

Oromi's Quest

Oromi settled her head on her claws, looking down into the Red Cliffs of Asleheim and admiring them in the sunset. An adventurer with any sense would be bedding down for the night and Oromi liked watching the sun streak through the cliff face gems. Across from her cave were three, red streaks of rubies. When the sun was setting like this, the deposits of ruby glowed like they were on fire. Egg keepers said that they were the claw marks of one of the first dragons. That was only a folktale told to younger drakes.

Spreading her wings, Oromi flexed her tired joints and yawned. She'd had three adventurers today that all wanted her to give them quests. A quest from a dragon was the noblest of journeys for any knight who wanted to prove their valor to the world. Oromi felt bad that she was running out of ideas.

Trying to keep up with the news of Asleheim was getting exhausting. Birds came to visit her every day and told her all the news from around Asleheim, but birds were not good judges of what was properly news. It used to be that young dragons would deliver news to the older quest givers. Now, dragons were either too young or too old to fly the distance. When Oromi was younger, she would bring news back to an older dragon named Dorin. She'd fly leagues and leagues in a day to find where the true monsters of the realm hid. The dragons had agreed long ago that they would watch the kingdoms and alert the humans of danger. The oldest dragons became sage givers of quests while the younger drakes saw the danger. Oromi used to love flying around the Asleheim, searching the land for monsters, and reporting to Dorin.

Dorin was a true spectacle of a dragon: thousands of years old with broad frills that almost looked like a second set of wings. Any dragon would be lucky to be half his age and Oromi still had a long time to go before her frills grew between her horns. When Dorin aged five thousand, he retired and offered his roost to Oromi. She had taken the prestigious position on top of the mountain, but now it seemed like this had all been a cruel joke.

Long hours spent sunning her wings had made them almost atrophy. Oromi

would flex her wings every day by doing a few lazy loops around her cliff peak, but it amounted to nothing more than a few laps to keep her wings from becoming completely useless. Dorin would complain about his old joints, so Oromi tried to exercise her aging joints daily. She would go down from her mountain abode to feast on an unlucky deer or a grizzly bear but never left her roost for more than a few moments to hunt. But, no sooner had she gone down for her hunt was she back languishing in front of her cave with a meal that felt underserved for all she did to get it. And it wasn't that Oromi chose to be lazy. She couldn't travel too far to risk missing an adventurer coming for a quest.

They came frequently. One or two in a day were typical, but the three today pushed Oromi's ability to come up with a quest for each one. The first was easy to give: a water spirit was running amok on the edge of a coastal village. That needed dealing with and the young knight and his battalion had looked competent enough to do so. The second was a series of werewolf attacks. Oromi had given this to the younger boy who came to her in the hopes that there would be a dialogue rather than sheer violence. The water spirit should have known better, but a werewolf had the chance to reason. The third person had pressed Oromi's creativity.

"I've come for a quest, oh mighty dragon!" The voice yelled. Oromi had almost choked on the bear shoulder she was eating, but managed to stifle the sound. Quest Givers had a certain reputation and Oromi felt that decorum was the greatest tool at her disposal. She adjusted her wings and puffed out her frill before coming out to meet the young girl.

She was barely out of childhood without much weathering to speak of. A pretty face with blonde curls and what Oromi could only guess was a hand me down--or worse, stolen--sword on her hip. No armor, no shield, no company...it felt a little unfair to Oromi.

"You come to seek glory and fame?" Oromi growled, trying to dissuade the girl. "I have no quests and little patience for pups who only seek to line their pockets with gold and bloat their ego."

"I come looking for honor!" The girl said, indignant. "There is nothing nobler than a quest from a dragon and I seek the greatest honor there is."

"Oh, do you? For your house name and glory?"

"For the good of Asleheim and the safety of the people! I bear no standard, but I will take on the troubles of others for their security!"

Oromi liked the girl. She almost wished she'd saved the werewolf for her instead of the boy.

"Very well!" Oromi said, trying to keep the regal façade as tough as possible. "Then you will prove yourself. You must...um...for your quest, you must...uh."

"Yes?"

"Well, give me a minute!" Oromi snapped, finally reaching the end of her patience. "It's been a busy day and I'm having trouble thinking of another quest!"

"Sorry..." the girl said. She fidgeted with the hilt of her sword while Oromi considered the options.

"Alright, here we are!" Oromi said. "For your quest, there is a farm in the village of Dur Shalle. Recently, a boar monster broke through a farmer's fences and devoured three sheep."

"I will slay the beast!" The girl said, excited. "I will run through the--"

"Oh no, the boar was dealt with," Oromi explained. "Another knight came through here a few days ago with a whole battalion of knights, so I sent him to deal with it. The quest I have for you is that you must go and help to repair the fences!"

"Fences?" The girl asked, dejected. "You're telling me I climbed up a mountain just to go back down and help repair fences?"

"Well, there's honor in making things right in the world again."

"I guess so," the girl sighed. "I was expecting something a bit grander. I know I'm not what you'd expect from a knight, but I can fight well! My dad taught me and everything."

"It's not that I doubt your skill," Oromi said, feeling a little bad. "It's just that there's been a surplus of heroes in the Adventurer-to-Quest ratio, recently. I don't get

as reliable information as I used to. The birds don't--"

"Birds?" The girl scoffed, almost angry now. "I came for a Dragon's Quest! Are you some second-rate job board for birds?"

"This is a prestigious line of work!" Oromi said, cracking her regal mask and showing some annoyance. "The information network is a bit lacking, sure, but--"

"No wonder the world has gone to rot!" the girl said. "Dragons don't even know how bad things are down on the ground with us lowly peasants--"

"Hey!"

--and you're too high and mighty to come down and see for yourself! If I wanted to build fences, I'd be a carpenter and not a knight."

"The dragon information network has...lulls, now and again. Not enough of our younglings can fly and deliver the messages like they used to. Either dragons are too old or too young to be doing much information collecting."

"Well, you could come down and help once in a while!" The girl said. She turned and started walking away. "Building fences," she muttered under her breath. "What a joke..."

Oromi had faced down giants and sea monsters, but this girl's words had cut harsher than anything else. She had lost her appetite for the bear, dwelling instead on the young heroine's parting words. *What a joke...*

As the sun set, Oromi picked at the mountain dirt, bored and uneasy. She wasn't a joke. She'd given two perfectly respectable quests earlier that day. It wasn't her fault if the girl had come late. If she'd waited until tomorrow, there might have been a decent quest waiting for her. As far as Oromi was concerned, fixing fences was admirable. There was nothing she could do, of course. It was the way things were.

Unless you're getting lazy... a nagging voice whispered in the back of Oromi's head.

The birds were unreliable and somewhat scatterbrained as of late. Dire situations popped up a lot sooner than they used to, but only because the information didn't get to Oromi until it was too late. She wondered if other dragons had the same

troubles or if she was the only one with a faulty delivery system. She hadn't heard from another dragon since she'd taken her position from Dorin and she'd lost count of how many winters had passed since then. It wouldn't be long until the young drakes would be able to see the big picture of the world and then Oromi could start giving out real quests. Good quests that any knight--or bratty girl--would be happy to take on. No greater honor than giving out quests.

Except, the nagging voice said, gentler, if you were to do it yourself.

It was a wild thought that almost felt like it should come from someone else. A dragon taking a quest was as unthinkable as a dragon becoming a knight. It was the way things were and that was that. Now, the thought lingered and Oromi began to wonder if there was any point in keeping to the old code. Dragons were watchers and delegators. Nothing was stopping them from doing

The thought bubbled into a feeling: a rush of heat and energy surging through Oromi's wings. Her old joints didn't even complain as she spread her wings out farther than they'd been open in a while. She was hardly at an age when she couldn't fly. The only thing stopping her at this point was that she'd thought there were no adventures left to have. The girl made her reconsider that thought. There was more that she could do.

Oromi took one, last look at the cave mouth. Her duty was here, of course, but her first duty had always been protecting Asleheim. She'd been stagnant long enough. Before she left, Oromi took one of her claws and carved letters into the flat, smooth stone at the mouth of her cave. *Off Adventuring, Be Back Soon.*

Walking to the edge of the Red Cliffs, Oromi rushed forward and dove toward the streaks of ruby. With a flourish of her wings, Oromi caught a strong breeze and glided over the forest she'd hunted in hours before. Passing over the trees, Oromi headed for the plains on a quest to learn what the birds had not told her.