

The Girl, The Boy, and The Dragon

Jim was sitting in the dell by the cave, leaning against a rock. The dragon was bumbling around, poking his nose into holes in the ground, and gaps between the rocks. Occasionally he would scratch a hole in the ground with his claws and stick his nose into it and huff.

He was behaving much like an eager Labrador, Jim reflected. Except that a Labrador didn't run about and hop around on two legs, keeping his balance by partly spreading his wings. And a Labrador didn't have quite so many teeth, and a slick black tongue that seemed too long for his mouth. Or a scaly skin.

He hopped up to Jim, nudged him and reached for his backpack with his teeth, but Jim was ready and moved it.

"There's nothing left! It's about time you learned how to catch your own rabbits!"

He stood up.

"OK, then. Come on, Idris, you idiot," he said affectionately. "Let's get you some food."

A number of events then occurred in quick succession. An armoured figure raced into the dell with a raised sword, Jim shouted "Look out!" to Idris, the dragon disappeared, and the armoured figure stopped.

At the same time Jim and the armoured figure said "Why did you do that?"

"What?" said Jim.

There was something funny about the armoured figure.

"Why did you warn me? The dragon got away!"

"I was warning the dragon! Why were you trying to harm him?"

"Where did it go?"

"I don't know! He's never done that before. What were you trying to do?"

He suddenly realized that the armoured figure was smaller than he was. The figure sheathed his sword and, with some difficulty, removed his helmet. Only the figure was revealed to be a girl.

"I'm Lotty, the Dragon Killer," she said dramatically.

"Really? How many dragons have you killed?" He was pretty sure of the answer.

Her shoulders slumped. "That one would have been my first. But you scared it off."

"No, you scared him off. I call him Idris. I'm Jim, by the way."

Idris appeared behind her and nudged her. She shrieked and tried to draw her sword. Idris nudged her again.

"Stop it, Idris! She hasn't got any rabbits! He's hungry," Jim explained.

Idris hopped around the dell, sometimes disappearing and reappearing. He tried to steal Jim's backpack again, but Jim was ready.

"He's tiny. I thought dragons were bigger. I didn't know that they did that vanishing thing," said Lotty.

"He's a baby! He'd only just broken out of his shell when I found him, Lotty. I didn't know that he could vanish until just then. He must have just learned how to do it."

"My name's not really Lotty. It's Gertrude, but I hate it. People shorten it to Gert, which sounds like a belch."

"OK, G-, Lotty," he said. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. Can I watch you feed him? I don't think I'm a dragon killer, Jim. Anyway, he's a just baby, isn't he?"

She gestured at a rock. "I left my stuff over there. I'll just get changed out of this armour, OK?"

Jim nodded. Lotty disappeared behind the rock. Suddenly there was a shriek.

"Get away, you stupid dragon!" she shouted.

Jim smiled. Idris suddenly appeared next to him, stepping from foot to foot. Jim somehow knew he was laughing. Lotty appeared from behind the rock.

"Stupid dragon licked my back while I was changing!"

She was dressed in normal clothes and held her backpack on one shoulder.

“Where’s your armour?”

She rummaged in her backpack and pulled out an object that looked like a pearl.

“I bought a spell off a magician that lets me compress it to a pearl.”

“That’s useful,” said Jim, hiding his thoughts. There was something not quite right there.

They carefully crept up to the ridge and stretching down in front of them was a meadow full of rabbits. They hid behind a large boulder, and Idris nudged Jim’s crossbow which was strapped to his backpack.

“No, no, Idris. It’s up to you, pal. Go get them!” Jim whispered.

He shoved the baby dragon away. Idris sniffed Jim’s crossbow again. Jim shoved him away again.

Then the dragon seemed to get the idea and gave up. He stepped from behind the rock, and started to run down the meadow, balancing himself with his wings. Rabbits went in all directions. At times he glided for several metres, but it seemed that the rabbits were going to escape. Suddenly he disappeared and reappeared on top of a rabbit. He grabbed it with his jaws but lost his balance and tumbled down the slope, and the unfortunate bunny flew high into the air. Idris snorted and stood up. He picked up the dead rabbit and started back up the slope. He disappeared and a few moments later appeared next to Jim and Lotty with the limp rabbit in his jaws.

“Good one, pal! Your first rabbit.”

Jim scratched him on the shoulder, and the dragon tossed the rabbit in the air, caught it and started to chew it noisily.

“Ewww!” said Lotty. “Does he always crunch them like that?”

“No, but then again, he’s never had one with bones in. I’ve been cutting the meat off for him. It looks like I could have saved myself the trouble.”

He unslung his crossbow.

“Now to get one for me,” he said.

“Erm, would you mind getting one for me?” asked Lotty tentatively. “I have herbs and things to trade.”

Jim looked at her, smiling. “Yeah OK. You don’t fancy chasing one down with your sword, then?”

“Lotty the Rabbit Slayer? I think that would only work if Idris chased them towards me and one ran onto my sword by mistake!”

Jim carefully cocked his bow and peered around the rock. The rabbits had returned so he picked out a fat one, put a bolt into the bow and shot at it. It was quite a distance away, so he was pleased to hit it fair and square. Of course, all the other rabbits disappeared.

“Get it, Idris,” he said, and the baby dragon hopped down the slope, picked up the dead rabbit, and brought it back to them.

“He’s just like a dog, isn’t he?” said Lotty, while scratching the dragon under the chin.

“Yes, and just like a dog, he can be a right pain.”

They moved back to the dell, and started to cook the rabbit. Lotty not only had herbs in the pearl from her backpack but a small stove and a light saucepan. Jim didn’t comment but got on with butchering the rabbit. While Lotty heated some water from the stream, Jim returned to the ridge.

The rabbits were a bit wary now, but he finally managed to kill another one. Idris was back in the dell bothering Lotty, so he walked down and picked it up himself. When he got back to the dell, Idris had turned his back on the cooking and Lotty was laughing. Idris was obviously sulking, looking back over his shoulder now and then.

“What happened?”

“Idris wouldn’t go away. I keep pushing him back, but he snaked his tongue out and licked the pan. Then he went over there and turned his back on the cooking. I think he’s OK. He’s just singed his tongue and is grumpy about it.”

“Yeah, I usually grill things on sticks, and he keeps clear of the fire. He’s never seen a stove or a pan.”

Jim butchered the second rabbit and put the parts into the pan. Lotty dug out some herbs, and a stock cube, and Jim peeled some root vegetables from his pack and added those. That just about cleaned him out of food, he reflected. But they would eat well tonight. Idris got over his sulk and started to bother them again, so Jim gave him the rabbit carcasses which he crunched up noisily.

“How old is he, Jim?”

“Well, when I found him he was still sitting in the remains of his egg shell. So, about two weeks. He could barely hop at first. I fed him bits of rabbit and chicken and he was soon hopping and walking all over the place. I stayed around for a day or two, but his mother didn’t turn up, so I took him with me. At first he slowed me up a lot, but I couldn’t leave him behind. I had to carry him at the beginning. I’m glad he’s learned how to catch his own rabbits though.”

He scratched the baby dragon behind his ears. They looked razor sharp but were actually like soft leather. He was the size of a large turkey, but preferred to stand or perch more upright than a turkey would. His natural stance was more like that of a heron.

“And how old are you, Lotty?”

“Fou-fifteen.”

“Me too. And what are you up to, roaming the hills with a suit of armour and some really decent camping gear?”

“Oh, stuff. I want to make my name somehow. That’s why I borrowed the armour and the other stuff.”

“‘Borrowed’? Does the person you borrowed them from know that you’ve ‘borrowed’ them?”

“Yes, of course. Well, not really. Well, Grandad won’t mind, I know it.”

Ah, so that explained it!

“Your Grandad is a wizard?”

“Yes. How did you...? Oh, you guessed.”

“Well, I know how much those pearl spells cost. And you have at least two of them.”

“Oh. What about you? What are you doing up here?”

“Me? Well, I like to go camping in the school holidays, and I’d heard that there was a dragon up here. It was probably Idris’s mother, I think. I don’t know how come Idris’s egg was left behind.”

He didn’t mention the big argument that had happened just before he left home, or where home was.

“I think the rabbit is done,” said Lotty. “Do you have a plate?”

Jim got his battered old plate out and fished around until he found his camping cutlery. One of the tines on the fork was missing and the knife had been bent and straightened at some time in the past.

“Your stuff looks properly used,” said Lotty, with admiration. “Mine’s still bright shiny new.”

They settled down to eat the stew, which tasted a lot better with Lotty’s herbs, spices and seasoning, Jim thought. He would have to remember that. They didn’t take up much space, but he’d previously categorized them as “optional”.

“Do you have any fruit in your backpack, Lotty? You can have half my apple if you want.”

Lotty laughed and produced an orange. “Half of my orange for it?”

“It’s a deal!”

Lotty packed up her gear, except for the stew pan which still had some stew in it.

“Are you camping here tonight? Do mind if I hang around?”

“Sure, Lotty. But I usually sleep under the stars. It’s too much bother to bring a tent, even a small one. Sometimes I sleep in a cave. That one is no good though. Too small.”

“What do you do when it rains?”

“I find a barn or something. Or get wet.”

“Oh.”

They chatted as the sun went down, while Idris snoozed between them, perched on a small rock, and then they got ready to sleep. Jim unrolled his bedroll and spread it in a smooth place and unrolled his sleeping bag onto it. He wondered what Lotty was going to do. She retrieved a pearl from her backpack and seemed to roll it between her hands. Suddenly she was holding a puffy

sleeping bag. She spread it in a smooth spot but Jim wondered if it was padded enough. He asked Lotty.

“Yeah, it’s got quite a firm base,” she said, tilting it and showing him. A blue toy rabbit popped out of the top, and she hurriedly stuffed it back inside the sleeping bag. He pretended he hadn’t noticed. The base was firm, but when he pressed on it, it cushioned his hand. Neat!

Lotty disappeared behind a rock “to brush my teeth and stuff”, and then he took his turn and they settled down. The moon was only an hour or two from setting, and it promised to be a starry night.

Jim didn’t drop off to sleep immediately, and suddenly realized that Idris had moved. He looked over at Lotty and the girl was curled up in her sleeping bag and Idris was lying down beside her with his head on her back. In the moonlight he looked like a large duck with a huge head. Jim nearly laughed.

The Farmer

Lotty was woken by an insistent clanging noise. She rolled over and discovered that Idris had woken up and had decided to finish off the rabbit stew. The clanging was the pan banging against rocks as Idris chased it with his tongue.

“Idris!” she scolded.

Idris gave up on the pan, which was empty anyway, and scurried up to the ridge and disappeared over it.

“What was that?” asked Jim sleepily.

Lotty looked up slope to the ridge.

“I don’t know. He was licking the pan and I shouted at him. I hope that I didn’t scare him away.”

Jim shook his head.

“That’s unlikely. I’m telling him off all the time.”

Idris suddenly flew over the ridge and glided into the dell. He had one rabbit in his talons and one in his jaws. He dropped one in front of Lotty, then tossed the other one in the air and caught it and crunched it.

“Oh, I see. Breakfast, Idris! Thanks,” laughed Lotty.

Idris ran across the dell and brought his wings down and took to the air, side-slipped over the ridge and disappeared. The wind generated by his wing beat swirled around the dell, whipping up dust.

“Yuck! I wonder where he’s gone now?”

“To get a rabbit for you, I’d guess.”

Sure enough, Idris returned after a few minutes with two rabbits.

Jim laughed. “Oh, he’s seen me catch a couple of rabbits every morning, so he’s done the same.”

“Why do you want two rabbits every morning?”

“To sell. Come on, let’s eat. I’ll show you after.”

They got up and, after they had both “brushed their teeth”, had a swift breakfast. Jim ate a muesli bar, and Lotty pulled a banana from her pack. Breakfast didn’t take long.

“Let’s go,” said Jim.

He tied the three rabbits to a stick and the three of them set off down the hill. Idris behaved just like a dog. He hopped/flew/walked in front of them until he scented something interesting, then he investigated it in detail, until he was left behind. Then he hopped/flew/walked past them again.

The communicator bleeped.

“Yes, they’re on the move.”

The communicator mumbled.

“Down the hill. Yeah, they’re OK for now.”

The communicator mumbled again.

“Of course they don’t know I’m watching them!”

The communicator evidently apologized.

“That’s OK. Over and out.”

They walked up to the back door of the farm and Jim knocked on the door. A man opened the door and looked at them suspiciously.

“What can I do for you, kids?” he asked.

“Would you like to buy a couple of my rabbits, sir? We caught them today, up on the hill.”

The farmer looked at the rabbits.

“They’re a bit battered. What happened to them?”

“Oh, sorry sir. My dragon caught them.”

“Is that your dragon eating my Brussel Sprouts?”

“Idris!” shrieked Lotty. “Come here immediately!”

Luckily Idris came to Lotty. His black tongue licked out and Lotty was afraid that he was going to lick the farmer. He did. He licked him on the arm. This was not going well.

The farmer just laughed. "Cute little beggar, isn't he? What do you want for the rabbits, son? I can't spare much money. I can trade some vegetables. Would you swap them for a bag of veggies?"

"Yes, sure. Do you have a small sack that you could put them in, sir?"

"Certainly, son. Hmm. So the dragon caught the rabbits? That's useful. Clever little thing."

He took them round to a shed behind the house and rummaged in some sacks. Root vegetables, potatoes, with a couple of bunches of green things, and a few apples went into a small sack which he gave to Jim. Jim gave him the rabbits.

"Thanks for the rabbits," said the farmer. "It's a pleasure doing business with you, son. We'll enjoy them. Take care of yourselves."

"Thanks, sir. Sorry about your sprouts," said Lotty.

The farmer laughed.

"Don't worry, lass. I don't really like them. My wife makes me plant them every year. She says that they are good for me. I don't know about that! Anyway, there's plenty left."

Lotty and Jim and Idris walked away down the road towards the town, and the farmer looked after them.

"I thought dragons were a lot bigger than that," he said to himself.

The Town

“Where are you headed for, Jim?” asked Lotty, as they strolled into the small town.

“Well, there’s a dragon centre up north. I thought that I’d go there and ask them what to do about Idris.”

“About Idris?”

“Yeah, he can’t stay with me forever. I suspect his mother will be looking for him. I hope she is.”

“Oh right. Do you mind if I come along? I’ve got no other plans.”

“So, what happened about you making a name for yourself? What happened to Lotty the dragon slayer?”

She looked a bit downcast.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that through, did I? I guess I’m not going to be famous. Not quickly, anyway.”

“Well, you never know. Just keep your eyes open. Maybe you’ll be famous one day. Lotty the dragon trainer!”

She laughed. “No, we’ve got to get him back to his mum somehow. That is, if you don’t mind me tagging along.”

“Nah, I don’t mind. It’s not so boring with the two of us. Idris is fun, but he doesn’t talk. Maybe we should keep him away from Brussel Sprouts though.”

The dragon had just belched.

“Phew, yes. Get away Idris! You stink!”

Idris hopped away a couple of steps, then stepped from foot to foot. He seemed to be laughing.

Jim was carrying a quartet of rabbits, which he hoped to sell in the town. They’d passed an open area or common up the road and the rabbits had scattered at their approach and Idris had swooped on them. He had got the idea of hunting rabbits now, and was getting skilled at it. He flew low over the common and was on the rabbits before they realized he was there, killing them with one bite, and moving on without landing. He got three in one flight. Then he turned and came back picking up the rabbits as he came. He dropped the rabbits in front of Jim.

A bit further on they scared up some more rabbits, and this time Idris got two. Jim got one, but the little dragon tossed the other into the air, caught it and crunched it noisily. Fair enough, thought Jim.

As they neared town, Jim tied a thin rope around Idris’ neck so that he could control the dragon better. He didn’t want Idris to be run down by a cart or truck. Idris didn’t mind. He hop-skipped along beside them quite happily.

“There’s the butcher’s shop,” Lotty pointed out.

They entered, and Idris was almost intoxicated by the smells. His muzzle was raised and his nostrils seemed to be moving independently. His eyes were huge and round, and his head turned from side to side,

“What can I do for you ... and your dragon,” said the butcher.

“Would you be interested in buying some rabbits, sir,” said Jim.

“I can always do with rabbits, son. Let’s see them. Hmm. No bolt wounds. Necks broken, skulls crushed, and a bit of damage around the shoulders. I’d guess that the dragon caught these, eh? That’s a first. How about three dollars?”

Jim thought of haggling, but decided against it. It seemed fair.

“Yes, great. Thank you, sir.”

The butcher gave him the three dollars, tossed the rabbits onto the big wooden cutting table and said “Hold on a second.”

He dipped his hands into a bucket and came up with a double handful of indescribable offcuts of meat and held it out to Idris. Idris put his muzzle into the man’s hands and slurped up the odds and ends. Then he did a little dance, and they all laughed.

"He's cute," said the butcher. "A baby?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

Jim and Lotty strolled down the main street of the town, with Idris skipping along beside them.

"What are you going to spend the money on, Jim?" asked Lotty.

Jim stopped dead.

"Bakery!" he said. "Fresh bread!"

They pressed their noses to the window. Neither of them had tasted bread for days.

"Wow!" said Lotty. "Just, wow!"

Idris wasn't interested, so they decided that Jim would go in and buy a plain white loaf.

"See if they have butter," suggested Lotty.

Jim came out of the bakery with two parcels wrapped in brown paper. He was wearing a big smile.

They continued through the town, and mostly they were ignored, but when any child spotted Idris, they wanted to come and see him. When Lotty and Jim and Idris passed the school all the kids came running up to the fence to see the dragon.

"Dragon! Dragon!" they squealed. Idris was leaping up and down, whipping his tongue from side to side in excitement.

"Come on, kids, indoors! It's only a dragon, and a small one at that," called the teacher.

The three travellers made their way out of the small town, following the road to the north. They passed a few farms, then turned off into the wild country. They stopped by a big flat rock, and Jim unrolled his map.

"We're here, and I want to get to there," he said, pointing. "We can head up to this pass here, and avoid the big mountain here. Does that sound OK?"

"Yeah, what's that? An Inn?" she said, pointing to the map.

The road swung up towards the big mountain, only to turn towards to the pass before it got to the heights. The Inn in question was on their side of the pass, just before the road started to snake through the pass itself.

"Yeah, we could reach it sometime this afternoon quite easily. It will be nice to sleep under a roof for a change. Shall we head for the spring here? We can have lunch there."

Jim and Lotty hiked up into the hills, while Idris mostly circled around them, high in the sky.

"He's flying really well now, isn't he? He's hardly moving his wings," said Lotty.

"Yeah, and I'm sure that he's about twice the size he was when I found him."

Suddenly Idris dived and came up with a struggling bird in his jaws. He changed his grip and the bird went limp. He glided down to Jim and Lotty, and dropped the bird at Jim's feet.

"It's OK, pal. I'm not hungry. You eat it."

Idris looked at him for a moment, then took up the bird and crunched it. Both Jim and Lotty laughed.

"That really is noisy and disgusting," said Lotty.

Idris didn't help by belching noisily.

They stopped by the spring, where Lotty heated some water in her pan for tea. She got the tea from one of her collection of pearls.

"Sorry, no milk."

"No worries. I'm used to doing without milk."

Jim unwrapped his purchases. The large packet was a loaf of crusty white bread, but the smaller one turned out to be a small block of butter and some cheese.

"Cheese! You genius!" said Lotty.

Jim concluded that there was nothing better in the world than fresh bread and butter with cheese for lunch, washed down by tea without milk. Part of it was being up in the hills, and part was being with Lotty and Idris. He drifted into a doze.

He was woken up by Idris' tongue licking his face. He sat up and Lotty was packing up the remains of their lunch. She moved her hands over the food and then one hand over the other and she was holding a pearl and the food had gone.

"How many pearl spells have you got, Lotty?"

"Five or six. Why?"

"Do you know how much they are worth?"

He told her. She was astounded.

"I had no idea. Grandad creates them all the time. He calls them 'portals'."

"Yeah, they don't cost anything if you make them, of course."

"Oh! Oh, yeah."

"Keep them safe. Don't let people see them. You're carrying around a fortune."

"OK. Thanks."

They started off, and Jim reflected that Lotty's Grandad must be a powerful magician. Hopefully she had a spell or charm that would keep her safe. He wondered if she was wondering about him. He'd let a few things slip, but nothing important. Sooner or later she'd wonder about his knowledge of the pearls, but she hadn't mentioned it yet. They pushed on towards the Inn.

The communicator beeped.

"It looks like they are headed to you."

The communicator mumbled.

"Yeah, it's the logical place to spend the night."

"Mumble mumble mumble."

"The Inn keeper is OK. He'll look after them, he's an old friend, but you'll be there as well?"

"Mumble mumble."

"Good. Oh, well, another night in the hills for me."

"Mumble mumble."

"Yeah, they still have the dragon. The funny thing is, no one seems to notice anything out of the ordinary. Like 'Oh, it's just a dragon. So what?' Kids love it, though."

"Mumble mumble."

"Yea, I agree, it's Protected somehow. Probably naturally. Over and out."

Jim and Lotty looked down at the Inn, and Idris glided down to join them. It was a sprawling building, looking as if two or three houses had been cobbled together. Round the side was a corral occupied by several oxen and a horse, and out the front were several heavy ox carts and a modern truck with a smoke stack, and even one which looked like it ran on petroleum spirit.

They walked up to the back door and knocked.

"What can I do for you, kids? And your dragon!"

The Inn keeper was pleasant looking fellow, cheerful and friendly.

"We're looking for somewhere to stay for the night, sir. How much do you charge?"

The Inn keeper mentioned a sum and their faces fell.

"I'll tell you what, you can sleep in the stock room, in exchange for some help around the place. If you do well, I'll even throw in a meal. How does that sound?"

"Great, thanks, sir!"

"Eric. My name's Eric."

"Would these be of any use to you, Eric?" Jim showed him two birds that Idris had caught on their way over.

"Grouse! Yeah! Great! I'll have to prepare them and hang them for a couple days, but, yeah, thanks! Two dollars each, but I'll pay you at the end of the night, if that's OK."

Eric worked them hard, but fairly. He had them tidying the bar, washing the floors, cleaning tables, and getting ready for the evening. He flung the windows open to let the air flow through the bar. Jim and Lotty brought in firewood and cleaned out the fire, feeding the still glowing coals from yesterday. The few customers already in the bar obligingly moved to let Jim and Lotty do their

cleaning. Idris wandered around, accepting a scratch or two under the chin and the occasional morsel.

Eric tended to the rabbit stew which was the only thing on the menu. He got Jim and Lotty to chop vegetables and knead what seemed like endless batches of dark dough. He told them that his wife and kids had gone to the city for a holiday.

“They’ve gone to see their grandparents. I guess it gets a bit quiet up here. Our clients are usually carters or other travellers, and they don’t often bring their kids. Where are you off to, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We’re heading for the dragon place, up north. We found Idris and we don’t know what to do with him, and maybe they can help. Before that we were just camping,” said Jim.

“Hmm, take a break, kids. Things are going to get busier soon. The little guy will need feeding, won’t he? Get yourselves a snack, a sandwich or something for now. You can have a bowl of stew later if you want.”

Jim and Lotty made themselves a quick sandwich, then went out the back and up onto the moorland with Idris. They didn’t have a plan but stumbled on one quickly when they disturbed a grouse and Idris pounced on it. He sat on a rock and crunched it noisily just like he did everything he caught.

Jim and Lotty spread out and flushed another bird, and Idris once again caught it, and ate it.

“It’s a good job we are moving on tomorrow, or there wouldn’t be any grouse left after a while,” said Lotty as they ate their sandwiches. “They’re too easy, aren’t they?”

Jim nodded. “I like Eric. He’s been very helpful, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah. Oh well, back to the grindstone.”

Jim and Lotty were kept busy. Lotty and Eric were filling and delivering bowls of rabbit stew with the dark bread, and Eric and Jim kept the ale flowing. Everything was delivered in cheap pottery bowls and mugs, but no one seemed to care. In between, Jim and Lotty washed up, and Eric tapped the barrels and manned the till. The carters settled down for the evening with their cards and dominoes and things were going fine. Idris begged snacks from everyone until his stomach was a hard ball, then he snoozed in a corner of the taproom where it was cooler. He checked on Jim and Lotty only now and then.

“What would you have done if we hadn’t come along, Eric?”

“Oh, I know the carters pretty well. There’s always one that will help out in exchange for a free meal. Boris over there, for example. But getting the chores done by you guys is a real bonus as far as I’m concerned.”

One of the patrons was Kirk, a local man and not a carter. He’d been drinking steadily the whole evening, and Eric warned Lotty and Jim to be careful around him. Kirk was a large man, and they kept their distance as much as they could. Kirk suddenly started to call for spirits.

“You know the rule, Kirk. I don’t sell spirits here, but I do give people a glass on their birthday.”

Kirk muttered something about the tavern in the town.

“Yeah, I hear that they banned you again, Kirk. You’re going the right way to be banned here too. Finish your drink and leave, please.”

That seemed to be it, until Eric went out the back to tap a barrel. Kirk grabbed Lotty who was serving someone near to him and demanded that she top up his beer mug. This caused Lotty to drop her tray and two bowls of stew splashed on the floor and the bowls broke. Lotty poked Kirk in the eye and he let her go. At the same time a meaty hand fell on his shoulder.

“Leave the girl alone, pal.”

The guy that the hand belonged to was beyond big. If he didn’t top two metres, it was close, and he wasn’t skinny. He wasn’t fat either, but was made of solid muscle. He wore denim overalls and coloured shirt like the carters, and boots that might serve as small boats, but had the air of a military man.

Kirk was in no mood to be denied, so he pushed his chair back and it fell over. He turned on the guy and tried to punch him in the gut, but his fist was enveloped by the big man’s other hand.

“What’s he going to do?” asked some wag. “Dance with him?”

Instead the man twisted Kirk's fist and forced his arm up behind his back and shifted the grip of his other hand to Kirk's collar.

"Bum's rush!" shouted someone and everyone en route to the door moved swiftly out of the way. Someone flung the door open and Kirk was ejected. The man stood in the doorway for a while to be sure that Kirk was on his way, then he returned to his seat and resumed eating his rabbit stew. Everyone cheered and he acknowledged the cheers with a wave of his spoon. The bar returned to normal.

Eric had returned and was standing watching.

Jim said to him "Wow! I'm glad he was here. What would have happened, if he hadn't been here?"

"A little bingo," said Eric.

He displayed a small cudgel and flicked it.

"Bing!" he said.

"Ow!" he said, miming being hit on the head. "Don't worry. I've handled Kirk before, several times. But that guy's way was much better."

"I'll clean up, Eric," said Jim. "Can you make sure Lotty is OK?"

Jim had his arm round his pal, who was still shaking.

"Sure, lad, thanks. That was a nice poke in the eye you gave him, lass!"

"Instinct!" said Lotty.

Eric took Lotty away and made her a cup of tea, while Jim cleaned up the spillage. It was now obvious why Eric used cheap bowls and mugs.

Eric showed them to the stock room. It was full of boxes, toilet roll packs, and other stuff.

"OK? You've earned more than this, but I'm full up at the moment. There's even three people in the barn out the back! Sorry."

"Thanks, Eric. This is fine," said Lotty.

Jim nodded.

He and Lotty got ready to go to sleep. There wasn't much room so they put a few toilet roll packs down the middle. Idris was perching on one of the boxes, but didn't look too comfortable as his talons were puncturing the soft cardboard.

Jim unrolled his bedroll and spread his sleeping bag on it. He dropped off almost immediately. Lotty thought that maybe she was overtired, and the episode with Kirk had rattled her a bit. She slipped into her sleeping bag but couldn't get to sleep. Idris hopped off his box and perched on top of her.

"Gerroff!" she whispered.

Idris hopped onto the ground, and lay down with his head on her.

"Stupid dragon!" she whispered as she slipped into sleep.

Jim woke up slightly in the middle of the night. The toilet roll barrier had disintegrated and Lotty was now snuggled up against him. It was kind of nice, but also embarrassing. Idris had his head resting on her, and he opened one eye and looked at Jim. Then his lid drooped and he dropped off to sleep again. Jim didn't want to wake Lotty up, so he just lay there and quickly drifted off again.

The communicator muttered.

"Nah, that guy wasn't any trouble. Just a drunk."

"Mutter mutter."

"Yeah, my only worry was that he would come back, but he didn't. The kids and the dragon are OK. The Inn keeper let them stay overnight in some storage room."

"Mutter mutter."

"Yeah, they left this morning, heading into the hills. The tough way again."

"Mutter mutter."

"I did speak to them. I mentioned the tourney. The girl seemed interested, but the boy didn't seem that keen."

“Mutter mutter mutter.”

“Yeah, of course. Over and out.”

“Mutter.”

The Tourney

They had rather a damp morning. Jim's jacket was leather, and kept out the rain, and he had a leather hood that covered his head. Lotty had a cape with a hood made of a thin waterproof material.

"My Gran made it. She calls it 'plastic'," she said. "It's brilliant! But she and Grandad don't like to use it much, for some reason.

"Maybe it's bad luck or something," suggested Jim.

"No, I don't think it's that. Not exactly. Gran wouldn't have given me something that is bad luck."

Idris didn't seem to think much of the drizzle. He kept shaking his head and stayed close to them. It wasn't until they almost stepped on a grouse, and Idris pounced on it and wolfed it down that Jim realized that he was hungry, and that hunting was not good in the rain. Still Idris managed to catch a rabbit later and seemed to cheer up a little, and at about the same time, so did the weather.

They stopped for lunch on a rock overlooking a rather damp-looking travelling tourney. It had a jousting field, sword fighting rings, archery butts, but the main attractions were the sideshows. There were quoits stalls where you could win a goldfish, darts stalls where you could win a dollar bill, a ghost train, and a booth that invited you to view "natural curiosities", like dwarves, a green man, and a bearded lady. From their vantage on the hill they could see one of the dwarves touching up the paint on the green man behind the scenes.

Jim and Lotty ate the sandwiches that Eric had kindly provided, while discussing whether they should go down, but Lotty was really keen, so there was no real question about it, really. Idris was smelling the air. Hot dogs! Pies! Ice cream! Of course the little dragon didn't know what he was smelling, but it smelled goooooood!

They watched the sports for a while, but then wandered around the sideshows. Jim had a go on an archery range, but the booth holder wouldn't let him use his own bow. The booth's bows were way out of alignment, and the strings were uneven. Jim's shots went way off target.

"Mind I take one shot with my own bow? Just for practise?"

The booth holder look around quickly, then said "OK, kid. No prize though."

Jim plunked his bolt right in the centre of the target.

"Nice one, kid. Please don't tell anyone," said the booth holder as he gave Jim his bolt back.

"That's outrageous," said Lotty, incensed, as they walked away.

"Nah. Anyone who's ever shot a cross bow would know that their bows were rubbish. If the customer had never shot a cross bow before, they'd likely not hit the target even with a good bow. Except by luck. It's just a bit of fun."

They walked along the line of booths. Idris was picking up bits and pieces everywhere, his long black tongue flicking in and out. Kids were giving him bits of sausage, pie, and other morsels. He sat drooling at a spit roast until the owner gave him a chunk of venison.

"You're a good advert, pal, but I can't stand those pleading eyes. Now, hop it!" said the owner good naturedly.

They came up to a duelling booth. The barker was calling for someone to take on the Champion, who stood there in battered and rusty armour, huge shield and a sword as long as Jim was tall. The Champion was almost two metres tall.

"\$10 to the man who lasts sixty seconds with 'Black Bart'!" called the barker.

"Jim will do it! Go on, Jim!" Lotty suddenly shouted.

"What me?" Jim was shocked.

The barker seized on the opportunity and Jim found himself on the stage. The barker shoved him into a small tent and instructed him to find some armour to suit him. Lotty followed him into the tent.

"What have you done now! He'll kill me!"

“No he won’t. They don’t want to scare people off. It’s like the shooting place. You can wear my armour!”

“It won’t fit me!”

“Yes it will.” She passed the pearl between her hands and the armour was in a pile on the ground.

“Strip off. Quick!”

“What!?”

Jim undressed and Lotty helped him on with the armour. She put the helmet on and slid up the visor. It all fit him perfectly, like it was made for him.

“Good luck,” she said pushing him out of the tent.

“This is crazy!”

The barker took one look at Jim, and ramped up his pitch.

“Black Bart, undefeated Champion, against, against, um, the Silver Knight, small, but cunning, ladies and gentlemen, one round of sixty seconds. Come to the line please, gentlemen.”

In the crowd the barker’s henchmen were setting up bets with the audience, which was growing by the minute. Lotty was at the front with Idris who was stepping from side to side in excitement.

Black Bart leaned forward and quietly said to Jim “Remember this is a bit of fun, but try your hardest. Use the flat of your sword, OK. Not the edge.”

Jim nodded. “So that I don’t hurt you.”

“So that you don’t chip your fancy sword when I block it!”

“Oh!”

Jim stepped back, and put his visor down. The barker rang a bell and turned over a huge sand timer. Black Bart swung his sword in a circle and Jim ducked. The crowd gasped. Jim thought that Black Bart was good, as Black Bart’s sword would have only just passed over his head.

Jim realized that he was in no danger. Black Bart was good, so he might get a few bruises, but that was all. Jim lunged at Black Bart and Black Bart spun out of the way dramatically, rapping Jim’s sword aside with ease.

They traded blows for a while. Blocking Black Bart’s blows was easy for Jim, but it felt like his sword was hitting a solid block of iron. He was getting tired and Black Bart batted his blows away with ease. Jim tried a few rushes, which Black Bart dramatically avoided, and Black Bart launched a few well telegraphed attacks, which Jim just about avoided.

“Ten seconds to go,” screamed the barker.

Just a bit longer, thought Jim. Then Black Bart stepped past his sword and flipped him onto his back. His sword point touched Jim’s gorget.

“Yield, sir knight!” he said.

“I yield, sir knight.”

The last of the sand flowed through the sand timer, and applause broke out, and bets were paid out more or less amicably among the crowd.

Jim climbed wearily to his feet, took off his gauntlet and offered his hand to Black Bart. Black Bart nodded and took off his gauntlet and shook his hand.

“Well done, lad.”

A little later Lotty and Jim were sitting on the bank watching the jousting when Black Bart, without his armour, threaded his way through the crowd, and sat down beside them. Idris came to try his luck and Black Bart fed him a bit of meat off a skewer of grilled meat pieces that he was eating.

“Oh, there you are, guys. Here’s your \$10. You forgot to collect it.”

“But I didn’t win!”

“We give everyone \$10. It takes guts to stand facing me. Even with your fancy armour.”

“I was volunteered!” said Jim, looking Lotty, who was grinning at him.

“Yes, but you could have backed out but you didn’t.”

“Well, Lotty said it was like the shooting gallery. Those bows are rubbish. You couldn’t hit a barn door with them! It’s all about the entertainment, isn’t it? And getting the suckers to bet on it.”

Black Bart laughed. “You risked a lot on that theory, son, but she’s right.”

Idris was clambering all over him while he was talking, trying get at the man's skewer of meat. Black Bart was effortlessly avoiding getting his meat stolen and otherwise ignoring him.

"By the way, that armour looked good. New is it?"

"It's Lotty's," said Jim.

"It fitted you well, then, if it was made for her."

Jim looked at Lotty, because he'd just realized that. He'd been too busy at the time to think about it. Lotty pointedly looked somewhere else.

"OK, I won't pry," said Black Bart. "But it wouldn't have protected you much, if I'd been seriously attacking you, so beware. Don't rely on it."

"How good am I, sir? Am I that bad?"

Black Bart gave the dragon, who was perched on his shoulder, his skewer with the last piece of meat on it, and the little dragon stripped off the meat and spat out the skewer. Black Bart held up his arm and Idris hopped onto it, then hopped onto the ground when Black Bart lowered his arm.

"You've had training, I can tell, but you've not had much experience. I could tell you were taking your lead from me, and that was good thinking. I think that you could be competent, but not great. I don't think that you have the spark, son. Sorry. I could have ended the bout after about five seconds, but that would have cheated the audience."

"Would you take me on with the bow, sir?"

"Cross bows?" he laughed. "No, thanks. I know the guy on the shooting gallery! I have a friend, though, who could probably split your bolt."

A cheer went up as someone was knocked off his horse down at the lists.

"Oh, that's an upset. I was sure George would win."

"Do you joust, sir?"

"Me? No, those horses are tough, but carrying my weight plus armour would be too much. Also, I'm a huge target. Those little guys would flatten me."

Lotty looked at the jousts. They looked pretty big to her. "Little" was obviously relative.

"Where are you headed, guys? With the little chap, I mean. There's a dragon place up north, I understand."

Jim looked at Lotty. "Yeah," he said. "That's where we are going. We want to get Idris back to his mum, if it is possible. They might be able to help."

"Idris. Hmm," said Black Bart. "That's a good name. You know the mountain back there is 'Cader Idris', or Idris' chair? Idris was a dragon or giant in the mythos of the area."

"Yes, sir. That's why I gave him the name."

Black Bart nodded and stood up. "Well, I might see you guys on the road, then. I'm taking the show up north to the coast. I'll settle in up there for the holiday season. Good day, folks. And dragons."

The communicator bleeped.

"Hello."

"Mutter mutter mutter."

"Hah hah! Don't call me 'Black Bart', you cheeky beggar. They liked it. I think that they will hitch a lift tomorrow. Yeah, I think we're getting to the end of this little adventure."

"Mutter mutter mutter."

"Yeah, see if you can contact our bosses and warn them."

"Mutter mutter."

"Yeah, over and out."

The Dragon Centre

"It's thirty kilometres to the dragon centre."

"Yeah. You're thinking of hitching a lift from 'Black Bart'?" said Lotty.

Jim nodded. "He seems to be a good guy."

"Idris liked him. Climbed all over him." She laughed.

"And he let him!"

They'd found a rock with an overhang not far from the road. A few stacked rocks gave them some shelter, and while the wind swirled around them a bit, they'd had a reasonably dry night. Jim was used to rough camping, but he was impressed that Lotty didn't so much as grumble a little bit. They were breakfasting on fruit that they had bought the day before, and Idris had been out hunting and seemed content.

"So, let's go. Let's hope he hasn't gone already!"

When they could see the road, there was a cart travelling along it. They could see a tarpaulin siding on the cart, and drawn on it was a large caricature of an armed man.

"That's the tarp that Black Bart had behind his stand!" said Jim. "He's ahead of us! We're going to have to chase him."

"No, I know!" said Lotty. "Idris, go and stop Black Bart!"

She pointed at the cart. Idris looked at her, looked at Jim, crowed and set off after the cart. He circled it, then glided down to the front of the cart, and they couldn't see him. The cart chugged to a halt.

"Quick!" Lotty was off and down the slope before Jim could move. He gathered himself and raced after her.

"Mind you don't break a leg," he said as he went past her.

They caught up with the cart.

"I thought I'd missed you, kids. Hop on."

Idris was clinging to his shoulder like a huge parrot. Jim and Lotty climbed onto the bench seat at the front of the cart. Idris shifted to the kickboard of the cart.

"Thanks, erm, Bart," said Lotty. "Is that your real name?"

"It'll do. I've had many, over the years."

"Have you been in the Army, Bart? You have that look about you," said Jim.

Bart looked at him. "'That look'? Jim, isn't it? Well, you have a certain look about you too. But it's not an Army look."

"What do you mean?" said Lotty. "What look?"

"That's for Jim to tell you, not me. Who wants a coffee?"

"Er, we have tea," said Lotty.

"That's fine. If you go into the cart, there's a 'thermo-oven'. Water in the tank to the left. I take two spoons of coffee, one sugar. Sorry, I've no milk. No room for a cow."

Lotty and Jim crawled into the cart.

"Wow!" said Lotty.

It wasn't so much cart as caravan. There were cupboards everywhere, and while the centre was occupied by a table, it probably folded down. There was a panel full of switches by the entrance. Jim flicked the one labelled "Lights" and the one labelled "Oven". They made the tea and the coffee and took them out to Bart. Jim flicked off the switches.

"Where's Idris?" Lotty asked anxiously.

Idris suddenly glided in and landed on the kickboard at the front of the cart. He had a rabbit in his jaws and tossed it in the air and crunched it.

They chatted as the horse clip-clopped its way along the road.

"I felt a vibration even after I switched the lights and oven off," said Jim. "You have a helper motor, don't you?"

"Yeah, to give the horse some assistance, especially over the pass. It's solar powered."

They stopped at a carters' stop for lunch. Bart had a huge plate of sausages, beans, eggs, tomatoes, fried potatoes, grilled fish, and bacon, all covered with a spicy sauce. Jim and Lotty couldn't help themselves. They dived into the fried fish, fried chicken and fried potato chips, with oodles of tomato sauce. Idris just begged for anything from anybody, and Jim finally had to put a leash on him to stop him bothering other patrons. Though the other patrons seemed happy to feed him until he exploded.

Bart slurped down a huge bowl of milky coffee and the kids sampled the milky spiced tea that the region was famous for.

"About an hour to go, guys," said Bart as they left.

The next hour or so passed quietly, with Idris snoozing off his impromptu lunch on the ridge-pole of the cart, and the others digesting their meals below.

They came across a sign that said "Dragon Ranch". The drawing of the dragon on the sign had four legs and two wings, and was nothing like Idris. Bart turned the cart into the drive, which was potholed and invaded by grass in places.

"That's not promising," said Bart.

Suddenly someone popped out from behind a large bush.

"What do you want? We're closed!"

"Is this the dragon centre?"

"Yes, I'm Lionel, the Dragonmaster!" he said with a flourish.

Idris flew down and licked him. Lionel screamed and ran for the house. Lotty and Jim exchanged looks of consternation.

"Lionel," Jim shouted through the closed door. "What's the problem?"

"What is that creature?" said the closed door.

"He's a dragon, of course! A baby one."

The door opened a crack.

"Dragon? Baby?"

"Yeah. He's really friendly. Do you have any meat?"

"Meat? A hamburger?"

"Yeah, that will do."

Lionel returned with a frozen hamburger. He held it out and Idris licked it, experimentally.

"It's too cold, Lionel."

"One minute."

Lionel disappeared and there was a ping and he returned with a thawed burger. This time, Idris ate it with gusto.

Lionel had lost his fear of Idris.

"So that's a dragon," he said. "Fancy me meeting a dragon and having a panic attack!"

"You're a Dragonmaster, and you haven't seen a dragon?"

"Well, no. They're not common, they're rare, even. And usually only seen from a distance. But I run a magazine for dragon fanciers, and people started calling me the Dragonmaster. But what we thought about dragons appears to be wrong. Hmm, two legs and wings. Not four legs and wings. It makes sense, doesn't it. Most things bigger than insects have four 'limbs'. Meat diet. Yeah, we knew that because they sometimes take cattle. Black tongue. We didn't know that. Can I touch him? Can I take a picture of him to put in my museum?"

Lionel "museum" turned out to be a room of his house full of paintings, drawings, newspaper cuttings and books of stories and legends about dragons. It was interesting, but there was not much in the way of hard knowledge of dragons.

"So you can't really help us get Idris back to his mother, Lionel."

Lionel shook his head sadly. "Sorry, no."

He was scratching Idris' head. Earlier he'd been trying to measure Idris, which Idris thought was a game. He had tried to eat Lionel's tape measure.

"Time to bring in some friends of mine," said Bart.

He got out a communicator and turned it on.

“Come on in. I think we need our bosses’ help.”

“Mumble mumble.”

“Over and out.”

Jim said “Have you been following us, Bart?”

“Yes, Jim. We’ve been paid to follow you. Sorry about that.”

A looming figure strode up the drive.

“Jim, it’s the guy from the Inn,” said Lotty.

“I get it,” said Jim, resignedly. “Smith and Jones. Am I right? My parents sent you, didn’t they?”

“You are right, Jim. We are known as Smith and Jones, but the King and Queen didn’t send us. I don’t know what happened to their agents, but when we realized who you were, we reported back to them, confidential like, and they requested that we keep an eye on you, too. That’s all.”

“King and Queen? Why would the King and Queen be after you? What’s this all about, Jim?” asked Lotty.

Jim hung his head in resignation. “Because I’m their son. I’m Prince James. It actually took quite a bit of planning to be able to run off by myself.”

Smith and Jones nodded. ‘Yeah, we heard. You can’t just walk out of the Palace, if you’re a Prince. We were impressed.”

“Oh, I remember the stories about the Prince’s disappearance! About two months ago, wasn’t it? I thought he’d, you’d, been located. If you weren’t following Jim, Prince James, were you following the dragon?”

“No, we were following you, Lotty. Your Gran and Grandad asked us to follow you, but not interfere. They and your parents thought that it would do you good to get away by yourself for a while. And you did pretty well.”

“Well, Jim was a great help. Oh! I mean Prince James.”

“Jim’ is fine,” said Jim.

“There was always a chance that Lionel could have helped you get Idris back to his mother, but since he can’t, we’ll have to call in the big guns. Have you got the device, Jones?”

Jones took a small device with buttons from his pocket and mashed a few buttons with his big fingers. Two figures appeared from nowhere, a man and a woman. The man was wearing robes and had a long beard and hair. The woman was conventionally dressed, except that she wore a white coat.

“Gran! Grandad!” said Lotty, and hugged them both.

“I’m the Boffin, and he’s the Mage. Thanks, Smith and Jones, good work. Since we’ve been summoned, I guess there’s something that needs fixing?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Smith. “The baby dragon. Idris. We don’t know how to get him back to his mother.”

“Oh, that. Everyone join hands. Smith, pick up Idris and get on the end of the line. Ready?”

Suddenly they were somewhere else. They were on top of a mountain, in what seemed to be a huge precipitous mountain range. Gravity felt different and there were dragons. Huge female dragons and slightly smaller males, flying between peaks and swooping down into the plains.

“Call your mother, Idris,” said the Mage.

Idris tweeted and parped, then suddenly let out a trumpeting bellow which surprised even him. Nothing.

“Again, Idris,” encouraged the Mage.

Idris called again, and this time a large female dragon spiralled down from the heights and landed on a nearby peak. Six small dragons appeared next to her, flicking into sight one by one. One flicked onto the peak where the humans were, sniffed Idris, and flicked back to the other dragons. They were all flicking backwards and forwards.

Idris looked at the dragons, then at Jim and Lotty. He appeared torn.

“Go on, pal. You belong here. Go to your mum,” said Jim.

Idris flicked to the nearby peak. He called mournfully. The mother dragon dipped her head to those on the peak, and then all the dragons disappeared.

The Boffin looked at an instrument. "They're halfway round the world from here. Shall we go home?"

They linked hands and returned to Lionel's 'Dragon Ranch'.

Lotty was sniffing and Jim moved to comfort her.

"No, no, I'm alright. Did you see how big he was compared to the other babies?"

"That probably because he was eating all the time he was here," laughed Jim.

"Do Mum and Dad want me to come back, Grandad?" asked Lotty.

"Yes, Charlotte," said her Grandad. "If you've finished here."

"'Charlotte'?" asked Jim. "What was that 'Gertrude' thing about?"

"Oh, it was a joke. Sorry. Didn't work, did it? I was nervous! Anyway, goodbye, Jim. I hope we see each other again. It was fun, wasn't it? And Idris was cute."

"I hope we see each other again, too. Maybe I can break out again, and we can go on the run together."

She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek, then went and held hands with her Gran and Grandad. They disappeared.

"Well, Lionel, you really are the Dragonmaster now. You've been close to a real dragon.

"Yeah," said Lionel thoughtfully. "But such a lot of what dragon fanciers talk about seems to be rubbish, doesn't it? I mean, we discussed how many species there are, but we couldn't even draw them right. It seems obvious now that dragons could only have two legs. Four legs is just ridiculous. And they can't be as big as people have reported, or breathe fire. That's not physically possible!"

"But it might be magically possible. Besides, you've never been downwind of a baby dragon that's been eating Brussel Sprouts. That may not be flammable, but it's certainly toxic."

Lionel conceded the point. "But I'm done with dragons, I think. I'll have to find a new interest. In the past hour or so, I've met a dragon, seen people appear from nowhere in my garden, and been transported to a mountain, probably in another world, by the feel of it. That's a lot to take in!"

He waved them goodbye as they set off in Smith's (or was it Jones') cart.

"I suppose that you have orders to deliver me back to the Palace in handcuffs, guys?" said Jim, Prince James, sounding slightly depressed.

"Yes, pretty much, sire..."

"Jim."

"... but it will take us three days to reach the nearest airport that will take the Royal jet."

"Really?" He looked happier. "Well, guys, let's go. You're no Idris and Lotty, but I'll have to make do with you, I guess."
