

The Old Fire
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Mev clenched her hands together to keep from jumping into the arena after her daughter. At ten years of age, Kitra was so small, so delicate, Mev worried about her getting hurt. But this was the final examination. If Kitra was ever to prove herself, this was the time. The little girl stood at one side of the sandy expanse, taking big breaths that made her shoulders heave under the oversized leather tunic. Suddenly, she sprang into action.

"Eeee!" Kitra shrieked, bearing down on her opponent, her little sword raised in both hands above her head. "Take that! And that!"

The other child, taken by surprise, put up a poor fight. In no time at all, Kitra was holding the bigger boy down with her foot. She pointed the blunted sword at his throat and shrilled, "Surrender or die!"

"That's my girl," Mev said, brushing a tear from the corner of her eye. The child not only looked just like her, with her broad, pointed chin and eager black eyes, but she was a chip off the old tilting block. Mev was so proud she felt her heart would burst. From the hubbub coming from the judges' enclosure near the barrier, she thought it was a sure thing that Kitra would be accepted for junior combat training. The other parents, most of them farmers, millers, coopers and shopkeepers, gathered up their disappointed youngsters, and went back about their business. They weren't really cut out for the warrior

trade. Kitra, on the other hand, had just proved she was fit to carry on a proud family tradition. Mev might not be in the adventuring business any more, but she was giving the world its next heroine.

Something rapped Mev on the shoulder, and she turned around, hand automatically reaching for the sword at her belt. Secondary responses took hold in a moment, telling her that there wasn't a sword there-hadn't been for years-and that knocking the head off one of her neighbors was frowned upon. Instead, she folded her arms and stared balefully at the man who had touched her. He was a stranger.

"And who the blazes are you?" Mev asked.

"You're Mev Grayshield?" The man asked, looking her up and down. "I was expecting someone more..."

Mev put her hands on her hips. True, those hips were somewhat more rounded than they'd been when she was part of the attack force that brought down the Fendarian citadel ten years before, but nevertheless, they were an integral part of the same woman. True, her mass of thick, frizzy dark hair pulled back with a leather thong was shot with white, and her muscular arms were getting a little flabby around the triceps, but how did anyone dare to doubt her identity?

"More what?" she snarled, sticking out her jaw. It was still an impressive jaw.

The skinny, bearded man backed up a hasty pace. He wasn't so much to look at, himself. Probably fifty, ten years older than Mev, a hand's-breadth shorter, and he had the pathetic, pale complexion of a man who went outside only when he had to. He blinked watery blue

eyes at her.

"I'm looking for you, because I need to hire a fearless adventurer."

"Still fearless," Mev said, with a shrug, "but I retired years ago."

The man pursed his lips in amusement, and looked past her at the arena, where Kitra was receiving the congratulations of her companions, the ones who could still walk.

"I see," he said, "but I need you. I am the Wizard Folminade. I serve the Duke of Kelevlund."

"Sorry, friend. There are other qualified warriors. I keep in touch with a number of my old colleagues. I'll give you their names. Ask around. Try the bars in any big city." She started away.

"No," the man insisted, hurrying after her. Mev sized him up with an eye. He was puny. If he got fresh, she could break him in two with one hand. "It's you I need. There's gold in the deal for you. Lots of gold. A lifetimes worth."

Mev eyed him with speculation. It was the first thing he'd said that had made any sense. "All right. Come back to my house and we'll talk."

While Kitra sat on the floor and played siege with her dolls, the stranger outlined his mission.

"Haste is an issue," he said. "You are familiar with the Amulet of Zgrumn?"

The very word hummed with power on the air in the little cottage. Mev felt the stirring of old campaigns in her memory. She nodded.

"I never came across it, but I've heard of it. It'll heal your ills if you can pronounce its name correctly. Changed hands a hundred thousand times. Is that the one?"

Folminade nodded his head. "The duchess is very ill. The healers can do nothing for her. I think it's a magical malady, but my degrees are in divination and strategic defense, not medicine." He looked around the cottage. It wasn't a half bad place, Mev had to admit, although she was a lot better at razing houses than building them. The door had a defensive barricade that barred it in three places when it was shut. The window shutters had spikes on the outside. Even the chimney had a steel grate seven feet from the top so an intruder could get partway in, but couldn't get out without giving her plenty of notice. Only twelve feet underground she could tap a hidden stream. The secret well head was concealed under the clothespress at the foot of her bed. The wizard's soggy gaze returned to her. "We need the amulet."

"Why come to me?" she asked.

"Litfusia has it."

Litfusia! The name sent a chill up Mev's back and down through her belly. She hadn't heard that name in years.

"You're the only person who's ever gone into the white dragon's cave and come out alive," Folminade said. "You can find your way

quickly, more quickly than anyone else." Before she could protest, he grabbed for her wrist. "Please. There isn't time for anyone else. His Grace is counting on you. And there's the reward to think of."

Well, Mev could take or leave the nobility, but money was money. The gold from her first withdrawal from Litfusia's hoard was about gone, and there would be combat school fees to pay, not to mention the fact Kitra was growing out of her kiddy armor; and Mev's two older children, one in wizardry school, one in service to the local lord, always needed something. She hated above all things to tell them they couldn't have it. A ducat didn't go as far as it used to.

"All right," she said.

Folminade's eyes shone like torches under glass. "You won't regret it."

Had it really been twenty years? she asked herself as she cleared away brush and fallen rocks from the mouth of the hidden tunnel that led to the maze of airways far below the dragon's eyrie. Folminade stood by with his arms crossed, watching. Useless bag of bones. The mountain, Litfusia's mountain, loomed above them, dark, rocky and barren, but it didn't seem as terrifyingly high as it had the first time. The paths she had thought as so dangerous and precipitous before were not especially perilous, in light of twenty years' experience. She welcomed the chance to put her first enterprise in perspective, to see if after all this time she really had deserved respect for it, or not.

"Hurry," Folminade said. "It'll see us."

"No," Mev said, calmly. "It'll see the lunch we left out, first. Two nice bullocks and a wild sheep bleating its head off should ring the dinner bell for any self-respecting firebreather."

With a lever formed from a fallen tree branch, Mev pulled away the last rock blocking the entrance. A foul, cold blast of air slapped her in the face. This was it, all right. She wished she could bottle Eau de Dragon's Lair. She'd make a fortune. Anyone who wanted to keep out intruders could spray it all over the outside of his or her house. Unfortunately, it wouldn't keep out tax collectors or beggars. Greed seemed to be the only thing that made you immune to it. Mev put her arms through the straps of her pack, and lit the first of the pitch-soaked torches she'd brought along. Rule two of the barbarian's handbook was that one never lasted long enough to get you out again. Rule one was never carry anything too heavy to keep you from running for your life.

Folminade watched her impatiently. The wind whipped his robe around his skinny legs.

"Well, get on with it," he said.

Mev took a deep breath and prepared herself to climb into the tunnel. Folminade sat down.

"Aren't you coming with me?" she asked.

"Heavens, no!" he said, peevishly. "I'm not an adventurer. I'm a scholar. I've told you what to look for. That's all you should need."

"Useless bag of bones," Mev repeated sourly to herself. She thrust the torch into the entrance.

The flames burned away the cold and with it, much of the rotten smell. Thick swags of spider web and ghostly white moss hung in her way. Mev chased them upward into thin black cinders with the torch. There was a temptation to clear the tunnel to the walls, but the housewife part of her retreated farther into her mind the higher she climbed.

The white dragon was an old adversary, almost the first one Mev had ever faced, as a young and foolish warrior maiden. Litfusia had been very young, too. In retrospect, Mev was grateful for the advantage. It had had very little experience in dealing with humans. Luckily for her, because she had been so green, she'd made all the mistakes the older warriors had warned her not to, which would have gotten her killed by an older and savvier dragon.

With the help of old charts and a guide, Mev had sneaked into the lair through the maze of twisting natural tunnels that served Litfusia as a cross-ventilation system. While it slept off a heavy meal (thoughtfully left out for it beforehand by Mev) she had gathered up a bag of treasure.

The white dragon had collected an astonishing assortment of valuables in a relatively short career. Mev had become so engrossed in picking out the best of the loot that she stopped listening to the dragon's breathing. The sudden silence was what had made Mev look up at last. Never let it see you, the others had said. But if you do,

look hard. It'll be the last thing you'll ever see.

She would never forget as the two of them stood eye to eye, just for a split second. Sometimes she still saw it in her dreams: the white face, almost as tall as she, with its glowing red eyes, backswept fringed ears, and catfish whiskers around the toothy, pointed jaws. On her paws and on the joints of its huge white wings, Litfusia had red claws longer than Mev's hand, but it didn't need them as weapons. That image was burned into her memory forever, then the dragon's pupil slits narrowed, and it hauled back its big head to inhale. Mev ran for it. As the warrior maiden had fled the cavern, the dragon gave her a fire blast to remember her by, burning her leather tunic right off her skin. Mev hadn't been able to sit down for a month. She still had the scars.

Mev had also forgotten to arrange with her guide to stay long enough to guide her back. She had become damned sick of dragging the heavy bag after her by the time she found her way out, though the sum was worth the trouble. Her house, her clothes, and even the sword hanging against her spine had all been paid for by that one great adventure. The escapade gave her bragging rights among bigger, older, and more experienced warriors of both sexes, and made her reputation.

Dragons had long memories and short tempers. The fact that Litfusia would certainly try to kill her if it recognized her was all part of the game. Litfusia was older and wiser, but so was Mev. She meant to earn that reward, if she could. After all, it wasn't easy to reenter the workplace after taking off years to raise a family. She'd always meant to, once her last child was old enough to take care of itself. Mev never thought that the opportunity would be offered to her

so soon.

With a good dollop of cash in hand, Mev could look forward to a very comfortable old age. She could be picky about her next mission, if she took any at all.

When she had been young, she had had to take what she could get. There'd been no thought of retirement benefits for old female warriors. There hadn't been any thought of retirement benefits for old male warriors, either. No one thought warriors could look forward to retiring at all. The job had a nearly 100% mortality rate, if you did it right. Few survived to grow old. Such a thing was considered to be a failure at one's profession. Fewer still thought of providing for their dotage. Mev herself hadn't ever considered the future.

She gained perspective entirely by accident, after she and the warrior general Ricasso had fallen into each others' arms after a long, hot battle in the fifth year of her career. Neither of them ever thought about the possibility of pregnancy. Swordfighting was generally considered to be effective as a means of contraception. Afterwards, it was too late for her to do anything but wear loose tunics. The Stork Goddess was on the way. At last, Mev had had no choice but to retire and go back to her village to await her offspring. Suddenly, she had to consider the needs of someone else, who had call on her services before kings or dukes or gods.

Motherhood was an unprecedented situation in her experience. Mev had to admit that even though she'd found adventuring hard, there was nothing harder than raising a family. Babies were helpless. They couldn't do anything for themselves. When you screamed at crying infants, they sobbed harder. They couldn't assist in a pitched

battle. All of them spat out the healthy diet of hardtack and cabbage water she had lived on for years. They liked soft beds and little animals.

No invasion she had had to withstand, no siege she'd lifted, no monster she had battled, no forlorn hope she'd defended had ever pushed her so close to despair. She was ready to defend her children to the death. This was good when they needed her to dispatch nightmare monsters and wild animals, but she hadn't the slightest idea how to deal with back-yard spats between her little ones and the children who lived in the nearby cottages, or the parents of those children, who kept a healthy distance from the storied swordswoman who lived in their midst like a phoenix in a chicken coop. (She was pretty certain that was why her elder daughter had chosen to enter wizardry school in a village half a day's ride away; none of the boys there would ever have seen her mother bring down a running hare with an ax.) All that came with hard-won experience. She had a lot more respect and sympathy for other women, who hadn't an iota of defense training, yet still stood between their little ones and armed enemy soldiers.

Ricasso had come through her village a few times over the years on the way to a battle or a siege, his visits resulting in a couple more children, and further delays to Mev's return to work. The last time she'd seen him was nine months before Kitra's birth. She heard that he had died gloriously in battle, exactly the way he'd have wanted to go. Pity. He'd have enjoyed this mission, a straight grab-and-run, with the possibility of additional loot, plus a guaranteed reward for success. It was almost impossible to fail. She could almost picture herself as that fierce, young warrior maiden who had helped to overrun citadels, force city gates and kill a thousand enemies.

Onward, she urged herself, climbing steadily up through the narrow tunnels toward the cave of the dragon.

Whew! The way hadn't been this tight when she was a lass. The gussets that her village blacksmith had had to put up each side of her chainmail jerkin were put to the test in the last few yards before she reached Litfusia's cave. No way to deny it: she wasn't the sylph she'd been. She had already had to abandon her bronze breastplate at the last turning. Mev tossed her torch out before her and left her pack behind in the last wide bend. With a mighty wriggle, she emerged in a low stone chamber like an anteroom. On the other side of a crack in the stone was the hoard, and somewhere in its midst, the amulet. She guessed it had taken her three or four hours to make the climb. She was out of breath. Her torch flared and guttered from the breeze coming in Litfusia's front door. Mev hid it on the inside wall so its flame couldn't be seen from the other room. She put her eye to the opening.

The air was warm, telling her the dragon was at home. Had Litfusia eaten up the bait she had left out on the path, and come back to sleep it off? Litfusia was there, all right, but not sleeping. Mev spotted it under the mouth of the cavern that led out into the upper air. The dragon was writhing around, bellowing and blowing streamers of flame from its sharp-toothed jaws. Litfusia seemed to be fighting with another, much smaller red dragon. The great white beasts rough hide glowed like a moonstone.

Good, Mev thought. It'll be too busy to deal with me. She crept through the crack, onto the heap of treasure. Mev looked around her

in dismay. By the Raven God, why did tax collectors never visit beasts? At the current high rate of tax in the kingdom, this lot would have been reduced by 40% at least! It was going to take Mev forever to sort through it. Litfuscia's fight couldn't last much longer. It seemed as though the white dragon was winning. The wee beast, less than a tenth her size, was on the ground, flopping around limply. Mev stared at it in disbelief. No! Litfuscia wasn't fighting. She was giving birth.

Mev had never thought of the beast as having a gender, let alone that it was female. Dragons of both sexes were equally long-lived and greedy. Female, she mused, as she turned back to the heap of treasure. Think of that. Huh. Well, thank the gods for useful distractions.

While the dragon was busy, Mev set about looking for the amulet. Folminade had given her a full description. She wanted a six-foot staff with snakes wound around it and its name engraved on the collar of the big, round, blue gem that was set on the top. That was surely what had attracted the dragons attention in the first place. Litfuscia liked blue. No sapphire hoard or cobalt mine a thousand miles in any direction was safe from its-her-marauding. Staying in the shadows, Merv crept over piles of necklaces, goblets, heaps of gold and gems, jewel-encrusted weapons that shifted under her or poked her as she passed. What a load of garbage! Did the dragon collect just anything because it was gold? She slid down a dune of treasure with a noise like a thousand pans falling downhill. Thank gods the dragon was making too much noise to hear her. Mev tripped over a thin shape that for a moment filled her with hope. It turned out to be a herald's trumpet. Why had Litfuscia stolen a herald's trumpet, of all stupid things? Not that Mev herself had any particular use for heralds; if people didn't know your name, having someone blather it all over the

landscape wasn't really going to do much for your reputation. Maybe the poor bugger had looked tasty. Mev gulped, hoping Litfuscia wouldn't fancy a middle-aged swordswoman.

In a low dip, she came across a full suit of blue armor for a very tall man. Mev was afraid to open the visor and see if the original owner was still inside. The quantity of bones and partial skeletons strewn about the cavern told her that plenty of unsuccessful adventurers had essayed Litfuscia's hoard since she'd been there. Maybe she had had a run of beginner's luck the first time. Sweat ran under the bronze cap on her head and dripped into her eyes and down her neck. Her palms were wet and slippery under the heavy gloves. For the first time, she felt pulled down by the effects of age and a less energetic lifestyle than she'd led as a warrior. She must be careful.

Mev heard a change in the sounds behind her. The dragon was crooning and keening horribly, flames licking about her head. Had it spotted her? She flung herself over the piles of treasure into a crevice of the rough stone wall, pulled her cloak over herself, and huddled down. Mev gasped for breath. She was more out of shape than she had thought. Merely pulling a plowshare, chopping wood, and hauling bags of grain was no substitute for real exercise. Mev vowed to start a toning regimen the moment she got out of here. Time was running away.

The noises got more desperate. Mev moved aside a fold of cloak to see what was happening.

Litfuscia was going crazy. She was crooning, bending her long scaly neck down, then throwing it up in the air to keen. Her wings flapped aimlessly, driving dust and ashes around the cavern. Her

pale hide had lost all its luster. Mev picked herself up just a little to see the dragonet. It wasn't moving. There was no flame coming out of its open mouth. It wasn't breathing. Litfuscia was bending over it, emitting soft cries of distress. What would Ricasso do in a case like this? She could almost hear his voice saying, "Kill them both, while you have the chance." But Mev couldn't do it.

The red dragon chick lay still, and Litfuscia was powerless to help it. Mev felt something she never thought in a thousand lifetimes she would feel for any dragon, and this one in particular: compassion. The baby's pilot light hadn't lit. Mev knew a lot about dragons, and had studied this species in particular before her first trip. Firebreathers were born breathing fire. If they didn't flame in the first few minutes after birth, they didn't make it.

Litfuscia kept trying to breathe into its mouth, but her flame was too big. She'd toast the chick, it was so small. She was too panicky to control herself. Mev felt sorry for the little one, and, in a sense of perfectly reasonable self-preservation in a mind so clear it amazed her, decided the last thing the kingdom needed was an insanely bereaved mother dragon cannoning around the landscape. Mev wriggled over the treasure heap and made for the tunnel where she had left her torch.

She came back with it in her hand, walking openly into the center of the cavern. The noise alerted Litfuscia, who was facing her way when she emerged. The dragon pulled her head back, eyes wide, the whiskers around its mouth standing out rigid. Mev's mouth dried with fear as she stuck her chin out defiantly at her old enemy.

"Yes, it's me, you old blowtorch," she croaked, her throat tight.

All her muscles ached, and her hand trembled disgracefully. "I've got this. Your baby needs help." She tried to approach the unmoving infant, but Litfusia put her head between it and Mev. The dragon shot out a tongue of flame, and Mev jumped back. She glared.

"Time's a wasting, you stupid mobile furnace! Move aside!" Mev shouldered the huge head away, and jumped for the infant dragon before Litfusia could try to flame her again. She knelt beside the body and took the small head in her right hand, prying open the mouth with her thumb. Dammit, but those little teeth were sharp! The knuckle-long canine pricked right through her best gauntlet.

Mev brought the torch close and tried to get the flame into the small mouth. Even that weak fire was too big. She couldn't break the ember apart, and there was no useful fuel in the cavern; Litfusia had burned it all up over the years. Mev cast around for something smaller. The trumpet! Perfect! As the dragon's head followed her like a giant weathervane, she clambered back to get the long tube.

The trumpet was a yard too long, but it was soft gold. With her sword, she whacked off the bell and turned it up into the dragonet's mouth like a funnel. She shoved the torch ember into the bell and blew the flame down the infant's throat. Mev felt ridiculous, breathing flame to save the life of a dragon. The Spider God would have loved the irony. There was a hiccup and a smell like burning leather, then a blast of flame roared out the trumpet's end. Hot! Mev dropped the tube and waved her fingers to cool them. The infant dragon opened its eyes. They were yellow-gold, like amber with the sun behind it. They fixed on her, and the chick trilled adoringly.

With an indignant howl that sounded like jealousy, the big dragon

pushed Mev away. Litfusia crooned over the wriggling infant like any mother, picked up a clawful of meat from somewhere and dropped it in front of the infant. The baby fell to hungrily, gurgling fire as it cooked and ate its first meal. Mev, remembering the trumpet and the suit of armor, wondered what the meat was, and felt a little sick.

Litfusia suddenly remembered she was being observed. She reared her head back again and glared fully at Mev. Nostrils steaming, she took in a big lungful of air. Mev was outraged.

"Oh, this is the thanks you give me, huh?" she said, planting her hands on the hips of her chainmail jerkin. "I exposed myself, putting myself in peril to save your baby. To hell with you, then." So it was to be a battle. She reached for her sword hilt. Her skills were rusty. She had no idea how she'd fare.

Litfusia stopped, letting the smoke trickle out of both sides of her mouth. The fire in her red eyes abated, as if she was taken aback. She cocked her head at Mev, whimpering with frustration. She looked at the baby, and back at the human female. Making a noise between a gurgle and a roar, the dragonet had moved on to the second pile of meat. It looked at Mev, too, its bright eyes fearless, knowing that its mother would defend it from every nightmare monster that moved. Chicks weren't that different from babies, Mev realized. And the dragon knew it, too. Litfusia felt gratitude towards her, and had no notion of how to handle such a concept. Mev wasn't certain, either. She'd never had a monster in her debt before.

"Wizard's amulet," Mev said, letting her hand drop. "Staff with round gem on top. That's what I came for. I'll fight you for it if I have to, but frankly, we're too old for that kind of thing, and you've got

better things to do."

The dragon appeared to agree. Grudgingly, she arched her long, white neck right over Mev's head and pointed into a corner the warrior had had no time yet to search.

"Thanks." Mev stood up, torch in hand. Something touched her leg. The little red dragon was reaching for the brand. "Oh, all right." Mev didn't need it. There was plenty of light to see by from the cave mouth. She offered the torch to the chick, who chewed happily on the ember. Litfusia made a dangerous sound in her throat. She was jealous of Mev, something that made the human woman feel smug.

She picked her way over the ground, surveying the treasure as she went. A big armring rolled in front of her feet, and she reached down for it. It was solid gold, studded with rubies. Not Litfusia's usual style. Bugger Folminade's reward; she could get what she needed right here. Mev started to put it in her pack. She heard a warning growl from the dragon.

"All right, all right," Mev said, dropping it like a guilty child. "Can't blame me for trying." In a heap against the cavern wall, Mev saw a finger of gold and knew at once she had found what she sought. The crowning blue gem glittered as she took the staff. Mission accomplished.

"Thank you," Mev said, turning back to Litfusia. "You've got a pretty chick, by the way."

The head cocked again, as if to thank her. Then, it drew back on its great neck. Litfusia took a huge, deep breath, and Mev knew the

truce was over. They were back to business as usual. She wasn't about to argue. Flames were licking out of Litfusias nostrils, and smoke was curling around her head. Mev didn't need it spelled out any more obviously. She ran for her life.

She turned and hurtled for the tunnel mouth. As she stumbled down the piles of golden treasure, she heard the roar of flame. Mev felt heat blast her from behind as she tumbled head first over the threshold. Ow! Not again! As Mev scrambled back through the narrow stone tube with the staff in her fist, she heard a deep, grunting sound. Litfusia was laughing. Then Mev heard scaly feet rustling away over the piles of coins, another mother going back to her baby.

"Why did you spare the dragon?" Folminade wailed, when Mev told him the story. He wrung his skinny hands together. "You could have killed both of them! They were vulnerable."

"You only hired me to get the staff," Mev pointed out, thrusting it into his arms. She stood over him with her arms folded, and waited. She couldn't have sat down if she'd wanted, not with the new burn on her bottom, but she felt energized by accomplishing a successful mission. "Dragons are extra. Lots extra."

It wasn't strictly true, and they both knew it. He was aware of her reputation, knew that the fierce Mev Grayshield had had no trouble executing extracurricular kills for free in the past, but he hadn't been up there. It had not been in her to attack the dragon or its chick. After all, Litfusia had been a fellow female in trouble. She was sure the dragon wouldn't have given her the same courtesy, but that was the

difference between humans and dragons. Part of the game. "My reward, please."

The wizard, grumbling, reached for the heavy leather bag at his belt. He poured a small pile of coins onto a flat rock, less than a third of the contents. "There you are."

"Thank you," Mev said, and took the bag. Folminade started to snatch it back, but Mev cleared her throat meaningfully. With a wary look in her direction, he withdrew his hand. He'd be safer facing the dragon than to be cheap with Mev. People like him really burned her backside. Mev shifted, and the heavy chainmail jerkin rubbed uncomfortably over her new scorches. Even more than Litfusia.

"Quite," Folminade said, with resignation, picking up the remaining coins. "My lord and lady thank you for your service."

"Call me any time," Mev said, with an airy wave. "I'm back in business." The wizard started off down the path toward the valley with the precious amulet in his hands, shaking his head and muttering. She grinned after him.

Besides, she thought, as she tied the pouch to her pack, she could think of her act of mercy as job security. Now that she'd ensured the survival of the next generation of dragons, there would be a beast left for her daughter to challenge one day. But Mev would definitely have to warn Kitra to fireproof the backside of her armor.