

Tears Of The Dragon

Carolina Valdez



TEARS OF THE DRAGON

...His dreams were filled with her...her body naked, warm thighs spread invitingly beneath him, arms reaching for him as his engorged cock teased her pussy and his balls brushed her hot slit. She lay with her golden hair spread out across the pillow on his bed, and a swirling collage of gold, purple, red and emerald colored the room.

He took the purple satin ribbons she'd presented to him and tied her hands to the wooden bedstead as she lifted her hips to him in invitation. He heard her pant as he tied her legs apart. Her gasp turned to hoarse moans as his mouth plundered her with a kiss in that most intimate part of her body.

Before he could slide through that golden nest of tight curls into her slick slit, he wakened, hot and sweaty, just as a dream king wearing a gigantic, jeweled crown and flailing a burnished sword the size of a castle had borne down on him. The king rode the back of a drang, its sharp talons heading straight for Rodick's throat.

Rodick pulled himself out of the nightmare and sat on the bed's edge with his head in his hands, experiencing again the reality that too much wine was a nasty thing.

He thought of the vision of her in his dream. He rose, his cock hard, his need to empty his bladder strong.

*Thighs spread wide and tied with purple ribbons, huh?
Don't you wish?*

Don't you dare...

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TEARS OF THE DRAGON

BY

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TEARS OF THE DRAGON
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*To those members of my Sweet_Ecstasies
newsletter group who participated in selecting
Tears of the Dragon as the title.
I appreciate you!*

CHAPTER 1

Xertan began to snort and paw, stirring up the richly scented loam on the forest's floor, just as Rodick's gaze fell on the fairest woman he'd ever seen.

He'd pulled the *destrier* up at the edge of the forest, but now Xertan was turning in circles in an attempt to retreat back into the woods. Rodick brought the great stallion under control. He wanted to gaze longer at this perfection.

That she rode alone surprised him, for her head was crowned with a golden circlet with four high prongs. It was the headpiece of a princess-royal, although of a house unknown to him. He knew of no princesses resembling this one, and he was acquainted with, or thought he was, those of

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every castle in the area. Had even bedded a few of them, he thought with a wry smile. But this woman, instinct told him, would fulfill every fantasy a lusty man could have in bed. And then some.

The horse she handled with such ease was a dappled grey, and its trappings and harness were decorated with tassels and ornate embroideries. Her flowing gown and cape were the color of emeralds and fastened over her breasts with bright ornaments. Sunlight splashed on her long, blonde tresses, spinning them to gold.

She sat her seat straight and yet relaxed. If her dress and the horse's rich *caparison* hadn't told him, he would have recognized she was a royal just by her carriage and dress. That she would be traveling without knights and outriders still puzzled him. Did some enchantment protect her?

A silence had settled over the meadow at her appearance. The buzzing of bees and the calls of birds quieted. The breeze died away. It was as if the entire meadow and its creatures held her fresh beauty in awe.

Resting an arm on the pommel, he felt for the first time the fine tremors in the horse beneath him. Here was another puzzle—even in battle the charger had never trembled. Rodick didn't know why he did so now. If he'd smelled wild boar or some other menacing creature, Xertan would've bolted into the clearing. Instead, he obeyed his master's commands to remain still, but trembled as if in fear.

It was odd. But there was always something odd in this forest. If there'd truly been danger, Rodick thought he'd have

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sensed it.

Enthralled, he watched as the princess's horse picked its unhurried way on the path paralleling a stream that ran through the meadow. Periodically, the vision of loveliness looked up, seeming to search for something, but the cerulean sky remained empty, as if the sun refused obscurity while she rode. Other than that occasional watchfulness, it was obvious she wasn't in flight from anyone or anything. Nor did she exhibit fear. Instead, she seemed content to meander in the lush meadow among the flowers that grew near the gurgling water.

Without warning, Xertan turned and carried Rodick back into the forest. By the time Rodick had pulled him up and around again, the young woman had vanished. A fine, cotton candy mist drifted in to fill the void with sweet mystery.

The *destrier* no longer trembled, and Rodick reached to rub his neck. "What's the matter, boy? What scared you?" He didn't expect an answer. Even in Ahnerion horses didn't talk.

* * *

Arondele had known a man was in the forest. Known the minute he'd approached the meadow's edge and seen her. Although he was dressed in the rough, brown clothing of a woodsman, she knew he was a knight. Unless he was riding a stolen mount, only knights and above owned warhorses.

He'd been hunting. Six large hares hung limply from his pouch. He carried a bow and quiver across his broad back and a sling at his waist. The hares had been killed humanely by a

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single slingshot blow to the head. They would have died instantly. Looking at the hares, she felt fortunate she'd eaten already and there hadn't been any blood to tempt her to eat again. That would have ruined everything.

His horse had sensed her essence and trembled with fear. He trusted his master, had obeyed him until fear overrode trust. His uneasiness was why she hadn't moved nearer and greeted the knight. But she'd wanted to, had longed to be closer. The sight of the powerfully built, handsome man, whose masculine scent was picked up by her keen sense of smell, had stirred feelings in her she'd never experienced before.

Curiosity would have led her to approach this man with the strong thighs and arms, save for the *destrier*. When it turned and fled, she took the opportunity to rearrange her body's cells and become invisible. It was time to go home.

* * *

All the way back to the keep, Rodick thought about the princess. He planned to return tomorrow in hope of seeing her again. Truth was, he felt *driven* to return, in order to get to know her. He'd wear the clothing of the knight he was and offer to ride beside her as escort.

Approaching the castle walls, he guided his mount to the small, stone house of Flynt, his squire.

"Sire! 'Tis a pleasure to see you. Won't you come inside?" Flynt turned awkwardly, gesturing toward the open door as he leaned on a wooden crutch.

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“I’ll be late for supper if I do. How’s the leg? Doing better?” Rodick swung down and drew the hares from his pouch. “Ah, Tira, you’re just in time to take these off my hands.”

The pretty woman with the kind eyes, who’d come out the door, gave a little curtsy and reached eagerly for his kill. “Saints bless you for these, sire. With my man hurt, we’ve no one to hunt for us.”

“Until he’s back on his feet, it’s the least I can do for the man who protected my back. Let me see that leg.” Rodick knelt to pull his squire’s pant leg up and examine the knife wound he’d sustained in a skirmish with thugs in the forest. Unwrapping it, he sniffed the cloth. “No foul smell. That’s good. No more puffiness and the redness has improved.” He settled his hand over the wound. “It’s not hot anymore, but I’ll send the healer with more salve. Soon you can toss that crutch away and ride with me again.” Rising, he clapped him on the back.

Despite guilt that Flynt had been injured protecting him, Rodick was happy he’d ridden alone today. When he’d wanted to watch the princess, it would have complicated things if the squire had been with him.

Later, at dinner in the great hall, he spoke casually with the earl he served, confirming he did, indeed, know all the castles in the area. That night, he decided to bed down outside and dream about the princess. He was sure the vision of loveliness had to be a guest in one of the castles, a guest who didn’t realize the dangers of traveling alone here. Yes, a knight

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escort was just what she needed.

Hands pillowing the back of his head, he fell asleep smiling as he gazed at golden lights flickering in a deep-purple sky.

* * *

After the knight left, Arondele became solid and visible again. She rode into the mountains until she came upon a pond. Slipping from her horse, she stripped, letting cloak and dress create a silent puddle at her feet. Gazing at her reflection in the still waters, she ran her hands slowly over full breasts and rounded hips, marveling at the curves of her body and the unimaginable softness of her skin. Spreading her fingers across her flat belly, she slid them down to explore the golden patch of curls at her apex. A sudden rush of sensation came as she brushed the small button hidden between the velvety lips.

Sparks flew through her. She inhaled sharply. This was what she'd felt when she'd seen the knight.

Her father had told her she was nearing the time when her body would be ready to mate. For years she'd been told after she'd mated she would fulfill her destiny. Would feelings like this accompany mating? If so, it might be quite nice.

With a swirling rush of water and a great splash that threw drops of water high in the air, a water dragon rose from the pond, poised to pounce and carry her away to his cave. Its blue and silver scales gleamed in the sunlight. Its jaws were open and its jewel-like eyes glittered in its spiky head. With wings partially spread, it was ready to grip her in its talons and fly

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away.

Arondele didn't flinch when the icy drops hit her warm skin. She immediately withdrew her hand from her crotch and covered her nest of curls. With the other arm, she modestly covered the nipples on her generous breasts, but didn't lower her gaze or shrink away from the scale-covered, winged body. There was no need to fear it.

She waited.

The creature froze. It stared at her—transfixed. It was a young dragon, and it took time, but at last it recognized her. With a slight bow of its head in homage, it sank back into the depths and was gone.

Arondele's delighted laughter at the stunned look on its face when he recognized who she was echoed like birdsong in the air.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning the sky was a brilliant turquoise as Rodick approached the forest's edge with his horse at a walk. His heart rate sprinted as he caught sight of her when she entered the grassy field on the far side. His happy mood turned to anger when he saw two mounted thugs ride out from behind boulders and attempt to hem her in. The heavier man grabbed for her reins.

She refused to yield them, attempting to turn her horse aside to escape, but the men weren't going to let her go. Her horse screamed and reared, then came down on all fours and danced in confusion. Rodick thought he saw disdain and determination, mingled with fear, on the princess's face.

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Red rage rose like molten lava in Rodick's head. Dropping his reins and kicking his war-trained mount into a run, he drew his bow, notched an arrow and let it fly.

With a cry of pain, the man farthest from the princess dropped his sword and grabbed the arm the arrow had penetrated. Looking up, he spotted the knight thundering across the meadow, sword and shield in hand, his horse's hooves crushing delicate flowers and grasses.

The battle cry issuing from the knight completed the picture. There was no misunderstanding either his mood or his intent. The wounded attacker didn't bother to retrieve his sword. He dug his heels into his horse's sides and bolted.

The heavier assailant was made of sterner stuff. Releasing the woman's reins, he turned, sword drawn, and rode out to meet Rodick. It was a fatal mistake. If it had been his first mistake, Rodick thought, with tightened jaws, it would also to be his last.

The ring of clashing swords filled the meadow. Horses whinnied and screamed as they were maneuvered around and around, first following, then evading the line of blows exchanged by the men. The enraged Rodick quickly demolished the man's shield, and the man had to ward off blows with his sword or by ducking or turning his horse out of its range.

He had no intention of letting the thug live. He'd not only tried to kidnap or hurt this woman, he'd foolishly taken on an armed knight. He was a capable swordsman, although an unscrupulous one, but his skills were nothing compared to a

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battle-seasoned warrior who served the Earl of Du Magne as his liege man.

For Rodick, this was but a practice-yard exercise. Ever alert to an opening, he found it, grimacing with satisfaction as he felt bone crunch when he drove his sword straight through the man's chest and into his heart.

The shocked look on the challenger's face, the sudden failure to move and then the slow slumping of his body in the stirrups indicated life had left him.

With one yank, Rodick removed his sword, feeling the blade resist briefly before it slid out. He decided not to sever the head from the bully's neck. He didn't wish to upset the princess any more than necessary.

He walked his mount in circles for a time, waiting while his blood, and that of his horse, cooled after the fight. The *destrier* breathed heavily from the exertion, and he patted its neck and rewarded it with praise. Finally dismounting, he cleaned the blood from his blade on the man's jerkin and pushed the weapon into its scabbard. Grabbing the reins of his enemy's skittish animal, he hauled the man from the saddle and laid him face down over it. A good slap on the horse's rump sent it trotting back to wherever the man had lived.

Finished with this gruesome task, he turned to the lovely woman and gave a small bow. "Good morrow, my princess."

"Arondele. My name is Arondele. Thank you for rescuing me from those brutal men, but how did you know I was..." Her hand went to the circlet on her head. "Oh. Of course."

Her face was flushed, but she'd remained calm. She hadn't

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fled as he'd fought. Removing her glove, she leaned down to give him her hand. "I'm afraid I have little with which to reward you."

Again, her smile dazzled.

A tide of relief that she was safe washed through him. He knew the appropriate, respectful response was to make pretense of kissing the back of her hand. Instead, heady from the fight and from being near her, he kissed it. Then, despite knowing this might bring down a king's wrath, he rolled it over and brushed his lips across her intoxicating palm.

Her gasp excited him. That she didn't draw her hand away emboldened him. He looked up into an amazing pair of topaz eyes, whose glints and depths entranced him. "There are many rewards one might give a man, princess." The comment was rich with sensual meaning. For a moment he thought he must be out of his fucking mind to have said what he did.

When she replied, "Ride with me," in a voice low and breathy, he knew she'd understood the subtleties of his message.

A new kind of excitement filled him. He almost leaped into his saddle. In light of Xertan's fear the previous day, he'd chosen a different horse. This one remained calm in her presence.

As they rode, he noticed she handled a horse with more skill than any woman he'd known. Her skin wasn't the pale, milk color of the pampered princesses he knew—it had a slightly golden tone, the tone of healthy skin kissed by sunlight. He thought perhaps he loved her already.

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Don't be a fool, he told himself. You're acting like a sex-starved, love-struck troubadour, and you haven't even introduced yourself.

Drawing up beside her, he said, "I'm Rodick, a knight of the Castle Du Magne. Yesterday, I noticed you traveled alone, and I thought perhaps you were new to the area and unaware of the dangers here. I intended to warn you, but by the time I got my unruly horse under control, you were gone. I came today to offer you escort, should you wish it."

Her perfume invaded him. She smelled like the air in springtime, when the limbs of the minion trees were heavy with fragrant, white blossoms as large as a man's hand spread wide. Underneath this was a subtle scent he couldn't describe, but it aroused him even as he sat in his saddle. The urge to embrace her almost overwhelmed him.

Suddenly wary, he wondered if she was an enchantress. He'd never responded like this to any woman, royals included. He pulled his mount aside a few steps.

They walked their horses and gradually he drew closer. Once his leg brushed against hers, and even though her cape and gown covered it, he could feel her heat. His blood sang.

"I've not seen you here before," Rodick said. With the rush of feelings he was having, he was amazed at how normal he sounded.

"I live in a castle in the Nordrung mountains. It's quite isolated and few know of it. Curiosity led me to finally explore the forest and valley here."

"I'm not familiar with any castle in the high mountains."

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“I noticed you in the woods yesterday. I doubted I’d have need of an escort, but this morning proved me wrong, didn’t it? Ride with me and tell me about Castle Du Magne.”

Pride that he was a knight under the earl welled up in him as he spoke of his liege lord and the castle.

He felt a certain strain in her when he commented he wasn’t aware of a castle in the high mountains. She hadn’t responded with any information about this castle or herself, while he realized he’d told her much about his life. As they’d ridden, he’d noticed her periodic glances at the sky. It was the same pattern he’d observed the previous day. She glanced up again now, and, without warning, cried, “I’ll race you to the forest.”

Her horse broke into a run, and Rodick watched in astonishment as the animal’s rump flew past. He spurred his horse and was into the race with her.

He had no trouble winning, but she was fast on his heels, joining him under the thick canopy of the minion trees’ leaves at the moment he pulled up.

“What prompted that?” He smiled.

“I had a sudden, overwhelming feeling of happiness. I’d been rescued by a knight whose company I like, and it seemed we should celebrate. Help me down, please?”

Since yesterday he’d wanted to get his hands on her. Now he discovered she wasn’t slender like other women, and his hands barely spanned her waist. Just touching her caused his body to begin to respond. When she put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself, and he saw the closeness of her

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moist lips, it took all of his discipline not to taste her, to yank her close and hard against his waiting body.

She held his gaze as he lifted her and let her slide deliciously the length of his body until she stood before him.

He thought she waited for his kiss, but he couldn't be sure. To taste her, he knew, would be his downfall. To taste her would lead to planting his swollen, aching cock deep inside her, to push and push until he'd found release from the desire now tormenting him.

Releasing her, he stepped away. Calm down, he told himself. The urge to fuck often came after a fight, and fuck it was, not love-making. It was pure release from the stress of fighting, and had nothing to do with caring for another person. This wasn't the time or the place for sex. He didn't want to confuse that response with his other feelings for her.

"Would you like to walk?"

She nodded. "I'm still a little shaken by the encounter. I've never seen a man killed before my eyes."

"I regret that, but it was necessary. He was determined to kill me and take you. I was determined he would not. You know, I expected you to run away as soon as he released your reins, but you stayed. That was brave."

"Mayhap not so much brave as confident you would win. Rumor in the castle where I'm staying says you are known as Sir Rodick, the Courageous."

His face went hot with embarrassment at the title. "In any land, there are those given to extravagant exaggeration, princess."

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“Ah, but I hear you’ve slain a dragon.”

“What?”—he drew his mind back from embarrassment to the conversation—“And there you have it. Perhaps it could be said of my father, and I’m not sure but what that’s exaggeration, too. Do you realize how few knights actually see a dragon in their lifetime?”

“Not many these days, I suppose. I’ve been told that, in my great-grandfather’s time, they battled side by side with warriors in the Great Upheaval among the three kingdoms. Now that there’s peace, they probably have little wish to be seen by humans.”

“They aren’t flying around everywhere. However, I saw one—a green earth dragon—and that’s how the rumor started. It flew right down, intent on taking my warhorse. But it was old, and its fangs and the nails of its talons were worn almost to nothing. I didn’t think he could even lift *me*, much less Xertan. I drew my sword to swat it away, the way one would a pesky bug, and it tried to brake its descent and reverse its flight direction. It was so clumsy it scratched itself on my sword. That caused it to bleed a bit. From there the story grew from telling to telling.”

Her smile warmed him. The crinkle at the side of her mouth convinced him she felt amused.

“Xertan and I flushed a nice, fat ponklet out of the wood for him. He was capable of lifting that juicy tidbit. He flew away, and I’ve never seen him again. On my sword, that’s the truth of my ‘dragon slaying.’”

Now she laughed, and he was so happy to be in her

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presence that he laughed with her.

They walked for a time, and when she stumbled over a rocky spot in the path, he caught her arm and hand to steady her. He didn't release her hand, and she didn't remove it. His hand often swallowed up a woman's, but hers was in perfect balance to the size of his. When she told him it was time for her to leave, he lifted it to his mouth and kissed it again. Her skin was like cool honeysuckle dew against his lips, and the smell of her skin entranced him. She stepped toward him, but, sighing, he let her go and drew back once more from temptation.

"I'd like to see you again. But if you ride here in the next two days, you won't see me because I've work to do in the castle. We're preparing for the Mystericale Faire to be held in three days. People from all over Ahnerion will gather. Will you come with me?"

"What's a faire?"

"You've never been to one?"

She shook her head.

"Then you must come! There'll be jugglers and dancing. Food and wares for sale. Everyone will be happy, and the earl's mage will see to it the weather's perfect. Join me. You'll have fun."

He could see she was going to refuse. He softened his voice and fought not to plead. "I'll meet you at your edge of the meadow and escort you."

"A princess-royal would need an entourage. My father doesn't know I visit here, and I dare not tell him or he'd forbid

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it.”

Rodick certainly wasn't ready for her father to know either. “I'll bring clothing for a noblewoman, and you can change in the nearby woodsman's hut. I'll also bring a horse that's less conspicuous than your white.”

Her face shone. “Hmm, dressing in disguise sounds fun. Yes, I'd love to go. I'll ride a more common palfrey. I think a knight who saved a princess-royal should be rewarded, don't you?”

He widened his smile as his chest tightened. “That I do.”

He helped her mount, and they rode through the woods and across the meadow. He watched her follow the stream's path up toward the mountains, and his spirits soared at the thought of spending time with her again.

CHAPTER 3

Terror had almost paralyzed her when the men accosted her. Instantly tempted to shift into her true shape, she just as quickly realized they might slay her before she could rise beyond their reach. A sour taste rose in her mouth. *How arrogant to think because I was special I didn't need anyone to protect me.*

Disdain that the filthy men had sought to touch her had mingled with her terror because, from the first moments of her life, she'd been told she had a sacred destiny to fulfill. Through strength of will, she could not let them have her.

The knight she now knew as Sir Rodick was coming. They'd had no idea who he was.

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Still, there'd been moments in the fight when she'd feared for his life. The rogue was cunning and didn't fight with honor. Gradually it became evident Rodick was stronger and better trained. The tightness in her shoulders had relaxed.

The thug's death sickened her and the sharp scent of his blood lingered with her still, but it was a just death. Had he taken her, she might have been kept chained up forever and suffered a myriad of indignities. Worst of all, she'd not have been free to fulfill her calling, and the world would have been plunged into darkness and despair.

The picture of Rodick, his long, dark hair streaming behind him in the gleaming sunlight, standing in the stirrups as he drew his bow and shot from the running horse, would never leave her. Nor would the sound of his horse's hooves pounding across the grassy field as his battle cry shattered the morning stillness.

Here was a man straight and strong, who honored women and was willing to fight for her when they hadn't even met. Chivalry, she thought. They called it chivalry, didn't they?

An emotion she couldn't put a name to rippled through her chest.

He'd reeked unpleasantly of sweat from the exertion of the fight, but when he kissed her hand, tiny olfins opened their wings and flitted in her chest. And when his lips touched her palm, his mouth warm and caressing against her skin, she might as well have had a hive of bees humming where she sat her saddle. The sensations created wonderful urges foreign to her.

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She'd wanted his mouth against hers. Wanted to experience something different from what her kind knew. And most of all, she wanted to know if these sensations she was feeling were what mating would be like. Perhaps she could convince him to teach her.

Her father had almost seen them. From the corner of her eye, she'd seen his great wings cross the sun and knew he searched for her. She didn't want to be caught—to be called home for a reprimand and possibly commanded not to return to the valley floor. She'd kicked her horse and challenged Rodick to a race, hoping they'd reach the cover of the forest before her father spotted her. They'd made it.

Now she kicked her mount hard up the mountain path, and when she was deep and securely hidden from the view of anyone above or below, she dismounted in order to shift into a new form.

She'd been very small when, quite by accident, she'd discovered this ability to change her shape. Because fathers raised the hatchlings, she'd had little contact with her mother during her lifetime. Although she'd always changed in private and spoken of it to no one, not even her father, somehow her mother knew. One spring day she appeared without warning when Arondele, in her true body, was resting alone on a peak, staring dreamily into the valley below.

“Mother! You startled me. What a treat to see you!” She greeted her by rubbing first one side of her mother's face and then the other with her face, scale to scale.

The last time she'd been with her mother, she'd been too

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young to notice Nombella's heart-stopping beauty. She gleamed even more golden in the sunlight than Arondele did, and her dark, topaz-colored eyes had glints and depths that seemed to go on forever. Her physical strength only added to her grace. It was small wonder her father had chosen to mate with her.

"This gift you have, Gloriana..."

Even startled by the comment, Arondele, whose dragon name was Gloriana, had no doubt what her mother meant. "How did you know?"

Nombella's gaze bored into hers as the corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly with what would pass as a smile. "You're my daughter. The gift came to me through my mother, hers through her mother, and now it has come down to you through me."

"You have it, too."

Her mother nodded.

"Why haven't I known until now?"

Her mother's beautiful face had grown serious. "I've waited until I thought you'd have discovered it, and I've come to warn you. It's a secret we must keep, my princess. The others might destroy us if they knew. Differences, even among our kind, are always a threat to those who don't understand."

Arondele had observed enough of that kind of hatred. Also, from the moment she'd hatched, her destiny had been drilled into her and, although she had no idea what it would be, she knew her life must be preserved at all costs. Now her mother was telling her she might risk injury or death by telling

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anyone she could shift. Perhaps, in her deepest mind she'd known, and that was the reason she'd kept her changes secret.

She thought of the king who'd both fathered and raised her. His power was enormous, and he was one of the most threatening figures anyone could imagine. Among their kind he was both respected and feared. She shivered. Would he would kill her if he knew? Would it make a difference in what had been predetermined for her life?

"Father?"

"You have nothing to fear from him. I'll tell him. He'll keep your secret...as he has kept mine. You'll mate soon, won't you?"

"Yes."

Nombella embraced her daughter. And then she did the strangest thing Arondele had ever seen her do—she bowed to her in homage. Lifting her golden body in flight, her words floated down. "Goodbye, my precious. Take care."

Arondele felt tears flood her eyes. Contact with her mother was so rare she ached for her to stay longer, and there was something ominous in Nombella's farewell. Would she never see her mother again? The thought was unbearably sad.

She let her tears fall, watching as they puddled and formed tear-shaped, golden coins on the sandstone rock. Imprinted on each was the image of a golden dragon in bas-relief.

Ever since that encounter, Arondele had been even more discreet about when and where she changed into human form. Her father, already vigilant lest someone harm her, increased his watchfulness, and she believed her mother had told him.

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She'd felt cared for and protected by the king, but now she didn't want him to know about Rodick because he'd deny her this new adventure out of concern for her safety.

Her change completed, she felt light and yet strong as she flew toward home. Happiness throbbed in her being. Mystericale Faire day with all its strange newness...and her own personal knight...couldn't come soon enough for her.

* * *

Rodick stole clothing for the princess from the castle storerooms. Well, it wasn't really theft, he convinced himself. He was borrowing a few things he'd return later. Everyone in the town and castle bustled here and there with last minute preparations. No one was around to question him.

The knights had private quarters, making it easy to stow his loot. He hadn't taken any undergarments. Although he'd removed enough of them in his day, he'd paid little attention to anything but getting them off fast to see and fondle the arousing things they revealed. Thus the finer points of women's small clothes weren't in his repertoire.

At first he'd worried about not borrowing some, but then realized she'd be wearing her own. Problem solved. He hadn't know her shoe size, and her feet didn't seem as small as those of some women, but, again, she'd be wearing hers. At least they'd fit. Anything he'd have chosen might not.

He'd swept the woodsman's cottage and spread fresh rushes on the floor. Now the rock fireplace was clean, laid with wood ready for a spark to set it aflame. He'd carried

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away the moldy bed straw and created a fresh bed of sweet smelling ferns, which he covered with linens he'd bought in the marketplace.

Satisfied the hut would do for a princess disguising herself as a noble, he'd nailed it shut. Unfortunately, any woodsman needing its use would be out of luck.

His excitement grew at the thought of seeing her again, and he was grateful for the chores that kept his mind busy. In the days before the festivities, between heavy drafts of golanberry mead, the knights cheerily erected booths for the vendors of food and various wares. They pitched a tent for the fortune teller, and set up awnings and benches for those watching the jousts. For the archery competition, they marked off distances and instructed yeomen in setting up targets.

On opening day, true to his word, the mage had woven three days of sunshine without wind for them.

At first light, in high spirits, Rodick and his fellow knights rode through the thick forest undergrowth, kneeing their mounts as they flushed a wild pig and a young stag for slaughtering.

The castle cooks prepared and mounted their catches on spits over open fires. Soon the rich scent of burning wood and roasting meats wafted through the faire grounds.

When guests began arriving, Rodick, dressed in an indigo jerkin and pants, took his bundle of clothing and rode to meet his princess.

CHAPTER 4

She wasn't coming.

Rodick turned his horse away from the foot of the mountain path at the edge of the meadow, disappointment a rock in his chest. He'd waited far too long, and she hadn't appeared. He kept his horse at a walk as he crossed the grasses and headed toward home. There was no point in hurrying. Without her, the faire had lost its appeal.

A shadow played briefly on the grasses ahead of him, then moved over him and disappeared. In his current mood, he thought even the mage's plans had failed and clouds were moving in.

I'm a love-struck fool. Why did I think a beautiful woman

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would be interested in a lowly knight? Or even in the Mystericale Faire? I may have the reputation of being the earl's most notable and eligible knight, but I'm obviously a complete idiot when it comes to women.

Lost in thought, he wasn't at first aware of pounding hooves coming up on him. When they penetrated his consciousness, he drew his sword and whirled his horse around to meet the oncoming threat.

"Sir Rodick! It's me...Arondele!"

Happiness washed away his despair. He pulled his mount up and returned his sword to its scabbard. "I thought you weren't coming."

Breathing heavily, her face flushed from riding hard and her golden hair a mystical cloud about her face, she drew up beside him. His chest expanded at her loveliness. She'd left her gold circlet at home, and her hair was a mass of untamed curls. He wanted to run his fingers through them and draw her to him for a kiss.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't get away any sooner. I feared you'd be gone and I'd miss the faire. I'm so glad I caught you. Please forgive me."

Forgive her? He'd forgive her most anything. "You're here now. That's what matters, my princess."

"Will we be late?"

His laughter brightened the air. "The faire lasts for three days. No, we're not late."

At the woodsman's hut, he freed the lock and let her in. He stood guard outside, proud of his control. What he really

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wanted was to go inside with her and let his hands explore the soft curves of her naked body. In fact, he wanted to get naked with her.

He looked down at the bulge increasing in his groin and flicked it with his fingers until it stung and he felt the arousal die. "Behave," he whispered to his body.

* * *

Leaning against the door, Arondele caught her breath. Her father had been more and more curious about her absences, causing her to slip away only when he was busy elsewhere. Today was his day to judge complaints. To make her escape, she'd had to wait until the line was long, and he was absorbed in listening to a plaintiff who presented him with an involved problem.

She'd been so rushed she'd almost forgotten to conjure up a less conspicuous horse. Flying above Rodick, she'd watched, tense with anxiety, as he crossed the meadow away from her. But she was here now, determined to enjoy these few hours.

Tossing aside her cape and gown, she noted he hadn't bothered with undergarments. Her chuckle was too soft to be heard outside. She could imagine how puzzled he must have been as to what might be appropriate. It would have been fun to see his choices, but she'd have worn her own anyway.

The silken dress she slipped over her head was the color of fall leaves and felt cool and slippery against her skin. The over-tunic was a deeper shade of burgundy, and she loved it. The cap, its color more umber than russet, had a five-inch stiff

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band that covered her forehead and barely rose above the top of her head. The silk veil hanging from it concealed much of her hair, beginning at her temples.

From her cape pocket, she pulled a piece of gleaming silver. Checking her looks in it satisfied her no one would believe she was other than a noblewoman. She returned it to her cape. The disguise would do.

The thought that Rodick waited outside caused a fluttering of olfins in her chest again. Stepping out, she smiled up at him. His long, dark hair was tied back with a leather strip, and he wore a long sleeved shirt of white lawn beneath his jerkin. She tamped down the urge to throw her arms around him and press her breasts against his chest. “You chose well, sire. Thank you.”

“Rodick...not sire...and you look beautiful.” He took her hand.

It was a strong hand, the touch of which caused a thrill of excitement to race through her, but a scar on it ran up his arm and disappeared under his sleeve. Tracing the hard line with her fingers, she posed a question with her face.

“Battle scar. I have a few. Warrior’s risk.” He smiled a boyish smile, a smile that didn’t boast of conquests. He pulled her to her bay. “Nice choice of a horse.” Then his hands were about her waist as he lifted her into the saddle. “Some day maybe you’ll ride on my horse. With me.”

His voice had changed to soft and husky, and her cheeks grew warm. The vision of that kind of closeness made those bees hum again. Oh, she’d like that very much, but

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embarrassment at her thoughts restrained her from replying.

As they rode through the forest, Rodick appeared constantly on guard, as if to ward off any threats to their safety. They approached a wide stream where one section of the water flowed contrary to that of the main current, forming a whirlpool, and he rode ahead up and down the bank studying it. Finally, he signaled her to cross beside him. Although they were well beyond the whirlpool, he rode between her and the vortex. “Warries sometimes hide in the deeper eddies. If you’ve never seen one, they’re nasty creatures with powerful tails and bone-crunching jaws. They’ve a collective memory, too. Kill one and every warrie in Ahnerion remembers you did. They’re particularly dangerous then.”

“Were you so careful now because you’ve slain one?”

“Yes. And that’s not an exaggeration, ’tis truth.” He smiled. “My squire, Flynt, had been driven into a warrie current in a battle, and I wasn’t going to let him die so ignominiously. He’s not only my shield and armor bearer, he’s a friend. He has been with me since I trained to become a knight as a lad.”

A friend. How many friends did she have? None, really. A dragon’s job was to guard treasures, either those of a human ruler or his or her own, and, except for capturing a human to keep confined to your lair as a companion, you didn’t collect friends.

And you didn’t experience *Mystericale Faires*. In the land of the golden dragons, things were far too serious for frivolity.

Her father, Dreicomar, as king of the goldens, the highest

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and rarest of the dragons, ruled. Other dragons guarded his castle treasures. He'd captured and kept a lovely woman as his companion and, although Gloriana rarely saw her, she assumed she must be devoted to him. On occasion the woman was allowed to visit her family, but one dragon carried her on its back and two flew guard on either side as she traveled there and returned. It was unthinkable that she not return. Dreicomar would capture her and keep her in chains if she ever attempted to escape.

Looking at the straight back and easy seat of this man she rode beside, Arondele tried to envision him as her companion. She, in her golden glory, guarding silver, gold, and jewels—or whatever was in her future—while he...

While he what? Sat around with her? There the vision ended. She bit back a bitter laugh at the ridiculous fantasy. The memory of Rodick pounding across the meadow, sword in hand ready to deliver death, interfered.

They threaded their way on a path bordered by thick ferns and bracken. Passing a pocket of flowers, they startled a covey of real olfins feeding from the nectar, and their bright wings gave a drift of color to the sky as they rose. Riding beside her, Rodick led them out of the forest and the castle came in view. Turrets and towers rose above the high fortress walls. Its weathered stones were gray, and it was surrounded by a moat with waters so still the castle and the sun were reflected in them.

Soon the smell of roasting meat hit her nostrils, and a wave of nausea assaulted her. She knew humans cooked their meats,

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but dragons ate their kill raw. And quickly. The smell of fresh animal blood always made her mouth juices flow, but, to her, dead meat was old and unclean. She took deep breaths to calm her roiling stomach. She was in human form now. She must get used to this.

They reached the village outside the castle walls. Rodick pulled up beside a modest stone house and dismounted. He reached for her and set her down beside him.

“Flynt, my man! Are you here?”

A man with a cloth tied around one leg appeared at the door, leaning on a wooden crutch. His light brown hair was neatly clipped, and his clothes were clean. “Sire!” Then, with a look at Arondele, his eyes grew wide and he smiled as he gave an awkward bow. “Milady.”

“Lady Arondele, this is Flynt, my squire. As you can see, he’s the one who was injured watching my back.”

A thick-waisted woman, with four children surrounding her, appeared in the doorway.

“And this beauty is Tira, Flynt’s wife.”

The rose in Tira’s cheeks deepened at the compliment. “He has a golden tongue, this one does. I hope you pay him no mind. Welcome, Lady Arondele. Going to the faire?” Her curtsy was low and deep.

“Good morning, Mistress Tira. And, yes, Sir Rodick kindly invited me.” Tira was pretty. The blue of her dress flattered her clear skin.

Rodick withdrew a sack from his saddlebag and handed it to his squire’s wife. “I dug these up in the forest this morning.

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If you don't make it to get some of the hog or stag, we'll see you have your share."

Tira looked in the sack and grinned. "Yamas! They'll be wonderful once I've baked them."

"Thank you, sire. I'll repay this favor when I've healed."

Rodick clapped Flynt on the shoulder. "You owe me nothing, my friend. You saved my life."

"And have you forgotten the warrie, then? I'd say we're even."

Rodick just laughed.

Six hares, Arondele thought. Flynt couldn't hunt, so yesterday Rodick must've killed a hare for each one in this family. Now the yamas. Amazing he would do that. With the exception of the father raising his hatchlings, her kind rarely concerned themselves with another's needs.

"Come, Lady Arondele. It's time for the faire!" Laughing, Rodick lifted her into her saddle and swung up into his.

* * *

As Flynt watched the horses ride into the next bailey and head toward the town inside the castle walls, he said to his wife, "Where'd she come from? I've never seen her before. Have you?"

"I haven't, and she doesn't live anywhere around here I know of. Lovely, isn't she? Did you see how he looked at her? He really likes her. That I do know."

Flynt shifted uneasily on his crutch. "Aye, he's opening his heart to her. It's about time he stayed out of the beds of other

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men's wives and found a good woman to love, but I only hope this goes well for him."

Tira came and put her arm about his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. "It went well for us, luv. Why would it not for him?"

She was round and soft, and wonderfully familiar against him. He smiled down at her and brushed a dusting of flour from her cheek before he kissed it. "Aye, it went well. And still does." He bit back further remarks about his concern, but he still had a bad feeling about the stranger. He prayed his friend wasn't making a mistake.

CHAPTER 5

Arondele laughed and clapped her hands. “Look,” she cried, pointing up to the flags that flew from the battlements. Red and gold, purple and blue, green, orange and yellow. There were pennants of almost every color.

“By order of the earl, they fly on every festive occasion. Betrothals, weddings, market day, when the traveling troubadours perform or the tinkers arrive. And for the *Mystericale Faire*. They make for a bit of cheer, don’t they?”

What a happy place this seems to be, she thought. Nodding, she followed him as they walked their horses through the crowds toward the place they’d leave them. They could hardly move for the friends who came up to greet

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Rodick. Other knights—who eyed her unabashedly and clamored for an introduction—old men, children and women.

Yes, women. Women with circlets of flowers adorning their hair who handed up colorful ribbons he tied about his saddle horn. She felt a flash of something hot and irritating as a particularly beautiful woman with long, mahogany-colored hair rippling down her back tugged at his boot.

“Rodick!”

They stopped. With the others who’d greeted him, he’d responded with warmth. Arondele noticed his response to this woman was guarded. “Marinyza, how are you?”

Smiling broadly, she offered him a wide, purple ribbon. It was obvious she expected him to accept it, but to Arondele’s surprise he shook his head.

The woman frowned, and Arondele noticed she stamped one foot beneath her gown as she stood in the dust with the ribbon still in her hand. Her gaze turned on Arondele, as if noticing her for the first time, and she seemed to force a smile back onto her face. Taking her skirts in her hands, she turned her attention back to the knight and said with formality, as she curtsied, “Enjoy the faire, Sir Rodick.”

She looked up, but her jaw was tight and her gaze never quite met Arondele’s. “Welcome to our faire, my lady.”

Arondele shivered at the jealousy and venom she sensed behind the words. Maybe this was not such a happy place after all.

Rodick signaled his horse forward again. Arondele nudged her mount closer. “Who was that woman? Why did you turn

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her ribbon down when you accepted the others? She was quite upset with you.”

“Was she?” His voice was even, and she thought he hid some emotion from her. “She’s just a friend I’ve known since coming here to the castle. I never accept purple ribbons. And she knows it.”

Why not accept them, she wondered. Instinct told her the color had special meaning, but he wasn’t going to tell her now.

Entering the area where they were to leave the horses, they dismounted. Pointy-eared elves dressed in brilliantly colored clothing took them away to remove their saddles and bridles. The big, black stallion she’d seen Rodick ride that first day in the forest whinnied in greeting and came trotting over to him. The knight patted his neck and rubbed his muzzle.

It was a cheerful scene until the warhorse saw her. It screamed and backed away, rearing and flaying his front hooves at her. Rodick grabbed her and pushed her behind him. “Xertan! Stop!”

Xertan came down on all four hooves, but he spun around and pawed the earth, eyes wide, nostrils flaring, just as he’d behaved the first day he’d seen her and sensed her essence. He’d carried Rodick away from her when she’d longed to meet him.

Arondele felt and smelled the *destrier’s* fear. It was obvious he and his master shared a strong bond, and she couldn’t have him behaving this way around her. There must be nothing between her and this man who fascinated her. Shutting her eyes, she drew deep within herself as she reached

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for another special gift she had. It was seldom used, and she wasn't sure she could call it up now, but she had to try.

Finally, she stepped into the deep, gray mist, she sought. She drifted until she found herself in front of the restless stallion. Only her thoughts reached out.

::I'll not hurt your master. Or you,:: she promised. *::He knows nothing of my true nature. We must keep the secret between us or he may come to harm.::*

Relief threaded through her as the animal slowly calmed.

Pulling herself free of the mist, she opened her eyes and stepped from behind Rodick. He grabbed for her, but she moved clear of him. Extending her hands palms up, she crooned, "Come, Xertan. You've nothing to fear from me."

"By all that's holy," Rodick said, as the warhorse approached her with caution and snuffed her palms. "I think he likes you."

Her reward was the feel of Xertan's warm breath across her palms...and the breadth of Rodick's smile.

With the horses settled and guarded by the elves, Rodick took her hand and they jogged to the festivities.

Scattered over the ground were huge bowls painted in many colors. Magical symbols decorated the sides. Rodick helped mothers and fathers lift children into them, and Arondele noticed seats ran along the inside of the bowls. At last Rodick scooped her up and settled her in one before joining her.

"Hold onto the sides," he instructed.

Before she could ask why, the bowls began to rotate.

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Without warning, they lifted into the air and suddenly they were swooping up and down, up and down in long arcs, all the while spinning wildly. Children squealed. She laughed. She could fly, but she couldn't do something like this. And flying was work. This was effortless. Pure magic.

Silently, and without even a bump, the spinning stopped and the bowls floated to the ground and settled soundlessly. Riders clamored out and new people took their places.

"Your friends are here." Arondele indicated Flynt and his family.

They joined them, and Rodick swung each child up with a laugh and ran a hand over their hair. "Into the bowls with you." Arondele lifted children, too. Rodick gave a hand up to Tira, who sat with the two youngest girls.

As the bowls began to move, Flynt called out, "Hang on tight, children!" before turning to thank Rodick.

Warmth flooded Arondele as she watched Rodick with his friend and his family. He was a good man. Deadly, yes, and chivalrous, but good as well. Fondness for him blossomed in her.

As they walked away, Rodick asked, "Did you like it?"

"Oh, yes! I've never ridden anything like it. Your mage did this?"

Rodick took her hand. "Yes, it's the work of Xidel, our mage."

"Let's see more wonders your mage has prepared for Ahnerion."

They explored the booths and, at one, people handed over

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small, green coins with a square hole in them to pay for a chance to win a prize. Rodick tossed his whole lot of balls into moving hoops and earned a group of arm bangles for her. They weren't made of gold or silver and were poorly crafted, but as he slid them over her wrist and his fingers touched her skin she felt a tiny jolt of electricity shoot through her. She studied the fine features of his face as he concentrated on slipping them on—long, dark lashes, perfectly formed lips, angular planes of a face whose male beauty astounded her.

There was no question that he fascinated her. She sighed.

He looked up. "Is something wrong?"

No, everything is right. Shaking her head, she replied, "I thank you, Sir Rodick."

When he smiled, one corner of his mouth always lifted slightly more, creating a small crease near it. "M'lady."

In her happiness, she laughed and took his arm. He didn't remove it.

"I see the next knight missed the hoops," she whispered as she looked back. "His companion is going without prizes."

He turned and chuckled. "Oh, that's Malroy. He's not too good at that sort of thing. Don't worry. I hear he's good in bed with the ladies."

"Good in bed?"

"Oops. I should not have said that."

She would have pressed him, but his face had pinked up. She assumed he was embarrassed, and not wishing to cause him further discomfort, she didn't ask him to explain.

Using mallets on long handles, they hit balls across the

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grass and under wooden arches. Once they'd reached the far end of the course, the balls magically reappeared at the start. Tiring of that, they rode the whirling bowls again.

He won a necklace for her at archery. It was made of a dull metal and carried no stone, but to her it was like precious metal. He gave her a few lessons in the use of the bow and arrow. He stood behind, arms about her as he instructed her in the correct form. The strength in his arms and thighs radiated from his body to hers and made her senses quiver. She was sure he felt it, too. Her buttocks were pressed against him, and his chest and shoulders touched her back. She wondered if this was having the same tingling, weakening effect on him it was having on her.

When the last arrow had been released and he'd stepped away from her, disappointment rushed through her at the loss of contact with him.

For a time after that, he didn't touch her again. It was as if he feared the closeness they'd shared. She hoped he'd get over it because she'd loved the feeling of his body against hers and of being cradled by his arms.

He bought meat pies for them...roast stag in a flaky pastry. The pastry and the vegetables in it were delicious, but she couldn't tolerate the meat. When Rodick left to buy cold drinks, she slipped it to one of the wolfhounds wandering from table to table begging for food.

As she sipped the sweet, green golanberry juice he'd brought for them, she caught him staring at her mouth. Her tongue tingled, and it wasn't from the juice.

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Just after the noon hour, the earl and his wife arrived with visiting dignitaries to watch the horses race, and in the entourage were women clad in silks and satins, who wore gold and silver jewelry set with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires.

Arondele's brain swirled at the sight of the gems. Her mouth quivered and her fingers ached. A tremulous longing, centuries old and passed down from generation to generation, stirred in her chest. She had to have them. *Would* have them!

Drawn by their lure, she resisted. She didn't move. There were other ways to have what she wanted. Needed.

Rodick rode Xertan in the races. Arondele cheered, jumped and clapped along with all the well wishers as the horses thundered past. She stopped jumping when she realized that, even as a human, her legs were stronger than those of most of the women. She'd jumped too high.

Between races, Arondele wandered among the gentry as they crowded the sides of the course. Rodick's reward for winning more races than any other knight was a new leather saddle and a garland of victor's leaves about his neck. Xertan was also decorated with a leaf garland, which he promptly shook down so he could eat it. This despite a treat Rodick gave him of fat, yellow vegetables that grew underground.

By mid-afternoon, Rodick seemed to withdraw from her and his mood grew somber.

Reluctantly, she could see their time together ending. "I need to go home."

He nodded. They reclaimed their mounts and headed back

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to the woodsman's hut, riding close enough to hold hands. When they pulled up at the hut and he lifted her down, he drew her into his arms and hugged her. She hugged him in return.

Rodick pried the wooden nails out and opened the door to the hut. He followed her inside and shut the door.

CHAPTER 6

Arondele turned, brows lifted in a question.

Rodick forgot to breathe. All day he'd wanted to be alone with her. If she was an enchantress, he didn't intend to resist. He ran a finger down her cheek, inhaling her floral scent with its underlying hint of musk, feeling the smoothness of her skin. She gave a little sigh, and her gaze didn't leave his as he leaned in and touched his lips to hers.

She didn't stop him, but neither did she return the kiss. Pulling back, he said, "Have you never kissed a man before?"

Alarm flared in her face as she shook her head. He thought she feared to disappoint him. His heart melted in his chest. There was no way this woman could ever disappoint him.

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“Then let me teach you. It’s a good skill to have.”

And that’s an understatement, he thought, as visions of all the parts of the body where one could place kisses swam in his head.

Framing her face with his hands to steady her, he pressed his lips to hers and slid them gently over her mouth. She responded in kind faster than he’d expected, but she didn’t open to him, and he wanted to feel the moist warmth inside. He continued to kiss her, unwilling to push her, unwilling either to let her go. He touched his tongue to her lips, and she seemed to sense there was more than what they’d done thus far. He felt a tentative opening.

“All the way,” he whispered. “Open to me all the way.”

She drew back slightly, looked puzzled, as if this was the silliest thing she’d ever heard, but she complied, and he kissed her the way he’d wanted to from the first moment he’d seen her in the meadow. It was pure heaven to taste her. To explore the sweet dew of that mouth and brush her tongue, to feel her tongue brush his back and then dance with his as he coached her. Her body, soft and supple, leaned into him. Kissing her like this was better even than he’d imagined it would be.

He pulled her headpiece off and let it drop to the bed, then threaded his fingers through the golden strands of her hair. Their soft silkiness made him deepen their kiss, and he pressed her tighter against his seeking mouth.

Little flames of desire licked at him and he felt his cock fill and strain deliciously against his breeches. He wanted to take her right then. Never mind the bed, just push her to the floor,

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yank her skirts up, rip off her smallclothes and plunge himself inside her. She'd wrap her legs around him, while he held her arms stretched and trapped above her head, his tongue plundering her mouth as his dick plunged in and out of her.

But she was virginal if she'd never kissed a man, and if he rushed her, it might frighten her and cause her to draw away from him. At least he thought it might. All the other women he'd bedded had been experienced, and had responded blatantly when he'd drawn them into his arms. Some of them had even initiated the act. But Arondele was different.

Control. He must exercise control. By all that was holy, it was almost impossible.

He felt her waiting stillness as he kissed a path from below one ear down her neck and slid his hands to her shoulders and down her arms to her hands. Her grasp on his hands was tight, as if she didn't know what would happen next and almost feared it, even while wanting it, but when he placed them around his neck, he felt a lessening of the tension in her body. Enclosing her in his arms, he returned to kissing her.

He could have kissed her forever, he thought, but she was leaning harder into him, her round breasts pushed against his chest. Her belly pressed against his taut dick, at times rubbing against it. This would never do. He'd lose control if he allowed it.

With a hoarse groan, he released her. "The afternoon is drawing on. You'll want to be in the mountains well before the light fades."

He watched as she slowly opened her eyes. He loved the

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puffiness of her lips from their kisses and the deep pink of her cheeks. Her eyes were large and dark with pleasure and desire. She was so beautiful. Something in his heart stirred.

She smiled, and sunbeams danced in his throat. “May I come tomorrow, too?”

Stepping away from her, still holding her hands because he wasn’t ready to let her go, he couldn’t restrain his happiness. “Can you?”

She nodded.

“They’ll be doing the Hierro pole dance. I think you’d like that.” Pausing at the door before stepping outside to give her privacy, he said, “Leave the clothes in the chest beside the bed. I’ll secure the hut again.”

Opening the door, he turned. “I had a wonderful day today, Arondele.”

She smiled the dazzling smile that lit up his world. “So did I, Rodick. So did I.”

* * *

Thoughts flew like a flock of migrating winged creatures through Arondele’s mind as she rode slowly up to the pond and dismounted. She sat on a boulder overlooking the waters, wanting to keep the day alive in her mind.

The Mystericale Faire had been so much fun. She’d loved how different it was from anything she’d ever known. Except for the woman Marinyxa, whose purple ribbon Rodick had refused, gaiety had been the mood of the faire goers. Even the knight who’d lost out to Rodick for the racing prize had been

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cheerful rather than envious. Unfortunately, in a situation like that, dragons could be very testy.

Memories of those last moments in the hut, of Rodick's mouth on hers as his tongue played with hers, and of his hands cradling her face while they kissed, were fresh and wonderful. She hugged herself, remembering the marvel of feeling this close to someone, whether human or her kind.

If this was what being with a male dragon would be like, she'd love it. Then she went still, and the day with her knight faded. *What if mating with a dragon doesn't feel at all the same?*

Pushing the frightening thought from her mind, she changed, rising on her back legs, her wings folded behind. The pond caught her reflection, and she saw a body similar in power and grace to Nombella's, with topaz eyes and the same rich glint off golden scales. Like her father's, her head bore the multiple, long spikes of her royal heritage. This was why in human form she'd chosen to wear a spiked circlet.

She'd thought her mother beautiful. Would dreigomen, the male dragons, consider Gloriana—for that was her secret dragon name—lovely, too? When she flew in the ritual, would any male fly up to mate with her, or would she circle ignored and alone in the heavens?

And if no one chose her, would she still be able to fulfill her destiny?

Shivers swept through her. *Don't think about that. Think happy thoughts.* She forced her fears out, replacing them with memories of her day with Rodick at the faire and in the hut.

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Warmth spread through her, and she gave a satisfying little cry as she spread her wings and flew toward the white castle of Dreicomar in the Nordrung mountains.

Tomorrow would be another day with her own special knight.

Dreicomar's white castle came into sight. It was different from that of the earl. The many towers were flat, allowing for take-offs and landings. She hadn't been inside Du Magne Castle, but she knew the inside of this one. Although the bodies of the goldens weren't as long as those of the earth, fire and water dragons, the staircases were wide with broad, deep steps to accommodate the handling of longer dragon tails.

She landed just outside the castle gates, and her touchdown was light, despite her weight. Sometimes the earth trembled when her father landed.

The men on guard snapped to attention. The wide, black gates shone in the afternoon sunlight as they hurried to pull them open.

“Thank you, Captain Kanyest.”

“Our pleasure, my princess.” He laid a black-gloved fist over his heart and dipped his head briefly.

“Is my father here?”

“I believe I just saw him approaching the landing pad on the uppermost tower, princess.”

“Good. I'd like to speak with him.” She started through the gates.

The captain waited until all of her body had cleared before signaling his underling to shut them.

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Hearing the gates clang shut behind her, Gloriana considered, for the first time, how much faster it was to cross a threshold in human form. Next time she'd complete her approach within the castle walls.

She waited on the pad below the one on which her father landed, feeling the thud as his great, burnished gold body touched and settled. As a child, and even now as an adult, he looked magnificent to her. The many spikes sprouting from his forehead and along the edge of what would be cheeks on a human grew at a backward slant so as not to impede flight. They gave him a kingly appearance. His eyes were the deep, dark red of garnets, and his head narrowed down to jaws bearing significant fangs.

Down his back and onto his tail were short, thick plates to protect him from air attack. Unlike the talons of a drang, those of dragons were closer to human hands—three long fingers and a thumb.

His broad chest put her in mind of Rodick's. His muscled shoulders reminded her of Rodick's, rippling as he'd wielded the heavy sword and charged her assailant.

She greeted her father-king with a slight bow, then followed him as he walked down the broad steps to the room below. Making note for the first time of the clean scent from his body, she commented, "You've been in the lake."

"Wonderful on a warm day like this. Sometimes I envy the water dragons, then winter arrives and I'm glad to be a golden." He chuckled.

After entering the room, they settled on the cool floor, legs

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tucked beneath their bodies, wings folded.

“And what can I do for you today, my daughter?” He turned his face toward her, his garnet eyes serious.

“This mating thing,” she began. He tensed. He always became awkward when the subject came up, and she almost lost courage before plunging ahead. “What if I fly and no one follows me?”

A puzzled look crossed his face. “There’ll be a score of suitors waiting on the ground below for your flight. Why would they not vie for you?”

This time she couldn’t look him in the eyes. “What if I’m not...”

“Not what?” He clicked one talon against the floor impatiently.

Clearing her throat, she said, “Pleasing to a male.”

He lifted his head and roared with laughter. “You think you’ll fly up and no golden will claim you? You can’t be serious. I can see I’ve sheltered you too much. Your scent will draw them, but, even if it didn’t, you are far too lovely for them not to want you.”

She lowered her head. “Fathers are prejudiced when it comes to their hatchlings.”

He reached out and stroked her head with great gentleness. “Gloriana, have you seen Nombella?”

She nodded.

“Have you never looked at your reflection? Your beauty outshines even hers, and I fought many to be her mate. No, my daughter, besides the fact that you’re Princess of the Goldens

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and the kingdom's heiress, your beauty's a legend and will draw many to fight to be with you."

Relief rolled through her like a wave reaching the lake's shore.

He stood. "Have we settled that then?"

She nodded. "Thank you." Her words were but a whisper.

"Good."

She watched him move down the stairs on legs strong enough to handle his huge body. He would probably seek out his human companion, and an unexpected sense of sadness came because he couldn't shift and would never experience what she did with Rodick.

* * *

The morning sky was the cool green of the flesh of the kiwi fruit, and the air through the open window to the balcony on the highest level of Castle Dreicomar was balmy and soft.

The king had finished his breakfast and was preparing to inspect the kingdom's crops when the sound of scales brushing across marble flooring and a throat clearing issued from the doorway.

Turning, he saw Llalyo, supervisor of agriculture, the green earth dragon who was to accompany him on the inspection.

Dreicomar stood in irritation at the interruption. Lalyo should have waited for him in the fields.

"My king." Llalyo dipped his head in submission, his voice containing a note of urgency as he directed the ruler's

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attention to the open sky.

The king stared out at the flight of a lone golden flying in the thin rays of the morning sun. He recognized Gloriana's form and wings. Attempting to understand Llalyo's alarm, he observed her. Certainly she wasn't practicing the mating ritual because, instead of flying straight up, she was making long, rolling swoops—up and down, up and down. Sometimes she also rolled her body over in flight, but what in the name of the saints was she doing now?

She'd folded her wings over her head and was spinning around vertically as she attempted the long swoops.

He could have told her such a dangerous maneuver was impossible. He watched in horror as she lost all orientation to where she was in space and, unable to deploy her wings, plunged toward earth. He took one giant leap out the open window to the balcony and launched his huge body down after her, flaring his wings to their widest width.

Moments before she hit the ground, his talons clamped on her plummeting form. Lifting her, he flew forward for a time before setting her down gently and landing beside her. He watched as she untangled herself and stood.

"Oh, my. That didn't work, did it? Thank you, Father." She was out of breath.

"What under the sun possessed you?" Fear made it come out as a roar.

"I was...it...it was just an idea I had."

"You always were headstrong, Gloriana. How many times have I warned you to think before you act?" He couldn't seem

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to stop shouting at her.

Now, he thought, she had the grace to drop her head in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I overlooked giving thought to the laws of flight before I acted.”

“You certainly did. No more experimentation of this kind. I’ll have your word on that.” His voice was firm, but he no longer shouted. His heart was no longer threatening to break down his chest wall. She was safe.

“You have it, my king.” She paid homage to him with what he knew to be genuine contriteness.

“I thought Llalyo was going to have a heart attack when he saw you. I was busy reviewing the annual crop yields when he alerted me to your danger, otherwise I might not have been able to rescue you.”

Horror spread across her golden face and her eyes darkened. “I’d never have forgiven myself if he’d damaged his heart because of me.”

“It’s forgotten now.” He’d been stern long enough. She’d gotten the message. He softened his voice. “Fly with me?”

They rose together, their shadows casting a wide formation across the green fields below. They caught a thermal and drifted together, the current tucked up under and over their wings, the warm air flow brushing their faces. She looked at him and gave a small cry with the joy of it.

Seeing her on his wing tip, memories of teaching her to fly as a hatchling sprang to mind, something he hadn’t thought about for years. A new, unexpected emotion thundered through him. What was he going to do when she was gone?

CHAPTER 7

On the flight to the pond where she'd change into Arondele, Gloriana pondered her foolishness in attempting to do what the mage Xidel had done with the swirling bowls. *How could I have been so stupid?* She shook her head. It illustrated how tricky changing from one form, from one way of life to another, could be.

A rush of excitement flooded her when Rodick came into view astride Xertan at the base of the mountain path. He pleased her so much she thought something would burst in her breast. To her relief, Xertan was behaving as a horse should.

Rodick leaned to kiss her as she drew near. The wet warmth of his mouth as it pressed on hers sent little thrills

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trickling down her back. The longing to be closer to him flared inside her, creating an urge to have more of him than yesterday's interlude had provided. But this wasn't the time for it. These hours were for the *Mystericale Faire*.

"Good morrow," he said. "I love the way you taste."

Saints, even the sound of his voice caressed her. "It's a good morning because I'm with you, and I love the way you kiss me." To tease him, she laughed and kicked her horse into a canter, reaching the cover of the forest seconds before he did.

She emerged from the hut, only to have him remove her headpiece and lean inside to toss it on the trunk. To replace it, he crowned her with a circlet of flowers and leaves that crossed her forehead just above her eyes. Streamers of red and gold ribbons hung down the back.

"I'd forgotten all the ladies wear them, and I didn't have one for you yesterday. Tira fashioned it for me."

"It's lovely, Rodick. Thank you." She kissed him again, but pulled away before they could linger. "Let's hurry to the faire!"

They rode in silence for a time before she said, "Why did the women give you ribbons yesterday, but the men had none for me?"

"Ah, but that would have been bad form. The women toss them to unmarried men as an expression of fun at the faire. Sometimes the man pairs off for the day with one of the ribbon givers. Had you and I been betrothed, the women wouldn't have offered them. However, for a man to present

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one to a woman when she was with another man might have caused the drop of a glove.”

“The drop of a glove?”

“That’s how a knight challenges another knight to combat over a woman.”

The vision of Rodick battling to save her from the thugs flashed vividly in her mind. “Oh, my. That would be bad, wouldn’t it?”

“It would certainly spoil the frivolity.” He was smiling that beguiling grin that made even her toes tingle.

“The lady with the purple ribbon...you wouldn’t accept it from her. Do you not like her?”

“It isn’t that I don’t like her. I’m just not interested in her.” He no longer smiled.

“She’s interested in you or she wouldn’t have offered that special ribbon. At least I assume it’s special because you said you never accept purple. What’s special about purple?” The incident had seemed strange to her, and he’d closed himself off to her when she’d questioned him yesterday. Curiosity drove her to pursue it.

There was a long pause. Finally, he said, “Ask Tira. It’s something the women know about.”

I shall ask her if I see her, but if I don’t, I shall press you for an answer. In fact, I shall tempt you with kisses until you tell me. The thought was so satisfying she smiled to herself.

Upon reaching the faire grounds, they walked their horses through the crowds again.

“Why no offers of ribbons today, Rodick?” She leaned

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toward him to whisper her query.

He chuckled. "Today you wear my colors."

"Your colors?"

"The red and gold in your circlet."

She screwed her face up as she tried to understand. "Does that mean we're betrothed?"

"No. It means I have a claim on you. At least during the faire."

A claim on her. She liked the sound of that very much. "And what is this betrothal thing?"

They pulled up and handed their reins to the waiting elves.

He lifted her down and, reaching for her hand, pulled her into a walk. "Don't you have betrothal where you come from? I thought it was a common thing."

She shook her head.

"It's a pledge to marry in the future. When his eldest daughter was too young yet to marry, King Nyle of Xectanel arranged for her betrothal to a young prince of Nanthall. In the Three Lands, it's a serious thing for the royals. They even sign papers for it. For we lesser people, there's no paper signing. Just a happy celebration."

She wrinkled her nose in delight and looked at him. "It's a clever arrangement, is it not?"

"That it is." He squeezed her hand.

They rode the swirling bowls again for they were her favorite. She asked to try archery again, and was happy she surprised him by her accuracy. Once she forgot the power in her arms and the arrow almost pierced the hay bale through.

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“You’ve strong arms for a woman. Especially a princess. Don’t you have servants in the mountains?”

“Yes, but I enjoy doing things that strengthen me.” Like pushing off from and landing on castle launch pads and the earth.

“Oh, there’s Xidel. Let me introduce you.” He pointed out a tall, stooped man whose long, yellow over-tunic seemed to take on the glow of the sun. Even from where they stood, Arondele’s keen vision could see the constant swirling of his black eyes. She thought it a wonder he saw anything, but then, he was a magician.

For her it was one thing to mind meld with a terrified animal and quite another to deal with a magician. She pulled back. The mage was dangerous. He might not be able to know her true form, but he’d detect her magic. It wasn’t time for her knight to know any of this. “Oh, look! These little boxes that ride along the ground weren’t here yesterday. Can we ride them?”

The tension in her shoulders relaxed when the danger was averted by Rodick’s, “Of course, we can! Come along.”

Like the swirling bowls, the colorful boxes had seats in them. They were magically connected in a long line and, once filled, chugged away smoothly to circle the faire grounds and then dip into a tunnel. There they sped past gnomes playing musical instruments, a lake with a fake blue dragon rising out of it that caused children to squeal in fun, and a fake drang that plunged down and threatened to carry riders away. More squeals and screams echoed in the chamber.

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Arondele was still laughing when the boxes glided out into the sunlight again and came to a gradual halt. Riders climbed out, and new riders climbed in. She'd never had so much fun.

"I see your squire and his family."

"Good. I've invited them to have lunch with us here. But first, I need to take you to my rooms. Come along!"

The drawbridge over the castle moat was down and the gates were open. The guards greeted Rodick with slaps on the back as they walked through into the first bailey. Here the ground was lined with stonework, and it felt strange under her feet. Her boots were of finely worked leather, but the soles weren't as sturdy as on those Rodick wore.

By the time they'd reached the inner bailey, she was limping. "Sorry, it's just a pebble."

"We've only a few steps more." He swung her up in his arms and carried her to his lodgings.

Struggling with the door because his arms were full, he managed to open it and set her down inside. Kicking the door shut with his foot, he kissed her.

There it was again, the enveloping warmth, the demands of his mouth on hers, her body blending into his. It lighted up her life. Disappointment flooded her when he released her.

"Sit," he ordered, pointing to a worn chest that looked like he carried it into battle. Then he removed her boot and tipped the stone out. As he slowly slid her foot back into the boot, his eyes never left her face. It was a moment that caused the juices to flow between her thighs. She felt lightheaded and slightly dizzy from wanting him.

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He stood, and the abruptness shattered the moment. “I risk your reputation by having you here. I forgot these when you dressed today, and you’ll need them for the Hierro pole. I’m going to step outside while you put them on. Wear them under your gown.”

He handed her a pair of breeches for a woman and went outside.

She stared at them. Did women truly wear these? And what was it about the Hierro pole that required them? With a shake of her head, she pulled them on. They felt strange over her smallclothes and under her dress. She hoped they didn’t look too bulky.

Before leaving his quarters, she took in the sparse, neat rooms. His armor stood in one corner and his sword hung over the stone hearth. His shield, the crest embossed with red and gold, leaned against one wall. A wooden table held his comb and brush, and she picked up the brush and brought it to her nose. It smelled of his hair, and she closed her eyes and remembered the feel of the dark strands.

His bed was framed by tall posts. Gossamer veils hung from them. The scales of dragons were too tough for insects to bite, but human skin was different. The veils would be dropped down at night to keep them out.

With a sigh and a last glance at his bed, she turned to the door. She’d dallied long enough. She joined him outside.

They located Flynt and his family seated on a blanket on the grass outside the circle of the faire. She accompanied Rodick to help carry food back to the six of them, wondering

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what she was going to do with the meat filling in the pie this time.

They returned for cold drinks of sweetened kiwi juice for everyone. The drink was refreshing, and to her surprise, there was no meat in her pie, only vegetables.

Have filled their stomachs, Flynt and Rodick took the children over to ride the boxes. She chatted with Tira, then finally asked the question that nagged at her.

“Sir Rodick told me to ask you about the purple ribbons. A woman offered one to him our first day here, and he refused it. There must be something special about them, but he won’t tell me.”

She watched in fascination as Tira’s cheeks pinked up.

There was a sustained pause before she answered. “They has to do with somethin’ a man and a woman do when they’re together. Close like, you know?”

Arondele felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Oh yes, she knew something of what closeness with a man meant. “I understand that, but what?”

Tira wouldn’t look at her. “I really shouldn’t be telling an unwed lady this, but it has to do with bondage.”

“Bondage?” To her bondage meant what dragons did to the people they caught and kept as servants. Not companions, as her father had, but servants. They chained them up. “You mean tying—”

Before she could finish, Tira said, “Oh, and here’s my lovelies and the men coming back,” but by now she’d gotten the idea the ribbons had something to do with restraining

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lovers.

“It’s Hierro pole time,” Rodick said. “Are you dressed for it, Tira?” When she nodded, he extended a hand to each woman and pulled her up.

A tall pole had been erected in the center of the faire grounds. Ribbons in a riot of colors hung from the top and reached almost to the ground. The end of each ribbon had been tied in a loop.

“Put your hand in this loop and hang on, Arondele. Understand?” After assisting Tira, he took hold of a ribbon next to Arondele.

Soon all the loops had a hand in them. She waited, wondering what was so great about this and why she wore breeches for it. With surprising suddenness, the ribbons began to flare out from the pole and rise. The pole rotated, moving faster and faster.

“Are you holding tight?” Rodick called.

“Yes!” Now she understood the reason for the breeches. As she rose, the people below could see up her dress. And she could tell there were those who were checking.

The pole was rotating, the ribbons were flying around it, and she heard Tira instruct, “Now we weave, milady. Over and under now.”

And so she wove, over and under, over and under the other ribbons, meeting the people swinging from the loops. People laughed, and sometimes collided or had to redo over when they should have gone under. But gradually the weave neared the lower end of the pole, the rotations stopped, and the people

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felt themselves gently touch the earth.

The Hierro pole had been decorated.

It was only as she released her hand from the loop that she realized her knight had chosen a purple ribbon for her. She magically changed it to red.

No one need ever know.

CHAPTER 8

They rode, without speaking, to the woodsman's hut, and when he stepped inside behind her, she turned and offered her mouth to him even as he shut the door behind them.

Rodick couldn't get enough of her kisses. He could tell she liked what he did to her, too. She'd become quite experienced with the kissing process and knew what things created fire in his belly. She'd wind her arms about his neck and run her fingers through his hair, stroking him in little ways, at first shyly and then more boldly, as if she wanted more of this erotic pleasure.

She was solid and warm in his arms. He couldn't believe how good and right she felt there. How good he felt. Oh, he

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liked this damsel. Liked her more than very much.

Today, she broke their kiss and looked seriously into his eyes. "Is this what they call mating?"

He gulped, stumbling over his words. "Well, no..." How could he phrase this? "It can lead up to it. Sometimes." He felt like a bumbling idiot.

"Will you teach me about mating? My father tells me it will be time for me to mate soon, and I know nothing about it."

Rodick almost choked. "Your father would be very unhappy if I did, Arondele."

First shock, then a sly smile slid slowly across her face. "My father need never know."

Oh, sure, he thought, as a vision of an irate king and his men-at-arms bearing down on him, sunlight glinting off their drawn swords, flashed quite vividly in his brain. "Was there no one to speak to you of what intimacy between a man and a woman is like?"

"And who might that one have been?" Her face reflected genuine puzzlement.

"Your mother. An aunt. Perhaps a governess?"

She frowned. "My father raised me and has said nothing. Only that I near the time. I have no governess, and I rarely see my mother."

Sadness turned over in his chest, and he drew her into his arms and pressed her head against his shoulder. His father, captain of the knights of the Ahnerion king, had sent an experienced courtesan to his bedchamber to teach him how to

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pleasure a woman, and be pleased in return. She'd taught him to be uninhibited, to explore her body in every way possible, just as she did his, and thoughts of those days still had the power to inflame his groin and tighten his balls.

If he'd had a sister, it would have been up to their mother to prepare her for what her husband would teach her on their nuptial night. Of course, he thought with a smile, betrothed couples didn't always wait until the marriage vows had been said to consummate their love.

While there was something special about being the first man to breach a maiden's pussy, and men—knight or not—liked to boast of it, it was always better if the girl knew *something*, had some knowledge about sex.

At least that was his justification for proceeding with Arondele.

“I can only show you certain things, my love. The rest will be up to your husband on the night you wed.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off by kissing her again, his tongue searching and wooing as he drank in the pleasure of doing this with her. He didn't think he'd ever get enough of it.

Coming up for air, he continued, “I've already taught you to kiss, and you've become very skilled at it.” Then he kissed her again.

Permission to teach her a little about making love was all he'd needed to ignore the danger to himself...should he lose control. Trembling with need and the rush of excitement that swept down his spine, he trailed kisses down her neck,

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stopping to remove her over-tunic to give him access to what he knew had to be a voluptuous body.

His hands glided over slippery silk as he explored the wondrous curves. Her clothing had hidden her beautiful form from him, and she felt even more solid and lush, yet soft and yielding to his touch than he'd expected. He marveled over what his hands were telling him as he explored her breasts and felt her nipples tighten to beads, even though his fingers had not played with them. He brushed kisses over her cheek and whispered erotic things in her ears.

As he continued his exploration, he felt her arms go around his neck, heard the low whimper in her throat and felt her move restlessly against him. The feel of her breasts crushed against his chest created a restlessness in him, too.

When his hand moved over the fabric covering the thick bush between her thighs, she gasped and clung tighter to him. "That's what I felt," she whispered, her voice so soft he had to concentrate to hear.

"What you felt?" Lord, it was difficult to speak he was so aroused.

"The day I first saw you. It was like bees humming there. I'd never felt it before."

He almost came undone.

"It felt wonderful. Touch me there again."

Holding tight to his control, he slid her dress up. His hand, usually so confident, was shaking as it made its way up satin thighs to her pussy. This much he could teach her about love making, or "mating" as she called it. This much was safe.

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As long as he could stay in command of his body.

And that would be difficult. He felt the slick drops that would make entering her easy forming on his penis and moistening his smallclothes. His stroking fingers between her thighs found Arondele's wetness, and he knew she was ready to be joined with him.

But entering her would mean teaching her what mating was, and that was something he dared not do.

He stroked and fondled, while forcing his thoughts to other things, as she made small noises at the back of her throat and pressed harder and harder against his hand. He felt her restiveness increase and knew her tension was building. With deliberate care, he circled his hand across her sensitive place of desire while he sucked her hot tongue into his mouth.

Her arms clamped so tight about his neck she almost strangled him. Still, he felt his frustration build. It seemed to be taking her too long, and he questioned whether or not she was too inexperienced yet to reach the pinnacle he wanted to drive her to.

With an abruptness that belied his fears, she opened her mouth wider to him, her tongue flicking and penetrating, as she pushed harder and harder, moving her hips from side to side as she reached a fevered pitch, seeking the moment when she would reach for and find that dazzling explosion among the stars.

Just when he'd almost given up, he felt her stiffen. She gasped. She cried out. Then she shuddered as he felt the spasms begin in her core, moving through his hand even as

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they traveled up through her clit to the smooth planes of her belly.

Relief, and a little pride that he'd brought her to satisfaction without penetrating her welled up in his chest. Now he could at least teach her how to know when she was ready for a man.

Lifting her, he carried her to the bed, where he pulled her onto his lap and rocked and crooned to her as her passion subsided. With his mouth against her ear, he spoke softly of what had happened to her.

Each time she moved during his explanations, her body shifted over his aching cock. Soon he lost all train of thought. When he couldn't stand the sensation of her riding him any longer, he whispered once again in her ear, warning her to stop. Her ear was hot against his lips.

With a wicked little laugh, she deliberately rocked across him.

He'd held back so long, and so deeply had she aroused him with her scented body and the little noises she'd made as he'd caressed and fondled her, that he felt his cock stand up like an arrow and his balls grow tighter with every sensual movement. By the saints, she felt good. Caught up in the rush of feelings she was creating, in the hot desire that flooded him, all rational thought fled his mind. He turned her face to him and opened his mouth wide enough to cover all of her lips with his so he could kiss her deeply, wanting to swallow her whole.

He felt his excitement build. When she opened her mouth to him and drew his tongue inside, he spread his legs to let her

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writhing body touch him fully. He pressed her down hard over his groin and lifted his hips to meet her, forgetting all about control, losing himself in the overwhelming sensual feelings his cock, his balls, his entire body were experiencing.

He was ready. With her body undulating hard against him, he came like lightning. One moment he was peaking; the next he was lost in pleasure.

It was as if he'd ridden to the sun and back.

After all the sensations had faded, he pulled her down beside him, where they lay bathed in the fragrance of the ferns, wrapped in each other's arms. He drifted off.

"Rodick...Rodick."

He opened his eyes. She lay facing him. "Yes?" He shook sleep from his mind.

"That was wonderful." She trailed a finger down the side of his face. "Did we mate?"

He laughed, but stopped at the embarrassment he read on her face. "No, we didn't mate, love. Although that was close. I'm glad you liked what we did."

"Of course I did." She screwed her face up. "I still don't understand what this mating is." She sat up, her face serious. "I need to know. Soon."

Later—much later and much too late—he wondered why he hadn't asked her then exactly why she needed to know. And soon. But he hadn't asked, and maybe it wouldn't have made any difference had he asked and heard her answer. He'd loved her too much already.

"Next time I'll explain." That was all he'd said.

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At the time, he remembered thinking she'd probably never seen a man naked or a cock, even a relaxed one. Right then his cock was so satisfied it wasn't in any condition to stiffen again to demonstrate what had to happen for mating.

"For now, give me your beautiful hand." He kissed it, rolling it over and licking her palm.

She shivered. "I like it when you do that."

Her rumpled tunic was now riding her hips. He took her hand and slid it under the silk garment to the damp spot between her thighs, asking her what she'd felt when he'd touched her there, explaining the meaning of the wetness.

"Oh," she said, her eyes wide. "I see."

Her naïveté was so endearing that he laughed and wrapped her in his arms again.

He hated letting her go, but someone had to be in command of their situation. If her father found out where she'd been, she might not be able to return tomorrow, and he couldn't risk losing her.

Finally, he rose and, patting her tush, urged her to get ready to leave.

He accompanied her to the base of the mountain and watched her guide her mount up the mountain trail until she was out of sight. Then he turned his horse back toward the faire. After walking a few steps, he tossed his head back, threw his arms wide and laughed as joy rushed through him. Kicking his mount into a run, he returned, not to the faire, but to his rooms to dream about this puzzling yet exquisite woman. He sat with a flask of fermented golanberry wine and

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drank until he tumbled to his bed and fell asleep in his clothes.

His dreams were filled with her...her body naked, warm thighs spread invitingly beneath him, arms reaching for him as his engorged cock teased her pussy and his balls brushed her hot slit. She lay with her golden hair spread out across the pillow on his bed, and a swirling collage of gold, purple, red and emerald colored the room.

He took the purple satin ribbons she'd presented to him and tied her hands to the wooden bedstead as she lifted her hips to him in invitation. He heard her pant as he tied her legs apart. Her gasp turned to hoarse moans as his mouth plundered her with a kiss in that most intimate part of her body.

Before he could slide through that golden nest of tight curls into her slick slit, he wakened, hot and sweaty, just as a dream king wearing a gigantic, jeweled crown and flailing a burnished sword the size of a castle had borne down on him. The king rode the back of a drang, its sharp talons heading straight for Rodick's throat.

Rodick pulled himself out of the nightmare and sat on the bed's edge with his head in his hands, experiencing again the reality that too much wine was a nasty thing.

He thought of the vision of her in his dream. He rose, his cock hard, his need to empty his bladder strong.

*Thighs spread wide and tied with purple ribbons, huh?
Don't you wish?*

Don't you dare.

CHAPTER 9

A fresh circlet lay on the bed waiting for her. This time the flowers were white, but the ribbons were still red and gold. The joy of wearing his colors and the memory of the purple ribbon on the Hierro pole made her smile. Arondele hugged the circlet to her breast and closed her eyes. Could any man be better to her?

She carried it outside to let him “crown” her with it. His eyes, so close to her, were deep green in the morning light. Anticipating a kiss, she was surprised when he merely brushed her cheek with his lips.

“Kisses later,” he said, his breath hot against her ear.

She shivered, and her heart speeded up in anticipation of

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the moments they'd spend alone at the end of the day.

The Flynts waved to them, and she and Rodick joined them and tossed balls with the children for a time. They ranged in age from three years to eight, and she rolled the ball to Jessa, the three-year-old. Tossing was not an option for a child this young.

Dancing came next, and Rodick guided her in the steps. For the circle dance, Rodick coaxed Tira in because you didn't need a partner. His comfortableness with his squire's family, even though she'd learned his father was a baron, and his kindness toward them caused an ache in her breast.

Breathless and laughing after the dances, Arondele thought she'd introduce this to the villagers outside the walls of the Dreicomar Castle. Then she realized that would be too risky in human form, and it squelched her enthusiasm for the project.

Rodick tugged her toward the fortune teller's tent, but she resisted. Mages and fortune tellers were dangerous to her. He only laughed at her reluctance. When he tried to go in alone, she distracted him, just as she'd done when he'd wanted to introduce her to Xidel. With relief, he cheerily followed her lead. She knew the time would come when she'd have to tell him what she really was. But not now. Not yet. Although she wanted these precious moments to last forever, she was wise enough to know it could not be.

"Trick racing is next. I'll leave you here with the Flynts."

"Will you ride Xertan?" She'd become quite fond of the stallion.

"No, Xremond, the horse I usually ride with you, is smaller

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and faster.”

He would ride only in the last challenge, but he left her now to prepare.

The nobles had arrived. There were many more of them today and, again, her eyes caught the flash of precious gems in gold and silver. Her fingers trembled to have them.

One of the women, a stout woman dressed in dark green, took her place on the race sidelines not far from Arondele. Sunlight glistened off a parure of emeralds set in gold filigree. The earrings hanging from her ears matched a gem-encrusted necklace around her aging throat and a heavy ring on a pudgy finger.

Arondele clasped her hands behind her and moved away from temptation. Emeralds and gold were her favorite gems and metal. It wasn't that she didn't have enough of them in her lair; it was that the need was unquenchable.

She sighed. It was a dragon's curse.

As Rodick's race approached, she joined the Flynt family to watch. This concept of family fascinated her. She still saw her father only because he was king and she his only heir. Nombella had dropped by only to warn her. Which was why her tears had been such a surprise.

Watching the children frolic with a ball on the grass behind Tira and Flynt, and rolling it back when one of them missed it, she realized how much she enjoyed them. With sudden unexpectedness, she became fully aware she wanted to be around for *her* hatchling as much as the father would be.

And she would continue to visit Rodick here in Ahnerion.

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Well, that will certainly break tradition, won't it? She smiled. There had to be some benefits to being princess and heir, didn't there?

The sound of pounding drew her attention to squires who, in preparation for the final race, were driving a post topped by a small, colored flag into the ground the height of a horse's withers.

They cleared the race track, and she could see Rodick waiting his turn among the other contestants at the far end. He'd stripped to a shirt that hugged his chest and tight breeches. That prickling feeling she got every time she saw him washed over her. Crossing her arms across her chest, she hugged herself.

The younger Flynt children gathered around her skirts to watch as the first rider came thundering down and successfully grabbed his flag off the post. The crowd cheered, and he rode back to the start holding the trophy high as it fluttered in the breeze. Eight riders in all competed, and each bagged a flag.

The stakes were lowered to shoulder height, and again every rider was successful. After a flag had been taken, a new flag mysteriously appeared after the stake had been lowered for the next heat. Rodick's flags were always red and gold, and Arondele smiled as she recognized the magic of Xidel. She assumed the flag would always be in the colors of the one who rode on that pass. In fact, she watched and smiled to see the color change on one still on the post because the previous rider had missed it.

It became more difficult to capture the flags as the stakes

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were dropped lower and lower. Now riders had to lean out of their saddles in a perfectly timed approach. Failure to retrieve a flag, or dropping it once you did, eliminated you.

When the stakes were dropped to fetlock height, only Sir Malroy and Rodick remained. Malroy, a heavy, blond knight, rode hard and fast, leaning out so far that only his left leg stayed in the saddle.

She shut her eyes, wanting him to fail, then felt guilty because she had. When she heard only a groan of disappointment from the crowd, she knew that left Rodick. If he captured this flag, he won. If not, he and Malroy would ride again.

As Rodick tore down the track, his body low over Xremond's neck, she saw again the determined face of the knight who'd rescued her from evil men.

As the pounding hooves approached the coveted flag, Arondele felt something brush her skirts and looked down in horror as little Jessa ambled into the lane, her hand outstretched for the bright, fluttering flag. Arondele grabbed for her dress and missed. Tira, who was farther away, screamed and Flynt cursed.

It was too late for horse and rider to avoid her. Without a thought, Arondele pushed off with her powerful legs and leaped after the toddler, snatching her back from Xremond's flashing hooves just as Rodick leaned for the flag.

Thunderous applause and cheers split the air. As Rodick straightened, the crowd could see he'd snatched the two of them and pulled them into his lap. Arondele, clutching Jessa,

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was half-lying in an awkward position, but she and the babe were safe. As Xremond finally slowed, she saw a crumpled red and gold flag in Rodick's gloved hand.

As the *destrier* turned and trotted back to crowds, she saw the hand rise and knew Rodick waved it to the crowd. Thunder roared again. It matched what Arondele's heart was doing in her chest.

Rodick pulled up in front of Tira, whose face was drowning in tears. He handed down Jessa, who clapped her hands because it had been fun, and Tira snatched her to her bosom and kissed the top of her fair head before crying her thanks to Arondele and the knight.

Arondele felt strong arms straighten her into a proper sitting position, but she wasn't handed down. Rodick pulled her back until she leaned against his chest. He walked Xremond back to the corral.

"I told you someday I wanted you to ride with me," Rodick whispered against her ear. "I can't tell you how terrified I was when I saw you and Jessa in front of me. For now I want you here, where I can know you're safe."

When they'd dismounted, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. She kissed him back, hard and passionately.

"You do take my breath away. You're a strong woman, my princess. I couldn't have stopped Xremond from running the babe down, and we'd have all lived with that tragedy the rest of our lives. You saved us from that."

"I didn't think. I just acted."

"Well, there was no time for thinking, was there?" His lips

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closed on hers again.

He walked with his arm about her waist, but as they neared the crowd of faire goers again, he withdrew it because he knew she was uncomfortable about others seeing them. At the corral there were only elves, and they were so disinterested in humans they wouldn't have told anyone of the kiss they'd seen.

The prize was an expensive bottle of the earl's best wine and a large gold ring set with a spinel. It was a man's ring, and it felt heavy in Arondele's hand when Rodick let her hold it.

Rodick's colors, she thought, as her head swam and her fingers twitched at the sight of the rich red gem set in the gleaming gold. Reluctantly, she returned it. "He must've thought you'd win."

"On occasion I have." Rodick slid it on his finger and smiled. The one corner of his mouth turned up as it did when he was amused. She'd kissed the corner of that mouth. She'd like to kiss it now.

Tira and Flynt were too upset over the near loss of Jessa to stay. After thanking Arondele and clapping Rodick on the back, they took their brood back to their house.

Now the two rescuers sat on the grass drinking wine and eating wild figs and golanberry tarts after devouring vegetable pies. The wine was elegant on Arondele's tongue. Smooth and rich and fragrant. Soon she felt mellow and easy. She looked at Rodick and caught him studying her. Giggling just a little, she brushed a crumb from his chin and felt the beginnings of beard stubble. It was rough and sensual to her touch.

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She slid her fingers under his chin. “I want to kiss again. Can we go to the hut?”

* * *

Staring at his beautiful and slightly tipsy princess, he answered by discarding their trash and giving her a hand up.

He only hoped the wine had been enough to release her desire and prepare her for what he intended to do with her in that hut.

CHAPTER 10

As Rodick was shutting the door, he heard the swish of silk. By the time he turned to her, her boots lay tumbled on their sides, her over-tunic, dress and small clothes in a silken puddle about her feet.

Oh, the wine had worked all right, he thought. He wouldn't have thought she could have removed her clothes that fast.

She stood with his circlet on her head, his colors streaming down her back, and her long, golden hair cascading over breasts whose nipples and areolae were the color of ripe peaches. His mouth watered to taste them.

Her form was of proportions so perfect it made his chest ache. The nest of golden curls between her thighs hinted of

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passionate nights and glorious afternoons, and he wondered if she was already wet for him.

His cock reacted so fast it pained him. Cream had already formed on its head.

“By the saints, but you’re beautiful,” he said, when he could breathe again.

She removed his jerkin, shirt and belt, and he felt his knees weaken. By the time she’d reached his breeches, he stopped her. Enclosing her in his arms, he brought those breasts up against his chest because he couldn’t wait any longer. He kissed her slowly, deeply, as she returned his kiss and pressed hard against him. His mind couldn’t get around how she felt in his arms, with the scent of her hair and skin surrounding him and her mouth sweet and warm under his lips, while the round softness of her breasts pressed into him.

Pulling back, he brushed the long strands of her hair over her shoulders, and his lips traversed the clean lines of her neck. He could feel her tighten in anticipation of what he would do next, hear her sigh with pleasure as his mouth reached her breasts, and his kisses and tongue made their own trail over the full mounds.

His lips brushed her nipples until they were as taut as pearls. Her hands were framing his face now, as if to keep him there where she’d longed for him to go, and he took one nipple and its surrounding areola fully into his mouth to savor her.

He slid his hand between her legs and touched the gem hidden there. The little moan she gave in the back of her throat almost caused him to lose control, but he was not going to

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spoil what he intended to do with her.

She was wet, and he slipped a finger inside her.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“You asked about mating...” He was whispering into her ear now.

“I like this. Is this it?”

He withdrew his finger and stepped back. “No. You can pull my breeches down now.”

When he’d kicked them aside, and stood naked and proud before her, he touched himself as he said, “A man’s cock stiffens like this when he desires to mate. And it goes into the opening where I just had my finger.”

God, he thought he was going to explode if he wasn’t inside her soon.

Her eyes widened as she studied his penis. She ran a finger over it, and that felt so good he wanted to forget danger and jam it in her, but she said, “Are you sure it will fit?”

“For sure it will fit. Now come to me, my princess. And we will make love without mating.”

“But I want to mate...”

He bruised her lips with his mouth and pulled her hard against his aching dick. Her buttocks were smooth and firm in his plundering hands. He ran hands and lips all over her beautiful body, gliding over every sensuous curve, exploring every opening, tasting and sucking. *Wanting*.

She was molten passion in his arms, returning his kisses, stroking his belly with her fingernails, wrapping her arms around his neck and then her legs around his waist.

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Tempering the frenzied longing to fuck her, he prepared her for the entry he intended. Continuing to assault her senses with his touch, taste and scent, he drew her thoughts away from what might come. He wanted to overwhelm her with feelings, until her desire was so strong that his invasion of her body wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

He reached for his cock, where its length was touched by her curls and clit, rubbing it across her until she threw her head back and moaned. She was so hot there, and he could feel her juices, slick and inviting, on his hand.

Carrying her to the bed, he laid her on her stomach and pushed her golden tresses away from her neck. She was lovely even from this side. Her skin was the silkiest he'd ever felt, and her buttocks were firm globes with skin like satin. He rained kisses down that neck and across her graceful shoulders, pausing to nip and graze her with his teeth, while his hands caressed her back to the tip of her spine and slid into the crack where her buttocks met.

"There's something else we can do without mating," he said against her ear as he whispered hot, erotic, sensual things in it. "It will be even more pleasurable for me than what we did yesterday."

"Anything, Rodick. You make me feel wonderful."

Joining her, he lay across her body, needing to feel the whole of her against him, to let his penis touch those buttocks almost where he wanted to be. With his hand guiding it, he gently probed the opening between them with his cock and was rewarded with her pleased gasp.

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Sitting up and straddling her, he continued his assault on her senses with his hands and mouth, until, desperate to be inside her, he felt his control slipping. He reached beside the bed for the small vessel of balm he'd stored there. Kissing her buttocks, he spread them and made her slippery with the balm.

When he applied the balm to himself, he almost came right then at the thought of entering her.

Reaching under her chest, he gently squeezed her breasts before running his hands down to her belly. As he thought she would, she raised herself slightly to her knees so he could reach her. He caressed her nest, finding the button that would bring her satisfaction, then he pulled her hips up higher until her bum was up and in position for him.

“I have to release you for a minute. Once I've entered you, I'll take you to the stars again, my love. Be patient.”

She was so blessedly tight he thought he'd die from the sensuality of penetrating her. Once past the opening, he plunged in deeper, and her heat wrapped around him even as her body did.

“Are you all right?” he asked, wondering if he could stop himself now even if she wasn't.

“It feels strange.” Her voice was low and hoarse.

“Shall I...”

“No! Don't stop.”

He reached around to press the heel of his hand against her clit and slide his fingers inside her as he hugged her against his body. She moaned, and he felt her passion igniting his own. Through her passage his fingers could feel his cock's

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sensitive head, and each time he withdrew for the wild sensation of sliding back into her again, it rubbed against them.

Soon she was rocking back against his thrusts. The little whimpers and cries issuing from her throat let him know she would soon reach that special moment when the world fell away and she hit the stars.

As she cried out, and he knew she'd reached fulfillment, he withdrew his hand and held her hips, watching his cock as it plunged deeper and deeper into her tight opening. When what he felt was so sensual he didn't think he could bear any more, he pumped into her hard and fast, then exploded in a shimmer of red and gold starbursts. They shot up, filtered out to the ends of the sky, and then settled gently down to earth.

In that moment of ecstasy, he knew she'd captured his heart.

Separating from her, he rolled on his side and snuggled her lovely rear up to him before relaxing into sleep.

* * *

Arondele lay awake in his strong arms, his body curved around her, and marveled at what had happened between them. She'd known nothing of this kind of lovemaking, as he'd called it, and had been overwhelmed by the feelings it created. She'd been lost in his advances, in the erotic words whispered to her in a voice hoarse with desire, in his scarred, stroking warrior's hands, in the hot sensations that were so incredible she couldn't pull away, even when he'd first pushed

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into her and it had hurt.

Then the hurt had died, and all she could feel was Rodick inside her, Rodick loving her, Rodick bringing her to the pinnacle, where the world stood still and she danced among the stars.

She pulled his arms tighter about her, and smiled. Not only had she discovered she was a sensual woman, she was also Rodick's woman. She wore his colors. He was her heart of hearts.

From this moment, she determined he would be more than that to her as well. Rising, she looked down at him, at the penis that had brought her to the summit, resting on a patch of dark hair, now soft and shorter than it had been for loving. Oh, what she was learning about the world of the humans.

Leaving his arms, she dressed, then leaned to waken him with a kiss. He barely stirred. "I'm leaving now. See you tomorrow morning?"

He nodded, and she left.

* * *

She flew into the forest near her father's castle and changed. It was a risk to go into the village shops at castle in human form. But she patterned herself as an older woman, paid attention to the coinage she'd need, and finally found and purchased what she wanted.

Tomorrow Sir Rodick would get the surprise of his life.

She bubbled over with joy as she changed into dragon form and flew to the topmost tower and landed. She made her

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way to her lair and signaled Semsá, her elfin servant, that dust needed to be brushed from her scales.

Retrieving the long-handled brush made of horse hair bristles, Semsá said, “Close your eyes, princess.”

Gloriana made a soft, singing sound as the bristles stroked her face, and Semsá moved on with the brush to her long neck. She recalled Rodick’s hands stroking her face, stroking her back, and happiness filtered through her once more.

Semsá had to stand on a ladder to reach her mistress’s back, and by the time she’d finished, Gloriana had recovered from the exertions of her day.

“I didn’t have time for a dip in the lake. It’s always good to feel so clean. Thank you, Semsá.”

“Would you like tea, princess?” Semsá asked as she put the ladder away.

“I don’t think so. Maybe another time.” What she wanted was to be alone with her thoughts.

After Semsá had scurried away, Gloriana shook out her scales and settled among her treasury of jewels. The sheen from them recharged her energies and allowed her to sleep.

CHAPTER 11

Rodick waited patiently at the foot of the mountain for her, but as yet she hadn't arrived. Xertan began to paw restlessly, and Rodick rode him in circles a few times. It was later than their usual meeting time because obligations at the castle had delayed him.

From the corner of his eye, something flashed near the boulders where the rogues had appeared the day he'd met Arondele. Drawing his sword, he rode the *destrier* cautiously over to inspect, but found nothing as he rode around them.

Back at the meadow's edge, something white fluttered on his right, just where the forest began. He heard laughter. A young woman's laugh, light and airy. Riding in that direction,

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he found nothing. Then the laughter came from behind, and he whirled in time to see a flash of red dress disappearing behind a tree.

He found nothing.

The voice was breathless now with laughter, and he saw another flash, this time of blue from behind a minion tree. He was laughing now, but he was also going to tease her a little himself.

“Arondele, is that you playing tricks on me? Or is it a forest sprite come to entice me? Mayhap I shall find someone more to my liking than a princess from the Nordrung high mountains.”

Again the laughter—light, and as lovely as morning birdsong.

It seemed he followed her all over the forest before Arondele finally stepped from behind a tree. “What a wicked knight you would be to have seduced me so thoroughly and then abandon me for some shallow wood sprite.” She laughed again and raised her arms to him. “Would you give this poor lady a ride?”

He lifted her into his lap and kissed her. “Where’s your steed?”

She whistled, and the palfrey came down the mountain and followed them.

He removed his gloves and handed them to her along with the reins. Then he enclosed her breasts with his hands and nuzzled her neck. Her scent stirred his loins. He wondered if he would ever get enough of her. Their time together was so

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brief that spending time at the faire had lost its appeal today.

When they'd dismounted, he followed her inside the hut. As she reached to unhook her cloak, he said, "Let me." Slowly he removed her cloak and then he undressed her, item by item, his gaze never leaving those amazing topaz eyes as he told her all the things he wanted to do to her.

At last she stood naked in all her glory before him, and when she reached for his jerkin, his breathing became labored from excitement. She was even more deliberate than he in stripping his clothes. He thought she'd never finish. Finally, the last bit of clothing fell to the floor, and his dick, hard and ready for love, pointed straight at her belly.

Naked and proud, he stood in front of her. As he reached to wrap his arms about her and pull her to him, she put up a hand to stop him. "I want to touch you."

And, oh, how I want you to touch me, he thought.

Her strong hands were gentle as they explored his body. She kissed every battle scar, brushed his nipples with her tongue, and ran her fingertips over his muscled chest, belly and thighs. When she knelt and took him in her warm mouth and he felt her tongue, he thought to die.

But she didn't let him come to fulfillment. Instead, she rose, took his hand and led him to the bed. As she did, he felt as if he'd stepped into another realm, where all his senses were heightened and his love for her was almost crushing.

He lay on his back, but when he reached to pull her on top, he heard the silvery laugh again and saw lengths of purple ribbon in her hands. She did lay on him, her body as hot as a

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winter fire, the golden fall of her hair spread across their bodies with incredible softness. Her musky scent almost drove him to madness because he wanted her so badly. Through the haze in which he found himself, he waited helplessly as she tied his hands to two of the four posts on the bed.

There are no posts in the hut. This is my bed in my quarters. It's some sort of magic she's using. The discovery that his legs were bound triggered panic. He struggled against the tight ribbons and fought his fear.

The gauzy curtains about the bed moved, enclosing them in a soft, white world.

Arondele began to weave a different kind of spell on him, a sensual spell with tongue, lips and hands. Soon his fear and panic washed away. He no longer cared she held him captive. This was his princess, who inflamed him with her caresses, and met his fire with her own.

When she'd heated his desire and arousal to a fevered pitch, she straddled him. Her hand took hold of his cock. She brushed it across her wet clit and cunt, and he knew her intent. She'd learned the purpose of the purple ribbons, and although he wanted this more than anything, he turned his head from side to side and groaned in protest. "Don't, Arondele. Your father will kill me."

Ignoring him, she held his dick steady and sank down. He pierced her like an arrow released from a bow. His sigh was long and deep. He was inside her. Where he'd always wanted to be.

At first she rode him slowly, as if savoring all the shivery

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feelings. Her intensity grew, until she was wild and uninhibited, and he lost himself in her heat, in the thrill of what was happening. He felt her, felt himself, but knew not where he ended and she began. They were one body, one person, and as he pressed to rise deeper, he sensed her tremors begin, racing through her body to his. He gave way to ecstasy.

This time there were no stars or sun. The earth shuddered. The mountain rumbled. Lightning struck with searing finality, splintering the sky as she cried out his name and he pumped into her. As her spasms tightened about him and he gave her his seed, he had a moment of blinding certainty. In some way he didn't understand, they hadn't just made love—they were bound together by invisible threads.

What had she done to him?

* * *

Arondele knew it, too. She'd tricked him into mating with her, and something strange and unexpected had happened. She belonged to Rodick, and he to her, in a way she didn't understand. Why it would be like this with a human when it wasn't like this between dragons she had no idea. It left her dazed and in awe.

Separating from him, she used more of her magic to put him in an easy sleep as she wiped the memory of the bed posts and the curtains, but not her seduction, from his mind. He wasn't to know of her use of magic. Not yet.

When he wakened, he looked at her with a softness in his face that had not been there before. They mated again. This

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time slowly and with wonder, cocooned not by gauzy veils but by love.

She rode in his arms back to the mountain path.

* * *

Happiness made his heart light, and Rodick hummed as he rode home. He wanted to shout to the heavens that he was in love. He'd never felt like this in his life. He pushed to the back of his mind the dilemma of having made love to a princess-royal, although the fact *she'd* compromised *him* should leave him blameless. He refused to acknowledge there was no hope for her to ever be his wife.

He arrived at the faire to find Flynt walking with his leg unbound and minus his crutch. The squire broke the news that everyone was talking about the disappearance of jewelry from some of the nobles and a few pieces of ordinary jewelry sold in the booths.

"Some owners who displayed shiny things would turn around after helping a customer and find the shiniest pieces missing. No doubt cadgaws took 'em."

Rodick nodded. Cadgaws were birds who confiscated bright things to decorate their nests before laying their eggs.

Tira added, "They think the glint of the real jewelry may have attracted them to those, too."

"I doubt it," Flynt responded. "That jewelry's too heavy for birds. The earl ordered an investigation, but, in my opinion, these rich people own too many things. They'll show up. They've just misplaced them."

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Turning his new ring around on his finger, Rodick laughed. "I guess I'd best take care no one steals my race prize."

"Let me see," Tira said.

Flynt let out a low whistle. "That's a beauty, isn't it? You could buy a manor house with it."

"I could, couldn't I?" The vision of Arondele as the manor's lady flashed in his mind, and he smiled clear down to his soul. Changing the subject, he said, "Are you strong enough to ride with me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Tira asked.

Flynt answered her. "Aye. There've been problems along the Nanthall border the earl wants us to check out. Yes, my leg's strong enough. Or so the healer says."

"Good. I'll see you at first light." Seeing the worry on Tira's face, Rodick added, "I'll watch out for him. I promise."

Her face relaxed a little as she said, "You've a pure heart, sire. You and the lady rescued our little Jessa, and you've saved my Flynt twice. You watch out for each other. My prayers will ride with you."

He felt the blood rush to his cheeks. "I don't know about this pure heart business."

Flynt clapped him on the shoulder so hard he almost stumbled. "Him? Pure heart? Most black-hearted man I know. You're going to swell his head, Tira, with talk like that."

They all laughed, and Rodick was grateful Flynt had made a joke of Tira's words. He thought of his afternoons of passion with Arondele and wondered if any man could be considered pure-hearted after all they'd done.

CHAPTER 12

Leaving the warmth of Rodick's arms, Arondele's mind swirled with somber thoughts as she journeyed with deliberate slowness back to Dreicomar Castle. The gravity of what she'd done weighed as heavily as a jewel-encrusted crown on her head.

In not too many days, she was to mate. With a dragon. From that union would come a hatchling to carry on the king's line. It was a duty she couldn't avoid. But the thought of being intimate with anyone else, man or dragon, horrified her now. She was *Rodick's* mate and, for reasons she didn't understand, it was for life.

Gloriana was sure Nombella had never gotten herself into

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a predicament like this or she'd have warned her. She caught a thermal current and drifted. In her selfishness, she'd found out about purple ribbons and tied him down. Rodick, a man of pure heart, had begged her not to do it, but she'd ignored him because she loved him, wanted him, wanted to know about mating.

Well, I know about it now, she thought with dismay. My selfishness may have woven the fabric of my beloved's death. Or mine.

That evening she didn't eat. The thought of food sickened her. Instead, she sent her servants and pages to their rooms at the back of her lair and sought the comfort of her bed. The low hum of its gems and precious metals soothed her as she pondered the tangled threads of deceit and desire she'd created.

* * *

Refreshed and in better spirits, as she always was after a night's rest, she flew into the morning's orange and lavender sunrise to find her lover—not to be with him, but only to be near him unseen. He'd said a group of the earl's men would investigate skirmishes occurring on the border between Nanthall and Ahnerion.

Still in the mountains, she caught a plump ponklet for her breakfast. As she ripped into the succulent pink meat, she worried about what her knight would think if he learned she hunted, killed and devoured raw meat. He might turn away from her in disgust. She comforted herself with the knowledge

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that, contrary to myth, dragons never devoured humans. Killed them if necessary, but never ate them. Not even the vicious dragons of the *morté splendus* genus ate human flesh. Word was it tasted so bitter it triggered severe vomiting. Unless you were a fire dragon, it burned your long throat and took months to heal.

The borderland was on the back side of the green mountain, and when she'd finished eating and had slaked her thirst in a cool stream, she took to the clean morning air again.

Flying high so as not to be seen, she alternately drifted and flapped her wings until her sharp vision spotted men fighting below. Alarmed, she flew in circles to observe.

Malroy and Rodick, dressed in chain mail and helmets, fought side by side. She identified Rodick by his red-and-gold tunic, and Flynt, fighting back to back to the two men, was visible because he also wore Rodick's colors.

The squires and men-at-arms were protected by padded leather vests. Leather helmets covered their heads, but their ears were free. Anger surged through her when she heard one of the earl's men cry out as his ear flew off and blood soaked his vest.

Agitated, Gloriana flew well out of sight, swooped down to pick up a boulder in each fore talon, then leaped into the sky and returned to the fight scene.

Step by step, Malroy and Rodick drove their combatants back, but Flynt couldn't match their pace. As he sliced and chopped with his huge blade at an enemy closing in on him, he didn't notice a man slipping into the space behind him.

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With a scream that circled the sun, Gloriana plummeted toward the man and pulled up in time to drop a boulder on his head before leaping into the sky again. As the man's skull split, he fell into Flynt, knocking him to his knees just as the front man lunged in for the kill. Flynt drove his blade upward into the assailant's gut and ripped him open. Freeing his sword, he regained his feet and took on the next fighter.

Once more Gloriana split a man's skull when he threatened one of the earl's men. Both times she climbed swiftly back into the sky in hopes she wouldn't be seen in the heat of battle. Watching from above, she circled until she was sure the skirmish had been decided in favor of the Ahnerion fighters before heading for home.

She'd killed two men. As her anger dissipated, she shook because she'd killed two men. It was too difficult to fly in this frame of mind. She found a pinnacle on one of the mountains and landed. Folding her wings, she rested.

She wondered if this was how warriors felt after they'd dealt death in battle. Rodick hadn't seem phased when he'd kill her attacker. Maybe one could get used to it. So far, she hadn't.

Had it been like this when goldens fought beside knights in the Great Upheaval? Maybe rocks had been their killing tools and the memory had implanted in dragon brains, much as that of warries if one were killed. It might account for why she'd acted on instinct today rather than considered thought. Or had those warriors of old wielded swords or just picked men up and dropped them to their deaths from a great height?

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Her father would know. She would ask him...after the trembling had stopped and she was once more in control of her body.

* * *

“Did you enjoy your dip in the lake, my princess?” Semsa was drying her scales and polishing them with a soft cloth made of the fibers of the *akiaki* tree.

Gloriana closed her eyes to the soothing ministrations of her servant. “I did. There was much dust to wash away.” In that washing she’d also cleansed herself of regret for the killings she done. The men had threatened Rodick. Maybe not directly, but she may have turned the tide of the skirmish to the men of Ahnerion, and thus to Rodick and Malroy. Flynt had been threatened directly.

That afternoon she was required to sit with Dreicomar in the throne room to hear petitions. She found it boring, but yawning wasn’t an option. It was too obvious on dragons. For a while she imagined sitting on her father’s magnificent throne with Rodick in the chair at her side, but a half-step lower because he was consort.

Without thinking, she sighed. A daydream. Pure and simple. She would have to be content with stolen hours with him as Arondele.

Her father rose and stepped down from the throne, interrupting her thoughts. *Thank sky, the petitions have ended.*

Some of the golden dreigomen gathered around to talk once she and Dreicomar left their thrones and were crouching

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on the marble floor, tails curled about their bodies.

Argonaunch, a particularly unpleasant fellow who gave off a strong acrid odor, inched closer and closer until his tail touched almost the length of hers. “You’re looking lovely today, princess.”

“You are too kind,” Gloriana muttered, lowering her gaze and trying not to inhale his strong breath. Unless she left the room, moving away from him would be too obvious. She noticed Beomar, one of the other males, observing them and thought a glint of irritation shone in his eyes.

“Would you care to fly with me this evening just before the sun sets?” Argonaunch asked.

“Perhaps the princess would enjoy my company as well.” There was a no-nonsense quality to Beomar’s voice as he scraped toward them.

In the past, she would have gone with them. Flying during twilight was a glorious time to be out. The day’s sun would have released the sweet smell of grasses and flowers into air when the temperature was mild. Tiny winks of light from flying insects would glow in the fading light as the sounds of night began. But since meeting Rodick, she had no wish to be with dreigomen. Instead, sadness crept through her because she’d never experience this with her lover.

With unexpected suddenness, Dreicomar’s voice boomed, startling everyone in the room. “I’m sure the princess appreciates your invitations, dreigomen, but we have kingdom affairs to discuss this evening. If you’re ready, my daughter, we’ll take our leave now.”

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She flashed a grateful smile at him and moved to his side.

As they ambled through the halls to the room adjacent to the top landing pad, Dreicomar spoke in easy banter. “You’re the most powerful dragoness in the kingdom, Gloriana.” His expression softened. “But, then, you are the product of another powerful dragoness, Nombella, and me.”

Nostalgia colored his next words. “I told you I fought to be with her, didn’t I? Only the strongest male reaches the nuptial dragoness, and I was a young prince, destined to be king. She alone was worthy to give me an heir, and I killed two suitors in that flight and out-flew the others to reach her.”

So her father understood what it meant to kill.

Now his tone commanded her attention. “My daughter, I need to caution you. I haven’t considered it necessary until now, but I could tell from the invitations of Beomar and Argonaunch that our dreigomen already sense you will fly in the mating ritual soon, and I need to warn you.”

“Warn me?” Her throat was too dry to speak in more than a whisper.

“The mating of a princess is a serious matter. It must be a *first* mating. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The thought of those two males or any other touching her with even a hint of intimacy, much less mating with her, almost sent her into hysterical gales of laughter. But this was not the time to laugh.

“The penalty for a princess not being virginal when she flies is death, Gloriana. Death for her and death for the male who compromised her purity.”

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Horror caused her heart to pound. She couldn't catch her breath. "Death? Surely this isn't true."

"It's true. And it has happened."

Why did you not warn me sooner? She wanted to scream it aloud, but it was too late and would have given her away.

"Take care, princess, between now and your nuptial flight."

She bowed her head in obeisance. It was a lie, of course, but, stunned into silence, it was all she could manage at the moment.

Her heart in agony, Gloriana flew alone into the twilight and on into the far night, screaming out her anguish. Finally exhausted, she returned just as the yellow moon gave way to the lavender sun.

Memories of her lover and her ruthlessness in seducing him ruined her sleep. She heard Rodick's voice, stumbling when she'd asked him to show her about mating, saying, "Your father would be very unhappy if I did, Arondele."

And Rodick, ensnared by purple ribbons, pleading, just before she slid onto his beautiful engorged cock, pleading, "Don't, Arondele. Your father will kill me."

And now she knew...yes, Dreicomar would kill him. And kill her.

If he knew. She clung to that. He must *not* know.

* * *

Out on the border, some of the raiders retrieved their dead and fled. Those who'd been captured were bound, thrown on

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horseback and led back to the Earl of Du Magne under guard. Malroy and Rodick remained with their squires and a handful of men-at-arms to patrol the rest of the troubled border and question the residents along its edges.

Some of the cottages had been burned. They buried what corpses they found.

Flynt reported in. "The marauders are definitely from Nanthall, but there've been no knights among them. They seem to be raiding for food and grain and to take slaves. One of Malroy's men tells me they've found the footprints of gnarls. along with those of men and horses."

"Gnarls! Those evil, vicious creatures? I'll double the guard tonight," Rodick announced.

They ate cold food to prevent giving away their position with fires should the raiders return.

Over swigs of mead, Malroy spoke in hushed tones only Rodick could hear. "One of my men thinks he saw dragons dropping boulders on the rogues. Did you see anything like that?"

Rodick shook his head. "Has anyone else spoken of this rumor?"

"No."

Rodick chuckled. "Dragons haven't fought since the Great Upheaval. How much ale did your man drink prior to our skirmish?"

Malroy sighed and leaned back against a tree. "No doubt too much. It's a wonder he wasn't killed. Too much ale makes a man careless."

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“True. And that’s a reminder I’ve had enough mead tonight.” Rodick stood and stretched, then rubbed his lower back and sword arm shoulder. “Better stop the soldier from spreading his tale of imaginary dragons. It’ll just make the men jittery. By the way, Flynt says they’ve found gnarl tracks. That’s trouble worse than dragons. I’ll post the watch now and double it.”

After he’d set the guard, Rodick wrapped himself in a woolen blanket and pillowed his head on his saddle. Exhaustion drove him to sleep instantly, without once thinking of Arondele. His dreams, however, were filled with the flights of dragons. Friendly dragons smiling down on his men.

CHAPTER 13

Rodick sent Flynt on up ahead. Missing Arondele and hoping against hope that by some miracle she'd be in the meadow, he took that path home.

He saw her as she came off the mountain path to enter the meadow. Dressed in a sheer, flowing white gown and riding an albino palfrey, she wore her spiked, golden circlet, but braided into a lock of hair at each temple were ribbons of red and gold that rested on the rise of her breasts.

His chest swelled with such joy he thought it might shatter into pieces. Kicking his heels into Xertan's sides, he thundered toward her, just as she raced toward him.

He pulled her into his lap and hugged her tight, letting

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Xertan have his head to slow to a walk as Rodick kissed her. Blessed Savior, he'd never get enough of kissing her.

Releasing her, he said, "I'm filthy, and you're wearing white. Forgive me."

Arondele pressed her lips to his again, sweet and honeyed, surrounding him with her soft, musky scent. "I know of a place where there are no warries." And she guided him there.

She stripped him and, noticing the stiff soldier jutting from the dark nest at his loins, leaned to brush a kiss across it. "Later, my friend. Now you must be washed clean."

Rodick sank into pond waters warmed by the sun and closed his eyes with a sigh. The soap she'd brought smelled of herbs, and her hands were strong and capable as she scrubbed his hair and scalp. She used a handful of rough moss to cleanse his body, avoiding his now-limp cock.

As she leaned over his chest, Rodick looked first at her long, curling lashes and then down to her luscious breasts. "Take off your clothes, my princess." His voice was so low with desire he could barely speak.

Standing, she removed them with excruciating seduction, enticing his dick to fill and stand at attention. She stood still, then slowly turned so he could take in all her nakedness and the places his lips and cock had been. After spreading her cloak on the grass, she beckoned. "Come to me, my love."

It was all the invitation he needed. He took her, his body still wet and slippery, using her hard as he drove into her over and over. Knowing it was an "after the battle" fuck, still he didn't hold back, plunging into her relentlessly, using her soft

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and welcoming warmth to erase the horror of the death and useless carnage he'd seen.

Instead of recoiling, a wild and passionate Arondele responded, meeting him kiss for kiss, thrust for thrust, until once again the earth trembled as the mountain roared and lightning splintered the sky.

In the aftermath, holding her in his arms, he sensed again this wondrous thing about being joined with her. It was pure magic.

"Ride with me to the hut," he whispered against her ear. "But first I think I need to rinse off again. I've grass on my arse."

Her laughter was like fine crystal tinkling in the wind.

In the hut, they made slow, measured love once more before falling asleep in each other's arms.

Rodick wakened and was immediately aware Arondele wasn't with him. On her side of the bed, late afternoon light glinted on a golden chain attached to a pear-shaped medallion. Still half asleep, he reached for it. The amulet was gold, with a slightly raised figure on it. He ran his thumb over it, but his thumb wasn't sensitive enough to recognize the figure. He sat up and held it to the light to see it better.

It was the figure of a dragon.

There was a regal stance to the creature. Its wings were spread wide, and the long body curled around its talons and legs poised for flight. The eyes were stones so tiny he almost didn't notice them at first. Then he saw they were made from flakes of topaz.

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He smiled. The chain was thick and obviously meant to be worn by a man. He slipped it over his head, and the touch of it left a cool kiss against his skin. *Arondele*. It was a gift from Arondele and precious to him. Rising, he pulled on his breeches and went outside to thank her.

She was gone. Her horse was missing, and he couldn't find her anywhere in the immediate vicinity of the hut.

Alarmed for her safety, he went inside and hurriedly dressed to ride after her. He noticed the borrowed clothes folded carefully on the chest. On top was a jumble of necklaces, rings, bracelets, armbands and head pieces—all of gold and silver set with bright, precious gems. The hair on his arms rose as he recognized what might be the stolen items from the faire goers.

By the saints, how had she gotten these? Was she a thief? He recoiled at the idea. Maybe she'd retrieved them from the thief. If so, why hadn't she told him? Beside the jewelry lay a note, the words dark on the sheer, peeling bark of a *poepoe* tree. He grabbed it up and read the stark message.

Please return these, my love. And forgive me, but I must leave you for now. If I can, I may return some day. Remember always that I wear your colors. The amulet carries my crest. Wear it over to your heart.

Leave him? Perhaps forever? He'd never experienced such pain. Not from any battle injury or enemy's torture. He knew her love for him was as true and pure as his for her. Why

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would she do this? He must've done something to drive her away. Swearing an oath because he'd been so inept, he found his horse and tore after her, but when he reached the edge of the forest, the lush, green meadow was empty. He rode hard up the mountain trail, tracking her horse's hoof prints. Reaching a pond, he stopped to let his horse drink.

The water stirred malevolently. Xertan backed away fast, his mouth still dripping, and began to tremble.

To Rodick's astonishment, a dragon whose silver-and-blue scales flashed in the fading afternoon sunlight, rose from the waters, its red tongue flashing in an open mouth that revealed fangs and a double row of sharp, stained teeth. Wings partially spread, it rocked its head as if to strike. Its breath smelled of old blood.

What is it with me and dragons? Rodick drew his sword, preparing to aim for the belly, the most vulnerable part of the scale-covered body, but before he could drive it in, the dragon paused, seemed to study him, then sank quietly under the waters and disappeared.

Rodick could have sworn it'd been staring at his chest.

Heart pounding, he pulled Xertan farther away from the pool and kicked him into a trot until he'd calmed himself and the *destrier* before continuing up the mountain.

Not long past the pond the path became rocky and the trail unreadable. Soon there was no trail at all. Rodick pulled up and stared at the brown, thorny thicket and huge boulders closing it off. How in the name of the saints had she come down the mountain to him?

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If there was a concealed way, he could not find it. Discouraged, he made his way back to the woodsman's hut, gathering up what Arondele had left for him and stripping their love nest of any hint of their presence. As he pulled the linens from the bed, still fragrant with her scent, a handful of small gold coins shaped like tiny pears fell to the floor. They were shaped like smaller versions of his amulet. Wondering if they were coinage of the high mountains, he pocketed them.

Entering his quarters inside the castle walls, he deposited the jewelry in a burlap bag. If he returned the gems he might be accused of having taken them. Best to abandon them in the forest and have someone stumble across them while they were out hunting with him. Flynt perhaps.

* * *

Changing near the pond, Gloriana felt a wrenching of her spirit. She'd abandoned Rodick to save his life. Was Arondele forever gone? She hadn't said a permanent goodbye because she wouldn't let herself believe she'd never see him again. Her thought had always been that after mating and laying her egg, she'd be able to steal moments in human form with him in the woods for years to come. None could sever the bond between them.

Now this nightmare had come up about being virginal. Surely joining with Rodick in human form would not show up on her body when she mated as a dragoness. *Would it?*

If it did, she died. But Rodick would be safe.

She flew back to Dreicomar Castle, planning to watch the

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flight of the males so she could decide who might be the most powerful and face the inevitable. A great shuddering shook her as she landed. After Rodick, having any other man's, any dragon's, cock inside her would be a horrendous violation.

Oh, Gloriana, how could you have gotten yourself into this mess?

She had to keep up her strength. She couldn't think if she was weak. She must stop this nonsense and eat. She assigned one of the dwarves to find fresh meat and vegetables for her.

* * *

To her dismay, Argonauch proved the strongest flier, at least among those she'd observed. Nausea at the thought of him penetrating her cunt rolled over her. Just as nauseating was the thought he would be the one to raise her hatchling. She stayed in her lair a full day after this discovery, rousing only after realizing she might not be seeing all the males who would vie for her favors.

The next morning, Semsa came to her and bowed. "My princess?"

"Yes?"

Semsa wasn't lifting her head. Gloriana smelled her fear.

"Stand up. Don't be afraid to tell me what you came to say."

"It's about Dreigoman Argonauch."

Gloriana tapped one talon against the floor in impatience. "Spit it out."

"My brother serves him, and he told me Argonauch boasts

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of being king. He'll mate with you, steal the hatchling and go to war with King Dreicomar."

"I...see... Thank you for bringing this important information to me. What reward may I give you?" She was pleased with the smile that broke across her servant's face.

Semsa's voice was timid. "A day off to spend with my family?"

"It's done."

Her earlier reaction to Argonauch had been correct. Now she must speak with Dreicomar.

* * *

Rodick returned the borrowed clothing to the castle store room. They were amazingly unwrinkled for all the activity they'd known, he thought with amusement, as he recalled the rumpled skirt pushed up around Arondele's hips that second faire day. He wondered what she'd done to restore them to their original smoothness.

He put the linens on his bed because they still carried her scent. At night he would dream of her and cover himself with her imprint. When he unlocked his chest to store the old linens and toss in the strange little coins, he was met with a shock. His gold ring with the spinel was gone. He'd locked it up when he'd left for the border, and the lock was intact and undisturbed. But his ring had disappeared.

He rifled through the stolen jewelry, thinking it to be there, but it wasn't. He reviewed his movements with it, and always came back to the clear memory of locking it in the chest. No

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one else had a key. He'd carried the only one on his person even when he'd fought, and it was there when Arondele had undressed him at the pond. The key was still with him when he'd wanted to open the chest.

He sank down on the bed, head in his hands, elbows propped on his knees, disappointment like bitter ale in his mouth. Now, even if Arondele returned, he had no means of buying a decent home for them. His father was a baron, in the service of the king of Ahnerion, but Rodick was not the firstborn son and so had no claim on his lands.

Bleakness settled over his usual sunny spirits.

CHAPTER 14

He was in charge of the knights who served the earl and were responsible for the security of Du Magne Castle. There was work to be done, and Rodick couldn't moon around over lost love. He centered all his thoughts and energies on seeing that the men and their squires took proper care of their warhorses and armor while they honed their skills as warriors.

Malroy took him aside one day in the *quintain* yard. "Rodick, you're driving these men too hard. Ever since the border raid, you've been a different man. Almost tyrannical. Give the men some credit for good sense. I don't think you've said 'Well done,' to anyone since our return. The men are beginning to resent you, and you know that's not a good thing.

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In battle, we must fight one for all and all for one or one of us dies.”

Rodick turned on his heel and stalked away, anger over the criticism blinding him. He stormed to the horse enclosure, yanked Xremond’s reins out of the hands of the squire who’d hurriedly culled him from the group, and tore over the cobblestones to exit through the gates.

Fortunately, the draw bridge was down or he might have drowned both himself and his mount.

By the time he reached the forest, his fury had dissipated. He walked the horse through the trees to stand at the meadow’s edge. It was the time of day he and Arondele had usually said goodbye, and he could imagine her lips beneath his, her fullness and warmth in his arms. He came here every day in hopes she might be here.

He pulled her amulet from beneath his shirt and fingered it. She would hate him for what he was doing to his men. He was punishing himself for losing her and, by consequence, punishing his men. Malroy, bless his soul, had done him a favor.

He returned at a walk to the castle, leaving Xremond outside his quarters while he went inside to retrieve the burlap bag of stolen jewelry. He hadn’t hidden it in the forest yet. It was time.

The next morning, he coaxed Flynt into hunting.

“It’s wonderful to be riding again. I even enjoyed the border patrol, despite seeing evil things that’d been done to people.” Flynt spoke companionably as he rode beside

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Rodick.

“I’m glad we didn’t meet up with any gnarls. It mightn’t have turned out so well for us.”

Flynt chuckled in agreement. “How is your lady friend? Have you seen her since the faire? I think she really enjoyed it. We wuz so grateful for you and her rescuing our precious Jessa. Tira wanted to make a little gift for her. Like she arranged the flower garlands for her hair.”

“No, I haven’t seen her for a while. She lives high in the mountains, you know.” Rodick spoke absentmindedly. They each had hares hanging from their belts, but right now he was wondering how he was going to get Flynt to discover the bag he’d hidden.

“You really liked her, didn’t you? Tira could tell. Do you miss her?”

As they talked, he maneuvered Flynt’s mount closer and closer to the tree where he’d stuffed the bag in a Y of the young trunk. At last, Flynt spotted it. Rodick inhaled and let out a slow breath in relief.

“Here, what’s this?” Flynt pulled the bag down. “It’s heavy.”

Rodick stopped his horse and backed away a little. “What’s in it?”

“Blessed Savior, look a’ these. It’s jewels. I bet these are what wuz taken at the faire.”

Rodick leaned over to peer into the bag. “Do you think?”

“I do. The earl’ll be happy to see these again and return them to their owners.”

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“Yes, I suppose he will.”

They left off hunting and hurried back to the castle.

“The thief must’ve stowed these until the excitement died down. I wonder why he didn’t come back for them?” The earl was seated at a table in the great hall. He was a trim man of unusual height, with shoulders and forearms as well developed as Rodick’s.

He had a reputation as a warrior, and his face bore a scar down one side to attest to it. Rodick wouldn’t want to meet him on the battle field.

“Must’ve been a stranger to Du Magne. Maybe he forgot where he stowed them,” Flynt offered.

“Or perhaps he’s dead,” Rodick volunteered.

“Or in someone’s dungeon for theft.” Flynt laughed.

“No matter. We have them, and you found them. The reward goes to you.” He made the mistake of looking at Rodick.

Rodick pushed Flynt forward. “No, my lord, ’twas Flynt who discovered them.”

A wide smile crossed the earl’s face. “Good man, Flynt. I’ll have my steward bring the money around to your house.”

“Thank you, my lord. You’re an honorable person.”

Outside, Flynt asked his knight if he could keep the money in Rodick’s house. “We’ve no way to keep it safe in ours.”

“Of course. You can keep it in my quarters, but not until I’ve changed the lock on my chest.” He told him of the disappearance of his ring.

“But the bag...”

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“It wasn’t in there.” Which was the truth.

After making arrangements for a new lock for his chest and door, Rodick made his way to Malroy’s quarters to apologize and thank him.

Malroy accepted his apology. “I haven’t seen that lovely lady you squired at the faire lately. That go sour?”

Rodick shrugged, aware of his friend’s sharp eyes on him. He kept his words casual. “She lives too far away, and I have no lands or manor house to offer her.”

Malroy nodded and sighed. “I know all about that. Let’s go have a drink at the tavern. Maybe we can get a little squeeze, too.”

Rodick joined him and other knights in the rough and tumble barroom, downing drink after drink of cheap mead and ale, but he wasn’t interested in any little “squeeze.” He reached that level of drunkenness where it became a challenge to make it to his quarters. Once inside, he closed the door behind him and fell on his bed. For the first time since Arondele had left, he wept.

He wasn’t the only man with a hangover the size of a fortress the next day, but he’d shed his self-punishment. He thought the men must be very glad of it.

He was working shirtless in the debilitating heat of the blacksmith’s stall, repairing a problem with his shield, when Xidel happened by. Rodick looked up to greet him and thought the mage’s black, rolling eyes were looking at his amulet.

“Strong magic that is,” Xidel commented.

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“Oh, really?” Rodick was curious. “What kind of magic?”

“Strong.” Xidel walked away.

“Don’t pay him no mind. The man’s half mad,” the blacksmith said.

Rodick laughed. “Mad or not, he did a great job with the faire. The woman who gave me this amulet loved it.”

Another grunt and a shake of his head was the blacksmith’s only reply.

* * *

Dreicomar had returned, and despite the frowns of his calendar secretary, who muttered about the king having fallen behind in kingdom affairs, Gloriana set up an audience with him for the next day.

At least he listened to her. He didn’t disagree with what Sema had told her, but in the end he shook his head. “I can stop him from taking your hatchling and the kingdom’s heir hostage, but I can’t forbid him to fly to you. The decree, written thousands of years ago, states all eligible dreigomen may fly. Argonauch is eligible, however despicable he may be.”

Dismayed over this pronouncement, she asked, “But war?”

Dreicomar snorted in disgust. “He has the cunning, but not the power to overthrow me. Every baron in the kingdom is loyal to me.”

“Surely not all, my king.”

“Perhaps. But enough we would win the day, even if some betrayed me. No, I’m not worried about this dreigoman.”

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So I must worry about me, she thought, as anger threaded silently through her. "One more thing, Father."

"Yes?"

"I've always known I had a special destiny. That it was a sacred one and the future of the world might depend on my fulfilling it, but you've never told me what it is. I'm close to the day when I'll take up this responsibility. I think it's time to tell me."

Once she wouldn't have cared to find out until he was ready to tell her, but now she'd come to love Rodick and had, in effect, wed him, she felt an urgency to know what the future held for her. She needed to know how far she'd have to fly to spend a few hours with him in the meadow. And whether or not they could meet during the day as they had done, or if there'd a time when she could stay the night, with him sleeping beside her, their bodies curled together after having made hot love.

Her father stood and drew himself to his full height. "You will guard the cup of hope in the Crystal Castle in a world only the goldens know. No king could be more proud of a daughter than I am of you, Gloriana."

There was more horror in this than having her cunt invaded by the foul Argonauch's prick. Out of her dismay she cried, "Why me? Why can't someone else do this?"

"You were the only female golden hatchling when Urianon rotated into seventh place from the sun. Our laws make it clear you are the dragoness chosen for this rare and sacred task. It might not have happened to a princess, but it did. Your mother

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and I have always been proud our hatchling was chosen.”

Panic was rising like smoke in her breast. “This world, is it far?”

“Yes and no. Tuwella, the dragoness on duty, is aging. When it’s time for her to fly to her death, she’ll come for you.”

“Will I be able to leave this castle at times?”

He frowned. “No, of course not. The chalice must be protected day and night, for evil seeks to destroy it. A knight and a golden dragoness guard it.”

Now she thought she understood why Nombella had wept for her. She’d wept from sadness that her daughter would lose her freedom to fly about the land, to drift on warm thermals and play in the sky, to rest in tall trees or leap from the high mountains into flight.

She turned and walked out before she fainted in front of the king. She could never be with Rodick again. There would be no rides under minion trees fragrant with blossoms or flaring desire in a woodsman’s hut or beside warm pond waters when her lover pierced her with his swollen cock and brought her to ecstasy.

Her life was over.

And Dreicomar had smiled with pride when he’d told her.

Rodick. I have to get to Rodick and tell him a forever goodbye.

CHAPTER 15

Rodick was easier in his spirit now, but he couldn't quite let go of the hope of seeing her again. Each day, morning or late afternoon, depending on his schedule, he'd make his way through the forest to stand at the edge of the meadow. After a few minutes, when his brain told him she wasn't coming, even though his heart still hoped, he'd return to the castle.

This morning, as he made his pilgrimage, he thought he heard her call his name. *Talk about Xidel. Now you're the one who's mad.*

"Rodick!"

Not madness. Joy. Through the trees, he could see her racing toward him. Xertan couldn't break into a run among the

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trees, but Rodick kicked him into a trot.

Even before he could break free of the forest, a dark shadow fell across the sun-kissed grasses ahead, and then, to his horror, an enormous dragon swooped down, picked her and her palfrey up and carried them to the highest peak of the mountain.

He screamed, "Arondele." Agony and horror flooded him. He kicked Xertan into a run as soon as his hooves hit the meadow grasses. On across the meadow they flew, and as they hit the dusty mountain trail, Rodick slowed him to a safer gait.

As they came to the pond, now so still you could see clouds reflected in it, he pulled up and summoned the dragon with a demanding roar.

When the dragon rose dripping from the waters, Rodick yelled, "One of your kind took her. How under the heavens do I get to her?"

* * *

Kaimar was annoyed at this interruption of his routine, but the angry knight before him, who looked familiar, was enormously out of sorts. Having been up all night cavorting with a dragoness, Kaimar yawned. "Took who, sire?"

"The princess. She was riding across the meadow calling for me when she was plucked, horse and all, and taken to the top of this mountain. I know the trail ends just up ahead, and unless there's a hidden passage there's no way to reach her on foot."

At that Kaimar straightened, his sleepy brain calling to

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mind that this was the man who wore the amulet of Princess Gloriana. He was bound by dragon law to aid this human. “Just who and what took her, sire?”

“A dragon. What else does ‘your kind’ mean? It was huge. Gold, I think.”

My, but the man was testy. The horse was trembling, too, no doubt because he feared Kaimar.

“Before his heart fails, tell your horse I’m not going to eat him.”

The knight rubbed the *destrier’s* silken nose. “Easy, boy. It’s okay. He’s not going to hurt you. Or me.”

Huge and gold could only mean the king of the goldens, especially since the princess was his daughter. Not a good thing to confront Dreicomar, however. *What to do. What to do.*

“Well?” The knight slapped his reins against his thigh.

“I’m considering.”

“Hurry. I don’t have all day.” Now anguish colored the knight’s voice.

There was nothing for it but to take the man himself. Kaimar stretched his long neck and stepped out onto the ground, shaking his body and flipping his wings once or twice to dry off. He noticed the knight wince as icy water drops hit his arms.

“Send your horse home, then climb on my back between my wings. I’ll carry you up the mountain.”

Relief washed over the human’s face. After a few missteps, the knight was settled on his back, clutching the base

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of each wing, and they were off into a turquoise sky that smelled of wild lavender.

* * *

If he hadn't been so terrified for Arondele, Rodick might have enjoyed the flight. Instead, the idea he might fall and not reach her caused him to turn his knuckles white clinging hard to the wings.

The dragon landed easily on the flat top of a large dwelling. Rodick thanked him and slid off. The next thing he knew, the dragon had pushed him through a big opening next to the landing area. This humiliating shove put him into a huge room, where he fell to his knees.

Just as he'd regained his footing, a noise at the entrance on the other side drew his gaze. A dragon larger than imagination walked through it. Sunlight from the huge windows bounced off its burnished gold scales, lighting up the entire space. The scales of its tail and the nails of its talons scraped across a travertine floor.

The faintest scent of flowers drifted toward him.

The dragon roared, circling him. His hands flew to his ears to protect his hearing, but he refused to cower. If this was when and how he was to die, he would do so with dignity.

At least as long as he could hold onto it.

He flinched—couldn't help but flinch—as the dragon halted in front of him and a finger-like talon reached out to his chest. But the finger touched only Arondele's amulet. The dragon's head leaned down to study it, and Rodick noticed the

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deep topaz color of the creature's eyes. The horns and spikes on the top of its head and along its cheeks flowed upward and back, and the memory of Arondele's simple circlet sprang to mind, and a memory of his love for her flowed through him. What served for the ears of the creature bending over him were miniature wings.

Why he sensed this to be a dragoness he wasn't sure, but there was a beauty to the fearsome face that signified female. And the eyes...the eyes had long, spiky lashes that helped to soften the features.

He was at once wary and yet intrigued enough by the creature that he forgot to ask if she had taken Arondele.

On his amulet, he remembered the eyes of the dragon were flakes of topaz. Arondele's eyes were the color of topaz. What had Arondele written about the thing hanging around his neck? *The amulet bears my crest.* Lord save him, what did that mean?

The dragon didn't roar this time. It spoke. "How did you come by this?"

After the experience with the blue dragon, he wasn't surprised she could talk. He thought she might tear the amulet away, and he closed his hand over it. "A woman I love gave it to me. She said it bore her crest."

The dragon released the amulet and paced agitatedly about the huge space. "And where did you meet this woman?"

He told her. Much of it, but not all. Not about soft breasts with nipples the color of peaches and tasting of cream pressed against his bare chest or about the magical moments of being

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inside her or the exaltation when lightning had mated them.

“Do you know what this is?” A finger pointed to what he protected with his hand.

“A mage told me it had strong magic.”

“Yes, that. But what else?”

He shook his head, not understanding her question. “I have these as well.” Removing the coins from his pocket, he opened his palm and showed them to her.

“Gloriana,” came the whisper as she stared at them. Tears formed in the dark eyes, and as they rolled from her face and dropped to the floor, they became like the golden coins in his hand.

Tears, not pears. The shock of it jolted through him. He was looking at the tears of a dragon. Arondele’s grief over leaving him had created the amulet, the coins. Coins stamped with the image of a dragon...her crest. Now he knew what she was, and understood why she’d never been able to stay with him.

And to think I’ve worried about not being able to buy a house.

Another shock followed as the dragoness faded like the afternoon sun sliding its face behind the mountains, and a breathtakingly beautiful woman stood before him. She was so like his Arondele, and yet not, that his own eyes clouded with unshed tears.

“You’re holding the tears my daughter Gloriana shed. She must love you very much.”

“She didn’t tell me what she was or that her name was

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Gloriana.”

She smiled. “No, she wouldn’t have. Gloriana’s her dragon name.”

“I called her...”

Fingertips touched his lips. “Shhh...do not speak her human name in Nordrung. It’s important. Do you know why she left you?”

He shook his head and stood in stunned disbelief at what he heard. “No!” His anguished cry reverberated across the marble floors and walls. “He’ll kill her. She’s my mate and no other’s.”

Her face paled at the implication of what he’d admitted. “And he’ll kill you, too, if he finds out. Why do you think she left you? Gave you the amulet? Your mage was right. It has strong magic that protects you from evil and harm. Kaimar, the blue dragon, brought you here only because our laws require us to assist any who carry such an amulet.”

“I thought he was bringing me to the one who took her.”

She shook her head. “He knew better than to confront King Dreicomar with you.”

Rodick sank to his knees and covered his face with his hands. Grief was threatening to crush him again. “So there’s nothing I can do.”

He felt a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t despair. Come. We’ll have a cool drink, and I’ll think.”

The room where they had their drinks was human-size, and it overlooked a white castle in the distance. He discovered he was thirsty, and the tangy blue drink was quenching. Nodding

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toward the castle, he asked, "Is that where she is?"

"My name is Nombella and, yes, that's where Dreicomar, king of the goldens, will have taken her. My guess is he's going to keep her chained up until the nuptial flight lest someone despoil her."

Despoil her. A rotten term for what they'd shared, Rodick thought. Then he cringed at the thought of his beautiful Arondele in chains.

"Once I'd told him she'd discovered how to change, he kept close watch over her to keep her safe. Our kind would harm her if they knew. Because of this, he's always kept my secret and he keeps hers, too. Apparently he wasn't aware of her visits to you. I'd guess he discovered her by accident today and brought her home to protect her. You, your earl and your friends would have died instantly if he'd known she was coming to you."

"He's that ruthless?"

"If he knows your cock took her virginity, the law says you both die. We're talking about the nuptial flight of a maiden princess, one who will produce the next heir to the throne. There can be only one dragon to give her his seed or the legal implications would be horrendous. The law is quite clear on this, and a king must uphold the law."

"But if we made love in human form, would a male dragon know?"

Her sigh was deep and long. "The males are called dreigomen. I don't know. There's been no precedent." Her face softened. "Dreicomar was my first. He killed two

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dreigomen to mate with me.”

Yet here she was, out of his life. And mostly out of that of her offspring. This seemed to be a culture without families. He thought it abnormal. And sad.

“Why would she have come to me now? I thought I’d never see her again.”

Nombella shrugged. “I’m not sure, but here’s what I know we must do.” Leaning her head toward his, she outlined her plan.

CHAPTER 16

As soon as Dreicomar released her, Arondele changed into Gloriana and turned on him. Dismay that she couldn't get to Rodick and fury warred inside her.

"Why did you do that?" Her roar was almost as strong as his when he was annoyed.

He looked at her, had treated her, as if she were a hatchling. "Surely you understand I can't risk anything happening to you now. This is a busy time for me as ruler, and I can't watch over you. If I don't know where you are, I can't protect you, and I can't assign anyone to watch you because no one but your mother knows you can be human."

"And just why do I never see that mother?" The

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resentment slipped out before she considered the wisdom of it.

He looked surprised. “Those moments with Nombella were fleeting.”

She tried to stomp her foot, but realized she could only accomplish that in human form. “Fleeting, perhaps, but she is my mother.”

She could see this puzzled him. He had no concept of parents being together with their child, even an adult child. Neither she nor Dreicomar would raise her hatchling, and yet it would be granddaughter or grandson to him and heir to the throne. Thinking of Flynt and Tira, with their children around them, made her realize how much she, her father and Nombella had missed.

She turned to leave, but he signaled to one of his guards. “Please confine the princess to her quarters. She is not to leave the castle.”

Confinement, she discovered to her horror, meant chains. And her servants and elves were not allowed to leave the castle either. She had no means to send a message.

Now that there was no hope of reaching Rodick, she might have withered in despair, but she reminded herself that she was a princess of the goldens, and she chose to live and grow stronger. Whatever came on nuptial day would come. Perhaps it was as plotted as her hatching when Urianon was in the seventh place from the sun.

* * *

Back again in the Castle Du Magne, Rodick greeted the

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day with enthusiasm and excitement.

On the training grounds, he lined up the knights-in-training in front of him. When they'd quieted and he had their attention, he asked, "Where is your strength in battle?"

"Our arms," one man cried.

"If there's anything needs strengthenin', it's those puny arms," another cried.

They all laughed.

"Nay, our shoulders. If the shoulder's weak, the arm's weak." This from a man in the back row.

"Yes, 'tis true." They all agreed.

Arms folded, Rodick nodded as he paced back and forth. "Aye, but where else?"

Behind him, he heard Flynt, who was checking Xertan's hooves, say in a voice only he could hear, "The legs, you doffs."

Fighting back a smile—and oh, how good it felt to be able to smile again—he said, "What about your legs, men? Don't your legs signal your *destrier* as you fight and get you up on that horse in a hurry? Weak legs make you vulnerable to being knocked from the saddle or staggering and losing your balance after a heavy blow, don't they?"

Again, they agreed.

"Your work with swords and poles strengthens your arms. We're going to work on our legs and here's the schedule. This isn't just for the knights, lads. We're all in this together." He thought that might knock the smirk off Flynt's face.

He set them to walking castle steps, then to running them.

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In the beginning, most of the men had to stop midway to catch a breath, but Rodick watched with satisfaction as their endurance increased, including his own, until they had the wind they needed.

The spreading of their legs against resistance, and then pulling them in, again against resistance, loosed a flood of lewd remarks and jests. They did squats and lunges, and he created a competition with a prize for the one who jumped highest or longest from a squatting position.

The biggest test came when they had to leap onto their horse's back without assistance, even with the horse moving. Next, they did it wearing full battle regalia—chain mail or quilted vests, helmets, swords or bows in their scabbards and shields in hand.

He gave praise readily, training alongside them, knowing his purpose was far different from the one he prepared them for. His purpose was to save the life of the woman he loved.

* * *

Flynt watched as the men felt their strength and prowess grow, and Rodick bested them at every stage. His reputation, already an honored one, grew until he was viewed as the greatest knight among them.

But in the late afternoons, after training time had ended, he'd disappear until the dinner hour, and Flynt, concerned about the peculiar turn-about in his knight's moods since the faire, followed him one day.

He found Rodick with sapling limbs strapped to each arm.

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Over and over, he'd run and leap into the air, repeatedly moving his outstretched arms up and down. When at last he quit and had unstrapped the heavy limbs and was rubbing his shoulders, Flynt stepped out of the trees.

"Those must be very heavy."

Rodick froze. Without turning, he said, "You spy on me."

"Not spying. Feeling concern for a friend whose moods have dipped from despair and grief to an unfettered high that seems against his nature. What in God's name are you doing, sire?"

Rodick's sigh was long and deep. Turning, he approached him. "Best this is said now since you're here. I must go away for a time, Flynt. I may never return. I'd like you to care for Xremond and Xertan for me while I'm away, and if you don't see me again, Xertan is yours. Malroy shall have Xremond. The earl will see that my other possessions are taken to my father. Except for the chest. You will have the chest and its key. In fact, I'll leave the key with you when I go, so you'll have access while I'm absent."

"Sire," he protested, his throat so tight he almost couldn't speak.

"You'll serve Sir Malroy while I'm away, please. He'll look after your family. Don't look so sad, Flynt. This is a personal pilgrimage I must make, and there's a small chance I may not survive. That's the chance we take anytime we skirmish or battle, isn't it? I'm sorry if it seems grave to you now."

Rodick's clap on his back lacked nothing in the way of

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enthusiasm. “The ponklets are out now digging for truffles. What say we bag one for dinner?”

And they did.

After they’d built a nice fire outside, Tira cooked it for them. After they’d finished it off, they sat near the warmth of the fire drinking ale and chatting. Jessa sat on Tira’s lap, while two others sat on Flynt’s. Flynt watched with a smile as his older boys gathered around Rodick, who was teaching them how to tie horseman’s knots.

When it was bedtime for the children, Tira took them in the house. Rodick leaned back and said, “This is nice, isn’t it, Flynt? Families are wonderful things.”

“Aye.”

“Do you think there are places where the idea of family doesn’t exist?”

“I’ve no idea. Can’t imagine it, myself.” What an odd turn the conversation was taking, Flynt thought. Rodick was thinking and behaving strangely again.

“Nor can I, Flynt. Nor can I. Ah, here’s Tira again. Thank you, lovely lady, for that delicious dinner. It’s time for me to get back to my quarters, and I need to speak with the earl.”

Flynt watched him leave, watched as his tall, powerful figure walked beyond the firelight and disappeared into the night.

Tira had stepped up and put an arm about his waist, and he’d automatically wrapped his around hers. As they headed back into the house, he said, “Do you know what that crazy man was doing today out in the meadow?”

CHAPTER 17

“No, no, no. You must lift your tail as you leap. Like this.”

Of course, she did it perfectly. Rodick despaired of ever getting it right. Nombella’s magic had given him the body of a dragon, but not the experience. The talons were close to being thumbs and fingers, but the feel of the tail and flapping the wings, despite all his training with the tree limbs, were something else.

“Again.”

He wanted to tell her to shove it up her arse, but that was men’s talk and right now he wasn’t a man and dragons didn’t exactly have arsens. Besides, it wasn’t language fit for a female. Not even a dragoness.

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“You’re hesitating.” She swung her tail around with a great swish that raised a cloud of dust and glowered at him. “Do you want to save her or not?”

“Well,” he grumbled under his breath, “when you put it like that...” He tried again.

The memory of his first flight, short as it was, stirred his senses. The rush of air under and over his body, supporting him as he rose above the land, the warm currents that carried him along as he drifted effortlessly, the exhilaration of using his wings and soaring. He would never forget it.

“I think you’ve got it,” Nombella said as she alighted beside him.

High praise, indeed, he thought with joy. Arondele, my love, I’m coming.

He’d learned he only had so many hours a day for his form as a dragon to hold. Nombella hid him in her lair when he was human, and when he saw the hoard of jewels, silver, platinum and gold and other precious objects, he experienced the shock of knowing Arondele had taken the faire jewelry. She’d obviously been unable to resist her dragon nature, even as a human.

Nombella told him she could only maintain her human form a few hours, and he understood why Arondele’s time with him hadn’t been as long as he’d wanted. It was true she couldn’t allow her father to discover her and she needed to be back on the mountain well before dark, but she also couldn’t remain in human form much longer than the time they spent together.

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In the days leading up to the day of the mating, his strength grew. He flew well away from the mountain to avoid other dragons, and practiced his leap into flight. The strengthening of his legs as a man had paid off in dragon form. Now he'd gained power with his wings.

The day came when he knew he was physically ready, but fear crept in. Most of the goldens looked alike to him. "Will I recognize her?"

Nombella smiled. "Oh, yes. Gloriana looks like me."

* * *

In her rooms in the castle, Gloriana was ready, too. Afraid she might weaken, she'd convinced her father to remove the chains and allow her to fly within the massive cavern beneath the castle. He hadn't allowed it in the open air because she could outdistance most of his men, but in the cavern a dragon could monitor her.

On her nuptial day, she wakened to a lemon-colored sky and the scent of citrus in the air. In the cavern, Sensma poured buckets of warm water over her to bathe her and scrubbed every bit of dirt away, then dried her with soft cloths. Next she brushed her until her scales shone the burnished gold they were.

"You're a beauty, my princess. You do look lovely."

The elves and dwarves all circled around her, clapping with delight, and Gloriana felt excitement ripple down her long spine in the anticipation that at last she'd be out in the open sky.

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She had her own plan today. No dragon was going to be allowed to mate with her. She'd have a head start, for she would leap from the top landing of the castle. The dreigomen would start on the ground below. She would leap and fly up and away. There would be no lull to let anyone catch up to her. If she was lucky, no dragon would.

She would be free then. Free from her destiny. Free to be herself in another land. And although she'd not dare return to her home or Rodick again, he would remain safe.

Passing her cache of jewelry on the way to the landing, she picked up his ring and pressed her mouth to it in a kiss before sliding it onto her smallest talon.

* * *

A crowd of dreigomen were milling around on the ground below, talking and sometimes taking short flights to warm up. Nombella had secreted Rodick in a garden niche, where she would change his form. Through a tiny window in the wall, she pointed out the strongest fliers...Argonauch and Moromir, another dreigoman.

“Those are the men you'll probably have to outfly.”

Rodick could feel his nerves reacting like tight bowstrings, just as they did before he had to face an enemy. He paced restlessly, but then a trumpet sounded, and Nombella pointed to the high landing. “There she is.”

The sun glinted off her scales, and she was so beautiful as a dragoness that his chest swelled with pride. She did, indeed, look like her mother.

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Without warning, he felt his body begin to shift. First his feet became talons, and his back legs those of a dragon. The metamorphosis from there on was sudden. First he was Rodick, and now he was dreigoman.

Nombella nodded. "It's time. Fly well and strong, Sir Rodick of the pure heart."

Stepping into the crowd, he looked up to see the largest dragon he'd ever seen flying over them with wings spread. He landed flawlessly to stand beside Arondele. There was no question but it was Dreicomar. Shoulders wider than the door to Rodick's quarters, well-muscled legs and arms. He stood beside his daughter, folded his wings at his back, and curled his tail about his legs as regally as if it had been the velvet and ermine cloak of royalty. His penis and scrotum were huge.

The chatter among the fliers ceased. The atmosphere had an almost holy quality to it as they awaited the words of the king.

The king's voice boomed, reverberating around the walls. "When the trumpet sounds, Princess Gloriana will fly. And you will fly, too."

Gloriana stood with bowed head, as if she dreaded what was ahead. Rodick felt his heart pinch.

::I'm coming.:: He sent the thought wave to her, knowing she couldn't hear it.

The trumpet sounded, and he leaped just as she did. He'd never seen her as a dragoness, never seen her fly, but she was marvelous.

There were so many starting out that it was difficult to

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move. Wings bumped his and jarred him aside. He learned to recover and continued to fly upward, seeking the straightest course to her. As the crowd thinned, things got rough. Out of his side vision on the right, he saw a dragon headed toward him, obviously intent on knocking him out of the sky. He waited until the fellow had almost reached him, then snaked away and upward. The dragon missed and, prepared for an impact that didn't come, spiraled out of control and dropped below.

Like an arrow, Rodick fought his way through the crowds of fliers, while Gloriana grew smaller and smaller in the sky.

Saints, she was strong. He thought probably only Dreicomar was stronger. He hoped his strength wouldn't falter as he strove to reach her.

Smaller, poorly trained fliers were beginning to drop out. The air was thinner here, and some of them struggled to catch their breath. Rodick took slow, deep breaths as Nombella had trained him to do. So far he felt good.

Several dragons more sought to knock him off his course, but he cursed and fought back until they gave up and dropped down. He watched for Argonauch and Moromir, finally spotting them. Now he attempted to keep them in sight while still rising, rising toward Gloriana.

Moromir was the first to attack him. He flew to Rodick's back and hit him with both hind legs. The blow knocked the wind from Rodick, but it infuriated him. When he returned to attack again, Rodick retaliated by clamping down with his teeth on a wing and ripping a piece out of out of it. Moromir

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lost balance and had to give up the flight to keep from plummeting to the ground.

Two other dragons near Argonauch dropped out. And now he and this dreigoman were the only ones left. Rodick had been warned Argonauch was ruthless, and that he hated Dreicomar. He only wanted to mate with the princess because he wanted to produce the king's heir.

Well, you're not going to have her!

Suddenly Argonauch flew past Rodick, and the stench made him choke. But the smell only made Rodick work harder. Even if Rodick's heart burst when he mated with her because it was weakened from his efforts to beat this suitor out, he was not going to let this evil dragon violate her.

Harder and harder, faster and faster, he beat his wings. He was almost level with Argonauch when the demon's tail struck him like a whip. Rodick spun around, fighting to stay in flight. As he spun, he saw the target he wanted within reach.

One flip of his own tail, and he was there. One grab, and his talons closed on the soft tissue of cock and balls. One twist, and Argonauch screamed. He fell into a dive. Rodick dropped the bloody tissue out of his hand, wiped his talons on his chest and flew on alone.

But he wasn't closing the gap to Gloriana. She was pulling higher and higher, seeming to want to flee.

His chest was screaming now from his efforts. He had enough breath only to cry, "Arondele! Wait for me!"

She paused and her neck swung around and down so that she made a lovely C in the air. She stared down at him.

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“Rodick?”

It was all the time he needed to reach her. “Fold your wings round me, my heart. I’ve been told it’s a tricky thing...this mating on the fly.”

Gold coins rained down on him as she wept from happiness.

She reached for him. Catching a thermal current, they went into a glide. He looked down to see the biggest, longest cock he’d ever seen, throbbing and aching to be inside her. He had no trouble finding her cunt, wet with juices, and sliding inside.

He wrapped her in his wings, and they rolled over and over in the gentle warmth of the current, sharing sensual joy as only dragons can, and the hope of a hatchling.

“Rodick?”

“Yes?”

“Wonderful as this is, I think we need to separate and fly now or we’re going to fall.”

They laughed, separated and flew into the lemon sky.

The sun glinted off something on her talon thumb. Rodick drew closer.

“That’s my ring?”

She laughed again, her voice pure crystal. “Of course it is. Didn’t my note tell you I wore your colors? Did you know you’re wearing my amulet?”

He glanced down in surprise. He thought it would only be there when he was in human form. “By heaven, I am.”

CHAPTER 18

She led him over ice-covered mountains gleaming white in frosty air, through torrential rains and over miles and miles of turbulent seas before dropping down on an oasis in the midst of a grove of palms not far from a great river.

They touched the warm sands, moved into the shade of the palms, and made love again before Rodick slowly changed into his true form. Nombella had advised him to wear his chain mail, sword and slingshot. To his surprise, he still had them. He removed them and his shirt in the desert heat.

“Shall I change, too?”

“Wait until dusk. I’ve always wanted you in my arms at night.”

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From her back as she hovered beside one of the trees, he plucked dates for their nourishment. At dusk, she changed, and they ate the sweetmeats and quenched their thirst with the cool water of a spring in the midst of the palms. They slept in each other's arms with the song of the river in their ears.

She fished for them so they might keep up their strength. They watched as her belly grew in human or dragon form, running their hands over it in amazement, wondering what sex it would be. Rodick worried about her delivery, but he wakened one morning to find her seated beside an egg the length of his sword. It was the color of dull gold, and Gloriana was digging a hole in the shade of the trees.

She looked up. "Help me, Rodick, we must bury it so the sands will keep it warm. Predators will break it open and eat it if we don't hide it."

First he put his ear to the shell and grinned as he heard thumping heartbeats. "Come. Listen. Hear it? It's alive!"

"Of course, it's alive. Why wouldn't it be?" But she listened and smiled, and rubbed her cheek against his. "You're growing a beard and mustache. It's soft. I like it."

Their task finished, Gloriana curled herself around his seated body and told him about her destiny.

"No!" His cry split the air.

"Usually the mother leaves now, and the father watches over the egg to guard it and the hatchling. I want to stay to see my child emerge from the egg. But, at some point, Tuwella will come for me. She'll know where I am, and when she comes, I must go."

TEARS OF THE DRAGON

He wept and clung to her when she told him she'd never be able to leave Crystal Castle until it was her time to die, and he wouldn't be able to find her. That evening as they lay entwined, she told him how to navigate back to Nordrung and Ahnerion using the stars. He would fly on the back of their golden child.

She wakened him one morning with excited cries. In her dragon form, she was frantically uncovering the egg. He rushed to help. They were just in time to lift it from the sand and watch the shell crack.

Soon a lizard-like creature pushed out and looked up at them through garnet eyes. Gold coins rained on the sand as Gloriana picked her child up and hugged it. "He's a dreigoman, Rodick. His eyes are the color of my father's."

Joy such as he'd never felt surged through Rodick. She had produced a prince. *They* had produced a prince. He held the squiggling body until it was clear it wanted to be set down.

Sadness crept over him. She would leave him forever, and he would be left only with memories of her loyalty, her soft skin, her smell, the hot place where their bodies joined and the cry of ecstasy when they shook earth and sky.

"But you will have our son, and I will not, my heart."

It was as if she'd read his thoughts. Or had had her own. "How under the heavens will I raise him? How will I know what to do?"

Her laughter brightened his dimming spirits. "Oh, that'll be no problem. I'll tell you the early part, and he'll show you the rest. He'll fly you back to Nordrung."

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They had two more days together, then wings darkened the sun, and the aging Tuwella alighted beside them.

“What a fine dreigoman, he is, princess. Congratulations, but I’m surprised to find you still here.”

Gloriana and Rodick exchanged smiles before Rodick spoke. “We’re setting a new precedent, honored dragoness. We think it nice if a dragon hatches with both parents present.”

Gloriana took her hatchling aside for long moments, and Rodick knew she was explaining everything to him about love, about destiny and loyalty. He wasn’t sure the small dragon could understand her, for he hadn’t spoken yet, but he would tell him when the time came.

He held their son at sunrise, as Tuwella and Gloriana rose in formation and flew away.

Weeping, he rocked Prince Arod for what seemed forever, then he put him down and moved away. If he continued to remain too near, his presence might draw a dragon or some other creature to his son. They would kill Arod if Rodick couldn’t reach him in time.

There came a day when he heard screams and the sounds of scuffling and snapping near Arod. He drew his sword and ran, his heart almost exploding in his chest from the effort. A reptile, similar to a warrie, but with a longer snout and tail, was trying to eat the prince. The little hatchling was on its hind feet, hopping away from each snap of the powerful jaws.

With a battle cry, Rodick blinded the reptile, straddled its back, yanked up the long snout and slit its soft throat. When it

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was dead, he pulled and pushed the heavy body into the river and watched until the current carried it away.

Now I suppose all these creatures will know I killed one of their kind.

Arod was fine. Not a scratch on him. He crawled up on Rodick's shoulder and nuzzled his neck as if to thank him.

One morning Rodick looked up to find a small golden dragon seated on a branch above where he'd slept.

"Hello. Who are you?" it asked.

Rodick smiled so wide he thought he'd surely tear the corners of his mouth. "I'm your father. I'm a human being, and my name is Sir Rodick. I'm a knight."

"Who am I?"

"You are Prince Arod, of the golden dragons. Your grandfather, Dreicomar, is king of the goldens. Your mother is the golden princess, Gloriana."

"Why am I not like you?"

Rodick told him all there was to tell. Each time the prince took flight, he walked beneath the golden wings and body in case he was needed. One evening, as he was preparing fish for their supper, he heard the voice again.

"Hello, Father."

There was an air of delight in the voice, and Rodick looked up to see a young boy standing in front of him. Tingling began in his fingers and spread all the way to his toes. He opened his arms, and the boy rushed in. Now there was more explaining to do, and many things to teach this human form of his son.

When the dragon prince was strong enough, Rodick

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stepped on his back and navigated as Gloriana had taught him. Instead of the high mountains, however, they landed in the meadow at the foot of the path to the pond. Rodick asked him to fold his wings, and they walked into the shelter of the forest. There, Arod became human.

Rodick whistled for Xertan. They waited a long while before the black warhorse trotted out of the forest. Arod conjured up an apple and fed it to him, rubbing the silken nose with his other hand. Rodick mounted bareback and gave Arod a hand up. Then they rode for Flynt's house.

Joy lit up his friend's face when he saw him. He'd just mounted Xremond when he saw them. He raced toward them.

"Sire! You're back! I wondered why Xertan took off like that, and I had to catch Xremond before I could go after him." They hugged as friends, not squire and knight.

Rodick thought he was the luckiest knight in Ahnerion to have this man as his friend, and pride flooded him as he said, "Flynt, I'd like you to meet my son, Arod."

Arod was allowed to play just outside the house with Flynt's brood, where Rodick could see him through the window. Inside, Rodick was explaining the full of who Arod was, and how he came to be.

"Saints preserve us," Tira said. "'Tis a true miracle."

They ate together and then Rodick told them it was time to leave because Arod couldn't hold human form much longer. This time he said a true goodbye. "Dragons have no idea of family, but I'm changing that. I'm taking Prince Arod to Gloriana. Dreicomar will have to kill me to keep me from her.

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She has a right to see her son. He has a right to know his mother and his grandparents.”

Flynt and Tira held him tight, and he drank in the deep friendship and love the hugs conveyed. He hoped he gave back as well.

He and Arod mounted Xertan. “Thank you for taking care of him, but I need to borrow him. Arod and I will ride him when we present ourselves at Dreicomar’s castle and demand an audience with the king. When he comes back to you, you’ll know all is well with me. With us.”

They rode to the woodsman’s hut just in time. Arod was fading into dragon form. He curled up on the floor, and Rodick slept with his head pillowed on his son’s neck.

The sky hinted of impending light, but the sun had not yet shown its face when a young dragon, with a warhorse gripped in his talons and a knight atop his back, leaped from the open meadow and flew toward the top of the high mountain.

They landed in a field not far from the castle, and Arod changed and climbed in front of Rodick on Xertan’s back.

CHAPTER 19

Rodick guided Xertan skillfully to the edge of the castle moat. He'd dressed in chain mail and carried his shield bearing its coat of arms and his colors. His gold amulet made sharp contrast to the dull metal of his mail. Prince Arod wore a simple golden circlet with the tiny spikes of a dragon on it.

"Hail to the guard!"

Xertan was restless, and Rodick walked him back and forth as they waited.

"What say you?" the heavy voice of the guard called back at last.

"I am Sir Rodick of the Castle Du Magne in the land of Ahnerion, and this is Prince Arod. I demand audience with

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Dreicomar, king of the goldens, and ask that the bridge be lowered.”

The sounds of a hoofbeats on stone could be heard to leave and return. No doubt a messenger to the king. Then, with a groan and a creak, the heavy bridge was lowered, and Rodick walked the *destrier* through. He halted on command, watched with a smile as the guard’s glance fell on his amulet, and he was waved through with escort.

In the courtyard below the castle entrance, he dismounted and handed Arod down, letting stable hands see to Xertan. As he and Arod were led up the stairs, he whispered to the prince where he was. “You’re going to meet your mother’s father now. He’s your grandfather and king of the goldens. You’ve nothing to fear from him. Someday, you will be king here.”

The doors to the great hall were open, and Rodick was required to hand over his sword and any other weapons he might carry. As the scarlet-clad majordomo rapped his heavy gold and silver staff on the floor and announced them in a strong voice, Rodick saw they had interrupted the day when complaints came before the king.

A puzzled look crossed Dreicomar’s face as he glanced up. He waived away the next supplicant and motioned Rodick forward.

His voice was a roar that caused young Arod to cover his ears. Rodick bit back a smile. “Who have we here?”

Rodick bowed, and Arod did the same. He pulled Arod in front of him. “King Dreicomar, I present to you Arod, prince of the goldens, by Gloriana, your daughter, in the nuptial

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flight, and Rodick of Ahnerion.”

“Clear this chamber!”

Everyone covered their ears now and rushed out.

“Close the doors!”

Rodick removed Arod’s circlet and stepped back to watch as he changed into dragon form.

“Hello, Grandfather.”

Rodick wondered how often the mighty Dreicomar was left speechless. He was now, and Rodick fought back a chuckle.

After a time, Dreicomar moved around Arod, studying him. Then he looked at Rodick. “He has my eyes.”

“Aye, and the heart of his mother.”

“You were there to watch over him?”

Rodick nodded. “Gloriana, whom I knew and fell in love with in human form as Arondele, stayed until he hatched. Later, she left with Tuwella for Crystal Castle. I guarded him until he could fly us here.”

“You wear her amulet.”

“Yes.” It was simply said, but there was so much behind its giving that his love for her warmed him all over again.

“Why are you here?” Sharp eyes turned on him.

The wily king knew this wasn’t the only reason. Rodick stood tall before this threatening figure and gave him simple words. “I want to take him to his mother.”

“No!”

“Why not, Grandfather? I’d like to meet her now that I can fly. I don’t remember her at my hatching.”

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“It is forbidden.”

This wasn't going well. Rodick rolled through his mind what Gloriana had said of this king. Then his spirits lifted. “Show me the law.”

“What?”

“Show me the law where it says a hatchling may not see his mother.”

Dreicomar paced and thought.

“There is no such law, is there?” This dragon could kill Rodick with one blow of his tail. Hopefully the amulet would protect him, and the king wouldn't slay him in front of his grandson.

“There are laws about Crystal Castle and the grail.”

“Do they forbid a husband and a son visiting the guardian-dragoness?” If they did, he'd lost.

“I do not know the directions to that world.”

He smiled a slow smile. *Ah, so there are no such laws.* “Neither do I, but there's a way. I'm sure of it. I know your daughter wishes the prince to live with you and Nombella during the flowering months and when the weather heats, so he may learn the business of ruling from you. When the weather is chilly and more restrictive, she'd like us to visit her.”

“I'll think on it. Come, Prince Arod. I'll show you around the castle.”

Rodick coughed, drawing the king's attention. “First, I'd like to take him to his grandmother's home so he can meet her.” He saw the king's brow darken and said hurriedly, “With

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your consent, of course. Then you may show off your castle to him.”

And so Nombella met her royal grandson. Rodick thought the chamber would fill and overflow with all the golden coins her happiness produced. Together she and Arod changed and walked as humans in the gardens, as Rodick watched them from the shade of a tree where he sipped one of her blue drinks, its tanginess tart on his tongue.

They changed again and flew over the city.

When they returned, Rodick explained his predicament to Nombella and, heads together, they contrived a plan for the next morning.

Dreicomar spent the rest of the day with the prince, showing him his lair, introducing him to his human companion, and taking him on a tour of the castle. Rodick trailed along behind, his eyes as wide as his son's at all the magnificence they were seeing.

The next morning, he and Arod again appeared in the great hall before Dreicomar, awaiting his decision on seeing Gloriana.

The fearsome face was made even more frightening by the frown Dreicomar wore today.

Rodick's emotions sank. He could see the rejection coming, although he knew there was no law forbidding what he wanted. Nombella had told him the laws were only in regard to the protection of the grail and choosing the descendant guardians. He could leave secretly, but he was the father of the future king here, and it would be a bad precedent

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to set in front of the prince. He wanted the consent of the king, law or not.

“I have decided against this journey. The grail must be protected at all costs. I’ll not let anyone else enter the castle where it is.”

Automatically, Rodick’s spine straightened into battle readiness. “We would be no threat to the grail. Do you question my honor?” He couldn’t keep the irritation from his voice.

A loud flutter of wings at the open window to the landing drew everyone’s attention, and a light scent of flowers wafted in as Nombella, all glittering gold, stepped into the room. “What’s all this nonsense, Dreicomar? You’d deny the child a chance to spend time with his mother? As you did me?” She swatted her tail on the floor, and the sound reverberated around the room. “I’ll not have it. Besides, he wears Gloriana’s amulet. The law requires you assist, does it not?”

Dreicomar roared back. “Even if I consented, I tell you I do not know how to get to her.”

Another flutter of wings sounded from the landing pad, and Tuwella stepped into the room, stumbling over the sill a bit due to her age. “I do. I’ll take them there.”

CHAPTER 20

Rodick made arrangements for Nombella to fly Xertan to the meadow. He fed, washed and curried him that morning, whispering words of thanks and farewell in his ear, telling him Flynt would be watching for him, speaking of Flynt as his new master, of his hope that one day he might see his faithful warhorse again.

Periodically, Xertan took a quiet step and gave a soft snort. Rodick stroked his forehead down to his velvety nose, and patted his neck one last time before stepping away.

“Are we ready?” Rodick admitted to a lump in his throat as he asked.

“Are you sure you can remember the way to return here?”

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Dreicomar asked his grandson, his anxiety evident.

“Oh, yes. I could even take you to my hatching grounds.”

“And I’ll point out what we’re doing as we go,” Tuwella said.

Nombella stepped toward Dreicomar and rubbed each side of his cheek with her own. Rodick heard her whisper, “Thank you, my king. And thank you, always, for the gift of my daughter.”

It was the way dragons kissed, Gloriana had told him, and Rodick thought if dragons could blush, Dreicomar did. Rodick remembered Arondele’s kisses and longed for them again.

“Well, let’s get going. My wings get stiff just standing around.” Tuwella ruffled them and took flight.

Rodick climbed onto Arod’s back because they weren’t sure dragon form for him would last the entire journey. He felt his son push off and leap, and the citrus-scented winds embraced them in a lime-colored sky.

He heard the flutter of wings behind him and knew Nombella had joined them. To his surprise, the great wings of Dreicomar also went into action.

For a time they flew with Tuwella in front and Arod, flanked by his grandparents, behind her. Eventually the grandparents peeled away and returned to Dreicomar’s castle as the now-smaller group flew on.

He was glad he hadn’t tried to fly, for it was indeed a long journey. They traveled through strange lands and brightly colored, heavily scented worlds. Tiring, Tuwella dropped behind to let the prince take the lead, and then Crystal Castle

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holding its sacred treasure was in sight.

Without warning, an angry, embattled golden rose in the distance, teeth gnashing, tail whipping, ready to destroy these invaders.

From below, an armored knight thundered out, sword drawn, kicking his mount to get under them and run them through as she knocked them from the sky.

Rodick's heart leaped with love at the sight of her. Powerful. Mighty. Eyes blazing and golden scales gleaming in the sunlight, she was as ferocious as her father might ever be.

She wouldn't be expecting anyone she knew and was too far away to recognize him, so as he had in the nuptial flight, he cried out to her. "Arondele!"

She paused mid-flight in that graceful C shape. "Rodick?"

"Aye, my love. I've brought your son." Joy flooded him. "In fact, I'm riding him. Thank dear Tuwella for bringing us here. Stop weeping, Gloriana, or you'll smother that knight in your tears."

His own tears streamed down his face unnoticed, splashing across his amulet and onto his chain mail. He had a family. He had come home.

That night, when everyone was in bed, Gloriana changed into Arondele dressed in a flowing white robe. Taking his hand, she drew him into her rooms. Her lair was enormous and filled, as expected, with unimaginable treasures. In one room there was a huge bed on the floor, a bed a dragon could curl up on. But she took him to a smaller room, a room of a size for humans.

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“It’s like my rooms,” he said in surprise.

“I slept here each night to feel close to you.”

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Inhaling the sweetness of her breath, he let her golden hair sift through his fingers as she ran her fingers through his dark lengths. When he tempted her with his tongue, she sighed and opened fully to him.

The robe slipped easily from her shoulders, leaving her naked before him. He nuzzled her neck and his hands held the weight of her breasts before he touched his lips to them and licked her nipples until they were tight gems.

He was so lost in the softness and the creamy taste of her skin that he hadn’t realized she was removing his clothes until her fingers were splayed across his chest. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her breasts against him.

He sighed. “I’ve dreamed about your breasts against my chest.”

Her hands were at his breeches and smallclothes, and now they were sliding down his legs. She stepped out of his arms and looked at him, her gaze roving from his mouth down to his dick, primed and dripping, ready to enter her. She fondled him until his knees grew weak.

“Come to bed,” she said with a kiss and led him there.

It had four posters and veil curtains. He lay down and reached for her, but she said, “No, not yet.” Then she waved purple ribbons at him.

“Oh, no. Those got us into a lot of trouble last time.” He grabbed for them, and they rolled over and over, laughing and

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tussling.

He emerged victorious and waved them, then he turned serious and kissed her again. When he stopped, she was the one tied to the posts. Hers was the body worshipped and attuned for love. She was the one begging to be fucked, and hers was the slick, hot cunt he entered.

He could feel her body beginning to tremble as she headed toward explosion. He stopped dipping in and out of her, and she lifted her hips in frustration to reach her climax.

“Do you think you can keep the mountain from shifting? It would be a dead giveaway.” He was so close himself he could hardly speak.

“Finish this, or I’ll make the whole damn castle splinter into shards.”

And so he did.

EPILOGUE

Ever after in Ahnerion, Sir Rodick was remembered as the knight who'd married a princess of the golden dragons, given her a son and now, side by side with her in Crystal Castle in a world unknown, guarded the most sacred chalice of all.

But in the wee hours in the taverns and barrooms, when cheap mead and ale had run freely, he was toasted as the knight who'd had the courage to fuck a golden dragoness and the wit to keep his cock and balls.

In the high mountains, he was remembered as the warrior knight, dressed in chain mail and bearing his colors, seated on a great, black warhorse, who'd carried the prince and demanded audience with the king.

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As for Gloriana, it was whispered that no other maiden's cry of ecstasy in the nuptial flight had ever caused the earth to tremble and the mountains to shift as lightning splintered the sky.

Young Prince Arod spends summers on the high mountain. He's sometimes seen flying in the morning sun by his grandfather's side, and at other times walking freely as a boy with his grandmother among the human citizens of the high mountain. As dusk approaches, it is known that Dreicomar and Nombella flank him as they rise on warm thermals and drift in the fading light.

CAROLINA VALDEZ

Carolina Valdez, author of the popular Amber Heat Wave winner *Dark Stranger*, composed her first stories at the age of eight. That was about the time Santa left the first books she had in her home-abridged versions of the *Wizard of Oz* for children. She has happy memories of trips to used bookstores with her mother to locate and buy the full versions when she was ten or twelve.

Captivated by the odd characters and their adventures, Carolina wrote a letter to L. Frank Baum, the author. Ruth Plumly Thompson replied, enclosing a map of the Kingdom of Oz. Sadly, the letter and map have disappeared over the years, but the love of writing and creating her own fictional worlds have remained. Carolina has a collection of Oz books, one of which, given to her by her mother when it was new, has recently been appraised at \$350.

Before writing for Amber Quill Press, Carolina had more than sixty publications to her credit, ranging from children's stories to articles in professional journals. A public health nurse with an advanced university degree, she won *RN Magazine's* First Award for Writing, and has been published also in the *American Journal of Nursing*. She was a Guideposts Writers Workshop and Guideposts Reunion Workshop winner, and her work has appeared in that periodical and several *Daily Guideposts* books. Among her other wins are the Soul-Making

Literary Prize for Essay, the Marjorie Davis Roller Award for non-fiction, Della Crowder Memorial and Millenium awards for poetry, and the Norman E. and Marjorie J. Roller first prize for a story about a horse that can float on water.

She contributed (under the name Carol Holman) to *Mean Girls Grown Up*, a book regarding adult female relational aggression.

Dark Stranger was her first venture into sensual romance. Her first attempt into the murder genre can be read on-line at *Mysterical-E*. Her latest can be found in the 2006 crime anthology, *Landmarked for Murder*.

Among her current projects is an article about the cat after which Cinnamon is patterned, and *Where Dragons Fly*.

Valdez is a member of the Orange County Chapter of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime/Los Angeles.

She resides with her husband in sunny Southern California.

* * *

***Don't miss Portal To Darkness, by Carolina Valdez,
available at AmberHeat.com!***

When Diana Waters attends her first Mardi Gras masked ball in New Orleans, she has no inkling she'll be spun back in time to the Dark Ages on a carousel manipulated by a jealous witch. She also has no clue her new lover, Lance Davison, costumed as a black knight, is in, actuality, a powerful wizard.

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