

A Silver Dragon and Glow-Flies

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To Whom it may Concern:

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Editor of *Proceedings*,

I officially authorize you to withdraw funds from my personal account (Miss Borzle should have the account number) to pay for the delivery, editing, and publication cost of this paper—subject, of course, to the usual peer review process.

As I recall I last wrote while about to go for a week-long trip across the desert in order to find a city.

I did not find the city.

I walked for a very long time. I do not remember how long—time is something I have found it harder and harder to measure lately—but I do know the sun rose and set many, many times. I don't remember ever stopping for more than a minute or two the entire time. There was never any good reason to stop. Sand is really boring after a few hundred hours in it, and I saw almost nothing except sand for days.

I also thought for a very long time. About as long as I walked, I suspect, for, like walking, I didn't have any reason to stop. I thought of all sorts of things, but mostly I thought about incantations.

As many of you know, prior to my loosing my ability to practice medicine, I was actively researching alternative ways to rid the body of minor contagions. The standard approach has always seemed a bit too expansive for the problem at hand, and I have long sought for a simpler, cleaner way about it. As I was thinking of this, I was reminded of *Frisky Chest*, a classic enchanter's spell that causes inanimate objects, such as chests of jewels, to dart away from anyone who approaches too close.

Those of you who took an alternate theories class in school no doubt remember *Frisky Chest*, it being a classic example of a spell simple in principle, but difficult due to the size and permanency requirements. Well, my thought was to model an incantation after the core principles of *Frisky Chest*, but bind it to individual microbes for only a few hours. I, of course, cannot experiment with this

at all, but I suggest the Fabovian method to distribute the effects and possibly a *Gratis Effusum* conditioned to the person's tear duct* to help prevent binding to healthy cells.

I had a few other thoughts that may have some merit as well, but none worth sharing at their present stage of incompleteness. Oh, and I should point out that the incantation thus described would remove the microbes themselves, but of course do nothing for the toxins they might have already released; I supposed any standard anti-toxin would fix that, though.

After some time—I estimate it between three and five weeks—the sand gave way and I entered an equally barren region of wind-sculpted sandstone. The canyons and buttes, coarse gravel and scattered boulders proved much more interesting going; there was always something to look at and more variety of exercise than simply plodding through fine, shifting drifts of sand.

On my second day in the rocky desert I was thinking to myself how spectacular it was, with the arches and the mushrooms and all. I had read about such formations, of course, but had never seen them because...

...because...

Oh dear, this could not be true! I surely must be dreaming...

...because there aren't any on the continent. Which meant I was not on the continent. But I had come here on my own feet! I could not have run across an ocean without noticing it, of that I was certain. Confused, I started pacing back and forth on the ledge I had climbed onto, trying to figure out what had happened.

I was still pacing away when the probably-a-dragon appeared. It looked mostly like a dragon, but it couldn't have weighed more than me and appeared to be made out of liquid mercury. It was long and sinuous with huge wings folded at its back, but it walked erect on its relatively short back legs. I had my back to it when it came, so I don't know how it arrived, but when I turned around it was on the same ledge as I, not more than five paces away.

*The reader may recall a discussion of tear ducts and minor contagion in Boltz & Goodman's encyclopedic work *Microbia*—either the thirteenth or the twenty-second chapter, I don't recall which.

Its first utterance was in a language I did not recognize, but after two or three tries it hit upon one I did.

“Well, what have we here! A foreign giant pacing about in the desert, if I’m not mistaken.”

I nodded my agreement to this assessment.

“What is your name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I didn’t mind at all, but I also could not tell it my name, so I just shook my head and shrugged.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you have a name?”

I nodded.

“Well then, why not tell it to me?”

I opened and closed my mouth several times and shrugged.

“What, can’t you talk?”

I shook my head.

“Can’t talk, eh? Then I guess you’re not much use to me. I had hoped you might prove an entertaining companion—good story-tellers are so hard to find, and it’s not everyday I meet someone who shows no fear at my approach either, but if you can’t talk there’s no sense in even trying.”

Its next act caught me completely off guard, and hurt more than I care to remember. All it did was place its hand on my chest, but my entire torso felt like it was being ripped to shreds. After some time it took its hand away and I leaned back against the cliff-face behind me, weak with pain.

The dragon was looking at its hand with a puzzled expression. After a moment it licked its fingers once or twice and then looked at me again.

“You don’t have a heart? Not even any blood at all? How am I to turn you into a zombie if you don’t have a heart? And I can’t very well make a meal of you if you aren’t warm-blooded, can I? Are you good for anything at all?”

I stared at it in helpless anger. It had tried to remove my very humanity from me, for no better reason than that I was a mute. What was it, some sort of demon? My vision blurred as the rage built in me and then, despite the intense pain in my chest, I leapt on him and we both went hurtling out over the edge of the ledge.

The instant we were over the ledge I suddenly regained my senses. I felt like an ordinary insignificant human medic again, and I wondered what had come over me. Was I insane? I instinctively let go of the dragon, watching it glide away on its magnificent silvery wings as I fell onto the rocks below and tumbled down the rest of the stony slope.

I lay there at the bottom of the canyon, looking up at the dragon circling above me, waiting to pass out. I was certain I had broken every bone in my body—especially

my skull, which had taken the full force of my initial impact—yet no faintness came. Instead I lay there, as helpless and immobile as though I were dead, unable even to move my eyes as I watched the dragon circle and land just outside my sight.

“Well!” it exclaimed as I heard it walk up to me. “That was entertainment enough to earn one’s pay, that was! Too bad the thing died in the attempt; a giant that’s not afraid to grapple with a dragon in mid-air might have been useful after all.”

It reached down and felt for my pulse—forgetting, I assume, that it had just ascertained that I had no heart—and then it carefully closed my eyelids.

“Ugh, must corpses always stare at me like that?” it asked. “But if I couldn’t make it into a zombie while it was alive, maybe I can now that it is dead.” For some time it tried various incantations, but finally, frustrated with no results, it left.

Perhaps an hour later I managed to open my eyes. I had been trying this frequently as I lay there, but the strength took a long time returning. Once I did open them I lay, staring up at the afternoon sky until the very last vestiges of sunlight were gone.

Sometime before midnight I started hearing distant voices from time to time. Having already determined that my prolonged inability to move was most likely due to significant nerve damage, I initially attributed the voices to hallucination. However, they slowly grew louder and more constant, and after some time I started to hear bangs and clinks and the clatter of dislodged rocks as well. It sounded for all the world like a group of men climbing their way through the canyons.

A few minutes after I had decided that I couldn’t be imagining them, the men arrived within my field of view. There were five of them, tall young men with huge backpacks and two swords each, repelling their way down from the top of the cliff to the little ledge off of which I had just hurled myself. What they were doing climbing cliffs at midnight I do not know. They were not ill-prepared for such a night journey, however; in addition to their packs and repelling gear, they were completely enveloped in a cloud of bluish sparks which fully illuminated their way.

The first of the men had only just reached the ledge when one of the sparks found me. When it got close I found it was not a spark at all, but rather a largish housefly. It settled on my face, and was soon joined by a few dozen more. They all shone with the same shimmering blue light which didn’t seem to come from any particular part of their anatomy, but rather to glow in the air about them.

As the flies were joined by others I was forced to close

my eyes to keep the flies out. It had never occurred to me before that even breathing had its value, but as I lay there I dearly wished I could puff away the flies that were investigating my nose. Eventually, however, the men gathered around me, talking animatedly in a language I did not know. One of them brushed the flies off of my face so I opened my eyes and looked at them.

Up close they were definitely the most determined-looking fellows I have ever seen. I never really thought someone could look determined and confused at the same time, but these fellows definitely pulled it off. They would look into my eyes, talk for a while in their language, feel for a pulse, poke me and stick me, and then repeat the whole process.

After a bit of this treatment, one of them finally said something I understood. I do not know the name of the incantation, but it was powerful and clear. The man filled my entire body with magical energy focused to search out and repair any damage it could. It was one of the most potent pieces of magic I have ever experienced, and I feel certain it could have started a dead man's heart and made him seem quite alive for a time. However, the man initially directed it to work on my heart and lungs—trying to resuscitate me, no doubt—and so the spell had no immediate effect.

After waiting for a minute or so, the men evidently gave up on me; for they called off their flies and continued up the canyon, out of sight.

As they left I decided I must take advantage of the situation or remain paralyzed forever. I had never tried to control someone else's incantation before, but the magic was fully alive in me and felt so familiar as it buzzed that I gave it my little all.

It was a stubborn bit of magic, and no mistake. It took me some doing to convince it to stop searching for a heart to start up again and attend to my damaged nerves and broken bones instead. I didn't make the job any easier for myself with this request—the magic informed me I had no bones, either, and didn't trust me that much thereafter—but eventually I did get it to work on my nerves, and within minutes the pain and paralysis were gone.

I pause here to speculate on the absence of bones in my body. I do not know any more than that I don't have any. In almost every way I would assume I do, for I look like I do, I move like I do, and feeling myself I certainly *feel* ribs and whatnot. But I trust the spell more than my senses (forgive me, but I *am* a theoretic magilogist) and do not doubt at all that what I think are bones are not really bones at all, or at least they are not made out of bone matter.

As soon as I was healed I stood up and looked about

me. There was nothing much to see—just wind-sculpted starlit cliffs and a boulder-strewn canyon. I started to climb back up to the ledge, but then I realized that I had no idea if that was a good move or not. I had no sense of direction in this desert, and even if I did I had no idea where I ought to go. However, the men I had seen were certain to need food and water, and in a desert like this that had to mean civilization. Besides, even if they never went near a city, a magician like the one who had healed me may be able to help me out in other ways too—like tell me what continent I was on, for instance. Decided, I turned and jogged up the canyon after them.

I had not far to go; shortly up the canyon I hit a fork and, not wanting to choose incorrectly, climbed up the spur of rock in between the two branches in hopes of catching sight of them. Once up I found that both forks soon disappeared, and the ground above was far too rough to see very far. A hundred yards away, however, was a narrow spire of rock, and when I had scaled this I saw what I was looking for.

The men were some distance away, working their way up a narrow cleft in a big flat-topped mesa. I saw them, but I also saw something else that made me fear for them. Circling high up above them was a slender silvery form, its huge mirror-like wings held so as to reflect the light of the swarm of flies not back down onto the men, but rather some distance way—for a moment in my general direction, which was the only reason I saw it at all.

Again I acted on impulse. It is becoming a habit with me, and a bad habit at that; perhaps blood has a cooling function on the brain? In any case, I immediately concluded that the dragon was stalking the travelers; that the travelers would be defeated if taken by surprise; and that the travelers, not the dragon, were in the right. I don't recall deciding to do anything about it; that seemed to come automatically, without any thought at all.

I scrambled down from the pinnacle I was on and began threading my way as fast as I could through the boulders and around to the side of the butte that had looked most scalable. I didn't run outright, for I felt certain that if the dragon saw me all would be lost, but I did move as fast as stealth and the rough terrain allowed.

I was just starting my way up the side of the mesa when a glint of light above me caused me to look up and see the dragon diving down toward the men.

Now it was all or nothing. I gave the climb all the power and energy I possessed and reached the top in almost miraculously little time. A dim blue glow illuminated the walls of the crevice where the men were, in which direction I sprinted as fast as my feet would carry me.

Looking down into the crevice I saw the battle scene

entirely engulfed in thin white smoke. Three of the men were lying on the ground, while the other two appeared to have glass bubbles over their heads and were sparing with their might against the dragon. Even as I was taking this in the dragon gave a flick of his whip-like tail and one of the bubbles popped. The man gave a gasp of surprise, coughed once, and fell senseless on the ground.

Poison gas? It must be. I saw there was no hope for the lone warrior; his bubble would soon pop as well and he would join his fellows on the ground, senseless and at the dragon's disposal. I knew I would die if I dropped into the gas, but I could not stand idly by while the dragon slew the last man. With a silent cry, I dropped down, hoping to crush the dragon under my weight.

I did not crush it. I did knock it flat and I think I winded it, for it emitted a billowing puff of white smoke when I hit it, but almost immediately I felt its wings and tail wrap upon me and begin to crush me. It did not succeed in this, however, for the man stepped forward and with a mighty stoke of his sword removed the dragon's head.

The dragon dead, the man rushed over to one of his companions; but he tripped as he ran, burst his bubble, and moved no more.

It was at this juncture I recalled I did not breathe, something I am embarrassed to admit I had forgotten. The immediate fear of death thus removed, I went into medic mode to see if I could save the men around me.

The first one I inspected did indeed have a pulse, so I decided to get him out of the smoke. The most obvious place was on top of the butte, since the smoke filled the entire canyon like a pool of water. I was just about to toss him up there the way a child might toss a doll onto the top bunk when I remembered the painful fall I had just taken and thought I had better be more careful.

Draping two of the men around my neck, I scrambled up the cliff as quickly as I could. Dumping them unceremoniously on the rock above, I slid back into the canyon for two more, and then made a third trip for the last one.

Once all the men were safely on the ledge I gave them a more careful inspection. I was surprised to find that, though they were alive and breathing, they were as cold as if they had been corpses. Curse the dragon! What noxious gas had he given them?

I took off my shirt and wrapped four of the men in it, bundled together to conserve body heat, then began to flush the fifth man's lungs, pumping gently on his chest and using my mouth like a bellows. At first I saw wisps of smoke come from his nose when I pushed on his lungs, but after a few minutes I was rewarded to feel him breathing more deeply and his natural color and temperature re-

turning.

As I turned to the second man I was frightened to note he had almost stopped breathing completely. In the circumstances, I decided to aim for speed rather than finesse. I pulled two men out of the bundle and pumped and blew a bit harder than was good for them (I broke a few ribs, I'm afraid), trying to get the smoke out as fast as I could. When I got to the last two I actually had to restart one of their hearts, but in the end I was rewarded to see all five laying there, sleeping peacefully and naturally.

There being nothing else to do for the men for the time being, I dropped back into the canyon to recover their gear. After hauling this up next to them I went back down to have a good look at the dragon.

There wasn't much to see, really. The mirror-like shine of the wings and scales disappeared when I touched them, scuffing easily into a pale metallic gray. The teeth weren't large enough to serve any useful purpose, and after the noxious gases I didn't trust its meat. In all it was a pretty useless corpse, so I climbed back up and sat, waiting for the men to come too.

In one of their packs I found a few sheets of paper and related supplies, so I began writing this letter.

Around noon one of the men woke up and we tried to communicate, but to no avail. He doesn't appear to be literate in any language, and I can't make heads nor tails out of his spoken language. He's still too ill to do much except sit around, so there's not much to do except wait. The other four are still completely unconscious.

Well, I'm just about out of paper. Hopefully I'll find some more and also find some way to ship this off.

(later) Men are all awake. We are leaving. I think you'll get this letter after all.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This letter was delivered to us by a teenage cabin boy from Commodore Haskin's merchant ship. He informed us they had picked it up from another ship at sea only a few weeks earlier, and that the captain of that ship had claimed to get it from yet a third ship's captain. We sent reporters back with the boy to his captain, but were unable to get any additional information out of him. The other ship was "captained by Gash—you know, that smack fellow who keeps cats on board," according to the boy; Haskin claimed ignorance as to his identity.

As always, we welcome any information anyone may be able to give regarding the ships involved, their course and ports of origin, as well as any insights into the glowing flies or silver dragon, neither species being one any of our staff has heard of.

Please address you letters to

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