

To Kill A Cockatrice

by Brady Solomon '18

There was a hesitant-sounding knock on the door. Jurian was impressed. A person being hesitant to knock was simple, but it took skill to make the actual noise sound hesitant. He opened the door—hesitantly, because someone who was unhappy enough about seeing him to knock like that was most likely someone he didn't much want to see either. He looked outside. He shut the door with very little hesitation at all.

Günther was standing on his doorstep. Jurian didn't know what he wanted, but whatever it was, he could find someone else to bother. It had been nearly a fortnight since Günther had broken the Wymond family sword and he still hadn't been able to find anyone who could fix it properly.

But... he'd looked troubled. Anything serious enough to concern a man like Günther was worrying indeed. He supposed it wouldn't hurt to see what he wanted. Besides, he could always just turn him away. He opened the door, hesitantly, again.

"What do you want, Günther?" he asked, sighing.

"You, uh... you know about monsters, right?" Günther asked as he scratched the back of his neck.

Researching magical creatures was a hobby of Jurian's, and most of the village knew it. He'd probably been to every hut in town looking for new books on the subject. "I read about them, yeah. What's it to you?"

"Do you know anything about a dragon with a rooster's head?"

"Rooster's head... cockatrice, probably. It could also be a basilisk, depending on your source. Why do you ask?"

"How do I kill one?" Günther asked, disregarding Jurian's question.

"I'm pretty sure they don't exist, so... you don't, I suppose." Jurian was confused. Why was Günther so

serious about this? It wasn't like him to care about much except money, beer, and fighting.

"They don't exist?" said Günther, fuming. "Well, that's good. Maybe you could tell that to the one that just destroyed my house."

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Jurian had never really believed in cockatrices. Sure, there were some magical creatures out there; he'd never forget the night the phoenix had flown over his village, just after his father had died. But cockatrices sounded too far-fetched to be real; just because a snake or toad decided to raise a rooster's egg didn't mean it should grow up to be some sort of draconic abomination.

The giant winged rooster-lizard squatting on the rubble of Günther's home and eating his neighbor was making him seriously doubt his previous beliefs.

"Okay, so maybe they do exist," Jurian said to Günther. They were crouching behind a short wall a stone's throw away from the cockatrice. "In that case, the first step would be to avoid all eye contact. If some of the other stories are true, that thing could turn you to stone just by looking at you—so don't get up for a second peek!" He grabbed Günther's tunic and dragged him back below the wall.

"It's eating my pig!" Günther wailed.

"Better it than you," Jurian replied, although he was starting to doubt it. "Now shut up and let me think. Okay... do you know if anyone in this village has a weasel? A living one," he added. Most people in the village would shoot anything, so long as it moved and had more hair than Günther or his friends.

"Why the hell would I know that? And what do you want a weasel for,

anyway?"

"Damn. Weasels are apparently immune to its stare. What about a mirror? It might turn itself to stone if it sees itself in the mirror, or at least attack its reflection until it's tired."

"Oh, I can get a mirror. That's easy."

"Good. Make sure the reflection is clear—and find some weapons too. I don't know if we can trust all these tales. When you've got what we need, meet me back here."

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Jurian returned a short time later with a crossbow and a book. Günther was waiting for him with a greatsword and pike. A mirror rested against the wall next to him.

"Good, you're ready," Jurian said. "We need to get the mirror in front of the cockatrice without looking at it or getting too close—oh! I did some research while I was gone—" he held up the book, "—and as it turns out, pretty much everything about a cockatrice is deadly. If there's any part of them that isn't venomous, it's poisonous or otherwise toxic, so try to avoid its beak, talons, tail, wingtips, spit, saliva, or breath. Good luck out there."

"Hang on just a minute, kid," Günther replied. "First of all, calm down. This isn't one of your storybooks. That thing over there killed two more morons while you were gone; the idiots were trying get underneath it or something; I don't know for sure, because it took them out before they were fifteen feet from it. Secondly, what the hell makes you think I'm gonna go out in the open, in front of that monster, to set up your stupid mirror?"

"Because it's now eating your cow, and I doubt it'll stop there."

Günther considered this. "Fine, I'll do it. But you're gonna need to make a distraction if it starts heading

my way. Throw some rocks around or something.”

“Sure. Sure, I can do that. I’d go now, though. You don’t want to wait for it to get bored with the cow.”

Reluctantly, Günther stood and grabbed the mirror. He quietly hopped over the wall and crept out onto the gravel road outside his home. When he was about forty feet from the cockatrice, he stopped and gently propped the mirror on a nearby rock, facing the beast.

He hadn’t made it ten feet when the mirror slipped and fell with a clang on the gravel. The cockatrice immediately looked up from what was left of its meal. It turned its bloodstained beak toward the noise, and then, raising its head, it shrieked.

The sound slammed through Jurian’s head. It seemed to ignore his eardrums entirely and go straight for his brain, which felt like it had a vice tightening down on it. He covered his ears and put his head between his knees, waiting for it to end.

After just a few seconds and an eternity later, the cockatrice fell silent. Jurian raised his head and peeked over the wall. He could see Günther writhing in agony as the last echoes of the abominable shriek died away. Finally recovering, Günther lifted himself up—and found himself staring straight at the cockatrice.

The cockatrice stared back.

Günther froze. It wasn’t like Jurian had expected it to happen. He didn’t suddenly turn to stone like the stories claimed. He simply... stopped, paralyzed by that terrible gaze.

Jurian Wymond had always been the type to think things through ahead of time. He liked to form a strategy, a plan of action to rely on before he ever made a move. Now, for one of the first times in his life, he acted without thinking. He grabbed the crossbow, leapt over the wall, and fired at the creature’s head.

The world exploded into motion. Jurian tossed the spent crossbow aside and ran towards Günther. The cockatrice staggered back, covering its head with its wing and wailing in pain. Jurian tackled Günther, propelling him away from the angry beast. The cockatrice, having retreated, began to curl up on itself. Jurian grabbed Günther by the arm and began dragging him back towards a nearby house, to shelter and safety. The cockatrice began stirring again,

all too soon. Jurian barged through the house’s doorway, Günther in tow. The cockatrice spread its wings, and with a single powerful beat, was airborne. Jurian released Günther, slammed the door shut, and collapsed against the wall.

After taking a brief moment to recover, Jurian crawled over to where Günther lay. He was breathing, but not very much. Jurian nudged his arm, then pushed it, and then, when that failed to elicit a response, he slapped him in the face.

In an instant, Günther was on top of Jurian, pinning him to the floor.

“Hey, hey! Get off me! I just saved your life, do you realize that?” Jurian yelled as Günther put his fist back to punch him. Günther paused for a moment with a dazed look in his eyes, before lowering his arm and complying.

“What the hell happened back there, man? Those eyes—it felt like it was staring into my soul, and there was nothing I could do to stop it,” he moaned, breaking down.

“Calm down, Günther. Listen, it’s probably going to be back soon. I don’t know where I hit it, but I get the feeling it’s not too happy with me about it. So get it together, man, because if we aren’t ready to kill it when it returns, I doubt it’ll be kind enough to give us a second chance.” Günther sighed. “You’re probably right, damnit. Well then, let’s stop sitting around and get ready.”

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The sun was beginning to set when the cockatrice returned. Jurian and Günther were waiting for it in the house. Jurian had recovered and reloaded his crossbow, now slung across his back, and held the scratched mirror in his hands. Günther was leaning against his pike with his greatsword on his back.

An elongated shadow stretched across the road as the cockatrice landed. Moving toward the window, Jurian snuck a glance outside. It was hard to see in the dying light, but his crossbow bolt protruded from the monster’s left eye. His earlier potshot had been more successful than he’d anticipated; the cockatrice could only see on one side.

He turned to Günther. “We’ll approach it from the left. Keep your distance as much as possible and aim for the head. Try not to let any blood get on you; It might not be dangerous,

but I’d rather not find out. I’ll try to get it to see itself in the mirror, which I hope will stop it long enough for you to kill it.” He paused and took a deep breath. “You ready?” Günther nodded, silent. “Alright. Let’s go.”

Jurien opened the door and they snuck out, as quietly as possible with four weapons between them. The cockatrice was slowly prowling down the road, evidently searching for them. Now off to its side, the pair checked their weapons one last time, and charged out onto the road.

Günther thrust the pike at the cockatrice’s head as it turned to face its unexpected opponents, but he aimed too high; the tip stabbed through the fleshy comb atop the rooster-like head, and with a savage twist of its neck, the cockatrice pulled the weapon from Günther’s hands, staggering him.

As Günther made his attack, Jurian positioned himself in front of the cockatrice’s body and held the mirror high. “Günther, a little help? I need it to look my way!”

Günther, recovering from the stagger, grabbed a stone from the ground and threw it toward the mirror before backing away and drawing his greatsword. The rock sailed through the air and hit the mirror with a metallic ting. The cockatrice turned, saw Jurien standing in front of it, looked up—
—and froze. “NOW, Günther! Go for the neck!”

And Günther raised the greatsword high, the setting sun shining golden against the blade, and brought it down on the cockatrice’s neck with one swift motion.

There was a soft, silken sound as the sword sliced through the sinew and bone of the cockatrice’s neck. For a moment, time seemed to freeze. Then, ever so slowly, the head of the cockatrice fell to the ground. The massive body collapsed behind it as Günther jumped away.

Jurien lowered his arms and dropped the mirror. “Well, that’s over. That wasn’t too bad, I suppose.”

“Not at all. You did good, Jurien. I appreciate that. Now, what do we do with this body?”

Jurien thought a moment. “We’ll burn it. I doubt it can do any more harm now, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“That works for me. Let it burn.”
And so they did.