

Talking to Dragons

Patricia C. Wrede

Copyright 1985 by Patricia C. Wrede

1

MOTHER TAUGHT ME to be polite to dragons. Particularly polite, I mean; she taught me to be ordinary polite to everyone. Well, it makes sense. With all the enchanted Princesses and disguised wizards and transformed Kings and so on wandering around, you never know whom you might be talking to. But dragons are a special case.

Not that I ever actually talked to one until after I left home. Even around the edge of the Enchanted Forest, dragons aren't exactly common. It's the principle that matters, though; always be polite to a dragon. It's more difficult than it sounds; dragon etiquette is incredibly complicated, and if you make a mistake, the dragon eats you. But I was well trained.

Dragon etiquette wasn't the only thing Mother taught me. Reading and writing are unusual skills for a poor boy, but I learned them. Music, too, and fighting. Don't ask me where Mother learned to use a sword; she wouldn't tell me. Until I was thirteen, I didn't even know we had one in the house. I even learned a little magic. Mother wasn't exactly pleased, but growing up on the edge of the Enchanted Forest I had to know some things.

Mother was tall and slender, and very impressive when

1

2 Patricia C. Wrede

she wanted to be. Most of the time she wore her hair in two black braids wound around and around her head, but when she really wanted to impress someone she let it hang straight to her feet. A lot of the disguised Princes who stopped at our cottage on their way into the Enchanted Forest thought Mother was a sorceress or something. You can't really blame them. Who else would want to live right at the edge of a place like that?

Sometimes I thought they were right. Mother always knew exactly what kind of directions to give them, even if they didn't tell her what they were looking for. I never saw Mother do any real magic, though, so I never thought about it much. Until the day the wizard found us.

I knew right away he was a wizard. He had the same sort of feel of magic that the unicorns and griffins have, when you catch a glimpse of them farther on in the forest. I was a little surprised; we didn't get too many wizards. Most of them preferred to go into the forest through the Gates of Mist and Pearl at the top of the Crystal Falls, or through the Caves of Fire and Night. The few that bothered to walk would never think of stopping at our cottage. But this one was unusual.

He turned off the road and walked right past me without

saying anything; I thought that was a little strange. He went straight to the door of our cottage and banged the head of his staff against it. The door splintered and fell apart. I decided that I didn't like him much.

Mother was cooking rabbit stew in the big black pot over the chimney fire. She didn't even look up when the door fell in. The wizard stood there for a minute, and I sneaked a little closer so I could see better. He was frowning; somehow I got the impression he wasn't used to being ignored. Mother kept stirring the stew.

"Well, Cimorene, I have found you," the wizard said at last.

"It took you long enough," Mother said without turning. "You're getting slow."

"You know why I am here."

Mother shrugged. "You won't get what you want; you're sixteen years too late. I told you, you're getting slow."

#### 4 Patricia C. Wrede

"Hah! I can take the sword now, and the boy as well. There is nothing you can do to stop me this time," the wizard said. I could tell he was trying to sound menacing, but he didn't do a very good job.

Mother finally turned around. I took one look at her face and backed up a couple of steps. She looked at the wizard for a minute and started to smile. "Nothing, Antorell? Are you sure?"

The wizard laughed and raised his staff. I backed up another couple of steps. I mean, I wanted to see what was going on, but I'm not stupid. He paused a moment—for effect, I think—and Mother pointed at him.

He screamed and started to collapse in on himself. "No! Not again!" He shrank pretty quickly, all but his head. He was shouting nearly the whole time. "I'll get you, Cimorene! I'll be back! You can't stop me! I'll—" Then his head collapsed and there was nothing left but a little puddle of brown goo and his staff.

I stared at the puddle. All I could think was, I never knew Mother could do that. Mother let me stand there for a while before she told me to clean it up. "Be sure you don't touch the staff," she reminded me. "And don't forget to wash your hands before you come to dinner." I went to get a bucket; when I came back, the staff was gone and Mother was stirring the stew as if nothing had happened. She didn't mention the wizard again until the next morning.

I was out by the remains of our door, trying to find some way of fixing it. I didn't think my chances were very good. I was trying to nail a couple of pieces together when I looked up and saw Mother walking out of the Enchanted Forest. I

was so surprised I dropped the hammer and nearly smashed my foot. Mother never went into the Enchanted Forest. Never. Then I saw the sword she was carrying, and if I'd still been holding the hammer, I'd have dropped it again.

Even from a distance, I could tell it wasn't an ordinary sword like the one I usually practiced with. This one was about the same size and shape as mine, but it shone a little too brightly and looked a little too sharp to be ordinary. Mother carried it carefully; she wasn't wearing a sheath, so there wasn't anything else she could do with it. She brought

Talking to Dragons

5

it over to me and set it down on top of the boards I'd been working on. "Don't touch it," she said, and went on into the house.

I had a hard time following Mother's instructions. The more I looked at the sword, the more I wanted to pick it up and try a few of the passes Mother had taught me. It was such a beautiful weapon! Just thinking about it made me shiver. But Mother always had good reasons for the things she told me to do, so I waited.

I didn't have to wait long; Mother came back almost immediately. She had a swordbelt and a sheath with her that I'd never seen before. They were old—so old the brown leather was turning grey—and very, very plain. I was a little disappointed; I'd expected something a little more impressive.

Mother went straight to the sword and put it in the sheath. She seemed to relax a little then, as if she'd been worried about something. I started wondering just what that weapon did. Mother almost never worried. I didn't have much time to think about it, though; as soon as she had sheathed the sword, Mother turned and gave me her you're-not-much-but-you'll-have-to-do look. I started to wony.

Mother picked up the swordbelt. "This is for you, Day-star." I reached for it, but she shook her head. "No, I'll do it this time. Hold still." She bent down and buckled the belt around my waist, then hung the sheathed sword on the belt. I felt a little strange letting her do it, and my elbows kept getting in the way. Finally she straightened up.

"Now, Day star, I have a few things to tell you before you leave."

"Leave?" I was shocked. Mother had never mentioned leaving before. It occurred to me that she'd said "you," not "we." I swallowed hard. "By myself?"

"Of course. You're sixteen; it's time you left, and I'm certainly not coming with you. Now pay attention." She gave me one of her sharp looks. I shut up and paid attention.

"You have a sword, and you know nearly as much as I can safely teach you. I don't want to see you back here again until you can explain to me why you had to leave. Do you understand?" I nodded. Mother went on, "You

should probably start with the Enchanted Forest; one way or another, things will happen more quickly there. Don't lose your sword, and don't take it out unless you need to use it. Oh, and watch out for Antorell. He may try to make trouble again, but it'll be a couple of days before you have to worry about that. It'll take that long for him to get himself back together and find out where I put his staff. All right?"

"But you haven't explained anything!" I blurted. "Why did that wizard come here yesterday, anyway? Why should he want to make trouble for me? And if he's so dangerous, why are you sending me—"

"Daystar!" I stopped in midsentence. Mother glared at me. "What happened to the manners I've tried to teach you?"

"I—I'm sorry. Mother," I said. "I was upset."

"Being upset is no excuse for rudeness," Mother said sternly. "If you're going to be rude, do it for a reason and get something from it." I nodded. Mother smiled. "I know it's hard, and it's rather short notice. This will probably be the best chance we get, though, and I can't waste it just to give you time to get used to the idea of leaving home."

I was more confused than ever, but I could see Mother wasn't going to tell me anything more. She looked at me for another moment, then turned and walked toward the cottage. At the door. Mother stopped and looked back. "Good luck, Daystar. And stop wasting time. You don't have much of it." Before I could say anything, she disappeared inside.

I started off toward the Enchanted Forest. Mother's advice was always good; besides, I was afraid she'd melt me or something if I hung around very long. I didn't bother to follow the road; I just headed for the forest. The road isn't particularly useful, anyway. It disappears as soon as you get past the outer edge of the forest, or at least, it usually does. At any rate, I wanted to stick to the part of the Enchanted Forest I knew, to start with.

The Enchanted Forest comes in two parts, the Outer Forest and the Deep Woods. Most people don't know that. I'd gone herb gathering in the Outer Forest; it's relatively safe, if you know what you're doing. I'd never been much

more than an hour's walk from our cottage, but I had to start somewhere.

I felt the little tingle on my skin that marked the border between the ordinary woods, where our cottage was, and the outer part of the Enchanted Forest. Some people have trouble getting in and out of the Enchanted Forest, but I never had. I was feeling excited and adventurous, and maybe a little scared. I mean, for years I'd watched all those Princes and heroes and so on go into the forest, and now it was my turn. I looked back over my shoulder to see if Mother was watching. The cottage was gone.

That shook me. You just don't expect the place you've lived in for sixteen years to vanish like that. I looked around. None of the woods looked familiar, either. The trees were huge, much larger than the ones by our cottage. I couldn't reach more than a quarter of the way around the trunk of the smallest one. The ground was covered with deep green moss, which ran right up to the bases of the trees and stopped short. I could see a couple of bushes, one that had three different colors of flowers on it. Everything felt very dark and green and alive.

I shivered. This wasn't the Outer Forest. This was the Deep Woods.

I stood and waited for a couple of minutes, but nothing much happened. Somehow, I wasn't reassured. Being lost in the Enchanted Forest is not conducive to peace of mind. There wasn't really anything I could do about it, though. After a while I started walking, feeling considerably less adventurous and considerably more scared.

I walked for a long time. After a while I quit being scared, at least mostly. Finally I started looking for a place to rest;

my feet hurt and I was getting very tired. I was careful, though; I didn't want to sit on a flower that used to be somebody important or anything like that. After about fifteen minutes I found a spot that looked all right, and I started to sit down. Unfortunately, I'd forgotten I was wearing the sword; it got tangled up in my legs and I sort of fell over.

Somebody giggled. I looked around and didn't see anyone, so I decided to get untangled first. I straightened my

8 Patricia C. Wrede

legs out and sat up, making sure the swordbelt was out of the way this time. Then I took a second look around. I still didn't see anyone, but the same somebody giggled again.

"Sir or madam or—" I stopped. What was the proper honorific for something that wasn't male or female? I was pretty sure there was one, but I couldn't remember it.

"Oh, don't bother," said a high squeaking voice. "I never cared much for all that fancy stuff."

I still didn't see anyone. "Forgive my stupidity, but I can't seem to find where you are," I said.

The giggle came again. "Down here, silly."

I looked down and jumped. A little gold lizard was sitting right next to my hand. He was about twice as long as my middle finger, and half of that was tail. "Hey, watch it!" he said. "You might hurt someone if you keep jumping around like that. Me, for instance. You big people are so careless."

"I'm very sorry," I said politely.

The lizard lifted his head. "You are? Yes, you are! How

amazing. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Daystar," I said, bowing slightly. It was a little awkward from a sitting position, but I managed. Being polite to a lizard felt peculiar, but there are only two rules of behavior in the Enchanted Forest: Don't take anything for granted, and be polite to everyone. That's if you don't live there; the inhabitants have their own codes, which it's better not to ask about.

"You're Daystar?" The lizard did something very tangled very quickly and ended up balanced on his tail. "So you are! Well, my goodness. I hadn't expected to see you around here for a while yet."

"You were expecting me?"

"Of course." The lizard looked smug. "I know everything that goes on in the Enchanted Forest. Absolutely everything! I know you from your little forays in the Outer Forest; it was only a matter of time before you got this far. I thought it would take longer, though. I'm Suz, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"You are?" The lizard leaned forward and almost lost his balance. "Yes, you really are! How positively extraor-

Talking to Dragons

9

dinary. Whatever are you doing in the Enchanted Forest?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know!" The lizard did a backflip and scurried up onto a fat tree root, where he would have a better view. He balanced on his tail again and looked at me thoughtfully. "If you don't know what you're doing, why are you here?"

I thought for a moment. "Do you really know everything that happens in this forest?"

"Of course I do." Suz looked offended. An offended lizard is an interesting sight.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything," I said hastily. "I just wondered if you could tell me where this came from." I touched the sword Mother had given me.

The lizard squinted in my general direction. "What? It's on the wrong side of you, silly; bring it over where I can see it. If it came from the Enchanted Forest, I can tell you about it."

I lifted the sword, sheath and all, and twisted around so the sword was on the same side of me as Suz. The lizard promptly fell over backward.

"Oh dear me my gracious goodness my oh," he squeaked.

"Do you know what this is?"

"I wouldn't have asked you if I knew," I said. "It's a sword; I think it's magic."

"It's a sword! He thinks it's magic!" Suz ran around twice in a small circle, then did the tail-balancing trick again. "Where did you get it?" the little lizard demanded.

"My mother gave it to me; she got it out of the Enchanted Forest somewhere," I said. I was getting a little tired of this. "Are you going to answer my question?"

"Your mother gave it to you. The Sword of the Sleeping King, that everyone in the world has been looking for for fifteen or twenty years, and your mother gave it to you." The lizard got so agitated he fell over again. "That isn't right. That isn't reasonable. My dear boy, that simply isn't done! Even in the Enchanted Forest there is a proper order for these things! Someone will have to notify Kazul immediately. Oh, dear, what a stir this will cause!"

"I'm sorry; I didn't know. What's the Sword of the Sleeping King?" I'd never heard of it before, which rather sur-

10 Patricia C. Wrede

prised me. After Mother made me memorize all those pages of names and titles and peculiar weapons, I'd thought I knew the name of every magic sword in the world. It surprised Suz, too.

"You don't know?" The lizard froze in the middle of getting back up on his tail. He looked like a golden pretzel. "No, you don't! Oh, my. You'd better go to the castle at once. Kazul will know what to do with you. I'd better go there myself, right away." Suz untwisted and darted off into the undergrowth.

"Wait!" I shouted. "What castle? Who is Kazul? And why—"

The lizard looked back. "I don't have time for that! And even if I did, I couldn't tell you. You have to find out yourself; magic swords always work that way. Don't you know anything?"

"Do you want me to recite the names of the Four Hundred Minor Swords of Korred the Spellsmith? I know lots of things; I just don't know about this. How do I find out?"

"Follow the sword, silly," Suz said, and disappeared among the leaves.

I DIDN'T TRY to chase the lizard. For one thing, there wasn't much point in it; Suz was small enough to hide practically anywhere. For another, I didn't want to go running through me Enchanted Forest. People get killed that way, or enchanted, or other unpleasant things. And besides, I wanted to think.

I settled back against the tree and looked down at the sword, a little unhappily. "Follow the sword," Suz had said. But Mother had told me not to take it out unless I meant

to use it, and I didn't flunk "following" it was the kind of use she meant. Besides, I wasn't sure I wanted to draw a magic sword in the middle of the Enchanted Forest, especially one I didn't know anything about. I decided to try something else.

I stood up and looked around. Over on my right there was a little gap in the trees, not enough to call a clearing, just a place where the trees were farther apart. I went over to the middle of it and stood there while I tried to unfasten the sheath. It was a lot more complicated than it looked;

finally I had to take the whole belt off. I wrapped the belt around the sheath and set the whole thing down in the middle of the open space. I backed up a couple of steps and sat

11

12 Patricia C. Wrede

down on the ground with the hilt of the sword closest to me and the end of the sheath pointing away from me.

The woods had gone very, very quiet. I didn't like that, but I would have felt stupid if I'd gotten up and picked up the sword without doing anything. Besides, leaving things half-finished can be awfully dangerous. I took a deep breath and spoke as steadily as I could.

"Sword of the Sleeping King,  
I conjure thee:

By stream and starlight,  
By sun and shadow,  
By song and stormwind,  
Show me thy tale!"

It was the simplest spell I knew; almost the only one, in fact. It's supposed to let the spell-caster know more about the nature of whatever object is named in the first line of the chant. I didn't think the spell would work quite the same way on a magic sword, but it shouldn't do any harm, and I was hoping to find out something useful. I finished the spell, and everything was quiet for about two heartbeats. Fast heartbeats; I was nervous. Then the world turned over.

That's what it felt like. The ground started shaking, and the part under the sword pushed up until it made a mound taller than I was. I didn't have much of a chance to look at it; I was being rolled all over the open space and trying to grab hold of something. Then everything went dark, and I was falling, and a huge, deep voice said solemnly, "All hail the Bearer of the Sword!"

And then it was over. I was lying on the ground in the Enchanted Forest, trying to dig my way through the moss. I stopped and waited. Nothing else happened, so I sat up and looked around. I was still sitting in the same not-quite-a-clearing, with the sword and sheath in the middle. The sword...

The sword was standing upright, half-buried in a knee-high mound that hadn't been there before. The blade was



about a handspan out of the sheath, and it glittered when the sun got through the trees enough to hit it. I stood up

Talking to Dragons

13

and walked out. The mound was covered with moss, just like the rest of the forest floor; it could have been there forever. I shivered, wondering how I was going to get the sheath out of the ground.

I put one hand on the hilt of the sword, intending to shove it back down into the sheath. When my hand touched the sword, my whole arm started to tingle. I jerked my hand away and stared at the sword. It just sat there. I reached out again, this time for the sheath.

As soon as I touched it, the sheath slid out of the ground. The belt was still wrapped around it, and there wasn't any dirt clinging to either of them. I touched the hilt again. It still made my arm tingle, but this time I was ready for it, and I shoved it back into the sheath. Then I stuffed the swordbelt under my arm and started walking. I was sure somebody must have noticed what had just happened, and I didn't want to be around when they came to find out what was going on.

I didn't stop again until midafternoon. By then I was hungry as well as tired; I'd forgotten to bring any food with me, and I certainly couldn't go back for it now. I sighed and sat down under another tree to rest and think some more, but I didn't get much thinking done. Mostly, I stared at the sword.

Finally, I gave up. Sitting under a tree wasn't going to teach me anything. I stood up and buckled on the swordbelt. As I adjusted it, my hand touched the hilt of the sword again. Three little tingles ran up my arm before I pulled my hand away. I looked at the sword for a moment, then shrugged and reached for the hilt with my right hand, as if I were going to draw it.

As soon as my hand touched the hilt, I felt the tingling. This time I didn't let go; I concentrated on the way it felt instead. I got three distinct impressions. One was a low, sort of background vibration, like a kitten purring in its sleep; one was a deep rumbling feeling; and one was a bright buzz like a bee in a jar. Almost as soon as I figured them out, they started to fade. In another minute they were completely gone, and they didn't come back.

I took my hand off the sword's hilt, then put it back. I

14 Patricia C. Wrede

didn't feel anything. I tried a couple more times, but whatever it was had stopped. I finally gave up and started walking again. I wasn't getting anywhere trying to figure out the sword, and I had to find somewhere to spend the night.

At least I didn't have to worry about giants; they live farther east, by the Mountains of Morning. It occurred to me suddenly that I didn't know where I was; I might be in

the Mountains of Morning for all I knew. It wasn't a particularly cheerful thought. I started walking more quietly.

I'd been walking for nearly half an hour when I realized that I knew where I was going. Unfortunately, I didn't know where I'd be when I got there. It was very odd, and I was a little uneasy until I realized that I didn't have to go that direction. I could just as easily turn around and walk the other way, or go sideways. In fact, I did for a while, just to prove I could.

After that I felt better, so I stopped avoiding whatever it was and started walking toward it again. I wasn't going to get anywhere if I kept avoiding things; I might miss something important. Besides, there isn't any way you can avoid everything in the Enchanted Forest. This way, at least I knew something was coming.

I was still walking very quietly when I heard the noises;

it sounded like somebody crying. I headed toward the sound, wondering what I was getting myself into. You can't just ignore something like that, especially in the Enchanted Forest. On the other hand... I stopped, staring at a thick, prickly hedge. It was taller than my head, and impossible to see through, much less shove through. The crying was coming from the other side.

I bent over. The bushes were much too close together for me to crawl through them. I could make out sunlight and long red hair and a brown tunic on the other side, but not much else. I stood up and walked to one side, looking for a thin spot in the hedge. It wasn't long before I realized I was going in a circle. Terrific, I thought. I bet it goes all the way around without breaking. I kept walking anyway, just in case.

It didn't take long to make the full circle. I bent over and peered through the bushes again. Suz might be able to

Talking to Dragons

15

get through, but I never would. I stood up and tapped lightly on the outside of the bushes.

"Excuse me, please, but would you mind letting me through?" I said as politely as I could.

The bushes rustled and pulled apart. I stared at them for a minute; I hadn't really thought it would work. The bushes rustled again; somehow they managed to sound impatient. "Ah, thank you very much," I said, and stepped through.

The hedge closed behind me with a prim swish, and I looked around. The inside of the hedge was a circular clearing full of sunlight and the feel of magic. A red-haired girl in a brown tunic was lying at one side of the clearing; she sat up as I came in, and her face was tearstained.

"Who are you?" she demanded fiercely as soon as she saw me. "And what do you want?" She looked about my age, but I never was very good at guessing how old people are.

"My name is Daystar," I said. "I heard you, um, crying, and I wanted to see if I could do anything."

She looked at me suspiciously. "You just walked through that hedge? Ha! I've been trying to get out of here all day. It's not that easy. I think you're a wizard." I noticed some scratches on her arms and some fuzzy places in the tunic where it might have caught on branches or trees.

"I'm not a wizard. Maybe it's easier to get in than it is to get out," I offered.

The red-haired girl sat back. "That could be true," she said a little less belligerently. She eyed me skeptically; I tried to look trustworthy. "Well, you don't look like a wizard," she said at last. "Can you get out again?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, try!" she said, "No, wait; I'll stand next to you so I can get out, too. Then we'll both be rescued." She jumped to her feet. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't really think I need to be rescued," I said. "I was looking for a place to spend the night and this seems pretty safe. I'm not sure I want to leave just yet. Besides, I don't know anything about you. Maybe I don't want to rescue you."

\ "Oh, rats." The redhead sat down again. "I thought you

16 Patricia C. Wrede

might be a hero; you can talk them into anything. Stupid creatures."

"Who are you?" I asked. "And why are you worried about wizards?"

"I suppose it won't matter if I tell you," she said after thinking for a minute. "They're chasing me. My name's Shiara," she added.

"Wizards are chasing you? More than one?" I was impressed. Wizards usually don't cooperate much, even the ones who belong to the Society of Wizards. "What did you do?"

Shiara hesitated, then threw her hair back over her shoulder with a toss of her head. "I," she said defiantly, "am a fire-witch."

"You're a fire-witch?" Well, she had the red hair for it, but that doesn't always mean someone is a fire-witch. She must have heard the doubt in my voice, because she scowled at me.

"I am a fire-witch! I am!"

"I didn't say you weren't," I said hastily. That only seemed to make it worse.

"You don't believe me!" she said accusingly. "But I am so a fire-witch! I am! I am!" She was shouting by the time she finished. She glared at me, and her hair burst into flame.

That settled it; she really was a fire-witch. "I believe you, I believe you," I said. "Uh, shouldn't you do something about your hair?"

Shiara burst into tears and her hair went out. I stood there feeling silly and useless. Finally I remembered my handkerchief; Mother made me carry one all the time, even chopping wood, so I actually had it with me. I pulled it out and offered it to her. After a couple of sniffs, she took it and mopped her face, but she didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," I said finally. "I didn't mean to make you mad."

"Well, you did," she snapped. She crumpled the handkerchief into a little ball and threw it at me.

I caught it and stuffed it back into my pocket. "I said I was sorry."

Talking to Dragons 17

"I can't help having a temper," Shiara said crossly. "All fire-witches do."

"Really? I've never met one before. I've met heroes and Princes, and once in a while even a wizard, but no fire-witches. Does your hair always do that when you get mad?"

"No," she said. She looked like she was going to cry again.

"Why are the wizards chasing you?" I asked hastily, hoping it was a safer topic.

"I burned the Head Wizard's staff," Shiara said matter-of-factly.

My jaw dropped about a foot. A wizard's staff is the source of his power; furthermore, most wizards store spells in them. Sort of an emergency reserve. A lot of the staffs get passed down from one wizard to the next, accumulating magic as they go. They're practically indestructible. They get lost a lot and then found in the nick of time under peculiar circumstances, but I'd never heard of one being destroyed before. And the Head Wizard's staff...

"You burned a wizard's staff?" I managed finally.

"You bet." Shiara's eyes glinted at the memory. "He deserved it, too. But the rest of them got mad. So I ran away while they were arguing about what to do with me."

"And you came to the Enchanted Forest? On purpose? Isn't that a little extreme? I mean, you could get, well, enchanted. Or killed, or something. This place is dangerous."

"Having the whole Society of Wizards mad at you is just as bad," she snapped.

I thought about it. She was right. "Why did you bum the Head Wizard's staff?" I asked after a minute.

"I didn't like him," Shiara said shortly. I got the distinct impression she didn't want to talk about it, so I decided to change the subject again. Besides, my feet hurt.

"Would you mind if I sat down?" I asked. "I've been doing a lot of walking today." She nodded. I moved the sword out of the way and sat down; I was starting to get the hang of it. Shiara saw the weapon and frowned.

"Are you sure you're not a hero or an apprentice hero '» or something?"

18 Patricia C. Wrede

"I don't think I am," I said cautiously. "I'm not really sure."

"You're not sure? Don't you know who you are?"

I blinked. I'd never really thought about it that way. "I know who I am," I said. "I just don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. Except finding out what I'm supposed to be doing."

Shiara stared at me. "I don't believe it. Nobody comes to the Enchanted Forest without some kind of reason."

"What's yours, then?" I said. I was getting a little tired of people and animals and things not believing me.

"None of your business!" Shiara said. She was glaring at me again. Then she jumped up and glared down at me. "I want to leave," she announced. "Right now."

"All right," I said. "But I thought you couldn't get through the hedge."

Shiara stamped her foot, and a little flame flared up from it. "I can't! Open it for me! Right now!" She was really mad, but at least this time her hair wasn't burning. I was glad; watching someone glare at you with her hair on fire is a little unnerving.

"I don't want to open the hedge yet," I said reasonably. "I don't even know if I can. Besides, it could be dangerous. There are wolves in this forest. And it's getting dark; there could be nightshades out there already. That may not bother a fire-witch, but—"

"I hate you!" Shiara cried. She sounded like she meant it.

"Just because I don't want to get eaten by wolves or driven mad by a nightshade or something?" I said, puzzled. "What's wrong with that?"

Shiara didn't answer; she just turned her back on me. I

watched her for a minute, then sort of settled back on the ground. Things were getting very complicated. I was lost in the Enchanted Forest, with no food or water. I had a magic sword I didn't want to use because it did strange things to the ground. In another day or so I would probably have a wizard looking for me. I still didn't have any idea how I was going to figure out why Mother wanted me to leave home. And then there was Shiara.

Talking to Dragons

19

Fire-witches are rare. Nobody can learn to be one; you're either bom one or you're not. They're very powerful. They can bum anything, of course, and fire doesn't hurt them at all. Fire-witches can leam almost any kind of magic there is. They're immune to most spells, too, which is why wizards usually don't like them much. Fire-witches can even summon Elementals and get them to listen. Well, sometimes. And Shiara was a fire-witch. With enough power to bum a wizard's staff. The Head Wizard's staff.

I didn't think I wanted her to be mad at me.

I didn't know what to do about it, though. I didn't even know what I'd done wrong, and I wasn't at all sure what to do next. What do you say to a mad fire-witch?

Right about then I heard snuffling noises; Shiara was crying again. I sighed and dug out my handkerchief.

"I didn't mean to make you mad," I said as I watched her mop her face again. "I just keep doing it by accident. It'd make things a lot easier for both of us if you would tell me what I'm doing wrong so I can stop."

Shiara looked at me over the top of the handkerchief, which was starting to look sort of damp and wrinkled. "You want to talk to me? You're not scared?" She lowered the handkerchief and stared at me. "You mean it!"

"Of course I mean it," I said. "Why shouldn't I? And why should I be scared?"

"I guess I'd better tell you," she said with a sigh.

THE PROBLEM WAS, Shiara was a fire-witch who couldn't do anything. On purpose, I mean. Things happened sometimes when she got mad, and once in a while she could make a spell work, but most of the time she couldn't make anything happen. She didn't have very many friends because everyone was afraid of her. I could understand that. I mean, with a temper like hers and no way of telling what would happen when she lost it, people had reason to be nervous.

On top of that, everyone kept telling her about all the things she ought to be able to do because she was a fire-witch. Like not worrying about nightshades; that was why she got mad at me. She was awfully sick of being told about what fire-witches could do, especially when she couldn't. I couldn't blame her for getting mad.

And then somebody told the Society of Wizards about this fire-witch who couldn't cast spells or anything. They decided it would be a great chance to find out more about fire-witches. As I said, wizards don't get along with fire-witches very well. So a whole bunch of wizards came and grabbed Shiara right out of the middle of town. Shiara didn't like it; she liked it even less when she found out they wanted her to stand in the middle of a circle of wizards while they

21

22 Patricia C. Wrede

threw spells at her to see what would work.

"I said no," Shiara told me. "And they said I didn't have any choice. That's when I burned the Head Wizard's staff."

"They don't sound like the wizards I've met," I said. Then I remembered Antorell. "Most of them, anyway."

"I don't care; I don't like wizards," Shiara said. I couldn't blame her, and I said so. She nodded and went on, "Anyway, it turned out that the wizards had brought me to the edge of the Enchanted Forest. They said something about the magic in the forest and fire-witches' magic being related. That was before I got away. So I decided to see if there was somewhere in the forest I could find out how to use my magic. Only then I stumbled in here and I couldn't get out. I was afraid the wizards would catch up with me, and I was tired and hungry and mad. That's why I was crying."

I wished she hadn't mentioned being hungry; I'd almost forgotten that I hadn't eaten since breakfast. But there wasn't anything inside the hedge to eat, and I wasn't going to try opening it. I thought I'd already done enough experimenting for one day, and besides, it was getting dark.

"What are you doing in the Enchanted Forest?" Shiara asked when I didn't say anything.

"I don't know," I said.

"How can you not know?" she demanded. "I told you why I came!"

So I explained about Mother and the wizard. Shiara was very interested.

"I think I want to meet your mother," she said. "After I learn how to use my magic. Do you think she'd be willing to teach me how to melt a wizard?"

I said I didn't know.

"I don't see how you can find out what you're supposed to be doing just by wandering about the Enchanted Forest," Shiara said.

"Well, you're planning to wander around until you find out how to use your magic, aren't you?" I said. "I don't think I really see the difference."

"I know what I'm doing!" Shiara said. "That's the difference."

"You don't seem to know very much about the Enchantee

\ )if<i-\*>>f ••'

Talking to Dragons

23

Forest," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't have gotten caught by this hedge."

Shiara scowled, then looked suddenly thoughtful. "Is it more dangerous to wander around the forest alone than it is with someone?"

"It depends," I said. "Two people can attract more attention than one, but sooner or later everyone in the Enchanted Forest runs into something dangerous. And when you do get into trouble, it's sort of nice to have someone around to help."

"Why don't we stay together, then?" Shiara said. "After we get out of this stupid hedge, I mean. As long as neither of us knows exactly where we're supposed to be going, we might as well wander in the same direction."

"All right," I said. It sounded like a good idea, especially since it's hard to run into someone completely by accident in the Enchanted Forest.

Then Shiara made me describe Antorell in detail. She decided that he didn't sound like any of the wizards who had kidnapped her. I wasn't sure whether that was good or bad. I was beginning to like Shiara; she was sort of nice when she wasn't mad. But if we were going to stick together, we would have two sets of wizards looking for us, and that didn't sound too good. Shiara was still curious, so I wound up telling her about the sword and the lizard and everything, too.

"The Sword of the Sleeping King," she said thoughtfully when I finished. "Well, it sounds important. Can you do that spell again? I'd like to watch; maybe I could figure it out."

"I could do it, but I won't," I said. "Once was enough."

"You scared or something?" Shiara said scornfully.

"I'm not being scared, I'm being sensible," I said. "That was no minor magic I set off. Are you trying to attract attention?"

"No, I suppose you're right. Will you let me see it, at least?"

"Sure, if you promise not to take it out of the sheath or say any spells at it or anything," I said. I stood up and started trying to unbuckle the belt. It was hard to do in the

24 Patricia C. Wrede



daik. Finally Shiara got tired of waiting and came and helped. It still took a while, and my elbows got in the way again, but finally we managed to get the swordbelt off. Shiara took the sheath and squinted at the parts of the sword that showed.

"I can't see anything," she complained.

"There isn't much to see," I said. "Besides, it's dark. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

"I wanted to see it now. Oh, all right." She handed it back, hilt first. I took it and nearly let go again right away. The tingling was back, the one that reminded me of a bee, and it was a lot stronger than it had been before.

"Watch out!" Shiara said. "You almost dropped it."

"It's tingling again," I said.

"It is? Let me see." I handed the sword back, and Shiara touched the hilt. "I don't feel anything. Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." I reached out and put my hand on the hilt, next to Shiara's.

"Ow!" I said, and Shiara went, "Oh!" and we both dropped the sword. We looked at each other for a minute.

"What did it feel like to you?" I said finally.

"Like something pulling at me," Shiara said. She eyed the sword. "You can have it back; I don't think I want to look at it anymore."

I picked up the sword and put it back on. I still wanted to know what it was doing, but I didn't want to do any more messing around with it in the dark. Shiara and I talked about it for a while, but we were both tired, and finally we decided to just go to sleep. We would have plenty of time to experiment in the morning if we still felt like it.

Spending the night in the Enchanted Forest sounds awfully exciting, but it isn't really. Either you stay up all night so the wolves and nightshades and things won't get you and they don't, or you fall asleep and they do, or you find someplace safe and sleep there and never know. We slept all night, at least I did, and when we woke up in the morning the hedge was still there.

By that time I was really hungry, and since there wasn't anything to eat inside the hedge I was anxious to leave. So was Shiara; she was still worried about the Society of Wizards. We got up and brushed the moss off our clothes, and

Talking to Dragons

25

I checked the sword, just to be safe.

"Will you quit fussing with that and come open this stupid hedge?" Shiara said.

I walked over to the bushes. They looked very dense and very prickly. "Excuse me," I said to the hedge. "I would

like to thank you for keeping the wolves and things out all night, and I would very much appreciate it if you would let me through now."

"That's the dumbest..." Shiara began, and the bushes rustled and parted. I grinned and stepped through. The branches shut behind me with a snap. "Ow!" said Shiara. I turned around. She was still on the other side of the hedge.

"What happened?" I yelled.

"What do you think happened? And you don't have to shout; I'm not that far away."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Make it open up again!"

"I'll try," I said doubtfully. I addressed the bushes again. "Excuse me, but you seem to have a friend of mine inside, and she can't get out. Will you please let her through?"

The bushes rustled smugly and didn't move apart at all. "I'd really appreciate it if you would let her out," I said. "She's nicer than you think." The bushes rustled again. This time they sounded skeptical. They still didn't open.

"Well?" said Shiara's voice.

I sighed. "They won't open up. I'm afraid you'll have to apologize."

"Apologize? To a bush?" Shiara sounded outraged. "I won't! I'll bum this hedge to cinders! I'll— Ow!"

"I really think you'd better apologize," I said. "Otherwise you probably won't be able to get out until the wizards come."

There was silence for a while. Finally Shiara said, "Oh, all right. I'm sorry I said you were a stupid hedge." She paused. "Now will you please let me through?"

Reluctantly, the bushes pulled apart. Shiara sighed with relief and stepped through. She almost didn't make it; the bushes closed again so fast they caught a piece of her tunic. "Hey!" she said. "Stop that!"  
i "I hate to mention this," I said as I helped Shiara work

26 Patricia C. Wrede

her tunic free, "but you really ought to be more polite."

"To lizards and bushes? Ha!" She jerked her tunic free and glared at the hedge.

"I mean it," I said. "It only gets you into trouble when you're not."

"I'm a fire-witch," Shiara said sullenly. "People are supposed to be polite to me."

"I thought you didn't like having everyone scared of you," I said. I turned to the bush. "Thank you very much,"

I told it.

The branches rustled politely. I turned back to Shiara, who was watching me with her mouth open. "If you act like that all the time, I don't think people would like you much even if you weren't a fire-witch. Good-bye." I turned around and started walking.

"Wait!" I stopped. Shiara ran up beside me. "I—I'm sorry. I guess I'm not used to being nice to people."

"That could really get you in trouble in the Enchanted Forest," I said.

Shiara looked back over her shoulder at the hedge and shuddered. "I guess you're right. Well, I'll try."

"All right. Let's find something to eat."

That was easier to say than do. We found a bush that had some berries on it, but half of them were blue and half were red. I wasn't quite hungry enough to take a chance on them, and neither was Shiara. She thought about it, but finally decided not to. "If my fire-magic doesn't always work, my immunity to magic might not always work, either," she said. "I'd hate to turn into something awful just because of a few berries." I thought that was very sensible. We kept going.

Eventually we found a clearing full of blackberry brambles. It looked very odd sitting there in the middle of the Enchanted Forest; it was too ordinary. The berries were full of seeds, but we ate a lot of them anyway. I picked some extras and tied them up in my handkerchief for later. When we finished, we started walking again.

It wasn't a very exciting walk. The woods looked just the same. The trees didn't get any smaller, the moss still covered the ground, and every once in a while there was a

Talking to Dragons

27

peculiar bush growing next to one of the trees. It would have gotten boring after a while if Shiara hadn't been there. It was sort of nice to have someone my own age to talk to;

I'd never had any friends. Most people didn't want their children getting as close to the Enchanted Forest as we lived, so we never had any visitors except the Princes and so on. I told Shiara about living at the edge of the forest, and she told me about the town she lived in. It was very interesting, to me, anyway.

By the middle of the morning we were both getting hungry again. Blackberries don't stick with you for long. We stopped and got out the berries I'd saved in my handkerchief. They were sort of squashed and messy, but they tasted fine. Then we started walking again. It was a warm day, and by the time we saw the stream we were both very thirsty.

"Water! Oh, great!" Shiara said as we reached the bank. It was a small stream, ankle deep and a little too wide to jump. I could see the pebbles on the bottom. Shiara knelt

on the bank and reached down.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "You shouldn't just drink that. You could turn into a rabbit, or lose your memory, or disappear, or something."

Shiara looked at me. Then she looked at the stream. "I don't care," she said finally. "I'm thirsty." She leaned back toward the water.

"But what if— Watch out!" I grabbed Shiara and pulled her away just as a huge swirl of muddy water came rushing down the stream. She scrambled back and stood up, and we watched the stream for a minute. It was now almost a river, deep and fast and angry.

Shiara looked at me. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I guess we'll have to go back—" I started to turn back toward the woods and stopped in mid-sentence. There was dark water on that side of us, too. We were standing on an island. A very small island. It was getting smaller every minute.

I stared at the churning water, and my hand went to my sword. I don't know why; swords usually aren't much good against floods. As soon as I touched the hilt I knew that it wasn't in the nature of this particular stream to do this sort

30 Patricia C. Wrede

of my monster, and I don't think you can. Pity, isn't it? Be patient; you'll have your turn in another minute, and then the Head Wizard will owe me a favor."

The head lunged again. By now I was ready for it, but it was awfully fast. I dodged again and struck at it with the sword, even though I wasn't sure what good it would do me to wound something that wasn't even alive. I found out in a hurry.

The sword made a humming noise, and I heard the wizard yell. There was a sound like an explosion. The snake head made a bubbly noise and collapsed in a wave of muddy water. I got soaked. The floodwater drained away, leaving a lot of wet moss. And Shiara yelled again.

I whirled around. Shiara was pointing; it took me a second to realize what she was pointing at. It was the big tree that the wizard had been leaning against. A couple of short branches were lying at the foot of the tree. The wizard was gone.

I STOOD WHERE I was, panting and dripping. When I got my breath back, I went over to the tree. There was no sign of the wizard except for the "branches" I'd noticed. There were three of them, and they weren't branches. They were

pieces of a staff.

I looked at Shiara. "That's two wizard's staffs you've broken," I said. "They're really going to be after you now."

"I didn't break it," Shiara said indignantly. "You did."

"I did not," I said. We looked at each other for a minute. "If neither of us broke it," Shiara said finally, "who did?"

"Me," said a voice. I looked up. A little man was sitting in the branches of the tree. He was about two feet tall and dressed entirely in green. His eyes were black and very bright, and his ears were slightly pointed. He had to be an elf.

"I think you mean 'I,'" I said automatically.

"I shouldn't wonder if you're right," the elf said thoughtfully. He tilted his head to one side. "Does it matter?"

"Can you get down from that tree?" Shiara said. "You're giving me a crick in my neck."

The elf looked from me to Shiara and back to me again. "Introduce me to your charming companion," he said.

31

32 Patricia C. Wrede

"Oh, excuse me," I said. I told the elf our names and thanked him for taking care of the wizard. I was a little curious about that. I'd never met an elf, but they didn't have a reputation for altruism. I wasn't sure I wanted to trust one, either. Elves can be very tricky.

"You're welcome," the elf said. "I've never cared much for wizards. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to do anything permanent to them. This one will be back in a day or two."

"If there is anything we can do for you in return, I would like to hear what it is," I said. If someone in the Enchanted Forest does you a favor, you have to offer to do one for them. Well, you don't have to, but if you don't, things seem to go wrong a lot after that. You have to be careful, though;

if you promise to do a favor before you hear what it is, you can end up in more trouble than you started with. I wasn't going to promise anything without finding out first what I was promising.

"Consider the debt canceled," the elf said politely. I thought he sounded disappointed, and I didn't like the way he was looking at my sword. Suddenly I was very glad Mother had told me about making promises in the Enchanted Forest.

"Thank you," I said. "You did a very neat job." He had, too; the staff had been sliced cleanly into thirds. I began to wonder how he had done it. I hadn't thought elves were powerful enough to break a wizard's staff. I didn't really

want to ask, though; he might take offense or something.

"You may have the staff, if you want it," the elf said, waving at the pieces.

"What good is a busted wizard's staff?" Shiara said.  
"You can't do anything with it."

"Nonsense," said the elf. "Wizard's staffs are just as powerful in pieces as they are whole, and they're fairly easy to put back together. So please, take it with you."

I didn't like the way he kept suggesting that. It sounded reasonable enough, but as I said, I wasn't sure I wanted to trust him. "Are you sure you don't want it?" I asked finally.

"What would an elf do with a wizard's staff? If you don't take it, I'll just have to get rid of it somewhere."

Talking to Dragons 33

That sounded reasonable, too. I wasn't going to commit myself, though; he was too insistent. "Thank you for the suggestion," I said. "We'll think about it."

"Do," the elf said. His black eyes twinkled. "Perhaps I'll see you later. Good-bye." Before I could say anything he had disappeared into the treetops. Elves move very quickly.

"What was that about?" Shiara demanded.

"I don't know about that elf," I said slowly. "I think something funny is going on; he was trying too hard to get us to take that staff."

"Well, we have to do something with it," Shiara said.

"Why?" I said. "We didn't break it. And I don't want to mess with a wizard's staff, even a broken one."

Shiara frowned. I made a gesture toward the pieces and realized that I was still holding the sword in my hand. I started to put it back in its sheath, then stopped. The sheath was as wet as everything else I was wearing; I couldn't put the sword in that. I mean, not all magic swords are rustproof, and even if you have one that is, putting your sword away without cleaning it is a bad habit to get into. I checked my pockets, just in case, but even my handkerchief was wet.

"Shiara, do you have anything I could borrow to dry my sword?" I asked finally. "Everything I have is soaked."

"What does that have to do with the wizard's staff? Oh, give it here; I'll fix it." She held out her hand, a little reluctantly. I could see she didn't really want to take the sword. After what had happened the last time she'd touched it, I really couldn't blame her.

"That's all right, I'll do it," I said. "It's my job. All I need is something dry to wipe it with."

Shiara glared at me. "All I have is my tunic, and I am

not going to take it off just so you can dry your stupid sword! If you won't give it to me, it can rust."

My face got very hot. "I, um, I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I mean, I didn't think..."

"Oh, shut up and give me the sword."

I held it out. Shiara took it, a little gingerly, but neither of us felt anything unusual. While she wiped it dry on the

34

Patricia C. Wrede

Talking to Dragons

35

front of her tunic, I walked over to the stream. I was pretty sure, now, that it was safe to drink from this stream. I'd swallowed some of it when the wizard's wave had hit me, and nothing had happened to me yet. I bent over and took a drink.

The water was clean and cold, with just a hint of lime. It tasted awfully good, though I prefer the lemon-flavored streams myself. However, I wasn't exactly in a position to be picky. I think I like lemon because Mother and I got most of our drinking water from a lemon-flavored stream just inside the forest. It was much nicer than the well water we used for washing, even if it was more work to haul the buckets that far.

Shiara came over just as I finished. She looked at me for a minute, then handed me the sword. "Here." I took it, and she sat down and started trying to drink out of her cupped hands. Most of the water ran out, but she kept trying.

I stood holding the sword and wondering what I was going to do with it. I mean, walking through the Enchanted Forest with a sword in your hand is just asking for trouble. On the other hand, I couldn't put it away until the sheath dried out, and that would probably take hours. I was still trying to figure out what to do when Shiara finished drinking and sat up.

"Now, what are we going to do about that wizard's staff?" she said.

Neither one of us wanted to take it. Shiara wanted to hide the pieces before we left, and finally I agreed. We walked back over to the tree. I started to put my sword down; then I changed my mind. One of the easiest ways of losing important things in the Enchanted Forest is to put them down while you do something else; when you get back, they're gone. Then you have to go to all the bother of finding whoever took your things before you can get on

with whatever you really want to do. I shifted the sword into my left hand and looked around for the nearest piece of staff.

"Daystar! Come see!" Shiara was waving a piece of the staff to attract my attention.

"You really shouldn't do that," I said as I walked over.

"You might set off a spell or something. This used to be a wizard's staff, remember? We ought to at least try to be careful."

"Yes, but look what it did," Shiara said, pointing. I looked down. There was a brown patch in the moss, just the size and shape of the stick Shiara was holding. I bent over and looked more closely. The moss was dry and brittle;

the stems broke as soon as I touched them.

"But this is the Enchanted Forest," I said to no one in particular. "You aren't supposed to be able to do things like this."

"Well, this wizard's staff did," Shiara said. "I bet it'll do it again, too." Before I could stop her, she laid the stick down on the moss. She picked it up almost immediately. The moss underneath it was brown and dead. I stared.

"I don't like this," I said. There aren't very many things you can be sure of in the Enchanted Forest, but I'd never seen a dead plant there, not even in the Outer Forest. The whole place felt too alive to put up with that sort of thing. "I wonder if all wizard's staves do that."

"I don't know about other staves, but we can check the other pieces of this one," Shiara said. She walked toward one of the other two sticks. I sighed and started for the last one.

"This one's the same," Shiara reported after a minute. "What about yours?"

"Just a minute," I said. I bent over and picked it up in my right hand.

When I woke up, Shiara was dripping water on my face. "You can stop now," I said. "I'm wet enough already."

Shiara shook her head. "Are you all right? I mean, you're not enchanted or anything, are you?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't think so, but if I am, we'll find out pretty soon." I sat up and realized I'd been lying on the moss at the foot of the tree. "What happened?"

"How should I know? One minute you were standing there with that sword, and then there was some kind of explosion and when I turned around you were lying on the ground and that piece of the wizard's staff was over there,



burning. I don't think anyone's going to put that staff back together again; it was the middle piece." Shiara scowled. "But I think you were right about that elf."

"Where's my sword?" I said. All of a sudden I was sure someone had taken it while Shiara and I weren't paying attention.

"In your hand," Shiara said. She sounded a little exasperated. "You wouldn't let go of it."

I looked down. She was right; my left hand was still clenched around the hilt. When I relaxed my hand a little, the fingers started to tingle. I'd been holding the hilt so tightly that my hand had fallen asleep.

Well, at least I hadn't lost it. I started to shift the sword back to my right hand, then stopped and swallowed hard. The hand was burned black; I couldn't even feel it. I looked away, feeling sick. Shiara was staring, too.

"Daystar, I didn't notice, I was so worried about waking you up I didn't even see—" She stopped. She tilted her head back until she was looking up the tree trunk, and her eyes flashed. "I'm going to find you somebody who can fix this," she said grimly. "And then I'm going to find that stupid elf and make him sorry he ever mentioned that wizard's staff." The way she said it made me very, very glad I wasn't an elf, particularly the elf she'd be looking for.

"It doesn't really hurt or anything," I offered. As soon as I said it, my arm started to throb. Not the hand; it was my wrist and arm that hurt. As far as I was concerned, that was more than enough.

"That's bad," Shiara said. She looked worried. "I know a little about bums, from the times when I... Are you sure you can't feel anything?"

"Not in my hand," I said. "And I'd really rather not talk about it. It might help me not notice the way my arm feels."

"Well, let me look at it, then, and I won't have to ask questions," Shiara said.

I stuck my right hand out in her direction and stared at my sword for a couple of minutes. I didn't succeed in ignoring the sensations that were coming from my arm, but I tried awfully hard. Finally Shiara said, "You can put it down now." I looked back in her direction.

Talking to Dragons 37

"It's bad," she said. "I don't know what to do for it, either. We have to find help, and pretty soon, too. There has to be someone in this forest who knows something about healing! Can you walk?"

"My legs are all right," I said. I started to stand up and discovered I was very dizzy. I made it on the second try, but only by using the sword as a prop.

Shiara picked a direction and we started walking. After about twenty steps I stopped worrying about which way we were going and concentrated on walking and hanging on to the sword. It was hard; I was still dizzy, and I was beginning to feel cold, too. I had to work at it. My arm felt as if it were on fire, and I started wondering whether the wizard's staff had done something else nasty in addition to burning my hand.

I don't know how far we went before we stopped. By that time, Shiara was holding my good arm, trying to help me walk. She wasn't as much help as she could have been, because she had to keep out of the way of the sword I was holding. As soon as we quit walking, I sat down.

"Daystar, are you sure you can't put that sword away yet?" Shiara asked. "It gets in the way a lot."

"The sheath is still wet," I said hazily.

"Well, can we at least put the sheath in the sun so it'll dry faster?" Shiara said.

I looked around. I was starting to feel sort of light-headed as well as dizzy, and on top of everything I was getting thirsty. "We can't do that," I said. "The cat has the only patch of sun around here."

"What cat?"

"That one." I pointed at the large, dignified, black-and-white cat that was cleaning its face in the middle of a puddle of sunlight. It didn't even strike me as odd that I hadn't noticed it until I started talking about it.

Shiara turned her head. As soon as she looked at it, the cat stopped washing itself. It stared at her for a minute, then stood up. The tip of its tail twitched three times, and it turned around and started walking away. After a minute, it stopped and looked back over its shoulder. It was obviously waiting.

38 Patricia C. Wrede

Shiara jumped up. "Come on, Daystar. We're going to follow the cat. I think somebody sent it."

"That doesn't make sense," I said, but I wasn't in very good shape to argue. Eventually, Shiara got me back on my feet. The cat was still waiting for us, but as soon as we moved in its direction it started walking again. I decided Shiara was right and concentrated OK walking.

I don't know how far we followed the cat. It seemed like a long way, but anything would have seemed like a long way at that point. My arm hurt, and every muscle in my body felt shaky. I never quite dropped the sword, but a couple of times I came close. After a while I stopped thinking about it.

Finally Shiara stopped moving. "I was about ready for another rest," I said fuzzily. "Is the cat still around?"

"This isn't a rest," Shiara said. "We're here."

I looked up. We were standing in front of a neat grey house with a wide porch and a red roof. A wisp of smoke was coming out of the chimney; whatever was cooking smelled delicious. Over the door was a black-and-gold sign in block letters, which read NONE OF THIS NONSENSE, PLEASE. I'm going to like whoever lives here, I thought.

The door of the house was closed, but the black-and-white cat jumped up on the porch and scratched at it. A moment later, the door swung partway open and the cat disappeared inside.

WE STAYED WHERE we were for a minute, waiting. I don't think either one of us really knew what to do next. Fortunately, we didn't have to do anything; a few minutes after the cat vanished, the door opened the rest of the way and the owner of the house appeared.

She was dressed in a very loose black robe with long sleeves, and she was wearing a small pair of glasses with rectangular lenses. She was considerably shorter than I was, though she obviously wasn't a dwarf. She managed to look down her nose at both of us anyway. Standing on the porch helped, I think. "It's about time you got here," she said.

"Do you know anything about healing?" Shiara demanded.

"Of course I do, or I wouldn't have sent Quiz out to get you," said the woman.

"Quiz?"

"The cat. Do you plan to stand there all day? I certainly can't do anything for you while you're outside."

So we went inside. The porch steps didn't creak. Neither did the porch, and the hinges of the door didn't squeak at all, either. I didn't think they would dare.

The inside of the house seemed to consist of a single

40 Patricia C. Wrede

large, airy room, full of cats. Practically every flat surface had a cat lying on it, except the top of the stove in the comer. I counted five cats before I stopped. Several of the cats had furniture under them, and there was a table in the middle of the room and another door next to the stove.

The woman in the black robe shooed two of the cats off of chairs, and Shiara and I sat down at the table. Shiara looked at me. "You can put that stupid sword down now. No one's going to take it."

"No," I said. I didn't know why I wanted to hold on to the sword, and I didn't have enough energy to explain it if

I had known. I just knew I wanted it in my hand.

"Sword?" said the woman in black. "Oh, that sword. It's quite proper of you to keep it for now. Now, if I may see your hand?" She came over next to me and examined my right arm, while I carefully didn't watch. Oddly enough, it didn't hurt when she touched it. After a minute or so, she nodded.

"Just as I thought. This could have been very bad, but you got here in plenty of time." She went over to a cupboard by the stove and took out a piece of something that looked like dried vine. She brought it back to me and tied it around my arm, muttering something as she did. Suddenly my head wasn't fuzzy anymore.

"That should take care of things for the time being," she said, "and in a little while I can take care of the magic. Then we can pack the bums with salve. Would you like some cider while you wait?"

I nodded; I was still thirsty. Shiara frowned. "Can't you do anything right away?"

"I have done something," the woman said. She set three mugs on the table, all different. "Several things, in fact. I sent Quiz out to bring you here, and I have stopped the damage from spreading. I have also made gingerbread, which should finish baking any minute now. When it's done, we can get on with things."

"Why did you send a cat out for us?" Shiara demanded. "How did you know? Who are you, anyway?"

The woman looked through her glasses. "I didn't have

Talking to Dragons

41

a dog to send. I'm a witch. My name is Morwen. And you?" She stopped. The cats looked at us.

"Pleased to meet you," I said. "This is Shiara, and I'm Daystar."

"Why do we have to wait?" Shiara asked again.

"It is an extremely bad idea to mix magic and cooking," Morwen said. "Don't worry, the gingerbread won't take very much longer." She got out a large jug and began pouring the contents into the mugs. "There!" she said as she set the jug down. "Help yourselves; I will be back in a minute."

Morwen went over to the second door and opened it. I got a glimpse of a small yard with a square garden, a well, and two more cats. Then the door closed with a swish of black robe. I stared at my mug, wondering how I was going to pick it up without putting my sword down. Then I heard a sniffle. I turned my head. Shiara was not crying. Much.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"It's all my f-fault!" Shiara said miserably. "If you hadn't been with me, you wouldn't have run into that wizard at all, and if I hadn't insisted on hiding that stupid staff, you wouldn't have gotten your hand.. ."Her voice sort of trailed off into snuffles. I sighed.

"If you want my handkerchief, you'll have to get it out yourself," I said. "And it's probably still pretty wet. But you can have it if you want it."

That made Shiara look like she was really going to burst into tears. Fortunately, the witch came back before she could. Morwen was carrying an armload of plants; when she saw Shiara, she put them down on the table and produced a large black handkerchief from somewhere inside her sleeve.

"That is quite enough of that," she said, handing the handkerchief to Shiara. "It does nothing constructive, it makes everyone else feel bad, and it is extremely self-indulgent. Drink your cider; you'll feel much better."

Just then one of the cats made a loud noise, sort of a cross between a purr and a meow. "Good; the gingerbread is done," Morwen said. She got it out of the oven and gave us each a piece. Shiara looked much better by that time, even if she still didn't seem really happy. Morwen put a large pot of water on the stove and then started sorting

42 Patricia C. Wrede

through the plants she had brought in. After a minute, she frowned.

"Two sprays or three?" she muttered. "I suppose I'd better look it up." She put the plants down and went out again. A few seconds later, she came back holding a book;

I saw a roomful of shelves behind her before the door closed.

I blinked. My head didn't feel fuzzy; but I was sure that door had led out to the yard a minute ago. I looked around the room, but there weren't any other doors except the one we'd come in through. Finally I decided to ask. It took me another minute to figure out how to phrase the question.

"Excuse me, Morwen? Would you mind telling me where that door leads?"

Morwen stuck a finger in the book and looked up. "Wherever I want to get to. What good is a door if you can't get somewhere useful by walking through it? Within reason, of course." She went back to the book. I thought about it for a minute. Then I decided not to think about it; I was afraid it was going to make sense.

Instead, I looked at my cider and gingerbread. I was just about ready to put the sword on the floor so I could eat, when Morwen set the book down next to the plants and looked over at me.

"Daystar, you aren't— Oh, of course, you're still hold-

ing the sword. No, don't put it down yet; this will only take a few more minutes." She picked up a handful of plants. "Come here, please, both of you."

I got up and walked over; so did Shiara. Morwen had me stand next to the stove, holding the sword across the front of my chest so that the tip of it rested on the pot of water. Shiara was behind me, with one hand on my right arm just above the dried vine. It took a while before Morwen was satisfied with our positions, but finally she stepped back. "Very good. Stay just like that until I'm finished, please."

She reached inside one of her sleeves and brought out a silver knife. She dipped the knife in the pot of water, then began muttering over the plants she was holding. Immediately, all the cats jumped down onto the floor and formed a half circle around the stove, with Morwen and Shiara and

Talking to Dragons

43

me in the middle. They just sat there with their eyes glowing and only the tips of their tails moving in tiny twitches. Suddenly, there was a sizzling noise from my right; the water was boiling.

Morwen gave a shout. Then she held the plants high over her head and said loudly:

"By the darkness of the stone's heart,  
By the silence of the sea's tears,  
By the whisper of the sky's breath,  
By the dawning of the star's flame,  
Do as I will thee!"

Just as she finished she threw the plants into the boiling water.

There was a big puff of steam from the pot that smelled of herbs and magic and gingerbread, and I sneezed. The steam spread out around me and got thicker. It smelled more and more like herbs and magic and less and less like gingerbread. My right arm started to ache, and my left arm started to tingle. The ache got stronger, but it stayed where it was; the tingle spread. In another second or two I was tingling all over, except for the arm that was aching.

By now the steam was so thick I couldn't see anything, but I could still feel Shiara's hand and the vine Morwen had tied around my arm. For what seemed like a long time, nothing else happened. Then one of the cats yowled. I saw Morwen's hand, the one holding the silver knife, come out of the mist. "In the King's name!" Morwen's voice said, and the knife cut the vine from my arm and pulled away.

My sword flashed once, very brightly. Most of the steam settled on my right arm and turned black. The ache started to creep upward, and something that felt like lightning or wind ran up my left arm and down my right one. I heard

Shiara gasp. The black steam stuff dropped off my arm into a slimy blob on the floor. Finally, my right arm stopped hurting, and my other arm stopped tingling, and everything felt normal again. I let my breath out and looked around.

Morwen was looking in my direction with an expression of extreme distaste. "That," she said, "was an exceptionally

Talking to Dragons 45

r nasty wizard. He deserves what's coming to him."  
| "What's coming to him?" Shiara asked.

"I don't know, but he certainly deserves it," Morwen said. "Anyone who would keep a spell like that in a staff..." She shook her head and looked down. "I do hope it doesn't disagree with the cats."

I followed her gaze. The cats had formed a small mob and were playing with something I'd rather not describe in detail. I looked up again very quickly and took a step backward. I bumped into Shiara and remembered that Morwen had said not to move until she was finished. "I'm sorry," I said to both of them.

"It's quite all right; you can sit down again now," Morwen said. "And if you don't want to put your sword in your sheath, you can lean it against the wall. You won't need it anymore, for the time being, at least."

I followed Morwen's instructions and sat down at the table again. I didn't realize until I reached for the ginger-  
| bread that although my right hand felt better it didn't look  
| any better. I didn't have time to worry about it, though;

t Morwen was already standing by my chair with some oily-  
|| looking salve and bandages. She worked on my hand while  
H I ate gingerbread and cider left-handed. We finished about  
the same time, and I thanked her.

"You're welcome," Morwen said. "Now, perhaps you would explain how you got into such an uncomfortable situation? I have a general idea, but I would appreciate a few details."

I told her about the wizard and the elf, and then Shiara explained how the staff had exploded.

"Of course the staff exploded!" Morwen said severely.  
"That sword doesn't like wizard's staves; nearly everyone knows that, or ought to. Next time, make sure it's sheathed before you touch one."

"I knew it!" Shiara said angrily. "That elf was trying to get Daystar hurt!"

"Not necessarily," Morwen said. "He may simply have been trying to make sure the wizard found you again. If you'd taken the pieces of the staff with you, he would have had no trouble catching up with you once he got himself

46 Patricia C. Wrede

back together, and of course the first thing he'd do would be to look for his staff."

"If that elf wanted the wizard after us, why'd he get rid of the wizard in the first place?" Shiara objected.

"I doubt that he did," Morwen said calmly. "It's really more the sort of thing the sword would do. I wouldn't depend on it in the future, though, particularly since you haven't really learned how to use it yet."

I wanted to ask more questions about the sword, but I was pretty sure Morwen wouldn't answer them if I did. "What if the wizard couldn't find his staff when he came back?" I asked instead.

"Wizards always know where their staffs are. And it's almost impossible to keep wizards away from their staffs for any length of time. One can slow them down a bit by putting the staffs somewhere hard to get at, but they usually manage in the end."

"That's why Mother hid Antorell's staff!" I said.

"I shouldn't wonder," Morwen murmured. "Now, I strongly suggest that you rest for a while, Daystar, and while you are doing so I will talk with Shiara in the library." She stood up and nodded to me.

Shiara frowned and opened her mouth, then looked at me. "All right," she said. She looked as if she wanted to say something else, then changed her mind at the last minute.

Morwen went to the door, followed by Shiara and most of the cats. I saw the room of books again before the door closed behind all of them. I went over to a bench that used to have three cats on it before they went into the library with Morwen, lay down on it, trying to be very careful of my bandaged right hand, and fell asleep almost immediately.

When I woke up, it was late afternoon. I could tell by the way the sunlight slanted in through the windows. There wasn't anyone else in the room, except for the black-and-white cat that had led us to Morwen's house. It was sitting in the middle of the table, washing its tail.

Talking to Dragons

47

"Hello," I said. "And thank you very much for bringing Shiara and me here."

The cat looked up briefly, decided I was uninteresting, and went back to cleaning its tail. I shifted a little; the bench was hard. I wasn't quite ready to sit up and start looking for people yet, though I felt much better. Then the back



door opened--this time it was the door to the yard--and

Morwen came in.

"You're awake; good. Shiara has been waiting for you."  
I sat up just as Morwen saw the cat on the table. She

frowned at it. "Child of Scom," she said sternly, "you are  
not allowed on the table."

The cat looked at Morwen. Morwen looked at the cat.  
After a minute, the cat jumped down to the floor, where it  
did its best to pretend that the floor was exactly where it  
had wanted to be all along. Morwen shook her head.

"You'll have to excuse the Grand Inquisitor; he knows  
he did me a favor when he brought you here, and he's  
inclined to take advantage of it. I would have sent Cass,  
but I was afraid you wouldn't pay attention to her,"

"Cass?"

"Cassandra." Morwen nodded at a small grey cat that I

hadn't noticed come in with her. "She has much better  
manners than Quiz, but she tends to be overlooked. Nobody

overlooks Quiz."

I looked at the cats. They both ignored me. I looked

back at Morwen. "I don't think I've thanked you yet for--  
for fixing my arm." I wasn't really sure what else to call

whatever she'd done.

"Don't thank me until you take the bandages off tomor-  
row," Morwen said. "Time enough for thanks if it's healed  
properly. Not that I have any doubts, mind, but it's better

to be sure."

"All right, I'll wait, then," I said. "Did you say Shiara  
was waiting for me?"

Morwen went over to the stove. "Yes, I did. She's out

by the garden," she said over her shoulder. She reached up  
and lifted a large kettle down from a hook on the wall.

"Thank you," I said. I got up and opened the back door.

48 Patricia C. Wrede

There was a room on the other side, with a bed and a large  
bookshelf and, of course, a cat. I shut the door and tried  
again. This time it was the library. Morwen had more books  
than anyone I'd ever heard of. I shut the door and looked  
back at Morwen.

"How do I get out to the garden?" I asked.

"Through the door," Morwen said without turning. "Just  
be firm; sometimes it's a little contrary with strangers, but

it won't last long."

I turned back, trying to decide how to be firm with a door. I opened it again; it was still the library. I closed it, wondering how long it would take me to get to the garden. I didn't really want to spend the rest of the afternoon opening and shutting Morwen's door, but I couldn't think of any other way of doing it. I sighed and opened the door again.

This time it worked; the door opened onto three steps going down into the yard. I went through it quickly, before it could change its mind. Shiara was sitting on a stone bench by the corner of the house. She looked a lot happier than she had earlier, but all she would say was that she'd been talking to Morwen.

"Morwen's nice," Shiara said. "She's been showing me some things. And she's going to give me a kitten."

"That's nice," I said. Actually, I wasn't sure it would be a good idea to have a pet with us while we wandered around the Enchanted Forest. On the other hand, if it was one of Morwen's cats, it would probably be able to take care of itself.

Shiara and I sat and talked for the rest of the afternoon. I discovered that somehow she and Morwen had decided that we would be spending the night here. Shiara was very pleased about it; evidently Morwen had promised to show her some interesting magic. I wasn't sure we should stay, even though I liked Morwen. It felt a little strange to be staying with someone neither of us had ever met before. I had to admit, though, that it sounded a lot better than trying to sleep out in the open. We were still arguing about it when one of the cats came to bring us in to dinner.

DINNER WAS SOME sort of stew; it didn't look like much, but it smelled and tasted awfully good. Morwen had made a large pot of the stuff. Half of it she put in a big pan and set on the floor for the cats; Shiara and I ate most of the rest of it. By the time we'd finished eating, we had somehow decided to spend the night with Morwen and the cats.

I was a little worried, at first, about what to do with the Sword of the Sleeping King. I didn't want to leave it leaning up against Morwen's wall all night. Finally, I decided to keep it with me. It wasn't that I didn't trust Morwen, but Mother had given the sword to me and it was my responsibility. Once that was settled, I started wondering where Shiara and I were going to sleep.

I shouldn't have worried. Morwen had several extra bedrooms behind her magic door, and she simply put each of us in one of them. By that time I was starting to wonder how many rooms she had in her house and where she kept them all when they weren't needed. That isn't the sort of question you ask people in the Enchanted Forest, though, so I didn't.

Besides, I was tired again. As soon as Morwen showed

me to my room, I stuck the sword under the bed and went

49

50 Patricia C. Wrede

to sleep. I couldn't think of anything else to do with it, but I was pretty sure the sword would be safe. I was right, too. When I woke up in the morning, there was a cat asleep on top of it.

After breakfast, Morwen took the bandages off my hand. The bumps were gone and it felt fine, but she insisted on examining it carefully before she finally decided it was all right. When she was finished with my hand, she helped me get my swordbelt on. The sheath was dry, so I put the sword back in it. While I was doing that, Morwen produced a couple of bundles and a small black kitten with one white paw. She gave Shiara the kitten and one bundle and turned to me.

"This is for you," she said, handing me the other bundle. "It should make your travels a little easier. Now, come outside."

Morwen opened the front door and went out onto the porch. I let Shiara leave next and started to follow her, but one of the cats darted in front of me and I nearly tripped. I had to grab for the doorframe to keep my balance.

"Watch out!" Shiara said, then, "Daystar! What's the matter?"

I almost didn't hear her. I was staring down at my sword. My hand had brushed it when I'd tripped, and I'd felt the tingling again. Only this time there was even more of it. I reached over and took the hilt in my right hand. The rumbling tingle hadn't changed, but the buzzing tingle and the purring tingle were considerably stronger than they had been, and they'd been joined by a brisk vibration I hadn't felt before. I concentrated on the new feeling, trying to figure out where it had come from, and found myself looking at Morwen.

I looked back at the sword. I hadn't let go, and my arm was still tingling. I tried to pick out one of the other vibrations. Suddenly I was feeling mostly the purring tingle and looking out into the woods. I blinked and tried again. This time I got the buzz, and I was staring at Shiara. Suddenly I understood.

"It's magic!" I said.

Talking to Dragons 51

to

"Of course it's magic," Shiara said. "It's supposed to be a magic sword. So what?"

"No, I mean that's what it does," I said. "The Sword of the Sleeping King finds magic!"

"Among other things," Morwen said in a satisfied voice.

"Finds magic?" Shiara said skeptically.

"That's what the tingling is," I said. I was completely sure of myself, though I didn't know why. "Different tingles mean different kinds of magic, and the tingles get stronger when the sword gets closer to the magic." I looked at Shiara. "No wonder it gave me such a jolt when we both touched it at the same time."

Shiara had been reaching for the hilt, but she pulled her hand back hastily. "If the sword finds magic, how come I couldn't feel anything until you touched it? And if the tingles are the way it finds things, why can't you feel them all the time?"

"I don't know," I said. The tingling was fading again, the same way it had when I'd held on to the sword before, so I let go of the hilt.

Morwen was considering me through her glasses; I couldn't tell what she was thinking from her expression. Finally she nodded very slightly. "I see. There is considerably more to you than I had thought, Daystar," she said in a thoughtful tone.

I was still trying to figure out what that statement meant when Morwen turned away. "However, it is time for you to be going," she went on briskly. "I suggest that you head north. You see those two trees? Walk straight between them and keep going until you get to a stream; then follow the stream. You'll get to something eventually, and you should be able to figure out what to do from there."

My eyes turned in the direction Morwen was pointing. It was the same way I'd been looking when I'd been concentrating on the purring tingle from the sword. I looked back at Morwen.

"Exactly," Morwen said.

"What?" said Shiara.

"Let's go," I said. I was feeling a little unsettled by the

52 Patricia C. Wrede

whole thing, and I didn't want to talk about it anymore. Shiara scowled at me, but she didn't insist on an explanation right then.

We said good-bye and thank you to Morwen and started walking toward the trees. Shiara carried the kitten for a while, but pretty soon the kitten decided it wanted to walk. We slowed down a lot after that, until the kitten got tired enough to let Shiara pick it up again without scratching her.

Shiara and I spent most of the walk talking. I hadn't realized how little she knew about the Enchanted Forest,

and I wound up telling her a lot of things. Like explaining about being polite to people, and why you shouldn't promise things without knowing what they are first.

Morwen hadn't told us how far away the stream was, and eventually I started wondering when we were going to get to it. I was also curious about where we were going. I was thinking about that when I noticed that the trees we were walking past were larger than the ones I'd seen the previous day. At least, I thought they were larger. I studied them as we walked, trying to decide whether it was my imagination or whether they really were larger. I was just getting ready to mention it to Shiara, when I heard a cough. I stopped and looked around.

"Ahem," said a voice.

This time I located the speaker. It was the little gold lizard, Suz. He was sitting on a branch at just about eye level, watching me.

"Oh, hello, Suz," I said. Shiara was looking around; I nodded toward the lizard and said, "Shiara, this is Suz. You remember, I told you about him. Suz, this is my friend, Shiara."

The lizard ignored the introduction and continued staring at me. "Why," he demanded in an aggrieved tone, "didn't you tell me Cimorene was your mother?"

"You didn't ask," I said.

Suz looked at me reproachfully. "It would have saved me a great deal of trouble if you'd mentioned it," he said severely.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know it mattered."

Talking to Dragons 53

"You didn't?" Suz ran down the branch and peered at me. "No, you really didn't! How amazing. I can't understand how it happened."

"What are you talking about?" Shiara said.

The lizard appeared to see her for the first time. He leaned outward in Shiara's direction and I thought he was going to fall off, until I saw that his tail was wrapped tightly around a sturdy twig on the far side of the branch. "You've brought someone with you? Dear me, this will never do. Who is this?"

"I've already introduced you once," I reminded him. "You weren't listening."

"You did? Yes, of course, you did. How perfectly dreadful." Suz ran around the branch very fast, and for a minute I was afraid he was going to try and stand on his tail. I was sure he'd fall off if he did; the branch wasn't very wide.

"What's so dreadful?" Shiara demanded. "There's nothing wrong with me."

"No, of course there isn't. Oh, dear, Kazul will be terribly unhappy about this."

"Who is Kazul?" I asked.

Suz looked at me in astonishment. "You don't know? No, you don't. I haven't told you yet. Kazul is who you're going to see." He cocked his head to one side as if that explained everything.

"Why should I want to see Kazul?" I said. "And why should he care about me, or Shiara, or anything?"

"She," Suz said. "And of course you want to see her. You have the Sword of the Sleeping King, don't you? I'm afraid she'll be dreadfully upset if you bring someone with you, though."

"Well, I'm not going to leave Shiara alone in the middle of the Enchanted Forest," I said firmly.

"No, no, you couldn't possibly do that," the lizard agreed. "That wouldn't be right at all. Dear me, whatever are we going to do?"

"You don't have to worry about me," Shiara said indignantly. "I'm a fire-witch; I can take care of myself."

"You are?" Suz turned his head and looked at Shiara so

54 Patricia C. Wrede

intently that his eyes crossed. "You really are! How convenient! Everything's quite all right, then; Kazul won't mind a fire-witch at all."

"Who," I said very slowly and carefully, "is Kazul?"

The lizard stared thoughtfully at me for a long time. "I don't think I ought to tell you any more," he said finally. "You're quite safe, you really are, but it wouldn't do at all for Kazul to lose her temper with me. Oh, dear, no."

"Quite safe? In the middle of the Enchanted Forest, with wizards after us?" Shiara said sarcastically. "You're crazy."

"I am? No, I'm not at all! How very rude." He turned his back, looking extremely offended. Shiara stared at him. As I said, an offended lizard is an interesting sight.

I sighed. "Shiara."

Shiara looked at me. I just stood there. After a minute, she looked down. "Well, it is dangerous to be out here, even if you do have that stupid sword," she said defensively. "What's wrong with saying so?"

"It wasn't very polite," I said. "And you promised you'd try."

Shiara glanced up at me, then sighed. "Oh, all right. I'm sorry, Suz."

The lizard twisted his head around and looked at Shiara for a minute. "You are?" He ran around the branch again and wound up peering at her upside down from underneath the limb. "No, you're not at all. How disappointing. I accept." He ran back up on top of the branch.

"Accept?" Shiara said.

"Your apology," the lizard said with dignity. A dignified lizard looks even odder than an offended one.

"Oh." Shiara looked at Suz doubtfully.

"If you won't tell us who Kazul is, will you at least tell us how to find her?" I said hastily. I didn't want Shiara to say anything that would offend Suz again, and she looked like she was going to. Besides, I was curious.

"You won't have any trouble," the lizard assured me.

"Just head for the castle. Kazul will—" He broke off in midsentence, staring at the kitten Shiara was holding. "What is that?" he asked disapprovingly.

Talking to Dragons 55

"A kitten, of course," Shiara said.

"You're sure it's under control?" Suz seemed a little nervous. I looked at the kitten. It was watching Suz with a great deal of interest.

"What do you mean, under control?" Shiara said. "She's a perfectly well-behaved kitten. Morwen wouldn't have given her to me if she wasn't."

"Cats are not— Did you say Morwen?" Suz peered at Shiara.

"Yes, I said Morwen. Can't you finish a sentence?"

Suz ignored her. "You've been to see Morwen? I didn't know that. Oh, dear me, I must be dreadfully behind. Why, all sorts of things could be happening that I don't know about! How perfectly dreadful. I must really get back to work at once. Oh, yes, indeed I must."

The lizard ran down the branch and disappeared behind the tree trunk. "Wait a minute!" I said. I ducked around the back of the tree, but Suz was nowhere in sight. I shook my head and went back to where Shiara was standing.

"He's gone again," I said. "And he still didn't tell me what castle he's talking about."

"So what? Nobody else has been telling us anything either." Shiara glared at the branch where Suz had been sitting. "I don't think he's very polite. He didn't even say good-bye."

"He keeps going off like that," I said. "I think that's just how he is."

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry he left," Shiara said. "Come

on, let's find that stream Morwen was talking about. I'm getting thirsty."

We started walking again. Shiara put the kitten down, and we took turns keeping an eye on it as we walked. It had a marvelous time, jumping on leaves and attacking bushes while Shiara and I talked about what Shiara was going to name it. Finally she decided on Nightwitch. I didn't think that was a very good name, but Shiara liked it, so I didn't say anything.

By the time we found the stream, Shiara and I were tired and hungry as well as thirsty, so we decided to stop. We

56 Patricia C. Wrede

each took a drink; then we sat down and opened the bundle Morwen had given me. Just as I had expected, there was a packet of food right on top—meat pies and apples and gingerbread. Shiara and I each ate some, and we gave one of the meat pies to Nightwitch. There was some left over, so we wrapped it up and put it back in my bundle before we started off down the stream.

We tried to stay close to the bank most of the time. It's easy to get lost in the Enchanted Forest, especially if you don't really know where you're going. If we got out of sight of the stream, we might never find it again.

In a couple of places the trees grew in thick clumps, right up to the water's edge, and we had to choose between wading and going around. I didn't like the dark look of the forest near the tree clumps, and the water was only ankle deep, so we waded. Nightwitch did not approve of it at all.

The forest got darker as we went along. I was sure, now, that the trees were bigger, and they were certainly closer together even when they weren't growing in tight clumps. We spent more and more time in the stream, but the water wasn't very cold, and the pebbles on the bottom were smooth, so it wasn't particularly unpleasant. Even so, I was glad when the woods started to open up again. Then I saw the clearing a little ahead of us. A minute later, I saw the person sitting in it.

She was a Princess. She had to be. Her hair was long and golden and not tangled at all, and her eyes were very blue, and her skin was very white, and she was very, very beautiful. One dainty foot was peeping out from under her blue silk gown. Her hands were folded in her lap, and she was looking at them with a sad expression.

Shiara poked me. I realized that I was standing in a stream with my shoes in one hand and Morwen's bundle in the other and my mouth hanging open. I swallowed and waded over to the bank. I wanted to put my shoes back on before we got any closer. I had seen at least two Princesses before, that I knew of, but both of them were enchanted and didn't look at all like their usual selves when I met them. When

Talking to Dragons

57



I finished with my shoes, the Princess was looking in our direction.

I stood up hastily and hurried toward her. Shiara followed. When I was within speaking distance, I stopped and bowed. The Princess smiled sadly.

"I bid you such poor welcome as I may," she said in a musical voice. "Alas! That I can offer you no refreshment. For I am in great distress."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I fear not," said the Princess. "For you are yet a youth. Alas, and woe is me! For I am in great distress."

"All right; so tell us about it," Shiara said. She sat down on the ground and looked at the Princess expectantly. I frowned at her; I didn't think that was the proper way to address a Princess, though I wasn't positive. Mother had taught me a lot more about dragons than she had about Princesses.

"You are kind to inquire of my sad tale," the Princess said. "It is not long to tell. My father was a King, much beloved of his people, and I his only daughter. Being lonely after my mother's death, my father remarried to a woman comely but proud, and under her influence have I suffered these seven years. And now the King my father is dead, and my stepmother hath cast me out, to wander alone and friendless through the world. Alas! For I am—"

"In great distress; you said that before," Shiara said. "Why didn't you throw her out when your father died? It would have saved you a lot of trouble."

The Princess's blue eyes filled with tears and she bowed her head. "'Twas not within my power to work harm against her, alas. And now I seek some Prince or hero who will take pity on my destitute state and return me to my proper place. Woe is me! That I should be without help in such distress."

"Sounds like a lousy excuse to me," Shiara muttered under her breath. Fortunately, the Princess didn't hear.

"I'm afraid we can't help you get your kingdom back," I said. "I'm very sorry. But if there's any other service I

58 Patricia C. Wrede

can do for you, I'd be happy to try."

"Daystar!" Shiara's voice was horrified, and suddenly I realized what I'd said. I swallowed. At least I'd only promised to try.

"There is one thing," the Princess said. She raised her head, and her eyes were very bright. I went cold. The Princess smiled sweetly.

"Give me your sword," she said.

I STARED AT the Princess. Then I shut my mouth and swallowed again, hard. Mother wasn't going to like this at all. I was just about to draw the sword and give it to her, when Shiara said, "Wait a minute, Daystar."

I stopped and looked at her. She looked at the Princess. "Daystar hasn't got a sword."

"What?" the Princess and I said at the same time. The Princess frowned. "I am not blind, to be so easily deceived. See, there it is." She pointed to my scabbard.

"That," said Shiara triumphantly, "is the Sword of the Sleeping King. So it belongs to him, not to Daystar, and Daystar can't give it away."

The Princess looked very puzzled. I thought for a minute. Shiara was right, but she was wrong, too. I mean, it was obvious what the Princess had meant, even if she hadn't said it right. I sighed and reached for the hilt.

Shiara turned on me. "Daystar, what are you doing?"

"Giving her the sword," I said, tugging at it. The sword wouldn't come out of the sheath. "You know as well as I do what she meant."

"Well, if all those wizards and sorceresses can be picky about the way people say things, why can't you?" Shiara

59

60 Patricia C. Wrede

was so mad I expected her hair to start burning any minute. "You can't even get it out of the sheath! You only said you'd try to do what she wanted; well, you've tried. Isn't that enough yet?"

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Shiara, but it's my sword, and I'm not a wizard. I just have to do it."

"Daystar, you... you..." Shiara gave up and just glared.

I tugged at the sword again; Shiara turned her back. The Princess was still looking puzzled. I shook my head and unbuckled the whole swordbelt. I looked at it for a minute, then held it out toward the Princess. "Here," I said. "Take it." My voice seemed very loud, and I realized that the woods had gotten very quiet. The Princess smiled and took hold of the scabbard. I let go of the sword.

There was a rumbling noise, and the Princess said, "Oh!" very loudly and dropped the swordbelt. The point of the scabbard hit the ground, and there was another rumble, and an enormous geyser of water shot up into the air.

I saw the Princess cringe and Shiara fall backward. Then I couldn't see anything but white spray. A voice said, "All

hail the Holder of the Sword!" The words echoed hollowly around me as the fountain vanished.

Shiara and the Princess were both staring at me, wide-eyed. All of us were dripping. The sword was standing upright in front of me, in the middle of a pool of water about four feet across. It was about halfway out of the sheath, and the blade shimmered in the sun. The Princess burst into tears.

"I knew not that this weapon was of such potency," she said between sobs. "Alas! For I cannot hold the sword, and who now will be my help? Alas, and woe is me!"

"You mean you don't want the sword anymore?" Shiara demanded.

The Princess nodded. She was weeping too hard to say much.

"And Daystar can have it back now?"

The Princess nodded again. She was still weeping. I sighed and dug out my handkerchief. It was wet. I squeezed it out and offered it to the Princess anyway. She took it without thanking me and cried some more.

Talking to Dragons

61

"What am I to do?" she kept saying. "Who now will be my help? Alas! For I am in great distress!"

"Oh, help yourself," Shiara said crossly. "Daystar, are you going to take that stupid sword?"

I hesitated; then I reached out and took hold of the hilt. The blade flashed once, and a brief shock ran through me as the hilt came to rest. I ignored the feeling and took hold of the scabbard. It came free almost at once. The water closed silently behind it. I took a closer look at the bottom part of the sheath; I wasn't even surprised when I saw that it wasn't wet.

I looked up. The Princess had just about stopped crying. I looked at the sword. Then I looked back at the Princess. "Are you sure you don't want this?" I said finally.

"Daystar!" Shiara sounded like she wasn't sure whether to be mad or horrified.

The Princess didn't seem to hear her at all. "I cannot take it!" she cried. "Oh, indeed, I cannot! Alas! That I am so helpless in my time of need!"

"Well, if you didn't want the sword, why did you ask for it in the first place?" Shiara said angrily.

"I fear I have deceived you," the Princess said tragically. "Yet I myself have been misled. Alas! I beg of you, forgive me! For indeed, I am, I am in great distress."

"Distress? Ha!" said Shiara. "You better tell us the truth, right now, or you'll find out what distress is."

"Shiara—" I began.

Shiara turned. "You shut up. You obviously don't know anything about handling Princesses, so let me do it. Now," she said to the Princess, "explain. And it better be good."

"I am a King's daughter," the Princess said. "My father would have me wed the Prince of a neighboring kingdom, to bring us wealth. Yet I could not, for I do not love him, but another. My father listened not, for all my pleading, so my love and I fled into the forest. We wandered far, and great was our suffering, yet were we happy, for we had each other. But I, being unused to travel, became tired, and my love at last set me here and bid me wait for him. And here have I stayed these two long days, and I fear me some evil may have befallen him. Alas! That we are parted!"

62 Patricia C. Wrede

"What," said Shiara, "does all this have to do with Daystar's sword?"

The Princess sighed again. "I was seated here, as you see me, bewailing my bitter fate, when lo! A man appeared, most wise and powerful of aspect. He told me my love was imprisoned by a mighty sorceress, and at that news I wept bitterly. Then he bade me desist from my grief, for the means of delivering my love was at hand, to wit, a sword most magical. And he himself made promise of aid, if I would but attain the sword. And this have I attempted, and I have failed. Alas, and woe is me!"

"I don't think I understand," I said. "Why didn't you tell us this to begin with?"

The Princess began to weep again. "My unknown friend instructed me in what I was to say; and told me that all would be well once I had the sword in my own hands. And in this he deceived me, for the touch of the sword bums so that I cannot hold it. And the cause is that I deceived you, and tricked you into offering me the sword, and the sword knew, and it will not abide in my hand, and now am I utterly without hope."

"What did this person look like?" Shiara asked unsympathetically. "The one you were going to give the sword to."

The Princess seemed a lot more interested in explaining how wise and powerful and helpful the man had been than she was in giving a simple description, but eventually we managed to get some idea what he looked like. Tall, dark-haired, blue eyes, and carrying a staff....

"It sounds a lot like Antorell," I said finally.

"AntoreU?" Shiara said.

"That wizard I told you about, that Mother melted. He must be back; she said he might try to make trouble for me

in a day or two."

"Oh, great. All we need is another wizard looking for us."

The Princess didn't seem to be following the conversation at all. "Alas!" she said finally. "There is nothing left for me but grief; I have no means now to save my love, so I

Talking to Dragons

63

shall die with him. I shall fling myself in yonder stream and make an end."

"You are even dumber than Daystar," Shiara informed her. "That stream isn't deep enough to drown in; you'll only get wet. Besides, if that stupid wizard lied about the sword, how do you know he didn't lie about your love? Who is this person you ran off with, anyway?"

"He is a knight," the Princess said, her eyes lighting up. "Poor in goods, yet rich in spirit, of most pleasing aspect. His eyes are a hawk's, his arms are mighty, and his sword is bright and—"

"He sounds like he can take care of himself," Shiara said. "I don't think you have to worry about him."

Shiara's words had a marvelous effect on the Princess. "Truly, you believe this?" she said, and her face lit up even more. "Then here will I abide his coming, for surely he will return to me. Ah, joy! That we shall soon be once more together!"

Shiara looked disgusted. "I'm sure you'll be very happy. Come on, Daystar, let's go." She stood up.

"I don't think we should leave her here by herself," I said.

"Daystar, you're impossible!" Shiara was still mad. "She tried to trick you! Besides, she's been here two days already, and nothing's happened to her yet."

"Alas! I did indeed attempt to deceive you," the Princess said. "And for that I beg forgiveness. Yet consider my unhappy plight, and be not harsh with me."

"Oh, shut up," Shiara told her.

"What if Antorell comes back?" I said. "Somebody ought to take care of her. Besides, I made a promise."

"Well, I didn't!" Shiara said. "And I'm not going to sit here doing nothing just because of a stupid Princess! I'm leaving."

"You can't do that!" I said. I was really upset. Shiara didn't know very much about the Enchanted Forest, and she was going to go tramping off into the middle of it with no one but Morwen's kitten. I couldn't let her do that, but I couldn't leave the Princess sitting there alone, either.

64 Patricia C. Wrede

"Want to bet?" Shiara said. She picked up the bundle Morwen had given her. "Come on, Nightwitch. Let's go."

"Nightwitch? What an unusual name for a cat," said a new voice.

Shiara stopped and both of us turned. An old man was standing at the edge of the clearing, in front of a large, scruffy clump of bushes. His beard and what was left of his hair were quite white, and he was stooped over and leaning on a staff. Even without the way my skin prickled, I knew he was a wizard.

The Princess was the first to recover from the surprise of seeing him there. "Ah, sir, have pity on my sad state!" she said. "Have pity, and if you have seen a knight, bright-armored, hawk-eyed, most fair and pleasing in speech and semblance, then tell me speedily where he may be found. For he is my love, and we are parted, and thus am I in great distress! Alas!"

"That's quite all right, my dear," the wizard said in a kindly tone. "You've nothing to worry about. In fact, he should be here before very much longer; that's why I hurried. Just sit there and wait quietly, like a good girl."

"Oh, joy! Oh, bliss!" said the Princess rapturously. 'To be with my love again!' She started happily explaining how strong and handsome and generally wonderful her missing knight was. Since she didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular, the rest of us ignored her.

Shiara, Nightwitch, and I were edging backward. I had my right hand on the hilt of my sword, and my whole side was tingling with the feel of the wizard's magic. The wizard noticed us and smiled.

"Take your hand from your sword," he said, looking at me. "I am not here to engage in a vulgar physical contest with you."

"Are you from the Society of Wizards?" Shiara demanded. Her voice sounded a little shaky, but I don't think anyone who didn't know her would have noticed.

"No," the wizard said. "Why? Are you looking for one of them?"

"Then why are you here?" I said.

"Why, to assist you," the wizard said.

••Wfwstsiiy"- •

Talking to Dragons

65

"Assist us?" Shiara said. "But you're a wizard!"

"I am not at all concerned with your baseless prejudices," the wizard told her. "I have come to offer to help your companion, and I will thank you to cease interfering."

I stared at him. "I don't want to be impolite," I said before Shiara could say anything else, "but why do you want to help me?"

"Why, because you deserve it, of course," the wizard said. "You made a foolish promise to this other young lady," he went on, nodding toward the Princess, who was still talking to the air. "You could have gotten out of it several times, but you refused to behave dishonorably. I think that is deserving of a reward."

"Thank you very much," I said. I didn't really know what else to say. After all, there are people in the Enchanted Forest who go around rewarding heroes and Princes for noble deeds; why else would all those people come here?

"Well, what would you like?" the wizard said after a moment.

"Like?"

"As a reward." He sounded a little impatient.

I thought about it for a moment. "I appreciate the offer," I said finally. "But I really don't need anything. Thank you very much all the same."

"What? Isn't there anything you want?" he asked sharply. He didn't look nearly as friendly as he had at first.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

For a moment the wizard looked very disconcerted. Then he seemed to relax a little. "Perhaps I did not make myself clear enough," he said. "You need not ask for something material; information will do just as well. The word for sorcery in the tongue of the giants, or the location of the Well of Silver Storms where the unicorns drink. There must be something you want to know, even if there is nothing you want to have."

The only thing I wanted to know was what I was supposed to do in the Enchanted Forest. Somehow, I didn't think Mother had told him. "No," I said. "I don't think there is anything."

The wizard looked at me, and his eyes narrowed. "Come,

66 Patricia C. Wrede

come! You need to know the name of your father, do you not?"

"No," I said, puzzled. I'd never been particularly interested in knowing my father's name; I mean, he wasn't around, so what difference did it make? Mother would have told me if she'd thought I ought to know. And I certainly couldn't think of any reason why I needed to know. "Why should I?"

"You're looking for him, aren't you?" the wizard snapped.

"No, not really." That might be one of the things Mother wanted me to do, but it certainly couldn't be all of it. Furthermore, I couldn't see how knowing his name would help much, even if I were looking for him. In the Enchanted Forest, looking for someone usually isn't the best way of finding him. You're much more likely to run into people by accident.

"You aren't? Then you must know! She told you! Who is it?"

"I thought you were going to tell Daystar that," Shiara said. "Don't you know?"

"Silence, fool! I have waited too long for this." The wizard turned back to me. "You will tell me now, or regret it deeply: Who is your father?"

"I don't know," I said. "And if I did, I don't see why I should tell you."

"There are other ways of learning what I wish to know," the wizard said. He straightened abruptly. The Princess squeaked and fell silent. Nightwitch hissed. Shiara started edging backward again. And the wizard changed.

He got a little taller and a lot younger; his beard melted away and his hair darkened and filled in. His eyes changed from brown to blue, but they still glared. "Antorell!" I said, and drew my sword.

The steel rang as it came out of the sheath, and the blade shimmered and flashed in front of me. It made the whole clearing seem brighter. Antorell's lips curled into a sneer.

"Fool! What use is a sword against a wizard?"

He raised his staff, and a globe of green light appeared

Talking to Dragons 67

at the lower end of it. A thread of green, dark and bright as the shine of a snake, reached out toward me from the staff. I raised the sword.

The green light touched the Sword of the Sleeping King. The sword hummed a little and the ray of light vanished, and that was all. Antorell frowned, and another, larger ray of green reached out. This time, the humming was a little louder, and the light around the end of Antorell's staff vanished along with the ray touching the sword. The jangling feeling lessened a little. I was considerably relieved;

Antorell looked shocked.

"You cannot! Not possibly! That sword can't..." His eyes moved to my face, then back to the sword, and he took a deep breath. "So! She must have known all along. But now I will have that weapon. I must have that weapon!"

"No," I said. "Mother wouldn't like it."

Antorell's eyes narrowed. "Cimorene has had her way



long enough. If you will not give me that sword, I will take it." He started to raise the staff again.

The bushes behind Antorell rustled noisily, and the wizard shifted. "You, there!" he called over his shoulder. "Show yourself at once!"

"Ach- Ach-" said someone behind him, and the bushes rustled again. Antorell frowned and turned around, raising his staff. "I will teach you to interfere--"

The angry look on Antorell's face changed abruptly to one of mingled surprise and fear. He stepped backward very quickly and waved his staff through the air in front of him.

"Achooo!" said the voice, and a large ball of fire demolished the bush and enveloped Antorell. The wizard screamed and disappeared, and we could see the person who had been behind the bush.

It was a dragon.

IT WAS ABOUT twelve feet tall, which is not very large as dragons go. But it was definitely a dragon. It sneezed again, which took care of the remains of the bush, and slid forward over the ashes into the middle of the clearing. The Princess fainted.

I started trying to put my sword away. Walking through the Enchanted Forest with a drawn sword is bad, but talking to a dragon with a sword in your hand is much worse. Fortunately, the dragon didn't seem to have noticed it yet. As soon as the sword was sheathed, I looked up again, and my stomach went hollow.

The dragon was eyeing Shiara, and I didn't like the gleam in its eyes. I didn't like the militant way Shiara was glaring back, either. There wasn't very much I could do, though;

you just don't interrupt a dragon when it's busy with something else. They don't like being distracted.

The dragon slid closer and bent its head until it was staring at Shiara from about a foot in front of her face. Shiara jumped. The dragon blinked.

"Are you a Princess?" it asked hopefully.

"No. I'm a fire-witch," Shiara said. "And if you bite me, I'll bum your nose off."

69

70 Patricia C. Wrede

"Oh. I thought you were a Princess." The dragon lost interest in Shiara. It looked around the clearing again and saw me. Its head moved over in my direction.

I bowed. "Sir or madam," I said, trying to recall all the proper ways of addressing a dragon, "I offer you greetings

in the name of myself and my companions, and I wish you good fortune in all your endeavors."

"I beg your pardon?" said the dragon. Its voice reminded me of one of those wooden wind instruments, the deep kind that you have to stand on a chair to play. It eyed me doubtfully. "Are you a Princess?"

"I..." I stopped and stared. Dragons just don't beg people's pardon. Then I realized that this must be a very young dragon, and I relaxed a little. Dragons don't usually insist on formality until they get old enough to decide which sex they're going to be. "I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I'm not a Princess. My name is Daystar; I'm very pleased to meet you."

The dragon sat back. "I had no idea Princesses were so hard to find." It blinked and seemed to look at me for the first time. "I'm sorry I burned your bush, but I couldn't help it."

"Oh, please don't worry about it," I said. "It really doesn't matter in the least."

"It was the wizard," the dragon said confidentially. "I'm allergic to them. All dragons are."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

The dragon looked at me, "You're very polite, Daystar." Its head swiveled back toward Shiara. "Say! You weren't polite at all!"

Nightwitch poked her head out from behind Shiara's ankle and hissed. The dragon started and then peered down at the kitten. "You aren't polite, either," it said.

I nudged Shiara. "Offer to do something for him," I hissed.

"What? Why?"

"If you insult a dragon, you have to do him a favor," I said. "Hurry up!" If she didn't say something quickly, the dragon would probably eat both of us. Unfortunately, the dragon might eat Shiara anyway; the favor most dragons

Talking to Dragons 71

want is dinner. I couldn't tell Shiara that, though, without offending the dragon. I started wondering whether I could talk the dragon out of eating us. I didn't think so; dragons are stubborn.

The dragon's eyes glittered. Shiara looked at it. "Can I do anything for you?" she said finally. She sounded a little sullen, but dragons aren't very good at tone of voice. Besides, it's the offer that counts.

"Find me a Princess," the dragon said promptly.

I breathed a very quiet sigh of relief. I didn't think there was a polite way to kill a dragon, and I hadn't been able

to think of any other way of stopping it from eating Shiara and me if it wanted to. It was nice to know I wouldn't have to, try.

"You want a Princess?" Shiara looked thoughtful. "Why?"

"Dragons are supposed to have Princesses," the dragon explained. "I can't be considered a proper dragon until I have one. But I've been looking for two days, and I haven't seen even a smell of a Princess, and I'm tired of it. So you do it."

"You aren't going to eat her or anything, are you?" Shiara said.

"Eat her?" the dragon sounded horrified. "And waste a perfectly good Princess? Of course not! There aren't enough of them to go around as it is! What kind of barbarian do you think I am?"

"Well, I've never met a dragon before," Shiara said. "How was I supposed to know? I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"All right," said the dragon. "But you have to get me a Princess. It doesn't have to be a large one."

"Do you want any particular kind of Princess?" Shiara asked. "I want to be sure you'll be satisfied."

"Oh, young and beautiful, of course," the dragon said. "Are there other kinds?"

"There are enchanted Princesses," Shiara pointed out. "Especially around here."

"That's right. Say, maybe that's why I haven't been able to find one!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Shiara said. "But will you

Patricia C. Wrede

72

take an enchanted Princess?"

The dragon thought for a minute. "No, I don't think so. Spells make things too complicated."

"And does it matter how long it takes me to find her?" Shiara went on.

The dragon considered. "I don't want to wait too long, but I really don't want to be unreasonable, either. How about a week? You bring the Princess here by a week from today, otherwise you owe me another favor." It licked its lips with a long red tongue.

"That sounds reasonable," Shiara said. "But what if I'm early?"

Suddenly I realized what Shiara was planning to do. I started edging around the clearing, toward where the Prin-

cess was lying. I wasn't quite fast enough.

"The earlier the better," the dragon said.

"Then, there's your Princess!" Shiara said, and pointed.

"My, you do work fast," the dragon said. It turned and looked at the Princess. "She's certainly beautiful enough, but are you sure she isn't enchanted?"

"I'm quite sure," Shiara said.

"Then why is she asleep in the middle of the day? I didn't think Princesses were nocturnal creatures."

"She just fainted when she saw you," Shiara said reassuringly. "It's nothing to worry about; it happens to Princesses all the time. Will she do?"

"Quite well." The dragon nodded. "You're very prompt. Thank you very much."

Shiara nodded. I waited until the dragon turned away; then I frowned at Shiara.

"Why did you do that?" I whispered. "That was a terrible thing to do!"

"Would you rather I got eaten?" Shiara whispered back. "She won't get eaten; the dragon said so. And I bet it won't want her for long. Dragons are smarter than some people."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I looked back at the dragon. It was bending its head to inspect the Princess more closely, and I tried to decide what I ought to do. Just at that moment, the Princess opened her eyes. She gave a small scream, and the dragon frowned.

Talking to Dragons 73

"You don't have to be frightened," it said. "Really. You're my Princess now, and I'm going to take proper care of you, and you can clean my scales and cook for me. I believe that's the standard arrangement."

The Princess burst into tears. The dragon pulled back, eyeing her uncomfortably. "Did I say something wrong?"

The Princess just cried harder. "Alas! Ah, woe is me! So recently was I happy, awaiting the coming of my love to rescue me from this dismal forest! And now am I a prisoner of a monster, and when my love arrives he will be eaten by this awful beast, and I abandoned to my fate! Alas, that I should come to this!"

The dragon looked considerably taken aback. It turned to Shiara and me. "This is a Princess?"

"Yes, she is," I said. Shiara nodded, too.

The Princess had heard the question also and she raised her head. "Indeed, I am a Princess, and the daughter of a King, and see to what misery I have been brought!" she

said tragically. "Alas, the day I left my father's house! Yet would I flee again, and endure with patience all the trials and woes which have come upon me, only to be with my love once more!" ,.

The dragon backed up a pace. "Are you sure this is a Princess?" he asked.

"Alas! Now even my birth is doubted, and to whom shall I turn in my distress? Ah, pity my sad state! For I am alone and friendless, and parted from my love. Ah, woe! That ever I let him leave my side. For he is mighty among men, most brave and fearsome in battle, and of a fair and pleasing appearance in all things, and he would not leave me thus, did he but know my fate." She went back to crying.

"If this is a Princess, I'm not sure I want one," the dragon said. It looked at the Princess speculatively. "Maybe I could eat her, instead."

"Ah, help!" said the Princess.

"I really don't think you should eat her," I said. "After all, you did say you wouldn't."

"That's right, I did," the dragon said. It looked at the Princess, who was crying again, and sighed. "Nobody told me Princesses were like this," it said in an aggrieved tone.

Patricia C. Wrede

"And who is this love she keeps talking about?"

"We haven't met him yet, I'm afraid," I said. "She says he's a knight that she ran away with because her father wanted her to marry someone else." I was still trying to figure out what to do about the Princess and the dragon.

"A knight?" The dragon backed up a little farther. "I don't think I'm ready for knights yet. They're so unpredictable. I don't suppose you could find me a Princess without a knight?"

"All really good Princesses have knights," Shiara said firmly. "And you wouldn't want a second-rate Princess, would you?"

"All of them?" the dragon asked plaintively.

"Well, not all of them," I said. "Some of them have Princes instead."

"Princes are much worse than knights," Shiara said thoughtfully. "They tend to have magic rings and sorceresses for godmothers and things like that. With knights you only have to worry about their armor and weapons, and maybe once in a while an enchanted sword."

"My love has no need of magic!" the Princess broke in indignantly. "For he is most strong and skilled, and never has he been beaten in combat with sword or spear. Woe! That he is no longer at my side!"

"I don't think I like the sound of this," the dragon said uneasily. "Maybe if I just—"

There was a loud crashing sound, and a rather tinny-sounding voice said, "What ho! A dragon?"

The Princess stopped crying very suddenly and sat up quite straight. "Hark! My love approaches! Now shall you see his prowess for yourselves!"

There were more crashing noises. The dragon backed up a little more, looking nervous. A moment later a knight in a somewhat dented suit of armor fell through the middle of the thickest clump of bushes, right in front of the dragon.

"On guard, monster!" the knight said as he picked himself up. "Prepare to die!" He pulled out a sword and waved it at the dragon. Well, actually, he waved it a couple of feet to one side; his helmet had slipped a little, and evidently

Talking to Dragons 75

he couldn't see very well. The dragon looked at him, and then back at Shiara.

"This is a knight?" it said.

"My love is the bravest of knights!" the Princess cried.

"If this is a knight, maybe I can handle him after all," the dragon said. "He doesn't look so bad."

"Ah, hideous reptile! No longer do I fear you, for my love will defend me! Yea, he will defend me even unto death!"

"Now, wait a minute, Isabelle," the knight said. He pulled off his helmet, looked at it disgustedly, and threw it on the ground behind him. "I'm perfectly willing to kill dragons for you, but who said anything about dying?"

"You are my knight, and my brave love!" the Princess said dramatically. "Oh, save me from this awful monster, who would carry me off and eat me!" She sprang up and threw her arms around the knight.

"It's going to be a bit difficult for me to save you if you hang about my neck like that," the knight said apologetically. "It's quite awkward. If you'll just sit down, I can see about doing this properly."

The Princess only hung on to him more tightly, which made his aim almost as bad as it had been when he was wearing his helmet crooked. The dragon was watching them closely, and its eyes were starting to glow. "You certainly aren't very polite," it said.

"My love is the soul of courtesy!" the Princess said from behind the knight. "For he is a knight most gentle and well spoken, much given to—"

"I say, Isabelle, must you go on like that?" the knight said. "It's rather embarrassing. Do, please, sit down and

let me fight the dragon. Then you won't have to worry about being eaten, you know."

The Princess gave a small scream. "Alas!" she said in a quavery voice. "Behold my sad state! For now must I watch a bloody battle, and perhaps see my love slain before my eyes, and become a captive of this monster."

"This is ridiculous," said Shiara, and before I could stop her she marched over to stand between the dragon and the

Talking to Dragons

77

knight. I followed her, hoping I could get her out of trouble if I had to.

"Ah, save me!" the Princess said as we got closer. I wasn't sure whether she wanted to be saved from the dragon or from Shiara. Shiara glared at her.

"You shut up," she told the Princess. "You've caused enough trouble already."

"I say," said the knight. "If we're going to discuss politeness ..."

"We aren't," said Shiara. "We're going to discuss battles. Battles between dragons and knights. Why do you want to fight this dragon?"

"Knights are sworn to do battle with the beasts which ravage the fields, carry off innocent maidens, and generally make a nuisance of themselves," the knight said. He sounded as if he were reciting something, and he didn't look very pleased about the idea, but the Princess nodded approvingly.

"Well, this dragon isn't ravaging anything, and it doesn't even want your stupid Princess," Shiara said.

"I do, too!" the dragon broke in. "If I'm not going to carry her off, I could eat her after all. And if I fought a knight, no one could say I'm not a proper dragon, even if I don't have a Princess."

"I really don't think that's a very good idea," I said. "Princesses aren't all that common, after all."

"Besides, you promised me you wouldn't," Shiara said.

"I did not!" the dragon said. "I only said I wouldn't waste a perfectly good Princess, and I don't think this one's so great. Eating her wouldn't be much of a waste."

"I don't think that would be very polite," I said. "Especially when you've talked to her this long without bringing it up. You really ought to ease into these things gradually, you know."

"Are you sure?" the dragon said.

I nodded.

"Oh, all right," said the dragon. "I won't eat her, then. But couldn't I fight the knight anyway? Just for practice?"

"I say, that sounds like an excellent idea," the knight said, brightening perceptibly. "A sort of exercise for both of us."

78 Patricia C. Wrede

"A tourney!" the Princess cried. "Oh, brave and clever, to think of such a thing!"

The knight looked pleased. So did the dragon. It nodded, then whispered to Shiara, "What's a tourney?"

"It's like a battle, only no one gets hurt. Usually."

"Not even a little?" the dragon said. The knight started looking worried again.

"Of course not!" Shiara said to the dragon. "It's a show of skill."

"If you were trying to hurt each other, it wouldn't be a tourney," I added. Actually, it wasn't going to be a tourney anyway; there are very specific rules about what a tourney is, and a practice fight between a dragon and a knight just doesn't qualify. I decided not to say so.

"Oh, all right, then," the dragon grumbled. "I don't know why I'm letting you talk me into this. How do we start?"

THE HARDEST PART was getting the dragon and the knight to agree about rules. The Princess didn't help much. She kept talking about the marvelous tourneys she'd seen, and which knights had been wounded. The dragon would start looking at the knight, and pretty soon it would want to know why it couldn't bite off one of the knight's arms, or at least a hand. The knight would get worried, and the Princess would start crying, and Shiara and I would have to talk the dragon out of it. As soon as the dragon agreed, the Princess would cheer up and start talking about tourneys again.

Finally, Shiara told the Princess to shut up. It wasn't very polite, but it worked. Well, sort of. The Princess didn't stop talking, but as long as she was complaining about Shiara and not talking about tourneys we didn't have any more problems with getting the dragon and the knight to agree.

When we finally decided on the rules, we had to draw a circle in the middle of the clearing for them to fight in. It was harder than it sounds. For one thing, a circle has to be pretty big if a dragon is going to fit inside it, even if it's a small dragon. Also, the moss in the Enchanted Forest grows awfully fast. By the time we finished drawing the

79

80 Patricia C. Wrede



circle, the first half of it had already disappeared. Shiara watched for a minute, then looked at the knight.

"Are you sure you have to have a circle to fight?" Shiara said.

"I really do think so," the knight said apologetically. "It wouldn't be a proper tourney without it, don't you see."

"I'm sick of proper dragons and proper Princesses and proper tourneys," Shiara said under her breath. Fortunately, the dragon didn't hear her.

We started redrawing the circle, trying to make the line wider this time. The knight scratched at the moss with his sword. Shiara used a stick. So did I; I didn't think Mother would approve if I used the Sword of the Sleeping King to cut moss. Nightwitch and the dragon sort of dug at the ground. The Princess sat under a tree.

Eventually we finished, and the knight and the dragon stepped inside the circle. "Well, what are you waiting for?" Shiara demanded.

"Someone has to say 'Go,'" the knight said in a reasonable tone.

"Go!" I said quickly.

Shiara gave me a disgusted look, but she didn't say anything, because as soon as I shouted the dragon and the knight got started. They were fairly evenly matched. The dragon was much larger, of course, and it had a very good sense of timing, but it didn't have much experience. The knight was wearing armor, which helped, and he was obviously used to fighting, but he was a little awkward most of the time. They were both good at dodging, though; they each managed to take three or four swings without hitting the other. The dragon was just starting to take another swipe at the knight, when a little tree sprouted up in front of him and hit him in the nose.

I was surprised. I mean, even in the Enchanted Forest, trees don't usually grow that fast. The dragon was even more surprised than I was. It sort of reared back, and its tail came around very fast to balance it. Nightwitch was a little too close and had to scramble back out of the way. "Hey, watch out!" Shiara said.

The dragon jumped and swung around, looking as if it

Talking to Dragons 81

expected another tree to pop up behind it. Its tail swung in the other direction, and the end of it caught the knight right in the middle of his chest plate as he was trying to back out of the way. The dragon yelped, the Princess screamed, and the knight fell over backward into the pool of water that my sword had made when the Princess had tried to take it.

He sank out of sight right away; evidently the pool was a lot deeper than it looked. The Princess screamed again

and leapt forward. I ran over, too; by the time I got to the pool, the Princess had hold of the knight. She wasn't quite strong enough to pull him out, but she wasn't letting go, either.

Shiara got to the pool about the same time I did, and together the three of us managed to get the knight out of the water. He was unconscious, and he had a large dent in his armor where the dragon's tail had hit him. The Princess checked to make sure he was still alive and then burst into tears.

"Alas! See now how sad is my fate! For my love has been grievously injured and I am without protection in this awful place. Ah, woe is me!"

"Is he dead?" asked the dragon from right behind me. I jumped a little; I hadn't noticed it come up. It peered curiously over my shoulder at the knight.

"Monster!" said the Princess. "Your base attempt to slay my love has failed! No second chance shall you have to harm him while I can stand between you! For if my love be slain, I shall care not whether I live or die, and thus I now defy you."

She threw herself across the knight's chest. The knight coughed, moaned, and opened his eyes. "I say, Isabelle," he said weakly. "That really is a bit uncomfortable." The princess sat up and started weeping all over his face. It didn't seem to make him much more comfortable.

The dragon was still peering. "That was a very good fight," it said to the knight. "Except for the last part. My tail still stings; I think I sprained it. Is armor always that hard?"

The knight tried to answer and started coughing instead. The Princess cried harder, until Shiara said pointedly, "I

Patricia C. Wrede

don't think all that water is doing him much good." The Princess stopped crying and glared at Shiara for a minute, then turned back to the knight. Somehow, she looked a lot more unhappy now that she wasn't crying. I felt sort of sorry for her.

Finally the knight managed to get his coughing under control. He looked up at the dragon and said, "I do believe I agree with you about the fight. That trick with the tail is quite good; I don't believe I've seen it before. I really must remember it."

"Actually, it was something of an accident," the dragon said modestly. "But I think I could do it again if I tried. Did you really think it was good?"

"Oh, quite," the knight said. I got the feeling that he would have tried to bow if he hadn't been lying on his back. "I think perhaps you broke one or two of my ribs."

"I'm sorry," said the dragon. "Is that bad?"

"It is certainly a bit uncomfortable," the knight said. "I don't really blame—"

A coughing spasm interrupted him. The Princess looked alarmed, but she didn't start crying or anything. I saw Shiara watching the Princess with a surprised look on her face, and right about then Nightwitch sprang up onto the knight's chest.

"What is this? Go hence, and leave my love in peace!" cried the Princess.

"You let my kitten alone," Shiara said wamingly.

The Princess stopped in midreach and looked over at Shiara. "And shall I neglect anything that may bring comfort to my love in his hurt?" she said.

"Nightwitch isn't going to hurt—" Shiara started, then paused. "I guess it doesn't matter. Go ahead."

I stared at Shiara in surprise, but she was watching the Princess and Nightwitch. The Princess got scratched a couple of times before she finally managed to pick the kitten up and move her. By then the knight wasn't coughing quite so hard anymore, but he still didn't seem up to talking. Shiara frowned at him. "You don't sound very good," she said.

The dragon stuck its head farther over my shoulder. "If

Talking to Dragons

83

you can't fix him, can I eat him?" it asked hopefully.

Nightwitch hissed. The knight looked alarmed and tried to say something, but all that came out was more coughing. The Princess said, "No!" very loudly and looked as if she wanted to throw herself on top of the knight again.

"Of course not," Shiara said. "You promised."

"It wouldn't be polite," I added. "After all, that was why you had the tourney."

The dragon looked hurt. "I was just asking."

"Ah, what are we going to do about them?" I said hastily, waving at the Princess and the knight. "They can't stay here, not with the knight hurt like that."

"It's not so bad, really it isn't," the knight said, looking at the dragon nervously. He started coughing again right away, but it didn't sound as bad as it had before and he stopped fairly quickly.

"I suppose you could come with us," I said after a minute. It wasn't so much that I wanted his company, or the Princess's; it was just that I didn't see what else I could do.

"That's frightfully kind of you," the knight said. He looked uncertainly at the dragon. "Very kind, to invite me to come with you. All of you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't asked the dragon about its plans yet. But you're quite welcome to join us, if you want to."

"Yes," said Shiara. "I'm sure you'll be very useful when the wizard comes back."

"Wizard?" said the knight. He was so alarmed he almost started coughing again. "What wizard?"

"Well, actually, there are several of them," I said. "Every now and then one of them shows up and tries to do something to us. The last one left when the dragon showed up."

"I'm sure he'll be back in a little while," Shiara said. "Or one of the others will. They've been chasing us all over the Enchanted Forest."

"You know," the knight said, "I really don't believe it would be a good idea for me to join you. I should almost certainly be a bit of an inconvenience, you see. Wet armor rusts, and with that and the ribs I'm afraid I'd be a little slow. Thank you terribly, all the same."

84 Patricia C. Wrede Talking to Dragons 85

"If you don't come with us, what will you do?" I said.

"Mrow," said Nightwitch.

"Morwen!" Shiara said. "They can go to Morwen! She'll know what to do for them." Nightwitch started purring loudly, sort of like a pepper grinder with rocks in it.

I thought about it for a minute. "It sounds like a good idea, but will she want to?"

"Morwen likes helping people," Shiara said. "And I'm sure she can take care of both of them."

"You know Morwen?" said the dragon. "I like her. She used to give me apples out of her garden."

I tried to imagine a dragon eating apples and failed. I could imagine Morwen giving them to a dragon, though.

"Who is this Morwen?" asked the Princess, clasping her hands in front of her. "Think you that she could help my love, indeed?"

"Morwen's sort of a friend of ours," I explained. "She lives back that way, with a lot of cats, and her house has kind of a strange door."

"I didn't have any trouble with it," Shiara said. "And she has nine cats. She told me while you were asleep."

"Nine cats?" said the Princess, looking puzzled. "But what has that to do with my love, who is so grievously hurt?"

"I said it wasn't that bad, Isabelle," said the knight un-comfortably. "Really, I wish you wouldn't make such a fuss. I shall be quite all right in a little, I'm sure."

"If this woman with the many cats can help you, then shall we go to her," the Princess declared with more spirit than she had shown about anything else. "For you are my love, and I will have you whole and well."

"Oh, but really, Isabelle--"

"I'm sure Morwen won't mind," Shiara put in. "She fixed Daystar up just fine. She's even good with wet swords."

The Princess looked thoroughly confused, but the knight brightened a little. "Are you quite sure? Because I'm fright-fully wet, sword and armor and everything, and it would be very nice if I could keep it all from rusting. It's rather expensive, you see."

"I'm sure she could manage mat," Shiara said. "Of course, you don't have to go. You could stay here and wait for the wizard to come back."

The knight didn't argue much longer; I don't think he liked the idea of staying around the dragon, especially if a lot of wizards were going to show up any minute. As soon as he agreed, the Princess started telling him how wise and brave and wonderful he was. Shiara looked disgusted, but the knight seemed to like it. He sat up and even managed not to cough very much.

Shiara and I told the knight how to find Morwen's house. He and the Princess said good-bye and started walking off down the stream. "That's a relief!" Shiara said when they were out of earshot. "For a while I thought you were going to make us go with that stupid Princess! It was bad enough having to listen to her here without following her around."

I blinked at her. "But I thought you changed your mind about her!" I said. "You were being a lot nicer to her after the knight got hurt."

Shiara snorted. "So I felt sorry for her. She really does care about that klutz in the tin suit; you could tell. That doesn't mean I like her! I still think she's dumber than you are, but I'm glad they're going to see Morwen."

I still wasn't really sure whether Morwen would object or not, but I didn't say anything else about it. I mean, by then it was too late anyway; the knight and the Princess were completely out of sight. I turned around to see where I'd put the bundle of food and things Morwen had given me. The dragon was staring at me.

"Why," it said, "do you have wizards chasing you?"

"It's a rather long story," I said. "I'll be glad to explain, but you might want to make yourself comfortable first."

The dragon sighed. "Have you ever tried to be com-

fortable with a sprained tail?"

Shiara giggled. I ignored her. We waited while the dragon tried curling into a couple of different positions. One of them looked sort of like Suz when he was halfway through getting up on his tail. Finally, the dragon curled itself around the little tree that had sprouted up in the middle of the toumey. "That's better," it said. "Enchanted trees are always more comfortable than regular ones."

86 Patricia C. Wrede

"Enchanted trees?" Shiara said.

"Of course," the dragon said. "What else do you expect to find in an enchanted forest? I'm going to have to remember to tell someone about this, though; there haven't been any new ones in a long time."

I looked at the tree a little more closely. It was about six feet tall now, and it seemed to have stopped growing. It didn't look very different from the other trees in the Enchanted Forest, except that it was a lot smaller than any of the ones growing around the edge of the clearing. And, of course, none of the other trees had dragons wrapped around them.

"You were going to tell me about the wizards," said the dragon.

So I explained about Mother and Antorell, and the Sword of the Sleeping King, and everything. It took a long time. The dragon didn't say anything at all the whole time I was talking, but its tail twitched a couple of times. Every time it did, the dragon winced.

"That's very interesting," the dragon said when I stopped. "Where are you going now?"

"Morwen told us to follow the stream," Shiara said. "And Suz said we should go talk to someone named Kazul."

"It's the same thing," the dragon said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The stream goes to the castle, and Kazul lives right outside it. I wonder why she wants to see you?"

"What castle?" Shiara said in an exasperated voice. "And who is this Kazul person, anyway?"

"It must have something to do with that sword," the dragon said, ignoring her questions completely. "Especially if it really does belong to the Sleeping King."

"You mean you know something about it?" Shiara said. "Well, then tell us what the stupid thing does!"

The dragon looked sheepish. Dragons just weren't meant to look sheepish. "I don't know. I'm not old enough yet," it said.

"Not old enough?"

"That's why I wanted a Princess," the dragon said.

"Otherwise, Kazul won't tell me anything important until

Talking to Dragons

87

I'm two hundred. She says that before then dragons are irresponsible, unwise, and talk too much." It looked faintly indignant. "I don't talk too much."

"Who is Kazul?" I said. I was getting a little nervous about meeting her. I mean, I didn't think I'd ever know anyone who could tell a dragon what to do, even a young one. Well, Mother might be able to get away with it.

"Oh, I thought you knew," the dragon said. "Kazul is the King of the Dragons."

SHIARA AND I looked at each other. "Terrific," Shiara said. "And I thought wizards were bad."

"Did I say something wrong?" the dragon asked.

"No, not at all," I said hastily. "We were just a little surprised, that's all."

"Hey!" Shiara said. "How can Kazul be King of the Dragons if she's a she? That doesn't make sense!"

"It does too!" the dragon said. "What else would you call her?"

"How about Queen?" Shiara said sarcastically.

"Queen?" the dragon said. "Why would you want to call her a Queen? That's not the same thing at all! You're the one who doesn't make sense."

"I do too make sense!" Shiara said. "Queens do the same things Kings do."

"Not for dragons," I said hastily. I didn't want the dragon to get offended again. "Dragons have a King, period. The King of the Dragons is the oldest dragon who can move Colin's Stone from the Vanishing Mountain to the Ford of the Whispering Snakes; it doesn't matter whether the dragon is male or female."

"It's silly to have two names for the same job," the dragon

89

90 Patricia C. Wrede

said complacently. "People might get confused."

"Oh." Shiara looked skeptical, but at least she didn't object anymore. I decided I was going to have to talk to her soon, before she got us both in real trouble. For about a minute, no one said anything. Then Shiara looked over at me.

"Daystar," she said, "why are we looking for the King of the Dragons?"

I started to say something, then stopped because I wasn't really sure what to say. I mean, it would sound a little odd to say that I was looking for a dragon because a lizard told me to. Especially since the dragon was apparently King of the Dragons. I thought some more.

"I don't know," I said finally. "But I think we have to. At least, I have to. It seems like the right thing to do."

Shiara sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say something like that."

The dragon looked puzzled. "What's the matter? It doesn't sound particularly unusual to me, but I suppose it'll be at least as interesting as running away to find a Princess."

Shiara and I looked at the dragon, then at each other, then back at the dragon again. "You ran away?" Shiara said finally.

"It was the only way I could think of to get a Princess," the dragon said. It sighed. "It didn't work out the way I thought it would, though."

Shiara and I exchanged glances again. I didn't really like the idea of meeting Kazul in the company of a runaway dragon, but I couldn't think of a way to keep it from coming along with us if it wanted to. "You're sure you really want to come?" I said. "I mean, there are wizards after us, and it might be a little inconvenient if they showed up again."

The dragon looked thoughtfully for a moment, then it shook its head. "I'm coming with you, wizards or no wizards," it said stubbornly. "Sneezing isn't so bad."

I sighed. It's awfully hard to talk a dragon out of doing something it's decided to do. "We'd better go, then," I said. "I'm sure Antorell will be back as soon as he thinks it's safe, and I'd sort of like to be gone by the time he shows up."

Talking to Dragons 91

Shiara grabbed Morwen's bundles and shoved one at me. "You're absolutely right. Here. Let's go."

I nodded and started toward the stream. "Not that way!" said the dragon. "It takes too long."

"How else are we going to find the stupid castle?" Shiara demanded. "We don't even know what it looks like!"

The dragon looked smug. "I do," it said. "And I'm very



good at shortcuts."

"Morwen told us to follow the stream," I said doubtfully.

"Morwen didn't know you were going to meet me," the dragon said. It looked at me for a minute. "I thought you said you were in a hurry."

"Come on, Daystar," Shiara said. "I don't care which way we go, but let's go!"

I decided not to argue. I still didn't like the idea of leaving the stream, but it didn't seem worth fighting over. Not with a dragon, anyway. Besides, if we didn't leave soon, I was sure the wizards would catch us. We started off, following the dragon.

Traveling with a dragon was rather nice, in a way. Nothing bothered us at all. When it started to get dark, we stopped and opened Morwen's bundles again. There was obviously something magic about them, because the leftovers from lunch had turned into a fresh packet of food, and there was plenty for everyone, even the dragon.

Nothing dangerous came near us all night, either. I stayed awake for a while, just to make sure, but evidently night-shades and wolves and things don't like the idea of annoying a dragon any more than people do. Finally, I went to sleep, too.

We started off again as soon as we woke up next morning. The dragon went first because it knew the way, and we followed. After a while, I noticed that I didn't feel quite comfortable for some reason. I touched the hilt of the Sword of the Sleeping King a couple of times, but I didn't feel any new magic tingles, just the same familiar ones. I started watching the trees as we walked. Finally, Shiara noticed.

"What's the matter, Daystar?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "But I feel as if I'm being watched."

"Watched?" Shiara looked at the trees quickly. "Who

92 Patricia C. Wrede

would be watching us?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not even sure someone is. I just feel uncomfortable."

"You're being a little slow," the dragon called back over its shoulder, and Shiara and I stopped talking and ran to catch up. We didn't have a chance to discuss it again, but I noticed Shiara looking uneasily at the forest from time to time. Even Nightwitch seemed to notice something wrong;

she stopped jumping at leaves and stayed close to Shiara. In fact, Shiara almost stepped on her once. After that, Shiara carried her.

In spite of all the worrying, nothing happened until late that morning. The dragon was moving on through the forest,

ignoring all the little branches and things that happened to be in its way. Suddenly it gave a smothered yelp and stopped. Shiara and Nightwitch and I ran forward to see what was the matter.

The dragon was sitting back, rubbing its nose and glaring at a large open space in front of it. I looked around, but I didn't see anything else. "What happened?" I asked.

"I ran into something," the dragon said, glaring at me for a minute instead of the open space.

"But there isn't anything— Ow!" Shiara started to wave toward the clearing, but her hand stopped about halfway through the wave, as if it had hit something. She rubbed her fingers, then put out her hand more cautiously. It stopped in midair, right where it had before. Nightwitch hissed and backed away.

I reached out, very carefully. It was a little strange to feel something where I couldn't see anything. It was cool and smooth, like stone, and it went up as far as I could reach. "It's an invisible wall!" I said.

"No, it's an invisible castle," Shiara said. Then she jerked her hand away and stared at the air in front of her as if she could make herself see something by trying hard. "Hey! How do I know that?"

"I don't know," I said. "When did you figure it out?"

"I didn't! I was just standing here, wanting to know what it was, and all of a sudden I did. I even know how to do it!"

Talking to Dragons 93

^?\*

!&  
ft

"Do what?" asked the dragon. "Put your hand on a castle?"

"No, no; how to make things invisible!" Shiara said.

"I don't want to know how to make things invisible," the dragon said crossly. "I want to know where this invisible thing came from. It wasn't here last time I came this way."

For once, I wasn't paying much attention to the dragon;

I was staring at Shiara. "You figured out how to turn a castle invisible just by touching it?" I said.

"No, you have to do a lot of other things to it," Shiara said absently. Then her face changed, as if she had just remembered something she didn't like, and she stared at the open area for a minute. Then she swallowed so hard I could see it. "Let's leave, Daystar; I don't think I want to meet anyone who would live in an invisible castle."

I looked at Shiara, and then at the open space. I looked

back at Shiara and opened my mouth to ask why we ought to leave, but I stopped before I said anything. Shiara looked a little white, and a little sick, and a lot scared. I hadn't ever seen Shiara look like that before, not even when the wizard tried to catch us with his snakey water monster. Especially not then. I decided I could wait to find out what the problem was. "All right," I said. "Let's go."

"But I want to know what it's doing in the middle of my shortcut," the dragon complained.

"We can talk about it somewhere else," I said.

Shiara was already backing into the trees; her eyes were still fixed on the open space where the castle would be if we could see it. I glanced back at the dragon. It sort of shrugged. "Oh, all right," it said. "But I don't see what all the fuss is about."

Right then Shiara yelled, sort of a half yell that stopped in the middle. I whirled around. There was a woman standing where Shiara had been. She was very tall, and she had long hair that was so red it was almost black. She was dressed in something green and shining and elegant that hung from a deep red jewel at her throat, and she was very beautiful. More beautiful than the Princess, even. I didn't care.

"Where's Shiara?" I said.

She smiled, the same way a very satisfied cat smiles,

Patricia C. Wrede

except that cats don't look evil. Well, most cats don't. "Shiara; is that your little friend's name? She's right here, my dear." She stepped aside, and I went cold. Behind her, where it had been hidden until she moved aside, was a grey stone statue that looked exactly like Shiara.

"That can't be Shiara!" I said. I was too upset to even think about being polite. "Shiara's a fire-witch, and fire-witches are immune to magic!"

The woman smiled another unpleasant smile. "Not the magic of another fire-witch," she said. "I've been waiting a long time for someone else to come by; I need her for something."

"How is turning her into a statue going to help?" I said. I was hoping I could talk her into changing Shiara back; then maybe I could do something to keep Shiara that way.

The fire-witch glanced at the statue. "It's an excellent way of storing people until you need them," she said. "I have quite a number in my garden; they're ornamental as well as useful."

"That doesn't sound nice," the dragon said.

The woman seemed to see it for the first time, which I thought was a little odd. I mean, dragons aren't exactly easy to overlook. "I am not concerned with being nice," she said.

"Why not?" I said.

The fire-witch turned and looked at me. Suddenly her eyes narrowed. "Who are you, boy?" she said sharply.

"My name is Daystar," I said, "and I would appreciate it if you would change Shiara back."

"No," she said flatly. "Why should I?" She was still staring at me, as if she were trying to figure something out. "You're very interesting, Daystar," she said abruptly. "I think perhaps I'll let you go. I haven't done anything like that in a long time; it might be an interesting experience. I think you had better leave before I change my mind."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not leaving until you turn Shiara back," I said.

"Then I am afraid you will grow rather bored," the woman said. She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then

Talking to Dragons 95

shook her head. "No, I don't have any use for you, and I can't be bothered storing things that aren't useful. Pity;

you'd make a nice fountain." She lifted one hand and snapped her fingers.

I had just enough time to realize that I hadn't drawn my sword. I grabbed for it and pulled, knowing I wasn't going to make it. There was something like an explosion just in front of me, and a wave of heat, and then I was holding the Sword of the Sleeping King up in front of me and watching the fire-witch cursing and stamping at something. She didn't look at all elegant anymore.

Suddenly I realized why the fire-witch had missed.

"Nightwitch!" I yelled. A small bundle of black fur darted out from under the witch's skirt and vanished under a bush. The fire-witch glared after the kitten, then turned back to me. "You'll suffer for--"

Right next to me there was a sound like someone blowing out several very large candles all at once, and a stream of fire shot out and enveloped the fire-witch. She laughed.

"Fire, to harm me? Even a dragon should know better! I'll see to you in a moment; do you think I am fool enough to grow a garden without dragonsbane?"

The dragon shuddered, and the fire-witch laughed again. Then she looked at me, and her eyes glittered. "I want you first, though. Now!" She pointed at me, and I raised the Sword of the Sleeping King a little higher, holding on to the hilt with both hands and hoping it would be able to do something.

Something hit the sword, and pain ran through my whole body. It felt a little like the shock I'd gotten when Shiara and I had tried to pick up the sword at the same time, except it went on and on. The Sword of the Sleeping King began to get hot. I felt as if boiling lead were running down the sword and into my arms. I think I screamed; I know the fire-witch did, because I heard her.

The Sword of the Sleeping King was glowing dull red in my hands. It wasn't behaving at all the way it had when it stopped Antorell's spell, and I got the distinct impression that this wasn't very good for it. It wasn't very good for

Talking to Dragons

97

me, either; the sensation of boiling lead was oozing farther up my arms.

I knew I had to do something, because if I didn't I was going to drop the sword. I yelled something and pushed. At least, pushing is the only way I can describe what I did. I wasn't really thinking too clearly by then; I just wanted the lead to go back into the sword and quit hurting.

I heard a wail from the fire-witch that kind of died out, and the pain stopped very suddenly. I noticed that the sword wasn't glowing anymore, and then I fell over. It wasn't that I felt particularly tired or weak; I just couldn't stand up anymore. The last thing I remember thinking was that I had to hang on to the sword, no matter what.

I woke up because something small and warm and rough was rubbing my chin. I opened my eyes. Nightwitch was sitting on the ground in front of me, licking my face. I was lying facedown on the moss; I could feel the Sword of the Sleeping King underneath me. It was very uncomfortable, but I didn't feel like moving. I closed my eyes again.

Nightwitch hissed and dug her claws into my shoulder. Kittens have surprisingly sharp claws; I opened my eyes again very quickly. The dragon was staring at me from beside Nightwitch. At least, its head was beside Nightwitch;

the rest of it wouldn't fit. It blinked at me.

"Are you dead?" it asked.

"No," I said. I thought about saying something else, but I didn't have the energy.

"Oh." The dragon sounded almost disappointed for a minute. Then it brightened. "I think that fire-witch is." (I "That's nice." I had the feeling I should remember something, but I didn't want to think hard enough to figure out what. Nightwitch hissed and dug her claws into me again. "Stop that!" I said, and I rolled onto my back to keep her from doing it again.

"What?" said the dragon.

"Nightwitch," I said. Rolling over had taken all the energy I had; I didn't want to talk anymore. I didn't even want to think anymore. I wanted the dragon to just leave me

98 Patricia C. Wrede

alone, but I couldn't say so without being rude, so I closed my eyes and started drifting off to sleep instead. Then Nightwitch jumped onto my chest and dug her claws in hard.

I yelled and sat up. Nightwitch jumped down to the ground and ran off. I tried to see where she'd gone and saw Morwen's bundle instead. Suddenly I realized that I was very hungry. I started to reach for the bundle, then remembered that I was still holding the sword. I also remembered the boiling lead, and I was almost afraid to look at my hands. I was sure that this time I'd burned both of them worse than when I'd picked up the wizard's staff.

I looked down. There wasn't anything wrong with me—at least, not that I could see. I let go of the sword with one hand; it didn't hurt. I heaved a sigh of relief and put the sword back in its sheath, then got out some of Morwen's gingerbread and started eating. It was a good thing the food was right on top of the bundle; I didn't have the strength to hunt for it.

The dragon watched me for a few minutes with a puzzled expression. "You're a very good magician," it said finally. "Where did you learn that spell?"

"Spell?" I was having a little trouble remembering the details of the fight. I wasn't sure whether it was because it had hurt so badly or because I was too busy eating.

"The one you shouted right before the witch went up in smoke," the dragon said. "You said:

'Power of water, wind, and earth,  
Turn the spell back to its birth.'

"Oh, that," I said. I felt a little silly. "It's just part of a rhyme Mother taught me when I was little. I don't know why I said it."

"Your mother taught you? But that's a dragon spell! Your mother couldn't teach you dragon spells!"

"You don't know my mother," I said. I'd eaten most of the gingerbread, and I was feeling much better. "She taught me two more lines to the rhyme," I offered. "They go:

Talking to Dragons

99

'Raise the fire to free the lord  
By the power of wood and sword.'

The dragon looked at me suspiciously. "Where did your

mother learn dragon spells?"

"I'm afraid she didn't tell me," I said. I finished the gingerbread and looked around. "Where did Shiara..." My voice died in midsentence as I remembered exactly where Shiara had been when I saw her last. I didn't want to look, but I had to. I took a deep breath and turned my head.

Sometimes, when witches or wizards die, all their spells die with them. If the witch or wizard is skillful, sometimes the spells last. The fire-witch had been skillful. Shiara was still a statue.

I SAT THERE for a minute, staring at the statue and wondering what to do. Finally I looked at the dragon. "Do you know anything about magic?"

"Of course I do!" the dragon said. "Everyone who lives in the Enchanted Forest knows about magic."

I sighed. "I mean, do you know anything about turning statues that used to be people back into people again? Because I don't, and we have to figure out some way to fix Shiara."

"Oh." The dragon looked doubtfully at the statue of Shiara. "We could take her to the Living Spring and drop her in," it suggested. "That would bring her back to life."

"You know where the Living Spring is?" I said in surprise.

"No," said the dragon. "But I bet if we found it, it would work."

I shook my head. "I don't think we have time to look for it," I said. "There are wizards looking for us, remember?"

"Oh, that's right," the dragon said. "I keep forgetting. I don't like to think about wizards." It blinked. "What about your sword? You could say that spell again."

102 Patricia C. Wrede

I nodded. I walked over to Shiara and pulled the Sword of the Sleeping King out of its sheath. I felt a little uncomfortable, partly because I hadn't thought of using the sword and partly because the dragon spell was still just one of Mother's nursery rhymes to me. The idea of standing in the middle of the Enchanted Forest holding a magic sword and reciting nursery rhymes made me feel very silly. I looked at the statue of Shiara again and decided I'd try it anyway. Slowly, I lowered the point so that it touched the statue's shoulder and said:

"Power of water, wind, and earth  
Turn the spell back to its birth.  
Raise the fire to free the lord  
By the power of wood and sword."

For a minute I thought nothing had happened; then three or four little tingles ran up my arm from the sword. I hadn't even realized they were missing until they started again. When I finally did notice, I was relieved. I mean. Mother wouldn't have been at all happy with me if I'd ruined the Sword of the Sleeping King somehow.

Unfortunately, Shiara was still a statue. "I suppose we're going to have to look for the Living Spring," I said. "Unless you have some other ideas."

"I'm afraid I don't," the dragon said. "I've never been on an adventure before. How are we going to find the spring?"

"I don't know," I said. Half of the heroes who stopped at our cottage had been looking for the Living Spring, and I'd never heard of one of them finding it. I tried to think of someone who might know where the spring was. "Suz!" I said suddenly.

"What?" the dragon said.

"Suz is sort of a friend of mine," I explained. "He says he knows everything that goes on in the Enchanted Forest;

I'm sure he'd know where the Living Spring is. I wish he were here."

"You do?" said a squeaky voice by my right foot. "Yes,

Talking to Dragons 103

you really do! How intriguing. Why do you?"

"Suz!" I said. I looked around until I saw him, then carefully sat down on the ground. "I'm awfully glad to see you. Do you know where the Living Spring is?"

"The Living Spring?" Suz said. "Dear me! Why do you want to know?"

"What's that?" said the dragon, who had finally managed to find the source of the squeaky voice. "It looks like a little dragon."

"Oh, I'm sorry. This is Suz; I was just telling you about him. He's not a dragon; he's a lizard."

"A lizard of extremely good family," Suz said. He frowned at the dragon, but the dragon didn't seem to notice. Suz gave up and looked back at me. "Now, why do you want to know about the Living Spring?"

"Because Shiara got turned into a statue by the fire-witch who lived in the invisible castle," I said.

"She did?" The lizard peered around until he saw the statue, then scurried over. He cocked his head briefly and stared upward, then ran up the grey stone in a spiral until he was sitting on one of the statue's shoulders. "She really did! How exceedingly distressing. What are you going to



do about it?"

"We thought if we dropped the statue into the Living Spring, it would, well, fix Shiara," I said. "But we don't know where the spring is."

"You don't? No, of course you don't. It's a secret." Suz peered at me from Shiara's shoulder. "I suppose you want me to tell you where it is." He considered for a moment. "I couldn't possibly do that, so you don't need to bother asking."

"But Suz!" I said. "How else can we fix Shiara? I've tried everything we could think of, and nothing worked."

"That is extremely obvious," the lizard said severely. He ran down the side of the statue and stopped right in front of me. "If anything had worked, she wouldn't be a statue, and you wouldn't be asking me silly questions," he said, and did whatever the thing was that he did to balance on his tail. "People who are looking for things in the Enchanted

104 Patricia C. Wrede

Forest have to find them for themselves. You really ought to know that, you really ought."

"Well, what are we going to do about Shiara if you won't tell us where the spring is?" I said.

"My goodness gracious, you certainly are persistent," Suz said. "Have you tried kissing her?"

"Kissing her?" I said incredulously.

"Kissing the statue," Suz explained condescendingly. "It's one of the standard cures for being made to sleep for years, or being turned into a frog or a statue or something else like that. Have you tried it?"

I felt my face getting hot. "Um, well, no," I said.

"Well, then," Suz said pointedly.

I thought about it for a minute or two. I didn't know whether Shiara would think much of my kissing her, but I didn't really object, especially if it would break the spell. In fact, I sort of liked the idea. At that point, I stood up very quickly because my face was getting even hotter and I could feel Suz staring at me.

I was standing right next to the statue, and as soon as I was all the way standing I leaned forward and kissed it. I didn't want to take time to look before I did it, because I didn't really want to think about it. First I felt cold stone, but it warmed up right away, and a second later Shiara jerked away and said, "Hey! Daystar, what on earth do you think you're doing?"

"It worked!" I said. I was awfully relieved. It would have been a lot of work to carry a statue around with us, and if we hadn't gotten Shiara turned back into Shiara, we would have had to. Besides, having Shiara back felt good, even

if she was glaring at me.

"What worked?" Shiara demanded suspiciously. "And where did that witch go? She was here a minute ago."

"You were a statue," the dragon informed her. "The fire-witch did it, but Daystar got rid of her. I'm very glad he did," it added thoughtfully. "I didn't like her. She wasn't polite at all, and she... and she..." The dragon leaned forward and said in a loud whisper, "And she grew dragonsbane!"

106 Patricia C. Wrede

Shiara stared at the dragon, but before she could say anything there was a loud squeak from behind her, and Suz's voice started shouting. "Help! Murder! Wild beasts and dangerous lunatics! Oh dear oh my help help goodness gracious help oh!"

I turned around. Nightwitch had come out from wherever she'd been hiding, and apparently she'd managed to sneak up on Suz while I was, well, kissing Shiara. Suz was rolled into a tight golden ball, and Nightwitch was batting him back and forth between her paws in wide-eyed fascination. I didn't think she'd ever played with a ball that yelled at her before, which would explain the interest.

I bent over to pick up Nightwitch, but before I actually got hold of her the lizard uncurled very quickly, slapped his tail sharply against the kitten's nose, and curled up tight again. He didn't stop yelling the whole time. The kitten jerked her head back so fast that she sat down hard on her tail, and I grabbed her.

"It's all right now, Suz," I said.

The lizard poked his nose out of the ball. "You're quite certain?" he said.

"Yes, of course," I said.

Suz uncurled a little more. "This sort of thing is quite unsettling," he said. "I do not approve at all. Dear me, no, not at all."

"I'm very sorry," I said. "I'm afraid I didn't know she was there."

"People who keep wild animals ought to know where they are so they don't go around eating other people," the lizard said. He uncurled the rest of the way and lay on the moss, peering reproachfully up at me.

I bent down, and Suz scooted back a couple of feet.

"You keep that, that beast away from me!"

"Nightwitch isn't a wild animal," Shiara said indignantly.

"She's a kitten. And I don't believe she meant to eat you;

she just wanted to play."

"She's too young to know better," I said. Shiara glared at me, and I added hastily, "Nightwitch, I mean."

"She is?" The lizard squinted at Nightwitch from a safe distance. "Yes, I suppose she is," he said reluctantly. "How

Talking to Dragons 107

unfortunate. I really do think I had better leave. Dear me, yes, I really must."

Suz nodded and headed off into the woods. "Suz, wait!" Shiara called.

The lizard stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry Nightwitch scared you," Shiara said.

"You are?" Suz turned around and ran back to where Shiara was standing. He cocked his head at her, then did his tangled tail-balancing trick and stared up at her. "Why, you really are! How astonishing! How extraordinary! How extremely unexpected!"

I was a little surprised myself, but I didn't think it was quite that unusual. I didn't mention it, though; I had a few other things I wanted to ask Suz as long as he was still around.

"Suz?" The lizard turned his head and looked at me. "What's the best way to get to the castle where Kazul lives from here?" I asked.

"Why, it's—" Suz paused. "Dear me, there seems to be an invisible castle in the way. How ridiculous. I'm afraid you'll just have to go around."

"That's what I was afraid of," I said. "But thank you anyway."

"It's quite all right. And I really must be going now, I really must. Good-bye." Suz bowed politely, then did a quick backflip and scurried off into the woods.

"And thank you for telling me how to change Shiara back!" I called.

Suz didn't answer. I turned back to find Shiara glaring at me again.

"All right, Daystar, explain. What's all this about statues and getting rid of witches?"

"I already told you all that," the dragon said in an injured tone. "Why do you want him to tell you again?"

"Because I didn't understand it when you told it," Shiara said. She sounded a lot like Mother. "And I want to know what's been going on." She sat down on the ground and looked at me. "So explain."

I explained. Shiara let me talk until I started to explain

108 Patricia C. Wrede

how we'd finally turned her from a statue back into Shiara, but then she interrupted. "You don't have to keep going," she said. She gave me an odd look. "I remember that part."

"Oh. I'm sorry," I offered. My face was getting hot again. "But no one could think of anything else, and it did work."

Shiara wasn't paying much attention. "Daystar, did your sword burn your hands when Antorell tried to throw that spell at you?" she said suddenly.

"No," I said, relieved by the change of subject. "It didn't do anything at all."

"It did too!" Shiara said. "It ate Antorell's spell, or something, without doing anything to you. Why didn't it do that to the fire-witch's spell?"

"Who's Antorell?" asked the dragon.

"The wizard you were sneezing at when we met," I said. "He's not very pleasant."

"Wizards aren't," the dragon said.

"Daystar, this is important!" Shiara said. "Do you know why your sword didn't do the same thing to the fire-witch that it did to Antorell?"

"Maybe the sword works differently on wizards than it does on fire-witches," I said. "I wish it would get rid of Antorell; then I could stop worrying about him."

Shiara said something else, but I missed it. All of a sudden I had the same itchy feeling I'd had earlier, as if someone were watching me. I looked over my shoulder, but there wasn't anyone there. Just trees.

"Daystar?" Shiara almost sounded worried.

"I'm all right," I said. "But can we get started and talk about this more somewhere else? We still have to get to see Kazul, and there's an invisible castle in the way."

"Shouldn't we do something about the people she turned into statues for her garden?" Shiara said, looking nervously at the clearing where the castle ought to be.

"Why?" said the dragon in a puzzled tone.

"Because it wouldn't be right to just leave them here," I said.

No one seemed to like the idea of going into the castle. No one wanted to leave the fire-witch's statue people there

Talking to Dragons

109

without trying to rescue them, either. We spent a little while trying to figure out how to get into the castle. Shiara wanted

to climb over the wall, but I didn't think that was a very good idea if we couldn't see the wall or what was on the other side. Finally, she agreed to help me look for a door or a gate or something.

We stretched our hands out in front of us and walked carefully toward the castle. It wasn't there. We went a little farther; it still wasn't there. We walked around the clearing for a while, while the dragon watched with interest. Eventually, we gave up.

"I don't understand," Shiara said as we came back to pick up Nightwitch and Morwen's bundles. "Where did it go?"

"Maybe the fire-witch moved it while she was talking to me," I said.

"A whole castle? That fast? Besides, didn't Suz say it was still in the way? It must have moved since he left." Shiara stopped, and her eyes widened. "Daystar, you don't think she could still be around, do you?"

"She isn't around anywhere," the dragon said positively. "She went up in smoke; I saw her."

"Good," Shiara said savagely. I must have looked awfully surprised, because Shiara glared at me and added, "She deserved it. You don't know what she had to do to make that castle invisible."

"What was it?" the dragon said curiously.

Shiara glared at it, too. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?" said the dragon.

"Because she tortured people to death!" Shiara shouted. "It was part of the spell, and I know how to do it, and I don't want to think about it!"

"I told you she wasn't a nice person," the dragon said.

Shiara snorted. She picked up Nightwitch and her bundle and started walking. After a couple of seconds, the dragon and I followed her. We went straight across the clearing; I sort of hoped we'd find the castle again, because I felt bad about the statues, but it still wasn't there.

Once we got across the clearing, the dragon took the lead again. Nobody said much for the rest of the morning,

110 Patricia C. Wrede

which was fine with me; I still felt like someone was watching me, and I didn't like it. Finally even the dragon noticed.

"You look a little strange," it said. "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I just feel like someone's watching me."

"I think you're imagining things," Shiara said. "I've been looking since you told me about it this morning, and I

haven't seen anyone."

"Someone's following us?" the dragon said. It blinked at me, then turned in a slow circle, eyeing the trees. "You're right," it said finally. "Someone is following us. That's not polite."

Before Shiara or I could say anything, the dragon's head shot out toward one of the trees. I'd never seen anything move so fast. There was a loud yell from someone who wasn't the dragon; then the dragon yelped and a bunch of leaves came drifting down to the ground. I heard a couple of crashing noises and another, louder yell, and then the dragon reappeared. Dangling by the seat of his pants from the dragon's mouth was an elf.

I stared for a minute, trying to decide whether this was the same elf we'd met before. He looked the same, but all elves look alike. Besides, he was yelling and kicking, and every now and then the dragon would shake its head, which made it hard to get a good look at the elf.

I almost laughed; the dragon looked a lot like a very large cat with a small mouse. Nightwitch evidently thought so, too; she eyed the wriggling elf with some interest, then looked at me. "Mrow?" she said.

"I'm afraid he's too big for you," I said.

"He certainly is!" yelled the elf. "Put me down! Let me down at once!"

"Mrof!" said the dragon through a mouthful of cloth.

"I don't think he wants to," I said to the elf. "Why were you following us?"

"Hey!" said Shiara. "Are you the elf we ran into before? Because if you are, I want to talk to you."

The elf stopped struggling and looked down at Shiara. Then he twisted around and looked at the dragon. "On the other hand, maybe I'm better off up here," he said.

Talking to Dragons 111

"Mmnuf!" said the dragon, and shook its head violently.

"Yow!" said the elf. "Help! I surrender!"

"Really?" Shiara said skeptically.

"Really!" said the elf. "Absolutely! Completely and without question. Will you put me down?"

"Maybe you should," I said to the dragon. "I don't think he can get away from all of us, and it will be a lot easier for you to talk."

The dragon looked at me for a minute, then slowly lowered its head and dropped the elf in a heap in front of us. The elf lay there breathing hard while Shiara and the dragon and I closed in around him. As soon as we stopped moving,

he bounced to his feet and spun rapidly in a circle, bowing to each of us. Then he sat down cross-legged and looked up at us with bright black eyes.

"Now," said the elf, "what can I do for you?"

WE LOOKED AT each other and then at the elf. "What you can do," said Shiara, "is answer some questions."

"My dear lady, I would be delighted," the elf said. "What do you want to know?"

"Why were you following us?" the dragon rumbled.

"I thought she was asking the questions," said the elf.

"We're all asking questions," Shiara told him. "So you can just stop dodging and answer that one."

"What one?" the elf said. The dragon growled and made a snapping motion at the elf, who jerked back hastily. "Yes, ah, of course," he said. "That question. I was, um, looking for information."

"Information? Ha!" said Shiara. "What kind of information?"

"Who you are, where you're going, and what you're going to do when you get there," the elf replied promptly. He was pointedly not looking at the dragon.

"That's all?" Shiara said sarcastically. "It sounds a lot like what we want to know about you."

"How nice," the elf said, beaming. "We have something in common."

"Excuse me," I broke in. "But who exactly are you?"

113

114

Patricia C. Wrede

Talking to Dragons

115

The elf looked at me with a pained expression. "I'm an elf."

"I can see that," I said politely. "But would you mind telling me your name? I mean, I'd sort of like to know to whom I'm speaking."

"My dear boy, I would be delighted." The elf rose and bowed with a flourish. "My name," he said, "is Janril." He sat down again and looked at me expectantly.

"Pleased to meet you, Janril," I said. "This is Shiara, that's Nightwitch..." I hesitated a moment. Dragons don't pick their names until they're old enough to pick what sex they're going to be, too, and I wasn't quite sure how to introduce one. I couldn't leave it out, though. "This is a dragon—"

"Somehow I guessed," the elf muttered.

"—and I'm Daystar," I finished.

Shiara was frowning at me, but before she could say anything the elf bounced to his feet and said, "Daystar! Not Cimorene's son? My dear boy, I can't tell you how glad I am you've finally come. It's about time things got straightened out a little."

"I don't trust elves," Shiara said. "And why should we listen to you, anyway?"

"My dear girl, if you expect me to answer questions, you're going to have to listen to me," said the elf. "Otherwise there's no point in it. Why don't you trust elves?"

Shiara didn't want to tell the elf anything. I was beginning to like him, though, and I didn't see what difference it would make, so I told him about the first elf and the wizard's staff. When I finished, Janril nodded solemnly.

"That," he said, "explains everything. I am afraid you ran into one of the Darkmoming Elves; they're a rather disreputable lot. They've been running wild since the King disappeared, so of course they'd cause you trouble."

"Why 'of course'?" said Shiara suspiciously. "And what King are you talking about?"

"The King of the Enchanted Forest," the elf said. "The Darkmoming Elves don't want him to come back; they like the way things have been run since he left. Since you have

his sword, of course they would want to get rid of you. If they could," he added thoughtfully. "Personally, I don't think they really know what they're doing."

"How do you know about Daystar's sword?" Shiara asked suspiciously.

"My dear girl, everyone who lives in the Enchanted Forest knows something about the Vanished King's Sword," Janril said. "It—"

"Wait a minute!" I said. "I only have one sword, and I thought it was called the Sword of the Sleeping King."

"Sleeping, vanished, run away—what difference does it make?" Janril said. "He's gone."

"I don't care about the sword," the dragon said. "I want to know why you were following us."

The elf looked annoyed. "My dear... ah... dragon," he



said, "I told you already, I wanted to find out more about you. I believe that's the usual reason for following people around."

"But that doesn't explain anything," the dragon complained.

Shiara's eyes narrowed suddenly. "All right, then, why did you want to know more about us?" she said.

Janril considered for a moment, then grinned reluctantly. "Because I'm trying to find out what the Darkmoming Elves are up to."

"What does that have to do with us?" I asked.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have to follow you," the elf said reasonably. "But the Darkmoming Elves have been very active in this part of the woods for the past few days, and we thought it might be you they were interested in. And of course, if they're interested, so are we."

"Who do you mean by 'we'?" I said.

"The Goldwing-Shadowmusic Elves," Janril said with a touch of pride. "We are on the side of the King, even if he is missing right now. We follow the sword."

"What does that mean?" Shiara demanded. "And how many kinds of elves are there?"

"Quite a few," said Janril. "But the only ones you have to watch out for are the Darkmoming Elves and the

Patricia C. Wrede

Silverstaff Elves. Fortunately, the Silverstaff Elves don't know the sword is back yet, but I doubt that your luck will hold much longer."

"How do you know these Silverstaff Elves don't know about Daystar's sword?" Shiara asked.

"My dear girl, if they did, you'd, have wizards all over the place. The Silverstaff Elves are in league with them. Undiscriminating, that's all I can call it." Janril looked prim. A prim elf is almost as odd-looking as a dignified lizard; I found myself wishing Suz were still around so I could compare them.

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Shiara said.

"I suppose you don't," the elf said cheerfully. "But it doesn't really matter. We'll still be glad to help you."

Shiara snorted. "The last elf who said he was going to help us almost got Daystar killed."

"I'm sorry about that," Janril said politely. "But I simply can't take responsibility for the Darkmoming Elves. Now, I must be going; I have to let the rest of the Goldwing-Shadowmusic Elves know what's going on. We'll see you in the castle."

"Just a minute!" Shiara said. "What makes you think we're going to let you go?"

"Can you think of anything else we could do with him?" I said.

"I could eat him, I suppose," the dragon said. He looked dubiously at the elf. "I don't think I want to, though; elves don't taste very good."

I decided not to ask how the dragon knew that. "I really don't think you have to eat him," I said. "I think we should just let him go."

"But Daystar—" Shiara stopped and thought for a moment, biting her lip. "Oh, all right. If you want to let him go, let's do it."

"Are you sure?" I said, surprised. "I thought you didn't like the idea."

"I don't," Shiara said, glaring at me. "But we'll be here all day if we start arguing. Besides, it's your sword."

I wasn't quite sure what that had to do with anything, but I didn't ask. "All right," I said to the elf, "I think you

Talking to Dragons 117

can go. But I don't really think you'd better follow us around anymore."

"But of course!" said the elf. He bounced to his feet again, bowed to each of us including Nightwitch, and whisked off. Shiara scowled after him and opened her mouth, then apparently decided not to say anything.

"Well, let's go," I said after a minute. We picked up our bundles and started walking again. The dragon and I both watched the trees for a while, but the elf apparently kept his promise to quit following us.

Shiara walked just behind the dragon, looking thoughtful. "Do you really believe that elf?" she finally asked me.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I don't think it makes much difference, though. I'd still be going to see Kazul, no matter what he said. I want to find out about this sword and what it does and what's really going on around here."

I must have sounded sort of annoyed, because Shiara frowned at me and said, "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm getting sort of tired of people chasing my sword," I said. "I'd like to know why they want it so badly." I was also beginning to realize that I didn't know nearly as much about the Enchanted Forest as I thought I did, which made me very nervous. I wasn't going to mention that to Shiara just yet, though.

"Oh." Shiara looked thoughtful again. "Well, you could—"

The dragon looked backward over its shoulder. "You're slowing down," it said. "Can't you talk and walk at the same time?"

We started walking faster, which really did make it harder to talk. I kept watching for elves or wizards, but I didn't see any. In between, I thought about the sword, but I didn't come up with anything new.

We made fairly good time for the rest of the afternoon, and we were just beginning to think about stopping for the night when we came to the clearing. The dragon stopped right at the edge of it, very abruptly. Fortunately, Shiara and I were back far enough to stop before we ran into it or stepped on its tail or something. Bumping into a dragon is not a particularly good way to end a day.

118 Patricia C. Wrede

"What's the matter now?" asked Shiara.

"This looks just like that last clearing," the dragon said. "The one that had the castle in it."

"You mean we've been going in circles?" Shiara said.

"No!" said the dragon. "I know my way around the Enchanted Forest better than that! I just don't like this."

"I don't see why you're worried," Shiara said. "You're not the one who got turned into a statue."

"Well, if you think it's fun to go banging into something you can't see, you go first," said the dragon.

I put my hand on the hilt of my sword, and felt a nice, strong rumble, like a cart full of bricks on a bumpy road. There was definitely something in the clearing, or at least close by. I said so.

"If it's invisible, I don't want anything to do with it," Shiara said decidedly. "Can't we just go around?"

"No," said the dragon grumpily. "I want to know who's putting all these invisible things in my shortcut. If there's another one here, I'm going to find out about it." It stalked cautiously out into the clearing, heading straight through the middle.

Nothing happened. The dragon walked all the way across, then turned and looked at us. "Are you sure there's something here? I can't find anything."

I touched the sword again. "It feels like there is," I said. I looked at Shiara. She looked dubiously across the clearing. "Hurry up," said the dragon.

I sighed and started forward. I kept one hand on the hilt of my sword, just in case, and I walked across the same part of the clearing the dragon had. Shiara shook her head and started around the edge of the clearing.

I got about five steps. Then there was a whooshing noise and a wall of flames shot up around me, very hot and bright. I yelled, because I couldn't see where I was going anymore, and I yanked at my sword. I think I had some vague idea that the sword might be able to keep me from burning to death; I certainly couldn't see to fight anything.

Something hit me in the middle of my back just as the sword came out of its sheath. I felt something from the sword; it wasn't a tingle, it was more like a wave of anti-

Talking to Dragons 119

cipation followed very closely by a surge of disappointment. I was so surprised I nearly dropped it. Then I realized that it wouldn't matter if I did drop it, because I was lying on the ground. I was also much cooler man I had been a minute ago, and someone was pounding on me.

"Stop it!" I said. The someone sat back, and I saw that it was Shiara.

"Are you all right?" Shiara said.

"I think so," I said. "Why were you pounding on me?"

"Your clothes were on fire," Shiara said. "I was trying to put them out. If I'd known you were going to fuss about it, I'd have let them bum."

I apologized and thanked her, then looked around. Shiara and I were sitting on the ground just inside a ring of fire. In the center of the ring was a short, round building with a pointed roof; it wasn't quite tall enough to call a tower, but it wasn't short enough to call a house, either. I moved away from the flames, which were uncomfortably warm, and looked at Shiara. "What happened?"

"How should I know? One second you were walking across the clearing, and the next second there was all this fire and you were yelling," Shiara said. "And when I tried to shove you out of it, we both got in here instead, and that thing was sitting there." She waved at the not quite tower.

"At least it isn't invisible," I offered. Shiara gave me a disgusted look, but she didn't say anything.

"Hello?" called the dragon's voice from the other side of the wall of fire. "Are you there?"

"We're here," I called back "Both of us."

"How did you do that?" the dragon shouted.

"I don't know," I said. "And I don't think I want to stay here to find out." I picked myself up off the ground and put the sword back in its sheath. "I think maybe we'd better go," I said to Shiara. "Before something comes out of that house."

"It isn't a house," Shiara said. "But I think I agree with you."

"Achoo!" said the dragon from the other side of the fire.

"Just a minute, here!" a voice said behind me.

I turned around. A medium-sized man was standing about

120 Patricia C. Wrede

ten feet away, leaning on a staff that was about three feet taller than he was. He had black hair and three rings on each hand, and he was frowning irritably at Shiara and me."

"Oh, rats," said Shiara disgustedly. "Another wizard!"

"You," said the man, ignoring her statement completely, "are trespassing. I don't know how you got in here, but it was a great mistake for you to do so."

"We didn't exactly do it on purpose," I said. "We were just trying to get across the clearing."

"Young man, there is a reason why I surround my home with a wall of fire," the wizard said. "And the reason is that I do not wish to be disturbed. I wish to know how you penetrated it, or I would not be wasting my time talking with you."

"I'm a fire-witch, that's how!" Shiara said. "And if you don't want to be disturbed, you ought to be more careful with your stupid wall. We would have gone right by if it hadn't jumped up all over Daystar when he tried to cross the clearing!"

"A fire-witch?" the man said. He gave Shiara an extremely odd look. "You haven't mislaid an invisible castle recently, have you?"

"No!" said Shiara. "It isn't mine!"

The wizard looked even angrier. "You know of it!"

"Well, sort of," I said. "It isn't ours, but we ran into it this morning."

"Did you," said the wizard. He sounded skeptical and very dangerous. I decided I didn't want to talk about the castle anymore.

"I think we ought to be going now," I said. "We're really very sorry to have bothered you."

"I'm not!" Shiara said.

"Shiara!"

"Well, I'm not," Shiara said. "I think he ought to apologize to us, not the other way around. And anyway, I'm not apologizing to any wizard, especially not one that messes around with invisible castles!"

The man with the staff frowned, but this time he looked more thoughtful than angry. "What is your complaint against wizards?"

"Ha!" said Shiara. "You should know."

"No," said the man, "I should not. I am not a wizard."

"AcAoo/" came the dragon's voice, and the wall of the fire bulged inward on that side.

"Excuse me, but if you're not a wizard, why are you carrying a staff?" I said. "And why is the dragon sneezing?"

The man looked startled. "Dragon? You travel with a dragon?"

"No, it travels with us," I said. "Does it make a difference/ .f"

"Perhaps," the man said. He looked at the wall of fire and made a pass with his staff. The flames began to die, and a moment later we could see the clearing again.

THE DRAGON WAS still sneezing in medium-sized puffs of flame. The man with the staff looked at it closely and shook his head. "That certainly is a dragon." He made another pass with his staff.

The staff vanished, and the dragon stopped sneezing abruptly. The dragon looked extremely surprised; it sniffed a couple of times in an experimental way, as if it were expecting to start sneezing again any minute. I was surprised, too. I mean, wizards never let go of their staffs, not willingly, anyway.

The man bowed politely to the dragon. "I must apologize for inconveniencing you," he said. "I offer you greetings and welcome to my home, and I wish you good fortune when you leave."

"What?" said the dragon.

The man looked a little startled and peered at the dragon more closely. "Oh, I see," he said after a moment. "Well, you're welcome; come and make yourself comfortable."

Shiara scowled at him and bent to pick up Nightwiteh, who had come running toward her as soon as the flames had died. The dragon looked suspiciously at the man.

"I don't like wizards," it said. "And I don't like people

123

124 Patricia C. Wrede

who put invisible things in the middle of my shortcut."

"I am not a wizard," the man said with a sigh. "And my tower has been here for years, and it isn't invisible. Now, come in and talk. There hasn't been a dragon by for a long time, and I'm a bit behind on the news."

"If you're not a wizard, who are you?" Shiara said, petting Nightwitch and glaring at the man.

"I'm a magician," the man said. "And my name is Telemain."

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"Mrrow," said Nightwitch, and started purring loudly.

Telemain looked at the kitten, and suddenly he began to laugh. He had a nice laugh, sort of deep and friendly. I started thinking that I might be able to like him after all, even if his firewall had nearly burned me to a cinder.

"I don't believe I have ever seen a group quite like this one," Telemain said when he finished laughing. "Please, tell me who you all are."

I introduced everyone, and Telemain nodded courteously to each of us. "Welcome to my home," he said.

"Some welcome!" Shiara said. "You nearly got Daystar killed, and you started the dragon sneezing again. And how come the dragon was allergic to you if you aren't a wizard?"

"Dragons aren't allergic to wizards," Telemain said, sounding surprised. "What gave you that idea?"

"I did!" the dragon said. It came forward and sat down emphatically, right next to me. "All dragons are allergic to wizards. I should know: I sneeze every time I get near one." It eyed Telemain belligerently.

"Oh, I don't doubt that at all," Telemain said. "But I am afraid it isn't wizards you're allergic to; it's their staffs. You stopped sneezing as soon as I got rid of mine, didn't you?"

The dragon looked startled. "I did, didn't I?" it said after a minute.

"If you aren't a wizard, what are you doing with a wizard's staff?" Shiara asked.

Telemain raised his eyebrows. "What business is it of yours, may I ask?"

"We've been having some trouble with wizards," I said

Talking to Dragons 125

before Shiara could answer. I didn't want her to make him angry; we had enough people mad at us already.

"Really," Telemain said. He looked as if he were going to laugh again. "All of you?"

"Well, mainly just Shiara and me," I said. "We've been sort of worried about them. Most of them are after Shiara," I added.

"What would the Society of Wizards want with a fire-witch?" Telemain said. "I can see that I shall have to invite

you in, if only to hear your tale."

"How do you know about the society?" Shiara said angrily. "And why should we trust a wizard, anyway?"

"Anyone who knows much about magic can tell you're a fire-witch, and the only reason I can think of for a fire-witch to have several wizards after her is if she has done something to offend the Society of Wizards," Telemain said. He still sounded amused. "And for the third time at least, I am a magician, not a wizard."

"What's the difference?" Shiara demanded.

"Magicians deal with many ways of magic," Telemain said. "Wizards with only one. Now, will you come in and sit down?"

Shiara was still looking at him doubtfully. Telemain smiled. "Will an oath content you? If you mean no harm, I am not your enemy, and I will do you no harm while you are my guests, save in self-defense. I swear by the sword."

I felt a kind of popping at my side, even though I wasn't touching the sword, and a ripple ran through the clearing, like a shimmer of light in the air. I thought it kept on going, out into the forest, but I couldn't be certain. Shiara started and dropped Nightwitch, who landed on her feet with a yowl. The dragon stretched its neck; it looked almost as if it were trying to purr. Telemain suddenly looked very intense.

"That is the way of it, then?" he said when the ripple passed. "I don't think I blame you for your caution." He looked pointedly at my sword.

Shiara scowled again, but I thought she looked a little more doubtful than the last time. "If you're so smart..." she began, and stopped. Nightwitch was rubbing against

126 Patricia C. Wrede

Telemain's leg and purring. "Nightwitch?" said Shiara.

"An intriguing name for a cat," Telemain said, bending over to pick up Nightwitch. "Even more interesting for a kitten. Where did you come by her?"

"She was a present," Shiara said grudgingly. "From a witch named--"

"Morwen?" said Telemain. Nightwitch started to purr. "I suspected as much. Now, will you come in? Or do you wish to continue this discussion where anyone may hear?"

We went in. The door of Telemain's home looked like an ordinary, normal-sized door, but it couldn't have been because the dragon fit through it without any trouble. The room inside was made of stone and very bare. In the center of the floor were two iron staircases that twisted around each other in a spiral and disappeared into the ceiling. The whole place seemed much taller from the inside; if I hadn't seen it before we came in, I would have been sure we were



in a tower.

As the door closed behind the dragon, Telemain waved his hand. A table and three chairs materialized beside the stairs. "Sit down," said Telemain, "and tell me more about yourselves."

We sat down, except for the dragon, who sort of curled itself around the outer edge of the room. I started explaining about Mother and Antorell and everything that had happened in the Enchanted Forest. I wouldn't have mentioned the Sword of the Sleeping King at all if I hadn't been pretty sure from the way he looked at it that Telemain already knew something about it. Too many people seemed to be interested in it; I didn't think it was a good idea to keep talking about it.

There wasn't much I could do about Telemain, though. The questions he asked made it pretty clear that I was right:

he did know something about the sword. Maybe more than I did; he sounded like he knew exactly what answers he expected, and when I told him about the voice that had said, "All hail the Bearer of the Sword," he nodded in satisfaction.

Then I explained how Shiara and I had met, and why the wizards were after her, and about the one who'd tried to get us at the stream. Shiara frowned at me, but she didn't

Talking to Dragons 127

interrupt. When I told him about meeting Morwen, Telemain seemed very interested. "I haven't seen Morwen in years," he said. "How is she?"

"You know Morwen?" Shiara said.

"We grew up together," Telemain said shortly, and if Nightwitch hadn't started purring again, there would have been an awkward silence.

After a minute, I cleared my throat and kept going. Tetemain asked a lot of questions about the things the Sword of the Sleeping King had done, but he didn't seem particularly interested in the wizards. He wasn't interested in the Princess at all. Then I told him about finding the invisible castle and the fire-witch.

"So that's how you knew about it," Telemain said. "I was wondering about that."

"That's how we knew," Shiara said. "How did you know?"

"The castle landed in my clearing sometime around noon," Telemain said dryly. "I was understandably curious as to why someone would go to all the trouble of making a castle invisible and then drop it on top of a magician who can't help noticing it."

"It's not there now," Shiara said.

"Of course not! What would I want with an invisible castle? When I found no one home, I cleaned the place up

a bit and got rid of it."

"Cleaned it up?" I said, puzzled.

"The most recent owner had a number of unattractive habits," Telemain said even more dryly than before. "Turning people into statues was one of them; there were others. I don't believe you would be at all interested in the details."

"Oh." He was right; I didn't really want to know about it. Telemain looked at Shiara again.

"I believe I owe you an apology," he said. "I knew that the castle was the property of a fire-witch, and I'm afraid that when you showed up, I thought you had some connection with it."

"Well, I don't, but I suppose I can see why you might have gotten mad," Shiara said. She sounded a lot friendlier than she had before; I think she would have been friendly to anyone who didn't like that other fire-witch. Then she

128 Patricia C. Wrede

frowned. "How did the castle get into your clearing, anyway?"

Telemain shrugged. "As far as I can tell, it was designed to move around the Enchanted Forest more or less randomly. It's a rather unusual spell to put on a castle, particularly an invisible one; it's too easy to be outside when the castle moves, and get left behind."

"Then why on earth would anyone put a stupid spell like that on a castle?"

"Presumably this fire-witch didn't expect to have any problems finding the castle again. I don't believe it occurred to her that someone else might find it first." He smiled. "I left a few surprises for her; somehow, I doubt that she'll be pleased."

"Oh, that's all right," the dragon said. "Daystar got rid of her."

Telemain looked at me. "Really. How did you manage that?"

"She threw some sort of spell at me, but Nightwitch scratched her, so she missed," I said. "And after that, I had the sword out."

"You used the Sword of the Sleeping King on a fire-witch?" Telemain said. He sounded somewhere between shocked and horrified.

"I couldn't think of anything else that might work," I said apologetically. "And it did work, sort of. I mean, it got rid of the fire-witch."

"She went up in smoke," the dragon said with considerable satisfaction. "I watched."

"She went up in smoke," Telemain repeated in tones of fascination. "And what were you doing while this was going on?"

"I was trying to hang on to the sword," I said. "It was glowing red, and my hands felt like they were burning or something, so it was sort of hard to do. But as soon as the fire-witch was gone, it stopped."

"You are extremely fortunate," Telemain said. "I don't recommend that you try that again. Stick to wizards; that's what the sword was meant for."

Talking to Dragons 129

"It was?" said Shiara. "How do you know? What else does it do?"

Telemain looked at her. "Magicians know many kinds of magic." He turned back to me. "Please, continue."

I was curious about what the sword did, too, but Telemain obviously didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't ask. Instead, I explained about fixing Shiara and not finding the castle and meeting the second elf. Telemain listened carefully, then shook his head.

"So the war is beginning again," he said, half to himself. "I had best make my own preparations."

"War?" Shiara and I said together.

Telemain looked up, almost as if he had forgotten we were there. "The war between the dragons and the wizards," he said in the tones of someone trying to be patient.

The dragon, who had been falling asleep, suddenly came awake. "War with the wizards?"

"What else can it be?" Telemain said a trifle crossly. "The elves are choosing sides, the dragons are restless, the wizards are coming into the Enchanted Forest in large numbers, and the Sword of the Sleeping King has returned. What more do you need to know? It is obvious!"

"What does the Sword of the Sleeping King have to do with a war between the dragons and the wizards?" I asked before the dragon could take offense.

"The sword is what started the war in the first place," Telemain said, and then refused to say any more. "If Cimorene didn't see fit to explain, I certainly won't," he said. "When you meet Kazul, I am sure she will tell you whatever you need to know. I'm afraid I don't have time at the moment; I must see to things at once, if we are to win this war at last."

"Who do you mean, 'we'?" Shiara said suspiciously.

"The dragons," Telemain said, "and the rest of us who follow the sword. Now, if you will excuse me?" He rose and started for the stairs.

"Wait a minute!" Shiara said. "What about us?"

"What? Oh, of course," Telemain said. He waved his hand again and muttered something, and suddenly the table

130 Patricia C. Wrede

was full of plates and bowls of food. I jumped. Telemain didn't seem to notice. "Help yourselves while I am gone," he said. "I don't expect to be long."

He turned away and went up one of the iron staircases. Shiara and I looked at each other. "Now what do we do?" Shiara said.

"I think I'm going to eat," I said. "Would you like something?"

Shiara snorted, but she reached for one of the bowls. There was plenty for all of us, including Nightwitch and the dragon. About the time we finished, Telemain came back.

"I was right," he said to no one in particular. Then he looked at me. "I think you should all stay here for the night," he said. "It will be much safer for everyone, and it will give me time to look into things a little more. You've been extremely lucky so far; there's no reason to take any more chances until you must."

I started to nod, then looked at Shiara. Shiara looked at me, then looked at Nightwitch, who was curled into a small ball on Telemain's chair. She looked back at me. "Let's stay, then," she said.

"You will find rooms upstairs, on the second floor," Telemain said. "Just pick one and go in." He turned to the dragon. "I think you would be more comfortable down here."

"I think you're right," said the dragon, eyeing the iron staircases a little dubiously.

"And thank you very much for your hospitality," I said.

Telemain nodded. Shiara and I started for the stairs. Shiara got there ahead of me and started climbing, but she didn't get anywhere. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"There's something wrong with this stupid staircase!" Shiara said. "I keep trying to climb up, but I don't go anywhere!"

Telemain, who had been talking quietly to the dragon, turned. "I'm sorry; I should have warned you. You'll have to take the other staircase. The one you're trying to use only works going down."

"That's ridiculous!" said Shiara. "How can a staircase

only work going in one direction?"

"He's a magician," I said.

"Oh, all right."

We didn't have any trouble getting up the other stairway. Telemain's tower really was a lot taller than it looked from the outside, because the stairs kept going after they got to the second floor. Shiara and I didn't climb any farther, though. We got off on the landing at the second floor and looked around.

We were standing on a narrow circle of wooden floor around the hole where the two staircases came through. Around the edge were six identical wooden doors. It looked even barer than the room below had when we arrived. "Well, he said to just go in," Shiara said.

Each of us picked a door and opened it. The rooms on the other side were identical; they looked very comfortable and not at all bare. They each had a bed, a table, a lighted lamp in a bracket on the wall, a padded chair, and a small set of drawers with a mirror above it. Shiara looked thoughtful. "I wonder if he keeps lights going in all these rooms?"

"He might," I said. "I mean, he is a magician. Does it matter?"

Shiara glared at me and went into the room she'd picked, slamming the door behind her. I stood there for a moment, wondering whether to knock on the door and apologize. I decided not to; I didn't even know what to apologize for. I decided to wait until morning to talk to Shiara, since by then she probably wouldn't be mad anymore.

I kept the Sword of the Sleeping King with me all night. It was a little uncomfortable sleeping that way, but I felt better knowing where it was. It wasn't that I didn't trust Telemain; I was just getting more and more worried about the sword. Everyone I met seemed to know about it, or want to know about it, or something. I spent a lot of time thinking about it instead of sleeping.

Telemain served breakfast the next morning on his magic table. He was very quiet while we were eating, but as soon as we finished he looked at me and said, "I have watched

132 Patricia C. Wrede

the Enchanted Forest all night, and there are some things you should know, but I do not wish to detain you against your will."

"What things?" Shiara demanded.

Telemain smiled slightly. "I fear you will have some difficulty in reaching the castle," he said. "I found no less than twelve wizards searching the area between it and you."

"Oh, great," Shiara said disgustedly. "Just what we need: more wizards!"

"I don't think it's very good," the dragon said. "Why do you?"

"I don't," Shiara said.

"Then why did you say so?"

"What can we do about them?" I asked Telemain.

"I think you can avoid them if you go through the Caves of Chance," Telemain replied.

WE ALL STARED. "Ha!" Shiara said finally. "The Caves of Chance are even more dangerous than the wizards!"

"I don't think so," Telemain said. "I have been through them, and they're not as bad as most people think. Furthermore, there is an entrance to the caves within half a day's travel, and an exit that is very close to the castle. And once you are inside the caves, the wizards will not be able to find you."

"Why not?" Shiara said.

"The Caves of Chance do not welcome wizards' magic," Telemain said.

"Can you give us directions?" I said. Telemain nodded and pulled a large map out of his sleeve. I was extremely curious; I'd never seen a map of the Enchanted Forest before. Most people don't bother to even try making maps, because things change so fast that an ordinary map is only good for a few days. This one must have been magic, because it seemed to be fairly accurate. At least, all the things Shiara and I had seen were in the right places.

Telemain showed us where his tower was and where the castle was, and he pointed out the places where he'd found wizards. I didn't ask how he knew they were there. Then he showed us where the entrance to the caves was. It really

133

134 Patricia C. Wrede

did look a lot closer and safer than trying to get by all those wizards. Even Shiara looked less doubtful.

Then Telemain turned the map over, and on the back was a map of the Caves of Chance. He went over the routes from the entrance to the exit we wanted and what to do about some of the things we might run into inside. I was very interested; I knew that trolk are allergic to milk, but I hadn't known that rock snakes like mirrors enough that they'll stop squeezing someone in order to look at their reflections. He also told us to hold anything we really didn't want to lose in one hand until we were out of the caves.

When Telemain was satisfied that we knew our way as well as he could make us, he rolled the map up and put it

back in his sleeve. We went outside to say good-bye.

"When you meet Kazul, tell her I will be coming for the battle," Telemain said. "She should be expecting you; I sent a spell to her last night to let her know that you're on your way."

"I'll remember," I said. "And thank you again for your help."

"Yes," said Shiara. I looked at her, a little surprised, but she was watching Telemain with an odd look on her face. "I think I ought to apologize to you," she said finally. "I wasn't very nice last night."

This time I really did stare, but she didn't seem to notice. Telemain bowed. "Neither of us was blameless," he said. "I shall forget it, if you will."

Shiara nodded and turned to me. "Let's go, then."

I shut my mouth and picked up the bundle Morwen had given me. Shiara already had hers. We waved good-bye to Telemain and started off into the forest again.

Nothing much happened all morning. Shiara and I were both nervous anyway, thinking of all those wizards ahead of us. The dragon didn't seem bothered, though, and Nightwitch certainly wasn't. We found the first few landmarks Telemain had told us about, and we were fairly close to the entrance to the Caves of Chance when the dragon stopped and demanded lunch.

As soon as the dragon mentioned food, Shiara and I

Talking to Dragons 135

realized that we were hungry, too. We started looking for a good place to sit down and eat, and we found one almost immediately. It was a small clearing with a huge tree lying on the ground in the middle of it.

The dragon wrapped itself around a medium-sized tree in front of us; it said it was much more comfortable than lying on the ground. Nightwitch wandered around investigating the interesting holes and crannies around the tree. Shiara and I sat down and started eating.

"How much farther is it to the castle?" Shiara asked the dragon, handing it a slice of gingerbread.

"Oh, not very far," the dragon said. "About another day, if we weren't going through the caves. I've never been in the caves, so I don't know how long that will take."

"I thought you said this was a shortcut," Shiara said.

"It is a shortcut," the dragon said in a hurt tone. "How was I supposed to know a fire-witch was going to get in the way? Not to mention an elf and a magician."

"Do you think Kazul will tell us anything about the sword when we get there?" I said. I was beginning to wonder;

nobody else seemed willing to explain anything.

"I'm sure she will," the dragon said reassuringly. "That is, if you're polite to her. Kazul is very particular about... about... ahh... ach.. "

Shiara and I dropped our lunches and ducked hastily to either side. "Achoo!" said the dragon. A large spurt of flame shot across the clearing, just missing us, and the dragon's tree shook. "Achoo! Oh, bother. Achoo!"

"Daystar!" Shiara shouted. "Over here!"

I ran around behind the dragon, who was now sneezing almost continuously. I pulled out my sword as I went. When my hand touched the hilt, I felt the same jangling that I'd gotten from Antorell earlier. Then I came around the tree, and even before Shiara pointed, I saw the wizards. There were two of them right in front of Shiara, leaning on their staffs and looking from Shiara to the dragon and back.

"Hurry up," one of them said nervously. "We don't want this to get out of hand.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait," another voice said from

136

Patricia C. Wrede

behind him. The first wizard jumped, and Antorell stepped out of the bushes. "You see, I want him, too."

"Urn, can't we discuss this somewhere else?" said the nervous wizard, eyeing the dragon.

"Oh, you needn't worry about that," Antorell said, following his gaze. He smiled nastily. "I came prepared." He held up his free hand so that all of us could see the spray of spikey, saw-edged purple leaves he was holding.

"Dragonsbane," he said unnecessarily.

The other wizards relaxed a little. "Such forethought," murmured the tall one. He exchanged glances with his companion, then bowed to Antorell. "Under the circumstances, we will be happy to split the reward with you."

"I am afraid that is out of the question," Antorell said over the dragon's sneezes. "The boy and his sword are mine."

"The boy!" said the nervous wizard. "But—" The tall one frowned at him, and he stopped.

The tall wizard turned back to Antorell. "As you say, the boy is yours. I trust you have no objection if we take the girl?"

Antorell frowned. He turned toward Shiara and stared at her for a minute, then shrugged. "She's no use to me. Of course I have no objection."

I started moving very, very slowly toward Shiara, so that when the wizards starting throwing spells at us I could try



and stop them with the sword. The wizards didn't notice, and neither did Shiara. By the time the wizards finished deciding what to do with us, I was almost over to her. "It's settled, then," Antorell said. "We help each other. The girl first?"

"Ah, why not start with the dragon?" the nervous wizard said.

Antorell smiled condescendingly. "Very well." He stepped forward and started muttering over the dragonsbane. Right away the dragon started yelling.

"Yow!" it said. "Achoo! I hate wizards. Ouch! Achoo! Help!"

"You stop that!" Shiara said to Antorell. The wizards

Talking to Dragons 137

ignored her, and Antorell kept mumbling.

I started forward; if I could knock the dragonsbane out of Antorell's hand, the spell would stop. I wasn't sure whether it would be completely broken, but at least he wouldn't be able to hurt the dragon anymore. Unfortunately, I'd forgotten about the other wizards. I didn't even realize one of them had done something until my feet stuck to the ground and suddenly I couldn't walk forward anymore. I almost lost my balance; it was very disconcerting. Antorell was still out of reach.

I took a quick glance back over my shoulder. The dragon was sneezing much too hard now to be able to say anything at all. It was also starting to lose its hold on the tree; I could see its coils going slack. Here and there, its scales were turning pink around the edges. Even the tree was looking wilted.

"Shiara!" I yelled. "Get the dragonsbane!" I didn't think I could get loose in time, but the wizards wouldn't be able to stop a fire-witch. I didn't wait to see what she did. I leaned forward a little and tried to lay part of the Sword of the Sleeping King across my feet. It hadn't helped Shiara when she was a statue, but this was a wizard's spell, not a fire-witch's spell, and Telemain had said the sword was meant to be used on wizards. Besides, I couldn't think of anything else.

It worked. I straightened up just in time to see a little tongue of flame shoot up from Antorell's hand. Antorell yelled and dropped the dragonsbane, which was burning brightly. Before it even hit the ground, there was nothing left of the plant except ashes. I looked behind me. Shiara was standing with a surprised look on her face and one finger pointing at Antorell. The dragon was still sneezing, but the green was already starting to come back to its scales. I sighed in relief; I sort of liked the dragon.

"This is the assistance you give us?" the tall wizard said to Antorell, who was brushing ashes off the front of his robe. "The dragon still lives!"

"Did I say anything about killing it?" Antorell said. I got the feeling he was trying to sound haughty; he only managed

138 Patricia C. Wrede

to sound annoyed. "You need have no more fear of it; it will take some time to regain its strength, and by then we shall be finished. What next?"

"The girl, I think," said the tall wizard. "That is, if you're sure you can handle her?"

Antorell glared. "That is the least of my problems," he said grandly.

"Ha!" said Shiara loudly. I moved back over to her, holding the sword in front of me. The three wizards looked at us, then at each other. "Let us begin," said the tall one.

All three of them raised their staffs, but instead of pointing them directly at us, they brought them together, so that they made a kind of star about a foot from their ends. There was a bright flash as the three staffs touched, and I felt a shock from my sword. I jumped, and suddenly I realized that I could feel the forest. The magic of the forest, I mean;

it was all around me, waiting. I felt almost as if the whole Enchanted Forest were watching me.

Right in front of me, I could feel the wizards' power growing and building. There was a kind of pattern in it that kept getting clearer and more complicated, and I knew I had to do something about it before the wizards finished. I stepped forward and swung the sword right through the middle of the pattern.

I felt a huge jolt of power from the sword, but it didn't hurt the way the fire-witch's spell had; in fact, it didn't hurt at all. The pattern collapsed in an invisible tangle. Antorell's eyes started to narrow; the other two wizards just looked stunned. And then something exploded.

I couldn't see anything. It wasn't that things had gone dark, and it wasn't that the light had blinded me. It was more as if the whole world had suddenly become invisible, so there was nothing left to see. There was a rushing noise all around me, and I felt as if I were floating. I heard a chorus of voices cry, "All hail the Wielder of the Sword!" and then the noise and the voices vanished, and I was standing in the clearing with the Sword of the Sleeping King shining in my hand and three very surprised wizards in front of me.

I stared at the wizards. The wizards stared at me. Antorell

140 Patricia C. Wrede

recovered first. "Enough of this!" he cried. He started to raise his staff, and right then the ground in front of him

humped up a little bit. A second later, a tree shot up about twelve feet into the air. It reminded me of someone opening an umbrella very quickly. A moment later, it burst into bloom with a sound like a hundred little bells tinkling.

Antorell looked even more surprised than before; then he scowled angrily and pointed his staff at me again. The tall wizard next to him grabbed his arm. "Wait, fool! Don't you know what that sword is?"

"What it is?" Antorell's eyes sparked at the other wizard. "It is mine! I will have it!"

"You will be dead, you mean," the tall wizard said, but he let go of Antorell's arm. "This is a matter for the whole Society of Wizards; there may still be time to stop him if we can bring them quickly enough."

"More wizards? Achooo! Oh, no you don't! Achoo! Oh, drat, achoo!" said the dragon. It dove out from its tree, unwinding itself like a spool of string, very quickly. Its head shot past me, and I got a fleeting glimpse of green scales and golden eyes and a very, very red tongue. One of the wizards yelled, and the dragon sneezed again. I jumped forward just in time to see all three of the wizards vanish hastily. Antorell was in the middle; he looked a little white and he had one hand clutched around a dark, wet-looking spot on his other arm.

I looked at the dragon. It snapped its teeth together twice, swallowed something, and sat back, looking very pleased with itself. "Wizards," it announced, "taste much better than elves."

I swallowed hard and decided I didn't really want to finish eating lunch. The dragon looked at Shiara. Shiara scowled.

"Don't you look at me like that!" she said. "I'm not a wizard, I'm a fire-witch."

The dragon looked thoroughly shocked. "But I wouldn't eat you!" it said. "You're my friend; it wouldn't be polite at all!"

Shiara looked suspiciously at the dragon, then nodded. "I just wanted to make sure you remembered," she said.

Talking to Dragons 141

"I think we'd better get going," I said. "Those wizards sounded like they were going to come back with more, and now they're after both of us."

"Oh, terrific," said Shiara. "Let's go, then. Where's Nightwitch?"

"Mrow," said a kitten-voice from somewhere above me.

I looked up. Nightwitch was perched on a branch of the tree that had sprouted up in the middle of the fight. She was washing her paws. She stopped and looked down at me for a second, then went back to washing.

"Nightwitch, come down!" Shiara said. "Those wizards might come back any minute!"

Nightwitch ignored her. The dragon came over and peered curiously at the tree. "Where did this come from?" it asked.

"It grew," I said. "I think you were sneezing when it happened."

"Kazul is going to be surprised about this!" the dragon said happily. "Two new trees in a couple of days!"

"What are you talking about?" Shiara said. "It's just a tree!"

"No, it isn't," the dragon said in an offended tone. "It's a new tree. And it's the second new tree I've seen in two days, so it's important. The other one hit me on the nose," it added in an aggrieved tone.

"You mean it's been a long time since there were new trees?" I asked.

The dragon nodded. "Kazul mentioned it once; she sounded worried about it. / think they're a nuisance, popping up like that."

"But where do they come from?" Shiara said. "And why do they show up when we—" She stopped short, and we looked at each other.

"Daystar," said Shiara finally. "It's the wizards."

"It can't be," I said. "What about the first one?"

"What are you talking about?" said the dragon.

"The trees," Shiara said. "Both of them grew in places where a wizard tried to throw a spell at us. But there wasn't any tree when the first wizard tried to drown us, so it can't be wizards."

I looked down, trying to think, and saw the Sword of

142 Patricia C. Wrede

the Sleeping King in my hand. "It's the sword!" I said. "It stopped Antorell's spell the first time, and a little while later a tree sprouted. This time it stopped a bigger spell, and we got a bigger tree. It didn't stop any spells when the first wizard made that water monster, so no new trees grew. It has to be the sword."

"You didn't get a tree when you fought the fire-witch," Shiara said, but she sounded half-convinced.

"Telemain said the sword was meant for wizards," I said.

"It probably only does that for wizards' spells."

"Your sword grows trees?" the dragon said.

"I suppose it sounds a little silly," I said.

"Mmmm-ow!" said Nightwitch. We all looked up. The kitten launched herself at Shiara, who just barely managed to catch her. I remembered that the wizards were going to

come back, so I suggested that we leave. Shiara scowled until I mentioned the wizards, then nodded. We picked up our things and started off again.

THE ENTRANCE TO the Caves of Chance wasn't very difficult to find. That worried me a little, partly because Antorell and the other wizards would probably figure out where we had gone, and partly because it isn't usually that easy to find something in the Enchanted Forest. Especially if you're looking for it.

Not that the way into the Caves of Chance looked as if it could be moved around easily. It was a large, smooth, circular hole in the ground, with moss growing right up to the edge of it, and it was very dark. The dragon and Shiara and I stood around the edge and stared down into it for a while.

"How are we going to get down there?" Shiara said finally. "I can't even tell how deep it is."

"We'll have to use the blankets Morwen gave us," I said. "We can tie them together and climb down."

"What about me?" said the dragon. "/ can't climb down blankets."

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe we'll think of something once we know how far down it is."

"What if you can't think of anything?"

"Hey!" Shiara had opened her bundle to get the blankets

143

144 Patricia C. Wrede

out, and now she was staring down into it as if she'd never seen it before. "Daystar, look at this!"

The dragon looked a little put out. It usually isn't a good idea to interrupt someone's conversation with a dragon, but for once I decided not to say anything, because I was glad Shiara had yelled. I didn't know what was going to happen if I couldn't think of a way to get the dragon into the Caves of Chance, and I didn't really want to say so. I said, "Excuse me," to the dragon and went over to Shiara. "What is it?"

"This," said Shiara. She pulled a coil of rope out of the top of the bundle. "It wasn't here before."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Of course I'm sure!" Shiara said. "Look in your pack; maybe you have one, too."

Shiara was right: there was another coil of rope in my bundle, along with a little silver lamp and a set of flints, and I didn't remember seeing any of them in there before.

We tied the ropes together, then tied one end around the tree closest to the hole. The dragon watched, grumbling the whole time. When we finished, Shiara and I argued about who was going to climb down first. We wound up tossing a coin, and I won.

I stuck the flints and the lamp into my belt, right next to the Sword of the Sleeping King, where I could find them easily. Then I lowered myself over the edge of the hole and started to climb down the rope. It wasn't easy; the rope kept twisting around, which made me dizzy, and I kept bumping into the side of the hole. I had to keep going, though, so I did. I'd gotten about seven feet from the top of the hole when the lights went out.

I stopped climbing for a minute and just hung there. I couldn't see anything except a circle of sky right above me, and that looked much farther away than it should have. Then I realized that I had to start climbing one way or another because my arms were going to get tired very quickly if I didn't move. I looked up at the sky; I knew I'd only come down a couple of feet, and it shouldn't be difficult to climb back up. On the other hand, I knew it could be extremely dangerous to start things and not finish them in the Enchanted Forest. I started down again.

Talking to Dragons

145

Climbing in the dark is not pleasant. I couldn't see where I was going; I couldn't even see the rope. It seemed like years before my feet finally touched something flat below me. I felt around to make sure what I'd found wasn't just a narrow ledge, then let go of the rope and called to Shiara that I was at the bottom.

The next thing I did was to get out the lamp and light it. I had a little trouble, since I was doing everything by feel, but I finally got it going. At first all I could see was the tiny yellow flame; then the lamp made a popping noise and suddenly I could see the cave.

Actually, it was more like a tunnel. Where I was standing, the walls were a smooth, speckled stone, but as soon as the tunnel got out from under the hole the walls looked rough. It was cool and dry, and it looked as if no one had been there in a long, long time.

"That doesn't look so bad," said the voice above me. I looked up. The dragon was peering over the edge of the hole. "I can jump that far."

"I think you should wait until Shiara climbs down," I said. "Then you can untie the rope and bring it with you."

Shiara's head appeared beside the dragon's. "You're right; it doesn't look nearly so bad when you can see the bottom."

"If you drop the bundles Morwen gave us, I can catch them," I said. "Then you can climb down and we can get started."

"All right," Shiara said. Her head vanished for a few seconds, then reappeared along with a pair of hands and a bundle. "Ready? Catch."

Nightwitch was more of a problem than the bundles; I got a few scratches catching her. As soon as I had everything, Shiara climbed down. We picked up our things and moved into the tunnel while the dragon took care of the rope, and then the dragon jumped down. "That was easy!" it said.

I thought about sliding down a rope in the dark and didn't say anything. Shiara looked from me to the dragon and back. "Well? Are you going to stand there until the wizards show up again?"

Patricia C. Wrede

146

"We have to decide what we're going to hold on to first,"

I said.

"Daystar, we have to carry everything ourselves anyway," Shiara said. "What difference does it make?"

"I don't think that's what Telemain meant," I said. "There are all sorts of ways to lose things in the Caves of Chance if you aren't paying attention, but if you have something in your hand all the time and never set it down, it's less likely to disappear."

"If you really believe that, you'd better carry the sword," Shiara said. "The only thing I don't want to lose is Nightwitch, and she can take care of herself."

"You're right," I said doubtfully. I didn't really want to march through the Caves of Chance with the Sword of the Sleeping King in my hand, but I certainly didn't want to lose it, either. Finally I decided to take the sheath off my belt and carry the sword and sheath together. I had some trouble doing it, though, and Shiara had to help.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" she said. "Why can't you just wear it?"

"Magic things are particularly easy to lose here," I said. "And Mother told me to take care of this sword." I tucked the sheathed sword under my arm and picked up the silver lamp and the bundle Morwen had given me. "Let's go."

The tunnel slanted down for a long way, then leveled. Every now and then we came to a dark opening in the wall that led to a side passage, but we ignored all of them. Telemain had been very specific about that. Not that they were particularly tempting; the silver lamp had no difficulty lighting up our part of the tunnel, but it didn't penetrate into the side passages at all.

After a while, the tunnel we were following jogged sharply

left, then right again, and suddenly it opened out into an enormous cave. The walls were crystal, and they seemed to have hundreds of different-colored lights shifting behind them. I stopped abruptly, staring, and the dragon bumped into me from behind.

"Excuse me," I said automatically.

"You shouldn't stop so fast," the dragon complained. It craned its neck to see around me. "Hey! This is nice!" It

Talking to Dragons

147

stretched upward, and a minute later it was clinging to the crystal wall several feet above us. I backed away hastily; I didn't want to be underneath if the dragon slipped.

"Where are we supposed to go from here?" said Shiara, ignoring the dragon.

"This must be the Cave of Crystal Lights," I said. "Telemain said to walk straight across. There ought to be three passageways on the other side, and we want to take the left one."

"I see them," the dragon said. It squinted across the cave, then climbed down and sat beside us. "They aren't straight across; they're over that way a little." It waved toward the right.

I looked at the dragon. "I think we should follow Telemain's directions. The Caves of Chance are even trickier than the Enchanted Forest; I don't want to risk getting in trouble if we don't have to." I didn't mention that the last time we had taken the dragon's advice we'd run into the fire-witch and Shiara had gotten turned into a statue, but I was thinking it. Shiara nodded in agreement.

"All right," the dragon said sullenly. "But I think you're being silly."

We started walking again, trying to go straight across the cave. The walls curved in and out, and the floor humped up in low mounds and ridges; between that and the shifting colored lights, it was hard to be sure we were going straight. Shiara and I went back a couple of times, just to make sure, and every time we did the dragon grumbled.

Finally we got to the other side and saw the three openings. The dragon stared at them, then looked around suspiciously. "Where did these come from? These aren't the ones I saw!"

"Well, then it's a good thing we followed Telemain's directions," Shiara said. "Otherwise, we'd be lost. Come on, let's go." She scowled and headed for the left-hand passageway. I started after her, and right away I tripped and fell.

"Ow!" I said. Shiara looked around, then came back to



help me up.

"What happened now?" she asked.

148 Patricia C. Wrede

"I tripped," I said. "I've still got the sword, but I dropped the lamp. Where is it?"

"I don't see it," Shiara said. She sounded a little worried. She had reason. Without the lamp, we wouldn't be able to see anything once we got out of the Cave of Crystal Lights.

"It can't be very far away," I said, and we started hunting. Shiara went one way and I went the other. About half a minute later, I saw something glittering. "There it is!"

"No, it's over here," said Shiara. She bent over and picked something up from behind a rock. "It's still burning," she said, sounding surprised.

"It lights up more space than it ought to, too," I said over my shoulder. "Morwen probably put a spell on it or something."

"Where are you going?" Shiara said.

"I saw something over here, and I want to know what it is," I said. "Especially since it obviously wasn't the lamp."

Shiara started to object, but right then I saw the glittering thing again and I bent to pick it up. "Here it is," I said. "See?" My fingers touched metal, and a fountain of sparks shot up from the floor of the cave where my fingers were resting.

I yelled and fell backward. The fountain hissed and sizzled angrily, getting bigger and brighter and hotter every minute. I scrambled backward. Blue and white and purple sparks started falling around us, and all of us ran for the left-hand tunnel. Nightwitch yowled as one of the sparks hit her, and Shiara scooped her up and kept on running.

We made it to the tunnel, but no one stopped until we were well inside, not even the dragon. When we finally got far enough to be out of reach of the falling sparks, we stopped and panted for a while. Fortunately, Shiara had remembered to hang on to the lamp as well as Nightwitch. When she set Nightwitch down, the kitten glared back toward the mouth of the tunnel, then sat down and began determinedly washing a spot on her back where the fur was a little singed.

"What was that?" Shiara asked as soon as she had her breath back.

"I don't know," I said. "I was just trying to—" I stopped.

Talking to Dragons 149

I was holding something in my right hand; I didn't even remember grabbing it. "It went off when I picked this up," I said, and opened my fingers.

I had three pebbles of various sizes, a little sandy dirt, and a small gold key. A tingle ran down my back as I looked at it, and I jumped. "Now what?" said Shiara.

"I felt something," I said. "Sort of like the sword when it's finding magic, but not the same."

"Is it magic?" the dragon asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, find out!" Shiara said impatiently. "I thought that was what the stupid sword was for."

I sighed a little and shifted all the things I was carrying around until I could put my left hand on the hilt of the Sword of the Sleeping King. I didn't feel any tingles, but the key started to glow.

We all stared at the key for a minute. "I knew it was magic!" the dragon said happily.

"I don't feel anything from the sword, though," I said. I took my hand off the hilt, and the key stopped glowing.

"So? The sword makes it glow, doesn't it?" Shiara said. "It has to be magic. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to keep it, at least until we talk to Kazul," I said. "She may know what it's for, or who it belongs to."

"It b-b-belongs in the c-c-cave," something said in a bubbly voice behind us.

I jumped and turned around. There wasn't anyone there. Shiara and the dragon and I all peered into the darkness. Nightwitch looked up from washing her back long enough to hiss, then continued washing. "Who said that?" Shiara demanded.

"M-m-me. You b-better put that k-k-key back right away," said the same voice. I still didn't see anyone.

"Why?" I said.

"B-because it b-belongs there!" the voice said. It sounded like water hitting a hot frying pan. "Gug-give it to me, and I'll put it back."

"If you want it, you'll have to come out here where we can see you," Shiara said firmly.

There was an unhappy bubbling noise from the dark part

150 Patricia C. Wrede

of the tunnel, then a series of unpleasant squishing sounds. A moment later something wobbled into the light from the silver lamp. It was about four feet tall, and it looked like a slightly sloppy pillar of very dark blackberry jelly.

"There!" it said. "Now, gug-give me that key!"

I was so busy trying to figure out how it could talk when it didn't have a mouth that I didn't answer. I was still trying when Shiara said, "How do we know it's your key?"

"It isn't my key; I just take care of it. Gug-give it to me!" The jelly was shaking angrily, and the top part was bobbing up and down like the lid of a teakettle. Every time it bobbed up, the pillar of jelly stretched thin underneath it, and when it bobbed down, the jelly made a sort of flattened lump, and every time it moved at all, it wobbled. The dragon, who had been standing behind Shiara, poked its head over her shoulder to see better.

"That stuff reminds me of something," the dragon said. "I can't think what, though. What is it?"

"/," huffed the jelly, "am a quozzel." It leaned forward as if it were trying to peer at us and said haughtily, "What are you?"

"It's a dragon," Shiara said, a little nastily. "Can't you tell?"

The pillar froze in midwobble. "There are n-n-n-no dragons under-gug-ground," it said. "None!" It leaned cautiously in Shiara's direction for a minute, then started bobbing again. "You aren't a dragon. I want that k-k-key! It belongs in the cave, and it's g-going to stay there!"

"Of course she's not a dragon!" the dragon said. "I'm a dragon. And I've never heard of a quozzel before."

The quozzel bent a little, then froze again. "Glurb," it said.

The dragon tilted its head to one side. "I don't think you're very polite," it said.

The jelly burred unhappily to itself; it looked as if it were boiling. The dragon kept staring at it, and suddenly its eyes started to glow. "I know what it reminds me of!" it said triumphantly. "Dessert!"

The quozzel shrieked and collapsed backward into the darkness just as the dragon's head shot toward it. The dragon

Talking to Dragons

151

kept going, knocking Shiara and me out of the way as it went past. We heard several squishing noises, and an angry snort from the dragon, followed closely by a small puff of flame that lit up the dark end of the tunnel. I got a brief glimpse of the dragon before the light died, but I didn't see the quozzel anywhere. There was a disgusted-sounding growl, and a moment later the dragon stalked back into the light from the silver lamp. "It got away."

"Well, I'm glad it's gone," Shiara said. She frowned. "You shouldn't go around trying to eat things all the time, especially if you don't know what they are. I wouldn't be surprised if quozzels were poisonous or something."

"Dragonsbane is the only thing that poisons dragons, and

the quozzel wasn't polite, and I'm hungry," the dragon said. It shook its head sadly. "Wizards taste good, but they aren't very filling."

Shiara started to object again, and I put the key in my pocket and started rummaging in Morwen's bundle. I was sure I still had some meat pies, and I didn't like the idea of traveling with a hungry dragon. I found the food and offered it to the dragon, who brightened up a little and accepted.

"We ought to keep going," Shiara said as the dragon sat back against the wall of the tunnel and started eating. "Suppose that quozzel thing comes back?"

"I don't think it could really do much to us," I said. "It didn't look very dangerous."

"You can't always tell by looking," Shiara said darkly. "And if that marmalade mess wants the stupid key badly enough, it'll think of something."

"The quozzel looked more like jelly to me," I said. "And I still don't really think it's going to come back. Not while the dragon is around."

"Well, you'd better carry the key in your hand," Shiara said. "I think it's important, and it might fall out of your pocket or something."

"All right, but you'll have to keep the lamp," I said, digging the key out of my pocket again. I still wasn't sure that the key didn't belong to the quozzel, but the more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed. And if it did have

152 Patricia C. Wrede

something to do with the sword, I wanted to hang on to it. "I don't think I can manage the sword and the things Morwen gave us and the lamp, and still hold the key."

"You wouldn't have to until we started walking again, anyway," Shiara said, but she kept the lamp.

Just then the dragon looked up. "I'm done," it said. "Where do we go now?"

WE CLEANED UP the remains of the dragon's meal and started walking again. I don't know how far we went or how long it took us. The tunnel forked and we went right, then it forked again and we went left. We went through a large cave with walls like black mirrors, and a damp one that dripped water on our heads, and an unpleasant slimy one with grey moss on the walls. I was very glad that Telemain had told us which way to go; we would have gotten very lost very quickly without his directions.

A few times I thought I heard squishing noises behind us, but I wasn't sure enough to say anything. I was also worrying a lot more about remembering all the things Te-

lemain had told us than I was about the quozzel. I was beginning to think we had taken a wrong turn somewhere, when we came to another cavern.

This one was long and narrow, and the floor was about a hundred feet straight down. It was full of orange light and very hot. A narrow path ran along one wall from where we stood to a dark opening on the other side.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Shiara said, eyeing the path dubiously.

"I am now," I said. "This was the last cave Telemain

153

154 Patricia C. Wrede

mentioned; once we're on the other side, it shouldn't take long to get to the castle."

"We have to get to the other side first," Shiara pointed out. "That doesn't look very safe."

"The Caves of Chance aren't supposed to be safe," I said. "I'm surprised we haven't run into something a lot more dangerous than the quozzel."

"I suppose— Nightwitch!" Shiara shouted a minute too late; the kitten was already halfway across the narrow path. Shiara sighed. "Well, now we have to go across."

Shiara insisted on going first, because Nightwitch was her cat. I didn't argue much. I went next, and the dragon came last. I had to hug the wall to keep from losing my balance and falling, which was hard to do with the key in one hand, Morwen's bundle in the other, and the sword under one arm. The dragon didn't seem to have as much difficulty as I did, even though it was a little too large for the ledge. It just dug its claws into the rock and kept coming.

When we finally made it to the other side, Shiara and I were covered with black rock dust. We took turns brushing each other off, while Nightwitch sat far enough back to avoid getting any of it on her and the dragon looked superior. Evidently rock dust doesn't cling to dragon scales, which was very nice for the dragon but didn't do much to improve Shiara's temper.

"How much farther is it?" Shiara asked as we started off.

"I don't know," I said. "But it shouldn't take much longer."

"I hope not," said the dragon. "I don't like this tunnel."

"Why not?" Shiara asked.

"It isn't finished," the dragon said.

I looked around. The tunnel was a lot rougher than the others we'd come through, and there were rocks sticking out at odd angles from the walls and the roof and even the

floor. Every now and then it narrowed into a crooked little passage; if the dragon had been much bigger, it wouldn't have been able to fit through some of them. We still saw side passages once in a while, but they seemed smaller and farther apart than they had in the first part of the tunnel.

"It does look sort of incomplete," I said. "I think--"

156 Patricia C. Wrede

"Daystar, look out!" Shiara yelled. A large rock fell out of the ceiling, just missing my head, along with a shower of pebbles that didn't. I heard a creaking noise and felt more pebbles.

"Get back!" I shouted. I dropped Morwen's bundle and shoved Shiara. "Run!"

Shiara stumbled backward. Nightwitch yowled and made a tremendous leap right onto the dragon's nose. The dragon jerked in surprise, and Nightwitch made another jump and vanished into the darkness behind it. I heard more rumblings, and I shoved Shiara again, just as the roof came down on top of us.

When I woke up, it was very dark. Somehow I'd managed to keep hold of the sword and the key. I could feel them, one halfway under me and the other digging into my palm. I could feel other things, too; I ached all over. I tried to move, but my legs were pinned under something heavy, and I couldn't drag them free. I pushed myself up a little and tried to stare into the darkness. "Shiara? Nightwitch? Dragon?"

No one answered. They couldn't all have gotten caught in the cave-in; I'd been the farthest forward, and I was just at the edge of it. I started wishing I had the lamp, and then I remembered that the key glowed when I touched the Sword of the Sleeping King. I felt around for the hilt, and something very moist and heavy hit me in the middle of my back.

I slammed back into the floor and almost lost consciousness again. I heard something above me bubbling, "The k-k-key! Let go, drop it, gug-give it to me!" Instinctively, I grabbed for the sword.

My fingers touched the hilt, and the key started to glow. It wasn't quite as good as the lamp, but at least I could see. I heard a muffled shriek, and the weight left my back very suddenly. An instant later, I saw the quozzel bending over my hand, and I tightened my grip on the key.

The quozzel bounced angrily. "You're still alive! I don't want you alive. I want that k-k-key. That's why I fixed the rocks."

Talking to Dragons

157

I shook my head to clear it. "You made the tunnel cave

in? Just to get a key?"

"Ofc-c-c-course!" the quozzel spluttered. "I'm supposed to take c-care of it. I'll get it, too. All I need is m-m-more rocks."

The quozzel wobbled forward, toward the caved-in part of the tunnel. I twisted, trying to see what it was doing, and a medium-sized rock came crashing down beside me. The quozzel made an angry whistling noise. "H-hold still!"

"So you can drop rocks on me?" I said. Out of the comer of my eye, I saw a long pile of something that seemed to end in a tangle of red hair. Shiara hadn't been buried under the rocks, then. Unfortunately, she didn't look like she would be able to help me with the quozzel any time soon, and I still didn't know where Nightwitch or the dragon were. I shifted the key into my left hand and started trying to get the Sword of the Sleeping King out of its sheath with my right, in case the quozzel decided to try coming closer.

There was a sizzling noise from somewhere behind me, and a dozen or so rocks of assorted sizes came rolling down on top of me. I yelled; some of them hit places that had already been battered by the cave-in. The quozzel bubbled happily, and a few more rocks went by on one side. I shoved myself up on my hands as far as I could and yanked the sword out of the sheath and out from under me at the same time. I twisted around just as two more large rocks came rolling down at me.

I swung at the rocks with the flat of the sword, trying to deflect them a little. There was a bright flash as the sword hit them, and the rocks went flying toward the far wall of the tunnel. I heard a low humming sound that changed suddenly into a rumble, and the light in the cave went out. For some reason, I thought of the clearing where I'd said the spell at the Sword of the Sleeping King, when everything had gone dark and the voice had called me the Bearer of the Sword.

This time I didn't hear any voice, but the rumbling got louder and louder, and suddenly I realized that my legs were free. I curled them up under me, so I wouldn't be trapped again if the quozzel managed to start another cave-in or

158 Patricia C. Wrede

something. The rumbling started to die down, and I heard faint shouts mixed in with it, and the bubbling noise that the quozzel made, and someone groaning. Then the rumbling stopped, and I could see again.

I stood up and looked around. I could still hear the shouting; it sounded faint and far away, and after a moment it faded completely. Shiara was the person who had groaned. She was starting to move a little, and suddenly I felt a lot better about things generally. Then I heard squishing noises from in back of me, and I whirled.

Behind me, the tunnel was completely blocked by a sloping pile of rocks and dirt. At the base of the pile,

where I had been trapped, was an empty space that looked as if something had sliced cleanly through the rocks and lifted them out of the way. Midway up the slope was the quozzel. It was wobbling hastily toward the tunnel floor. I pointed the Sword of the Sleeping King at it, and it stopped abruptly.

"Just a minute, you!" I said. "You have some questions to answer."

"I d-d-d-didn't know," said the quozzel. "I still don't. K-k-keep the k-key. Nice to m-m-meet you. Glug-gug-good-bye."

"Oh, no you don't," I said. I stepped in front of it, so that if it wobbled forward any more, it would get stuck on my sword.

"I'm gug-gug-gug-going," said the quozzel. It seemed to be stammering a lot more than it had before. I found myself hoping it was even more nervous than it looked.

"You aren't going anywhere until you explain why you want this key so badly," I said. "And maybe not then. I don't think I ought to leave something as sneaky and treacherous as you running around loose." I tried to sound intimidating, even though I had no idea what I was going to do with the quozzel. I didn't think I could just kill it, and I certainly didn't want to bring it along with me. I wasn't about to tell the quozzel any of that, though; after what it had tried to do, it wouldn't hurt it to worry a little.

"Daystar?" Shiara's voice distracted me from the quoz-

Talking to Dragons

159

zei, which was bubbling and popping worriedly to itself. "Daystar, what happened?"

"The quozzel made the tunnel cave in," I said. "It was trying to kill me so it could get the key. Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm— Yow!" said Shiara. I looked quickly around and saw her sitting up very carefully. She looked a little pale. "I think I broke my arm," she said.

"Can I do anything to help?" I said.

"You can keep that stupid quozzel away from me!" Shiara said. "I'm all right as long as I don't move much."

I didn't believe her, but I couldn't have done much to help anyway. I didn't know anything about setting broken arms, except that you can make things a lot worse if you don't know what you're doing. I decided not to say anything;

if Shiara wanted me to keep watching the quozzel instead of trying to help her, she would probably get mad if I didn't. Besides, I didn't want the quozzel to get away and try dropping the roof on us again.

"Where's Nightwitch?" Shiara said after a while. "And



the dragon?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I haven't seen them since the tunnel fell in."

"You miserable little blob!"

I looked around in surprise and was very relieved to see Shiara glaring at the quozzel and not at me.

"If anything's happened to Nightwitch because of your stupid cave-in, I'll, I'll melt you into a puddle!" she went on.

"You'd better not try," the quozzel said, starting to bounce. "The w-w-wizard will gug-get you if you do!"

"What wizard?" I said.

The quozzel bubbled unhappily. "I can't tell you."

"Oh, no?" Shiara said. She stood up slowly and came over beside me, holding her right arm carefully in her left one. "I guess I'd better just melt you, then, and save some time."

"N-n-no/" said the quozzel. Little ripples ran over it, and it seemed to shrink a little.

160 Patricia C. Wrede

"Then you'd better tell us what wizard you're talking about," I said.

"The one who gug-gave me the key," the quozzel said unwillingly. "He told me to take care of it until he came back for it."

"How long ago was that?" I asked, ignoring Shiara, who was rubbing her bruises and muttering to herself.

"A long time," the quozzel said. "He never came back, so it's still m-m-my responsib-b-bility."

"Not if I melt you, it isn't," Shiara said, and the quozzel subsided very suddenly.

"What is it the key to?" I said. "And why did the wizard leave it here?"

"D-d-don't know," the quozzel said sullenly. "He said people would come look for it and try to take it. That's why he wanted m-m-me to look after it. You aren't supposed to take it. No one's supposed to take it b-b-but the wizard!"

"What did this wizard look like?" I said. I had an unpleasant feeling that I knew already, and I was therefore extremely relieved when the quozzel described someone who didn't sound at all like Antorell. Shiara didn't recognize the description, either, but she wasn't as relieved as I was.

"How do we know this stupid thing isn't lying?" she said. "I think we should—What's that?"

I could hear something from far down the tunnel, but it echoed too much for me to be able to tell what it was. It seemed to be getting louder. "I think something's coming," I said to Shiara, then, "You stay where you are!" to the quozzel, who had been trying to wobble a little closer to the bottom of the rock pile.

The quozzel froze again, and Shiara gave me a disgusted look. "I know something's coming, but what is it?"

I didn't answer. The noise came closer, and I saw a flickering light partway down the tunnel. I shifted position so I could watch the quozzel and still see some of the rest of the tunnel. The light got brighter, and a moment later about a dozen people came through one of the side passages. They were all short and sort of squashed-looking, bigger than the elves we'd met, but considerably shorter than a

Talking to Dragons 161

normal person. Most of them were carrying picks or shovels or long, pointed iron poles; a couple of them had torches. They seemed to be following something, but they were too far away and the light was too bad for me to be sure.

"Dwarves!" I said. They must have heard the echo, because two of them looked up and saw us. One of them shouted something, but I couldn't make out the words.

Terrific!" Shiara muttered as they started in our direction. "What'd you have to do that for?"

"They'd have seen us anyway," I said. "I mean, we'd be sort of difficult to miss, with the key lighting up the tunnel like this."

"I suppose so," Shiara said. She squinted into the dark part of the tunnel between us and the dwarves. "What's that in front of them?"

I didn't have to answer, because a second later Nightwitch came bounding out of the darkness with her tail held very high. She looked extremely proud of herself. She went straight to Shiara and started rubbing against her legs and purring.

"I'm glad to see you, too," Shiara said. She started to bend over and winced. "Sorry, kitten; I'm afraid you'll have to wait to get petted until somebody does something about this stupid arm."

Nightwitch stopped rubbing and looked up. "Mmrew?"

"Well, I said I was sorry," Shiara said. "I didn't ask to break it."

The dwarves had reached the edge of the key's glow, and the whole tunnel was lit up by their torches. It made things a lot more cheerful. I could see the dragon in back of the dwarves, looking almost as smug as Nightwitch had.

"Look!" it said when it got close enough to talk without shouting. "I found a whole lot of dwarves!"

"I see that," I said. I bowed to the dwarves as well as I could while trying to watch the quozzel at the same time. "My name is Daystar, and that's Shiara. We're very pleased to meet you."

"They're going to dig through the part of the tunnel that came down," the dragon said.

162 Patricia C. Wrede

"Hold on just a minute!" one of the dwarves said. "I didn't say I'd help. Not exactly. I said I'd look at this cave-in of yours."

"Me too," said another. "Proper mess it looks, too."

"Not natural," said a female dwarf. She looked at Shiara and me suspiciously.

"How do you know?" Shiara said belligerently.

"We made this tunnel," still another dwarf said. "And dwarf-made tunnels don't just fall in."

"Not ever," agreed the first one.

"Of course not," I said. "The quozzel made the tunnel cave in; it was trying to stop us from getting out of the Caves of Chance."

"The quozzel?" the dragon said, looking interested. "That dessert thing is back again?"

"You can't eat it until we find out if it knows anything else," I said. "Besides, you had plenty of lunch."

The dragon sighed. "I suppose so. All right, I'll wait."

I looked at the dwarves. "We'd be very much obliged to you if you would help us get through this, or show us a way around it, or something," I said.

"Now, why should we do that?" one of them said.

"I don't see any reason," said another.

"Lot of work for nothing," added a third.

"And I don't like dragons!" said a voice from the middle of the group. The dragon glared, but it couldn't pick out the dwarf who'd spoken.

"Could you at least set Shiara's arm?" I said.

One of the female dwarves started to reply, but she was cut off by a yell from Shiara. "Daystar! Behind you!"

I raised the sword and spun around just as the quozzel bunched itself together and jumped at me. It came flying through the air, and I ducked. Something dark and purple shot out of it toward me, and I slashed at it with the sword. I got most of the purple stuff and part of the quozzel as well. I heard it shriek, and then it had landed and launched

itself again, straight for the wall of the tunnel.

"I'll kill all of you!" it whistled angrily. "Key stealers! Cannibals! I'll kill you d-d-dead!"

Talking to Dragons 163

I lunged for it, but I was too late. The quozzel hit the tunnel wall, and instead of bouncing, it vanished into the rock like water being absorbed by a sponge, only faster. An instant later a shower of rocks fell out of the roof of the tunnel, and I heard the walls creaking ominously.

"Run!" I yelled. I started to follow my own advice and saw a large rock shifting in the wall of the tunnel just above Shiara's head. I shouted again and swung the sword at it, hoping it would be deflected like the other rocks the quozzel had tried to drop on me.

The flat of the sword hit the rock, and everything seemed to slow down suddenly. There was a lot of creaking, and the top of the tunnel started to sag, as if it were trying to fall in again but couldn't quite manage it. The sword got very heavy for a minute or two, and then there was an angry-sounding rumble and the whole tunnel shook. The rock that had been heading for Shiara went bouncing off the opposite wall of the tunnel, and all the creaking and rumbling stopped very abruptly.

I didn't move for several seconds at least. I kept thinking that something else was going to happen; the quozzel wasn't going to give up this easily. Then I saw a thin trickle of dark purple stuff dripping down the wall of the tunnel, where the quozzel had disappeared. I watched it for a minute or two and decided that we probably didn't have to worry about the quozzel anymore. I looked at Shiara.

"Are you all right?"

"That's a stupid question," Shiara said. "My arm is broken!"

"I mean, you didn't get any more hurt than you were already, did you?"

"No," she said. She looked at me for a minute. "Thanks."

I was so surprised that I couldn't think of anything to say for at least a minute. "Um, you're welcome," I said finally. I realized suddenly that my sword still had some wet purple stuff on it from hitting the quozzel, and I started digging in my pocket for my handkerchief so I could wipe off the sword.

I couldn't find it. I sighed; it had probably fallen out of

164 Patricia C. Wrede

my pocket somewhere on the trip through the caves. I didn't really mind losing it, except that now I didn't have anything to get the purple goo off my sword with. I turned to the dwarves. "Excuse me, but do any of you—"

I stopped. The dwarves were standing in a tight group, and all of them were staring at the sword. "Now, why didn't you think to mention you had that?" one of them said.

SHIARA AND I looked at the dwarves. "He's been holding it since before you got here!" Shiara said finally. "Why should he have mentioned it?"

"It would have saved a lot of bother," one of the female dwarves said in an aggrieved tone.

"Time, too," said another.

"Inconsiderate, I call it."

"Well, not inconsiderate, exactly. A little thoughtless, maybe."

"After all, we aren't elves."

"Of course you're not elves," the dragon said. "Anyone can see that! What difference does it make?"

"Elves can recognize that sword just by looking at it," one of the dwarves said in a resentful tone.

"So can some other people," said another darkly.

"But not dwarves."

"Unless we get a good look at it, of course. Which we couldn't, because of the light, not to mention the fact that you were standing there talking and distracting our attention."

"Which is why you should have mentioned it," a dwarf in the back finished triumphantly.

165

Patricia C. Wrede

166

"I didn't mention it because there seem to be a lot of people who want it," I said. "One of them is a wizard."

About six of the dwarves started talking so fast it was hard to tell whether they were all speaking at the same time or whether they went one after another.

"Of course there are a lot of people who want it!"

"Particularly wizards."

"It's the King's sword, isn't it?"

"Maybe it isn't; he hasn't said."

"It has to be the King's sword, silly. There aren't any other swords that the earth obeys."

"What about Delvan's blade?"

"That's not a sword, it's an ax,"

"And the earth doesn't obey it, it just shakes a lot."

"So this has to be the King's sword."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What do you know about my sword?"

"It's the King's sword," one of the dwarves said indignantly. Another dwarf shushed him, and a dwarf near the front of the crowd stepped forward and bowed.

"We follow the sword," she said, as if it explained everything.

The other dwarves all smiled and nodded. I sighed and gave up. Either none of them really knew anything else, or they weren't going to tell me, and I didn't think it mattered much which it was. "If you aren't going to tell me about my sword, could one of you do something about Shiara's arm?" I said. "And after that, we'll be going."

"Going where?" the dragon said. Some of the dwarves jumped; evidently they'd forgotten the dragon was behind them. I was surprised; if a dragon were standing behind me, I certainly wouldn't forget it was there.

"We have to find another way out of the Caves of Chance," I told the dragon. "I don't really think we can dig through this one."

"That will not be necessary," said the dwarf closest to me. "Had we known you were the Bearer of the Sword, we would not have objected to your request."

"Not at all," said the dwarf next to him. She turned and

Talking to Dragons

167

waved at the others. "Lord Daystar requires this tunnel cleared. Begin!"

I stood and stared while the dwarves all grabbed then-picks and shovels and things and started toward the rocks that were blocking the tunnel. In a few minutes they were all digging furiously except for one, who came over to Shiara and bowed. "I am Darlbrin," he announced.

"That's nice," Shiara said sarcastically. I sighed, but I didn't say anything. You can't really expect a fire-witch with a broken arm to be particularly polite.

Darlbrin didn't seem to notice. "I have some skill at mending things," he said, and bowed again. "If you will permit it, I would like to look at your arm." Darlbrin looked at Shiara a shade anxiously and added, "To see if I can mend it."

Shiara rolled her eyes, but she walked over to the edge of the tunnel and sat down so the dwarf could see better. Nightwitch followed, alternately purring reassuringly and meowing anxiously. I watched for a minute or two, then turned away. I couldn't do anything to help, and I wanted to think.

I didn't get the chance. As soon as I turned, the dragon stuck its head over a couple of dwarves and said, "I didn't know you were a lord. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I'm not a lord!" I said. I think I sounded a little desperate; I know I felt desperate. I didn't have the slightest idea what was going on, except that it had something to do with my sword. Everything seemed to have something to do with my sword; I was getting tired of it and more than a little worried.

"Well, if you aren't a lord, why did they call you one?"

"Because he has the King's sword," said a dwarf, who was walking under the dragon's chin with a boulder more than half as big as he was. The dragon pulled its head back far enough to eye the dwarf, who ignored it and kept walking.

"Oh," said the dragon at last. The dwarf continued to ignore it.

"I really wish you'd explain a little more," I said to the

168 Patricia C. Wrede

dwarf, and then I thought of something. "Why did you call me the Bearer of the Sword?"

"I didn't call you anything," the dwarf said without stopping. "That was Cottlestone." He set the boulder down and headed back toward the pile of rocks, which was beginning to look smaller already.

"Excuse me," I said loudly in the general direction of the crowd of dwarves, "but would one of you tell me which one of you is Cottlestone? I'd like to talk to him, please."

"Cottlestone!" shouted half a dozen voices. For a minute I thought the roof was going to cave in again, but all that actually happened was that one of the dwarves stepped out of the crowd and bowed to me. He looked as if he really meant it, not as if he were just being polite. "Don't do that," I said.

"As you wish," the dwarf said, bowing again. "What do you want to know from me?"

"Why did you call me the Bearer of the Sword?"

Cottlestone looked surprised. "It's obvious. When the Bearer of the Sword holds the King's sword, the earth obeys it. So when you held up the sword and the earth obeyed, we knew you were the Bearer of the Sword."

"Oh." I thought for a moment. "Have you ever heard of the Holder of the Sword? Or the Wielder of the Sword?"

"Who?"

"Never mind," I said. "How do you get to be the Bearer of the Sword?"

"No one knows," Cottlestone said, looking at me curiously.

"Oh," I said again. I was trying to think of something else to ask, when there was a shout from the top of the caved-in section of the tunnel. Cottlestone bowed again. "If you will excuse me, I think they've gotten through to the other side. I ought to go help. It's my job."

"All right," I said uncomfortably. Cottlestone turned away, and I watched him melt into the crowd of dwarves. I wasn't sure what I'd found out, except that I didn't like people bowing to me. I found myself hoping that the rest of the dwarves wouldn't imitate Cottlestone.

"Did he say they're almost finished?" said Shiara's voice

Talking to Dragons 169

behind me. "Wonderful! I can't wait to get out of here."

I turned. Shiara was standing, holding Nightwitch in the crook of her left arm. Her right arm was covered from her fingers almost to her shoulder in something smooth and grey and shiny. She looked a little white, but it might have been the torchlight. "Well, what are you staring at?" she demanded.

"I wasn't staring," I said. "I was just checking to see if you were all right."

Darlbrin stepped up beside Shiara and bowed. "Not quite all right," he said. "But not bad; not bad at all."

"I wouldn't call a broken arm 'not bad,'" Shiara said sourly.

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" Darlbrin said hastily. "I was referring to the mending."

"I'm sure you did a very good job," I said. "And I really appreciate it."

"I suppose I do, too," Shiara said. "Thanks."

"It isn't really mending yet, you know," Darlbrin said with a touch of anxiety. "People aren't as easy to fix as ax handles. It'll be a month or so before you can take the sheath off."

"Yes, I know," Shiara said impatiently. "I've had a broken arm before."

"Then you're very welcome!" the dwarf said, beaming. "Happy to be of service!"



Shiara snorted, but quietly. Darlbrin didn't notice; he bowed to each of us and went off to help the rest of the dwarves finish clearing the tunnel. I looked at Shiara. "I didn't know you'd broken your arm before."

"That's because I didn't tell you about it," Shiara said. She looked at me for a minute, then sighed. "I was stealing apples from the Prince's gardens and fell out of the tree, all right?"

"Oh. What Prince, and why were you taking his apples?"

"The Prince of the Ruby Throne," Shiara said after a minute. "He had a house and garden just outside town, and he never picked any of the apples. He just left them to rot. And I was hungry. So I sneaked over the wall and climbed the tree, but there was a big snake in it, with wings. So I

170 Patricia C. Wrede

fell out of the tree and broke my arm, and the snake went away."

"Shiara," I said, and stopped. She obviously had no idea what she had almost done. I sighed and changed what I was going to say. "Shiara, the Prince of the Ruby Throne raises magic apples. All kinds of people have been trying to steal them for years and years, but he's a very powerful magician, and there are hundreds of spells protecting his gardens."

"That must be why he was so upset," Shiara said in a tone of sudden enlightenment. "I'm pretty sure he was the one who told the Society of Wizards about me. I thought it was a lot of fuss to make about a few apples, but now I understand."

I looked at her for a minute. "I don't want to be nosy or anything, but, if you wouldn't mind telling me, I'd really appreciate knowing if there's anyone else who's mad at you."

"I don't think so," Shiara said, frowning.

"I'm glad," I said. "I don't think I want any more powerful magical people chasing us. It wouldn't be so bad if you could use your fire-magic."

"She can!" said the dragon, and Shiara and I both jumped and turned around. "She burned the dragonsbane, and she can make her hair bum."

"When did you see Shiara's hair burning?" I asked. The only time I'd ever seen Shiara's hair on fire was when she'd gotten mad at me right after we'd met, and the dragon hadn't been there then.

"Just a few minutes ago," the dragon said. "You were fighting that dessert thing, so you might not have noticed."

I looked at Shiara, and she blushed. "I was trying to do

something to the quozzel," she said. "I thought it would work, because it worked with the dragonsbane."

"It worked on the dragonsbane," I repeated slowly. "And remember that first wizard, the one who made a water monster out of the stream? You did something to it while I was fighting it! That's at least twice that you've made your fire-magic do something you wanted it to. Can you think of any others? Maybe we can figure out how it works."

"She used it at that invisible castle," the dragon offered.

Talking to Dragons 171

"The one where that other fire-witch lived."

"I did not!" Shiara said. "I didn't have time. We ran into the castle, and she came out, and bang! I was a statue."

The dragon sat back, looking smug. "You said you wanted to know what the castle was, and then you did. That's fire-magic, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," Shiara said slowly.

"Then that's three," I said. "Can you think of any more? Before you came to the Enchanted Forest, for instance?"

Shiara frowned and was silent for a while. "No," she said finally in a very positive tone. "Those are the only times I've ever gotten my magic to do what I wanted it to, ever."

"So it's only been happening since you came to the Enchanted Forest," I said.

"And met you and got bitten by that stupid sword," Shiara added, and stopped. We looked at each other for a minute.

"Not again!" I said. I thought for a minute. "It can't be the sword alone, or you would have been able to do something to the quozzel. There has to be something else, too."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Did you do anything differently when it worked?"

"No."

"Well, then did you do anything differently right before it worked?" I said. "There has to be some—" I stopped, remembering. "Oh," I said.

"What is it?"

"I think I know what makes your magic work," I said. I didn't think Shiara was going to like it much, but I couldn't just keep quiet about it, either. "I think you have to be polite to people."

"What? That's stupid!"

"It makes sense," I said. "You apologized to me after

we got out of the hedge, and then when the first wizard came along your magic worked against the snake thing. You were nice to the Princess because you felt sorry for her, and right after that you knew about the invisible castle. And you said thanks to Suz and apologized to Telemain, and then you made the dragonsbane bum."

172 Patricia C. Wrede

"But that other fire-witch wasn't polite!" Shiara objected.

"I didn't say all fire-witches have to be polite to people before their magic will work," I said. "I only said your magic works that way. And I'm not positive. I mean, it could be something else."

"Well, I'm not going to go around being nice to people just so I can do magic!"

"I don't think it would work, anyway," I said unhappily. "I mean, I don't think you can just say things, I think you have to really mean them. You meant it when you apologized to me, and when you were nice to the Princess, and when you were talking to Telemain."

"Oh, great," Shiara said disgustedly. "I bet this is all that stupid sword's fault. It sounds like something it'd do." She glared at me for an instant, then turned her back. I sighed.

"Excuse me. Lord Daystar," said a voice by my elbow. I looked down; the dwarf bowed as soon as I turned.

"Don't do that," I said.

"Certainly, my lord," she said, and started to bow again, then stopped and looked confused. "The tunnel is clear; you may continue your journey whenever you wish."

I looked around. She was right; the pile of rocks that had been blocking the tunnel was nearly gone. A few boulders were left along the sides, but there was plenty of room to walk through, even for the dragon. "Thank you very much," I said. "But I really ought to tell you: I'm not a lord."

The dwarf smiled tolerantly. "Of course not, my lord. Is there anything else we can do for you?"

"I'd appreciate it if we could borrow one of your torches," I said. "Our lamp got lost in the cave-in."

"We would be pleased to offer you a torch," the dwarf said. "You can leave it by the exit, and someone will get it later. It isn't far."

We gathered up what was left of our things, and the dwarves did some more bowing. One of them handed Shiara a torch. She grumbled a little because she had to put Night-witch down in order to take it, but she was the only one of us who could carry it. I had the sword in one hand and the key in the other, and the dragon couldn't hold a torch.

Talking to Dragons

173

Fortunately, Nightwitch didn't seem to mind walking. We thanked the dwarves and said good-bye, and they all bowed again, and finally we started off.

The tunnel started slanting upward almost as soon as we were past the cave-in, and shortly after that we stopped seeing side passages. Eventually we came to a flight of stairs that curled around and around until all of us were dizzy. Just when I didn't think I could climb anymore, the stairs ended against a hard, rocky surface, like a trapdoor made of stone.

I shoved against it, but it didn't budge. "It's too heavy."

"Really?" said the dragon. "It doesn't look so bad."

I looked down at the dragon, who was last on the stairs because neither Shiara nor I had wanted to be behind it if it slipped. "It probably isn't too heavy for you. Why don't you try it?"

The dragon agreed, and Shiara and I squashed ourselves against the side of the stairs so it could climb past us. There were a couple of minutes of grunts, and the dragon's tail whipped back and forth, which made Shiara and me retreat farther down the stairs. Finally there was a loud noise like extremely rusty hinges, and the dragon started moving upward. A moment later, it stopped. "Uh-oh," it said.

"What's the matter?" Shiara called.

The dragon didn't answer, but it moved out of the way so we could climb up. Shiara and I got to the head of the stairs at almost the same time and looked around.

We were standing at the top of a small rise. The sun was starting to set, but there was still enough light to see the castle clearly. It was quite close, not more than a few minutes' walk from where I was, and it fascinated me. At first, I thought it was made of something shimmery, like mother-of-pearl; then I realized that it wasn't the castle that was shimmering, it was something around the castle, like a giant soap bubble. I was still trying to figure out what it was when Shiara poked me, and I looked down. There were approximately two hundred dragons sitting on the ground around the little hill we were standing on. Watching us.

I SWALLOWED HARD, and for a moment I wished I were wearing my sword instead of carrying it under my arm. Every dragon in the Enchanted Forest had to be there, and quite a few from outside it. They were spread out in all directions, so that I couldn't even see the ground, and I realized suddenly that there was a lot of open space around the castle. The forest circled the castle at a distance, and there seemed to be something wrong about it. I couldn't tell what, though, and besides, I had other things to worry about right then. Two hundred dragons, for instance.

I stepped forward and bowed carefully in all directions.

One of the first things Mother taught me about dragons was that dragons expect a new arrival to make the first move. They always allow you one chance to convince them that you're too polite or too important to eat. I was going to have to rely on being polite; I didn't think I could convince two hundred dragons that I was particularly important, especially since I didn't believe it myself. I took a deep breath.

"Sirs and madams, I apologize most profoundly for intruding upon you in this fashion, and I hope we have not inconvenienced you in any way," I said, trying to talk loudly enough for all the dragons to hear me and still sound polite.

175

Talking to Dragons

177

"Nevertheless, I offer you greetings in the name of myself and my companions, and I wish you good fortune in whatever endeavors are most important to you."

The dragons stirred briefly, then settled back again. After a moment, an old, grey-green male slid forward. "We greet ( you, and wish you well," he said. "May we know your names?"

I bowed again, the half bow of respect for a dragon of great age and uncertain status. "I thank you for your greeting," I said. "I am called Daystar, and my companions are Shiara and Nightwitch." I didn't ask for the dragons' names. It's perfectly acceptable not to, and I didn't feel like standing there through two hundred introductions, especially since the dragons would expect me to remember them all.

"Well met, Daystar," the old dragon rumbled. "We've been expecting you since early this afternoon; I'm glad you finally got here."

"I'm sorry if I kept you waiting," I said. "We had problems with some wizards, and a cave-in, and a quozzel, and I didn't really know you were waiting. I hope it hasn't been long."

"Of course not; Telemain only told Kazul yesterday that you were coming. Silly way to do things, making everyone gather in such a hurry." He looked at me for a minute, then I nodded approvingly. "Well, come along; no sense wasting any more time. You might as well bring the girl and the cat, too; this way."

Our dragon lifted its head. "What about me?" it demanded. It looked much smaller next to the full-grown dragons all around us, and it sounded considerably younger as well.

"You had better keep quiet," the older dragon said indulgently. "You're in quite a bit of trouble already; I wouldn't make it worse if I were you."

"I don't have to keep quiet!" our dragon said. "I found

a Princess, even if I did decide not to keep her, and I fought a knight and bit a wizard. I can talk if I want to!"

The crowd of dragons shifted again, very slightly. Shiara, shivered and held Nightwitch closer; I thought about wiping my hands on my tunic, then decided it would be too no-

178 Patricia C. Wrede

ticeable. The older dragon ignored all of us; he just stood and stared at our dragon, which finally shook its head and settled back, watching the crowd below us with a sulky expression. The old dragon smiled slightly and turned his head. "What do you think?" he asked the crowd of dragons behind him.

All of the dragons roared at once. I couldn't tell what they were saying, or even if they were saying anything, but the old dragon nodded again and looked at the little dragon. "You'll get your wish, then. Well, don't just stand there."

I nodded and stepped forward as the old dragon turned. Shiara followed behind me, very closely, and our dragon came behind her. "Where are we going?" Shiara whispered to me.

The old dragon looked back over his shoulder, and his eyes glinted with amusement. "You're going to see Kazul."

"Oh," Shiara said. We stepped down from the little hill, and there was a loud clattering and rumbling as the dragons moved out of our way. I stopped short in shock.

The ground around the hill was dry and brown and bare. It looked even worse than it would have normally, because I'd spent several days looking at the rich moss in the Enchanted Forest. Then I remembered that we were still in the Enchanted Forest, and I started being worried as well as shocked. I knew from experience how fast the moss grew, and how hard it was to clear off even a small strip of ground;

I didn't like to think about what had stripped the moss from the area around the castle.

Shiara poked me, and I started moving forward again. Fortunately, the dragon ahead of us hadn't noticed my pause. A few of the ones at the edge of the crowd had, but they seemed more amused than anything. I decided not to worry about it and walked a little faster, trying to ignore the large shapes on either side of me. With two hundred dragons around, I could waste a lot of time worrying if I wasn't careful.

The old dragon led us toward the castle. As we got closer, I could see that there were two shimmerings in the air around the castle, one a few feet inside the other. The outer one looked like a shifting, green-and-silver veil, very thin and

Talking to Dragons

179

transparent. The inner one seemed to be a pale golden glow, but I couldn't be sure because of the way the one on the outside shifted around; it seemed to interfere with my seeing

the inner one clearly. After a few minutes, I gave up on trying to look at the shimmerings and tried looking through them instead.

The shimmerings didn't seem to get in the way at all; I discovered that I could see quite a bit of the castle. Part of the reason was that there was no wall around it, only the shimmerings and a water-filled moat just inside them. The castle itself was a wonderful, rambling-looking place, with about six towers of various sizes and large square windows and four balconies. I could see several stairways running up to oddly shaped doors or around the outside of the towers, and a lot of walls that seemed to be there just to confuse people. I was so busy studying the castle and the shimmerings that I almost didn't notice when the dragon stopped;

I was lucky not to step on his tail.

We were about halfway around the castle, and there seemed to be fewer dragons around. I was trying to guess which one was Kazul, when the old dragon who had been leading us stepped a little to one side and bobbed his head respectfully. "King Kazul, these are the travelers who wish to see you. That one's Daystar, the other one's Shiara, and the cat is Nightwitch."

Right away I bowed very deeply, and so did Shiara. I was relieved; I hadn't been completely sure she would do any of the things I'd suggested. As I straightened up, I got my first look at Kazul.

Even lying on the ground, she looked large for a dragon. Her scales were just beginning to turn grey around the edges, which surprised me; I'd expected someone older. Her eyes were hypnotic, green-gold ovals. She was the most dangerous-looking dragon I'd ever seen. Kazul smiled broadly. Dragons have a lot of teeth.

"So," she said, "you are the people Telemain sent through the Caves of Chance, and you have the Sword of the Sleeping King."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I said. I took the sword out from under my arm and held it up so she could see it better.

Talking to Dragons 181

"Mother gave it to me a few days ago, and I was told you would want to know about it."

"Ahhhhhh." Kazul's eyes glowed as she looked at the sword. Literally; the light from them was a little like firelight, except it didn't flicker. After a minute, she transferred her gaze to me. "And you got it here safely. Well done, Cimorene's son."

"Thank you. Your Majesty," I said. "You knew my mother?"

Kazul smiled again. "Cimorene was the best Princess I

ever had."

Shiara choked. My jaw dropped; the little dragon said, "That's how she knew dragon magic!" in a pleased tone.

I closed my mouth, swallowed hard, and bowed to Kazul. "Excuse me, Your Majesty. I was, urn, startled. Mother is a Princess?"

"She certainly was once," Kazul said. She looked at the sword again. "I'm glad she managed to keep it safe. We didn't have a lot of choice at the time, but it's still worrying to have to take a risk like that."

I wasn't certain what to say to that; Kazul didn't seem to be talking to me, but it isn't a good idea to ignore a dragon. I decided not to say anything and bowed again.

Kazul looked up from the sword. "You needn't bother being quite so formal," she said. "I have a lot to tell you, and it will make the conversation a lot easier if you're not quite so stiff."

Before I could reply, Kazul turned toward the old dragon, who was still standing beside me. "It will be tomorrow morning. Let everyone know; the preparations must be finished by then."

The old dragon nodded and left. Kazul looked back at us. "Come with me." She started to rise.

"What about me?" the little dragon demanded.

Kazul sighed. "Yes, you may come, too." She stood, which made her look twice as big as she had before, and started walking. Shiara and I looked at each other and followed. There wasn't anything else we could do; after all, Kazul was King of the Dragons.

By this time the sun was completely down, but there was

182 Patricia C. Wrede

still enough light in the sky that we could see where we were going. Kazul led us a little farther around the castle, then turned away from it. As we walked along, the other dragons would slide out of the way for Kazul and bow their heads respectfully to her; then Shiara and I would walk by and bow respectfully to the dragons. It kept us too busy to see much of where we were going.

Kazul led us to what looked like a jumbled pile of rocks a little way from the castle. There was a dark opening at one side of the pile, and Kazul went right in. Shiara and the dragon and I followed.

It was very dark inside, almost as black as the Caves of Chance. I stopped immediately; I didn't want to step on Kazul's tail in the dark or run into her accidentally. Shiara bumped into me, squeezing Nightwitch between us. Nightwitch said, "Mrowww!" in a complaining tone, and Kazul's voice came out of the darkness.



"I suppose you human people need some light."

"Only if it won't be inconvenient," I said hastily.

"Not at all," Kazul replied, and added about five hissing words.

Silvery light sprang up all around us. I had to squint for a minute; then I blinked. The inside of the pile of rocks looked a lot like a cave. I looked for the source of the light and realized with a shiver that the light was coming from the rocks.

That shook me. Dragons don't usually do magic casually;

they take it too seriously. In particular, the King of the Dragons wouldn't normally work a spell just for a visitor's convenience. I looked at Kazul, wondering exactly what was going on.

"Sit down," said Kazul, nodding toward a row of rocks. We did. The little dragon sat down by the entrance, looking half-sulky and half-defiant. Kazul ignored it.

"I think you had better tell me your story first," she said, looking at me intently. "Start at the beginning, when Cimorene gave you the sword."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll start with the sword if you want me to, but I think the beginning is the wizard."

"Wizard?" said Kazul.

Talking to Dragons 183

"His name's Antorell; he came to our cottage the day before Mother gave me the sword, and Mother melted him."

"Oh, him." Kazul shook her head. "Sounds like he hasn't learned anything since the last time he tangled with Cimorene. Yes, start with him, by all means."

So I told Kazul everything that had happened to me since Antorell had walked up to our cottage and knocked the door in. It took a long time, especially the part after Shiara and I met the dragon, because the dragon kept adding things. Finally, Kazul told it to either be quiet or go away. It looked terribly offended, but it quit talking.

Kazul didn't ask any questions at all. Once, when I mentioned finding the key in the Caves of Chance, she made a noise that sounded like an astonished snort, but she apologized for interrupting and told me to go on. I did, once I got over the shock of having the King of the Dragons apologize to me.

When I finished, there was silence for a minute or two. Then Kazul stirred. "So. You have accomplished a great deal in a short time, Daystar."

"It doesn't really seem like it to me," I said.

"A great deal," Kazul repeated. She sounded as if she

were talking to herself.

Shiara shifted restlessly. "Are you going to explain about Daystar's sword?" she demanded.

"Shiara!" I said, horrified. Nobody talks to the King of the Dragons in that tone of voice.

Except Shiara. "No," said Kazul. "Or at least, I'm not going to tell you as much as you want to know. It's one of the problems with that sword right now. The Society of Wizards has more than a hundred spells hunting for it, and all of them depend on finding someone who knows what he's carrying; the sword itself is invisible to wizards' magic. If Daystar knows too much about that sword too soon, we'll be up to our wings in wizards right away. I don't want that to happen yet."

"I don't like wizards," the little dragon said suddenly. "They make me sneeze."

Kazul's head turned and she eyed the little dragon for a minute. "I think it is time you made yourself useful," she

184 Patricia C. Wrede

said at last. "Go find Marchak and tell him to bring us dinner. Then go back to your teacher and apologize for running off, and after that you can start getting ready for tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?" the little dragon said suspiciously.

"We have a war," Kazul said. "Which you might manage to live through, if you're ready for it. So go!"

"Yes, ma'am!" The little dragon disappeared out the door of the cave.

Kazul looked after it for a minute, then shook her head. "That is undoubtedly the most irritating grandchild I have."

"Who are you going to be fight— Grandchild?" said Shiara.

"Yes, of course," said Kazul, looking mildly surprised. "It's an annoying youngster, but precocious children frequently are. I'm hoping it will grow out of it."

"Oh," said Shiara. She stared out the entrance thoughtfully.

"I enjoyed its company, most of the time," I said honestly.

"I'm glad," Kazul said.

"Um, if you wouldn't mind telling us, I'm sort of curious about whom you expect to be fighting tomorrow," I said after another minute. I was also wondering whether Kazul thought Shiara and I were going to be included in this. I wasn't particularly anxious to get involved in a war between

dragons.

Kazul smiled; I got the feeling she knew what I was thinking. "Wizards," she said. "There will be a few elves, of course, and maybe some ogres and trolls, but mostly we'll be fighting wizards."

"Oh," I said. I was even less interested in getting involved in a war between dragons and wizards. Dragons alone might overlook Shiara and Nightwitch and me, but wizards certainly wouldn't.

"I'm afraid you already are involved," Kazul said.

"Because of the sword?" Shiara asked while I tried to remember whether I'd said anything out loud about not wanting to get involved.

Talking to Dragons 185

"Yes," said Kazul. "The sword, and other things. It's a long story; I hope you're comfortable."

We both nodded, and Kazul smiled again. "Well, then. There are two types of magic in the world: the kind you're born with, and the kind you get from something else. Dragons—Kazul looked smug—"elves, unicorns, and fire-witches are bom with magic, to name a few. Ordinary witches and magicians get their magic from objects or from rituals involving things that have magic; it works quite well and doesn't upset things.

"Wizards, on the other hand, get their magic from everything around them that happens to have magic. Those staffs of theirs absorb little bits of it constantly and it gets worse every time a wizard stores a new spell in his staff. That, by the way, is why dragons are allergic to them; whenever those staffs get near us, they start trying to soak up some of our magic. It creates other problems, too."

"You mean those stupid wizards have been grabbing my magic every time they come near me?" Shiara said indignantly.

"Not yours," Kazul said. "Wizards can't use fire-witches' magic; it's too different. Their staffs explode if they try."

"Good!" said Shiara vindictively. Her face grew thoughtful. "I wonder if I could learn to do it on purpose?"

Kazul looked as if she agreed with Shiara. "Wizards get most of their magic from the Enchanted Forest, but if they absorb too much magic in any one place, things die."

"The moss!" I said. "That's why it turns brown when a wizard's staff touches it."

"Yes," said Kazul. "The Kings of the Enchanted Forest had a way of reversing the process, taking magic out of a wizard's staff and putting it back in the forest, so wizards weren't too much of a problem until about seventeen or eighteen years ago, when one of the wizards managed to steal some rather important items from the King's castle.

One of them in particular was critical to the King's control of the wizards." Kazul paused and looked at me expectantly.

"The sword?" I said. "Telemain said it was supposed to be used on wizards."

"Telemain talks too much," Kazul said a little sourly.

186 Patricia C. Wrede

"The wizard who stole the sword didn't know exactly what he had, at first, but he knew enough to convince the rest of the wizards to attack the castle. They were trying to kill the King and take his place, but before they succeeded, the sword was stolen again. A few wizards managed to get inside the castle, but without the sword they didn't have enough power to actually kill the King. The best they could do was find a way of keeping him out of action while they hunted for the sword."

"They put the King to sleep?" I said doubtfully. It sounded a bit unlikely. Sleeping spells are very effective on guards and Princesses, and even a kingdom now and then, but they can't usually do much against a good magician, and whatever else he was, I was sure the King of the Enchanted Forest had to be a master magician.

"We don't know exactly what they did," Kazul admitted. "We know the King isn't dead, because the Enchanted Forest reacts very strongly when a King dies. We know they did something, though, because the seal they have around the castle wouldn't hold the King in by itself."

"You mean those shimmerings around the castle?" I said.

"The outer one is ours," Kazul said with a grim smile. "The wizards put up a spell to keep everyone but themselves out of the castle, so we put one to keep the wizards out. Without the sword, there wasn't anything more we could do."

"Then how did Daystar's mother get hold of the sword?" Shiara asked.

Kazul smiled again. "Cimorene was the one who stole it back from the wizards in the first place. They've been trying to get hold of it again ever since. They'll show up as soon as we break through their barrier tomorrow, but by then we should be ready for them."

"Uh, you expect Shiara and me to help you fight the wizards?" I said.

"Of course not," Kazul replied. "You're going to get into the castle and break whatever spell the wizards put on the King seventeen years ago."

THAT TOOK SOME explanation. What Kazul meant was, the dragons would lower the barrier they had put up around the castle. Then I would draw the Sword of the Sleeping King

and put it into the wizards' barrier, which, according to Kazul, would break their spell. The wizards would know immediately that something was happening, and they would start trying to get to the castle. The dragons and their various allies would hold off the wizards and whomever they brought to help them, while I ran into the castle, found the King, and broke the spell.

I didn't like the sound of it at all, but I couldn't say much. Mother had given me the sword, and I was pretty sure this was what she'd wanted me to do with it. Besides, Kazul seemed to think I was the only one who could use the sword to break the spell, and how do you tell the King of the Dragons that you won't do something she wants you to do?

Shiara, on the other hand, had a lot to say. She thought it would be stupid for me to go into the castle by myself. Kazul asked if she was volunteering, and Shiara said that she wasn't going to be left out just when things were getting interesting. Kazul pointed out that Shiara's arm was broken,

187

188 Patricia C. Wrede

and Shiara told her that being inside the castle with me sounded safer than being outside with a lot of wizards and dragons fighting each other.

Finally, Kazul said Shiara could go with me if she wanted to. Shiara said good, and were the dragons going to be able to keep all of the wizards out of the castle, or were some of them going to sneak in after us? They kept on like that for quite a while. I was very glad when a middle-sized dragon arrived with dinner and interrupted. I couldn't see why Kazul was being so patient with Shiara, and I was getting worried that it wouldn't last much longer.

Dinner was excellent. Kazul didn't eat with us; she spent most of the meal lying on the floor and watching us inscrutably. Dragons are very good at being inscrutable. I found it a bit unsettling, but it didn't seem to bother Shiara or Nightwitch much.

After dinner we talked some more. Kazul told us about the castle and what the floor plan was. She also told us about a lot of things to watch out for; most of them were magical items that would only be dangerous if we accidentally did something to them, but there were a few traps, too.

"This castle sounds awfully big," Shiara said after a while. "How are we supposed to find this King, anyway?"

"You look for him," Kazul said. "I'm afraid I can't tell you exactly where. The only people who knew where the King was were the wizards who went in and put the spell on him, and as far as I know they're all dead."

"As far as you know?" I said.

"Some of them didn't come out of the castle," Kazul

said.

"But you're sure that the ones who did come out are dead?" I said.

"Positive," said Kazul.

"So what?" said Shiara. Kazul and I looked at her. "I don't care about the wizards who came out," she said defensively. "I'm worried about the ones who might still be in there."

"They have to be either dead or enchanted," Kazul said. "Even a wizard can't live seventeen years without food."

Talking to Dragons 189

"I suppose so," Shiara said. "Well, what does this King look like?"

"You'll know him when you see him," Kazul said. "Besides, he's the only other person in there."

"Oh, great," said Shiara. "We have to hunt through an empty castle for someone we don't even know, while a bunch of wizards are trying to get in and stop us."

"It shouldn't be that bad," Kazul said. "The sword and the key should both help considerably."

"The key?" I said.

"Of course the key!" Kazul said impatiently. "For one thing, it'll make it a lot easier for you to get into the castle; you could have done it with the sword alone, but it will be much faster with the key as well."

"Are you saying I just picked up the key to the castle by accident?" I said.

"Accidents like that happen all the time in the Caves of Chance," Kazul said dryly. "Where do you think they got their name?"

"How do you know it's the right key?" Shiara demanded. "The quozzel said some wizard put it there."

"It was one of the things that were stolen along with the sword," Kazul replied. "But if it will make you more comfortable, I can look at it."

I dug the key out of my pocket and held it out to Kazul. Kazul glanced at it and started to nod, then stopped suddenly and stared at the key very intently.

"That wizard's done something to it," she said after a moment. She sounded outraged.

"Wonderful," said Shiara disgustedly. "All we need is another wizard to get mixed up in this."

"He isn't another wizard," Kazul said. "He's the same one who stole the key in the first place, and he's dead."

"You're sure he's not one of the wizards who didn't come out?" Shiara said. Kazul nodded, and Shiara frowned. "Can you tell what he did?"

Kazul didn't answer. She stared at the key instead, and her eyes started glowing again. The key began getting wanner and wanner in my hands. Just before it got too hot for me to hold, the key jerked in the direction of the castle outside;

190 Patricia C. Wrede

a second later, I dropped it. I stood shaking my fingers, while Kazul and Shiara stared down at the key, and Nightwitch walked over and sniffed at it.

"Nightwitch!" said Shiara. "Stop that; you'll get enchanted or something." She bent over and grabbed awkwardly for Nightwitch with her left hand. The kitten jumped away, and Shiara's fingers brushed the key. A look of surprise came over her face, and she picked the key up. "It feels like fire," she said.

"I know," I said. "It burned my fingers."

"No, I don't mean it's hot," Shiara said. "It just feels like fire."

"It shouldn't," Kazul said, sounding interested. "Bring it over here."

Shiara took the key to Kazul, who looked at it for a few minutes and handed it back. "I thought so. It's part of what that wizard did."

"But what's it for?" Shiara said.

"I don't know," Kazul admitted. "The spell is connected to something inside the castle, but I can't tell what with the barriers around the outside. He may have set a trap with it;

he was one of the wizards who got inside during the battle, you know."

"No, I didn't," Shiara said. "And how could he use the key inside the castle if it was sitting down in the Caves of Chance the whole time?"

"He couldn't have," Kazul said calmly. "He probably left the key there after he got out of the castle; he was the last one of the wizards we caught, and he had plenty of time to do it."

"May I have my key back, please?" I said. Kazul and Shiara both looked at me, and Shiara handed me the key. "Thank you," I said, and put it in my pocket. I wasn't quite sure why I wanted it; I only knew that it felt right, somehow.

"Is there anything else we ought to know about right now?" I asked after a minute. "I mean, we've walked a long way today, and been in a cave-in, and Shiara has a

broken arm, and if we're going to do all of these things tomorrow, I would sort of like to get some rest."

Talking to Dragons

191

"Mrrrroww!" said Nightwitch emphatically.

Kazul chuckled. "It seems you aren't the only one who would like rest. Very well. Marchak!"

The middle-sized dragon who had brought us dinner appeared, and Kazul had him show us to our rooms. They turned out to be normal, human-sized rooms, and quite comfortable. I was surprised until it occurred to me that the King of the Dragons would probably have occasional human visitors, who would need a place to stay. I wondered how many human magicians kept a special place for visiting dragons in their castles and towers and things, and right in the middle of wondering, I fell asleep.

A loud pounding noise woke me; someone, probably a dragon, was knocking on the door of my room. "Just a minute, please," I called, and the pounding stopped.

I got out of the bed, which I couldn't remember having gotten into, and picked up my swordbelt. I checked my pockets to make sure I had the key, started for the door, and stopped suddenly in the middle of the room. If the dragons expected me to do things with the Sword of the Sleeping King. I wasn't going to carry it under my arm like a bag of laundry. I put the swordbelt on and opened the door.

"It's about time," said the little dragon in the hall. Shiara and Nightwitch were already there.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know you were in a hurry."

The dragon snorted and started off down the hall. "Come on."

We went after it. It didn't seem to be in a particularly good mood, and I didn't understand why until Shiara told me that it wanted to come into the castle with us, but Kazul wouldn't let it. I couldn't see why it wanted to come; there weren't supposed to be any wizards inside the castle, and I thought the little dragon wanted to fight wizards. I didn't say anything, though. Arguing with a grouchy dragon isn't safe, even if it's a small dragon.

The dragon brought us back to the cave where we'd talked to Kazul the previous night. Kazul wasn't there, but breakfast was, and we sat down right away. We were almost

192

Patricia C. Wrede

done with it when Kazul arrived.

"Go on, finish," she said when she saw we were still eating.



"Urn, that's all right," Shiara said hastily. "I don't want any more."

"I've had plenty, too," I said. "It's very good."

Kazul nodded absently. "Well, if you're finished, let us begin."

I stood up from the table, wishing suddenly that I hadn't eaten quite so much. My stomach felt as if it were full of lead, and my head was very light. "How do we start?" I said.

"Follow me." Kazul slid out of the cave without looking back at us. Shiara and I followed, and Nightwitch and the little dragon came behind us.

Kazul led us back across the hard, brown ground toward the castle. All around us, dragons were polishing their teeth and sharpening their claws; some of them were muttering spells under their breath. A couple of times, I saw elves hurrying through the crowd, and once I saw a group of intense-looking red-haired people who had to be fire-witches. Everyone was very serious and grim.

None of us said anything until we got to the castle. Kazul led us around the outside of the shimmerings until we were at the front of the castle; if I concentrated on looking through the barriers, I could see a flat wooden bridge across the moat and a large door with steps leading up to it. Kazul stopped and turned to the little dragon. "You'd better go find your place now," she said.

"But I want to—"

"Go!"

The little dragon went. Shiara and I looked at each other, and then at Kazul. Kazul smiled. "Are you ready?"

I nodded jerkily. Shiara bent and picked up Nightwitch. Kazul's smile widened. "When I tell you 'now,' draw your sword and run for the castle. Don't look back, and don't stop for anything."

I nodded again, because I didn't trust my voice just then. Kazul turned to the crowd of dragons, and suddenly everything was completely silent. A shiver ran down my back,

Talking to Dragons 193

and I put my hand on the hilt of the Sword of the Sleeping King.

I felt the bee-in-the-jar buzz that was Shiara's magic, and a strong humming from all the dragons, but the strongest feeling of all was the purring I'd felt from the first time the sword made my arm tingle. It was coming from the castle. Not from the shimmerings around the castle; they just got in the way. What I was feeling was the magic of the castle itself.

I took a tighter grip on the hilt of the sword. The tingling

from the dragons got stronger and more positive, and abruptly Kazul turned and shouted, "Now!" As she spoke, the silver-and-green shimmering around the castle vanished.

I yanked the Sword of the Sleeping King out of its sheath and swung it at the golden glow that was still left between me and the castle. I felt a shock like a lightning bolt as the sword hit, and then the shimmering vanished in an explosion of golden light. I shook my head and heard Kazul shout, "Run!"

I took two steps and almost lost my balance. The ground wasn't hard and bare anymore; it was covered with slippery green fuzz. Shiara grabbed my arm just as I heard a series of explosions from behind us.

We ran. I could feel the jangling from the sword that meant there were wizards around somewhere, but I didn't stop to look for them. I was too busy trying to keep up with Shiara, hang on to the sword, and dig the key out of my pocket, all at the same time. It didn't work very well.

Shiara was standing in front of the door, panting, when I got up to it with the key. I didn't see a keyhole, but as soon as my foot touched the top step of the stairs, the door swung open.

"Daystar," Shiara said, "are you sure—"

Something hit the stone of the castle next to the door and exploded, showering us with little chips of rock. Shiara and I dove through the door and landed on the floor inside with Nightwitch on top of us. I sat up just as the door closed silently behind us.

"Hey!" Shiara said. "Watch what you're doing with that sword!"

194 Patricia C. Wrede

"I'm sorry," I said. I stood up, stuck the key in my pocket again, and held out a hand to help Shiara up. "Is your arm all right?"

"I think so," she said absently. "At least, it doesn't hurt any more than it did already. Now which way do we go?"

"I don't know," I said. The door shook as something hit it, and a moment later there was a muffled explosion. "I think we should get out of here, though."

"Aren't you going to put that stupid sword away first?"

"No," I said. "I'd rather have it in my hand, in case some of the wizards do get into the castle."

Shiara scowled, but she didn't object again, and we started hunting through the castle.

The castle was even more confusing on the inside than it was on the outside. Rooms opened into more rooms and then suddenly into a hallway or a flight of stairs. All of them were full of chairs and tables and books and suits of

armor, and everything was dusty. The wizards' spell seemed to have kept spiderwebs and cobwebs out of the castle, but it hadn't done anything at all about the dust. Nightwitch didn't like it at all; she kept sneezing. Finally, Shiara picked her up and carried her, which helped a little.

It took a lot longer to figure out where we were going than I'd expected. I could feel the sword pulling me toward the center of the castle, but it was very hard to just go in that direction. In spite of Kazul's instructions, Shiara and I kept getting into hallways that curved the wrong way and chains of rooms that ended with nowhere else to go. It was very discouraging.

Finally, we came to a large door at the end of a long hall. It was about three times as wide as a normal door and much taller, and it was made of gold with designs on it in relief. There was a staff lying on the floor in front of it; I could tell from the jangling of the sword that it was a wizard's staff. When I stopped to look at it, the sword jerked impatiently toward the door. "I think this is the place we've been looking for," I said.

Shiara tried the door. "It's locked. Where's that key?"

"Just a minute," I said, and dug for it. "Hey!" I said.

Talking to Dragons 195

As soon as I touched it, I felt the key pulling at me, the same way the sword was.

"What is it?" Shiara said. "Come on, hurry up!"

"It's this key," I said as I unlocked the door. "It feels almost like the sword, except—"

I stopped as the door swung open. The room inside was very large and very high. It was full of light and not dusty at all. In the center of the floor was something like a shallow iron brazier, about three feet high and nearly five feet across, full of glowing coals. On the other side of the brazier was a couch, and lying on the couch was a man.

He was dressed in expensive-looking clothes, but there were tears in them, as if he had been in a fight. He didn't look old, even though his beard was long and grey. His head was bare, and at his side was a jeweled scabbard, empty. He was asleep.

Shiara took a deep breath. "That must be him; come on, Daystar, let's get this over with."

I stepped into the room and walked slowly toward the couch. As I came around the brazier, I saw that there was another wizard's staff lying beside the couch. I slowed down even more; something felt wrong. I stopped, standing next to the couch with the key in one hand and the sword in the other.

"Well, now that we're here, how do we break the spell?" Shiara said, coming up on one side of me.

"Something's wrong," I said, and as I spoke I realized what it was. The key was still pulling at me, but as soon as I had stepped into the room, the pulling from the sword had stopped. All I could feel from the sword was the jangling of the magic in the wizard's staffs.

"Maybe if you lay the sword on him it'll work," Shiara said, ignoring me. "Come on; you have to try something or we'll be here all day."

"I wouldn't try anything at all, if I were you," said a voice behind us. Shiara and I spun to look backward. The doorway of the room was full of wizards.

I STARED AT the wizards for an instant, then turned and jumped for the couch, hoping I could break the spell before the wizards could do anything. I didn't make it. As I brought the flat of the sword down, the sleeping man vanished. The sword clanged softly against the couch, and I spun back to face the wizards.

Something hit me as I turned, and suddenly I couldn't move my body at all. I could turn my head far enough to see Shiara, but that was all. Shiara looked as if she were concentrating on something, so I turned my head back to the wizards. They were standing around the sleeping man, who was now lying on the floor in front of the doorway.

"Well done," said one of the wizards to another.

"Thank you," the second wizard said. "It was a mere trifle."

There was a stir at the back of the group of wizards, and a moment later Antorell pushed forward to the front. He had a bandage around one arm, probably where the dragon had bitten him. "I want the boy!" he said. "Now!"

The wizard in front, who seemed to be the leader of the group, looked at Antorell coldly. "You were permitted to join us in order to give you an opportunity to repair some

197

198 Patricia C. Wrede

of the damage you did seventeen years ago. Not to further your private ambitions."

"But you said I could have the boy!"

"Antorell, you're a fool," the leader said. "You may have the boy, but after we have possession of the sword, not before."

"I'll give you the sword, then!" Antorell said angrily. He strode around the edge of the brazier and reached for the hilt of the sword, just above my hand. I wanted to jerk away, but I still couldn't move.

There was a flash of blue-and-gold light as Antorell

touched the sword, and he was flung backward onto the floor; if he'd fallen a few inches to the other side, he'd have gone into the brazier. I found myself wishing he had, then found myself staring at the brazier. There was something about it that nibbled at my mind, but I couldn't make it come clear. I didn't have time to think about it, because the wizards started talking again.

Antorell was picking himself up off the floor, and the leader of the wizards smiled at him nastily. "You see?"

"You knew this would happen!" Antorell said furiously.

"Of course I knew," the leader said. "Had you spent your time hunting that sword instead of trying to get some sort of ridiculous revenge on Cimorene, you, too, would know."

"Then demonstrate the proper method for me," Antorell said sarcastically. "If you know so much, you take the sword."

"I am not so foolish," the other wizard replied. "No one save the King of the Enchanted Forest can take that sword from a Bearer who is not willing to give it up, especially not inside this castle."

"Then how do you expect to get it?" Antorell said even more sarcastically than before.

"We kill the King," the wizard said, gesturing at the sleeping figure on the floor in front of him. "When the line of the Kings of the Enchanted Forest is ended, one of us can take up the rule of the castle."

"What good will that do?" Antorell said. "The boy will still have the sword. And, as you have reminded me so

199

## Talking to Dragons

many times in the past two days, he seems to be able to use it."

The leader shrugged. "If your tale is true, I shall admit to some surprise; I thought no one but the King could use the sword. Which is why one of us must become King."

"You accuse me of lying?"

"Why should I bother?"

Antorell scowled and started to raise his staff, then seemed to change his mind. "When the boy blows your own spells back at you, perhaps you will see what I mean."

"Nonsense!" the leader of the wizards replied. "You obviously know little of what you speak."

"No, of course not; I have only seen the boy in action," Antorell said with awful sarcasm.

The leader shrugged again. "What the boy has learned

matters little. The power of the sword passes to the ruler of the castle, and there is nothing he can do about it. He will be easy enough to take care of then."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flicker of movement;

Shiara was edging toward me. I had to force myself not to turn my head. The wizards seemed to have forgotten both of us, and I didn't want to remind them. I hoped they wouldn't remember until after Shiara had done whatever she was planning to do. I also hoped Shiara was planning to do something; I certainly couldn't, and I didn't think Nightwitch would be much help against all those wizards.

"Stop talking and let's get on with it," one of the wizards in the back said.

"An excellent suggestion. That is, if you are quite satisfied, Antorell?" said the leader.

Antorell glared and stalked over to the rest of the wizards. The leader looked around and nodded. "Begin."

Under other circumstances, the spell-casting would have been very interesting to watch. The wizards spent quite a bit of time arguing about where each of them should stand, and exactly what the correct angle was for each staff, and in what order the spells should be said. The leader seemed particularly concerned that things be done right; evidently there was something about the castle that would cause prob-

200

Patricia C. Wrede

lems if everything wasn't perfect. Finally, they agreed on what they were going to do, and they got started.

As the wizards started chanting, something touched my arm; if I could have moved, I'd have jumped. It was Shiara. "Do something before they finish!" I whispered.

"I've been trying!" Shiara whispered back. "But it isn't working."

"Oh, no." I was so upset that I spoke the words in a normal tone of voice; fortunately, the wizards were too busy chanting to notice. "You haven't been polite to anyone since you apologized to Telemain, and you used that up on the last bunch of wizards."

Shiara looked stricken. "Daystar, I'm sorry!"

"There isn't anything we can do about it now," I said.

"If you—"

I stopped, because the wizards had stopped chanting. Shiara and I both looked at them, but the wizards didn't seem to be finished with what they were doing. They looked more like they'd been interrupted in the middle of things. The leader was bending over the man on the floor, who was still sleeping. A moment later the wizard straightened with an exclamation and stretched his staff out over the man's body.

The figure dissolved into sparkles, leaving a little blob of mud on the floor, and the wizards stirred in surprise. "A simulacrum!" said someone at the back of the wizards.

I let out my breath in relief. Simulacra are very hard to make; like most major spells, earth, air, fire, and water have to be properly mixed in order to get a good one, and that's fairly tricky. A really good magician can make a simulacrum that looks exactly like someone, but it doesn't have any connection to the actual person at all. As a result, a simulacrum can't be used against someone the way other types of magic can; what they're mainly good for is confusing people.

This one seemed to have done an excellent job. The wizards were glaring at each other accusingly. "If that was a simulacrum," one of them said finally, "where's the King? Who put it there, anyway?"

"Old Zemenar, probably," an older-looking wizard said.

Talking to Dragons 201

"It looked like him, and setting up a decoy is just the sort of thing he would do."

"That doesn't make sense! He started this whole affair in the first place; why would he put a false King in the castle to distract us?"

"Zemenar never trusted anybody. He probably wanted to do this himself, so he made it as hard as he could for anyone else to finish the job. Or maybe he was just being omery." The older wizard shrugged. "Either way, I doubt that he expected to get eaten by a dragon."

"We have wasted enough time here," the leader of the wizards said with sudden decision. "Silvarex, take three others and begin searching for the King at once. We cannot allow him to escape again."

He went on giving instructions, but I stopped paying attention. He wasn't talking to me, and I had other things to worry about. I was still holding the key in my left hand, and as soon as the simulacrum disappeared, the key stopped tugging me and started getting warm. My other arm, the one with the sword, was tingling under the jangling of the wizards, and my head felt very light. I had a sudden, strong feeling that there was something important I ought to remember, but the jangling of the wizards' magic kept distracting me just before I could figure out what it was.

"Daystar!" Shiara hissed, practically in my ear.

I jumped a little and realized that the wizard's spell holding me was beginning to weaken. I couldn't move very much or very fast, though, and if the wizards noticed, they'd just throw the spell at me again. I decided not to move at all until I was sure I could move the sword fast enough to block another spell if they threw one at me, then whispered to Shiara, "Don't do that. They might notice."

Shiara snorted. "If you don't want them to notice, you'd

better try to notice sooner. That was the third time I called you."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I. What are we going to do?"

"If you could— Nightwitch!" I broke off in midsentence as a small black streak darted toward the group of wizards. One of them raised his staff; Shiara cried out and Nightwitch

202 Patricia C. Wrede

dodged. The spell hit the marble floor in a ball of light, and a moment later the kitten was among the wizards' feet. I couldn't see what was happening, but I could hear the wizards shouting.

"There it goes!"

"Stop it!"

"It got away."

"Find it," the leader of the wizards commanded. "You, Grineran, go after it; it may lead you to the one we seek."

One of the wizards nodded and left, and I blinked. There were only three wizards left now: a short, round wizard, the wizard who was giving orders, and Antorell.

Antorell was staring at Shiara and me. "What about them?" he said suddenly. "They may know something."

The leader of the wizards looked thoughtful. "For once, Antorell, you may have made a useful suggestion. Persuading them to explain what they know may be difficult, however."

Antorell grinned nastily. "I think I can manage it."

"Really." The leader sounded skeptical. "The girl is a fire-witch, and the boy has the sword, remember."

"Sword or no, he cannot be immune to spells or Silvarex would never have been able to bind him," Antorell said.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Something like this."

Antorell waved his staff casually in my direction as he spoke. Even if I'd been able to move, I wouldn't have been able to twist the sword into a position to block the spell before it hit me, especially since I didn't realize what he was doing until the pain struck. It felt as if I were fighting the fire-witch again, only this time the pain was all through my body instead of just in my arms. It was worse than anything I'd ever felt. I think I screamed, but I'm not sure.

Beside me, Shiara shouted, and a long ribbon of fire shot



through the air in front of me, straight at Antorell. The pain stopped abruptly and the key in my left hand got even hotter. Antorell was on fire; he was slapping at his clothes and his staff, trying to put out the flames. Neither of the other wizards was helping; they were staring toward Shiara and me.

Talking to Dragons

203

The ribbon of fire still hung in the air above the brazier, making a curtain of flames between us and the wizards. Slowly, reluctantly, it began to fade, and as it died, the heat from the key in my left hand faded along with it. Fire, I thought. Fire in the brazier, fire in the key; Kazul had said something about the key and fire....

I lifted my left hand, fighting the remnant of the wizard's spell, and threw the key forward into the brazier.

There was a whoosh of flame that leapt all the way to the ceiling, then died. I thought I saw something in it, but it vanished before I could be sure. The brazier began to glow, and the whole room was suddenly full of magic, the magic of the castle and the Enchanted Forest. It seemed to be getting ready for something, or perhaps waiting; I was sure there was something else I should do, but I couldn't think what.

"Stop them!" the leader of the wizards shouted.

"Move, Daystar!" Shiara cried, and ducked down behind the brazier.

I tried to follow her, but I couldn't move fast enough because of the remains of the binding spell and because I was worrying about what else I was supposed to do in order to finish the spell I'd started with the key. I saw Antorell and the other wizards bring their staffs up, and I tried desperately to move the sword far enough to block whatever they were throwing at me. I made it, but only just.

There was a flash as the wizards' spell hit the sword, and a tingle ran through me. The spell that had been binding me vanished; I could feel what was left of it flowing through the sword along with the rest of the magic the wizards had thrown at me. It felt a lot like the jolt of power I'd gotten in the forest, when I'd used the sword on the spell the wizards had tried to throw at Shiara, except that this time I could tell where the power was going.

The power was flowing through me, into the magic of the Enchanted Forest itself. Back where it had come from in the first place, if Kazul was right about where wizards got most of their magic. Back to...

I felt my eyes widening and almost missed blocking the next spell. Then I saw more wizards appearing behind the

204

Patricia C. Wrede

three m the doorway; if I didn't do something soon, I wouldn'

be able to do anything except block spells. There was no way to find out whether I was right except to try.

I stepped up to the edge of the brazier, took a deep breath and said loudly:

"Power of water, wind, and earth,  
Turn the spell back to its birth.  
Raise the fire to free the lord  
By the power of wood and sword."

As I spoke the last word, I thrust the Sword of the Sleeping King into the middle of the coals in the brazier.

As the sword touched the coals, I felt the magic of the forest surge forward around me. Fire shot up to the ceiling, the same way it had when I threw the key into the brazier, but this time the flames didn't fade. They got brighter and brighter until all I could see was fire. I heard a rumbling sound like the roof of the Caves of Chance falling in, and the floor shook under me. A voice said loudly, "All hail the Waker of the Sword! Hail!" and voices all around me shouted, "Hail!"

Echoes from the shout rolled around the room, like thunder rolling back and forth across the sky. I felt very light-headed; I couldn't see anything except fire, I couldn't hear anything except echoes, and I couldn't feel anything at all. Then something in my head seemed to snap into place, and the noise stopped abruptly.

I let go of the sword and stepped back a pace. The light in my eyes started to dwindle into flames again, but now I could see things in them, outlined in fire: dragons fighting wizards outside the castle, and dwarves fighting elves, and elves fighting wizards and other elves. I couldn't tell who was winning; sometimes it seemed to be one set of fiery little shapes, and sometimes it seemed to be the other.

As I stared at the fire, I realized that I could feel the jangling from all the wizard's staffs and the deep rumbling of the magic of the Enchanted Forest and the purring of the castle itself, even though I wasn't holding the sword any-

Talking to Dragons

205

more. I could even feel the shape of the wizards' spells inside and outside of the castle, including the one around and over the brazier. I could feel the magic of the sword, too, weaving a bright pattern through all the other types of magic. I followed the pattern until I saw how it worked, and then I reached out toward all the different kinds of magic and twisted.

The jangling of the wizard's staffs stopped abruptly as the power of the Enchanted Forest swallowed up the power of the staffs. Immediately, the flames in front of me swirled and pulled together, so that the pictures I'd been watching disappeared, and I found myself staring at a crowd of very angry ex-wizards through a shifting curtain of fire.

At least two of the wizards were wearing swords, and

they were reaching for them. The leader started to point in my direction, and I ducked instinctively. Almost every wizard who's any good carries a spell or two outside his staff, just in case the staff gets stolen. The wizards at the castle didn't have any magic in their staffs anymore, but they might still be able to make trouble with their spare spells.

I got behind the brazier just in time to avoid being hit by something like a large lightning bolt. I swallowed, hoping these wizards didn't have very many more spells like that. I heard shouts, and I rolled to my feet, expecting to see the wizards with the swords coming after me.

Wizards were running in several directions, but none of them seemed to be heading for me. For a moment, I was puzzled; then I saw Morwen, Telemain, and a couple of elves charging into the room from the hallway. I didn't stop to worry about how they had gotten there. I turned back to the brazier, to pull the Sword of the Sleeping King out of it so I could join the fight, and stopped.

The flames were still swirling in the air above the brazier, but they were denser somehow, and brighter. All I could see was a mass of white-and-yellow light, shot with power. Then something flashed so brightly that I had to cover my eyes. When I could see again, there was a door in the center of the brazier, right on top of the place where I had thrown the key and facing the point of the sword. The door was

206 Patricia C. Wrede

hung between two pillars that looked as if they were made of solid light, and I couldn't see anything in back of it except light and flames.

I stared at the door for a moment as it grew even more solid. I wasn't sure I wanted to find out what was on the other side. Doors like that are even worse than the one in Morwen's house; they can go anywhere. I reached for the Sword of the Sleeping King, but before my hand touched it, the door opened and a man stepped through.

He didn't look at all like the simulacrum; he was taller, with black hair and tired-looking grey eyes, and he didn't have a beard. He was dressed in plain clothes, but there was a feeling of strength about him, and power. Even without the thin gold circlet he wore I would have guessed who he was. I took a deep breath of relief as he stepped down from the brazier and onto the marble floor in front of me.

As he did, the doorway behind him melted back into leaping flames, which faded quickly until there was nothing there except the brazier and the glowing coals. The room was utterly silent. I looked up at the King of the Enchanted Forest for a moment, then turned to the brazier and reached for the hilt of the Sword of the Sleeping King.

The sword wasn't even warm from the fire, but the blade shone even more brightly than it had the day Mother brought it out of the Enchanted Forest and gave it to me. I looked at it for a minute, then turned back to the King and held it out.

"I've come to return your sword, Father," I said.

FOR A LONG moment the King of the Enchanted Forest looked at me over the hilt of the sword. Then he reached out and took it. He held it up for a moment, then turned and brought it down hard on the edge of the brazier.

The brazier split and fell apart, scattering embers. As soon as it hit the floor, it started to melt and vanish, and in a few seconds there was nothing left of it except the key. The King bent and picked it up, then turned back to me and smiled. "Thank you, Daystar."

"You're welcome," I said automatically. Then I noticed Shiara sitting on the floor, where she had dived when the wizards started throwing spells around. She was looking from me to the King and back, as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "Shiara, this is the King of the Enchanted Forest. Father, this is my friend, Shiara. She's a fire-witch."

Father bowed. Shiara looked at him and cleared her throat, then cleared it again and said, "Hey, urn, are you really Daystar's father?"

The King smiled slightly and nodded. "Of course. Only the Kings of the Enchanted Forest can use the sword." He raised it so that the light flashing from the blade filled the

209

210 Patricia C. Wrede

room, then in one fluid motion he sheathed it. He looked at me and smiled again.

Shiara blinked, then turned her head and glared at me. "Why didn't you tell me the King of the Enchanted Forest was your father?" she demanded.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't know it myself until just now," I said.

"Ha!" said Shiara. "Why--"

Before she could finish her sentence, Nightwitch pounced on her. I was just as surprised as Shiara; I hadn't seen the kitten coming. "Nightwitch!" Shiara said. "Where did you come from?"

"I believe she came with them," Father said, nodding toward the doorway.

Shiara and I turned. A dozen wizards were sprawled on the floor in a tangled pile. Some of them were wrapped in

vines, some of them seemed to be frozen, and some of them had elves and cats sitting on them. As soon as we turned to look at them, the elves all got up and bowed, then ^at down again quickly before the wizards could get up and do anything. The cats just sat and blinked at us.

"I don't think you need to be quite so careful," the King said to the elves. "If you'll let them up one at a time, I'll decide what to do with them."

The elves nodded, and one of them stood up and bowed politely to the King. Father walked over to the wizard the elf had been sitting on and started asking him questions. The wizard didn't answer. Finally, Father shrugged and waved a hand. The wizard disappeared, and Father went on to the next one.

As soon as they got off of the wizards, the elves started gathering up the staves into a big bundle; most of the cats just sat down and washed their paws. None of the wizards would say anything to Father, and he didn't waste much time on any of them. In a few minutes, there were only three wizards left. I was watching them when Shiara poked me.

"Daystar, where's Morwen?" she said when I turned around. "Those are her cats; she has to be around somewhere."

Talking to Dragons

211

"I don't know," I said. "I remember seeing her right before Father showed up, and Telemain was with her." I looked toward the door, where the last few wizards were, and blinked. "Shiara, where's Antorell?"

"Didn't he disappear already?"

"No, he didn't. I was watching," I said. Shiara and I looked at each other for an instant, then headed for the doorway.

No one tried to stop us. One of the elves gave us an odd look, but another elf grabbed his arm and whispered something to him, and he only bowed deeply as we passed. It made me feel almost as uncomfortable as I felt when the dwarves bowed to me; I didn't like it at all.

Outside in the hallway we found Morwen, kneeling on the floor beside Telemain and wrapping long strips of black cloth around his right shoulder. There were pieces of odd-looking plants all over the floor, and a little way down the hall was a puddle of something dark and slimy. The puddle had a wizard's staff lying across it, and a wizard's robe was sort of crumpled up under the staff; I got the distinct feeling that the puddle used to be a wizard.

"Morwen!" Shiara said. "What happened? Can I help?"

"What happened was a battle," Morwen said. "I should think that would be obvious enough."

"But how did—" Shiara stopped, because Telemain was

stirring. A moment later he opened his eyes and looked up at all of us.

"What was that?" he said rather hazily.

"That," said Morwen, "was a sword. They are usually long, very sharp, and pointed. You're lucky it didn't take your head off."

Telemain started to shake his head, then winced. "A plain sword. No wonder I couldn't block it; I thought it was a spell."

Morwen snorted. "You may be one of the greatest magical theoreticians in the world, but you don't have a particle of common sense," she said acidly. "Why, in heaven's name, didn't you duck?"

"I did duck!" Telemain said, looking startled and indignant. "He wasn't aiming for my shoulder, he was aiming

212

Patricia C. Wrede

for my chest. And if you think I'm going to put up with you and your—"

"You," Morwen said firmly, "are going to put up with me until that shoulder is healed. Which, may I remind you, means that I will have to put up with you for the same period of time. Fortunately, it shouldn't take very long; a few days, at most."

"A few days!" Telemain said. "Woman, are you mad? It'll take at least a week!"

"Not if I change herbs twice a day," Morwen said in an irritated tone. "I should know; it's my field."

"Well, it's my shoulder!"

"I'm so glad you noticed," Morwen said. "Stop fussing, or you'll make things worse and I will have to put up with you for a week."

Telemain stopped talking and just glared. It didn't seem to bother Morwen in the least. She dusted her hands and began picking up some of the plants that were scattered all over the floor. When he saw that Morwen wasn't even watching him, Telemain stopped glaring and tried to sit up. Right away, Morwen was beside him, pushing him back down on the floor.

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Morwen asked. "Stop jumping around like that."

"I'm quite capable of sitting up," Telemain said. He didn't look as if he were telling the truth; he was too pale, and he was having a lot of trouble pushing himself upright even before Morwen started pushing in the opposite direc-

tion.

"You are too stubborn to know what is good for you," Morwen informed him.

Telemain glared at her again. "This floor is cold, hard, and extremely uncomfortable. Do you expect me to lie here all day?"

"That would be far too much to ask," the King of the Enchanted Forest said from the doorway behind us. "But I believe I can do something about it."

Morwen stood up and nodded, then frowned at Telemain, who was trying to sit up again. "I told you to stay there, and I meant it, Kings or no Kings. Excuse me, Mendanbar,"

Talking to Dragons 213

she added, looking at the King.

"Morwen, you are incorrigible," Father said, smiling. He looked at Telemain. "You may as well do as she says; Cimorene's the only person I've ever met who has more determination than Morwen. Which room do you want?"

"The brown one," Morwen said before Telemain could answer. "He'll need a firm bed to support that shoulder."

Father laughed. "Of course." He started to lift his hand, and I cleared my throat.

"I would like to ask them something before they go," I said when Father turned toward me. He nodded, and I looked at Morwen. "Did you happen to notice what happened to the wizard who was halfway around the brazier when you came in? I didn't see him afterward."

"You mean Antorell? Yes, I thought I saw him," Morwen said. "I'm afraid I don't recall. He wasn't the one I melted, if that's what you're asking."

"Could he have gotten away?" Shiara asked.

Morwen glanced at the King. "If you will allow me, I can find out fairly quickly." Father nodded, and Morwen made a chuckling sort of sound. Two of the cats poked their heads around the corner of the doorframe.

"Daystar wants to know what's become of one of the wizards," Morwen said to the cats. "The one named Antorell."

The cats looked at each other, and one of them twitched its tail. The other one looked back at Morwen and said, "Rroowww!" and they both pulled their heads back out of sight.

"He got away," Morwen said, turning back to the King. "Scom says he ducked down the hall while Telemain and I were busy with the rest of them."

Father frowned in concentration. "Well, he isn't inside the castle anymore," he said after a moment. "I suppose I'd better go find him; he might still be able to cause trouble, and I think it's about time we checked on things outside, anyway." He looked at me. "Is there anything else you need to ask right now?"

"No," I said. There were still a lot of things I wanted to

214

Patricia C. Wrede

know about, but I couldn't really say I needed to know any of them. Father nodded and looked back at Morwen. "The brown room, I think you said?"

Morwen nodded, and Father waved his hand. Morwen and Telemain disappeared. Father raised his hand for another gesture, then paused and looked at Shiara and me. "I suppose you want to come, too?"

"Yes, we do. That is, if it isn't going to cause problems," I said.

I hadn't quite finished my sentence when the castle dissolved into mist around us. The mist cleared immediately, and we were standing on springy green moss with the trees of the Enchanted Forest all around us. At first I thought Father had taken us to a place a long way from the castle;

then I saw all the dragons and elves among the trees. I looked back over my shoulder and saw the castle right behind us.

"Hey, where did all the trees come from?" Shiara said.

"They came from the wizards' magic," Father said. "When Day star released the magic they had stored in their staffs, it went back into the forest, and things got back to normal in a hurry."

"When Daystar did what?" Shiara said.

"It was part of the sword and the fire and the brazier," I said hastily. "I think you were busy ducking."

"Oh," said Shiara.

By that time the dragons and elves had seen us, and everyone started cheering and bowing. In the middle of the cheering and bowing, one of the dragons came over. "It is good to see Your Majesty again," she said.

"It is good to be here again," the King replied. "How goes the battle?"

"It is quite finished," the dragon said. "There are a few still out herding prisoners together, but that's about all. Oh, yes, we won," she added.

"Excellent!" the King said, but he was watching the trees out of the corners of his eyes, and there was a tiny crease between his eyebrows. "If King Kazul is about, I would



like to speak with her."

Talking to Dragons 215

The dragon smiled and her eyes glittered as if she were enjoying a private joke. "Kazul will be here in a moment."

Father nodded, managing to look impatient and polite at the same time. Suddenly the cheering got much louder, and then the dragons drew apart and Kazul came through the trees toward us. She was smiling, and she looked very large and green and shining. She was so magnificent that none of us saw the figure with her until they were both quite close to us.

I was the first to notice that Kazul had someone with her. When I saw who it was, I blinked and swallowed hard. "Mother?"

"Cimorene!" shouted Father. He took three strides forward and took her in his arms. Kazul smiled and sat back, looking smug.

Mother was laughing and crying at the same time; I'd never seen her react like that to anything before. Not ever. I was still staring when Shiara poked me.

"Don't stare," she whispered when I turned. "It's not polite."

I looked at Shiara for a minute, and my face got hot. I couldn't really say anything, though; she was right. I felt very peculiar, but fortunately Mother and the King stopped hugging each other just then and started paying attention to the rest of us instead.

Father went to talk to Kazul, and Mother came over to us. She looked at me for a moment, then put her hands on my shoulders and said, "You've done very well, Daystar. For the most part, that is."

I didn't say anything, because I was sure she meant the way I had almost lost the Sword of the Sleeping King to the Princess. Then Shiara shifted uncomfortably, and I remembered that I hadn't introduced her. "Mother, this is my friend, Shiara," I said. "She's a fire-witch."

"I can tell that by looking at her," Mother said. She smiled at Shiara. "You'll stay with us for at least a few days, won't you?"

Shiara nodded. "Good," Mother said. "Now, if you will excuse me, there are still a few things I have to attend to."

Talking to Dragons 217

"Mother," I said, and she turned. "That wizard, Antorell. He was in the castle, but he got away; I thought you should know."

"He did not get away!" said a familiar voice behind me. "I caught him myself. Do you want him for anything, or can I eat him?"

We all turned. The little dragon was sitting on the other side of the bridge, holding on to one of Antorell's arms. Antorell's robe was dirty and he didn't have his staff anymore. He looked very tattered and very unhappy; the dragon looked extremely pleased with itself. "Well?" it said. "Can I eat him?"

I looked at Mother, and she shook her head. "I don't think you should eat him," I said to the dragon. "The King talked to all the other wizards, and he'll probably want to talk to this one, too."

"Well, I want him back when the King gets finished with him," the little dragon said. "I caught him, and I'm going to eat him."

"He'll probably give you a stomachache," Shiara said.

I stopped listening to the conversation, because Antorell had straightened and was glaring past me, at Mother. He looked more powerful, somehow, but no one else seemed to have noticed anything unusual. I looked uneasily over my shoulder and saw Father, still talking to Kazul. I looked back, wondering whether I really had anything to worry about. Without his staff, all Antorell had were his extra spells, and he'd probably used them up in the battle. At least, I hoped he had.

Shiara and the dragon were still arguing. Suddenly, Antorell twisted and made a throwing motion with his left hand. The dragon shrieked in pain and let go of him, and he ran toward the bridge, waving his hands and shouting. I felt a sudden, intense surge of magic around him, and an instant later the demon appeared.

It materialized right in front of us, all purple scales and orange claws and silver-green teeth. Fortunately for them, demons are color-blind. Antorell shouted again, in a language I didn't understand, and pointed at Mother. The de-

218

Patricia C. Wrede

mon nodded, and on" arm darted out.

I grabbed something I couldn't see out of the air in front of me and pulled. The demon vanished, and Antorell cried out in surprise. I yanked at the something again and sent Antorell after the demon; after what he'd been trying to do, I didn't care whether the King wanted to talk to him or not. Then I saw that the little dragon was turning pink around the edges again. I let go of whatever it was, grabbed a different one, and twisted. The dragon gave a surprised-sounding squeak and turned green again, all at once.

I dropped the piece of nothing I'd been holding and turned. Mother was shaking her head. "That was a bit extreme, Daystar," she said, but her expression was proud.

"Daystar, what did you... I mean, how did you..."  
Shiara gave up and just stared at me.

"I don't know," I said. I was at least as surprised as she

was. "I'm not even sure what I did."

"What happened?" the little dragon asked. It looked around suspiciously. "Is that wizard dead?"

"No, but he probably wishes he were," Mother said. "Demons do not like surprise visitors."

"Oh, is that what Daystar did with him?" said Father's voice from behind me. "I was wondering."

I jumped and turned around to see the King and Kazul standing there. The King was looking at Mother; Kazul was looking at the little dragon. "Where have you been?" Kazul said in a resigned voice.

"I've been catching wizards!" the little dragon said proudly. "Well, one of them, anyway. He threw dragonsbane at me again and called a demon and Daystar got rid of both of them. I didn't even get to eat him," the dragon finished sadly.

"I see," Kazul said, shaking her head. "I think you'd better spend the rest of the day with me. It may, just possibly, keep you out of trouble."

"I don't understand!" Shiara burst out. "How could Antorell do any magic without his staff? And how could Daystar do any magic at all? And what did Antorell have to do with the sword and everything?"

Talking to Dragons 219

The King smiled at Mother, then looked at Shiara and me. "As long as things seem to be quiet out here, why don't we go inside? That way, we can be comfortable while I explain."

Shiara and I nodded. Father waved his hand, and the Enchanted Forest dissolved into mist around us.

->&

', 'A\*

'>

i>

WE APPEARED IN one of the rooms inside the castle, a small, cozy-looking place with lots of bookshelves. It was just as dusty as all the other rooms Shiara and I had been through, but when Father waved all the dust vanished. Mother muttered something about instant cleaning being no excuse for letting things get into such a state, and we all sat down. The King looked at us.

"I believe this should begin with you, Cimorene," he said. Mother looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded and started talking.

Apparently, Mother really was a Princess. She was the

youngest daughter of the ruler of a very large kingdom on the other side of the Mountains of Morning It sounded like a nice place, unfortunately. Mother thought it was bonng So, when she was about sixteen, she ran away She went straight to the Mountains of Morning, to the Pass of Silver Ice that the dragons guard, and demanded that the surprised dragons make her a prisoner

The dragons weren't quite sure what to do, but finally Kazul agreed to take her Although Kazul wasn't King of the Dragons then, she was fairly important, and she and

221

222 Patricia C. Wrede

Mother got along very well. A couple of knights from her father's court showed up after a while, but Mother told them in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to be rescued. The knights went away, and Mother stayed with the dragons.

Mother spent a long time as Kazul's Princess. After a while, Kazul started teaching her dragon magic, and Mother got very good at it. She made quite a few friends in the Enchanted Forest, too, because Kazul traveled a lot. And then the old King of the Dragons died, and all the dragons went to the Ford of Whispering Snakes to try and move Colin's Stone, and Kazul was the one who did.

That was how Mother met my father. The dragons had been friends of the rulers of the Enchanted Forest for centuries, so when he heard that the dragons had a new King, the King of the Enchanted Forest came to pay his respects. He also wanted to talk to Kazul about the Society of Wizards; they were getting a little out of hand, and he was trying to decide whether to use the sword on them.

"The sword can do quite a few different things," Father explained. "One of them is to drain off the power in a wizard's staff gradually, over a period of time; another is to empty a staff of magic all at once. Most of the time, I used the sword to keep wizards from draining too much magic out of the Enchanted Forest, not to destroy their staffs completely, but the Society of Wizards was becoming a problem in spite of what I was doing with the sword."

"Then why didn't you empty their staffs?" Shiara demanded. "It would have saved us an awful lot of trouble."

"It would have saved me some trouble, too," Father said. "But I couldn't destroy their magic completely like that without a very good reason. Which was why I went to talk to Kazul."

Mother and Kazul both liked Father very much, and he started visiting them more often. The wizards kept making problems, so he had lots of reasons. Finally, he and Mother decided to get married, but before they could even announce it, someone stole the sword.

The King and Mother dropped everything else to find out who had it and where it was. It didn't take long; evidently

the sword does strange things when it's taken outside the

Talking to Dragons

223

Enchanted Forest, so it wasn't hard to locate. One of the wizards had it, of course, and he'd put it in a tower well away from the forest, with a lot of spells around it to keep the King from getting to it.

That was when the argument started. Father and Mother both wanted to go steal the sword back, and neither of them wanted the other to go. Kazul was the one who settled it;

she said that the wizards were expecting Father to try to get the sword back, but they weren't expecting Mother. The King still objected. He said the sword might do something awful to Mother, because she wasn't one of his family. Kazul told him that if that was all he was worrying about, he should marry Mother right away, so she'd be a member of his family. Apparently, he still didn't like the idea of Mother going off to steal the sword back, but he could see that he wasn't going to be able to out-argue Mother and Kazul. So he and Mother got married.

Kazul performed the ceremony, and a few days later Kazul and Mother flew off to the tower where the sword was. It took them nearly three days to get there. By the time they arrived, most of the wizards had left for the Enchanted Forest, but the sword was still there. The only wizard in the tower was Antorell.

Mother knew Antorell fairly well. He was the son of Zemenar, the wizard who'd stolen the sword, and he'd been courting her for several years. Mother found out that he didn't know what the sword was; he'd been left to watch it without being told anything, and he was very sulky about it. Mother managed to talk him into letting her inside the tower to see the sword, then she broke the last of the spells guarding it and took it. Right away, Antorell tried to kill her and take the sword himself; evidently, he'd let her into the tower because he knew she could break the last warding spell and he couldn't. So Mother melted him.

On their way back to the Enchanted Forest, Kazul and Mother were met by one of the dragons, who told them about the wizards' attack on the castle. Kazul flew straight there, but by the time they arrived the battle was over, and the dragons had put their own shield up around the castle. Kazul sent some of the dragons out to look for the wizards

224 Patricia C. Wrede

who had gotten away, and then she and Mother had a long talk about what to do next.

Both of them were sure that the wizards had put a spell on the King, and they were just as sure that the sword could break the spell. Unfortunately, the sword could only be used by one of the Kings of the Enchanted Forest or his children, and then only when the earth, air, and water of the Enchanted Forest and the fire of the sword itself had recognized the person holding it as a rightful heir of the sword. And

the only way to be recognized was to go out in the Enchanted Forest and hope you would do the right things at the right times.

Mother and Kazul spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way to get the sword to work for someone besides the King, but they never did. Then Mother found out she was going to have a baby, and about that time Antorell found her. He blamed her for his father's death, because she'd taken the sword, and he tried to kill her. Mother had to melt him again.

After that. Mother decided that she'd better find somewhere to hide until I was old enough to use the sword. The wizards were hunting for the sword, but as long as it stayed inside the Enchanted Forest it was invisible to them. Mother, however, wasn't, and she knew that if she stayed in the Enchanted Forest, one of the wizards' spells would find her eventually. On the other hand, she couldn't take the sword out of the forest and still keep it hidden, any more than the wizards could.

So Mother hid the sword inside the forest, then left and never went back until the day she gave the sword to me. She put up some good spells to keep Antorell from finding us, then waited. She taught me very carefully, without ever telling me anything about the sword or the King of the Enchanted Forest or the war with the wizards, so that I would have a chance of being recognized by the sword and reaching the castle without getting caught by one of the wizards' spells.

"I'm afraid it was rather hard on you, Daystar," she said. "But we couldn't think of anything else that had a chance of working."

Talking to Dragons 225

"Well, / think we were lucky," Shiara said.

The King smiled at me. "Kings of the Enchanted Forest are supposed to be lucky."

Shiara blinked. "You weren't very lucky, were you? What did those wizards do to you, anyway?"

The King shook his head. "Zemenar made a bad mistake when he attacked the castle without bringing the sword with him. He and about ten others broke into the castle during the battle. I got a couple of them, but without the sword I was outnumbered a little too badly. They wanted to kill me, but they couldn't do it inside the castle without the sword, and they couldn't take me outside the castle because of the dragons. So Zemenar decided to put me in storage, in a manner of speaking, while he went back for the sword. The simulacrum was a decoy, in case someone managed to get into the castle while he was gone."

"But where were you for seventeen years?" Shiara said.

"There are... places that can be reached through the proper doors, places that can't be gotten into or out of except

through such a door. Some of them are very large; some aren't. Zemenar found one that suited him and put me in it, then hid the door. Without the sword or the key, I couldn't get out until someone put the door back up."

"But I still don't understand about Antorell. He acted as if he wanted to do something to Daystar a lot more than he wanted the sword."

"Antorell never knew what the sword was," Mother said. "Zemenar and the Head Wizard were the only ones who knew the whole story, and after the way Antorell failed to guard the sword, the Head Wizard wouldn't tell him anything."

"Ha!" said Shiara. "Served him right. But what did Daystar do to Antorell, anyway? And how? He never did anything like it before."

"He couldn't do it before," Father said. "The Kings of the Enchanted Forest can use the magic of the forest directly, but only after the sword has acknowledged them. Daystar wasn't acknowledged until he put the sword into the fire."

"Oh." Shiara sat back, looking thoughtful.

There was a moment's silence, then I thought of some-

226 Patricia C. Wrede

thing else I wanted to ask about. "Mother," I said, "do you know anything about fire-witches' magic?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "Why do you want to know?"

"Could you teach Shiara how to do things?" I said. "She helped me a lot, and I think she ought to have some sort of reward, and that's why she came to the Enchanted Forest in the first place."

"I didn't do very much," Shiara objected. "You kept me from staying a statue, and I think you saved my life when the roof of the Caves of Chance fell in. You're the one who deserves a reward."

"I think," Mother broke in before I could answer Shiara, "that it is time you told us what you have been doing these past few days. I have a general idea, but I would like a few more details, and Mendanbar hasn't heard anything about it yet."

I looked at Father, and he nodded, so Shiara and I went through our story again. I did most of the talking, with Shiara putting in a comment now and then when she thought I was leaving something out. I finished by explaining about Shiara's magic. Both Mother and the King looked rather startled, and then the King began to smile.

"A polite fire-witch," he said thoughtfully. "Very unusual."

"I don't want to have to be polite to people!" Shiara said angrily.

"Why not?" I said. "You're getting much better at it."

"Especially not to you!" Shiara said.

"I can understand that," Father said. "It's his fault, after all."

"What?" said Shiara and I together.

"It's Daystar's fault that you have to be polite," Father repeated. "His and the sword's. One of the things the sword does besides controlling wizards is unlocking people's talents, particularly magical talents. When you met Day star, both of you touched the sword at the same time. You wanted to be able to use your magic and Daystar wanted you to be more polite; I think the sword did the best it could, under the circumstances."

"I knew it!" Shiara glared at me. "I said it sounded like

Talking to Dragons 227

something that stupid sword would do!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know. But at least you can use your magic now, sometimes; isn't that better than not being able to use it at all?"

"No!" said Shiara. "It's worse! I have to go home and be nice to people, and it probably won't work most of the time because I have to mean it, and how can I mean it if I'm always thinking about being able to do magic? And it's boring at home, and people will still keep expecting me to do things I can't do. I don't even know anyone who could teach me about magic even if I could get it to work all the time. I'll never learn anything!"

Little flickers of flame started running down Shiara's cheeks. It took me a minute to realize that she was crying fire, and when I did, I didn't know what to do about it.

"That is quite enough of that," Mother said while I was still thinking. Shiara looked up.

"You don't know what it's like! It's horrible."

"On the contrary, I know quite well what it's like," Mother said. "And the solution is quite obvious. In fact, it's the same one I used."

"What?" Shiara blinked, and the flame-tears stopped running down her face. "What do you mean?"

"You can become Kazul's Princess," Mother said. "She doesn't have one at the moment. It would have a great many advantages on both sides. You will learn considerably more about magic, dragons, and the Enchanted Forest than you would anywhere else, and Kazul will get a Princess who can't be accidentally roasted if one of the other dragons gets out of hand. And you'll be living nearby, which will give Daystar and Mendanbar a chance to figure out how to reverse that ridiculous politeness spell."



"But I'm not a Princess!" Shiara said.

"If Kazul says you are a Princess, then you are a Princess," Mother said firmly. "Besides, it will be excellent experience for you later."

I opened my mouth to ask what Mother meant by that, and Shiara said, "But are you sure Kazul would be willing to do it?"

"Kazul will have no objection whatever to training the

228 Patricia C. Wrede

next Queen of the Enchanted Forest," Mother said calmly. "You don't need to worry about that."

I closed my mouth very quickly and looked at the floor, feeling my face getting hot. I heard Shiara say, "Oh," in a small voice, and then the King laughed.

"Cimorene, I think you're going a little fast," he said, still chuckling. "If Shiara wants to go live with Kazul, I'm sure we can make the arrangements, but there's no reason to hurry. She can stay here until she decides; there's plenty of room. Now, if you don't mind, I think we should go back outside; Kazul said something about a feast, and I haven't had a good meal in seventeen years."

Mother didn't object, so the King moved us all to the feast with another wave. Everyone was there: dwarves and dragons and elves and cats, and even a few wizards who had been on the King's side. Morwen was there, too, but she spent quite a bit of time popping back to the castle to make sure Telemain wasn't doing anything she disapproved of.

Mother and the King sat at one end of a long table, and Kazul sat at the other. Shiara and I sat in the middle. The people in between us kept changing, and all of them wanted to hear about how the King and Mother had gotten married, and how Mother had stolen the sword back, and how Shiara and I had gotten into the castle and broken the spell on the King.

"I'm getting tired of this," Shiara whispered to me while some of the people next to us were changing seats. "Let's go someplace else for a while, and let them tell each other about the stupid wizards. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"I don't, either, but I don't think we should leave," I said.

"You don't? No, of course you don't. How very tiresome," said a squeaky voice from the ground by my left foot.

"Suz!" I said, looking down. "Where did you come from?"

"The forest, of course," said the lizard. He ran up the leg of the table in a thin gold streak, then stopped and looked

around nervously. "Is that--that kitten anywhere close by?"

Talking to Dragons 229

"No, she's inside," said Shiara. "I don't think she likes the crowd. Why?"

The lizard looked at her. "If you'd ever been jumped on by something four times as big as you are, and been rolled around until you were dizzy, not to mention bruised, you wouldn't have to ask." He balanced on his tail and peered over the edge of a bowl of nuts.

"Would you like something to eat?" I said.

"I believe I would," said Suz. He made a very fast bouncing motion, and a moment later he was holding one of the nuts. "What are you going to do now that the wizards are gone?"

"They aren't all gone," I said. "Some of them were on our side, and I think some of the others actually got away."

"They did?" Suz considered for a moment. "I suppose they did. How very annoying. But what are you going to do?" He looked from me to Shiara and back.

"I'm going to be Kazul's Princess," Shiara said before I could answer.

Suz fell over backward, just missing a silver bowl full of cranberry jelly. "Oh my gracious goodness my oh!" he squeaked. "However did that happen?"

"Mother suggested it," I said. I looked at Shiara. "But I thought you hadn't made up your mind yet."

"I just decided," Shiara said. "Home is boring, and this way I can learn things, and maybe even stop having to be polite to get my magic to work."

I suspected Shiara was more interested in not having to be polite than she was in learning things, but I didn't say so. "I'm glad you're going to be staying," I said instead.

"You are?" Suz said skeptically. He peered up at me. "Why, you really are! How amazing."

I didn't know what to say to that, but fortunately I didn't have time to think about it. Father and Mother and Kazul all stood up just then and everyone else got very quiet. Father looked around for a moment, smiled, and started speaking.

First he thanked everyone for coming to help with the wizards, and then he introduced Mother formally as "my wife, Cimorene." All the dragons and elves and other people

230 Patricia C. Wrede

shouted and applauded; the din was tremendous. Then he introduced me, and I had to stand up and be clapped at. After that, Kazul said that the dragons were pleased to be

of assistance, and everyone sat down and started talking again. The whole thing didn't take very much time, which surprised me. I'd thought speeches at feasts were supposed to be longer.

Even with short speeches, the feast lasted longer than I expected. Shiara left after a while, to go find Nightwitch and talk to the little dragon. I stayed at the table. I didn't have much choice; every time I tried to get up, someone new would pounce on me and start asking questions. I got very tired of it after a while, but I couldn't seem to get away. I was glad when it was finally over.

The next few days were a little hectic, but then the elves and dragons who'd been in the battle went home and things started to settle down a little. Morwen and Telemain were almost the last to leave, because of Telemain's shoulder. Morwen had to stay to take care of it, and she wouldn't let Telemain go anywhere until he was well.

"It's simply ridiculous," Telemain grumbled at breakfast on the third morning after the battle. "I am quite capable of traveling with my arm in a sling."

"Yes, and the first time you ran across a slowstone or a pool of transformation-water you'd take your arm out of the sling and start tinkering with it," Morwen said. "Which would not be good for that shoulder."

Telemain glared at her. "I disagree."

"You may disagree all you wish, but you aren't leaving the castle for another two days," Morwen said. She picked up a basket of muffins, took one, and passed the rest to Mother.

"Two days!"

Mother raised an eyebrow. "Is our hospitality unwelcome?"

"No, of course not, but... Cimorene, I have a tremendous amount to do if I'm to be ready for the wedding in time."

I hadn't heard about any weddings being planned, but I

Talking to Dragons 231

was carefully not looking at Shiara anyway. Then Father looked up.

"Wedding?" he said.

Morwen smiled. "Telemain and I are getting married."

Shiara and Father and I all said, "What!?" at the same time, but we were nearly drowned out by a chorus of startled meows from Morwen's cats.

"Yes, married," Morwen said to one of them. "And it has nothing to do with you, so you may as well be quiet and accept it."

The cats made unhappy noises for another minute, until Morwen frowned at them. Then they all got up and went over to a corner of the room, where they sat muttering to each other with their tails twitching. Morwen watched for a moment before she nodded and turned back to the table. "They'll get used to the idea," she said.

"Urn, congratulations to both of you," I said.

Father was looking at Mother. "Cimorene, did you know about this?"

"Not exactly," Mother said, and smiled.

"I see." Father shook his head. "Well, congratulations."

"Thank you," Telemain said. He started to reach for a plate of sausages with his bad arm, and Morwen stopped him.

Two days later, Morwen announced that Telemain's arm was well enough for him to travel. She promised to invite all of us to the wedding, even the dragons, and then she and Telemain left the castle, followed by a string of disapproving cats.

Shiara and Kazul were the last to leave. I was a little taken aback when I heard. It hadn't occurred to me that Kazul lived in the Mountains of Morning, and that if Shiara was going to be Kazul's Princess, she would have to live there, too. I didn't say anything about it, though; I felt too silly for not having realized it before.

Father and Mother and I went out to see them off. Mother gave Shiara some advice about princessing, and Father told her that if she was going to glare at dragons, she'd have to learn to glare politely. Then they both went to talk to Kazul.

232                    Patricia C. Wrede

Shiara looked at me.

"I'm beginning to wonder whether I really want to do this or not," she said. "Does he really expect me to practice glaring at people?"

"No, just at dragons," I said. "If he wanted you to glare at everyone, he would have said so."

"Well, I think it's— Nightwitch!" Shiara bent to retrieve the kitten, who had been investigating one of Shiara's bundles a little too vigorously.

"Where did you get all of this, anyway?" I asked as she straightened up. There were at least three bundles in the heap Nightwitch had been climbing, and I knew Shiara hadn't had any of them when we'd arrived at the castle.

"Morwen gave me that one, and Cimorene gave me the others," Shiara said. "She said I would need them if I was going to live with Kazul. I don't even know what's in all of them yet."

"Oh." I couldn't think of anything else to say because just then I realized how much I was going to miss having Shiara around. The Mountains of Morning weren't exactly close to the castle, and I didn't think Kazul would be interested in flying back and forth every day.

Shiara frowned. "What's the matter with you?"

"I was just wishing you were going to be living a little closer to the castle," I said.

"I don't see why. I'm going to have to come here a lot anyway, at least until you get that stupid politeness spell off of me so I can use my fire-magic. So what difference does it make? I'm the one who has to do all the traveling back and forth." Shiara looked toward Kazul. "I think they're ready to go. Come on, Daystar."

She picked up one of the bundles and started walking. I didn't say anything, but I felt a lot happier than I had a few minutes earlier. Getting rid of that spell didn't sound easy, and until it was gone Shiara would have to spend quite a bit of time at the castle. I was sure that if I had enough time, I could think of some reason for her to keep visiting after the spell was gone, and even if I couldn't, Mother would be able to. Smiling, I picked up the other two bundles and started after Shiara.