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PERSIMMON WONDERSEEKER AND THE DRAGON OF DAUNTINGHAM

by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

My friend, I put it to you thus:

Imagine yourself poised for your morning constitutional. Four footmen assume strategic positions in your entrance hall. A fifth opens the door only when his noble lord, yourself in scarf and greatcoat, assumes the hunchbacked posture of a charging bull. For should you fail to meet the misty morn with braced shoulders and lowered head, the wind would bowl you onto your behind so that your lordly person would become a foyer rug, notwithstanding the four footmen, who must wrestle with the door to discourage it from flying off.

Having gained the out-of-doors with your handsome head, so valuable to King and kingdom, still firmly attached, you stagger over grey grass, which like yourself is bent and nearly flattened. With sea-spray spat into your eyes by screaming

winds, you could not look upon the sky even if you so desired. But you need not look to know that the clouds are grey and fat, and ere long you shall find yourself soaked through to the bone by thumb-sized dollops of chill water.

'Blast!' you think and 'Bugger all!' when the first frigid droplet smacks the bit of eyelid you've exposed. You begin to see that your insistence on a constitutional was somewhat lacking in wisdom. However, dignity restrains you from returning so soon after you departed, to be laughed at by the servants who did after all warn you. Wisdom seems rather to lie at the Tavern In The Cave, the only such establishment in this forsaken place.

The cave is by the sea at the bottom of a path. You stumble in the direction whence the salty spray lashes at your face until a blast of cold air, attended by a deafening growl and a great crash, gives you a start and thereby saves you from stumbling over a cliff. Chance gives you the sight of a stone whereupon somebody determined, with a hammer and a healthy sense of the common good, has chiselled the word PATH.

Yet you see nothing before you but the roiling, grey sky. You see nothing below except the angry, frothing sea. You cannot see the tavern, but a squint over the side reveals the crinkled outline of the village at the bottom of the cliff, clinging to the rock so as not to be swept away by gales.

The path is nearly vertical. It's but a slit in the jagged black stone on which you stand, half a league above the village. You clamber down stone steps and sandy slides, scraping your hands on the serrated rocks, whereupon the winds and waves carve their everlasting fury.

On the beach, you watch the sea; and when the time is right, you run! For it's the ocean, grey as steel, which makes the awful growls, hurling house-sized waves unto the shore. Slipping and sliding over black seaweed and sodden boulders, you wonder how anybody with a bit of ale in him would find his way back home again!

In the tavern, you nonetheless accept, with heartiness born of relief, a hot liqueur made of local kelp. You'd give your right arm for a bowl of hot apples; but from the sullen fisherfolk, your close companions in the dingy cave, you learn that the scrawny woods atop the cliff produce few edibles. Some blame the gravelly soil, others the unrelenting winds.

'You'll be wantin' to wait,' says someone. 'Next caravan be arrivin' any moment.'

Those around you take this as a bitter joke. Any caravan with sights upon this place must cross the Draconskaya Mountains, which offer a bare handful of treacherous passes. The journey requires a cycle of the moon, and many caravans are thwarted by the terrible storms that are born over the sea and

spend their lives rampaging among the peaks. Moon upon moon, in consequence, the village must endure without flour or grain, new ropes or linens, vegetables or fruits of any kind.

If you made your dwelling here, upon the passing of each storm you'd likely find yourself obliged to rebuild your house or, if yours was the Great House at the summit of the cliff, to replace sections of the roof and send hunters for the furniture that's flown out of the upper rooms.

This, my friend, is Dauntingham.

Not a peninsula so much as a bit of fingernail that could use a trim, Dauntingham is a protuberance of no consequence from the otherwise perfect ring of mountains that surrounds our Kingdom of Viendebonia. Chagrined by this geographical presumption, most people try not to think about it.

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It seemed superfluous that Lord Sydnus of Dauntingham should not only include me in his invitation but insist doggedly upon my presence. Circumstances bade him wait a good long while, for I'd decided to combine my springtime peek into the Dragons' nests (no eggs this season, but all who live are healthy!) with another (failed) attempt to catch the Sparkling Snow Cactus in bloom. Happily I rambled through the Draconskaya Mountains, scaling perilous cliffs, leaping treacherous ravines, braving snowstorms and fleeing ill-tempered Dragons. I came

home to Ivylea exhilarated, if slightly singed, with the notion of hunting giant molluscs in the tropics - only to be informed that I was wanted on a journey to the soggy fingernail, where I knew my Lady Mummy would attempt to make me remain indoors. She described Lord Sydnus' doggedness, and I supposed the poor fellow wanted me to save his drawing room from certain monotony with tales of my bold escapades into the world of wonders.

So off we went! I rode Sammus astride; Talvi trotted at his heels. But Lady Mummy and Lord Dad must have their carriage! Travelling in the stately but circuitous and manifestly boring manner that befits the reigning Stewards of an affluent province, we went down into Onanne, keeping behind the mountains and out of the winds, availing ourselves of pretty inns and southern sunshine. We turned northwest and spent a cycle of the moon wending through mountainous ravines. Here the inns were few and poor. The weather worsened as we drew nearer to Dauntingham.

Lady Mummy was not impressed. She and Lord Dad were far from enthused about the journey to begin with. Sydnus had never imposed his hospitality on them before; they were quite happy to continue corresponding with him via post. They see him every summer, after all, at the Assembly of Royal Stewards in His Majesty's Palace. It fell to Lady Mummy to remind us all why we could neither refuse nor lengthily postpone the invitation to

visit Sydnus' new summer house. By way of explanation, she recalled Dauntingham's history.

Sydnus descends from a wealthy farming family out of Onanne. His ancestors had such healthy opinions of themselves that they believed they could turn uninhabitable land into a thriving community, which of course they wished to rule. They were rich, you see, but not high-born. They desired the title of Royal Provincial Steward, which would elevate them to the nobility.

They petitioned the Monarch for a sliver of storm-battered seashore at the intersection of vast Onanne and powerful, magnificent Ivylea. And on that sliver they proposed, for the first time in the history of Viendebonia, to build a city beyond the ring of mountains. Folly, but nonetheless, Dauntingham was born.

The new Stewards knew full well the ill temper of their land. They chose it for its recalcitrance. To prove that the might of wind and sea and the wildness of the country would bend to their desires. To prove that they were fit to rule.

But the land rebelled. Like a wild stallion out of the Draonskaya peaks, the harsh terrain of rock and sand refused the plough! The peasants who followed the new Lord Dauntingham began to starve upon the passing of a single generation. Forced to forsake their dreams of prosperous farms, they resorted to

scavenging the baleful sea and meagre forest. Dauntingham's Great House survived on ancestral bequests; but the wealth of Sydnus' line dwindled, guzzled by barren fields. Today, even with a Royal stipend, it costs more for Sydnus to maintain his people than it would to move them and let the stallion go wild.

And yet not for the world would that fool give up his Stewardship. The man is desperate to prove that Dauntingham deserves to remain a province. How he rails at the Assembly, which considers him a laughingstock!

For even when he grovels, every plea is an announcement. Certain words trigger hidden springs which cause him to hop from side to side:

'My family (hop)! Has made The Ultimate Sacrifice (hop)! To develop singlehandedly (hop) the western frontier of this (hop hop) great land! I shall not see it dissolve into Onanne or Ivylea, into (hop) just another fishing village!'

'Do leave off beating the table, Lord Dauntingham. It has no money to give you and shan't produce any under torture,' replied Lady Mummy.

The Assembly receives even her jests with approbation, for the Stewards of Ivylea have the King's ear and respect.

For my own part, I offered, 'When the land speaks, we must listen, Lord Sydnus. Your land is as passionate and vocal as your noble self.'

But I'm afraid he takes me for some sort of eccentric. He won't listen to me.

'The day will come,' said Lady Mummy, 'when Sydnus will be made to yield. Gently but firmly, you understand. And the ugly task will fall upon his neighbours.'

She and Lord Dad therefore desire cheerful relations with Dauntingham, their tacit wish being to minimize Sydnus' resistance when his time runs out. It's a bollixed situation, bloody awkward for all concerned. And he's already on the defensive. He sees any omission of himself from any guest list as a terrible, dishonourable slight against the kingdom and humanity at large. In kind, failure to receive his invites with hysterical enthusiasm is as you see: terrible, dishonourable, thus and so.

Our opinion of his new house having been sought, we were received, soaked and reeling, at the ancestral homestead: the old, draughty, damp and creaking Great House of Dauntingham.

For me, this place was a delight. Dark corners, attics, unused corridors, mysterious stairways and eerie chests of drawers: a house full to bursting with the promise of wonders! Lady Mummy and Lord Dad found it threadbare and a bit unstable. But they will put up with a great deal: stiff upper lip and so on. Consider, after all, what the building must endure.

Sydnus gives a similar impression. So does his daughter, Mero. Both are threadbare and a bit unstable, only on her it is intriguing. One was presented to the latter at suppertime.

The first impression is of dignity, the haughty sort. As the lithe little body flows into a curtsey, the grey eyes, the hue of thunderclouds, lift in unsolicited challenge, daring you to deny that they belong to a Lady of stature. In conversation, her voice is low in pitch and often silent; and the eyes, framed by smooth, dark skin - brown like the beams in the house of her ancestors - the eyes flash silver at the person who is speaking or at someone who is not speaking, subjecting them to baleful stares.

Or the flash is that of lightning as my lady alights upon a point of argument, seizes it and rails impassionedly, so that her shining black hair threatens to escape its bonds.

Or her gaze wanders away, far away or deep into herself, so she does not know she is observed.

Or she does know, and an arch smile suggests that my lady wouldn't mind at all if you tapped on her door that night.

Of course, if you are Persimmon Wonderseeker, as I have the terrific good fortune to be, such suggestions are perfectly ubiquitous and nonetheless intriguing. But if you are a Lord of Ivylea, son of Royal Stewards of the realm, you cannot tap on doors without incurring certain risks.

Mero's gaze flitted away, an equivocal suggestion. She's never been at Court, she has no mother - Dauntingham therefore has no other Lady - and I pitied her because (one can barely bring oneself to write it) I cannot imagine life without my dear Lady Mummy. Yet I learned during supper that my Lady of Dauntingham can dive to fifteen fathoms in rough water on a single breath!

She it was who found the silvery-blue pearl that one observed atop her bosom: a marvellous creation by an artistic genius, a wondrous oyster, who generates beauty from affliction! My lady even has a name for it: the Pride of Ondineshka, whatever that means.

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The next morning brought a cold but negotiable breeze. As there was no downpour, Sydnus packed his daughter, Lord Dad and Lady Mummy into a rugged gig. I followed them on Sammus, Talvi yapping alongside, to Lord Dauntingham's summer house.

Do guffaw, my friend. There was no summer house! Sydnus brought us to the skeleton of an ancient ruin.

We were at the top of one of Dauntingham's great cliffs. Our host begged us leave the horses and walk with him to the edge. I made sure Lady Mummy held tightly to my arm, for in that place the breeze became a merciless wind!

There, in the beleaguered grass, was a small jumble of stones:

A handful of wavering pillars.

Some walls in diverse stages of dilapidation.

Piles of rubble that were really nothing but.

And a staircase of stone, the same as that which made the cliff. A dozen steps led to the remains of a landing. Above this landing, four eroding stairs rose into the empty air. A fifth crumbled away. Incredibly, this sad little structure retained portions of its western wall, facing the sea.

The site as a whole was like the broken shell of a nut that's been gouged out by a squirrel and thrown aside, blown out of the forest by an errant wind. But as the scraps of the squirrel are feasts for the ants, the refuse of the dead was a refuge for other kinds of life.

Hidden in the grass were little holes: burrows made by crabs.

In niches between stones: the tiny nests of mice.

In holes in the staircase, in the pillars, in the walls - the wind's work through the ages - were black eggshells and bits of woven straw: the bowers of scruffy crows.

We call them 'scruffy' in Ivylea because their black feathers always look unkempt. During my boyhood, a scruffy crow got into the stable and mimicked the noise of a creaking door.

He was so effective that the stable-hands were nearly driven mad; they kept oiling the thing and couldn't seem to get it silenced!

But in Dauntingham, the crows were gone. Some of the nests had been walled up with plaster, the holes in the staircase forcibly emptied. For the work of shoring up the stairs and extending the wall with wooden beams had begun.

No one but ourselves was at the site that morning, yet it seemed to me that ours were not the only eyes to observe the empty crab-holes. One could see where Sydnus had made his peasants pull the grass out of the ground. Near a certain stone, an ugly trap waited for a mouse.

'My noble friends (hop)! I give you Defiant Rise! On this site I will construct (hop) the summertime extension to Dauntingham's Great House! For as you see (hop) the view is unparalleled!'

One couldn't help but worry as our host hopped up the staircase.

'It's perfectly safe!' shouted Lady Mero, springing up the steps and down again in all her skirts.

It was all accomplished in the end: the lot of us crowded onto what was left of that landing, peering through an empty window in a wall that had largely blown away, with nothing at our backs but wind!

'There!' said Sydnus. 'A panoramic sea-vista! No other view like it in the kingdom! And look! There! No, that's a wave. Now look! Do you see the island?'

'Do not fear, Lord Dauntingham. My son is never without his collapsible farscope,' said Lady Mummy.

'Or aggrandiscope or fire-starter,' said Lord Dad.

'Adventure is everywhere!' said I. 'One may stumble into it in the unlikeliest of places. Wonders may conceal themselves in the most ordinary - '

'Save your breath, my son.'

For Lord Dauntingham had eyes only for the farscope, showing Lady Mummy where to aim.

Far, far away, beyond the rocks that jutted skyward from Dauntingham's waters, the horizon bore a tiny blister.

'It belongs to the queendom of Orcaon!' said Sydnus. 'But it's nearer our shores than theirs! Lovely addition to the view, and great potential! Uninhabited! If it were part of Viendebonia, we'd do great things with it!'

It was not my place to opine on such matters till my noble progenitors had aired their views. Spake my lord father: 'It must be nearing dinnertime.'

As we trundled back to the Great House, Sydnus rhapsodized upon the potential of this unnamed island. He and Mero ('an indomitable sailor') had visited the place and found certain

hardy shrubs. He believed an experienced agriculturist could make the island fully arable by layering sand and seaweed upon its stony shores and guarding it from erosion by importing those legendary trees known as seawalkers. I've observed the uncanny work of seawalkers in tropical zones; but even they would meet their match in Dauntingham's frigid clime and raging waves. To bring them here would be to torture them and do no more!

However, before I could voice my objection, Lady Mummy wondered at the trouble and expense of turning a ruin into a gay abode upon a site that would just as soon rip itself apart.

'Perfectly manageable! Easy if you know how to build! And we build to last in Dauntingham, don't we, Mero?'

'Yes, against all odds.'

As we dined, Sydnus prompted Lady Mero to expound her theory that the ruin is a Great House from a bygone age. Those leaning pillars and crumbling stairs are the final remnants of an ancient Great Family, of whom all other traces have dissipated on the winds of time.

'So you see, Dauntingham was always the seat of noble Stewards. Only, the land has forgotten its own history. Our task, Father's and my own, is to restore Dauntingham's heritage. Defiant Rise will be a Great House once again. As its new, noble inhabitants, we will bring its history to life. And the

house of Sydnus shall be as one with the ancient Stewards: past, present and future merging together in a single current...'

My friend, I can say to you what I could not in Dauntingham: those broken stones might have belonged to anything from an ancient lighthouse to a home for aged sailor-folk.

Mero had no evidence but her own conviction; and the longer she spoke, the more she waved her hands in fervour. Her descriptions had the tenor of romance rather than legend, fancy instead of history. And later on, in private, Lady Mummy observed that 'the attempt, by the young Lady, to cobble together a venerable lineage for her family - which has been in Dauntingham but a handful of generations - so that her father's claim to Stewardship might seem not merely a claim but an entitlement historically endowed: that, my dears, is cunning.'

Thus, Mero shared her father's passion. But it seemed that some other, secret ardour made her strange eyes sparkle like the ocean at midday - when the water reflects the fires of the sun but guards its depths from even the brightest rays. And what seeketh the wonder-seeker but the inexplicable? Phenomena that elude established thinking, recorded history: these are the marvel-hunter's darlings. Singular and ambiguous, they evade the languages of reason; with veiled hints they address themselves to intuition, fancy, the sense of romance and curiosity.

The curiosity of Persimmon Wonderseeker needs but a shadow of a spark to set itself ablaze! What indeed was so desirable about Defiant Rise? Truly nothing more than the fantasy of a birthright? My wish to know encumbered me with the agreeable obligation to investigate the provocative Lady Mero.

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But we awoke, next day, to a terrible hubbub: servants turning the Great House upside-down.

The Pride of Ondineshka was missing!

'Carelessness is not among my daughter's qualities!' shouted an irate Sydnus to her petrified maid.

Mero bent her knee to Lady Mummy, unable to look at anyone for the dishonour in her request. She besought her noble guests to make sure that nothing of our own had gone missing.

'Why should it have done?' Lady Mummy's tone was of a sort before which Lord Dad and I have often cringed.

'If you must know, Lady Ivylea, strange things have lately been afoot,' said Mero.

'Tis true, mum, very strange,' said the hovering housekeeper.

'Then all shall be well!' said I. 'Among descriptors, "strange" is a favourite of mine. Lady Mero, how would you characterize this strangeness?'

With a glance at her father, she replied, 'Things go astray. Little things. Bits of jewellery, buttons...'

'A sugar spoon, some weeks ago, out of the silver cabinet,' said the housekeeper. 'A little fork for eating shellfish, an everyday one, not too fine. And imagine, my lord: a needle disappeared from someone's mending! One of the maids fell asleep with her work at her bedside, and 'pon the morn her nice new needle, a lovely copper one from Draga, which she'd fastened in carefully to the fabric, had just up and gone - '

'Yes, that'll do,' said Sydnus. 'Our guests have no interest in servants' chatter. Ghosts and whatnot.'

'Ghosts?' said I.

Hindsight reveals the wily little smile that passed through our host's expression. I promptly offered my services as an investigator of the otherwise-than-normal. Lady Mummy and Lord Dad wearily declined to forbid my doing so, knowing objections would avail them naught. And Sydnus eagerly accepted, despite his daughter's wariness.

The servants were only too pleased to have someone new to complain to. As the housekeeper took me through the rooms whence some napkin-holder or shoe-buckle had vanished, she mourned the taut nerves of the staff, which never knew when it might find itself accused.

Preliminary investigations yielded scant results - which from a paranormal quarry were only to be expected:

With indignation poorly concealed, Mero admitted that prior to retiring, she'd latched her jewel-case but hadn't locked it. On the silver cabinet, as well, the lock hadn't functioned for some time; however, there was an ornate latch.

Several servants spoke of strange sounds in the burgled rooms: moaning, whistling, fluttering. In the alcove that housed the silver cabinet, a maid reported 'creaks and sort of flaps'.

Everything creaks in Dauntingham, from the longsuffering shutters to the worn-out beams. Everything that isn't battened down contrives to flap. There are draughts; the old house is forever whistling out of its crannies. And the windows in Mero's bedchamber are wont to rattle in the gusts. The windows do latch, as do the shutters; but I have it from Sydnus' carpenter that the gales abscond regularly with latches and shutters both.

However, breezes have no interest in pearls. The latch on Mero's jewel-case was such that no zephyr could have managed it.

When the Pride of Ondineshka eluded every search, Mero dismissed her maid in tears. At dinnertime, my lady was sullen and irritable, stricken by the loss of her discovery. Meanwhile, Lady Mummy made it clear that she would tolerate only

so much unsociable behaviour. To avert the impending storm of feminine agitations, my Lord Dad enquired: 'In general, Persimmon, how does one detect the erstwhile presence of a ghost?'

A glance from Lady Mummy hinted that this was not perhaps the wisest course of discussion, but Sydnus seized upon the topic with enthusiasm - and I defy anyone to discourage me from holding forth on marvels!

I explained that the surest way to determine whether anything out of the ordinary has penetrated one's home is to employ an expert magician. But as Dauntingham has no magicians, and because magical senses had failed to manifest in me despite the best efforts of the Collegium Arcanum, my greatest hope was the dog test.

My audience progressed from sulky indifference or desperate awkwardness to rapt curiosity as I explained that all nonhuman animals are inherently far more sensitive to paranormal traces than the average human. With the exception of trained magicians, humans are notoriously self-centred, too caught up in ourselves to register the subtle moods, shivers and paradoxes of our environments. When I'd described all my research, even Mero was eager to agree that Talvi should assist in my investigations.

On the conclusion of our meal, my cheerful dog followed Lady Mero to her chamber. Propriety demanded that I remain with the others in the drawing room, where I enthralled our host with tales: my hunt for Elephants on the southern savannahs, my perilous escapes from the Draconskaya Dragons...

A turn of the glass, and Talvi came into the drawing room with the leather ball I'd made for her, followed by a gloomy Mero. The former dropped the ball at my feet, demanding to be taken out of doors. And my lady reported that Talvi had done no growling or whining, no excessive listening or insistent sniffing. She'd wanted nothing but a tummy rub and thus, by all accounts, spent all that time being comfortably herself.

Lord Sydnus seemed disappointed.

'Never fear, my lord!' said I. 'It is not unheard-of for dogs to be distracted and self-centred too. And Talvi does so love a tummy rub - just as ghosts luxuriate in dark and misty nights!'

I proposed another experiment based on two observations.

The first: that all the violated rooms were on the southern-facing side of the Great House.

The second: that all the stolen trinkets were somehow shiny. Lustrous like the pearl or metallic like the needle.

Twilight found me in Sydnus' private study, whence at one time the ghost had purloined a silver inkwell cap. At a

distance of a league or two, the windows espied the forests to the south.

I took a chair in a corner, Talvi's head upon my knee. We brought no candle, but upon the desk I laid a miscellany of items: cutlery, my foldable aggrandiscope, a silver comb from Mero's jewel-case and a valuable buckle gleefully contributed by our host.

'This ghost of ours chose an auspicious hour in which to wreak its mischief! For we have among us Persimmon of Ivylea, called Wonderseeker! To such as he, the face of this menace cannot but unmask itself! You thought Dauntingham would be dull for a young lord, did you not? But in fact you are right at home here among our marvels!'

'Yes, Father, come along,' said Mero.

She left me with a look at once sceptical and hopeful, ironic and somehow pathetically earnest. Though I burned to know what would come of my experiment, I dared to hope this other creature - no less enigmatic for the warmth of her flesh - might visit me during the night.

Talvi and I are accustomed to silence and darkness. In such conditions we have glimpsed glowing butterflies and fire lizards, green-eyed moles and the silver flying fox of Ivylea. But alas! Our patience in Dauntingham was moot.

The thief struck in my own room: the very chamber I forsook for my vigil in the study! Talvi and I and all our bait were undisturbed; but when my valet wrapped me in my cloak for my morning constitutional, the cloakpin that I'd carelessly left upon my washstand was nowhere to be found.

Delighted, I announced to everyone at breakfast: 'Ladies and lords, the ghost returned!'

One was not disturbed by the loss of a cloakpin, for it was not so long ago that one lost all one's clothing to a ravenous fresh-water octopus. But the ladies were quite overexcited: the one incensed, the other mortified. Lady Mummy was put out because the cloakpin was an heirloom and 'as a guest in a noble house, one should have no cause to fear for one's belongings!' Lady Mero was appalled. Her wrath over the pearl melted away. Her gloom became ardent supplication as she pressed on me a cloakpin of beautiful blue coral that she had made for her father.

It required all her strength for this proud Lady of Dauntingham not to surrender to the tearful agony of shame. 'Your lady mother is right! What has become of our house?'

'But neither you nor my Lord Sydnus are to blame,' I replied. 'I assure you I shall get to the bottom of this mystery.'

Yet she looked at me strangely as I pressed her hand and kissed it.

'Let's go out!' said Sydnus, who thus far had been dumbstruck. Nothing seemed so heartening to him as the site of his future summer house.

As he stepped into his carriage, I asked, 'How long has the haunting been? Generations, I suppose?'

'Why, it's been roughly two moon-cycles! Since the work began on the new house!'

An estimation that astonished both of us.

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Mero had her horse brought out for a gallop. In our race to Defiant Rise, my sure-footed mountaineer dropped behind her feisty stallion, the better for me to admire her sleek riding habit. We crowed over her victory at the top of the cliff. She caused her stallion to rear; Talvi pranced ecstatic around us. We dismounted and walked together.

Mero said, 'I used to play in this ruin as a child.'

Then she fell silent, gazed over the sea.

Talvi, like her master, loves the thrill of discovery and backyard marvels. She cavorted about, collecting stones, wood chips, an old nail and a piece of crow's nest into a pile at the base of the stairs. As expected, I praised everything and tousled Talvi lovingly.

There were no workers that day either, yet as I bent for Talvi's ball, I once more suffered the impression of being observed.

It was only the carriage. The wind brought the jingle of the harness. Mero looked around as the voice of her father caught an updraft, lauding Defiant Rise in the same terms as before. Lady Mummy was embittered on account of the cloakpin. She treated Sydnus to a merciless scolding for what seemed to her rash miscalculations of the maintenance that a dwelling at Defiant Rise would doubtlessly require. He in turn brought up the island, a lucrative investment that would solve everything. And she objected to his extravagance...

Mero looked at me as our begetters neared: gathering her strength, it seemed, restoring the proud set of her shoulders.

And from the vacant dwellings of the scruffy crows, I wished for one of those mimics to chortle at us loudly and in such rude manner ease the tension that rigidified our party. Were we a caravan of explorers, I could have made everyone laugh with tales of our own foibles! But as the son of Stewards and the guest of another, I could not jest freely in good conscience. I passed the afternoon entrapped betwixt our hosts' enforced cheer and Lady Mummy's glacial rage.

Upon the fall of dusk, I made my way to the Tavern In The Cave, ostensibly to further my investigations.

I arrived windblown and drenched, and the barkeep speculated that it would rain all night. She and her patrons knew at once that I belonged to the noble family which bestowed the doubtful honour of its rich and foreign presence upon their humble lord. I dispelled their wariness by buying drinks for all and joining in a local ditty, 'O, Ocean Drag Me Down-o!'.

'Everybody knows Defiant Rise be full of ghosts,' rasped a fisherman.

'Tain't just the Rise!' said another.

'Aye, matey! And ye, young sir, ghost-hunter from the north, I tell ye: I've heard 'em wailin' an' a-roarin' over the water. The barkeep here, this wench, she heard 'em in the forest.'

'Aye,' said the wench in question.

'And in the village! And over the Great House! Horrid sounds, young sir, terrible. Frightful even to this old catfish, what be used to the howlin' of the hurricane.'

Intrigued, I questioned further. I ascertained (marred in places by inebriated dissension) the following consensus:

That the ghost(s) could fly.

That its wail was a composite of a hawkish cry, a wolfish growl, and the moan of a whale.

That the sounds most often seemed to originate in the spindly forests, though the ghost(s) roamed everywhere.

And that no one had ever seen the creature, only heard it.

The barkeep claimed that she'd begun to hear it only recently, perhaps in the previous spring. The fisherman swore he'd spent his life in terror of the thing. A smattering of folk agreed that the moon had turned a cycle since last the noise had troubled them.

'Are you sure it never comes out of the mountains?' said I.

'Quite sure, young sir.'

'There are mountains to the north, south, and east,' I pressed, as a certain theory took shape within my mind.

'Look here,' said the barkeep. 'This village survives because the folk in it can hear when death be comin' at us and where it be comin' from. Every moment, waked or sleepin', we be listenin' to the wind and tides.'

A conclusive argument. But it diverted my theory from the even trail of evidence upon which it began, sending it into the nothingness over the cliff. For you see:

Dragons can fly. Certain species, anyway.

Most Dragons have polyphonic voices: a single roar sounds like a cacophony of animals.

Some Dragons, the fire-breathers, cherish and hoard beautiful treasures, particularly those that are somehow shiny.

But only one type of Dragon may count all these extraordinary features as its own. A single, wondrous kind

possesses every wonder of the species and possesses it to the most magnificent degree.

Anguis ardoris magnificus: the Grand Fire-Breather of the Draconskaya Mountains. The very same marvellous species which I visit every spring to assure us all of its prosperity!

But Dauntingham is too low, too plain and too impoverished to provide these sublime, opulent beasts with practical dwellings. No forest could house a creature of their magnitude, let alone their hoards of treasure, which themselves amount to mountains! The Dragons are at home only in the Draconskayas.

Permit me, then, to pose a riddle:

What flies like a Dragon, roars like a Dragon and steals like a Dragon but is not a Dragon?

The ghost of a Dragon?

Think of it, my friend: no full-bodied Dragon could enter and quit a room undetected.

Consider, in addition, the feeling I had lately suffered at Defiant Rise: the sense of being watched - haunted.

As I climbed back up the path, it was as if one of the gusts that seemed inclined to waft me off the ground seized my thoughts instead and whisked them through the dark, whirling them over the ruin.

This notion of a summer house never sat well with me: the displacement of the animals, the staircase hewn from the cliffs...

Was the cliff, that fingernail, the remnant of a mountain? Could it be that the ancient family, the 'ancestors' whom Mero planned to make her own, had gutted the mountain to build what is now the ruin - and in doing so displaced the true, reptilian steward of Defiant Rise?

Could it be that the ghost of a dispossessed Grand Fire-Breather haunted the old family, drove it away and sought the same fate for Sydnus, who wished to build anew upon the site?

We know that Grand Fire-Breathers turn to fiery dust upon their deaths; that other Dragons know at once of their fellows' passing; that survivors do battle for the hoardings of the dead. But have you ever heard tell of a Dragon who persists in guarding and replenishing its hoard after death?

The idea was perfectly alien to me. Indeed, I wanted to laugh as I stood on the threshold of Dauntingham's Great House, watching raindrops slash the light that came out of the windows. However, I could not laugh.

The wondrousness of such a creature! Imagine its ancient, fire-driven rage, the more infuriated by the inconvenience of death!

I went indoors, found Mero brooding by the fire. And feelings of vexation laid hold upon me, suspicions that I could not articulate even to myself. I startled her by speaking without preamble.

'Why did you not tell us of this roaring and wailing? Every voice in the village murmurs of these things: ghosts at Defiant Rise, monstrous flying creatures over the Great House. On perils such as these, why do our hosts keep silent?'

Half her face was in shadow. She watched the flames, yet seemed to scowl at me askance. She rose as if to quit the room. But she stood near to me for a long moment.

Angry or abashed, she refused to lift her eyes to mine.

'You desire us to trust you, Lord Persimmon?' she said. And then she really did leave.

Forsooth, she had a point! For what purpose had we come but to someday take her lands from her? Yet we might not have come at all, had we known there'd be a Dragon, angry and undead! What mischief brewed here?

I rose in time to catch the servants before anyone else. I felt justified in being rather stern.

'We were told not to speak about the roaring, my lord, not to visitors,' said the housekeeper. 'The master feared it would look badly for Dauntingham.'

'But he mentioned the ghost himself.'

'Be 'aunted by 'is ancestors, poor man,' said a footman.
'Them spirits be affrighted as he's apt to lose the province.'

'Nonsense!' said I, in spite of everything.

'No ancestor of a Great House would roar so,' said the housekeeper. 'They'd take things that they considered theirs, but they wouldn't frighten people. They were civil folk.'

'Were they?'

'As good as your own, my lord!'

'Your master never told you what does the roaring?'

'Shouldn't think he knows, my lord.'

'He's never mentioned a Dragon?'

A general murmur.

'If it be a Dragon, I should leave this house at once,' said a timorous little maid. 'Shouldn't be stayin' to be eaten! Flee to Ivylea, I would!'

'As would anyone what be of any sense.' Such was the general feeling.

What was I to glean from this? That Sydnus' household welcomed ghosts but couldn't abide Dragons, unaware that they might be one and the same? Did Sydnus welcome the hauntings as evidence of his connection with the ancient ones - or perhaps as a lure for a wonder-seeker, a curiosity that, while intriguing, was unlikely to be off-putting?

I am not normally suspicious. But I've always believed that among the wonder-seeker's greatest assets are the intuitions rooted in his gut. A strong feeling intimated that something in our visit was out of tune. The omissions, the thefts, the wrongness of the Rise, the daughter's volatile behaviour...

Who would prevail upon Royal Stewards to inspect a non-existent house?

I searched for Mero, meaning to question her. She was in the stable, just in from a ride. Her back was turned, but her father, with whom she spoke in an impassioned murmur, volubly announced, 'A morning jaunt, Lord Persimmon? Lovely day for it!'

The day was cold. Thorny raindrops got into everything.

'I confess, my lord, I was seeking Lady Mero. I hoped she might tell me more about Defiant Rise. From the perspective of a local historian, that is.'

Given the diverse qualities of my debonair grin, I was not surprised when my lady began to smile.

'You see, Father?' she said. 'With all its adventures and dark secrets, Dauntingham at last finds sympathy in Lord Persimmon. Perhaps it begins to win his heart.'

Sydnus was somewhat too eager to leave us alone. We spent the day in his murky library, seeking some reference to whoever

it was who built the ruin. We found nothing to corroborate Mero's theory.

But my lady was spirited. She discoursed intriguingly on fascinating sea creatures, and a certain moment found us close together in a corner between bookcases. Ah!, had I been in a tavern, she a barmaid in some far-off place, I should've made the move that her eyes seemed to beseech of me. There are times when I despise being a loyal and noble son!

'There are no Dragons in Dauntingham,' she said, nearly laughing at the prospect when one ventured to raise it.

And yet, that very night, everyone heard the roar.

The bellow of an angry bear...

The snarl of a giant crocodile...

The screech of a thousand burning ravens combined in a single, monstrous wail!

In my leap of startlement I banged my head on the doorway in which I skulked. The midnight glass had turned, nonetheless I could not sleep. I was wandering the shabby upper rooms of the Great House. Upon the roar there followed a scuffle atop the roof. The sound was too thin, almost a whisper - ghostly - and yet the scrabble of talons against tile was unmistakable. I ran to the nearest window, hauled myself onto the roof - a flash of lightning, and I saw -

Nothing. Nothing but darkness.

Thunder rolled in from the sea. Rain pummelled the roof. I stood still and waited - and lightning revealed something flapping at roof's edge.

A trio of black feathers, caught between tiles. Tail feathers from a scruffy crow.

I went in, deflated. In the corridor outside the bedchambers, I met Lady Mummy in her dressing gown.

'Persimmon of Ivylea, whatever are you doing? Go to your room! Get rid of those sodden clothes!'

'Yes, Lady Mummy.'

'And then go into my room and drink the hot tea that the maid left me. I won't have you catching cold.'

'Yes, Lady Mummy.'

'Then come immediately downstairs. The servants have been screaming, running about in terror; we must help our hosts to manage if we can. And bring your father! The man persists in dithering!'

My pragmatic Lady Mummy made no mention at all of ghosts or wailing. Though she was pale, she uttered not a word of her own fright.

In dry doublet and hose, I rushed to my parents' bedchamber, there to discover my Lord Dad crawling about on the floor, peering underneath the washstand.

'Ah, Persimmon, shut the door! We are lost if we don't find it!'

My father thrust into my hand a heart-shaped ruby. I knew it at once: ten such gems reside in a wristlet that my father gave to Lady Mummy on the tenth anniversary of their marriage.

She is rarely without it.

As my heart sank into my belly, I dropped to my knees and peered beneath the bed.

We never found it. We were scolded for dithering. Mero was scolded for letting the servants work themselves into a panic. Servants were scolded for attempting to give notice. For the last, I'm afraid I was to blame, having planted the notion of a Dragon in their heads; but Lady Mummy set them right, nobly reminding them of their duty to their lord. Sydnus was scolded:

'Do you take me for a fool, Lord Dauntingham? Do you think one can spend her life in Ivylea, in the lee of the Draconskaya Mountains, and not know the noise of a Dragon? Guests ought to be warned if they are to be imperilled in your house!'

'But Dauntingham has no Dragons!' wailed Sydnus.

'And yet, my lord,' said I, 'I know the roars of all the Dragons in Ivylea. I've a very good idea about the ones in Onanne. That wasn't any of them! In fact, there's something altogether wrong about the sound. This is no ordinary Dragon.'

Lord Dad cleared his throat and said, 'There have been discussions of a ghost with a love of finery.'

'The opulent tastes of a Grand Fire-Breather. An angry one at that.'

Susurrations of alarm.

All were informed of the tragedy concerning Lady Mummy's wristlet. 'I stepped on this lone ruby when I bounced out of bed, frightened out of my wits by that infernal noise,' said Lord Dad. 'You were already halfway down the stairs, my dear. And our window was open.'

He placed the ruby in my mother's palm. Her silence was that of a smouldering hearth, poised to explode in flames at any further provocation.

#

The day was rent by storms. Mero and I were in the library, arguing and seeking vainly for some history of Ghost-Dragons.

'Why did you not warn us? If you wanted our help in dealing with this creature, why did you not say so? If you sought to hide it, why did you invite us? Why not wait till it moved on or you found a way to manage it?'

'We had no time!' she snapped. 'Summer will soon be upon us, and then our parents must report to the Royal Assembly of

Stewards. The Palace will be chaotic - Father wished to speak in private with your parents - '

'Why?'

'To assure himself of a friend at the Assembly! Just one! Is that too much to ask?'

Mero stormed out of the room. And I, my thoughts in turmoil, stormed outside and threw a saddle on Sammus.

I later learned that Sydnus spent the day attempting to appease my noble parents. I perhaps ought to have been there to guide the conversation. For what to Sydnus was a most diverting topic - this island which does not belong to him - was becoming tiresome to Lady Mummy.

'Lord Sydnus, if you desire a loan with which to purchase this boulder, why not simply ask?'

'Funds are no object, my lady!'

'That remains to be seen.'

'Behold the grand house I am building! But to some, that is nothing. Orcaon would never deign to sell to such a paltry lord as I! The King would not even permit us to negotiate! He would laugh at the notion of expanding Dauntingham...'

On second thought, perhaps I was better off becoming drenched with Talvi.

Without the aid of a magician, it is nigh impossible to track a Dragon. One must witness it fly off in a particular

direction and in such direction try to follow earthbound clues, such as fallen gemstones, of which there are likely to be few. Applied to living Dragons, this technique is unreliable. Where ghosts are concerned, it is hopeless.

Thus it was upon no evidence but the drunken testimonies of fisherfolk, and the south-facing window in my parents' bedchamber, that I wandered towards the forest. Talvi did what she could with the non-existent scent of Lady Mummy's ruby. The fact that we discovered nothing only strengthened my conviction that our quarry was indeed none other than a Ghost-Dragon.

A whim, as we turned homeward, sent us on a detour to Defiant Rise. Under dark churning skies seared by lightning-spikes, the ruin's listing pillars resembled teeth in a giant, disembodied, sinister jawbone.

Talvi nestled close. For though the driving rain was such that we could not see the ocean, there remained the sense that we were watched.

A scruffy crow stood on a canting pile of stones. She puffed up her feathers, hunched her shoulders, drew her head down into her neck. She did not cringe when Talvi ran at her, only watched us with disdain.

'Very well, old granny!' said I, and bade Talvi cease to torment her.

The crow remained where she was, mourning her home, even as I was stricken by a certain observation. I took Talvi onto the saddle and made for the Tavern In The Cave.

It was not the crow that alarmed me but another thing. I noticed it only because I was in the grip of worry and suspicion:

The pile of 'discoveries' that Talvi had made on our first visit, days before. The old nail and little stones were right where she had left them.

Around them, the fixtures had not changed. Pillars still leaned, stairs eroded, rubble was unmoved. Not a single new beam was in place.

And at the tavern were three men who had once laid in nails, made piles and ousted nests at Defiant Rise.

For a new house, they said. They worked a single moon-cycle, asked his lordship when they should return. Sydnus said, 'Not for a while, lads!' and galloped off, wearing a fervid, tenacious expression.

Who, then, would build this house?

In my heart I knew we were deceived: there would be no new house! Yet I couldn't help but wonder if naught but fear of a Ghost-Dragon and dislike of Sydnus' ambitions drove me to this conclusion. I raced to the Great House, both to warn my parents and to seek their counsel.

Lady Mummy herself met me at the door. 'Young man, what did I tell you? You will catch your death! Already you are sneezing!'

'I'm not sneezing.'

'Yes, you are!' And she shooed me up the stairs.

In my chamber, whilst she bundled me in towels, she spoke in low tones.

'Persimmon, you are not to sup with us tonight. I shall arrange for a meal and hot bath to be brought. You shall not leave this room. You shall receive no one but your valet. If you say that you are suffering from symptoms of a chest cold, no one will question you. Do you understand?'

Lady Mummy well knew I was not sneezing. She'd made me a legacy of her own constitution, which cannot be enfeebled by a bit of rain. Some matter was afoot!

I whispered of the men in the tavern, the stagnation of the construction, ghosts and my suspicions.

'My son, I'm grateful for your scrutiny,' she said, frowning. 'It seems my precautions are all the more necessary. I want you to avoid young Mero from now on. Especially tonight, when Sydnus means to propose an alliance. He has convinced himself - convinced her as well, perhaps - that his daughter is enamoured of my handsome son. And the looks that girl is giving you do not escape me.'

'She doesn't love me, Lady Mummy. She's angry at the world; she knows not whom it's safe to love.'

'That may be. However, both of them have witnessed your natural generosity of heart. I do not wish them to corner you in a position whence generosity might compel you to utter niceties which may be misconstrued.'

Misconstrued indeed! Lady Mummy has forever misconstrued my desperate assertions that any alliance would amount to fatal imprisonment! Her one concern was to preserve me for a better match, and she would hear no arguments.

She would speak only of Sydnus' obsession with that island.

'What it has to do with Ghost-Dragons or ruins, even I cannot discern. Hence, on the morrow, you may ride out alone, learn what you can - provided you do not sneeze!'

#

I left at dawn, when the storm clouds were exhausted. Compared to my agitated thoughts, the winds were calm.

Talk of marital entanglement never fails to agitate. I wondered if the Ghost-Dragon had come to warn me of this calamity, to chase me to the tropics, where I should be safe! The haunting began with the work on Defiant Rise, but it had stopped, after all. Peace reigned for a cycle of the moon - until my family arrived and Sydnus filled his head with notions!

What decided my direction? Was it luck? My bleak temper?
The want of wild company that cared nothing for noble
connivances? Or the obstinate scowl of the old crow?

I withdrew, from my belt-purse, the feathers from the roof.
In Talvi's keen nose, these incited memories of her black and
stoic playmate. She pranced into the forest, pausing betimes to
sniff.

The bedraggled copse in which she stopped would scarcely
have filled a corner of Lord Dad's evergreen garden -

Yet Sammus' vigilance alone saved us a drop into a canyon
where the rock-strewn ground tumbled away!

The grey light did little to penetrate this crevasse, a
two-fathom wedge of darkness delving into the earth. The walls
were of stone, threaded with roots. I espied a way down.

But Talvi leaped and yapped at the boughs above. All were
speckled, as if splashed with ink. And ah! - the splashes were
scruffy crows. Hundreds of scruffy crows!

Marvelling at their numbers, we hardly believed the Ghost-
Dragon would materialize on a cloud of mist!

It didn't, in fact. The mist settled on us in a blanket.
The crows grew used to us, chatted amongst themselves. They
spoke in turn, thus:

From a tree to the west would come a chirp.

Next a growl from an eastern shrub.

A clatter of a beak, like a little drumroll, somewhere above Sammus, who turned his ears this way and that as each crow murmured in its especial voice. It was all strangely civilized. Even Talvi stood entranced while I climbed down the ravine.

You see, now and then a crow would dive into the crevasse, visit a slit in the wall and return to its perch. I wondered what it was they sought.

I set foot on the bottom, sprinkled by their little sounds (now a gurgle, now a snarl, a small wail). I lit a torch and then -

The roar of the Ghost-Dragon shook the air!

The very forest trembled. Branches shuddered overhead. Gravel tumbled from the lip of the ravine. But as my torch burst aflame, a flicker answered from the slit in the wall.

The wonder-seeker's curiosity will not be denied! I squeezed within, found myself inside a cavern. The Ghost-Dragon screamed as I went over the threshold, a sound so huge, so near that I feared my skull would shatter. Yet I saw, within the cavern -

My cloakpin on the floor, flung beside the silver spoon.

The Pride of Ondineshka dangling, on a chain, from a protuberant root. A buckle, an egg cup...pathetic little things, a scruffy treasure hall. But there, glinting in the firelight -

Lady Mummy's wristlet!

I seized the jewels and ran, knowing that the Ghost would appear at any moment and one must never, ever rob a Dragon!

But there came no ghastly fire. Not one misty fang reached beyond the veil of death to decapitate me. I shimmied out of the ravine and saw crows mobbing poor Talvi, dodging blows from Sammus' hooves. I dove into the fray, whirling my arms and shouting, and a host of wrathful birds fixed their black eyes upon me, opened their beaks -

From a multitude of scruffy throats - enflamed by the fury of a thousand tiny hearts, rent by the injustice of enforced exile - there issued forth a noise like no other in the world: the wail of the Ghost-Dragon!

Yes, my friend! The chatter of the crows was a symphonic rehearsal! One by one, individuals rehearsed their parts, and when at some signal they coordinated their efforts, the result was grand mimicry that no human artifice could best!

Although we knew the truth, Talvi and I and Sammus, though the three of us have faced more than our share of Dragonfire, we ran out of that forest for all that we were worth! And how I laughed! Had I not been made a fool? Had not we all?

My friend, we cannot underestimate the scruffy crows' achievement. By the stars, we call them pests! Yet they are gallant explorers! They or their ancestors must have travelled

far, braved the perils of the mountains - for only thus would they have learned to understand Dragons and humans both: to caricature the one to make the other flee in terror. And why?

Because scruffy crows are not forest-dwellers. They want stone, they want stables - stability, cultivation - not scrawny trees and crumbling cliffs. Routed by housekeepers, they had one home left in Dauntingham. And they discerned precisely who planned to take it from them.

When we came to the ruin, we slowed as if in deference.

The thunder of hoofbeats bore down upon us. And when I saw Mero, her frantic expression, my head still rang with the crows' sublime deception.

And suddenly I found I understood the house of Sydnus.

'Where have you been? I thought you were ill!' She leaped from her horse as if to fly into my arms.

But she stopped. I bowed stiffly.

The dissemblance of crows is a wonder among wonders, but Persimmon Wonderseeker is no friend to any person who presumes to manipulate the Great House of Ivylea. Mero's discomfiture was plain. We faced one another on a barren hill.

'Your father never meant to build that house.'

The crows never understood this. They thought the presence of my family heralded the recommencement of construction.

'It is a performance, a sham of wealth and heritage. So that my parents would find nothing wanting in our alliance.'

'Well - your reputation - Father hoped to ensure that if you - you would not abandon me - '

Honour forbade me to describe Sydnus' hopes! 'Did he not lure us here with falsehood? Did he not try to draw me in with talk of ghosts?'

'It's not a ghost?'

'Nay, a greater wonder! He wants an expeditious marriage, does he not? Prior to the Assembly? Lady Mero, surely you wouldn't trade your happiness for a scrap of an island!'

Desperation glinted in her eyes as her stallion nipped the stunted grass. 'You purport to love nature. Why do you not wish this land to prosper?'

'Prosper it shall, when you cease to shove humanity down its throat. Let the island be. If you try to bend it to your will, it will defy you. You need not repeat your forbears' folly, my lady! Some places are not meant for humans but for others better suited - '

'This is my father's land! He's given his life to it!'

'There is room for your people in Ivylea - '

'We are Stewards!'

'You are proud! Meanwhile your horse is hungry! I've found your pearl, my lady.'

I dropped it in her hand and rode to Lady Mummy.

She was overjoyed to see her ruby wristlet, so much so that she pressed my hand and Lord Dad fairly crushed it in relief.

I told them of the crows: *Corvus incultus*, wonder of wonders! Sydnus slumped in his chair at the loss of his ghost.

'The Dragon wasn't real?' Mero seemed almost to despair.

For this I reproved her. Are scruffy crows less marvellous for being crows and not dead reptiles? Nay! Virtuosi of mimesis, Dauntingham's crows made themselves marvellous for the sake of a moment: a singular occasion which we were privileged to witness! When the Ghost-Dragon is no longer required, they'll cease rehearsing and return to their ordinary customs. But their secret potential shall render them permanently wondrous!

'You'd not give up Defiant Rise to scruffy crows,' said I. 'But you'd yield to a Dragon or - ha! - a Ghost-Dragon. Indeed, you'd have no choice. Your help would all give notice! Likewise, you remarked, my lord, regarding the Orcaon island, that the King would hear no such proposal from poor Dauntingham. But he would hear it from mighty Ivylea!'

His Majesty trusts my parents' sober judgement. Any house with which they joined in alliance would have Royal consideration.

'With each step on your ambitious climb, you'd pretend you'd risen higher than in fact you could. You'd have all Viendebonia take you for a Dragon, though you are but a scruffy crow!'

This was no insult but the highest compliment.

THE END