

Applied Draconics

Dramatis Personae

King Crispin
Queen Fenella
Princess Aurelia
Princess Amethyst
Prince Percival
Lord Mountpleasant, Chancellor
Harry the Messenger
Oscar the Bard
Sir Giles Dunbar, knight errant
Sir Malcolm Venables, ditto
Sir Galahad Blakeley-Norris, ditto
Eustace the Communal Squire
Alphonse Mountpleasant, son of the Chancellor
Baron Balliwell
Squire Basham
Glxpnx, a demon of the Abyss
Doris Bellwether, apothecary and probably also witch
ffinch, her assistant
The Dragon

ACT I

Scene 1. The throne room. KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, and LORD MOUNTPLEASANT are present. HARRY rushes in, looking ruffled.

HARRY Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!

KING You know, Harry, this isn't the town square. No need to shout, don't you know. There are only five of us here.

HARRY Oh. Sorry, Your Majesty. Well, er... I'm afraid I've got some bad news.

LORD M Oh. Peasants revolting, by any chance?

HARRY Certainly not, My Lord! Some of them are very good friends of mine. Fine upstanding people...

LORD M I meant revolting as in...

QUEEN Yes, yes, we know, Mountpleasant. Throwing off the yoke and all that sort of nonsense. But as it happens, we are not inclined to yoke them in the first place.

LORD M Ah, yes, about that. I do feel that if Your Majesties could see your way to raising a few taxes, a great deal more could be done. Such as, for instance, employing a standing army.

KING Why do we need an army?

QUEEN And even if we did, couldn't it sit down now and again?

KING We do perfectly well just hiring people in when we need them. I mean, you know, there are those three knight errants...

QUEEN Knights errant, dear.

KING Yes, well, them. And Eustace. And the peasants always come out with their pitchforks if there's a threat...

LORD M Three knights errant plus a squire, no matter how valiant, do not an army make, Your Majesties.

AURELIA *[clears throat]*

QUEEN How long have you had that cough, Aurelia dear?

AURELIA It isn't a cough. I am trying to attract your attention to the fact that Harry is still standing here patiently waiting to give you his news.

HARRY Thank you, Your Highness. There's a dragon.

AMETHYSTA dragon? Where?

HARRY It's been reported just inside the southern border of the kingdom, but it is apparently heading northwards.

KING Oh dear. This is serious. What is it doing? Ah, no, silly question; I assume it's rampaging in the standard manner. Burning villages, eating livestock, playing havoc with the standing corn, and so forth.

QUEEN It's a little early for standing corn, dear.

HARRY It doesn't appear to have burned any actual villages yet, Your Majesties, but it has burned a few isolated buildings. Let me check... ah, yes. One

cottage, fortunately unoccupied at the time. Three barns. A farm outbuilding. And, er, a privy.

LORD M Speaking of which...

KING Yes, yes, Mountpleasant, go by all means.

LORD M No, no, Your Majesty, you misunderstand me. I merely wished to remind Your Majesty to sign the minutes of the Privy Council.

KING Oh. Yes. I'm sure we should replace Lord Fairfax as secretary. I can barely read a word he scrawls.

AURELIA Lord Mountpleasant, we are trying to talk about a dragon here! Please save your political machinations until that matter is properly resolved.

LORD M Machinations, Your Highness? Why, what can you be thinking?

AMETHYSTI want to hear about the dragon. We could get Oscar to write a tragic song about it.

KING Never mind tragic songs. So far we have half a dozen cases of arson. Harry, has it eaten anything it shouldn't?

HARRY I'm afraid so, Your Majesty. It's been making somewhat free with the local livestock.

QUEEN Well, then, it's obvious what we ought to do.

KING It is, dear?

QUEEN Of course it is. We just find a champion to kill the dragon. Standard procedure.

KING But the champion would want a reward. And there's no guarantee that the dragon has treasure.

QUEEN Do you really think I haven't thought of that, Crispin? We simply offer him Aurelia's hand in marriage.

AURELIA *Hey!!*

QUEEN Again. Standard procedure. You kill the dragon, you get to marry the Princess. And honestly, Aurelia, it's high time you were married.

AMETHYST Does that mean I get Aurelia's room?

AURELIA No, it does not, because I am not marrying some random dragon-slayer. I mean, what if it's Sir Giles Dunbar?

AMETHYST He's kind of pretty, though.

KING Sir Giles is from a very old and distinguished family...

AURELIA And he won't be continuing it unless he actually starts showing some interest in matrimony. He seems to be very happily single.

HARRY What if it's a woman?

AMETHYST Huh?

AURELIA Harry's right. There's nothing to say a woman can't slay a dragon.

QUEEN Um... well, I suppose if that happened she could have Percival...

AURELIA And what if Percy doesn't like her?

QUEEN Aurelia, dear, there is no need to make difficulties.

AURELIA I'm not making them. I'm simply pointing them out.

LORD M May I make a suggestion here?

QUEEN Only if it's actually something to do with the dragon.

LORD M Her Highness is extremely intelligent. I can well understand that she would not be satisfied with a husband who demonstrated nothing more than sheer brawn. Therefore, might it not be advisable to specify that the successful candidate should not necessarily *slay* the dragon, but simply *neutralise* it?

KING What are you driving at, Mountpleasant?

LORD M Simply this, Your Majesty. What you actually require is for the dragon to be prevented from further, ah, forays, and as long as this is done, it need not be fatal to the dragon in question. This does two things. By opening it up to any method, you have the maximum chance of getting what you want; plus, by allowing the use of intelligence as well as simple strength, you ensure that Her Highness has a greater chance of getting what *she* wants.

AURELIA Oddly, I'm in favour of this, Lord Mountpleasant. What are you up to?

LORD M I am but a humble servant of Your Highness' illustrious family. Your Highness wounds me with such suspicion.

AMETHYST Watch him, Aurelia. He's after you himself. He plans to go and talk the dragon to death.

LORD M Oh, Your Highness! I assure you, I have only the purest affection for both you and your sister. Think of me as a benevolent uncle.

QUEEN I see no reason we shouldn't take Mountpleasant's suggestion. After all, if we can simply be rid of the dragon without killing it, it will make things much easier. There's never anything about how to bury a dead dragon in the lore, and I imagine it's not an easy task.

KING All right. Fair enough. Harry! Go and issue a proclamation. And stick up a few notices while you're at it, there's a good chap.

HARRY Right you are, Your Majesty. So it's definitely "neutralise" and not merely "slay"?

KING That's right, yes. Um... can you spell that?

HARRY Yes, Your Majesty.

Scene 2. Another room in the castle. OSCAR is within. HARRY enters, again in a hurry.

HARRY Oscar!

OSCAR Ah, Harriet.

HARRY Harry! Remember? Walls have ears round here.

OSCAR Oh... ah... sorry. How are you enjoying the messengering?

HARRY Quite a lot, except that I'm rather fed up of having to pretend I have a Y chromosome in order to do it.

OSCAR I'm impressed that nobody's noticed.

HARRY Oh, people see what they want to see. You walk around in a codpiece and everyone assumes you have a bona fide piece of cod in it. Actually I keep my knitting in there... but that's not what I need to talk to you about. I've come to tell you that you have a chance to marry Princess Aurelia!

OSCAR Really?! How? I'm only a bard now!

HARRY Yes, but you're a *clever* bard. And you know she's in love with you and she won't be at all happy if they make her marry anyone else, but they're going to make her marry whoever *neutralises* the dragon. Not necessarily kills it. Which means you have to be that person.

OSCAR Wait, what dragon?

HARRY The one that's coming up rampaging from the south. That dragon. And Queen Fenella was all for having someone come along and slay it, and then Lord Mountpleasant spoke up and said neutralise it, because he wanted people to have a chance to deal with it using brains rather than just brawn. And I think I know what he's plotting, but that doesn't mean you can't use it.

OSCAR Ah. Lord Mountpleasant. An interesting character.

HARRY You mean he could hide behind a corkscrew? Yes, pretty much. I think he's cooking up some scheme to get his son Alphonse married to Princess Aurelia. And of course Alphonse is no fighter.

OSCAR He must have hidden depths. I must confess I was not aware of his intellectual capabilities.

HARRY He'll do what Daddy tells him. I don't know about any hidden depths.

OSCAR I will not abandon Aurelia to Lord Mountpleasant's schemes!

HARRY Good! That's the spirit.

OSCAR But I do not, currently, have a plan for the neutralisation of dragons. I shall have to work on one. Perhaps you wouldn't mind helping?

HARRY With the greatest of pleasure, but not now. I have to go and issue the official proclamation. And put up notices. But I thought you should be the first to know.

OSCAR That's very kind of you, Harry... er... Harry. This dragon... do you have any relevant information about it?

HARRY Oh, well, you know, standard dragon, as far as I'm aware. Breathes fire, eats people's livestock, that sort of thing.

OSCAR Known vulnerabilities?

HARRY There you have me, I'm afraid... oh. I'd better go. I can hear Princess Amethyst's voice in the corridor.

OSCAR Ah. She'll probably ask me to sing Dowland. *[Pause]* Again.

HARRY Good luck! *[Exit, hastily]*

Enter PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, and PRINCE PERCIVAL.

AMETHYST Was that Harry just now?

OSCAR Ah... yes... but he's in a hurry, don't you know. He has an urgent proclamation to issue.

AURELIA I should just think he does. What was he doing in here?

OSCAR Telling me first.

AURELIA Oh... that was very good of him.

AMETHYST Can you sing *Flow my tears?*

OSCAR Certainly, Your Highness, but... now, if I may ask?

AURELIA *Not* now. Later. We have dragons to discuss.

AMETHYST It's all very well for you. I have a serious case of unrequited love going on here!

AURELIA Yes, well, if you'd actually say who it was for, maybe you could go and talk to him about requiting it.

AMETHYST I can't. It's too embarrassing.

AURELIA Well, if it's Oscar, hands off. He's mine.

AMETHYST It isn't. I promise. I just want him to sing about it.

PERCIVAL This isn't bally well getting us anywhere with respect to dragons.

OSCAR Just the one dragon, I understand, Your Highness.

AURELIA That's plenty.

PERCIVAL I expect we'll get the knights errant. And Eustace.

AMETHYST Eustace doesn't count.

OSCAR With respect, Your Highness, that's hardly fair. What would they do without him?

AMETHYST I didn't mean it like that, Oscar. I meant he isn't going to be doing anything to the dragon. He's not... competition.

OSCAR He *could* be, though. One can't automatically rule him out.

AMETHYST Maybe you could kill the dragon, Percy? They can't make you marry your own sister!

PERCIVAL Me?!

AURELIA Amethyst, I have seen Percy use a sword. He just about knows which end to stick into his opponent. He's young, he'll learn, but you need a great deal more experience than that to kill a dragon. And, besides, we're not necessarily going for violence here.

OSCAR And that is just as well.

AMETHYST You could sing it some really sad lute songs and move it to tears.

OSCAR I'm... really not confident with that approach. While it is true that music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, I have never tried it on a large and ferocious reptile.

PERCIVAL Right. I mean, can dragons even cry?

OSCAR I don't propose to die finding out.

AMETHYST Can you poison them? You know, give it a spiked sheep or something?

AURELIA Ah. A sensible suggestion. How about you go and find out?

AMETHYST How?

AURELIA Go and talk to an apothecary. Or an alchemist. Or someone like that. And Percy? You can be making a list of the competition as it comes in. We may need to... distract some of it.

PERCIVAL I'm not awfully sure it's possible to distract those knights errant. They're all very single-minded, once they get going.

AURELIA No, you have to think strategically here. You don't distract the knights. You distract *Eustace*. That would put all the knights right out of the picture.

PERCIVAL How would you distract Eustace?

AURELIA How about you have a think about it? Don't just leave me to come up with all the ideas!

OSCAR But, darling. You're good at it.

AURELIA Heh.

ACT II

Scene 1. A forest clearing where SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS and EUSTACE are having lunch.

MALCOLM What's this, Eustace?

EUSTACE Preserved fish, Sir Malcolm.

MALCOLM It's disgusting. Where'd you get it?

EUSTACE Lady Venables packed it specially, Sir Malcolm.

MALCOLM I shall have words with Mother. How far off are we now?

GALAHAD I make it about five leagues from the capital.

GILES And where's the dragon right now? Anyone know?

GALAHAD By my calculations, approximately sixty-five leagues west-south-west of here and travelling on a bearing of somewhere between 325 and 355 degrees, allowing for the fact that it is not heading in a straight line, at an unknown average speed.

GILES I say, that's deuced precise, Gally.

GALAHAD I am familiar with the geography of the kingdom.

MALCOLM H'mm. Well, I think before we get there, we ought to talk about the elephant in the room, don't you?

GALAHAD We are here to pursue a dragon. I had no idea there was also a pachyderm in the equation.

MALCOLM Metaphorical elephant, Gally. What I'm driving at here is we can't all kill the dragon. Princess Aurelia can't end up with three husbands.

GILES Oh, I'm personally very happy to bow out and give you two my full assistance wherever necessary.

MALCOLM Or even two husbands. One is plenty for any princess.

GALAHAD Ah. Well, yes, indeed, this is a somewhat tricky matter. However, since all of us have far more chance of dealing with the dragon, in whatever way, by working as a team than separately, may I propose that we continue to work together but then subject the eventual outcome to the laws of probability?

MALCOLM Bweh?

GALAHAD We toss a coin.

GILES You two are going to *toss a coin* for the hand of Princess Aurelia?

EUSTACE It does seem a little... unromantic.

GALAHAD Tossing a coin is the fairest solution, if not, as you rightly point out, the most romantic.

MALCOLM Well... I'll admit, you do have a point... but... we can't possibly let her find out! She'd be horrified. Probably even insulted.

GALAHAD She doesn't have to know. In fact, we could even anticipate by tossing it now. If we all take a knightly oath to give our full support to whomever wins...

GILES Only you would say "whomever".

MALCOLM Never mind that. It's... possible, I'll grant you.

EUSTACE But then if you work together to... do whatever you're going to do... to the dragon, and then only one of you steps forward to claim Princess Aurelia's hand, don't you think her family will be a bit... suspicious?

GALAHAD Not at all. We just say that we agreed in advance which one of us would marry her. We don't have to tell anyone *how* we agreed.

MALCOLM Right. Giles, have you got a coin?

GILES Somewhere.

MALCOLM Then find it. You're not biased for or against either of us, so you can do the tossing.

EUSTACE Wait a moment! There's someone coming along the road down there.

GALAHAD Friend or foe?

EUSTACE How do I know? The sun's in my eyes... hang on... let's see, two of them. A knight in black armour, and what looks like his squire.

MALCOLM Black armour, eh? What's on his surcoat?

EUSTACE Some sort of bird, I think. Can't really see for the horse's head.

GALAHAD Ah, that's probably Baron Balliwell. And if it is, his squire's name is Basham.

EUSTACE Well, he does rather look as if he could, Sir Galahad.

[FX hooves. BARON BALLIWELL and SQUIRE BASHAM ride up to the clearing.]

BARON Well, now, who have we here? The famous knights errant, I believe?

GALAHAD Ah, Baron Balliwell. This is an unexpected... pleasure. You're here for the dragon, I imagine?

BARON Course I am.

SQUIRE You lot, you might as well all go home now. Baron's got a gun, he has.

GALAHAD Is that... quite... chivalric?

BARON I don't care. What I do care about is that it's a sight better at killing dragons than a sword is. Or even three swords.

SQUIRE Yerrrr.

BARON So I marry Princess Aurelia, and after a while I talk the King and Queen into letting Squire Basham here marry her sister.

SQUIRE Yerrrr!

MALCOLM Really? We'll see about that!

BARON And then when Prince Percival becomes king, he'll have to do what we want.

SQUIRE Yerrrr!

GALAHAD Balliwell, you are a blackguard and a scoundrel.

BARON Yeah, and I've had years of practice.

GALAHAD You are also sadly misguided. We shall deal with the dragon.

BARON Oh yeah? And which of you is planning to marry Aurelia?

MALCOLM That is... yet to be determined.

GALAHAD Stochastically.

SQUIRE You what?

GALAHAD Stochastically. Would you like me to spell it?

GILES Gally. I think you're talking over his head.

Scene 2. A room in the castle. LORD MOUNTPLEASANT is addressing his son ALPHONSE.

LORD M ...and it is extremely important to pronounce the correct words of abjuration before... Alphonse! Are you even listening?

ALPHONSE I don't like this, Dad.

LORD M Precisely what do you not like?

ALPHONSE Black magic. No good can come of it.

LORD M [*sighs heavily*] Which is why, as I was just explaining, it is imperative to take the necessary precautions. The magic circle must be completely intact, and the words of abjuration must be in place before the demon is summoned. And if all these measures are followed, I assure you the procedure is perfectly safe. This demon has been fully abjured to tell only the truth, to co-operate with me to the full extent of its ability, and to remain within the boundaries of the magic circle.

ALPHONSE It's still a demon.

LORD M Yes, Alphonse, and demons can be extraordinarily useful at times. Now do at least try to look like an upcoming dark adept rather than a terrified neophyte, will you? I am about to pronounce the Summoning Word, and I would really rather not have my son look like a complete idiot in front of one of the denizens of the Abyss.

ALPHONSE Ulp.

LORD M Is that all you can manage?! Oh well, it will have to do. *Zzadorg!*

GLXPNX [*materialising*] Who disturbeth the uneasy slumbers of the eternally accursed?

ALPHONSE [*panicked*] He does! Nothing to do with me!

LORD M Oh, do be quiet, Alphonse. You! Name, please.

GLXPNX Glxpx.

LORD M Short of vowels down there, are they? Well, Glxpx. There is a dragon currently besetting the kingdom, and anyone who successfully stops it from doing so, whether fatally or otherwise, will gain the hand of the Princess Aurelia in marriage. I intend that my son Alphonse here shall achieve that feat. However, there is an obstacle, in that Aurelia is unfortunately in love with the castle bard, and as things stand I suspect she would be quite prepared to elope with him rather than marry Alphonse. Therefore we shall also need to remove the said bard from consideration.

GLXPNX Thou dost not need my aid to bring about the demise of a sorry minstrel.

ALPHONSE I don't think he's sorry. I think he loves her right back.

LORD M *Will* you be quiet and listen, Alphonse? No, Glxpx, I was thinking that perhaps in some way we could use the bard to remove the dragon. I am in favour of neat, dovetailed solutions. The bard's name, incidentally, is Oscar. That fact may be of use to you.

GLXPNX Oscar... ah, I behold him now...

ALPHONSE How? He's not here.

LORD M [*with strained patience*] Glxpx is a demon, Alphonse. That means he can see and hear through channels that we wot not of.

GLXPNX *She*, if thou dost not mind.

LORD M Excuse me?

GLXPNX Thou automatically assumest that all demonic beings are male. Hast thou not heard of succubi, O ignorant one?

LORD M Ah. Oh. Um... right. Are you, in fact, a succubus?

GLXPNX Go thou and boil thy head.

LORD M Now just a moment! You are under the strictest possible abjuration...

GLXPNX Thou hast abjured me to co-operate. That I am doing. Thou hast not abjured me to be polite about it, especially not when thou talkest like a lackwit.

LORD M I'll definitely refine the spell next time. Anyway. Tell me what you see about this Oscar.

GLXPNX Thy plan doth not totally want sense. He would make most toothsome fare for a dragon.

LORD M Why in particular?

GLXPNX For why he is a virgin, forsooth.

LORD M Ah. Well, good, but we shall have to take care, as that also applies to Alphonse...

GLXPNX Pull thou the other one, for it hath bells on.

ALPHONSE Ulp!

LORD M *Really*, Alphonse?

ALPHONSE Ulp.

LORD M Believe me, I am not criticising you in any way. I am merely... somewhat astonished.

GLXPNX If thou wishest the details...

ALPHONSE Noooooo!

LORD M Intrigued as I undoubtedly am, I feel we should stick to matters of business. So. Is there a way we can, for instance, gain control over the dragon by feeding it our bard? Perhaps by casting some kind of spell on him first?

GLXPNX Thou knowest nothing of dragonkind. Control, thou sayest? As well might thou speak of controlling the mighty ocean. The best thou canst do by such a device is to extinguish its fire, and that but for a short span of time. And with that fire extinguished, a warrior might haply then slay the dragon, but he must still be valiant. Or she, for such it might be.

LORD M She? What woman would try to slay the dragon?

GLXPNX Why, none but the peerless Lady Gillian Dunbar.

LORD M Wait... I know a Sir Giles Dunbar, but not a Lady Gillian.

GLXPNX Then thou seest not that which lieth before thine eyes, for Sir Giles *is* Lady Gillian.

LORD M Oh! Well... that does actually explain quite a lot. But, in any case, we can't let either her or the other two go round slaying the dragon. It has to be Alphonse. So what do we do to the bard to make sure the dragon's fire goes out when it eats him?

GLXPNX Thou must needs first obtain paper and a quill, for I shall give thee a spell; but mark well thou this, that if thou dost not perform that spell in strict accordance with the instructions that I give thee, thou canst not hold me responsible for any ill consequences.

LORD M Oh, I quite understand. Even a demon has to cover its backside.

ALPHONSE Um... it's all very well doing another spell, but how are we going to get Oscar to go and be eaten by the dragon?

LORD M You idiot! That's the *easy* bit. Aurelia will be determined that he should get to be the one who deals with the dragon, so she'll be helping him to come up with a plan – as, no doubt, will be Harry the messenger, who seems to be in cahoots with him, and possibly Princess Amethyst and Prince Percival as well. You just join in and pretend to help them.

ALPHONSE Harry's not in Cahoots, Dad. That's over in the east of the kingdom. He's here.

LORD M Remind me how I ended up with a son like you.

GLXPNX Thou didst engage in a night of passion with Lady Mountpleasant.

LORD M I didn't ask *you*.

GLXPNX Didst thou know thou hadst a daughter near the same age?

LORD M *What?!*

GLXPNX Two weeks later thou didst also engage in a night of passion with Lady Fairfax.

ALPHONSE Dad!

LORD M What? That's nonsense! Lady Hilaria Fairfax is definitely Lord Fairfax's daughter!

GLXPNX Fret not thyself. I do not propose to undeceive her. It is not worth the trouble, forsooth.

ALPHONSE Dad, you never said I had a sister!

LORD M Alphonse. Just go and get some paper and a quill like the... er... lady said.

ALPHONSE But I've got a *sister* and I never knew about it and that's important!

LORD M Get. The. Bloody. Paper.

GLXPNX Oh, do keep thy hair on. I swear unto thee that thou and I shall have all of eternity to discuss thy misdeeds. Further, verily, O thou innocent stripling, thou knowest not the half of it.

ALPHONSE Dad... you know you said demons were useful?

LORD M Aaaaargh!

Scene 3. Another room in the castle. OSCAR is singing. As he does so, HARRY, PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, and PRINCE PERCIVAL enter one by one. It takes OSCAR a while to realise he has an audience, but when he does, he stops, a little taken aback.

OSCAR Ah. Um. I was just... rehearsing...

AURELIA Don't stop! That was lovely.

HARRY It was, but we do need to come up with a plan. About the dragon.

AMETHYST Harry! I've been wanting to talk to you, but you keep avoiding me.

HARRY [*uncomfortably*] Oh, er, busy, Your Highness, don't you know...

AMETHYST Have you written that love letter yet?

HARRY Um... no, Your Highness. Sorry. You see... you won't tell me who it's supposed to be addressed to, so I don't really know where to start.

PERCIVAL Generalised love letter? Fill in the blanks, sort of thing, what?

AURELIA Amethyst, are you seriously telling us that you tried to get Harry to write a love letter to this person and you won't even tell him who he is?

AMETHYST But Harry has such a way with words!

HARRY I am very flattered, Your Highness, but in order to do anything with words I do need to have something to hang them on. I can hardly praise the beautiful blue eyes of your beloved on your behalf if they're actually brown.

AURELIA *Oscar* has blue eyes. Are you *quite sure* it's not *Oscar*?

AMETHYST I swear it isn't! And actually I don't know what colour his eyes are. It's not as if I've ever had a chance to gaze into them.

PERCIVAL I think I ought to fall in love. That would be jolly.

AMETHYST It's not jolly at all, Percy. It's an absolute torment. I am going to wear black this evening and have *Oscar* sing Dowland.

OSCAR [*aside*] Again.

AURELIA Yes, well, this isn't getting us anywhere at all with the dragon. Percy, do we have any more news on what the competition looks like?

PERCIVAL Well, there are the knights errant, of course, and I've heard a rumour that that ghastly oik Baron Balliwell and his squire are involved.

AURELIA Balliwell?! That's terrible! The man's nothing but a thug, and his squire's even worse!

HARRY Yes, Your Highness, but if I may venture to say so, not a very bright thug. You and *Oscar* should easily be able to outwit him.

AMETHYST Do you think I should paint my nails black too?

Enter ALPHONSE.

AMETHYST Nnnnnnnngh.

ALPHONSE Um, I've come to... help?

OSCAR That's very... ah...

AMETHYST Oh, um, Alphonse, how very nice to see you, do sit down, er, somewhere, is there a chair anywhere for Alphonse?

OSCAR *Ah...*

AURELIA [*aside, to AMETHYST*] Him? Seriously?!

AMETHYST [*aside, to AURELIA, defensively*] I just knew you'd react like this! That's why I didn't say anything.

AURELIA [*aside, to AMETHYST*] But he's a massive drip!

AMETHYST [*aside, to AURELIA*] He has hidden depths!

PERCIVAL What are you two jawing about?

ALPHONSE Am I interrupting something?

HARRY Your guess is as good as mine. So you've come to help? Splendid – do you have any ideas we might like to consider?

ALPHONSE I've... got some information. And you're not going to like it.

OSCAR About the dragon?

ALPHONSE [*unhappily*] Not really. More about my dad. Oscar, I'm sorry to have to tell you that your life is in danger.

OSCAR What? Why?

AURELIA Wait, *what*? And this has something to do with your father? Let me at him!

ALPHONSE Your Highness, Dad wants me to marry you. Only... no disrespect or anything... I don't. I mean, I like you and so on, but not... like that. So he's got it

into his head that I'm going to deal with this dragon, somehow, and he summoned a demon to help.

OSCAR A demon? Oh my. This is extremely serious.

ALPHONSE Too right. And it was called Glxpnx, and Dad told it that he wanted Oscar out of the way as well as the dragon because you wouldn't marry me while Oscar was still alive.

AURELIA The blackguard!

AMETHYST [*aside, to AURELIA*] See? I told you he had hidden depths.

ALPHONSE And, er, it said Oscar would be very tasty to the dragon due to being, er, a virgin...

AURELIA Right, that settles it. We're eloping.

OSCAR Um... while the idea is certainly tempting, do you think it's an altogether sensible one? I would have to get a job as a bard in another castle, and if it was known who you were... which it would most certainly be... you might well find yourself vulnerable to, ah, political machinations.

AURELIA Sadly, you do have a point. Huh. As if there weren't enough of those round here already. Sorry, Alphonse, carry on.

ALPHONSE Yes, Your Highness. So it gave Dad a spell to cast on Oscar, and I'm supposed to pretend to help you so as to lure him into the dragon's clutches, but I'm not doing that because actually I like Oscar and I like you and I don't see why you two shouldn't get married. And I *don't* like demons. They give me the willies.

AMETHYST Oh, Alphonse, you are a hero!

ALPHONSE [*confused*] No, I'm not. I'm just doing the right thing.

HARRY This spell. Has he cast it yet?

ALPHONSE No. For a start he has to get hold of a whole long complicated list of ingredients. And then he has to get into Oscar's room somehow while he's asleep so he doesn't know the spell's being cast.

AURELIA Then Oscar had better sleep in *your* room for the next few nights, Harry.

HARRY Oh... er... ah... no, there isn't room, and in any case it's a mess!

OSCAR *[quickly]* And I... probably snore, and Harry needs to be fully alert. Can't have a messenger wandering around half asleep.

PERCIVAL Don't see what all the fuss is about. But you can sleep in *my* room, Oscar. Nobody's going to go looking for you there. And I won't mind if you do snore, because I sleep like the dead.

OSCAR *[relieved]* Thank you very much, Your Highness.

ALPHONSE Oh, and do you know what else that demon said? And I know it was true, because it was... abjured... to tell the truth. Which means it had to.

AMETHYST About the dragon?

ALPHONSE No, about Sir Giles Dunbar. Apparently she's really Lady Gillian Dunbar.

PERCIVAL Oh, I say! Really?

ALPHONSE Yes, really. And I've got a sister I didn't know about. That demon told a lot more truth than I think Dad wanted.

PERCIVAL Oh gosh. How jolly! You know, I've always thought I wanted to marry someone... interesting. Not one of those ladies who just sits around doing embroidery all day. I mean, after a while, you run out of places to put embroidery. We've already got all the fire screens we need.

AMETHYST A sister?

ALPHONSE Er, yes. Lady Hilaria Fairfax. Apparently.

PERCIVAL I say, I think I'm in love already. A-wooing I shall go!

HARRY If we could perhaps return to the matter in hand?

OSCAR Indeed. It does occur to me that if Lord Mountpleasant enters my room at night and finds me absent, he will be suspicious.

AMETHYST But it'll be dark. And he probably won't bring a light in case it wakes you up.

OSCAR We can't guarantee that, Your Highness. I think there should be some kind of dummy in my bed. A judicious arrangement of bolsters, perhaps...

ALPHONSE Or... I could do it.

AMETHYST But wouldn't that be dangerous?

ALPHONSE Not at all. The spell only works on virgins.

AMETHYST Wait, you're not... Who is she? Do I know her?

ALPHONSE [*embarrassed*] Um, it was a while ago, nobody you know, it wasn't anything serious, and actually...?

HARRY We are in danger of getting sidetracked again. Alphonse, don't you think it might also be dangerous because of the risk that your father might recognise you?

ALPHONSE Not if I'm buried under the covers he won't. Because he won't be expecting to see me there. He'll be expecting to see Oscar.

OSCAR And it will, as has already been pointed out, be dark. Even if he does bring a light, I can see this working.

PERCIVAL I shall offer to joust with the valiant Lady Gillian, and when I defeat her I shall gallantly help her up and say...

AURELIA Pffffff!

PERCIVAL That was not what I had in mind, Aurelia.

AURELIA Defeat her? *Defeat* her?! She'll have you out of your saddle before you can blink. I've seen her in action.

HARRY Do you think Your Royal Highnesses can manage to remain on the subject for more than about thirty seconds?

AURELIA Well, we can probably do it for longer than Percy can remain in the saddle if he tries jousting with Lady Gillian.

AMETHYST Well, I think you're very brave, Alphonse.

ALPHONSE Well, um, y'know, just because he's my dad doesn't mean I should let him get away with outright villainy.

OSCAR I feel the King and Queen should hear of this. The demon, that is.

ALPHONSE You're right, but he'll just deny it. It's my word against his. As soon as the demon was banished, he rubbed out all traces of the magic circle.

HARRY But, presumably, he has books on black magic? Nobody summons a demon by simply using a formula out of their own head.

ALPHONSE Oh, yes! The one he was using was called *The Practical Maleficus*.

AURELIA And you know where he keeps them, do you?

ALPHONSE Sadly I don't. He keeps them well hidden.

AMETHYST Then we need to have his rooms searched.

HARRY Yes, yes, but what do we do about the dragon?

OSCAR Possibly adjourned to the next meeting.

Scene 4. The banqueting hall in the castle. KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, LORD MOUNTPLEASANT, SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, BARON BALLIWELL, and SQUIRE BASHAM are all present.

KING It's jolly decent of you all to come all this way.

QUEEN Yes, indeed, and you're all most welcome.

BARON So when do I get to see my future bride?

MALCOLM That would be *my* future bride, you scoundrel.

QUEEN Ah... yes... I understand that you three are working as a team?

GALAHAD Indeed, Your Majesty, and we have settled by a knightly oath that if we are successful, it will be Sir Malcolm here who claims the hand of the Princess Aurelia. However, there is also, I believe, the Princess Amethyst?

SQUIRE Wot I am going to marry.

BARON *[aside]* Shut up, Basham! You're not supposed to say that yet.

KING Ah. Sir Galahad, you wish to be considered as a suitor for Amethyst?

GALAHAD Well, of course, only if we are successful in defeating the dragon, Your Majesty.

QUEEN She's only fourteen, though.

GALAHAD I am a patient man, Your Majesty. I would not object to a long engagement.

BARON And Giles here gets Percival, does he? Ha, ha, ha!

GILES My gauntlet, Baron Balliwell. *[FX: clatter]*

BARON Oh, come on, now, if you can't take a joke...

GILES I am already tired of your ham-fisted excuse for a sense of humour. Do you have enough honour to pick up that gauntlet?

BARON Oh, go and...

GALAHAD *[coughs loudly and meaningfully]*

MALCOLM I'm with Giles. And if you won't fight him, you'll be fighting me.

SQUIRE Baron's got a gun, he has.

KING And he will not be using it.

QUEEN Indeed not. As the challenged party, he does have the choice of weapons, of course; but since we don't have another gun in the castle, guns are therefore out.

BARON Is it my fault if the blighter's in love with Eustace?

KING Baron Balliwell, your behaviour is outrageous! I demand an apology.

QUEEN Forthwith, dear. You need to add "forthwith".

KING Yes, that. Forthwith.

BARON I haven't done anything to *you*, Your Majesty.

QUEEN Oh, yes, you have. This was supposed to be a nice quiet civilised banquet, and you've... you've...

LORD M I think he's actually made it rather entertaining, Your Majesty. Also, if the Baron is having difficulty choosing a weapon, may I suggest a joust? With lances?

BARON *[suspiciously]* Here, what business is it of yours?

LORD M Oh, nothing. It's merely that if you insist on putting on a show, you may as well make it a good one, don't you think?

GILES I'm all in favour of a joust.

MALCOLM Yes, you can knock pretty much anyone off a horse.

GALAHAD Indeed, and it's a very interesting technique. It relies not so much on strength as on dexterity and considerable accuracy.

BARON Yeah? Well, I'm stronger than boy Giles here. Way stronger.

SQUIRE Yerrrr!

GILES Oh, almost certainly, but you might do well to listen to Sir Galahad. Do I take it that you will, in fact, joust?

BARON Suppose so. Not now, though. Too dark.

GILES Then I shall meet you at dawn.

BARON Dawn?! Have you got a screw loose? I've been riding all day. I need my sleep!

GILES So at what time do you purpose to crawl out of your pit?

BARON Oh, well, I need a good breakfast, obviously. Can't joust on an empty stomach. Shall we make it ten o'clock?

GILES If you insist.

LORD M On the bright side, that will give everyone else time to have a leisurely breakfast themselves and then come and watch. I'm sure the Prince and the Princesses will be greatly entertained.

GILES [*stiffly*] This is a private quarrel, Lord Mountpleasant, not a public spectacle.

LORD M Come, come, now, L... Sir Giles, there's no reason why other people shouldn't also enjoy it.

MALCOLM Well, I'll certainly be there.

GALAHAD As shall I.

SQUIRE Me too!

BARON Of *course* you'll be there, Basham. You're my bloody *squire*.

SQUIRE Oh. Yerrrr.

Scene 5. The same room as in Scene 2. Enter ALPHONSE, cautiously, with PERCIVAL.

PERCIVAL I don't know what you're so worried about, Alphonse. Your father's going to be at the banquet with all the knights for the next few hours.

ALPHONSE Er... demons? If he can summon one, there's nothing to stop him having one guard our residence. It needn't be visible.

PERCIVAL Oh, phooey. You said yourself he had to take all sorts of precautions with them. Confine them in magic circles and all that sort of rot. He's not going to leave one to its own devices in your rooms, now, is he?

ALPHONSE I suppose that makes sense... anyway, let's search his bedroom first. I'm not supposed to go in there, so it's probably where he hides things.

PERCIVAL Capital! I say, this is quite a lark, what?

ALPHONSE It's all very well for you. Your Highness. He's not your dad.

PERCIVAL And I'm jolly glad he isn't. Must be pretty beastly for you.

ALPHONSE Oh, you don't know the half of it. Right, I'll look under the bed. You can try the wardrobe.

PERCIVAL Locked! We're on to something.

ALPHONSE [*indistinctly, because his head is now under the bed*] Try that little drawer at the top of the dresser. That's the sort of place he might have put the key.

PERCIVAL Ah, yes, in fact there are a few keys in here. Found anything?

ALPHONSE A pair of fluffy slippers. I had no idea he owned those.

PERCIVAL Are they arcane fluffy slippers?

ALPHONSE Er... probably not.

PERCIVAL Aha, this is the right key! Now then... oh, yes, there are some books in here. A whole shelf of them, right at the top. But I can't reach. I'll have to get a chair.

ALPHONSE Can you read any of the titles?

PERCIVAL Not from here. Right, here we jolly well go... [FX chair scraping] Aha! And here's the very book you mentioned. *The Practical Maleficus*. What is a maleficus, anyway?

ALPHONSE I think it's an evil wizard. Well, get it down – we need to show your parents.

PERCIVAL Right ho! Oh, I say, Alphonse, I've just had a topping idea.

ALPHONSE Go on.

PERCIVAL Well, now we've got the book, why don't we summon that demon and make it tell us how Oscar can defeat the dragon?

ALPHONSE Have you the brain worms?!

PERCIVAL What's the problem, old chap?

ALPHONSE No demons! Demons are evil! We do not want anything to do with evil!

PERCIVAL But we'd be making it do good, though.

ALPHONSE They twist everything! Dad's not stupid, but I'm telling you, that demon was a lot brighter than he is. There is no way on earth that would go as planned. Here, throw me the book. I'll put it on the bed and you can look for more incriminating evidence. There's bound to be some.

PERCIVAL Oh, all right. Thought it was a jolly good idea, myself.

ALPHONSE That would be because you haven't actually seen the demon. Right, what else is up there?

PERCIVAL H'mm... *The Illustrated*... oh, I say!

ALPHONSE The illustrated what now?

PERCIVAL ...oh my...

ALPHONSE Percival! What have you found?

PERCIVAL Gosh. I didn't even know that was physically possible.

ALPHONSE Percival...!

PERCIVAL Um. Sorry, old chap. Got a little distracted there. It's not, er, evidence, in fact.

ALPHONSE Given that you've just gone as red as a beetroot, I don't think I'm going to ask what it was. Now please concentrate! We're looking for occult books of an evil persuasion. Remember?

PERCIVAL Yes, of course. Sorry. Right... oh!

ALPHONSE What now?

PERCIVAL You won't believe this. *Applied Draconics: A Natural History of Dragonkind*.

ALPHONSE Wow! Now *that* might help us. I wonder why Dad didn't consult it instead of summoning that demon?

PERCIVAL Well, you did say he was very keen to get poor old Oscar out of the way. You know, I'd never forgive him if he did. Oscar's the best bard we've ever had.

ALPHONSE That's probably it. Well, get it down, then! Let's have a look at it.

PERCIVAL It's quite heavy. Catch!

ALPHONSE Oof!

PERCIVAL Got it?

ALPHONSE Yup. You keep looking for the evil stuff. I'm going to see if there's a section on how to get rid of them if you've got one in your kingdom.

PERCIVAL It'll probably just say knights. I mean, that's the usual solution.

ALPHONSE I'm not so sure about that. It is called *Applied Draconics*, after all. That suggests it's information we can use. Now, let's see...

PERCIVAL ...h'mm, pretty sure this one's banned...

ALPHONSE Arcana or just erotica?

PERCIVAL It's called *Elemental Manipulations*, so not altogether sure.

ALPHONSE Probably arcana. Throw it down, please... ah, that's helpful, there's an index...

PERCIVAL This one's about fly fishing. Why would he lock that in his wardrobe?

ALPHONSE Mother used to hate it.

PERCIVAL Great Scott! *Necromancy for the Serious Practitioner*.

ALPHONSE I am no longer surprised. Just throw it down... oh, now *this* is interesting! Percival, listen to this.

PERCIVAL I'm all ears.

ALPHONSE *[quoting]* "While it is generally assumed that dragons, like cats, are obligate carnivores, this is not in fact the case. It is certainly true that a dragon will take livestock or even human beings, with a strong preference for virgins, if it is unable to obtain its natural food; and in this way it can survive indefinitely, if it has to. However, dragons, being intrinsically magical creatures, are in fact thaumivores."

PERCIVAL They're what?

ALPHONSE They feed on magic. Listen, it goes on: "A dragon must eat a large quantity of meat in order to sustain itself, but it takes very little magic to achieve the same effect. A single properly concocted and executed dragon-food spell of quite moderate strength is capable of sustaining a full-grown dragon for hundreds of years."

PERCIVAL Why, that's astounding! That would absolutely stop it from ravaging the kingdom. So does it tell you how to, um, concoct and execute this spell?

ALPHONSE It says it's in the appendix. Let's see... *[long pause]* Oh. Oh no.

PERCIVAL What's wrong, old chap?

ALPHONSE Someone's torn out the pages.

PERCIVAL Well, then, there's only one thing for it. We search the castle library. And we get everyone involved!

ACT III

Scene 1. A pavilion in the castle grounds. SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, EUSTACE, BARON BALLIWELL, and SQUIRE BASHAM are standing in a group. Nearby, but currently out of earshot, are KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, PRINCE PERCIVAL, LORD MOUNTPLEASANT, ALPHONSE, OSCAR, and HARRY.

BARON Dammit, Eustace, stop smirking!

EUSTACE A mere trick of the light, My Lord.

GALAHAD Jolly well done there, Giles. Extremely scientific.

GILES Thank you, Gally.

BARON Scientific? I'm going to have a sore bum for weeks!

GILES *[drily]* I could have landed you on worse places.

BARON I don't understand it. Everyone knows the stronger man usually wins at a joust!

GALAHAD Ah, there you have it, Baron Balliwell. Sir Giles is extraordinarily adept at using the principles of leverage. Perhaps you would like me to draw you a vector diagram?

BARON You can take your diagram and shove it where the sun does not shine.

SQUIRE Yerrrr!

MALCOLM You are a disgrace to your title. You could at least pretend to be a gentleman.

BARON I thought you were all into honesty?

PRINCESS AURELIA and PRINCESS AMETHYST approach.

AURELIA Ah, Sir Giles, congratulations on your victory!

GILES Thank you very much, Your Highness.

AURELIA If perhaps my sister and I could have a little word...?

GILES Oh... of course. *[Withdraws to a quiet corner with the Princesses]*

AMETHYST So, well, Mum says you three have agreed that if you deal with the dragon, Sir Malcolm gets to marry Aurelia.

GILES That is correct, yes.

AURELIA There is just one problem. I don't want to marry Sir Malcolm.

GILES Oh... well, yes, I can see why you'd prefer Sir Galahad. He's such a geek. Definitely the sort to appeal to an intelligent lady such as yourself.

AURELIA He is undoubtedly a geek, but I've found a better geek, thank you. I don't want to marry any of you.

AMETHYST Only, see, we know – that is, all three of us know, but Mum and Dad don't – that you're really Lady Gillian and not Sir Giles at all. It's all right. We won't tell anyone. But you probably ought to know Percy fancies you.

GILES Er...!

AURELIA Amethyst, could you not have put that a bit more diplomatically?

AMETHYST There's nothing diplomatic about Percy fancying someone. When Percy fancies someone, he's kind of... all in.

AURELIA Aaargh. Sorry, Sir Giles... er... Lady Gillian... er, whatever we're calling you for now.

AMETHYST Look, all right, Aurelia, what did you want me to say?

AURELIA Well, you could have said, "Our noble brother Percival, heir to the throne, has expressed an intention to press his suit."

AMETHYST But we have servants to do that!

AURELIA Not that kind of press. Or that kind of suit.

AMETHYST Well, anyway, if you play your cards right, you get to be the next queen. And we'll help. As long as you help us, of course.

GILES But... I'm not even sure I want to be queen. Wouldn't I have to give up the knighting?

AMETHYST Oh, not for Percy. Percy *loves* it. The whole knight thing is why he fancies you in the first place.

AURELIA Yes, he says he likes interesting women. But in any case, you being a knight and so on, then presumably it's your bounden duty to defend a lady from being forced to marry someone she doesn't want to?

GILES Um... well, yes, of course.

AURELIA Right! So I need you to make sure I don't have to marry Sir Malcolm.

GILES Ah. This is... difficult. You see, you're quite right in what you've just said, but I have already sworn a knightly oath to support Sir Malcolm.

AMETHYST So, you just tell Sir Malcolm he needs to get behind the contender that Aurelia wants to marry, because if *you* have to defend a lady from being forced to marry against her will, then so has Sir Malcolm. Right? Then you can carry on supporting Sir Malcolm and we'll all be happy.

AURELIA And Sir Galahad. Wherever exactly he fits into this. And Eustace.

GILES H'mm... well, you certainly have logic on your side. I'll have a word with the others. So, ah, who is this person you want to marry?

AURELIA Oscar. Our bard.

GILES *A bard?!*

AURELIA Hey! Don't go taking that tone. For one thing he's an outstanding bard, and for another thing you should hear him once he starts up about chord progressions and harmonies. I bet he could even lose Sir Galahad!

AMETHYST And Lord Mountpleasant wants to kill him so that his son Alphonse can deal with the dragon and marry Aurelia, but Alphonse doesn't want to marry Aurelia any more than Aurelia wants to marry Alphonse, and he's helping us because he's a hero. *[Pause]* Though I still don't know if he wants to marry *me*.

AURELIA You're a bit young to be thinking about getting married, Amethyst.

AMETHYST I saw what colour his eyes were. They're grey. A really nice light grey...

AURELIA Please excuse my sister.

GILES I see that the situation here is unexpectedly complicated.

AMETHYST You bet it's complicated! Lord Mountpleasant summoned an actual demon! And it was called Glxpx!

GILES A... demon? Where is it now?

AMETHYST Oh, he banished it afterwards. It's back in the Abyss.

GILES And long may it remain there. What are you doing about Lord Mountpleasant?

AURELIA Percy and Alphonse searched his room. They found some books. They're just waiting for their chance to show Mum and Dad.

GILES You mean occult books?

AMETHYST As occult as you get.

GILES Riiiiight. Well, this definitely... changes things. I shall go and have a word with Malcolm and Gally.

AMETHYST What about Percy? I mean, are you interested or what?

AURELIA Amethyst!

AMETHYST Well, I've got to ask. I mean, if she's not, then we need to tell Percy he's barking up the wrong tree after a red herring.

GILES *[faintly]* I... er... don't know right now. Well, um, it's been a pleasure to talk to Your Highnesses. Quite the education. *[Heads off back towards the other knights]*

KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, PRINCE PERCIVAL, ALPHONSE, and HARRY approach.

PERCIVAL Ah! Now we're out of earshot of Lord Mountpleasant, Alphonse and I have something we need to tell you. Got the books, Alphonse?

ALPHONSE In my bag here.

KING Why did Sir Giles rush off like that?

AURELIA He didn't see you coming, Dad, and he wants a word with the other knights errant.

QUEEN He did jolly well. It's not often you see a knight his size knock someone the size of the Baron off a horse. And frankly, I think it did the Baron a lot of good.

ALPHONSE Um... Your Majesties... it is my sad duty to tell you that... er... er...

PERCIVAL Oh, spit it out, old chap, or I'll do it for you.

AMETHYST His dad summoned a demon. And he's embarrassed about it and I don't blame you, Alphonse, anyone would be embarrassed.

QUEEN Summoned a *demon*?!

ALPHONSE Er. Called Glxpx. And I didn't want it to be just my word against his, so the Princesses and the Prince here said we should search for any occult books in his possession, and Prince Percival and I did that last night, and... here!

KING But this is extremely serious!

QUEEN Necromancy? *The Practical Maleficus*? What have we been unwittingly harbouring, Crispin?

KING We must arrest him on the spot! I'll have the knights errant do it. Oh, and Eustace. Sound fellow, Eustace.

QUEEN If he's capable of summoning demons, we must be a little more careful than that. Who knows what he may do if he is cornered?

HARRY If I may be permitted to make a suggestion, Your Majesties?

KING Fire away, Harry. You normally talk sense.

HARRY I suggest you pretend nothing is amiss for now, and then have him arrested at night. That way, he will be quite unprepared.

QUEEN Jolly good idea.

HARRY And speaking of which, Alphonse, has he performed that spell yet?

ALPHONSE Oh, yes. Droned on for about three quarters of an hour. I was awake the whole time.

QUEEN What? What spell?

AURELIA He wanted Alphonse to deal with the dragon. By feeding it Oscar. So he planned to put a spell on Oscar so that when the dragon ate him, its fire would go out for a while. But Oscar slept in Percy's room last night and Alphonse took his place, because he knew the spell wouldn't affect him.

KING What? He wanted to feed our bard to the dragon? Do you know how difficult it is to get a bard of that quality?

ALPHONSE I know, Your Majesty, and he got the spell from the demon.

AMETHYST And Alphonse was supposed to pretend to help Oscar so as to get him near the dragon so it'd eat him, but instead he came and revealed all his father's nefarious plans because he's a hero!

ALPHONSE Um, no, just, you know, doing the right thing. Can't take any credit for it.

AMETHYST And so modest, too!

ALPHONSE Ummm...

AURELIA Amethyst, do stop it. You're making his ears go all pink.

HARRY Whoops. Do please excuse me. I've just spotted Lord Mountpleasant bearing down on Oscar and I think I need to be there. *[Hurries across the pavilion]*

HARRY joins OSCAR, who is being approached at this moment by LORD MOUNTPLEASANT.

HARRY Oscar, it's all right. You can go back to your own room tonight. He's done it.

OSCAR Has he? Oh, splendid! I still have no idea whether or not I snore, but I assure you Prince Percival does. Like a very badly tuned sackbut.

HARRY *[raising his voice a little]* So, ah, what are you planning to sing this evening?

OSCAR Oh, I thought we might have a little Machaut. Ideally, of course, some more voices would be good, but...

LORD M Ah, Oscar. I hear you have a plan for dealing with the dragon?

OSCAR In the process of formation, My Lord.

LORD M Most enterprising of you. I admire your intelligence and, ah, zeal. But I do have one question. Do you actually know where the dragon is at this moment?

OSCAR I understand it is somewhere south of here and proceeding in a variable but roughly northerly direction.

LORD M And how do you propose to locate it more precisely?

OSCAR I was planning to follow the knights errant, My Lord.

LORD M Dear, dear. That will never do. Do you think they'll let you get anywhere near it if they spot it first? I'll tell you what I shall do. Tonight I shall endeavour to get a more precise fix on the dragon for you, and then you can slip in and steal their thunder.

OSCAR That is, ah, very kind of you, My Lord.

HARRY *[aside, to OSCAR]* The heck it is.

OSCAR *[aside, to HARRY]* I know, but it is needful to play along.

LORD M I shall send a message via Alphonse. In fact, I know what I shall do; I shall have him accompany you. I'm sure you would appreciate some help.

OSCAR Oh, indeed, My Lord. I am quite certain I can trust Alphonse to render all the assistance he knows how to give.

HARRY Absolutely. Sound chap, is Alphonse.

LORD M Good; then that's settled. And, Harry. Do you also plan to accompany your friend here?

HARRY If my duties permit, My Lord.

LORD M *[aside]* Excellent. I shall see that they don't.

Scene 2. The castle library. PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, PRINCE PERCIVAL, OSCAR, HARRY, and ALPHONSE are present.

AURELIA All right, we divide it up into six sections and everyone takes one of them.

AMETHYST That's still an awful lot of books.

OSCAR What a wonderful library! But is there not a suitable scientific classification system by means of which we could identify potentially helpful volumes in minutes?

PERCIVAL Classification system? Our ancestors have been acquiring books for centuries and just, y'know, throwing them in here!

HARRY Yes, it does rather look like it. Maybe we should go and get the knights errant and Eustace?

OSCAR [*brightly*] Ah, here's Euclid's *Elements*.

AURELIA That's not going to help with dragons, dear.

OSCAR Um. Probably not. On the other hand I'm not sure that filing it next to an atlas is going to help with... anything.

HARRY I've just found a volume of love poetry.

AMETHYST Gimme!

AURELIA Nobody is to get distracted here! We have to find books on magic. Or dragons. Ideally both.

ALPHONSE Some of the titles over here are so faded I can hardly read them.

AURELIA Well, then, get them down and look at the flyleaf. There must be something useful in here. [*Pause*] What should we mark the divisions with?

ALPHONSE I hate to state the incredibly obvious, but... books? We just put a book on the floor at the boundary of each section.

AMETHYST That'd work! You're so clever, Alphonse.

ALPHONSE Errr...

PERCIVAL Dash it all, this one's in gibberish.

AURELIA Let me look. It's either a foreign language or else it's encrypted arcana.

ALPHONSE Does it really matter which? If it's encrypted, we can't use it.

OSCAR Ah. Well, as it happens, I *do* have some experience with cryptography. If it is merely a simple cipher, it should be easy enough to crack it using relative letter frequencies, provided it is not also written in a foreign language; alternatively, there are techniques such as code wheels, or, as they should more correctly be called, cipher wheels, though the other name has become established and it is indeed true that the results achieved with them are far more subtle and difficult to

crack than a conventional or even an affine cipher. An affine cipher is, incidentally...

PERCIVAL Cut to the chase, old chap. Are you telling us you can read gibberish?

OSCAR That does, um, rather depend on the gibberish in question. As I was saying, an affine cipher differs from a conventional cipher in that it involves multiplication modulo 26, and therefore requires one to find a multiplicative inverse of the original multiplier in order to decipher it. By hand, this process is rather slow and awkward, but there are devices...

AURELIA Darling. Stop.

OSCAR Um?

AURELIA We do not need a lecture on theoretical cryptography at this moment.

HARRY I was rather enjoying it.

PERCIVAL Can you read this?

OSCAR [*sounding disappointed*] Oh. Yes. It's Greek.

PERCIVAL Well? What's it say?

OSCAR It is *The Frogs* by Aristophanes. Hardly relevant to our search.

ALPHONSE How does a bard know about advanced cryptography? And Greek?

HARRY Oscar is very clever. You would be quite surprised at the snippets he's picked up on his travels.

AMETHYST Well. While you lot were all talking, I've divided the library up into six sections, so everyone pick one!

PERCIVAL Jolly good show. What do I do if I find any more gibberish?

HARRY Call Oscar. Or me. I can help with some of it.

ALPHONSE How does a messenger...?

HARRY It's the company I keep.

Scene 3. Somewhere in the castle grounds. SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, and EUSTACE are talking.

GILES I don't see the problem, chaps. If Princess Aurelia doesn't want to marry either of you, but she knows who she *does* want to marry, and he's after the dragon too, then the way I see it we're honour bound to help him.

MALCOLM But you say he's not a knight?

GILES That shouldn't make any difference. Neither is Eustace here, but if the Princess were in love with him I'm sure we'd work something out.

EUSTACE Can I just make it absolutely clear here that I don't want *anyone* to be in love with me? Princesses or otherwise? I'm quite happy just the way I am.

GALAHAD Nobody's saying either of the princesses is in love with you, Eustace. Don't worry.

MALCOLM Not a knight, but, Giles, you do seem to be a little coy about what he actually is. He's not some sort of servant, is he?

GILES Great Scott, no! He's a bard.

MALCOLM Well, that's pretty much the same thing.

GILES I think you're being a little unfair, Malcolm. Have you heard him?

GALAHAD It wouldn't make any difference. Malcolm here has a tin ear. He couldn't tell a lute from an alpenhorn.

MALCOLM That's harsh, Gally. One of them's got strings and the other one is as long as you are.

GALAHAD Good, but do you know which is which?

EUSTACE Well, if you mean Oscar, *I've* heard him, and yes, he is very good. He sings like an angel. But how does he propose to deal with the dragon? I'm sure he's very resourceful and so on, but... he doesn't look like a fighter.

GALAHAD Mmm. He reminds me of someone, y'know. Can't think who. But, yes, you're right. Very fine voice, but doesn't strike me as a natural dragon-slayer.

GILES It doesn't really matter who or what he is. The point here is that Princess Aurelia is in love with him, and he's in love with her, and making her

marry anyone else would be... er... what's the word I'm looking for here, Gally? You're good with words.

GALAHAD An outrage upon her delicate sensibilities.

GILES Yes, exactly. That. And as noble knights, it is our bounden duty to ensure that no lady's delicate sensibilities get outraged. Insofar as we can prevent it, anyway.

EUSTACE I've never thought of Princess Aurelia as being exactly... delicate. I mean, she can be pretty forthright when she wants.

GILES Don't you think that's rather splitting hairs?

MALCOLM So what d'you want us to do, Giles? Kill the dragon for him?

GILES No, no. But I think we should at least go and talk to him. Find out what he has in mind and offer our assistance, that sort of thing.

MALCOLM What if it needs brains?

GALAHAD [*coughs meaningfully*]

MALCOLM Ah, yes, sorry, Gally.

Scene 4. The throne room. KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, OSCAR, and HARRY are present.

KING Right, that's Mountpleasant out of the way for a while. Harry, be a good chap and go and get the knights errant, will you? And Eustace, of course.

HARRY Yes, Your Majesty, but before I do, may I just ask if you have a book on dragons anywhere in the castle?

KING [*blankly*] Haven't got a blessed clue, Harry.

QUEEN You should read more, you know, Crispin. It's good for the brain.

HARRY Ah... right, Your Majesty. I'll just go and get the knights. And Eustace. Back in a jiffy. [*Exit*]

QUEEN And while we're waiting, perhaps you could sing something for us, Oscar.

KING Not. Dowland.

QUEEN Why not Dowland?

KING Because it's all Amethyst ever wants to listen to at the moment and it's so dashed miserable. A man could go and drown himself in the well.

QUEEN Don't you think that's a little extreme?

KING Well, really, Fenella, don't you think Dowland is a little extreme? That one Amethyst particularly likes – *Flow My Tears* – I mean, that one is completely over the top.

QUEEN It's very beautiful, though.

KING Oh, yes. Lovely melody. Can't fault that. But seriously? "Happy, happy they that in hell feel not the world's despite"? I think the man should have got some counselling.

OSCAR Did you want me to sing anything in particular, Your Majesties?

QUEEN You could do that one about sweet Amaryllis.

KING Don't you think that's a little *risqué*?

QUEEN Oh, but only a little. And it does have a good tune.

KING I don't know about only a little. It doesn't leave very much to the imagination.

QUEEN Well, if your imagination is as well-developed as that, then...

OSCAR Perhaps Your Majesties would care to hear *Absence, hear thou my protestation?*

KING Still too glum. I'm in the mood for something spirited.

QUEEN Oh, just sing something, Oscar, or we shall never get anywhere.

OSCAR obligingly launches into the most cheerful lute song he can think of, but he stops after a couple of lines, as HARRY reappears with SIR MALCOLM VENABLES in tow.

HARRY Hey, don't stop!

OSCAR Their Majesties did wish to talk to the knights errant. Though I see we have only one of them.

HARRY Yes, er, sorry about that. I'll go and look for the others now.

QUEEN Don't they come as a unit?

MALCOLM Not invariably, Your Majesty. But if you speak to me, you speak to us all. I shall tell the others as soon as I rejoin them.

KING That'll do. Very well, Sir Malcolm; I have a little task for you and the others, if you don't mind. I need someone arrested tonight.

MALCOLM [*hopefully*] Is it Baron Balliwell?

KING Actually, no, though I'm sure if he continues to misbehave at the rate he is doing, we shall have cause to arrest him too soon enough. No, it is in fact Lord Mountpleasant.

MALCOLM Lord Mountpleasant!

QUEEN Unfortunately, yes. He has been practising black magic on the quiet. In fact, we have his son's word for it that he even went so far as to summon a demon. And I am *not* having demons in the castle.

MALCOLM Well... no, Your Majesty. Probably unhygienic, for a start.

QUEEN I... hadn't actually looked at it that way.

KING Harry, I want you to go with the knights when they make their arrest.

HARRY Me, Your Majesty? I... don't know that I could be much help.

KING No, no. Your job is to sound the alarm if he has a horde of demons with him when the knights burst into his rooms.

QUEEN Do you really think he'll have a whole horde, Crispin? After all, from what Alphonse said, it sounds as though even one requires considerable attention.

KING One must cover all eventualities. So... shall we say about midnight?

QUEEN Do we actually know when Lord Mountpleasant goes to bed?

KING A good point. We should ask Alphonse. Harry, go and get Alphonse, will you?

HARRY Right ho, Your Majesty. *[Exit]*

OSCAR Your Majesties, if you will excuse me, I am now working on a classification system to allow the efficient location of any volume in the castle library you should desire. At the moment I fear the level of entropy in there is...

QUEEN The level of what now?

OSCAR Ah. It is extremely disorganised, Your Majesty. To take but one example, I found Euclid's *Elements* filed adjacent to an atlas.

KING That's all part of the charm. You never know what you're going to find in there.

OSCAR Yes, but, Your Majesty, if you had happened to be specifically searching for Euclid's *Elements*, you would probably not have thought to look near an atlas.

KING *[puzzled]* Why would I want to read Euclid?

OSCAR Ah. Perhaps I should have chosen a different specific example, Your Majesty. The point I am attempting to make is that a suitable classification system would aid you greatly in locating whatever volume you *did* wish to read, and I am therefore asking formal permission to implement my system once it is fully developed.

KING Huh?

QUEEN He wants to sort the books out, Crispin. I think we should let him. I was looking for a book of lace patterns in there the other day, and could I find it?

KING Oh... well, yes, of course, if it makes you happy, Fenella. Go for it, Oscar.

OSCAR Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I promise you, you will not be disappointed!

MALCOLM Wait a moment. Aren't you that bard?

OSCAR I am... the only bard in this castle at the moment, Sir Malcolm. To the best of my knowledge, at least.

MALCOLM Jolly good. My fellow knights and I would like a word, when you've got a minute.

OSCAR Um, certainly. When Their Majesties can spare me.

HARRY returns, with ALPHONSE.

HARRY Alphonse, Your Majesties.

KING Oh, yes, jolly good. Alphonse! What time does your father usually go to bed?

ALPHONSE Um... I don't know, Your Majesty. I have to go to bed first.

QUEEN But you're of age, surely?

ALPHONSE Yes, Your Majesty, but it doesn't work like that.

MALCOLM Shall we just strike at random, Your Majesties?

KING Um, yes, you'd probably better. Oh well. Run along, everyone.

Scene 5. One of the castle towers. PRINCE PERCIVAL is standing looking out through the battlements. SIR GILES DUNBAR walks in behind him.

GILES Ah, Your Highness, there you are.

PERCIVAL Oh, I say, dash it, I mean to say, great Scott, what?

GILES I'm not altogether sure I can parse that. But I understand you know my little secret.

PERCIVAL Oh. Well, yes, actually, now you mention it. So may I call you Lady Gillian?

GILES In private, yes. But I would really rather you didn't mention it in public. How did you find out, anyway?

PERCIVAL Oh! Well, Alphonse told me.

GILES Alphonse Mountpleasant? And how on earth did he know?

PERCIVAL His father summoned a demon, don't you know. Excuse me one moment. *[Shouts]* Basham! Get out of the bally rhododendrons! Those are Mother's favourites!

GILES I'm... not sure I quite follow you.

PERCIVAL Squire Basham. Odious blighter. He keeps skulking around the grounds hiding in the shrubbery. If I had my bow and arrows here, I'd have a good mind to take a few pot shots just to scare him.

GILES No, not Basham. Gally spotted him in a rose bush earlier. I meant the demon.

PERCIVAL Glxpx.

GILES Bless you.

PERCIVAL No... Glxpx. That was its name.

GILES I don't really need to know its name, Your Highness. What I'd like to know is why Lord Mountpleasant summoned it.

PERCIVAL The bounder wanted to cast a spell on Oscar so that its fire would go out when the dragon ate him. And Alphonse was supposed to see to it that it did, and then give it what for while its fire was out.

GILES Charming man. And I take it Alphonse is actually helping you instead, given that he's spilt the beans?

PERCIVAL Oh, yes, rather.

GILES Good for Alphonse. Though I could wish he had kept quiet about me personally. It does make for... complications. *[Pause]* Although... I hear it may also have some potential positive consequences?

PERCIVAL *[enthusiastically]* Well, I was jolly glad when you knocked old Balliwell off his horse this morning. I like a lady who can hit!

GILES Thank you, Your Highness. A little judicious Newtonian mechanics. Gally would be able to draw you the diagram. I just know where to aim.

PERCIVAL Um... on the other hand I'm not quite sure where to start here. I mean. Should I get you flowers or offer to have your shield straightened out? I, um, don't want to be awkward, but there are a few dents...

GILES They show it's well used. Thank you for the offer, but I like my shield as it is.

PERCIVAL Flowers, then? Or... chocolates? Bottle of mead? New sheath for your sword? I mean, you know, I'm heir to the throne and all that, so we could go quite fancy. Your name picked out in emeralds, perhaps?

GILES Which one?

PERCIVAL Ah...

GILES Though I *would* appreciate a new sheath. That's very kind of Your Highness...

PERCIVAL Percy. Please.

GILES Percy. But no jewels, if you don't mind. They do catch on things so.

PERCIVAL Then I shall order the finest inlays. Quite amazing what one can do with coloured enamel.

Enter SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS.

GALAHAD Oh, there you are, Giles. You were the one who wanted to talk to the bard, and it's taken me for ever to find you. He's waiting downstairs with Malcolm and Eustace.

GILES Is he singing?

GALAHAD He was. But then Malcolm asked him to sing *Pop Goes the Weasel* and he looked a bit despondent.

PERCIVAL I should jolly well think he did. Right. I'm going to get my bow and arrows.

GALAHAD What on earth for?

PERCIVAL That oik Basham is in the rhododendrons again. I haven't a bally clue what he's doing there.

GALAHAD Who knows? Anyway, Giles, if you wouldn't mind...

GILES Yes, yes, of course, Gally. I'll talk to you later, P... er... Your Highness.

Scene 6. A room in the castle. PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, EUSTACE, OSCAR, HARRY, and ALPHONSE are present.

GALAHAD Well, I feel on hearing all the facts of the case that Giles here is quite right. We should, in fact, be supporting you, Oscar.

OSCAR Thank you very much, Sir Galahad. I appreciate that a great deal.

MALCOLM Yes... that does all make sense. Wouldn't want to marry Her Highness here against her will. That would go against the grain. But how are we to get hold of this dragon-food spell?

EUSTACE I want to know why those pages were missing. Do you suppose Lord Mountpleasant tore them out himself?

HARRY He can't have done. If he had, he could have just cooked up the spell and had Alphonse administer it, and saved himself a good deal of trouble. And I'm sorry to say he's not above something like poisoning Oscar if that suits his purposes. No, they must have been missing when he acquired the book.

AURELIA Anyone know where he got the book?

ALPHONSE Don't look at me, Your Highness. For all I know, he's had it since before I was born.

AMETHYST And we drew a complete blank in the castle library.

OSCAR On the bright side, your parents have given me permission to implement a scientific classification system in there.

HARRY Want any help?

OSCAR Oh, yes, please!

AURELIA Huh. You're going to end up spending hours in there, and then I shall never see you.

HARRY Well, you know, Your Highness, *you* could always help too. I'm sure Oscar will need all the help he can get.

AURELIA I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll send my maid.

GALAHAD Oscar, you definitely remind me of someone. I'm trying to think whom.

OSCAR Ah, well, yes, Sir Galahad, such resemblances are not uncommon. You yourself remind me quite considerably of one of my late uncles. When he was much younger, of course.

AURELIA This is not helping with regard to the spell. We can't find another copy of that book in the castle library. So where's the next most sensible place to go?

HARRY We really want a good wizard. Or witch. Anyone know one?

AMETHYST Well... they say Mistress Bellwether's a witch. She's the apothecary.

OSCAR An apothecary might well know something useful.

MALCOLM I don't, you know, want to disturb anyone, but do we have an ETA for the dragon, Gally?

GALAHAD By my calculations, probably about Tuesday afternoon. But, of course, we don't want it to arrive here at all. We should go out and meet it first.

EUSTACE Not without the spell, though.

ALPHONSE Then we should go and see Mistress Bellwether as soon as possible.

AURELIA We won't all fit in her shop. I shall summon her here. Harry!

HARRY Right ho, Your Highness. *[Exit]*

AMETHYST Where's Percy, anyway?

GILES Getting his bow and arrows. Squire Basham has been hiding in the shrubbery, and your brother takes exception.

AMETHYST *[meaningfully]* Have you had that talk with him yet?

GILES Um... yes, I think it probably counted as That Talk.

AURELIA Why is Squire Basham hiding in the shrubbery?

GALAHAD A very good question, Your Highness.

MALCOLM I could go and... oh. No, I can't. He's only a squire.

EUSTACE Does that mean I could?

MALCOLM H'mm. I don't see why not, actually.

EUSTACE Right! No reason you knights should have all the fun.

GALAHAD But what are you going to challenge him *for*?

EUSTACE Disrespect to the King and Queen. And if lurking in their shrubbery isn't disrespectful, I don't know what is.

GALAHAD Jolly good. Well, if you want to borrow my morningstar, just ask.

EUSTACE Well, of course he'll get the choice of weapons, but I shouldn't be at all surprised if he goes for some kind of blunt instrument. I'll let you know. Thank you, Sir Galahad. *[Exit]*

HARRY returns, with DORIS BELLWETHER and her assistant FFINCH.

AMETHYST Wow, that was quick!

DORIS Doris Bellwether at Your Highnesses' service. And what can we be doing for you this fine day?

AURELIA We're looking for a dragon-food spell.

DORIS Oh... dragon-food. My, my, haven't been asked for that one in years.

OSCAR Can you do it?

DORIS I can if I can get all the ingredients together. Of course, it won't be cheap. Most of the ingredients are very rare.

AURELIA Expense is not an issue, Mistress Bellwether. And I imagine you already have many of them in your shop.

DORIS I do, I do. Well, I think I do, anyway. Have we a hair from a unicorn's mane in stock, ffinch?

FFINCH Three, in fact. It was an unusually co-operative unicorn.

DORIS Good, good. What about bottled starlight?

FFINCH A small phial, but it should be enough.

DORIS A basilisk's fin?

FFINCH At least half a dozen.

DORIS I don't know what I'd do without ffinch here. He has the entire inventory by heart. Well, if we have those, we've probably got everything else we need by way of ingredients... but we also need two people who can sing.

OSCAR Ah. Well, I can, in fact, sing, and I've been giving some lessons to Aurelia.

AURELIA Like this! *[She sings.]*

DORIS Oh, that will do very nicely. You see, the spell has to be sung, and it has to be sung *well*. Dragons are extremely sensitive to music. And it's a call and response, so there have to be two people.

OSCAR Ah... I've heard of the existence of such spells, but never come across an example.

GILES So what do you do, exactly? Mix up all the ingredients and then sing over them?

DORIS Not exactly, dear. You have to enchant an item of food. I suggest you use a loaf of bread. Or some fruit. The dragon will eat it just so long as it's edible; it will smell the magic and it won't be interested in eating anything else. Or *anyone* else, for that matter. You can safely walk right up to the dragon with it.

AURELIA So where does the singing come in?

DORIS I was coming to that. You take your loaf, or whatever you're using. You make a small fire and put the ingredients for the spell on it, and as you do so, you start the singing. And as soon as you finish singing, you pass your loaf through the smoke of the fire, and that's it. Done!

AURELIA Mistress Bellwether, that's perfect! Name your price.

DORIS Oh... I think a hundred gold pieces will cover it, Your Highness.

AURELIA I shall have them sent over. Now... the words and music to the song?

DORIS ffinch?

FFINCH I'll get straight on to copying them out as soon as we get back to the shop, Mistress Bellwether. Are Their Highnesses going to want a translation?

OSCAR A translation?

FFINCH Well, see, laddie, the words are in Greek.

OSCAR That is not a problem. I can read Greek.

GALAHAD I've never met a bard who could do that before.

OSCAR I am interested in some *very* ancient music, Sir Galahad. So, let me get this straight – we just put all the ingredients for the spell on the fire at once?

DORIS That's right, dearie. And I'll just send them all across in a bag, with the song.

AURELIA That will be excellent.

DORIS Well, if Your Highnesses and the rest of you don't mind, I'll be getting back to the shop now. Then we can be getting on with your spell.

AURELIA Yes, yes, of course. And I'm so happy I shall get to use my singing!

ACT IV

Scene 1. A corridor in the castle. SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, EUSTACE, HARRY, and OSCAR are gathered outside a large door. SIR GALAHAD is holding a key that clearly fits it.

MALCOLM Jolly good job the King had a spare key. I mean, we *could* break that down if we wanted, but it would take time, and he'd have enough warning to get out through a window.

HARRY We're twenty metres up, though.

OSCAR Metres?

HARRY Oh, come on, Oscar, you're a man of science.

GALAHAD Seems quiet in there.

GILES I doubt we'd hear anything through a door like this if he was having a wild party.

MALCOLM I wouldn't have thought wild parties were quite his thing.

GILES Well? Are we going in?

GALAHAD Actually, Oscar... what are you doing here?

OSCAR Ah, well, you see, Harry... he's put himself to quite a lot of trouble on my account, and I'd never forgive myself if anything, ah, untoward happened to him, so... you know...

HARRY You don't need to, you know. *I'm* the one who's supposed to be looking after *you*.

OSCAR Well. I am going to reciprocate for once.

GALAHAD Right. We're going in. *[FX: door opens]*

MALCOLM There's a light through there. He's not in bed.

GILES Lead the way!

The group bursts in on LORD MOUNTPLEASANT, who is standing in front of a magic circle containing GLXPNX.

GALAHAD You're under... holy smoke!

GLXPNX If he were, he would forthwith fall insensible upon the ground. I see that thou art Sir Galahad Blakeley-Norris, the famed knight errant.

LORD M This is an outrage! What are you doing in my rooms?

MALCOLM I'll say it's an outrage! That's a demon you've got there!

GLXPNX Thy powers of observation are undimmed, Sir Malcolm. I am Glxpnx.

GALAHAD As I was trying to say when I came in, you are under arrest, Lord Mountpleasant. You are charged with the use of black magic, and here we find you *in flagrante delicto*, no less.

LORD M Under arrest, am I? Really? Try it. You'll have to cross the circle to reach me.

GLXPNX Oh? Dost thou imagine that I will protect thee?

LORD M Not intentionally, no, but you'll probably eat them. Or drag them down to the Abyss. Or something else they really won't like.

EUSTACE *[quietly]* It can't attack us all at once. I will step into the circle. The rest of you, rush past me and grab him.

GILES Eustace, no! We can't let you sacrifice yourself like that.

EUSTACE Oh, don't worry. I'll put up a fight.

GALAHAD Absolutely unthinkable. I'm moved by your heroism, Eustace, but it won't do; we're not going to lose you. And certainly not as food for that thing.

OSCAR I... think I have a better idea.

GLXPNX Ah. Viscount Dunford, forsooth. Third son of Algernon Gilchrist-Waites, ninth Duke of Micklewood?

GALAHAD I knew it! You're the image of Algy.

HARRY [*firmly*] Oscar. The bard.

GLXPNX Oh, and Miss Harriet Hoffnung, too? The last of the Hoffnung family, which hath been in the faithful service of the Gilchrist-Waites family sith the days of the second Duke?

HARRY That's Harry to you, demon.

GILES Wait... you're a woman?

HARRY Completely irrelevant. I'm a loyal retainer, is what I am. When Oscar ran off to become a bard, *someone* had to go with him and keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't get caught up in any political intrigue. Which he just *might* have done if some idiot had recognised him and, you know, *said something*.

GALAHAD Great Scott!

LORD M You damned fool of a demon, why didn't you tell me all that sooner?

GLXPNX Thou didst not ask.

GILES Harry... I promise, my lips are sealed.

GLXPNX Why, of course thou wilt keep silent. Thou hast thine own secret... Lady Gillian.

MALCOLM Is there actually anyone in this room apart from me who is who they say they are?

GALAHAD Well... there's me. I think. But it might be a good idea if Oscar, or whoever he really is, told us his idea.

OSCAR Oh, I'm Oscar all right. And what I thought I might do is... sing.

GLXPNX No! Thou shalt not!

LORD M Glxpnx... much as I don't want him in here, even I have to admit he has a beautiful voice. What's your problem?

OSCAR begins to sing. GLXPNX writhes in obvious agony.

GLXPNX Stop him! Thou lackwit! I cannot bear it!

LORD M Oscar! Shut up!

OSCAR continues singing. LORD MOUNTPLEASANT rushes forwards to try to lay hands on him, but in doing so he inadvertently steps into the magic circle, where GLXPNX grabs him.

GLXPNX Puny human! Now I have thee!

LORD M No! Let go!

OSCAR stops singing.

GALAHAD Well, I never. I had no idea singing could do that to demons.

OSCAR Ah... something I once read somewhere, Sir Galahad. While demons can, of course, pervert music as they can almost anything, they do not love it.

LORD M Let me go!

GLXPNX Why, forsooth, thine only chance hath just gone. Now, if someone might haply banish me, I shall depart whence I came and take this sorry specimen with me.

MALCOLM Um. Technically I'm not sure we can do that. We're supposed to arrest him, don't you know.

GALAHAD Precisely. He's meant to get a fair trial, not be dragged off to the Abyss.

GLXPNX Fret not thyself, Sir Galahad. He will be tried.

HARRY You're quite sure you mean "tried" as in judicial proceedings, and not merely "sampled"?

LORD M I really do wish you hadn't said that.

OSCAR [*his voice ringing with sudden authority*] Let him out of the circle. Or I will sing again.

GILES He... tried to kill you, you know.

OSCAR I know.

GLXPNX *[very sulkily]* So be it.

GLXPNX pushes LORD MOUNTPLEASANT out of the circle in the direction of the knights errant. SIR MALCOLM VENABLES grabs him and deftly manacles him.

MALCOLM Good. Well done, Oscar... er... My Lord, I should say?

OSCAR Oscar will do. There is no need for anything said in here to go beyond these walls.

GALAHAD Are you sure? After all, you do want to marry the Princess, and it will definitely help with that.

OSCAR No need, Sir Galahad. We shall do the spell and give the dragon the enchanted loaf, it will stop ravaging the kingdom, and then no further questions should be asked.

LORD M Ah, but you haven't considered one thing. How do you know *I* shall keep quiet?

GILES If you don't, I'm pushing you right back into that magic circle.

OSCAR No, Sir Giles. He must have a fair trial, and we must all take our chances.

LORD M Your innocence is touching. If I am ruined, I intend to take as many of you as possible down with me.

GLXPNX Thou wilt make a reasonable demon, with a little practice.

HARRY Will someone please banish that thing?

GLXPNX Wait but a little while. I have that which I would reveal first.

MALCOLM If Gally here is really a wizard in disguise, I shall no longer be surprised.

GLXPNX Alas, no, thy Sir Galahad is but tediously straightforward. No, I refer to the list of children begotten of Lord Mountpleasant here.

LORD M Alphonse.

GLXPNX Also: Lady Hilaria Fairfax. Rosie Banks...

LORD M Banks?

GLXPNX Dost thou not recall the washerwoman with whom thou dallied upon a time?

LORD M Oh... Jenny? I never knew her surname... wait, what am I saying?

GLXPNX Robert Fotheringay. Lord Simon Gresham-Alexander. Lady Irene Armitage. Matthew Forrest. The twins Susan and Nell McDonald. Lord Roger Nye. Abel Crabtree...

LORD M Stop!

GLXPNX If ye bring paper and a quill, then ye may write them all down. For if the wretch doth reveal any secrets, then ye shall wish in turn to reveal his.

LORD M You're supposed to be on my side!

GLXPNX Forsooth, I am not on the side of any human; but I do not love thee.

HARRY I think I can remember all those names. Well, now, Lord Mountpleasant, do we have a deal?

LORD M Glxpnx, I banish you in the name of the Eternal Void!

GLXPNX Up thine. *[vanishes]*

LORD M Very well. But understand that my silence is *entirely* conditional upon yours.

GALAHAD Oh, that's perfectly fine. Just as long as you know that it's reciprocal.

MALCOLM You do know Lord Fairfax will probably get asked to be the judge?

LORD M It... would not surprise me.

MALCOLM Riiiiight. So, now that all the dust's settled... Giles is a woman, and Harry's a woman, and Oscar's a viscount, and...?

GILES And we just go on exactly as before. Unless and until I marry Prince Percival, in which case, fair enough.

EUSTACE Wait... Prince Percival?! That was rather quick.

GILES He pressed his suit. With a little help from his sisters. But seriously, you all know I'm not bad at the knighting. No reason I can't keep on doing it.

GALAHAD You do make a very fair point.

HARRY Same with me and the messengering.

OSCAR And me and the barding. I'm not cut out for a nobleman, in any case. They keep trying to train you to do things like use a sword and ride a horse. And I always fall off. I mean... horses do tend to have their own ideas.

MALCOLM Yes, well, that's all very well, but... Giles? I mean, if it ever gets out, and it will if you marry the Prince, then what are we going to look like?

GILES You didn't know, and officially you still don't.

GALAHAD We'll discuss it further tomorrow, Malcolm, if you still want to. Right now we have to go and put this felon in the dungeons, and then I don't know about the rest of you but I'm for bed.

OSCAR One other thing we should do tomorrow, Sir Galahad. We should have a word with the King.

GALAHAD About the demon?

OSCAR No. About Eustace. Don't you think he is perhaps ready now to become a knight?

EUSTACE [*taken aback*] Really?

MALCOLM But what would we do for a squire?

HARRY Get another one? Oscar's quite right. Eustace offered to sacrifice his life just so that we could arrest Lord Mountpleasant here. And while that was... over the top, it was also an incredibly brave thing to do. I'm with Oscar.

EUSTACE To be fair... while you're both very kind, I wasn't planning to die.

OSCAR How did you propose to take on a demon?

EUSTACE Ah. That was the one secret it didn't get round to revealing, and perhaps it's no wonder. It would have been against its own interests. I have an amulet. It gives me +10 to defence against Evil.

GALAHAD You've never mentioned that before.

EUSTACE Well, you know, the fewer people who know about it, the safer it is. I wouldn't want to be parted from it.

GALAHAD You know we wouldn't breathe a word!

EUSTACE Not deliberately, no, but still... anyway, now all the secrets are out.

OSCAR You're still brave.

HARRY Right. Well, if there are no further revelations to be had, I too am for bed. I think this evening has been entirely too exciting.

GILES Sleep well... you know, Harry, I think we should keep in touch.

HARRY Excellent idea!

Scene 2. A field. BARON BALLIWELL and SQUIRE BASHAM are hiding in a ditch behind the hedge. On the other side of the hedge stands OSCAR with PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, PRINCE PERCIVAL, SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, EUSTACE, HARRY, and ALPHONSE.

BARON Dragon should be along in a moment.

SQUIRE Ulp.

BARON Nah, we're safe as houses here. I heard Lord Mountpleasant put a spell on the bard so it'll eat him.

SQUIRE But he got arrested, though.

BARON And how exactly is that going to stop the spell? Think, Basham.

SQUIRE Am thinking. Am thinking how I'm going to fight Eustace.

BARON Oh, Eustace... well, that was your own stupid fault. You should have been better at hiding. If you want my advice, use a mace.

SQUIRE Yerrrr.

AURELIA Sir Galahad! When exactly are we to expect the dragon?

GALAHAD Oh, I don't think it should be very long now. If anyone's nervous, this might be a good time to get behind the hedge.

AMETHYST Actually, I'm a bit... hey! Look, everyone, we've got company!

MALCOLM Oh. Those two. I am so not surprised.

BARON Don't mind us, Your Highness. We've just come to watch the bard getting eaten.

EUSTACE Ah, Squire Basham. There is still that little matter of a challenge between us. If you're amenable, we may as well settle it now?

SQUIRE Errrr... yerrrr?

BARON Here you go, Basham. My mace.

GALAHAD Eustace. My morningstar.

BARON Does that count as the same weapon?

AURELIA They're both blunt instruments. I don't see why not.

PERCIVAL Jolly good show, what?

GILES I'm not sure I can quite believe this. Here we are waiting for a dragon, and you two decide to bash seven bells out of each other.

EUSTACE Well, we're going to do it at some point, so it may as well be now. Alphonse, would you mind moving over a little?

ALPHONSE Oh... certainly. Um... Oscar... you're quite sure about the spell?

OSCAR As confident as I can be. We followed all the instructions carefully, and Aurelia sang awfully well.

HARRY Hang on. Who's giving these two the starting signal?

GALAHAD Oh, I might as well. You two! Ready?

EUSTACE Champing at the bit, Sir Galahad.

SQUIRE Yerrrr!

GALAHAD Then you may start... now!

FX: loud clatter.

SQUIRE Hey!

AMETHYST It bounced right off him!

EUSTACE *[brightly]* Oh, splendid! He's Evil.

BARON Huh?!

GILES Ah... *[FX: further clattering.]*

EUSTACE Don't mind me. I'll just wait till he gets tired and then I'll wallop him.

BARON Would someone mind explaining what is going on here?

OSCAR Stop the fight a moment, please. I need a word with Eustace.

SQUIRE No way! *[FX: clattering intensifies.]*

HARRY Squire Basham, I think I know what Oscar wants to say to Eustace, and it's in your own interest if you let him.

SQUIRE Grrrrr! *[FX: even more clattering]*

OSCAR Oh. Well, we tried...

PERCIVAL Oh, gosh, I say, look over there!

AMETHYST Eeeeeek!

OSCAR Stand your ground! The only thing it'll be interested in is this loaf.

HARRY I admire your confidence, but just in case you're wrong I'd like all the knights to draw their swords about... now...

The DRAGON arrives, landing heavily in front of OSCAR. BARON BALLIWELL yelps, turns tail, and flees. SQUIRE BASHAM is so busy trying to land a blow on EUSTACE that he does not even notice.

DRAGON I... smell... magic!

OSCAR Ah, yes... now, I trust you'll forgive me in that I have sadly not had the opportunity to study dragon etiquette. How should I address you?

DRAGON "Your Excellency" will do very well, human.

OSCAR Very well, Your Excellency. Please accept this enchanted loaf with the highest compliments of Their Majesties the King and Queen, who were

unfortunately not able to be present. They are represented here by Prince Percival, heir to the throne, and his sisters Princess Aurelia and Princess Amethyst.

DRAGON H'mm. Nice little speech. And you are...?

OSCAR A mere bard, Your Excellency. My name is Oscar. *[He holds out the enchanted loaf.]*

DRAGON *[snapping it up hungrily, but with care not to bite OSCAR in doing so]* Your most noble gift is accepted... ahhhhh. Delicious! I shall need no more food for at least five centuries.

OSCAR It is a pleasure and an honour to be of such service.

DRAGON Don't mention it. And who are all these?

GALAHAD We three are knights errant. And over there is our squire. The one with the, ah, morningstar, Your Excellency.

DRAGON And who is the idiot trying to hit him?

MALCOLM Ah. That is Squire Basham. Baron Balliwell ran away.

DRAGON Most entertaining. That leaves... a confused-looking minor noble and a small commoner in an ill-fitting codpiece.

ALPHONSE Alphonse, Your Excellency. And, er, Harry.

At this moment, SQUIRE BASHAM suddenly realises that the DRAGON is present. He spins round with his mouth open. EUSTACE scientifically wallops him with the morningstar and he goes down like a ton of bricks. FX: clatter.

OSCAR Eustace... was that quite fair? Against a demon is one thing, but Squire Basham, whatever else he is, is not a demon.

EUSTACE Oh, he'll be all right. I haven't done him any serious injury.

HARRY So, er, Your Excellency, may we ask what your plans are now?

DRAGON I am in a good mood, so I shall graciously deign to tell you. I intend to find a nice cave somewhere and sleep for the next few centuries. And I am convinced you have a knitting needle in there.

HARRY *[hastily attempting to straighten codpiece]* Trick of the light, Your Excellency.

MALCOLM There's a very nice cave just near Baron Balliwell's castle, don't you know.

GILES Ooh. There is. Shall I ride after him and get him? If I convince him that the dragon won't eat him, then I'm sure he'll show him... her?... the way.

GALAHAD Excellent idea, Giles.

PERCIVAL I'll come with you. He might take a little extra persuading.

Exeunt SIR GILES DUNBAR and PRINCE PERCIVAL.

DRAGON So. You knights errant are not planning to fight me, then?

MALCOLM Oh, no need for that, Your Excellency. Since you are no longer ravaging the kingdom, we have no further quarrel with you.

DRAGON Are you sure you don't simply want to perform a heroic feat of derring-do? Even if you fail to defeat me, surviving a fight with a dragon generally looks good on a knight's CV.

GALAHAD You're offering?

DRAGON Well, only if you're interested, obviously.

MALCOLM I'll admit, I'm tempted. But only if you promise not to use fire.

DRAGON Nope. That takes all the fun out of it.

ALPHONSE The spell my dad tried to cast would have stopped you using fire. For a while, anyway. But he wanted to cast it on Oscar so you'd eat him, and I took his place so he'd cast it on me instead, because it wouldn't work on me.

DRAGON Eat him? Eat a *bard*?! Does your father think I am a complete barbarian? Would you eat a singing bird?

AURELIA Wait... we went to all that trouble and now you tell us Oscar was perfectly safe all the time?

DRAGON As long as he'd said he was a bard, absolutely! And now I require him to sing.

OSCAR Certainly, Your Excellency. Do you have a particular preference?

DRAGON I like ballads. Sing me a good long one. Ideally with a few battles in it.

OSCAR Very well. Ah. We may be here for a little while...

Scene 3. Back in the throne room. KING CRISPIN, QUEEN FENELLA, PRINCESS AURELIA, PRINCESS AMETHYST, PRINCE PERCIVAL, SIR GILES DUNBAR, SIR MALCOLM VENABLES, SIR GALAHAD BLAKELEY-NORRIS, OSCAR, HARRY, and ALPHONSE are present.

KING Well. Um. Very well done, everyone. It's good to know that we shall have no more trouble with the dragon. But since it was, you know, a team effort...

AURELIA Are you going to tell me I can't marry Oscar just because we helped?

QUEEN Well, he *is* only a bard, dear.

GILES Your Majesties, I object. The other knights and I agreed to help Oscar because we could not countenance a lady being forced to marry someone not of her choosing. She has chosen Oscar, and we helped solely on the understanding that if we were successful, the wedding would take place.

MALCOLM Well said, Giles.

GALAHAD Absolutely.

ALPHONSE And while we're at it, I wish to be considered as a suitor to the Princess Amethyst.

AMETHYST Ohhh! My hero!

QUEEN Well... umm... you did stand up against your father, and you are at least nobility. We could... consider it.

AURELIA If you don't let me marry Oscar, I'll... I'll elope with him.

GILES There needn't be any eloping. Your Majesties promised the hand of Princess Aurelia in marriage to whoever...

GALAHAD [*automatically*] To whomever...

GILES That. To anyone who prevented the dragon from ravaging the kingdom. And Oscar did that, and the fact that he had help shouldn't make the slightest difference.

MALCOLM And in any case, he's a...

GILES)
GALAHAD) Quiet!
HARRY)

MALCOLM But...

AURELIA He's a *what*?

HARRY Er... linguist. Speaks Greek. Very useful in royal families.

QUEEN I do realise he's very clever, but I think we need more than that in a son-in-law.

GALAHAD With respect, if Your Majesties fail to keep your word, you are nothing.

PERCIVAL I say! I've just had a topping idea.

ALPHONSE It had better be an improvement on the last "topping idea" you had.

PERCIVAL You need him to be nobility? Well, dash it all, Mum and Dad, you *are* the King and Queen. You could just *give* him a title.

AURELIA Good point, Percy! In fact, Lord Mountpleasant has half a dozen titles, and now he's in disgrace. You could easily take one of them off him and give it to Oscar.

ALPHONSE I'm more than happy with that. As things stand, they all pass to me, and I don't need more than one.

KING H'mm. It would be a way out.

QUEEN But he's such a good bard. I wouldn't want him to stop doing that.

AURELIA He wouldn't have to! You could make him Master of the Royal Music and give him a choir to conduct. For special occasions and so on.

KING Master of the Royal Music? H'mm. I do like the sound of that. And a choir... yes, a choir would be splendid. And perhaps we should get an organist.

AMETHYST We might have to get the organ fixed first. It's a bit out of tune.

OSCAR [*with feeling*] Something of an understatement, Your Highness.

HARRY Your Majesties, don't you think Master of the Royal Music is quite enough? I'm sure Oscar would be embarrassed by any further title.

AURELIA H'mpf. I think you should make him at least a Duke.

OSCAR Harry is quite correct. I am happy to be Master of the Royal Music, but nothing more.

HARRY And another thing. Eustace. Where is Eustace, anyway?

GALAHAD Last I heard, he'd challenged Baron Balliwell.

PERCIVAL That should be deuced entertaining.

GILES I suppose he can't be dubbed a knight if he's not here. But if Your Majesties wouldn't mind considering it for future reference...

QUEEN Oh, yes, I've heard all about Eustace. Very valiant. Crispin, I think you should definitely dub him a knight when you next see him. But this isn't getting us anywhere with Oscar's title.

HARRY [*firmly*] Master of the Royal Music, Your Majesty. That's the only one he's actually happy with. You know, if people would just listen to other people...

KING Well... I suppose it will do? Doesn't seem much, though. I feel I should at least throw in a knighthood with it.

HARRY Your Majesty, he doesn't get on with horses.

QUEEN And while we're about it, Crispin, we need a new Chancellor. One who isn't a yes-man. What about Alphonse here?

KING He's certainly not like his father.

ALPHONSE Er... well, I'm a bit young...

QUEEN At the moment, yes, but I'm sure you'll mature into the role.

PERCIVAL That would be capital!

KING So, let me get all this straight. Oscar becomes Master of the Royal Music. Alphonse becomes Chancellor. Aurelia marries Oscar?

QUEEN And Amethyst, in the fullness of time, marries Alphonse, assuming she's still interested. Which she appears to be at the moment.

KING Right. And Eustace gets knighted. What do we do with Harry?

HARRY Nothing, Your Majesty. I'll just stick with the messengering. It seems to be my forte.

OSCAR You were quite a lot of help, you know.

KING So I understand. I think you should get, well, something.

HARRY Um... well... there is *something*, if Your Majesties don't mind.

QUEEN Say on!

HARRY The messengering doesn't take up much of my time. Could you possibly make me Castle Librarian as well?

KING Why, nothing easier!

HARRY Thank you, Your Majesty.

PERCIVAL And you three knights... oh, and Eustace... are jolly welcome to stay here as long as you like.

GALAHAD Thank you, Your Highness. I'm happy to give you some additional lessons in sword technique while we're here.

GILES [*demurely*] Your Highness is... very kind.

PERCIVAL What about this choir, though, eh? I'd like to join it!

GALAHAD Actually...

GILES You can sing?

PERCIVAL Of course I can sing! Listen to this. [*Sings*]

GALAHAD Nice countertenor, Your Highness. I expect you'll want a tenor too? [*Sings*]

OSCAR [*happily*] Wonderful! Do we have a bass?

KING I believe there's one in the attic, but it probably needs restringing.

OSCAR This... may actually be harder work than I thought.

FINIS