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A Circle of Dragons

A Circle of Dragons

By A.J. Prufrock

[1] Unexpected Guests

*Tell me of the people's ways
The ends and outs of all their days
Dare they believe that when they die
They soar above where dragons fly?*

Hilda Kenterick had been alone in the cabin for a week now. Mother had sent her over a well-known path to join her father and brother in the forest outpost, but Hilda had been greeted only by a note balanced upon the wide mantle above the hearth. Father's scrawl indicated the two would return by morning. Seven mornings had passed. One early afternoon while Hilda sat enjoying one of Father's favorite books, three large shadows passed across the window pane. Her bare feet felt the largeness of whatever had lumbered into the front garden, heavy vibrations radiating through the slatted floor. Hilda's whole body now trembled in sympathetic waves. No one but family knew the cabin's locale and friends never came to call.

In haste, she set the book aside and took stock of the encroachers through a chink in the logs. Hilda was fortunate. Her parents had set facts plainly before their children. Since she could walk, there had been no coddling nannies and overprotective tutors buffering her from the wildness of the outside world. Though she had never before seen a dragon, she knew a rhyme to help distinguish one species from another—

Green of scale and yellow-eyed
Rekiki, by troll meat is satisfied

Two guests were definitely Rekikis. "Too bad I have not a single slice of troll in the root cellar," Hilda muttered, trying to use humor to choke back her fear. She pulled hard at childhood memories and extracted a second rhyme to identify the third figure—

Sarkani, great in fang and claw
By mere presence kills with awe

But if guest number three was a Sarkani, it was only an adolescent, for the beast was yet to develop the fatal dread its presence was reputed to carry. Still, the look of it caused a shiver to crawl up and down Hilda's spine.

There was a third rhyme for a third kind, but if a Zendino was coming, it had not yet appeared. Hilda's father and brother had taken the weapons. Even with the remaining well-sharpened kitchen knives, the battle was three against one, gargantuan trio against a little girl. There was no use running. No one outran dragons. They had to lose interest, and these seemed to be growing in their curiosity.



There was nothing to do but to invite them to tea.

Hilda burned her father's note, stoked the fire in the woodburning stove, checked the kettle, and stepped out into the yard.

"Greetings!" she called with feigned naivety. "Can I refresh you on your travels? There is not much in the pantry, but I can put on a pot of tea."

Each visitor turned towards Hilda, then back to each other. They were used to humans cowering, scurrying, and screaming. Hospitality was a fascinating novelty.

One of the Rekiki spoke first, clapping fore-claws together, "Oh how quaint! Let's do! Let's do!"

Her near-twin was quick to answer, "Yes, let's do. Let's have a tea party like the peoples, hosted by a small human." She glanced to both her companions, adding, "I believe this young one is female."

The intruders conferred among themselves, then bowed low to accept the invitation. Hilda pointed to a circle of stumps around a fire pit and invited her guests to rest there. She returned to the cabin, careful to hide her continued shaking. As she went, she heard the Sarkani say, "Perhaps when Geraldine arrives, we can make a campfire and tell stories, like the peoples do."

So a fourth is coming and they don't intend to leave any time soon, thought Hilda, her stomach dropping.

As Hilda found cooking pots to act as teacups, voices filtered in from the yard, "Perhaps the girl—'girl' is what baby humans are called, right?—will teach us the human songs that humans sing while roasting their tiny globs of goat meat over an open fire. What great fun!"

"You and your 'fun,' Jolene," scorned a sour voice. "We are on a mission."

"Fun is fine, Loretta, if done along the way," answered back the chipper voice of Jolene. "We can't do much more than wait until Geraldine joins us again. We might as well learn the ways of peoples while we wait. I hear they don't live long, so let's all do our best not to frighten. The young one shows spirit and might teach us much."

"I am in no mood," grunted Loretta, "and will never be, to take lessons from a human girl."

"You will if it is useful to our quest," hissed the third voice of the Sarkani.

"No one made you boss, Wynona," shot back Loretta in return, "just because Geraldine sent us on ahead."

Hilda emerged with three copper pots and a sugar jar, balanced upon a large wooden tray. Wedged between was a small tin cup holding a spot of tea for herself. Hilda placed the tray upon the cornerstone of the fire pit, handed each guest a steaming beverage, curtsied, and asked, "Cream or sugar?"

By the time the words left Hilda's mouth, Loretta's pot was empty. The others pointed and laughed at her over-eagerness. Tea dripped from the corners of the wide reptilian mouth as she fumed.

"You don't get out much, do you?" cackled the caustic tones of Wynona, "Did you get zero education in human custom?"

"If you want more, I can get it for you," offered Hilda.

"No. Don't bother. I was drinking for show. I am not in the least bit thirsty and this stuff is overpraised," Loretta said. She stared at Wynona with a look that made Hilda shudder. Hilda refilled her pot anyway.

"I'd like sugar," said Wynona, ignoring Loretta's glare. Wynona reached—all the while trying to smile with politeness through snagged teeth—to take the entire canister out of Hilda's hands.

Hilda stepped back out of reach, bowed again, and asked with demure firmness, "One lump or two?"

It was Loretta's turn to cackle. "Get out much?" came the mocking echo, "What was that about human custom?"

Jolene had stifled laughter twice now, for it was her careful habit to stay out of the volatile in-between of her two companions "Don't mind our banter," she whispered to the hostess. "We'll all drink it black."

Hilda nodded, and took the canister back inside. When she returned, she took up her tin cup and sat with her visitors round the fire. Each of her guests held her pot with an awkward fist and watched the young human's every motion.

"I could not help but hear a few names bandied about while I brewed your tea," Hilda began. "Which of you is Loretta? I think I also heard the names Jolene and Wynona."

The guests were impressed. To be named and treated like ladies made them forget to be suspicious of Hilda's listening ears.

"I'm Jolene," piped up a Rekiki, "and this is my sister, Loretta. We hatched from the same clutch, two strong ones who survived." Hilda made a rhyme in her head—

Rekiki Loretta
Rekiki Jolene
One seems nice
but both are mean

Wynona blinked and added, "So it's obvious who I am." Hilda continued making verse—

Wynona Sarkani
Claws do gleam
Leads in place of Geraldine

Hilda noted that Wynona and Jolene made a game of imitating her, attempting small sips, while Loretta gulped, belched, and shot forth a mocking command, "Human girl, little darling, take my order. I'll have wild boar stuffed with pigeon and in each pigeon, a marinated sparrow."

"Don't tease her," scolded Jolene, "she is a young one I tell you!"

Hilda stood and apologized, "I'm afraid, until the men come back from the hunt ..."

"Men coming! When?" exclaimed Jolene, her voice rising, her head twisting round.

"I don't know. They're gone for weeks sometimes," said Hilda. She noted the rise in Jolene's pitch. "But until they return, I have nothing to offer you but jerky, flat cakes, and oatmeal. There's nothing worthy of guests, I'm afraid."

"Ignore Jolene, little people-girl," said Wynona. "You poor humans, having to eat so constantly ... once a week is often enough for us. Loretta here is still digesting half an ox."

"What a feast," mused Loretta, rubbing her belly.

"And," continued Wynona, "if we were hungry, we would not be sitting round sipping your tea."

Hilda turned white and sat down.

"I am not so ignorant as my comrades, human," Wynona said. "Tell us stories. If they please us, we might let you live. Mind that the tales have dragons in them. You do have stories with dragons, don't you?"

Hilda nodded.

"And people-girl, tell them just as your mother and her mother before her told them. Skip nothing, add nothing. I wish not only to be entertained, but enlightened. Let us, we three dragons, get to know you peoples better."

Jolene and Loretta looked on, unblinking.

Hilda took her last sip of tea, and began.

[2] The Secret Dream of Tobit Quattlebaum

*I had a dream
Till it comes true
I'll tell no one
Especially you*

Tamar Quattlebaum could not keep a husband any better than she could keep a secret. She did manage to keep—for a while anyway—a little son she liked to call Tobit (though the man who sired him called him something else altogether).

Hilda felt ill at ease. She was used to telling stories but not used to anyone paying attention. The mesmerized dragons could not tell. They had not expected this level of sophistication from one so young. Infidelity and a gossiping tongue in the first two lines ... fascinating!

Tobit's one distinction from all the other boys his age was an obsession with an old scabbard his father had left behind. He wore it always, though his mother pretended not to notice it hanging constantly from his belt. Mother Tamar used the same

expert selective memory she employed in pretending the man who once owned the sheath never existed to begin with. This was the reason she did not notice that, as Tobit grew, so did the scabbard.

The brows of all three tea-sipping dragons were raised. Hilda did not notice and continued without pause.

The sword which belonged in the empty scabbard was buried to its hilt on the edge of Tamar's property where the apple trees brushed the edges of the vegetable garden. Every year on his birthday, Tobit would go out to see if he were strong enough at last to pull the blade from the ground. He wondered often if the matter of extraction had more to do with the willingness of the sword rather than the size of his muscles. Whatever the reason, he longed for the day he would place the blade into the scabbard hanging from his waist.

Loretta suppressed a snicker and swallowed hard. Hilda focused on the more serious face of Wynona and pressed on.

The year that both sword and sheath were just the right size, Tobit was only going through the motions of trying. He had awakened from the most marvelous dream and was still pondering its mysteries when he stumbled to the garden out of birthday habit. When he gave the customary tug, the weapon slipped from the earth with such ease that the young man found himself flat on his rumpus, holding the great blade up in the sunlight. Tobit was delighted, but determined to not tell anyone about his accomplishment, particularly his mother. He loved her, but accepted the sad fact that she could never keep anything from the neighbors. He put the sword back in the hole and went in to breakfast.

It is one thing to keep a secret when others do not wish to see, but quite another when they are determined to know. Tobit said nothing outright, but his face did not hide the fact that something had happened. Before he had swallowed his first bite of gruel, his mother asked him why he was glowing with pride, like one who had unearthed buried treasure. Tobit was troubled how close she had come to a part of the truth, but only answered, "Oh, mother, I had such a nice dream last night!" Then catching himself, he added, "but I can't tell it to anybody."

"You can tell it to me," Tamar answered. "It must have been a nice dream, or you wouldn't look so happy."

"No, mother. I can't tell it to anybody," said Tobit, "until it comes true."

"For crying out loud, I am your mother!" Tamar cried. "Know the dream, I will!"

But it was no use. Neither threats, nor beatings, nor meals withheld could get the secret out of the boy. There was such strife between mother and son that often Tobit would run out into the garden and collapse weeping. When his fits occurred near the buried sword, the weapon would work itself round and round, whirling in its hole. But the moment Tobit stretched out his hand, it stopped and let him slide it out of the hole and into the scabbard. It was strangely comforting, and strange company to keep.

Hilda looked across the fire at the strange company she herself was keeping. Jolene and Loretta were elbowing each other and shooting sideways glances. Wynona boxed them on their pointy ears and gruffed, "Grow up. She is too young to follow the multiple meanings and you are both too old to be giggling at double entendre. Pay attention and learn!"

Jolene and Loretta sobered. Wynona, with the tone of a schoolmarm, instructed, "Lesson one—old human-nags hate secrets as much as mother dragons do, both to the point of abusing their young."

Hilda had never noted that point in the story, even though she had heard it year after year. She had always hurt too much for Tobit's tears to pay much attention to his mother's frustration.

There was no time to ponder. This was a long tale and it would be some time before dragons entered the story. Hilda would not mind if her guests continued their sniggering and ear-boxing as long as the tale did not grow old to the listening reptilian ears.

#

During one of his sobbing fits, unbeknownst to Tobit, His Highness King Humphrey came riding along. The king heard the sounds of distress and stopped his coach. "Footman!" he ordered, "Go and see who it is that is crying."

In a few minutes, the servant returned and answered, "It is just a young boy, sire, being disciplined for disobedience."

"Humph!" cried King Humphrey. "Bring him to me at once. I can't stand for a child to cry."

"Yes, my lord," answered the servant, who was very familiar with how this exact weakness in the face of tears affected the king's rearing of his daughters. Keeping his child-rearing opinions to himself, the footman went to Tobit, instructed him to dry his tears, and brought him to the royal carriage.

King Humphrey was at once smitten with the noble-looking youth and exclaimed in a magnanimous tone, "Will you be my son, boy?"

"Certainly, sire," answered Tobit. "If my mother will let me."

King Humphrey called for Mother Tamar and went through the motions of asking permission. He told the greying woman he intended to adopt her boy, adding with a wink that, if he proved worthy, Tobit might even marry a princess one day.

Tamar's resolute anger with Tobit now turned into joy. She began kissing King Humphrey's hand, cooing, "I hope ... kiss-kiss ... he will be ... smack-smack ... more obedient ... smooch-smooch... to His Majesty than he has been to me."

This outbreak of distracting affection gave time for Tobit to slip back into the garden and retrieve his beloved sword. Neither the king nor his mother noticed him leave or return. After a bow to his mother, Tobit climbed into the king's coach and blew kisses as he was driven away.

When they had gone some distance from Tobit's home, and the tops of the orchard trees had faded from view, King Humphrey turned to his newly acquired boy and asked, "Why, my dear son, were you crying with such bitterness in the garden?"

"Because my mother had been beating me," said Tobit straightaway.

"And why," questioned His Majesty further, "would a woman wear herself out beating a fine lad like you?"

Tobit answered without hesitation, "Because I would not tell her my dream."

"And why would you not tell it to her?"

"Because I will never tell it to anyone until it comes true," said the boy.

"Humph," said King Humphrey, "I bet you'll tell it to me."

"No sir, not even to you, Your Majesty," said Tobit.

"Oh, I am sure you will when we get home," said the king smiling and spoke no more of the matter while they traveled.

[3] Tobit and Merriwether

*Those who tell the truth don't swear
Those who can't convince demand
Those refused might shriek and shrill
And think to master and command
But nose and mouth and foot and hand
And sparkling eye and tongue all know
That outer man aches to display
Integrity of inward soul*

That evening, Tobit and the king arrived at the palace. King Humphrey's three daughters ran out to meet the carriage, crying, "What did you bring us, Daddy!?"

The king laughed so hard his belly shook. He presented Tobit to them saying, "I have brought you such a nice present, my angels. A beautiful boy." All three girls were delighted, and though their father admonished them not to spoil Tobit, they fell over each other giving him their best toys.

"Toys for the boy toy," giggled Jolene. Loretta rolled her eyes. Hilda resumed.

The next day King Humphrey went out on his balcony to watch the four children play together on the lawn below. "He has a secret, my daughters!" the king called out, "that he says he will tell no one."

"He will tell me," said the eldest princess, Flora. Tobit shook his head.

"He will tell me," declared the second girl, Fauna. Tobit shook his head.

"He will tell me!" cried the youngest, Merriwether who knew she was the prettiest and most charming.

"I will tell nobody until it comes true," said Tobit to them all, "and it is best not to ask me."

The king was very sorry to hear this for he liked Tobit very much. But he also knew it would never do to keep anyone near him who would not do as he was ordered. Tobit was expelled from the palace that very day and sent to live in the servants' quarters. King Humphrey was sure he would come to his senses when he began to miss the girls and their playthings.

The sword clanked as Tobit was led away from Humphrey's palace, but the boy said nothing. He was saddened by his treatment, but the servants and their children were very kind to him and he soon grew merry again.

Tobit lived with the servants and as a servant until his seventeenth birthday.

#

The three princesses grew up into lovely young women. Flora and Fauna married two powerful kings who ruled over great countries across the sea. But Merrivether was particular and turned up her nose at all the young princes who had sought her hand.

One day Merrivether was sitting in the palace feeling so bored she began to wonder what the servants were doing. Her father was in council discussing the sudden arrival of a Pannonian envoy, and, since her mother was ill in bed, there was no one to stop the princess from running across the gardens to the houses where the help lived.

In the courtyard at the center of a cluster of cottages, Merrivether noticed a youth who was handsomer than any prince who had come to court her. In an instant, she recognized him to be the little boy she had once played with so long ago.

"Hello Tobit," she said, crossing the ground between them.

"Hello, Princess Merrivether," Tobit said with a bow, surprised he could remember even his own name in the presence of one who had grown so beautiful.

Merrivether came close and took both of Tobit's hands into her own. She could feel the young man tremble as she pressed her lips close to his ear and whispered, "Tell me your secret, Tobit, and I will get Papa to let me marry you."

Tobit wrapped Merrivether in his arms, more tightly than the pampered princess was used to. He could feel her tremble as he whispered back, "I will tell nobody until it comes true. And it is best that you not ask me."

With that, Tobit pushed her away and turned on his heel. Merrivether watched him disappear among several pretty servant girls, and felt anger boil in her veins.

"I heard a similar story ..." interjected Loretta, "from the mouth of a princess my uncle tied to a spit. The about-to-be-roasted highness said Tobit beat the girl for her brazenness ..."

Hilda was glad not to be telling stories from a spit.

Wynona squinted and peered at her, "You aren't adding anything, human? Not skipping anything, are you? Cleaning it up for the times? I think I was crystal clear about giving us unedited versions. Oral history should be passed along unchanged ..."

"No, ma'am," answered Hilda. "It may have been changed by someone, but not by me. I'm telling it just as my mother told it. I suppose the about-to-be-roasted princess was stressed and forgot how it went."

"Swear."

"No need, since I do not lie."

"Fair enough. Continue."

Hilda tapped her forehead to find her place, mumbling, "Where was I? ... watched him disappear ... several pretty servant girls ... anger boiling ... ah yes."

Princess Merrivether turned on her heel as well and ran home to complain to her father. She told King Humphrey that, while she was out gathering flowers for her ailing mother, she had been jeered, mocked, and shoved by the wretched servant, Tobit.

"If he had a thousand souls, I would kill them all!" swore King Humphrey.

That very day King Humphrey ordered gallows built outside the palace and invited all his subjects to come to see the execution of a young man who had dared to insult a king's daughter.

The next morning, Tobit was brought out blindfolded with hands tied behind his back. When his sentence was read, he felt the sword clank within the scabbard against his side.

As the guard led Tobit to the noose, a great noise was heard. A golden coach rumbled over the stones, with a white flag waving out of the window.

It stopped underneath the gallows, and from it stepped the ambassador from Pannonia. "King Humphrey, good friend," the stranger in fine clothes called out for all to hear. "Since you have no use for this miscreant, might I have him?"

"Sir," replied King Humphrey, "He has publicly insulted the royal princess and even dared to lay a hand upon her. I cannot pardon that!"

"Send him with me to Pannonia, Your Majesty, and I assure you he will learn manners and great humility."

"Well. Humph," said King Humphrey, who, if he were honest with himself, would have admitted he was of two minds concerning Merrivether's testimony. "If you want him so much you can have him. Only let me never see his face again!"

When the blindfold was removed from Tobit's eyes and the cords from his wrists, he found himself seated in a golden coach beside a royal ambassador on his way to Pannonia.

#

The Ambassador wined and dined Tobit all the way to their destination, and the very hungry young man appreciated both every bite and every sight along the way.

After they had gone some distance, the ambassador leaned in and asked, "Why, my dear son, were you really condemned to hanging? How did you stir up the fury of the princess?"

Tobit answered without hesitation, "I would not tell her my dream."

"And why wouldn't you tell it to her?"

"Because I will never tell it to anyone until it comes true," said Tobit.

"Perhaps you will tell it to me ..."

"No sir, not to you, nor even to your king," replied Tobit.

"Oh, I am sure you will when we get home to Pannonia," said the ambassador smiling. He spoke no more of it while they traveled.

The journey to Pannonia was very long. When they arrived, King Wittlesbach's daughter (who was as beautiful as the morning star) happened to be picking roses in the garden. The ambassador was sure, seeing Tobit take in her beauty, that the young man's secret was as good as told.

"Oh, what a handsome youth! Have you brought him from fairyland?" cried Princess Pasha.

"Word has reached me, ambassador," bellowed King Wittlesbach, trying to hide the fact he was vexed at his daughter's open words of admiration, "that you have saved this youth from the gallows."

"I don't care where he is from," said the determined princess. "I will marry him and nobody else."

"He is no better than a recalcitrant servant," said her father, growing ever louder.

"That is nothing to me," said Pasha, "for I love him and to me he will open his heart."

King Wittlesbach shook his head in dismay, and gave orders that the guest was to be lodged in the summerhouse.

[4] Tobit and Pasha

*Love and passion, though di'erent grapes
Make wines that smell and taste near same
One sipped slow, one downed in haste
And bitter dregs to one pertain*

One week later to the day, Princess Pasha put on her finest form-fitting dress and went to pay Tobit a visit. She looked so beautiful that at the sight of her a book dropped from his hand and he stood up speechless. "Tell me," she said, coaxingly, "what is this wonderful secret? Just whisper it in my ear, and I will give you a kiss."

"My angel," Tobit said, "Be wise and ask no questions. I have kept my secret all these years, and do not mean to tell it now."

Pasha, as was her habit, did not listen. She went on pressing Tobit, following him about the small room jesting, teasing, threatening, promising. At last Tobit took her by the arm, pulled her to the open door, pushed her out upon the stoop, then slammed and barred the entrance.

Princess Pasha stood there in shock—then shrieked. Screaming and crying, she ran all the way back to the palace where she knew her father was waiting to hear if she had been successful in her quest.

"Pish-posh on the pushing! He hit her!" said Loretta.

"Who cares," said Wynona.

"I do," whimpered Jolene.

"These princesses," continued Wynona in disgust, "set themselves up to be scorned. To hell with their fury. They should go create secrets of their own and make the men wonder."

"Shall I continue?" asked Hilda.

"Do!" said the dragons in chorus, all three heads bobbing in a synchronized nod.

"If he had a thousand souls," cried King Wittlesbach when he heard how the common youth had put his ungentle hands upon a royal princess, "I would starve each of them to death, that son of a dragon!"

The king that very day ordered the summerhouse to be bricked up with Tobit locked inside.

Pasha went out to watch the work, perplexed by the sense of doom rising in her heart. She was having, for the first time in her young life, second thoughts. She wandered to the far side of the cottage where blackberry bushes brushed against a grove of trees. Here she sat and watched the masons lay brick upon brick. To one she began to prattle and jest and he, of course, was very flattered that a princess paid him mind and complimented his work. In the end, as a joke between them, he left three bricks loose. No mortar was spread between three low blocks on one corner, and this left an opening just large enough for a bottle of wine and some food to pass through. Into this opening every morning Princess Pasha passed a hearty breakfast to prisoner Tobit.

Wynona's dragon face was framed in furrows. Hilda surmised she disapproved of the softening of Pasha.

Jolene, in contrast, cooed and sighed through a pasted lipless smile.

Loretta yawned. "What food do you supposed the princess passed through to him?"

Hilda shrugged and continued.

#

King Wittlesbach of Pannonia was in an ongoing battle of wits with the Sultan of Uman, but the tête-à-tête was all veneer. The underlying conflict was always in danger of spilling onto the battlefield, and the Pannonians were ill-prepared for such a possibility. So when an ambassador arrived from the sultan bearing a riddle, Wittlesbach trembled.

The silk-clad ambassador presented three finely carved walking sticks, gifts of goodwill. He told King Wittlesbach how all three staffs were carved from the same trunk. The king thanked the ambassador as profusely as he thought culturally appropriate, and told him he regretted having no equal gift to offer in return. The messenger (after stating with vigor that he was under strict orders to come home empty-handed) arose to go as quickly as he had come. But, just as the sultan's servant's second foot was crossing over the throne room threshold, he turned back, bowed low, and added, "My master bids me ask, O Wise King of the West, which of these three canes grew nearest the root, which in the middle, and which high up near the branches."

King Wittlesbach's eyes grew wide as the servant continued, "And if you cannot tell me, perhaps my sultan—may he live forever—is worthy of your daughter after all."

King Wittlesbach, trying to hide his anxiety, took the walking sticks and scrutinized them. He could not see the slightest difference between them. Still, buying as much time as he dared, he told the sultan's servant that he would have the answer for him the following evening.

When the servant left, King Wittlesbach called for Princess Pasha.

"Pasha, my daughter, you must pack your things," the king said. "You are to wed the Sultan of Uman."

Now before she met Tobit, Pasha would have pretended to resist while her heart rejoiced, for she had always believed that to marry a sultan would make her queen and matriarch in some faraway exotic kingdom. Having met Tobit, she instead became anxious. Pasha begged her father to tell her the cause of his momentous and sudden decision.

King Wittlesbach told Pasha all, even hinting (though not quite admitting) that the sultan's army was far greater than his own.

"Do not despair, my father," said the princess. "We shall find a way to answer the riddle." Her father was not convinced, but found some comfort in the brave words of his daughter.

Pasha took her concerns to Tobit. Through the hole in the bricks she whispered her plight, and through the hole she watched Tobit pace deep in thought. For the first time she noticed his sword and wondered to herself—Why is a prisoner allowed a weapon? And why does it seem to tremble in the scabbard as intensely as the young man thinks?

Tobit stopped in his tracks, and—without so much as a glance in Pasha's direction—gave the following order, "Go to bed as usual," he said, "and when you awaken in the morning, tell your father that you have dreamed that the canes must be placed in warm water. One will sink to the bottom. That is the one that grew nearest the root. One will float in the middle, neither sinking nor coming to the surface. The last, the one cut near the high branches, will float to the top."

The next morning, Pasha told her father of her "dream."

Her father listened and took action.

The sultan's messenger left for home dumbfounded.

The princess told Tobit all the next morning as she brought him a hearty breakfast made by her own hand.

#

Forty days later, the Sultan of Uman sent his ambassador to Pannonia again. Wittlesbach trembled. The linen-clad ambassador led three foals, all from the same stud, right into the throne room. The king thanked him as profusely as he thought culturally appropriate, and told him he regretted having no equal gift to offer in return. The ambassador (after stating with vigor

that King Wittlesbach's presence was present enough) arose to go as quickly as he had come. But, just as the sultan's servant's second foot was crossing over the throne room threshold, he turned back, bowed low, and added, "My master bids me ask, O Wise King of the West, which of these three foals was born in the morning, which at noon, and which at evening?"

King Wittlesbach's eyes grew wide and his heart sank. He did not expect his daughter to be lucky enough to have a second dream of discernment, and his army had grown thinner due to a bad case of the flu.

The servant from Uman pretended not to notice, but Wittlesbach was sure he saw a sneer when the servant bowed again (not quite as low as before) and added, "And if you cannot tell me, perhaps my sultan—may he live forever—is worthy of your daughter after all."

"What's it with human fathers trading daughters?" asked Jolene. "We dragons choose our mates."

"If we do not eat them first," said Wynona with a grin that showed all her pointy teeth.

"What I want to know," interrupted Loretta, "is what is it with the sets of three? Three loose bricks, three sticks, three tender foals."

... and three dragons, thought Hilda to herself.

"Shall I continue?" Hilda asked.

"Do!" said all three dragons in chorus, bobbing their heads as one.

King Wittlesbach took the foals' reins and inspected the animals closely. He could see not the slightest difference between them. Still, buying as much time as he dared, he told the sultan's servant that he would have the answer for him the following evening.

Princess Pasha entered the throne room just as the servant was leaving. She did not like the leering look he gave her and was about to complain to her father, but noted Wittlesbach's gloomy countenance. The king stood, head down, holding the lead ropes of three young horses. "I have yet another challenge from the sultan," he mumbled, not looking up.

Pasha, who had educated herself between the messenger's visits, now understood that the Sultan of Uman had twelve wives already. She would be thirteenth, a very unlucky number.

Pasha answered her father with even more determination than before, "Do not despair, my father. We shall find a way to answer the riddle." Her father was not convinced, but again found much comfort in the brave words of his daughter.

Pasha took her concerns straight to Tobit and, through the hole in the bricks, told him the riddle. She watched Tobit pace, deep in thought once again, the sword vibrating in its scabbard.

Tobit stopped and turned to meet Pasha's stare. Her heart pounded as he spoke. "Go to bed as usual, my dove," he said, "and when night comes, pretend to scream out in your sleep. Scream so loud that your father hears you and comes running. Inform him that you have dreamt that you were chained to the wall of a harem and ... do not say more. Just imply ..."

Pasha nodded.

"Next, tell your father that you will be made an inglorious concubine instead of a majestic queen, your rightful destiny. Tell him that this is your fate only because no one would listen to the young man shut up in the summerhouse. Tell the king his prisoner holds the answer to the riddle of the foals."

Pasha obeyed and, before dawn, Tobit stood before the King Wittlesbach.

[5] Tobit Goes to Uman

*They say disasters come in threes
I know of only one
But Sorrow now abides in me
And you have just begun*

"I did not expect you to still be alive," said His Majesty when Tobit stood before him, "but I trust you used your time in the summerhouse to repent of your wicked conduct. I grant you pardon on the condition that you help me solve a riddle."

Tobit nodded and the king told him the conundrum.

"Yes, I can help you," said Tobit, "but let us discuss the answer outside. Having been so long confined, I need to stand under open sky." The king followed the freed prisoner, trying not to seem too eager.

Stretching his arms out and looking upward, Tobit commanded, "Bring me three identical troughs. Fill one with oats, one with wheat, and one with barley. The horse that eats the oats was foaled in the morning, the horse that eats the wheat was foaled at noon, and the horse that eats the barley was foaled at night."

That evening, the messenger of Uman left dumbfounded. Reaching home, he was at once deprived of the opportunity to deliver a third enigma, for as soon as the sultan saw his servant return without a thirteenth royal bride, the ambassador was thrown into prison.

#

For a day, the Sultan of Uman found nothing to do but sulk. His wicked servant had failed to ensure political dominance through the only eligible Pannonian princess. On day two, the sultan's mood became so sour that he sent for his auntie.

Auntie Maximilla was a housekeeper for three mountain dragons who gave her leave to go, on the condition that there was plenty left in the pot for them to sup on.

"Lizardly landlords?" interrupted Wynona. "Is that how you humans describe us? Are we a joke?"

"You commanded me, ma'am, to leave out nothing, to tell tales just as my mother and her mother told them," answered Hilda, trembling inside.

Wynona's eyes narrowed but she made no answer.

"Humans really call us lizards ..." mused Jolene, in rhetorical wonderment.

"Well, it is pitiful," said Wynona to her companions, "but proof that the young one is not changing things for her audience, just telling as she heard it. I had half a mind to eat her but must admit she is doing precisely as I asked."

"At least dragons have entered the story," added Jolene, "however ridiculous and inaccurate."

"I wonder what Auntie Maximilla left in the pot for her masters," said Loretta.

"Shall I continue?" asked Hilda.

"Do!" said all three dragons together.

"It is not King Wittlesbach who has answered your riddles," said Auntie Maximilla when her nephew told his story. "The King of Pannonia is far too stupid, and his daughter has just begun to use her mind. I will consult the dragon's eye, for another soul is interfering with the age-old forces that govern the battle of wits between Pannonia and Uman."

"Dragon's eye?" said Wynona, cutting Hilda off before she found her rhythm again. "What the frack is a dragon's eye?"

"It will be explained soon, I promise, if I may continue ..." Hilda answered, almost showing her frustration. She had never told stories under duress before and constant interruption was wearing on her nerves.

"Go on, go on," said Wynona, "I'll try to bite my bifurcated tongue."

Auntie Maximilla left, and returned four days later with an answer. It was a difficult and puzzling one, but at least it gave a hint of direction. Of course, Auntie had to present it as a rhyme for, though she had settled her lot in life as a maidservant for dragons, she had always wanted to be a full-fledged sorceress. Rhymes were as close as she could come to conjuring spells—

*She loves a youth from far away
Who solved your riddles, both
one and two
Her father will trade his soul
for peace
Insist the lad be sent to you*

The sultan, a stickler for grammar, wanted to stop and insist that Auntie Maximilla clarify whose soul was being traded for peace, the king's or the youth's. But he thought it wise to spare the poetess's feelings and followed the context clues. He sent a message that very day demanding a certain mysterious youth be sent from Pannonia to Uman for the sake of cultural exchange.

By the time King Wittlesbach received the message from the Sultan of Uman (noting with interest that it was not delivered by the same messenger), he no longer hated Tobit. In fact, he was growing rather attached to the young man. Attached enough, in fact, that he did not want to part with him. But King Wittlesbach had just quit shuddering from his daughter's hysterical description of being chained in a harem, and there was a degree of relief that the price of peace was Tobit, not Pasha.

Tobit read King Wittlesbach troubled face and stepped forward. "Do not fear, sire," he said, "to Uman I am destined to go. Only send with me two more youths near my age and stature, and dress us all alike. I assure you, either the two of them will return to you wiser, or all three of us shall come back to Pannonia unscathed."

The sword dazzled itself spinning in approval. Princess Pasha swooned.

Wynona and Jolene snickered.

#

When Tobit and the two youths arrived in Uman, there was none to point out who was whom. The servant messenger, twice sent to Pannonia, had perished in the sultan's prison. Something about forgetting to feed him was the excuse given by the warden.

Along their journey, Tobit trained his companions in mimicry. By the time they reached their destination, all three youths' mannerisms, gestures, and timber of voice were so alike that Auntie Maximilla could not choose which young man she needed to condemn. The dragon's eye she claimed to consult was no more than old woman's intuition (and the occasional favor of her landlords, who threw her a tip when their supper was particularly satisfying).

"Aah," interjected Wynona. "The dynamic is making a bit more sense. Go on."

"Does this story footnote the recipes?" said Loretta.

It was Jolene's turn then to jam her elbow in a sister dragon's ribs.

When the three young men entered the sultan's throne room, he made a sign for them to come near. They all bowed low in greeting, in one motion, at the same angle. He asked them about their journey and they answered in one voice. That night at dinner the three sat together, rose together, chewed and swallowed together in complete synchronization. It was unnerving. The sultan could not detect any difference between the three youths; neither could he bring himself to kill or hold all three captive.

Noting his auntie's loss of bravado, the sultan felt even more irritated that he had allowed his ambassador to perish in prison. The emotion bordered on remorse, and the feeling, so new to him, was difficult to process. The three guests were playing the part of "cultural exchange" to the "T." What excuse could be found for harming them?

The next morning the sultan, now tired of the whole affair, began thinking perhaps twelve wives were enough and that the Kingdom of Uman needed no further expansion. He allowed Auntie Maximilla to make one final address to the three guests before he sent them on their way. He expected her to shout threats or weave rhymes, but Auntie did neither. Auntie Maximilla decided instead to gamble.

"Three honored guests," she began. "By spells and charms I had heard of an amazing youth in the land of Pannonia. I asked my nephew, the sultan, to bid him come as a personal favor to me. I cannot tell you how surprised and pleased I am to find there is not one superior male specimen from the west, but three." Auntie bowed low to Tobit and his friends and went on, "Three noble youths, would you help an old woman? For the problem I face is threefold and you, a threefold solution, bode well."

Tobit pricked his ears, paying close attention to her every syllable, gesture, and inflection. His companions did their best to mirror him. Auntie, who was equally attentive, thought she saw that only one of the three youths' swords shook in its scabbard as she continued her appeal. "My house is infested by three dragons and, though it has been within my power to tame them, neither I nor any man of Uman can chase them out. I have grown weary of living and sleeping, cooking and cleaning, all the while in constant danger. I begged my nephew for help and have found favor in his eyes. He, the Sultan of Uman, has agreed to live in peace with Pannonia, not asking for daughters, nor lands, nor sending endless riddles to vex your king if ... and only if ... the three dragons are slain."

Two things occurred next, one just as Auntie expected and one to her great surprise. First, which youth was the one sought after became crystal clear. Tobit stood taller while his companions shrank. Second, Tobit called out, with no hesitation nor excuse for delay, "Show me the great lizards! I will defeat them, one against three."

"Now that," exclaimed Loretta, "is a clever woman! Getting her problems solved with someone else's brawn. Auntie is playing the men like violins! Next, she'll rile up her housemates and send them out to do her dirty work! Of course, I wish she wasn't using dragons as pawns in her clever scheme, but what a woman!"

"Don't trust a human story, Loretta dear," countered Wynona, "It rarely turns out well for our kind. We are here to learn. Like relations between Uman and Pannonia, it is a cultural exchange."

"Humph!" said Loretta. "It's three dragons against one neophyte."

"Shall I continue?" asked Hilda.

"Do," said all three together.

Auntie Maximilla prostrated herself before the sultan to show gratitude, but smiled widely under her matted hair. The youth she was after was exposed and, in his eagerness, as good as dead. The sultan shook his head in admiration of both Tobit's

naive bravery and his aunt's subtle craft. To assuage what was left of his remorse, he ordered the two sidekicks to be well supplied, packed off, and sent home. Two out of three returning would send the necessary message, and leave the Pannonian king shaking in his cheaply made second-rate boots.

[6] Tobit's Sword Unsheathed

*Distract the pain
Beyond all reach
Pass the time
and do not teach
O frabjous day! Calloob! Callay!
Just entertain
and do not preach*

Auntie Maximilla herself guided Tobit to her little home deep inside the neighboring forest. She had him wait just outside her garden gate on a patch of encroaching crabgrass, perfectly suited to be set aflame. She proceeded inside, promising to send the dragons out to meet him in short order.

Closing the door behind her, Maximilla called to the great serpents Meeney, Miney, and Mo, "Remember how you promised to raise my salary if I brought you fresh knight? Well, peek out the window and see one young and tender, waiting with eagerness to meet the three of you."

"Are you sure her name is not Aunt Eeny?" quipped Wynona with a small smile.

"Hush! It's finally getting good," said Loretta, licking her lips.

"I'm telling it as I heard it," said Hilda, and she pressed on.

Meeney, Miney, and Mo peered out the window and smiled. Identical sets of jagged glimmering teeth flashed in anticipation.

"Remember to share," admonished Auntie Maximilla with a chuckle as they slithered out to meet the waiting guest. Tobit saw the dragons coming, undulating and flexing, mighty to behold.

He did not budge, he did not blink, and when three heads darted forth in the same split second, so did Tobit's sword. Each head was cut off in the quick succession.

"Well, I guess it was an actual sword after all!" exclaimed Jolene.

The other two listeners held their tongues, but Hilda noted the dropped jaws. She grew worried.

"Shall I continue? The story is kind of upsetting for a dragon audience ... I can change it if you'd like."

"Do NOT!" screamed Wynona, "change a single detail! I will not flinch in the face of human fabrications. Give it to us straight, like I asked!"

Hilda was sure she saw a little spurt of flame with the outburst. Her heart skipped a fearful beat but she proceeded on.

The feat of daring happened with such speed that Auntie Maximilla, who had gone to the kitchen to put on the kettle, did not notice until an eerie silence invaded. She did not hear the thump, thump, thump as the bodies of Meeney, Miney, and Mo fell to ground. Not a blade of crabgrass was harmed. The crashing carcasses fell instead upon the newly blooming begonias, smashing them. Maximilla did not see Tobit gather the dragon's heads and skewer them like shish kababs.

Neither the sultan nor his aunt knew that Tobit slipped silently away to the city streets of Uman. There he traded a single dragon's tooth for a fine suit of clothes and a royal charger upon which to ride home. They did, however, discover within the week that three dragon's heads were set upon poles at the border between Pannonia and Uman. No army dared cross over as long as Meeney, Miney, and Mo looked down, and dragon's heads take two generations to decompose.

"Is that true?" asked Jolene, looking at her fellow listeners. Hilda opened her mouth ready to once again defend the veracity of the tale, then realized it was not to her that the question was addressed.

"Our body parts are valuable in human commerce," said Loretta.

"I mean about the decay," said Jolene. "Dragon's heads on poles for generations ..."

"It seems," said Wynona, "We can cull a few lessons from the fable: one—dragons, dead and alive, strike fear in the heart of man. Two—dragon remains weigh more with peoples than does gold. As for decomposition, save the question for Geraldine. She will know."

All three listeners sat quiet for a long spell. Hilda broke the silence at last, continuing on as if there had been no upset.

#

As the days slipped by and Tobit did not return, Princess Pasha passed her nights in despair. When his two fellow travelers crept through the palace gates without him, her tears turned to resolve. That very day, she began to pester her father to give her troops to command. Surprised but proud, King Wittlesbach capitulated.

In front of a thin band of soldiers Princess Pasha rode, dressed in uniform.

“That is a blatant modernization,” interjected Wynona.

“I tell it the way my grandmother told it,” said Hilda.

Wynona waved a backhanded claw for her to proceed. Hilda did, but noted all three listeners seemed disheartened, less zealous. She feared her audience was growing disengaged.

The princess had not gone more than ten miles when Tobit came riding forth to meet her. She lifted up her eyes to see the man she loved back from the dead. Springing off her horse she ran on foot to meet him. Tobit swept Pasha in front of him on his charger and the two rode back in triumph.

Upon their arrival, King Wittlesbach declared that Tobit would be his son-in-law as soon as wedding preparations could be made. He also declared for himself an early retirement from the throne. Tobit would be king when he returned from his honeymoon.

Three days later, the wedding ceremony was performed. That night, out together under the stars, Tobit turned to Pasha and said, “O love of my heart, would you like to know my secret now?”

And Pasha laughed until she cried, saying, “I had forgotten, my king, that I ever wanted to know.”

“I will tell you anyhow. And when my mother arrives this spring—for I have sent for her—you will make known to her what I am about to tell you. She surpassed all in her curiosity regarding the matter.”

Queen Pasha nodded, surprised she did not mind in the least about the coming of a mother-in-law. Her husband continued, “I dreamt when I was a little boy, sleeping in the sun out in my mother’s garden, that I should become King of Pannonia. If my mother had not beaten me to know the secret, it would never have come true.”

And so the story ended. Human audiences would have clapped.

Hilda received no adulation, only shocked silence.

She stood and curtsied, asking, “May I bring my guests more refreshments?”

All three heads shook “no.”

“Well,” Hilda said, “as Miss Wynona insightfully pointed out, I, a poor girl-human, have to eat much more often than dragons do. So if you will excuse me ...”

All three waved her away towards the cabin.

Halfway to the door, a voice called out through the darkening twilight, “But we insist you return once you dine. We require more stories.”

~~~to be continued in issue #45, 2023~~~