



MOONLIGHTING

by

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Deep in the Realm of Cyberia, during the illustrious Reign of the Three Monarchs, a lovely queen encountered a hideous problem one moonlit evening - just outside the gates of her modest castle.

It could not be ignored.

The dragon's fierce pacing shook the ground. The flames that shot out of the beast's nostrils and cavernous mouth occasionally caused the moat waters to boil. At various unpredictable intervals, the creature would take flight, circling the castle repeatedly before finally landing with tremendous force right across from the raised drawbridge.

Queen Jeanette and her dinner guests were trapped. The party of six stood at the banquet hall's long windows, watching and waiting for the "problem" to go away – but it wouldn't.

"Dragons only eat once a month, you know," said Sir Francis. "He could hang around here for weeks."

“She – it’s a female.” Sir Artemus gestured towards the beast. “See the red crest on her head?”

“Red crest?” The Bloody Baron (so called due to his battlefield reputation) pushed Sir Artemus aside to get a better look. “Doomed – we’re all doomed.”

“Surely, my friend,” Count Alfashari said, “it is far too soon for such pessimism. Perhaps the recitation of a melodious poem would calm the beast.”

The Baron’s smile was grim. “It’s been really nice knowing you, Count.”

“Gentlemen, please, we must think rationally.” Queen Jeanette stopped pacing and addressed her close friend.

“Lord Garrison, do you have any idea why we’ve been targeted by this creature?”

“It’s quite obvious, really,” Lord Garrison replied. “The dragon wants something, and I don’t think it’s a meal.”

“Like I said before – we’re all doomed.” The Bloody Baron let out a tragic moan.

“Only one of us, perhaps,” Sir Francis said, staring suspiciously at the Baron.

The Gatekeeper appeared in the doorway to the banquet hall. “Permission to enter and speak freely, Your Highness?”

Queen Jeanette nodded. “Of course, dear fellow.”

“The beast is determined to wait us out. I’m here to offer you my services as an invincible dragonslayer.”

The Baron sniffed. “You can’t even spell the word. You expect us to believe you can save the day – or night, as it were?”

Sir Artemus snickered.

“Gentlemen, let the man explain.” The Queen’s look of disapproval silenced them.

“Your Highness, beg pardon, but I was afraid you’d think me overqualified for this position if I admitted my true fame and calling – which, alas, does not pay enough these days.” The Gatekeeper removed his shabby clothing, revealing a gleaming sword, armor made of shiny, green scales, and a strange necklace. “As long as I wear this

sacred crystal from the secret mines of Mount Arial, I cannot be defeated. The dragon will die.”

Flames suddenly shot up past the windows. Everybody jumped.

“Bravo, dear boy.” Count Alfashari smiled and clapped his hands together. “I knew a hero would appear to save us.”

The Queen cleared her throat. “Gentlemen, I also have a secret to reveal: I’m not just a monarch, I’m an activist. In fact, I’m the president of R-PEC, Royalty for the Protection of Endangered Creatures. We cannot kill this dragon.”

A moment of stunned silence fell over the great hall – broken only by the sound of the dragon’s frantic pacing.

“I thought she only liked cats,” Lord Garrison mumbled.

“I hope I survive to write my memoirs,” Sir Artemus said. “This is the most exciting night of my life.”

“We’re doomed – all of us, doomed.”

Sir Francis punched Sir Artemus in the jaw. “Oh, sorry, old chap. I was aiming for the Baron.”

“Come now,” said the Queen, “I’m sure we can think of another solution.”

“To be sure, yes,” the Count replied. “To have no hope is illogical.”

Lord Garrison sighed. “I suppose it’s up to me then. If you all must know, usually at this time of night, I’m teaching wizardry at the School for Wayward Fairies.”

There was another moment of stunned silence.

Lord Garrison continued. “I hate being boastful, and didn’t want anyone to think they were beneath my company, so I kept quiet. In truth, I’m the most powerful wizard who ever lived in this Realm.”

The Gatekeeper quietly left the room.

“You think you know a person,” muttered the Queen, shaking her head. “Can you make this dragon go away?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. The beast is enchanted – it’s not a dragon at all. I could tell right away by its hazy aura. I shall have to perform a de-mystifying spell to return the creature to its true form.”

The Bloody Baron turned a pale shade of green. “Is that really necessary? Couldn’t you just transport it to another dimension?”

“Look here, Baron,” Sir Francis said; “it’s obvious to all of us now that you know what this dragon wants – and who it really is. Confess.”

The Baron swallowed hard. “I couldn’t marry her – she was a redheaded shrew. But there was that bloody contract, you see, and I couldn’t get out of it.”

Sir Artemus grinned. “You should have come to me. I practice the dark side of the law in the wee hours of the morning – never lost a case.”

“What did you do to your fiancée, Baron?” Queen Jeanette asked, frowning.

“It wasn’t me, actually. I just happened to meet this old witch in a pub, and one thing led to another and then ‘poof.’ My problem disappeared – or so I thought. I ought to ask for my money back.”

“If you live long enough,” Sir Francis offered cheerfully.

Lord Garrison was already working on the de-mystifying reversal spell, using a wand he had conjured out of thin air.

The dragon quieted down as the drawbridge was lowered. A few moments later, there was an intimidating knock at the front gate.

The Bloody Baron fainted dead away as everyone rushed to the windows.

THE END