

The Dragon's Daughter

Sierra Dafoe

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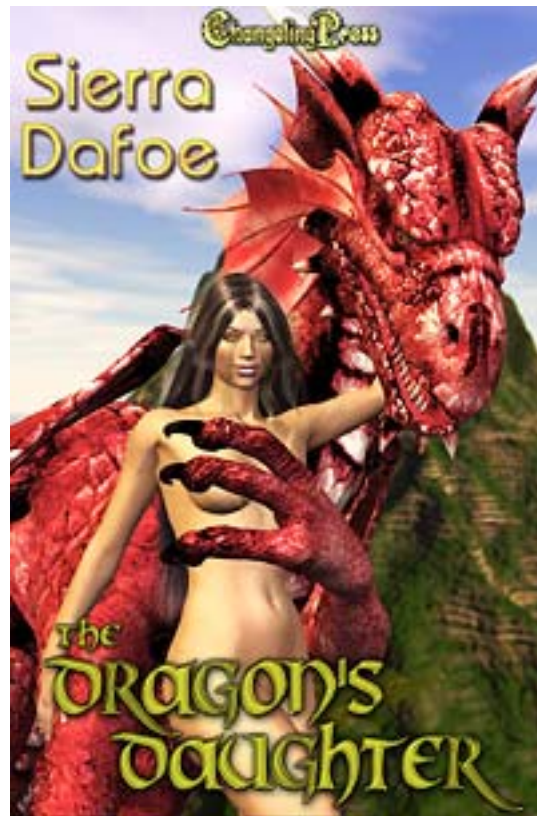
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Prologue

Twenty-odd years of wrangling, and it all came down to the same question -- who would get to marry her daughter?

Sighing, Melgara sat back and rubbed at her temples. Below, at the foot of the dais, the lords Hausther and Aureora glared up at her, while their sons glared only at each other.

"Allow the challenge, your Highness!" Darmon Hausther demanded, his black eyes blazing. He was lean, hawk-faced, with a high, arrogant forehead and one striking streak of silver in his jet-black hair. Behind him, his son Darrek was coiled like a cat, seeming ready to spring into battle the instant Melgara so much as nodded.

Typical.

The northern Hausther clan was eternally belligerent, the first, always, to leap to arms, and the last to accept an accord. Well, Darmon Hausther would accept one today, by the Winds. Him and that darkly handsome offspring of his -- whether they liked it or not.

On the other side, Thrand Aureora stood with arms crossed over his huge barrel chest, his son Rand towering beside him like a mountain. Thick, orange-red hair cascaded over the youth's broad shoulders -- the very sign and mark of the Aureorean clan. Where Darrek was lean and fast, Rand was built like a young bull; stolid, massive, and enduring. Looking at him, one would never suspect the lively intellect that lurked beneath that fiery head of hair.

A battle between the two young scions would be more than deadly; it could well be disastrous.

The four clans of her realm were held together by only two things -- the balance of power between them, and the queen's law. *Her* law. Let these two hotbloods at each

other's throats, and within weeks the entire realm would be wracked by war. Gerdain in the west would side with Hausther in the north, and the southlands would ally inevitably with Thrand.

At times she felt it was like trying to control the Winds themselves. And yet, if she didn't, they would rip the very fabric of their world to shreds. The constant sparring between the two clans had been bad enough, as they'd each tried to gain an advantage in their bid for her daughter's hand. She didn't dare allow it to come to open warfare.

Knowing this day would inevitably come, Melgara Southerlin had watched, and waited, and *planned*. "No." Her tone was final.

Even Thrand looked surprised. "But, your Highness..."

"I said no, Thrand."

"Then *choose*, your Highness!" Darmon snapped. "Choose a consort for that daughter who is so precious no one may even *see* her!"

Melgara let just the tiniest trickle of smoke escape her nostrils and Darmon Hausther stepped back quickly, knowing he had gone too far.

"Or let her choose." The words were spoken softly, and Melgara looked up. Yes, young Rand. She was not surprised, though Darrek's head jerked in shock as if such an idea was almost unthinkable.

That one, she chuckled sourly, has a lot to learn.

"She shall." Immediately, at her words, much of the tension seemed to ease from the room. Melgara held up a hand. "Be warned however. The one she does *not* choose shall be banished forever from the four corners of my realm." Rand's blue eyes went wide at this pronouncement, while Darrek's grew darker, till they glinted like obsidian amid the sharp planes and angles of his face. Melgara noted their reactions from the corner of her eye even as she kept her attention on their fathers. "Do you want the throne so badly *now*, my lords?"

"Rand, no." Thrand stepped forward. "I cannot allow this."

Rand looked down at his father with a gentleness Melgara observed closely. "If you command, Lord, I will of course obey. But it would grieve me greatly to not be given my chance. And I think," he added, almost offhandedly, "that the lady deserves more of a choice than Darrek."

At that, Thrand gave an approving bark of laughter, while both Darmon and Darrek tensed in fury. Then Thrand pulled Rand close into a hug that cracked the younger man's spine.

What passed between Darrek and his father was silent, no more than an exchange of glances. When Darmon nodded, Darrek drew himself up and met Melgara's gaze haughtily. "Bring her forth then, and let her choose."

Insolent whelp! Melgara stared at him, raising one regal eyebrow, until finally Darrek flushed and dropped his gaze.

Yet it had been the fire and ferocity of the Hausther clan which had saved them all in the Zendarian wars. And someday they might well need that ferocity again. Melgara kept her tone mild as she replied, "She's not here."

"What?" Both the older lords started forward in consternation.

Melgara glared at them. "Darmon Hausther. Thrand Aureora. For over twenty years the two of you have been at each other's throats. Should I have let my daughter grow up surrounded by your petty brawling? Should I have let her become jaded and cynical from being used as a pawn in your power games? Will you *dare* tell me that you would not have done so?"

Abashed, the two older men stepped back, Thrand's shaggy head drooping. She eyed them coldly. "One way or another, my lords, your feud ends here."

Dismissing them from her mind, she turned to their sons. "You are both resolved?" The youths nodded. "So be it."

She clapped her hands and immediately an enormous wind sprang up, howling through the confines of the long, vaulted hall. It wrapped itself around the two young men and threw open the massive doors at the end of the hall with a bang. Outside, the world seemed to tumble away from the high perch of Wind Castle, spreading out far

below into a tapestry of green, gold and blue. In the distance, the peaks of lesser mountains glinted in the sunlight.

Under the wind's rough hand, Rand's hair tangled into thick, fiery curls, while Darrek's streamed back, long and smooth and black as pitch. They both leaned into the wind like hounds eager to the scent.

Melgara raised her voice over the wind's keening. "It will carry you to the land where Elara has been hidden all these years -- a land that, I warn you, will seem very strange to you. You are forbidden to offer each other any violence," she continued. Both of them glowered rebelliously, and she eyed them sternly. "Do not doubt that I will know. And if you do..." She left the threat hanging. "You may, however, help each other if you choose."

From the rolling of their eyes, it was clear the two lordlings found that possibility unlikely. Privately, Melgara sighed. "You shall each have an equal chance to woo and win my daughter. But first --" She smiled evilly, allowing herself to enjoy this moment. How she had waited and planned for this day! "First, you will have to find her."

She clapped her hands again, and the wind redoubled, whipping through the vast audience hall with a hungry ferocity. Under its buffeting, the two young lords seemed to *shred*, their outlines blurring, stretching, spreading until, with a last muscular shudder, two dragons, one deep-chested and red as flame, the other lean, black, and wickedly taloned, unfurled their wings and sprang from the castle into the rushing wind.

Oh, my daughter, Melgara prayed as they rose, flitting through the cool, clean air, *all my hopes rest on you. May you find joy enough now to make up for all your years of exile.*

The hall seemed preternaturally quiet after the fury of the wind. Below her, Darmon Hausther shifted, already impatient. "What now, your Highness?"

"Now?" She settled back, enjoying his discomfiture, and smiled coldly. "Now, my Lord Hausther, we wait."

Chapter One

Lara reached for her pencils, picked up a blue one, then, shaking her head, selected a bright orange-red. On the large sketch pad in front of her, a dragon was slowly taking shape.

Outside the wind gusted, bringing with it the scent of salt and the echoing cries of seagulls. Lara paused a moment to listen, smiling.

The wind was why she'd moved out here to this tiny cottage on the edge of the Cape. Okay, shack, really, if she were honest -- even off-season rents on Cape Cod were obscenely steep. There was room enough for her bed (a queen-sized, and her sole self-indulgence), although it had to serve both as a chair for her drafting table and a couch when she wanted to watch TV. There were shelves for her meager wardrobe and a tiny kitchenette. She even had something resembling privacy in the form of scrub pines that enclosed the shingled cottage in a u-shaped hedge. A mere formality now that most of the houses in town were boarded up for the season.

Lara loved the sound of wind and the feel of it pressing against her body with an intimacy that set her blood to humming in a way nothing else ever had. Not even sex. Oh sure, she'd done her fair share of groping in back seats, white cotton panties growing damp as she'd alternately leaned into and suffered through the usual adolescent attempts at seduction. But the few times she'd gone farther, it hadn't been at all like what she'd imagined, or hoped.

It was a lonely life, she supposed, but that didn't bother her. She'd never felt that comfortable around other people anyway. Maybe it was because she'd been an orphan. Maybe it was just her nature. Either way, she'd gone to art school, and moved here, and okay, sure, sometimes she was a little lonely -- vibrators were great up to a point and all -- but at least she had the wind.

And her dragons.

All her life, Lara had been fascinated by dragons. While other girls her age had been mooning, preening and playing with makeup, she'd been fighting Thread from the back of a Pernese dragon, confronting Smaug with Bilbo Baggins, and sailing with Ged down the Dragon's Run. But none of the creatures she'd found in books had ever seemed quite right to her. Close, but not *it*.

At times, the depth of her fixation had worried her. Watching the other kids, she couldn't help feeling there was something a bit wrong with her. She wasn't really shy -- or at least she didn't think so. She just didn't seem to have anything in common with them.

She'd never dared to tell her "Aunt" Dee -- the woman who'd raised her and who, oddly enough, she rather resembled -- exactly how bad it was. The closest she'd ever come was asking Dee, once, if she felt it was unnatural for Lara to be uninterested in boys. Dee had given her a small, mysterious smile and shaken her head. "Don't worry, Lara. You'll find the right one someday. *I did.*" And Dee had turned that private smile on her husband Rory.

Her words hadn't entirely reassured Lara -- but then again, Lara hadn't exactly told her all of it either. She certainly hadn't told her that not only did she fantasize about dragons, she... well... *fantasized* about them.

Lara looked down at her drawing, considering. He was shaping up to be a handsome brute, massive and deep-chested, with powerful muscles that flowed in strong, sensuous curves. Sexy. Sexy in a way she'd never seen in a guy -- a couple of movie stars, maybe. But the chances of her ever meeting a movie star, even here on Cape Cod, were about as slim as... well, as having a dragon knock on your door.

Smiling at her whimsy, she bent back to her work, enjoying the cool autumn sunlight streaming through her window, and the soft, seductive touch of the wind.

* * *

Tumbling, the two dragons fell, their wings straining as they fought for altitude. Impossibly tall buildings loomed around them, and below was a whirling mass of color and noise, none of it familiar.

And people screaming. Rand recognized *that* sound at least.

I don't think they're dragons, Darrek.

Really? What gave you that idea? Even in mind-speak, Darrek's sneer was unmistakable. His wingtip accidentally fouled Rand's, and together they plummeted toward the strange black earth. It looked awfully hard, rushing up to meet them.

At the last minute, Rand let go his dragon-shape, feeling his wings shred into nothingness as his body condensed. Ducking his head, he hit the ground and rolled, coming to his feet just as an enormous blue-and-white creature squealed in alarm and swerved. He and Darrek threw themselves aside and landed, panting, on a thin strip of white running at the base of the buildings.

Rand sat up, ruefully rubbing an elbow. The white earth was even harder than the black stuff had been. Darrek was glancing around, eyes narrowed to contemptuous slits.

If he'd been looking at *him* like that, Rand thought with a surge of dislike, he'd rip the sneer right off the snide bastard's face.

"They're staring at us."

Rand looked up. The inhabitants of this place appeared much like himself -- if rather small and spindly-looking -- but he had the uneasy feeling that none of them had the vaguest idea what it felt like to spread your wings on a morning breeze. They were gaping, their eyes filled with shock and a sort of cold loathing, as if he and Darrek were bugs, or worms, something alien and repulsive. Instinctively he shrank closer to the Hausther heir. "Let's get out of here."

"You do what you want, Aurorea." Darrek shoved him away and clambered to his feet. "Go ahead then. Go on."

"Fine," Rand shot back, glaring, and rose.

In the distance he heard a new noise approaching, a sort of harsh, insistent blaring. It was alarming somehow. He stalked away from it, shoving through the crowd. They drew back as if his touch were acid.

Which it might be to them, for all I know.

Buildings loomed over him and Rand glanced up, his head swimming at those towering edifices. Everything here was so fast, and loud -- and *big*. He heard footsteps, and glanced back to see Darrek, his face set in a black scowl. "Don't say anything, Aureora. Just don't."

Rand didn't. There was no Wind in the world -- this world or any other -- that would make him admit that what he'd felt, when he'd heard Darrek coming up behind him, was relief. The idea of being alone in this alien place was terrifying.

They reached another stretch of the black earth. The strange metallic creatures rushed past in an unending stream. Behind him, Rand heard a shout. "Stop right where you are! Police!" He had no idea what "police" was, but "stop" he understood.

Rand halted. Glancing back he saw six burly men, though none near his own height, pushing through the crowd at a run as they approached.

Beside him, Darrek swore. "By the Winds, Rand, are you daft?"

"They said stop."

"And if I said go jump in a lake, would you do that too?" Grabbing his arm, Darrek dragged him around the corner of the building. "Now run!"

They zigzagged through a maze of streets that left Rand's brain in a whirl. After five minutes, a nagging unease began growing in his mind. He panted as he ran, "Darrek? Where are we going?"

For the first time, an expression other than hauteur crossed Darrek's face. *He looks nervous*, Rand thought. *Even scared.*

The idea was alarming.

Then, even more alarmingly, he realized, *So am I.*

Wherever it was, this place stank. The noise and the constant shoving set Darrek's nerves on edge. Time after time he'd had to fight back the urge to disembowel some fool who'd bumped into him. He could feel his muscles tensing, wanting to gather into dragon form and lash out in his frustration.

Instead, he lashed out at Rand. "We? What do you mean, *we*? What makes you think I want *you* hanging around?" Turning a corner, he slowed abruptly to a walk, blending in with the flow of pedestrians.

"Look, Darrek, I don't like it either, but we have to --"

"We don't have to do anything, Aurorea. Get that straight right now."

He strode along the pavement, gritting his jaw. Darrek loathed the fact that he had to look up at Rand. Not that he himself was short, by any means -- especially not in this strange land where all the inhabitants appeared to be underfed shrimps. But Rand's sheer size had always both impressed and annoyed the shit out of him. Even at the age of seven, when they'd first met, the Aurorean had towered over the scrappy, black-haired Hausther heir.

Darrek had hated him on sight.

The huge redhead sighed. "Be sensible, Darrek. We'll stand a better chance of finding her if we --"

"I don't need your help!"

Darrek's outraged shriek bounced off the face of the building behind them, piercing even the ceaseless clamor of this cursed place. Passersby stared, and then, apprehensively, hurried on.

Unceremoniously, Rand shoved him back into a doorway. "By the Winds, Darrek, do you want *everyone* staring at us?"

Darrek snarled, fighting the red-haired giant's unbreakable grip. "Don't... *ever*... touch me, Aurorea!"

"Fine." Rand let go, and folded his arms. Darrek glared, then abruptly shouldered past him. He hadn't gone ten steps before he heard Rand following.

Gnashing his teeth in frustration, Darrek scanned the seemingly endless street -- but all he saw was more streets, more buildings, more things that flashed and blared and whooped and bellowed. How was he supposed to find Elara in all this?

A wind scuttled past, and Darrek leaned into it, longing for the comfort of something familiar, something *known*. But even the wind here was strange, scattered, broken into a hundred bickering bits by the buildings.

And it was growing dark.

He strode forward, trying to outpace Rand, stomping out his fear and fury on the unpleasantly hard ground. Abruptly, it dropped into another broad, black lane, and Darrek stumbled, reeling forward.

One of the hideous, squealing creatures, this one with glaring white eyes, rushed at him. It lunged -- he screamed -- and suddenly Rand was hauling him backward to safety as the thing roared past.

This was more insult than Darrek could bear. Shaking with rage, he spun, throwing out a fist. "I said don't touch me!"

Rand wasn't even looking at him. He was staring open-mouthed at something beyond Darrek. In consequence, he never saw the blow coming. He staggered back as Darrek's fist connected with his jaw, and fell heavily on his ass. Even so, his gaze never left whatever it was he was staring at.

Darrek turned, curious. There was nothing there but a green-painted shed with a small, gray-haired man inside and stacks of brightly colored papers in front. "What?"

Rand looked up at him, his eyes wide, mute.

"What?" Darrek repeated impatiently. Reaching down, he yanked Rand to his feet.

"It's you." Rand pointed.

"What's me?"

"That. There. Oh, Darrek, don't you see?"

And then Darrek *did* see. It was a painting, so cunningly rendered he couldn't even make out the brush strokes, on a canvas so thin it fluttered in the breeze. He'd

never seen himself in a mirror, but he recognized the hooked talons, the barbs along the tail, the onyx sheen of the smooth, gleaming scales...

Glancing at Rand, he saw his own excitement reflected in the Aureorean's eyes. They shared one quick, conspiratorial grin -- and then they were running, Rand reaching out to snatch the painting as they passed, pounding down the dusky street like the very Winds themselves, whooping and laughing while far behind the man from the shed shouted after them in futile rage.

Chapter Two

It was hours later when Lara looked up again. She straightened slowly, easing her aching back. Really, she needed a proper chair. Sitting on the edge of the bed just didn't cut it.

But, looking down at the dragon she'd drawn, she smiled in delight.

He was perfect. Just perfect. Huge and powerful and honest -- you could tell, somehow. A massive champion, one that protected maidens fair rather than eating them.

Not that she'd mind particularly being eaten by him! Lara's nipples tightened at the very idea.

Oh, he'd sell. He'd sell like hotcakes. What woman wouldn't want a great, gleaming, golden-red bodyguard of a dragon? Other than the one she'd painted for the cover of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine, he was the best she'd ever done.

Glancing up at the oil painting above her drafting table, Lara marveled once again at the smooth, sleek lines of her black dragon, the deadly strength in his long coiled tail, the dangerous curves of his spikes and talons. His scales gleamed, so smooth they looked almost oily, and Lara wondered again what they would feel like under her hand. His black eyes burned down at her with a hungry intensity she found both sensuous and a little frightening.

Carefully, she pinned the red dragon up beside the black, and stepped back to look at them.

Oh, they were a handsome pair. Blackie was going to have some competition in her fantasies tonight, that was for sure!

Outside, the wind gusted, moaning around the edges of the cottage with a sound that was both desolate and yearning. Dusk had darkened into true night, and Lara

realized she must have flicked the light on at some point. She reached to turn it off, then paused, her gaze still on the two dragons, and instead fumbled open the window.

A draft of cool, clean air swept in, fragrant with the sea. It ruffled the sheer curtains and swirled about her, tossing her hair playfully. Lara leaned into it and closed her eyes, surrendering to the touch of the wind.

What was it about that insubstantial contact that stirred her so? At times, when she was walking, she almost imagined she knew what it would feel like to be surrounded by air, rushing past her, bearing her up... The sensation was intoxicating, flooding her limbs like wine until, dizzy, she would fall to the gritty sand and lie, feeling the wind slide over her like a lover.

There was a sense of anticipation in the night; a cool, shivery electricity like the air before a storm. Peeling off her clothes, Lara dropped to the bed and stretched out, spreading herself wide before the wind. It danced across her belly, tickling her nipples which hardened into nubbly pink buds under the gentle caress. A lovely, private warmth trickled through her veins, and Lara followed the wind's touch with her own, drawing her fingers lightly over her skin. The wind caressed her, riffling the chestnut curls that covered her mons, then lapping delicately at the soft, moist folds of her opening. She shivered at that cool, incorporeal touch, and spread her legs wider.

What would it be like, if wind were made flesh?

Maybe that's why she loved dragons so much -- they were children of the wind, after all. She looked again at the two dragons she'd drawn. They appeared to be watching her, their tense, coiled muscles almost ready to spring free of the canvas, the hunger in their eyes arousing her further. Playfully, she arched her back, displaying herself to their glowing gazes, and closed her eyes.

In her mind's eye she could see them, enormous and wild, looming over her. She tilted her hips, spreading herself to their view, watching their nostrils flare as they caught her clean, musky scent.

What would it be like to mate with a dragon? Even in her arousal, Lara smiled to herself. Painful, no doubt! The logistics were impossible, of course, but hell, it was *her*

fantasy. She pictured them again, standing next to each other, one dark and dangerous, the other a stunning, masculine crimson, as her fingers trailed closer to the throbbing nub of her clit.

So, which one did she want to play with tonight?

* * *

"C'mon, Darrek, let me see." *Vain bastard's still entranced by his own portrait.* Kicking his feet, Rand watched the bright-eyed creatures rumbling past. Behind them, the fountain on which they perched trickled water into an enormous basin. The sound was soothing amidst all the honks and screeching from the strange metallic monsters.

One of them stopped, not ten feet in front of him, and Rand stiffened as it opened a mouth huge enough to swallow him whole. His shock redoubled as a man, seemingly unharmed, climbed out and another man, rushing along the pavement, voluntarily jumped in. Rand heard him say something, and then the monster took off with the man still inside.

"Darrek..." Reluctantly, Darrek surrendered the book -- for, however odd its appearance, that was definitely what it was. The lettering was familiar, though there were symbols he didn't recognize. Flipping it open, Rand leafed through the pages and found another painting. Below it, in a box, was a picture. Clear gray eyes, incredibly lifelike, stared up into his.

"Darrek! Look!"

"That's her?"

"It's got to be! Listen." He read aloud, slowly making out the words. "The artist, Elara Sutherland, resides in the quaint Cape Cod village of East Wellfleet..." Rand shot to his feet. "Come on!"

"Where?" Darrek was staring at him as if he'd gone mad.

"That's where she lives. Darrek, we've found her!"

"Her name's Southerlin, not Sutherland."

Rand waved aside Darrek's objection impatiently. Darrek looked at him in disgust, leaned back against the fountain's edge, and added, "So, even if it *is* her, how precisely do you suggest we get there? Or even find out where 'there' is?"

Baffled, Rand sat back down, gnawing at a fingernail. It was a habit he had no temptation toward when in dragon form -- slicing his tongue open once had been enough. Another beast pulled up, yellow like the first, discharging a woman this time. Curious, Rand stood and moved closer. Now he could see a man inside it, staring out through its transparent skin. The man didn't look alarmed. In fact, he looked bored.

A pedestrian shoved Rand aside and made a dash for the monster. He climbed into the mouth, and this time Rand listened closely as the bored fellow asked, "Where to, Jack?"

That's it! Excitedly, he ran back to Darrek and yanked him to his feet. "Come on!"

"Aurorea, if you don't stop grabbing me --"

Rand ignored him and rushed back to the curb, scanning the flow of creatures. Darrek came up beside him. "What, by the Winds, are you doing?"

"The things -- the creatures -- the yellow ones. They take you places."

"They what?"

Rand nodded eagerly. "You climb in their mouths and tell them where you want to go." Darrek regarded him dubiously. But a yellow monster was approaching. Would it stop? They didn't always.

This one did. The mouth opened and a tiny man climbed out. He stared up for a moment at Rand, then scurried off. Quickly, before the mouth could shut again, Rand leapt inside, banging his head painfully against its lip.

Why was everything in this land so *hard*? Rubbing his forehead, he beckoned frantically to Darrek. "Come on!" Reluctantly, Darrek followed him into the belly of the thing.

"Where to, gents?" the man in front asked. His features were different from the other fellow's, but the bored look was identical.

"The quaint Cape Cod village of East Wellfleet," Rand quoted. He'd always been proud of his memory.

The man glanced back. "You're pulling my leg. Cape Cod?"

"Uh... Yeah. East Wellfleet."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time. For that, I'll need the dough in advance."

Dough? Rand glanced at Darrek, who shrugged.

"I... I don't have any dough."

The man stared at him. Now he didn't look bored at all. He looked mean. "Think you're funny, huh? Get outta my cab."

Rand's gut sank down to his toes, and his shoulders slumped. How was he supposed to have known they needed bread dough? The unexpected disappointment was more than he could bear.

They'd been so close!

Then Darrek leaned forward, his eyes slitted dangerously. From his hand, four wickedly curved black talons protruded. Laying them across the man's throat, he said, "What say we forget the dough, *you* take us to East Wellfleet, and *I* leave you alive?"

The poor fellow gulped, and nodded.

* * *

The black one, she decided. She was in the mood for something dangerous.

He twined toward her, head slung low, and Lara arched her back in anticipation. His black eyes glittered with impatient desire, and she could feel the heat baking off him like the warmth radiating from the pavement on a summer day. His breath gusted over her (the curtains rustled in the open window) and his slitted tongue flickered, red as blood, between the ivory spikes of his teeth.

"Do you want me?" he asked, his voice a metallic whisper, low and exciting. "Do you want *this*, Elara?"

Looking down, she saw the wicked curve of his erection, jutting from between the powerful haunches. It was huge, larger than any human male's could ever be. Both frightened and aroused, she nodded, her eyes wide. Slowly, the dragon moved closer,

his tongue darting now to the hot, salty folds of her cunt, its slitted end dancing, hot and slightly raspy, over her hard little nub, caressing both sides of her clit at once as no human tongue could do.

“Oh, yes,” Lara breathed.

His tongue moved faster, lashing up and down her clit, then snaking lower to lap at her flowing juices. It separated the folds of her cunt and pressed against her opening, and Lara spread her thighs wide, whimpering. His tongue pushed inward, both firm and flexible, sliding deeper than any cock ever had. Its rough surface, slick with saliva, tugged at the walls of her passage in a way that made her moan with delight.

Throwing her head back in abandon, Lara stared up at him, panting, her eyes challenging him to take her, mount her, to slide that massive cock inside her and fuck her till she screamed. He tilted his head, a small, amused smile glinting in his jet-black eyes, and lowered himself over her till she felt his heat on her belly, felt onyx scales so smooth they slid along her skin like chain mail made of velvet, like iron made of silk.

And then...

Chapter Three

Pine needles rustled as Darrek pushed aside a branch and peered through the gap at the tiny, shingled cottage. Light glowed from the window, illuminating a small porch that faced the beach. Beside him, Rand hunkered close, craning to see over his shoulder. Darrek shifted irritably at his proximity.

"Stop breathing down my neck, Aurorea."

Rand moved back slightly and whispered, "Are you sure this is the place?"

Oh yeah. He was sure. His entire body seemed to strain forward into the night. He could *feel* her, eagerly waiting for him...

For a moment, he toyed with the idea of lying to Rand, sending him off to hunt elsewhere while *he* introduced himself to Elara. But no. It had taken both of them to make it this far. He owed Rand the courtesy of his chance -- but no more than that.

As they circled the hedge and walked up the small lawn, the giant redhead cleared his throat, looking vaguely embarrassed. "Darrek."

Darrek stopped, glancing at him sidelong. "What?"

"I just..." Rand ran a hand through his hair, tugging at the thick, coppery locks. "Whatever happens from here..."

Curtly, Darrek nodded. It was all the recognition he could stand to give after what had happened between them in the past ten hours. From here on out, it was each dragon for himself. And he had no doubt whatever what the outcome would be. It was, after all, what he had come for.

Then why was the image of Rand banished, cast out forever from the Dragon Queen's realm, suddenly so disturbing?

Rand had apparently been thinking along the same lines. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"So am I." Darrek was perturbed to realize he meant it.

Enough of this, he snarled to himself. He could picture his father now, his triple-barbed tail lashing, staring at him in horrified dismay.

Rand Aurorea, a friend? Not hardly. Brusquely, he turned away and padded up the worn steps of the porch. The wood squeaked softly under his feet, then squealed under Rand's greater weight. Darrek turned his head to shush him, then fell silent as he saw what was inside the window.

Rand, peering in beside him, froze with the same hungry intensity Darrek himself felt.

Not four feet away from them, a woman sprawled naked on an enormous bed. It looked almost obscenely soft to Darrek. The room was bathed in light, showing clearly the dusting of golden freckles on the curve of her shoulders, the smooth, sweet curve of her breast, the flushed, crinkled circles of her areolae... Her eyes were closed, her face lax with arousal as she pinched the taut pink tip of one breast with one hand, while the other toyed with the neat brown curls covering her sex. Saliva flooded Darrek's mouth, and his cock throbbed, swelling so fast he felt momentarily dizzy.

Elara Southerlin. They had indeed found her. Whatever brief accord he and Rand had shared shredded like clouds before the wind at the erotic scene before them.

The lady was obviously in want of some company. Without hesitation, Darrek put his hand on the windowsill and prepared to climb in the open window.

Then an implacable hand closed around his biceps. He spun, his face silently snarling in fury, to see Rand shaking his head frantically. In that moment Darrek could have happily gutted him despite Melgara's commands.

But when Rand tugged, jerking his head toward the lawn, Darrek followed him, fuming, off the porch. Near the hedge, they whispered intently. "Darrek, I don't think that's a good idea."

"Since when do you *think*, Aurorea?" Hurt flickered in Rand's blue eyes, and Darrek felt his temper slip another notch -- the more so because he felt a sudden flush of shame. By the Winds, was the big lummoX daft? This was no game they were playing.

One of them would win Elara. The other would be exiled. It was hardly the time for niceties.

"You woo the lady however you want, Rand. Knock on her door with flowers in the morning. Don't mind me." Darrek grinned wolfishly. "I'll just stay in her bed."

"Darrek!"

Like a dark, hungry shadow, Darrek slid back up the porch steps.

* * *

With a fury no human could ever match, the dragon plunged himself into her. His cock -- hard as iron and huge, so much bigger than any man she'd ever had -- thrust deep into her passage, filling her utterly. She could feel the heat of it, the searing warmth of dragonfire, all the way inside her like a furnace in the very center of her loins. He rocked back, plunged in again, and Lara cried out in delight, pressing her fingers harder against her clit.

Gods, *why* could it never be like this? Why couldn't she meet a man who could take her to this blazing edge of ecstasy?

The question intruded on her fantasy, making the dragon fade in her mind. Pushing it aside, she concentrated, drawing him once again in her imagination. Black scales sliding like liquid metal against her skin, both smooth and hard at once. The haughty, malevolent gleam in his eye that seemed to say he would have his way with her whether she liked it or not. And the self-satisfied smirk that curved his lips, absolutely confident that she *would* like it.

As if sensing her distraction, he paused, his cock throbbing inside her. Almost tenderly he reached out to touch her, trailing one sharp claw over her skin, so lightly it almost tickled. It traced the curve of her belly, the swell of her breast -- when it brushed her nipple, Lara whimpered and almost came right there. The sensation of that cool, sharp talon so delicately wielded left her gasping, poised at the brink.

It was that combination of strength and seduction, wildness and control, that completely undid her. He could rip her to pieces, yet instead he bent all that power to such a small, intent motion -- just the stroking of one deadly claw across the

hypersensitive tip of her breast. His gaze was despotic, almost regally amused. He knew what he was doing to her -- and he liked it. He liked holding her there, trembling, her breath tearing in ragged gasps through her throat. He flexed his haunches slightly, and Lara groaned as her passage spasmed around his shaft, squeezing and releasing.

Jesus, she thought incoherently, if he so much as breathes on me, I'm going to come.

His tail snaked up, sliding between their bodies, and curled around to cup her breast, squeezing it with as much dexterity as a hand. Lara panted, feeling her body arch into his touch, and moaned as he seized both her breasts in his grasp, his fingers tugging her nipples, his lips hot against her neck as he bent to kiss her --

Wait a second.

Even in her erotic stupor Lara was pretty certain dragons didn't have fingers. She definitely knew they didn't have lips.

Her eyelids flew open and she saw a man poised above her, his long black hair sliding like silk against her cheek as he nuzzled her throat. His hands were closed on her breasts, sending jolts of pleasure through her each time his thumbs flicked her taut, erect nipples. And his cock --

Oh, dear God.

She froze for one single second -- then something in her raged up in fury. How *dare* he touch her, whoever he was!

Screaming like a banshee, Lara grabbed a fistful of the intruder's hair, right at the crown of his head where it'd hurt. Yanking like a longshoreman, she tumbled him off her and, rolling with him, bent her knees, drew her feet up, and slammed them straight into the pit of his stomach. With a *whoosh* of lost breath, he tumbled off the bed, hitting the floor with a satisfying thump.

Immediately, two things happened. One, Lara sprang up, ran for the kitchenette, and grabbed her ten-inch chef's knife. Two, a second man bounded through the window and onto her bed.

Thank God it's a queen-size, Lara thought dumbly. The first one had been big enough, but this man was *massive*.

"Are you all right, my lady? Did he hurt you?"

What the hell was she going to do now? Cowering back against the counter, waving a knife that suddenly seemed no larger than a nail-clipper when measured against him, Lara screamed, "Stay away from me! Just stay away!"

Standing, he turned to the figure sprawled, wheezing, on the floor, and kicked it. "Get up, damn you. I told you this was a bad --"

"Oh, spare me, Aureora." The first man sat up cautiously, as if checking for broken bones. His complexion was an interesting shade of sickly green, and even amidst her confusion, Lara felt rather proud of herself.

"Winds, Darrek, how did you *think* she'd react?"

Darrek. So that was his name. Black-on-black eyes gleamed at her from under thick, straight ebony hair that fell almost to his waist. "She seemed to be reacting just fine, till you barged in."

Remembering the way she'd been moaning, Lara flushed and tried to look away. "Come on," Darrek continued, his eyes glittering with malevolent amusement. "Tell me you didn't like it, Elara."

"I --" Blushing fiercely, Lara realized that, one, she was stark naked, and two, her nipples were still tellingly erect. Her limbs trembled, remembering his self-assured, dominating touch, and she became aware of the undiminished wetness between her thighs, the way her breath rasped in her throat, not with fright, but with... "Get out!"

Torn between embarrassment and fury, she flung the knife. It flew past Darrek, missing him by a hair's breadth, and slammed with an impressive *thunk* into the wall. Both the men stared at it, their eyes suddenly wide.

"Get out!" Fumbling behind her, Lara grabbed the first thing to hand and chucked it. Her sugar bowl shattered above the red one's head, spraying them both with sugar and bits of broken crockery. A plate was next. Then her skillet. By the time she started on the teacups they were beating a hasty retreat back through the window, the dark one tugging at his unfastened pants as he half-climbed, half-fell, out onto the porch.

Lunging after them, Lara slammed shut the window, catching Red's last words as they scrambled down the porch steps. "I *told* you it was a bad idea!"

Oh, it was a bad idea, all right. She wrenched the knife from the wall, and brandishing it ostentatiously, glared out into the darkness.

Let them come back. Just let them try to come back, and she'd show them *exactly* how bad an idea it was.

Chapter Four

As the sky lightened to a soft silver-pink, Rand peered out through the scrub pines again.

"She still there?" Darrek asked, his voice surly.

Rand nodded. Behind the sheer curtains he could still make out her outline, as rigidly upright as it had been all night long. "Congratulations, Darrek. We'll never get near her now."

"Who'd want to?" Hissing, Darrek felt the bruise high on one cheek where a teacup had caught him. "She's a harpy."

"Well, she wouldn't be if you hadn't -- Oh, never mind." Realizing they were repeating a conversation they'd already had, with minor variations, at least twenty-three times over the slow hours of darkness, Rand broke off. Slumped on the ground, he stared glumly at the grass. It was thin and sharp, and prickled beneath his butt. Oblivious or uncaring, Darrek stretched out on it, draping one arm over his eyes. Rand kicked him. "What're you doing?"

"Taking a nap, Aureora. She's got to sleep sometime. And when she does, we'll just sneak in there, tie her up, *wake* her up, and make her choose. This is ridiculous."

Somehow that didn't seem like the best plan to Rand. He watched Darrek shift once or twice as he drifted off. His arm fell to his side and he lay, his body relaxed, utterly defenseless in sleep. After a moment, Rand chuckled, shaking his head.

Twenty-four hours ago, it would have been unimaginable that Darrek Hausther would have allowed himself to be so completely vulnerable -- in front of an Aureorean, no less! Yet there he lay, sleeping like a baby, his proud head tossed back, his neck exposed defenselessly.

He was, Rand had to admit, awfully handsome, the lines of his body neat and graceful even in sleep. His high cheekbones and glossy black hair gave him an elegance Rand had always secretly envied, feeling himself huge, gawky and rough next to the smaller, aristocratic youth.

But he wouldn't have chosen Darmon Hausther for a parent for anything.

Rand smiled, thinking of his own father who stood now in his mind as he'd always been -- a big, burly, auburn-haired man who'd smothered him with bear hugs and showered him with approval. For Thrand Aurorea, it had always been enough that his son be exactly who and what he was.

Looking at Darrek, he wondered if the Hausther heir had ever known that kind of unconditional love. Without thinking, he reached out and smoothed a wayward strand of hair back from Darrek's face. No wonder Darrek was always so touchy, so driven.

Darrek murmured softly and turned in his sleep, and Rand withdrew his hand cautiously. Why did it have to be one or the other? Either he won Elara, and Darrek was doomed to exile, or Darrek married Elara (a possibility which, frankly, Rand found exceedingly unlikely) and it would be he who was doomed never to return.

Well, they had no one but themselves to blame. He wouldn't mind exile so much for himself, Rand supposed, looking around at the deserted beach, the gleaming flecks of pink and orange dotting the still-dark waves, reflecting from the burnished clouds. But it would absolutely break his father's heart.

Sighing gustily, he looked back up at the cottage. *You woo the lady however you like, Rand. Knock on her door with flowers in the morning.*

Well, he didn't have any better ideas. And he certainly couldn't make things any worse. Drawing a deep breath, Rand stood and readied himself for the plunge.

* * *

Why hadn't she ever gotten a phone? For the fortieth time, Lara upbraided herself. They weren't that expensive, for God's sake -- no matter how hard she was trying to eke out a living from the meager paychecks her artwork brought in.

The knife wavered in front of her as, once again, her eyelids drooped. Ruthlessly, she dragged them back open. In another twenty minutes, the East Wellfleet diner would open, and she could escape to there and call the cops. It was no use going to the neighbors -- all the cottages along this shore-side road were empty for the coming winter.

She could still see their two outlines, crouched down behind the hedge. So the door was out -- they'd see her leaving. She could climb up on the sink, open the kitchen window, and sneak out that way.

She only had to stay awake another twenty minutes.

How did he know my name? That was the question that nagged at her. He hadn't been just some random rapist, crawling through the window of an unsuspecting masturbator. He'd been there for her.

Why would anyone be after me?

It didn't make sense. None of this made any sense.

Darrek. The name suited him, at least. All dark and angular with sharp, jagged edges. Like her dragon, she thought muzzily -- so much like him that when he'd slipped in and touched her, she'd accepted it as merely part of her fantasy. Like her black, sharp-clawed...

Lara sat up abruptly, and the knife, which had been sliding from her lax fingers, clattered to the floor. She whipped around and stared up at the red dragon's portrait. Huge, protective...

Are you all right, my lady?

This was getting creepy.

Lara stared, feeling dizzy. *I'm in shock. I'm sleep-deprived. I've undergone a very traumatic experience.*

True enough, but still...

A heavy footfall rang on the porch outside, and she heard the screen door squeal. Craning forward, she laid her cheek to the glass and peered sideways.

The big one was standing outside her door, his hand raised hesitantly in midair as if he was working up the courage to knock. If he turned his head he'd see her. Lara ducked back -- but not before she spied the bunch of spindly, half-wilted autumn daisies he clutched like a bouquet.

What on earth?

She crouched against the wall, taking shallow breaths, listening for any sound of motion. His face had been a study in indecision -- maybe he'd just chicken out and go away. What was he so nervous about anyway? Her? C'mon. Knife or no knife, he was easily twice her size. If he'd meant to hurt her last night, there really wouldn't have been a thing she could do about it.

But he hadn't.

Lara paused, feeling indecisive herself. Curiosity warred with apprehension. Padding silently to the door, she yanked it open just as his hand finally came down to knock.

He jumped like a startled cat, and daisies scattered across the faded gray planks of her porch, their petals blowing softly in the early morning breeze. Dropping heavily to one knee, he began scooping them up.

At the sight, her fear fled entirely. "Well?" Lara demanded. "Where's Tweedle-Dee?"

"Who? Oh, you mean Darrek." He nodded toward the hedge. "Over there. He's asleep."

Lucky guy, Lara thought as the rising sun seared her bloodshot eyes. She felt worn, bleary with exhaustion as he turned back to face her, still on his knees, and held out the flowers. Their petals were bent, their thin stems crushed. A few of them were even turned upside down.

Lara laughed. She couldn't help it. If he was dangerous, she was a turtle. She opened the door wider. "All right. I surrender. Come on in."

As he followed her in, ducking to avoid smashing his head on the doorframe, Lara wondered at the sudden lightness inside her. Maybe it was the rising sun, just

peeking through the curtains and making the whole cottage glow like the inside of a pearl. Maybe it was the breeze, tossing the curtain as it gusted and sighed. Maybe it was the rattle of beach grass, or the hush of the waves against the sand, or the soft cry of seagulls somewhere above.

Or maybe it was the man behind her, filling her space with a quiet sense of peace.

His feet crunched on broken crockery, and he looked down at her abashed. "I'm sorry. I'll clean it up," he offered.

Lara shook her head. "No, it's okay. You're not the one who --" She trailed off in confusion, and the man before her actually blushed. The moment hung awkwardly until Lara concluded tartly, "We'll leave it for Darrek."

He grinned at that, and her breath caught in her throat. When he smiled, his eyes danced with light like sunflecks on water. She was suddenly acutely aware of his strong, solid nearness. His huge shoulders, rolling with muscle, protruded from an intricately embroidered vest. Beneath it, a dusting of soft auburn hair flecked his broad chest, and Lara couldn't help wondering if they continued on down in a soft trail of copper... and if *everything* about him was equally massive.

Jerking her gaze away from his crotch, she looked back up into the most remarkable eyes. They were a startling, almost turquoise blue. Where had she seen eyes just that color before? She tried to place it as she studied his face. He had a heavy, determined jaw, stubbled now with the same coppery red that dusted his chest. His thick hair tumbled halfway down his back, and she had to suppress a sudden urge to touch it -- it looked so soft, like waves of spun sugar. "So, Red. Who are you?"

"Oh." He looked startled. "I'm Rand Aurorea."

Maybe it was the knife she'd thrown, or that satisfying kick she'd landed in Darrek's stomach, but she was feeling downright saucy this morning. "And when you're not haunting SCA conventions?" she asked archly.

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean, what's your real name? Harold? Ned? Eugene?"

He shook his head confusedly. "Rand. Just Rand."

"Uh huh. You drink tea, Rand Aurorea? I'm all out of coffee."

"Yes, please. What's coffee?"

She laughed again, and started the kettle. This guy was too much! And yet she felt totally at ease with him, as she might with a big, panting, overfriendly dog.

A very *handsome*, overfriendly dog.

Sternly, she repressed that idea. Seriously, maybe she *had* been out here too long alone, if strange guys that crawled through her window at night were starting to look appealing. "I'd offer you sugar, but it's all over the floor. So, where are you from, Rand Aurorea?"

No response. She turned, and realized he wasn't listening -- hadn't even heard her, probably. He was staring at the drawing she'd pinned up, his mouth open in shock. He shut it with an audible click and glanced down at her, his expression suddenly wry, almost skeptical.

"You dissemble well, Elara." A muscle rippled along his jaw as he clenched it, and Lara recognized that for all his seeming innocence, this was no boy she had in her shack. She gulped.

"I... I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?"

She stared at him, confused, then glanced back at the drawing.

His eyes! That's where she'd seen that color before. His eyes were precisely the same intense blue as the dragon she'd drawn just...

Yesterday.

And now here he was, watching her with a steady intensity she wasn't sure she liked at all. "You know perfectly well who I am, my lady."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" It was the first thing she could think of to say. He raised a skeptical eyebrow, and rather than answering her, instead tilted his neck, revealing a scar.

Wide-eyed, Lara looked from him to her dragon. She remembered drawing that, remembered wondering why the scar on his long curved neck had seemed so *right*...

Barely aware that she was moving, Lara backed away, shaking her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He followed her, his gaze fixed on her face. His voice was deep, rumbling, almost hypnotic. "Untruths don't become you, Elara Southerlin."

Sutherland, not Southerlin.

"Tell me, my lady, if you don't know who I am, how do you know what I look like as --" He gestured at the drawing.

That's it, she thought frantically. He's hypnotized me. None of this is real. None of this is...

"Elara?"

She was still shaking her head dumbly, her mouth open. Nothing came out though. He grabbed her arms, gently but firmly. "Elara! Look at me."

She did. His gaze changed, becoming softer, puzzled, then dark with concern. "Elara," he whispered, "do you even know what you are?"

Don't say it, she pleaded silently, though what she was so afraid of hearing, she had no idea. He opened his lips to speak, and driven by an impulse she barely recognized, she closed her fists in his hair and dragged his mouth down on hers.

She looks so like her mother, was Rand's first, very distracted thought.

The tall, regal Melgara had been the object of his first childhood crush. He'd worshipped her from afar, indulging in thrilling, ongoing fantasies during which he always rescued her (at great risk of life and limb) from hordes of faceless enemies, vanquishing them all. Then he'd hold her reassuringly, and she'd look up at him with wide, grateful eyes, her body quivering tremulously in his arms. And then...

The "and then" had been pretty vague at that age. And it was in fact almost impossible to picture the real Melgara trembling, with fear or anything else. But there was nothing vague about the erection that throbbed beneath the thin fabric of his

trousers, or the wholly adult urgency pulsing through his veins. The same heady sense of his own masculine strength that had stirred his youthful imagination now filled him, making him feel powerful, unconquerable; an unbreakable champion. Elara trembled in his arms, her mouth clinging desperately to his, and his blood thundered in his ears as he swept her close, pressing her tightly against the hard plane of his chest, feeling her heart beating as rapidly as a sparrow's.

He would do anything, he swore silently, to keep that heart safe.

Drawing back for a moment, he gazed down at her wonderingly, and gently traced the curve of her cheek. "Oh, Elara..."

Placing her fingers over his lips, she shook her head, her eyes wide as a child's. "Don't. Don't talk. Only love me. Please."

Rand let his head fall back, feeling his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. Every nerve in his body seemed to lead straight to his cock. Each sensation aroused him; the whisper of Elara's hair tickling his chest, the warmth of her belly against his hard, throbbing shaft... She pushed her hips forward, increasing the pressure, and white lust roared in his mind, blotting out everything else.

Sweeping her up, he carried her to the bed, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck. Her fingers stroked the corded muscles of his back, and his skin seemed almost to shimmer in response to her touch. His cock flexed, straining outward, and Rand's mind reeled, awash with sensation.

Gently, he lowered her down and she lay looking up at him silently as he eased off the strange, stretchy shirt she wore. Her breasts were beautiful, small and curved, the hard pink nubs at their tips almost begging to be touched. His hands trembled as he unbuttoned the trousers -- just like a man's! -- that had shocked him into silence when she'd first opened the door.

Sliding the tough, unfamiliar fabric down her legs, he swallowed again at the sight of her sex, the dark chestnut hair covering it in a tangle of curls. Her arousal was obvious in the swollen lips of her cunt, the erect points of her nipples, the hungry

invitation in her eyes. Running his hand up the smooth skin of her belly, Rand leaned forward, barely able to breathe, and kissed her.

At that light contact, his massive frame shook. Her lips brushed against his, and he panted for breath. Winds! What she did to him!

It felt like he had dreamed of this moment forever.

Elara's hands slid into his hair, playing with the long, curly tendrils. Rand leaned into her touch, turning his head so he could rub his cheek against her palm. "Oh, Elara," he whispered. Sitting back, he slid his vest off, and watched her eyes glow brighter as she stroked his broad chest.

Why was he so nervous? He'd had his share of partners, indeed more than his share -- he was, after all, the heir of Aurorea. But this was Elara Southerlin, the Dragon Queen's daughter.

How had she known what he looked like? His eyes, his very scars? It seemed impossible and yet, as her hands slid over him, Rand was convinced she *did* know him, with an intimacy no woman had ever approached -- his thoughts, his wishes, his most secret desires.

Her arms twined around his neck again, insistently tugging him down alongside her. He lay on his back, and she moved on top of him, her damp, aroused sex nudging against the bulge in his trousers. Her head was thrown back, her eyes closed in enjoyment, her hair tumbling over her breasts so that her nipples peeked through the fall of brown hair. Rand raised his hands to caress them and she leaned into his touch, her hair sliding, soft and silky, against the palms of his hands.

It was like touching a dream. He was haunted by a sense of unreality, as if he'd woken to find himself in his most stirring childhood fantasies; only this time, they were actually happening. Elara arched above him, sliding back and forth along the length of his throbbing shaft, and he felt his balls growing heavy, aching with the weight of unspent come. Each time she slid herself up, his trousers snugged tight against them, increasing the friction.

Her breath was coming quickly now in little mewling yips, and her cheeks were flushed with impending orgasm. At the sight, his balls swelled further, sending a fresh wave of heat into his groin. Groaning, he pushed his hips upward, lifting her half off the bed as he mashed his cock against her cunt, feeling her juices soaking the fabric between them. She gasped and stared down at him, her eyes smoky with lust.

Scrambling off him, she reached for the tie of his trousers. Her small, nimble hands brushed his cockhead, and he moaned. Hurriedly, she yanked at the string, freeing his cock, and her eyes grew wide as it sprang out to greet her. "Oh, wow," she whispered.

Then she did something no woman had ever done, something Rand had never even imagined was a possibility. She lowered her head and took his cock in her mouth.

Fire poured through him at the touch of her lips. Her mouth was so wet and warm, and her tongue flicked at his sensitive tip, gently probing the slit. Opening her jaw wide, she sucked the entire head of his cock into her mouth, her teeth scraping lightly against the thick, meaty rim. He felt her swallow, and her mouth tightened down. Rand closed his eyes, straining for control.

Her hair fell over his groin, tickling delicately, and he wrapped his hands around it. It was thick, shiny, a deep lustrous brown. Her mouth was tugging at him, faster now, intoxicating. Rand felt as he had the day before, pounding blindly through the twisting maze of streets -- dizzy, confused, overwhelmed by sensation. But where that assault on his nerves had been horrible, *this* was almost divinely seductive.

She pulled back, and the head of his cock slipped from her mouth with an audible pop. Smiling at his flushed expression, she kissed her way down the length of it, her tongue dancing over the bulging vein. Groaning, Rand thrust his hips up, helpless to control the motion. In response, she sucked at the side of his shaft, and slid one hand between his heavy thighs to caress his testicles. Her fingernails trailed over their taut, furrowed surface, dragging lightly at the soft copper hairs.

"Elara," he groaned, and slipping his hand under her chin, forcibly raised her head. Her eyes flashed with annoyance. "Elara, no. Wait."

Pushing her back by her shoulders, he sat up, his cock standing straight as a pole against his belly. Trying to ignore it, he breathed heavily, fighting down the lust that still clouded his mind. He rubbed at his face, then drew his hands through his hair, knotting his fists in it as he fought to think.

This wasn't the Melgara of his boyhood dreams. This was her daughter -- *and she didn't even know who she was.*

That was it. That was what was holding him back. He wanted her -- Winds, how he wanted her! The heavy leaden pressure in his balls practically demanded he tumble her backward, spread her sweetly curved thighs, and plunge himself deep between them...

She was nipping at his shoulder, her hands caressing the muscles of his broad back. Turning, he captured her hands in his own, trapped them against the swell of his pecs. "Elara, listen to me. We can't do this. It isn't right."

"Why not? Don't you want to?" Playfully, she grabbed his hands and tugged them to *her* chest instead. His fingers spread involuntarily over the firm warmth of her breasts, and she held his wrists, drawing his hands more tightly against them till he squeezed them, hard, and she whimpered in longing.

Still holding his hands, she lay back on the bed, dragging him with her till his cock nudged, hard as granite, at her folds. By the Winds, she was ready for him! So ready it was unbelievable. He could feel her juices slicking his cockhead, teasing it till the sensitive skin was strained to its limit. His balls throbbed, tightening in anticipation, and Rand hung, his arms quivering as he held himself over her, wracked by the almost irresistible urge to plunge, to plunder, to shove himself inside her and *fuck*...

"No!" Yanking himself away, he rolled to the edge of the bed and sat there, his fists clenching and unclenching as he fought to control the fire surging through his loins.

Her eyes black with fury, Elara sprang up. Grabbing her shirt, she tugged it down over her head. "Wouldn't you know it. One tries to have sex with me when I

don't want it. The other one *won't* when it *is* what I want." Stomping into her strange, heavy trousers, she glared at him. "Just a regular pair of comedians, aren't you?"

"Elara, no, wait. There's things you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand 'no' well enough. Unlike your friend." She slammed out of the cottage. The screen door squeaked, and banged shut behind her.

"Elara." Grabbing at his untied trousers, Rand stumbled out onto the porch. Elara was striding down the beach, her arms wrapped tight around her body. Her heels dug angrily into the soft sand. "Elara!"

A gust of wind caught his cry and wafted it away like a dry leaf. She didn't even turn her head. Rand leaned his fists on the plain, unpainted porch rail and stared after her.

What -- how -- *why* had he made such a mess of things? And what, by the Winds, was he going to do now?

A chuckle sounded behind him. Rand spun to see Darrek leaning against the wall of the cottage on the far side of the door. He stood with his arms crossed lazily, one hip cocked out in a casual slouch, an eyebrow raised at Rand's semi-clothed state. "So..." he drawled, "...the flowers weren't enough for her?"

Rand flushed as Darrek's jet-black eyes flicked over his chest, his tangled hair, the dangling drawstring of his trousers. His jaw clenched in embarrassment. With a sneering smile, Darrek moved past him and padded with feline grace down the steps. "Where are you going?"

"You've had your chance, Aureora. Now it's *my* turn."

Rand watched in mute fury as the smooth, handsome Hausther heir meandered down the beach after Elara, his straight ebony hair tangling behind him in the wind like a black, triumphant banner.

Chapter Five

God *damn* it!

For the first time in her life, she'd been on the verge of having sex with a man who actually made her feel the way her fantasies did. Frustrated impulses roiled along her nerves as Lara stomped up the beach, her thoughts a steady, seething turmoil like the constant hiss of the waves.

Who the hell did he think he was? The pair of them, appearing out of nowhere as if they'd dropped out of the sky, climbing into her bed and making her feel things no man had ever made her feel.

"What's coffee?" *Hah!* He could find out in jail for all she cared. *If* he was dumb enough to still be there when the cops showed up.

Of course, first she'd actually have to call the cops -- and if that was her intent, why was she walking *away* from town?

The wind brushed past her cheek with a feathery touch, exactly the way Rand had. Stroking her face so gently, as if she were the most precious thing on earth...

Elara, do you even know what you are?

No. She wasn't going to think about that. She didn't know what game the two of them were playing, but she knew damn well who she was, thank you very much.

Not even the steady ocean wind could soothe her. She felt as if something had shattered inside her -- as if the personality she'd always regarded as hers had cracked like a cheap china plate, and underneath it was something wild, almost feral -- something that was clawing inside her, trying to get out.

No one -- *no* one -- had ever affected her like this. Her entire body seemed to blaze with a fury that was as alien to her as the curses that wanted to tumble from her lips.

First one of them sneaked through her window and started trying to fuck her without so much as a "Hi, my name's Darrek" -- and then the other one got her so worked up she practically creamed her jeans. And then he said no!

Well, fuck the both of them.

Lara threw herself down on a dune and wrapped her arms around her knees, quivering with emotions she could barely keep in check. Hot, frustrated tears coursed down her cheeks. It was more than just the ache in her clit, throbbing against the seam of her jeans, or the tender, painful weight of her breasts dragging against her shirt. She felt barked, somehow, stifled in a way she couldn't define. She felt as if she was meant to be more than this...

More than what?

She didn't know. All she knew was her body trembled with a yearning, a fierce, compelling *need*, to...

To what?

Lara shook her head and pounded a baffled fist against the sand. "What the hell are they *doing* to me?"

"Nothing, yet."

She spun, glaring, and saw Darrek standing perhaps ten feet away, his feet, like hers, bare on the gritty sand.

The collar of his soft white shirt was open, fluttering in the wind, exposing the firm, rippled muscles of his abdomen, the clean, smooth lines of his torso. His black hair, as straight and smooth as a skein of silk, fanned around him, falling halfway to his waist. His string-tied trousers rode low on his hips, revealing a thin line of crisp, ebony hair that trailed down his belly and disappeared beneath the soft fabric.

"Why? Would you like me to?" He smirked at her easily, his hair twisting in the ocean breeze. Behind him, the Atlantic rolled in slow, even waves, curling over to shatter on the sand with a hollow, muted roar. His features were haughty, almost hawk-like, with thick, arched brows and high, sharp cheekbones.

It was strange -- Lara had always considered herself rather quiet, even meek, an oddball who lived in her own private fantasy world and never seemed able to find the right words to say to people, never felt comfortable saying them even when she did. But there was something about Darrek that almost demanded confrontation. Standing there so gorgeous and self-assured, he challenged her -- how or why she didn't know. She only knew that somewhere inside her was a woman who was dying to wipe that smirk off his face. "Are you always this arrogant?"

If he sensed her belligerence, he didn't show it. He shrugged nonchalantly. "Usually." Ambling over, he sank down beside her, his long, lean frame folding in on itself with the taut grace of a cat.

"And do you usually --" she stressed the word sarcastically, "crawl through windows to screw unwilling women?"

At that, he grinned. "No. Usually they're crawling through my window."

Damn him. I bet they do, too. Lara looked away.

"Besides, you weren't unwilling. Just surprised."

"What?" Lara sprang to her feet. "You arrogant bastard!"

"You act so shocked. Are you a virgin?" His dark eyes gleamed with renewed interest.

"No!"

"Pity. Oh, sit down, Elara. I'm not going to rape you." His black eyes studied her, gleaming with amusement. She'd acted like a fool, and she knew it. She'd let him needle her. Sullenly, she sank back to the sand, refusing to look at him. "Here." Darrek stripped off his shirt and draped it over her shoulders, startling her.

It was a heavy fabric, something like a blend of silk and the softest, finest wool, still warm with the heat of his body. Lara clasped it to her and tried not to stare at the smooth ripples of his torso, the way the muscles dimpled just above his hipbones and flexed along the sides of his ribcage...

He turned his head, those ebon eyes gleaming down into hers, and Lara found herself gasping for breath.

Just from his glance. Just from that. "Aren't you... aren't you cold?" she heard herself stuttering, and wondered what had happened to all the brashness she'd felt, just moments before. And it wasn't the cool autumn air that was making her shiver...

"No." Then he grinned. "Perhaps I should have said yes. Would you have warmed me, if I were?"

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Raising one long, elegant hand, he stroked her cheek. His fingertips were warm, almost hot, leaving tendrils of sensation behind. Lara gasped. His grin widened. "There is so much I could teach you, my beautiful Elara. So many desires you have yet to even imagine."

His words stung. Partly because she had a sneaking suspicion he was right -- she wasn't exactly an encyclopedia of sexual knowledge. Partly, too, because what she did fantasize about was so totally outlandish. "You have no idea what I imagine, Darrek."

"Maybe you should tell me." He cocked his head enquiringly, smiling at the stubborn fury she felt blazing in her eyes. "No. I guess not."

He leaned closer, and the musky, slightly metallic scent of him filled her nostrils. She could feel the heat radiating off his lean, powerful body. His eyes glittered dangerously, watching her with an almost predatory glee as he lowered his lips to hers, and she felt as much as heard him whisper, "Tell me, Elara, is it anything like *this*?"

Raising a hand to her chin, he dragged her lips against his, his tongue darting, hard and demanding, into the moist warmth of her mouth. His other hand slid around her waist, pulling her irresistibly against him. She could feel the taut, bulging muscles of his forearms, the biceps like a rock against her back. If she struggled, she realized, it wouldn't do any good.

But she wasn't struggling. Couldn't struggle. Couldn't do anything but feel his lips devouring her mouth, his tongue snaking against hers, the heat pouring off his long, hard body like a furnace, like a bonfire. It would consume her, Lara knew, but she didn't care. She was dry timber, waiting for his flame.

Her head dropped back against his arm, and Darrek drew back, looking down at her. His face was a mask of self-satisfied triumph. "Yes," he murmured. "Yes, you want it bad."

Even in the midst of her arousal, annoyance twisted through her. *Yes, I want it, she admitted silently, but you don't have to look so damn pleased with yourself.* He drew back, almost as if he'd heard her thought, and looked down at her, his lips curved in a small, amused smile.

"Did I offend you, my lady?" His tone twisted the endearment into a sneer. "Perhaps you're not used to hearing a man speak the truth."

"Perhaps I'm just not used to being pawed at by strangers."

One haughty eyebrow shot up. "Shall I stop?"

Lara paused -- then cursed herself. That pause was all the admission she needed to make. Darrek's smile widened, and he lowered his lips to her throat, kissing and nibbling at the smooth, soft flesh just above her shoulder.

Damn him! Lara could feel her muscles turning to water as his teeth dragged lightly down the side of her neck. His arm tightened around her; fierce, possessive, demanding.

She didn't protest when he dragged her on top of him, settling her with her thighs straddling his so her ass was resting on his crotch. Slowly, teasingly, Darrek kissed his way down the hollow of her throat to her breasts. He nipped at them, teasing the nipples through her T-shirt, rasping his tongue across their hard, jutting points. With an involuntary whimper, Lara thrust forward, shoving one aching nipple into his mouth, desperate for him to suck it.

Pushing his shirt sleeves aside, he did, suckling it through the thin fabric of her T-shirt with a hunger that sent flares of agonized delight burning through her. Lara arched her back, lost in the sensation, and he looked up at her, grinned, and drew his head back to let the chill breeze gust across the wet spot he'd created.

Lara gasped as her nipple contracted further, burning with the sudden, unexpected stimulation. The contrast of heat and cold made her doubly aware of the

contact of his skin, the warmth radiating off him. She could feel his erection wedged against the lips of her cunt, straining against the fabric between them, a hard, pulsing ridge that ran all the way from her clit to between the cheeks of her butt, pressing against her asshole. He pulled her hips more tightly against him, and she was shocked to feel a strange, aching hunger as her sphincter throbbed eagerly.

"Oh, yeah." His voice was husky with desire. "Your body knows what it wants. Elara, you have so much to learn."

And so do you, you bastard. Humility, for starters. But his hands were drawing her downward, pulling her with him as he stretched back upon the sand, then sliding down to clamp firmly on her hips.

Watching her with that same self-satisfied smile, he dragged her up and down the length of his shaft with an exquisite slowness, the muscles in his forearms clenching as he slid her forward and back. Her clit rubbed against the inseam of her jeans, pressed firmly against his cock. The sensation was overwhelming, almost torturous -- intoxicating enough to drive every thought from her mind but the urgent awareness of that agonizing point of contact and slow enough to keep her hovering helplessly on the edge.

Forward and back. Forward and back. His eyes like black diamonds never looking away.

She would go mad if he didn't stop.

If he stopped, she would slaughter him.

He wouldn't, though -- somehow she knew that. Unlike Rand, he wouldn't stop, not now, not for anything. *Not even if I wanted him to.*

She couldn't bring herself to admit the realization only made her hornier.

Smiling, Darrek let go of her hips, as if to prove to himself -- or let her prove to herself -- exactly how bad she wanted it. She could jump up, run, get away...

She didn't. Instead, she bit her lip in concentration as she kept the same slow, torturous pace, teasing herself against his bulging hardness.

What was happening to her? She'd practically tried to rape Rand -- and then stormed off in fury when he'd stopped her. And Darrek... Last night, she'd thrown a knife at him, and now she couldn't seem to thrust her breasts hard enough against his clever, teasing hands.

Darrek's eyes gleamed in satisfaction. Sliding his shirt from her shoulders, he tugged her T-shirt up over her breasts, smiling lazily as he pinched first one nipple, then the other. Lara glanced up, suddenly aware of the silent, distant cottages. Half-heartedly, she tried to tug her shirt back down.

"What're you doing?" he asked.

"I... People might come. Someone might see..."

"So?"

His casual response sent another wave of heat through her. Lara gulped and closed her eyes. She could just see it, some jogger plodding along the sand, catching a glimpse of her moving above Darrek, her breasts bared to the thin autumn sunlight, his hands squeezing them...

It was so easy to imagine the surprise he would feel, the sudden arousal throbbing painfully in his loins. Would he creep closer for a better view? Crouch behind a dune, surreptitiously watching, one hand tugging at his turgid cock? Would she, perhaps, glance over at him as she mounted Darrek's shaft, smiling a bit in invitation?

Oh, my God, what am I thinking?

But Lara couldn't deny the frenzy building in her cunt. Her body seemed suddenly alien to her, violently aroused, filled with exotic, dangerous cravings over which she had no control at all. When Darrek whispered, "Take off your shirt," she yanked it over her head with an abandon that both thrilled and terrified her. His fingers clamped on her nipples, tightening to a point just before pain, and she cried out, letting her voice ride free on the wind.

Then Darrek was tumbling her off him, rolling her onto her back on the sand. His fingers tugged at her jeans, undoing the snap, struggling a moment with the zipper before yanking them off. She lay naked, the sea breeze drawing cool fingers down her

flesh, a sharp, exciting counterpoint to the heat burning inside her. "That's right," Darrek whispered, his eyes fixed on her cunt, "open yourself to it. Let the wind fuck you."

Drawing her knees up, Lara spread her legs wide, letting the wind gust and moan between her thighs. Its unseen tongue darted between her folds, pressing gently into her passage with a chill that made her shiver with delight. Darrek knelt, his cock jutting from his pants, and Lara couldn't keep her fingers from her clit as she watched him working the skin of his cock, clamping his fist around its throbbing shaft.

"Oh, yeah," he groaned, his voice hoarse with desire, "touch it, Elara. Rub yourself for me." His eyes gleamed, and Lara tilted her hips, spreading her folds wide with one hand while the other stroked her clit.

He moved forward suddenly, and she expected him to plunge himself inside her, but instead he straddled her chest, his balls nestling between her breasts as he thrust his cock into her mouth. His hands closed in her hair, holding her head up, and Lara moaned deep in her throat as a hard gust of wind pushed its way inside her even as Darrek entered her mouth.

Rand's cock had been huge, the meaty head so thick she could barely wrap her lips around *it*, let alone his shaft. Darrek's wasn't so impossibly enormous, but it was nearly as long and comfortably thick, filling her mouth nicely without stretching her jaw. The slick juice of his pre-come was both sweet and tangy, and Lara swallowed, wanting more of it. Lust roared inside her, a hot, conflicted emotion that both reveled in and resented his easy command of her body. She wanted to devour him, to eat him alive, to suck his juices till he was nothing but a quivering husk, powerless before her.

Yes, she thought, even as she felt him grab her head harder, thrust deeper into her mouth, *oh yes, Darrek, I will have that. Use me now, and I'll like it. But someday, I will use you. And you will love it.*

With that vow, she closed her eyes, concentrating on the musky scent of him filling her nostrils, the way he tensed above her on the very verge of orgasm. His balls, brushing against her breastbone, were so taut and swollen she could feel every crisp

hair, dragging across her skin. She swallowed again, her throat spasming around his shaft, and he groaned above her, "Don't... don't..."

Oh, no? In her mind, she grinned evilly, and lashed her tongue across the tip of his cock, then pistoned her head forward, sucking hard. Writhing, Darrek fought to hold back but Lara clamped her lips down, and he moaned as his balls swelled even further. Snaking one hand between his thighs, she rubbed them, feeling the taut skin slide across the hard sacs within, as with her other she very lightly stroked her clit. God, she was so close!

He was panting above her, his hips pistoning freely as, with eyes half-shut, he gave in to her insistence, unable, now, to stop himself. Lara felt her lips curve in a catlike smile even as he thrust between them.

Closing her fingers around his balls, she tugged lightly. Darrek whined like an overeager hound. She squeezed harder, and his hips bucked, ramming his cock deep in her throat. His balls contracted, hard as rocks within their nubbly, furrowed casing, and he lunged forward, planting his palms on the sand on either side of her head as he slammed his cock downward into her waiting mouth. His head snapped back and he roared as he came, shooting wad after wad of hot, salty liquid deep in her mouth.

He rolled off her, gasping, his trousers crumpled around his knees. Disgustedly, he kicked them off and turned his head to glare at her. The expression sent a shiver of excitement down her spine.

"You're going to pay for that." His tone was low and menacing, but Lara wasn't in a mood to be cowed.

"Why?" she replied, raising an eyebrow. "Don't tell me that's all you've got."

It better not be. Her body was still thrumming with arousal.

"Not even close." As smoothly as a snake uncoiling, he rolled back on top of her and slid between her thighs. His undiminished erection nudged the swollen lips of her sex, and Lara felt anticipation flare inside her.

"The question is," he hissed, "how much can you take, Elara?"

Breathless, quivering on the edge of orgasm, she whispered, daring him, "As much as you've got -- Darrek."

He smiled then, his lips thin as a knife slash over his sharp white teeth, and for the first time, Lara felt a spurt of true fear. His cock pressed against her opening, then slid easily between her folds.

God, it was so hot! Like liquid metal, he flowed into her, his shaft gliding smoothly further and further in. As he drew back, she could feel the rim of his cockhead rubbing against the walls of her passage, teasing the sensitive tissues. It swelled inside her, becoming even thicker, harder, and Darrek's smile widened as she gasped. His jet-black eyes glittered with triumph, and he whispered, "You are mine, Elara. Mine and no one else's."

He flexed his hips, and Lara moaned. Then he slammed himself home, ruthlessly, viciously, his head raised on his neck and his black hair whipping in the wind as he took her.

Lara screamed in ecstasy and closed her eyes. Her cunt was starting to spasm, eagerly gripping his thrusting shaft. It spread her open further each time he plunged, ramming into her with a brutal hunger that left her breathless, filling her so utterly she thought she'd pass out. His pubic bone ground against hers, rubbing over her hard, swollen clit, and his cock was so hot she could feel its fire pulsing through her.

Again and again he thrust himself into her, each time harder, deeper, driving away everything but the awareness of his shaft slamming into her cunt, fucking her with a fury that left her gasping, shuddering, as the heat inside her rose to a fever pitch. Her nipples were searing points of fire. Her clit blazed with an urgency beyond her wildest fantasies. He rammed in one last time, his cock impossibly huge, hard as iron, and then she was falling, somewhere deep inside herself, feeling white-hot waves of pleasure so intense they were almost agony sear through her one after another, wracking her frame till she was afraid she'd go mad with sensation.

Gasping, she tossed her head mindlessly as Darrek drove home harder, his weight bearing down on her, the sand shifting under the force of his thrusts. The sound

was harsh, oddly metallic, and Lara, turning her head to one side, opened her eyes to see four long black talons not a foot from her face, flexing and contracting as they raked through the sand.

Yanking her head back, she stared up at the enormous black chest arching above her, its scales gleaming like jet in the clear morning light. High, high above, the dragon tilted his head, gazing down at her with a merciless hilarity.

That was when she screamed.

A broad sweep of crimson filled her gaze, and a concussion like a thunderclap shook the air around her. The dragon poised over her staggered back, his enormous cock slipping free of her cunt, leaving her shocked and gasping at the sudden, aching emptiness.

Again, that sweep of red, and this time Lara saw the second dragon, broad-chested and massive, slam into the black dragon. The ground trembled underneath the impact.

Stop! Darrek, stop!

Above her, the black dragon reared back, his mouth opening in a fang-filled snarl. *Back off, Aureora. She's mine.* He hadn't spoken -- she was certain of it. But she'd heard him just the same.

Once again, the red dragon crashed into him, the broad crimson wings sending sand pluming over Lara. She scrambled backward, avoiding the talons that dug briefly into the dune and pushed off again quickly.

Darrek! You bastard. She doesn't know what she is.

Then I'll show her.

That amused, haughty tone... Shocked into stillness, Lara stared upward. The black dragon leaned forward, tensing his haunches, preparing to spring.

Darrek. It *was* Darrek. Somehow, impossibly, that black monster was --

Darrek, no!

Wheeling on wings that seemed to span the whole sky, the red dragon plunged down, landing with such force the entire dune crumbled. Slipping, tumbling, Lara fell

with the cascade of sand, and found herself on hands and knees on the cold salty shore. A wave crested and broke, sending icy water splashing over her, and she stumbled to her feet, wiping the grit from her eyes.

Here!

She looked around quickly at the urgent cry. She could see the black dragon scowling down at her, his wings like sails of smoke spread wide against the sky, his haunches knotted beneath him, ready to leap. Then --

There. Just ahead. The red-gold dragon, his massive head swung around on his neck, looking back at her, his turquoise-blue eyes sparkling in the bright sun. *Here, Elara! Quick!*

Running faster than she'd have ever imagined, Lara sprinted to the red dragon's side, leaped for his back, and straddled his neck. The great muscles heaved beneath her, and then her stomach flipped over as the beach fell away and they were flying, the wide crimson wings carrying them steadily higher, while below on the sand the lean black dragon shrieked in balked fury.

Chapter Six

Servants had brought wine on her order, and food. Neither of the two waiting lords did more than pick at it. Melgara herself ate heartily, thoroughly enjoying their mounting apprehension as the long hours dragged past. Every now and again, one of them glanced up at her from the chairs she'd had fetched for them, cleared his throat as if to ask a question, then scowled across at his rival and looked away.

It was Thrand who broke first, as Melgara had known it would be. "Your Highness..." Rising, he shuffled forward to the base of the steps.

She raised an eyebrow, pausing with her goblet halfway to her lips. "Yes, Lord Aurorea?"

"Your Highness, I..." His gaze slid to Darmon Hausther, then back up to her. "May we speak in private?"

"No." She smiled to soften the word, but not its meaning. "There is nothing you have to say that Lord Hausther cannot hear."

The barrel-chested old lord stood, wringing his hands. His red hair was grizzled now, his beard shot with streaks of white. Melgara felt a pang at the sight. *I'm using them so hard. And yet...* and yet they'd demanded it, the both of them, with their stiff-necked pride and endless bickering.

And she was using them no harder than she'd used herself.

For twenty years, she had given up her daughter. She'd given up her childhood, and the joy of watching her grow, find her wings... She'd had to. The two lords below her had left her no other choice. The anger she'd kept bottled up all those years steadied her now, and her eyes were cool as she watched Thrand Aurorea shift and fidget. Yet her heart bled for him -- she knew what he was going through.

"Your Highness... My lady. I cannot... Please, cancel this contest. I cannot bear it any longer."

"No."

Her voice was like ice, sharp and cold. It cut through his hesitation, his soft, guarded words. His face twisted in anguish, and he cried out, "My lady, I love my son!"

"Yes, Lord Aureora. But you hated Hausther more."

Thrand Aureora blanched, his ruddy face going pale as parchment. Mutely, he stared up at her, his eyes gleaming with tears. He stumbled backward blindly, almost falling into his chair. Picking up his wine glass, he stared blankly into its depths.

Melgara leaned forward, carefully keeping her gaze fixed on Thrand. It wouldn't do to glance at Darmon Hausther. Not now.

Quietly, she asked, "Would it ease you to know that Elara is with your son, right now?"

The old man glanced up, his watery blue eyes brightening with hope. "She is?"

The queen nodded. Then, looking inward in the way only those born to the throne of Wind Castle could do, Melgara smiled fondly at what she saw there. "They're flying together."

From the very corner of her eye, she saw Darmon Hausther nervously biting his lip.

* * *

Watercolors, Lara thought dazedly. I'd use watercolors to paint this.

Below, the ocean sparkled, sunlight snatching flecks of light from its rippled gray surface. Above, the sky was streaked here and there with contrails leading to and from Logan Airport, high white streaks against the pure, crystalline blue. The air rushed around her, hissing lightly in her ears, and to either side curved crimson wings rose and fell, carrying her effortlessly far above the waves.

The wind was cool against her naked back, but beneath her the dragon's skin was warm, glowing with an internal fire that warmed her chest, belly and thighs. Her arms were wrapped around the dragon's shoulders, her legs clutching the ribcage just

below the powerful pectoral muscles. Tilting her head, she rested her cheek against the side of his neck. He had hide rather than scales, a soft, durable skin that felt like warm leather. Peering down, Lara could see his shadow skimming along the waves -- and that's when it hit her.

This was real. She was flying on a dragon. An honest to God *dragon!*

Raising her head, she slit her eyes against the wind. It whistled past, surrounding her, a sensation that was both intoxicating and oddly familiar. The horizon stretched out before her, shining and immeasurable. "Rand?" she whispered, unbelievably.

Yes, my lady? The reply was immediate, and unspoken. It tolled in her head, both vast and silent, as deep and soft as Rand's own voice.

"Do you... can you read my mind?" The idea was disconcerting.

An amused chuckle reassured her. *No, my lady. It is mind-speak. Dragons cannot talk, they can only roar. So we mind-speak instead. It's like conversation.*

"But..." She didn't really understand, but never mind. There were more pressing questions.

"Rand, did I... did I make you?"

Make me what, my lady?

"I mean, did I *create* you?"

His chuckle rumbled again inside her mind. *I don't see how.*

"But I drew you!"

There was a moment's pause. *Yes, that puzzles me, too.* They flew in silence awhile, following the curve of the Cape northward. She could see it in the distance, glimmering white, off to her left. Further away she could see the mainland, nothing but a blur of haze and the jagged outlines of cities. Rand's wings beat steadily, and his warm hide was soothing on her skin, pressing against her torso and the sore place between her thighs.

So *that* had been real, too.

Wonderingly, Lara replayed the scene in her head, remembering the way Darrek had touched her, caressed her, *fucked* her... She almost giggled as it hit her. Impossible as it seemed, she, Lara Sutherland, had actually fucked a dragon.

What made you draw me, Elara?

The question startled her, and she stared absently at the waves below for a moment. "I don't know. I dreamed you. I've always dreamed about dragons." Then she laughed. "I even made up a land for them, all the dragons I've drawn."

What does it look like, this land of yours? Rand's mind-voice was curiously eager.

"Oh, it's lovely. Vast mountain ranges, rolling fields, big, broad rivers flowing through them... There's a castle, high on one peak -- or a palace, really, all white columns and arches with the wind blowing through --"

Rand checked in the air below her, his wings freezing in excitement. Lara's stomach lurched as they dropped. *That's it!* His shout echoed in her mind, and he plunged forward, his wings once again (and much to Lara's relief) sweeping the air.

"What's it?"

That's it! Oh, don't you see? You're remembering it.

"What? That's not possible. How can I --"

Of course you can. It's where you were born.

Lara's stomach flip-flopped as a sickly sense of vertigo rushed through her. The world tilted, and desperately she grabbed at Rand's neck. In terror, she clung to him, feeling cold, sticky sweat suddenly coat her as she stared down, down, to the waves far below. Slowly she realized that she hadn't fallen -- it had only felt that way.

"Rand, no, I --" She faltered, remembering the intensity of his blue eyes, the way they'd widened with sudden comprehension.

Elara, do you even know what you are?

Not who -- what. *What* she was. And what she was, apparently, was a --

Hoarsely, she whispered, "Rand, I'm not a dragon."

You are Elara Southerlin, the Dragon Queen's own daughter.

What? "Rand, no I'm not. Whoever you think I am --" *Sutherland*, not Southerlin. Only why were the names so *close*? "You're wrong."

That chuckle again, inside her skull. Unlike Darrek's, it was warm, affectionate -- but there was still an undertone of challenge in it. *Am I?*

She opened her mouth to say yes, but Rand lurched underneath her, rolling sharply to the right. Her hands slid from his neck and then she really *was* falling, the air whistling around her, her own screams piercing her ears.

Vainly, she clawed at the air. The wind seized her in its incorporeal grip, buffeting her, seeming to shred the very flesh from her bones. She beat against it, shrieking in her fear and fury.

How could he do this? She'd trusted him!

The motion wrenched her muscles strangely, sending an unfamiliar ache through her shoulders. She fought to right herself, her wings beating madly at the air, her tail lashing for balance...

Squawking in surprise, Elara faltered in midair, tumbled further, and felt more than saw the massive red-gold shape dart between herself and the waves, breaking her fall.

Don't think, Elara. Just do it!

Straining her neck forward, she spread her broad, graceful wings, feeling the great muscles working as she cupped them, brought them down, raised them again. The wind glided under them, bearing her up.

She was flying!

With a sigh of relief that sounded clearly in her mind, Rand veered away, his longer wings beating steadily beside her. Wind stroked along her long, golden frame, surrounding her with its intoxicating touch. Oh, she had *dreamed* of this, so many times!

And now she knew why.

Reveling in the embrace of the wind, she swooped down, feeling it rush by her in a delirious blaze, the massive red dragon hovering protectively nearby, but giving her the freedom to try her wings. With a playful flick of her tail, she shot forward, speeding

past him and climbing higher. Casually, confidently, Rand soared to match her, not trying to outdo her but simply staying close.

Turning her head, she peered at him, admiring his sturdy crimson frame, the strong, handsome jaw, the clear turquoise eyes. He bared his teeth in what she instinctively knew was a grin, and Elara grinned back.

Okay, so I'm a dragon.

He didn't answer. Mentally, she pictured tapping a microphone. *Is this thing on?*

Is what thing on?

She grinned again. *Just seeing if you could hear me.*

I hear you just fi --

Something shrieked past overhead, and Rand dodged instinctively. Looking up, Lara saw the silver underbelly of a massive 787, far too close for comfort. Glancing around, she saw more air traffic and realized they'd blundered into Logan's air space. *Rand, we'd better get down.*

Yeah, he replied shakily, I think you're right.

But as they turned back, Lara saw that getting down wasn't going to be so easy, either. Far below, the flat green turf of the Cape Cod National Seashore was dotted with tiny, staring shapes, and the gray line of Race Point Road, curving north from Provincetown, was suddenly jammed with vehicles, looking like toys at this height.

Now what?

Then Lara heard the unmistakable drone of a helicopter approaching. Whipping her head around on her sinuous neck, she saw it, humming low over the waves, speeding from the mainland directly toward them.

Shit! Follow me!

Lashing the air with her wings, she sped forward, cutting across the tip of the Cape. As she did, she saw hundreds of heads swivel below like daisies turning to follow the sun. Rand was right at her wingtip. So far, so good.

There were honks and the screeching thud of crumpled fenders as they arrowed above Provincetown, heading for the barren, deserted crescent of sand and sea grass

that was Wood End. The squat, square bulk of Wood End Lighthouse gleamed in the distance, and Lara folded her wings and dove for the dunes.

Her landing was a travesty. She thumped to the sand, fouling one wing, then rolled gracelessly down a dune face. Silently she swore as Rand touched down easily beside her. *Are you all right, my lady?*

Never mind. Change! How do I change, Rand?

Just let go. Like this.

And suddenly Rand was standing before her, still in his trousers.

Struggling in her mind, Lara tried to will herself back into human form. But the harder she tried, the more she became aware of her wings, her tail, her sheer *size*...

Rand!

He didn't answer. The helicopter was zooming toward them, and Lara could see the signature peacock plume painted on its side. Damn!

Closing her eyes in concentration, Lara thought frantically. Let go how? The wind tugged at her wings, and the urge to spring back into it, thrust herself away from the approaching helicopter was fierce, almost undeniable...

Let go. That was all the instruction she had. Lara breathed deeply, feeling a sudden image flash through her mind -- some TV actor, David Carradine, maybe, sitting cross-legged doing belly breaths like a Buddha. The picture distracted her, made her want to giggle, and just like that she felt her wings shred into nothingness and her body condense. She opened her eyes to see Rand standing there, grinning.

"Come on." Hurriedly, she glanced back over her shoulder as she grabbed his hand. They were below the dune line momentarily, but at any second the news 'copter was going to appear, whirling above them...

Crouching low, Lara ran, tugging Rand with her. Weaving between the dunes, she got maybe thirty yards away from where they'd landed, and threw herself down onto the sand. "Now fuck me!"

"What?" Rand stared at her in consternation.

"Or pretend to, anyway. Here they come!"

Just in time, Rand dropped on top of her, causing her to grunt as his solid frame thumped heavily against her midriff. Yanking at his trousers, she got them down over his ass just as the 'copter appeared above them, circled once, darted a few dozen yards away, and then sank to the sand. A man jumped out, hauling a camera over his shoulder, and Lara shrieked, tugging herself from beneath Rand and attempting to hide her breasts behind her arms.

"Jesus! Do you mind?"

She glared at the camera guy who, oblivious, ran toward them, shouting over the beat of the helicopter blades, "Where did they go?"

"Where did who go?"

"The dragons! You must have seen them."

Lara dropped her hands to her hips and stared. "Are you on *crack*?"

For the first time, the guy seemed to notice her nudity. He checked in consternation and glanced uncertainly at Rand, who was sitting, his arms resting on his bent knees, grinning up at him.

Ask him for a tape. Lara wasn't sure if he could hear her, but she'd heard *him* when he was shouting at Darrek, so maybe...

His head whipped around, his eyes widening as he looked at her.

Just do it, Rand! Relax, grin, and repeat what I'm saying...

Lazily, Rand leaned back on his forearms and grinned up at the guy. "Hey, I'll buy a copy of that tape. She won't let me film us fucking."

"Oh, I, uh..." The guy backed away. "I wasn't trying to... I mean..."

"Yeah, right." Lara's voice was tart with skepticism. "Gimme that camera or I'll sue your ever-loving ass off. WHDH Boston, right?"

The guy blanched. "Lady, I swear... I *can't* give you this." The febrile excitement returned to his eyes. "You won't *believe* what I've got on here."

"Oh, I might. Make a habit of this, do you? Hand it over, bub." Stumbling backward, the guy tried to flee and Lara, naked and bristling, stalked after him. "It's your ass, bozo!"

Scrambling back into the 'copter, he signaled frantically to the pilot who grinned at Lara and winked before lifting back off.

Shielding her eyes against the blowing sand, Lara watched them go, her teeth bared in a ferocious smile. "Okay, so I'm a dragon." Turning back to Rand, she continued, "Now who am I, exactly?"

Rand was standing right behind her, his massive arms coming down to swoop her into a triumphant hug. He grinned down at her. "You are Elara Southerlin, and my future queen."

His grin broadened as he bent his head to hers, his soft, shaggy mane blazing like sunset as it fell around her, enclosing them both in a veil of crimson. "And I do believe you ordered me to fuck you."

Chapter Seven

She gazed up at him, her eyes wide and startled as Rand lowered his head. Winds! The way she'd stood before that human, naked and bristling, terrifying him into a stumbling retreat -- she was magnificent. He closed his eyes, feeling a thrill of arousal running through him as their lips met.

She was as regal as Melgara, as fierce as Darrek Hausther -- she was truly every inch a dragon queen.

Drawing back, he gazed down at her admiringly. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks flushed -- whether with the excitement of the chase or of the kiss, he couldn't tell. He hoped it was the latter. Then she opened her eyes and grinned up at him, and Rand sighed in relief.

He wasn't sure, after he'd rejected her, if she'd still want him. Well, he hadn't rejected her, exactly -- he'd just wanted to wait till she knew what was going on. And all he'd accomplished by his hesitation was to drive her into Darrek Hausther's arms.

Well, he wouldn't make that mistake twice. Pulling her to him, he kissed her again. Her lips parted slightly and Rand extended his tongue, gently probing the warmth of her mouth. He was so conscious of her body, wrapped close in his arms -- the sweet curve of her bare breasts against his chest, the swell of her hips, the feel of her thighs, brushing against his. His arms were trembling, as if conscious of the enormous risk he was taking. What if she pushed him away? She'd wanted him before, sure -- but that was before she'd fucked Darrek.

And now Rand couldn't help wondering if he measured up.

He had no doubt that Darrek would already be fondling her, teasing her, rousing her to readiness with those long, clever fingers... but he wasn't Darrek. He didn't know

the techniques of seducing a female. For all the times he'd made love, he'd only taken what had been freely -- and obviously -- offered.

But she was kissing him back, her hands twined in his hair, her tongue hungrily probing his mouth in return. With a groan compounded as much of relief as of lust, he folded his arms around her, pillowing her head against his broad chest.

"Oh, Elara," he whispered, staring out at the ocean, feeling her hair tickle the underside of his chin. His cock, which had begun to lengthen as she'd yanked his trousers down and bared his ass to the approaching sky-creature, now twitched as it thickened, hardening inside his trousers, the blood beating through it like a tidal wave.

She felt it, apparently, for she tilted her head back, smiling up at him with that same smoky invitation he'd seen in her eyes that morning. His hand shook as he delicately brushed her hair back from her face.

"Tell me you want this," he asked, his tone almost pleading. He wasn't Darrek -- he couldn't simply throw her down on the sand and shove himself inside her, no matter how much he might want to. He had to know she wanted it, too.

She chuckled at that, and the sound trickled through him like honey, sweet and warm, spreading through his chest and his stomach and down into his balls. They pulsed almost painfully, swelling with renewed arousal. Laughing up at him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and dragged his mouth back down to hers. "Oh, Rand," she whispered, "can't you tell?"

His pulse thundered in his ears as her lips closed on his hungrily, demandingly. Then she slid her hands over the broad plane of his shoulders and pushed downward. Gulping, Rand sank to his knees before her and found himself staring directly at her breasts.

They were beautiful -- not as large as some, perhaps, but nicely rounded and firm. The nipples were a deep dusky pink like the underside of a rose petal, and Rand's cock swelled further, brushing against the flat ridge of his abs as he imagined leaning forward and closing his lips around one. Glancing up at her, he saw her watching from under half-lowered lids, her face flushed with arousal, her mouth open slightly. At the

sight, a bolt of sheer desire shot through him, and he groaned again as, impatiently, she closed a fist in his hair and dragged his mouth to her breast.

He suckled eagerly, his tongue swirling around one pink bud while he rubbed the other gently, his fingers playing over the nubbly skin of her areola. She arched her back, sighing in enjoyment, and encouraged, he squeezed her breast more firmly, then rolled her nipple between his fingers.

A deep, almost painful heat pulsed in his overburdened balls, and he couldn't help rocking his hips slightly, letting his cockhead nudge against her thighs. Trailing his hand down her soft tangle of curls, he slid his finger between them, amazed at the wet heat emanating from her cunt. The temperature in his groin climbed another few degrees as he found her swollen clit and pressed it. Elara gasped and buried her hands in his hair, pulling his head tighter against her breast. Opening his mouth wide, Rand sucked at it, hard.

His cock was trapped between his abs and her thighs, mashed between the two, aching with need. Moaning, he surrendered to those twin points of sensation, feeling his balls tighten further as Elara pushed her hips forward, urging him to rub her clit faster.

There was something uniquely stimulating about the feel of her fists clenched in his hair, holding him helpless at her breast, almost suffocating him as she made him suck harder, taking him as insistently as Darrek, he was sure, had taken *her*. He could still see Darrek towering over her, his head thrown back, his hips pistoning insistently forward. Her eyes had been closed, her face lax in abandoned delight, her hips rising to his fierce thrusts as she urged him on...

What had that been like, to be fucked so fiercely, so greedily?

His balls tingled at the very idea.

And now here she was, her nipple in his mouth, the hot little nub of her clit pulsing under his fingers. He pressed down firmly, rubbing its swollen length, floating on the delirium of her small, hungry cries. He felt her grab his hair again, knotting her fingers in it as she shoved his head down, forcing it against her cunt. Rand groaned at

the scent of her, sweet and tangy at once like a hot ocean breeze. Delicately, he licked, running his tongue over her clit, feeling her buck and shudder in response. Then he clamped his mouth around it and suckled like an infant.

Dropping her head back, Lara gave herself over entirely to Rand's enthusiastic ministrations, her breasts rising and falling as she panted. Her hands clenched in his hair as she rammed his mouth against her cunt, feeling her arousal building to a fever pitch.

But it wasn't Rand she wanted to force to his knees -- he was already so willing to go there. She smiled at the thought even as his flicking tongue drew another gasp from her throat, and a fresh spurt of wetness from her saturated cunt. He was so big, so dependable, so utterly, utterly sweet.

Ironically, she'd rather hoped he'd be more aggressive, more like the dark, brooding, tempestuous Darrek.

She was fully aware there was a certain incongruity between that hope and her desire to humble Darrek. Or maybe both desires were really the same -- the urge to force each of them to be *more* than they wanted, to do what *she* wanted. And what part of her wanted, more than anything on earth, was to have Darrek Hausther right where Rand was now, on his knees before her, trapped by her hands, by her will, humbled and horny and both hating and loving every minute of it.

That image nearly drove her over the brink.

No, she told herself sternly, this is wrong. Rand deserves better than to have you pretending he's Darrek.

"Rand, stop."

With a barely-suppressed whimper, he froze against her. Her clit throbbed in protest as he drew back at her command, and the sudden brush of the wind against the curls of her pubic hair made her cunt throb with frustration.

Looking down into his upturned face, Lara felt a wave of tenderness so strong it almost frightened her. His shaggy head was bent back, his fiery hair cascading down

his shoulders as he gazed up at her with an urgency that made her insides quiver -- and yet she knew he wouldn't move, wouldn't even so much as stroke the massive erection straining from his pants until she told him to.

He does deserve more. And so do I.

She was glad she'd made him stop. Stroking his face lightly, she whispered, "Oh, Rand." Then she sank to her knees, facing him, and kissed him gently. His cock prodded her stomach, and she chuckled into his mouth at its hopeful insistence. "All in good time," she said, and looked down at it playfully.

Her breath caught in her throat. God, she had never seen a cock like his. The head was nearly the size of her fist. Its delicate skin gleamed, it was so tightly stretched. The dark slit at its tip gaped, and the twin curves on either side flowed smoothly down to the swollen rim. His shaft was so hard it was almost purple, and she could see the individual veins bulging along its length. The thought of commanding him to wrap his fingers around that huge, throbbing erection, of watching him rub it, made her delirious with lust.

Oh yeah, she thought weakly, swallowing the saliva that had flooded her mouth. That's me. Elara Southerlin, budding dominatrix.

But this wasn't the right time for that -- or the right partner. Lying back on the sand, she drew Rand down with her, smiling up into his earnest blue eyes. Spreading her legs wide, she drew her knees up, framing her breasts, and felt Rand's enormous cock press gently against her.

Holding himself over her on his powerful arms, he watched her expression as he slid slowly forward.

Oh, dear God.

Lara swallowed, feeling her body turn to water. He was so huge! His thick head stretched her cunt, muscling gently inward. She could feel every inch, every centimeter as it filled her, rigid and yet yielding just enough to slide back and forth carefully, working her open deeper and deeper. Grateful for his hesitant gentleness, she wrapped her arms around the corded column of his neck, pulling herself up to kiss him. His

shoulders tensed, bearing her weight in addition to his, and he tightened his ass, prodding softly forward.

The slow, steady pressure invading her cunt was intoxicating in a way utterly unlike sex with Darrek. It was like being seized by a tidal wave in slow motion, and she could feel every flex, every drag of skin against skin as his cock worked its way fully inside her. For a moment she was afraid she couldn't take all of it, and she froze, her arms clenched around Rand's neck, shuddering against him.

He stayed motionless, only the tiniest quiver through his frame betraying the effort his self-control cost him, until she relaxed, the walls of her passage easing around him. Then, with a last small thrust, he sank in all the way, his pubic bone pressing against her swollen clit.

"Oh," she whispered breathlessly. "Oh God, Rand."

"I know." His voice was rough, gravelly with need, almost a gasp against the curve of her neck. She clung to him as he pressed his hips downward, increasing the pressure on her throbbing clit, and held himself there, his whole body trembling.

She could feel his cock inside her, could feel the beat of blood through it as the sheer grip of her passage brought him closer and closer to the edge. She whimpered, pressing her breasts up against his hard chest, and he gasped, "No, don't move." She didn't, only tightened her arms, feeling his great heart thundering in his chest, his abs tense against the curve of her belly -- and that hard, steady pressure against her agonized clit.

His balls nudged the lips of her cunt, huge and hard, and she felt them clench even as he groaned in her ear. The first wave of his come exploded into her cunt -- she could feel it, hot, almost searing as it pulsed into her. He strained forward desperately, sinking in even further, and that last overwhelming thrust mashed against her clit, sending her cunt into a frenzy as it clamped around his cock, gripping and releasing in time with the spurts of liquid fire erupting inside her. Clinging harder, she cried out, and at last he pulled back, slamming his cock in again and again as their orgasms grew

to a blazing conflagration breaking over them, and he gasped in her ear, "Elara! Elara! Oh, sweet Winds! Oh, Elara!"

Her own voice tumbled free, whimpering, moaning as her body trembled, wracked by an ecstasy so keen it was painful, as his cock pulsed, splitting her open with each short, rigid thrust. His balls swelled and contracted, still shooting his liquid deep in her cunt.

Slowly, the tremors eased, until at last he lowered her gently to the sand and dropped his head to her shoulder with a deep, gusty sigh.

Lara lay, stroking his marvelous, coppery hair, feeling their mingled juices trickle from her as his cock softened enough to allow passage. "Rand?"

"Hmmm?" he murmured muzzily.

"Rand, what if I'm pregnant?"

Should have worried about that before, you dumb cluck. But Rand shook his head without lifting it from the pillow of her arm.

"Can't happen."

"Are you..." She couldn't bring herself to ask, but he shook his head again.

"We're dragons. You can only get pregnant in dragon form -- and can only give birth that way, too. My dad scared me to tears as a kid, telling me about my mother in labor. Believe me, you don't *ever* want to knock a female dragon up accidentally."

Lara grinned. "Vicious, huh?"

"Labor pains *and* the ability to breathe fire? You'd better believe it."

That made her blink. "I can breathe fire?"

She felt Rand shrug. "Sure. I'll teach you." Then he yawned. "Later."

"You're not falling asleep on me, you great ox!" She nudged him, and he moved off her. She felt a pang of regret as his cock, still huge for all it was flaccid, slid out of her. He rolled onto his back, drawing her to him, and she rested her head on his chest, playing absently with the fingers of the hand he'd wrapped around her shoulder.

She had the feeling she was forgetting something -- something important. It nagged at her even as she lay, utterly relaxed, her body awash in erotic contentment. Then she sat up abruptly, staring out at the bay.

In the tumult and excitement of the past -- she squinted, noting the sun dropping low against the horizon -- eighteen hours she'd neglected to ask one very crucial question. "Rand, why are you here?"

He blinked, his face wearing the blank, surprised look of a man who's just remembered something as obvious as his own name. Then he chuckled. "Oh, my lady. I have *so* much to tell you."

Chapter Eight

As soon as he'd heard the shouts and distant sirens, Darrek had had the sense to drop out of dragon shape and make his way back to the only shelter he knew -- Elara's cottage.

He paced the single room, irritated by the crunch of shattered crockery underfoot. The sirens had moved northward and now, as the silence returned and stretched out, growing long and thin like the late afternoon sunlight slanting across the floor, fury warred with apprehension inside him.

Had he lost? Had he lost to *Rand Aurorea*?

He was beginning to suspect he had.

Glaring at the wreckage of dishes and scattered sugar, Darrek seethed at the unfairness of it all. Elara hadn't been frightened when he'd crawled through her window. Oh, she'd acted like it, but her body hadn't once ceased to radiate desire. He wasn't wrong about that! No, what she'd been was angry -- angry and embarrassed at being forced to admit to her body's hunger.

Darrek snorted. Quite the little temper tantrum she'd thrown over it, too. Like they hadn't both known perfectly well how much she'd wanted him -- *him*, not Rand. And she'd proved it, too, this morning, down on the beach.

A self-satisfied smirk twisted his features as he remembered the way she'd held herself above him, completely free to leave but restrained utterly by the hot, aching lust inside her. It had burned in her voice as she'd challenged him. *As much as you've got -- Darrek.*

Oh yeah, she'd wanted it then. So why, by the Winds, had she been so pissed off about admitting it?

I don't need your help!

Darrek's head jerked up. As sharply and unexpectedly as a slap, the words he'd screamed at Rand rang in his memory. Hadn't he been just as angry, and for precisely the same reason? Because he hadn't wanted to acknowledge that he *did* need Rand's help?

Scowling, Darrek kicked at a smashed teacup, sending its cracked remains flying in a spray of jagged shards. That was different, damn it!

But that wasn't all of it, was it? Just the fact that he'd wounded her precious dignity? No. Because whether he'd frightened her last night or not, he'd terrified her this morning. He'd been angry because she'd made him lose control, so he'd tried to pay her back, to cow her into submission -- *her!* Elara Southerlin, the queen's own daughter!

He could still picture the way she'd blanched, her eyes widening in stark terror as she'd stared up at him -- and the way she'd run, like a child to its mother, to Rand. Huge, handsome, *honorable* Rand.

Oh yeah, he'd paid her back all right.

Staring dully at the floor, his gaze fixed pointlessly on a shattered piece of china, for the first time in his life Darrek Hausther came face to face with the ugly specter of his own pride. *Congratulations, Darrek. I think you just bought yourself a lifetime of exile.*

The thought was terrifying. He stared wildly around the cottage, as if at a prison closing in on him. To be condemned to a lifetime among pathetic, wingless creatures, meekly pretending to be one of them? Never to feel the wind in his face, the sun hot on his back as he glided free on the air?

He couldn't do it. Self-awareness was hardly his forté, but he knew himself well enough to know that. He would struggle, trying to contain his wildness, his pride, the haughty fire of his soul -- but eventually he would fail. And then they would kill him, he had no doubt of that. He would undoubtedly kill as well, ripping his tormentors to shreds as they closed in on him, giving vent to the last violent fury of his heart.

And that would be the end.

For all he knew, Rand and Elara could be gone already. Could have flown back and simply stranded him here, wondering, waiting...

No. *He* might have done that, might have taken off without a word, abandoning Rand to his fate. But Rand wouldn't. Not in a million years.

Scowling, Darrek hung his head. How many times had he sneered at Rand, called him an oaf, mocked him for that very innocence, that almost naïve decency which wouldn't allow Rand to simply abandon him? And yet, as he stood in the silence of Elara's cottage, Darrek admitted for the first time that what he'd really felt was envy. Rand was so huge, so solid, so secure in himself in a way that Darrek had never been. He'd never seemed to feel the need that lashed Darrek constantly -- the need to prove himself, to be the best, to dominate.

No, he'd always simply been there, huge and unassuming. Honest, straightforward, compassionate...

Like the way Rand had put up with him, his sulks, his sneers, never once responding in kind -- not even when Darrek had hit him. And what had he hit Rand for? For saving his life.

Rand deserved to win -- and that was the most bitter admission of all.

* * *

They'd waited till nightfall before risking the flight back. Lara had no idea what the State of Massachusetts -- or, God forbid, the Coast Guard -- would do if confronted with a dragon, but she'd had absolutely zero desire to find out. Now they flew through the darkness, the long curve of Cape Cod glimmering below them in the pale, thin light of a crescent moon, their wings flapping softly, the wind no more than a whisper as it slipped by.

Lara found the silence soothing. She was appalled at the decision her mother had burdened her with. How could she possibly choose between them, knowing she would be damning one of them to exile forever?

Could her mother really be that ruthless? The image Rand had painted of Melgara suggested a queen both stern and wise -- but not vindictive. He'd told her

about the Zendarian wars, and the brave young queen who had done whatever it took to protect her subjects. And then, in order to end a rift that threatened to tear her domain to splinters, leaving it fatally vulnerable to a second attack, she'd given up her own daughter, sending her into hiding precisely so that Rand and Darrek would one day have to come looking for her. Lara knew it had not been an easy sacrifice for her mother to make.

What if she simply refused to choose? No, that was too easy. And it wouldn't solve the problem, anyway.

But Lara couldn't help feeling she was missing something.

Whatever it was, she hadn't found it by the time East Wellfleet appeared below them, its scattered streetlights casting dim pools of light along the deserted lanes. With no more than a rustle of wings, they glided to the wave-swept sand and quickly dropped into human form.

As they padded toward the cottage, Rand took her arm, halting her. "Elara..." His eyes were dark with worry and strain, but his expression was determined. "Elara, whatever happens, I want you to know I have no regrets."

Feeling an ache where her heart should be, Lara studied him -- the broad, honest face, the turquoise-blue eyes. She opened her mouth, but Rand laid a finger across her lips, silencing her.

"No. This is important. You *need* Darrek, Elara. And I'm not afraid of exile -- or, well, I am -- but I can survive it. It might even be an adventure for me." He grinned, but even in the darkness she could see the bravado in it. Then his eyes darkened again as he added, "Darrek can't. And I want you to take that into account."

Without replying, she slid into his arms, hugging his massive frame tight. He was so good, so gentle... How could she possibly leave him behind?

She couldn't do it.

As they walked up the scrubby little lawn to her cottage, she finally made out Darrek's silhouette. He was sitting on the porch steps, his shoulders slumped in defeat. His head had lifted abruptly as he heard them approach -- but no hope lit his eyes. The

only expression in them was a sullen resignation. He looked nothing like the awesome, powerful dragon that had so terrified her this morning -- he looked, in fact, like a very frightened, very lonely young man.

Rand was right -- he wouldn't survive. He was too inflexible, too arrogant, too angry...

"Came to say goodbye, did you?" His tone was sullen and futile, like the snarl of a caged lion that knows his roar is useless.

Rand opened his mouth. "I... no."

Darrek stared at him, puzzled. Then, slowly, his expression changed to absolute rage. His black eyes narrowed to sharp, deadly slits as he glared at Lara. "Do you *enjoy* tormenting us, my lady?" His tone twisted the endearment into an epithet. "Does it give you pleasure, watching us writhe?"

Lara shook her head, unable to speak to defend herself. *Isn't that what I'm doing, after all? Simply putting off the inevitable?*

"Do you *like* leaving us hanging, waiting to know which of us you'll condemn forever?"

"Darrek, stop it!" Rand broke in.

Darrek whipped around to face him. "You're defending her? Her hero, her rescuer -- and after everything you've done she's considering leaving you here!"

Springing to his feet, Darrek loomed menacingly over Lara, his inky hair whipping across his face. Trembling, feeling the blood drain from her face, she backed away.

"What now? Shall we do handstands for you? What else would you care to examine? Our teeth? Our intentions? How well we *dance*?" He pounced, grabbing her by the arms. His grip was vise-like, his nails digging into her arms. His eyes glittered down at her as he whispered, low and intense. "You *will* choose, my lady. One way or another. And you will choose *now*."

"No!" Throwing himself at the Hausther heir, Rand bore him to the ground. Lara screamed as they rolled, thrashing and fighting, each trying to gain the upper hand. For

all Rand's massive strength, Darrek moved like a snake -- deadly, limber, and lightning fast.

Rand grabbed Darrek's arm as he sought to gouge out the Aureorean's eyes, but Darrek pivoted on his hold, sliding from beneath Rand to straddle his back. Viciously, he yanked Rand's arm upward, forcing it high between the heavy shoulder blades. Rand shrieked in agony, and thrust himself backward, tumbling the dark Hausther to the ground. Grabbing Darrek's hair, he slammed him to his knees, one burly arm coming up to hammer his enormous fist home.

"No!" Lara screamed. The two men froze, glaring at each other with murder in their eyes.

"No!" she repeated and stalked forward, naked and bristling. In her fury and distraction, she barely saw them. There was something Darrek had said, something...

You will choose, my lady. One way or another.

How could she make such a heart-wrenching choice? Surely her mother hadn't given her up, hadn't sent her into hiding and set all this in motion just so that one of them could be exiled forever.

Darrek was staring up at her, his hands still wrapped around Rand's throat. Ignoring them both, Lara dug her hands into her hair, yanking it as she thought furiously.

One way or another, my lords, your feud ends here.

She'd made Rand tell her, word for word, what Melgara had said. Now that phrase rang in her mind. Instinctively, she knew her mother had chosen those words for a reason.

One way or another...

She knew what the one way was -- they all did.

But what was the other?

"You!" She jabbed a finger at Rand. "You said earlier I *need* Darrek. Tell me why."

He stared at her, panting, his face a mask of confusion. Straightening, he lowered his fist and turned Darrek loose. He bent his head for a moment, his thick, crimson hair hiding his face, his shoulders heaving as he breathed deeply, regaining command of himself. "Because, my lady. He's arrogant. He's unpleasant. But he's also the best fighter in the four clans."

"But..." Confused, she gestured at the scene. Darrek was still on his knees, glowering at the sandy dirt beneath his knees, his face a mask of hatred and spite.

Rand laughed ruefully. "This? This wasn't a fight. This was..." He shrugged dismissively, reducing their brawl to inconsequentiality. "Believe me, in a *real* battle? Darrek would have torn my guts out and left me bleeding on the sand."

For a moment, Lara seemed to see two dragons in the air, their shrieks like thunderclaps splitting the sky. Rand was right, she realized -- this had been nothing.

"If Zendar ever attacks again -- and Melgara has been certain for twenty years that he will -- you'll need Darrek. Him and every stiff-necked, arrogant, violent Hausther." Rand paused a moment, thinking. "I know he's infuriating sometimes, but... I've always kind of admired that fierceness. I might not like how he goes about it, but Darrek makes things *happen*. And he's not afraid of anything."

"Is that all?" she said coldly.

"No." He shook his head, then stared at her beseechingly, as if desperate to make her understand. "Darrek would like nothing better than to make everybody believe he doesn't care about anything, except his own pride."

Lara saw Darrek's head jerk up, his eyes glittering with both fury and a strange sort of dismay, as Rand continued. "But I know him better than that, Elara. He does care -- a lot. More than he knows, or even knows how to admit. And he will fight to the death to protect what he loves."

"No!" The word was as sharp and jagged as broken glass. It shrilled from Darrek's throat as if torn from him. Snarling, he lunged at Rand, tumbling the huge Aureorean to the ground and straddling his chest, his hands clamping around Rand's

neck. "You bastard! Do you think I'll allow that? Do you think I'll spend the rest of my days burdened by your mercy?"

Leaping forward, Lara grabbed Darrek's hair, yanking his head back, and breaking his grip on Rand's throat. "Then tell me why," she demanded. His eyes burned with poisonous, febrile hate. "Tell me why I should choose Rand instead of you."

"Because!"

"Because why?"

"Because he's everything I'm not!" Darrek's voice was almost a shriek. "He's kind, and patient, and good. I'm *not*! And I will *not* allow him to sacrifice himself -- you deserve him!"

Darrek stared at her, panting, furious. Lara froze, staring at him in shock.

You deserve him.

Not *he* deserves you, but *you* deserve *him*.

Lara's hands flew to her mouth as her eyes widened in sudden comprehension. Could it be that easy? Could the rage and enmity between these two really be that *simple*?

She stared down at them. Then, as the implications of what Melgara had set in motion sank in, she felt an evil grin slowly spreading behind her fingers. She started chuckling -- she couldn't help it.

Oh, Darrek was going to *hate* this!

"I'm glad you find this so amusing -- *my lady*."

The sneer in Darrek's voice made it easy to wipe the grin off her face. Dropping her hands, she managed a stern glare. "I don't. Now get off him."

Darrek's eyes narrowed, but he pushed to his feet. "There. Are you satisfied?"

"No."

He cocked an arrogant eyebrow at that, and suddenly Lara didn't need to feign a single ounce of indignation. "No, Darrek, I am *not* satisfied. Do you remember this morning, on the beach?" He flinched, and his gaze slid away from her. "Look at me."

There was absolutely no pretense to her rage now. "Do you remember what you said?" He opened his mouth, but she steamrolled right over him. "You said, 'You are mine now, Elara.' Well, I am *not* yours, Darrek, and I never will be!" Stalking to him, she slapped him hard across the face. "How dare you? Do you know who I am?" Letting her eyes blaze with rage, she ignored his mute nod. "I am Elara Southerlin -- your *queen*, Darrek Hausther! And you *will* obey me!"

He stood, his face drained of color, his black brows raised high in stupefaction. He swallowed once and opened his mouth as if to speak. She cut him off. "If that's an apology, save your breath and help Rand up."

His expression shifted back to a glower, but he turned and extended a hand, helping the Aureorean to his feet. Lara nodded. "Good. Now kiss and make up."

"*What?*" Darrek whipped around, his eyes blazing in fury. Behind him, Rand looked equally horrified, his turquoise eyes going almost silver with alarm.

Lara had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning. But she had the whip hand here -- she knew it, *they* knew it. And she had every intention of using it. She frowned harder, instead. "You heard me, Darrek. You too, Rand."

They glanced at each other, Rand's face going deathly white, while two bright pink spots burned high on Darrek's pale cheeks. Lara practically purred as she said, "Unless you'd prefer exile, of course."

Glowering, jaws knotted, the two men glared at the sky, the ground -- anywhere but at each other. An unspoken accord seemed to flash between them and, awkwardly, they shuffled toward each other, their eyes averted as they leaned in.

"Oh, and make it count," Lara added sweetly, seating herself on the steps of the porch. For the first time, she realized she'd been standing on her back lawn stark naked, screaming at two fighting men. Hedge or no hedge, she was instantly uncomfortable. *Thank God it's autumn. And the middle of the night.* She didn't dare interrupt this moment - - not even long enough to grab her robe from inside.

Screwing their eyes shut like children swallowing cough syrup, the two men braced themselves, leaned forward...

Automatically, Rand raised his arms to slide them around Darrek's waist. Wait -- what was he *doing*? Blushing furiously, he dropped them.

He could feel the heat pouring off Darrek's body, the shorter man's chest brushing lightly against his own. He didn't know why Elara was forcing them to do this, but...

Suddenly he remembered how the Hausther heir had looked sprawled asleep beside the hedge -- and the way he'd reached out to stroke Darrek's hair back. With that same innate tenderness, Rand lowered his mouth and gently brushed Darrek's lips with his own.

Darrek tilted his head back, enraged by the fact that Rand had to bend down to kiss him. What game did that bitch think she was playing? He stood quivering with fury as Rand kissed him -- lightly, delicately, *considerately*, as if Darrek were as precious, as fragile as a girl.

Bastard! How *dare* he?

That was the last straw, the final indignity. Grabbing the Aureorean by the scruff of his neck, Darrek dragged his head downward and kissed him, *hard*, raking his lips over Rand's fuller ones.

Make it count? Oh, he'd do that, by the Winds!

Rand gasped in shock, and Darrek took advantage of the motion, forcing his tongue between Rand's teeth and lashing the inside of his mouth.

Rand stood, his chest heaving, unable to do anything but let Darrek savage his mouth. He was uncomfortably aware of the erection thickening inside his trousers.

What if Darrek felt it?

He tried to move away, but Darrek's hands were clenched in his hair, restraining him unmercifully as his long, agile tongue darted deep into Rand's mouth. Rand groaned -- he couldn't help it. Darrek kissed him harder, jabbing his tongue between Rand's lips, and Rand whimpered as his cock flexed painfully, becoming fully erect.

Winds! How could he be wanting this?

With a shock that jolted him, running from his balls straight up his spine, Rand realized, *No, the question is how long have I been wanting this?*

Darrek nipped viciously at his neck, and rasped in his ear, "You like that, Aurorea? You like it rough?"

Only from you, Rand thought incoherently. His hands hung awkwardly at his sides, and he had to suppress the urge to slide them around Darrek's slim waist. Darrek's mouth lifted again to his, licking and biting at his lips, and this time Rand was unable to stop himself from kissing Darrek back. Hesitantly, he probed with his tongue, and Darrek seized it between his lips, sucking it deep into his mouth. Rand felt his knees buckle as his pulse thundered in his ears.

Then Darrek was grabbing him, yanking him close. Rand stiffened in apprehension as Darrek's sharp hipbone brushed against his erection. His eyelids flew open in alarm, and he stared down into the hot midnight blackness of Darrek Hausther's gaze.

Darrek's cock was as erect as his own.

Oh, I'll fuck you, you bastard. Darrek grinned into Rand's soft blue eyes as he thrust his hips forward. *Fuck you harder than you've ever dreamed...*

All his pride, all his envy, boiled up inside him. He ground his shaft roughly against Rand's thicker one. *I'll fill your ass with my cock, your mouth with my come, I'll tease you till you beg me for it, you big ox...*

He slid one hand from Rand's hair, grabbed his ass tightly instead. Pistoning his hips, he slammed his cock against Rand, feeling the other's heat even through the cloth separating them. He reached for the drawstring of Rand's trousers -- and a cold, commanding voice pronounced one single word.

"Stop."

Chapter Nine

It had taken every ounce of willpower Lara had to utter that one word. She had never in her life been as horny as she was right now. The look on Rand's face as Darrek had dragged his head downward, thrusting his tongue furiously into his mouth, was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen.

How long had these two been in love with each other? Years, she suspected. And yet the way Rand had touched her, and the hunger with which Darrek had fucked her, hadn't been in the least bit feigned -- what they felt for her was equally real. But this, Lara was certain, was the defining passion of their lives.

Had her mother known? Yes, she rather thought Melgara had known quite well.

But desire wasn't enough. Not by a long shot. And that's all she was seeing in Darrek's expression -- lust, and rage, and pride.

She didn't want to break him -- pain in the ass or not, the sight of him violently kissing Rand reminded Lara sharply of how incredibly arousing his arrogance could be. But if she couldn't find some way to rein in the savage wildness of his nature *now*, there was no hope at all she'd be able to control him later.

For once in his life, God damn it, Darrek Hausther was going to admit there was something he *needed*.

"Rand!"

The Aureorean lifted his head and she saw that he was blushing furiously. Embarrassed? No -- or at least not *just* embarrassed. Lara stood, and jerked her head. "Come with me."

He pulled away from Darrek as she walked up the steps. Darrek started to follow, but Lara glared at him. "No. Not you."

Going inside, she let the screen door fall shut behind her with a satisfying thump. It creaked open again a second later, and Rand entered quietly. "Close the door," Lara said, and flicked on the light.

The cottage was spotless. No debris littered the floor. The sheets had been smoothed on her queen-sized bed, and she could see her broom propped neatly in the corner by the fridge.

"He cleaned it," Rand murmured. "I don't believe it."

Lara grinned. "Maybe there's hope after all."

"Elara..."

She turned. "What is it, Rand?"

He cleared his throat, shuffling his feet awkwardly "Elara, what just happened... I..."

She smiled gently. "No. Don't apologize. You didn't know?"

He shook his head, his eyes wide and wondering. Then he added, "But... What I feel for you is just as --"

"I know." Sliding into his arms, she lifted her chin, and with a sigh of relief, Rand kissed her. She could feel his cock, still erect, throbbing against her belly, and his kiss grew more demanding as he pulled her against him.

Lara dropped her head back, and as he bent to kiss her neck, he slid one hand to her breast. Arching her back, she strained against him, fitting herself more snugly against his huge, rock-hard body. God! Watching them kiss had left her panting like a teenager. She was acutely conscious of the wetness between her thighs, the aching sense of emptiness in her cunt longing to be filled. Her hands slid over Rand's back as he licked at her earlobe, feeling the rolling muscles, the smooth, velvety skin.

Her cunt was pulsing with hunger, and she nuzzled his neck, enjoying the salty tang of him even as she whispered hoarsely in his ear. "Rand? What would you do, if you could both come back with me? What would you be willing to do to make that happen?"

He pulled back abruptly, staring down at her, his eyes wide with unexpected hope. "Anything," he whispered. "Anything at all."

"Then kiss me, Rand. Kiss me hard."

He did, wrapping his arms around her and dragging her to him, his mouth closing firmly on hers as he plunged his tongue between her teeth. Deliriously, she clung to him, but even as she did she tugged him slightly forward, taking two steps back till they were right by the bed -- and right in front of the big picture window.

Outside, crouched just beyond the edge of the porch, Darrek scowled as he watched Rand's hands moving over Elara, his biceps flexing as he pulled her closer. Holding his great, shaggy head in her hands, she guided his mouth downward, and Darrek gritted his teeth as Rand's lips closed on one taut, pink nipple, suckling it with a look of such *lust*...

Damn her! *Damn* them both!

When she'd told -- no, *ordered* -- him to wait outside, Darrek's first impulse had been to let his body expand into dragon form and shriek his fury against the night sky. Rage thundered through him, too hot, too overwhelming for this human form. His second impulse had been to spin on his heel and stomp away.

But, like a lonely orphan on the edge of a playground staring hungrily at a father playing with his son, Darrek hadn't been able to tear himself away from that bright, warm light pouring through the window, or what might be his final sight of the two of them inside.

She'd chosen, obviously. And she'd made the right decision -- it was Rand who deserved to go back, Rand who should have a life, a future. Darrek watched him avidly, storing up every shift of expression on that broad, mobile face, the quick flash of his open, artless grin, the way his jaw went lax with arousal as Elara untied his trousers, sliding them down his muscular thighs, and wrapped her fingers around that huge, throbbing cock.

Jealousy flooded through him -- he couldn't help it -- as her hands glided up and down, working the skin over Rand's thick, rock-hard shaft. She was kneeling now, one

hand guiding his cock to her lips, while the other curved around Rand's balls. Winds! They were enormous. Swollen with come, they filled her hand to overflowing, as oversized as everything else about him; his cock, his shoulders...

His heart.

Grimly, Darrek clenched his teeth against the hoarse, ragged sounds that were coming from his throat. This was the way it should be, he told himself fiercely. Rand would go back with Elara, and he...

He should leave now. Now, while they were distracted by their pleasures -- what, after all, would be the point of goodbyes?

But he couldn't make himself move. He seemed rooted to the spot, his gaze devouring the two of them. Groaning, he knotted his hands into fists, watching as Rand's fingers slid through Elara's brown hair, pulling her head gently against him, watching her tongue dart over the tip of his cock, probing lightly at the slit, dancing over the red, engorged rim. She opened her jaw wide, closing her lips around his cockhead, obviously unable to get more of it in her mouth.

Rand's balls were tightening now, drawing up against his groin as his shaft swelled even further. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back in ecstasy, the corded muscles standing out in his strong neck as he panted, his broad chest rising and falling with his impending climax -- and then she stopped. Simply pulled away abruptly, leaving him hanging there, quivering on the edge of orgasm. His hand slid toward his cock -- Elara said something -- he froze, his face a grimace of agony as he dropped his hand to his side. His erection strained upward, so distended Darrek could see the large vein pulsing along its formidable length.

Darrek felt a curious ache at the base of his tongue. Jutting it out slightly, he closed his eyes and pictured placing it where Elara's had just been. Opening his mouth and curling his lips over his teeth, he could almost feel that massive shaft sliding against them, bruising his lips as it pushed inward...

Sobbing with longing, he clung to the edge of the porch. His groin was on fire, his balls so heavy they felt made of lead. His cock pulsed against his abdomen, and he could feel the first drops of come leaking from it, smearing over his swollen tip.

Stretching herself out on the bed, Lara tried to ignore the insistent throb of her clit as she listened intently. Yes. There. She heard it again -- a harsh, agonized groan, outside the window.

There was such *need* in it, such yearning, that it tore at her heartstrings. Looking up at Rand, Lara realized he'd heard it, too. His gaze strayed toward the window, and she whispered quickly, "No. Don't look." His eyes were haunted by shadows as they focused back on her face.

She breathed deeply, trying to contain the welter of emotions assaulting her -- compassion, a vague, restless guilt, and sharper and more demanding than either, desire. But underneath them beat a fierce determination, not at all like the resolve she'd felt when she'd vowed to herself that she *would* humble Darrek. No, this was a force of will she'd barely known she possessed, an almost ruthless ferocity that would do whatever it took to accomplish her goal.

She would not leave either of them behind.

Writhing on the bed, panting with arousal even in the midst of her reflections, she said, "Pretend you don't even know he's there." Then she smiled, feeling a resurgence of her earlier, mischievous glee. "And now you can touch yourself."

She arched her back, thrusting her breasts up toward his gaze, and watched as Rand stroked his fingers over his cock, working them around the enormous tip and down the underside of the shaft. He rubbed it hard, right at the base where his cock joined his sac, then wrapped his hand around it and squeezed.

Holding it like that, he stood, his face rigid with concentration, and Lara felt a wave of lust flood through her as his cock pulsed in his grip, flexing up against his almost brutal hold with every beat of his heart.

“Oh, Jesus,” she whispered, staring at that club of a cock, which was turning slowly purple as Rand tightened his grip. Frantically, she thought, *Darrek better break soon. Because I don't know how much longer I can last.*

Chapter Ten

The great hall was silent. Torches flickered in sconces, and the candles had long since burned low. Thrand Aureora sprawled, fast asleep in his chair. Melgara smiled fondly, looking at the old lord, then shifted her gaze to Darmon Hausther.

He sat motionless in his chair, every muscle as tense as a spring coiled in on itself. His long, elegant hands were wrapped around a silver wine goblet, and Melgara noted with satisfaction the whiteness of his knuckles. His eyes, hard as obsidian, were the only thing that moved -- they flicked to her, every so often, but Melgara remained silent, her face impassive, and that black, febrile gaze flicked away.

Then, tossing back his head in a motion that precisely mirrored his son's, Darmon raised the goblet -- but his fingers trembled as he did so. Scowling, he set it down, his nostrils flaring as his chest rose and fell. His hands clenched the arms of his chair, his body arched as if straining against the prison of his will.

Melgara watched his struggle from under half-lowered lids. She could see the tension mounting through him, the way the cords stood out on his neck, the way his shoulders shook slightly...

"Your Highness," he whispered hoarsely, "have pity. Tell me there is hope."

At that, Melgara opened her eyes fully and gazed at him coldly. But she made no reply.

"My lady... Melgara, please!"

The moment when his battle was lost was painfully visible. His shoulders slumped. His proud head drooped, his gaze falling to the floor. His hands went lax on the arms of the chair, and he sobbed, twice, bitterly. Then he was silent.

After a long pause, he raised his head. His usually pale face was utterly white. His black eyes, dull now with despair. "Call it off, your Highness. I beg you."

She raised an eyebrow, not smiling now. He was a father in the clutch of a parent's most terrible fear -- she would not mock that.

"My lady, I was wrong. And you have every right to punish me. But not my son! Not that. Oh, my lady, please, not that!"

A tear trickled down one high, sharp cheekbone. Still, Melgara said nothing. Dropping his chin, Darmon Hausther said, "There is nothing more important to me than my son. Not the throne. Not my pride. Nothing. Your Highness, I will do anything, I will *give* -- anything."

He slid from his chair, dropping heavily to his knees. "Please, my lady, let me have my son back."

* * *

Crouched in the darkness, hidden by the shadow of the porch, Darrek rocked back and forth, his hands clamped over his mouth. Winds, what was wrong with him? Every nerve in his body seemed to blaze with fire, and his heart burned in his chest, lacerated by emotions he couldn't begin to contain.

He should leave. Right now. Just make himself walk away.

Only he couldn't.

Remembering how he had kissed Rand, Darrek blushed in shame. *Why* had he been so fierce, so angry? He'd done everything he could do to humiliate the Aureorean heir, and now...

Now I would give anything just to touch him one last time.

Leaning his head back against the edge of the porch, Darrek let the tears roll down his face unregarded. How many times had he showered Rand with contempt? He couldn't even begin to count them. What would he give for a chance to take it all back?

You could do that, you know.

Darrek froze at the thought.

You could simply walk up there, knock on the door, and...

And what? another part of his mind sneered in reply. *Walk in there, abase yourself before them, beg their forgiveness? What would it change?*

Nothing. Nothing at all.

But nevertheless that was what he was going to do.

Trembling, terrified, he crept up the steps, feeling his heart thunder in his chest and his breath, loud and harsh, rasp in his throat. At every step, that grating, scornful voice echoed in his head, calling him a weakling, a coward, a fool, until finally Darrek screamed back at it. *Shut up! Just shut up!*

His eyes cleared, and he found himself staring at Elara's door. The night stretched, black and endless, behind him. He raised his hand to knock -- and couldn't do it. It wasn't pride this time that immobilized him. It was fear, pure and simple.

What if they don't want me? What if they laugh at me? What if they won't even open the door?

He stood, paralyzed by indecision. Now he really was a fool, standing on a doorstep too afraid to knock! He sniffled, wiped away his tears with the heel of one hand -- and stared at that mute, closed door with a longing that cut deeper than anything he'd ever known.

How much had he thrown away for the sake of his pride?

Everything, the wind whispered back. *Everything*.

Bowing his head, Darrek turned away -- and heard a soft voice call from inside the cottage, "Come in."

* * *

When he opened the door and stood blinking in the doorway, it was all Lara could do not to throw her arms around him. His face was so pale, his eyes shadowed with terror and loneliness. But she stood where she'd placed herself -- in the middle of the floor, with Rand standing behind her.

She leaned back against Rand, feeling his comforting bulk behind her, and did what she had to, no matter how her heart bled. "Come here," she commanded coldly. Shuffling, his gaze cast downward after that first, vulnerable glance, he did. "Is there something you would say to me?"

"Elara... Rand... I --"

"On your knees, Hausther!" She barked the command, and he dropped like a stone, his shoulders heaving as the sobs he could no longer contain burst from him. Lara waited silently until they eased. Finally, Darrek looked up at her, his eyes streaming with tears.

"I was wrong," he whispered hoarsely. "Oh, Elara, I was so wrong. You are not mine -- I am yours. I, and Rand, we are your subjects. And he is everything I cannot be, everything you deserve. I would not change that, my lady. I only wanted to say goodbye to you both."

Bowing his head again, he stayed motionless before her, his long, straight black hair gleaming like pitch. Reaching down, she stroked it gently. With a cry, he leaned forward, wrapping his arms around her waist, and resting his head like a child against the warm curve of her belly.

"Please, my lady," he whispered hoarsely, and at the raw agony in his voice, she relented. Sliding her fingers through his silky hair, she drew him closer against her. He kissed her belly blindly, then slid his mouth lower, burying his face with a sob against the warm cleft between her thighs.

Lara felt Rand holding her as her muscles went lax. Dear God, the things Darrek's tongue was doing! Fervently, he licked at her clit, his tongue dancing over it with a hunger that paled anything she'd ever imagined. Clamping his mouth over it, he suckled with the urgency of a starving man. She could feel the warmth of Rand's breath on her neck as he stared over her shoulder, watching Darrek eat her cunt, and his erection pulsed furiously against the cheeks of her ass. His hands rose to her breasts, cupping them, tugging at her nipples as Darrek's mouth tugged at her clit.

Her whole body arched, and fire lashed through her, running from the hard little nubs Rand pinched between his fingers to the hot, throbbing spot that Darrek worked at unmercifully. The lips of her cunt were so swollen and thick she almost wanted to beg them to fuck her, to pierce their aching fullness. Instead, she reached back with one hand, and guided Rand's cock down between the cheeks of her ass. He bent his knees to

accommodate, and slid his cock between her thighs. With the other, she tugged Darrek's head back, forcing him to look up at her.

"You will do whatever I tell you, Hausther." It wasn't a question, but he nodded anyway. Rocking her hips back, Lara felt her cunt dragging across the enormous shaft of Rand's cock. It was so long it protruded from between her thighs and, with a smile, she guided Darrek's head to it, watching avidly as he wrapped his lips around the huge, purple tip. Behind her, she felt Rand stiffen, and plunge his hips forward. The motion tugged at her clit, and drove his cockhead deep into Darrek's waiting mouth.

Eagerly, Darrek craned forward, his breath searing her clit as he worked at Rand's cock, sucking it with a frenzy that made Lara dizzy with desire. He drew back a bit, and she could see his tongue gliding over the taut, gleaming skin, flicking at the swollen rim and then jabbing hungrily at the gaping slit in its end. Panting, she asked, "Do you want that, Darrek? Do you want to taste his come?" Rolling his eyes upward, his mouth filled with Rand's cock, he nodded, and Lara felt her knees buckle as her desire spiraled upward even further. Burying her hands in Darrek's hair, she dragged his head forward, impaling his mouth with Rand's cock. Rand groaned and slid his hands to her hips, grabbing them as he pushed hard between her thighs.

Twisting Darrek's hair through her fingers till her fists were clenched against his skull, Lara raked his head backward and forward along Rand's shaft. Darrek whimpered, and she felt Rand tense behind her, his cock teasing her from asshole to clit as he pounded forward, meeting each thrust as she dragged Darrek to her.

Each time Darrek's lips brushed her clit, Lara felt her frenzy growing. Harder, faster, she yanked him to her, fucking his mouth furiously with Rand's massive cock. Then she felt the first pulse as Rand started to come, his cock flexing and jerking against her asshole as the first spurts of his semen flooded Darrek's mouth. Hungrily, Darrek moaned and thrust his head forward, the motion of his lips as he tugged at Rand's cock teasing her clit unbearably. Shoving his head back, Lara watched as Rand orgasmed, shooting pearly-white streams of come into Darrek's open mouth. The feel of his shaft

throbbing against her was too much, and panting, her mind whirling, Lara let herself peak.

As the first shudders hit her, Darrek groaned and leaned forward, lapping at her clit with his come-covered tongue. Its hot, slippery caress sent shudders deep through her, and Lara mashed his face against her, feeling her knees give way as wave after wave of ecstasy filled her. Rand held her up, his arms wrapped tight around her waist, as Darrek devoured her cunt, sucking deliriously at the juices spilling from her. Shuddering, moaning, Lara held Darrek there, her hands fisted in his hair as the last, agonized quivers pounded through her, leaving her shaking and drained, limp as a rag doll in Rand's powerful arms.

Darrek tilted his head back, looked up at her with eyes soft with gratitude. "Thank you, my lady. I couldn't leave without letting you know... without letting you *both* know --"

"Oh, you cluck," Lara replied impatiently. Behind her, she felt Rand's chest quiver with laughter. "Do you think there's any way I'm going to leave you here?"

At the look of blank astonishment on Darrek's face, she started laughing too -- she couldn't help it.

Epilogue

The tall wooden doors at the end of the hall thumped open. Thrand Aureora startled blearily awake. Darmon Hausther raised his bowed head. And Melgara Southerlin, queen of the dragons, felt her heart leap with a longing she'd suppressed for twenty years.

Keening triumphantly, a wind swept through the room, blasting around columns and dousing the torches guttering in the thin morning light. When it passed, Melgara saw two dragons crouched on the broad marble floor, one red and one black.

And between them stood her daughter, Elara.

Naked, resplendent, she tossed her head back and raised her gaze challengingly to her mother's face. "Mother, I have come. But I will not allow either Darrek or Rand to be condemned to exile. If you force me to choose, I will leave now, and never return."

At her words, the two dragons started in shock, and suddenly Rand and Darrek stood there, their mouths opening to protest. Elara, she saw, raked them each with a stern glance, and they subsided immediately. Turning back to Melgara, she added, her tone softer, "I cannot do without either one. Mother, *please* -- don't make me choose."

Smiling, Melgara stood and opened her arms. A fierce, overwhelming gladness burst through her as Elara ran to embrace her. Stroking her daughter's hair, Melgara felt tears leaking from her eyes. Brushing them away, she smiled down at Elara. "You do realize, of course, there was a test for you here as well."

Elara raised her head, her gray eyes puzzled, and Melgara explained. "If you hadn't been able, whether by guile or stratagem or sheer strength of will, to force an accord between these two, one of them *would* have had to be exiled. I could not have left my kingdom to be ravaged by them. Forgive me, my daughter?"

Elara nodded. Then, in a burst of joy, she threw her arms around her mother's neck. "Oh, Mother, I *do* understand." Then she grinned. "And guess what else? I can fly!"

* * *

Almost stumbling with weariness, Lara pushed open the door of her new bedchamber. It had been a long, very tiring, very exciting day. The two old lords had gladly accepted her decision, happily abandoning their hopes for a royal marriage in their joy at their sons' return. Through all the festivities her mother had beamed at her proudly, and Lara, who really had not been sure what the result of her decision would be, had felt both relief and an unexpected pride in the beautiful, resolute woman sitting beside her.

Lara yawned widely, realizing with astonishment that it had only been forty-eight hours since Darrek had first crawled through her window.

On the carpeted floor of the enormous room, two dragons sprawled, their limbs intertwined. Their massive chests rose and fell steadily as they slept. Darrek's sinuous neck was draped over Rand's gleaming red back, their muzzles almost touching. She smiled fondly. The only question left was, which one of them did she want to play with tonight?

Elara Southerlin smiled to herself. *Why, both of them, of course.*

Sierra Dafoe

Sierra Dafoe imprinted early on the one, the real, the only Robin Hood (and we all know who that is!) and has been in love with the heroic adventure story ever since. She branched out from there into fantasy and science fiction and even a few forays into horror, but still has a deep-seated weakness for those cocky, handsome rebels.

Rather unsurprisingly, Sierra lives in northern New Hampshire's White Mountains -- which is good, because nothing short of their beauty would likely ever drag her away from her keyboard! After years of publishing short stories, she's thrilled to be with Changeling Press, and would love to hear your feedback. Visit her at her website, www.darkerdesires.com, for excerpts, contests, freebies, and more!