon? Or even his canteen?"

"Who knows why Cranon does anything?" pointed out the orc. "He never told us how he chose this place, or at least how he knew about it."

"You'd be shorter by a head if it wasn't for him," the man reminded her.

"I know. I'm not ungrateful. It's just... Like he wasn't even fully human sometimes."

"He had me decipher an old map for him," explained the teenager. "The glyphs on it matched those pillars we kept running across in the woods."

"What glyphs?" asked the orc, suddenly interested.

The teenager shrugged. "Just some Draconic names."

A faraway shriek cut off the next question. The treetops were in sunlight by now, unseen birds singing like there was no tomorrow, and a pair of shapes danced in the eastern sky, gliding on brilliant wings.

"By Gurdun," said the man, "Tell me those are white eagles."

Without a word, the orc went to retrieve her spear. She left it planted in the ground while she recovered a few things from her tent and proceeded to strap them on. The teenager fearfully eyed the glistening bronze tip splattered with dried blood. He shivered: the wind had grown stronger, reaching down through the trees with fingers of cold.

"You're planning to fight a dragon with pointy sticks?" he asked.

"I'm planning to run away as fast as I can," she retorted, completing a bundle which she shouldered. The man followed her example and returned briefly with an ax in his hand and a shield on his back; he owned little else besides.

"What about Cranon?" the teenager insisted, but he bent down to collect whatever he could.

The orc grinned. "Somehow, squirt, I don't think he's coming back." She surveyed the doomed camp once more, and the egg caught her eye. The first rays of the sun shone down on it at last to reveal a pulsing shadow in its translucent depths, now resembling a human fetus, now a coiled serpent wrapped in leathery wings. All of a sudden, the flying shapes were much closer than they'd seemed. Too close.

"And sometimes you pay the price without getting your wish..."