

JOHN MORRESSY

NEST EGG

Unlike certain other mythical creatures, the griffin has never gained acceptance as a suitable domestic companion.

A dragon raised from the egg can be very useful around the house, especially for lighting a fire quickly on chilly mornings. The only drawback to a dragon, aside from size, is the risk of a cough or sneeze setting off an unintended conflagration. But preventive measures can be taken. Early removal of the fire-breathing organs (a painless alteration if done in the creature's first half-century) renders a dragon not only safe but sleek, docile, and affectionate. According to experts on the subject, the procedure also improves general health and extends the life span. Altered dragons are said to be especially good with children.

A troll, if taken young and raised within a caring family group, can be an invaluable help, particularly in the kitchen. Close supervision is required until it learns to follow recipes exactly, but a properly trained troll is fit to serve as chef to a king.

Even a unicorn, though high-strung and picky about living conditions, can be a pleasing and useful home companion. Unicorns require constant attention and firm handling, but they are clean, attractive creatures and discourage lions from hanging about.

A griffin is something else entirely. For one thing, a griffin is very big. It is also very noisy. It has few social graces and makes no effort to acquire any. Its disposition is unpredictable, its strength awesome, its anger terrible. Even the spelling of its name can lead to controversy: disputes are frequent among those who spell it griffin, griffon, and gryphon. Granted, a griffin will keep a home free of rats and mice; but its appetite is not satisfied by small creatures. It considers a dog or cat an appetizer, and a pony a light but satisfying supper. A pair of well-fed Belgians seventeen hands high would be no more than a filling meal. People of sense and good judgment do not attempt to domesticate a griffin. They keep their dealings with griffins to a minimum when they are unable to avoid them altogether.

Thus Kedrigern's surprise at the content of an urgent communique from an old client. He unfurled the scroll with interest. The message was gorgeously rubricated, formal in style and diction, but the intent was plain and unmistakable.

To the justly famed and powerful wizard Kedrigern, master of counterspells and disenchantments, from his friend and comrade Tyasan, Lord of the Misty Marshes.

Whereas Cecil, our cherished household griffin, has not eaten in three weeks, is molting in an unsightly way, and does not respond to treatment; and

Whereas the physicians and chirurgeons of the court are unable to find the cause of this noble creature's suffering, much less a cure for it, and

Whereas the aforesaid Cecil's condition manifests signs of magical origin, viz. a malediction placed upon him by enemies of the kingdom with the aim of distressing, discomposing, and discomfiting Our Royal Self and the Royal Family,

Therefore your presence is urgently required at Castle Contrecoeur. Come at once.

Kedrigern flung the message to the floor, where it promptly rolled itself up. He paced about the room, muttering and kicking the scroll before him, and at last he snatched it up, dropped into a chair, and glared into the fire.

His wife looked into the doorway. "What is it now?"

He thrust the scroll at her. "This. It just arrived. From Tyasan."

"I don't recall the name. Do we know him?"

"He has a small kingdom off to the north of the Dismal Bog. I did him a service nine or ten years ago, and now he wants me to drop everything and run to his aid again."

Princess took the scroll and opened it out on the table, placing heavy candelabra at top and bottom to keep it from rerolling. She read it over and said, "It seems reasonable. He's got a sick griffin on his hands, and he wants you to help. Can't you?"

"He wants a physician. A very highly specialized physician. I'm a wizard. I don't do griffins."

"Griffins are mythical creatures. Maybe they require treatment by a wizard."

Kedrigern reflected on that for a moment, then shook his head. "Not so far as I know. I've heard of griffins being cured by holy men, but not by wizards."

"This might be a special case."

Kedrigern scowled. "Kings always think their problems are a special case."

Placing her arms akimbo, Princess gave him a straight look. "My father was a king."

Kedrigern was willing to give a bit, but not too much. "I'm sure he was a very nice king. But I never met your father. Most of the kings I've met have been .

. well, just look at that note! The arrogance of the man! As if he need only snap his fingers and I'm to drop everything I'm doing and run off to hold his griffin's talon and pour syrups down its throat. I've just come back from working a very difficult counterspell, and he --"

"If you're going to call yourself a master counterspeller, you can't complain when someone asks you to work a counterspell."

"It's the way they ask."

"Well, if Tyasan's an old friend --"

Kedrigern flung up his hands in frustration. "He's not! That's what annoys me most, this pretense that we're old pals. He didn't say a dozen words to me when

I was there last, and now he tries to sound like a boyhood chum."

"Don't be impatient with him. The man's desperate. It's possible to become very fond of a pet."

"My dear, no one knows better than you that I'm a patient man. The soul of kindness. I am filled with love for all living things, griffins included. But only a very silly man keeps a griffin as a household pet, and I resent being summoned to the aid of a silly man because the consequences of his silliness have finally caught up with him."

Princess raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She returned her attention to the scroll.

In a milder tone, Kedrigern went on, "I don't like to refuse help to an old client -- even when he's presumptuous and demanding -- but I don't know anything about healing sick griffins."

"Tyasan says that the griffin might be spelled. You know about despending victims of wicked spells."

"I'm sure the reference to a spell is a desperate guess on the part of the physicians. It's highly unlikely that Cecil has been spelled. If anyone with sense wanted to discompose the royal family, they'd put the spell on them, not on their griffin."

"Would they?" said Princess. She pointed with a delicate fingertip to a handwritten addendum far down in the parchment, below the point to which Kedrigern had unrolled it. He rose, grumbling, and joined her at the table. The

postscript read:

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Please come, Dear K. The children will be heartbroken if they lose their Cecil.

Your old comrade, Tyasan.

Kedrigern gazed long at the message. He looked up helplessly and sighed.

Princess let the scroll furl and tapped the ends into neat alignment. "I'll tell Spot to start packing. We'll leave in the mornings" she said.

"We?"

"You don't think I'm going to pass up a chance to visit a royal court, do you? Even if it means sitting up with a sick griffin."

The castle of Contrecoeur was five days' unhurried ride from the cottage on Silent Thunder Mountain, and the weather was ideal for travel. The skies were clear, the sun bright. The roads had dried after the spring rains, but summer had not yet encumbered the land with heat and dust and small insects and crowds.

Traffic, in fact, was nonexistent. The woods were splashed with shadings of green highlighted with the brightness of flowers. Fragrance and birdsong filled

the air. All appeared tranquil, but Kedrigern felt increasingly ill at ease. Finally, on the morning of the fifth day, he reined in his horse and dropped back to Princess' side.

"There are people nearby," he said.

"It's the season for traveling."

"I know it is, and yet we haven't seen a soul on the road so far. Now I sense a large crowd, and they're not in a friendly mood. Probably robbers and marauders."

"Are you sure? There's not much to rob out here, is there?"

"There's us."

Princess looked thoughtful. "Well, I'm sure you can handle a band --" she began, when an arrow whistled between them, others zipped overhead, and a loud shout came from the wood.

"Let's go!" Kedrigern cried, casting a quick shielding spell around them as he dug his heels in. They galloped to the last bend in the forest road, where a barrier blocked their way. No sooner had they halted than a score of archers, bows at the ready, emerged from the surrounding wood and six pikemen advanced on them, led by a swordsman.

"It's all right, my dear. These are Tyasan's men," said Kedrigern.

"Stand and unfold yourselves!" the swordsman demanded.

"We are friends to this ground, come at the request of King Tyasan. I am the wizard Kedrigern, and this lady is my wife and colleague."

At the name, the swordsman sheathed his blade and said, in a much more cordial tone, "Welcome to the Kingdom of the Misty Marshes. You are fortunate indeed to have come this far in safety."

"We encountered some bandits in the forest."

"Not bandits, wizard, but enemies of the kingdom. Alas, since the sickness of the Chief Defender of the Realm has become known, our enemies have grown bold. Three outlying hamlets have been raided. An invasion may come at any moment."

"Tyasan didn't mention that. We'd better hurry."

"I will provide you with a guide."

"No need, no need. I know the way," said Kedrigern, urging his horse forward. "Just raise that barrier."

They reached the castle in the early afternoon, and were welcomed to Contrecoeur and the Kingdom of the Misty Marshes by Tyasan himself. The king was wreathed in smiles, and greeted them warmly.

"My good old friend, we knew you would come. Our troubles now are over," he said, embracing Kedrigern. "And this must be your wife, as famed for her magical talent as for her beauty and wisdom."

Princess rose from her saddle with a flutter of her gauzy little wings and flew lightly to Tyasan's side as the king looked on in astonishment. She curtsayed gracefully.

"We have heard you praised for many qualities, my lady, but we knew nothing of your ability to fly," said Tyasan.

"It's just something I picked up on a quest," she said with a delicate gesture of dismissal.

"The royal children will be delighted to meet someone at once so lovely, so charming, and so gifted. You must be kind to them. They are much troubled by Cecil's condition."

"How old are they, Tyasan? They weren't even born when I was here last."

The king beamed upon them. "I remember the occasion well. I had only recently wed my fair queen Thrymm. She was sorely afflicted, but you came to her aid, old friend."

"What was her problem?" Princess asked.

"Spiders."

"Isn't it customary to call an exterminator?"

"These spiders popped out of Thrymm's mouth every time she spoke," Kedrigern explained.

"It was especially unpleasant when she talked in her sleep," Tyasan said with a slight shudder of distaste. "A single oversight in drawing up the guest list, and it caused us no end of inconvenience and distress. You can imagine how punctilious we were in sending out invitations to the royal christenings."

Kedrigern, not having received an invitation to either christening, was about to speak, but Princess silenced him with a stern glance. He held back his retort and instead asked, "This problem with the griffin, Tyasan. How long has . . . .?"

Oblivious, Tyasan went on, "Ah, those were the good old days, were they not?"

How

I miss those long walks, those stimulating games of chess, those late night conversations over a goblet of excellent wine, with the fire roaring. Many a time have we seen the sun rise after a night of fine talk." He heaved a nostalgic sigh and clapped Kedrigern warmly on the shoulder. "We really must keep in touch, old friend."

Tyasan's cozy memories were pure fiction. Kedrigern again started to speak, but

Princess asked, "And what are the ages of the little prince and princess, your highness?"

"Please, my dear, call me Tyasan. Better still, call me Ty. All my close friends do, and I count you both among my closest friends."

"And your children?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "I count them as family."

"I meant their ages. How old are they?"

"Ah, yes, of course. Their ages. Eldry is the older by a year. She'll be about eight or so very soon. And that would make Ashel about seven. Give or take a year or two. Yes, that sounds right."

"And they're fond of this griffin?"

"My lady, they dote on the creature, and he is devoted to them. Cecil was a christening gift to . . . one or the other. I can't recall now. The three of them have grown up together."

"An unusual christening gift, isn't it?"

"A most unusual gift indeed, my lady. He was sent by a distant cousin from the land of the Scythians. They have many strange customs in that part of the world."

Kedrigern, recalling that one of the nastier Scythian customs had something to do with feeding unruly children to a griffin, felt a twinge of alarm. "Your cousin, or Queen Thrymm's?"

"Mine. Charming old fellow, Gulberan. Soul of generosity. Immensely fond of children. Everyone loved him. We were very close."

Tyasan's word were reassuring, but Kedrigern wanted more. "Have you many Scythian relatives?"

"None at all. Never did. Gulberan only went to Scythia for the climate. That and

the gold. Gold all over the place in Scythia, you know. Common as grass. Peasants thatch their hovels with it. Birds use it to build their nests. But enough small talk. You must come inside. Thrymm is around the palace somewhere.

She'll want to meet you, unless she's resting. This business with Cecil has her depressed. Makes her sleepy."

"The prospect of invasion must be upsetting for her," said Kedrigern.

"Oh, that. Yes, I suppose so. No cause for concern, though. Once Cecil is up and about, the neighbors will quiet down and there'll be no more talk of invasion."

Kedrigern nodded. He tried to look confident. This was a far more serious matter than he had anticipated.

Tyasan took Princess' arm and said in a confiding way, "You'll meet Thrymm when we dine, in any event. I expect you'd like to wash up and take a nap before dinner. Travel is so fatiguing, and we've got quite a night planned. Feasting, dancing, music. Jugglers, tumblers, performing dogs. Just like old times. eh, Kedrigern?"

Princess brightened at every word Tyasan spoke. By the time he was done, she was fluttering a full hand's breadth off the ground. "It sounds wonderful!" With a sharp glance at Kedrigern, she added, "One does sacrifice certain amenities when one lives in isolation on a mountaintop."

Kedrigern did not share her exhilaration. If he could not cure Cecil, he knew, he would be obliged to help defend Tyasan's little kingdom against invasion, and he disliked such work. It was always unpleasant. Sometimes it was downright nasty. "I'd better have a look at Cecil."

"He's in his shed on the wall, next to the north tower."

"I'll go now, if you don't mind. Care to come along, my dear?"

"I leave it all in your hands," said Princess, practically glowing. "I have a thousand things to do to get ready for this evening."

Cecil Dwelt in a spacious, well-constructed shed on the lee side of the tower. As

Kedrigern approached, he saw a boy and a girl sitting beside the entry. From a distance, their posture suggested dejection; up close, their expressions confirmed it. But the moment they caught sight of him they sprang up and ran to his side to welcome him with joyous shouts.

The girl cried, "You're the wizard Daddy sent for! Aren't you? Tell us you are!"

"Of course you are! You'll make our Cecil well again so he can go out and tear our enemies to bits!" said the boy, taking Kedrigern's hand and tugging him toward the shed.

Clearly these were Eldry and Ashel. Kedrigern was impressed by the children's perceptiveness. He made it a point to dress plainly and avoid displaying indications of his profession. It avoided complications. "I'll do everything I can. How could you tell I was a wizard?"

"Daddy sent for a wizard. You had to come," Ashel said.

"And besides, nobody but a wizard would dare to come near Cecil. The others are

all afraid of him. Especially the physicians."

"You don't seem afraid of him," Kedrigern said.

"Cecil is our friend and protector. He's really a very nice griffin. He always sounds cross, but he's not the least bit nasty, not really."

They stopped at the entry and the children released his hands. "You'd better go in alone," Eldry said. "We'll be right outside."

"Don't be afraid," said Ashel. "He won't hurt you."

Cecil lay sprawled on a thick bed of straw. His breathing was a loud wheeze. His mouth, once red as a roaring furnace, was a pale pink. His eyes, big as basins, were glazed and bloodshot. The plumage of his head and wings, brilliant no longer, appeared dusty and faded and very patchy. Flies clustered about sores on his tawny hide. His ribs were clearly visible. Huge black, red, blue, and white feathers were scattered everywhere. He appeared to be in worse condition than Tyasan had claimed.

His disposition, however, was still griffin-like. As soon as he became aware of the wizard's presence, he raised his head, opened his fierce hooked beak, and in a grating voice said, "What do you mean, bursting in here like that? Go away! If I catch you prowling around my lair again, I'll dismember you !"

Kedrigern was unintimidated. "King Tyasan has asked me here to see what can be done about your condition."

"Get lost, butcher. I'm in perfect health."

"I will not leave until I've examined you."

Struggling unsteadily to his feet, Cecil said, "That's what you think. Try to take one drop of my blood, and you'll lose your own. All of it."

"I'm not a physician, I'm a wizard."

"Prove it: make yourself disappear."

"Tyasan thinks there's a possibility you've been spelled."

Cecil gave a quick snarling laugh. "Fat lot Tyasan knows. I can take any spell they throw at me. I'm a griffin."

"All the same, I have to check." The griffin hissed and snapped his beak, but made no further hostile move. Kedrigern drew out his medallion and inspected Cecil through the Aperture of True Vision. He found no trace of enchantment.

"All right, you checked. Now run off and collect your fee."

"I want to do a few more tests," Kedrigern said. He reached out to give Cecil a



reassuring pat.

"Lay a hand on me and your name is Lefty."

"Cecil, you have to cooperate. Tyasan is worried. The queen is distraught. The kingdom is in danger. Eldry and Ashel --"

Cecil raised a thick foreleg and flexed four wicked-looking talons. "Leave those kids out of it, you hear? Anybody messes with those kids, he answers to me."

"I'm here for their sake, Cecil. They're worried about you."

"Shut up."

"If anything happens to you, they'll be heartbroken."

"Shut up, I said! All I need is a good rest. Go away and maybe I can get it."

Kedrigern could see that he was going to get no more out of Cecil. He had already learned that no magic was involved, and that was useful to know. And Cecil was apparently as fond of the children as they were of him. That might provide an approach. But griffins are short tempered; to press Cecil further would probably do more harm than good. "All right, Cecil, I'll leave you now," the wizard said. "But I'll be back."

"Don't hurry."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"Maybe I'll be lucky and die in my sleep." Cecil slumped down in the straw, turned his back on the wizard, and almost at once began to snore.

Once outside, Kedrigern was confronted with two expectant, hopeful faces.

"Is he well? Did you make him better?" Ashel demanded.

"It's too soon to say. But I've learned a few things. Maybe you can help me."

"We are at your service," said Eldry with queenly dignity. "Anything for our dear Cecil."

"How long has he been like this?"

"Since the spring," Eldry said, and Ashel nodded and added, "Early in the spring."

"Has it ever happened before?"

"Never," they said in one voice.

"Did he eat anything unusual? Catch a chill? Sustain an injury? Did you observe any odd behavior?" the wizard asked, receiving an unequivocal negative each time.

Eldry began, "He was perfectly fine. At the end of winter he gave his lair a thorough cleaning and built himself a lovely new nest of fresh straw --"

"And then he got sick," Ashel broke in.

Kedrigern nodded and stroked his chin thoughtfully, doing his best to convey an impression of confidence. "Thank you both. You've been a help."

Ashel tugged at the wizard's sleeve. "Do you know what's wrong?"

"Can you fix it?" Eldry asked.

"I've narrowed my field of inquiry. I'll be back to see Cecil in the morning. Perhaps then I'll be able to determine the exact problem."

"Please do it, wizard. Save our Cecil," said Ashel, looking up with moist eyes.

He turned away, unwilling to let his tears be seen, and Eldry whispered to Kedrigern, "You must. Poor Ashel would never get over it if we lost the dear creature. And we'd be invaded, besides."

"I'll do everything in my power. And if I can't help Cecil myself, I'll do my best to find someone who can. Now let's all go back to the castle and have a nice snack, and let Cecil get some rest."

There was no time, and little inclination, for shop talk before dinner. Throughout the evening, over one elaborate and superbly prepared dish after another, amid the singing of minstrels and the whirling of dancers and the tumbling of dogs and acrobats, the drinking of toasts and the bursts of merry laughter, Kedrigern pondered the case. He was able to do so without interruption; Princess, looking her loveliest, was the center of all eyes. No one paid attention to a moody wizard, nor to the haggard, dusty messengers who turned up at frequent intervals with urgent messages for the king.

Kedrigern had much to ponder. Griffins were famed for their rugged good health.

He had never read or heard of griffins' ailments, and knew no griffins personally, so he had no ready source of information. Griffins, so far as he knew, were not prey to sickness. And yet Cecil was definitely sick. Could he be

some odd species of griffin? Had he succumbed to an illness unknown in Scythia?

Was he getting the proper food? Enough to drink? Could the climate of the Misty

Marshes be affecting his health? These were all questions to be asked tomorrow.

Princess settled beside Kedrigern, breathless and happy. "I haven't had such a delightful time in ages! The courtiers are charming. And the musicians are excellent. And everyone dances so well."

"I notice you've been dancing every dance."

"Yes. And you haven't left your seat."

"You know I'm a terrible dancer, my dear. And I'm worried about Cecil. He looks awful, and he's not the least bit cooperative."

"Griffins aren't, as a rule, are they?"

"I don't like to think of the children losing their pet and then having the kingdom invaded."

"Is he that bad?"

"I'm afraid so. Come and see for yourself tomorrow."

She rose and took him by the hand. "I will. And I'm sure you'll think of something. Now come and dance. It will do you good."

"Oh, I really don't . . ."

"Come. It's a very easy one. You'll pick it up in no time."

They slept late next day. It was mid-morning when they climbed to the platform where Cecil's shed stood. Kedrigern had expected to find the royal children awaiting them, but Cecil was alone.

"You again. I told you to keep away," he said in welcome.

"Tyasan gives the orders here, and he wants me to look after you."

"Who's this? Your assistant?"

"I am a princess," said Princess with dignity.

Cecil yawned. "Good for you. Who asked you to butt in?"

"There's no need to be rude, Cecil. We're here to help you. We want to get you back to normal."

"If I were feeling normal, I'd be a lot ruder. Now go away and leave me alone. It's bad enough to feel rotten without having nosy intruders barging in on my privacy."

Kedrigern was not to be put off. "Where does it hurt, Cecil?"

"None of your business."

"I'm just going to keep asking until I get an answer."

Princess frowned at Kedrigern. "Don't be so inconsiderate to the poor dear creature." She turned to Cecil and said in her sweetest voice, "You're very brave, Cecil. I'll bet your poor head is aching terribly, but you don't complain."

Cecil glared at her for a moment, then muttered, "I can take it."

"Oh, you poor brave thing," she said.

"Stop pooring me, lady. I'm a griffin. We're tough."

"Of course you are. Tough, and brave, and decent. And loyal to King Tyasan. And devoted to the royal children. And all this time your head is throbbing, throbbing, throbbing." Princess wiped her eyes.

His voice somewhat less rasping, Cecil said, "Not really. The headache comes and goes. It's the loss of appetite that bothers me the most. And the general lassitude."

"Dear good Cecil," said Princess. She reached out cautiously to stroke the griffin's forehead. He did not shrink from her touch. She dug her fingers into the feathers and scratched the broad expanse. Cecil closed his eyes and made a sound like a kind of creaky purring. "Don't you want anything at all to eat?" she asked.

Dreamily, Cecil said, "Not a thing, lady. Just keep scratching. Get the back of my neck."

With a quick wink to Kedrigern, Princess leaned closer and applied both hands to her work. Cecil sank down, his eyes closed contentedly, and his purring grew to a reverberating drone that filled the shed. Princess knelt at his side and scratched. After a time, Cecil said sleepily, "You know, lady, I could go for a nice basin of horse meat broth. Maybe they could put a few chunks of meat in it."

"We'll have it brought up right away."

"Send the wizard. You stay here and keep scratching."

She turned to Kedrigern and shrugged. He nodded and tiptoed from the shed.

On his way to the kitchen he met Eldry and Ashel. They looked at him accusingly, and Ashel said, "You're late."

"Your father does not encourage early rising on the part of his guests. And I've made progress. Cecil has asked for a basin of broth."

"Is that all?"

"He'd like a few chunks of meat in it."

The children exchanged a solemn glance. Eldry said, "That's a good sign."

"He let my wife scratch his head. And he's purring."

"Is your wife pretty? He likes to have his head scratched by pretty ladies."

Kedrigern smiled at the image of Princess, resplendent this morning in a deep maroon gown trimmed at wrists and neckline with gold embroidery; no jewelry but a golden circlet around her gleaming black hair and a long gold necklace that hung to her waist. "She's very pretty indeed. Look here -- why don't you supervise the making of the broth? You know how Cecil likes it. I'll go back and keep an eye on him."

They were off at a run, and Kedrigern returned to the hut. He stood in the doorway for a time, looking on in silence as Princess scratched Cecil's great neck and his upper back between the shoulders. Her treatment was working wonders; he had shown improvement from her very first touch and was now reclining peacefully, snoring with a faint, not unpleasant, whistling sound.

It was strenuous work for Princess. She was forced to lean forward awkwardly.

From time to time she paused to ease her back and flex her fingers, but the pauses were brief and she quickly resumed her work. She was a picture of selfless dedication, and Kedrigern felt proud of her. Not many princesses would be so considerate of a griffin.

But why was it working? Surely mere head-scratching, even by the hand of a princess, could not be the cure. As Kedrigern watched he noticed that as Princess bent over Cecil, her gold necklace lay against the griffin's side. Something in the scene tugged at his memory, but he could not quite grasp it. Something about griffins . . . and gold. . . . Griffins and gold . . . Scythia . . . thatching . . . and the making of nests.

And that was it.

He hurried to Princess' side and whispered, "You can stop scratching. I'm going to put your necklace around Cecil's neck. He'll be all right now."

"He will?"

"For a while, anyway."

"That's not a magic necklace, you know."

"It's gold. That's all that matters."

She rose stiffly and wrung her hands. "Good. I wouldn't want to do that for much longer. Cecil has very rough feathers."

He took her hands gently in his. "You won't have to do it again."

"I take it you've figured out what's wrong with him."

"I'm pretty sure. Whether or not we can fix it depends on how much Tyasan thinks of his griffin."

They gathered in an antechamber just off the throne room. Tyasan and Thrymm, having heard the wizard's explanation and Princess' anecdotal support, exchanged a long silent glance. Tyasan turned to his guests.

"A nest of gold?" he said.

Kedrigern nodded. "That's what it will take."

"A nest for Cecil would require a huge amount of gold. I wouldn't have anything left to pay your fee."

With a generous wave of his hand, Kedrigern said, "We're willing to accept gems and silver. Your Cecil is suffering from acute gold deprivation. If you want him to be his old self, you'll have to provide him with a nest of gold."

Tyasan looked pained. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"As soon as Princess' gold necklace touched him, Cecil relaxed and his appetite returned. That's when I realized."

"Couldn't it have been the scratching of his neck? Maybe if all my subjects took turns scratching. . . ."

"It wasn't my scratching that did it," Princess said, "although I'm sure it helped. Long after I had stopped, Cecil finished his basin of broth and called for a haunch of horse meat."

"He spoke of flying out to the borders tomorrow, and seeing what the neighbors are up to," Kedrigern added. "I think you can stop worrying about an invasion."

With a sigh of relief, Thrymm said, "Cecil's himself again."

"But it won't last unless he stays in contact with a substantial amount of gold. Once griffins reach a certain age, it's essential to their health. That's why they use gold for nesting material back in Scythia," Kedrigern said.

"They only use it because it's so easily available. There's gold lying all over the place in Scythia. Everyone knows that," said Tyasan.

"Everyone may be wrong. How much gold did your cousin Gulberan amass during his stay?"

Tyasan reflected for a moment, then looked at them with an expression of discomfort. "None, as a matter of fact. Poor old chap died penniless." When neither Kedrigern nor Princess made reply, he went on desperately, "What if we used brass? I'd have it polished up. It could pass for gold if we kept it polished."

"Griffins are rude, but they're not stupid. Cecil wouldn't last long, and he'd be a mighty angry griffin toward the end."

"Couldn't you hypnotize him, or create an illusion of some sort?"

Kedrigern shook his head. "It has to be real gold. Substitutions won't work."

They sat in silence, pondering the problem, and Princess looked up brightly and said, "Just as a temporary measure you might try gold leaf."

"Or maybe a nice cloth of gold blanket," Kedrigern added. "But only until you can get enough gold together for a nest."

"We'll demand reparations from our neighbors," said Thrymm. "They ought to do something to make up for all the annoyance they've caused with their talk of invasion."

Tyasan stared dejectedly at the ground, slowly shaking his head. "They haven't got a thimbleful of gold among them. All we'll get from that lot is hides and firewood."

The four sat silent for a time. Thrymm raised her eyes to the heavens and said,

"Why couldn't Gulberan have sent the children a dog?"

"Maybe there are no dogs in Scythia."

The queen shrugged. "All right, a cat. Even a monkey would be less trouble."

"As protection, Cecil is worth a brigade of guards. He's devoted to Eldry and Ashel. They couldn't have a better companion. Once he has his strength back, he'll be able to take them flying. Dogs and cats can't do that," Kedrigern pointed out. "Or monkeys."

"But all that gold. . . ."

Princess said, "It's not as though he'll eat the gold, or squander it foolishly.

It will all be right there in his shed."

"That's true," said Thrymm without much enthusiasm.

"And well guarded," Princess added. "Too well guarded," said Tyasan.

"If you really need it, Ty, I'm sure Cecil will let you have some," the queen said.

Tyasan looked at his wife, his face a mask of gloom. "I know you're trying to console me, Thrymmie dear, but it's unpleasant for a king to contemplate asking household help for a loan. It's demeaning."

A long silence followed, broken at last by Kedrigern. Putting his fingertips together, gazing into the middle distance, speaking in the manner of one expounding an interesting speculation, he said, "Since Cecil is in the nest-building mood, it probably won't be long before he's ready to settle down.

He'll return to Scythia to seek a mate --"

"What will I do for protection?" Tyasan cried. "Without Cecil, I'll have to hire an army! Either way, I'm ruined."

"Cecil will be back. He's very content here, and I doubt he'd leave the children. With a family to look after, he'll want to build a bigger nest. That means --"

"That means I'll have to find even more gold!" Tyasan wailed, burying his face in his hands.

"Griffins are proud creatures. He'll go out and get it himself. Lots and lots of it. Griffins know where to find gold. And if Eldry and Ashel ask him nicely --"

"He'd do anything for the children," Thrymm said.

"-- I'm sure he'll bring back a barrel or two for them. . . ."

Tyasan looked up. His expression was that of a man who had clutched at the last

straw and caught the whole bale.

". . . And their parents," Kedrigern concluded.