



The  
Dragon  
Deal

By  
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# The Dragon Deal

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So a few months ago I was just setting myself up with a pot of tea and a hot water bottle to take to bed when I gets me a knock on the door to my wagon. “Here, now,” I says to meself, “Who can this be knockin’ on me wagon at this time of night?” So I wraps me a shawl about me shoulders and goes over to find out.

“Who is it?” I called out from my side of the door and this young man’s voice mutters something and I say, “You’ll have to speak up, luv. I can’t hear you none through the wood, like.”

So he ups his voice and says he’s looking for Madame Zazibella, which is me alright, and I tells him, “I’m afraid the spirits have all settled for the evening, but if you wants your fortune read you can return tomorrow morning.”

“Oh no,” says he, “I don’t need any fortunes read...”

“So what is it then?” I asks, but then I gets me this bad omen, like ravens flying low on a windy day, but in me head, like, and I says, “Here! This isn’t about Sybil’s Cat-Fer-Every-Tree thingo, is it? I already told her, my Whisky’s staying right here with me and if she doesn’t like it-“

But he interrupts and is all, “Oh not at all, ma’am, I’m just here looking for some advice, that’s all, and they tells me you’re the one to help.”

So I opens the door a crack and has me a look at the young fellow outside. “Dear me,” I says to meself. “He looks like a man of noble bearing.” And knowing that a man of noble bearing tends to be the kind of man to be generous with his purse I figures it might actually be nice to have a little more company before I heads off to bed.

“Alrighty then,” I tells him and unlocks me door. “Come in and take a seat at the table. I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

Now here’s a wee touch of inside industry knowledge for ye. The spirits and the omens don’t always like to cooperate nicely so sometimes you

need to judge a mark- I mean a client by other stuff and after a while you can read 'em like you would a bit of paper, which is what I do with this chap.

So in he comes and I immediately regret me decision. Noble bearing he may have in the dark, but in the light he starts to show his wrinkles. I've never seen a young man look so old, I haven't; balding before his time, fine clothes that have been repatched to the point of motley, breastplate shined so often it's been worn down to foil. But what strikes me most of all is his feet; they's naked, and that shocks me. This young man has taken his boots off at my doorway.

Now that's a bit of chivalry I's not seen in a long time. Most folks coming in treat me wagon like a hovel, which it well may be, but it's MY hovel and I like to keep it clean, y'see.

So I picks up that not only is this man of noble blood but he's one of the rare ones of noble heart too. Two usually don't mix, y'see.

Sorry sight indeed, poor fellow, and he could do with a break. So I figures me right there and then

to give him a helping hand. Much as I can, anyways. Even moreso when I comes back to the table with a pot of tea and guess what he does next? He stands up and pulls my stool out for me. Well that just makes my day, doesn't it. It's been many years since I've had a gentleman pull my stool out, and I'll thank you not to snigger at that comment.

We gets settled and I pour the tea and put out me palm, which he crosses with silver, and as he does so I sees that he's down to his last few coins, but business is business and I tuck the groats away in my apron and we gets down to the caper.

“So what can I help you with, dear?” I asks him.

“Well,” he says and clears his throat and he “umms” and “ahhs” for a bit.

So I says, “Let me guess, then. You're the last son of a noble line fallen on hard times looking to reclaim your fortune and you wish to know how you can reclaim your riches?”

“Well, that's mostly accurate,” he says. “But I do have a job at the moment.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. And it doesn’t seem right to claim riches unless they’ve been earned.”

“Is that so?”

He nods at me. “My family has indeed lost its great wealth, but I can’t rightly blame destiny or fate for that. My father and his father before him squandered their birthrights, it must be said, so I can’t claim that our low position hasn’t been justly earned.

We lost it fairly and if I’m to reclaim our position I’d like to do so equally as honest, as it were.”

“Very honourable of you,” I said as I finally realised that I was dealing me with an idiot. “Is it love, then? Some fine lady has swayed your heart and you wants best to know how to woo her? Perhaps she be lowborn and you seek a way to subvert the harsh rules of heretid- heredidit- he- ancient custom and whatnot, yes?”

“Oh no, ma’am,” he said. “No, I’ve no special lady...”

“Ah,” I said with a wink. “No special lady, indeed. I think I take your meaning, Sir.”

I leaned over to my cabinet and pulled out my spice boxes. “I’m quite accustomed to young folks seeing me, you know, though I do commend your foresight. It’s usually the lassies who come, but it is nice to see a man taking some responsibility for once. This little pouch contains enough for about four doses. Just put it in some lukewarm water and drink about an hour before you hit the haystack. No chance of reaping the harvest of any sown oats, if you gets me meanin’ and doesn’t affect the beanstalk’s integrity none neither, so’s the chaps tell me...”

“Oh!” he cries and turns red as a monkey’s bum. “No! I mean, thank you, but no. That’s not... I mean, I don’t... I never... Not until I’m rightfully wed, you see...”

“What? You mean you’ve never?”

“Well, of course not.” He seemed genuinely puzzled. “What would my prospective wife think of me?”

“I can’t imagine,” I says with no small sympathy for this theoretical prospective wife. “Well what is it ye be wanting from me, then?”

“Well,” he says, “They tell me that you can give me some advice on dragons.”

“Do they now?” I says, all cagey-like. “They seems to be quite a talkative ‘they’ indeed. Exactly who is this ‘they’ what’s telling you all this stuff about me?”

And so he goes on to tell me he’s been hard on his luck of recent and Duke Walder did him a favour, but now the Duke’s called in on the debt and is sending him off to fetch some crown from a dragon’s hoard.

“I see. And the Duke told you I might be knowing something about dragons, did he?”

“No, ma’am. I asked at the library if they had any information that could help and the lady there informed me you might be of assistance.”



I nodded. “Halfling woman with brown curly hair? That’d be Lilly. And I wager she charged you more than three groats for that recommendation, didn’t she?”

“She did insist I had to join the library before she could help me.”

“Of course she did.”

“And it was outside of library hours so there was a premium charge.”

“I’m beginnin’ to see how your family ended up so impov’rished,” I says, but the lad’s paid his silver and I makes it a point to give honest answers for honest coin. “Well, best advice I can give ye on dragons is to keep well clear of the treacherous beggers, and that’s a fact. Ever seen a dragon?”

“I’ve seen paintings of the beasts.”

“Beasts? Dragons ain’t no beasts, young man. Maybe the icewyrms can be considered beasts, or even wyverns, but dragons? They’s far too smart

and proud to be called beasts. Best way I was taught was to treat ‘em like emperors, but each has their own preference. Verxighares the Tyrant was the best example of what one might call the ‘typical’ dragon, if such a term could be used. If you approached him all groveling and praising he’d be willing to accept an audience, long as he had something to gain from it.

Jeruthuulm the Thunderwurm was more fickle, and I never liked dealing with him; he had a terrible temper on ‘im and little liking for us lesser races, but he had a fondness for oranges and would become almost playful if you brought him a few barrels. On the other hand, Rezhikhurnaas the Bane of the Broken Mountain was surprisingly down to earth and would speak with you almost as an equal if she found you honest and interesting.”

“You make it sound as if you’ve actually met them.”

“I have. Wasn’t always an old woman, was I? Used to be a damsel in my younger years, before that caper turned foul. Bet you’ve heard the tales of them, haven’t ye?”

“You were held captive by a dragon?”

“You’ve heard too many stories, young man,” I says. “Guess it’s been long enough that the truth can’t hurt. Most of the other damsels’re gone now, and I ain’t far from joinin’ ‘em. I s’pose someone’s got to fess up at some stage. I was never captive; none of us were. We was all in it together.”

He gives me this cross-eyed look as if he doesn’t get what I’m sayin’ so I goes back to the very beginnin’.

“It all started with Princess Isabel of Dire Loch. She were betrothed to her father’s best and most loyal knight, Sir Gerhard, but she’s no interest in him or marriage at all, so she hires a group of mercenaries to snatch her away; makes it look like she’s been got by bandits, y’see.

Her father goes mental and promises a quarter of his kingdom to Gerhard if he rescues her back from these ‘bandits’ and he goes off to fetch her. Sure enough, he butchers the lads and returns with his fiancé, much to her annoyance. So then she hires a sorceress to spirit her off.

King promises half his kingdom and Gerhard kills the 'witch' and brings her back again. By now she's desperate and runs off on her own, but Gerhard's on her tail already bein' promised the whole kingdom. So she hides herself in a cave and meets Jhiranox the Sly.

"Now Jhiranox was only a young dragon then, but she's a canny one and so's the princess, so together they works out a plan So Isabel pretends she's captured by the dragon, Gerhard rides up all brave and ferocious, the dragon's too young to take on a knight of Gerhard's caliber and flees, and Gerhard takes her back to the king. Soon as they get back, the king grants Gerhard his entire kingdom and Isabel insists that she be married right away. Everyone agrees, they gets wed, and they ride back to Gerhard's castle with an honour guard sprinklin' rose petals all the way.

"Now here's where it gets hot. Since Gerhard's been out looking for Isabel he ain't at home guarding his hearth, hall, and hoard, y'see. So while the wedding's been on, Jhiranox has turned up to Gerhard's home and razed it, nicking everything of worth. Then, about the time that Gerhard and his

men turn up to find his castle ruined, Jhiranox has gone to the king's castle and done the same; after all, all his fighting men are in the honour guard protecting the newlyweds.

With no money to pay them, Gerhard's soldiers soon abandon him and he swiftly falls into a sickness that seems to have nothing to do with poison, oh no, nothing at all."

"That's horrible!" says young Ivan, and I corrects him.

"That," I says, "is just the beginning. Isabel and Jhiranox splits the takings fairly and promise they'll never see each other again. But it only takes a year or two and they meets up again. Isabel's been investing in a trading fleet with this merchant captain called Umbata, but he's taken the profits and sailed off into the Scarlet Sea.

She's managed to get her revenge by getting one of the crew to scuttle the ship, but now all the loot is on the sea floor and she's got no way to reclaim it. But then she has a think about her old friend Jhiranox, who's more than capable of pulling up the treasure long as she's told where it is. For an equal

share of the cut, Jhiranox is in and both of them are richer than ever.

“Once again, they goes their separate ways until one day Isabel gets a visit from her old ally. The young dragon has gotten too rich too quickly, y’see, and a bigger rival dragon called Tharacraxus the Curse of Cold Caern Keep has stepped in and taken her hoard, leaving her with nothing. In order to get it back, they’s gonna need a proper dragonslayer. So they look about until they find this golden boy named Sir Apollonius who seems like he can do the job.”

Ivan then gets all excited. “I’ve heard of him! He was said to be one of the finest and most noble of the knights of the Crescent Order.”

I nods. “So they reckon. That’s why they picked him. Honourable, competent, and utterly gullible. Isabel meets up and befriends the poor sod, but wouldn’t you know it, suddenly she’s kidnapped by a dragon! What are they odds, eh? And all the evidence points toward the culprit bein’ Tharacraxis, the biggest and baddest one about. So off goes Sir Apollonius to challenge the Curse and a mighty battle ensues. Any idea how that went

down?”

He frowns a bit and gets his thinking look on.

“Legend states that he slayed the wyrm but at great cost. He freed the damsel, but realized that they could not both escape alive. So he told her to run-“

“Wait on,” I says. “So you know the damsel’s in the story?”

“Of course!” And then he frowns again. “But her name wasn’t Isabel in the version I heard..”

“Really, now?”

“No...”

“What was it, then?”

He umms a bit and I goes, “Didn’t have one, did she?”

“No,” he says. “I never thought to ask. I expect there’s one in the written versions.”

I shakes me head. “Trust me. There ain’t none, not unless they’ve made one up. It became a rule later, y’see. Damsels don’t do names. The dragon’s just the dragon and the damsel’s just the damsel. Any more’n that you’re gettin’ noticed; career over. But I’m getting’ me ahead too much. Go on; he tells her to run...”

“Uh... Right. So he told her to run whilst he stayed to fight and after an epic struggle he managed to collapse the ancient fortress atop both he and his enemy, sacrificing himself to destroy the Keep’s foul inhabitant.”

“Ooh, ‘foul inhabitant.’ I likes that! Yes, lovely bit of story, innit? Not too far from the truth, neither. The paladin charged into the mountain and challenged the dragon sure enough, but he didn’t see Isabel. She was never there in the first place. And the collapse? That was all Jhiranox. She waited until the knight and the Curse were right stuck into each other and then - BOOM! Brought down the house on ‘em both.

Then while she dug out Tharacraxis’ treasure,



Isabel went back to the Crescent Order and spun ‘em the tale what you just told me.”

“Are you telling me that Sir Apollonius was killed just so this Isabel and her dragon ally could make some money?”

I has a sip of tea and gives him one of me special LOOKS, just so and says, “Not just that. They also did it to kill Tharacraxis. That bastard needed killin’, and not even your Sir Applesauce couldn’ a done it alone. He just managed to be distraction enough to let the girls do their work. Work that ended near a thousand years of the Curse’s terror... And, yeah, turned them a pretty profit in the meantime. Which is when they made the Deal.”

“The Deal?”

“The Dragon Deal. Or the Damsel Deal, if you’re a dragon. It depends where you stand. Believe me, life is subjective. Everyone’s got their own opinion and everyone thinks theirs is important. Whatever. They’ve been a pretty good partnership so far so they decides to keep it up.

Much as dragons are powerful, there's still things that you can get done as a human. And having a dragon in your pocket is handy for anyone, y'know. But the big money started coming in when they decided to franchise."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Isabel knows she's not gonna be young and beautiful forever, and even if she could somebody's gonna twig to the game eventually. So she starts engaging other lasses to help. Meanwhile, Jhiranox doesn't wanna risk her tail on every damn job, so she starts networking with other dragons what needs tasks, plans, and whatnot done. It's all very secret and all very hush, and all very profitable... for a while.

"Two hundred years pass. Isabel has long died and her role of Head Damsel has passed down through about ten different women's hands. Jhiranox has gotten older and her hoard has gotten mighty. About this time I was lookin' me for some employment and a friend asks if I'd mind doin' some babysitting.

I loves me some children, so I says sure, and she says do I mind lookin' after a baby dragon. I says fine, and the pay's amazing, so that's how I got into the Damsel business.”

“So you started leading knights to their doom, like Isabel used to?”

I shakes me head. “Not me, lad. I was never into any o' that. Wasn't quite pretty enough, y'see, and the girls what did it were a particular kind o' nasty what I never had in me. I s'pose they'd need to be to deal with the dragons they partnered with. No, that was a rough gig. I stuck to the simpler work.”

“Like babysitting.”

“Yup. Little bit later I got into midwifery, makin' sure the eggs came out right, and then into some beauty work; polishing scales, sharpening claws, helping clean up after moulting a skin. So most of the dragons I was working with were either new mothers or ones seeking a mate.

Matchmaking was a lucrative field, but hard to get into. There was a matchmaker called Avantika

who had been damseling for over fifty years that I sometimes had dealings with, but she had her own daughter apprenticed to take her position, so I stuck to the beauty side of things. But it was her who warned me to get out.”

“How long were you a part of this operation?”

“Twelve years, on and off. Mostly when I was desperate for money. I was never greedy like most of the others. And it was the greed that got ‘em all, dragon and damsel alike, when it all fell apart. Avantika warned me, as I said. She was worried that some of her clients had seemed to disappear, or had been caught in ambushes by mercenaries or adventurers. Likewise, there were a few damsels who had likewise vanished or come to a... ahem, ‘accidents’ so’s she said.”

“Did someone leak?” asks Ivan.

“Far as I can tell, it was all part of the plan from the start. As I told you, dragons are treacherous, but they’s also smart. They has to be. What with dragonslayers, the will of the gods, and the bloody enmity of their own kind, only the smartest,

strongest and most ruthless ever grow to a size where they can be considered proper grown. Maybe one in a hundred at most. And in the end, Jhiranox was playin' the long game. This whole damsel thiung was her plan to stay alive long enough to get to the stage where she could survive alone.

And as soon as she did, SNAP! She brought it all down. There's a reason they called her the Sly."

"How did you manage to escape?"

I shrugs at him. "Never had much money so she never came lookin' for it, maybe. Or maybe just because I was only doin' the little jobs and never done any of the big 'uns. Best I ever got was a handful of gold here or there, which was enough for me, for sure.

I guess I just wasn't worth her time. Or maybe because I saw which way the wind was blowin' and changed me name an' ran off before she could gets to me. I likes to think that was me natural fortune-tellin' talents come through as gut instinct years before I learned me how to use 'em proper-like.

So there you go, lad. That's what I know about dragons, and it's more than I ever really told to anyone, apart from Lilly an' that was only because we was in our cups."

"Well," he says an' he stands up an' bows at me.

"I thank you goodwoman for the information. It will prove most useful in my coming mission."

"Rubbish!" I says and he looks all startled.

"Nothin' I told you is gonna be useful at all. Be honest."

"Madam?"

I sighs. "Gimme your palm." He fumbles for his pouch an' I says, "No charge, lad." So he takes off a glove an' holds out his hand an' I grabs it and sticks me eye innit.

"Y'know what I see most often when I looks in a palm? I sees dirt. An' callouses. I sees how a person makes their way in the world. A few nicks on a thumb? That's a tailor. Worn strip along the palm? That's from reins and ridin' cart or horseback.

Black soot sunk deep in the lines? Smith. From that I knows roughly what I needs to be tellin' 'em.

“Because you can blame the weavers of fate, or the gods, or lady luck as much as you want, but the sick truth is that we each makes our own destiny, my lad, and we already knows our course. Sometimes we just wants an old woman to tell us enough that we can pretend we’re sure of what we’re doin’.

That’s my job. To tells you enough story and spin enough confusion that you can make your own mind up for yourself.”

I close his fingers back up, lets him go and finish me cup of tea.

“So,” he says. “Are you trying to tell me that all that talk of dragons and damsels was... That you made it up?”

I yawned and leaned back in me rocking chair. “I ain’t said no such thing. What I said was that none of it was gonna be useful.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

But then I started snoring and kept pretendin’ to be asleep until he left. I was done with talkin’.

‘Sides, his three groats of time was up.





