

I'm Afraid
You've Got
Dragons

ALSO BY PETER S. BEAGLE

NOVELS

A Fine and Private Place

The Last Unicorn

Lila the Werewolf

The Folk of the Air

The Innkeeper's Song

The Unicorn Sonata

Tamsin

A Dance for Emilia

Return

Summerlong

In Calabria

The Last Unicorn: The Lost Journey

NONFICTION

I See by My Outfit

The California Feeling

(with Michael Bry)

American Denim

The Lady and Her Tiger

(with Pat Derby)

The Garden of Earthly Delights

In the Presence of Elephants

COLLECTIONS

The Fantasy Worlds of Peter S. Beagle

Giant Bones

*The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche
and other Odd Acquaintances*

The Line Between

Your Friendly Neighborhood Magician

We Never Talk About My Brother

Strange Roads

(with Lisa Snellings-Clark)

Four Years, Five Seasons (Audiobook Only)

Mirror Kingdoms: The Best of Peter S. Beagle

Sleight of Hand

The Overneath

The Karkadann Triangle

(with Patricia A. McKillip)

ANTHOLOGIES

Peter S. Beagle's Immortal Unicorn

Edited by Peter S. Beagle, Janet Berliner, and Martin Greenberg

The Secret History of Fantasy

Edited by Peter S. Beagle

The Urban Fantasy Anthology

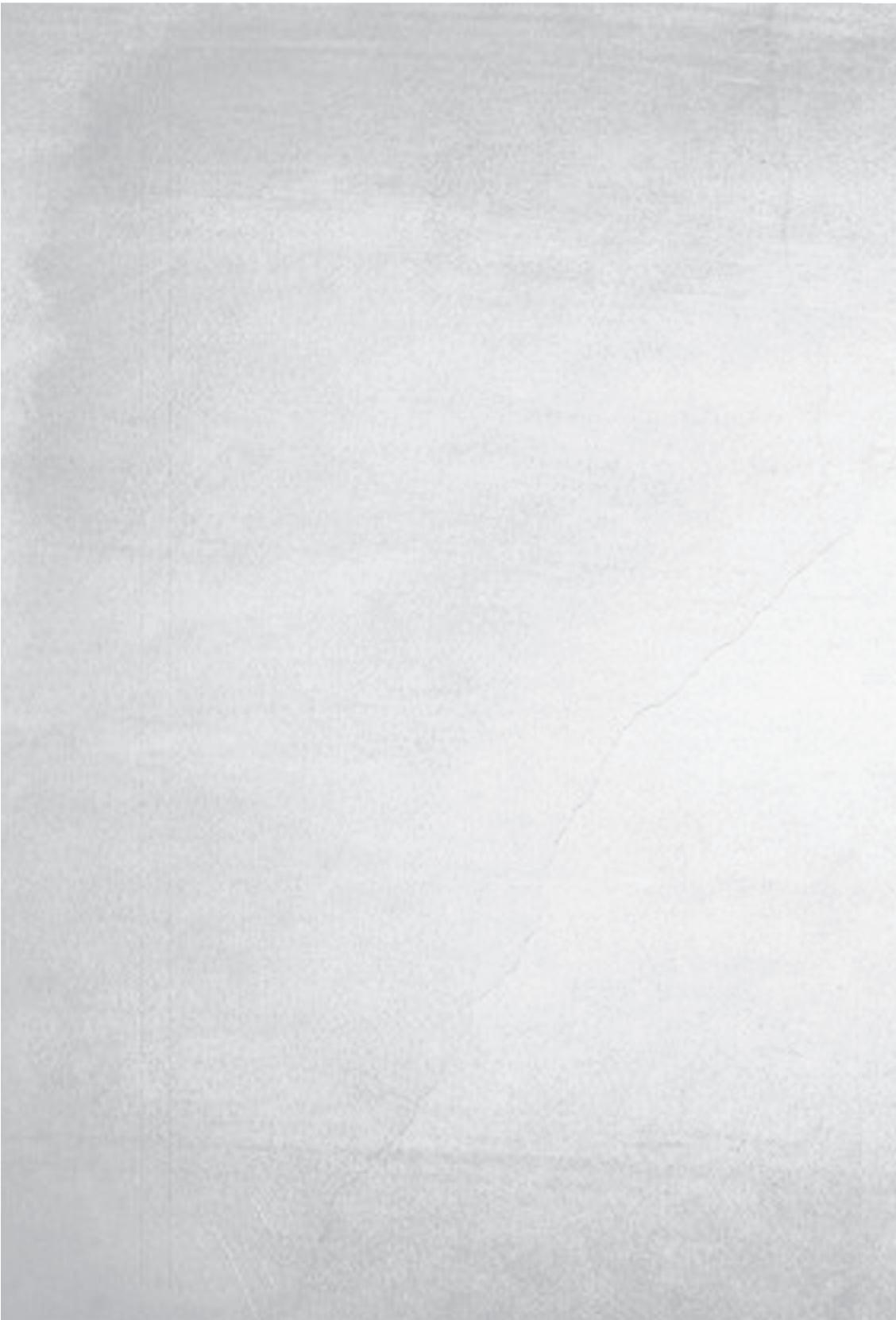
Edited by Peter S. Beagle and Joe Lansdale

The New Voices of Fantasy

Edited by Peter S. Beagle and Jacob Weisman

The Unicorn Anthology

Edited by Peter S. Beagle and Jacob Weisman



I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

PETER S. BEAGLE

SAGA  PRESS

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO
AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP NEW DELHI SYDNEY/MELBOURNE



1230 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020

For more than 100 years, Simon & Schuster has championed authors and the stories they create. By respecting the copyright of an author's intellectual property, you enable Simon & Schuster and the author to continue publishing exceptional books for years to come. We thank you for supporting the author's copyright by purchasing an authorized edition of this book.

No amount of this book may be reproduced or stored in any format, nor may it be uploaded to any website, database, language-learning model, or other repository, retrieval, or artificial intelligence system without express permission. All rights reserved. Inquiries may be directed to Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 or permissions@simonandschuster.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Peter S. Beagle

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Saga Press Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Saga Press trade paperback edition May 2025

SAGA PRESS and colophon are trademarks of Simon & Schuster, LLC

Simon & Schuster strongly believes in freedom of expression and stands against censorship in all its forms. For more information, visit BooksBelong.com.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Interior design by Esther Paradelo
Cover and inside front cover artwork by Justin and Annie Gerard

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024931399

ISBN 978-1-6680-2527-7
ISBN 978-1-6680-2528-4 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-6680-2529-1 (ebook)

*This story is for Jenella DuRousseau,
wherever she is,
for always and always.*

*But since, for so many reasons,
it would never have reached anyone at all
without the aid of my beloved friend Kathleen Hunt,
this story is also for her.*



PROLOGUE

The warning came in the form of a great wind, sudden and cold, sweeping out of the western mountains on a perfectly bland and cloudless summer day. Along with it came the charcoal-burners, the trappers, and the rest of the forest folk—woodcutters, swineherds, herbwives, even the occasional hermit and more occasional outlaw—rushing to seek shelter in the nearby village. The villagers eagerly took them all in, glad of more hands to share in hastily battening down doors, windows, shelves, and cellars, and hanging stones from the eaves and edges of thatched roofs, in hopes of holding their houses together against the rising wind. As they worked, they prayed it might indeed be only wind.

The village's three Wise Women—a larger town would have had as many as seven—were the only inhabitants bold enough to stand exposed in the fields on the mountain-facing side of the village. Their hair and garments whipped behind them as they watched the forest bend and twist as if wrenched between

invisible hands. The air was thick now with dust and twigs and torn leaves, and over the growing howl they could hear tree limbs snap and splinter with a sound like cracking bones.

The Wise Women watched, and worried, and debated.

“This is no storm,” said Uska, youngest of the three, her one good eye searching the oddly clear sky. “The Kings return.”

“Nonsense,” replied Yairi. At sixty-three, she was Uska’s elder by thirty years. She never missed a chance to hint that Uska had attained her place too soon, and with insufficient testing. “The Kings passed before you were born, and none of their progeny could do this. Besides, this wind is cold. I remember the Kings. The wind of their passage was always hot, almost too hot to breathe, as if their wings were made of stolen sun. This fury is another matter altogether. Some faraway shift in the land or sea, perhaps, echoing its way to us across the distance. Watch. It will shake itself out and fade.”

“What great lurch or tide, no matter how distant, moves trees without touching the sky? It is the Kings. We must light the beacons, so we might yet be noticed and avoided. We must prepare the rune arrows, to ask forgiveness and beg them pass us by.”

“You are young and coarse, and lack understanding.” Yairi made no attempt to hide her condescension. “The world has many mysteries. Is that not so, Brugge?”

The oldest of the Wise Women held her bony right hand out flat, wobbling it slightly this way and that: *maybe yes, maybe no*. Her skin was almost transparent with age. She frowned at her companions and breathed in twice, preparing to speak, but before she could begin, a tangle of crosscurrents stilled the air for a moment. In the sudden hush a new sound came to them from the forest: a low, dark rumble that rose and fell in waves,

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

and seemed to be made of many other noises all blurred and jumbled together. When the wind rose again the sound was dulled, but they could still hear it, growing louder. It was as if all the lightning in the world had been bridled and *something* now rode it toward their village.

Brugge's sure stance and undimmed eyes belied the count of her years, which only she remembered. But uncertainty colored her voice, and this change in the fixed star of their hierarchy frightened her listeners more than either could admit in the other's company.

"Shoot your arrows at will, sister, for whatever you think they are worth. Light your beacons as you choose. And you, Yairi, so quick to dismiss strangeness, so anxious to quell your own troubled thoughts: I do not believe we will be laughing about this tonight, or tomorrow, or at any time to come."

The gale grew steadily wilder, and for a moment all three women peered keenly back at the village, dreading to see a hearth fire drawn up even one chimney, to leap from housetop to housetop, setting the whole village ablaze. But there was no sign of that disaster, at least.

"The world has turned noisily in its sleep, like some babe disturbed in the cradle, fussing and crying until it forgets the dreams that troubled it. The Kings do not come now to harm us in their vast indifference. Something else is loosed, something that stinks of magic."

"Aye? And what will *he* do?"

As venerable as she insisted on being regarded by her companions, it was extremely rare for Yairi ever to challenge Brugge's authority so directly; she had always been far more likely to snap sideways at her, and then to back away with a quick, inaudible

mumble. “When *that one* comes once again to challenge our supposed wisdom, our legendary power for the very last time . . . how do you imagine we will face him then, my sister?” The last two words flashed and bit with contempt, as they were precisely meant to do.

The oldest of the three Wise was silent for such a long moment that Yairi began to shrink hard away from her, while trying her best not to show fear. None of the other Wise had ever seen Brugge in a rage; and Yairi suddenly became utterly aware that she did not ever want to be the first. But the older woman’s voice was quite calm when she spoke again, which young Uska thought was quite the most terrible thing of all. Brugge finally shook her white head in distaste. “What *we* will do,” she said at last, “is what we Wise always do when wisdom fails. We will chant and charm in all the languages we know, using every prayer, every incantation at our disposal, conjuring to make what approaches leave us in peace. And it . . . it will do whatever *it* will do. Begin.”

They knelt together, Brugge’s authority still strong enough to bind them. And where else, in truth, could they go? What else, in fact, might they possibly do?

Hours of chanting passed without effect. The sky was still far too clear come nightfall; beneath its dark ceiling the air raged, and the noise from the woods grew harsher and louder than the world might possibly contain. Though the three women screamed their secrets into the onrushing wind, seeking to blunt its fury, they could no longer hear each other or themselves. Their words were torn and scattered as if they had never had form or meaning.

And then there were no words at all.



Robert dreamed . . .

It was The Dream—the one that visited him so often that it had long since lost any terrifying aspect and become as drearily predictable as the ones in which he was being driven out of town by a jeering, laughing mob, or found himself suddenly naked and pink as a shrimp while kneeling to court Violette-Elisabeth, the baker’s daughter. Even so, The Dream left him feeling strangely thrilled—in a shivery sort of way—when he woke to his mother’s call from downstairs: “Gaius Aurelius! Gaius Aurelius Constantine!”

“Not now, not now,” he muttered into his pillow, turning over in forlorn pursuit of a few last fragments of sleep. But Adelise was on the bed already, pulling the coverlet back with her tiny fangs and tickling his ear with her forked tongue. He could hear clumsy Fernand scrabbling for purchase on the shaky bedstead, which meant that Lux would be next, and then Reynald—poor little Reynald, always last in everything.

Peter S. Beagle

The call came again. “Gaius Aurelius Constantine Heliogabalus!”

He tried to shout, “I’m awake!” but only managed a croak this time, as he forced himself to sit up. *What was in that new batch at Jarold’s last night?* “Get away, Adelise, I’m awake, I’m awake. . . . Oh dear God, I’m dead but I’m awake.” Reynald’s long scarlet head appeared above the edge of the bed, accompanied by a piercing cry for attention. “Reynald, keep it *down*, I’m not well.”

“Gaius Aurelius Constantine Heliogabalus *Thrax*, it’s chestnut pancakes—and if you’re not here in the kitchen in two minutes, it’ll be hog slop!” The three pigs rooting disconsolately in the small pasture out back could no more have passed as hogs than Robert could have, but Odelette Thrax was an optimist in all things. “And there’s a job waiting, Gaius Aurelius—”

“*Don’t call me that!*” It was enough of a bellow to send all four of the dragons scurrying as he lurched out of bed and began stiffly fumbling his way into his heavy working clothes. Robert’s mother alternated between being his best friend and a headache to dwarf the one he already had—sometimes she filled both positions simultaneously—but at all times he was extremely fond of her cooking.

Adelise leaped to his shoulder as he clumped down the stair, her claws skidding on the dragonskin vest that he always wore to a job, and whose origins she and the others never seemed to sense. He hated the vest and all the rest of the armor of his trade as he had never hated any item of clothing—all right, except for the silly green forester’s cap that his mother had made him wear as a boy—but his customers took confidence in his appearance, as some kind of emblem of his expertise, and it did

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

have practical benefits in a day's work, for all its uncomfortable stiffness. He reached up awkwardly to pet the carefully balanced dragonlet, feeling the feather softness of her deep green scales, which would not turn tough, almost impermeable, for another year yet. *The women like them just like this at Dragon Market. The men want the yearlings.*

The thought of Dragon Market roiled his empty stomach as he sat down at his mother's table. She was at the stove with her back to him, cooking what amounted to her third breakfast of the morning. Robert's younger brothers, Caralos and Hector, were of course already out and at work behind a neighboring farmer's oxen, having left at dawn. Now Patience and Rosamonde were racing through their own meal, late for lessons as usual, too hurried even to greet him.

Robert loved his younger sisters, but he also envied them painfully. He had always thought it unjust that village girls got to be properly educated, while boys must apprentice early, and were lucky if they were taught to read and write at home, as he had been. He often peered over his sisters' shoulders while they were studying, until they complained and their mother shooed him away.

By the time Patience and Rosamonde had left for the schola, trailing promises of good behavior they would keep only if absolutely necessary, Robert had revised his opinion of the day. *Chestnut pancakes, browned perfectly at the edges . . . pomegranate syrup . . . fresh milk . . .* there might be something said for living after all. Wolfing down his third cake, he asked, with his mouth full, "Who's the *engagé*?" He never referred to the people who hired him as *customers*, that being a term favored by those in trade, the people who sold things, rather than renting out their

Peter S. Beagle

skills. In all honesty, he didn't actually care, but it mattered a great deal to his mother. She was intensely aware that her late husband's work, now Robert's work by inheritance, assigned them to the lowest rung of a steep and unforgiving social ladder.

"Medwyn and Norvyn, behind the granary." Odelette turned then, frowning as she saw Adelise on his shoulder. "Does she have to hear this?"

"Go help the others with the beds, Adelise," Robert said gently. The dragonlet flicked out her tongue and spread her minuscule wings, their inner vanes flushed purple as thunderclouds, then glided to the floor and scuttled up the stairs to Robert's bedroom. The four of them always did his bed first, no matter how often he tried to get them to alter their routine. Sometimes they even tried to make the bed with him still in it.

When he was sure the little dragon was out of earshot, Robert turned back to his mother. "Medwyn and Norvyn? That's going to be nasty. Another caud of *Serpens flamma vegrandis*, I'll lay odds—it'd serve them right, not letting me sweep for eggs the last time. Five, what, six seasons in a row, is it? You think they'd learn."

"They didn't like your father. They like you. Maybe you can convince them."

"Not much chance of that so long as they both keep the books. They're too busy cheating each other to know a bargain, once nothing's blistering their ankles. Ah well," he sighed as he slid his seat back, "more food on the table, and new scrolls for the twins. There are worse livings."

But later, after he'd left the house to gather up Ostvald and the day's tools, he had to confess to himself that he really couldn't think of any.



TWO

The Great Hall of Bellemontagne was full of princes. It wasn't that difficult to fill the Great Hall with princes, because it wasn't that big of a Great Hall. People had generally been smaller when it was first built, a good four centuries before; and besides, the Castle of Bellemontagne, while it had undoubtedly seen better days, couldn't remember them. The fireplace, open on both sides, was so remarkably constructed that it could roast an ox without throwing the least bit of heat to those huddling as close as they dared. The roof—easily high enough for a cathedral, if considerably narrower, and not nearly so gracefully curved—had over the years been home to thousands of transient birds and half again as many bats, as the cracked and begrimed portraits of royal ancestors along the walls bore mute testimony. Every sort of nameless vermin squeaked and creaked and rustled along the walls, or else inside them; and the princes crowded closely together on their seats, for comfort and reassurance as well as body heat. Somebody was

Peter S. Beagle

heard to growl, “Stop kicking!” but for the most part the gathering was a quiet one, with most conversations going on under fiercely hissed breaths. Each prince had his own axe to grind, sometimes literally, and everyone else’s ox to gore.

“No, you cannot borrow my hauberk—get your own! What do you need a hauberk for, anyway?”

“Battle? You’re going to tell her you were in a battle? You’ve never been in any damned battle!”

“You might as well go on home—you’re way too short for her. I despise—I mean, she despises short men.”

Princes, as a rule, are not raised to be paragons of patience. Stuffed four to the bench and desperately uncertain of their pecking order, they did not show well. Indeed, most had started to wilt within minutes of their arrival, and some, having been waiting there for days, despaired of ever making themselves presentable again. The most depressed of the lot positively drooped; there was simply no other word for it.

“Who’s that chap? The tall one, with the cheekbones—I don’t care for the look of him, not at all. . . .”

“You slept in the servants’ quarters last night? They gave me the pantry, practically to myself—”

“But I had a bed! All right, a bench . . .”

Good manners inevitably decay under siege, especially when an aggressor wakes to the fact that the walls being breached are his own. Even an eldest son can take umbrage then, doubting the value of royal purpose and the preordained blessings of his fate.

“I don’t know how they get to call this a kingdom. We’ve got backcountry baronies bigger than this place—”

“We’ve got bigger backyards—”

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

"So does the Princess, if she's anything like the one I was courting in Malbrouck last week . . . oh. Oh my!"

"Oh MY!"

The Princess Cerise had just swept into the hall, deigning at last to grant this month's batch of princes the gift of her presence. She was accompanied only by the castle's chamberlain, a small, portly man who always looked more put-upon than he felt, and knew how to use that to his advantage. He carried with him a block of stretched parchment and a charcoal stylus.

The waiting princes came to their feet as one creature, smiling eagerly in Cerise's direction while hurriedly straightening each ribbon, button, medallion, decoration, ornament, epaulet, and feather in sight. One tried to snug up his father's best formal oyster-pearl garters from where they'd slipped, without being noticed, but he was too late; and another clearly didn't realize that his capotain no longer covered his bald spot.

None of them spoke. The rules of polite behavior in this circumstance were absolute, and only the Princess could break the silence, however long it might go on. But inside their heads, in diverse languages, the princes hummed like a plucked lute with variations of a single thought: *Goed/God/Gott/Mon Dieu/Good heavens, she's bloody breathtaking!* Unfortunately for them, she knew it well, and considered it more trouble than it was worth.

Cerise seated herself in the Great Hall's one comfortable chair, which was on a dais elevated just high enough to let her see all her suitors clearly. The chamberlain took post, standing, at her side, parchment and stylus at the ready.

After a perfectly calculated pause, to let the moment sink in, Cerise spoke. Her voice was low and warm, clear, and—she

Peter S. Beagle

had been well-coached—not too amused as she sang out, “Good morning, gentlemen. I do hope everyone’s taken a number?”

Everyone had, but even so there was a good deal of muttering and trampling on feet as they sorted things out. Cerise waited patiently until order had been more or less restored, and the princes lined up for review. First was the young man with the cheekbones, second son of King Denisov of Landoak.

His name was Lucan. He was tall, handsome, sincere, broad-shouldered, slim-waisted, well turned out, and possessed of precisely the brains of a rutabaga; sadly, his cheekbones were the sharpest thing about him. Not two questions into his interview—the easy starter questions that Cerise always used to begin these sessions, like “Have you a horse? And “Oh, what’s its name?”—he had gone all sideways and tongue-tied on her. Which was no more than she had expected, but she heard him out courteously just the same, before smiling sadly and banishing him to the rear of the assembly with a polished wave of her hand. In desperation he finally found his voice, crying out, “Princess, I have slain the manticore of the Gharial Mountains, all to do honor to your name. It is being stuffed and mounted at present, but if you wait, I will have it shipped directly—”

The Great Hall filled with derisive catcalls. “Oooh, you liar!” “You never did!” “Stuffed manticores, twelvecence the bunch!” “What did you do—bore it to death?” Prince Lucan exited in shame and confusion, and was never seen in Bellemontagne again.

The chamberlain, vaguely nodding as the Prince’s only farewell, put stylus to parchment and crossed off his name.

And so it went, one by one by one. Cerise endured the monthly audience as graciously as always, never giving way to

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

the impulse to let this or that wooer know what she actually thought of single-handed triumphs over a dozen mysteriously trained assassins—or a pack of wolves—or a hundred armed mercenary troops; and the same for their reports of laden treasure vaults and vast landholdings, or juggling tricks, or attempts to demonstrate prowess on the dance floor (which, being based on turns unfamiliar to the court's musicians, were typically disasters from the first or second step). No. She managed the levee with practiced proficiency, smiling until her enchanting mouth hurt, silently reciting her favorite poems to herself by way of distraction . . . right up to the moment when her mother and father entered the room.

The chamberlain stiffened.

“*Attendez!* Their Royal Majesties Antoine and Hélène, King and Queen of Bellemontagne!”

King Antoine was a striking, commanding figure, with a full head of storm-gray hair and features that might have been carved from a weathered cliffside. His wife the Queen, on the other hand, was thin and pallid, and of a meek appearance that suggested she had never enjoyed a full meal in her life, nor a good night's sleep, nor a single day free from every sort of abuse. Not even the résumés of Cerise's suitors could have been further from the truth: Queen Hélène ate like an alligator, slept like a drunken coachman, and personally handled any abusing likely to be perpetrated within the walls of the castle, and the out-buildings as well. She did have nice eyes, though.

“Well, well,” Cerise's father boomed jovially. “How goes the fox hunt, daughter? Start one up yet?”

“That young man on the left,” the Queen said. “The one in stripes and slashes. I know him. He's the nephew of the Countess

Peter S. Beagle

of Dortenverrucht. Call on him next, Cerise. By report, he knows any number of interesting songs.”

“Mother, please, they’ve all got numbers.” Cerise looked to the chamberlain for help, but he glanced away, knowing far better than to get involved. “Father”—in a lower tone—“I’m handling things perfectly well. I always do.” Her unspoken *Can’t you get her out of here?* was answered by a slight twitch of the King’s thick gray eyebrows. *You know your mother—what do you expect me to do?* The Princess sighed and nodded just as slightly.

At that, she would most likely have gotten through the remainder of the morning without a hitch—there were only a few candidates left to consider—but for the Queen’s further interruption while she was interviewing a shy, awkward, but likable young prince from a kingdom whose name even he had difficulty pronouncing. The Prince was telling her earnestly about his favorite book, and Cerise was listening with genuine interest, when her mother’s sharp voice shattered the moment: “Cerise. Darling. Exactly what is the point of bothering with all this childish drivel? Finish with him, and get on to the Countess’s nephew, for goodness’ sake.”

Cerise rose from the chair, her shoulders thrust back like wings. Her beautiful face was flushed with angry embarrassment, but her voice had turned cold and taut and expressionless. She looked down at the remaining suitors and said, “I’m sorry, but this audience is at an end.” Then she stalked off the dais and out of the Great Hall without once glancing at her parents. A door slammed a moment later, and the dusty portrait of her oldest ancestor fell off the wall.

Cerise never looked back. She rushed from the castle and straight across the Royal Lawns (rather bare, thanks to a long

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

struggle with dropfiddle), past the Royal Croquet Grounds (King Antoine had a passion for competitive sports, of a sort), past the Royal Gazebo, the Royal Grotto, and the Royal Folly; and so on into the Royal Woods, which stopped being Royal at a certain tangly place that the Princess knew well. It was miles from the castle, and well-shielded from view. There she sank down, amid the rustle of her several elaborate skirts, by a quiet, clear-running stream, and leaned back against a sycamore tree whose worn and battered trunk had never in its life refused to receive her. Cerise patted it gently, saying only, "Hello."

She sat quite still for some while; then looked quickly around her and began to dig with her hands in the soft earth behind a nearby boulder, humming very softly to herself. A few minutes' work uncovered an oilskin-wrapped bundle, inside of which were a flat block of hard wax, a pointed stylus, and a manuscript written on a roll of dingy vellum. Cerise held the manuscript up to the light, clearly trying to locate a certain passage; having succeeded, she began to recite the words to herself, moving her lips silently. When she came to a word or a phrase she could not comprehend—and there were many of those—she copied it down on the wax block. Often she would copy it over and over, each time staring as hard at the letters as though she had never seen them before. She bit her lips, now and again mumbling a very un-princess-like word. Once she even threw the stylus away into the long grass by the river, but she was on her feet immediately, scrabbling frantically to find it again. And no matter how angry or frustrated she became, she never stopped working. The Princess Cerise was going to teach herself to read if it was the last thing she ever did.

That silly boy with his wonderful book, she thought sadly. He has no idea how lucky he is.



THREE

Crown Prince Reginald, sole heir to the Kingdom of Corvinia, rode into the Royal Woods of Bellefontagne singing a joyous, manly chorus with a lot of *tirra-lirras* and *fa-la-las* in it. Prince Reginald disliked the song, and manly choruses in general; but he knew that if he were not to sing, his valet, riding close behind him, would start singing himself, or find some other way to remind Reginald that knights-errant—worse, princes-errant—*always* sang joyous choruses while in quest of adventure. Speaking personally, Reginald desired adventure about as much as he desired a third nostril, and he knew that the valet, who was called Mortmain, was aware of this. Unfortunately, he also knew that Mortmain was under strict and specific orders from Reginald's father, King Krije, to observe every aspect of Reginald's behavior on their travels, and report it all faithfully when they returned. So he sang—for the record, as it were. The Prince and Mortmain were as friendly as their relative positions allowed, but one of them could be

whipped for his failure, and the other couldn't; though King Krije had more than once been heard to growl that he wished it were the other way around.

“What in God’s name is the matter with him?” the King would bellow at anyone who met his son. “Looks like a man—rides like a man—struts around like a man—but there’s nothing *in* there! Just a warm smile with a body wrapped round it. And I’m supposed to leave my kingdom to that? My kingdom, which I waded through blood to win, left to an idiot who faints if he cuts himself shaving? I swear I don’t understand how anyone so tall can’t fill my shoes.”

The King suspected a curse was involved, and had some reason to think so. But he had never shared the details with Mortmain, and the valet—one of the very few people who sympathized at all with the terrible old man—was forbidden by position from asking.

Prince Reginald, for his part, was simply glad to be away from his father’s loud disappointment. That was the one good thing about unspecified questing: getting out of the house. At least away from home he could indulge himself a little, even under Mortmain’s eye; and these outlying kingdoms were always so absolutely thrilled to host the Crown Prince of so large and powerful a country, they practically turned cartwheels for him at a blink. It was most gratifying. And it made Mortmain frown, which was more gratifying still.

When he first started out, the Prince had considered places to go, thought, *Alphabetical or by proximity?*, and settled on a whim-driven mix of the two, modified as needed to avoid encountering any serious challenge or knightly obligation. As a result he was undoubtedly the sole royal personage not bound

I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons

for Castle Bellemontagne in quest of the hand of the Princess Cerise. In fact, he had no notion of her existence, and might well have given the entire kingdom a wide berth if he had. Reginald liked women, certainly, but not to the point of disrupting a perfectly tranquil life—or what could be a perfectly tranquil life if his father and Mortmain would only leave him alone with it.

Still, even with all the bloody singing, the day was a pretty one, and the sun was warm. He wondered what the ale and usquebaugh were like at Castle Bellemontagne.

When the path through the Royal Woods briefly widened, Mortmain urged his horse up beside his master's to murmur deferentially, "Lord, our mounts need watering. If I might suggest—"

"Heavens, yes, Mortmain, suggest away, by all means."

"I can hear a stream, Highness—not all that distant, to judge by the sound. We would only have to turn off the path a little way—"

Reginald cocked his handsome head. "Right . . . right, I can hear it myself. Well, then, absolutely, let's divert to it." His usual enchanting smile appeared a bit twisted. "Divert—there's a good military word. My father would like it."

Once off the path, the undergrowth slowed them considerably, punishing their faces and entangling the horses' legs. But they pushed on until they reached the stream and dismounted to let the horses drink. Mortmain stayed with them, while Reginald, noticing wildflowers growing in profusion all along the bank, gradually wandered off upstream, plucking them with the cheerfulness of a child. "Just gathering a bunch for this local Queen," he explained over his shoulder to the valet. "Good to be ready. Women like flowers."

So it was that Cerise, grimly immersed in her struggle with the difference between “aweful” and “awful” and “offal,” never heard Reginald’s approach until he missed his footing and wet his boots in the stream up to the calf. The sudden splash, and the prince’s yelp of annoyance, sent her springing to her feet with her back pressed against the old sycamore. She relaxed somewhat on realizing that he was plainly a gentleman, more on noticing the bunch of wildflowers in his hand; and altogether too much once she got a good look at him. In fact, she reacted to Reginald as most men reacted to their first sight of her. Her knees turned predictably shaky; she flushed and paled by turns, and her heart began pounding hard enough to echo along all her bones. Certain that this beautiful stranger must be royalty, wet boots or no, she faltered her way through a curtsy, whispering, “Majesty . . .”

To her surprise, the young man looked mildly chagrined at the word. “No, that’s my father. I’m just the Crown Prince. Reginald of Corvinia, pleased to make your acquaintance. And you are?”

“Oh, I’m . . . I’m . . .” Cerise was unmoored; the familiar word *Corvinia* chimed in her heart like a bell, and for the first time in her life, she felt inferior. The ironic novelty of this moment was lost on her; the confusion, meanwhile, was all too real. She was startled to realize that she simply could not speak her name, not to this stranger whose casual riding clothes were more sumptuous than the very best in her wardrobe, not when just looking at him left her shy and humble as a servant girl. She stammered again. “I . . . I live here. Near here, I mean. Not really here, you see, but—”

“Ah. Yes.” The beautiful young man scratched his head.