

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

A Spells 'R' Us story

"Mum! Why is that man wearing a dressing gown?"

The old man smiled benignly as he looked over the counter at the hyperactive seven year-old with the piercing voice.

"Damien!" The boy's mother shouted, "What have I told you about being rude to people? Anyway, it's not a dressing gown. It's a..." The woman looked over at the old man and stared in puzzlement.

"It's a robe," the old man said helpfully.

"Thanks." The woman walked over to her husband, who was browsing through a stand of miscellaneous pieces of silverware "Have you found anything yet, Dean? We've only got three hours before the flight."

"Nah. I told you we wouldn't get anything here, Deirdre." Dean looked over at the old man and winked conspiratorially. "She insisted that we try to find a present for her sister before we fly back to England. I don't know what's wrong with the T-shirt we picked up in New York, though."

"What?" said his wife in a tone that told the old man where the child got his piercing cry. "My sister went to America and all I got was this lousy T-shirt? Honestly, Dean, sometimes it's like you've got no class at all. I told you we should have bought the 'I love New York' one."

Dean nodded. "No class. Right." He reached down the back of his tracksuit bottoms and had a good scratch. "Damien! Careful with that!" he shouted.

The boy was standing in front of a stand of delicate looking crystal ware, holding a small crystal statuette of a ballerina. "Put that down now," Dean said. "I'm sure we couldn't replace it if you broke it."

"You'd be surprised," the old man said.

"Anyway," Dean said, once Damien had moved towards some less fragile looking stock, "Do you think you'd have anything suitable for a gift? We want something nice, but not too pricey. Know what I mean?"

The old man looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, maybe if your sister-in-law..."

"Dad! Dad! Look!" Damien interrupted, tugging at his father's sleeve.

"Can't you see I'm busy, son? Sorry, mate, you were saying."

"But Dad! Look, Dad!"

Dean looked down at his son. "If you don't shut it, I'll... What's that you've got?"

The boy was holding up an incredibly detailed model of a dragon. "Look at this Dad! Isn't this cool?" Dean picked it out of his son's hands and took a closer look. "Here, Deirdre, look at this," he said.

The model looked like it may have been made from a stuffed lizard, with details added by a master taxidermist. The effect was like a dragon from a fantasy illustration, on a simple stand made out of driftwood. The dragon itself was rearing, as if in triumph over some invisible fallen knight. Dean looked for signs of joins or bits obviously glued or stitched on, but the whole effect was breathtakingly real. The wings, in particular, looked like they had always belonged there.

"What do you think, Deirdre? For your sister, I mean? She's into all that fantasy shit, isn't she?"

"Dean," Deirdre hissed. "What have I told you about language in front of the children? Anyway, I don't like it. It gives me the creeps."

"Oh go on. The boy seems to like it and it's got to be better than some crappy old T-shirt."

Deirdre frowned. "Ooh, I don't know," she said. "It looks expensive."

Dean turned to the old man. "I'm sure we can work something out, mate."

After some perfunctory haggling a favourable deal was arranged.

"Can I carry it, Dad? Can I?" Damien hadn't taken his eyes off the dragon once.

"As long as you're careful with it."

The old man walked around from behind the counter and knelt in front of Damien. "Now, young man," he said, with an avuncular grin, "You're going to have to be careful with our little friend. His name is Hrothbart. A long time ago a very powerful wizard, though not as powerful as me, put Hrothbart under a spell and he's been like this ever since. His spirit is bound into this model of how he used to look. One day he'll wake up and discard this shell, but that's not due to happen for a long time. Well, not unless someone breaks the spell.

"I'm going to put him in a box to make sure he doesn't wake up unexpectedly. Your job is to be gentle with him and make sure he isn't shaken out of his slumber. Do you think you can do that?" Damien nodded gravely.

Dean smiled at the old man as he put the dragon into a cardboard box and padded it with shredded paper. "You obviously like kids."

"Well," said the old man, "I don't think I could eat a whole one." Sometimes, he thought, you've got to go down to their level.

During the whole time the seatbelt sign was lit Damien battered his feet against the seat in front of him. On a couple of occasions the nun in the seat on the receiving end turned around and glared at Deirdre with a very unchristian expression in her eyes.

As soon as the light was off he was out of his seat and running up and down the aisles. Deirdre put the complimentary blackout mask on and tried to take advantage of her son's absence to catch a bit of sleep. Dean hadn't needed any such aid and had been snoring away since shortly after takeoff. After a few minutes, though, Deirdre was shaken awake.

"Is this your child?" a harassed looking stewardess asked.

"What's he done now?"

"A number of the other passengers have complained about the noise he's making. Also it's a bit of a safety hazard having a child running around an aeroplane. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to keep him under control."

Once Damien was back in his seat Deirdre tried to get back to sleep. At first his fidgeting was maddening, but his kicking of the seat in front grew almost rhythmic and the effect was strangely calming. She had almost nodded off again when she heard a sharp voice coming from in front. "Do you know what God does to bad little boys who can't sit still? They go to hell, where they are plunged into a lake of fire and demons spend all day tearing their skin off with..."

Deirdre ripped off the mask. "All right," she said to the obviously irate nun. "That's enough. I'll get him settled. Just leave him alone - I don't want to be calming him down from nightmares for the next year."

The nun smiled and settled back into her seat.

"Look, you little monster," Deirdre said to her son, "Is it too much to ask for you to behave for a few hours? You can run around and scream and play all you want when we're home, but just try to be good until then."

Damien crossed his arms and slumped in the seat, a sulky expression on his face. "I'm bored," he said.

"Have you got any comics left to read?" He shook his head. "Is there anything on the headphones you want to hear?" Another shake. "Well, you can just sit there quietly, then."

Five minutes passed. "Mum."

"What?"

"Can I take the dragon out and look at it?"

"No. Remember what the man in the shop said." Deirdre half-smiled with the memory. "You don't want to wake him up."

"I'll be careful with it, Mum."

"No."

Deirdre put her mask back on and tried to relax. "But, Mum!"

"I said no."

There was another pause of a few minutes. "Please, Mum."

Wearily, Deirdre took her mask off again. "You'll be quiet and behave? And be extra careful with it?"

Damien grinned. "Yeah!"

"Oh, all right. But if you break it there's going to be real trouble."

"Thanks, Mum!"

Deirdre was woken up again by a sharp prodding in her arm.

"Mum!"

After a moment of disorientation she remembered where she was. "What?"

"It's gone! The dragon! It's gone!"

"What do you mean gone?" The fog left her brain rapidly. "Have you any idea how much that thing cost? Where did you lose it?"

The boy started snivelling. "I don't know. I had it in my hand and then it was gone. I didn't lose it, honest, Mum!"

"Well, if you didn't lose it then where is it? Show me where you had it last." Deirdre followed her son down the aisle towards the back of the plane. "If we can't find this I don't even want to think about what your dad's going to do to you."

They stood at the rear of the plane, just in front of the toilets. "I had it here," said Damien. "I was swooping him through the air. He was getting ready to eat a whole village and then he was gone."

Deirdre looked at the people in the seats around them. Only one middle-aged man was awake. "Sorry, luv, but have you seen a dragon round here?" The man looked over the rim of his glasses, blinked at her and put his headphones on.

Deirdre raised one hand back as if to slap her son. "Sometimes I wish we'd just had a dog instead," she said. She knelt down and started looking under seats. After a few minutes of poking around she couldn't see anything, but she could feel something warm and wet under her hand. She lifted it up and sniffed it - there was a distinct odour of bile. "Great," she said, "Not only have you got me grovelling around down here, but I've gone and knelt in someone's sick." She got up and opened a toilet door. "You just wait there."

After washing her hands, Deirdre switched on the dryer. She held her hands underneath for a second and then snatched them back: the air coming out was painfully hot. While checking her hands for damage she noticed that the air had brought a smell of burning with it, almost sulphurous. That was the last straw.

Deirdre opened the toilet door and tore up the aisle. "Wait there," she called back to her son. She found a stewardess at the serving galley. "'Ere," she said, "That blower in the toilet back there burned my hand. What are you going to do about it?" At the stewardess's prompting, Deirdre led her to the back of the plane. "There's another thing," she said as they passed the patch of carpet with the vomit on it. "Why hasn't anyone cleaned that up?" Looking at it, Deirdre thought it looked even larger. Maybe some dirty bastard kept puking in the same place.

While she waited for the stewardess to finish her inspections Deirdre leaned against the wall, weary through to her bones. She was due to start work again on Monday and unless she got some sleep on the plane the jetlag was going to be a killer. At least the wall was nice and warm. Its heat soothed her aching muscles. She felt that she could almost sink into the wall like a feather bed.

Then the wall twitched. Deirdre screamed.

The stewardess came running out of the toilet. "What's wrong?" Deirdre just pointed at the cabin wall. The surface of it was sticky and vaguely organic looking. As the two women watched it pulsed gently. "You're seeing this too?" Deirdre asked.

"Try not to panic," the stewardess said, heading off towards the front of the plane. "There's nothing to worry about," she kept repeating to the handful of passengers who had looked around.

Trying to follow the stewardess's advice, Deirdre backed away from the wall. As she stepped back she felt her foot land in something wet. She looked down and saw the patch of vomit on the carpet had spread and seemed to reach as far up the aisle as she could see. The smell was getting stronger. She grabbed Damien and started back up towards the seats, a feeling of dread growing inside her. A number of the other passengers were awake and alert now and there was a buzz of anxious chatter filling the cabin.

When they were sitting down again Deirdre told her son to stay put and to behave. She was about to wake Dean up when she noticed the skin on her foot was feeling sore. She lifted up her leg to take a look. The canvas of the shoe had been partly eaten away and, when she pulled the shoe off she could see that the skin underneath was slightly blistered. She kicked off the other shoe hurriedly and sat cross-legged on the seat.

The PA system kicked in. "This is your captain speaking. As you may have noticed we are experiencing some slight technical problems. There is no cause for concern at present. Please stay in your seats until the matter is resolved. If there are any serious developments then I will inform you as soon as I can. The cabin crew will be circulating to offer any assistance they can. I apologise for any distress the current circumstances may be causing."

"Wassat?" Dean blinked blearily. "What's he on about?"

"Oh, Dean." Deirdre grabbed hold of her husband and hugged him tight. "Something scary's happening."

"It's a bit dark in here," Dean said. "Have they got the lights dimmed?"

Deirdre looked around. The cabin lights did seem a bit dimmer, but that wasn't the only thing. The windows were all dark. She thought at first that the shutters were down on them, but it looked like they were covered over on the outside.

"Go and see what's going on, Dean. Please." Grumbling, Dean got up and headed towards the front of the plane.

The corridor seemed narrower than when they had got on the plane a few hours back. The floor was spongy and Dean was sure we could hear a squishing noise with every step. Maybe he was still asleep and this was some kind of weird dream. When he reached the forward galley there was no one there. He looked around the corner, up into business class. There was no sound coming from there at all. He could see the backs of a few heads. Maybe they were all asleep.

On the other side of the galley, by the emergency exit, there was a steward sitting in one of the seats. Dean walked over to him. "Excuse me, mate," he said. The steward showed no sign of having heard. He was looking straight ahead with a fixed expression. There was a strong smell of vomit coming from him, but Dean could see no sign that the man had been sick. "Excuse me." Dean reached out and grabbed the steward's shoulder and shook gently. The young man started to slide down the seat, but there was something very wrong. His back stayed where it was, separating away from the rest of his body. The front half of the steward's body pooled on the ground in front of his seat, leaving the seared and rotted looking remains behind. Gagging, Dean backed into the galley. Shit. Deirdre and Damien. He turned and started running back towards their seats.

The economy class section was filled with the sound of wailing and crying. The walls were throbbing now and looked like they were made of latex. The rear section of the plane appeared to be tapering away. Some of the people sitting down there had attempted to move further up the plane and there were bodies in the aisle, some in the same kind of state of dissolution as the young steward had been. When Dean reached them, Deirdre and Damien were packed into one seat, clutching onto each other. They were both in tears.

"What's happening?" Deirdre demanded.

Dean clambered into the seat beside them. The seat was wet and he could feel his skin burning as he touched it. "I don't know, luv. Sorry, but I just don't know." He looked over at the bank of seats in front and saw a nun, praying frantically. "Say one for us, sister," he said, but the nun showed no sign of responding.

There was a crackle from the PA system, but then it fizzled out again with a noise that sounded like a great sigh. The floor buckled under them and the cabin was filled with screaming. Dean grabbed his wife and child and held tight. Sounds of rumbling and the splashing of liquid grew from the front of the plane, getting closer.

When the lights finally went out it was a mercy.

A week or so later, during a quiet spell, the old man was flicking through a supermarket tabloid. While all the respectable newspapers were concentrating on the mysterious crash-cum-disappearance of flight 714 to Stanstead, the Weekly World News lead with an altogether more interesting story. Apparently there were a number of sightings over south eastern England of what appeared to be a dragon in flight, although some witnesses insisted that it was an alien mothership. They even reported that the air traffic controllers at Stanstead had seen the monster approaching and had picked it up on radar. Official sources, of course, denied everything.

With a smile the old man folded the newspaper. Maybe he should write to the World Wildlife Fund, he thought, to tell them that there was at least one endangered species that was making a healthy comeback.

The End