



The Dragon Negotiator

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Action/adventure

They begged and they pleaded, even got down on their knees, but he refused and refused and refused again.

“It’s impossible,” he told them, but still they begged.

“Someone must try,” they said stubbornly. “Someone like you.”×

“No.”

When begging did not work they began to hem and haw at him. “King’s business,” they reminded the farmer.

“We ask this in the name of the king.” They clutched their spears and puffed out their chests, uniformed in the king’s livery embroidered with the king’s crest.

“Don’t care. I’m not doing it, and you can’t force me to.”

He was right and they hated him for it. They changed tactics again.

“Ten dinerats,” they offered, more money than he would ever see in his farming life. “Twenty.”

“No.”

It went on for weeks. The king’s men promised, “If anything should happen to you, we’ll make sure your farm goes to your parents. It won’t fall in disarray.”

The farmer said, "No."

He'd once been shyly proud of his negotiating skills. He felt shame at being reduced to only one word. It seemed all he ever said, anymore.

Finally the king's men grew desperate. The farmer noticed the way people stared at him when he went into the village. He saw the way children scowled at him and mothers closed their doors when he walked past. The soldiers looked smug.

They've turned my own people against me, thought the farmer. His sadness deepened. What kind of life would he have now? All because he wanted to live instead of die. He shouldn't feel shame at wanting to save his own life, but he felt selfish because the king's men singled him out and refused to leave him alone and he would not give them what they wanted.

But his "no" was stronger than ever, even when they asked again.

When he went into the village later, a small child ran up to him. "Farmer," asked the child, "why won't you negotiate with the dragons?"

"Because they cannot be negotiated with," replied the farmer.

"Someone can. The prophecy says they will speak with someone."

"Just not me," said the farmer stubbornly.

The king's men could take no more resistance from him. "What do you want?" cried the captain. "What can we give to convince you to help?"

"I want to be left alone," the farmer told him. "I want to fall in love and get married and have children who will run my farm someday. I want to live my life."

"If you can negotiate with the dragons, then you will be a hero. You'll never want anything again!"

The farmer shook his head. "No one who has ever gone to speak with them lived to tell about it."

“But you could be the one!”

“No.”

The choice was never actually his, of course, but the farmer didn't see that at the time.

His villagers began to shun him more openly. No one wanted to buy his crops. After harvest, he couldn't afford to buy enough seed to see him through another year. The farm that he'd saved for all his life began to wither.

He thought about moving to another village. He lived in a populated valley so there were options close by; not so close that he couldn't start over. But the king's men must have anticipated this, or maybe the word spread quickly that he refused to negotiate with the dragons. He was not welcome anywhere.

The night a group of angry villagers burned his farm, he made up his mind to travel far, far, away. Perhaps if he went far enough he could live in peace. But the dream was not destined to come true. He'd no sooner left his village than the king's men followed him, telling him that he could stop all this if he would just go talk to the dragons. The king would even pay for him to have another farm, they promised. A bigger farm.

“No.”

“We will follow you everywhere,” the king's men threatened. “We will tell everyone we see of your cowardice and selfishness. You'll never be able to settle down, much less get married and have children.”

He knew they would do it, too.

“Please,” the captain begged once more. “Will you go speak with the dragons?”

His heart screamed, “No!” but his lips whispered, “Yes.”

They took him into the mountains, further from home than he'd ever been before, until the landmarks faded away and he felt hopelessly disoriented. At first he was sullen and angry. The soldiers tried to cheer him.

“The prophecy says they will speak with a human someday,” they reminded the farmer. “It could be you.”

“It could be,” he murmured, but he did not believe it. If he was created to speak with dragons, wouldn't he

know? Wouldn't there be a burning inside him, a little voice whispering about his destiny and his future? Wouldn't he feel he was born for heroic deeds? He did not feel special. He was good at helping people solve conflict, and that was the only way he could mark his life individually from any other. He did not think he was someone worth writing a prophecy about.

"It could be you," they said, day after day. He was here, after all, so perhaps he should try.

"It could be," he said, and his words grew stronger. It could be.

When they were high enough that he could look over a rocky ledge and see the entire valley laid before him like toys on a rug, the mountain walls began to darken. Ash and soot covered the pathways and crags as they climbed steadily higher and wove deeper into the peaks. The farmer knew they'd arrived when the men began to murmur under their breaths and their eyes shifted uneasily.

"It could be me," said the farmer, hoping his fear didn't creep into his voice. "It could be."

"It could be," they replied, giving him false smiles filled with false hope.

The charred remains of others who'd gone before him began to litter their path. It was not long before they came upon a gigantic cave on one side of the mountains.

The farmer looked at the captain, who nodded to him.

"You could be the one to save us all," said the captain.

"I could be." The farmer took a deep breath and walked to the mouth of the cave. He waited. The dragon would smell him, he knew. He didn't need to call for it.

He did not wait long. The dragon rose from the darkness, shining like an avenging angel. The farmer couldn't see its wings, but he did see the dragon's eyes. They were deep blue and constellations danced inside them.

It could be me, thought the farmer. He was strangely calm. I could be the one. The dragon was not so scary. It was beautiful, in a way.

The dragon measured him with a steady gaze, and the farmer gazed back. He knew that the dragon was

deciding whether or not to speak with him. Should he speak first? The farmer breathed deeply. The dragon did not move. The farmer began to relax.

I am the one.

The farmer opened his mouth to introduce himself, but before he could speak, the dragon opened his own and expelled a blast of fire that engulfed the farmer with remarkable speed.

Guess not.

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