

## **The Singer, the Princess, and the Dragon**

Mot's mother always told him there were two kinds of power: fake power and real power. Fake power manipulated and destroyed. Real power created and protected. The king had fake power. He could make war for land and give it to his friends, but he could not make the rain fall on that land.

Like his mother, Mot watched power. Most of the time it didn't matter whether the power was fake or real. He simply tried to stay out of the way.

Mot worked the land that others controlled. On Sundays he would go to Mass by the old shop. His mother had pestered the priest into letting her son serve as cantor. The priest had fake power. He controlled who would be cantor, but he could not touch a heart. Mot had real power, for he could touch the hearts of the faithful with his gift for song.

As he chanted the ancient texts his voice would reach out, and he could feel every leaf on the trees and each hair on his listeners. The faithful would lose themselves, entranced by his music.

During one such Mass, three large carriages stopped on the far side of the road. When the service was over, officials came out of the carriages and headed towards the crowd. "The king is here! The king is here! Kneel before the king!" Mot knelt. Power was coming.

The king came right up to him. He was a large man with flowing robes and tromping boots. "Peasant boy!" said the king. "What is your name?"

"My name is Mot, sir," he said.

"Well, then, Mot," said the king. "We have need for you at the cathedral, where you will be part of the best choir in the land." He snapped his fingers.

Before Mot could say or do anything men grabbed him and put him in the rear carriage. The last thing he saw of the village was his mother, breaking down in the middle of the road, sobbing.

They put Mot in the singers' quarters at the back of the cathedral. Mr. Grimmy, the choir master, made him do chores and gave him little to eat. He did not allow Mot to sing in the loft with the other boys. Mr. Grimmy had fake power. Mot never stopped thinking about his mother.

He was cleaning the top of the outside cathedral wall one day when some of the choir boys approached him. They picked him up and threatened to throw him over the parapet.

"You boys! What are you doing?" boomed an authoritative voice.

The boys let him go. “Nothing, sir.”

Mot looked up and saw a captain, and two guards. He had never seen guards on the cathedral wall before.

“Do not let me catch you threatening that boy again,” said the captain.

“Yes sir,” said the boys. They ran away.

The captain was tall, with arms like ropes and eyes sharp as nails. He was dressed in a blue doublet and a morion helmet. The two guards took their places at his side, slightly behind him. This man had real power. Mot felt safe before him.

“I’m Captain Nevis,” he said. “I’m going to speak to the choir master and see to it you never get such dangerous tasks again. But please be careful.”

The next day the choir master called Mot to his chambers and threw a robe at him. “I have decided to give you a chance at being the cantor, but I don’t expect very much from you.” As Mot walked out he felt afraid and angry. He could not wait to use his power.

That Sunday, as he sat in the cantor’s chair on the altar, Mot clasped his hands together to keep them from shaking. The frescoes on the cathedral ceiling were so high his eyes could barely distinguish the angels and clouds painted across them.

When Mot mounted the podium to chant the Gloria, he stood up straight, breathed deep and reached out with his voice:

*“Gloria in excelsis Deo,  
Et in terra pax hominibus bonae...”*

The old shop back home was nothing like the cathedral. In the thrill of his terror, he achieved a piercing clarity of everything around him. He felt the dentils of every cornice. He touched the soft lead that held the stained-glass windows together. He sensed the stilled breath in the hundreds of the faithful, struck dumb by his music.

He saw the king in an alcove towards the front. A hairy man sat at his side. At his other side was the most beautiful girl Mot had ever seen. During most of the Mass she held her head down. When Mot sang, however, she gazed up at him. Her gray eyes were melancholy, like a stormy sky. Her mouth strained downward, as if to hold back the sadness of the entire kingdom.

At the end of Mass, Mot asked the altar boys about the girl. They told him she was Princess Oleander, and that she was sad because the king was always trying to get her to marry some lord or duke from a faraway land.

Back in the singers' quarters, the choir master was angry. “You boy! How can a peasant boy sing like that? Very well. You shall continue as cantor. But I am watching you!”

That night, as Mot lay awake on a bed instead of the floor, he thought about the beautiful princess Oleander. Once he fell asleep, her gray eyes haunted his dreams. He could not stop thinking about her. Mot knew he was feeling the effects of power, but was this fake power or real power? He wished he could be with his mother.

The next Sunday, he noticed the cantor's book was crooked. He lifted it and found an apple. From then on, more food was under the cantor's book every time he sang.

One day, as people gathered in the square after Mass, Mot heard a scream that made the top of his head grow cold. Everyone looked up, and to their horror they saw a dragon carrying the princess into the sky. In a few moments, she was gone.

The king sent messengers far and wide in search of a hero who could rescue the princess. The dragon was known as the Dark Chastisement. He had been a scourge to the kingdom for centuries.

That afternoon, as Mot cleaned the floor, He could not stop thinking about the princess in the clutches of that dragon. He straightened up and said, "I've got to save Oleander!"

"You can't," said one of the older singers. But the boys who had threatened Mot shushed the singer.

"You can defeat the dragon," they said. "What you need is a suit of armor and a horse. Then you'll be invincible. We can get the armor and the horse for you if you like." Mot agreed.

The following morning the boys put him in a suit of squeaky armor and hoisted him up on a bony horse. Mot felt powerful. Still, he was suspicious this was fake power.

The boys gave him advice. "Look for a cave with a lot of gold in it," said one.

"When you see mist on the ground, that means you're close. That's the dragon's breath," said another.

They set Mot onto an ancient mountain road. The Clauthrel Forest was the land of the dragon. Few ventured that way, and of those who had gone, none had ever returned. The brambles became so thick he sent the horse back and took off the armor.

Higher and higher he pushed through the overgrown trail. As the morning wore on Mot could hear the growing din of the streets far below. He rounded a series of turns which passed to the far side of the mountain, and the sounds of the great city ceased.

Mot walked into a hollow, and the ground was covered with mist. Remembering the dragon's breath, he hid in some ferns and pondered what he should do next.

The sun inched along the sky and the hollow changed. The leaves turned to brighter hues. The smells of the flowers built to a pungency that was impossible for him to miss, even in the midst of his terror. Mot looked at what seemed like a toad, but it had a nose like a shrew and large eyes that gazed at him with a suspicious stare. Another creature, stoat-like, walked in front of him on its hind legs. It had the face of an old man.

A trio of green creatures flew by. Mot thought they were beetles at first, but the smallest stopped in front of him. Its skin was like interwoven leaves. It had pointed ears and antennae. Its tiny face was like a child's. Mot fell into a dazed stupor as he admired the creature's beauty.

"*Glerndy?*" It seemed to say. How Mot longed to reply but did not know how. His heart pounded as the creature flew close and was about to touch his cheek. At that moment the other two called. The creature looked back, and Mot's heart was about to break. What could he do?

Mot breathed deep, straightened his back, and sang. It was a long high note.

“Heeeeeeeee!”

His voice reached out to everything in the hollow. He touched the moist bark of the trees and the pine needles nestled on the ground.

He felt the creatures. At first, they held still, but Mot softened his tone and lowered his pitch. As his voice resonated with their feathers and fur, they came out, curious. He was overjoyed to see them, and they revealed their stories. Mot’s mouth, on its own, began to form the words of an ancient language, far older than the sacred scripture of the church.

Then a roar sounded from the distance and the creatures scampered away. Mot felt a new power after making friends of those in the hollow. He ventured on to see what was on the other side of the bend.

The dragon’s cave had a large round entrance in a tall gray rock that reached to the sky. Inside the cave was a mountain of gold, and on top of the gold was the princess in a cage. On the right side of the cave’s entrance hung a key. The dragon was nowhere to be seen and Mot’s spirit leapt. “This should only take a moment,” he thought. “I’ll sneak in, grab the key, free the princess, and then we’ll escape into the brambles.”

When princess saw him, her expression changed from sadness to horror. Only then did it occur to Mot that the dragon might be close by.

“Ha!” cried the dragon, bursting from a clump of evergreens and scooping him up. The dragon tossed Mot onto the mountain of gold next to the princess. “I must say,” said the dragon, “you are the most pathetic knight I’ve ever seen. Not that any knight

poses much of a threat, of course, but your arrival is something of an insult. Is this the best your king can do? Still, I admire your pluck. Tell you what. Before I eat you I might grant a last request.” The dragon reclined on his mountain of gold and yawned. “What say you?”

The Dark Chastisement had a powerful reptilian body that could easily reach up to the top of the cave. Jagged horns sprouted out the back of its head, and its claws were long and hooked, like scythes. Its wings, bat-like, gave the dragon a menacing appearance, but the most terrifying part of all were its eyes: small, calculating, nestled under brows of spikes, and burning in a bright crimson.

Mot thought of seeing his mother, one last time. But as bad as getting taken away in a carriage was, to let her know he was about to be eaten would have been much worse. The choir did not like him, and he was miserably in love with a princess who was far above his own station. Death would almost be welcome.

“No,” he said. “I have no last request. Just eat me. But try to make it quick.”

Mot heard a strong, self-assured voice behind him. “I have a last request for the boy,” said the princess.

The dragon’s eyes opened wide, and for a moment, blazed in a vermillion orange. He seemed to be in the mood for some amusement. “Yes?” said the Dark Chastisement. “What is your request?”

The princess was standing in the middle her cage, eyes focused on the dragon. “This boy has sung so sweetly, and I love... his voice more than anything. My request is that I might listen to him sing one last time.”



“Very well,” said the dragon. “I shall grant your request, if the boy agrees.”

Mot agreed.

He wanted to sing of glory and power. The princess had noticed him. And what did it mean when she paused before saying she loved... his voice? But the dragon huffed impatiently, and Mot remembered his fate, so he sang “O Lamentissima,” the saddest song he knew. He closed his eyes and reached out with his voice. In an instant, he knew every golden coin, the bars of the cage, and each thread of the princess’ torn gown.

Then he felt the dragon, and his voice recoiled in awe and fear. The cathedral itself was nothing compared to the power of a dragon.

Mot recovered and allowed his voice to touch that power. At first he felt alarm, then rage. His voice soothed the rage, and the power grew peaceful. With some hesitation, he entered the power. It was like walking into the hallowed halls of a distant castle. Then he was the power.

A terrible melancholy took Mot’s heart, and his voice wavered. It was as if the weight of the earth were bearing down upon him. He had never felt so lonely, desolate, and cold, but he continued singing. As his voice filled the cave, the air became like ice. Frost covered the cave’s walls and coated the mountain of gold.

Then he felt, within the frozen darkness, a tiny piercing of light, like a prisoner who has had a small window opened to him after centuries of isolation.

When he finished his song he was shivering. The princess was curled into a tiny ball, trembling with cold. Only the dragon seemed to be comfortable.

“That was a nice song,” said the Dark Chastisement. “The princess was right, and it would be nice to preserve your voice. But you came to me as a thief and a murderer, did you not? And what would you expect a dragon to do with a thief and a murderer?”

“Wait,” said the princess. She jumped to her feet. “Let him live. I have power.”

“Ha!” spat out the dragon, and a puff of smoke burst from his nose. “What can you offer me that I should spare him?”

Oleander’s face lost all trace of sadness and cold. Her whole being spoke with determination. “I have riches. I know the treasures of the palace and they are considerable. The goblets of the pantries are gold. The weapons in the vestibule are encrusted with gems from the wilds of Africa. The secret chests hidden in the dungeons contain untold wealth. And if you wish to listen to the boy sing, I will make an alcove just for you in the cathedral. I offer these things in exchange for the boy’s life.”

The dragon twirled a cup in its claws as he considered Oleander’s offer. “Won’t your father refuse?” he said.

“My father will refuse me nothing!” said the princess, whose eyes blazed with their own fire. “He has honored my rejections of all those dreadful suitors. At my request, my father created the Cathedral choir and built our royal alcove. At my request, my father accompanies me to church every Sunday.”

Then the princess' voice caught in her throat. She looked at Mot, her face wrenched in agony. "And at my horrid request, my father took this boy away from his mother and made him sing for me. And so, mighty dragon, as sure as my heart bursts with remorse, you will sit next to me at the high Mass this very Sunday!"

The world spun under Mot's feet. He had kept his wits in the face of a gruesome death, but the princess' words were more than he could bear. "You took me from my mother?" he said, as he crumpled to his knees. "But you couldn't. You're the princess. You... you..."

He fell face-first into a pile of agates, and the world went black.

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A vigorous breeze woke him. He was lying on his stomach, on something sharp and craggy. His arms and legs hung down. He opened his eyes and straightened up. He screamed in terror.

Mot was flying high above the land, seated on the dragon.

"Calm down," said the Dark Chastisement. "You are perfectly safe. And I'm not going to eat you."

"You won't?" the boy said. His voice emerged as a squeak.

“No. I won’t,” said the dragon. “The princess and I have reached an agreement, and it does not involve gold.”

“What was the bargain, then?” Mot said, still suspicious whether he would see another day.

“Let me show you something,” said the dragon.

They flew above the mountain and the surrounding Clauthrel Forest. The dragon showed Mot the vast kingdom, the Cathedral, and the King’s palace. They flew over the farmlands and towns surrounding the Citadel. The dragon said his name, Onyx.

“I have lived a long time,” said the dragon. “I have seen the growth of the kingdom and its people. With the way humans are, this is no surprise.

“The king and the people may do as they wish with their lands,” he continued. “But the mountain and its forests are mine. A week ago one of the villages began to fell the trees of my woods and the king ignored my warnings. Hence, you and the princess are my guests now.”

Onyx banked away from the farmlands at the edge of the kingdom and started flying back towards his mountain. The forests of the mountain were deep and wild, with a clear line of where they ended, and the kingdom began.

“The princess will remain with me until the king agrees to the boundaries I demand,” said Onyx. “As soon as the king accepts, she will return home. If the kingdom encroaches upon my lands any further, I shall respond, and I will not be so patient like I have been before.”

“And what about me?” Mot asked.

The dragon began to soar in a circle. He stiffened, and so did Mot. Onyx spoke again, an edge to his voice.

“You used my power.”

Mot’s stomach dropped. “Yes.”

“I wanted to kill you for that.”

“I nearly died when I sang in your cave,” the boy said. “But something changed, didn’t it? You changed.”

“I changed, yes,” said Onyx. “But not as much as you. With your voice you have done the impossible and touched a dragon’s heart. You will never be the same. That is the reason I brought you here. Sing once again, using your new power. Learn. Stretch out as far as you can.”

Mot reached out with his voice and felt the earth below and all the living things that dwelt on it. Then his voice felt the wind, and he had an idea. From the moist recesses of the sky he assembled clouds until they were huge thunderheads.

A downpour followed that drenched the earth below. The trees, the shrubs and the crops sang their joy with voices of their own. Mot had real power. It was terrifying.

But he was not alone. He and the dragon were equals now, and in a step that was wordless but clear, Onyx and Mot created a bond between themselves—a bond that went beyond even what he felt for his mother. To do so was natural as day following night.

Onyx spoke. "With your new power, your life will endure through the centuries. That brings me to the final part of the agreement. While she lives, the princess will have you for one moon's cycle, and I will have you the next. Once she dies, the mountain will be your only home. Of course, you too would have to agree to this arrangement."

"Where's the princess?" Mot asked. "I have some questions for her."

"You shall see her now," said the Dragon, and they plummeted back towards the mountain. Mot was not afraid since he had come to know the dragon as he knew himself. The dragon's thoughts were his own.

The princess stood when the dragon let Mot onto the ground. "I'll leave you two," he said.

"What for?" the boy asked. "You know everything I'm thinking anyway. You might as well stay."

"Very well," said the dragon. He plopped himself onto his mountain of gold.

Mot walked in a new way as he approached Oleander. He held his head high and his body had an uplifted stature. He possessed the power of a dragon. "So in your boundless arrogance you took me from my mother for your personal use."

The princess began to weep. "Yes, I did. I am a terrible, thoughtless person."

"But you also bargained to save my life," he said.

"More of my selfishness in not wanting to give you up."

“And the royal guards up on the Cathedral Wall who saved me from those boys. You had them watching me, right?”

The princess looked down, further revealed. “Yes.”

“And when Mr. Grimmly decided to give me a chance as cantor. You made him do that, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And the food under the cantor’s music. You left it there for me?”

“You were looking so thin and pale.” She looked past Mot. “The dragon told you of the agreement?” she asked.

“He is with me always,” Mot said.

“So is there nothing for me?” Oleander asked. Her lips and eyes wilted into thin creases.

Mot approached the princess, caressed her cheeks, and drew her close. Her skin was soft and smooth. Her body was supple like shoots of spring wheat. “There is something for you. I have agreed to the bargain you struck with the dragon.”

Her eyes blazed with relief and longing, and Mot’s body responded with its own quickening. They locked in an embrace, followed by a passionate kiss.

The princess clung to Mot. “I was so afraid the dragon would take all of you.”

“Call me a fool,” Mot said. “I will be with you all your life, which I hope will be a long time.”

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The three were enjoying the wine of the forest creatures and playing a game. Mot was getting better at using his power. His voice would make frozen things appear out of the sky. Then Oleander would toss them up and Onyx would evaporate them with a puff of his fiery breath.

“An apple,” said the princess.

“You got it,” Mot said. he closed his eyes and sang, and a frozen apple dropped into the princess’ lap.

“This apple is so perfect, I could take a bite of it,” she said. She threw it into the air and the dragon vaporized it instantly.

Then Onyx sniffed and straightened up. “Trouble,” he said. The princess looked around, confused.

An arrow hissed and bounced off the dragon’s chest. His roar shook the air.



More arrows followed, tearing at the dragon's wings. Onyx, in preparation for battle, swept the princess and Mot aside and they slammed into the cave's walls. Mot was dazed, but the princess was limp on the ground, not moving.

He pulled Oleander further out of the way as he heard Onyx's roars and the shouts of men, including Captain Nevis. Mot was trying to figure out what he could do for the princess. Then he knew.

Mot sang in a new way. He discerned an injury on the left side of her head. He focused his voice to heal her.

The shouting and the roars gained intensity. The ground shook, but the battle was going poorly for Onyx. Soon his breaths were coming in wheezes. Mot looked up for a moment and saw clamps and ropes wrapped around the dragon. Captain Nevis was shouting at the cave's entrance, giving commands as he personally advanced.

Onyx spoke to Mot. "It is over."

As the men struggled to keep the weakened dragon down, Nevis climbed onto the dragon's shoulders and began working on some clicking device. Mot kept singing, using his voice to help Oleander. She was breathing deeper, and the color returned to her cheeks, but her healing progressed so slowly.

"Goodbye, Mot," said the dragon. "I must let go of the mountain, the forest, and all who dwell therein. Goodbye."

At that moment, the princess gasped and sat up. Her hand went to her side. "Oh!"

Mot looked up and saw how they had killed him. His eyes, blinded, were bleeding wounds. His legs and wings were bound. A huge garrote encircled his neck. They had strangled the dragon to death.

The men slackened their hold of the ropes and Nevis saw the princess had awakened. He approached, knelt before her, and bent down his head. "Your Highness," he said. The other men did the same. Dozens of dead soldiers lay in piles at the cave's entrance.

The princess held her side as she struggled to her feet. Her voice came out hard and cold. "Captain. Leave us. Wait for me at the far side of the bend."

"Yes, your Highness," replied the captain. He left, with his men close behind.

By the time Oleander came back to Mot, he had already laid himself on the dragon's shoulders. His bond with Onyx was new, but powerful. He felt like a leaf shorn from a branch, like a hand separated from its arm. His stomach tied itself into knots as he wept. Oleander touched his shoulder.

"You will not be coming down to visit me, will you?"

Mot stopped and turned to her. "No," he coughed out between wheezing breaths.

Oleander's tears were streaming down her face. "I understand."

Mot was not finished. "Let all know and beware. The forest will kill all who venture into it. My voice will see to that. Now go."

The princess did not argue. “Goodbye, Mot. But please know you are not the only fool. I love you more than my own life. I know it makes no sense, but I will be waiting for you. I will always be waiting for you.” She backed away, repeating her love for him. Finally she turned and walked down the path to join Captain Nevis and his men.

Mot draped himself on Onyx’s huge shoulders. What good was power if it came with such agony? He sang a new song, a terrible song. His song blasphemed against the earth itself and tore at the boundaries of time and space. Mot was ready to use his power, and he did not care about the consequences.

Then Mot felt soft thuds on top of him, by the dozens, by the hundreds. The creatures of the hollow were covering Mot with their bodies. A soft humming filled his ears. They were trying to show him something. Mot yielded to their vision.

In the vision, dream-like, he saw his mother, not as she was when he had last seen her, but much younger. He was a small boy once again, about to sing at his first Mass by the old shop.

Mot decided to make things different in this vision.

“Mother, I shouldn’t do this.”

She was straightening the ties of his robe. “Why not, son?”

“This thing, this voice of mine. It will bring us trouble and pain.”

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “Life is trouble.”

“Mother. Stop this. Stop me. I’m not doing it.”

Her laughter ceased. Her eyes focused on her son. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m not doing it. No.”

Her eyebrows pressed down, hard, low. “You are doing it and you are going. This is who you are. Do it. You must go.”

“No.”

Her whole body tensed, like a bow about to release an arrow. She gripped his shoulders. Her fingers dug into his skin and her voice stung like needles. She was terrifying. “You were meant to do this! You are going to do this! So go! Now!”

The people in the congregation were looking at them. His mother spun him around as if he were a troublesome pig and pushed. “Go!”

Mot put his head down. “Yes, Mother.”

He walked through the faithful. He approached the table set out for Mass and his shoulders barely reached up to its edge. Mot opened the book to the page for that day and began to sing.