



THIS IS NOT A TALE OF OUR OWN WORLD.

It is a world like ours in many ways, but one where dragons live in their own lands, wary of humans. One with Sorcerers, light and dark. One where Pipers can control things around them merely by playing a Song.

Yet tales of other worlds *can* reach us, sometimes. All it takes is a little magic, and the Pipers have always known something that – for us – is easy to forget:

There is magic in music.

Listen...



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A
VANISHING
OF
GRIFFINS

S.A. PATRICK





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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ERNER WHITLOCK?

Erner woke, as he did every morning, from a nightmare: being pushed off the back of a dracogriff, into a cold lake far below. In his nightmare, the face of the person who had pushed him was smiling a terrible smile, cruel and cold, *laughing* as Erner tumbled through the air and into the icy water, his Pipe slipping from his fingers and lost to the depths.

When it had actually happened, though, there had been no smile on Patch Brightwater's face: he had looked utterly terrified.

A question had burned inside Erner ever since that fateful day, and he knew that there was only one way he would ever get an answer.

He would have to find Patch Brightwater, someone he'd



always thought was a friend, and ask him *why*.

Why did you push me into the lake?

Erner's journey since then had been eventful. It had brought him, eventually, to the Islands of the Eastern Sea, and to the court of one of the many Pirate Kings and Queens. Here on the island of Pengersick was an old fortress, where the King of Pengersick had his palace. It was in the heart of that fortress that Erner was imprisoned now: hanging in a tiny cage next to the throne of a Pirate King.

The king snored in his throne. He always slept there when he threw a party, and he'd thrown a party almost every night since taking the crown. The floor of the throne room was covered in sleeping pirates and empty rum bottles.

Erner's legs were going numb. He shifted his weight, working his feet out from under him, trying not to make his cage swing – if the cage swung, the rope it hung from would creak, and the creak might wake the king.

That was never a good idea. Two nights before, one of the pirates had let out a belch that was long and thunderous as everyone slept. He'd woken the king. Worse, he'd *laughed* about it.

In front of the throne were a dozen wooden spikes, and on the top of each spike was the severed head of someone

who had displeased the king. The head of the belching pirate was there, the freshest of the bunch.

Yes, waking the Pirate King was never a good idea. He was *not* a morning person.

Arpie Noss was his name – King Arpie to his subjects. He hadn't been king long. Two months, that was all, but it had been a *busy* two months. Pirate rulers didn't tend to last, and it seemed that Arpie Noss had been trying to fit as much as possible into whatever time he had.

Like buying Erner, for a start.

Erner was an apprentice in the Custodian Elite. Held in the highest esteem, the Custodians only accepted the best Pipers into their ranks.

The magical Songs that Pipers played could achieve wondrous things: there were Songs to conjure winds to sweep snow from blocked roads; Songs to make seeds sprout in barren fields; Songs that helped wounds to heal. There were even Songs that could defend against *armies*.

Pipers usually specialized in one kind of Song, but Custodians excelled at them all, using their skills with the Pipe to help wherever they could.

To the poor and downtrodden of the world, the Custodian Elite represented justice and hope, and for Erner there was no greater honour than being part of their ranks.

For many, the greatest honour of all would be to become a member of the Pipers' Council, as they were the highest authority among Pipers, and decided the laws of Piping. But it was the Custodian Elite who *upheld* those laws, and much more besides.

Erner had gone with Patch Brightwater to visit the castle of Underath the Sorcerer, hoping that the Sorcerer would help their friend Wren – a girl cursed into the shape of a rat.

When they'd got to the castle, however, they had found Underath seriously wounded and in hiding, his castle occupied by violent mercenaries. When the mercenaries had discovered them, the Sorcerer had hidden again; Erner and the others had fled on the back of Barver the dracogriff, as the mercenaries gave chase.

Just as they seemed to be out of danger, Patch had suddenly pushed Erner off Barver's back, into the lake below.

Erner had managed to swim to the side of the lake; exhausted, he'd expected the mercenaries to kill him. The moment they saw Erner's robes, however, they realized he was in the Custodian Elite. Killing him wasn't worth the kind of trouble it could bring down on their heads.

Instead, the mercenaries did what they always did: they tried to think of a way to make some money out of the situation. They'd already plundered everything of value

from Underath's castle, and the time had come for them to move on; extra money would be welcome.

They considered holding him to ransom, but the Custodian Elite was far too powerful a foe, with far too long a memory. Such a course of action would end disastrously, they decided.

But there were, they knew, criminals in the world who were reckless enough, or foolish enough, to actually *enjoy* the thought of angering the Custodians.

Pirates.

So a letter was sent to the Pirate Kings and Queens of the territories of the Islands of the Eastern Sea, all two hundred and twelve of them. *We have come into the possession of a young apprentice in the Custodian Elite*, said the letter. *For a simple payment of one hundred gold muttles, you may have him as your prisoner, and show how little you fear the Custodians! Although none shall pay, for none would dare!*

The Custodian Elite tended to leave the Islands of the Eastern Sea alone, but it would take a particularly foolish and reckless pirate to think that a captive Custodian wouldn't be a huge risk. Luckily for the mercenaries, one of the Pirate Kings and Queens *was* particularly foolish and reckless.

Arpie Noss, newly crowned King of Pengersick, looking to make his mark in the pirate world. What better way,

thought King Arpie, than to do something nobody had ever done before?

He wanted everyone to see how *fearless* he was!

He wanted everyone to see how *wealthy* he was!

And so Erner was sold. He spent a week blindfolded and chained in the stinking hull of a ship, his stomach heaving with every swell of the sea, and then he was brought before the king.

“Is this what I paid for?” said King Arpie. “Not exactly formidable...” The king prodded Erner with his staff. “Put him in a little cage hanging by my throne!” he said to a tall, skinny man standing beside him. The skinny man looked anxious. “Snap to it, Skreep! I gave you an order!”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Skreep. “But surely the Custodians will be angry when they find out?”

“Of course they will!” said the king. “That’s the whole *point*! Every pirate will know that I, King Arpie, fear nobody! You worry too much, Skreep. Worry less!” Skreep nodded and seemed to relax ever so slightly. “That’s an order, by the way,” added the king. “Worry less, or I will have you *killed*.”

Skreep looked much less relaxed.

And so, they had built Erner a cage. It wasn’t quite high enough for him to sit upright, or long enough for him to lie down, and in the weeks he’d been here he had yet to discover a way to sleep without some part of him being

numb when he woke. He’d learned that as long as he was quiet, he was forgotten. Sometimes, one of King Arpie’s pirates would amuse themselves by throwing insults to see if Erner responded. But Erner did not respond, and interest was soon lost.

He was given the bare minimum to eat and drink. Once a day, he was taken from the cage, manacled, and led outside; there, he would do what needed to be done, and they would douse him with buckets of cold water when he was finished.

Yet Erner considered himself lucky. While King Arpie was eager to show how badly he treated his captive, Erner was a prize possession: no real harm was allowed to befall him.

Eventually, he knew, the Pipers’ Council would do all in their power to find him, and they would make an example of King Arpie Noss. It would not be pleasant.

Then, once free, Erner could find Patch Brightwater.

He could finally ask him *why*.

Once Erner had shifted his legs – without making the rope creak – the pins and needles subsided, and he dozed. After a while, the entrance to the throne room swung open; a nervous pirate came inside and woke Skreep, the king’s advisor. A few whispers later, Skreep looked very worried

indeed. He came over to the throne, and gave a little cough, but the king kept snoring. “Your Majesty...” said Skreep, and then he just threw caution to the wind. “Arpie, wake up!”

King Arpie’s eyes opened wide and he drew his sword, putting it to Skreep’s throat. “Assassin!” he cried, then saw who it was and put his sword away. “Oh. What is it? Lunchtime already?”

“No, Your Majesty,” said Skreep. “A couple of troublemakers have been chained up and brought for your judgement, sire. They were asking questions about *him*.” He threw a narrow-eyed glare at Erner, then looked back at the king, probably hoping for some sign of concern.

Instead, the king grinned. “Ah ha! They’ve got wind of it at last! Sent some spies to check! This is good news, Skreep!”

Skreep gave a huge sigh. “This is *bad* news, Your Majesty. It was only a matter of time, and I’d hoped to talk you round before the Custodians found out, but...”

King Arpie looked at him in horror. “*Talk me round?* I’m King Arpie Noss! I make the decisions! I fear nobody! What’s the point of trying to make the Custodians look like fools if they don’t know I’m doing it?” He reached to the floor and picked up a tankard, half-full of stale ale. He drank it down and started to bang the tankard against the metalwork that arched over his throne. It was the alarm

call everyone in the palace knew well – the king has awoken, and when the king wakes up, all his subjects have to *damn well wake up too*.

“Rise and shine, you lot!” shouted the king. There was a lot of wincing and blinking from the waking revellers, but absolutely no complaining – the heads on spikes were a constant reminder that an unbuttoned mouth was bad for your health. “Seems the Custodians have learned about my little *pet*,” he said, smiling at Erner. “And the idiots have sent some spies, who’ve been so kind as to be captured! I want you all to be on your best form, understand? Lots of sneering and glaring! *Bring in the spies!*”

Everyone in the throne room looked eagerly to the doorway, where, with a burly pirate at the front and another guarding the rear, in came a wretched pair of manacled prisoners, with sackcloth bags over their heads.

Erner felt sorry for them. In all likelihood, they were just two people who’d happened to ask about the king’s new trophy because it was *interesting*. The king himself had wanted people *everywhere* to talk about it. To suddenly call someone a spy because they’d done what the king had been desperate for people to do... Well, that made Erner’s sense of injustice burn deep inside him.

The two prisoners were led to the only clear area of the throne room floor, right in front of King Arpie and the spiked heads. There was a *reason* that area was left clear –

a reason closely related to a certain *lever* by one arm of the king's throne.

A lever that, when pulled, opened up a large trapdoor right where the prisoners now stood.

"Let's have a look at them," said the king. One of the pirate guards stepped forward and pulled the cloth bag off the first prisoner's head.

A woman. Erner had seen her before, but for a moment he couldn't place where. She gave King Arpie a look of absolute contempt.

Then Erner remembered where he'd seen her, and his stomach lurched in a way it hadn't lurched since his horrible sea journey.

Alia, thought Erner. That was her name. She'd accompanied Patch and Wren back to Marwheel Abbey, after their trip to see the Witch of Gemspar Mountain. The trip had been a success – Wren, who had been cursed into the form of a rat, had been granted the ability to change back into her human shape, albeit just for short periods. He'd met Alia only briefly then – she had introduced herself as some kind of expert in magic, and had seemed very friendly with Patch and Wren.

He turned his eyes to the second prisoner, who was quite a bit shorter than Alia, and a terrible feeling washed over him.

No, he thought. *It can't be.*

The guard gripped the cloth bag covering the second prisoner's head, and yanked.

There, only ten feet from Erner's cage, stood the whole reason that Erner was here at all.

Patch Brightwater. Looking terrified. And Erner could just make out a small shifting bulge in the chest pocket of Patch's coat, which he strongly suspected was a certain rat-shaped friend.

Erner had had plenty of time to wonder how he would feel when he saw Patch again – anger, perhaps, or even hatred. Now that the moment had arrived, he felt no animosity at all. What he felt was *apprehension*.

If they had come to rescue him, they had made a terrible, terrible mistake.

King Arpie cleared his throat. "Pitiful prisoners! You're accused of being spies for the Custodian Elite, on account of you asking questions about my pet Piper." He thwacked Erner's cage with his staff. "Do you confess?" He grinned, and at that moment Erner knew that the king didn't *care* if they were spies, not really. All he cared about was that *other people* would think it.

Alia's eyes narrowed as she spoke. "We don't represent the Custodian Elite, Your Majesty," she said. "We're here to ask you to show mercy and release a friend." She nodded

to Erner. “He is a...”

But the king interrupted. “Yes, yes, blah, blah, yakkity yak! You’re a spy, admit it! You admit he’s a friend, so admit you’re a spy and be done with it! We don’t have all day.”

Erner saw the king’s hand move towards the lever. “No!” he cried, and the king gave him a sharp look and another *thwack*.

Alia was also looking at the king’s hand, and at the lever it was now touching. “Don’t do anything you might regret, sire,” she said. Her voice was laced with the direst of warnings, a sound of deep foreboding woven into every word she uttered.

There was sorcery at work here, Erner realized. The woman’s voice would make anyone with sense pause for a moment and wonder why it felt like the very stones of the throne room walls were shaking as she spoke. She was obviously powerful; ignoring her would be a very foolish thing indeed.

Unfortunately, King Arpie Noss was a very foolish man.

“This is how King Arpie deals with spies!” said the king. He pulled his lever. The floor under the prisoners swung down, and Erner watched them fall, their cries disappearing into the dark below. Everyone in the room listened, until at last the cries ceased and the trapdoor swung closed again.

Erner was in so much shock he could hardly breathe.

He didn’t know what awaited his would-be rescuers, but he did know *this*: the trapdoor led to a winding shaft, down which prisoners would tumble until they reached the bottom and found themselves in a place of absolute horror.

A place the pirates called, “The Pit of Screaming Death”.

King Arpie clapped his hands together in excitement and jumped out of his throne. “Come on, then,” he said. “Everyone to the viewing gallery!” He nodded towards Erner. “Bring him along, Skreep. Let him watch. It’ll be fun!”

