

# The Hagenspan Chronicles

Book Three



## Roarke's Wisdom

Going Home

*Robert W. Tompkins*

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## Going Home

*translated from the original tongues by*

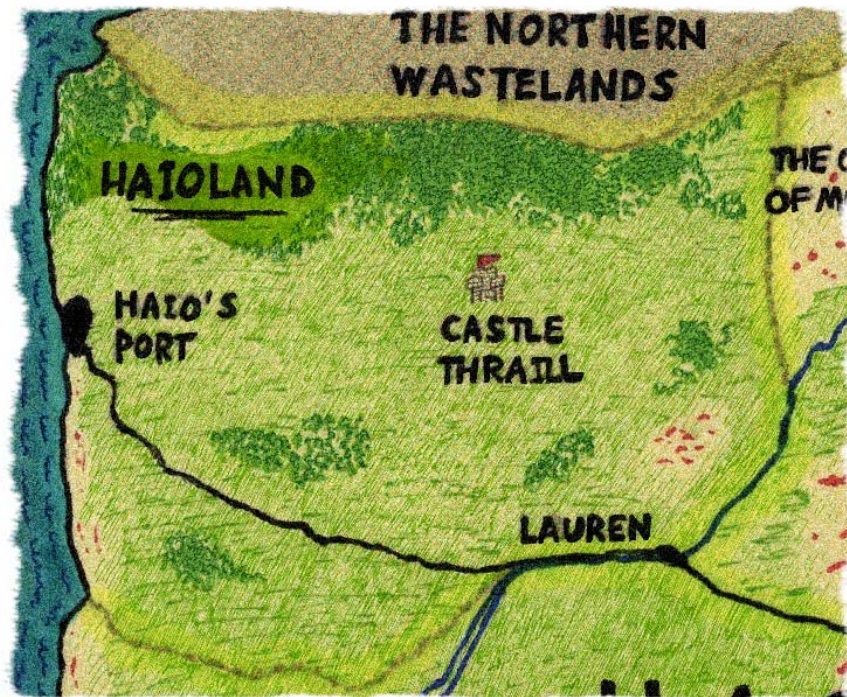
*Robert W. Tompkins*



# Roarke's Wisdom

## Book Three: Going Home

*being chiefly concerned with the events which occurred in Haioland*



*Around every corner*

*an adventure waits.*

*The world is clean and new....*

*Every color is as bright as if my eyes were freshly born.*

*I have touched the silken clouds with the tips of my fingers;  
I have handled heaven.*

*This is my time.*

*These visions, these beauties, these stirrings of the heart,  
were created by God for me.*

*I will marvel for*

*as long as I may.*

*Who can ever know how long?*

*But in the glories of this day,*

*I am whole.*

*Who will see this when I'm gone?*

*Around any corner*

*my true love waits.*

*The world is hot as steam....*

*Every taste is as sweet as if my tongue were freshly born.*

*I have touched her silken hair with the tips of my fingers;*

*I have handled heaven.*

*This is my time.*

*These touchings, these feelings, these longings of the heart,*

*were created by God for me.*

*I will love her for*

*as long as I may.*

*Who can ever know how long?*

*But in the glories of this day,*

*I am whole.*

*Who will kiss her when I'm gone?*

*Around the next corner*

*the dragon waits.*

*The world is cold and dark....*

*Each terror thrusts as deep as if my heart were freshly torn.*

*A tingle of apprehension pricks the tips of my fingers;*

*I shall soon see heaven.*

*This is my time.*

*These hardships, these duties, these testings of the heart,*

*were created by God for me.*

*I will wrestle for*

*as long as I may.*

*Who can ever know how long?*

*But in the glories of this day,*

*I am whole.*

*Who will battle when I'm gone?*

# Chapter One

Sir Jayles stood idly outside the gate to the palace of Ruric's Keep, waiting with unconcealed boredom for his shift to end, so that he could retire to the castle and get some food. He loathed the weeks of guard duty at the gate, but it was a small enough price to pay for the honor and the rewards of serving as one of King Ruric's knights. His companion Sir Fentin did not mind the guard duty as much, being naturally more gregarious than Jayles, chatting and smiling with the townsfolk who passed by the gate.

Nothing terribly interesting had happened at the palace since the rogue knight, Roarke, had been fetched from the pub and deposited in the dungeon, some three weeks ago. If indeed he was a rogue—Jayles rather doubted the charge, since Roarke's comportment had been consistently without fault, at least as far as Jayles had been able to tell. He had talked about it with Fentin, who seemed to agree with him, if somewhat reluctantly. They were the king's men, and to question did not fall within the purview of their calling.

A clatter of hoofbeats caught Jayles' attention. Usually horses were not ridden this close to the castle gate, unless the castle was their destination. He saw, picking his way gingerly through the crowd, a gangly youth with a wispy rumor of a light-brown beard, astride a handsome black horse with a white blaze on its forehead. Dismounting at the paved landing in front of the gate, the boy approached the two knights boldly, and said, "Yer honors, I must see the king."

"That's quite impossible," said Sir Fentin, who was always grateful for the opportunity for conversation.

"I know, I know," the youth said. "It has to be put on yer calendar by Herm."

"That's right," Fentin said quizzically. "Shall we—"

The boy broke in firmly, but not rudely. "I believe the king will want to hear what I've got to say. Can one of you gents kindly go and tell the king himself that I've come, not yer Minister Herm?"

Jayles, suspicious, thought the boy impudent and patronizing. "Who are you, shaveling, that you would address the king's guard so?"

"My name is Willum of Blythecairne, and I've come on the king's errand, I do believe."

Fentin said, "Blythecairne! Then you are Sir Roarke's squire!"

"Aye, that's right."

Fentin and Jayles looked at each other uncertainly. They were not sure whether they should put Willum under arrest or not; there had been a warrant for him some time ago, of course, but they were unsure whether that had been rescinded.

Jayles finally said, "Young sir, we must ask you to surrender any weapons that you may be carrying, and wait here with me. Sir Fentin shall take your request to Prime Minister Herm."

"No!" Will said sharply. "Beggin' yer pardons, yer honors, but I don't trust Herm." He swallowed and said, "Is there not one of ye who's man enough to take my request directly to the king?"

Fentin's eyes blazed at that challenge, and he retorted, "Boldly said, Willum of Blythecairne. We will see who's man enough! Surrender yourself to us now, and we will take you to the king. You will find that it's Serpent's-Bane himself who has teeth, not Herm, who is but his servant!"

"Aye, I'll surrender to ye," Will agreed. "Hell, ye'd think that ye'd come and tracked me down. I came to *you*, remember?"





Ruric asked, perplexed, "But I thought you *wanted* to punish him."

"Punish him, yes! Humble him, yes! But I didn't hope to kill him!"

"Well, do whatever you feel is right; you have our permission," the king acceded.

Queen Maygret flew out of the room in a flurry of robes, without so much as a caustic reply. *That was unusual*, thought the king. He turned back to the scrolls he had been reading, and idled away a few moments while waiting for Herm to arrive. The queen seemed particularly appealing today; there was a rosy concern in her cheeks that aroused something almost forgotten in the king. Perhaps he might pay a visit to her chamber later on, if there was nothing pressing today. It had been long since he had seen the inside of her canopies.

While he was thinking these things, one of his knights—Jayles, the king thought—stepped hesitantly into the room.

"Begging your pardon, Your Majesty," said Jayles, bowing low. "A matter of some urgency brings me to you."

"It must be very urgent indeed, for you to come before us without going to Herm first," the king said sternly. He laid the scroll he had been staring at down on his desk. "Well, go ahead. What is it?"

"The squire of Sir Roarke, whom you had issued a warrant against—he has come to Ruric's Keep, demanding to be heard by you."

"He has! How curious!" The king stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Where is he now?"

"Just outside this room."

"And he has come to us, you say?"

"Yes, Majesty."

"Very well. We are feeling somewhat generous today. Bring him in."

A moment later, Will was before the king. He knelt and bowed his head low to the ground. "Yer Highness, I'd offer ye my sword if I could, but ye see that I have none."

"Rise, young squire. The crown appreciates your overture. We bear you no ill will, in spite of the misunderstanding of a few weeks past."

Will fought back the urge to utter an ill-advised reply. "Highness, do I understand proper that ye are lookin' for proof that Lord Roarke killed the dragon at Blythecairne?"

"Yes. We have sent Sir Tiler and his yeoman to Bretay to obtain that proof."

"If I may, Yer Highness ... ye needn't have troubled them. I have the proof."

King Ruric was not under the direct influence of Herm at the moment, so he was feeling equitable in his judgment, and was personally curious to see the tokens of the dragon. "Lord Roarke's appointed time has not yet come." He fixed Will with a wary eye. "But in view of his illness and the arrival of his squire, we shall hear his case today. Sir Jayles, see that our friend here has a meal, and meet us in the throne room in one hour."

Will, alarmed, said, "His illness? Forgive me, Yer Highness, but is Roarke all right?"

"Oh, yes, quite all right, we believe. The queen herself is tending to his recovery."

"May I see him?"

"You shall see him at his hearing. For now, eat and rest. One hour is not that long." The king rose and departed to his own chamber, Sir Jayles and Willum bowing as he passed.

"King Ruric allowed you much liberty with your words," Jayles commented in a low voice. "It may not always be so; have a care with what you say."

"Yes, sir," Will agreed contritely. "About that meal—I really *am* hungry."

"Come along," the knight said rigidly, and led Will through the palace to the kitchen.

## Chapter Two

Roarke had been carried from his cell by two of the king's guards, who were guided by Queen Maygret to lay him upon a softly quilted bed in a chamber quite near her own. She had one of her maidens fetch some hot broth, and another one a simple shift of white linen for him to be clothed in. Even though it was not lawful for the queen to minister to a subject (let alone a man) in such a way, the queen bathed Roarke's body with warm water, and wrapped his feet in rabbit's-fur slippers. After all, the king had given his permission for Maygret to do whatever she felt was right.

The queen supervised as her maidens clothed Roarke and spooned some of the broth into his flaccid lips. He mumbled a few incoherent words and drifted into a deep sleep, which likely would have lasted for many peaceful hours, but for the arrival of Sir Keltur and another knight.

"Your Highness," began Keltur, "we had not known of Sir Roarke's removal to this chamber."

"No, Keltur," replied Maygret, "he has just been brought here. He was found earlier today in a state of unconsciousness. He surely would have died if he had not been helped."

"Hopefully he is able to stand and appear before the king?"

"Of course not!" the queen retorted crossly. "He is nearly dead!"

Keltur said apprehensively, "The king has ordered me to bring Sir Roarke to the throne room immediately. He has waived the remainder of the waiting period before the time appointed to hear Roarke's plea for Blythecairne."

"Waived it? Why?" Maygret demanded.

"Roarke's squire has come, and claims to have the tokens of the dragon that were sought."

"Indeed!" Maygret exclaimed, and considered for a moment. "Tell this to the king: Queen Maygret begs His Majesty to remember his boon from an hour past, when he authorized the queen to do whatsoever she felt necessary to provide for the aid of his fallen knight, Sir Roarke. Now the queen demands—no, make that 'requests'—that the king attend here, instead of causing Sir Roarke to appear in the throne room, for Sir Roarke is dreadfully ill and cannot stand."

"Your Highness—" Keltur protested.

"Just do it, Sir Keltur. If the king is angry, it will be with me, not with you."

Doubting the truthfulness of that statement, Keltur nonetheless bowed to the queen, turned, and departed with his attendant.



The king had changed his clothing, and was now wearing a deep violet robe with gold appointments, over which was draped a white cape trimmed with fur. Upon his brow he wore a pointed crown encrusted with many jewels, and in his hands he held a sceptre of gold, likewise bejeweled. He favored this appearance when he was preparing to dispense justice: purple for his royalty, white for his purity, and precious metals and stones symbolizing the supremacy of his wisdom.

He was seated upon his throne, an immense, ornately carved seat of oak and mahogany, with velvet padding to cushion his royal fundament. He was in good spirits this day, but he was starting to grow impatient, waiting for Roarke to appear. And where was Herm? It was not like him to ignore the king for so long; usually he anticipated the king's every need, desire, or whim.

Before the king stood Sir Jayles and Roarke's boy, Willum. Ruric studied the face of the boy, who seemed to be alert, bright, and anxious for the appearing of his master. And, King Ruric mused, the boy had one other unmistakable quality—though in fact Jayles had mistaken it for impudence, outside the castle gate—that of great courage. If he truly did have the tokens from the dragon, it was still very bold of him to ride alone to the palace and demand an audience with the king. And if he did *not* have the tokens, but had used the story as a means to gain access to Lord Roarke ... well, then, the king thought approvingly, so much the bolder. A pity that he would have to be killed along with Roarke, if the tokens were not convincing.

At that moment Sir Keltur appeared in the throne room, bowing low before the king.

"Where is Lord Roarke?" King Ruric asked.

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty, but I bring this message from your queen: *Queen Maygret begs His Majesty to remember his boon from an hour past, when he authorized the queen to do whatsoever she felt necessary to provide for the aid of his fallen knight, Sir Roarke. Now the queen requests that the king attend here, instead of causing Sir Roarke to appear in the throne room, for Sir Roarke is dreadfully ill and cannot stand.*"

The king, though he was not aware of it, was benefiting from having spent several hours outside of the influence of Herm the Magician. Instead of becoming angry at the queen's defiant words, he threw back his head and laughed.

Remembering the rosy spots of blood in her cheeks, the king said, "Send your man and tell Maygret to make ready. And then lead us to the room where Roarke lies."

Will thought that it was terribly improper for the king to laugh. "*His fallen knight?*" "*Dreadfully ill?*" But he kept his tongue, and the king motioned for him to follow, as Sir Keltur led the way from the throne room.



Herm the Magician stared into the blue flames, entranced and unblinking. His voice softly sang words that his mind did not know.

Suddenly, he awakened from his trance, alarmed. The king was about to do something momentous—what, Herm could not tell. But he knew that he was needed in the throne room. The sweat was cold upon his brow as he dizzily made his way up the stairs from the lowest bowels of the castle.



The queen's two attendants tried to rouse Roarke from the soundness of his slumber. King Ruric had been announced, and had proceeded into the bedchamber, and was now peevishly waiting for the sick knight to awaken and pay attention to him.

Roarke heard the voices calling to him as if from another world, and willed his eyes to open. As he struggled to focus, he saw no faces—just flesh-colored blurs. He could tell there were several people in the room with him, wherever he was, and he wondered who they could possibly be.

At last one face began to come into clarity, eyes liquid with concern, staring back into his own. "Willum!" the knight cried in a frail voice. "But ... you are dead! I am so very sorry," Roarke said, and he began to weep.

"May I go to him, Your Majesty?" Will begged, and before the king could speak, Queen Maygret said, "Yes, do."

Will sat on the bed next to Roarke, and gathered his friend into his arms. "There, Lord Roarke ... it'll all be set right soon enough." They sat that way for a

few minutes as Roarke quietly cried, and King Ruric waited. The king's knights were amazed that their monarch would choose to tarry, standing, while an old man who had apparently departed from his sanity wept.

Roarke looked down at himself and saw that he was dressed all in white, and thought that he understood. "Ah ... so I am dead too. That explains it." He sniffled, rubbed his nose, and said to Will confidentially, "It's not as good as I imagined it would be."

King Ruric, who had exercised nearly as much patience as he possessed, said in a commanding voice, "Lord Roarke! You are not dead, though Queen Maygret tells us it has been a close thing. But you are alive, and the day of your reckoning has arrived."

Roarke struggled to understand, and Will released him and stood before the king.

"Is that you, Your Majesty?" Roarke asked tremulously. "Forgive me for not rising!"

"You are forgiven," the king said magnanimously. "Since you are obviously in a weakened state, we shall dispense with any formalities, and proceed immediately.

"Lord Roarke, did you kill a dragon at Blythecairne and free those lands from their long imprisonment?"

Roarke was confused, but answered, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"And do you have tokens to offer as proof of that deliverance?"

Roarke began to answer, but Willum cut him off. "I will present those tokens to ye, O King."

"Then do so."



Will withdrew from his tunic the little leather pouch which he wore on a thong around his neck. Lifting the tether over his head and removing the purse entirely, he bowed low and offered it to King Ruric.

The king accepted the purse, handed his sceptre to the queen, and worked open the pouch's mouth. He poured several of the dragon's scales out into his right hand, and gazed upon them with wonder. "Never have we seen the like of these before," he murmured. "Really, though, Prime Minister Herm should be here to verify that they are what they appear to be."



Herm had rushed breathlessly into the throne room, only to find it empty. Confounded, he wondered to himself where else the king might possibly do something momentous? He found a serving boy nearby, and asked him if he knew where the king was.

"They just went off to Queen Maygret's suite," the boy replied, and Herm rushed off without thanking him.

Entering the queen's rooms cautiously, he heard voices nearby and went there to investigate. Coming to a spacious spare bedroom, he was surprised to find it full of people. He poked his head into the room, and heard the happy cry of King Ruric, "Ah! Herm! Here you are at last!"

"Your Highness," Herm said, dipping his head toward the king, "I have been seeking you."

"And I you," the king said heartily. "Tell me—what do you think of these?" And the king thrust the handful of dragon scales toward him.

Herm saw instantly what they were, and quailed before them. "Your Majesty!" he sputtered. "Do not—"

"Herm!" the king demanded acrimoniously. "Tell me what you make of these scales."

And because of the vagaries of the magic with which Herm had constrained himself, he was compelled to put out his hands and accept the tokens of the dragon that King Ruric pushed into them.

Searing his palms as if with acid, the scales glowed like metal in the light of the fireplace, and they seemed to speak, a slight hissing voice. But that ethereal sound was quickly drowned out by the rising wail from the mouth of Herm the Magician.

"Ahhh-iiiiiiiiiii-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEE!" cried Herm, and his wail turned into an echoing, otherworldly scream that made the hearts grow cold of all who heard it. The knights in the room put their hands on the hafts of their weapons, making ready to draw, but unsure just what the enemy was. The king stood in bewildered terror, staring at his most trusted advisor, who continued to shriek as if his soul were being torn from his body.

Roarke, who had briefly fallen back asleep, was jolted awake by the eerie noise of Herm's screams. He beheld the magician standing there howling—his head thrown back at an impossible angle, a hissing wisp of smoke rising from his hands—and said with as much voice as he could muster, "Quickly, Will—it's the dragon."

Will, who had been stunned into frozen inactivity, roused himself then. Seizing the king's sceptre out of Queen Maygret's hands, he dealt Herm a solid wallop on the crown of his head, knocking him senseless.

A stark silence followed. The people in the room continued to stare at Herm, who lay unconscious on the floor, a thin trickle of blood oozing from where Will had struck him. None of the knights dared to look at each other out of shame.

The king said in a shaken voice, "Willum ... our sceptre."

Will then realized just what he had done, and said with horror, "Yer Majesty! I'm sorry! I didn't—"

"It's all right, young man. We realize that the extremity of the moment demanded a quick response."

In a voice barely audible, Roarke said, "Your Majesty ... if Herm recovers ... I believe he will be able to tell you that my claim to Blythecairne is true."

The king, who was beginning to recover from his fright, felt no longer the heretofore-unrecognized presence of the demon in his palace. He perceived within himself a faint breath of liberation, a lightness of heart, and his courage (which had been drawn from him by Herm's magic) was somewhat renewed.

"Lord Roarke, we are not quite sure whom we have been these past days ... but we are now the king. We need not Herm's counsel to remember that you are a true man. The title to Blythecairne shall be drawn up, and as soon as you are able to stand, you shall appear before us in the throne room and the lands of Meadling shall be yours."

Turning to Willum, the king said, "Young squire. Would it please you to be named among the knights of my realm?"

Will blushed deeply, and said, "Yer Majesty, it would please me no end—" Will hesitated briefly, "—but I am Roarke's man, and it would be in my heart to stay with him, unless Yer Majesty commands me otherwise."

Ruric nodded solemnly, and proclaimed, "Then Sir Willum of Blythecairne you shall be, and we shall make you not a knight of the castle, but rather a knight-errant such as Sir Roarke is. And we shall assign you to Sir Roarke, and him to you, for your mutual protection and edification. When Sir Roarke comes before me to receive Meadling, we shall offer such ceremonies as are proper for your investiture, and we shall feast to you."

Will knelt before King Ruric, and said humbly, "Thank you, Yer Highness."

Roarke smiled down at him from the bed, and murmured, "Well done, Will."

## Chapter Three

Hollie's days were long and lonely. It had been about two weeks since Will had left for Ruric's Keep. Time enough for him to have arrived at the castle, shown the king the dragon scales, and come back already with Cedric, if things had gone perfectly.

Apparently things had not gone perfectly.

She sat on the hillside, wrapped in shawls, and stared afar off to the west, hoping to see some glimpse of anything at all that was either moving or out of place. She had become quite adept at spotting the movements of ground squirrels or small birds as she watched from her spot on the embankment. The slightest motion that was not attributable to the susurrations of the winds, or the faintest trace of color that didn't match the patterns of the ground cover below, caught her eye and held her attention until she could identify it. She wondered idly if perhaps her newfound ability might be useful to Cedric someday.

The wind whipped her long blonde hair, and she gathered the shawls around her more closely. Snow was in the air again; soft flakes landed upon her cheeks and melted like tears.

Matthias walked up to her watching place and stood silently, gazing across the vista toward the sunset. He had become more open to Hollie as the days passed with no disaster befalling his community. "Hard it is to look upon where the sun goes for its nightly rest; it makes the eyes grow tired."

Hollie sighed and said, "My eyes are almost always tired now."

"Comfort your heart, daughter," he said gently. "Fear not adversity that may never come to pass. Time enough there barely is to mourn for things we *know*, not just fear."

She nodded silently, not wishing to tell Matthias all of the things she mourned.

When she did not answer, Matthias said, "Mara Dannat asks for you."

Hollie said, "Thank you," gathered her shawls about her, and stood. Before she left the crag, she cast one last longing glance westward, and breathed a silent prayer to the Almighty for Roarke's safe return, and Will's.



Roarke had lain in the bed the queen had provided for him for two full days before he had been ready to appear before King Ruric. Will had been his constant companion during those days, and they had talked much about the things that had transpired, both at the palace and in the mountains. The knowledge that Hollie was still alive filled Roarke with great joy. Joy and fear. Joy and fear and dread.

Roarke argued within himself about his merits as a suitor for Hollie. He worried that he had already been too old for the girl before she had fled the city, and since that time he had undergone a harrowing experience which had made him paler, weaker, thinner, whiter. Older. And when he remembered how it had been a month ago, when he had tentatively been courting her, he had to admit that he had not exactly swept her off her feet at any point in time. What did she really think about him? Roarke did not know.

But when Roarke thought about Hollie, he felt ... nervous ... taut ... *excited*—as if his belly had been displaced from its normal position and redeposited up into his chest somewhere. The sensations were reminiscent of those he had experienced when he had been courting Millisen—what was it?—thirty years ago. He rather enjoyed the feeling, he allowed, which he had forgotten; it

seemed a little risky, a little dangerous. But there was the rub: it really might *be* dangerous, if risked his heart too recklessly.

Deriding himself for an old fool, he offered up a prayer of gratitude to God for allowing him to live, and Will and Hollie too. He decided that he would go ahead and beg Hollie for just that one kiss—he *would*—and then he would see what would be. Maybe Mara Dannat had been right. He would know someday soon—soon enough.

After two days of rest, Roarke had Will help him get dressed, and they walked around the halls of the palace closest to the chamber they had been given. They had both been provided with fine new clothes, as well as swords from the king's armory. Roarke mourned the loss of his old sword, which had been with him for almost half his lifetime and had slain three dragons ... but there was nothing to be done for that. King Ruric gave it an honored place in his hall of treasures, and Roarke was content.

The next day, Roarke and Will had appeared before King Ruric, who, as he had promised, granted Roarke the deed to the lands of Meadling, as well as the humblest royal apology that had ever been given by any of the kings of Hagenspan. Ruric also declared that Blythecairne would be free from tribute for as long as Roarke lived, which sounded grand, but in fact cost the king nothing, since there had been no tribute from Blythecairne to Ruric's Keep for over one hundred years. And Herm, who was recovering from trauma of his own, both from his possession by the dragon spirit and also the knock on the head he had taken from Will, offered his heartfelt regrets to Roarke for the treatment he had dealt out to him. Herm was no longer the king's Prime Minister, since his trustworthiness had been compromised, but Ruric was loath to dismiss him entirely from his council.

But the real victory of the day—at least in Roarke's eyes—came when Willum of Fairling, of Blythecairne, son of Keet, knelt before the throne of

Hagenspan and King Ruric the Third, who was called Serpent's-Bane, named him a knight of the kingdom, charging him to do good works, uphold the knights' code of honor, and defend the defenseless of his realm. Sir Willum the Bold was feted by his fellows that night, and (being rather innocent of such activities) quickly became Sir Willum the Intoxicated, and shortly after that, Sir Willum the Violently Ill.

Roarke and Will stayed at the king's palace one more day after that, since the newly christened knight was in no shape to travel the next morning. And, truth to tell, Roarke was better served as well by having one more day of a warm hearth and good food. But the next day after that, it was time to go.

The king sent word to his royal stables to give Roarke a fine palfrey for the journey to Mount Tendor, and Willum had his friend Starlight. Neither the royal couple nor Herm was there to bid Roarke and Will farewell, but the company of knights sent them off with roistering cheers. "For the Dragon-Killer—ho!" and "For Willum the Bold—ho!" Much backslapping and good-natured laughter followed, with the king's men relieved and grateful that this incident, which had begun so grimly, had been resolved with such triumph and nobility.

And then they were gone. Now that Willum knew the way to the Amencarii, he felt certain that they could make the journey in three days, while riding gently to accommodate Roarke's lingering weakness. During the week of his recovery at the palace, Roarke had indeed been strengthened somewhat, and had put some flesh back on his bones. But he was still susceptible to fierce bouts of shivering when he got chilled, and he tired very quickly.



Mara Dannat lay on the bed that had belonged to Matthias. She had told herself truly that her march to the Amencarii was the "last journey of Mara



Dannat," for her legs would no longer carry her. So she spent her days in prayer, and was greatly honored by the men of the village for her courage and her piety.

The door to the hut opened, and Hollie ducked into the room. "Hello," she said softly. "You called for me?"

"Come sit with me, my dear." Mara Dannat patted the bed beside her. "Your mind is troubled about many things."

Hollie sat in silence, staring at the pelts that covered the bed.

"Tell me your heart, my dear."

She traced patterns in the furs with the tip of her finger, welcoming the sensation of the soft roughness against her skin. "You probably know my heart already," she said, not bitterly. "I feel so useless here ... so helpless."

Hollie stopped then, but Mara Dannat said, "That is not all of it?"

The blonde-haired girl shook her head slightly.

"Say the words," Mara Dannat gently urged. "There is healing with confession."

Hollie closed her eyes, but continued to fondle the robes on the old woman's bed; it appeared to comfort her to feel the soft warmth of the furs. "I am afraid—" Tears trickled down her cheeks. "I fear that Cedric will no longer love me."

Mara Dannat laughed, a merry, light-hearted trill. Then, recovering, she spoke soberly, "Forgive me, Hollie, for laughing. I did not mean to mock your sorrow! But if Cedric ever did love you, he loves you still. For love that is true is not so capricious as to be driven away by one month's hardships."

"But I was so cruel to him ... and he was so kind to me. Perhaps he has reconsidered his offer ... to marry me." The girl sounded so sad that Mara Dannat's heart was touched with compassion.

"And yet, that is still not your greatest fear." The old woman spoke it as a statement of fact, not a question.

"No." Mara Dannat waited, and Hollie realized again that she wanted her to verbalize her thoughts. She whispered, "What if they do not come back ... at all?"

"What if?" Mara Dannat coaxed her.

"The six weeks appointed by the king will be done within a matter of days. I feel that I must get on Cedric's horse, and ride to the palace as fast as I might ever, and beg for his mercy—whatever the cost to me." She wiped her cheeks with a shawl. "Mara Dannat," she said, almost inaudibly, "if I could trade my life for Cedric's ... I would do it."

"Ahh," the old woman said approvingly, "these weeks of solitude and prayer have not been without reward for you, my dear."

Hollie looked at Mara Dannat curiously.

"Kiss me on my cheek, my dear, and I will tell you something," the old woman said, with a bright smile dancing in her eyes.

Hollie bent and kissed Mara Dannat's weathered cheek.

"So nice," the white-haired woman said, and patted Hollie's arm. "When you came to me in the night a month ago, your only thought was for yourself. Now, you are ready to ride to the castle and beg a king for the opportunity to trade your life for another's. Hollie ... you are learning how to love!" She smiled kindly. "God has taken my feet from me, but he has not taken my eyes. Here is what I have to say to you: You think to ride your Cedric's horse and go to rescue him? I tell you this now: Do so. You will be needed today."

"I should go now?" Hollie asked, barely comprehending.

"Yes, go now." Hollie ran from the hut without another word, the door slamming shut behind her. Mara Dannat murmured into the fresh solitude, "The lips that you used to kiss my old face will soon be used for a happier task."

## Chapter Four

Willum, with concern in his voice and a worried look in his eyes, said, "There, Roarke, we're headin' east now, and we're almost to the hills that starts the Amendicarey's land."

Roarke nodded gamely. He was exhausted. His eyes ached, and the soreness of his joints made every step the palfrey took a torturous agony. Periodically, he would experience a spell of quaking shivers, shuddering so severely that he almost lost his seat. Then the trembling would subside, and he would ride on for another couple of agonizing miles before the cold would terrorize his bones once more.

"I'd stop and make us a fire," Will said apologetically, "but by the time I'd get it blazin' enough to warm ye, I believe we could be to the Amendicarey's lookout post. And there should be a fire there already, and blankets to wrap yerself in, and perhaps a sip of somethin' to warm ye."

"That's fine," Roarke said through chattering teeth. "I expect I can make it all right the rest of the way."

They rode on for a few minutes further, the only sounds being the puffing and blowing of the horses' breath, and the crunch of their hooves in the crystalline snow. At last Will could see the faint flicker of the signal fire outside the hut where he and Hollie had first met Riccard, and he said, pointing, "There it is. We're nearly there; hang on just a bit more."

Roarke did not reply. Will's voice seemed to be coming from a long way away, and he could hear him only dimly. He feared that he was beginning to hallucinate. A sensation reminiscent of the feeling he had experienced that last morning in the prison cell began to steal over him; he became unsure of what was

reality and what was fantasy. He heard Will say something else, but he didn't understand the words. He was so cold. And then he began to dream.

He dreamed he could hear the stamp and snort of his old horse Justice. Justice that Herm ate. He began to cry. Wait—maybe that had been a lie. Roarke could not remember. Suddenly he began to dream that he could fly. He felt himself being lifted from his saddle, floating through the air, and laid down on the ground, wrapped in warmth.

He dreamed that he saw the face of an angel ... maybe he was dead again. The angel spoke to him, but the voice was too far away for him to hear it. Then the angel's face became the face of the one he longed to see more than anyone else in the world, and suddenly Hollie was kissing him. She kissed his cheeks, his mouth, his forehead, his eyelids. Her golden hair formed a canopy about his head, as she kissed him, kissed him, she kissed him. Roarke began to laugh. "This is a very good dream," he said in slightly slurred tones. His face was wet from Hollie's tears and kisses, and she pressed her cheek to his, whispering in his ear, "I am so sorry, Cedric."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he whispered back to her with a faint smile. Since this dream was turning out so well so far, he thought he might as well ask. "Hollie?"

"Yes, I'm here," she said.

"With you being a free woman now ... would you perhaps consent to marrying me?" he whispered.

"You mean you would still have me?" she asked.

He laughed again. This was such a good dream. "Of course I would! I love you!"

"Yes." She kissed his right cheek. "Yes." And his left. "Yes, I will marry you." And she kissed his mouth, all softness and moistness and tenderness and warmth.

Roarke ... was happy.

He fell asleep then, and did dream dreams, and none of them were dreams of dragons.

## Chapter Five

Roarke slowly became aware of the sounds of humming—Will's humming. He lay under a pile of thick animal skins, and was quite comfortably warm, but for the life of him, he didn't have any idea where he was. At least they were indoors.

"Will...."

The young man halted his humming, and cried joyfully, "So ye've awoke! A great, grand, good mornin' to ye!"

"What is this place?" Roarke asked. He could not see much from his vantage point beneath the furs, but what he did see was very humble, very sparsely furnished.

"This is the first hut of the Amendicareys," Will replied.

"So we made it, then! I don't quite remember."

"Aye ... I thought I was startin' to lose ye there for a bit. But then, when Hollie come down from the hills—"

"Hollie?" Roarke asked incredulously. "You mean ... that was real?"

Will looked at him without understanding.

Roarke mused, "Oh, my. I thought it was a dream."

"No, it was real, all right," Will confirmed. "She wanted to sleep in here with ye last night to keep ye warm, but Unxal thought it weren't quite proper."

Roarke chuckled happily. "No, I'd guess not." He thought to himself, *It was real!* He tried to remember what had transpired between Hollie and him the night before, and it seemed that he hazily remembered getting his kiss from her. Must be, in his feverish state, he had dared to ask her for it. He thought wistfully what a pity it was that he could remember it so faintly. With a sense of wry amusement he pondered the frailty of man, and the fleeting passage of time. *How ironic that*

*the Almighty would grant a man his very heart's desire, and then cause all memory of it to disappear so swiftly. Well, he thought, better to thank God for the getting, than to curse Him for the forgetting.*

Will said to him, "Do ye think ye could eat somethin'? I've made ye a kind of porridge here, which ain't too bad."

"Why, yes, I believe I could. Thank you, Will."

"How about walkin'? Do ye think ye're able?"

"Let's find out," he said, and threw off the covers from the low-lying pallet where he had slept. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and Will held his arm while a momentary swell of dizziness washed over him. His legs seemed sturdy enough under him, though, and he said, "After I get a little of that hot porridge in me, I'll be stronger."

"That's fine," Will beamed. "I thought ye'd be happier on yer feet than on yer back, what with the weddin' and all."

"Wedding?" Roarke asked blankly. "What wedding?"

"Why, *yours*, of course! Yours an' Hollie's." Will stared at him in grinning, gaping amazement. "Ye don't remember, do ye! Well, today's yer weddin' day, and no mistake!"

Roarke smiled foolishly, and asked, "How ... did that come to be?"

"Well, I didn't hear ye ask her, but when Hollie was bent over ye, and she was a-kissin' yer face, once she finally come up for air, she told me that ye asked her again if she'd marry ye. And she said that, yes, she would. So there ye are."

In a daze, Roarke said, "I don't even remember asking...."

Will looked at him with laughter in his eyes, and said, "Well, ye still *want* to marry her, right?"

"Why—"

"Because I fear ye won't have no more say in the matter. Hollie's gone up to Matthias, and she's goin' to insist that the weddin' be done immediately. Or even quicker, if she can."

Roarke laughed then, a happy, carefree chortle. *How like God to seem to take away something that was good, and then replace it with something even better!* Roarke had lost the memory of last night's kiss ... but now, apparently, he was going to have many kisses, for many days. *Praise be to God. Thank You, O Most High.*



Roarke and Will stood by the fire outside Unxal's hut, nervously smoking their pipes. They had not yet heard any word from the Amendicarii village, where Hollie had gone to make preparations for the wedding. Roarke had barely tasted Will's breakfast, and he did not feel at all strong, but he was not sure whether to attribute his weakness to his recent illness, or to his apprehensive anticipation of the day's events.

He had had a happy reunion with Justice a short while before, and his outlook on the rest of his life was probably the most optimistic it had been in over twenty years. He was free, the Lordship of Blythecairne was secured, he was regaining his health, and he was about to be married to perhaps the most beautiful girl he had even seen. He was scared to death.

He heard the clop of a horse's hooves, and peered up the hill toward where Will said Hollie had gone. He saw the palfrey from King Ruric's stables coming toward them, bearing his prospective bride, and his heart leaped in his chest.

He walked up the grade to meet the horse, reached out and took hold of the bridle. "Good morning, Hollie," he said.



She smiled down at him. "I wanted to make sure you were able to come to the village all right. Otherwise, I would have made Matthias come back down here with me."

"Yes, I am well. Thank you," he said awkwardly.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sensing his discomfort.

Roarke fumbled with his words. "Well, Hollie ... I don't actually remember asking you to ... marry me ... again."

"Having second thoughts?"

"No!" Roarke replied earnestly.

"Ask me again," she commanded.

Roarke blinked, and looked at her, befuddled. "Hol—"

"Yes," she replied. "There, now that that's out of the way, and I see that you are strong enough to stand, come to me." She slapped the reins against her horse's neck, and Roarke had to let go of the bridle. "Soon!"

He stared after her in amazement, as she guided the palfrey up the rock-strewn path, back into the hidden place of the Amendicarii.

Will, who had been listening to this exchange from a distance, came up alongside Roarke, and commented wryly, "I see ye've got her right between yer thumb and yer finger."

"Yes," Roarke answered, still staring off to the place where Hollie had just disappeared. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"I'm certain I don't know, m'Lord," Will said wistfully. "But dive in deep. Dive in deep."

The two men nodded at each other solemnly, and then smiled.

## Chapter Six

The men of the Amencicarii village were milling around in eager anticipation of the coming of the bridegroom. Normal chores were still being attended to, but with one eye on the work and the other on the hills. As soon as Roarke should appear, the tools of their labors would be left scattered on the ground, and the monks would rise up to greet him, and escort him to the place where he would meet his bride.

At last, somewhat before midday, from just beyond the horizon line the sounding of a horn could be heard. Unxal had lent the Amencicarii signal horn to Willum, to blow upon as he approached the village, heralding the arrival of the bridegroom. Shovels, hammers, forks were all dropped, and the brown-robed men ran up the trail to cluster around the two shining black horses as they bore their happy burdens to the center of the village.

Matthias, with a loud shout toward Mara Dannat's hut, proclaimed, "The bridegroom has come! The bridegroom has come! Has the bride made herself ready?"

An expectant hush fell over the company of men, broken only by the stamping of the horses. The door to Mara Dannat's hut opened, and Hollie stepped forth, wearing the same gown of shimmering white that she had worn to the king's banquet a month earlier. She also wore the crown and necklace and scarlet cape that Roarke had bought her for that occasion. Her golden hair rippled softly in the light wintry breeze.

The men of the village, who had seen Hollie's beauty revealed only slightly, because of the rough men's clothing and the hooded cloak that she always wore

outdoors, were stunned. Some of them turned their faces away in reverent restraint, and some of them fell to their knees in awestruck humility.

Matthias, still facing Hollie, called to Roarke in a voice that echoed through the hills, "Here is the bride you have purchased! Covered her with crimson you have, and clothed her in purest white! Adorned her neck with jewels you have, and upon her head you have placed a crown of glory! She has washed herself and made herself ready for your appearing!"

Turning from Hollie to Roarke, Matthias asked, "Is this bride acceptable to you?"

Moved beyond all understanding, Roarke cried out words that came unbidden to his lips, "My bride is beautiful in every way! I see no flaw in her! My heart is ever toward my bride, and I will give her goodness and glory for all of her days!"

"Let it be so," Matthias decreed. "Please dismount," he directed Roarke. He beckoned to Hollie, and the two of them came together in front of him. "Stretch out your hands to each other." Roarke reached toward Hollie, she placed her hands in his, and Matthias bound them together with a scarlet sash.

"Men of the Amencarii, witnesses you are of what has transpired before you today! Let the memory of this day be a sign to you, to wait patiently for the glorious appearing of Iesuchristi, Who shall one day catch us up to be together with Him forever. As He has covered us with the crimson of His sacrifice, and clothed us in the pure white of His holiness, so shall He one day crown our heads with righteousness. May we ever long for that day, when we hear His mighty voice cry, 'Beautiful is my bride in every way! I find no flaw in her!' Amen!"

"Amen! Amen!" the monks shouted, rising to their feet and cheering.

Matthias raised his hands to quiet his men. "But today—" he cried over their shouting, "—today, we celebrate the joining of this one man, and this one woman,

who are signs to us, but who are also pledged to love each other! Cedric Roarke of the northlands, and Hollie of Ruric's Keep, I declare that, from this moment forward, the two of you are to be two no more! In the eyes of God, man, and the laws of all the worlds, you are now one!"

Again the men cheered joyfully.

"Tomorrow, we shall return to our labors and our prayers. But today," Matthias concluded, "we shall sing and dance and make merry, both in anticipation of the wedding feast of Iesuchristi, and also to celebrate the joining of these two children of Iesuchristi's delight!"

From somewhere came the music of a fiddle and a pipe, and some of the men linked arms and began dancing in a circle together, while others scurried off to begin setting up a common table and fill it with bread and mead.

Roarke stared deeply into Hollie's blue eyes, oblivious of the cheering and mirthful men around them. "Has this day truly come?" he asked in wonder.

"I am yours, my Lord," Hollie replied, gazing back at him with a fluttering joy beginning to quiver in her deepest parts.

"Thank you, Hollie. I—" he stopped. "I... I don't know what to say."

She drew in a trembling breath, and exhaled slowly. "There will be many days ahead for me to listen gladly to all of your words, my Lord. For now ... Cedric ... perhaps my Lord might find a better use for his lips?"

And he did.



After the revelry was concluded and the sun gone from the sky, and the men of prayer had returned to their humble dwellings, Matthias showed Roarke and Hollie to a small bungalow that had been prepared for them to stay in while they

dwelt with the Amencarii. Matthias said to Roarke, "Your friends have told me that you are a man of character, so I am sure I do not need to impress upon you the need to be discreet with your behavior. My men are dedicated to the service of Iesuchristi, and I do not wish to add covetousness to the list of their transgressions."

Roarke nodded and shook Matthias' hand. "I understand. I myself was unmarried for the last twenty years and more. We will be careful with the hearts of your men."

Matthias smiled gently, and said, "We shall speak again tomorrow, Brother Cedric."

Roarke closed the door softly, and turned to face his bride. He looked at her from across the room, and she returned his gaze with apparent calm.

"My Lady," he began, "I have longed for this moment. Except for looking upon the face of God Himself, there is nothing in this world that I have ever desired more." His face turned red, enough so that Hollie could see it across the dimness of the room. "My dear ... I have not ... been with a woman for many, many years. I fear ... that I may disappoint you."

"Cedric," she said tenderly, "we may always speak openly together, may we not?"

He nodded.

"The only way you could possibly disappoint me tonight is by being gone when I wake up in the morning. Come to me."

He did as he was commanded.

She continued, "I need nothing from you tonight, save that you lie beside me in our bed, and that you hold me in your arms, and kiss me with the kisses of your mouth. If you are beside me in the morning ... it will be the first time I have ever awakened with a man."

He kissed her forehead and whispered, "For as many days as God gives us together, I will love you with all of my heart."

She returned his kiss and breathed, "Come lie with me."

He took off his boots, swordbelt, and cloak, leaving them in a cluttered heap upon the floor, and climbed under the covers with her. They lay there together for a long moment looking into each other's eyes, and then he leaned forward and began gently kissing her.

In a soft tangle of arms and legs, they kissed, they fondled, they caressed, and Roarke felt a fire begin to burn in his belly. All of her soft roundnesses became yielding, welcoming, yearning, and all of his strength became firm, insistent, ravenous. Roarke's fear that he might disappoint Hollie proved to be ... unfounded.



The next morning, Roarke awoke to find Hollie gazing at him with tears in her eyes.

"Is something wrong?" he asked with concern.

"No ... all is right," she replied. "My heart is full ... my husband."

## Chapter Seven

Thus began many happy days for Roarke, and Hollie, and Willum.

They spent the winter with the Amendicarii, and Roarke had many occasions to speak with the holy men about God and His ways. Willum made friends with the men of the village, and often lent his hands to help lighten their work. Hollie spent her days tending to Mara Dannat's needs, and learning from her deep wisdom.

Roarke and Hollie drank deeply of love. Roarke spent many moments watching her as she moved about their small bungalow at her daily tasks, filling his eyes with her graceful movements and the delicacy of her figure, the loveliness of her face and hair. Hollie in return glowed with the fulfillment of being a loved woman. She cherished her husband's gentleness and honesty, and was surprised from time to time by his wit. She loved being loved, and the days of Kenndt's seemed far away, as if they had happened to somebody else.



One day early in the winter Matthias and Roarke were talking about the scraps of parchment bearing God's words that Roarke always kept close to his chest, and the great significance they had provided for Roarke's life. Matthias said, "May I see them, please?"

"Certainly." He presented the precious fragments of paper to the monk, who took them and held them cautiously, as delicately as if he were balancing feathers on his fingers. He peered at them closely, and murmured, "Yes ... yes."

He handed them back to Roarke, who tucked them safely back into his pouch. "I see why you hold them in such esteem," Matthias said. He looked at Roarke thoughtfully. "If you will consent to come with me ... we have something here that I believe you might like to see."

"With a good will," Roarke replied.

The two men left the village heading eastward, and traveled by foot up a narrow, windswept path yet deeper into Mount Tendor. Finally the path, which had been scarcely discernible even to Roarke's experienced eye, disappeared into the rocks entirely, and he watched as Matthias vanished into the mountain. Following him, Roarke stepped into the mouth of a cave—not a damp, musty hole, but a large, warm room, dry and well lit. At three broad wooden tables sat three monks that Roarke had not yet met, and each one had a palette before him containing various quills and inks of different colors. The three were studiously at work, copying words from loose pages onto other parchment sheets, which looked as if they were being prepared for binding into books.

"I hesitate to show you these," Matthias said, "for I do not wish to overwhelm you. But, other than your wife, I believe that what I am showing you here represents the very desire of your heart."

Roarke walked curiously over to one of the tables. The monk writing there looked up with a humble smile, and said something in Sonderen. He beckoned to Roarke to inspect his work, and the knight leaned over to see.

He could not read the writing on the pages, but the words written there were certainly from the same source as the three scraps in Roarke's pouch. God's words!

Instead of joy, though, the emotion that assaulted Roarke like a punch in the belly was one of fear. Dread.

Reaching a hand out to the table to steady himself, Roarke knelt on the stone floor of the cave and thought to pray—a cry of wonder, a psalm of praise, a



repentance, something. But nothing came to his mind—as Matthias had suggested, he was indeed very nearly overwhelmed by the significance of what he saw there. He had based much of his entire life's philosophy on the words that he thought he understood from the three small fragments of parchment that he carried. But here, there were hundreds and hundreds of pages ... perhaps thousands!

Feeling a sense of utter mortification before the terrible presence of the Almighty, he thought, *What will I do? What if I have misunderstood? There is so much, and I am so very small.*

A hand on his shoulder stirred him from his sudden attack of despondency. "Brother Cedric, do not be overburdened by what you have seen. Strengthen your heart, and do not quail. Come with me, deeper into this stronghold, and we shall sit and talk."

Matthias led Roarke into an inner room, which seemed to be as far into the mountain as the cave went. In that room were four wooden chairs, as well as another table, upon which sat six completed manuscripts, bound elegantly in colored leather bindings. "Are those books filled with God's words?" Roarke asked hoarsely.

"Yes. As far as we know, they represent the complete sum of words that Iesuchristi has entrusted to man."

"How did you get them?"

"Two autumns ago, two brothers of our order carried all of our earnings for an entire year, and sailed from Jemai Bay far to the southern parts of the world in search of the book. *Iesuchristion*, we call it. We had heard of its existence, and greatly desired to obtain a copy for our own edification, and the teaching of any whose heart sought the Most Holy. After a year, our brothers returned. Success they had, in the form of the *Iesuchristion* ... but unfortunately, we have no translator." He placed a hand on Roarke's arm. "It is possible that you, with your

three scraps that you call God's words, have more actual knowledge of what is contained within *Iesuchristion* than we do.

"However, next spring, we will send those same men back to the land where they purchased the book, and they will bring back with them a scholar who can unlock all of the words to us. It will be the glory of Hagenspan, to have the knowledge of the Most High come at last to her shores. In the meanwhile, we are doing what we can do, in our small way, to prepare."

The thought came to Roarke's mind that the Amendicarii were engaged in a task even more noble and admirable than battling a dragon. Whereas Roarke had successfully defended against the powers of darkness, these monks were actually making plans to advance the kingdom of light. "How may I help?" he asked earnestly.

"Perhaps you have been sent to us by the Most High for just that purpose," Matthias mused.

"What may I do?"

Matthias crossed his legs and tapped a finger thoughtfully on his chin. "Throughout Hagenspan, eighteen castles there are. You, as Lord of two of them, could theoretically be called the most powerful man in the land—outside of the king himself."

"Judging by my last month at Ruric's Keep, I respectfully doubt whether that is true."

"Doubt it not. Your imprisonment by the king was the result of all that is wicked in Hagenspan being aligned against you, desiring your destruction. And yet you have prevailed, by the strong and merciful Hand of the Almighty. All the land now speaks once more of the Dragon-Killer, as they once did two decades ago. And the king is now kindly disposed toward you, as well. Your influence has never been greater."

"How will that help you?" Roarke asked.

"We actually desire very little from you, Brother Cedric, but a noble calling it is. Only that you would deliver some of the books of *Iesuchristion* to Blythecairne and Thrail, and whatever other castles may be along your way. That you would speak kindly to your fellow Lords and encourage them to see the importance of keeping one of these books, and making it available to be taught to their people. And if your heart is so moved, that you would send some of your brightest young men back here to Mount Tendor two springs from now, so that they may learn at the feet of the instructor we shall send for, and then go out to teach the words of *Iesuchristion* to all of Hagenspan."

Roarke said sincerely, "These things I will do, and more, if God allows. Whatever small influence I may have among the nobles of Hagenspan, I will spend in encouraging them to be attentive to God's words. Yes, I will help."

"Then you are named Paladin Knight of the Amendicarii, and you shall be called Defender of the Faith, and Protector of the Words of the *Iesuchristion*. Ambassador of the Amendicarii you shall be, to the lands where our arms cannot reach."



For a time, deep snows covered the mountain home of the Amendicarii, and life in the village eased to an even more relaxed pace than it had already been accustomed to. Outdoor work was suspended, and the work indoors was shared among so many hands that each man had time for leisure, for rest, for prayer and praise to Iesuchristi.

A day came, though, when the sun shined brightly, and the snows began to melt, and the men of the mountain could tell that it was not a temporary thaw this

time, but that spring was arriving in earnest. Water began trickling down from the peaks in rivulets and runnels, and grass started to show green and brown through the dissipating whiteness. It was not long before tiny blue and purple flowers began to appear in clusters on the hillside. The men of the Amendicarii picked up their hoes and shovels and once more began to cultivate their gardens between the crags.

It was time for Roarke, Hollie, and Willum to leave.

The three had spent the winter at Mount Tendor very comfortably. They had been well fed and warm, had developed genuine friendships, and were healthy and content. Roarke had recovered completely from his privation at the hands of Herm, and was once more strong and robust, though his hair remained as white as the recently melted snow.

Hollie was growing more and more confident in the love of her husband. She was understandably nervous about leaving this place of refuge, where she had known only happy days, to head off to the northlands, to places she had not seen and people she had never met. But she trusted that Roarke would protect her.

Willum was anxious to get started. He had enjoyed his stay with the Amendicarii very much, but he could hardly wait to tell of his adventures to Barlie and Yancey and Keet. When he had met Roarke by the roadside at Fairling less than two years ago, he had been dressed in tattered rags, and had been just plain Will, the tavern-keeper's son. When he rode back into Blythecairne this spring, he would be Sir Willum the Bold, accoutred in finery from the king's own wardrobe.

But with the beginning of this new adventure also came goodbyes. Matthias and the other brothers of the Amendicarii prepared their way with fasting and prayers, and presented Roarke with the first two copies of *Iesuchristion*, to be held at Castles Thrail and Blythecairne until the time of its unfolding. The horses were saddled and ready—Justice and Starlight and Joy (which is what Hollie named the

palfrey from King Ruric's stables). Before the three mounted to ride down the slope toward the Eldric River and turn toward the north, though, they stopped in one last time to see Mara Dannat.

"Ah, children, come and let me bless you before you depart," the old woman said softly. "First you, Willum the Bold."

Will knelt beside Mara Dannat's bed. She laid her right hand on his head, and a faraway look came over her. "For some, a race of endurance—for some, a dash. Run fast and hard for as long as you may, and you shall not be denied your reward."

She caressed Will's cheek and said with a sad smile, "I would have given you a better blessing if I could. But remember, the prize is at the finish line, not along the way."

"Thank you, Ma'am," Will said, and he rose and kissed her cheek.

"Cedric, kneel here beside me," she said to Roarke, and he did.

Once again Mara Dannat's eyes assumed a distant look, as if she were staring hard at something a long way off. She smiled faintly then, and said, "Protector of His people, and careful of His heart. Songs have been sung for you, and are sung even in Iesuchristi's land. Weary you are of wandering, but cause your heart to be strong. Soon you will be home, never more to wander."

Roarke thought that these were rather bittersweet prophecies, but then realized that the thought of home was sweet, purely sweet to him. "The blessings of God upon you, Mara Dannat," he whispered, and kissed her as Will had done. "And on you, dear friend," she replied.

"Hollie, my dear," the old woman beckoned, and Hollie, weeping openly, knelt at her bed and took her hands. "We have had adventures in our short time together, have we not?" The girl nodded her head and continued to cry. "Listen carefully, now." Mara Dannat's voice dropped to a whisper. "Once has her heart

been pierced, and twice. Her crown of gold is the glory of Hagenspan; and a mother of kings shall she be."

"Mara Dannat, I don't understand," Hollie said sadly.

"No, not now—but you always do in time, don't you?" She smiled, and her eyes crinkled with affection. "Hide these words in your heart, my dear. You have sorrowful days ahead of you, yes—but first you will have many days of joy."

"I will miss you, Mara Dannat," Hollie said, beginning to cry again.

"And I will miss you, my dear. Though not for long, I perceive, for the gentle voice of Iesuchristi calls me onward, upward, and soon I shall leave this bed for the shores of His own country." Hollie buried her face in the old woman's bosom, and Mara Dannat wrapped her frail arms around the girl and patted her on the shoulders. "I will meet you there, in the day when all of our tears be dried."

## Chapter Eight

This time, when Will and Roarke arrived in Lenidor, they were able to see the city as Roarke had intended back when they had been heading south several months earlier. The Maur Wain was swollen with the springtime runoff from the Senns, and everywhere green things were growing. Birds flew through the air, mostly brown and gray, but some brightly colored, chirping and twittering. Doves strutted on the streets, only to flap away in a fluster when people or horses stepped too near to them. The happy calls of street vendors filled the air, and occasionally people bowed, doffed their caps, or cheered when they perceived that Roarke the Dragon-Killer had come.

By the time Roarke, Will, and Hollie had begun their northward journey from Mount Tendor and Ruric's Keep, the story of their adventures (or at least rumors thereof) had sped before them. So when they reached Lenidor, it was no longer possible for Roarke to travel with his identity concealed. The men of Lenidor toasted the Lord Roarke and Sir Willum, and gave them gifts of ale and food. They also admired the Lady Hollie—who kept her beauty veiled as much as was practical—and offered pledges to her health. The women of Lenidor, who had heard whispers of her disreputable past, treated her with cool indifference, except for the serving girls and harlots, who welcomed her as an honored sister.

Roarke, who observed the discourteous treatment his bride received from the respectable women of the city, decided to spend only one night in Lenidor. Besides, Will was becoming increasingly anxious to be home, to see his father again. Hollie, who was thankful just for the opportunity to sleep in a bed again instead of on the ground as they had done for the past three nights, was accustomed to such treatment by women who saw themselves as proper. But she was grateful

that her husband desired her to be treated with dignity, and so she voiced no objection when he announced that they would leave again the next morning.



Dusk of the next day found the three travelers stepping through the doors of Buster's in Goric, the public house where Roarke and Will had eaten last fall. While Will strode off to the bar to get the news of the town, Roarke and Hollie seated themselves at the common board. There was no one in Buster's who acknowledged Roarke, which was a relief, though the two men who shared the board with them gaped openly at Hollie until they got used to her presence with them.

When Will came and joined them at the table, carrying three mugs of beer with him, he said to Roarke, "Ye'll never guess."

"What's that, Will?"

"Ye remember that feller Rulous, that changed our money last year?"

"Yes." Roarke thought back to the curious experience he had had with the shifty-eyed, sweaty-palmed magistrate.

"Well, he's dead."

"You don't say!" Thinking he understood part of what Will was telling him, he commented, "Didn't die of natural causes, must be?"

"That's right. Buster told me that Rulous was sleepin' in the night, a few months back, and a bad man called Ared Nak crept in and blew a poisoned dart right into his throat, while he was sleepin'. Never woke up, he said."

"I wonder why he did that? Robbery?"

"No, he just killed him. He was seen comin' out of Rulous' place, though, so they knowed it was him, on account of he had the blowpipe."



"Where is this murderer now?"

"They hung him. Seems he also blewgunned Rulous' helper, who was found down in Lenidor with a dart in the back of his neck, too. He musta just had it in for the magistrates, for some reason."

One of the men who shared the table with them spoke up. "'Twas a curious story, aboot that Ared Nak. He'd been a-stabbed in 'is back some time afore he kilt Rulous. We thinks they was in on some mischief together what went wrong, but he wouldn't say a word. Fought like a lion, he did, when he was caught."

"Hmm," Roarke mused. "Maybe we'll never know what that was all about." Buster came and brought their meals, and they ate in silence for a few moments. After a bit, Roarke asked the man across the table, "You've chosen a new magistrate?"

"Aye," he said, and he looked happy for the chance to talk. "They've revised somethin' o' the magistrate system, if ye ain't been here in awhile." The man looked at Roarke with guarded interest. "First Magistrate, which usta be here in Goric, is now in Lenidor. Second Magistrate, which was in Lenidor, is now here in Goric, and that's Moa Singer. Mo, we calls him. Third Magistrate was Keet from Fairling, but he up an' moved to Blythecairne awhile back. Since Blythecairne's inhabited now, they've got their own magistrate. That's Fifth Magistrate, if ye're countin', and that's still Keet. Third Magistrate is still in Fairling, and they've named that blind feller Treadle to be theirs. Fourth Magistrate, which usta be in Farport, still is."

"You're very familiar with the judicial system of County Bretay," Roarke commented.

"Well, ye might say it's kind of a hobby o' mine," the other man said.

"What's your name, friend?" Roarke asked.

"Ye can call me Mo, though rightly speakin', I'm called Moa Singer, Second Magistrate of Goric." The man smiled congenially. "And you would be Sir Cedric Roarke, Lord o' Blythecairne, or I'm a blindfolded jackass."

"Yes, that's right," Roarke said, chuckling. "I am pleased to know you, Moa Singer."

"And this delightful creature beside ye must be yer lady Hollie, the one the song's about."

She smiled modestly and nodded at him, but looked confused. Will said, "There's a song about Hollie?"

"Ye mean ye ain't heard it? Why, Carlie, we must sing it fer 'em," he said to his companion, who had been listening politely to the conversation. "Now, how's that start?"

Carlie smiled shyly and began to sing. Mo joined him in the parts he remembered:

*Invited to the king's to dance—*

*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*

*She won their hearts with just one glance—*

*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*

*She curtsyed down before the queen,*

*and liked to turn the old girl green—*

*A fairer face she'd never seen—*

*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*

*Hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey nonny-nonny, hey Hollie-Hollie, hey nonny-oh!*

*The dragon-killer's heart was won—*

*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*  
*Her head was golden like the sun—*  
*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*  
*His eyes were blinded by the glare*  
*of beauty more than passing fair,*  
*and all the queen could do was stare—*  
*with a hey-nonny-nonny, hey nonny-oh!*  
*Hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey nonny-nonny, hey Hollie-Hollie, hey*  
*nonny-oh!*

*The beauty of all Hagenspan—*  
*with a hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-oh!*  
*The fairest lass in all the land—*  
*with a hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-oh!*  
*For such a face, so fair and bright,*  
*we'd raise a glass, we'd drink and fight!*  
*She's rightly wed to Lord and Knight—*  
*with a hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-oh!*  
*Hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-Hollie, hey*  
*Hollie-oh!*

Roarke, Hollie, and Will sat in stunned silence. "Well," Roarke said finally.  
"Well."

Mo said to them, humbly, "My name's Singer, it's true, but ye see that it's really Carlie here what's the real singer." He smiled agreeably. "Ye're a lucky feller, Lord Roarke, to have such a bride. No disrespect intended, of course! Ye're a lucky lass, too, Lady Hollie, to have found a fine gentleman like Lord Roarke."

And ye're a lucky lad, too, Willum called Bold, fer ... fer ... well, ye're all just a bunch o' lucky folks."

"Yes," Roarke said softly, "God has blessed us much."



Three more days of easy travel found them nearing Blythecairne. The path through the brambles that had led north from the Goric-Fairling road had been widened to the point where it was now a recognizable road to the castle.

As they reached the swath of bare ground that was still left from the days of the dragon's dominion, Hollie felt a shudder. Everything she had seen so far in the northlands had been green, growing, and glorious, but suddenly, here was this gray-brown parcel of desolation that stretched onward as far as she could see.

"Cedric," she murmured from atop Joy, "this place makes me afraid."

Will said, "This ain't near as bad as it was last year. Just over the top of that next little hill, ye should be able to see the fields of Blythecairne, if I don't miss my guess."

He was correct. The farmlands, which had been so productive last year, were being extended southwards toward the plains, which were pushing slowly northward to meet them. Perhaps next year, or the year after, the evidence of the dragon's influence might disappear altogether.

At the southernmost edge of the tilled land, a farmer stood with his back to the three riders. He was mopping his brow with the back of his sleeve and looking longingly northward, his day's labors nearly complete. Startled by the sound of the horses approaching, he turned and raised a horn to his lips, from which came a long, mellifluous tone.

Almost immediately, two riders appeared, one from the east and one from the west, each blowing a resonant tone on a horn of his own. They came up rapidly to the three travelers, and Will joyfully recognized his friends Kayce and Tinker from Yancey's Brigade.

"It's Will!" Kayce shouted. "It's Will! An' Roarke!"

"Roarke's brought his Lady!" Tinker bellowed.

The five riders met near where the farmer still stood, staring in awe, and they all dismounted. Will and the other two boys exchanged hugs and thunderous backslaps, and Tinker and Kayce both knelt before Roarke and Hollie, with heads uncovered.

"My, it's good to see you boys again," Roarke said with genuine affection. "Stand up, stand up!"

Will introduced the two to the Lady Hollie, and they held their eyes down and mumbled a greeting, with cheeks reddened. "What's wrong, boys?" Roarke asked.

Kayce stammered, "Well ... a minstrel show come up t' the castle about a fortnight ago, an' they taught us yer song—that is, the song they're singin' about ye—the *hey-nonny-nonny* one."

"But the Lady Maryan said 'twouldn't be right fer us t' stare at ye, if we was t' meet ye," Tinker contributed.

Roarke laughed gently. "Hollie, do you mind?" She looked at him with a question in her eyes. He asked, "Would it be all right if these two young men looked upon your face, so that they could see for themselves what apparently all Hagenspan is singing about?"

Now it was Hollie's turn for her cheeks to turn red, but she smiled coyly and said, "If it would please my husband for these young men to know the kind of

trouble he has gotten himself into, I would be most honored to know them face-to-face."

"Raise your eyes, my good men," Roarke commanded, and they did so.

Tinker gasped, "Lor', it's true!" and fell to his knees once again.

Kayce stared at her, eyes wide and mouth agape, and Tinker slapped him behind his knees, causing him to fall to the ground as well.

Hollie reached out her hands to the two boys, and said, "Please, stand!"

Tinker said, "Oh, no, my Lady, ye don't want t' be lettin' such as *us* touch ye!" And they scrambled to their feet without her help.

Hollie's eyes blazed then, and she demanded, "Lord Roarke, am I to be an ornament on your arm, or am I a flesh-and-blood woman?"

Roarke said, eyes twinkling, "Oh, you're a woman, my dear."

"And am I to be the Lady of this realm, or am I to be a scullery-maid?"

"Well, if I'm the Lord, that must make you the Lady," he said, barely able to hold back a laugh.

"Then I have some small amount of control over what these young men can and cannot do?" She paused her harangue and turned apologetically to Kayce and Tinker. "Forgive me, but I have never been a Lady before, and I am still learning the standards."

"Yes," Roarke said, "I believe your Ladyship may exercise some authority over my faithful men."

"Then I *command* you," she said regally, "to take my hands!"

The two boys looked helplessly at Roarke, who said with a smile, "Well, you've been commanded."

They sheepishly reached out and grasped Hollie's hands, though not very tightly, and she said, "Now, that's better. I'm not a song, I'm a woman. And if God

has given me a pleasant face, He has also given me sorrows to balance it. You boys must not bow to me again, unless your Lord Roarke requires it."

"Thank ye, my Lady," Kayce said humbly.

"Can we go now, my Lord?" Tinker asked Roarke. "They'll be wantin' t' know at the castle, what all the fuss was about with the horns."

"Yes, go," Roarke agreed.

Will said, "Come on, fellers! I'll race ye!" And the three youths jumped on their horses and tore up the road toward Blythecairne.

"My love," Roarke said gently to Hollie, "let us make our way together a bit more slowly. I dare say there will be people lining the way to greet us, before we go very far."



Roarke and Hollie lay side by side on Roarke's bed in his chamber in the southeast corner of the castle. It had been an exhilarating, exhausting evening, but they were having trouble falling asleep. There had been hugs and kisses from Keet and Thalia, and Lirey and Maryan. There were warm, enthusiastic handshakes from the brigadiers, and smiling salutes from the men and boys of the three brigades. The women had fawned over Hollie, congratulating her, petting her, and exclaiming that the words of her song were true.

Roarke's only sadness in the evening had been when he noticed that his old friend Knaiver was not there, and Keet had sadly confirmed that several weeks earlier, he had passed over into the next world. "But he said t' tell ye, he'll be waiting fer ye on th' other shore," Keet said.

Hollie had been delighted to see the small children of Blythecairne, Robin and Peet, run to Roarke and clamber up into his lap. The boy who was Peet's older

brother stood respectfully waiting for the invitation, but once given, he also climbed into Roarke's lap and gave him a hug.

She mentioned the children's response to him, and he said, "Yes, they are wonderful, aren't they?"

She paused a moment and then asked quietly, "Do you think you might like to have a child of your own someday?"

"Yes. Yes, I would," he said. Then a jolt of fear caused his heart to skip a beat. "Hollie ... you're not ... with child, are you?"

She laughed with delight at his discomfiture. "No, my dear husband, I am not. But if you'd really like to have a child with me ... since we're not sleeping anyway...."

As they began to kiss, they could hear drifting faintly across the courtyard—must be from the barracks of Yancey's Brigade—distant voices raised in song: "*with a hey-Hollie-Hollie, hey Hollie-oh!*"



## Chapter Nine

The months passed. The lands of Meadling were blessed with an exceptionally long and fruitful summer, watered by gentle rains, and warmed by a benevolent sun. The wheat and corn grew abundantly, and vegetables were plentiful—beans and cabbages and carrots and beets.

There was still not a profusion of wild game, though rabbits and squirrels had been seen scampering among the gardens. But hunting expeditions south of the dragon's defilement yielded acceptable returns, and the livestock kept at Blythecairne itself was sufficient to supply all of the needs of the growing community.

Maryan gave Lirey a third son, and they named him Tim. Faria and Nolan the slave also had a son that summer, and him they called Keric, after Faria's mother's father. Other settlers arrived to join the company of Blythecairne's farmers and craftsmen, and they brought sons and daughters with them as well.

Enough houses were constructed to accommodate all of the families of Meadling, so that the only individuals left in the barracks that had been built by Abey and Yeskie were single men. But of that sum there was no diminishing, because young men from as far away as Lenidor and Farport arrived, a few each month, desiring to add themselves to the number of Roarke's Men.

Since Willum was a full-fledged knight now himself, Roarke sent him on journeys of good will to Fairling, Goric, and Farport, accompanied by Barlie once, by Tinker once, and once by Aron Millerson. His mission was to meet with the local magistrates and offer the aid of Blythecairne if it was needed, explaining how the farmlands of Meadling had prospered and that Lord Roarke wished to be a benevolent neighbor. Willum was not sent to Lenidor, but Second Magistrate Moa

Singer himself came to Blythecairne and sat at Roarke's table for several helpful days.

One day toward the end of summer, Abey the woodsman was working at his sawyer's tools, when suddenly he clutched his chest, and died without uttering another word. He was buried near the gate he had carved so skillfully, and the whole community mourned, but especially his friend Yeskie.

Roarke gave the book of the *Iesuchristion* to Keet for safekeeping. He told the leadership of Blythecairne about the Amencarii and their mission, and the request for some of the willing young men to make the journey to Mount Tendor and learn from the translator that would be coming. Keet and Lirey delivered that information to the youths of the three brigades (Yancey's Brigade was no longer the only one with young men), and Aron Millerson, Gosse, and Spence came shortly and presented themselves to Roarke, asking to be chosen as Blythecairne's delegates to the Amencarii. After considering it for a week, Roarke called the three boys before him and gave them each his blessing to go to the Amencarii when the time came.

Hollie developed friendships with Maryan and Thalia, the first friendships she had ever had with "proper" women in her life. *Except for Mara Dannat*, she thought. Keet and Lirey were at first a little apprehensive about how their wives would react to the addition of a *new* lady of the castle, after they had spent so much time sharing that position by default. But the two men were both grateful to learn that their wives were not quite so vain as they had feared.

Thalia had taken over much of the day-to-day chores of running the household from her husband Keet, leaving him to oversee the administrative functions of the castle. Maryan was busy with her new baby, and had scant use for the ceremonial duties of ladyship anyway. And both of the women were happy for Roarke, that he had found someone to warm his bed and warm his heart. And even

though Hollie was very pretty, she was not conceited about it. The things that were apt to cause friction among many women of beauty and position, therefore, were not to be found between these three, and their friendship was amiable and sincere.

Roarke, however, cautioned his bride not to grow too attached to her status as Lady of Blythecairne. For it was in his heart to winter with his friends here in the land of Meadling, but come the following spring, to take Hollie, head through the north country, and go home. He thought about the blessing Mara Dannat had given him when they were preparing to leave Mount Tendor: "*Soon you will be home, never more to wander.*" He thought the words probably meant that he would live out the rest of his days as the Lord of Thrail, enjoying the land of his youth, though he acknowledged that perhaps they meant he was soon to enter the everlasting lands of Iesuchristi. In any case, it had been close to five years since he had seen his homeland, or at least it would be by the time springtime rolled around.

Though every part of Hagenspan that he had seen had its own particular kind of beauty—the woodlands of Bretay, the mountains of Temter, the great cities of Greening—there was nothing quite like the beauty of home. Roarke missed the rolling hills and green fields of Haioland. He missed the lowing of cows and the taste of fresh milk. He missed the melodious bleating of lambs, the softness of their fleece against his hands, the insistent tug as they sucked on his fingers. He missed his sister and her husband; he missed his two nieces—how big must they be now?

He longed to show Hollie the western coast of Haioland, where you could look off into the distance and see nothing at all, nothing but the steel-blue sky melting into the Great Sea. He wanted to show her the home of his childhood, and tell her about the games he had played, and what his parents had been like. And he longed to present her to his people at Castle Thrail, too—the ones who had questioned his wisdom when he had ridden off with nothing but his horse Justice,

seeking only some scraps of God's words. And when he returned, he would be bringing an entire book full of God's words, a beautiful young bride, and the lordship of another realm. He supposed that he might be bringing Sir Willum the Bold, too; after all, King Ruric had assigned them to each other.

Come spring, Roarke thought, it would be time to go home.

## Chapter Ten

Billy Spreg was drunk. Drunk *again*, his wife would say.

Billy Spreg couldn't stand his wife when she was pestering him about being drunk, which was most of the time. He sat at his regular seat in the only pub in the town of Katarin, The Cold Fish, and drank himself into a blissful stupor most days, as far away from the harping voice of his shrewish wife, Sarie, as he dared to run.

He chuckled aloud to himself, and shook his head. He could still remember when there had been nothing in the whole world that he desired more than to sit and listen to the soft voice of Sarie. Sarie Corder, she had been then, but once she had become Sarie Spreg, it all began to change.

The nights that he used to spend carousing with his mates, she now wanted him to spend at home with her. Instead of fishing a few days a week to pay his bill at the pub, she now wanted him to work at farming a plot and fixing up their house, which was just fine the way it was, as long as it didn't rain too hard. And lately she had been pestering him about helping to put her in a family way, which he didn't mind too much, except for the family part.

The more she whined, the more he stayed away, and the more he stayed away, the more she whined. The irony was not lost on him that the voice he once longed to hear above all others was now the last voice in the world that he wanted to hear at all.

Billy Spreg thought hard. If he had some money—*lots* of money—then he could pay his tab, fix up Sarie's house, put a bun in her oven, and maybe have some left to do a little coquetting on the side, too.

"What's that?" Billy's cousin and closest friend, Padallor Clay, asked him with a moony grin on his round face.

"What's what?" Billy asked. He had not been aware that he had spoken.

"You said somethin' about money," Paddy said agreeably.

"I did, eh? I thought I was just thinkin' it."

"Nope, you said it, right out loud. Unless," Paddy's face clouded with confusion, "maybe *I* was just thinkin' it."

"Well, whichever one of us was thinkin' it, it was me," Billy decided.

"That's good," Paddy nodded. "What was you thinkin'?"

"I was thinkin', if I had some money, I could make Sarie happier. And if I had lots of money, then that would make Sarie *lots* happier."

"Well, laddie, the only way I know of to get lots of money, is to do lots of work." Paddy blinked happily and smiled. "So I don't think your prospects is all that good."

"That's what I was thinkin' on." The two fell silent for a time, and polished off another couple of pints. In the background, someone began reciting the poem of Roarke the Dragon-Killer that had become popular in the taverns of the north. After each stanza, someone would shout, "To the Dragon-Killer!" and the listeners would reply "Ho!" and raise their glasses in salute. Since the poem was a bit on the longish side, it had become rather a favorite among those folks inclined to hold a wassail in order to pay their respects. "To the Dragon-Killer! Ho!"

"That's it!" Billy Spreg declared, slapping his hand on the table top.

"It is?" his cousin said, surprised.

"That's the answer to our money problems—yours and mine."

"I have money problems?" Paddy asked sadly.

"Not no mores," Billy said. He leaned in conspiratorially. "Let's kill the dragon."

"What dragon?"

"Granddad always told me, when I was a wee lad, that there was still two dragons in Hagenspan. That Roarke had kilt one in Haioland, and one in a cave someplace, but that there was still two left, in Meadling, and in Beale's Keep."

"Well," Paddy said, "Granddad always was a truthful sort of chap. And Roarke did kill another dragon, so I guess that part was true. But I don't even know where Beale's Keep *is*."

"We can find it," Billy urged. "And when we do ... Gold! and Glory!"

"I don't know," Paddy replied doubtfully. "There ain't nothin' in the poem about gold, nor glory neither."

"Well, they ought to write another verse, then, 'cause everyone knows about dragon gold." Billy nodded, agreeing with himself. "And as for glory, why, they're writin' poems and singin' songs about him. Ain't that glory?"

Paddy had to admit that. He began to grow more enthusiastic. "And what about that other song? The 'Hollie-oh-Hollie' one?"

"What about it?"

"Well, you've already got your Sarie, but there ain't nobody for old Padallor Clay, not yet. It'd sure be fine to have a Hollie-oh-Hollie of my very own."

"Well, there you go, then! We can start out tomorrow."

"Hold on, laddie!" Paddy objected. "I need to drain my pouch and think about this a bit, before I agree to go trompin' off across the mountains with you to become dragon feed."

"I'll go with you, and we can talk while we pee."

A moment later, the two were in the back alley behind The Cold Fish, leaning against the wall and relieving themselves. The brisk night air made Padallor more sober. "We don't even own one sword between us," he complained. "And we ain't no good with swords anyways."

"We don't need a sword," Billy said. "I been thinkin' on that, too. We'll take our bows, and while the dragon's sleepin', we'll each shoot out one of its eyes. That way, when it wakes up, it won't be able to see us, and no matter how mad it gets, we'll just pump it full of shafts until it dies."

"Hey," Paddy replied, impressed, "that *is* good." His round face contorted into a thoughtful grimace. "Let me sleep on it tonight, and I'll let you know in the mornin'."



The next morning, though, found Padallor with a firmer grip on his sanity than he had had in his half-seas-over state of the night before.

"You must be barmy!" he told his cousin, when they met somewhat before midday. "Kill the dragon! Why don't we just jump in the Maur Wain, swim to the bottom, and blow out our breath?"

"Cause there ain't no gold at the bottom of the Maur Wain," Billy said pointedly.

"I don't need no gold, anyways," Paddy grumbled.

"Have it your way," his cousin said sullenly. They sat in stony silence for a moment, which Billy broke by quietly humming the tune to the song about Hollie.

"Stop that!" Paddy bleated.

"Stop what?" Billy replied innocently.

"You know." Paddy slipped a hand inside his tunic, scratched his armpit, then withdrew his hand and furtively sniffed his fingers. "I'm goin' fishin'," he said, rising. "See you tonight?"

"I'll be at The Fish, I guess."





Later that night, Billy Spreg entered the murky gloom of The Cold Fish's public room, found his cousin, and plopped onto a stool beside him. "Buy me a drink," he said. "I'm leavin' tonight."

"Really? Where are you goin'?" said Paddy, who was already several drinks toward dismissing sobriety for the evening.

"Beale's Keep. Got my bow and my pack right outside the door."

"You can't go to Beale's Keep alone! I won't let you!"

"Well, I'm goin'. If I have to go alone, I will." He thumped the table. "Gold and Glory!"

Paddy looked at his cousin rheumily and began to cry. "But I don't *want* to go to Beale's Keep."

"Don't go, then." Billy waved his hand as if to dismiss the notion. "I ain't makin' you."

"Say you'll stay."

"Can't say that. I'm goin'."

"But ... you *need* me!"

"Aye, that I might, Paddy, my lad. There might be any kind of danger awaitin' me, and to face it alone might be more than I can handle." He took a long draught of ale. "But with another stout lad to watch out for me and help me through my trials, well ... then I just might make it."

"Ohhh...." Padallor Clay moaned and hung his head. "Ohhh.... Damn you, Bill Spreg! I only hope I live long enough to hate myself for what I'm goin' to do."

"That's the spirit!" Billy clapped his cousin on the shoulder. "Come on! Your pack and bow are right outside the door with mine."

## Chapter Eleven

It was five weeks later when Padallor Clay returned to Katarin, gaunt and sunken-eyed, filthy and clothed only in tattered rags. When he realized that at last, he had once again reached the streets of his own town, he fell to his knees, bent low, and kissed the earth.

Lurching to his feet, he resisted the urge to head for The Cold Fish, and instead wound his way through a series of alleys until he came to the humble residence of Sarie Spreg.

Knocking tentatively at the door, he heard a suspicious voice demand, "Who's that?" Smoothing his ragged clothing with his grimy hands, he replied, "It's me, Sar'. Paddy Clay."

The sound of stamping feet came toward the door, which was savagely thrown open. Before him stood the lady of the house, with fury blazing from her eyes, and her lips already parted, prepared to hurl sharp words of reprobation toward her husband's comrade. When Sarie saw the state Paddy was in, though, the words froze in her mouth, and her jaw went slack. A mixture of emotions played across her features in quick succession: anger, confusion, fear.

"Can I come in, Sar'?"

"I—I don't know," she said, trying to recover her sense of indignation.

"Please, Sar'."

She moved aside so that he could enter, and he stepped into the room and sat wearily at the table.

The young woman said, "You look terrible. Can I get you something to eat?"

"That'd be grand," Paddy said gratefully. He looked around the interior of the small house and said, "You've fixed Billy's place up nice."

"It's not Billy's place any more—it's *my* place," she retorted crossly.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," he murmured.

"Where have you been? The men at the bar said they heard you talking about Roarke, and I thought ... maybe you went to Blythecairne."

"Now, *that* would've been a good idea," Paddy said sadly. "But no...." His voice trailed off.

"Then, when there wasn't any word from Billy, I figured that must be the two of you had run off to find another woman, and that he'd left me high and dry."

"No, Sarie, that ain't true. Whatever Bill did, he did it for you."

She slammed a plate of beans down in front of Paddy, and he flinched. "He most certainly did *not* do it for me! All I asked was that he would be a normal husband, and work a little patch of ground for some vegetables, and maybe get a cow. And all he ever wanted to do was sit and drink his damnable beer with—with *you!*" Her anger had returned in force. "So, where is he? Off living with some trollop in Solemon, I suppose?"

"No." Paddy's eyes grew very sad. "He ain't never comin' back, Sar'."

"I thought so—" she started, but then she saw Paddy's face. "Why," she asked in abashed tones, "what's the matter, Paddy? Bill ain't hurt, is he?"

"Sarie, Bill ain't never comin' back."

"Tell me what's happened," she said, as tears filled her own eyes. "Is he dead?"

Paddy looked away sorrowfully, and said, "Aye, he's dead, poor lad."

Sarie covered her face with her hands, and cried softly for several minutes.

Paddy said, "His last words was, 'Get back to Katarin and take care of my Sarie. See that you do it, Paddy.'" Billy Spreng had in fact said no such words, but

Paddy thought it was best to say so—best for Sarie's peace of mind, and best for his cousin's memory.

"How did he die?" she asked mournfully. "Where did you go?"

"Well," he admitted, "we tried to go to Beale's Keep."

"Beale's Keep? But isn't there a dragon there?"

"Yes, there surely is."



The dragon had left her home in the castle and gone off in search of food. She was hungry more frequently now, and awake more often than she had been for most of the past century. Finding two fat deer grazing just outside of her territory, she had devoured them ravenously—flesh, hide, and hoof. Then, instead of going back to the castle to sleep as she was accustomed to, she had lain on the ground at the southern perimeter of her desecration, and dozed. After awhile, a horned goat wandered into her range, its nose twitching curiously at the unusual scent of the huge serpent lying there. A moment later, its life was draining out onto the darkening grass, snatched away with one sinuous stab of the serpent's head. Since the dragon was no longer as hungry as she had been earlier, she played with this beast for awhile, tossing it into the air and catching it several times before she ate most of it, crunching happily on the bones.

Someplace in the deeper realms of the serpent's consciousness, four spirits dwelt. It could not be rightly said that they were happy, for there was nothing on earth that could make them so. But they were eager with anticipation, for they knew that the long period of the dragon's dormancy was soon coming to an end. It would be death and blood, crushing and devastation, for the human creatures that

were the object of the Most High's affection. And that prospect is what made the foul spirits fairly intoxicated with expectation.

The dragon herself was an inarticulate, dull-witted beast. But the demons that indwelt her had been exercising more and more control over her actions, working in concert with each other, to the point where they could even make the beast deny her own instinctive impulses. Most of the time the demons let the dragon be herself, and do what she would do. But it was ever in their minds that their destiny included one more encounter with the disturbing human named Roarke, and they wanted to surprise him—impress him—when next they met.

The dragon stomped from the south of her domain up to the southeastern part, tearing at the earth and uprooting plants as she went. Again, instead of returning to the castle for her rest, she lay down at the edge of her realm, and dozed for several days.

She was awakened by two little humans, tentatively sneaking across the open wasteland toward her castle. She watched them as they went, pushing and jostling each other, and peeping at each other in their squeaking voices. The dragon was intrigued; it had been long since she had seen any of these creatures. She seemed to remember that they were quite tasty.

Rising to her full height, she thundered across the dirt behind the humans, making the ground shake. The little creatures were terrified, not knowing where she came from, and they began to shriek. One of them turned then and saw her. He took something from his back and sent a tiny pointed stick hurtling toward her. It glanced off her breast, and she paid it no mind. She bent and grabbed the little creature with her mouth, tossing him high into the air and catching him with a satisfying crunch.

She was about to bite down on the other one when the demons suddenly exercised their full control over her. She was furious, but she stopped, with her

dagger-like teeth poised just above the little human's head. It was wailing and sobbing, and she desperately wanted to eat it, but she did not. The small creature fell to its knees before the display of her glorious strength, and she turned her head and fixed an eye upon it, willing it to pay attention to her.

Then the demons bade her sing, but not her usual throaty bellow. She roared. Her tongue, her palate, her throat all contorted in ways nature had not intended, so that it sounded to the little human's ears as if she were *saying* the word "roar."

"RRRRROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRR!" she sang, and then the demons made her cough, one little chirp.

Again they caused her to sing:

"RRRRROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRR!" followed by one little cough.

Then, utterly against her will, her muscular legs carried her away, back to Beale's Keep. She snarled and snapped, but her legs would not take her back to taste the little morsel. And inside her heart, four spirits, foul and mean, rejoiced. For the dragon had once more tasted human flesh, and her hunger would not soon abate.



"I don't know why the dragon didn't kill me, too," Paddy said softly. "It was almost like it wanted me to come back and tell folks that it was there. And ... I'll be jigged if it didn't sound like it was yellin' Roarke's name."

Sarie, who had listened intently to Paddy's story of the encounter with the dragon, had stopped crying. She grieved for her husband's death, but she had already had five weeks to get used to the idea that he was gone. In a hushed voice

she said, "Paddy? Just when was it that Billy told you to come back to Katarin and take care of me?"

Paddy's face turned bright red, and he said nothing.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked him.

"Well," he said hoarsely, "after I rest a bit from this last trip, I think I ought to see about going off to Blythecairne, and tellin' Roarke about what happened."

"Do you think you might stay there?"

"Ah, no ... I don't think so. I like my life here in Katarin."

"That's good. Will you come and see me when you get back?"

"I will, if you want me to."

Paddy pushed back from the table and stood to go. Sarie stuck out her hand, and he shook it solemnly. "Thank you for coming and telling me about Bill," she said.

He nodded, and met her gaze for the briefest of moments. Then he was back out on the street, headed for The Cold Fish. The story he had to tell ought to be worth a couple of rounds.

## Chapter Twelve

Harvest time came, and even though King Ruric had decreed Blythecairne to be free from tribute, Roarke directed Keet to make up a gift to send to Ruric's Keep. So Keet commissioned a large wagon and filled it with different grains from the fields, representing the increase of the land of Meadling. Along with the grain, he sent some pots of honey, and a small chest filled with falconets. After some deliberation, he also sent one of his precious casks of *uisge beatha*. As a final thought, he sent along one of the last woodcarvings created by Abey before his death, which depicted a snake being pierced by a down-thrust sword. *A fitting gift for Serpent's-Bane*, he thought.



Toward the end of autumn, the horns of the far watches sounded, announcing an unknown visitor. It was Padallor Clay, coming to tell Roarke of his adventure with the dragon of Beale's Keep.

Expecting to find Roarke sitting on a throne, and having practiced kneeling and bowing while on his way from Katarin, Paddy was surprised to find him seated at a great table, surrounded by cheerful-looking men, and women too. Gosse, who had brought him in from the gate, announced, "Lord Roarke, I present to ye this feller named Padallor Clay, who brings tidings from Katarin."

"Welcome," the white-haired Lord said. "There is always room at this table for someone bringing news. May I present to you my Lady Hollie; Keet, the steward of Blythecairne, and his wife Thalia; Lirey, the Captain of the Guard, and Maryan his wife." He indicated each one in turn. "And those seated—"



"Beggin' your pardon, my Lord, but is this the Lady Hollie of the song?"

Paddy interrupted.

"So I hear," Roarke said with a dry smile.

"My Lady," Paddy said humbly, "it would be my great honor, if I was to be allowed to shake your hand."

Hollie smiled at her husband with a bright twinkle in her eye. "Master Clay, it would be my honor to shake *your* hand."

He circled the table, lightly took Hollie's hand, and bowed deeply. "Thank you, my Lady," he said, his cheeks flushed.

"Thank *you*, Master Clay." A ripple of laughter came from those seated at the table.

"Ah, you might be thinkin' to mock me, but no one else in Katarin has shook the hand of the Lady from the song!" Paddy said with a self-conscious smile.

"Mock you? Never," said Roarke. "We are just delighted to be able to offer you this great pleasure, at such a small cost to ourselves." He smiled warmly.

"Please be seated, Master Clay, and join us in our dinner."

"Thank you most gratefully, my Lord."

After dinner was concluded, the young man Barlie of Yancey's Brigade gave a short display of a new skill he was in the process of mastering—that of juggling. When he managed to keep five apples in the air without a single miscue, those seated at the table burst into appreciative applause.

"Well done, Barlie!" Roarke beamed. "It's good to know that those long hours of guard duty have not been unprofitable for you."

"Thank ye, m'Lord," said Barlie. "When I get to th' point of bein' able to juggle some flamin' swords, I'll come an' give ye another show."

The dinner guests laughed and applauded again, and Barlie left the hall.

"Now, for our friend from Katarin," Roarke said, turning. "What news do you bring?"

"Thank you for your hospitality, my Lord," Paddy Clay replied, "but I fear that the tidin's I'm bringin' will give you more sorrow than pleasure."

"Go on," Roarke said, and the mood of the listeners grew more sober.

"Well, the news I bring you ain't really from Katarin, but from farther west. From Beale's Keep." Paddy went on to tell of his encounter with the dragon, leaving no fact unspoken. When he told of the dragon seeming to cry Roarke's name, the knight exchanged dark glances with Hollie and Willum, who knew more than the rest of the guests about the source of the dragon's unnatural fury.

When Paddy's story was concluded, Roarke said, "Thank you. What you did was very foolish, but you have shown courage in coming to tell me your story.

"It seems that I may have yet one more encounter with a dragon before I leave this earth. But I think that it will not be this year; snow is already in the air. And it is in my heart to take Hollie to Haioland next spring, to show her my homeland." He sighed wistfully. "May God grant us a season of peace that lasts just a bit longer, I pray."

"Amen t' that," said Keet, and it was echoed around the table.



A blanket of snow once more covered the hills surrounding Blythecairne, and smoke rose in lazy billows from the chimneys of the houses of Meadling.

The news that Paddy Clay had brought concerning the dragon caused a little undercurrent of uneasiness to swirl beneath the surface of many thoughts and conversations, but other than that, God had indeed apparently granted Roarke and his people an extended season of peace.

The winter was cold, but not bitterly so, and no threats of danger came to the land or its inhabitants. Food was plentiful, and there was just enough work to be done so that most of Roarke's men ended each day weary and happy, making sleep a sweetly refreshing experience each night.

Families continued to grow; marriages were planned, children were conceived, babies were born. The people of the land of Meadling were as fruitful as the land that supported them. And whenever a new child was brought into the burgeoning community, it was presented to the Lord Roarke and the Lady Hollie so that they could lay their hands on the baby and bless it.

Whenever Hollie took one of those little ones into her arms, a faint shadow of melancholy cast itself across her face. She smiled and spoke gracious words to the eager parents, but Roarke could see that some unspoken sadness was resting upon her heart. He longed to ask her about it, but he supposed that she would tell him when she felt ready.

He thought back to the day when Mara Dannat had given her final blessings to him, and to Will, and to Hollie. The old woman had spoken to Hollie so softly that he had not heard everything she said, and he did not ask his wife about it, feeling that the words had been spoken for Hollie's ears alone, unless she wished to share them with him. But what he had heard was, "*Once has her heart been pierced, and twice.*" He wondered what had pierced Hollie's heart. Certainly she had had an unfortunate childhood ... but what specifically had happened to pierce her heart? She never spoke of her experiences with her father or at Kenndt's with any particular bitterness. Ah, well. She would probably tell him someday.

Whenever Roarke sensed that Hollie was heavy-hearted, he tried to be particularly tender with her. On those evenings, she spoke little, but took great comfort in lying quietly in her husband's arms until she heard his breathing deepen into the soft, slow rhythms of sleep. She also pondered the words of Mara

Dannat's prophecy, and wondered what they could mean. *A mother of kings?* Such words seemed fantastic to her, beyond her ability to believe.

But Hollie's moments of melancholy were few. Day-to-day life at the castle was, on the whole, a peaceful and joyous experience for her—altogether different from the winter before with the Amendicarii, which she had also enjoyed greatly. But now she had the satisfying friendships of Maryan and Thalia, as well as the tender concern of her noble husband. Her duties as Lady of the castle were pleasant, and her people admired her for her beauty and her gentleness. Following Roarke's lead, she sought to serve the people of Blythecairne in whatsoever ways that she was able, instead of commanding them to serve her. Her days were full, and so was her heart.



The snows were melting; the sky was clear and blue. Spring was once more coming to the northlands. The time was drawing near for Roarke to leave Blythecairne for, he suspected, the last time.

Pipe smoke filled the hall where he sat with Lirey and Keet and Willum in council, discussing plans for the future.

"Even though I have a wife now, and may possibly have an heir someday, should God so grant, I have decided to leave my will the way I described it to you before I left for Ruric's Keep," Roarke said. "Upon my death, the two of you—" he nodded toward Keet and Lirey, "—will share the leadership of the community, and the resources of the castle will be yours. This is a terrible responsibility, but you are up to it. If in generations in the future your two families quarrel, then that will be their burden to bear. But I implore you two: Remain friends. Always seek each other's welfare. And rule your people gently."

Keet and Lirey looked at each other, at a loss for a reply.

Willum asked, "Don't ye want some part of Blythecairne to be an inheritance for yer little ones, if ye have some one day?"

Roarke thought for a moment before he spoke. "No, I don't think so. But, Keet, Lirey ... I would ask you this: If one day, someone from my family should arrive here at Blythecairne and need help in some way, that you would remember me, and the friendship we have shared."

"Aye, that we'll do," Keet replied huskily.

Lirey nodded his affirmation.

"So, then," Will continued, "ye'll be claimin' Castle Thrail as yer inheritance?"

"Perhaps...." Roarke's voice trailed off, and he assumed a faraway look. "Castle Thrail, though, has got along well enough without me for a number of years, I'd have to think. It may be that they won't be as happy to have me back as I hope." He shook his head and chuckled.

"Well, Cap', if ye ever need a home, ye'll always have one here," Lirey said earnestly.

"Thank you, Lirey." He gazed at the other men with affection. "Thank you, Keet."



Roarke faced the assembly outside Abey's gate. The crowd was larger now than it had been a year and a half ago, when he had dedicated Lady Ileane's rosebushes. Beside him stood Hollie and Willum, for they were all saying goodbye.

"My friends!" he cried. "Words cannot adequately express how full my heart is today, or how much affection I have for each of you. What an adventure we have shared!"

As Roarke talked, he looked tenderly at his people, cherishing the imprint each one of them made upon his eyes. Hollie watched her husband as he did this, and remembered the first impression she had ever had of the man she had come to love: his ability to gently caress somebody with his gaze alone. She felt a momentary wistfulness as she recalled that first evening at Kenndt's table, but then a swell of gratitude replaced that faint sense of longing, as she realized that he caressed her still, each time he looked upon her face.

Roarke continued, "If I had a lifetime to spend knowing each one of you alone, it would not be enough. But such is the wisdom of God, that he has not given us that much time together. What He has given us are but a few brief moments to share, so that we may learn mercy, forgiveness, sacrifice, and love. And He has also given us this: the sensation that our moments together have been too few, and the longing to share just one more, ever and always, one more.

"For some of us, our moments here are done. For I do not foresee that I shall ever look upon Blythecairne again, after today. But I shall continue to cherish the hope ... that one day, when we have all crossed over into the realm of God's understanding, that we shall be together again, to be no more parted. And then, that sense that we have, that we were always denied that one more longed-for moment, will be answered. For, there ... we will always have it: one more moment together.

"It is this hope that keeps my heart from breaking, as I look upon each one of you—my friends. It is the knowledge that, in the sight of God, our last goodbye is not ... goodbye. Our final separation is not final. That no matter how many long years pass before we meet again, no matter how hard the trials or how bitter

the sorrows ... there is a tomorrow for us, when we come together in the evergreen fields of Iesuchristi's own land. We shall dance, we shall sing, we shall kiss, and we shall be evermore fulfilled.

"So take heart, my friends. The years pass as a moment, the mightiest trials of our lives like a breath of wind. Hold on strong to what you know to be good, noble, and true, and almost before we know it, we will see each other in the next world. And we will *know*, at last. Our hearts will say: *This* is what I always longed for. *This* is what I have always loved. *This* is why I was born, and lived, and died."

His voice broke, as a tear ran down his cheek. "I fear that I have expressed these thoughts badly. For even though I have this strong hope, I must admit ... I am sad today." He wiped the tear away with the back of his hand. "I will miss you, my friends." He drew a deep breath. "But I am not the only one saying farewell today." He turned to Hollie.

She said, "My husband is very eloquent, and I do not share his gift with words. But let me just say to you that in this past year, I have grown to love each one of you as he does. You have become the family that I never knew. And wherever I go in this world ... you will always be in my heart." She took her husband's arm and hugged herself to it, and looked at Willum.

"Guess that means it's my turn," Will said. He looked at the ground for a moment and scuffed his feet, then raised his voice to address the people of Blythecairne.

"Ye've known me my whole life, most of ye. Ye knowed when I was just a wee scamp runnin' errands fer my dad in The Stag's Head, and some of ye patted me on the head a time or two. 'Good little Will,' ye'd say. And now ... I'm standin' before ye, a full-grown man, just about, an' the king of all Hagenspan has named me Sir Willum, an' they call me Willum the Bold.

"Well, I'm bold enough, I guess, but I know in my heart that there's some of ye here who are bolder than me. And I've been called 'Sir' by the king himself, but don't I know it, that there's a whole bunch of ye here who are more noble than me.

"But now I'm goin' out from here, to visit other lands, and to do what's right regardin' the knight's code. I don't even hardly know what that is, but I've got Lord Roarke to show me. And I guess what I really want to say is this: That whatsoever ye me hear about me in future days, or whatsoever ye might hear about Sir Willum the Bold ... it's really just me, yer old friend. And," his throat grew thick with the words, "I'm really just tryin' to be Keet's good little Will."

At that, Keet could restrain himself no longer, and rushed forward to meet his boy in a sobbing embrace. Roarke and Hollie could not speak, but Roarke reasoned that they had said enough anyway.

Lirey stepped forward and raised his arms in the air. He shouted, "The time's come fer goodbye." He turned to the three travelers, and said, "Lady Hollie, ye've blest us with yer beauty. Yer gentleness will be missed. Remember, do remember—wherever Roarke leads ye in this world, ye are truly the Lady o' Blythecairne, an' ye'll always be welcomed here."

He turned to Roarke. "Lord Roarke! Ye've made us bigger than we were, inside and out. Ye've given us a pleasant home, a prosperous community, an' a bright hope fer the future. Ye've tried to teach us the ways of God. Ye've tried to make us as ferocious as tigers, and as gentle as lambs. Fer those things an' more, we bless ye." He lowered his voice somewhat, and said sincerely, "Ye'll always be my Captain."

Lirey turned to Will. "And ye, Sir Willum the Bold: We remember ye, good little Will! Ye have shown us what one good boy, planted in good northern soil and watered by th' tears of an honest father, can grow up t' be! When trouble came to ye at Ruric's Keep, th' nobility of yer heart busted right out as it was destined t'



do, for that's who ye are! Now ... go out an' show th' whole world th' kind o' man that's sent forth ... from Blythecairne!" He raised his right fist in the air as if leading a battle cry, and many of the company roared their approval.

"Blythecairne!"

"Now, Cap', while the crowd's still cheerin', get on yer horses an' ride," Lirey said.

Roarke said, reaching down to grasp Lirey's hand for the last time, "Until next we meet, my friend."

"Aye, Cap'. Until then."

## Chapter Thirteen

Haldamar Tenet sat in the common room of the soldiers' quarters, chatting idly with the men of Sun Company, who had just been relieved from their posts by Castle Thrail's Moon Company. Sometime toward the morning, Star Company would take over. Their days of guard duty were done today, and they would be relieved in turn by Day Company, Dusk Company, and Dawn Company. Three days of guard duty, three days of other chores, and one day of leisure; it was an arrangement the troops of Castle Thrail found very agreeable.

Haldamar Tenet was not one of the guards, though he often spent time eating, drinking, joking, and gossiping with them. His wife Ronica was the sister of Roarke, Lord of Thrail, and she had been, for all practical purposes, in charge of the lands of Roarke's domain since he had left the castle nearly five years earlier. Of course, the castle steward, Esselte Smead, was nominally in command, but he deferred politely to Ronica Tenet in any matter that did not present a direct conflict of interest with his mandate from Lord Roarke. Since those conflicts of interest were virtually nonexistent, more and more people assumed that Ronica was in fact the designated authority of Castle Thrail.

Songs had been making their way to Thrail—songs about a nameless dragon-killer, and a beautiful maiden who had won his heart. Ronica had heard the songs, and she was not entirely pleased. Since her brother Cedric had left the castle several years ago, there had not been one word of communication from him—not one!—and now, to find out that he had killed another dragon, and taken a bride too—for who else could the songs be about?—was galling to her. Was she not due *some* modicum of respect from the brother that she served so selflessly? She worked and worked, tirelessly, ungrudgingly, all for the sake of her brother

and his holdings. Wasn't she at least due the pitiful effort of Cedric sending her a message? Just a message, nothing more, to tell her that he was getting *married*, for God's sake. *Hey-Hollie-Hollie*, indeed!

A small troupe of traveling minstrels appeared at the soldiers' quarters, dressed in brightly colored clothing and carrying small musical instruments.

The leader of the band spied Haldamar talking with the troops, and bowed before him with a flourish. "Might your lordship be desiring a bit of entertainment this eve?"

"Why, yes, that would be welcome," Haldamar replied. "You may eat with the kitchen staff, and then put on a show for us when dinner is through." Then he had a thought. "Do you know the songs of the dragon-killer, and of Hollie the beautiful lass?"

"Yes, your lordship, they're particularly popular right now, aren't they?"

Haldamar smiled grimly. "I'll give you an extra two rurics, if you promise *not* to play them."



The most direct route from Blythecairne to Thraill led north through the wilderness, farther north than the Senn Mountains, farther than the headwaters of the Maur Wain or the frosty waters of Lake Belanna. Roarke had never been all the way from County Bretay to Haioland on this northern route, but he was fairly sure he could find the way without undue difficulty.

They could have traveled the King's Road and perhaps had an easier route, but that way detoured far to the south of their destination, and led all the way through Ruric's Keep, which none of the travelers had any desire to see again this soon.

The three riders traveled at a leisurely pace, enjoying the springtime sun as it began to warm the northern air. Behind Justice, Starlight, and Joy they trailed a packhorse that was loaded down with such things as to make their journey a comfortable one. They made an early camp each day so that they had plenty of time to make a hot meal and choose the most pleasant places to sleep. While Will and Roarke cared for the horses, Hollie would wander and explore, picking tiny flowers that she placed in her hair. Roarke didn't let her go beyond his range of vision, though; there were still other wild things besides the dragon living in the untamed forests in the north of Hagenspan.

Will mentioned this idea while making camp one evening early in the journey. They had chosen a little hollow in the plain, some distance from the edge of the vast, nameless woodland that was the northern border of County Bretay. He gazed off at the thick tangle of trees in the gathering gloom of dusk, and a shiver went up his spine. "Us boys used to say, back when I was a lad, that hideous things lived in the great north woods. Goblins and kobolds and dryads and such." He looked at Roarke hopefully. "But they was probably just stories, right?"

Roarke lifted his eyebrows, smiled, and shrugged. "Whether those creatures existed in fact or just in folklore, I don't know. But I've seen enough things in my travels to suggest that there must be something of the truth in them. We have dragons, don't we? And we still see descendants of the dwarves, though not many, to be sure.

"But even if those creatures have passed away into legend, there are still things to be wary of here in the wild lands. Wolves, bears." Roarke thought for a moment. "And of course, the dragon."



Ronica was worried about her girls. Her eldest daughter, Paipaerria (who was commonly called Piper), was clearly old enough to be entertaining suitors, but so far she showed no interest whatsoever in any of the eligible young men at the castle. Let alone any of the young sons of noblemen who had heard of her and ridden quite a good long ways just to see her! But would she even deign to sit with them? To let them talk with her? Maybe even to flirt with them a bit, though heaven knows they should never suspect such a thing. *No!* It was quite maddening.

And then there was her other problem. Her younger daughter, Jesi (who was properly called Jesimonde), was clearly *not* old enough to be entertaining suitors, but could Ronica get the girl to *stop* flirting with every young man, either noble or common, who happened to glance her way?

Of course, her concerns were only just and reasonable. She wanted Piper to marry and bear a son, so that she might provide Ronica's brother Cedric with a male heir, since he had none of his own. And she wanted Jesi to be a seemly and proper young maiden, and for *God's* sake, keep her legs crossed, until she was old enough to marry decently!

Ronica sighed and drummed her fingers on the windowsill. Perhaps she needn't worry about providing her brother with an heir after all. Now that he had gone off and gotten *married*, to God only knows what kind of a woman, without so much as presenting her to his sister for approval beforehand. Roarke was so simple-minded, always seeing the best in everybody. *The poor fool*, she thought fondly. He had no idea what kind of manipulative schemers women could be. Some women.

Perhaps this hey-Hollie-Hollie was a woman like that. It would be just like her brother to think that she had a heart of gold, when really she only had a heart that was *digging* for gold. Well, Ronica would know, all right, if they ever came to

Castle Thrail. If they stayed out in the east, then, all right for them. But if they ever came back to Haioland, well, then there would have to be some kind of reckoning.

Ronica Tenet intended to look out for the interests of her girls, and her poor oafish husband, and her future grandchildren. And yes, herself, too, if it came to that, though certainly she thought of everyone else first.

She was thankful to her brother for killing that dragon and receiving the Lordship, of course! But who was it who had run the castle and the holdings for these last five years, while he was gone, off running all around Hagenspan searching for scraps of paper and yellow-haired women? She smiled grimly and nodded her head. Perhaps she should send a messenger to that eastern castle she had heard about, and just tell Cedric he might as well stay there, that she had everything well in hand here.

He would probably be grateful.

## Chapter Fourteen

Two weeks after leaving Blythecairne, Roarke began to recognize the terrain. It was grass-covered now, though rather sparsely; when he had seen it last, it had been wasted and desolate.

"We are quite close to the Cave of Mendor," he said to Hollie and Will. "Do you want to see it?"

Hollie felt a little shudder of fascination. She had been married to Roarke for over a year now, and had become well acquainted with many of his fine qualities, but something about his experiences with the dragons still seemed somehow unreal to her. She had lived her entire life—before coming north to Blythecairne—in the relatively tame central lands, where dragons had never come, dwarves were rarely seen, and faery folk had fallen into fable.

"Is it safe, do you think?" she asked. Then she laughed nervously.

Roarke and Will smiled at her, and Will replied mischievously, "Ye're bein' guarded by the two bravest knights north o' Ruric's Keep. I dare say that, between the two of us, we can probably protect ye from one dead dragon."

Hollie smiled then self-consciously, and her cheeks reddened. Roarke saw, and said comfortingly, "We shouldn't be in any more danger than we've been in during this whole trip through the wilderness. I just thought you might be curious."

"Yes. I am," she said. "Let's go."



A short while later, they had come to a spot where rugged outcroppings of rock jutted skyward from the plain, and they had to lead their horses gingerly between the boulders and crags.

"There it is: Mendor," Roarke said, pointing to a black shadow in the face of the largest rock formation.

They could see remnants of battles from twenty years ago strewn still upon the ground—broken shields, fragments of weapons, a scattering of sun-bleached bones.

Will spoke in solemn, hushed tones, as if he were in a holy place. "All those men that died before ye killed this dragon? What happened to their bodies?"

Roarke said grimly, "There really weren't any. Most of them were eaten."

Hollie felt the same sense of awe that the men did, but was also frightened. She thought to herself that it was not the fear of what might befall them today, but rather the fear of what might have happened to Roarke, two decades earlier, if he had failed to kill the dragon. She told herself that it was unreasonable for her to be afraid of something that obviously had not happened, but it didn't help. "I don't like this place," she said softly.

"Me, too," agreed Will. "But it's awful excitin', ain't it?"

"The bones of the dragon are just inside the mouth of the cave," Roarke said. "Since we've come this far, we might as well have a look."

Before they could direct their horses to the cave's entrance, though, they were stopped by the sound of a shrill voice commanding them, "Hold!"

Roarke drew back on the reins, and raised a hand to halt his companions. The voice echoed through the rocks, making it hard to determine its point of origin.

"Back where ye came from, 'less it be that ye wants t' die this day!" cried the disembodied voice.

"Who are you?" called Roarke. "We mean no harm."



"Nobody comes up here, nobody 'cept me," the voice answered suspiciously.  
"What d'ye want?"

"We only traveled to this lonely place because we knew there was once a dragon here. It was my thought to show my friends the dragon's bones."

"Aye, a dragon's bones there be here," the voice agreed, then turned menacing again. "If ye mean mischief, I'll use me magic t' bring th' dragon back t' life an' chase ye away!"

"How is it that ye have such power over a dragon?" Willum asked loudly.

"Magic! I'm th' one what kilt it, an' I'm th' one what can bring it back t' life!"

"What—" began Will, but Roarke held his hand up to keep him from speaking further.

"You must be a great warrior," Roarke said.

"Aye, that I am," the voice cackled, pleased. "I'm th' king o' this whole land, an' all th' treasures ye see lyin' about, they belongs t' me."

Will thought to himself that if the quality of the treasures lying around were any indication of the quality of the kingdom, it was a very poor province indeed.

"Your Majesty," Roarke continued, "if you will show yourself, we will do you no harm. And we do not wish to see your dragon's bones for free; we will give you a gift in honor of your mighty deed."

Hollie looked at her husband curiously, but he offered no explanation.

"Ye're a tricky one, ain't ye?" the voice said warily. "Well ... I cain't show meself t' ye." The voice paused for a moment, and then continued, "Besides, I'm already oot there wi' ye. Th' reason ye cain't see me is, I'm invisible."

"Well, Your Majesty, if you cannot show yourself to us, perhaps you can just give us your name, so that we may know what to call you."

"Me name?" the voice asked, and it sounded confused. "I don't suppose I got a proper name, not so's I recall," it said, somewhat more softly. "Ye can jist call me ... King o' th' Dragon."

"Very well," Roarke agreed, and then proceeded to announce in a ceremonial tone, "King of the Dragon! My name is Sir Cedric Roarke, and I am Lord of Thrail, which is not far from here. My friends are Sir Willum of Blythecairne, who is called The Bold, and the lady is my wife, the Lady Hollie, about whom songs are sung."

"Thankee, thankee," the voice answered in a conciliatory tone. "What be yer business here?"

"We spoke truly when we said that we only wanted to see the dragon's bones," Roarke said. "And we also spoke truly when we said that we would give you a gift for the seeing."

"A gift, eh? What would ye like t' give?"

"What does Your Majesty have need of? We could give you some gold, or perhaps a suit of clothing, or perhaps some food...."

"Oh, food! Food!" the voice cried with excitement. "Gold an' suits is all fine, but ye cain't eat 'em!"

"Is there any particular food that the King of the Dragon desires?"

"Well ... there's three o' ye there, but ye've got four 'osses.... It's been ever so long since I've had a good bit of 'oss meat."

"Let me confer with my companions for a moment," Roarke called, "and we will let you know." Wheeling Justice around to face Hollie and Will, Roarke said in a low voice, "I have a mind to grant our friend's request." He chuckled. "King of the Dragon."

Hollie, who was more afraid than she wished to admit, said in a trembling voice, "What is he, Cedric?"

"I guess I don't know," he admitted. "It seems likely that he must be a descendant of a dwarf or a kobold. If he were a troll, he would've just shown himself."

"Gosh, I wish I could see him," Will breathed. "That'd be somethin' to tell 'em about, back home."

"You may yet," the older man said with a small grin. "Just keep a sharp eye."

"But ... we can't let him eat our horse," Hollie protested weakly.

"It's a high price to pay to see some dragon bones," Roarke agreed. "But it's likely as not the poor fellow is just about starving. And our trip is nearly over; we can divide up what's left of the packs upon our three horses." He looked at his wife tenderly. "Can your heart bear it, my love?"

"Well," she said hesitantly, "if you think it's right...."

He nodded at her with an approving smile in his eyes. Turning Justice back to face the mouth of the cave, he called out, "King of the Dragon!"

"Aye! I'm here."

"After we have seen your dragon's bones, we will leave our extra horse with you. You may keep it and ride it, or kill it and eat it—whatever suits Your Majesty's greatest need."

"Ride it!" the voice cackled. "Say, wouldn't *that* be somethin'?"

"May we approach?" Roarke asked.

"Jist a bit, jist a bit, while I hides meself back deeper in th' cave," the voice said, forgetting that he had previously said he was invisible. "Arrright," he echoed distantly a moment later, "ye can come on in."

The three dismounted. Will held the horses' reins while Roarke and Hollie went in first. As Hollie's eyes slowly grew accustomed to the dimness of the cave, she saw the skeleton of the huge reptile begin to appear, like a ghost taking form

out of the darkness. Its head was closest to her, resting on the dirt floor, with its teeth bared in a permanent snarl. An involuntary shudder raced down her spine, as she saw that the beast's spiky backbone, which rested upon the arched framework of its ribcage, rose to almost twice her height. She whispered, "You have killed this beast? Three of these?"

Roarke, also whispering, replied, "This was the smallest." Sheepishly he admitted, "I just wanted to show you what I can do."

At that she turned and kissed him fiercely. "You foolish man," she said. "There's nothing you need to do to impress me more than you do by just being the man that you are." She clung to him for a moment. "Three dragons is enough."

"I hope so," he said with sincerity.

"Where's th' other one?" King of the Dragon said from quite close by, though still hidden.

"He's out tending to our horses, so that they don't run away," Roarke replied.

"Don't he want t' see th' bones?"

"Sir Willum has seen dragon bones before," Roarke answered. "What he would really like to see is something far more magnificent."

"What's better'n dragon bones?" the voice demanded.

"My friend would like to look upon the one who has subdued the dragon. Sir Willum desires to kneel before *you*, O King."

At that, there was no reply by the mysterious inhabitant of the cave, but Roarke and Hollie could hear a soft cackling of delighted laughter.

Roarke said into the darkness, "Your Majesty, the Lady Hollie and I will be leaving you now, and Sir Willum will be coming in to see what there is to see here. When he has departed, we will leave you in peace, and the fourth horse shall be yours."

"Good, good. Otherwise, I might needs t' bring th' dragon back t' life t' catch ye fer a liar. An' then I'll be eatin' 'oss meat, an' people meat too."

"As you say, Your Majesty," Roarke said with a bow, and he escorted Hollie from the cave.



Will walked into the cave's open mouth while Roarke and Hollie redistributed the burdens from the packhorse. He stood and peered at the bony remains of the dragon for a couple of minutes, and felt somewhat unfulfilled. His own experiences with the Blythecairne dragon's tail, as well as with the evil spirit at Ruric's Keep, made this adventure seem pedestrian by comparison.

"Ho, Sir Willum," King of the Dragon tentatively called from the darkness.

"Is that you, Yer Highness?" Will asked.

"The old feller said ye wanted t' bow before me."

*He did?* Willum thought to himself, but he said, "I'd be honored to offer ye the service of my sword, Yer Highness."

Will heard a sound like the clapping of hands, and a chortling kind of suppressed laughter, but King of the Dragon said no more. So Will knelt toward the back of the cavern, drew his sword, and lifted it up in his palms before the blackness. "If ever ye have need of a strong arm, Yer Highness, ye may call on me, and I'll lend ye such aid as I can." He waited for a reply, but there was none, so he rose, looked at the skeleton again, and made to leave, saying, "Thank ye for yer hospitality, Yer Highness."

"Sir Willum," said King of the Dragon, "when ye've got t' th' end o' th' path here, just afore ye goes 'round th' bend, turn an' look, an' maybe I'll come visible fer ye."

"Thank ye, Yer Highness," Will said humbly, and left to join the others.

Will stepped to Starlight, checked that the packs were fastened securely, and thanked the others for doing the job for him.

"Did you see him?" Hollie asked quietly.

"No, not yet."

All three of the travelers patted the packhorse affectionately, saying goodbye. "Maybe the king'll just want to keep ye for ridin'," Will told the horse apologetically. Roarke put its lead line under a stone to keep it from following, then they mounted and departed.

King of the Dragon called out after them, "Ye'd be welcome to visit again, if ye've a mind to."

"Thank you!" all three travelers shouted in response.

Will thought he detected a wistfulness in the mysterious creature's voice, as if he were a little sorry that they were leaving so soon, but they kept on riding. When they got to the bend that King of the Dragon had mentioned to him, he turned Starlight back toward the cave, while Roarke and Hollie rode on ahead.

He had ridden far enough away from the cave that the abandoned packhorse looked quite small in the distance. But standing next to the horse, he saw a tiny gray creature, perhaps half the size of a man. Will could not tell what sort of being he was, or even whether he was clothed or not. But he lifted his hand in salute to King of the Dragon, owner of all of the scattered treasures of the rock-strewn valley of the Cave of Mendor. And the little gray man jumped—jumped, and waved. From across the distance, Will could hear his shrill cry, "Come back again!"

"I will, if I can!" Will waved, then he turned his good horse Starlight to follow his friends, and was gone.

## Chapter Fifteen

Jesi ran down the hall to her sister's room, her bare feet slapping noisily on the stone pavement. Breathlessly bursting through the doorway, she gasped, "Piper! Uncle Cedric's come home!"

Paipaerria Tenet sat before a gold-framed looking glass, regally combing her long auburn hair. "I know. I saw from my window."

"Aren't you going to come and see him?" Jesi asked in amazement.

"I will in a bit. Mother and Father and Master Smead will be monopolizing him for awhile. I shall get dressed, and present myself to him after the furor dies down."

"Don't you want to see his wife?"

"Yes, of course," her sister said patiently. "After a bit."

"Well, I'm not waiting," Jesi exclaimed, and Piper heard the slap of her feet echoing back down the hall.

*Just like Jesi, Piper thought. Always in a hurry to get someplace.* She had not yet realized, as Piper had, that there was almost always plenty of time to do everything you needed to do, without getting into a panting sweat about it.

Mother wanted her to grow up, she knew, but Piper was not quite finished yet with being a girl. She reflected wryly that her apparent aloofness toward boys only increased their desire for her; that her stubborn rebellion against the encroaching responsibilities of adulthood was viewed by some as a kind of quiet maturity. And so, perhaps, it was.

Piper did not bat her eyelashes at the boys who came to call on her. She did not lay her hand on their arms and feign interest in their stories. Piper Tenet did not giggle.

She thought (quite reasonably) that, if she were to marry, there would be a household to run, children to bathe, a husband to tend to. Where, then, would be time for walking in the sunlit fields, or dipping her bare feet into icy cold streams, or riding her pony through the hills with her father?

She was perfectly willing to become a wife one day, but that day would come soon enough on its own, without her chasing after it. Children? Yes, of course she wanted children one day, but the important thing there was to find the proper husband first. And she had not been greatly impressed by the young nobles of the western lands. Perhaps she would marry a common boy. It would infuriate her mother, of course.

But hadn't her Uncle Cedric once been a common boy? And there was certainly nothing common about *him* now. A noble birth did not apparently guarantee a nobly lived life. Nor, she supposed, did common birth prohibit someone from living an uncommon life.

In any case, she would wait.

There was time enough.



Hollie was warmed by the enthusiastic greetings she received from the people of Castle Thrail as they ran to meet Roarke and his company in the courtyard. She was introduced to so many smiling men and women that she could not hope to remember many of their names, but some she did.

The first person to greet them was a beaming red-faced man that Roarke crushed in a laughing, back-pounding embrace. "Hollie, this is Esselte Smead," Roarke introduced, and the florid man bowed low and kissed her hand. "I am delighted to meet you, my dear. Anything at all that you have need of, please ask



me." He winked at Roarke, and said, "I see the songs have not overstated her charms!"

"Those songs have gotten this far, then?" Roarke asked in mock dismay.

Smead laughed and said, "Oh, yes," then turned toward Will, and asked, "And who is this young warrior?"

"May I present to you Sir Willum of Blythecairne, whom King Ruric named 'The Bold.' Will, this is Esselte Smead, the steward of Castle Thraill." The two smiled, nodded, and clasped hands. "Esselte, Will's father holds the same position at Blythecairne that you do here."

"I'm honored to know ye," Will said.

"The honor is mine, Sir Willum," Smead said with a bow. "Perhaps, if you find yourself in need of a father while you are here at Castle Thraill, you will consider coming to me."

Will smiled gratefully.

Hollie and Will were then introduced to the other people who gathered around them, and the faces all blurred into a collage of happy eyes and smiling mouths. After a bit Hollie noticed a man and a woman walking elegantly toward the clustered residents of Thraill, with the woman's arm draped through the man's. The crowd parted to give them access, and Roarke cried out with delight when he saw them.

"Ronica!" He took his sister in his arms and gave her a long hug.

She returned his embrace, and said, "I'm so glad you're home, Cedric." She looked at him and said with concern, "Your hair ... so white!"

Roarke laughed and said, "I'm married now!"

A ripple of laughter spread through the little crowd, and even Ronica could not stifle a small smile. Hollie could feel the color rising in her cheeks, but she smiled gladly too.

"Haldamar!" Roarke shook his brother-in-law's hand and thumped him on the shoulder.

"Welcome home, Cedric," Haldamar replied sincerely.

"Hollie," Roarke turned to her, "meet Haldamar and Ronica Tenet. My sister, her husband. Ronnie, Hal—this is my bride," he said with an obvious mixture of tenderness and pride.

"Welcome to the family, my dear," Ronica said, and she gave Hollie a little hug, patting her on the shoulders. "It's been long since I have had a sister. I am looking forward to getting to know you."

"Thank you so much," Hollie said. She had been very nervous about meeting Cedric's sister, and had asked her husband many times about what kind of woman she was, and whether she would accept Hollie once she knew of her past, which she was bound to learn about in time. Roarke had assured her that she would be loved as a sister; privately, he hoped that his assurances would be proved true.

Haldamar Tenet shook Hollie's hand gravely, and said, "Welcome, Lady Hollie." Hollie recognized the look in his eyes—it was the look of a man who would have liked to have gazed at her openly, but feared the wrath of his wife. She had seen it many times before. *He was probably a nice man, she thought, but Ronica seems to be the dominant one.*

Roarke then introduced his sister and her husband to Will, and Hollie noticed curiously that Ronica measured Will with her eyes, as if fitting him for a suit of clothes.

"Where are the girls?" Roarke asked his sister.

"I expect they haven't yet heard you've—oh, here's Jesi now," she said, as her bare-footed daughter came dashing from the castle toward the knot of people in the courtyard.

The gathering scattered to get out of her way, and the girl hurtled into Roarke's arms, hugging him tightly and saying, "Uncle Cedric! You've come home!" Roarke laughed gently and stroked her hair, willing to hold her for as long as she wanted. Her mother cleared her throat and said in a voice tinged with quiet severity, "Jesimonde."

"Yes, Mother," she said, disengaging from the hug, but smiling furtively at her uncle.

Roarke regarded the girl with fondness. "Would you like to meet my wife?"

"Yes!"

"Lady Hollie, this is my niece, Jesimonde Tenet. Jesi, please welcome your new aunt."

Hollie was delighted to receive a hug from the girl that was nearly as enthusiastic as the one that Roarke had gotten. Jesi said, "Thank you, Aunt Hollie, for making Uncle Cedric so happy. It shows all over his face. You'll be so happy here."

"Thank you, Jesi. I know I will be. I hope we can become good friends."

"Oh, I hope so, too!" Jesi gushed. Then she said, almost conspiratorially, "Foard, a boy I know from Sarbo, said that he would write a song about *me*."

"I'm not surprised at all," Hollie smiled, but she noticed that Ronica wore a disapproving frown. She smiled at her new sister-in-law apologetically, and Ronica's stern expression melted somewhat.

## Chapter Sixteen

Piper Tenet descended her stairwell, having seen from her window that the crowd in the courtyard had all but dispersed. This, she judged, would be a good time to make her appearance before her uncle. The Lord of Thrail. Uncle Cedric.

When he had left Haioland, however many years ago, Piper had been only a girl. Now she was practically, almost, a woman. And she was a little bit angry with her uncle for having missed those important years.

Before Uncle Cedric had left the castle, Piper would sit in his lap nearly every day to hear stories that he would create just for her, spinning them off the top of his head. He would sometimes get down on the floor on his hands and knees, and she and Jesi would take turns making believe he was their horse. And even when he began to complain that he didn't have the knees to be a horse anymore, he would still hide in odd corners of the castle and jump out at the girls unexpectedly, causing them to scream, and then scoop them up in his strong arms for hugs and kisses.

Then, suddenly, he was gone. Piper figured that he had probably been thinking about it for a long time ... but he had never told Piper that he was going to go away. And she had never had the chance to tell him that, maybe, she would have liked just one more ride.

Her father and mother were kind and loving, yes ... but they did not tell stories. And while Jesi was faithful to hide in Uncle Cedric's old hiding places and try to scare her sister, where were the hugs? Where were the kisses?

That was why she had made him wait.

When she arrived in the courtyard, Piper found to her dismay that it was empty. Empty of anyone that mattered, anyway. Her sister was there, talking with

some young traveler, whose clothes were filthy from his journey. He was tall and slender, but he wore a thready beard that was clearly not suited to his tender years. He should shave.

The other young men who came to call on Piper and Jesi were all cleanly shaven, immaculately dressed, and just a trifle dainty. This youth was obviously not one of the sons of the western Lords, and he was also not one of the men of Thrail's companies of soldiers. He was probably not a stable boy, because he had apparently just arrived from a long journey. Surprisingly, the thought that he had just come with her uncle did not occur to Piper.

She turned a slow circle, trying to see where her uncle might have gone, but could not discern it. She stamped a foot impatiently, and then stalked over to where her sister was laughing at something that boy had just said. Interrupting them, she said, "Jesi, where's Uncle Cedric?"

"Ah, is this yer sister?" the boy said with bold-faced impudence.

"Yes, it is," Jesi replied. "Piper, meet Will."

Piper glanced at him frostily and said, "Delighted," without offering him her hand. "Where's Uncle Cedric?" she repeated.

"He and Aunt Hollie have gone to get some food," her sister said, with an apologetic glance toward Will.

"The kitchen or the dining hall?" Piper demanded.

"The hall, I think."

Without any further remarks, Piper turned and walked back to the castle, and followed the corridors to the dining hall. There she found her uncle, her parents, Master Smead, and the blonde-haired woman who could only be Hollie. Aunt Hollie.

Roarke noticed her entrance, and said wonderingly, "Could this be ... Piper?"

She bowed her head toward him. "Hello, Uncle Cedric."

"My little girl ... why, you're all grown up! You're absolutely lovely," he said, his voice filled with awe.

She granted him a small smile then, and her resolve to feign indifference toward her uncle began to disintegrate.

"Come, sit with me," Roarke urged, and she walked elegantly to where he sat. "I suppose you're too big to sit on my lap now...."

Her eyes misted as she said, "Maybe just once ... maybe just once more." Her mother cast a warning glance toward her, but she ignored it.

Roarke held his arms out to Piper, and she climbed into his lap, smiling shyly at the blonde-haired Hollie, who smiled back with kindness in her eyes.

"I've missed you," Roarke said.

"I've missed you, too," she replied.

"Such stories I have to tell you," Roarke breathed, and Piper nestled into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder.

## Chapter Seventeen

Talk around the table that evening centered mostly around Willum, which surprised and flattered the young knight, and surprised and dismayed Piper Tenet. She had completely misread Will when she had met him in the courtyard, and insulted him as well by not offering him her hand. He had changed out of his traveling clothes and, except for the scruffy beard, really looked quite presentable.

Roarke was in the midst of relating the story of his rescue from the dungeon at Ruric's Keep, and had just told about Will's disobedience of his command to bury the whole dragon's tail. "I never did give him a proper thrashing for that little bit of rebellion," he said heartily. "But, since his choice to keep some of the dragon's scales ultimately resulted in saving my life, it did seem just a bit ungrateful to reprimand him for it."

There was a chorus of chuckling assent to that last statement, and Will said, "It must've been always in the mind of God to save ye in such a way. To know that if yer command had been obeyed, ye would have died, and that because yer command was disobeyed, ye were saved ... well, that must kind of humble a man, don't it?"

"Yes, it does," said Roarke with a rueful smile.

Jesi Tenet then raised a glass in the air, and said, "Uncle Cedric, I'd like to make a toast." With a smart grin crossing her pretty young face, she proposed, "To disobedience!"

The folk around the table laughed, but waited to see what Roarke would do before they joined Jesi in her toast. "I expect your parents would not think too kindly of me if I drank to that," he said, and Ronica looked sternly at her daughter, while Haldamar laughed.

"How about this, then?" Jesi tried again. "To Sir Willum, for saving Uncle Cedric!"

"To Sir Willum," the diners joined in, without waiting for Roarke's approval. The men at the table tipped their glasses up and drained them, while Piper Tenet sipped daintily from her cup, looking over the rim at Will.

He caught her eye and winked, and she immediately turned her head, her cheeks flaming scarlet. Ronica saw this exchange, and asked her brother, "What will become of Sir Willum now? Will he be joining one of the companies of Castle Thrail?"

Roarke said, "Only if he chooses to. Sir Willum is King Ruric's knight-errant, and he is not really mine to command, though the king did assign him to me for his training. He will probably be traveling throughout Haioland on goodwill missions for the castle, though he may certainly work with the soldiers if he desires. I don't know." He turned to Will. "Do you have any idea what you'd like to do?"

"Well, now that it's been mentioned, yes, I've got an idea."

"What is it?" Roarke asked.

"If it's all right with yer Lordship, I'd like to gather up a batch of food and some clothing maybe, and take 'em back up to King o' the Dragon."

"Yes," Roarke approved, nodding. "That's a fine idea."

Esselte Smead asked with curiosity, "King of the Dragon? Who's that?"

Roarke said, "He's some kind of creature who has taken up residence in the Cave of Mendor. I don't think he has a name ... though I believe Will knows more about him than I do."

Smead said, "Tell us your tale, Master Will, if you please."

"Surely." Will went on to tell of his encounter with the puzzling creature at the cave, freely embellishing such parts as he thought would make a good story.



Piper listened attentively while trying not to appear that she was doing so. The others seated around the table listened with uneasy concern about this previously unknown neighbor to their northeast, but Will assured them that King of the Dragon seemed to be completely harmless.

"In fact," Will said (and here Roarke noticed a tone come into his voice which was usually reserved for spinning yarns), "ye seem to have a creature here livin' at Castle Thrail which is ten times as dangerous as King o' the Dragon."

Jesi Tenet said excitedly, "What's that, Will?"

"Why, I thought you saw it, too, Jesi! Ye were standin' right out in the courtyard with me when it came roarin' through." He looked around the table at everyone except Piper, paused a moment for suspense, then continued in a low voice, "It had hair the color of leaves in autumn, when it looks as if all the trees o' the north are on fire. Its eyes was flamin' like thunderbolts, but the sound it made was as cold as a blast o' the north wind." Piper blanched as she realized with outraged disbelief that he was describing *her*. "It stamped its feet in fury, so's to tell a man, 'Ye'd best stay out of my way when I'm in such a temper.'" Others around the table were beginning to get the idea that Will was tweaking someone, and most of them were pretty sure who it was. "It drew right up to me in the courtyard, swirled around for a minute like a tornado, and then flew right away again. It liked to take my breath right away."

Piper stared at the young knight in fury, her lips pressed tightly together, her cheeks white-hot with anger but for two bright spots of scarlet. If she could have designed an appropriate retort to hurl toward this impertinent jester, she would have done so forcefully. But (except for her anger) her mind was blank, so she decided that the best way to maintain the rapidly dissipating shreds of her dignity would be to keep silent.

Will's voice turned wistful. "God's my witness—the creature was majestic. I surely hope I get a chance to see her again." He glanced at Piper then, and offered her an embarrassed smile.

Piper glared at Will, and the color returned to her cheeks.

Ronica said quietly to Roarke, "Cedric, don't you care about your niece's self-respect?"

Roarke looked at his sister with a smile, and said, "No, not very much, I guess. It seems to me that she has just been paid quite a high compliment."

"Your young man is very brash," she complained.

"Well, King Ruric *did* name him Willum the Bold," Roarke said with a chuckle. He raised his voice slightly to address Piper. "Lady Paipaerria, I believe a knight of the kingdom of Hagenspan has just asked for permission to call on you. This is not some mere fop of a nobleman's son—this is a true man, whose heart has been declared to be noble by the king himself. Of course," he looked at Will, "the young lady's time is her own, and how she chooses to spend it is entirely at her discretion."

Piper felt the eyes of all the people in the room upon her, and once again her cheeks blazed red. She spoke in a raspy voice, "I would never consent to being called on by a man who can only grow half a beard."

The people around the table sat in amused silence, wondering how Willum would counter that salvo. "Well, to be fair," Will said with a wry smile, "I'm only half of a man."

That comment produced a quiet swell of appreciative laughter, and Piper found to her consternation that she could not resist a slight smile of her own.

Will continued, "My lady, would it please you if I was to shave my face? Or would ye prefer that I wait until my beard grows in full?"

The room was still as the listeners waited for Piper's response.

"It seems very likely that I should prefer to wait. However," she said with mock haughtiness, "if you should happen to shave before tomorrow morning, you may join my sister and me after breakfast, and we will show you the castle and the grounds."

"Thank you," Will accepted humbly. "My Lord," he said to Roarke, "seein' as how I've never shaved before in my life, would it be all right if ye excused me from the table, so's I can try and figure it out before mornin'?"

"You are dismissed," Roarke said gravely. "If you use the edge of your sword, have a care that you don't accidentally lop your head off."

"Come along, Master Will," said Esselte Smead. "Allow me to assist you."

"Thank you." To the rest of the assembly around the table, he bowed and said, "Good night." He looked at Roarke's two nieces. "Lady Paipaerria. Lady Jesimonde. Until tomorrow."

"Good night, Will," Jesi said with a giggle, and Piper nodded.



Later that evening, Ronica and Haldamar Tenet were preparing for bed. Ronica was understandably worried about Willum. "I had just gotten Castle Thrail comfortably civilized!" she complained. "And now Cedric comes back. He's a civilized man, too, of course, but there's something about him that's just a little bit *wild*, don't you think? And there's something common about that woman he married. Oh, she's lovely, I know, but not quite properly a *lady*, is she?"

Haldamar diplomatically said nothing about Hollie. Ronica continued, "But Sir Willum ... oh my. He's practically a *barbarian*!"

"I don't know, Ronica," her husband said patiently. "I believe I rather like the young man."

"Yes, you *would* think so," she said with a toss of her head. "Well, I intend to watch him closely!"

"Were you watching closely tonight?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your daughter," he said with a laugh. "I never saw anyone's face turn red so many times, so quickly."

"The poor girl!"

"The poor girl, indeed. She thinks she was embarrassed, but she loved every moment of that attention."

"Haldamar! You obviously have learned practically nothing of the ways of women!"

"Hush," he said, and pulled his wife to himself.

"Why, you—"

"Hush," he repeated, and she hushed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Hollie woke up the next morning with an uncomfortable gray feeling in the pit of her stomach. She wondered if the food that she had eaten at dinner the previous evening had been too rich for her digestive system, after the simple fare that they had eaten during the weeks of their journey.

Roarke heard her utter a soft moan, almost a whimper. "Are you all right?" he whispered.

She placed a hand on his cheek and smiled for him. "I'm sorry that I woke you. I'm just not feeling very well this morning."

"Can I get anything for you?" Roarke asked with concern.

"No ... I think I'll skip breakfast, if you can make my apologies." She thought for a moment, and then said, "Maybe just some tea."

"I'll run down to the kitchen and see if I can still find my way around."

"Can you just stay with me here for a few minutes?" she asked.

"Nothing would make me happier." She burrowed into his arms, and he kissed the top of her head.



Will's face felt cold, even though the springtime sun was warm on the rest of his skin. But the light breeze that wafted through the courtyard felt bracingly cool to his freshly bared cheeks. It was a new sensation, and he was enjoying it, though he figured that he would not be enjoying it quite so much if it were still wintertime.

He had been waiting for quite some time, exchanging uncomfortable greetings with the castle's morning workers, when finally Jesi and Piper appeared. Will smiled broadly with relief as Jesi beckoned for him to join them.

"Good morning, Will," the younger sister said happily. "I would've been here earlier, but Piper made me wait for her."

"Mornin', Jes'. Yer sister don't intend to make it easy for me to get to know her, does she?" Will said good-naturedly.

Piper measured him coldly, and said, "So that's your face? Perhaps you should grow a beard."

Jesi said with horror, "Piper!"

Will broke into a happy laugh. "If I wasn't sure what a good-lookin' feller I am, that woulda cut me right to the heart." He looked at Piper with interest. "Ye don't intend to be broke to the bit any time soon, do ye?"

"No, she sure doesn't," her sister said, relieved that Will had not been offended.

"What do you want from me, Sir Willum?" Piper said impassively.

"Nothing at all, Miss Paipaerria," he smiled. "Why, I'm a healthy young man, it's a beautiful spring mornin', and all I thought was that I might share it with the two prettiest girls at Castle Thrail that ain't yer Aunt Hollie." He winked at Jesi. "Unless there's a couple that I haven't met yet."

"No!" Jesi exclaimed. "There aren't."

"Well, then, how much happier could one man be, who just arrived from a long and lonely trip through the northern wilds?"

"May we show you around the castle?" Jesi asked politely.

"Yes, indeed," said Will with a smile. "Will ye take my arm?" he asked Jesi.

"I'd be delighted," she said, and snaked her hand through the crook of his arm. "Oh, you're very strong," she gushed.

"Just strong enough," Will said humbly.

The two started walking back into the castle, leaving Piper standing open-mouthed behind them. After debating for a quick second how to best avoid further humiliation at the hands of this young rascal, Piper scampered after the pair and took Will's other arm. He *was* strong.

"I'm very glad you joined us," Will said gently.

Piper said nothing, but she did steal a glance upward at the young knight's face. He wasn't *too* terribly homely, she supposed.

## Chapter Nineteen

"It looks as if you've done splendidly without me," Roarke said sincerely.

"Well, truth to tell, we really just mostly let Ronica do things the way she wanted," said Esselte Smead, and Haldamar Tenet nodded. "Of course, we handled the matters that were purely related to the business of the castle, but things like the social calendar, the beautification of the grounds, acts of charity—they were all pretty much Ronica's doing."

"And you were all right with that?" Roarke asked Smead. "I left you in charge."

"Oh, yes," he replied. "I think it started because she was looking out for your interests. You know, family and all. But after she got her fingers into everybody's pie, well, I think there was something a little intoxicating about it to her."

Haldamar added, "If she had gotten out of control, I would've stepped in and stopped her. But, really, she was rather good at it." He looked at Smead for confirmation, and received a nod in reply.

Roarke asked, "Was she ... overbearing? Did it cause you trouble?"

"No, not at all," Smead replied. "I wouldn't say so. There may have been a little confusion at first, about just who was in charge, you know, but when folks started seeing that I deferred to your sister in things that weren't critical to the defense of the land, everything sorted itself out."

"What about Dan? I noticed he wasn't at dinner last night." Dan Dressler had been the Captain of the Guard at Castle Thrail when Roarke had left five years earlier.

"Oh," Smead began, "well—"



Haldamar broke in, "Truth is, Danny died about two years ago. Took to bed with some kind of a fever, and never did get up again."

"Where's Marta?" Roarke asked, referring to Dan Dressler's wife. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, she's still living here near Thrail. We're taking care of her and the girls," Smead said. "Maybe you could stop in and see them later?"

"Yes, of course. If Hollie is feeling better this afternoon, I'll take her around to meet them."

The three sat in silence for a moment as they let Roarke absorb the knowledge that his friend was dead.

Roarke finally sighed, and said, "Back to my sister." He looked at Haldamar. "There's not going to be any trouble, now, is there? With me being back, I mean."

"Oh, no," his brother-in-law said. "Your sister loves you. She respects you. It's just that she's awfully ... busy."

"Yes, that's it," Esselte Smead agreed. "She's busy."

"You know," Haldamar said slowly, "unless it would cause a problem with the Lady Hollie, you might want to consider letting Ronica keep on doing what she does." Smead nodded in agreement. "She's really pretty good at it."

"Hmm." Roarke pondered the idea. "I'll think about it. I'll talk to Hollie. They're women, after all, so we probably need to be careful how we address the situation."

"My Lord," Smead said. "Careful, yes, that's good. But if you need to make a decision, just do it, and let your word be your word. Haldamar and I tried to be careful of Ronica's feelings five years ago ... and today she's running the castle."

"Yes, I believe I see your point."

"Not that that's a bad thing, mind you. It was just ... unexpected."

"Well, the grounds look beautiful. The land seems to be healthy and productive. The people happy, for the most part?"

Haldamar and Smead both nodded affirmatively.

"How's the treasury stand?"

"More gold in the coffers than when you left," Smead reported.

"Then I am impressed indeed. The three of you have done a remarkable job."

"Thank you."

"Too bad about Dan, though. Who did you choose to replace him?"

"Well, nobody. Each of the six companies has their own captain, and, thankfully, there hasn't been any need for them to do anything but guard duty since you left." Smead nodded at Haldamar. "Hal spends more time with the men than anyone."

Roarke cocked an eyebrow toward his brother-in-law.

"Yes, but that's just socializing," Haldamar quickly interjected. "They don't look to me as any kind of a leader."

"Well." Roarke said, and then sighed. "I should go down and greet the men. Would the two of you like to accompany me?"

"Certainly." They pushed their chairs back from the table, and walked outside.



In the center of a garden of flowers, a stone dragon stood. A spout of water flowed continually from its open mouth, splashing into a stone-rimmed pool that surrounded the statue.

"That's grand!" said Willum. "What makes the water come out?"

"We don't know," said Jesi, who was plucking petals off the flowers to cast into the pool, where they floated like tiny colorful boats. "Mother hired an engineer to create the piping inside the sculpture."

Piper stood a few paces apart from Willum, who was studying the dragon, and her sister, who continued casting petals on the pool. Will turned and sat next to Jesi on the edge of the pool, and said to her, "Them flowers sure do look pretty floatin' on the water like that."

For the second time that morning, Piper said, "What do you want from me, Sir Willum?"

He fixed his gaze upon her, and thought for a long moment before he made his reply. She felt the color begin to rise in her cheeks again under the weight of his scrutiny.

"Now, there's a question," Will said, almost to himself. He continued to look at Piper's face, much in the same way he had seen Roarke gaze at Hollie that first night together at the table in Kenndt's.

"I love yer uncle," Will said finally, and Piper was not at first certain that she had heard properly. "I don't say that I love him like a father, though it's a bit like that. Nor do I love him like a brother. Nor quite like a friend. It's kind of like a mix of all three of them things. Outside of me own father, there's no one in this world that I love more than yer Uncle Cedric. And there's no one whose judgment I trust more."

A light breeze ruffled Will's hair, and he looked up, squinting, into the midday sky. "I've learned a few things from livin' with yer uncle for these last two years. One is, always be open and honest, and obey what ye know to be true. God hasn't gave us forever to live in, but just a few short years. So it's best to be truthful and direct, if it's somethin' that's important to ye.

"Not everything's that important, of course. But some things are so important, that if the whole world thinks ye look like a fool ... still ye pursue, still ye follow."

He looked at Piper's face again. "What I want from you, Paipaerria Tenet, is to spend a quiet hour in yer mother's garden, enjoyin' the sweet smell of the flowers and the warmth of God's sun. Ye're a lovely girl, and my eyes is enjoyin' the fact that ye're a part of their world today.

"It's too early for me to tell ye if I'm goin' to try and win yer heart. But I will tell ye this: If yer heart proves itself to be a prize worthy of one of the king's knights, then I'll either win it, or else the whole world will see how big of a fool I can be tryin'."

The girls had both remained silent while Will had delivered this speech. Jesi spoke now, saying, "If Piper doesn't please you, you might think of me."

"Jesi!" Piper said sharply.

"Well, I won't make you make a fool of yourself," Jesi said submissively.

"I mean you no offense," Will said, "for ye're also a beautiful young girl. But ye're just a bit too young for me, I fear." He gave her a sheepish grin. "If I'm still a single man in five years, though ... we'll see."

Piper stared at the two of them in amazement. "Am I *standing* here?"

Jesi said with a laugh, "You sound just like Mother!"

Piper opened her mouth to make a retort to her sister, but found that she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Besides, I thought you didn't *want* to grow up yet."

"I—" she said, and stopped. She had been about to say "I don't" but found that she had nearly been compelled to blurt "I do." Confused, she said once again, "I—" then turned on her heel and walked as steadily as she could back to her own room.

"So," Jesi said to Will, "if you marry Piper someday, that would make you my brother-in-law?"

"That's right," Will smiled.

"Well, that's pretty good." She took Will's arm and they walked together back into the castle.

## Chapter Twenty

Hollie felt well enough that evening that she was able to accompany Roarke down to the hall for dinner. This meal was a much more festive affair than the one from the night before, since yesterday the cooks had not known that the Lord of Thrail would be returning to them that very day. But today, they had the whole day to prepare a feast, and that is what they did.

There were game birds, roasted and stuffed with bread and spices. There was a boar, turning slowly on a spit over an open fire. Platters piled high with beef and venison were placed on each table, and extra tables were brought in, for the five companies of soldiers that were not on duty were all invited to join the banquet. Breads and pastries were bountiful, and there was plenty of water, wine, and beer for all. Steaming bowls of vegetables were there, which were eaten more by the women than the men, and there were baskets full of apples and pears, which rolled across the table like drunken sailors trying to cross the street at Haio's Port, whenever something happened to jostle them from their position.

Hollie picked at her food daintily, trying only some vegetables, a roasted hen, and an apple. If her illness this morning had indeed been caused by rich foods, she wanted to give her stomach no such cause for complaint tomorrow.

For entertainment, Haldamar had hired singers and dancers, and yes, they did sing the songs about Roarke and Hollie, to the exuberant applause of the dinner guests. As Hollie watched one member of the troupe skillfully juggling various items that were tossed to him from the table, she thought wistfully about Barlie and his apples.

After the entertainment was concluded, to the noise of appreciative cheers and whistles, Esselte Smead rose and addressed the crowd.

"Is there anyone here who doesn't feel fat tonight?" he asked, and in reply he received a chorus of groans, laughter, and shouted joking answers. "If so, the shame's on you. You had your chance!" More laughter. "And who do we have to thank for this evening's bounty?" Here he looked at Roarke, who was about to make some humble disclaimer, when Smead said, "Why, the cook, of course!" More laughter, and scattered applause. "Come out and take a bow, Bertie!" A large red-skinned woman walked out of the kitchen, trailing her assistants along behind her, and as she gave a signal with her hand, the entire crew took a sweeping bow. Roarke joined in the hearty laughter and clapped his hands appreciatively for the kitchen staff.

Smead said, "Thank you, thank you, Bertie." Turning back to the assembled guests, he said, "And now, our host—Sir Cedric Roarke, Lord of Thrail, Lord of Blythecairne, Slayer of Dragons."

The entire company of guests rose to their feet and applauded. Roarke stood as well, raised his hands to quiet them, and said, "Please be seated."

He regarded the roomful of people affectionately, looking from face to face, and said, "It's good to be home." He smiled wistfully. "Home ... I wasn't sure I'd ever make it back. But here I am, and I've brought treasures with me." He looked at Hollie tenderly for a moment. "And I hope to be able to stay for a long, long time." Grinning sheepishly at the rest of the crowd, he said, "Well, I guess that's all," and started to sit down.

"Hold on, there," laughed Esselte Smead. "You're not going to get off that easily, my Lord. We require a tale!"

"Well, can I at least tell it sitting down?"

"If my Lord's decrepit old shanks can't support the tremendous weight of his body anymore, then I believe his people will allow him to be seated," Smead graciously conceded.

"Sir Willum, after I finish my story, have that man beheaded," Roarke said, and Smead laughed loudly.

Will said, "Yer word is my law, m'Lord. Shall I use my sword, or my butter knife?"

"Whichever hurts more," Roarke said agreeably.

Those members of the castle's company who had not known Roarke before he had departed five years earlier were astonished that the Lord of the realm would be so casual, so *playful*, with his servants, but the rest of the people laughed joyfully at the banter.

Roarke finally sat down, and said, "Well, what tale do you wish? I already told you about the glorious triumph of Willum the Bold."

Jesi spoke up then. "Please, tell us how you won Aunt Hollie!"

Roarke and Hollie had known that it was inevitable that this moment should arrive sooner or later, and they had discussed beforehand the boundaries of how much of the story they would reveal. Still, Roarke said in a nonchalant tone, "Surely that tale would be of no interest to anyone but the Lady Hollie and myself?"

"Oh, yes!" cried several of people around the table, and Jesi said, "Please, Uncle Cedric!"

"Hmm, let me think," said Roarke, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "I'm not so sure I can even remember how it starts."

"You were dazzled by my great beauty," Hollie reminded him.

"Oh, yes, that does sound familiar," her husband said with a twinkle in his eye. "Well, here it is, to the best I can recall. I'm sure Will or Hollie can fill in any details I might forget."

He shifted his weight in his chair to get comfortable, crossed his legs, and began. "When Will and I arrived at Ruric's Keep, we were quite disappointed to



find that the king would not be able to see us for several weeks, so one of the knights of the castle recommended a place for us to stay, called Kenndt's Rooming House."

"Kenndt's Public House," Hollie corrected.

"There, you see? I have forgotten," Roarke said. "As I was saying, we went to Kenndt's Public House, and were eating our dinner there that first night, Willum and me, and I recall that Will was having quite a high time flirting with the serving girls there."

Piper, who was seated across one of the tables from Will and a couple of seats down, shot him an annoyed glance. Will, who was enjoying the banter at the table, did not notice.

"There were three girls in all who were waiting on the tables, two with dark hair and one with blonde. I had scarcely noticed any of them, because I was in a foul temper on account of not being able to see the king. But Will drew my attention to the blonde-haired woman, and when I saw her—the very moment I saw her—she captured my heart, utterly and completely."

Will offered, "He dropped his pipe in his lap, and just about caught his pants on fire."

To the sounds of the guests' laughter, Roarke said, "Well, just *look* at the woman. Whose pants *wouldn't* have caught on fire?" A roar of bawdy laughter followed, and Hollie threw a pear at her husband, which bounced off his shoulder and landed in Ronica's lap.

As the chuckling subsided, Roarke continued, "I soon learned that Hollie was not a free woman. Her father had run up some very large debts, and she had been sold into servitude, to Master Kenndt of the Public House."

A murmur of surprise ran through the crowd. Ronica said in shock, "You mean, she was not born of noble blood?"

"No, her blood's just as common as yours or mine," her brother said pointedly.

"Oh, that's not what I meant," Ronica hurriedly apologized. "I mean, she carries herself like a princess."

"And so she is," Roarke replied. "If you can believe that I, who was born the son of a farmer, am legitimately a Lord in Hagenspan, then it should be easy enough to believe that Hollie's blood, which is just as common as mine, is driven by the heart of a princess."

"Hear, hear," said Esselte Smead, and Ronica agreed, "Yes, of course."

Hollie said, "Cedric, please continue your story."

"Ah, yes—the story," he smiled. "Well, to make the tale a bit shorter, I secured permission from Master Kenndt to eat dinner with Hollie for the next three nights, where I attempted to dazzle her with my significant charms."

"Even though he didn't tell me who he was," Hollie contributed, "he was different from any man I had ever met before. I was not expecting love ... not hoping for deliverance ... but I found both, and joy, too."

There was a respectful pause in the narrative, and Jesi blurted, "Well, how did it happen?"

Roarke smiled. "On the third day, I arranged with Master Kenndt to pay off her father's debts, plus I added in a little bonus, an incentive, to make the deal, ah, hard for Kenndt to turn down. That evening we appeared before the king together, Hollie and Will and I, at the king's command. It was a good night."

"You're not telling something," Jesi complained.

"Be patient, be patient. I'll make the story better now." He uncrossed his legs, and then crossed them again in the other direction. "That night, after only knowing Hollie for three days, I asked her to marry me. After spending those few

hours with her, I felt that I could never be happy with anyone else again, so I barged right ahead and risked everything.

"She did not know that I had already arranged for her freedom, so she would not tell me yes. She told me to ask her again when she was a free woman. The next morning I paid the sum that I had agreed to with Kenndt, and that evening, Hollie was given her freedom.

"But at the same time as these things were happening, the king's most trusted advisor was cultivating lies about us. This was Herm, the one who was possessed by the spirit of the dragon, that I told you about yesterday. He incited the king to have me arrested, which happened before I was able to ask Hollie again if she would marry me.

"That was a good thing, I think.... If she had been with me at the time of my arrest, we may have both been killed. But Hollie and Will escaped the city, and fled to the home of the Amencarii, about whom I will tell you much more in the future. And I went to prison, and there I stayed for several weeks."

Hollie took up the tale then. "When I was staying with the Amencarii, I had much solitary time to think about things. I thought about life, I thought about death, about sacrifice, about nobility ... and I thought about Cedric—Lord Roarke. Somewhere along the way, I understood ... that I loved him." She brushed a trace of a tear away from her cheek. "I decided that I *would* marry him, if he would still have me."

"Of course, I had despaired of just about everything, being in prison, eating only bread and water, and only Herm for a companion," Roarke continued. "He had told me that Hollie and Will were both dead, and I believed him. Why not? I had just about given up hope in everything, except for God Himself.

"But I promised myself that if I ever was to see my beloved Hollie again, whether in this life or the next, I would ask her ... for just one kiss."

"How sad," one of the women at the table said.

"How wonderful," said another.

"That's where I come in," announced Will. "Riding in boldly with all of the power and righteousness of an angel of God on a holy crusade, I delivered yer Lord Roarke from his peril, so he could come home to ye here, and live out a good long old age with his beautiful wife."

Esselte Smead said, "While that seems to be bringing the story to an abortively short conclusion, I think a cheer for Sir Willum may perhaps be in order. Lord Roarke?"

"Yes, indeed," he affirmed.

"Then, would all of the men of Thrail please stand to your feet and give a rousing cheer for Willum the Bold?"

After the roar of the men died down into a scraping of chairs and an undertone of laughter, Jesi once again asked, "But what happened?"

"Well, after Will obtained your uncle's freedom from the prison at Ruric's Keep, he brought him to where I was staying with the Amendicarii," Hollie answered. "Your uncle was very ill. He never got a chance to ask me for a kiss ... because as soon as I saw him, I covered his face with kisses."

"That's true," Willum said.

"I was so happy to see him," Hollie continued. "I just don't know how to tell you. But your uncle thought it was just a dream, because of his illness."

"And I thought—because it was such a good dream—that I might as well ask her to marry me again," Roarke added. "It seemed that my chances might be pretty good."

Will said, "Truth is, he didn't even remember askin' her again." Roarke nodded ruefully. "But that next day, Hollie made sure that he did marry her!"

"The next day?" Jesi asked in wonder.

"Yes, the very next day," Hollie replied. "I wasn't about ready to have your uncle slip away from me again. My goodness, that was about a year and a half ago now," she reflected. "And they have easily been the happiest days of my life."

"And mine," Roarke added.

"And mine, too," Will added with a grin.

"Well, there you have it—the short version of *The Courtship of Hollie*," Roarke declared. "And now, I believe I will declare the evening's festivities to be concluded." He rose to his feet. "My dear?"

Hollie stood and took his arm, and the rest of the company rose as well.

"Good night, my friends. Good night."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Piper undressed, preparing for bed, and she was angry. She took off the deep olive-green gown that perfectly accented her long auburn hair and was terribly flattering to her figure, which she had worn just to make Willum jealous. Which, apparently, he had not even *noticed* she was wearing! He had not so much as looked at her all night; she knew this because she kept stealing glances at him, to see if he was noticing her. She had practiced for *two hours* in the mirror in her room, trying out different disdainful looks that she would throw his way, to show how little she cared what he thought of her, and then he hadn't even had the decency to *look*!

She was tempted to agree with her mother that Willum was a barbarian. He apparently knew *nothing* of the rules of proper society. Why, he should have come over to Piper, bowed low, and declared earnestly how lovely she looked. And then she could have dismissed him with a glance, and turned to her escort for the evening, the son of Lord Popinjay or Popalot or something like that, and she could have said, "This is Will. He runs around with my sister a bit." And then the son of Lord Fopalot could have said something condescending, and she could have laughed lightly and turned her back on Willum, leaving him seething and humiliated.

She did not know why she had agreed to let the son of that Lord Whatever to be her escort for the evening. He had been dreadfully boring, and probably could not have thought of something properly condescending to say to Willum if he had had a month to prepare for it. Piper sat at her dressing table and began to brush her hair. *Willum*. She sighed. That speech in the garden had been *terribly* insightful. Damn him!

How dare he? How dare he suggest that her heart might be a prize unworthy of him? A hot, angry tear of frustration burned in her eye, but she refused to acknowledge it. She blew out the candles in her room, and lay down upon her bed, staring through the blackness at her ceiling.

As she lay there, perturbed, unable to sleep, she thought she imagined that she heard someone whisper her name. Suddenly alarmed, she held her breath, trying to be utterly silent, listening intently, anxiously willing the sound to repeat itself so that she could identify it.

There it was again: a low whistle that was clearly not a nighttime bird, followed by a soft call, "Piper!" It was not Jesi; her sister would have just come into Piper's room. Not her parents, of course, for the same reason. It was clearly not Lord Popinjay's son; he didn't have the chest for such surreptitiousness. Her heart pounding in her breast, she slipped over to her window, and tentatively pushed open the pane. It had to be Willum.

Feeling a resurgence of her earlier anger at the young knight, she demanded, "Who is it?"

Laughing quietly, the shadowy figure in the courtyard below said, "Ye know who it is, I bet. I didn't wake ye, did I?"

"Yes." She felt a fluttering thrill in her chest, but was unwilling to let that fact be known to the audacious young man below her window. "What do you want from me, Sir Willum?"

"Ah, there we have it," he said cheerfully. "Miss Paipaerria Tenet, I most humbly request your presence in the garden, in ten minutes. Meet me by the dragon."

She was shocked at this request. None of the other young men who had ever called on her had dared to ask to see her alone, in the dark! "Of course I can't do that!"

"There's a full moon tonight, and the whole world is as beautiful as a fairyland. Meet me in ten minutes."

"Willum! I can't do that!" she repeated.

"Why not?" he asked reasonably.

She was silent for a few beats of her rapidly pounding heart. "Are you ... are you an honorable man?"

"My Lady, I am a knight of the kingdom and a dear friend of yer uncle, and I swear before God Almighty that I pledge myself to guard yer honor."

She was silent again for a moment, then said, "Willum ... I can't."

"I'll be waitin'."



It was nearly a half-hour later when Piper slipped through the gate into the garden, and there waiting for her near the fountain, as promised, was Sir Willum the Bold. She had dressed again in her gown from the dinner and wrapped her arms in a shawl.

Willum walked over to her, dropped to one knee, and took her hand. "How lovely ye look."

Blushing with pleasure, she said, "I didn't know if you'd noticed."

"Oh, I noticed. I was stealin' looks at ye all night long, just wishin' I could have a moment alone to have a word with ye, without that young Lordling about."

"No, you weren't!" she said, her temper starting to rise. "I—" She stopped then, for she had been just about to reveal that she had been watching Will.

"I'd catch little glimpses of ye when ye were listening to yer escort talk, but it wasn't very satisfyin', I'll admit. Ye may have noticed that I'm one to speak my



mind?" He waited for her to nod, but she did not. "Well, the truth is," he said, rising to his feet, "I longed to just fill my eyes with the sight of ye."

Her breath caught, and she realized that Will still held her hand. "Shall we walk through the garden?" she asked.

"If ye like," Will agreed, "though I'm perfectly content to just stand here and look at yer face."

"You're making me uncomfortable, Will," she said softly, though it wasn't entirely true.

"And ye're makin' me a bit uncomfortable, too," he smiled, and that was the truth.

Piper took Will's arm, and they walked through the paths of the garden for a while in silence, breathing in the bouquets of the flowers, listening to the sounds of the crickets and the mournful call of an owl some distance away. They had no trouble navigating the paths, for the soft gray light of the full moon was more than bright enough to light their way. After a bit, Piper rested her head against Willum's arm, and his heart was glad.

At last they came back to the stone dragon, and Piper said, "I should go back inside."

"Will ye sit with me for just a moment longer?" Will asked.

"Maybe for just a moment."

They sat on the rim of the fountain's pool, and Will took her hands in his, and she did not resist. While Piper regarded his hands holding hers with a kind of detached curiosity, he gazed intently at her face, and wondered what love was like.

"I'll be leavin' Castle Thrail for awhile, tomorrow," he said finally.

"You will?" she said, not masking her disappointment. She was surprised at how keenly she felt that disappointment.

"My first duty for Lord Roarke as a member of the household here at Thrail. I'll be goin' to visit a friend we made on the trip here from Blythecairne—but that's not what I wanted to talk about."

She looked into his eyes, and waited for him to continue.

"Were ye listenin' to the story tonight? The one about how Roarke courted Hollie?"

"Yes."

He turned his gaze away, and looked at the moon, studying it but scarcely seeing it. It was easier than looking into her eyes. "When yer uncle thought all was lost, the thought that kept goin' through his mind was, 'If only I had gotten just one kiss from her.' Do you see?"

"I don't know...."

"What I mean is this," he started, but then didn't know how to continue.

"Will, I've never kissed a boy."

His face reddened. "It's the God's-honest truth, Piper, but I've never kissed a girl, neither. And I'd just hate for somethin' to happen, maybe, and me to think that I never kissed ... you."

A long moment passed between them, while they silently debated what to do next.

Piper had an idea then, and said in a whispered tone, "What do you want from me, Sir Willum?"

"I, ah, I, ah, would like to kiss your mouth, Piper Tenet."

"You may, if you wish."

She leaned slightly toward him, and he met her, ever so gently brushing her lips with his. As their lips touched, her heart leaped in her breast, and a slight gasp escaped her. She looked at him then with wonder in her eyes, and he looked back at her with tenderness and awe.

"God be praised," Will breathed softly.

"I ... I should be getting in, before someone ... before someone," she said.

"I know," Will said. "I think I'll just wait here for a bit."

"Yes. That would be ... good."

She stood and disentangled her hands from his, and smiled at him. "I was so mad at you, you know."

"That's good."

She nodded, and began walking away. Just before she got to the gate, he called out to her. She turned, and he said, "What do you want from me, Piper Tenet?"

She thought for a moment, and then she said in a voice so low he could hardly hear it, "I would like you to try and win my heart."

"All right."

She gave him a little wave, which seemed inadequate to express the monumental upheaval that had taken place in her world in the past hour. He raised his hand to his heart in a salute to her, and she turned and went upstairs to bed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Roarke's first recognition of consciousness the next morning came when he heard a rooster crowing faintly in the distance. He reached for Hollie, but found her side of the bed empty. Blinking in the dimness, he noticed that it was not quite dawn, and he wondered where Hollie was. He called her name softly, heard no reply, and decided to get up and try to find her.

He wrapped himself in a bearskin robe, which had been one of his favorite garments during the years he lived at Thrail before his sojourn through Hagenspan in search of the writings of God. He had left it behind with regret when he departed, and was delighted to see that Ronica had kept it for him.

Thinking that perhaps she had gone to the kitchen for a cup of tea, he headed that way, found one of the bakers preparing bread for the morning, and asked if the Lady Hollie had been there.

The woman, who seemed to be embarrassed that her hands and apron were dusty with flour, said, "Yes, she was here. I think she went out to the garden, my Lord."

"Thank you. Have we met?"

"No, my Lord. I'm new since you left."

"Well, I am Roarke. You knew that, I suppose." He held out his hand to her.

"Helen, my Lord—but I can't shake your hand! I'm white with flour ... your robe."

"That's all right, Helen," he said, and took her hand anyway. "Welcome to Thrail."

The woman made a small curtsy, and said, "My Lord."

Roarke clapped his hands, making a little cloud of flour appear, and said, "There. No harm done!" He smiled at Helen, and said, "I'd best go find my wife now."

"Good morning, my Lord," she said gratefully.

"Good morning."



Hollie knelt in the garden in front of a spray of roses that reminded her of the Lady Ileana's rosebushes at Abey's Gate in Blythecairne. Tears stained her cheeks, and even though she prayed no words, she was pouring out her sorrow to God.

She had not been ill that morning, not like yesterday, but had been awakened early with a slight queasiness in her belly. Lying in the darkness of her bedroom listening to her husband softly snoring, it had suddenly occurred to her: She might be ... she might be.... She was afraid to finish the thought, for, though it was joyous in itself, it also cast a shadow of sadness over her ruminations. She thought of Mara Dannat's words to her: *Once has her heart been pierced....*

Hearing the sound of steps in the garden, she dried her face quickly and rose to her feet. It would not do for her to be found outside weeping, while her husband was sleeping peacefully upstairs. For all anyone at Castle Thrailknew, she should have been the happiest woman in all Hagenspan ... and she did not have the strength to try to explain why she was not.

She headed toward the stone fountain in the center of the garden, and tried to lift her cheeks in a smile. When she met whoever was there, she would simply say that she was enjoying the beautiful fresh morning.

When she saw who it was, though, she abandoned her pretense. "Cedric," she sighed.

His face was full of concern. His hair was sticking out at odd angles, and he wore a robe of black fur that had a dusty white handprint on it. "Are you all right?" he asked.

He walked over to where she stood, and he wrapped her in his arms, covering them both with the fur cloak. She lay her head on his chest and wept silently.

Roarke let her cry for a moment, knowing that sometimes women needed to do such things. He asked, "Has something happened to upset you? Has someone offended you?"

She shook her head against his chest, and then choked, "No."

"Is there something I can do to help?"

Again she shook her head no.

"Do you want to tell me what it is?"

No. She whispered, "Will you please just hold me in your arms for awhile?"

"For as long as you want."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Piper had been too excited to fall asleep when she got back upstairs to her room, so consequently it was long past sunup when she at last drowsily roused herself. She stretched her arms and arched her back, lazily smiling, and then remembered why she was happy. She touched her lips with her fingertips, very softly, like she had been kissed—*kissed!*—by Willum. She sighed deeply.

*Willum.*

She sat up with a start. He had said something about leaving this morning! *Leaving!* Oh, no. She had just *found* him, and now he was going away? She threw back her covers and raced down the stairs, pulling only a light robe over the thin dressing gown that she slept in. *That* would surely cause a scandal, when Mother saw her—if she saw her—in the courtyard without having properly dressed. But then, Piper thought, that was not nearly the scandal that there would be if her mother was to find out about the kiss in the moonlight last night.

Arriving in the courtyard barefoot and breathless, she saw her sister talking to the son of Lord Fopinpop, whom she *really* didn't want to see, but there seemed to be no way around it now. Jesi held one of her mother's roses, which struck Piper as somewhat strange; usually only Mother was wont to cut the flowers.

She caught her breath, and walked up to Jesi and the boy, and addressed her sister. "May I have a word with you?" she asked.

"Good morning, Piper. You know Alan, son of Lord Poppleton?"

"Yes, of course." She nodded at the boy and smiled. *So that was his name.*

"Will you excuse us just for a moment?"

"Certainly, my Lady."

Drawing Jesi away, she said urgently, "Have you seen Sir Willum this morning?"

"Yes, he's gone, about an hour ago," her sister said, with a mischievous twinkle dancing in her eyes.

Feeling a sharp pang of disappointment, Piper said, "Oh." She thought she might go back upstairs and cry.

"This rose is for you," Jesi said. "It's from Will."

"It isn't!"

"It is. Let me get this right—he said, 'Tell yer sister, I wanted ye t' have the second-prettiest flower from yer mother's garden.' Piper," her sister grabbed her arm with excitement, "what has *happened* between you two? And why didn't I know about it?"

"The second-prettiest flower?" Piper said in wonder, and a faint smile graced her features. She took the rose and lifted it to her face, breathing in the delicate fragrance. "When did he leave?"

"I just told you—an hour ago."

"I have to see him." Piper gathered herself and addressed her sister. "Go and saddle up Buttercup, you and Poppleton. I have to get dressed."

"You're crazy! You can't ride after him alone!"

"Just do it, Jesi." She ran back up to her room, laid the rose on her pillow, and began to change.



Roarke was in the stables, visiting his old friend Justice. His thoughts were full of torment this morning, and stroking the neck of the black stallion helped him put them in order.



Hollie had been ... *broken* this morning. He could think of no other word for it. And yet, she refused to talk about it, only telling him that he was not responsible, and there was nothing he could do to help her. Not yet. She had just wanted to be alone with her anguish, and so he had left her in their bedroom, after eliciting the promise that, as soon as Roarke *could* help, she would let him.

And then he had seen Willum off on his journey to visit King of the Dragon. Roarke had misgivings about sending Will off all by himself; this would be the young man's first trip into the wilderness alone. He had suggested that Will take one of the youths from Castle Thrail's companies of soldiers along with him, but Will had assured him that it was not necessary. That he was ready. And what could Roarke say to that? After all, Will was a knight now, and eager to prove himself worthy of that title.

So Roarke had let him go, after sharing a prayer of benediction with him. But after Will had left the castle, trailing a laden packhorse behind him, Roarke didn't know what to do next. He considered going upstairs to see Hollie, but then thought that he should probably give her some more time. Smead and the others at Thrail were busy with their regular duties, and he didn't really want to get in their way. He almost headed off to see if he could find out what Haldamar was doing, but then he walked past the stables and remembered that he hadn't paid Justice a visit since two days ago.

While he was stroking his horse's neck, murmuring soft platitudes into Justice's ear, he heard a slight commotion in the front of the barn. It was his niece Jesi, accompanied by the young man who had sat with Piper at dinner just last night.

"—think she should be doing this," Roarke heard Jesi say to the boy.

"No, indeed," he replied, apparently agreeing with her. "Perhaps I should accompany her on my own horse, for her protection."

"I shouldn't think that would satisfy you much," Jesi retorted. "She's chasing after another boy, for goodness' sake."

"Well, I can at least help you get Paipaerria's horse equipped properly. And then perhaps you and I can have a ride of our own." His father had encouraged him to secure an engagement with one of the Tenet girls; it didn't matter which one.

Roarke thought about what Jesi had said about Piper chasing after another boy, and wondered who it might be. As far as anyone had told him, Piper was definitely not interested in chasing after boys, and was more likely inclined to run hard in the other direction. He observed as Alan Poppleton skillfully saddled Piper's pony, Jesi standing to the side, watching. When the young man had gotten the pony successfully outfitted, he turned to Jesi, and said with a nervous clap of his hands, "There. That's that. Now, what would you say to a bit of a thank-you?"

"Um, all right," Jesi replied with an exasperated look in her eyes. "Thank you."

"No, that's not what I mean, you know," Alan said impatiently. "Your sister might act the part of the wet fish, yes—but you're not like that, are you? You're a fiery one." And he reached out and tried to draw Jesi to himself.

Roarke stepped out of the shadows then, offering a hearty, "Good morning, young Poppleton."

The boy froze, with his hands still clutching Jesi's shoulders. She wrested herself free from his grasp and ran over to her uncle, hugging him around the waist. "Uncle Cedric! I'm so glad you are here."

"So am I," he said wryly. "Poppleton. I believe your father has need of you back in Ester."

"Yes, sir," Alan replied apologetically.

"Come and visit us again some day."

"I will, sir. Thank you." He stood there waiting to see if Lord Roarke had anything else to say.

"You are dismissed, then."

"Yes, sir. I'd better be saddling up and moving on."

"That's right."



Piper came back downstairs, clothed in her riding attire. Hoping to avoid anyone who might ask awkward questions, and hoping that Jesi had Buttercup saddled and ready in the courtyard, she slipped through the cool corridors of the castle and stepped out into the bright sunshine.

She stopped short, briefly staggered by a stab of dismay as she saw not only her own pony waiting there, but also her uncle's magnificent charger Justice, snorting and stamping. She nearly turned back and headed back to her room ... but then thought that she might as well face the storm.

She walked over to her uncle, who was holding the reins to both horses and talking to them in soft tones. "Uncle Cedric," she began, "this is a surprise."

"Good morning, Piper," he smiled. "I thought you and I might have a little ride through the hills together today."

"That would please me very much," she said cautiously. Perhaps he didn't know about her plan to follow Will?

"Do you have any particular direction that you would like to go?" Roarke asked agreeably.

Piper suddenly realized that she had no idea which way Willum had gone, though it probably would have been someplace to the northeast. "Um ... that way?" she suggested, pointing vaguely in that direction.

"Ah, a fine choice," said her uncle with an innocent smile.

He helped her into her saddle, and noticed once again what a lovely young lady she had become, graceful and delicate, if a bit temperamental.

They trotted their mounts down a path that led through the grainfields, heading due east. Roarke said, "You know, if we keep on going in this direction, the sun will be in our face for the whole ride. Are you sure that we wouldn't rather go west in the morning, and then come back eastward this afternoon?"

"No," Piper insisted, "I like the way the sun feels on my face. Besides, after we get to the end of this trail, maybe we could head northward for a bit."

"Hmm. Yes."

They came to the end of the grainfields, and did turn north. "What do you think, now?" Roarke asked. "Shall we just let our horses walk, or do you feel like a gallop?"

"Oh, I don't know," Piper said carelessly. "It might be fun to let them run for a bit."

"Bet you can't catch me!" Roarke said, and dug his heels into Justice's flanks. The stallion, eager for the chance to run, burst forward like a flash of ebony lightning, and Roarke guided him deftly along the just-discernible trail left by Starlight and the packhorse Will had taken.

"Hey!" Piper cried, and slapped the reins on Buttercup. The pony could not catch up with Justice, but did stay within shouting distance.

They rode on at a frantic pace for nearly half an hour, with Piper afraid several times that she would lose her seat. Roarke felt invigorated by the exercise; he had not worked Justice like this in many days. After a time, he was able to see what he was looking for: Quite far ahead of them, but now clearly visible in the distance, was a rider with two horses. Tugging on the reins, he slowed Justice to a trot and allowed Piper to catch up.

"There!" he said, laughing, "How was that for a gallop?"

"All right," she said breathlessly. She had never been in these parts before and had given up any hope of being able to find Willum in the wilderness. "I'm glad you came with me, Uncle Cedric," she said sincerely. "I would have gotten lost."

"Yes, and then how would I have ever apologized to your mother?" he said. She had no answer for that.

Roarke continued, "My ... we've come so far, so fast, that we've almost caught up with my friend Willum."

"We have?" she said, and she sat up straight in the saddle, craning her neck and scanning the horizon for a glimpse of him.

"Yes." He looked at her expressionlessly. "Well, we've had quite a ride, and come a long way. It's nearly time for our noon meal, and we've brought nothing to eat. Perhaps we should turn back to the castle?"

"No!" Piper felt the color begin to rise in her cheeks. "I mean, we'd be awfully hungry by the time we got back, but maybe your friend Sir Willum has got some food that he'd share with us, before we head back to the castle."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Roarke said innocently.



Willum was lonelier than he thought he'd be. In all his life, he had never been this far away from a friend, or so he thought.

He was less eager than he thought he'd be, too. Two days earlier, he had been full of enthusiasm for the adventure of going back to find King of the Dragon again. But, now, he was a different man than he'd been before. Today he was a man who had kissed a woman.

The adventure of carrying supplies to King of the Dragon now carried just slightly less allure than the adventure of finding Piper Tenet once again in her mother's garden.

*Piper.* Will had tarried around the castle longer than he had intended, hoping to see her again before he left, but when it started to look like he was stalling, he had no choice but to saddle up and leave. He wondered regretfully why she had not come to see him off. Was she just being coy, or had she already repented of the kiss in the garden?

He tugged on Starlight's reins, and climbed down from the saddle. He figured that he wouldn't make a camp or cook anything right now, but he did have to relieve his bladder. And he thought that it wouldn't do the horses any harm to just stand around and graze for a bit. Maybe he could take some biscuit out of his saddlepacks and just munch a few bites. He took a walk around the hillside, just stretching his legs, and to his surprise saw two riders coming toward him from the direction of Castle Thrail.

One of them rode a large horse that shone black in the midday sun, so black that it almost appeared to be white. That must be Roarke! He couldn't tell who the other one was—it was someone smaller, on a smaller horse. But if Roarke were coming after Will, after having just bid him farewell two hours earlier, there might be some danger. He waited pensively for the two riders to reach his position. It didn't make sense for him to turn his two horses back, but he certainly should not ride on when Roarke was coming. As he waited for them to draw near, he rehearsed in his mind how he would greet Roarke, and decided to say, "My Lord! Is there trouble?"

When they were still some distance away, Will saw the second rider's hair tossed by the wind—it was so long and golden-brown that it could only be Piper! A strong sense of misgiving gripped him for a moment. Perhaps Roarke had found

out about the moonlit rendezvous of last night, and was coming to dress him down for his behavior, humiliating him in front of Piper.

*No, that would be ridiculous*, he decided. *That's not who Roarke is*. Still, he felt a little apprehensive about whatever the next few moments might hold.

Will stood in the center of a knoll as Piper and Roarke ascended, with the wind tousling his hair and his hand on the haft of his sword. Piper thought that he looked very handsome, and smiled at him hopefully, but his eyes were on Roarke.

"My Lord! Is—"

"Good afternoon, Will! Surprised to see us?" Roarke said.

"I should say so! Is there—"

"Piper and I just decided to take a little ride today, and she wanted to come in this direction. And look—we found you!"

A sheepish grin spread across Will's face, and he said, "Now, ye know I ain't much of a scholar, but ye must've rode like the wind to have caught up with me."

"Well, trailing a packhorse, you couldn't have been going all that fast," Roarke reasoned. "But, to tell the truth ... we rode like the wind."

"Ye really just took a ride, and this is where ye ended up?"

"Well," Roarke said, "we shouldn't tell a lie, should we Piper?"

"What?" she asked in surprise. "No, we shouldn't lie."

"I believe I spy a little stream over there," her uncle said. "Why don't you hop down from your pony, my dear, and help Will put together a little meal for us, and I'll walk the horses over there so they can get a sip of water."

Roarke took Justice and Buttercup down to the stream, leaving Piper standing before Will. He looked at her earnestly, with a small smile on his lips.

"My eyes are happy today, Piper Tenet."

"I overslept," she said. "I had to see you."

"They're all goin' to be talkin' back at the castle now, ye know."

"That's all right."

"Want to help me get some food?"

She nodded, and as they walked over to where Starlight waited, patiently grazing, they reached for each other's hands. From his vantage point down by the stream, Roarke saw, and he smiled.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

When Roarke peeked into his bedroom after getting back to Castle Thrall early that evening, he found Hollie seated at the window, staring calmly out at the distant hills. "Hollie?"

"I'm glad you're home," she said, still looking out the window.

"Have you eaten anything today?" Roarke asked.

"No," she said. "I *am* hungry."

"Would you like to come down to dinner? Or would you rather have me bring something up for you?"

"I'll come down with you." She turned her head slowly and said to him sadly, "I'm sorry about today."

Roarke walked over to where she sat, and knelt down before her. "So am I. I'm sorry you had to suffer, alone."

She placed her palm on his cheek. "It was best that way. I needed to cry." She looked at him tenderly, and did not smile.

"Did you ... cry enough?"

"I hope so." She sighed, and looked back out the window. "I cried all morning. I cried all afternoon. I must have run out of tears about an hour ago, and since then, I've just been looking out the window. It's quite peaceful."

"Do you want to tell me about it yet?" Roarke ventured.

"No, not yet. I might tomorrow."

"Can I do anything for you?"

"Sit beside me here, and hold me."

Roarke got up from the floor and joined her on the window seat. They sat without speaking, Hollie resting her head on her husband's shoulder. Clouds

floated across the face of the heavens, thready and white as wisps of cotton, as they watched the sky slowly fade from blue to gray.



Ronica Tenet was not sure whether to be furious or pleased. It seemed that her daughter Piper had finally consented to be wooed by a boy, though it was certainly not the one that Ronica would have chosen. Oh, there was no question that Sir Willum was a fine strapping young man, and her brother certainly seemed to approve of him ... but the question was this: Did he have land?

Alan Poppleton had land. Or at least he would someday, when old Lord Poppleton of Ester went on to his rest, God bless him. But Willum ... one of King Ruric's knights-errant. Would he even have a roof over his head from one month to the next, or would he be always traveling here and there, to and fro, in answer to duty, in search of adventure?

Ronica questioned whether that would be an appropriate life to subject her daughter to, even though she was impatient to see the girl married. Of course, she knew that if she were to forbid her daughter from seeing Sir Willum again, that would probably make Piper just that much more determined to marry the boy. So ... what to do?

"You wished to see me, Mother?" Piper knocked at the door to Ronica's study.

Ronica regarded her daughter proudly. Piper stood erect, unflinching, with her eyes flashing, a little defiantly, perhaps. She was going to make someone a superior wife—maybe this Sir Willum, at that. Apparently he had been the one who had awakened this response in the girl, this backbone, though she had always been headstrong.

"I understand you took a little trip."

"Yes, Uncle Cedric and I took a ride into the hills."

"We could play this game if you wish, but your sister already told me why you rode today." Ronica could feel that this conversation was in danger of turning into a confrontation, which is not what she had intended. Or so she told herself. She seemed to be always on the brink of an argument with her daughter, but she recognized that this was probably just an inevitable part of Piper's growing up. Still, she wished that it could be some other way; she missed the little girl that she had pampered, dressed, combed, tucked into bed.

The auburn-haired girl stood patiently before her mother, wondering what it was that her mother wanted. She had been bothering Piper to start thinking about marriage for the past year, and had sent a wearying stream of simpering fops her way. Now that Piper was actually interested in a boy, was Mother going to change her mind? Or was Will just not up to her mother's standards?

"Piper," Ronica sighed, "I don't want to get into a fight."

"What is it that you want?" Piper answered, not disrespectfully.

"I just want ... to know ... what's happening," her mother finished, with some confusion. She was not actually sure what it was that she *did* want, but she knew that she wanted to be a part of whatever it was that was taking place. "Come sit with me here on the couch, and please just talk to me."

"All right," her daughter relented. "I'm sorry ... I don't want to fight either."

"Paipaerria—my daughter—do you know how much I love you?" Ronica reached out and stroked Piper's long auburn hair.

"Yes." She attempted a small smile. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget."

"We all do, sometimes. That's why we need to remind each other."

Piper sighed. "Mother ... Will is really quite nice."

Though Ronica was not really sure how she did it, she forced herself to smile. "Tell me all about it."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Roarke was carefully balancing a pot of steaming hot tea, two empty cups, and a plate of sweet breads on a platter as he made his way up the stone stairwell to the bedroom that he shared with Hollie. He had been awakened an hour earlier to the sounds of his wife retching into a ceramic pot over by the window. She had apologized profusely, with tears streaming down her face, for having awakened him. But she had assured him that these tears were not for sorrow, but had just been a product of her sickness.

Roarke was concerned for Hollie. In the time he had known her, she had never suffered any illness more than just a cough or a runny nose. But since she had arrived at Castle Thrail, she had been sick nearly every morning. Maybe the tea would help to settle her stomach. He wished he had thought to pick some flowers for her, but rather than go back for some, he continued on into the room.

She was seated at the window seat, pale and drawn.

"Are you feeling any better?" Roarke asked.

"A little," she said weakly. "It only lasts for awhile each day."

"I wonder what could be wrong with you," he said apprehensively.

She laughed, merry in spite of her frailty "You do?"

A confused look clouded his face as he poured the tea. "I don't understand...."

"Cedric, I have two hard things to tell you. One of them is very wonderful, and one of them is very sad ... for me, at least." She looked at him hesitantly, hoping that he might perceive the importance of what it was she had to share.

"Are you going to go back to Ruric's Keep and abandon me to my old age alone?" Roarke asked.

"No," she smiled softly.

"Then I am not afraid of anything that you have to tell me," he decided.

"Tell me the sad thing first, and I will cry with you. Then tell me the wonderful thing, and we will dance together."

"It won't work that way. If I tell you the sad thing, it will spoil the wonderful thing. Let me tell you the happy news today, and we'll rejoice together with that. Then, when your heart is settled, I will tell you what's been haunting me for the past few days, and you will tell me if you still love me."

"There is nothing, I think, that you could ever tell me that would diminish my love for you," Roarke said sincerely. "I love you better than that."

"I know." She took his hand. "You really don't know what my news is?"

"Should I?" He looked bewildered.

"I am amazed," Hollie said with a faint smile. "The wisest, most perceptive man that I know ... has no clue that he is going to be a father."



For the next few days, Roarke moved about as if in a dream. He was able to converse capably with his friends at the castle, but afterwards, he retained little memory of what it was they had just talked about. *A father!* He was full of conflicting emotions, but mostly, a profound sense of gratitude and joy colored his days.

After Hollie had told him her secret, he had knelt before her, speechless, and then he had lain his head in her lap and wept. She had stroked his hair patiently, noticing how it curled at the back of his neck. As she continued to caress his neck and shoulders, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed his cheek against the softness of her belly.

"Are you happy?" she asked at last.

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes."

She had asked him not to tell anyone else yet, until she was certain she was ready. He had agreed, of course, but that didn't stop him from walking around with his head lost in the clouds.

Roarke experienced some moments of doubt along with his happiness. He felt his age keenly. He realized that when this new little one would be ten years old, he would be well into his sixties, and he was exhausted just thinking about those implications. But then, he reasoned, God knew this, just as He knew all things. If the Almighty wanted Roarke to be a father, then a father he would be.

Roarke also felt a few pangs, surprisingly, of guilt regarding his first wife, Millisen, who had been dead now for a quarter of a century. He imagined that he had somehow been unfaithful to her, by loving Hollie so much, and by creating a new life within her, when he had been unable to do so with Millisen. But, after a reflective moment in prayer, he recognized the absurdity of those guilty emotions, and dismissed them as best as he could.

Mostly, he rejoiced. He walked out alone into the flower garden at dawn, singing his morning song and raising his hands in joy toward the heavens.

While her husband sang and prayed, Hollie struggled with the nausea and lightheadedness she experienced in the morning. But she was glad for Roarke, and she didn't particularly want him lingering around the bedroom while she was sick. When he returned to their room, he brought tea and a light breakfast, and they talked hopefully of their dreams for the child.



One morning almost a week after Hollie told Roarke of her pregnancy, he ascended to their room carrying the breakfast tray, and found her weeping softly upon the bed.

"What is it, my love?" he asked gently. "What troubles you?"

She dabbed at her cheeks with a quilt, and said, "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry."

"Hollie, you never need to apologize to me for your tears." He set the tray down upon the window seat and took her in his arms. "Won't you let me bear this burden with you?"

She hesitated. "Yes ... if you're sure."

"The very reason that I exist in this world right now is to share your sadness." He kissed the top of her head. "I'm sure."

"I ... I don't know how to tell you."

"Just start. We can sort it all out as we need to."

"All right," she said slowly. "This may take some time."

"As much time as it takes, even if King Ruric himself has to stand waiting in the hallway."

Hollie smiled gratefully, and gave Roarke a wet-cheeked kiss.

She began, "Maybe this won't take as long as I thought. What I have to tell you is really not so much, I guess ... but it feels so big to me, because I've carried it so long by myself. Sometimes I've even been able to forget about it, for awhile ... but sometimes...."

A great shuddering sigh racked her slender frame, and she looked away from Roarke, staring distantly out the window across the years.

She didn't speak for several moments, and Roarke waited patiently. He was anxious to be able to relieve her of carrying the weight of this sorrow alone, but he realized that she needed to tell the story at her own pace.



She sniffled, and rubbed the end of her nose with a knuckle. "Cedric ... when you ... chose me, you weren't suffering any illusions about what kind of woman I was." It was a statement, not a question. "You knew who I was ... what I was."

He nodded once, silently.

"I, ah ... I..." She faltered. "I'm not sure I can tell you."

Roarke took her hand and continued to wait patiently. With his fingertips, he gently traced a pattern on the back of her hand. "I'll wait."

"Our—" her voice broke, and she paused to compose herself before she continued.

"Our baby," she tried again, "our baby isn't the first child that I have borne."

Roarke was momentarily stunned, but he didn't say a word. After he considered it for a moment, though, he wondered why he should be surprised. He searched within himself to try and discern what it was he was feeling. Disappointment? Anger? Sorrow? He decided numbly that he wasn't particularly feeling anything at all, and then experienced an instant of panic, when he realized that what he should really be worrying about was what *Hollie* was feeling. "Tell me," he said. "It's all right."

Hollie looked at him longingly, with sadness radiating from her blue eyes, then turned and stared out the window again. "I was just a child myself ... just a little girl. I didn't know. I didn't know what was happening. But Kenndt did." Her gaze drifted down to the breakfast tray, untouched. "I won't tell you all of the details.... The midwives came and held me while the pains ... the pains." She sighed. "And then ... then, when it was all over, there was a little baby girl. My little baby. And I held her in my arms, and nursed her, just once, and then...."

Her shoulders started to shake, and she covered her face with her hands. Roarke let her sob quietly for a time, and he got up and fetched a handkerchief for

her. She took it with a murmured thank-you and wiped her cheeks, and then blew her nose.

"Kenndt took the baby away. He said that because I was a slave, the baby belonged to him." A deep breath. "I never saw her again. He sold her. I never knew if she became somebody's daughter, or ... or what."

She offered a brief broken-hearted glance to her husband, then looked away again.

"That's not the worst," she said quietly. "It happened again, a few years later. That time, I didn't even care. I had forgotten ... how to love, by then. A little boy, a baby boy. I didn't even care."

She looked sorrowfully at Roarke, then. In a whisper, she pleaded, "Can you forgive me?"

He held his arms out to her, and said, "Come here." She obeyed mutely.

He wrapped her in a warm embrace, and held her there for several minutes without a word. Then he said, "I don't believe you've done anything that requires my forgiveness, but if you need to hear me say it ... yes, I forgive you. I forgive you with all my heart."

"You don't hate me?" Hollie said in a small voice.

"Never."

After a moment, she asked, "Do you still love me?"

"I have never loved you more than I do now, at this moment."

She squeezed him, and sighed, "I am so sorry."

"I am, too. I'm sorry you had to go through those things, and I'm sorry I can't do anything to make it better, and I'm sorry you had to bear this secret alone for so long."

She rested quietly in his embrace, thinking about his words. "Cedric?"

"Yes?"

A pause. Then, softly, "Do you really love me?"

He thought about his answer before he gave it. "God is my witness. I do love you. You haven't said anything, or done anything, that has lessened my respect or my admiration or my fondness for you in any degree. Hollie ... I love you."

She smiled faintly. "That's good." She looked up at his face. "I feel ... very tired. Do you think it would be all right if I went back to sleep for a little while?"

"Of course it would."

"Will you wait here with me until I fall asleep?"

"Yes."

Roarke covered Hollie with a quilt, and she closed her eyes, exhausted, and was quickly asleep.

Roarke stood and walked over to the window. He picked up a cold piece of pastry, looked at it, and laid it back down again.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

"Back where ye came from, 'less it be that ye wants t' die this day!" came the cry from deep within the rocky corridor heading toward the Cave of Mendor.

"It's me—Sir Willum!" Will yelled. "King o' the Dragon, is that you?"

King of the Dragon crouched in his hiding place in the rocks and wondered to himself. He had forgotten that he had taken that name, since he had no use for names (being all alone), but he was strangely pleased to hear it again. *Sir Willum?* That did sound vaguely familiar, though he wasn't sure where he had heard it before.

"Come closer, so's I can see what ye are," he decided with a shout.

"I'm comin' in," Will hollered back. "Are ye invisible today?"

*Invisible?* Then King of the Dragon remembered that he had indeed told the last travelers who had come through his region that he had the ability to become invisible, and he thought with eager anticipation that this Sir Willum must be one of them. "Say, ye ain't one o' them folk what left me that 'oss, are ye?"

"Yes, that's me," Will shouted. "Remember, ye showed yerself to me when we was leavin'?"

"Aye, I remember," the little gray creature said. "I ain't daft, ye know."

"No offense intended, Yer Highness."

"None took, none took," he replied graciously.

As Will arrived at the mouth of the cave where the dragon's bones rested, King of the Dragon asked, "Where's them others what's wi' ye?"

"I'm all alone this time, Yer Highness. Just me. But I brought some stuff that might be useful to ye, and a feast worth o' food, too, if ye'd like to share it with me."

"I see ye got another 'oss there wi' ye. Is that th' feast?" he said excitedly.

In fact, the horse was a tired, old plough-horse, which Will had gotten permission to leave behind with the King when he departed, but that was not the feast he had in mind to share with him.

"The horse is a gift from me to you," Will said to the invisible voice. "But I've brought some other things that I thought we might eat together, if it would please ye." He dismounted, and began unpacking his bundles. "I've got some dried venison and some other meats, and some breads and grains, and I brought along a skin of wine. I don't know if ye drink that or not. I also brought ye some clothes fittin' fer a king, if ye'd like 'em, and I got a special present too, for Yer Majesty."

King of the Dragon usually went about naked, since he lived completely alone and his skin was not particularly sensitive to the cold, but he sensed that there must be something about being a monarch that demanded that he adorn himself somehow. He shouted out to Will, "How about if'n ye go ahead an' set up that meal fer us, while I decide whether t' show meself to ye today, 'r not." Then he scampered back into the deeper parts of the cave, where he kept some of the trinkets that he had scavenged from the arena of the dragon's battles.

After setting up a little picnic on the ground, and arranging his gifts for King of the Dragon in what he thought was a pleasing display, Will called out, "Yer Highness! Everything's prepared for ye!"

"Arright," the little creature replied from the mouth of the cave. "Now, don't make no sudden movements, 'r I might be shocked inta blastin' ye with a bit o' me magic. An' that wouldn't be a good thing fer ye, no indeedy."

"I promise that I mean ye no harm, Yer Majesty."

"Well, arright, then," the King said cautiously, and half-crept to the mouth of the cave.

Will stood solemnly, waiting for his tentative friend to approach.

King of the Dragon slowly walked toward Willum, in a slight crouch, his yellow eyes wary and watching, his nostrils twitching. "Ye ain't wearin' no weapons, I see?"

"No, Yer Majesty."

"Ye mean ye ain't afeared o' me?"

"Yes, I fear ye, O King ... but I trust ye."

King of the Dragon chuckled then, and said, "That's arright, Sir Willum. Ye have no need o' fear. I promise not t' blast ye."

He came and stood before Will then, and rose to his full height, which brought him almost to Will's belt. "Gad, but ain't ye a big 'un?"

Will smiled gently at the little gray creature. "Thank you, Yer Majesty."

King of the Dragon was practically hairless and had dull yellow eyes. It was impossible for Will to determine his age. He had draped some scraps of cloth over his shoulders and carried an old leather belt in his right hand, but was otherwise naked. "Don't ye want t' kneel?" he said.

"Yes, please, Yer Highness, if I may."

The King's chortling laughter indicated his permission.



As the pair shared their picnic, the chattering little creature became more and more relaxed around his new friend. The King asked eager questions about the food: "What's this stuff? I don't b'lieve I ever et none o' that before," followed by satisfied coos and sighs. The more comfortable he became with Will, the closer he sat, until he was practically shoulder-to-shoulder with the young knight.

Will regarded King of the Dragon with polite amusement, and was sincerely curious about the stories he had to tell, so he began asking him courteous questions.

"Have ye lived here a long time?"

"Oh, ever so long. I don't rightly know how t' reckon time, but there's been ever so many days that I watched th' sun go up, an' watched it go back down, an' never had a voice t' talk to besides me own."

"Have ye been alone for long?"

"Forever, I guess."

"Ye must've come from someplace?" Will asked, bewildered.

"Oh ... ye mean before I come here."

"Yes, that's right."

King of the Dragon thought for a moment, patting his belly contentedly. "I had a family oncet. A pa an' a ma an' some other kin. But when th' wolves came, we ran. I got away, an' they didn't."

The creature's explanation left Willum almost more mystified than he had been before. "I'm very sorry, Yer Majesty. That must've been so sad."

"Aye." A wistful look came into the creature's yellow eyes, and he was silent for a few minutes. "I had magic, though, an' they musta not."

"Is that when ye came here to the cave?" Will asked gently.

"That's when I found out about me magic." King of the Dragon smiled, revealing a mouth mostly filled with slightly pointed teeth, though there were some gaps where a few were apparently missing.

"Will ye tell me about that?"

"I came t' this country, all alone, an' I could tell that there'd been a turrible battle here. Even worse'n th' wolves. Blood an' bones ever'where. Blood an' bones. But I could feel there was a cave close-to. My kind o' folk allus lived

under th' ground, an' I musta had a nose fer findin' sech a place. But—" and here his eyes grew wide with the excitement of telling his story at last, "—ye'll never guess what I found a-waitin' fer me at th' mouth o' th' cave, jest a-waitin' t' snap me up!"

Even though Will figured it must've been the dragon, he asked, "What?"

The King's voice dropped to a hush. "Th' dragon! It was starin' at me, with its turrible teeth just hangin' out wantin' t' eat me fer lunch, an' it was jest as still as a cat, tryin' t' trick me. An' I froze jest as solid as a icicle. I was skeered, I'll tell ye. Not so brave then's I am now.

"We jest stood there a-starin' at each other, both of us tryin' t' be as still as we could be, an' then I thinks t' meself, 'That's a big 'un, an' if I don't have some kinda powerful magic, then it's th' dragon's belly fer me!' Ye see, I'd already started decidin' I must have magic, after I'd escaped th' wolves.

"So's I jumped up an' down, all of a sudden, an' started shoutin' out whatever magic words come t' me mind, an' don't ye know? That dragon never said a word, an' it never twitched a muscle, an' it never et me, not so much as a bite. My magic was so strong, it kilt that dragon clean an' out, right there where it was a-lyin' thinkin' it was goin' t' eat me.

"An' so, that's how I come t' be King o' th' Dragon. An' instead of it eatin' me, I et *it*."

Will said in surprise, "You ate the dragon?" He remembered Boof, and Treadle, and the others who ate the bits of the dragon's tail in Fairling. "But wasn't it poison to ye?"

"Nay, it weren't poison. I et th' whole dragon. Took me a good many days, too. It was good, but not so good's that 'oss ye left me awhile back." He scratched the inside of his leg, and leaned up against Will. "Nay, it weren't no poison." An



idea occurred to him. "Parbly, if th' dragon had gotten around t' eatin' me, it woulda been *me* what was poison t' *it*."

The sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows across the corridor that led to the Cave of Mendor. Will knew that he would not be leaving the little valley that evening, and asked King of the Dragon for permission to camp there.

"Why, yes, that'd please me fine." He looked at Willum hopefully. "Usually I sleeps in th' cave, back in deep, but if it'd be arright wi' ye, why, I b'lieve I'd like t' camp out here wi' ye."

"I'd be honored, Yer Majesty."

The King chuckled happily. "There was somethin' when I was younger. It was called a far, I think. A great hot thing. Will there be a far?"

"I can make one if ye like."

"Oh, yes! I ain't had a far in ever so long. Not since I come t' th' cave."

Will figured that meant that he hadn't been warmed by a fire in nearly twenty years, and he felt keenly sorry for him. Apparently King of the Dragon had not known the touch of another creature of his kind, had eaten only raw meat, had had no one to speak to ... for almost two decades.

As he was building the fire, Will thought to himself that King of the Dragon had probably been a perfectly normal youth of his kind—whatever that was—when the mysterious happenings with the wolves took place, and the course of his life had been forever altered. *How frail life is*, he thought, and considered that his own life could just as easily veer out of his control, should the wolves attack. Whatever that meant. He decided to kiss Piper Tenet again as soon as he got home to Thrail.

The two talked until the stars glittered like jewels against the blackness of the sky. When Will finally drifted off to sleep, King of the Dragon was snoring peacefully, resting in the crook of his arm.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hollie was pregnant. That had to be it. Ronica Tenet lay beside her husband, who had just fallen asleep, but slumber refused to come to her; her mind raced with thoughts. Hollie appeared with Cedric at dinner each evening, but never in the morning. Why not? That was the question. She seemed to be a little pale and drawn even though the weather in the northwest had been particularly fine this spring. And in spite of the fine contours of her figure, she did seem to be thickening just the tiniest little bit about her midsection. Haldamar would never have seen it, but Ronica did. *A woman knows*, she thought.

Ronica was perturbed. She had privately hoped that Cedric would never have offspring of his own, and that Piper would bear a child someday that Cedric would adopt as his heir. That way, Ronica's family would be ensured the lasting inheritance of Castle Thrail and its property. Honor. Respect. Land.

Of course, she never would have voiced those thoughts to anyone, not to anyone at all. Maybe Haldamar. Perhaps Piper. But never Cedric, of course. After all, he *was* the Lord of Thrail, and she didn't want him to ever suspect that she would like to have his inheritance.

*Usurper*, her thoughts accused her. She shook her head, denying it. She was glad it was dark in her room. She may have felt foolish if Haldamar had been able to see her, and she did not enjoy feeling foolish.

It was easier to ignore her own motives if she had something else to think about, so she chose to focus again on Hollie's condition. Well, if the woman *was* carrying a child, there was nothing to be done about it, she supposed. Her brother would have his heir, and the Tenet family would be left to depend upon his mercy.

Of course, Cedric's mercy *was* very merciful. Perhaps she could figure out a way to ask him for some kind of gift of land that could be called their own. He would probably grant such a request, probably most generously, but ... oh, the distaste of having to *ask* for such a thing. Since it was dark in her room, the contorted grimace of her face was invisible.

A thought occurred to her, and it seemed to her that it held some promise. Suppose it were to happen that Piper *did* consent to marry Sir Willum? Her brother was very fond of the boy, it seemed, very fond. Perhaps as a wedding gift to his beloved niece and his cherished friend ... perhaps a gift of land could be wrested from him? A large, extravagant, fertile plot, good farmland, water, a place to build a castle for the Tenets? Or the Willums, or whatever his name or title might be. It seemed that in the barbarian lands where Sir Willum came from, they only were known by one name each. Well, perhaps he would like to take Piper's name as his own ... Sir Willum Tenet.

Ronica realized that her thoughts were starting to drift, and they weren't making as much sense to her as they usually did. She decided to wait until morning, and maybe pay a visit to the Lady Hollie, and see if she could determine if her suspicions were true.

Or maybe she should breakfast with Piper ... and see if she could gently encourage the girl to start thinking about ... maybe asking her uncle if he would consent to provide the dowry for her engagement to Sir Willum ... to handsome young Will Tenet....



"Ye know, if ye wanted to ... ye could come back with me to Castle Thrail, and live there," Will said to King of the Dragon.

The two had breakfasted in the bright, blinking light of the dewy morning, and Will had given the rest of his gifts to the King, including a pewter medallion on a chain which the little creature had hung around his neck, dancing with delight. "Is this th' special present ye told me about yestiddy?" he sang.

"Aye, Yer Majesty."

"Why, it's fine! Jest fine!" King of the Dragon exclaimed, holding it upside-down so that he could look at it. "What's these signs mean?" he asked, indicating the pattern embossed on the ornament.

Will did not know. He had found the medallion in Castle Thrail's treasury and thought it might make a good gift for King of the Dragon, and had asked Roarke for permission to take it. "It means that, wherever ye go in this land, ye're under the protection of Sir Willum the Bold," he said.

"Thankee, thankee, thankee," the little gray creature gushed. "Thankee!"

The two had lingered together throughout the morning, with King of the Dragon proudly showing Will all of the treasures of his realm: broken bits of swords, shattered shields, scraps of clothing. After lunch, though, Will started preparing to take Starlight and begin his journey back to Castle Thrail.

"Why d'ye want t' be goin' off again so soon?" the King asked in disappointment.

"Well, Yer Highness ... as much as I've enjoyed spendin' this time with ye, there's someone I want to get back home and see, real bad."

"Ain't I ... yer friend?" the King asked mournfully.

"Oh, yes, I surely hope so," Will replied earnestly, "but this other person I'm talkin' about is ... more than a friend, maybe. I might ... marry her, someday, maybe."

"Marry? I don't know that one," King of the Dragon said sadly.

Will realized with surprise that when the King had come to the cave so long ago, he had most likely been too young to understand such things. That he had never had a mate ... that he had never even had a girlfriend, if that's what his kind would have called such a relationship ... that for twenty years, he hadn't had a friend at all, until Willum came along.

"Marryin' means ... when a man and a woman comes together, and stays together, and don't go off with no other man nor woman no more. And perhaps they have a little one, or two, and they're a family."

"Oh," King of the Dragon replied, understanding. "Ye mean like me ma an' me pa, back when I was jest a tad."

"Yes, that's right."

"I ain't never had a ma of me own," he said, meaning a wife. "Don't know how it's did."

"Are there ... women folk of yer kind out there someplace?"

"They *must* be," King of the Dragon said. "Less the wolves got 'em."

A silent moment passed between the two friends, and that was when Will had offered to take King of the Dragon home to live with him at Castle Thrail.

The King's yellow eyes had flared to an almost orange brightness, as he considered this astonishing proposition with interest. Will saw his eyes as they seemed to change color, and wondered how they did so. But then they dulled back to their normal yellowish hue, as the King rejected the notion.

"No, no, I don't think I can do that," he said apologetically. "If'n I was t' go an' live at this Castle Thrail, then I'd jest be a reg'lar feller, an' not th' King."

"Well, that's true, I suppose. Ye *wouldn't* be a king no more. But ye wouldn't just be a regular person, neither. Ye'd be an honored guest."

"Mebbe someday ... mebbe someday I'll pay ye a visit," the King decided. "Well, if ye've got t' be goin' ... why don't ye go on an' marry yer other friend like

ye said, an' have a little one 'r two, an' then come back to me before th' summer's oot, an' bring me another 'oss?"

Will laughed good-naturedly. "I fear it don't work out that fast, not with people." He noticed the injured look on King of the Dragon's face, and quickly said, "I didn't mean to offend ye, Yer Highness."

"Nay, I ain't affendered," he said, brightening. "I just ain't been taught th' ways o' yer kind o' folk."

"Thank ye, Yer Highness," Will said.

"What's it called? Yer friend t' marry, I mean," King of the Dragon asked politely.

"Her name is Piper."

"So, how long will it take?"

"I don't know," Will replied. "It might take a real long time. But I'll come back and visit ye again at the end of the summer anyway, if it would please ye."

"Even if ye ain't got yer Piper married?"

"Yes, Yer Majesty. Ye're my friend, too."

King of the Dragon chuckled happily. "Here," he said, producing the leather belt that he had carried as his sceptre yesterday.

"What's this for?" Will asked.

"That'll show ever'one that sees ye, wherever ye go, that ye're under th' pertection o' th' King o' th' Dragon."

Will knelt humbly and said, "I accept yer gift very happily, O King. I'll wear it with honor."

King of the Dragon chuckled quietly. He reached out tentatively and touched Will on the shoulder, and then patted him softly, and then thumped on his back, laughing for joy.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Did you tell your sister about the baby?" Hollie asked.

"No," Roarke said distractedly, "I haven't told anybody."

"Hmm. I think she knows."

"Really? I wonder how?"

"Ronica is no fool, Cedric."

"Well, she could hardly be. She *is* my sister."

Hollie rolled her eyes, and said dryly, "Yes, there is that."

Hollie was trying to sew some simple baby clothes but wasn't having much success. She knew that her husband would provide her with whatever she needed, if she should simply say the word, but right now what she needed was to try and sew something for her baby by herself.

Roarke sat on the edge of the bed, shining the sword that King Ruric had given to him. He had not worn the sword since he had arrived at Castle Thrail. He could easily hope that he would never have to wear it ever again.... But he remembered the story he had heard last fall from that young man from Katarin ... the fourth dragon, the fourth dragon of Roarke's lifetime, was awake and prowling. Maybe the last dragon in Hagenspan. Roarke urged a brief prayer heavenward that it was indeed the last dragon.

As he continued to shine the blade, his gaze turned inward, and he remembered things he had long ago chosen to forget. Snapping teeth and thundering, earth-shaking footsteps. A huge, terrible head that darted at the end of a sinuous neck, stabbing toward Roarke only to be thwarted by the point of a sword—his other sword, not this one—that caused blood to gush from the end of the serpent's snout. A raging scream, as the bloodlust of the beast was further

incited by the hot, salty taste of its own blood. Fear, dull fear, that had to be overcome. Exhaustion. A triumph without joy.

Roarke's arms trembled, remembering the fatigue of those days, and he ceased polishing the blade. He felt ... so tired. Maybe somebody else could kill the dragon this time. He prayed another prayer. *Maybe somebody else can kill the dragon this time....*

Faintly, he heard words in his memory—words not spoken to him, but spoken to Willum by Mara Dannat: *The prize is at the finish line, not along the way.* He wondered why he remembered those words now, and what they had to do with him anyway.

Hollie had just been saying something to him, and he had missed it.

"I'm sorry ... what was that?"

"Are you all right?" she asked with concern.

"Yes, just daydreaming." He felt guilty about the small lie, but didn't wish to share those dark thoughts with his lovely pregnant wife. "What did you say?"

"I was just saying that we should start thinking about making some kind of announcement, that the Lord of Thraill is going to be a father this fall."

"Yes, you're right." He thanked God once again that Hollie was a part of his life. "It would be better for us to announce the news, than for my sister to be whispering it." He lay back down on the bed with his hands behind his head as he watched Hollie struggling with her sewing.

After a moment she noticed him watching her, and she said crossly, "Don't look at me."

"Why would I not look at you?"

"I can't do this," she said, meaning the needlework.

"Nevertheless."



She granted him a small smile then, and continued to work, allowing him to gaze at her with affection unhidden. After a few more minutes, she angrily said, "Ahh!" and threw the material to the floor in disgust. "I can't do this!" she said again.

Roarke smiled at her, and said, "That's all right. There are things that you *can* do."

"Say you love me," she said.

"I love you."

"Even though I can't sew."

"All the better."

"Say you don't think I'm stupid."

"I don't."

"Say that you'll still think I'm pretty, even when I'm fat."

"I will."

"Say you want me to come back to bed with you right now."

"I do."

"Make me."

Roarke heard the challenge in her voice, and was grateful for her spirit, her freshness. He decided to meet the challenge. "My dear, you know I love you, but you need to remember one thing."

"Yes?"

"I ... am the Lord of Thrail, and *you* ... exist for my pleasure."

"What?" she cried in a shriek of horrified delight.

"I command you to come to bed."

"You dreadful man!" she said, laughing. "I would *never* come to bed with you!"

Roarke patted his sword and smiled. "Right now."

She debated whether or not to refuse him just one more time, and then said meekly, "Yes, my Lord," and loosened her gown.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The men of Castle Thraill's Dawn Company sat in their quarters, chatting together amicably. They had just shared their midday meal, which was dinner for Dawn Company. Soon they would be turning in to get their sleep throughout the late afternoon and evening, preparing for their shift of guard duty, which would begin somewhat after midnight.

There was a polite rap on the door to their quarters, and Sir Willum stuck his head into the room. "Greetin's, gentlemen," he said. "I'm lookin' for Haldamar Tenet. Is he about?"

One of the men sitting near the door called out to Dawn Company's captain, a big, likeable fellow named Hess Boole. "Seen Haldamar today, Hess?"

Captain Boole had just finished washing up, and was wiping his hands on a towel as he walked toward the doorway. "Hello, Sir Willum! Just back from your trip?"

"Yes, sir, Captain. It's good to see ye again." Will had met Boole at dinner the second night he had been at Castle Thraill, the evening that Roarke had told the story of his courtship of Hollie.

"Looking for Haldamar Tenet, eh?" Boole's eyes twinkled. "Wonder why you'd want to see him?"

"Well," Will said sheepishly, "I had a question I wanted to ask him."

The men chuckled and nudged each other.

"Wouldn't have anything to do with a certain young lady who went riding in the hills with Lord Roarke a couple of weeks ago, would it?"

A little embarrassed, Will asked, "Everybody knows about that, huh?"

"Well, maybe not everybody," Boole said with a smile. "Kelly, did you tell your dog?"

Kelly, a thin young man with a thoughtful manner, said, "Why, yes, Captain, I did."

"Oh." Hess Boole looked surprised. "Guess that *is* everybody, then."

Will joined in the men's laughter. "So, do ye know where Mister Tenet is?"

"Fact is ... we don't. Haven't seen Haldamar today."

"Well, thanks anyway," Will smiled. He shuffled his feet impatiently, not wanting to appear rude, but eager to find Haldamar. "Guess I'll be headin' out."

"Sir Willum," Boole said, "Would you be interested in sharing your noontime meal with the men and me tomorrow?"

"Why, yes, I think so. That would suit me just fine. Just let me check with Lord Roarke and see if he has any jobs for me first."

"Good. Maybe we can play a bit with our swords. Some of the boys are pretty fair."

"I'd be honored. I'm sure ye can teach me a few things."

"Until tomorrow, then!"



Ronica was helping a couple of the other women of the castle choose some material for new draperies, when she spied Sir Willum walking tentatively across the floor in her direction. Excusing herself from the others, she strode directly to Will, gauging him with a glance as she walked. "Well, Sir Willum of Blythecairne," she began, "you have come back."

"Yes, ma'am," he said politely.

"Are you looking for my daughter, perchance?"

"Well, actually, I'd thought to speak to yer husband first."

"You should speak to Paipaerria. She has shed quite a bucketful of tears, missing you for these last two weeks."

"She has?" Will asked, alarmed, astonished, and pleased. Then he said cautiously, "And it would be all right with you if I saw Piper before I talked to yer husband?"

"Well, it doesn't matter. It so happens that Haldamar and Piper are riding together today. You, Sir Willum, shall dine with us tonight."

There didn't seem to be any possibility of contradiction. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

She continued to measure him with a thoughtful gaze. She found that she did rather like the boy, and it annoyed her that Haldamar had liked him first.

"Sir Willum?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Please forgive me if this question seems too straightforward ... but have you any land?"

Will answered honestly, "Well, no, not rightly."

"No possibility of an inheritance?"

He remembered Roarke's stated will regarding the disposition of Blythecairne and the lands of Meadling after Roarke's death, and said hesitantly, "Well, I believe it would be true to say that I'm in line to inherit half of all that belongs to Blythecairne."

"Really?" Ronica murmured, impressed. "Cedric hadn't told me that."

Will recognized that what he had said was only partially true. He was certainly Keet's sole heir, unless his father had produced a baby with his new wife Thalia that Will had not heard about. But Roarke had stipulated that the half of Blythecairne's treasury that would fall to Keet and his family was to be used for the

benefit of the people of County Bretay. It wouldn't exactly be much like being a wealthy landowner, which is what Ronica seemed to be asking. Still, he decided not to bother correcting her over a small detail like that.

"We shall see you for dinner, then." She was apparently dismissing him.

"Is there anything I should bring?" he asked.

"You have my permission to pick a rose for my daughter. The last one is quite dead."

Will smiled shyly, embarrassed. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Yes, well." She held out her hand. "Until this evening, Sir Willum."

"Many thanks." He released her hand, turned, and headed for the garden.



Jesi greeted Will at the door to the suite of rooms shared by her family. "Welcome home, Will!" Noticing the belt that King of the Dragon had given him, she asked, "What's that you're wearing on your arm? Are you injured?"

"No ... it was a gift from a friend," Will smiled.

"He must have been a very poor friend!" Jesi blurted, then immediately regretted her words.

"Yes, he's pretty poor at that," Will replied, "but he's got a kindly heart."

Haldamar Tenet came to the door, smiling gently. "Welcome, Sir Will." He grabbed Willum's hand and pumped it heartily. "Glad you could make it."

"Thank you, sir," Will said solemnly.

"Come in, come in."

"Thank you, sir," Will said again.

Ronica was seated at the table already. She smiled at Will, nodding, and said, "Welcome, Sir Willum. Please be seated. Jesi, would you please tell your sister that our guest has arrived?"

A few moments later, Piper appeared, lovelier yet than Will had ever known her to be. Rising unevenly to his feet, he realized that this moment had been designed to create the most positive impression possible upon him—that somehow he had gained Ronica Tenet's favor—and he was thankful.

"Miss Paipaerria," he said respectfully, and she replied, "Sir Willum."

Their eyes met and held, and they smiled faintly at each other. When the gaze showed no sign of coming to a swift conclusion, Ronica cleared her throat and asked, "Sir Willum, have you brought anything to present Piper as a token of your intentions?"

Will, who was obviously empty-handed, said blankly, "Oh. Ye mean a flower?"

Ronica briefly entertained the thought that perhaps this boy was not such an especially bright specimen after all, and Piper felt a stab of misgiving, thinking that Will had arrived unprepared, and her mother might take the opportunity to humiliate him.

Ronica said dryly, "Yes, a flower would have been appropriate."

Will said, apparently flustered, "Let me see if I've left anything outside."

He hurried from the dining room, leaving Piper standing there in self-conscious confusion.

With faint sarcasm, Ronica said, "I believe you may be seated, Piper. Perhaps he will return eventually."

"Ronica," Haldamar said with a tone of quiet warning.

As Piper sat sadly in her chair, next to where Will should have been seated, the Tenets were surprised to hear hushed voices whispering in the next room.

Will returned then, holding two blood-red roses. He presented one to Ronica, and one to Jesi.

"Are these *my* flowers?" Ronica asked doubtfully.

"No, my Lady," Will replied with a polite grin. "I thought it would be more appropriate if I went and got some flowers of my own to present on an occasion like this."

Jesi blurted, "But don't you have one for Piper?"

Will straightened up and called out, "Now, Lord Roarke, if ye please."

At that, Roarke, and Hollie, and Esselte Smead appeared, each one bearing two large baskets fully laden with all types of wildflowers.

"Miss Paipaerria," Will said, "these are for you." Roarke, Hollie, and Smead placed their baskets in a semicircle around Piper's chair, nodded silently at Haldamar and Ronica, and retreated.

Piper, surrounded by the sweet-smelling little bursts of color, was shocked, delighted, speechless.

"And yet," Will continued softly, "there is one flower in the room that is lovelier still."

Piper said huskily, "You must mean Aunt Hollie."

Will smiled at her. "No."

Taking a deep breath and tearing his gaze away from the girl, he addressed Haldamar Tenet. "My Lord ... it would give me great pleasure if ye were to grant me permission to call on yer daughter, Paipaerria."

"Why, yes," Haldamar replied with a wry smile. "I believe that might be arranged."



## Chapter Thirty

Hink Halsey crouched in the tall grass, trying to shift his weight silently so he could free his bow without startling the majestic stag that was grazing some yards away. Eight ... ten ... twelve points! Hink's brother Link would be impressed—or at least jealous—if he came back to their camp dragging this superb creature.

The stag lifted its head, nose twitching, and Hink was surprised to see that it did not look toward the place where he hid, but off across the open field instead. Maybe his brother had also seen the deer and was coming toward it from the other direction.

Determined that he was not going to lose this prize to Link (who was usually a little bit more successful than Hink on their frequent hunting trips, and always made sure that his brother was aware of the fact), he quickly fitted a shaft to his bow and let it fly.

"Dammit," he cursed, as the arrow flew wide of its mark and sailed far past the stag, landing gently in the grass next to a colorful outcropping of rocks near a small grove of trees. Must be the shaft had been a little bent, though Hink had not noticed that it was.

A movement among the rocks startled the deer, which bounded off over the plain in the opposite direction, its bobbing tail held high. Hink was annoyed, figuring it must have been his brother, and stood up to start trudging across the field and retrieve his shaft, even though it meant he would have to face Link's mocking laughter.

Suddenly Hink saw what it was that had startled the stag. It was not a movement among the rocks—it was the rocks themselves that were moving! As

the dragon rose to its full height, shimmering red-gold in the morning sunlight, it shook its head to scatter the morning dew from its face, opened its mouth as if it were going to roar, and then appeared to reconsider.

Hink immediately dropped to the ground in terror, but thought to himself, *It saw me*. He lay on his back, staring wide-eyed into the brightness of the sun, and noticed distractedly that the sky was very blue today.

A jumble of thoughts fought for his attention. *So there was a dragon after all*. He had doubted it, as had many of his friends. He had only ever traveled about half of the way from the village of Solemon to where he supposed Beale's Keep was located, and no dragon had ever gone anywhere near Solemon, as far as Hink knew. He wondered if Link was dead. What was the dragon doing here? What had driven it from its nest? What was it going to be like to die?

He felt the earth shake as the dragon rumbled across the plain, he reckoned, toward his hiding place in the grass. He thought that maybe he should stand and run, but decided he was too weak; even the effort of trying to lift his arms exhausted him. Maybe if he pretended he was dead, the dragon would leave him alone. That was supposed to work with bears. Hink giggled to himself against his will, and wondered what kind of idiot he must be that he couldn't keep silent now of all times. How was the dragon supposed to believe he was dead, if he was lying on the ground giggling?

The brightness of the sky turned to shadow as the beast appeared directly overhead, blocking the sun, stopping and staring down at Hink. He laughed uncontrollably, tears pouring from his eyes, as the dragon bent down and exhaled its foul breath in his face. Hink saw the dragon's teeth, so very long, so sharp, with bits of old meat wedged between them, and figured that really soon, there would be bits of Hink stuck in the dragon's teeth too.

The dragon's head jerked back as if someone had pulled back on its reins, and Hink giggled again. A dragon with reins.

Then the dragon roared, and Hink screamed. A sustained blast of the serpent's breath, hot, fetid, pinned him to the ground. Then the dragon coughed.

The dragon roared again, its gaping maw only inches from Hink's face, and again it coughed.

Then the beast coughed again and closed its lips over its terrible teeth, continuing to utter a muted grumbling hum.

Turning its head and fixing Hink with a lidless stare from one of its eyes, the serpent seemed to be making sure that Hink was understanding what it was ... saying. What it was saying.

Then, the dragon tipped its head back and roared to the heavens, a long, loud, raging bellow, followed by a cough, then another cough, accompanied by a close-mouthed grumble of annoyance.

The dragon looked back at Hink and snapped its teeth angrily, but again seemed to be constrained by invisible cords. The beast turned away then in seeming disgust, and whipped its muscular tail over the place where Hink still lay, then stomped away in fury back toward the west. After a stunned moment of incredulity, Hink, who was not a religious man, prayed a thank-you to whatever deity might be listening. He thought that he might just lie there on the ground and look at the blue sky for awhile.



It was dusk, and Link Halsey was beginning to get really worried about his brother. They were supposed to meet back at their camp hours ago. It wasn't like Hink to get lost, and it certainly wasn't like Hink to miss a meal, let alone two.

In the morning, from far away, Link had heard the angry bellows of the dragon, and had been filled with dread. He was not certain what it was that was making the distant roar, having never heard a dragon, but he knew that it wasn't a deer. Or a goat. Or a rabbit. Or a wolf. Perhaps a bear, but it didn't really sound like any bear Link had ever heard before

Whatever it was ... Link was concerned for his brother. It was too late to go looking for him now, for it would quickly be dark. In his timidity, he had waited too long to make the decision to go. But he would have to start out first thing in the morning and see if he could determine what had become of his brother, no matter where that trail might lead. A sad, sorry look covered his homely face, and he sniffled loudly.

The cracking of a twig behind him startled him so much that he almost gave an involuntary yelp of fear. Maybe it was the roaring bear! He scrambled to fit an arrow to his bow, but then blurted out a relieved cry when he saw who it was coming through the brush: "Hink!"

"Hey, Link," his brother said softly.

"Where've ye been?" Link demanded in an aggrieved tone, then said with surprise, "Why, ye've pissed yer breeches!"

"Yes, and that ain't the worst," Hink said matter-of-factly. "I shook out my drawers afore I started walkin' back."

"What was it?" asked Link in astonishment.

"Dragon."

"No!"

Hink didn't answer, but just looked at his brother with an expression that meant he was in deadly earnest.

Link thought for a moment, and then asked, "How come ye ain't dead?"

"Dunno."

"Did it see you?"

"Yes." Hink shuddered involuntarily as he remembered his face-to-face encounter with the dragon's open mouth. "Oh, yes."

"Tell me!"

"Ye're gonna think I'm a bloody jackass ... but I think it was tryin' to tell me somethin'."

"What?" Link was willing to give his brother the benefit of the doubt this time.

"It sounded like it was sayin', 'Roarke. Roarke, come. Roarke, come.'" He ducked his head sheepishly as if embarrassed by what he had said.

"Ye mean the Roarke from the song?"

"I guess."

"Ye think there really is a Roarke, then?" Link asked in wonder.

"The dragon thinks so," his brother replied matter-of-factly.

"Well, what do ye think that we should do?"

"I was thinkin' on that whilst I was layin' on the ground, after the dragon left." He drew a deep breath. "We gotta go back to Solemon, and warn the folk that the dragon might be comin'. Then we need to go to Ruric's Keep and tell the king, if he'll listen to us. Maybe he'll know how to find Roarke."

"Ruric's Keep!" The brothers were country boys, and had no desire to go to the city, a fact they had forcefully declared to each other many times.

"I think so," Hink sighed. "We'd best start back for home first thing in the mornin'. Though I don't expect I'll be sleepin' much tonight."

"Well, I'll go if you will," Link agreed reluctantly. "To Ruric's Keep, I mean."

"I know." Hink shifted his weight, and said, "Why don't ye go to sleep, if ye can? I'll sit and watch."

"Well, all right, but I don't know if I'll be able to sleep any more'n you can."

"I know."

Link stretched out on his bedroll, and stared at the sky as the stars began to appear. He told his brother, "I'm glad ye ain't dead."

"Me, too."

"Though ye do kinda stink."

"You would, too."

"I expect."

## Chapter Thirty-One

Haldamar heard the whisper of slippers in the hallway, and said softly to his wife, "Piper's heading out to meet Will in the garden again."

"You should really put a stop to that," Ronica complained.

"No, I won't," Haldamar replied gently. "That's their little adventure together. The corner of the world where they can be alone, without being watched or warned or worried by anyone else. Maybe the only place in the world where they can share a kiss." He planted a buss of his own on Ronica's cheek. "You wouldn't begrudge your daughter a kiss, would you?"

Ronica huffed and did not answer. Instead she said, "If he's going to marry her, I wish he would just hurry up and declare himself. If he's just trifling with her—"

"Nonsense. I believe young Will's heart is as true as ... as your own brother's."

"Oh, *that's* a relief," she said in a sarcastic tone.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with resignation. "I just didn't feel like agreeing with you."

"It's hard, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Being you," Haldamar said with a grin.

She reached back to give him a ringing slap, but Haldamar caught her arm in midair and held it firmly. He said, "You're just awfully lucky that I love you so much."

Ronica snorted, "Oh, you do?"

"Didn't you know? I thought I had told you." He kissed her again, and after a brief tight-lipped rebellion, she returned it.



"I'm sorry I'm so irritable," Hollie said.

"I hadn't noticed," Roarke lied.

"It's just that, well, I'm bored. And lonely. And fat."

It had been several weeks since Roarke and Hollie had announced the impending arrival of their baby, and as her belly began to grow, Hollie had ceased appearing in public.

"Doesn't Ronica come and visit you?"

"Yes," Hollie said wearily, "but she doesn't really ... accept me that much, you know. She's not a friend to me, not like Thalia and Maryan were." Remembering she was talking about Roarke's sister, she said, "I'm sorry."

"No, I understand. Ronica has her own agenda."

Hollie continued, "It's all right when you're here—you're good to me." She smiled sadly at him. "But there are so many hours that you're gone."

"Hmm." Roarke thought of Marta Dressler, the widow of his old friend Dan, and also of the woman named Helen he had met in the kitchen awhile back. "There may be some women here at Thrailly who would make better companions for you, if you'd like me to invite them in for a visit."

"I don't know. If you think so."

Roarke stood and stretched. "How would you like to go for a walk in the moonlight with me tonight?"

"Oh, I shouldn't go out," she said, but a hopeful light glowed in her eyes.



"You've never looked lovelier. We'll put a big shawl around you, and nobody will notice your condition. Even if there's anyone about, which there probably isn't."

She paused just a moment, then said, "All right."



Strolling arm-in-arm into the garden, Roarke and Hollie were surprised to find another couple already there, shrouded by the shadow cast by the stone dragon. The other couple was locked in an embrace, and oblivious to the presence of the Lord of the castle.

"Let's leave," whispered Hollie, and tugged on Roarke's arm, but the slight noise was enough to alert the other pair of lovers.

"Lord Roarke!" said Sir Willum the Bold, deeply chagrined.

"Is that you, Will?" Roarke asked in amusement.

"Ah ... yes."

"That had better be Piper with you."

"Oh, yes!" he said hurriedly.

"Hello, Uncle Cedric," she said, humiliated, stepping out from behind Will.

"You two are, ah, not going beyond the bounds of propriety ... are you?"

Roarke asked.

"No, Uncle Cedric!" Piper said, aghast.

"I give ye my word," Will promised.

"That's good," Roarke said benignly. "Well, if the two of you are quite finished with the garden, I would like to take the Lady of Thrail for a walk among the flowers."

"Yes, sir."

As Will and Piper, red-faced and holding hands, walked past them back toward the castle, Hollie stopped them, saying, "Piper ... would you like to come and visit me?"

"Oh, yes, I'd love to! Mother said I shouldn't bother you, though."

Hollie reached out and touched the younger woman's arm, saying, "Please! I would be so happy if you would come and spend some time with me."

"Tomorrow?"

"Please."

Piper smiled shyly at Hollie, said, "Good night, then," and allowed Will to lead her back to the stairwell that led to her family's rooms.



King Ruric and Queen Maygret sat in Maygret's bedroom, talking about what they had heard earlier that day from the Halsey brothers.

"So the last dragon in Hagenspan has left Beale's Keep," the old man mused sadly.

"You must ask your knights for volunteers," the queen said.

"We've done that before, and sentenced a great many men to unseemly graves."

They sat in silent rumination, and he reached out a blue-veined hand to grasp hers.

"There is Roarke," he said at last.

Maygret looked at him, concerned. "He is nearly as old as we are," she said simply. "It may be ... that he has done enough."

"Sometimes.... If only we could ask Herm what his thoughts would be," Ruric said wistfully.

"You are the king," Maygret said, patting his hand. "Whatever you do will be right."

## Chapter Thirty-Two

As the weeks went by, Ronica Tenet observed the comportment of Sir Willum, and approved of him more and more all the time. It no longer annoyed her that Haldamar had instinctively liked the young man from the beginning, since she had practically convinced herself by now that it was *she* who had chosen Willum for Piper.

The incident with the flowers had irritated her at first. She had given the boy permission to pick *one* rose from *her own* garden to present to Piper. Then, when he had given her *hundreds* of the flowers that grew wild in the fields, apparently picked with his own hands—why, it must have taken him *hours*—well, there was something just a bit *insolent* about it.

Instead of one rose—cultivated, respectful, obedient—he had given Piper *armloads* full of wildflowers—*wild*, independent, mocking, with more than just a hint of untamed, adventurous romance. Ronica flushed a bit thinking about it again.

She wished Haldamar had done something like that for her. Well, she thought sensibly, if *everybody* did things like that, why then, it wouldn't seem so special when somebody actually *did* do it.

She thought about Will's sometime inheritance of Blythecairne. While that was a very impressive fact, as far as she knew, she did feel a bit of apprehension about the idea that Piper might actually leave home to go live in the barbaric eastern lands. Perhaps if Ronica were to speak plainly to her brother about granting Willum some land here in the west.... Yes, that was it. Speak plainly. Now, she just needed a plan.



Piper knocked on the doorjamb leading to her Aunt Hollie's rooms. She had a small tray of toasted sweetbreads and a pot of tea with her.

"Aunt Hollie?"

"Come in, Piper, I'll be right out," Hollie called from the bedroom.

Piper slipped into the room and placed the tray on a small table by the window seat. She stood looking out at the courtyard from the window, wondering what it was like to spend so many days cooped up inside the castle.

In the time since she and Will had been discovered in the garden by Roarke and Hollie, she had come to visit Hollie nearly every day. Her beautiful aunt was thirsty for companionship, and Piper soon came to realize that she—Piper—had been, too.

The relationship she had with Hollie was different than that which she enjoyed with either her mother or her sister ... it was reminiscent of both, but also included a whole realm of shared secrets that neither Ronica nor Jesi was privy to. Sometimes the two young women would chatter about nothing but clothing and hairstyles. Sometimes they would talk hopefully of Hollie's dreams for her baby, or Piper's dreams for Will. Hollie had even told Piper bits of her own past that only she, Roarke, and Willum had previously known, out of all the people at Castle Thrail—scandalous things that Piper held in solemn trust. If her mother ever found out about them ... well, Piper didn't know what, but she knew that it was better if her mother never heard of them.

"Here I am," Hollie said, walking slowly from the bedchamber, swaying from side to side and keeping one hand on her belly, which had swollen with the presence of her baby.

Piper, thinking that Hollie looked perceptibly larger today than she had remembered just from yesterday's visit, said, "It can't be too much longer now, can it?"

"No, I don't think so," she said, lowering herself gingerly into the window seat. "Maybe a week or so?" She folded her hands over the shelf her belly made in her lap while she sat, and pushed with the heel of her hand against a sore spot where the baby was fond of kicking her.

"Are you very uncomfortable?" Piper asked.

Hollie laughed ruefully. "There is a price to pay for having a baby. But I'm sure it will prove to be worth every ache or twinge."

"Would you like some tea?"

"I shouldn't. It seems like I have to pee every few minutes. But still, I think ... yes, thank you. I will."

The two women sipped their tea for a few moments while Hollie looked out the window.

"It looks like a lovely day today."

"It is," Piper replied enthusiastically. "I wish you could come for a walk with me."

"Soon," Hollie smiled.



Roarke still held the small scroll that had been presented to him a moment before by Sir Jayles.

In the king's own handwriting, these words were scrawled: *It has been report'd us that the last dragon has awaken'd. We are offering prayers to all the gods that another champion may be found. But if not, redde your sword.*

He distractedly brushed broken bits of sealing wax from his desk to the floor, then dusted his hand off on his pantleg.

Realizing that Jayles was still standing there, along with Esselte Smead (who had led him in), he said, "You'll stay and share our table tonight?"

"It would be appreciated, Sir Roarke. Thank you."

"Do you have anyone with you?"

"No, m'Lord. Since Ruric Serpent's-Bane was unsure whether you'd be at Blythecairne or Thrail, he sent Sir Fentin to Blythecairne and me to Thrail, each of us bearing the same message. We rode swiftly, and alone."

"Well, I'm sure Fentin is being received kindly at Blythecairne. Why don't you walk back downstairs and stable your horse? I'll send Will—Sir Willum—to show you the lay of the castle."

"Thank you, Sir Roarke." Jayles turned crisply and departed with Smead, leaving Roarke alone with his thoughts.

Roarke played with a tuft of his beard, staring blankly at the top of his desk. The king's message slipped from his hand, making a small crackling noise as the edge of the scroll hit the floor.



"Ouch!" Hollie winced.

"A kick?" Piper asked.

"Yes ... do you want to feel?"

"Of course I do!" She sat beside Hollie on the window seat and laid her hand gently on her aunt's belly. She didn't need to wait too long before Hollie's abdomen distended at an uncomfortable-looking angle and a slight moan escaped her lips.

"Your whole body is getting moved around!" Piper exclaimed with a mixture of awe and fear. She wasn't too sure that she would ever want to experience that for herself, but at the same time, it was very exciting.

"Yes. That wasn't a kick that time; he was just rolling over. He does that sometimes when I'm lying on my back, and it's really quite painful."

"You said 'he.' You really think it's a boy?"

"I do. Your Uncle Cedric thinks it's a girl." She laid her hands over Piper's, which still rested on her belly. "I think that he really wants to believe it's a boy, too, but he's afraid to."

"And what would be so wrong with having a girl?" Piper demanded playfully.

"Maybe next time, if we can have more children. But it would be nice to give Cedric a male heir."

"Yes, I suppose." Piper rested her head on Hollie's shoulder. "Have you decided on a name yet?" The two friends had talked about names for the baby several times in the past weeks, making it into a kind of game.

Hollie smiled. "I told Cedric that if it's a girl, he can name her. But if it's a boy, I get to choose. He agreed, of course."

"You must have a name for him, then?"

"No one will understand what it means. Not many, at least. But I'll tell you, if you'll keep it just between you and me."

"You know I will."

Her voice dropped to a hush. "You remember I told you about my other two babies." Piper nodded solemnly. "Well ... this sounds a little silly now ... I told myself that if I had a little boy that I could keep for my own, that's what I would name him. Owan."



"Oh, that's a lovely name," Piper exclaimed softly. "Owan. And it's not silly at all. It's sweet. And a little sad."

"Yes, it reminds me of some sad things. But it's a happy name. A strong name."

"Have you told Uncle Cedric?"

"Not yet." Hollie smiled at Piper. "Only you."

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Ronica peeked into Roarke's study, and found him sitting at his desk, lost in thought, distractedly twisting his beard into an uneven braid. A rolled piece of paper lay on the floor next to his feet.

"Cedric?"

"Oh," he said dully. "Hello, Ronnie." He smiled at her sadly.

"What's wrong?" his sister asked. "Are you suffering from melancholy?"

"No." He still wore the same tired smile. "No. Just worrying about things that might never happen anyway."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then." She did not wish to get distracted from the purpose for her visit.

"Is everything well with you?" Roarke asked.

"Yes, yes," she replied. "I wondered, though, if you might be willing to discuss a business proposition with me?"

"Whatever you desire," Roarke said, a spark of amusement appearing in his eye. "Have a seat."

"Thank you." She sat primly across the desk from her brother, and folded her hands in her lap. "I was wondering, Cedric, if you might be willing to sell a bit of land to Haldamar and me."

"Land? What on earth for?"

"Well ... none of us lives forever, you know."

"Point conceded."

She took a breath and plunged ahead. "This is really about Sir Willum of Blythecairne. When his father dies someday—many years from now, I hope—and Willum inherits Castle Blythecairne, I fear that he will take Piper and leave for the

eastern lands, and I ... will never see my daughter again. Your niece." She dabbed at her face with a handkerchief, though Roarke was not certain that he had noticed a tear.

He knew that he had not told Ronica anything about Will inheriting any part of Blythecairne, though it was true that he was Keet's heir for half of the treasury. Perhaps Will had told Ronica something, or perhaps she had just deduced it on her own, but he did not feel any compulsion to correct her interpretation of Will's future inheritance. In any case, Roarke felt fairly certain that, whatever Ronica was there for today, it was not to purchase land.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I thought that, perhaps, if you were to sell us a small plot of land out in County Bretay, we might be able to still see our Piper every once in awhile. And maybe there would be another fine eastern boy for Jesi someday, too." She sniffed and smiled apologetically, stealing a glance at her brother to see his reaction.

"You'd leave Haioland? But you've lived here your whole life."

"Well, the only other thing I could think of would be for Willum and Piper to stay out here in the west with us. And if his inheritance is so far away...." Her voice trailed off sadly. Suddenly, her face brightened. "Unless ... no. But ... perhaps?"

"What is it?"

"If you would give Willum an inheritance out *here*, in the west ... then perhaps he wouldn't take my Piper away, and we could all be a family out here at Thrail!"

Roarke said doubtfully, "It's not really my place to give Will an inheritance at Thrail. He's not my blood, nor does he have any relatives at all here in the west."

"Well, if he marries Piper, he *will* have relatives. And *Piper* is your blood." She frowned for a moment, deep in thought, but then said, "That's it!"

Roarke raised his eyebrows and looked at his sister, the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile, which was practically hidden behind his beard.

"You can give land to *Piper*, as a dowry! You know that Haldamar and I have little of our own—that we are living mainly on your generosity. But if you were to give land to your niece, that would serve as her wedding gift to her husband—then, they wouldn't have to leave!"

Roarke regarded his sister with amused affection. He wondered to himself whether she had ever had any intention at all of going east to County Bretay. "You know," he confided in her thoughtfully, "when I brought Will with me to Thrail, it never occurred to me that his inheritance at Blythecairne would be any kind of issue at all. We never spoke of it, and I guess I just always assumed he would be ... with me. And the idea that Piper, my little sweetheart, would be old enough to entertain the idea of *marriage* ... why, the thought never entered my mind. But now, it seems, the Almighty has cast our fortunes together in such a way that Willum shall not only be my squire, or my fellow knight, but that he's going to marry into my own family." He tipped his chair onto its back legs. "And, truth to tell, I couldn't be happier about it. For Piper, or for Will."

Ronica waited with thinly concealed eagerness, sensing that he was about to grant her request.

Roarke directed his attention back to his sister. "I have three things to say to you. The first I say as the Lord of Thrail, and you must not question it. The second is as your brother, and the third is as the uncle of your daughter. Are we agreed?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Then, first: That story about you moving to Blythecairne or else your heart would break—that was not even close to the best story you have ever told me. Be honest with me!"

She started to protest, but he stopped her. "That was the Lord of Thrail speaking. Hush." He continued, "You are in a position of great authority and responsibility here, Ronica. You must not be duplicitous."

He waited to see if she would respond, but she kept silent, though her eyes flashed with challenge. "Secondly, as your brother: I want you to know something." She still held her peace, and he said tenderly, "I love you very much, and almost anything I have is at your disposal. If you wanted a piece of land for yourself and for Haldamar, all you had to do was ask."

At that, she allowed herself a response. "I love you too, Cedric. It's just ... hard to ask."

He nodded gravely. "I understand. Please forgive me for not realizing that I have placed you in an awkward position. I will take steps to rectify that soon, and I believe you will be pleased."

She started to apologize, but again he interrupted her. "Thirdly, as Piper's uncle—and as Willum's friend—if the two of them really do marry, as it certainly seems that they shall, then I will purchase them the finest estate in Haioland that I can find within a day's ride of Castle Thrail. That way, they'll have enough distance so that they can be their own people, but they'll be so close that you can see them every week if you choose. If Will's eventual duties cause him to spend time at Blythecairne, well, then, at least he'll always have a home here in Haioland to which he and Piper can return."

"Thank you, Cedric." She started to rise from her seat and then paused. "Would you like me to be honest with you?"

"Always."

"Then I am going to reveal to you what a small, selfish woman I have been," she said, and it appeared to Roarke that this time, a tear really did materialize at the corner of her eye. "Before you took Hollie as your wife ... I always just assumed that someday you would die without an heir. I'm sorry," she said, but Roarke nodded, acknowledging the truth of the words. "I had hoped ... that you would make Piper and Jesimonde your heirs, and that you would allow Haldamar and me to hold the lands of Thrail in trust for them ... if you predeceased us, of course, or if they were not of age." She patted her cheeks with her handkerchief, and apologized again. "But now, now that Hollie is having her baby—*your* baby—well, it seemed to me ... that the house of Tenet was going to come to nothing in the end after all."

Roarke looked at his sister with tenderness in his eyes. She looked away, saying, "You must think me very foolish and small."

"No," he said kindly. "I have long recognized the need for women to look out for their own family's interests, even when it transcends the boundaries of logical thinking. God help the man who doesn't understand such things. You were just being a mother."

"You make it sound like something tawdry."

"On the contrary. I believe it has been given to women by the Almighty Himself, to nurture and protect their families so fiercely. It is an honored and exalted calling."

Ronica smiled slightly then.

Roarke said, "I would just beg you to recall, if the day ever comes when you need to consider such a thing: Hollie's baby will be your family, too."

"Thank you, Cedric." She relaxed somewhat. "I didn't mean to seem ungrateful for how good you've been to us."

"No harm. Hopefully we won't need to worry about these things for many years. Except for Will and Piper, of course."

"You should probably plan, though. Your will right now lists Esselte Smead and Dan Dressler as the trustees of Castle Thrail. Dan's dead, for goodness' sake."

"Yes, I've considered that. As soon as the baby is born, I'll have to make some decisions about how the estate should be handled."

"Well." Ronica stood to her feet, patted down her dress, and said, "Thank you, Brother. I'm sorry if—"

Roarke stood and gave his sister a gentle hug. "I love you, Ronnie," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she said, patting his back.

After she had left the room, Roarke scratched his head absent-mindedly, and sat back down in his chair. Noticing the scroll lying on the floor, he bent over and picked it up, read King Ruric's words once again, and frowned.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Wagons and donkeys laden with household goods, mothers and fathers with sacks and packs, children carrying blankets filled with possessions, all lined the road heading south from Solemon to Ruric's Keep. Rafts and boats similarly laden pushed out from the shores of the Maur Wain, which flowed south to Lenidor. A few hardy souls and a few fools were choosing to stay behind in Solemon, thinking to defend the city against the dragon and win for themselves the respect and rewards that their neighbors would bestow when the serpent was dead. Some few unscrupulous ones scoured the residences that had been abandoned, scavenging for any items of value that could be looted. And of course, some farmers, some merchants, refused to leave their homes for the simple fact that their homes were *theirs*.

Other hunters than the Halsey brothers had now seen the dragon. It seemed to be lumbering ever closer to civilized parts, which meant that it was headed more or less directly to Solemon.

The dragon from Beale's Keep had been mostly dormant since the time when the great-great-grandparents of the citizens of Solemon were little children, and it had been largely forgotten about. The day-to-day scabbling out of life itself had relegated the stories of the dragon to legend, fireside tales, bedtime stories. Many believed, as Hink Halsey had, that the dragon simply didn't exist, if it ever had. The song of Roarke the Dragon-Killer was a good drinking song, but nothing more.

All of that was changed now. The streets and parlors and taverns of Solemon had been alarmed, panicked, terrorized, by the news that the fell creature was coming. Now the beast had been ascribed powers even more terrible than that



which it really had, which were terrible enough. It was not enough for the dragon to be malevolent, evil, soulless, with a whiplike tail, daggers for teeth, and larger than many people's houses. Now (according to the stories being told), it could fly, it could become invisible, it could breathe fire.

Indeed, one farmer on the western outskirts of Solemon had, in his hurry to abandon his property, left his last cooking fire carelessly untended. Several miles toward Solemon, he had turned to look longingly back toward his home, seen the black smoke rising from where his house had stood, and thanked God that he had fled from his land before the dragon got there.



Sir Willum had arrived back at Thrailt earlier that day. He had been out to Hagenspan's far west coast, to Haio's Port, with Kelly of Dawn Company. They had marveled at the Great Sea, which extended as far as the world did, roiling and roaring, off west toward the sunset. Ostensibly, the two young men had been on a visit to Bost, Lord of Thrimball, who lived quite near Haio's Port, to extend Roarke's greetings and set up a time for Bost to pay a visit to Castle Thrailt. But Will seldom missed a chance to see the parts of the world that he had never seen before, and it was no hardship trying to convince Kelly to accompany him to the seashore.

He was struck by how much he wished he could show the sea and the city to Piper. She'd probably seen them before, he figured—but they had never seen them together. He was amazed at how much, more and more, he needed to have his world validated by sharing it with Piper. He wondered how she would like King of the Dragon.

Dusk found Will standing below Piper's window, whistling a birdcall that had become familiar to her ears. She ran to the window, smiling, and said in a hoarse whisper, "I'll be right down!"

Will shuffled around the courtyard, wearing a moon-faced smile, waiting for Piper to appear. He knew that Haldamar was aware of their walks in the flower garden, and he was careful not to abuse the trust that Piper's father extended him. He would have been allowed to court Piper openly, calling for her at the door instead of whistling up to her window, and this is certainly what Ronica would have preferred. But there was still something special about their clandestine meetings in the moonlight that he was unwilling to part with; something romantic and adventurous. And this, Haldamar understood.

Piper appeared at the door to the courtyard and ran to Will, wrapping her arms around him, clinging to him. He kissed her chestnut hair and breathed in the scent of her perfume.

"Did ye miss me?" he said softly.

In reply, she kissed him with great tenderness, taking his face in her hands and pulling him insistently to her.

"Careful," he warned huskily. "Ye can't be startin' no fires that we can't put out."

"No," she pouted, "I know. Walk with me, then."

"Aye." It was very warm out.

They strolled through the gathering darkness, between the banks of sweet-smelling flowers. Piper looped her hand through Will's arm, and they walked for a time without speaking. Wending their way through the maze of fragrant blooms, they came to the stone dragon at the center of the garden, and sat on the edge of the fountain's pool. Water still bubbled from the dragon's mouth, as it did all night and all day, a feat of engineering which never ceased to fill Willum with a childlike

wonder. Piper dipped her fingers into the pool, and flicked some drops of water toward Will's face. He grabbed her hand, held on to it.

"Ye know ... people seem to think ... that we'll be marryin'," Will said quietly, not looking at Piper.

"They do?" she replied innocently.

"Yes, they do," he said, and fell silent again for a few minutes.

He looked up at the grinning moon, and returned a grateful smile. "Ye know ... it might not be such a bad idea at that."

"I see," she said noncommittally.

"So ... do ye think ye might?"

She laid her free hand tenderly upon his cheek, and said, "You'll have to do better than that, Willum of Blythecairne."

"So I see," he said with a shy smile. He got down from the edge of the pool and knelt before Piper on the footpath. He rested his forehead upon her knees for a moment, and breathed a silent prayer, then turned his face upward toward hers.

"Miss Paipaerria Tenet, it would be the greatest honor that I have ever known, if ye were to consent to bein' my bride."

She looked down upon his face with heart-swelling fondness. The soft twilight made it look as if his cheeks were glowing, and his eyes twinkled like starlight. "Sir Willum ... have you found that my heart is a worthy prize for a knight of Hagenspan?"

"I swear before God, that I believe yer heart to be a prize fit for the king himself. But since I'm not a king, and I'm only me, all I can do is beg ye to accept me for yerself. Please say yes."

She looked deeply into his eyes, and did not answer for such a long time that his heart began to feel the panicky flutterings of despair. At last ... she said the

words that he had longed to hear. "Yes ... I will marry you, Willum of Blythecairne. Yes."

## Chapter Thirty-Five

It was lonely around the cave now. Funny, it hadn't been all that lonely before he had met Sir Willum. His friend.

King of the Dragon brought all of his treasures out of the cave and laid them in the pale sunshine, arranging and rearranging them, an activity which had brought him many hours of pleasure through the long years of his isolation. Today, though, it seemed tedious, artificial, almost boring.

Summer had ended long ago, and the bite of winter was already in the air. But Sir Willum had told him that he would return for another visit at the end of summer. Why had he lied? Wasn't he really his friend after all? But then King of the Dragon remembered the medallion that Will had given him, which he always wore on the chain around his neck. He grabbed it with his gray fingers and held it up before his eyes. His greatest treasure. Surely Sir Willum wouldn't have given him such a gift, if he weren't really his friend.

So ... what had happened? Maybe he had gotten married like he said, and his new ma Piper wouldn't let him come out no more. Maybe the wolves had got him.

King of the Dragon thought to himself that maybe, he would head south and try to find this Castle Thrail where Sir Willum lived, but then knew that he wouldn't. He picked up the handle of a broken knife, one of his treasures, and threw it away, clattering among the rocks.



Padallor Clay sheepishly pushed open the door to his cousin Billy's old house, and said a tentative hello to his new wife Sarie.

She said, "*There* you are. You're later than I thought."

"I know," he replied.

"Where were you?"

"Well," he said hesitantly, "I did stop in at The Fish for a cold one."

"Of course you did. I counted on that. Why are you so late?"

"Well, Sar', there was a couple o' boys there."

She turned to face him, wondering what he was hiding. "And?"

"Well, they was a couple o' boys from Solemon."

"Paddy, you're not making this easy."

His forehead furrowed in apology. "I don't know how to say it."

She felt a nameless stab of fear, and wondered what burden her kindly, honest husband bore. Since his return from his visit to Blythecairne, Paddy had been so helpful, so attentive, so decent, that Sarie had not felt the least bit of resistance when he humbly asked her if she might consider marrying him. Even though Paddy was not particularly handsome or intelligent, Sarie had been happier with him in their short time together than she had ever been with Billy.

"Come and sit down," she said, "and I'll get you a plate. Then you need to tell me what's troubling you. What's troubling *us*."

"Aye, I'll do that." He said mournfully, "I'm just awful sorry, Sar'."

"Now you've got me really worried," she said as she placed his dinner before him and sat next to him.

"I know." He toyed with his food for a moment, but did not eat it. "Them boys from Solemon seen the dragon."

"The dragon?" she said blankly.

"The one what kilt Bill."

"I know what dragon it was."

He ducked his head as if preparing to receive a blow. "They're tryin' to get some boys to go and help 'em kill it."

"The dragon that killed Billy."

"Uh ... yes," Paddy said, confused.

"Damn you, Padallor Clay," she whispered fiercely, brushing a tear from her eye. "That damned dragon already cost me one husband, and now you're trying to tell me that you're going to go and let it kill you, too."

"Why, *no*, Sar'. I don't intend to let it kill me at all," Paddy said. "Hell, if that dragon'd wanted to kill me, it coulda done it that last time it seen me."

"You saw the dragon and lived ... and you're going to give it another chance?" she said incredulously.

"Them Solemon boys are raisin' a whole army to stand against the dragon. It wouldn't be just *me* against *it*." Paddy tried to sound reasonable. "Why, they say they already got more'n twenty people to fight against it, good strong boys all of 'em."

"Twenty boys. Against a dragon." She moaned hopelessly. "And there probably isn't one brain in the whole batch of you."

"Why, there's probably one or two," Paddy said, growing slightly annoyed. "And there's a damned sight more strong hearts than that, plus twice as many strong arms."

"You're just like Billy," she said, regretting the bitter words that she knew were not true.

"No. I *ain't*," Paddy said indignantly. "Bill was one man, alone, chasing the dragon on its own ground, lookin' to get gold an' riches. I'll be one man amongst many, defendin' a batch of innocent folk, tryin' to save the lives o' the people of our country. God mighta not looked too kindly on what Bill was tryin' to do, but He

might be more disposed to help us what're goin' to defend Solemon." He took a defiant bite of his dinner.

Sarie Clay stared at the table helplessly for a time, and then, with a heaving sigh of resignation, said, "I'm sorry. I expect you're just trying to do what you think is right." She paused a moment. "*I know* that's what you're trying to do. I just don't think I could bear to lose you. I know I haven't never told you this ... but I love you, Paddy."

"Thank you, Sarie," he said, surprised. "That means the whole world to me."

"When do you have to leave?" she asked, not looking at him.

"I don't know yet. I'll go back to The Fish tomorrow and talk to them Solemon boys again."

"Just come back home to me again, Paddy. I'll always keep the door open for you."

Padallor Clay smiled and took the hand of his wife. "If there's ever any way that I can come back to you, I surely will."



## Chapter Thirty-Six

Roarke sat anxiously in the dining hall with Willum, Haldamar, and Smead. Then he stood and paced around the hall, while the other three men engaged in quiet small talk, smoking their pipes and sipping mugs of ale. After a few minutes Roarke sat down again, toying with his mug, swirling the liquid in the bottom of the glass and watching the patterns it made.

The midwives were upstairs with Hollie, and Ronica and Piper were with them. Roarke suspected that Hollie really didn't want Ronica there, but that she was too polite to ask her to leave. He hoped it would work out all right.

"How long does this take?" asked Willum.

Haldamar replied, "It's different every time. Sometimes just a few hours. Sometimes it feels like days."

Roarke groaned inwardly. Days.

Esselte Smead said, "I believe that when a woman has her first child, it usually takes longer, and then the later ones come faster. So this might take awhile."

Roarke tipped his mug back and drained it.



Ruric Serpent's-Bane sat upon his throne. Before him stood the company of the king's knights, nearly seventy men, grim and pensive. Some of the men stole uneasy glances at one another, but most of them were focused intently on the king.

"Thank you for attending," Ruric began. "Certainly you know, or have at least heard rumors, why we have called you before us today.

"Dark days are upon us. Perhaps. Certainly days of significant challenge have arrived. Perhaps they are not so much dark days as days of glory.

"Glory *will* come to one of you ... or more, perchance, if you work in concert. For the possibility that our enemy will prevail is, we believe, non-existent. Enemies like this have brought havoc to our land in times past, and triumphed for some small span of days, but they have not ultimately prevailed.

"We are speaking, of course, of the dragon.

"Three times before, since we have been King of Hagenspan, has a foul serpent threatened the peace of the land. Each time, a champion rose from among the people, subdued the beast, and received rewards befitting that champion."

All of the veteran warriors who stood before the king thought uncomfortably to themselves that, the three other times, it was always the same champion who had arisen, and a good deal of other men had died in vain. Not all of the younger soldiers and squires were aware of this information; the first dragon had been killed before many of them were born.

The king continued, "We are commissioning you, the most trusted men of Hagenspan, to ride throughout the land and find the champion who will deliver our land this time. Perhaps that champion will be one of you ... perhaps he is yet to be revealed.

"Decide among yourselves who will ride, and who will stay here to tend to the defense of Ruric's Keep. Only a score of you will be required to stay here at the Keep; the rest of you shall go forth and seek our champion.

"Tomorrow morning, you shall ride. Ride to the four corners of the kingdom, and sound the alarm. Compel no one to follow you, but let it be known that whoever kills this last dragon shall be rewarded with the Lordship of Beale's Keep, and every acre of County Temter that lies between the Sayls and the Senns.

"After you have raised the alarm, those of you who have a heart to fight the dragon shall ride with all speed to the town of Solemon, where the beast has been spotted. The rest of you may then return here to Ruric's Keep."

The old man rose to his feet, signifying that his speech was complete.

"Before we bid you Godspeed, do you have any questions?"

There was an awkward moment of silence, but then Sir Keltur cleared his throat and said, "Your Majesty?"

"Yes, ah ... Keltur."

"What of Roarke the Dragon-Killer?" When the king did not answer immediately, Keltur continued, "Shouldn't somebody be sent to see if he will fight for us again?"

Ruric paused, and the men waited uneasily. "We had hoped that Sir Roarke's battles were behind him," the king answered slowly. "He is an older man now, and has suffered many things. It may be ... that he can no longer...." He let that thought expire unuttered.

"Besides," the king started again, "it has been reported to us that his wife is with child—Roarke's firstborn, his heir. If we were to call upon him now, he would probably respond to duty's demands, as he has done before. But ... that would not be our first desire. No."

The king's gaze sharpened, and he spoke more stridently.

"Is there no other champion in Hagenspan? Not in all of the country?"

Ruric looked from man to man, settling at last on Keltur. "If no champion is raised up from the knights and the people, then be certain we will call upon Sir Roarke."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Forgive me."

"No need. It was a valid question." The king looked at his men again, saying, "Are there any more?"

There were none—at least none that were verbalized.

"Godspeed, men of Hagenspan." King Ruric walked from the throne room, and the knights of Ruric's Keep began debating who would go, and who would stay.



Ronica Tenet appeared at the entrance to the dining hall, small flecks of blood visible upon her apron. Roarke noticed the blood, and rose quickly to his feet, alarmed. "Is Hollie all right?" he gasped. "The baby?"

"Yes, yes," Ronica laughed. "Everything is fine. My Lord, you must come upstairs with me. Your wife has an introduction to make."

Smead clapped Roarke on the back, and Haldamar and Will offered words of congratulation. Beaming uncontrollably, Roarke shook the hands of his friends, and then giddily followed his sister up the stairs. A hot sensation gathering behind his eyes promised tears, like the looming threat of a thunderstorm.

Stepping hesitantly into Hollie's bedroom, he was stunned by her beauty. He was amazed that, after so many months together, she still had the power to take his breath away with one glance from her eyes.

A soft light fell from the window upon her golden head, and the smile she wore on her face was tired, sad, joyful, glorious. She looked ... so peaceful. As if she had passed through all of the trials a woman could endure, and come out on the other side to find that everything in the world was just the way it should be.

Roarke looked at her with awe, not wanting to rush this moment, thinking that if he had helped in some small way to produce this beatific expression that she wore, then his life had been worthwhile after all. He imagined that he would remember the way that she looked right now for the rest of his days.

During this moment (in which Roarke had the curious impression that time had somehow been suspended), Hollie had not looked at him. Her gaze was directed downward, to something hidden in her arms, something pressed against her breast. Roarke saw then ... an arm, a tiny arm, reaching convulsively out of the bundle in Hollie's embrace, then relaxing and disappearing again.

A sob threatened to escape him then, but he brought it under control with a swallow, and choked, "May I see?"

"Cedric," she said, turning her smile toward him. "Come."

He stepped quietly to the bedside, and saw the face of his child for the first time, red and wrinkled, tiny and yawning. "Is it...?"

"Sir Cedric Roarke, Lord of Thrail, Lord of Blythecairne, Lord of Hollie," she said tenderly, "I would like to present to you ... your son, Owan."

"My—" he rasped, "My ... son...." He kissed Hollie's face, weeping openly now, and whispered, "Thank you." Roarke's chest felt so full that he had the fleeting impression that his heart might possibly burst. "Thank you."

"Would you like to hold your son?"

"Oh, no! I mean ... should I? Can I?"

"Yes," she said, "you may. And you should."

Then Roarke was holding the baby, he was holding his son, he was holding Owan, holding his boy, holding this tiny gift from God, his boy, his son. He was holding his son! Tears coursed down his cheeks, and many moments passed before he was able to speak. His son...! Owan ... his son.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

The small army defending Solemon had gathered in the center of town to decide upon their strategy for battling the dragon. The knights of Hagenspan had not yet arrived, nor had any of the hopeful champions that they were recruiting. This army consisted of the men who had been engaged by Hink and Link Halsey, and were almost all natives of Solemon or Katarin. There were nearly thirty of them: farmers, hunters, merchants, fishermen.

One of the shopkeepers of Solemon was in the center of the group, assigning posts to defend and suggesting strategies. Almost all of the men were armed with bows, and some had swords too. Some of the younger men had no weapons at all, except for stockpiles of stones suitable for throwing.

Paddy Clay stood next to his new friend Hink Halsey. They had formed a bond between them upon the realization that they were the only two men in Hagenspan who had come face-to-face with a dragon and lived to tell about it. Well, them, and Roarke, of course.

Paddy had been assigned a position on top of one of the buildings in the town square, a tavern and hotel called Bedford's Tap, which was about at the level of the dragon's head. He thought to himself that, just maybe, he might shoot out one of the eyes of that dragon after all.

Hink was looking past Paddy, down the street to the west. All of a sudden, his jaw dropped and a look of remembered terror filled his eyes. Alarmed, Paddy turned in the direction that Hink was staring. He punched Hink in his shoulder to rouse him, and cried at the top of his voice, "Everybody get to your places! It's comin'!"



Hollie was sleeping soundly, the curtains drawn to keep out the early morning light. She had been up several times in the night with Owan, and was fairly exhausted.

Roarke had heard the baby start to stir, and knew that he was getting hungry again. Thinking to let Hollie get a few more moments of sleep if he might, he rose as quietly as he could, clumsily changed the baby's swaddling, and then sat down in a chair, holding his son to his breast.

Rocking gently from side to side, and gazing tenderly down on Owan's face, he said as softly as he could, " Shh-h-h-h-h.... Shh-h-h-h-h."

Comforted by the swaying movements and susurrations of his father, Owan opened his eyes, blinking in the dim light. Finding the eyes of the person who held him, the baby boy stared back up in contentment.

"Good morning, there, little fellow," Roarke whispered. "Remember me? I'm your daddy."

The two stared into each other's eyes for a few moments, enraptured, and Roarke marveled at the steadiness of the baby's gaze. "God, bless this boy," he prayed.

Roarke was amazed at how deep the affection was that he felt for this tiny human being, whom he had only known for a few short days.

Owan started to stir, and Roarke knew that if the baby were to cry, Hollie would quickly rise, so he decided to talk softly to him, and see if he might be content for just a few minutes more.

"I can't wait until you're a bit bigger, little fellow. When you're old enough that you can take walks with me ... or at least ride around on my shoulders. Lirey used to do that with his boys, and they always seemed to like it.

"I think the first place I'll take you is out to see the stone dragon. You'll like that. You'll hold your hands under its mouth, and the water will pour out and tickle your fingers, and you'll laugh ... you'll laugh. It'll be next spring, I'm sure, because it's getting cold now, too cold to take you outside. Unless we bundle you all up in blankets, and then you won't be able to feel the water anyway." He shook his head and smiled at the baby. "No. No, too cold for this year.

"And then, I'll take you for a little ride on Justice. Your mother will have a fit, of course, but that's all right. We'll do it anyway, just us boys. You'll love the feeling of the sun on your shoulders, and the breeze in your face. We won't go very fast at first, especially if your mother is watching.

"And then maybe, I can make us some little wooden swords, and you can start to learn how to handle a blade. You won't be able to beat me, you see, because I'm the Dragon-Killer. Yes, I am."

Roarke continued to talk softly to his son in a singsong voice. He didn't feel silly, since he didn't realize that Hollie had awakened and was lying in their bed listening to him.

"And then, when you get a little bigger, I can teach you how to shoot the bow. Or maybe I can find somebody who's better than me to teach that to you, because I'm not all that special with the bow, you know. The sword, that's what I use. And my wits. Because I'm, oh, so clever, you see. Oh, yes, I'm a smart one. I married your mother. Yes, I did."

Hollie broke in with a laugh, "Oh, yes, you're a smart one! And a lucky one, too!"

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Roarke said in an injured tone. "You couldn't resist me."

"That was lucky for you, wasn't it?"



"Well, yes," Roarke conceded, standing. "Here, young mommy. I have a hungry boy for you."

"Will you come back to bed with me while I feed the baby?"

"You know I will." As he climbed back under the covers, he thanked God for this idyllic period of his life, and prayed that there would be many such days.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Esselte Smead rapped politely at the door to Roarke's study.

"Lord Roarke?" he said. "You have a visitor."

"Very well," Roarke said wearily. Owan was still waking up several times each night. "Show him in."

"A problem, my Lord," Smead apologized. "The young man refused to enter the castle grounds without your leave. He fears to offend you."

"He might consider that it would offend me more to have to get up out of my chair," Roarke replied testily. "Who is he?"

"Young Poppleton from Ester."

"Really?" Roarke considered for a moment. "Where is he?"

"Apparently he waits out where the wheat field ends. He sent a boy in to announce him." Smead ventured, careful not to pry, "I was not aware he had done anything to offend you?"

"Well, not too much. Just some churlish behavior with one of the young ladies of the castle." He did not mention that it was his own niece, Jesi, who was the aggrieved party. "Just some youthful high spirits gone awry, I believe."

"I see. Well, he seems concerned that you may harbor some strong feelings against him."

"Good. I'm glad he remembers." Roarke stood creakily to his feet. His right knee bothered him when the weather was cold. He debated for a few seconds, then reached for his sword and strapped it on. "Is the boy still here?"

"Yes, right downstairs."



Roarke, astride his black stallion Justice, rode next to Alan Poppleton's young squire to the place where his master waited for them. Before they even got close to the edge of the wheat field, though, Roarke could see Poppleton, who wore a full suit of brilliant silver plate mail, which gleamed blindingly in the midmorning sun.

Alan saw the white-haired Lord approaching and drew his sword. Roarke thought with alarm, *I hope he doesn't think we're going to fight.* But Alan laid his sword on the ground before him, took two steps backward, and bent his knee to the earth, bowing his head.

Roarke tugged on the reins, bringing Justice to a snorting halt, and dismounted with a grunt. "Good day, Poppleton. You may rise."

"Thank you, my Lord," Alan replied.

"What brings you to Thrail?" Roarke inquired. "It's a frosty time of year to be traveling."

"The call of duty has summoned me from my father's house," the young man said solemnly. "And I beg my Lord to recall his own words to me: You said that I might visit again one day."

"Hmm. So I did," Roarke said, recalling their encounter in the stables.

"Well, you are here. Will you join us for tea?"

"No, my Lord. I don't consider myself worthy to share your table, not yet. I just wanted to secure your permission ... if I am able to complete the task that has been set before me, I would count it a great privilege if you would grant me leave to call upon your nieces, Miss Paipaerria and Miss Jesimonde." He looked steadily at Roarke without flinching.

Roarke regarded Alan thoughtfully. Apparently he had matured considerably in the past few months. "I regret to have to inform you of this, but Paipaerria has been promised to another."

"I'm sorry ... I had not heard."

"As far as Jesimonde is concerned, well ... that would be up to her father, and to Jesi herself, of course."

"But you have no objection, my Lord?" Alan persisted.

Roarke pursed his lips, and shook his head slowly. "No, I have no objection."

"Thank you, Lord Roarke," Alan said sincerely. "Then I will leave you for now, and if God permits, we shall meet again one day."

"Where are you going?"

Alan looked at Roarke steadily and said, "I go to do battle with the dragon of County Temter."

"You mean ... the dragon from Beale's Keep?"

"Yes."

Roarke was saddened by the news. So King Ruric had sent out the call for volunteers ... most of whom would probably die. "May I ride with you for a ways?"

"I would be honored."

As they rode, Alan told Roarke of the visit to his father's estate by a knight, a Sir Tellis, who had declared the king's urgent need for a champion, the grave danger facing the land, and the promised reward for Hagenspan's deliverer. He spoke of the conflict within his own soul, wondering whether he might be the one, trying to convince himself that he was, and then seeing if he could make himself believe it. He told of his troubled nights of prayer, in which he offered himself for the Almighty's purposes, but received no assurances that he had been heard.

"In the end," he said, "I decided that I must go because ... I must. There will be warriors dying to defend Solemon and beyond ... should I not stand with them? Could I call myself a man if I would not?" They rode in silence for a few paces.

Roarke remembered his own youthful sins: His discontentment. The nameless barmaid in Lauren. His betrayal of Millisen, who had been all alone when the dragon came. His heart swelled with yearning for young Alan Poppleton ... that he should not die ... that he should come to visit Castle Thrailt once again ... that somehow he might be able to convince Jesi that he was a better man than even her old Uncle Cedric.

Roarke drew on Justice's reins, and Alan and his squire halted as well.

"I have three pieces of advice for you, Alan. You will not listen to the first two, so mark the third one well."

Alan nodded solemnly.

"First: Go home to your father. You are as true a man as you will ever need to be."

Alan smiled sadly. "Thank you ... but I cannot."

"Second: When you get to Solemon ... let somebody else kill the dragon."

He nodded slightly. "We shall see."

"Third: If you should happen to face the dragon on your own, use your sword. The serpent will strike at you, much as a snake would strike. Stay as far away from it as you reasonably can, and when it strikes toward you, give it as fierce a cut as you can, upon its snout.

"It will bleed there. The scent of its blood, the taste of its blood, will infuriate the beast, and it may be distracted from you.

"If it tips its head back to roar, you strike then, at its belly, with the point of your blade, not the edge.

"Don't think to deal it a killing blow on its head; it is well-protected there with bone. Think not to pierce its heart, for that is shielded by many scales. The belly is soft and less well-protected. Disembowel the beast if you can ... and you just might prevail."

"Thank you, my Lord. That is most helpful."

"Alan, before I let you go on to meet your destiny ... may we please share a prayer together?"

"Nothing would please me more, my Lord."



Happy, cooing sounds came from the cradle next to Hollie's bed. Roarke heard his son, and knew that Hollie did too. "I love the little noises he makes when he first wakes up in the morning," he whispered.

"It's my favorite sound in the world," Hollie admitted.

"Even better than the 'Hey-Hollie-Hollie' song?"

"Well, that would have to be second," she said, and punched Roarke on his shoulder.

"How about cries of pain from your poor husband?"

"Getting more popular every minute," she said, and then kissed the shoulder she had just attacked.

"That's more like it," he said in an injured tone. "How will we ever teach our son to have respect for the aged and infirm, when his own mother practices common thuggery upon them?"

"Please forgive me, my husband," she said contritely. "Sometimes I forget that you're old enough to be my great-grandfather."

"My sweetheart," he laughed gently. "My own true love. What will you ever do without me?"

"Don't say that," she said, suddenly serious. "I don't like it when you talk that way."

"I'm sorry." He lay quietly with his wife for a time, and Owan continued to make his contented morning sounds.

"You know," Roarke said softly, "if the world just follows its natural course ... someday, I will have to leave you."

"I know," she replied without inflection. She lay silently, with her head nestled against the shoulder she had punched. She sighed, and then sighed again. "I just ... don't want you to leave me ... not for a long time." She rubbed the tip of her nose against his arm. "I mean for years."

"I swear before Lord Iesuchristi the Almighty ... if God will grant somebody else the power to slay this serpent ... then I will never leave you again. Not until I'm a doddering old man and you can no longer stand the sight of me."

"Promise me."

"I just did."

"Do it again."

"I promise you, Hollie."

"Again."

"I promise."

"You promise?"

"I do."

She rested her cheek against his arm, and stroked his chest. "You're not really old enough to be my great-grandfather, you know."

"I know."

She nuzzled his shoulder with her nose, and kissed it again with her soft, full lips. "Just my grandfather."

"You know, if you're trying to seduce me, you're only doing it about half right."

"Show me which half, and I'll try harder."



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Will was rearranging the loads on his horse Starlight, two packhorses, and an extra saddle horse. Roarke watched him with mute approval, noticing the care he took with his work, and the cleverness he showed with each little adjustment that was required. "You think you'll be gone quite awhile, then?"

"Not too long, I hope, but I want to be ready. There's likely to be snow before I get back."

Roarke nodded. "Tell me again what your plan is."

Will had already told Roarke clearly what his intentions were, over a week ago, but sensed some kind of reluctance on the older man's part to end this conversation. Even though the work of packing the horses was essentially done, and it was time for Will to say goodbye to Piper and then be on his way, he respected Roarke's desire for just a few more words.

"Well, I told King o' the Dragon I'd be back to see him at the end of summer. It's past that now, and if he remembers I said I'd be comin', he might be hurt that I ain't made it back there yet."

"Yes, I understand. But where exactly is it you're planning on taking him?"

"Well, I guess, wherever he wants to go." Will leaned his arm up on his saddle, and tried to stifle a yawn. "I figured that we could head north a little ways, and see if we could find some more of his own kind, if he thinks he wants to do that. Or if he wants to come back and live here at Castle Thrail, I'd gather up whatever he wants to bring with him and haul him on back." Will and Roarke had discussed the idea of giving King of the Dragon a place to live, and while it promised to provide some interesting new problems for the inhabitants of Thrail, Roarke was not inclined to turn the little creature away. "Maybe he won't want to

go nowhere. If he don't, then I'll just spend a couple of weeks with him, makin' sure he's ready for the winter, and then I'll come back home." Will smiled at Roarke with a faint self-conscious glow of humiliation. "I don't intend to stay away from Piper for too long, you know. She won't allow it." Roarke returned a knowing smile. "Who knows? Maybe the King won't even be there no more. Or maybe he'll be invisible."

Roarke laughed then, and thought wistfully how much he had come to appreciate this fine young man. "Well, enjoy your trip, and come home again soon. Be careful if you head north. That's still some very wild country."

"I will." Willum looked at his friend, and wondered if there were something he wasn't saying.

"Well." Roarke roused himself, and clapped the dust of the stables off his hands. "I guess I'd better let you make your goodbyes. I've detained you long enough."

"Lord Roarke, ye've not detained me," Will said. "I've never for one minute grown weary of your company. Not for so long's I've known ye."

"Ah, Will..." Roarke said, and he thought, *how I love you*, but he didn't speak the words aloud.

"Well, goodbye, then," Will said, and he stretched out his hand to his friend.

Roarke's cheeks lifted in a tired smile, and he found that he could not speak. He gripped the hand Will had offered, and with his other one he clapped Will's shoulder. After a long moment, he released his grip, gave Will one more slap on the shoulder, and turned and left the stables, thinking to himself, *It's never enough. It's never quite enough.*



Will had said goodbye to Piper. It was a drawn-out, sniffing, teary-eyed affair, as he had known it would be, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that Piper's "welcome homes" were much more pleasant experiences. If she needed to complain and cry a little bit when he left ... well, he could grant her that.

Trailing the three horses behind him, he slowly made his way northward. Somewhere he would cross the border of Haioland into County Temter, but he didn't suppose that anyone really knew exactly where that border was. County Temter ... that was where the dragon was. Everyone was talking about it now. Everyone except Roarke.

Will wondered if that was it, that thing which hung unspoken like a silent ghost in the room between him and Roarke. Maybe Roarke feared that, come spring, if nobody else had killed the dragon yet, it would be his job to do. His and Will's.

Will hoped not. He remembered the story Roarke had told him about killing a dragon for the first time, and the sensation Will had had that the only reason Roarke was able to prevail was that he was completely hopeless, completely abandoned, completely resigned to die if necessary, if only to see that the dragon was dead, too.

Well, *Will* wasn't hopeless. He had his whole life left to live, a beautiful young bride in his future, and the stewardship of Castle Blythecairne someday too. He had all *kinds* of reasons to want to live.

He reflected glumly that Roarke was no longer hopeless either. Whereas before, he had been bereft of all the things he loved in the world, except for the sword he was able to buy ... now there was Hollie. And Owan. And for that matter, he didn't even have the sword anymore, either—the Dragon-Killer sword.

*No, he prayed, Ye'd better find someone else to kill this one. Not me nor Roarke.*



"Thank you for waiting, Sir Tellis."

"Well, I don't much understand, Sir Roarke, but I respect your right to rule Castle Thrall as you see fit. Also, you are held in high esteem by the king himself."

Roarke nodded. "I just wanted to see Sir Willum off on his way before you made your appeal to my men."

"Willum the Bold?" Tellis asked in surprise. "Why, of all people, would you not want *him* to hear the king's call to arms?"

Roarke regarded Tellis thoughtfully. He was a younger man, probably idealistic, probably on his own way soon to die in the teeth of the dragon. "My reasons are my own. But I'm sure the king would not disapprove."

"Well, he said that we weren't to compel anyone to join the battle, so I guess it's all right," Tellis said doubtfully.

"You may take any of my men whose hearts are willing," Roarke said wearily. "Only be sure to have them report to me here before they leave. You should come, too."

"As you say, Your Lordship."

After Tellis left the room, Roarke knelt on the floor. He began praying for the souls of his men, naming the names of as many as he could recall. Though his right knee pained him grievously, he did not rise, not even when the soreness caused his leg to throb all the way to his hip joint, and tears coursed down the furrowed lines of his face.

## Chapter Forty

There was a balustrade on the roof where Paddy Clay was stationed, a partial wall for him to hide behind whenever the dragon came into the town square of Solemon, just tall enough so that the dragon could not reach over the top and snap him up. There had been a couple of close calls when Paddy had lingered at the edge too long, hoping to make just one more shot, but so far he was unscathed.

Others in the battle for Solemon had not been so fortunate. Most of the Katarin boys were dead, Link Halsey was dead, and Paddy was pretty sure Hink was, too. He had seen the dragon tear off one of Hink's arms just before Hink was able to escape to his fallback position, and Paddy had heard pitiful screams from across the square that quieted to moans and crying, and then became silence. That had been two days earlier, and Paddy had not seen Hink since.

The dragon only ventured into the center of town once or twice a day, but Paddy was unwilling to leave the relative safety of his assigned post. He had seen one of the Katarin boys—Bubby Nettles—trying to steal across the square a couple of days ago, and the dragon had suddenly appeared from the opposite side of town where it had last been seen, thundering across the open space with a speed Paddy had not dreamed it possessed, and Bubby Nettles was no more. He had been a good fellow, too, who had been known to occasionally buy a round for the house. Now Paddy would have to tell Bubby's wife how he had met his end, if he ever got back to Katarin. He thought of Sarie, and tried to tell himself, *Not "if" I get back— "when" I get back.* But he was unconvinced.



Four young men from Castle Blythecairne—Tinker, Kayce, Nobbin, and Jubal—had responded to King Ruric's call for volunteers to go to Solemon. They were on good mounts, each wore a suit of glittering chain mail, swords at their sides, bows slung over their shoulders, and shields hung on their horses' flanks. They had ridden from Blythecairne to Goric, and then had proceeded across uncultivated land directly toward Solemon instead of taking one of the King's Roads, which, though easier to traverse, did not lead directly to their destination. As the four companions crossed the wooden bridge that forded the Maur Wain, entering Solemon itself, they were wary and alert. There had been no sign of the serpent's presence on the other side of the river; perhaps it dared not cross the bridge. But here in Solemon, the devastation was terrible to behold. Huts and houses on the streets leading to the center of town were crushed, walls caved in, gardens dug up, trees uprooted. Closer to the center of Solemon, where the buildings were generally of sturdier construction, most of them still stood intact, but much of the vegetation was torn up, and now there was something even more dreadful to see. Scattered remains of horses, dogs, and men were now evident—just fragments, but identifiable.

Nobbin, a sturdy youth who had joined Yancey's Brigade just a year ago, said, "Might we pause a minute, lads? I fear I'm about to lose me lunch."

Kayce, who had tacitly assumed command of the little squad of warriors, said quietly, "Not now, Nob'. We'd best find shelter som'eres first."

Tinker said, "Just swaller, Nob'."

Nobbin tried to swallow, but the effort was more than he could handle, and he retched over the side of his horse. Jubal, upon seeing his friend lose control, did likewise.

Tinker and Kayce, who were both veterans of Belder Payn's attack on Blythecairne, exchanged knowing glances. Seeing the aftermath of battle for the first time was an unnerving experience.

Kayce said, "Quietly, lads."



Paddy heard the quiet clop of horses coming from the east, and, after making a quick check to ensure that the dragon wasn't anywhere in sight, stood up and waved his arms frantically, hoping to alert the riders. A couple of buildings away, one of the Solemon boys who still lived rose from his hiding place and did the same.

Riding cautiously into the center of town came the four youths from Blythecairne, looking guardedly from one side of the square to the other. Noticing the movements from Paddy and his comrade, Tinker raised a gloved hand in salute. "Kayce," he said in a low voice, pointing toward the roof of Bedford's Tap.

Paddy was jumping up and down now, gesturing frenetically for the four riders to dismount and find shelter. When they continued riding slowly into the square in his direction, he decided to risk a shout. "Get down! Get inside!"

"Where is everybody?" Kayce asked uneasily.

"Get down!" Paddy cried. "Leave your horses!"

Tinker and Kayce dismounted then, but Jubal and Nobbin were unwilling to leave the perceived safety of their saddles, which were the things most familiar to them in this terrible place they had come to.

"Run!" Paddy screamed, and the boy on the other rooftop yelled too, "Run!"

Suddenly an ear-splitting roar shook the air, and the horses reared, spilling the riders onto the ground. One of the horses fell over on its side, unfortunately

pinning Kayce underneath him. Tinker could hear the audible snap of Kayce's leg, and he furiously kicked at the scrambling horse to try to get it off his friend.

The dragon was stamping across the square now toward the four boys, its head lowered, blasting fury before it as if it really could breathe fire. Nobbin tried to rise, fainted, and fell back to the earth, causing a puffy cloud of dust to rise into the air. Jubal screamed and ran off back down the street toward the east where he had come from. Paddy Clay cried, "Run! Get inside!"

Tinker tried to drag Kayce toward the doorway of the building from which Paddy was tearfully pleading with them. The dragon grabbed one of the horses in its mouth and picked it completely off the ground. Blood ran from its mouth and splattered on the street. The serpent hurled the horse across the square and focused its attention on Tinker.

Paddy's voice was hoarse from screaming, and he could only watch. Kayce looked up at his friend, and groaned, "I'm done, Tink'. Run." Tinker looked down into Kayce's eyes, and the dragon whipped its tail toward him, knocking another one of the horses from its feet. "I'm sorry!" Tinker cried, and ran.

Kayce struggled to free his sword from its sheath, hoping to strike some kind of blow before surrendering his life. He shouted an angry yell, trying to distract the dragon from its pursuit of his friend. He was still wrestling with his sword belt when he disappeared into the dragon's jaws, his defiant howl cut off with a muffled crunch.

Flicking its tail at Tinker again, the serpent sent him spinning uncontrollably across the street to crash against the front of the building. Tinker crumpled to the walkway, but didn't lose consciousness. He rolled painfully away from his attacker to press himself as flat against the wall as he could.

The dragon stabbed its face down to grab Tinker up, but found to its utter frustration that the boy was wedged just out of its reach, in the little angle made



where the wall met the street. The serpent's snout was just blunt enough that it could not get hold of its quarry, so instead of biting the boy, it roared at him in exasperation. Tinker, recognizing a piece of Kayce's cloak snagged in the dragon's teeth, passed out then.

Nobbin drowsily wakened, and wondered for a moment where he was. The dragon, seeing him stir, crushed the life out of his body with one stride from its heavily muscled hind leg, and then stopped, looked again at Tinker, then followed the street to the east, hunting Jubal and one of the horses which had fled in that direction.



Tinker woke up at last, and it was dark. He suddenly realized that he was inside the building, remembered what had happened that day, and wept.

Paddy Clay handed him a crust of bread, which he had scraped the mold off from, and said, "Here, friend. It ain't much, but ... well, it ain't much."

Tinker looked at him in the dim light; must be moonlight leaking through cracks in the ceiling. "I think we've met before, ain't we, mate?"

"Aye. I been to Blythecairne once."

"Ye were the one what tolt us about the dragon, last year."

"Aye." There didn't seem to be anything more to say about that.

After a moment Tinker asked, "Was it ye what brung me inside?"

Paddy nodded.

"What're we goin' t' do?" Tinker asked sadly. "Them boys was some o' the best we had at Blythecairne."

"A lot o' good boys been kilt already. We had thirty when the dragon struck. I don't know how many's left, but there can't be no more'n five or so."

"What're we goin' t' do?" Tinker echoed his own question.

"Well, stay and fight, I suppose."

"How?" Tinker looked at Paddy incredulously. "Why?"

Paddy looked at him steadily, and said in a calm voice, "What else are we goin' to do? Go home?" He let that question sink in. "And then what?"

Tinker looked back through the gloom at Paddy, and then his eyes grew desperate for a moment, darting around the blackened room and seeing nothing. Finally he sighed, seemed to resign himself to the bleakness of his circumstances, and said in a sad voice, "We're already dead, ain't we?"

"Maybe."

Tinker looked at the crust of bread that he still held in his hand. He broke it in two pieces, and handed half of it back to Paddy.

## Chapter Forty-One

Roarke woke up in a sweat; he could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and it caused him a moment of alarm. Then he heard the crowing of a rooster, and realized it was morning. He was at home in Castle Thrail with Hollie lying beside him, and it had only been a dream.

In his dream, he had been a young man again. Millisen was alive, and she was glowing with happiness. Roarke was content, and he did not go to Lauren, did not meet the nameless barmaid, did not break faith with his wife. Then the scene shifted. When the dragon came to his farm, he hid with Millisen and she lived. Must be the dragon died some other way. The years passed; they rebuilt, they had children, they grew old together, and apparently, he was happy. And so was she.

Then the pictures that played in his mind changed into the history he knew all too well. His failure, his bereavement, his desolation. He killed the dragon, and he was alone. Alone for years, and years, and more years. And then, there was Hollie, and then there was Owan.

And suddenly, he was back in his youth again, and he was at the moment when he made the choice to leave Millisen and go into Lauren. And it was as if there were a voice, the voice of God perhaps, and it seemed as if it were saying to Roarke that there was one choice that he could have made, that would have changed his entire life and the histories of everybody that his life touched.

And Roarke saw both of his histories, rolled out like carpets before him, and he had to choose. Would he choose Millisen and the children they had never had, a life of peace, safety, a life of contentment, a life that was normal and undistinguished, but happy? Or would he choose the years of emptiness, the years

of regret, but resulting in the deliverance of Hagenspan by his hand, and ultimately leading to Hollie and Owan?

On the one hand, he would be sentencing Millisen to death, and Millisen's children to unlife. On the other, Hollie would be abandoned to her fate at Kenndt's, and Owan would never exist.

Most frightening of all, in his dream (for such is the nature of dreams), the power was absolutely within Roarke's control. As he slept, he was completely convinced that, should he choose to go back to his farm and stay with Millisen, it would be so. And when he awoke, he would find Millisen lying beside him, silver-haired and stout, and their grandchildren would be gathered around his feet.

The voice, which spoke but did not speak, seemed to be asking him, to be demanding of him, *If you could, would you change your life? Would you go back and change your life?*

Roarke, awakened from the dream, felt his heart break again, break again that Millisen was dead. Tears coursed from the corners of his eyes and drained back into his whitened temples. He still felt the fear hammering in his chest, fear that if he said yes to the voiceless question, Hollie would disappear from his side and Millisen would materialize. And fear that, if he chose Hollie, he would once again be sentencing Millisen to death.

Still, though he was awake—still the answer was demanded of him. *Would you change your life?*

Torn but resolute, he whispered to the dawn. "No."

"No, what?" murmured Hollie drowsily.

"I'm sorry, love. I was just dreaming," he said softly.

"Mm-hmm," she said, and drifted back to sleep.

With tears of mourning still damp upon his face—mourning for Millisen and the children she never bore—he kissed Hollie's golden head and whispered, "I love you."



Roarke was sitting on a table in the dining hall with Owan in his lap. Hollie was before him, and she was playing with the baby. Owan was still too young to understand the things that were going on around him, but it was clear that he enjoyed the kisses and laughter of his mother.

Roarke looked upon his beautiful young wife with a mixture of such love, longing, and appreciation that she could not help but be flattered by his attention. Each time she touched Owan, she was sure to brush Roarke's fingers that held their child. She let her hands linger on his knees when she leaned in to kiss the baby. And sometimes, after she kissed the baby, she would brush her husband's face with her hair, her lips, and press her bodice suggestively against the backs of his hands.

"My God, but you'll have me undone," he said huskily. "Be careful, or I may drop the baby."

"I'll catch him," she said, and kissed him passionately on the mouth. Roarke felt that he must surely swoon.

Esselte Smead came to the entrance to the dining hall then, clearing his throat noisily, leading a tall figure that Roarke recognized as being Sir Keltur, one of King Ruric's most respected knights.

"My Lord Roarke, we have a visitor," Smead said.

"Hollie, would you take Owan while I receive our guest?" Roarke said with regret. Hollie took the baby, but it was clear from her countenance that she was terribly discomfited by the appearance of one of the king's men.

After she had left the room, Roarke stood stiffly, dismissed Smead, and addressed Keltur. "You have some word from the king?"

"Not directly, Sir Roarke, though he is aware. I bring you a message from Queen Maygret." He took a scroll from his pouch, and offered it to Roarke.

"Would you read it to me, please?" Roarke asked, dreading the words it almost certainly contained.

Keltur broke the seal on the scroll and unfurled the parchment. Clearing his throat, he began to read:

*Maygret, Queen of the Realm, to our most faithful and valiant knight, Sir Roarke, Lord of Thrail, etc. etc.*

*To Cedric Roarke:*

*The young and the brave and the foolish are dying from among our people once again, and while we regret to impose upon your generosity this second time, you, Roarke, are the Dragon-Killer.*

*We say "this second time" recognizing that you have already dispatched three fell beasts to their reward. But we have only forced our will upon you once before, in the form of the royal commission. Now we do so again, regretfully.*

*It is our hope that you shall win the battle, and retire to a good old age with your new family. But live or die, you must now arm yourself for battle. For without your strong arm, the youths of Hagenspan are spent.*

*It is with our undying gratitude and respect that we thrust this charge upon you. May your God protect you, as He has in former days.*

*Signed by our own hand,*

*Maygret, Queen*

Roarke slumped wearily back against the table, his shoulders stooped, his head bowed, his eyes dry.

"Sir Roarke?" Keltur asked with concern.

Roarke waved off his apprehension, saying bleakly, "I did say that I wouldn't have changed my life." He looked at the other knight with grim resignation. "Well ... here it is."

## Chapter Forty-Two

"I don't like t' complain, but th' truth is, I was a sight happier afore I had a friend," King of the Dragon said to Will.

"I'm so sorry," Will said, and he truly was. "The summer just got away from me before I had a chance to come back to ye."

"Must be ye married yer ma," the King offered helpfully.

"No, not yet, but it might be pretty soon."

"Then what took ye so long?" The yellow eyes flared, becoming almost reddish in hue before fading back to their normal shade.

"Please forgive me, Yer Majesty. I was just so busy with my duties at the castle, and takin' trips for Lord Roarke." *And spending time with Piper*, he thought.

"Well, I was purty busy too," the King said sullenly.

"I'm sure," Will nodded. Hoping to take the edge off his friend's brusque temper, he opened up a pack of sweetbreads and presented a piece to him. "I think ye'll like this."

Grunting disagreeably, the King snatched the food from Will. He took a small bite, then chewed it quickly with his front teeth, smacking his lips. "Hmm," he said, and then devoured the rest of the piece Will had given him. "Got any more?"

Smiling, Will passed him another piece of the sticky bread. King of the Dragon ate it all, then sucked on his fingers so that none of the sugary residue would be wasted. "I guess ye're fergave," he said grudgingly.

"Thank you, Yer Majesty," Will said, his gratitude unfeigned. "I see ye're still wearin' the medal I gave ye."



"Aye. An' I see ye're still a-wearin' the, uh ... the, uh, thing what I gave t' ye."

Will nodded. "I never go anywhere without lettin' folk know that I'm protected by the King o' the Dragon."

The little fellow laughed then, but Will noticed that it wasn't perhaps quite as heartily as he had laughed the last time Will visited him.

"What else ye got in there?"

Will looked inside the pack that was resting next to him. "Ever had jerky?"

The King looked curious. "I don't rightly recall. What is it?"

"Well, it's kinda like the horsemeat ye like, except it's salted and dried out."

"Dried out? What would ye want t' do that to it fer?"

"It makes it last longer that way without spoilin'."

"I don't know nothin' about that." He sniffed the air; the jerky had a pungent scent that made him begin to salivate. "Well, let's have a bit."

Will handed him some of the meat. King of the Dragon tore off a bit with his pointed teeth, and chewed it laboriously for a few minutes. "It's hard eatin', ain't it?" he said. "I don't much like it." He popped the rest into his mouth and chewed it stiffly until it was soft enough to swallow. "Ye know," he said with more enthusiasm, "after that last feast what ye left me, I almost fergat how t' hunt fer me own food. Spoilt, I was."

Will was unsure whether to apologize for bringing the feast or not, so he just said, "Did ye make out all right?"

"Aye. When I got hungry enough, I remembered how t' go oot an' fetch me a coupla conies. I'm pretty spry, fer an old feller anyways."

Will smiled affectionately. "Ye're the King."

"That's right. I am," King of the Dragon said happily. "Say, ye got any more o' that jerky? That's purty good."



At the campfire later that night, King of the Dragon said, "Ye know, there's things what I jest cain't do. I cain't make a far, fer one. I tried all o' th' magic that I know, t' make me a far after ye left last time, an' there weren't nothin' I could do t' make it happen." He stared at the dancing flames, mesmerized. "I do surely like a far."

Will decided to broach the subject he had come to discuss. "Ye know ... there's a way that I can make sure that ye always have a fire, whenever ye want one."

With excitement flaring in his eyes, the King said, "Would ye come here an' make me one whensoever I wants it?"

"Well, no," Will answered, and before his friend could register disappointment, he continued, "but I can take ye to a place where ye'll always be able to have one, if ye like."

"Ye mean yer castle." King of the Dragon fell silent, and Willum couldn't determine what was going on in his mind. Finally the little gray creature turned his eyes toward Will with a pleading look in them. "Would ye and yer ma live wi' me?"

Suppressing a smile, Willum said, "Well, no, probably not. But we'd be close by."

After a moment's contemplation, the King moaned, "I s'pose, if I don't go back t' yer castle wi' ye, I parbly won't see ye no mores."

"Well, no, that ain't necessarily true. I'd come back and visit ye from time to time."

King of the Dragon's face twisted in something like a smile, and then he turned glum again. "Ye know th' worst part about havin' a friend?"

"What's that?"

"The turrrible lonesomeness, when it's gone."

Will said slowly, "I might have an answer for that, too ... if ye don't want to come to Castle Thraill, nor ye don't want to stay here alone."

"What else *is* there?" he asked mournfully.

"We could take a ride back up north, where ye come from, and see if there's any of yer kin left. Maybe they been missin' you all these years, and they'd be happy to have you back."

"Ye don't mean ... back up where th' wolves is, do ye?"

"With my sword protectin' you, and yer magic protectin' me, we'd be safe, Yer Highness. Safe and cozy."

"Hmm." King of the Dragon pondered the concept. "Some o' me own kin.... Ye think they'd still be some of 'em left alive?"

"We won't know unless we go and look."

"How'd we get there?" He was becoming excited, thinking he knew the answer, but wanting to hear Will say it.

"Well, Yer Majesty, I brung along an extra horse, so's ye can ride if ye like."

"An' ye'd help me, so I wouldn't fall offen it?"

"Yes, I'd lead it along behind me, and all ye'd have to do is hang on." He indicated the horse that King of the Dragon would be riding. "I picked her out just for you. She's ever so gentle."

The little gray fellow was starting to laugh again, in his chortling, self-delighted way that Will had come to know, and the young knight felt with relief that he had finally gotten back into his good graces.

"I allus thought it'd be so handy, havin' a 'oss t' ride!" the King said enthusiastically. "Ye could ride an' ride an' ride, an' then when ye got tired o' ridin', ye could hop off an' eat th' 'oss!"

"Yes, that could be right handy," Will said, nodding.

## Chapter Forty-Three

Hollie was lying on her face in the bed she shared with her husband, sobbing bitterly, and Roarke figured there was probably no way to comfort her. Nevertheless, he sat beside her, not speaking, but gently stroking her back. He noticed and treasured every curve that his fingers traced; the smooth angular plates of her shoulder blades, the soft valley between them; her beautiful neck, shaking now with the force of her crying, and on down to the lovely basin at the small of her back. He loved the way she felt to his touch, and he cherished the sensation of her warm reality beneath his yearning hand, cherished it as if he were feeling it for the first time. *Or the last*, he thought somberly.

Hollie continued to cry, and Roarke continued to caress her. The sky outside their window turned from white to gray, and Roarke closed his eyes, nearly nodding off himself, but continuing to stroke her for as long as she needed him. At last Hollie's cries turned to muffled whimpers, and after a few more minutes, she slept, the exhausted sleep of the broken-hearted. Roarke sat at the edge of their bed with his hand on her back, still now instead of stroking, and his head drooped down toward his chest. He woke briefly twice, when he startled himself by snoring, but soon slept himself, the blessed relief of the disconsolate.



He woke sometime in the night to find Hollie sitting cross-legged next to him, nursing the baby. Somehow he had lain down and gotten under the bedcovers, but he didn't remember how that had happened. "I thought Piper had the baby," he said hoarsely.

"She did. But he's a hungry boy, and he needed his mommy."

Roarke watched her as she fed the baby, her features softly lit by the flame of a single candle. "You're so beautiful," he said. "I am so blessed."

She said nothing, but a solitary tear crept down her cheek, glistening in the candlelight.



Morning arrived, and Owan sang his warbling morning song, waking his father, who lay there listening with a sweet ache in his heart, thinking that it must be like the song of angels, transcendent, pure, holy. He thought that he would be content to lie there for the rest of eternity, with the muted rays of the morning sun creeping through the window, listening to his son joyfully greeting the new day.

Hollie reached over and touched his face with her fingertips.

"Cedric?"

He turned to look at her.

"There's something I need to tell you."

He gazed into her eyes and waited for her to continue.

"I want you to know something." She took a deep breath, and released it slowly, involuntarily shuddering as she exhaled. "I love you, Cedric. I want you to know ... that I love you."

He was about to reply, but she continued. "I've always loved you. When I married you, it wasn't because you were rich, or because you bought me presents. It wasn't because you knew the king, or that you had killed a dragon. It wasn't out of pity, or respect, or greed, or just settling. It wasn't because I thought you could get me out of Kenndt's. I married you because ... I love you.

"My life has been so full since you entered it. You have made me so rich. Not in ... things. But in *everything*." She held his gaze, her eyes earnestly begging him to understand. "Thank you for these last two years. I will beg God that He gives us more time together. But if the days we have shared are all that we will ever have, it's been enough.

"I just wanted you to know ... I love you, Cedric."

## Chapter Forty-Four

"I have a burden for you, Esselte." Roarke welcomed Smead into his study, directing him to the chair across from his desk.

"Anything." Smead's round face was creased with concern.

"In case I don't come back ... my will ... I just didn't get around to registering with King Ruric the fact that my estate should go to Hollie and Owan."

"Everything happened so quickly, my Lord."

"Yes, but I should have known it would." He grimaced. "Well, there's no sense in berating myself for it now. The point is, if I don't return, you are in line to inherit all of the holdings of Castle Thrail, as we discussed so many years ago. I thought that you and Dan would balance each other nicely, his brashness and audacity against your common sense and generosity, but now it's all upon you.

"I won't presume to tell you how to rule the land. But I do have a very large request for you."

Smead interrupted, "My Lord, you speak as if you are not coming home. Isn't that premature? Maybe you'll kill this dragon, too, just as you did the others."

"Esselte," Roarke said, "that may be ... yes. But if I don't come back again ... then when will we ever speak of these things?"

Smead said sorrowfully, "Of course. Forgive me."

"Our time is short. Forgive me for being blunt, but I must." Smead nodded. "You have no heir."

"No."

"My request to you is this: If I cannot return ... would you please name Owan as your heir?"



"Of course I will! Everything here is yours, my Lord, and I am, and will always be, only your steward. Of course I'll name Owan as the inheritor of your property."

"You're not only my steward, Esselte. For these many years, you have been ... a good friend."

"Thank you, my Lord. Cedric." The two men stood, looked at each other grimly, and then embraced.



Roarke finished cinching up his gear, and patted Justice's neck, noticing the sprinkling of white hairs mingled among the black. He rested his forehead against Justice's cheek, speaking softly to his old companion. "We have one more trip to take, old-timer. One way or the other, this will be the end of our battles." The horse grunted as if it understood his words, and the old knight stroked his neck. "Well ... let's go."

Stepping out into the crispness of the bright winter morning, Roarke blinked at what he saw. Almost the entire company of Castle Thrail's people had turned out to wish him well, to offer prayers, to say goodbye. They lined the courtyard in two long, crowded rows leading to the outer gate.

Hess Boole stepped forward to take the reins of Justice. "Allow me to lead your horse, my Lord. You'll need both hands for your people."

Roarke nodded mutely, then began to make his way slowly through the corridor created by his friends. Each one of them reached out to touch him as he passed; some shook his hand, some touched him affectionately on a shoulder, a few women dared to embrace him, some children hugged him around the legs.

All the men of his six companies of soldiers, all of the craftsmen and farmers of the surrounding village, all of their wives and children were there. "I am overwhelmed," Roarke said, humbled. "Thank you."

"God be with you," they said. "You'll be in our prayers," they said. "Come back to us soon!"

Finally he came to those most intimate with him. Jesi Tenet, weeping, clung to him. "Oh, Uncle Cedric."

"My sweetheart," he murmured, and offered her a brave, trembling smile. "If Alan Poppleton ever comes this way, hear what he has to say."

Jesi was confused, but said, "I will."

Piper was next, and she did not speak, for fear of bursting into uncontrollable sobs. But she looked deeply into her uncle's eyes. Roarke regarded her with wonder and pride, and said, "Who is this glorious young woman I see? Where has she come from?"

She reached for him, stood on her toes and kissed him, then turned and ran, back toward the castle and the privacy of her room.

Ronica stood next in line, her face pale and drawn, and she held Owan. "Ronnie," her brother said with open affection, "how blessed I am to have you for a sister."

Her lips trembled, and she whispered, "I love you so much."

"Take good care of my little family while I'm gone, will you?"

She nodded, and almost said something else, but could not.

"Goodbye, little baby boy," Roarke said to Owan, and the baby flailed his arms toward his father. Roarke picked his son up and squeezed him to himself, kissing the little boy several times before handing him back to Ronica. His face was wet with his own tears when he regretfully released his grip on Owan's pudgy little hand.

"Haldamar," Roarke choked, and held his arms out to his brother-in-law.

"Cedric," Haldamar replied, and returned the embrace, clapping him on the back, his eyes moist and red.

"Esselte."

"Cedric." Smead gave Roarke a quick handshake, then they too embraced.

"Remember to love these people," Roarke whispered against his ear.

"I will."

The last person between Roarke and the gate was Hollie. She wore the iridescent white gown that he had purchased for her from Mara Dannat on the day he had presented her to the king, and the ruby-set circlet he had given her that same day. She no longer wept, but had the regal, majestic bearing of a queen.

"My Lord," she said softly, taking his hand and curtsying.

It was as if his heart was full of an aching emptiness. He had so many things he wanted to say to this woman, but could find words for none of them. He stood, gazing at her shimmering beauty, seeing none of it, enveloped by all of it. He breathed. And his eyes filled with tears, burning, blinking, blocking his vision of her. He must blink. He must breathe. He opened his mouth so that he could breathe. He blinked rapidly a few times, and his vision cleared, and she was still there. *Oh, God, couldn't we just stop right here?* A breeze ruffled his hair, reminding him that time was still passing, had not stopped. He exhaled.

In a tight, high voice, he said, "Hollie."

"My Lord, I shall walk with you."

"Yes."

Roarke retrieved Justice's reins from Hess Boole, turned back to the assembled people of Thrail, and lifted his hand in farewell.

Boole shouted, "To the Dragon-Killer!"

And the people of Thraild cheered, loud, long, triumphantly, sorrowfully, gratefully.

Roarke turned and took Hollie's hand, and they walked wordlessly through the gate.

## **End of Book Three**

Roarke's adventures continue in

# The Hagenspan Chronicles

## Book Four



# Roarke's Wisdom

## The Last Dragon

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