

Fool's Gold

Elizabeth Moon

"It's been done to death," Mirabel Stonefist said.

"It's traditional." Her sister Monica sat primly upright, embroidering tiny poppies on a pillowcase. All Monica's pillow-cases had poppies on them, just as all the curtains on the morning side of the house had morning glories.

"Traditional is another word for 'done to death,'" Mirabel said. Her own pillow-cases had a stamped sigil and the words PROPERTY OF THE ROYAL BARRACKS DO NOT REMOVE.

"It's unlucky to break with tradition."

"It's unlucky to have anything to do with dragons," Mirabel said, rubbing the burn scar on her left leg.

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Cavernous Dire had never intended to be a dragon. He had intended to be a miser, living a long and peaceful life of solitary selfishness near the Tanglefoot Mountains, but he had, all unwitting, consumed a seed of dragonsfoot which had been—entirely by accident—baked into a gooseberry tart. That wouldn't have changed him, if his neighbor hadn't made an innocent mistake and handed him dragonstongue, instead of dragonsbane, to ease a sore tongue. The two plants do look much alike, and usually it makes no difference whether you nibble a leaf of *D. abscondus* or *D. lingula*, since both will ease a cold-blister, but in those rare instances when someone has an undigested seed of dragonsfoot in his gut, and then adds to it the potent essence of *D. lingula* . . . well.

Of course it was all a mistake, and an accident, and the fact that when Cavernous went back to the village to dig his miser's hoard out from under the hearthstone it was already gone meant nothing. Probably. And most likely the jar of smelly ointment that broke on his scaly head—fixing him in his draconic form until an exceedingly unlikely conjunction of events—was an accident too, though Goody Chernoff's cackle wasn't.

So Cavernous Dire sloped off to the Tanglefoots in a draconish temper, scorching fenceposts along the way. He found a proper cave, and would have amassed a hoard from the passing travelers, if there'd been any. But his cave was a long way from any pass over the mountains, and he was far too prudent to tangle with the rich and powerful dragons whose caves lay on more lucrative trade routes.

He was forced to prey on the locals.

At first, sad to say, this gave him wicked satisfaction. They'd robbed him. They'd turned him into a dragon and robbed him, and—like a true miser—he minded the latter much more than the former. He ate their sheep, and then their cattle (having grown large enough), and once inhaled an entire flock of geese—a mistake, he discovered, as burning feathers stank abominably. He could not quite bring himself to eat their children, though his draconish nature found them appetizing, because he knew too well how dirty they really were, and how disgusting the amulets their mothers tied round their filthy necks. But he did kill a few of the adults, when they marched out with torches to test the strength of his fire. He couldn't stomach their stringy, bitter flesh.

Finally they moved away, cursing each other for fools, and Cavernous reigned over a ruined district. He pried up every hearthstone, and rooted in every well, but few were the coins or baubles which the villagers left behind.

Although the ignorant assert that the man-drake has powers greater than the dragonborn, this is but wishful thinking. Dragons born from the egg inherit all the ancient wisdom and power of dragonkind. Man-drakes are but feeble imitations, capable of matching true dragons only in their lust for gold. So poor Cavernous Dire, though fearsome to men, had not a chance of surviving in any contest with real dragons—and real dragons find few things so amusing as tormenting man-drakes.

'Tis said that every man has some woman who loves him—at least until she dies of his misuse—and so it was with Cavernous. Though most of the children born into his very dysfunctional birth-family had died of abuse or neglect, he had a sister, Bilious Dire, who had not died, but lived—and lived, moreover, with the twisted memory that Cavernous had once saved her life. (In fact, he had merely pushed her out of his way on one of the many occasions when his mother Savage came after him with a hot ladle.) But Bilious built her life, as do we all, on the foundation of her beliefs about reality, and in her reality Cavernous was a noble being.

She had been long away, Bilious, enriching the man who owned her, but at last she grew too wrinkled and stiff, and he cast her out. So she returned to the foothills village of her childhood, to find it ruined and empty, with dragon tracks in the street.

"That horrible dragon," she wailed at the weeping sky. "It's stolen my poor innocent brother. I must find help—"

* * *

"So you see, it's the traditional quest to rescue the innocent victim of a dragon," Mirabel's sister said. "Our sewing circle has taken on the rehabilitation of the faded blossoms of vice—" Mirabel mimed gagging, and her sister glared at her. "Don't laugh! It's not funny—the poor things—"

"Isn't there Madam Aspersia's Residence for them?"

"Madam Aspersia only has room for twenty, and besides she gives preference to women of a Certain Kind." Mirabel rolled her eyes; her sister combined the desire to talk about Such Things with the inability to *name* the Things she wanted to talk about.

"Well, but surely there are other resources—"

"In this city perhaps, but in the provinces—" Before Mirabel could ask why the provinces should concern the goodwives of Weeping Willow Street, her sister took a deep breath and plunged on. "So when poor Bilious—obviously past any chance of earning a living That Way—begged us to find help for her poor virgin brother taken by a dragon, of course I thought of you."

"Of course."

"Surely your organization does *something* to help women—that is its name, after all, Ladies' Aid and Armor Society. . . ."

Mirabel had tried to explain, on previous occasions, what the LAAS had been founded

for, and why it would not help with a campaign to provide each orphaned girl with hand-embroidered underclothes for her trousseau, or stand shoulder to shoulder with the Weeping Willow Sewing Society's members when they marched on taverns that sold liquor to single women. (Didn't her sister realize that all the women in the King's Guard hung out in taverns? Or was that the point?)

Now, through clenched teeth, Mirabel tried once more. "Monica—we do help women—each other. We were founded as a mutual-aid society for all women soldiers, though we do what we can—" The LAAS charity ball, for instance, supported the education of the orphaned daughters of soldiers.

"Helping each other is just like helping yourself, and helping yourself is selfish. Here's this poor woman, with no hope of getting her brother free if you don't do something—"

Mirabel felt her resistance crumbling, as it usually did if her sister talked long enough.

"I don't see how he can be a virgin, if he's older than his sister," she said. A weak argument, and she knew it. So did Monica.

"You can at least investigate, can't you? It can't hurt . . ."

It could get her killed, but that was a remote danger. Her sister was right here and now. "No promises," Mirabel said.

"I *knew* you'd come through," said Monica.

* * *

As Mirabel Stonefist trudged glumly across a lumpy wet moor, she thought she should have chosen "stonehead" for her fighting surname instead of "stonefist." She'd broken fingers often enough to disprove the truth of her chosen epithet, and over a moderately long career more than one person had commented on her personality in granitic terms. Stonehead, bonehead, too stubborn to quit and too dumb to figure a way out . . .

She had passed three abandoned, ruined villages already, the thatched roofs long since

rotted, a few tumbled stone walls blacked by fire. She'd found hearthstones standing on end like grave markers, and not one coin of any metal.

And she'd found dragon tracks. Not, to someone who had been in the unfortunate expedition to kill the Grand Dragon Karshnak of Kreshnivok, very big dragon tracks, but big enough to trip over and fall splat in. It had been raining for days, as usual in autumn, and the dragon tracks were all full of very cold water.

Her biggest mistake, she thought, had been birth order. If she'd been born after Gervais, she'd have been the cute little baby sister, and no one would ever have called on her to solve problems for the family. But as the oldest—the big sister to them all—she'd been cast as family protector and family servant from the beginning.

And her next biggest mistake, at least in the present instance, had been telling the Ladies' Aid and Armor Society that she was just going to check on things. With that excuse, no one else could find the time to come with her, so here she was, trudging across a cold, wet slope by herself, in dragon country.

They must really hate her. They must be slapping each other on the back, back home, and bragging on how they'd gotten rid of her. They must—

"Dammit, 'Bel, wait up!" The wind had dropped from its usual mournful moan, and she heard the thin scream from behind. She whirled. There—a long way back and below—an arm waved vigorously. She blinked. As if a dragon-laid spell of misery had been lifted, her mood rose. Heads bobbed among the wet heather. Two—three? She wasn't sure, but she wasn't alone anymore, and she felt almost as warm as if she were leaning on a wall in the palace courtyard in the sun.

They were, of course, grumbling when they came within earshot. "Should've called yourself Mirabel Longlegs—" Siobhan Bladehawk said. "Don't you ever sleep at night? We were beginning to think we'd never catch up."

"And why'd you go off in that snit?" asked Krystal, flipping the beaded fringe on her vest. "See this? I lost three strings, two of them with real lapis beads, trying to track you through that white-thorn thicket. You could just as easily have gone around it, rather than making me get my knees all scratched—"

"Shut up, Krystal," Siobhan said. "Though she has a point, 'Bel. What got into you, anyway?"

Mirabel sniffed, and hated herself for it. "Bella said if I was just investigating, I could go alone—nobody should bother—"

"Bella's having hot flashes," Siobhan said. "Not herself these days, our Bella, and worried about having to retire. We unelected her right after you left, and then we came after you. If you had just waited a day, 'stead of storming out like that—"

"But you're so impetuous," Krystal said, pouting. She pulled the end of her silver-gilt braid around, frowned at it, and nipped off a split end with her small, white, even teeth.

The third member of the party appeared, along with a shaggy pack pony, its harness hung with a startling number of brightly polished horse brasses.

"I needed a holiday," Sophora said, her massive frame dwarfing everything but the mountains. "And a chance for some healthy open-air exercise." The Chancellor of the Exchequer grinned. "Besides, I think that idiot Balon of Torm is trying to rob the realm, and this will give him a chance, he thinks. The fool."

Mirabel's mood now suited a sunny May morning. Not even the next squall off the mountain could make her miserable. Krystal, though, turned her back to the blowing rain and pouted again.

"This is *ruining* my fringes."

"Shut up Krystal," said everyone casually. The world was back to normal.

* * *

Cavernous Dire had subsisted on rockrats, rock squirrels, rock grouse, and the occasional rock (mild serpentine, with streaks of copper sulfate, eased his draconic fire-vats, he'd found). In midwinter, he might be lucky enough to flame a mountain goat before it got

away, or even a murk ox (once widespread, now confined to a few foggy mountain valleys) . But autumn meant hunger, unless he traveled far into the plains, where he could be hunted by man and dragon alike.

Now, as he lay on the cold stone floor of his cave, stirring the meagre pile of his treasure, he scented something new, something approaching from the high, cold peaks of the Tanglefoots. He sniffed. Not a mountain goat. Not a murk ox (and besides, it wasn't foggy enough for the murk ox to be abroad). A sharp, hot smell, rather like the smell of his own fire on rock.

Like many basically unattractive men, Cavernous Dire had been convinced of his own good looks, back when he was a young lad who coated his hair with woolfat, and had remained convinced that he had turned his back on considerable female attention when he chose to become a miser. So, when he realized that the unfamiliar aroma wafting down the cold wet wind was another dragon, his first thought was "Of course." A she-dragon had been attracted by his elegance, and hoped to make up to him.

Quickly, he shoved his treasure to the back of the cave, and piled rocks on it. No thieving, lustful she-dragon was going to get his treasure, though he had to admit it was pleasant to find that the girls still pursued him. He edged to the front of his cave and looked upwind, into the swirls of rain. There—was she there? Or—over there?

* * *

The women of the expedition set up camp with the swift, capable movements of those experienced in such things. The tent blew over only once, and proved large enough for them all, plus Dumpling the pony, over whose steaming coat Siobhan labored until she was as wet as it had been, and so were half their blankets. Then she polished the horse brasses on Dumpling's harness; she had insisted that any horse under her care would be properly adorned and she knew the others wouldn't bother. Meanwhile, the others built a fire and cooked their usual hearty fare, under cover of the front flap.

They were all sitting relaxed around the fire, full of mutton stew and trail bread, sipping the contents of the stoneware jug Sophora had brought, when they heard a shriek. It sounded like someone falling off a very high cliff, and unhappy about it.

Scientific experimentation has shown that it is impossible to put on breastplate, gorget, helm, greaves, armllets, and gauntlets in less than one minute, and thus some magical power must have aided the warrior women, for they were all outside the tent, properly armored, armed, and ready for inspection when the dragon fell out of the sky and

squashed the tent flat.

"Dumpling!" cried Siobhan, and lunged for the tent as the pony squealed and a series of thumps suggested that hind hooves were in use.

"No, wait—" Mirabel grabbed her. Siobhan, doughty warrior that she was, had one weakness: an intemperate concern for the welfare of horseflesh. "You can hear he's alive."

"Ssss. . . ." A warm glow, as of live coals being revived, appeared in the gloom where the tent had been. Dumpling squealed again. Something ripped, and hoofbeats receded into the distance. "Ahhh . . . sss . . ."

"A dragon fell on our tent," Mirabel said, with the supernatural calm of the truly sloshed. "And it's alive. And we're out here in the dark—"

Light flared out of the sky; when she looked up, there was a huge shape, like a dragon made all of fire. It was about the color of a live scorpion, she thought wildly, as it grew larger and larger. . . .

"That one's bigger," Sophora said, in her sweet soprano. "At least it's not dark any more."

Mirabel had never noticed that dragons could direct their fire, in much the way that the watch commander could direct the light of his candle lantern. Silver threads of falling rain . . . a widening cone of light . . . and in the middle of it, their flattened tent held down by a lumpish dragon the color of drying slime along the edge of a pond. Its eyes—pale, oyster-colored eyes—opened, and its gray-lipped mouth gaped. Steam curled into the air.

"Is it a baby?" asked Siobhan. Then she, like the others, looked again at the expression in those eyes. "No," she said, answering her own question. Even Siobhan, whose belief that animals were never vicious until humans made them so had survived two years in the King's Cavalry, knew nastiness when she saw it.

"It's hovering," Sophora said, pointing upward. Sure enough, the bigger dragon, now only a bowshot above, had stopped its descent and was balancing on the wind. Its gaping mouth, still pointed downward, gave fiery light to the scene, but its body no longer glowed. Sophora waved her sword at the big dragon. "This one's ours," she shouted. "Go away, or—"

The dragon laughed. The blast of hot air that rolled over them smelt of furnaces and smiths' shops, and deserts—but it did not fry them. It laughed, they knew it laughed; that was enough for the moment, and the great creature rose into the dark night, removing its light and leaving them once more in darkness.

With a live and uncooperative dragon on their flattened tent.

"We haven't seen the last of that one," Sophora said.

"My best jerkin is probably getting squashed into the mud," said Krystal.

"Shut up, Krystal," they all said. All but the dragon.

* * *

Cavernous Dire had never seen a dragon before he became one, and thus had only the vaguest idea what they were supposed to look like. Big, of course, and scaly, and breathing fire from a long, toothy mouth. Long tail with spikes on it. Legs, naturally, or dragons would be just fire-breathing snakes. If he'd known that dragons have wings, he'd forgotten it after he became a dragon, and his own wings were, like those of all man-drakes, pitiful little stubs on the shoulders, hardly more than ruffles of dry itchy skin.

So when the real dragon swooped down the valley, he was amazed. She—he still thought, at this point, that the dragon was female—was an awe-inspiring sight, with the wide wings spanning the valley from side to side. She was so much bigger than he was. Crumbs of information about insects in which the male was much smaller than the female tried to coalesce and tell him something important, but he couldn't quite think, in the presence of this great beast. Dragons have this effect on all humans, but it's much stronger with man-drakes, and it amuses them to reduce their toys to mindlessness right before they reduce them to their constituent nutrient molecules.

The dragon flew past, and out of sight. Cavernous thrust his own long scaly neck out of his cave, trying to see where she'd gone. Nothing but wet rock, nothing but wet wind, nothing but curtains of fine rain stirred by her passage. She must be shy . . .

Strong talons seized his neck and plucked him from his cave as a robin plucks out a worm from the ground. The wings boomed on either side of him, and boomed again, and he was rising upward so fast that he felt the blood rushing to his dependent tail.

It is not for Men to know, or Bards to tell, what true dragons do to man-drakes in the high halls of the air, but it took several hours, during which time Cavernous realized how little he knew about dragon anatomy, his own or that of others, and how little he liked what he was learning now. Night had fallen by then, and soon he had fallen—was falling—and the glowing beast beside him rumbled warm laughter all the way down to the base of the clouds, then let him fall away into the wet night.

He didn't remember hitting the ground, but waking up was terrible. Darkness, cold, rain pelting his hide, and more pain than he had ever imagined inside him. His fire-vats had slopped over, burning other internal parts he hadn't known he possessed. Since it is the nature of dragons of all kinds to heal with unnatural speed, his broken bones were already knitting, but they hurt as they knit. Something was hitting him repeatedly, hard punches to the nasal arch, and squealing in his lower ear. He tried to draw in a breath, which hurt, and finally whatever it was quit hitting him and ran away. It was a long moment before he realized it had been a horse.

Light stabbed through his third eyelid, and he smelt the big dragon hovering above him. If he could have thought, he would have begged for mercy. Then darkness returned, and he closed his eye again, hoping that he'd wake up in his own cave and find it had all been a bad dream.

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Experienced campaigners can light a fire in a howling wet gale, if sober and industrious. Those whose tents have been flattened by dragons, and whose last prior calories were derived from potent brew may have more problems.

Siobhan was off somewhere in the distance, calling Dumpling. It wouldn't do any good to call her back; as long as she was fretting over the pony her brain wouldn't work anyway. Krystal muttered on about her ruined wardrobe, but Mirabel heard Sophora give a gusty sigh.

"I supposed I'll have to do something about that dragon," she said. "And that means making a light—"

Experienced campaigners always have a few dry fire-starters in their packs, but the packs were inside the tent, underneath the dragon. Mirabel felt in her pockets and discovered nothing but a squashed sugared plum, left over from the Iron Jill Retreat some months back. Sophora had her Chancellor's Seal, with the crystal which could double as a lens to start a fire from sunlight . . . but not in the middle of the night. Glumly, they huddled against the dragon and sank into a state of numb endurance familiar from past campaigns.

* * *

Morning arrived with a smear of light somewhere behind the Tanglefoot Mountains. Eventually the sodden expedition could make out the shape of the fallen dragon, still lying on their tent.

Compared to the Grand Dragon Karshnak, it was a small specimen, not much larger than the tent it had flattened. Its color in this cold gray light reminded Mirabel most of a mud turtle, a dull brownish green. It lay as it had fallen, in an untidy heap.

But it wasn't dead. Even if thin curls of steam hadn't been coming from its nostrils and partially open mouth, the slow undulation of its sides would have indicated life within. Siobhan, returning with the mud-streaked Dumpling, eyed the dragon suspiciously.

Dumpling whinnied. At that, the dragon opened one gelid eye. Its mouth gaped wider, and more steam poured out. It stirred, black talons scraping as its feet contracted.

"We ought to kill it now," Siobhan said, soothing the jittery pony. "While we can."

"No," Krystal said. "If we kill it now, it'll bleed on the tent, and there go all our clothes."

"If we don't kill it now, and it wakes up and kills us, what use will our clothes be?"

* * *

Recovery from the dragon-change induced by eating a dragonsfoot seed, and then a leaf

of dragonstongue, and then being slathered with Goody Chernoff's anti-wrinkle ointment (guaranteed to hold your present form until a certain conjunction of events) requires three unlikely things to happen within one day, as foretold in the Prophecies of Slart.

"Whanne thatte murke-ox be founde,
in sunlight lying on the grounde,
in autumn's chill to gather heate,
and when the blonde beautie sweete,
her lippes pressed to colde flesh,
and also dragons' song be herde,
then shalle the olde Man spring afresh,
and hearken to commandinge werde."

If the warrior women had known that Cavernous Dire *was* the dragon, bespelled into that form, and if they had known of the Prophecies of Slart—but they didn't. The Prophecies of Slart were only then being penned three kingdoms away by a young woman disguised as a young man, who had not been able to make a living as a songwriter.

* * *

Toying with the man-drake had been fun, but now the big dragon wanted meat. He could always go back and eat the man-drake—but if he did that, he'd be tempted to play with his food awhile longer, and his body wanted food *now*. He sniffed, a long indrawn sniff that dragged the prevailing winds from their courses.

Somewhere . . . ah, yes, murk ox. He sniffed again, long and low. It had been a long time—centuries, at least—since he'd eaten the last murk ox near his own lair. And he did like murk ox. Huge as he was, even one murk ox made a pleasant snack and a herd of them was a good solid meal, food for the recreation he rather thought he'd enjoy later.

The trick with murk ox was extracting them from the murk. They lived in narrow, steep-sided valleys too narrow for his great wings, where the fog lingered most of the day. The great dragon had learned, when much smaller, that flying into murk ox terrain, into the fog, led to bruised wings or worse. There were better ways—entertaining ways—to hunt murk ox.

The great dragon drew in another long, long breath and then *blew*.

* * *

For days a chill wet wind had blown down from the mountains. Now, in the space of a few minutes, it had shifted to the southwest, and then gone back to the northeast, then

back to the southwest again. Back and forth, as if the sky itself were huffing in and out, unsure whether to take in air or let it out.

Then, with startling suddenness, the clouds began rolling up from the southwest, toward the mountains, the bottoms lifting higher and higher until the sun struck under them, glittering and sparkling on the drenched moorland. Higher still the clouds rose, blowing away eastward, and leaving a clear blue sky behind.

Mirabel squinted in the sudden bright gold light, but as far as she could see the land lay clear—wet but drying—in the sun, which struck warmer with every passing minute.

"It's certainly a break from Court procedure," Sophora said. "There every day's much the same, but this—"

"What's that?" asked Siobhan, pointing to a cleft in the mountains a few leagues distant. Little dark dots were moving quickly from what must be the entrance to a narrow mountain valley, out onto the moorland.

Sophora held up her Chancellor's seal, centered with crystal, and put it to her eye. "I had our guild wizard apply a scrying spell," she told the others. "Good heavens—I do believe—it's a kapootle of murk ox."

"Murk ox! But they never come out in the open. Certainly not the whole kapootle."

"Not unless they're chased," Sophora said. "Look." She pointed.

Mirabel recognized the flying shape without having to be told what it was. The big dragon, now gliding very slowly down the mountainside and aiming a stream of fire into the valley where the murk ox had been concealed until the clouds lifted.

Soon the last murk oxen had left the valley, but the great dragon seemed in no haste to snatch them. Instead, it floated low overhead, herding them closer and closer to the women and the smaller dragon. Then it dipped its head from the glide—not even

swooping lower, they noticed, and snatched one murk ox from the herd. They could see it writhe . . . and then the lump sliding down the dragon's long throat, just like an egg down a snake.

Another jet of flame, and the murk ox kapootle picked up speed, lumbering nearer—those splayed hooves now shaking the boggy heath.

"That dragon," Mirabel said. "It's herding them at *us*."

"Oh, good," Sophora said. "I was hoping for some fresh meat on this trip, and hunting's been poor . . ."

"Not that much fresh meat," Mirabel said. The heaving backs of many murk oxen could now be seen quite clearly, though the curious twisted horns could not be distinguished from the muck they were kicking up.

Although it is well known—or at least believed—that a herd of horses or cattle will divide around a group of standing humans rather than trample them, the murk ox kapootle has quite another reputation, which explains why it has not been hunted to extinction by men. No one knows what the murk ox thinks as it gallumphs along, but avoiding obstacles smaller than hills isn't part of its cognitive processes. A kapootle of murk ox will trample all but the stoutest trees, and the mere human form goes down like straw before the reaper.

With the quick decision that characterizes the combat-experienced soldier, the warrior women bolted for the only cover available, that of the still-recumbent dragon on their collapsed tent. Siobhan dragged Dumpling along behind.

In moments, the lead murk ox overran their campsite. Emitting the strident squeaks of a murk ox in mortal fear, the lead ox galloped right over the dragon, digging him painfully in the snout and eye on the way up to his shoulder, and then staggering badly on the slippery scaled ribs, before running on down the declining tail. Only a few of his followers attempted the same feat, and all but one slid off the dragon's ribs, there to be trampled by their fellows. That one, unable to match its leader's surefooted leap down to the tail, launched itself right over the heads of the cowering warrior women, tripped on landing, and broke its neck.

"That was lucky!" shouted Mirabel over the piercing squeaks of the kapootle, now thundering past on either side.

"Yes," Sophora agreed. "Quite plump—a nice dinner for us." She started toward the twitching carcass, but a shadow loomed suddenly. They looked up. The great dragon lowered one foot and plucked the murk ox off the ground, meanwhile watching them with an expression which mingled challenge and amusement.

"You are a wicked beast," Sophora said, undaunted. Mirabel remembered that Sophora had been undaunted even by the Grand Dragon Karshnak, at least until she'd been knocked unconscious by a wing blow.

The dragon winked, and popped the murk ox into its mouth. Flames licked around it; they could smell the reek of burning hair, and then the luscious smell of roasting meat. Then, with a boom and a whirl of air, the dragon was up and away, chasing laggard murk oxen on with a lick of flame, and crooning something that might have been meant for music.

"Well," said Krystal, flicking dabs of muck off her vest. "Now *that's* over, maybe we can do something about getting this mess off our tent, so I can find out what's happened to my clothes."

* * *

Cavernous Dire had slept uneasily, with cold rain trickling down his ribs and under his tail, but each time he'd roused, he'd managed to force himself back to sleep. It hurt less that way. When sunlight struck his eyes in the morning, he clenched his outer lids tight to block it out and hoped for the best. He could feel that his broken bones were mostly mended, and the internal burns were nearly healed as well. But he did not feel like coping with the real world.

He had, however, sneaked peeks at the humans in his immediate vicinity. Four women in bronze and leather, with swords and short hunting spears. Cavernous Dire had not enjoyed human meat when he tried it before, and three of the four warrior women looked unappetizing in any form. The fourth, though, he might have fancied in other situations. She had silvery blond hair, peach-blossom cheeks, a perky nose, teeth like pearls, and a ripely pouting mouth. Years of solitude as a dragon, with a meagre and uninteresting hoard to guard, had given him time to fantasize about women, and this woman met all his qualifications except that she was carrying a very sharp sword.

If he just lay there and pretended to sleep, maybe the women would go away. His draconic scales dulled his tactile awareness enough that he didn't realize he was lying on their tent, and before he listened to enough of their conversation, he became aware of something else.

The ground was shivering. Then shuddering. Cavernous opened one eye just in time to see a dark hairy shape hurtling toward him, and snapped his eye shut. Sharp hard things hit the same tender parts of his snout which the horse had kicked in the dark, and then dented his scales on their way up his head, his shoulder, and along his ribs, where they tickled. And he could sense, with that infallible sense given to man-drakes, that somewhere in the sky the large dragon which had hurt him so badly was lurking, waiting for him to show life so he could be tormented again.

Better the tickle of murk ox hooves than the talons of a dragon. Cavernous hunkered down, feigning unconsciousness as best he could, as the kapootle squeaked and thundered past, though the moment when he sensed the great dragon close above him was almost impossible to bear. Then it was gone, and he dared open his outer eyelids again, just a tiny bit, to see what was going on.

"—And I say we butcher it now!" That was his diminutive blonde, she of the perky nose and accouterments.

"You were the one who said it'd bleed on our gear," the tallest one said. "Besides, Krystal, you really should be grateful to it. It saved our lives."

"And if you say 'What's life without my embroidered nightshirt with the suede fringe?' I will personally roll you through that squashed murk ox," said the one with the crooked nose.

"I am grateful," Krystal said, sounding very cross. "What do you want me to do, Mirabel, kiss it and make it well?"

"Don't be silly," said the one petting the very dirty pony, whose harness was adorned with gleaming gold shapes. For a moment all Cavernous could think of was the treasure wasted on that stupid pony. "We all know you wouldn't kiss anything that ugly, no matter

what it did for you."

"You—you—"

"Like when Rusty the Armorer fixed that helm for you, and all you did was wave at him—"

"Well . . . he's *old*. And he has only three teeth."

The one named Mirabel grinned suddenly. "Come on, Krystal—I dare you. Kiss a dragon. Maybe it *will* cure it."

"Eeeuw!"

"Scaredy-cat."

"Am not!"

"Just think, Krystal, how your . . . mmm . . . special friends will be impressed . . . if you do dare the dragon's breath, that is. If you don't—are they going to respect you, even if you do have that fancy mask?"

Krystal glared at them, shrugged, and twitched the twitchable parts of her anatomy. Then, with a pout the dragon was finding increasingly adorable, she shrugged. "All right. But only because I know you'll make up some horrid story about me if I don't. And not—*not* on the lips."

She sauntered toward the dragon's mouth. Cavernous had to roll his big man-drake eye down to watch her. She leaned over his snout, lips pursed.

From the man-drake's point of view, the kiss was an explosion of sensation unlike

anything he'd ever felt, and the strange feelings went on and on. No one had told him he could turn back into a man, so he hadn't bothered trying to imagine what it would feel like. His eyes opened very wide, but all he could see was whirling colors.

From Mirabel's point of view, Krystal put her lips to the dragon's snout, and the dragon collapsed like a bagpipe's bag, with a sort of warm whooshing noise, and almost simultaneously, the moor burst into spring flower. Where the dragon had been, a scruffy looking naked man hunched against the cool air. Although Mirabel knew nothing about physics, she had just observed that the energy released when a large form condensed to a small one could generate enough heat to activate seeds and accelerate their growth.

Krystal, who had had her eyes shut, stepped back and opened them. When she saw that the tent was no longer covered by a dragon, and that lumps within the wrinkled canvas suggested the remains of their gear, she made straight for the collapsed entrance. A dirty old man didn't interest her at all.

Mirabel had gone on guard instinctively, as had Sophora, and the appearance of Cavernous Dire did not reassure them. Decades of life as a man-drake had left him no handsomer than when he had chosen misering over marriage. Now his greasy hair was stringy gray instead of black, and his lanky form even more stooped. A dirty-looking gray beard straggled past his chest no farther than necessary . . . in fact, not quite far enough. He looked like the sort of man who would lurk in dark alleys to accost the sick or feeble.

"Who are you?" Sophora asked, in her Chancellor voice.

"Cavernous Dire," the man said. His voice squeaked, like an unoiled hinge.

"You're Cavernous Dire?" Mirabel asked. Her mind boggled, then recalled the shape and expression of Bilious Dire, made a quick comparison, and knew it must be true.

"You were a dragon . . ." Sophora said.

"They tricked me," the man said. "Just because I was getting rich and they wanted my money . . ." He sounded peevish, like someone whose neighbors would trick him every chance they got.

At that moment the big dragon returned. They had not heard it gliding nearer, but they heard the long hiss as its shadow passed over them.

"Nooooo!" wailed Cavernous. "Don't let it get me!"

"He's Cavernous Dire?" Krystal said, crawling out from under the tent. "He's the one we were supposed to rescue? Eeeeuw!" Nonetheless, she struck an attitude, peering up at the big dragon with conscious grace.

Mirabel and Sophora both had swords in hand, but Mirabel knew that they hadn't anywhere near the force necessary to tangle with a dragon this size. But they also had nowhere safe to run. The dragon smiled, and let its long, thin, red tongue hang out a little, steaming in the morning air.

What might have happened next, she never knew, but Cavernous Dire suddenly snatched her belt knife, and lunged toward Siobhan and the pony Dumpling.

"Here's treasure!" he screamed, hacking at the horse brasses on Dumpling's harness.

"Hey—stop that!" Siobhan tried to grab his arm, but Dumpling interfered. The pony backed and spun, fighting Siobhan's hold and cow-kicking at Cavernous. The dragon seemed to be amused, and let another yard or so of tongue slide out. Cavernous quit hacking at the brasses individually, and slid Mirabel's knife up under the harness, which parted like butter. Two more slices, and he'd cut it free, all the while dodging Siobhan's angry swats and Dumpling's kicks. He snatched it from the ground, dropping Mirabel's knife, and turned back to the dragon, holding the harness at arm's length.

"Treasure! Gold! Take it! Go away!"

"Yesss. . . ." The long tongue lapped out, and gathered it in—but Cavernous did not let go, and the tongue wrapped round him too, snatching him back into the dragon's toothy maw as a lizard might snatch a fly.

A gulp, and the bulge that had been Cavernous Dire disappeared into the dragon's innards. A flick of the wings, and another, and the dragon was gone, sailing low over the heather, back toward the distant kapootle of murk ox.

Dumpling squealed and bucked, landing on Mirabel's knife, which shattered.

"My best knife—!" Mirabel said.

"I hope he hasn't cut his hoof," Siobhan said.

"My best shirt, ruined!" Krystal held up a nightshirt with a wet stain down one side.

"Shut up Krystal," they all said.

On the way back to the city, they agreed that Bilious Dire need not know the whole story, only that at the end Cavernous had sacrificed himself for others, and been eaten.

* * *

Mirabel's sister had things to say about the outcome which left a coolness of glacial dimensions between them for more than a year. At Monica's instigation, the Weeping Willow Sewing Circle paid for a plaque commemorating the Dauntless Courage of Cavernous Dire, in saving the life of four of the King's Guardswomen from a dragon. Every May-morn, they lay a wreath beneath it. Mirabel Stonefist won't walk by that corner at all anymore. Siobhan Bladehawk narrowly escaped punishment for defacing the plaque as she tried to correct "Four of the King's Guardswomen" to "Three of the King's Guardswomen and One of the King's Cavalrywomen."

In the belly of the dragon, Cavernous Dire remains undigested, a situation acceptable to neither him nor the dragon. Neither of them knows that it is Cavernous's miserly grasp of the pony Dumpling's horse-brass which maintains this uneasy stasis.

Meanwhile, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had a very satisfactory chat with Balon of Torm, whose arms, dyed orange to the elbow, proved he had been dipping into the

treasury. Sophora Segundiflora may be the only person satisfied by the expedition.