

THE DRAGON'S LOVER THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM I

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Chapter 1

Raine studied the slave child. The girl was seven, perhaps eight years old and tied to a stake in the center of the village square, the rough rope knotted about her neck like a dog. The child was filthy, her clothing little more than rags hanging off her thin frame. Intense blue eyes stared out from beneath a tangle of matted hair.

The slaver studied Raine craftily. She appeared well off, her lightweight leather armor gleaming and in good condition, her clothing simple but well-made and of high quality. She carried a variety of weapons, a longsword, two shortswords, a dagger, and something that looked like a longbow folded in two. The slaver tried to get a better look at the unique weapons to assess their worth, but it was difficult to do so without staring. Normally he did not bother with subtlety, but the woman gazed at him impassively in a way that made him feel she could see right through him.

His graft outweighed his misgivings, however, and he launched his sales pitch anyway. “You’re aware of the legend of the Arlanians?”

The woman examined him with skepticism. “I know a little of their story.”

“Ah,” said the man, moving closer as if to take her into his confidence. Raine wrinkled her nose at the man’s pungent odor, but he did not appear to notice as he began spinning his tale.

“The Arlanians were the most stunning creatures in all the world, surpassing even the Elvish in their beauty. Skilled artisans and musicians,

they were desired by all other races. It's said," the man said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "that Arlanians were not truly man or woman until their 18th year, existing in a neither/nor state that was irresistible."

The woman gazed at him in contempt, which he did not appear to notice as he continued. "This child before you is a remnant of that race, one of the very last of that beautiful people. She could be yours if you have the coin."

Raine was not certain what disgusted her more, that this oaf was selling the child as a slave, or that he was selling her in a manner that would certainly result in the most awful sexual abuse.

"First off," Raine said coldly, "this child is clearly not Arlanian. It's said that Arlanians have eyes of a deep purple that is unmistakable."

The man took a step back. Evidently the stranger was a little more familiar with the legend than he thought.

"Second," Raine continued, her voice even colder, "although I don't believe the Arlanians were ever real, even if they did exist at one time, there is nothing left of them. Myths say they were all captured or sold into sexual slavery. They may have been skilled at music and art, but from what I've heard, they were completely unable to protect themselves."

The slaver nodded sagely at this recount. "Yes, 'tis true. It's said there were so few of them in the end that kings started great wars just to possess them, and fortunes were forfeited for a single night in one's arms." His eyes gleamed with lust and avarice at the thought and Raine's jaw clenched spasmodically. She threw a bag of coin at him, striking him squarely between the eyes.

"This is for the girl. It's far more than the market rate for a slave, and if you even think to barter with me, I'll run you through with my sword where you stand."

The slave merchant juggled the bag of coin and even though it had struck him squarely, he still managed to keep it from falling to the ground. He hefted the weight and took a quick peek in the bag. It was a small fortune.

"Very well, stranger," he said with all the dignity he could muster, a bright red splotch appearing on his forehead. "The girl is yours."

Raine drew a short sword and sliced downward and across in one

smooth motion, freeing the tether from the stake and the girl from the tether. The merchant was stunned. The movement had been so fluid and fast it had been almost invisible. He was very glad he had not bartered with this woman.

Raine leaned down and scooped the scrawny child up, tossing her onto her back where the girl clung to her neck.

“Let’s go,” she said with a sigh, “I’ll have to find a place for you.”

Raine watched the farmhouse from a distance, the girl still clinging to her back. She counted five children, two girls and three boys, ranging from toddler to teen. They were laughing as they did their chores, and their round-hipped, apple-cheeked mother scolded them good-naturedly. The father was shoveling hay, lanky, thin, and far quieter than his gregarious wife.

The farmer lifted his eyes at the approaching stranger, squinting, and his weathered features took on a wary expression. He was relieved to see it was a woman, although that was not always the lesser of two evils. But she had a young girl on her back and that was generally a good sign as well.

“Hail, farmer,” Raine said in greeting as she slung the girl down to the ground. The girl hid behind her, clutching the hem of Raine’s cloak.

“Hail, stranger,” the farmer replied in a taciturn manner. To his dismay, his wife rushed past him to get a closer look at the girl.

“Look, Sven! It’s that babe from the village! The one that monster was trying to sell for,” she paused, her indignation getting the best of her limited vocabulary, “for unsavory things!”

Raine nodded. “Yes, the slaver in the village sold her to me, but I can’t take her with me, it would be too dangerous.”

The farmer eyed the woman. She was bristling with weapons and armor and carried herself with a deadly grace. She might have been a mercenary, but it was more likely she was a soldier or possibly an imperial knight.

“I don’t have any money to give you,” the farmer said, “we would ‘a

bought her if we could. Not for anything unsavory,” he added quickly, “but just to get her out of that evil man’s hands.”

Raine nodded. She had judged the family correctly.

“Then take her in,” Raine said. She tossed the farmer a bag of coin far larger than she had given the slaver. “This should cover her keep until she can pull her own weight.”

The farmer’s wife was overjoyed and didn’t wait for her husband’s response. She clasped the dirty urchin to her ample breast, then scurried away with the rest of her children skipping behind. The farmer watched the exit of his impulsive wife, then let out a deep sigh. He turned back to the tall, imposing woman, eyeing the gleaming leather and weapons.

“You heading out to fight the Hyr’rok’kin?”

Raine nodded. “The threat’s still a ways out, but I’m going to start heading in that direction.”

The farmer nodded. “Be safe then.”

Raine nodded and started off down the dusty road. The farmer took that opportunity to glance in the pouch she had tossed him. He had assumed it was copper, possibly even silver, but what he saw almost caused him to drop the purse. It was the emperor’s script, pure gold, more money than he had ever seen in his life. It would support his family for the next twenty years.

The farmer glanced after the stranger but wasn’t really surprised to see that she had already disappeared.

Raine tossed her rucksack to the ground. She had assessed the surrounding area and found a strategic spot for camp in a small clearing on the side of the hill. It was protected from above by a rock outcropping and below by thick, gnarled trees. She thought it was safe to build a small fire and began collecting sticks, twigs, and the few logs that lay about. She was just about to strike a spark with her flint when she paused, glancing over her shoulder.

“You’re not going to sneak up on prey that way,” she said, “You’ll have to work on that.”

A gray wolf peeked out from the underbrush at the edge of the

clearing. He was young, plainly a juvenile by his size, and wore an expression somehow suggesting embarrassment.

Raine struck the flint and a tendril of smoke curled upward as the tinder caught fire. “Come on over,” she said, mildly exasperated, and the young wolf trotted into the clearing, settling at her feet. She turned to the darkened forest around her. “And the rest of you as well.”

Three more juvenile wolves trotted out, turning here and there seeking the perfect spot, then plopping down about the campfire. Raine eyed each of them in turn. “Does your mother know where you are?”

One wolf barked indignantly and Raine sighed. “Yes, yes, of course, you’re all quite grown now.” She slung the rack of hares she had from her shoulder. “So I suppose you’re too proud to take handouts?”

An anxious bark clarified any imagined resistance to the proffered meal, bringing a smile to Raine’s lips. “I see,” she said, “cooked or uncooked, then?”

Raine sliced one hare into four equal pieces, tossing each wolf a chunk of raw meat. She sharpened a stick, impaled a second rabbit, then set the spit over the flame. It was not long before she, too, was munching on dinner. When finished, she unhooked the bedroll from her pack and spread it outward with a snap. She sat down on the makeshift bed and maneuvered her pack behind her, preparing to use it as a pillow. Instead, the young wolf that had first entered the clearing crawled forward on his belly, his expression hopeful. He squirmed in behind her and Raine adjusted her position, leaning backward and laying her head on the canine’s side. She shifted her weight, enjoying the warmth of the wolf and the softness of his fur.

“You’re right,” she murmured, feeling her eyelids grow heavy, “you are a most excellent pillow.”

The wolf growled happily, the others moved close, and the impromptu pack went to sleep.

This village looked almost exactly like every village before it. Little in the way of fortifications, it was built primarily around agriculture and livestock. The fields in the outlying areas looked fertile and the cows, sheep,

and goats all looked healthy. Clearly the Hyr'rok'kin had not reached this area yet.

Raine passed the chapel, home to those looking for greater meaning in life, and headed toward the local tavern. She pushed past a drunken dwarf and entered the pub, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dark, smoky interior. The occupants were the usual motley array of customers, mostly human, farmers, mercenaries, merchants, and a couple of thieves. There were a few soldiers lucky enough to draw duty at this peaceful outpost, and even an imperial knight sitting off by herself in the corner. A group of dwarves, probably miners from the local mountain, were downing huge flagons of ale, and an elf sat half hidden in shadow against the wall.

Raine examined the only two in the room that attracted her attention, and both were returning the favor. The female knight was assessing her as a potential threat, but when her eyes lingered on certain portions of Raine's anatomy, Raine correctly surmised she was being assessed as a potential conquest as well. Raine turned her attention to the elf. His expression was far more guarded, and his intentions not so obvious. He held her gaze coolly and Raine's eyes drifted downward to the elaborate yellow stitching on his green jerkin. The symbols were Alfar and she examined them with casual interest. He was an assassin, and from a particularly dangerous guild. She smiled at the obscure motto written on the jacket, one without a direct translation outside of the Elvish language, but essentially meant "if you're close enough to read this, you're already dead."

The elf was surprised that the stranger had correctly interpreted the ancient markings on his clothing and nodded to her with newfound respect. Raine nodded back, the restrained recognition of one killer to another. She moved to the bar.

"I'll have an amber sting."

The humans within earshot turned in surprise while the bartender blanched. An amber sting was a deadly drink, causing convulsions, blindness, severe vomiting, and various other maladies to those who could not handle the cinnamon liqueur. Those who could successfully ingest the drink generally turned violent upon swallowing the liquid fire, and for that reason, the drink was banned almost everywhere.

But not here.

"Very well," the barkeep said. He reached up onto the top shelf and

pulled down the honey and spice concoction, blowing the dust from the seldom-used bottle. His actions caught the attention of everyone in the bar and resulted in raucous cheers from the dwarves who began pounding on the solid wood table. The bartender carefully poured out a shot glass full of the dark yellow liquor, giving his customer a once over. She actually looked like someone who could handle the drink, but she also looked like someone who could destroy the entire room if this went sideways. He glanced over at the knight, who had gotten to her feet.

Raine lifted the shot glass, swirled the dark amber liquid so that the red highlights spiraled in a miniature vortex, then drank the deadly concoction in one swallow. She set the glass down solidly, enjoying the rush of fire that suffused outward, reddening her cheeks, giving her a flush of pleasure that went to every extremity. The barkeep watched her nervously, but when it appeared she was experiencing no ill effects, a roar erupted in the pub. It had been years since anyone had even tried the amber sting, and no one had ever drunk one so effortlessly.

“Here you go then,” the barkeep said, able to finish the ceremony surrounding the drink for the first time in his life. He lifted a sconce from its holder and held the flame in front of Raine, who forcefully exhaled the fumes from the alcohol. A pyre of flame shot from her mouth as if she were breathing fire and another roar erupted from the crowd. The flames subsided, fortunately doing no more damage than singeing the hair of those closest to her, and she was surrounded with well-wishers who pounded her on the back in congratulation.

“By the gods,” the bartender said, “that’s a feat that would do even a Scinterian proud.”

Raine smiled mockingly. “That’s a myth, my friend. There are no more Scinterians, and maybe there never were.”

Suddenly, the shadowy elf was at her elbow, and he, too, was mocking. “You don’t believe in Scinterians, ancient allies of the dragons, the most skilled and invincible warriors of all time?”

Raine laughed at the handsome elf. “Well, I sure as Hel don’t believe the dragons gave them amber sting so they, too, could breathe fire.”

This produced much more laughter from those around her and Raine became aware that the knight was heading in her direction. She leaned down conspiratorially to the elf, winking at him. “Got to go,” she

said.

The elf grinned. He understood exactly. The stranger was much like him and it was always a little dangerous to attract too much attention. He shifted his position, shielding her from view, and Raine slipped through the crowd and to the door. She gave one last wave to the handsome elf, who watched the skilled departure with admiration and a little regret. The Alfar were rarely attracted to humans because their own kind were far more beautiful. But that young woman was gorgeous, and he would have taken her to bed in a heartbeat, given the chance. The devilish glint in her eye as she headed out the door would long haunt his dreams.

Raine jogged down the back alleyways feeling remarkably refreshed. The amber sting invigorated more than impaired, at least for her, and where before she had considered stopping for the night, now she thought she would continue forward, meandering toward her destination.

Chapter 2

The terrain was incredibly steep. Raine had already accidentally created two rockslides and was thankful she was traveling alone because the slides would have killed anyone climbing below her. There were stretches so impassable she had to wedge her double swords into crevices and pull herself up entirely by arm strength. The ascent itself was a feat of physicality that few could have matched and for that reason, Raine was again glad that no one saw her. She could perhaps attribute it to magic, but then she would be hard-pressed to produce any other act or spell.

She paused on a ledge no wider than a foot, resting for a moment and allowing her legs to dangle over the side. The drop was thousands of feet, yet she felt only exhilaration looking down into the abyss. She glanced up, estimating she had almost another thousand feet to go before she reached the pinnacle. She was not quite certain why she was climbing this mountain but somehow, she felt compelled to continue, as if something was drawing her in. She had felt the sensation while in the lowlands, something unidentifiable yet totally intriguing. It was familiar, yet unknown, and now she could not have stopped if the entire mountain collapsed in on her. She simply would have dug her way out and started climbing again, so driven had she become.

She stood, balancing on the narrow ledge, and chose a path of ascent. She continued to climb effortlessly, her strength and endurance excessive even for her impressive physique. In a very short time, she reached

the rock ledge she was climbing toward. This ridge was far wider, however, and as she pulled herself over the edge, she saw the entrance to the cave she had suspected was there.

Raine examined the gaping hole in the mountain, nonplussed. This was what she had been looking for, what she expected to find, yet she still was not quite certain what was driving her. She strolled toward the entrance and without hesitation, entered the cavern.

And cavern was an apt description. This was not some hole in the wall, some dark, dank cave. It was well-lit by the sun streaming down through a gigantic opening in the ceiling and the enclosure itself was enormous. It even had a lake of sorts, so large was the opening inside the mountaintop. It was quite a stunning sight, with elaborate rock formations on the shores of the lake.

A stone clattered to the ground and Raine froze. Whatever had compelled her climb, whatever had drawn her in, whatever had so attracted her to this place...

Was now behind her.

A scratching, abrasive noise, like stone-on-stone emanated from the rocks she had just passed. It was like the scales of an armored reptile scraping across rough ground, a very, very large reptile. Raine slowly and methodically turned around as the dragon's head rose above a jagged rock formation in a sinewy, serpentine fashion. The creature then moved its massive body out into the open with a lithe grace that nothing that size should possess.

Raine gazed at the creature in wonder. It was a deeply saturated red color, the heavy plated scales reflecting light in millions of tiny rainbows. There were hints of a brilliant yellow which would flash in the light as the dragon moved, creating an illusion that the creature was made of fire. The skin in places was rough with sharp, protective spikes protruding that could easily impale a man. In other places, the skin was supple and smooth, the muscles flexing and rippling beneath the scaled surface. The dragon had a mouthful of wicked looking, razor-sharp teeth and stunning gold eyes also flecked with red. The golden eyes examined her as the dragon came completely into view. A long silence ensued as Raine simply stood there, then at last exhaled.

"You're beautiful," she said.

The dragon was taken aback, yet also clearly amused.

“You’re a strange little creature,” the dragon said. “Most come into my presence in terror or with fake bravado, yet I sense no fear in you at all.”

The dragon was female, and it was clear to Raine that she was very old and very powerful. Her voice was low, with a dangerous but sensual edge to it. Raine bowed low, making no effort to go for the weapons at her disposal.

“I apologize,” she said formally, “it was rude of me to disturb you simply to satisfy my curiosity.”

“So, you sensed me,” the dragon said, now even more intrigued by the little creature before her, and Raine realized she had revealed more than intended. She also realized there was probably very little she could hide from the creature in front of her.

“Yes,” Raine replied.

“Hmm,” the dragon said, the scales scraping across the rock as she moved to examine the girl from a different angle. “And what should we do to compensate for this transgression, this trespass of my domain?”

The dragon leaned down close and Raine could feel the heat of the monster’s breath. The sensation created an odd disquiet in her, a fluttering twist located in her abdomen, an extraordinarily odd reaction more akin to pleasure than fear. The dragon sensed the reaction and thought she must be misinterpreting the response because it felt more like desire than anything remotely appropriate for the situation.

“What is it you wish from me?” Raine asked, struggling to focus and remain calm under the dragon’s now pronounced scrutiny.

The dragon drew back, pleased. “You have a secret,” she announced. She again examined the girl at length, both physically and mentally. “I want you to show me.”

Raine sighed. She had known this was inevitable from the moment she laid eyes on the dragon. She began methodically removing her weapons, laying them on the ground one-by-one. The dragon was impressed with the weaponry, but her attention was immediately diverted when the girl also began removing her armor. This was truly unexpected, but not necessarily unwelcome. The ancient creature wondered if the girl was going to strip naked and could not imagine what the outcome of that potentiality would be. The young woman turned her back to the great drake and the

dragon now wondered if this were a sudden attack of modesty. But the girl removed her long-sleeved jerkin with a flourish and the dragon instantly understood.

There were elaborate, beautiful markings on the inside of the girl's forearms and spread across her upper back. They were mythical, unmistakable, less tattoos than inlaid filigree, a brilliant royal blue and gold woven beneath the skin in a process so painful and permanent that only one race could survive the process.

The dragon exhaled. "You're Scinterian," she said with immense pleasure.

"Yes," Raine said simply, "I am."

The dragon drew back, still unable to believe her eyes or her fortune. "The closest allies of dragon kind in all the world. But I haven't seen a Scinterian in hundreds of years and I didn't think there were any left."

"I may be the last of my kind," Raine replied.

At this comment, the very space around the dragon shifted as she began to transform. The great creature shrank as bones, tendons, and ligaments transitioned into their alternate phase, then re-formulated, re-spawned into human-like form. The dragon was now a stunningly beautiful older woman dressed in imposing red armor that also at times appeared to dance with flame. Her hair was silver and brushed back from her face. Her cheeks were high, chiseled into her face, and her eyes were still a deep gold color filled with wicked amusement.

Raine stood dumbfounded, then swallowed hard. She normally was master of every situation but at the moment, she was at a complete loss. This was very unexpected.

Weynild stared at the girl, slowly grasping the effect she was having and quite surprised by it. As a shapeshifter, she could morph into any form she wished, young, old, ugly, beautiful, voluptuous, spare. But her current form was the most similar to and consistent with her dragon form in all ways, age included. And the girl just stood there, stunned.

"Is it possible," the dragon-human said, "that I'm more dangerous to you in this form than my other?"

Raine again swallowed hard, a deep flush spreading out across her cheeks. "Not just possible," she murmured, "but highly probable."

Weynild stepped forward, a matching desire flaring within her. But

she was far more in control than the one in front of her and there was something else here. She placed her hands on the slender hips and pulled the lithesome frame to her, gazing down into eyes that were now having a hard time meeting hers.

“You have another secret,” Weynild said with growing certainty, “and you will show me this one as well.”

Raine’s eyes sought refuge anywhere, the lake, the rock formations, the entrance that now beckoned so invitingly. But they could not evade the golden eyes that were seeking her deepest secret. Very slowly, the dragon leaned down and touched her lips to the girl’s, and a shock of electricity went through them both, causing Raine to jerk backward and reveal what she could not hide from the dragon.

Weynild stared down into eyes that were a deep violet, a color so beautiful it would make the flowers in the field weep with envy. They were deep purple, a color that would put royalty to shame.

“You’re Arlanian as well,” Weynild whispered, unable to fathom the creature she was holding. What kind of improbable union could have created this being? And had there been any doubt as to the outcome of their meeting, it was now removed. She took the girl to the ground, shredding and stripping her clothing with nails that had lost none of their sharpness in the transformation. The armor that hugged the curves of her body retracted, revealing magnificent breasts that occupied all of Raine’s attention for a brief moment before Weynild bit into the side of her neck, creating intense pleasure. Then the tongue was in her mouth, gentle but insistently dominant, and although she had kissed few in her life, somehow Raine knew exactly what to do and matched the dragon’s passion.

Then the trail of fire went down her body, down her sternum, to one breast, then the other. Raine was not as endowed as the creature on top of her but sensed the woman’s pleasure in her. And when the dragon fixated on the firm muscles of her torso, then went lower, the girl writhed beneath the incessant brutal sensuality of the creature.

Weynild returned to her position on top the girl. “Although I’m female,” she said, “I’m also a shape-shifter and capable of many things.” Raine was not quite certain what this pronouncement meant, but it became immediately clear when the woman penetrated her with some fortuitous appendage she had constructed. Raine arched upward in both pain and

pleasure, holding onto the woman who briefly paused. Weynild glanced down between the girl's legs where her hips were now buried.

"You're untouched," she whispered, surprised and pleased.

"Well, I was," Raine said, stating the obvious.

The dragon's pleasure only intensified, although she moderated the size of the appendage she had created. But she did not slow the pace or strength of her thrusts and quickly drove the two of them to a precipice much higher than the one Raine had just scaled. Although the violet-eyed beauty beneath her was inexperienced, the gorgeous creature was not unskilled, clearly inheriting all the gifts of her Arlanian parent. Her body answered with unrestrained passion and although Arlanians could be forced to climax against their will, that was not remotely an issue as the two moved to a complete and explosive union. In the end, the girl cried out at the overwhelming sensation she had waited centuries for. The dragon's climax was simultaneous, the experience in a way as novel for her as it was for the vestal creature beneath her. Never had a lover so completely sated her.

The older woman rolled over, carrying the younger with her. The two lay side by side, their limbs comfortably intertwined. Despite the suddenness of their conjoining, conversation was unnecessary. The silence was lengthy and enjoyable and was only broken when the humor of the situation impressed itself upon the dragon.

"So, are you always attracted to women a thousand years your senior?"

Raine stretched languorously. "I've met only one, so apparently yes."

The golden eyes assessed her carefully. "And don't you wish to ask me which form is truly mine? The dragon or the woman?"

"No," Raine said casually, "it doesn't matter. And you might as well ask me if I'm Scinterian or Arlanian because I'm quite impossibly both."

"Yes," Weynild said, shifting her weight so her hip rested against the girl's. "And how exactly did that come about?"

Raine shrugged. "My parents died when I was very young, so I remember very little of them. But it's said my father was fierce on the battlefield, and my mother fierce in bed."

"And did you get the best of both of them?"

Raine grinned mischievously. "Now that's not something I can

judge for myself now, is it? Clearly that's something someone else must decide."

The dragon examined the long graceful limbs, the slender musculature of the torso, the intricate blue and gold markings on the forearms. "Well I can attest to at least one of them. Which brings to mind another question. Both your parent races are long-lived. Although you're young, I'm still guessing you're several centuries old."

"I am," Raine said. "I'm almost three hundred, in fact."

Weynild traced the outline of the girl's cheekbone with her finger. "Then how is it an Arlanian remained untouched all of that time? Surely you had numerous suitors?"

Raine's words were still casual, but with a slightly harder edge. "Arlanians don't have suitors. They have masters, they have keepers, they have owners."

The golden eyes locked on the girl. "Your people were not always slaves. They were worshiped by the Alfar long before the sons of men discovered their existence."

"Nevertheless," Raine said, "Scinterians have no masters, no keepers, no owners. And they only ever had one equal."

Weynild rolled the girl onto her back, easily pinning her with strength that belonged to her other form. She stared down into the violet eyes with great pleasure.

"And is that why you've had no lovers?" she asked. "You couldn't find a dragon?"

The mischievous grin returned. "I found you."

The beautiful older woman smiled at the renewed desire of the youngster beneath her. "You should be careful what you wish for, small one. Dragons are notoriously insatiable and known for grinding their lovers into dust."

Raine clasped her hand behind Weynild's neck, pulling her downward and kissing her deeply. Weynild's desire, too, returned full force, inflamed by the playful actions of the woman beneath her. Raine's fingers caressed each breast, then traveled lower, stroking the softness between her legs.

"You're remarkably skilled for someone so inexperienced," Weynild said between gritted teeth, then gasped as the fingers gently entered her,

exploring. She captured the girl's mouth with her own, her tongue probing as deeply as the fingers inside her. The two were engaged in a dance, the tongue and the fingers, each matching in opposite but complementary rhythm. The rhythm increased, and the body beneath her rocked in a gentle motion that became quite insistent, again pushing the dragon to a pinnacle, then over the edge.

The two kept up their dance for hours, each pushing the other to heights of pleasure that few would ever experience, and most would not survive.

Raine rolled over on the ledge. At some point in time, they had made it to the small raised platform on the far end of the cavern, the floor of which was lined with hides and fleece. It was quite comfortable, like a large, warm nest. A fire burned in a nearby pit and Raine idly wondered if Weynild had lit it by traditional means or simply ignited the inferno from her lungs. The latter she would have enjoyed seeing.

The water beckoned invitingly and Raine stood, stretching. Weynild was nowhere to be seen and Raine imagined she was out hunting for food. They had spent days locked in nearly non-stop sexual union. The dragon truly was insatiable and Raine apparently possessed both her mother's desire and her father's stamina. This thought brought a smile to her face as she dove into the water, surfacing with a gasp as the chill took her breath away. She floated on her back for a while, gazing up at the sun shining down through the jagged hole in the mountain.

She became aware of a pair of golden eyes watching her intently and she paddled back toward the shore. Weynild sat near the fire, once again cloaked in her fiery scales. Raine waded from the water, no concern for her nakedness even when it was in such stark contrast to Weynild's fearsome armor. Weynild did not disguise her admiration for the lithe, sinewy form, or her admiration for the casual confidence in which it was displayed. Raine shrugged her undershirt over her head and pulled on the soft shorts she wore beneath her clothing.

"You need not get dressed on my account."

"I'm a little chilled from the water. Otherwise I'm quite comfort-

able wearing nothing at all.”

Weynild glanced to the blazing fire. “Then I shall do my best to keep you warm at all times.”

A dark heap drew Raine’s eye and she peered closer at the form half in shadow. It was the bloodied remains of a cow, or at least half a cow as a very large chunk of it was missing.

“Are you hungry?” Weynild asked mildly, unperturbed at the bloody carcass or the implication of the jagged bite.

Raine’s response was as nonchalant and understated as the silver-haired woman’s. “Yes, actually I’m famished.” She pulled one of the short swords from her pile of belongings and sliced off a large piece of the rump, skillfully separating out a choice cut. She speared it cleanly with the spit and placed it over the fire.

“Would you like me to cook you some?” Raine offered, raising an eyebrow in question.

The fire glinted off the golden eyes. “I already ate,” Weynild replied, causing a smile to tug at the corner of Raine’s mouth.

“Very well.”

The meat cooked quickly and Raine ate ravenously. She had lost all track of time and now wondered if she had been here for weeks rather than days. She finished the steak, then walked to the edge of the water to rinse the grease from her hands. Weynild spoke to her as she knelt at the water’s edge.

“You have pleasantly delayed my return to the lowlands, but I can delay my departure no longer.”

The pronouncement seemed to have little effect on Raine as she continued to scrub, dissatisfied with the results of her attempted cleanliness.

“Ah,” she said over her shoulder, “you have a home in the lowlands?”

“Yes,” Weynild said, watching her closely, trying to assess the girl’s response or lack of one. She continued, her tone even, testing the preoccupied youngster.

“And do you wish to depart with me?”

Raine stood, examining her hands closely. They finally passed muster. “Well of course I’m going to return with you—,” she said, starting

to turn around then glancing sharply upward over her shoulder. She was forced to take a step back. Weynild towered over her in dragon form, fairly menacing, or at least would have been to anyone who was not so aroused by the display of power.

“Were you going to eat me if I said no?” Raine asked mockingly.

The dragon’s golden eyes glowed with amusement. “No,” came the throaty, sensual reply, “but I would have chained you to my bed for the next hundred years.”

Raine considered the threat while gathering her things. “I don’t think we should take that option off the table.”

“You’re incorrigible,” the dragon replied with pleasure. The sinewy neck snaked downward. “We’ll travel much quicker if you take to my back.”

This prospect brought a flush of joy to Raine’s cheeks. No one was ever allowed to ride a dragon. They were intensely proud creatures and the only recorded instances of shared flight in all of history were in Scinterian legend. Still, she could not repress her humor.

“Well, in truth I’ve already ridden you...”

“Get on,” Weynild ordered.

Raine scrambled up onto the neck of the beautiful creature, marveling at the supple feel of the muscles. She ran her fingers along the reddish scales glinting with multicolored highlights. “I don’t know,” she said, her tone dubious, “shouldn’t I have a saddle and stirrups, perhaps a riding crop or something?”

The wicked sense of humor had pushed the dragon quite far enough. The enormous head turned around, gazing at Raine with glowing gold eyes. “That’s an excellent idea, on one condition. I get to use them on you when I transform at our destination.”

“Ah,” Raine said, her fingers tracing the scales beneath her. “I think riding bareback will be quite sufficient, then.”

The dragon snorted and the mass beneath Raine moved to the opening of the cave. They stood balanced precariously on the edge and Raine held tightly as the muscles beneath her contracted and then the beast leaped skyward. The wings unfurled like the sails of a ship and the sensation was glorious. The blood-red dragon went into a dive from which any normal being would have died from fright. But the girl perched on the neck of the beast just laughed. The dragon engaged in a series of acrobatic

maneuvers to entertain her passenger, then wheeled about toward the west, settling into a steady pace.

The feel of the rippling muscles beneath her was pleasurable. In fact, Raine thought to herself, it was almost a little too pleasurable. The steadiness of the pace was also adding to the wonderful feeling of discomfort and the warmth that began to tingle between her legs. She shifted her weight, uncertain if she was attempting to relieve the sensation or move herself into better position to experience it. It did not matter as her shifting only intensified the inexorable stroking, matching every beat of those powerful wings. A soft groan escaped her lips.

The dragon became aware of the shifting movement of the creature behind her, and it took her a moment to interpret the cause. In the meantime, the girl shifted again and pressed herself closely to the sinewy neck, removing any doubt as to the condition she was in.

“Oh my,” the dragon whispered to the wind.

It was an exquisite torture and the tension built and built, but the girl would not release. She appeared intent on restraining herself and resisting an outcome that was inevitable. The pleasurable distress finally became too much for Weynild and the dragon dove straight into the ground, pulling up just parallel to the surface and strafing into the rocky earth with her talons. Rock and dirt flew everywhere as the dragon dug a furrow three hundred yards long before the massive creature came to a halt, transforming as she did so and taking the girl to the ground. Weapons, armor, and clothing went flying as the dragon-woman buried herself in her lover, bringing her to climax almost immediately, one that seemingly went on without end. She herself came to pleasure quickly, then did so more leisurely a multitude of times.

At long last, Raine lay exhausted on top of Weynild, her head on her breast. They were lying in the crater the dragon had left on final impact. The crater would be found by hunters days later, causing them to speculate that a star had fallen from the sky judging by the trench that had been torn from the earth leading to the massive hole.

The silver-haired woman looked down at her now-sated lover, shifting her weight slightly and drawing the girl close.

“At this rate,” she said with languorous sarcasm, “we should reach the lowlands in three, oh maybe four—” she paused.

“—months.”

Raine shifted in her arms, unrepentant. “I blame you.”

“Me?” Weynild said in surprise.

“Yes,” Raine replied, “you were the one who was flying so,” she stopped, trying to think of the appropriate term, then found it. “So rhythmically.”

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