Booms and Brooms – We Fight Your Fires

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Teusenburg – build right at the foot of the great Teusenberg, with its speckled cow pastures, lonely spruces, and rock crevices draped in morose clouds – has everything a proper town needs. A baker selling poppy buns so delicious that wars are rumoured to have been fought over them. A recently failed revolution against the aristocratic leadership in the hopes of establishing an independent parliament. And a giant, red dragon is currently setting the school building on fire.

"This should have happened a few decades ago, back when I still went there, eh Mädchen?" Hector Broom says to his favourite cart horse, Fleckchen.

The head of the Teusenburg's fire department, 'Booms and Brooms', leans against the fire engine, safely stationed away from any stray sparks on the Gutachsbrücke opposite the school. The rest of his troop, three firefighters stacked up next to each other like organ pipes on the railing of the bridge, are enjoying their premature midday break.

"I count 23," Hector tells Maria Brecht as the last group of children is herded over the river Ernach. Brecht is the headmaster of the school, a tiny, skittish woman with thin brown hair sticking out from her head like mouse whiskers.

"23, yes, yes, that should be all of them," Brecht mutters. She leans closer to Hector conspiratorially. "What a shame that it had to hit us, of all people. And just before election day. We were about to finish the flower wreaths when the dragon bells went off. You don't suppose they can be saved?"

Hector shrugs. “No. Except, of course, the knights break their own record again. They’re getting rather good at this. Last week’s dragon didn’t even get to finish torching the mill before they took his head off.”

They both look to the two knights who are cautiously approaching the dragon, crossbows at the ready. Hector doesn’t care much for dragons, especially since they started terrorising Teusenburg a few months ago. The last time a dragon had come down the mountain far enough to munch on some cows on the upper pastures had been during the time Hector’s grandfather led the fire brigade. But now, they’re getting them almost weekly, with increasingly ruinous consequences.

Even so, Hector has to admit that the specimen before them is rather breathtaking. Her long, thin body glides over the ground in a fascinating interplay of muscles, magic, and pure will, like a strong current in an otherwise calm river, erupting to the sides into eight twirling legs and a set of wings.

Brecht doesn’t seem to share his fascination. She quickly turns her attention back to Hector, impatiently tugging on his right sleeve. “Can’t you just take your troop, quickly hop in to collect the wreaths, and come back? I promised Mayor Schilling they would be finished in time.”

One of the knights shoots the first arrow. It bounces off the dragon’s thick scales and almost hits the second knight in the face.

“No can do,” Hector says, eyes fixed contentedly on the knights who are now being chased around the school grounds by the dragon’s waving tail.

One of the firefighters, Nora, leans over to them. She is the youngest member of the brigade and is blessed with a slightly worrisome asthma condition, keeping her from coming near anything that smokes, which fires tend to do quite a lot. She’s great at handling equipment, though, with her almost two metres in height

and a never-seizing enthusiasm for complex machinery.

Nora recites dutifully: "Article 11 of our codex states: If the dragon is still alive and torching the town when the fire brigade starts to firefight he might torch the fire brigade, hence we wait until the dragon is dead."

They came up with that article last week. Hector has the tentative suspicion that it is the only one any of his personnel have ever memorised.

"So what?" Brecht asks.

"We wait," says another firefighter, Kapitän Berchwald, curtly. "And when the dragon is dead, we extinguish the fire." He is a small man and pale as parchment. Hector blames it on the old pick helmet the Kapitän won't take off.

In the distance, the dragon howls deafeningly as her left wing is pierced by a spear mid-flight. She starts lurching from side to side and barrels into a big church tower down the road from the school. It topples down like a sandcastle, burying the poor beast underneath. The crowd stares in stunned silence. It had taken two centuries and three tragically killed stonemasons to build this church.

The only one who doesn't seem phased is Brecht. "I think your article 11 just became futile," she states dryly.

Hector sighs and examines what is left of the school – a few scorched walls, sticking out feebly between the smoking debris. He highly doubts they will be able to find the flowers.

"Thank you for your patience. We will be doing our duty now!" he tells Brecht and waves his troop over. "Let's have a look then!"

The Kapitän gives the last member of their little crew a hearty shove, waking them up from a drooling nap. Clay, as they call themselves, is lanky and dressed exceedingly improperly, the orange fire brigade shirt barely visible underneath a collection of

badges they never earned. Nora gets to the back of their little procession, taking Fleckchen and the fire engine with her.

The brigade stops a few metres away from the school so Nora can safely prepare the fire engine. Hector leaves Clay and the Kapitän with her and carefully approaches the ember that is still crackling between the bricks and wooden stakes of the ruin, greeting him with the familiar smell of charred memories.

"Hello," he introduces himself quietly. "I'm Hector. And what might you be?"

At first glance, this fire looks like it's already defeated, stripped of any nourishment after having evaporated most flammable objects in the simmering breath of the dragon. But dragon fire is sneaky and cunning. Hector considers taking a few steps closer, just to see if it will react to him. That's when he sees something moving underneath the dust and rubble. For a horrible second, he thinks they forgot a child. But then, a long tail bolts free, covered in soot.

"There's something alive in there!" Hector shouts back.

"A cat?" Clay asks.

Hector has watched them run into a collapsing building because they had heard a meow from the second floor. Before he can stop them, they scurry past him towards the creature, using broken pieces of the walls as stepping stones.

"Clay, get back here, or you will be cleaning Fleckchen's box for the next month!" Hector warns sharply.

Clay stops dead in their tracks, swaying back and forth as they try to stabilise themselves on a small rock.

"That's a fucking baby dragon," they huff. Clay turns to Hector, grinning. "Can we keep him?"

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The name of the baby dragon is Paul. Clay won't budge on that.

When they found Paul, the brigade had been almost unanimously in favour of calling the knights over to take care of him, but Clay, already head over heels in love, begged them to make Paul their firefighter mascot instead. Hector had been sceptical. There's enough fire in Teusenburg, even without a pet whose main form of communication is setting the furniture aflame.

But then, the dragon had turned around, looked at Hector with sleepy coal eyes and stretched his wings with a squeaky yawn, bringing the thing he was nibbling on the whole time into view – a beautiful amulet, cast out of solid gold into the shape of an intricate tree, with little gemstones in the form of hazelnuts embedded into its branches. The mayor's sigil. No one had dared to take it away from the baby, so Hector had finally given in and let Clay take the dragon back to the 'Brooms and Booms' headquarters, where he is currently chewing on Hector's favourite office chair.

"Clay, tell Paul to stop!" Hector commands as the first leg snaps in half with a pitiful scrunch.

"But he's teething," says Clay, muffled by a mouth full of cheese sandwich. As if that will make Hector's heart ache any less at every crack of the poor chair. It is a pretty thing, with flower ornaments along the back and a purple cushion for his cranky back. His husband, Anton, made it for him.

"I know what that is!" shouts the Kapitän from the other side of the office.

"Teething?" Clay asks.

"The amulet!"

As soon as Paul dropped his treasure in favour of Hector's chair, the Kapitän revealed a decade-old obsession with fine jewellery to his astonished colleagues and vanished behind his desk, where he keeps a stack of old books on the history of goldsmithing.

Now, the Kapitän emerges triumphantly from his file dive, waving around a piece of paper covered so densely in small black letters that it looks like someone tried to immortalise a particularly busy swarm of thunderflies.

"What's it say?" Nora asks.

The Kapitän holds up the amulet, clearing his throat nervously.

"The legends say that when the lindworm Fafner was slain by Siegfried, a few of his tears fell on the ground and seeped deep into the heart of the soil, where they hardened to gold. You can recognise Fafner's gold by one thing – its dragon curse. When you hold it into sunlight –"

He tilts his hand with the amulet so the sunrays peeking in through one of the dusty windows graze over it. Immediately, the golden tree turns pitch black, incinerating into an ashy skeleton. The Kapitän moves the amulet back into the shadows, and the gold returns, as shiny as ever.

"– Fafner's spirit awakes, lonely and tormented in his golden grave. So he calls to all the dragons close enough to hear him to come and take him with them."

"But why would someone take this gold into a school?" Clay asks. "Or, for that matter, bring it into a town built on the foot of a mountain that is crawling with dragons?"

"There are records on the current possessor of this gold," the Kapitän mentions hesitantly. "It belongs to a family from Teusenburg."

"Oh," says Clay, looking like the cheese in their tummy turned sour all of a sudden. "It's no accident that the amulet looks just like Schilling's sigil, is it?"

Hector reaches for the amulet and turns to Paul. The dragon stopped tormenting his chair a while ago, judging from the three remaining legs that are still firmly attached to the seat, and is

staring at them intently. Or rather, he is staring at the amulet in Hector's hand.

"This is what you are all here for, isn't it?" Hector asks softly.

Paul knocks a few cups off the kitchen cabinet as he wags his tail.

"You can have it back," Hector promises. "And we will get you back to your family. I'm sure you have a father out there, somewhere."

Hector moves his hand towards the window, letting the sunlight once again darken the metal. He barely has time to marvel at the magic before Paul darts forward, climbs onto his legs, and wraps himself around his arm like a living bracelet, his head nuzzled into his palm against the amulet. The little dragon snores contentedly.

Behind Hector, Nora snorts. "He likes you."

Hector lost his best friend in the riots six months ago. He and Hanna had been marching up to the castle with the rest of Teusenburg's people, like every Monday at three in the afternoon, to demand the establishment of a citizen parliament. She had been complaining about her work while they were walking. The cobblestones that had been delivered were grey, even though she had ordered russet. They had already built half the street in russet; how stupid would it look if they suddenly switched to grey? At that point, someone in front of them started singing, soon joined by the small trumpet band that usually performed in the Adlerstube. Hanna stopped her grumbling and dragged Hector into a dance.

An hour later, she died in Hector's arms.

Three days later, Anton walked into Hector's prison cell to take him home.

A week later, the king announced that Teusenburg was to be

the first town in the realm that got to vote for a mayor. They had elected their local judge, Schilling, a pleasant if not a bit pontifical man.

And after five more days, the first dragon arrived and set a joinery aflame.

Hector can't help but shudder as he walks past the knights guarding the entrance of the castle. He can't see their faces behind the grilles of their helmets, only dark eyes following each of his steps. They all look the same, like the motionless eyes that had watched him as he had knelt on the russet cobblestones, begging Hanna to open her eyes.

He steps into the courtyard, where most of the town has already gathered. An orchestra provides a stimulating background tune. Servants in intricately worked blue uniforms are walking among the guests with grilled pepper skewers and wine, making the townspeople who are flocking to the long tables, which ache under their burden of strange fruits and steaming pots, look like chickens in a peacock pen.

Nora comes up to him, a glass of pear schnapps in her hand, beaming from ear to ear.

"How did everything go?" Hector asks.

"As smooth as fresh butter. Paul's really fond of strawberries, did you know that? I thought dragons only ate meat."

"And chair legs," Hector sighs.

An old man, draped from head to toe in royal red, steps onto the stage in the middle of the courtyard, accentuated by a loud – if slightly off-key – trumpet fanfare.

"Citizens of Teusenburg," he begins with a raspy voice. "As representative of King Heinrich IV of Turnland und die Margariten-

heiden, it is my pleasure to announce the re-election of Mayor Thomas Schilling."

The crowd claps as Mayor Schilling enters the stage. He's a slightly stocky man with a steadily vanishing hairline, evened out by his sinfully expensive velvet suit. Closely behind follow four men and women dressed like plum tomatoes – the royal delegation, sent to oversee the kingdom's first tentative dip into democracy.

"My dear friends," Mayor Schilling begins his acceptance speech. "I am humbled by your trust in me. I will do my best to lead this town, and each and every one of you, into the glorious future we deserve."

As the crowd claps again, Hector makes his way to the front of the gathering. The mayor sees him coming and pulls the corners of his mouth up to an embracing smile, welcoming him on stage.

"In the name of Booms and Brooms, I would like to be the first to congratulate you on your re-election, Mayor Schilling. As someone who has made it his profession, let me just say, you certainly know how to put out a fire."

A few members of the royal delegation giggle politely.

"I think we can all attest to how tirelessly you have worked for Teusenburg," Hector continues, turning towards his people. "First, you had to oversee the reconstruction of the districts that were destroyed in the riots. And now, we're being attacked by dragons almost every week. What a streak of bad luck, but so far you have mastered it all."

The mayor steps up beside him. He moves to put an amicable arm around Hector's shoulder, but he is a few centimetres too small to reach the other side, so he pats his back instead.

"Well, thank you so much for your kind words, Hector. But I can't possibly take all the credit for that. As I am sure you are all

aware, the knights have been an indispensable protection for our beloved Teusenburg. I think we might just be on a good path to find our way back together and forgive each other. And let me tell you, it fills my heart with joy to see that!"

The royal delegation erupts in enraptured applause. A few of the townspeople join in, hesitantly. Most are eyeing the cake buffet behind the stage. Mayor Schilling gives Hector's back a soft shove, his sign to get back down to the people.

Hector smiles. "I wasn't quite finished yet. I didn't just come here with nice words. We got you a gift, too. Something to remind you of the difficult times you have led us through."

The mayor's eyes narrow. He's catching up now. Hector can practically hear the gears in his head starting to turn as he tries to figure out what Hector is doing. He surely must have heard that the amulet wasn't found in the remains of the last fire. And now, a fireman stands before him, refusing to leave the stage.

Mayor Schilling pulls on Hector's arm. "Maybe you can give it to me privately," he suggests. "So I can thank you properly."

Hector frees himself with a firm tug and pulls something out of his pocket, enclosed by his fist. The crowd leans forward.

"I hope the king paid you well," Hector says. "The next time you betray your people, maybe don't leave your family sigil behind on the crime scene."

He opens his fist. The mayor's eyes widen as he recognises the amulet.

"You madman!" he spits out. "Get that away from the sun!" He jerkily reaches out to cover the gold with his own hands, but Hector simply raises his arm. In his hand, the hazel tree withers. From the fruit table in the back, strawberries still smeared over his snout, Paul flutters towards him and wraps himself around Hector's arm, sucking on his thumb with a pleasantly warm snake

tongue.

And somewhere behind the castle, not very far away, a dragon father roars for his child.