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A QUEST IN REVERSE

Emma Bell

My parents, when I had reached the age of five, gave me a gold coin. I wrapped my pudgy hand around it and marveled at how the light danced across the reflective surface. It was cool to the touch. The shiny face of the coin winked at me when I tilted it back and forth in the light.

“This,” my parents said excitedly, like it was some great secret, “is glory.”

I took the coin and put it high on the mantle above the fireplace. It looked lonely up there by itself, and I was sure that if I could collect more then it wouldn't be so alone.

Golden coins, true golden coins, are harder to come by than I had thought at the ripe age of five. Still, I didn't give up. When I was old enough, I went into the local tavern, looking for quests that would suit my needs. Wanted posters, hung by the esteemed kingdom guards, were meant to entice amateur bounty hunters to catch small prey. They layered over each other and at the bottom of each one was a reward written in stiff, red script.

The rewards varied in amount, but it was always gold. My desire was not uncommon, and I knew that even compared to amateurs, I would be considered a novice.

Still, I took up some of the smaller tasks and hunts. Though I had to learn how to keep my hands steady as I crossed perilous caverns, evade the heated blows of criminals and monsters alike, I did not regret my decision. When I returned from an adventure with whatever group I had been traveling with, we treated ourselves to a hearty meal and rejoiced that we were just a little richer.

My dream was becoming vivid life and my gold coin was not so lonely.

I still held them in my hands, though the years had grown my hands into calloused palms with long, slender fingers. They no longer shook when I stood before a great beast and weaved the coins between my fingers with steady surety. These same hands still turned over the gold coins like they were something new and unique, still tilted them so they caught the sun.

Eventually there was fresh parchment hung in the tavern. On its face was a detailed picture of an elegant dragon, rippling scale dark blue like the night, its lips curled in distaste.

I had never dealt with dragons before. They were grand and dangerous creatures who took to the sky rarely and only in search of a new object for their hoard. Their breath of fire was said to burn away poorly made armor and flesh with ease. Normally, I would have scoffed at the prospect of slaying a dragon, but the reward, in its stiff, red ink, was too large to pass by. The task seemed too dangerous to complete alone, so I requested company on such a dangerous quest. The other amateurs I had often gone with on lesser adventures laughed at my suggestion.

Despite the tempting reward, they saw the threat as too great, even for great amounts of gold. It would be of no use to anyone if they were all dead, they said.

I would not hear it.

If I had to go alone, I would. And so, I did.

The dragon had hidden itself away in the overlapping folds of a mountain range. As I scaled the sharp cliff faces, the cold wind bit at my face, but I did not cease. The gray cliffs were soon covered in snow as I

reached the summit of one of the mounts and I rejoiced at having remembered to bring my thick woolen coat.

At long last, I began to descend from the dreary mountain. Once I was beneath the clouds, I was greeted by a warm green valley that lapped at the base of the mountains. In the center of this valley was a deep canyon. The green retreated from it, revealing the red dirt beneath. It was then that I knew the exact place the dragon had hidden.

The forests I traveled through were brimming with fresh fruit and under shaded logs or roots, mushrooms and moss flourished. I gathered the food greedily, stuffing any extra in the deepest pockets of my reliable leather bag. It was quiet save for the happy chirping of the birds and the occasional buzzing of a bee or beetle. With the sweet juice dripping down my chin and the kind sun warming my back, I knew I had not been wrong risk this journey. This great peace that I found deserved to be enjoyed. I was only sad I was enjoying it in solitude. The sun was warm on the upturned planes of my face, but I could not ignore the chilling absence of a community.

I could not stay though. After eating my fill, I began to traverse that rocky, barren ground. At its edge, a deep chasm yawned before me. Shadows enveloped the true extent of the cavern, but I knew the dragon had to be in its depths.

Taking a stone the size of my palm into my hand, I tossed it down into the ravine and listened carefully for it to hit the rocky floor. Many seconds passed before I heard anything and when I finally did, it was not the sound of a rock hitting the ground. It was the sound of heavy wings flapping as the dragon, larger than I thought any beast could be, flew into sight in front of me. Its nostrils flared and cerulean scales glittered in the sunlight.

Fumbling with the sheath, I drew a hefty broad sword and leveled it at the great beast.

In response, it leaned its head down against the red earth. It did not seem irate

or irrational. In its face, I could see an expression that resembled human curiosity. Rising from its neck was a tall woman who began walking toward me, a thick rope bound around her waist.

She told me of the coveted hoard, full of gold and the sorts of things that kings and adventurers alike desire, which this dragon had collected. She modestly bowed her head to me as she explained her own duty.

"We protect the hoard," she said and gestured plainly to the rope, "In return, the dragon protects us."

"How many are you?" I asked.

Her face was naturally serious, but as we spoke it creased with a kind smile. I saw the others, standing tall among the trees. Nine, including the eldest who spoke to me. It was her who offered me the rope, the dragon's white eyes boring into me as it watched.

I tied the rope myself.

The other Protectors of the Hoard came to welcome me. They did not mind my excitement or confusion when they gathered me into a large embrace. I was like a child to them, and they trailed in my wake as I became accustomed to the heavy weight of the rope. It was like holding that first gold coin again for the first time. I longed to become as strong and as wise as the Protectors.

That, I was sure, would bring me glory.

At first, I was fawned over. Even the great dragon kept its watchful eyes on me. As time passed, however, I was left to myself on the edge of the cliff where I was to watch for trespassers. It was luck that I had collected the fruit and luck that I was content enough to eat it, even as I watched other Protectors fly down toward the hoard on the dragon's neck. After many days, I realized that I had no way of communicating with my family, who by now surely thought me dead.

I could not return home, for the rope would constrict against me when I attempted to travel back. I could not even travel into the woods to collect more food. My multiple attempts left my torso with a ring of tender bruises.

Eventually, I learned it was wise to leave some slack in the rope. I hoped and waited, as my meager supplies ran dry, for the dragon's return. It came for all the others and so, I thought, if I were patient, it might come for me too.

More days passed and the dragon still had not come. My food had run out long ago and so I, mad with hunger and desperation, grabbed the rope with two hands and pulled until I heard the flapping of wings.

The dragon's massive body towered over me. Behind it stood the other Protectors, passively watching. I explained that I had run out food and begged the dragon even for a few more lengths of rope to gather from the surrounding forest. In response, the dragon leaned its large head down on the rust-colored ground, its white eyes glowing against the dark blue scales. I knew from watching the others to climb upon it and hold tightly to the divots between the scales.

It waited only for me to still before it took flight once more and I scarcely managed to keep my grip. I felt its great body moving beneath me, curving to fly downward into the stomach of the earth. The light could not reach down into the canyon and it did not matter whether my eyes were opened or closed, for I was blind either way.

After a long while when the only light came from the dragon's burning eyes, a small, yellow light appeared even further down.

As we flew closer, it began to take shape. In a pillar of stone, a cave had been formed, and from that cave came the warm, yellow light. Several golden spheres cast the comforting glow and I reached up to touch one as it floated by. It felt fuzzy and electric when it brushed against my fingers. Inside the cave, from what I could see on the dragon's neck, were stacks and piles of gold and jewels. In the air, partnered with the wet smell of the dirt, wafted scents of cooked meat and bread that made my starving mouth water. Somehow, the other Protectors had gathered here as well and were toasting to my arrival. They

drank from large goblets, encrusted in gold and silver, that were filled to the brim with a dark red wine.

The dragon landed and one of the younger Protectors, who I had watched climb on the dragon's neck the day before, gave me a smile and clapped me twice on the back as I stepped down from the dragon's neck. Likely spurred on by this, the others came up to pull me into their circle as well. One filled my hands with bread still warmed from the oven and another piled some of the roast on top.

Once again, I ate greedily until both my heart and stomach were full. When I had finished my meal, one of the elders gave me a filled goblet. I held the glass up high, as the others were doing, and took large swigs as the others did. The cave was filled with such light and merry contentment that I dreaded returning to my lonely post. The Protectors held each other arm in arm and the younger one who had welcomed me here linked up our arms with ease as the dancing began.

Too soon, the dragon placed his large foot on my tightened line of rope and pulled me, now full and merry, away from the fellow Protectors. I reached out for the extended hands of the others but was out of reach. The eldest of us stood behind her sisters, an unreadable expression on her face.

Time and time again it happened. The dragon would come for me only when I pulled on the rope for food and take me down to the hoard again. When I had my fill, it would pull me back from my sisters and place me back on that lonely cliff. These other Protectors, who I had come to call my sisters, were never pulled away. They never had to pull on their rope for food. The dragon tended to them like a caring parent but left me alone.

I did not understand why, even with the rope, my sisters had more freedom than me. I did not understand why they could willfully go to the hoard, and I could not.

No matter how many times I asked the dragon, it would not answer.

The time came when I was hungry

again, but I could not make myself call for the dragon. I knew I could not stand it if I were brought to the hoard again, but unable to stay. The rope I had tied myself was choking me.

I turned and began walking as far as I could away from the cliff edge. The rope became taut and began cutting into the soft skin of my stomach until I could not continue. The dry, red earth bled into prosperous green just a few paces ahead, but I could not reach it. I turned once more to look back at the chasm, home to the dragon with its heavenly hoard. Home to the Protectors who had given me food and took me, arm in arm, to dance with them.

At my side rested the sword I had come here with. It weighed heavily now against me and had become dull with disuse. Despite this, my hands did not fumble as they wrapped around the handle to pull it out. The sword had been with me longer than the rope had, but I could never find the strength within myself to pull it free. As I examined the sword, I came to a decision.

Most would kill the dragon. That's what would give me the reward, it was why I had come here in the first place. It had trapped me here, lured me to its side with the promise of glory, with the promise of belonging, only to hold them just beyond me. But I could not kill the dragon.

If I killed the dragon, I would have to fight the Protectors. Even now, I know very little, but I knew then I could not do that. And besides, a dragon will always be a dragon. It always had been. It could not help its power, its mass, its shortsightedness. It was my foolishness that fell for the vivid scales, that saw humanity in the white reptilian eyes.

I did not need to stain the sword with blood.

Having decided, I picked up the heavy broad sword, my knuckles white with effort. The finality of this decision made my eyes sting, and it was not long before my face was wet with tears. The weight of this decision, of the sword, and the swirling grieving determination inside of me all compounded in my chest, in the erratic

clanging of my heart.

The cacophony was brought into terrifying stillness as I hefted the sword above my head. As I held the rope taut.

I brought down the sword and the corded rope snapped.

The dragon let out a tremendous wail. The mournful sound echoed against the surrounding mountains, and I was tempted to pick up the rope and tie the frayed ends back together, even if it was just so I could put an end to the cries.

I didn't.

I let the sword hang from my hand, its tip dragging against the ground. My stomach ached so sharply it could have been mistaken for hunger, but I knew that it was not. It was that very same treacherous pain that I felt seeing that lonesome coin up on the mantle. That loathsome desire.

As I stood there, watching the frayed remains of the tether and being unable to block out the dragon, the other Protectors of the Hoard began to appear - like specters - out of the horizon.

They were the ones I had envied, had eaten with, had wept over. I was weeping for them then. Their warm, tender hands braced my shoulders and gave me little valuable pieces of gold they'd been allowed to take from the hoard - bracelets, coins, an intricate pendant. I felt my eyes overflow yet again at their kindness. A part of me wanted to latch on and never let go.

I knew they had blessed me with their welcoming grace when I first had first tied the rope. And I know they watched sadly as I failed to do what they all had: gain the dragon's favor. More than that, I knew they were displaying a rare kind of grace now, greater than any that had been extended before. One beyond words, that lovingly discarded the usual boundaries.

The eldest of the Protectors, whose stern face and innate wisdom had always intimidated me, went ahead of all her sisters to stand in front of me. Carefully, so, so very carefully, she wiped my stubborn tears, brushed the stray hairs out of my face, and bent down to place a soft kiss on my forehead.

It was permission.

It was forgiveness.

I forced down the wave of fierce emotion that threatened to overtake me and grabbed her wrist to hold to my lips in thanks.

Her stern face melted with a sad smile, and she placed her hands once more on my shoulders to turn me away from them, from the tether. Finally, she gently pushed me forward into a slow march away from the chasm.

I pretended not to feel the pain of loss as it warred with the triumph of release, but I fear they will always go hand in hand when I think of the dragon.

The sword was heavy and the pain was great, but as I reached the shaded forest floor and plucked a fresh peach from the tree, I knew I would have the strength to continue. And I knew I could not turn back.

The dragon would mourn me and I would mourn that special sisterhood, but just as the dragon must protect its hoard, I had to leave. I had to return. To end and to begin again

