



Terrified but desperate, the king at last found his voice and shouted to the intruder, “Leave those apples alone, thief! You shall not take that which does not belong to you!”

Mildly amused, the dragon turned to view the puny human who spoke with more authority than he ought.

“Pompous king,” the dragon said, “I shall take what I want, when I want it.”

“The golden apple tree belongs to me. It was a wedding gift and you will not steal its apples.”

“A wedding gift, you say?” asked the dragon, her yellow eyes flashing with mischief. “And, pray tell, oh noblest of kings, where is your dear wife now?”

The king was unable to stop his eyes darting to the tree’s roots, where the ashes of his beloved wife lay. The dragon followed his look and chuckled, little puffs of smoke billowing out of her nostrils.

“You are not a king but a simple fool if you thought you could keep your queen within the gold of the tree. These apples are of no use to you. I am doing you a service by taking them away and freeing you from your curse.”

“The apples are all I have left of her,” said the king, dropping to his knees and begging the dragon to spare him further pain.

The dragon, bored of the conversation, continued to gather the apples to take back to her golden lair. Suddenly outraged, the king rose from his knees and picked up the sword he had hidden under the princesses’ cushions. With all his might, the king brought his sword down upon the dragon’s blood-red, scaly tail.

“Ow!” wailed the dragon, dropping the apples and turning to the king. Her eyes flashed again, this time in anger.

“Leave now, dragon, and I will not strike you again,” said the king, sounding much more brave than he felt.

“Put down the sword and I will not burn you alive,” snarled the dragon.

Instead of lowering his weapon, the king raised it high above his head and brought it down hard, with all his weight behind it, onto the dragon’s tail once more.



This time the dragon let out a burst of fire from her jaws, setting alight the cosy camp the princesses had made the night before. It burned wildly just a few steps away from the king. The heat was overpowering and fierce, knocking the king to the ground and his sword out of reach. The red beast then launched into the air, beating her great, leathery wings and fanning the flames below. In one talon she took hold of the top of the golden apple tree, crushing the speared apple and wrenching the deep roots right up out of the ground. The ripping noise was loud and terrifying, as if the tree itself were screaming, and the king rolled onto his belly, unable to watch.

“If you want your apples so much then you must come with me,” roared the dragon, and with another talon she grabbed the king and lifted him high above the castle grounds.

Roaring flames once more, the dragon scorched the earth below and took off into the sky, beating her wings hard with fury.

The noises and smells from the battle woke Perceptua and she leapt out of bed just in time to see her father and the golden apple tree being flown out of the castle grounds towards the sea.

“Quick!” she shouted, rousing her sisters. “There’s no time to dress, we have to go after Father!”

In nothing but their nightgowns, carrying only the bow and arrows and Chordia's precious violin, the three brave princesses tore out of the castle, through the gates and down to the sea edge.

"I've lost sight of them," said Chordia, straining her eyes to look into the lightening sky, as Archeria hurriedly untied the ropes of their mother's sailboat.

"I can see them. They're as real to me as you are," said Perceptua, leaping into the boat. "I'll lead the way."

"Come on, Chordia," urged Archeria, and the eldest sister did as she was asked by taking up the sails. Within moments the princesses were skilfully harnessing the wind, which blew in their favour, and using their sailing expertise to chase the disappearing dragon.

With her face tilted into the breeze, Perceptua could smell the dragon's stink as strongly as she could hear its leathery wings and see the angry swish of its forked tail. Perceptua tracked the retreating red demon right across the sea.

"Just a little closer and I'll take a shot at the red devil," said Archeria, lining up her bow and arrow.



"No," said Chordia, firmly placing a warning hand on her headstrong sister's arm. "There's only one spot to hit a dragon to kill it: at the base of the throat. At this distance, even you will never make that shot. I can barely even see it! Besides, it doesn't feel like the moment."

“She’s right,” agreed Perceptua. “Father won’t survive a fall into the water from that height. It would be like hitting rock. Just be patient, sister, our time will come.”

The wind stayed strong for some time and the sight of the dragon grew closer, tempting Archeria to shoot, until suddenly there was no wind. Just as fast as the clicking of fingers, the thrill of the chase was over.

“No!” shouted Archeria, and in frustration she shot an arrow straight up into the morning sky.

“Without wind, we’ll never reach them,” said Perceptua. “I can smell the dragon’s anger. I’m scared she’ll eat Father out of spite, even if she’s not hungry.”

The princesses slumped down in the boat, as deflated as the sails. The noise of the slack ropes hitting the mast and the gentle lap-lapping of the waves against the hull was all there was to be heard. It felt as if they had failed their father yet again.