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Very early in the morning, surrounded once again by a low fog rising up from the ground, Flin got up and began walking around in circles to get warm, and he kept on doing that until the sun came up.

Juniper had been asleep, lying on his side. Now he woke up and looked around groggily, his mane all tangled. ‘That dragon...’ he said angrily. ‘Let me tell you...if he’s stupid enough to show his face, I’m going to kick his butt six ways from Sunday. The whole night out in that cold! Why can’t those jerks live in forests?’

Only the dwarf hadn’t been bothered. He was used to it—it’s often just as cold and damp below the ground.

‘Such a peaceful night,’ Mono mumbled as he stretched. ‘Rest before eternal rest.’

Right then, just as the bright sun was creeping up the side of the mountain peaks, one of the eagles let out a harsh warning call; then both birds flashed away. A loud roar echoed across the mountains.

‘You hear that?’ Mono whispered. ‘That was one...’

The three of them crawled behind a huge boulder. Far away, much higher up above them, something came into view against one of the rocky outcrops. Something was moving... It was hard to see, because from their hiding place they were looking straight into the light. But all at once whatever was scurrying around up there grew bigger, something unfolded, it lifted off, making a flapping sound, like a bat, and for a moment it blotted out the sun.

Then they heard the whooshing close by. Heavy and massive, the dragon came streaking past, leaving behind wisps of yellow cloud against the white sky.

‘That was him!’ Flin whispered.

‘It was *a* dragon,’ the dwarf whispered. ‘But he’s not the only one that lives around here...’

‘I think it was *our* dragon,’ Juniper said. ‘I saw where he came from. That’s where we need to go! And then... then we’ll set a trap! And then we’ll wait for him to come back! And then... then... um... Um...’

‘And then,’ the dwarf scoffed, ‘we’ll be scorched toast.’

‘No, we won’t!’ the unicorn said. ‘Will you stop being such a worrywart? It’s so annoying! It really brings everyone down! We’ll just lie in wait. And then we’ll all pounce on him! And then... um...’

‘Listen,’ said the dwarf’s left head. ‘For the last time, let’s turn back while we still can! Haven’t I made it clear? Dragons are sociopaths! Nasty as a boil! Hot as the sun!’

‘A trap?!’ the right head said. ‘Ha! You silly little pony...he’ll roast you alive!’

‘Stab him?’ the left head went on. ‘A dragon would use that sad little homemade spear as a toothpick! After he’s fried us, that is! Unicorn barbecue! Grilled blood sausage! Dragons hunt giants for sport! They eat knights straight from the can! They bathe in boiling lava in the mornings!’

‘Searing pain and smoldering remains!’ the right head added. ‘Their skin is tougher than this rock! Their breath will melt your heads! Are you finally getting the picture? *There’s – no – beating – a – dragon!*’

The dwarf had gotten so worked up he was stomping his feet.

Flin and the unicorn stared ahead in silence.

‘She had such a sweet voice,’ Juniper eventually said softly. ‘Like tinkling bells... or a babbling brook... I wanted her to be happy, even though sometimes she wasn’t. Because I loved her. More than anyone... I think I said that once before.’

Flin nodded slowly.

‘Maybe her clothes will still be there,’ the unicorn continued in a small voice. ‘She always wore white. She looked so good in white... White is the most beautiful col—’

‘Alright, fine!’ the dwarf’s left head snapped. ‘We’ll go to the dragon’s lair! I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... alright then!’

‘Enough, put a lid on it,’ he silenced his right head. ‘We’ll go! Right now! And we’ll see if we can find a piece of your friend! And then...’

‘Not a piece of Solange,’ the unicorn said. ‘Just a piece of her clothes.’

‘Whatever you say!’ the dwarf said. ‘We’ll look, and you guys can take whatever you want. And then we’ll get the heck out! Faster than a greased fart! Alright?! Okay?!’

Flin nodded again.

Now they were walking at a rapid pace towards the peak where they’d seen the dragon lift off. The dwarf was huffing and puffing.

‘Is there really nothing you can think of that might help against a dragon?’ Flin asked.

‘I’m more than four hundred years old,’ Mono panted. ‘I’ve never heard of anything that can defeat a dragon. Those monsters are *invincible*! Didn’t you guys see what happened back in

that village?’

Juniper nodded. ‘That guy with his bent pitchfork, yeah... who went and lay down in a trough. A trough for horses... Well... I... I wasn’t really planning on trying to fight him anyway...’

‘No, me neither,’ said Flin.

‘I’m not an animal killer,’ the unicorn went on. ‘I’m more about protecting animals, actually. When I see a snail, I always think: careful now, Juniper, don’t step on it! And if I accidentally step on it anyway, my whole day’s ruined.’

‘Yeah,’ Flin said. ‘Yeah, that spear... well...’ He threw it listlessly. It clattered down onto the ground a little farther off. ‘I just thought that maybe Solange might still be...’

‘Dead as a doornail!’ Mono said. ‘Gone! Gobbled up! Lost forever! I’m sorry for you guys, but... but he probably only took her with him as a snack... As lunch for the next day, you see! As a little pick-me-up in the afternoon! A savory bite! A tasty treat! Something to munch on! A...’

‘Alright, alright, we get it!’ said Flin.

They carried on climbing in silence.

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The moment they got closer it became clear as day that this, at least, was where the monster lived. Bones were scattered around everywhere. There were skulls from all kinds of animals; they found entire legs, the rotting flesh still on the bone, and half-charred deer. They were stumbling through a huge graveyard, albeit a messy one, where everything was left wherever it had been spat out. Here and there Mono saw what he thought might well be human bones, but he was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

They made their way through the carcasses, circling the summit to an area that lay in the shade. There they found a cave, its entrance partly blocked off by a flattened boulder. Every inch of the ground in front of it was littered with animal body parts. The sickly stench of decay was thick in the air.

Their eyes wide, Flin and Juniper surveyed the chunks of scabby flesh, the patches of dried blood and the stinking limbs. They were both asking themselves what on Earth they'd gotten themselves into and why they'd been stupid enough to think they could take on the monster that had dragged all this here.

Mono saw their faces and knew they'd be turning back any second now. 'And here we are!' he said cheerfully. 'Final destination: the beast's lair! And now you guys can rummage through the trash while I keep an eye on the sky...'

Shivering, Flin shuffled towards the entrance of the cave. He peered around the large, flat rock. And then he actually crawled inside.

It took some time for his eyes to get used to the near-darkness. Finally he began to make out the shapes of crumbling walls and jagged stalagmites. There were no bones or other human or animal remains here. Apparently, the dragon left those outside.

But the beast probably did sleep here—somewhere, there had to be a huge worn-down hollow in the rock...

And a little further off, amid some chunks of moss, he suddenly spotted her comb. The bone comb with the red handle that Solange had used to brush Juniper's mane. There it was, lying abandoned on the floor of the cave...

Trembling, Flin wriggled his way back outside. Some distance away the unicorn still stood staring glassy-eyed at the gruesome remains at his hooves.

'We... We... I... ' Flin stammered.

He took a step forward, but slipped on a greenish chunk of meat. As he landed, a few ribs rolled away, something cracked underneath his shoulders and he felt something soft...

He jumped up as if he'd been bitten. 'It's... horrible here!' he hissed. 'Just horrible... We... we have to get back down immediately!' He gagged for a moment.

'Well...' the unicorn said dejectedly.

'Finally!' said Mono. 'Let's go!'

Slipping, jumping and stumbling, they fled.

Down the mountain! Their footsteps echoed through the barren landscape. The hooves of the unicorn were the loudest of all, clattering across the rocks. Mono, who had the shortest legs, had to make a real effort to keep up with the others. They kept looking up; the eagles seemed to have

disappeared.

They left slope after slope behind them, sometimes sending small avalanches of stones skittering down the side of the mountain.

‘Stop... stop!’ the dwarf shouted after an hour, when his heart felt like it was about to burst.

They came to a halt. His face a deep red, he dropped down onto his knees.

They leaned against a boulder to catch their breath. The sun was beating down on their heads. A piercing cry rang through the air: one of the eagles was circling above their heads again.

‘He’s coming back!’ Flin whispered.

They hid between the rocks, squeezing underneath an overhanging ledge as best they could. They heard the now-familiar roaring, it got louder... passed them... died down again...

When it was over, Mono leaped to his feet. ‘Let’s skedaddle!’ the dwarf hissed.

‘Vamoose!’

They’d forgotten all about how tired they were. One after the other they hurtled down, back towards the woods.

Half an hour later, they were back among the pine trees. Here they once again heard the thunderous roar, echoing between the mountain tops.

They flinched for a moment, then sprinted off across the soft, bouncy moss into the shadow of the trees, where they felt a little safer.

Suddenly the roaring sounded much closer! The dragon seemed to be hovering in huge

From Henry Lloyd, *Flin, or the Lost Love of a Unicorn*  
Querido, 2019  
328 pp.  
Translated by Emma Rault ([emmarault@gmail.com](mailto:emmarault@gmail.com))

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circles above his domain...

In a dense part of the forest, they crawled behind the broad trunk of a beech tree. And there, looking up through the gaps between the branches, they saw the monster's huge body, soaring above the treetops, with a tail like a fat slithering snake. A breeze swept between the leaves. Even the heavy tree trunk they were pressed up against swayed for a moment, like the mast of a ship in a storm.



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Surrounded by bluegray twilight, they had sat down beneath a large fir tree on the edge of a ravine.

‘Need... rest...’ Mono panted. ‘No food... No drink... Go again tomorrow...’

‘Yes, time for a bite to eat,’ Juniper mumbled. Wheezing, he pulled some plants toward him and started chewing on them.

Flin had dropped down against the base of the tree. Sweaty and dejected, he sat staring off into space. After a few minutes he couldn’t keep it to himself any longer. ‘She’s dead,’ he said.

The unicorn stopped eating. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I think so too...’

‘I don’t just think so,’ said Flin, ‘I *know* so.’

‘What... What’s gotten into you?’ Mono asked, in two voices.

‘Yeah!’ Juniper said. ‘How do you know?’

‘Because of this,’ said Flin. He pulled the bone comb out of his garments.

The dwarf looked at the object with interest.

But Juniper’s jaw dropped. ‘That’s... How...? Where...?’

‘In that cave,’ said Flin. ‘That’s where it was. Just lying there on the rocks. When I saw that thing, um...’

‘A comb,’ Mono said. ‘It’s a comb.’

‘Yes,’ Flin said. ‘When I saw it, I knew for sure. She was there. There was nothing left of

her. Just this comb...’

They were silent for a full minute.

‘It’s all over,’ Juniper sighed, defeated. ‘I... I don’t know what else I can do... I’ve even lost my appetite... But... I will go on living, thinking of her. And I will always carry it with me...’

‘What?’ Flin said.

‘Her comb,’ said Juniper. ‘It’s mine, after all. I’m glad that you found it. Yes, I’m grateful to you for that.’

‘But... I... No,’ said Flin. He tucked the object back into his clothes. ‘I’ll keep it with me. You’re welcome to have a look at it whenever you like.’

‘Excuse me?’ Juniper asked. ‘Have a look at it? Are you joking? She brushed my mane with it! You saw that yourself! *My* mane! Not yours.’

‘But I’m the one who went into that cave,’ said Flin. ‘Finders keepers.’

‘Guys, guys,’ said the dwarf. ‘Let’s not forget that...’

‘I loved her the most!’ said Juniper angrily. ‘And she loved me! You saw that with your own eyes! You went and spied on us from over in your sad little corner! Now give me that!’

‘Um... guys?!’ the dwarf said again.

‘Hooves off,’ Flin snapped, pushing away one of Juniper’s legs. ‘Enough! That comb’s mine—end of story!’

‘You greedy good-for-nothing!’ Juniper snorted. ‘It was annoying enough that you had to turn up all of a sudden! It really killed the romantic mood, you know that?! And... Cut it out, will you? For the last time, give me th—’

The dwarf let out a double cry. Flin and Juniper abruptly looked up.

Right at that moment, a noise had started above their heads, like a volcano erupting.

Rasping and spraying sparks, something grazed the highest branches of the tree...

Flin jumped to his feet. The dwarf and the unicorn had already leapt to safety. Fearing for his life, Flin jumped headfirst into the depth of the abyss...

Instinctively, he curled up into a ball. He tumbled down, hurtling along crashing into things, down the steep, dark slope. The hillside was thick with ferns and shrubs. Again and again his fall was broken, but he felt the branches scraping against his arms and his cheeks...

And suddenly he was free! No friction—he was floating in the air... It hit him that the dragon had already disappeared out of sight again. He heard muffled roaring in the distance... For a moment, Flin tried to fly, making some flapping motions with his arms...

When he landed it was on something soft. He heard a stifled cry...

Was this a deer that had been resting here, at the foot of the steep hillside? Some other kind of animal? Dazed from the rough landing, Flin tried to sit up. But *beneath* him something started bucking and struggling...something trying to get out from under him...

Suddenly he felt a blow against his jaw, hard enough to make him see stars. Still reeling, he noticed that the animal he'd fallen onto was getting up... It seemed to be running away...

He watched the slim figure running off. Until, a little further away, he heard a voice. 'Unicorn!' the voice breathed. 'My sweet unicorn... You found me!'