

TORRID TWISTED TALES



DRAGON'S BANE

Sherrill Quinn

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by

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Dedication

To my family, who support me in their indomitable way, and my beautiful, wonderful fellow vixens: Jan, who started me on this incredible journey; Suz, Maya, Jenna, Kate, Lauren, Jeanne, Sloane, Yasmine and Nancy for their incredible support and phenomenal powers of critique.

Chapter 1

“Really, I don’t want...” Adara Tremeirchion slapped her companion’s roving hands yet again. What had Francesca been thinking to set her up on this date?

A hand slid up her thigh and she picked it up by the thumb and thrust it away. “No! I mean it.”

“Aw, come on, Adara. You know you want me.” Her companion pushed his chair closer, blocking the view of the other patrons in the busy pub. He tilted his head so the light caught and danced across the golden blond strands of his hair. When she caught him glancing at his reflection in the mirror over the bar, she rolled her eyes. She’d admit that he was a handsome rogue. But he knew it and that was a turn-off for her.

She was twenty-six years old and still a virgin. She wanted to find a man who would love her with a passionate, endless love. A man who was strong and brave and had a body to die for, but wasn’t vain. A man who would please his woman because he wanted to, not because he wanted something from her.

This guy wasn’t it.

“I *don’t* want you,” she said, batting at his hands.

One big hand grabbed both her wrists and held them. His other hand fondled her breasts. “Francesca said you’d play hard to get. Said I’d have to cajole you.”

"You call this *cajoling*?" Adara shook her head. *Men*. Why couldn't she find just one who knew the difference between seduction and mauling?

"Yes, well, I'd say this is far more than playing hard to get. Darling, you're the most frigid woman I've ever met. A real ice queen."

That was just downright mean. She knew the Ice Queen, and she wasn't a pleasant person. Enough was enough. She'd tried to be nice, but he wasn't listening. Fine. She'd show him exactly why she was the youngest fairy godmother in the realm.

With the blink of one eye, she summoned her magic and threw him across the room. Everyone quieted and looked first at the big man lying unconscious against the back wall, then back at her. She smiled and rose from her chair, standing as tall as her five foot four inch frame would allow, and gathered her handbag. "No means no," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

The men in the pub raised their eyebrows and then, almost as one person, they turned back to their dinners, shoulders hunched. The women smiled at her, giving her an unvoiced approval. Adara felt like she'd scored one for womankind everywhere.

Now, she had a job to finish. She just needed to dust off her "old lady" outfit, and finish her matchmaking with Cinderella and her handsome prince.

* * * *

"Calm down, Adara." The short, somewhat stout woman took Adara's arm and led her to a comfortable wingback chair, urging her to sit. "How was I to know he'd turn out to be such a toad?"

Adara was so worked up, she could hardly sit still. "How could you *not* know, Francesca? His hands were everywhere!"

“Well... So what?”

“So what? So what!?” Adara jumped up and paced. Her arms waved in agitation as she sputtered, “He was despicable. Conceited. *Mean.*”

Francesca hucked up her skirts and sat in the abandoned wingback. The chair shrunk to fit her smaller contours and she wiggled until she was comfortable. “Well, my original idea was sound. You need a man.”

Adara stopped and stared at her mentor. “I am fine just the way I am. Francesca, why can’t you just leave me be on this?”

“It’s not natural,” the older woman muttered, “this fixation on staying a virgin.” She stood and walked to a shelving unit that held dozens of glass and clay jars. She took her wand from a lower shelf and turned to face her protégé. She sighed at catching sight of the confusion Adara knew must be written all over her face.

Francesca flicked her wand and, in the blink of an eye, a naked man stood between the two women. He faced the older woman, leaving Adara the rear view, so to speak.

And what a view it was. She knew she should probably appreciate the long, lean line of his back and the muscled breadth of his incredible shoulders, and even the strength of his powerful thighs. All she could look at was his taut, rounded ass.

“There.” Francesca walked around to Adara’s side, and the man turned as well. Adara felt her eyes widen when his penis came into view. She got a peripheral impression of a hard abdomen and dark blond hair smattering a trail over his muscled chest, but her gaze was riveted on his cock.

“At first, the other Sisters kept telling me you needed a man. Then they thought perhaps you didn’t like men,” her

mentor said, her tone gleeful now that she could prove them wrong. "I can see you do. Touch him."

That broke Adara from her lustful trance and she looked at the other woman in horror. "I don't even know him."

Francesca frowned. "He's nobody, Adara. I just created him. For you."

Adara didn't want to think about what poor little creature this man had just been. A mouse, perhaps? Or maybe a cricket? "And just what makes you and the other Sisters think I need a man?"

"Why else were you on a blind date? You're desperate for cock."

Adara gasped and choked on her own spit. "I am not!" she finally managed to say between coughs.

"You are. Otherwise, well, you'd have been at Cinderella's when her prince showed up, wouldn't you? You almost fucked up. And *not* in a good way." Francesca walked up to the man and took his cock in her hand, smiling when it lengthened under her touch. She pumped his flesh and continued, "You have only yourself to blame, Adara. I keep telling you to live your life, instead of staying on the sidelines and living vicariously through your charges."

Francesca increased the speed and strength of her strokes and the man groaned, pumping his hips against her hand. Adara watched in helpless fascination as he threw back his head. His jaw tightened and his neck corded with strain. With a shout, he came, his cock spurting thick jets of semen onto the floor, across Francesca's hand and onto her skirts.

"This is what you need, Adara." Her mentor flicked her wand and the man disappeared. On the floor where he'd stood was a small beetle, which scurried off and ducked through a knot in the wooden floor. Another flick of the

wand, and Francesca's stained clothing was clean again. "A man to fire you up, to entice you into the world of the living."

"You're saying I don't live?" Adara had no problems ignoring what had just happened; she'd seen similar scenes countless times growing up. It was a wonder she was still a virgin, considering she lived in what some might call a brothel.

Of course, it would be a brothel if the women sold their bodies for profit. It was the men who sold themselves—one night between the sheets for some magical favor or another.

It wasn't as if she hadn't received plenty of offers. She had. But a dream of True Love was hard to push aside, and she had always felt as if she'd be unfaithful should she have sex with someone other than her One True Love.

"When was the last time you kissed a man?" Francesca asked.

When Adara didn't answer, her mentor hissed, "Don't tell me you've never even kissed a man!"

"I've kissed men," Adara said, her hands on her hips. "I just don't think it's any concern of yours." She held up her hand when Francesca would have interrupted. "And when I meet my One True Love, I'll know it. And I'll be ready. All right? I'm sure I'll be ready."

* * * *

Six Months Later

Adara stood with Cinderella and watched the princess' stepsisters dance with their new husbands. Once the two women had been moved out from under the ugly influence of their mother, they had shown their true natures: loving, kind, and ashamed of the hurtful way they'd treated their younger stepsister.

Looking at them now, laughing and in love, it was hard to remember the hard, pinched looks they'd worn when she'd first seen them. Cinderella had been sitting by a cold hearth, mending a pair of stockings in feeble candlelight. The elder sister had chided Cinderella for her uneven stitches. The younger one had frowned at the harsh tone, but had said nothing.

Later, when the prince had come with the glass slipper and found Cinderella at her stepmother's home, Adara had been fighting off the unwelcome advances of her date.

A slight frown pulled at Adara's brow. It still rankled that she'd come so close to failing. After all the hard work she had put into Cinderella, to have almost botched it at the last minute... Well, she'd never be so gullible again. The next time someone told her they had 'just the man for her,' forget it. She'd find her own man, or she'd die a virgin.

Her frown deepened. Damn it, she didn't want to die a virgin. Maybe if she cast a spell, just a small one...

The frown became a full-fledged scowl. She couldn't use her magic for personal gain. Not only was it against the Fairy Godmother Code, it was dangerous. Magic had a life of its own and a way of turning on the one who misused it.

"Oh, Adara, thank you again for everything you've done. I've never seen them so happy." Cinderella reached out and took Adara's hand in hers. The princess wore her golden hair in big, fat curls that cascaded down her back, with two small braids at her face. The diamond-and-ruby-studded gold crown sat naturally on her head.

Adara pushed away her melancholy and smiled. Cinderella was a princess in every sense of the word. Rather than using her newfound political power to exact revenge against the cruelty her family had shown to her, she'd recognized that her stepsisters were as much victims of their

mother as she had been. She'd brought them to the castle, shown them the kindness they'd never seen from the woman who'd given birth to them, and found new lives for them.

"It was my pleasure, Princess." Adara squeezed Cinderella's hand and released it. Her job was finished; it was time to go. Just as she turned to leave, a man entered the ballroom and captured her attention.

He was big and tall and so be-damned masculine her body pulsed with heat. He wore his dark hair in layers a bit too long to be fashionable, and it suited him. He looked arrogantly confident. Dominant.

Alpha.

She fought back a shiver and watched as he moved further into the room. His shiny boot-encased calves looked long and lean. His buckskin-colored breeches hugged taut thighs and the bulge that nestled between them.

Sweet Sisters of Destiny. He was all man.

His gaze swept the room. She was too far away to see the color of his eyes, but they had to be dark to match his hair, she thought. Dark like the richest chocolate brought by the traders from the East. The kind that melted on her tongue and made her crave more.

Cinderella murmured something and Adara nodded in response, not really hearing her and not looking away from *The Man*. He stood at least a head taller than most of the men around him, which put him somewhere around six and a half feet. Unless he merely seemed taller because of the commanding way he carried himself.

This was a man who was comfortable with himself and his place in the world.

This was a man who would love a woman completely, who would take her higher than she'd ever been before, granting release only when he knew she was ready.

She wanted him. She'd been practical and dedicated to her job too long, denying herself the pleasure of sex because she was always taking care of others. Regardless of what the Sisters thought, it wasn't that she didn't like men. She did. Very much. She just never seemed to find the time for a relationship. Or, rather, find the inclination to devote the time to one.

Francesca frequently chided her for not slowing down and enjoying the hot, slick slide of an aroused male body against hers. 'You're missing so much,' she would lament, always accompanied by a solemn, sad shake of her head. 'You should embrace life instead of merely viewing it from the outside. You need to take time for yourself.' The Sisters of Destiny might be the founding members of the Fairy Godmother Guild and most looked like the epitome of grandmothers, but they had sensual natures that defied age. Adara had grown up in an environment that encouraged sex, so even though she was untouched, she was not ignorant.

However, sex for sex's sake had never much appealed to Adara. Before now. Really, what good was her virginity, anyway? What were the chances that her True Love would be a virgin? Men were...well, men were supposed to be experienced. Why not women?

Looking at this man... *Why not spend some time doing something for myself?* she wondered. *Virginity is overrated.* This time, she couldn't stop the shiver and it echoed as a flash of heat low in her belly.

He stopped to talk to a duchess, his manners perfect as he bent over her hand and placed a chaste kiss on her fat knuckles. The woman preened and blushed, fluttering her hand near her face while she batted her eyelashes at him. Even from where she stood, Adara could see the slight tightening of

his jaw, and knew he was impatient and irritated with the insincerities abundant at court.

Something else to like about him besides his physical appeal.

"That's Prince Ruarc of Melthione," Cinderella said, her voice soft and awed. "His family has ruled that province for more than five centuries. Ruarc is my husband's best friend; they practically grew up together since Melthione is next door to our kingdom of Giffard, but he scares me a little. He's so...big. And intense. You can see it in his eyes." She leaned closer. "Stepmother tried to get him to court Estrela, but he's a perceptive man and, well, you know what my stepsister was like six months ago."

"Your stepmother doesn't deal well with rejection," Adara murmured, still watching Ruarc. "I'm surprised Diamanta didn't go after him herself."

Cinderella let loose a laugh and Adara looked at her. The princess put one hand over her mouth, and winked and then waved at her husband when he glanced over to see what mischief she was up to. He grinned, shook his head, and went back to his conversation with his father.

"She did, actually," the princess said. "When he treated her politely and respectfully, as if she were his mother, she changed her tactics and painted a bull's-eye on him for Estrela. When he still wasn't interested, she set her sights on Bertrand." She glanced again at her husband, who looked up to meet her gaze.

The picture of the eldest stepsister with a big, red target painted on her bottom made Adara laugh. She stilled when Ruarc looked her way. Her breath caught in her throat as he strode through the crowd, oblivious of the duchess making a bid to keep his attention, obvious in his intent to reach her. He came closer, his steps purposeful, yet unhurried, his body

loose and graceful and built for sex. Her heart started thudding hard and fast against her ribs.

"Oh, good God, he's coming over here," Cinderella whispered, taking a step back. She looked nervous. Her eyes darted to her husband. "I, um, I think I'll go talk with my husband and father-in-law."

Adara's eyes widened and panic fluttered in her stomach. She didn't want to face him for the first time by herself. She reached out a hand to grab the princess. "Wait!"

Cinderella skirted a nearby column and faded into the crowd. And then he was there, his chest level with her eyes. She stared at the front of his shirt with its starched front. Slowly, her gaze traveled up past the strong column of his tanned throat to his chin. She blinked at the sudden urge to put her finger on the dent there, to put her lips on that spot. Further up to his sensual mouth, curved in a soft smile. Up his bladed nose and outward to his eyes.

Dark chocolate eyes sparkled with gentle humor. And something more. Something...hot.

Beneath the satin and lace, her nipples hardened and pressed against her gown's bodice. She clenched her thighs against the throbbing in her loins.

"My Lady." He took her proffered hand and brought it to his lips. Rather than the chaste kiss she expected on the back of her hand, he turned it over and pressed his mouth into her palm. He curled her fingers over the spot as if to hold his kiss there. "Ruarc of Melthione, at your service."

Heat traveled the length of her arm and flushed her face, her breasts, her pussy. She'd never had such a primitive reaction to a man before. This was what the Sisters had talked about, that first, strong attraction to her One True Love.

It couldn't be. Not this man. He was too hard, too forceful. Something told her that he would not be the gentle,

tender lover of her dreams. He would demand everything from her. He would take her heart with very little effort, and if she wasn't careful, he'd break it.

With that unsettling thought, she jerked her hand away, then blushed at the rudeness of the action. "I, ah, I'm not part of all this," she said, waving her hand at the gathered nobles. She sidled back a step, almost desperate to put some distance between them.

"But you're here." He leaned toward her and she smelled his cool, crisp scent. It was a mixture of soap and cologne and sensual male. Her brain seemed to shut down and all she could do was stand there as his gaze traveled over her face, then dipped down to trace the length of her body. He lingered on the thrust of her breasts.

Adara looked down and realized her pebbled nipples were clearly visible. She quickly crossed her arms over her chest. He looked up at her face and grinned at her effort to cover the telltale signs of her arousal.

His own arousal was just as plain to see, his penis a hard outline along his thigh. When she realized where her eyes were glued, she gasped and jerked her gaze back to his. The dark orbs blazed with heat and need.

The same need rode her, made her want his mouth on her, sucking hard on her distended nipples, making them even harder, longer. The sizzling need made her pussy weep with the desire to have his mouth there, his cock claiming her. *Ack*. She had to get out of here before she got into trouble.

"And you are..." His voice was hoarse and deep.

"Adara." She backed up a step, trying to put more distance between her and this unsettling man. She couldn't do this. Not now. Not with him. She wasn't ready. Being initiated into sex by a handsome man was one thing; being conquered and mastered by a man who she wasn't completely

sure she wanted to be her One True Love was something entirely different.

Her breath shuddered in her lungs and she knew she had to get away from him before she did something silly like...faint in his arms. She was a fairy godmother, for crying out loud. How embarrassing would that be? "I...I have to go."

"Wait, Adara..."

Ruarc couldn't believe how fast she vanished. Two steps into the crowd, and then, *poof!* she was gone. He stood for several minutes, scanning the throng, but couldn't find her.

He hadn't imagined her interest. Or her desire. It was as real as his. As immediate as his. His heart still pounded in his chest. His cock pulsed beneath his constricting breeches.

From the moment he'd heard her throaty laugh, he'd wanted her. His body had hardened with need, even before he'd reached her. Seeing her up close, with her green eyes dazed with startled passion, her upturned breasts moving with her rapid breathing, he was lost in lust. He'd surprised himself that he'd been able to form coherent sentences when all the blood in his body seemed to be pooled considerably further south than his brain.

Her body was slender but shapely, with generous breasts and hips. Sensuous lips made to fit against his. He knew her other parts would fit him just as well.

With a grimace, he turned his back on the crowd and reached down to adjust his breeches. As much as he wanted to talk to the princess about Adara, he couldn't very well walk through the assembled guests with his cock looking like a third leg. He'd have to find a secluded bower somewhere and do something about it.

The strength of his attraction to her didn't surprise him. He was a man of great physical needs who enjoyed sex with beautiful women. What did surprise him was the thought that

had come to him when he'd met her eyes from across the room.

Finally, I've found her.

As soon as he could get his randy prick under control, he'd talk to the princess. He'd find out all about the lovely Adara. He was aware that he made Cinderella nervous and he'd use that knowledge to his advantage. She'd tell him what he needed to know.

He turned and nearly bowled over a maid standing with her head bent and a tray of champagne glasses held out before her. He reached out to steady her and murmured an apology.

"Wine, sir?"

More out of habit than any real desire for a drink, he accepted a flute of champagne and took a few sips. He heard the maid laugh, and wondered at it for a moment. Then she raised her head and he saw who it was.

Diamanta. The princess' stepmother. What the hell was *she* doing here?

She looked down at his erection, then back up to his face, a smirk twisting her features. "You want that little goody two-shoes Adara?" She laughed again. The sound was sharp, like broken glass against his soul. "Well, maybe you'll have her."

Her eyes went to the fluted goblet in his hand. "Do you know what happens when a prince drinks dragon-dust hexed by a transmutation spell?"

His own gaze flew to the goblet. Then, with narrowed eyes, he stared at her.

Her smile widened. "Oh, it's too late for threats, my fine prince. It's too late for you, period." She stepped closer and in a low voice only he could hear, she whispered, "You'll regret the day you rejected me, Ruarc. Just as little Adara will rue the day *she* crossed my will."

Stepping back, she gestured toward a side door. "You should leave now, Prince Ruarc. You're turning an interesting shade of green."

He glanced at the window and drew in a startled breath. His skin was mutating from his normal healthy tan to an iridescent blue-green. His eyes were changing, too, turning slitted, reptilian.

"What the hell have you done to me, you bitch?" he snarled. His voice was guttural, thick and unrecognizable.

"Man by day, dragon by night. Only a virgin's blood can save you." She gave that tinkling laugh again, but it ended in a cackle. "But nothing will save Cinderella this time. I *will* become queen." She slid one long, crimson-tipped nail down his arm. "Fly away, my prince, before someone sees you and tries to end your miserable existence. Fly away."

The goblet fell from his nerveless fingers and shattered on the floor. Ruarc gave one last snarl and fled into the darkness.

Diamanta watched him, tapping one finger on her chin. *One down, one to go.* "A virgin's blood can save the dragon; a dragon's blood will save the virgin." Thinking about her beautiful, devilish plan brought a flush of glee and she clapped her hands. When a few people in the crowd looked her way, she slid further behind the column. "Now, to set the bait for Adara. Once they're both trapped in the Hinterlands, with only one way out..."

She smiled slowly and licked her lips. "Each will try to kill the other and, if I'm lucky, at least one will succeed." She swept her hand down her body, using her considerable magic to change her servant's clothing to a glittering evening gown. Sauntering out from behind the column, she winked at Duke...What's-His-Name. He immediately perked up. Bowing respectfully, his immense girth threatened to pop the buttons of his putrid-looking waistcoat. He straightened and,

with his jowls quivering in a lustful smile, approached her with a pathetically hopeful look in his eyes.

Diamanta watched him come closer, her thoughts turned inward. Evil delight coiled through her at the thought of Adara and Ruarc at each other's throats. Smiling slowly, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She couldn't wait to hear that her plans had succeeded. The outcome would be... "Delicious," she whispered, and slid her hand into the crook of the duke's arm, smiling seductively. Until she had the prince who would one day be king, she'd use the next best thing.

Chapter 2

Adara picked her way carefully over the rock-strewn path, wincing when yet another sharp stone pierced the fine leather sole of her soft shoe. She hobbled over to a small boulder and sat down. Pulling off her slipper, she rubbed her throbbing heel and, not for the first time since waking here in the Hinterlands, cursed Diamanta.

The bitch had caught her off-guard and cast a sleeping spell over her. Once Adara was unconscious, the other woman had teleported her here to the Hinterlands. Dragon country. There was no question Diamanta had outmaneuvered her. Adara ground her jaw in impotent anger at the critical error she'd made. She'd underestimated the depths of the wicked witch's hatred toward her for thwarting the woman's plans.

She thought of Ruarc, as she often did. He'd figured prominently in Adara's dreams, to the point where for the last several months, she hadn't slept but a few hours each night. As soon as her eyes closed, she'd see his face, the dent in his chin. She was sorry she'd been such a coward and run from him.

She'd been told he'd returned to Melthione the very night they'd met, and she didn't have the courage to go to him, especially since she didn't know if he even believed in True Love. So she'd buried herself in her job, winning even more accolades. But it was hollow, because she'd thrown away something she knew on an elemental level was special.

Just thinking about the tall, handsome prince made her squirm. With a small squeak, she slid off the rock and landed on her bottom on the ground.

She shot to her feet with a quick, guilty look around. "Oh, for crying out loud, there's no one here, you nit," she muttered. Sitting again on the boulder, she replaced her slipper. She rested her palms on her knees and sighed. Here in this gods-forsaken place for barely an hour, and she was already one step closer to going crazy; she was talking to herself.

Adara looked toward the east. In the much-too-close distance loomed the Drake Mountains. Drake. Where the dragons lived.

Before she'd sent Adara here, Diamanta had shared the only way out: Adara had to find a dragon. Take three thimbles full of blood from the creature, mix it with three scales from its belly, and drink it down with the red wine in the pouch at her side. Dragon scales were hard, except for those on its soft underbelly. The creatures didn't give up their scales willingly, not even through normal sloughing. The only way she knew a dragon would give up blood and scales was through death.

Another sigh.

Adara had never killed anything in her life. She could just hear her mentor now. 'This is so like you,' she'd say. 'Never go into anything gradually; just jump right in and take on more than you can handle.'

Going from nothing to slaying dragons. *Ack*. Was she in trouble!

She stood and faced the mountain. The sun was low in the sky and she could see dragons circling their lairs, preparing to settle down for the night. She figured she had another one or two hours of daylight left, then all she had to do was creep up on one after it went to sleep. At least

Diamanta had provided her with a dagger and petals from the dragonsbane flower. If the creature was awake, she could blow the blossoms into its face and start the killing process with the scent that was deadly to all dragons. Then she'd cut its throat with the small dagger in her belt.

She pulled out the dagger and looked at it. It was small. Really small. Miniscule when weighed against the great bulk of a dragon.

Damn Diamanta. The land of dragons was shrouded in ancient magic and her powers were useless here. All she could rely on was the dagger and the flowers. With such puny defenses, Diamanta had pretty much guaranteed that Adara would be stuck in the Hinterlands for the rest of what would probably be her very short life. Dragons were said to eat people, and they particularly enjoyed snacking on virgins.

Lucky her to still be one. She should've stuck around and seen what could have happened with Ruarc. If she weren't still a virgin, at least she wouldn't have to worry about being quite so tasty to a dragon.

Well, it was too late now. As Francesca always said, 'No use in crying over spilt fairy dust.'

The only way she could get away from this place and save Cinderella from her wicked stepmother—once again—was to kill a dragon that would be just as intent on killing her.

Adara turned in a circle and surveyed her surroundings. The path she'd been on since morning meandered up the foothills toward the steeper slope of the mountain. It came from the swamplands, where the poisonous gases were so deadly, no living creature could survive.

Diamanta's spell had deposited her on this side of the murky waters just after dawn. Adara knew she couldn't go through the swamp; her only choice was the mountain. If she wasn't able to kill a dragon, assuming she survived the trying

of it, she could climb over the mountain, go down the other side, and around. Assuming she could stay out of the grip of all the dragons that would be hunting her.

She drew in a breath through her nose and blew it out between pursed lips. That trip would take months, assuming she survived the frigid temperatures at the snowy peaks. Looking down at her attire, which consisted of a calf-length skirt and flirty petticoats, a long-sleeved, button-front blouse and, of course, her comfortable but certainly not practical slippers.

She was doing a lot of assuming. *Damn it.* She might be able to dodge the dragons, but she'd never survive the cold. And, since she couldn't stay here and let Diamanta hurt Cinderella...

Dragon hunting was her only option.

Joy.

If the Sisters of Destiny could see her now, they would shake their heads in sorrow. But even their magic couldn't stand against the dark forces of the Drake Mountains. Against dragon magic, there was no defense.

Squaring her shoulders, Adara started walking again. She would not fail. She would not disappoint the women who had raised her and made her the success she was today. She would make them proud. She *would* protect her charge.

If that meant she had to kill a dragon, then a dragon she would kill.

* * * *

Ruarc stood at the entrance of his cave and stared at the late afternoon sun. Even though there were a couple hours of daylight left, he could already feel the dragon's presence. His skin felt tight and hot, his cock engorged to the point of bursting.

The dragon always made its presence known first sexually. It seemed that dragons ate, slept and breathed sex. Usually with other dragons but, if they came across a beautiful woman...well, there was nothing more tasty to a male dragon than cunt juice.

Even as he slid his hand down and rubbed his cock, trying to find some release, he knew he couldn't stay here forever. He had to get back and stop Diamanta's plans. Somehow, whether it was because of his enhanced dragon senses or the connection he had to the witch through her spell on him, Ruarc knew what she planned. She intended to cast a spell to trap Cinderella here in the Hinterlands while Diamanta took the princess' place. His friend Bertrand would never know of the switch, for the witch planned to use a chameleon spell to disguise herself. As far as Bertrand would know, he would have his True Love—Cinderella—by his side.

Ruarc jerked his hand away from his cock, curling his fingers into a tight fist. While he wasn't a big believer in One True Love, he recognized that what Bertrand had with Cinderella was the real thing.

His thoughts drifted back to that night a year ago when Diamanta had wrought her curse. The night he'd met Adara.

The immediate attraction to a beautiful woman wasn't new. What had been different was the sense of completion he'd felt. He, who assuredly did not believe in Love At First Sight, had fallen in love. At first sight.

And he'd paid for it by self-imposed banishment to the Hinterlands. He couldn't put his family in jeopardy by staying in the kingdom of Melthione. Once people discovered his secret, even their great love of his father wouldn't have saved him. They would have battered down the doors of the castle and killed anyone who got in their way in their quest to kill the dragon.

He needed to reverse the curse and return to his friends. He clenched his jaw against this complete feeling of helplessness. He had to save his friend from the fate of being mated to the bitch.

Only a virgin's blood can save you, Diamanta had said. If that meant he had to kill an innocent virgin, so be it.

He'd do it.

Just as soon as he found one. They were rather scarce in these mountains, which was why he'd already been here a year.

He felt the telltale tingling of his skin and knew the transformation was close. Over the past several months, he'd found he could transform from human to dragon at will during daylight hours, but at night, the dragon was stronger than him and he was powerless to resist the change. With a heavy sigh, he took off his clothes. He knew from experience that if he wasn't naked when the dragon came, his clothes would be destroyed. It had only taken him two sets of clothing to get him to remember to undress when the discomfort began.

He had to admit that the shift was never painful. A tingling in his skin, heat crawling through his blood, and a slight headache were the precursors to the mutation. That, and a hard-on from hell.

He returned his hand to his cock and curled his fingers around his thick shaft. Sliding his hand from base to tip, he skimmed his thumb over the sensitive head. He repeated the motion again, and again.

With narrowed eyes, he looked out over the valley. A slight scent came to him on the breeze and he stopped. His cock jerked in protest. In need. His nostrils flared, catching the scent again. It was something new, something...floral and

fresh and *soft*. Then he saw her, making her way gingerly up the rocky path.

Adara.

What in the hell was she doing here? As much as he'd lusted after her, now was not a good time with his cock doing all his thinking for him and the power of the dragon soon to descend upon him. Another whiff of her unique scent and his rod turned purple-red with lust. Hellfire and damnation.

He could do nothing except wait. He wanted her as a man and he knew his dragon would be just as enamored with her. He'd use his dragon wiles to seduce her into letting him have a taste of her sweet cunt. Hopefully, she wouldn't make him wait too long. It wouldn't be easy, he knew. Nothing worthwhile ever was. But the desire he felt now in human form was insignificant compared to what he'd feel when the dragon overtook him. The passion had to be slaked. If he didn't taste her, and soon, madness would overtake him.

Ruarc moved back into his cave, into the large main cavern. There he would transform and wait for Adara to find him.

* * * *

Adara paused at the entrance to the cave. Kneeling, she ran her fingertips over a massive dragon print. She'd known the creatures were big but from this print, the one that lived inside was huge.

Another print caught her eye and she rose. She walked over and knelt. It was the print of a boot. Judging from its size, it fit the foot of a tall man.

Man and dragon prints...together? Perhaps it was a dragon hunter who had been trapped here. Maybe he'd killed the dragon inside. Maybe the dragon had killed him.

There was only one way to find out.

Drawing the dagger, she held it tightly in her right fist and moved into the cave. The further she went, the darker it got. She felt along the wall with her left hand, moving slowly so her eyes could adjust to the deepening gloom.

The rock under her hand was rough and cold. The further into the cave she went, the colder it got. Her nipples tightened as the temperature dropped. She stumbled over a stone and stopped, wincing as it skittered across the ground, bouncing with a hard *crack* against the opposite wall. Holding her breath, she waited. When nothing rushed out at her from the darkness, she moved on.

From up ahead, she could see flickering light and she caught the sharp odor of sulfur. She knew she approached the dragon's lair. She slowed even more, trying to regulate her breathing so the beast wouldn't know of her presence until she was ready.

Peering around the edge of the cave wall, she saw the torch-lined walls and a fire pit in the center of the room. The flames crackled and spit, sending sparks into the air. She'd expected to see the creature standing guard over piles of gold and jewels, but the cave was empty.

Except for him. Just to the right of the fire and near the entrance to the cavern stood the dragon.

She dragged a breath into lungs she'd not been aware had stopped breathing. Gods above, she'd been right. He was huge. From his snout to the tip of his tail, he had to be at least fifty feet long. She'd be lucky if the top of her head reached his kneecap. It was hard to tell with the way he sat on his haunches. His skin glimmered an iridescent blue-green in the firelight. The top of his head touched the ceiling of the cave; his golden eyes glittered as he stared toward the entrance of the cavern.

Oh, gods above. She didn't think she could do this.

Come in where I can see you, she heard him say in her head.

His voice, dark and sensual, echoed inside her. She fought back a shiver of unwanted arousal, tamped down on her fear and walked into the large area. The dagger slipped in her grasp and she tossed it into her left hand long enough to wipe her sweaty palm against her skirt. Then she took the dagger back into her right hand.

Her heart pounded inside her chest like a captive thing, frantic to escape. She wished she could follow her instincts and get the hell out of here. But she couldn't leave Cinderella to the fate Diamanta had planned for her. All she had was her job; it was her duty to protect her charge at all costs.

Even if it meant her death.

Thinking of dying brought Ruarc to her mind's eye, and she felt again the deep slash of regret that she had let her own insecurities frighten her away from him. It was likely that she would die a virgin here in the Drake Mountains. Ruarc would go on with his life, one day ruling the kingdom of Melthione with another woman at his side.

Adara shook her head to dispel the fantasy. Who had ever heard of a fairy godmother ruling anything? Let alone a kingdom as powerful as Melthione. No, she'd best concentrate on the matter at hand. She had no choice. Either she would get the dragon's blood and his scales, or she would die trying.

With her left hand, she reached into the small pouch on her belt and drew out a handful of the pretty purple petals of the dragonsbane. The dragon shifted his weight, his massive head reaching down toward her. She waited until he was within an arms' length and then blew the petals into his face.

The great beast snorted and reared up. It shook its enormous head and looked at her with a strange glint in its eyes.

I wish you hadn't done that, he muttered in her mind. *My cock was hard enough already.*

Adara saw the creature's shaft and gasped in horror. Apparently, she'd been misled on the properties of dragonsbane. Rather than being a potent poison to dragons, it was obvious that it acted as an aphrodisiac, inciting his passions.

Damn Diamanta. Dragons—especially *horny* dragons—liked to eat virgins.

Ignoring the giant hard-on, or at least trying to, she brandished her dagger and moved in closer. The chances that she could strike a killing blow before he could reach her with fire, teeth or tail were ludicrous, but for Cinderella's sake, she had to try. With a loud cry, she rushed him, only to grunt when he swatted her softly with his tail. She rolled to her feet and took a fighter's stance, the dagger clutched in her fist. She was outmatched, and she knew it. But what else could she do?

You have no need to try to harm me. His voice was soft, but firm. *I have done nothing to you, little one.*

"I have to do this," she said. "For me to return to my home, I must shed your blood and take your scales. I'm sorry. It's not personal."

On the contrary, that dark, seductive voice replied, sliding into her soul and setting her nerve endings on fire. *I take it very personally.*

"I'm sorry," she said again. And attacked.

This time, she was prepared for his tail, and jumped over it before he could swat her to the ground again. She managed to nick him between his front legs before one big paw lifted her and set her near the cavern entrance.

You really have no hope of winning, my girl. His voice was hard. His tail twitched, signaling his growing irritation. *I wish you would cease your puny efforts so we can move on to other matters.*

“What other matters?” She rushed him again, diving under his tail to come up between his legs again. Another strike with her dagger and a few drops of blood welled up on his soft underbelly.

It wasn't nearly the quantity she needed.

He roared his displeasure and swatted her away with his tail, less gently this time. She landed against the wall, gasping when the air was knocked from her lungs. She got to her feet, determined to see this through. She had no other choice.

I want to taste you. I want the honey of your cunt to coat my tongue, slide down my throat. Your pussy juices will be my nourishment.

She fought back a shudder as his voice echoed softly, seductively in her head. Why would the dragon's voice bring Ruarc to her mind's eye? Why, when he spoke to her, did she see Ruarc's face, Ruarc's smile? Why did it make her want something she could never have?

The love of a prince.

Angry at the unfairness of it all, she surged forward with a snarl. The dragon's massive tail swept forward. With a growl of frustration, she leapt into the air and came down on the bulky appendage with all her weight, twisting the heels of her slippered feet for good measure.

He winced and twitched his tail, catapulting her into the air. He caught her with one outstretched paw and lowered her gently to the floor.

Now, that was just mean, he chided. Stretching around, he rubbed his paw over the offended spot on his tail. His gaze held a hint of amusement, as if her battle against him struck him as humorous. *I didn't think you were the vindictive type, Adara.*

She had been moving toward him again but, when he used her name, she halted midstride. “H-how do you know

who I am?" She gripped the handle of the little dagger until her fingers ached.

I know more about you than you realize. His big head reached down until he was eye-to-eye with her.

Well, as eye-to-eye as a dragon could get with a human.

This close, she could see the details of the skin across his face. Small, iridescent scales reflected the glow of the firelight and glittered in multi-faceted hues of blue and green. The fins on either side of his jaws trembled as if he held his jaw tightly. With each exhalation of his breath, she caught a hint of sulfur and...mint. She blinked. A dragon with minty-fresh breath was not something she'd expected.

She looked into his golden, reptilian eyes and saw that they burned with a multitude of emotions. The predominant one was lust.

Her eyes widened and she backed up a few paces. Somehow, in the short but furious battle, she'd forgotten about his erection. An irritated dragon she could deal with. An amused dragon she could deal with. She wasn't so sure about a lust-filled dragon.

Do you really want to keep at this? The dark amusement was back in his voice and, by the goddess, it somehow seemed familiar.

His tail twitched again and she kept watch on it from the corner of her eye. She was already beginning to ache from where he'd swatted her with the thing. He'd been careful, too, and she didn't want to know what it would feel like to have the full force of his powerful muscles behind a swing from that solid tail.

She sighed, conceding defeat. For the moment. She'd find a place to rest, then she'd find another dragon. One that was unprepared and wasn't so...sexy. She wondered at her choice for a description, but it was the only one that came to mind.

He was sexy.

Ack. Was she ever in trouble.

“Fine. Look, I’m sorry I bothered you.” She edged toward the entrance, still keeping an eye on his twitching tail. From the looks of it, he was irritated again.

He raised his head. *Where do you think you’re going?*

Uh-oh. “Um, I’m just going to leave you to...” she paused, then finished lamely, “do whatever it is that dragons do.”

What do you think dragons do?

Besides eat people? was the thought going through her head. Of course, not wanting to give him any ideas, she kept it to herself. “Well, shouldn’t you be guarding your treasure?” She took another step back, hoping she would distract him by reminding him of all he held most dear.

Gold, silver and jewels are not what dragons treasure the most, little one.

His golden eyes glittered at her and he moved his tail around behind her, trapping her inside the cavern. His slender, forked tongue flickered out and tasted the air. Nostrils flaring, he lowered his head toward her again.

Adara didn’t want to know what they treasured the most. From the look in his eyes and his massive erection, she knew it had nothing to do with jewels and everything to do with sex.

Talk about trouble. She had to get out of here, and now.

She slipped over his tail, never turning her back on him for a second. While she hadn’t known that dragons were so randy, she did know they were sneaky.

Without warning, one big paw scooped her up and deposited her back inside the cavern. He leaned in and flicked her neck with his tongue. His eyes flared and he rumbled deep

in his chest. *Even the sweat on your skin tastes like the finest of wines.* Another flick of his tongue, another rumble.

Her skin where his tongue had touched sizzled with heat. The tingle spread down from her neck, igniting the nerve endings all along her body until it reached her sex. She gasped and backed away from him, coming up against the cavern wall.

Her nipples grew into hard nubs, almost painful in their tightness, the slightest touch against the sensitive skin setting off tiny convulsions in her lower body. Even the softness of her loose blouse was too much. Almost out of her mind, she unbuttoned it and then took it off.

Not caring that she was nude from the waist up, she undulated against the wall, trying to stave off the ache in her womb. The ache spread outward, swelling her clitoris and coating her pussy with slick, hot moisture. She hadn't felt like this in a long time, not since Ruarc. And this was so much more.

Yes, his voice growled in her head. *Let go, little one. Let go and feel. Feel what a dragon can do for you.*

She felt apart from herself, as if she were a spectator in her own body. Her mind screamed at her to get the hell out, but her body seemed rooted, intent on its own pleasure. *Why was this happening now? With a dragon?*

Too late, she remembered something she'd been told when she'd just come into puberty: stay away from the saliva of a dragon. It acted as a topical aphrodisiac and was impossible to resist. Dragons controlled how much—or how little—of the chemical they released. She'd heard stories of women who'd been driven mad by sexual lust when they'd been subjected to too much.

Sisters of Destiny help her. She was in so much trouble.

Chapter 3

Trapped in his dragon body, Ruarc watched Adara rub her palms against her heavy breasts. He growled in his throat, wanting it to be *his* hands on her breasts, plumping them, squeezing them. *His* fingers pinching and twisting her peach-colored nipples. In his dragon form, it was impossible; one of his paws could wrap around her body with room to spare.

The salt of her perspiration clung to his tongue, wrapped around his taste buds, making him want more. He needed to taste more of her silky skin, needed to plunge his tongue into the hollow of her body and lick her cream.

Her arousal permeated the air and he flicked his tongue, capturing it and drawing it deeper into his mouth. He could hardly wait to taste her.

The firelight glinted off her soft skin, draping her in light and shadows. Her sleek, dark hair hung over her shoulders, creating a game of hide-and-seek with her nipples and Ruarc's gaze.

She moaned and raised her skirt and dirt-stained petticoats. He knew they'd gotten dirty when he'd swatted her with his tail and felt a momentary guilt. When he got a look at her fine linen pantaloons, his eyes narrowed and the guilt faded. She pushed the frilly underwear down to her ankles and it was all he could do to keep from leaping on her.

He had to be patient. There would be a point when she would welcome his tongue and the pleasure it could give her.

Until then...well, he'd used enough dragon aphrodisiac for now. He would wait.

The tangy scent of her arousal wafted to him again, teasing his sensitive Jacobson's organ. She slid her hands up her slender legs. Her fingers dove into her pussy and she moaned. The sound drove like a spike into his brain and echoed in his own sex. He ground his teeth together and reminded himself to be patient.

Spreading her legs, she braced her back against the wall and worked her fingers over her clit, massaging the nubbin of flesh. Her fingers glistened with the cream of her arousal. When she slid one finger into her sheath, he nearly howled with frustration. That should be him. His finger. His tongue. His cock.

His finger and cock would have to wait until he could shift back to his human form. But his tongue...from what he'd been told during the time he'd been here, there was nothing quite like soft, swollen female flesh against a dragon's tongue. The screams of a woman in climax were the best music of all to a male dragon.

She moaned and tossed her head. Her hair cascaded down her back, leaving her breasts fully open to his heated gaze. Her left hand moved from one breast to the other, tugging on the dark peach tips, keeping them hard and engorged and needy. She undulated against the wall, her finger plunging deep into her slick channel. Her thumb rubbed against her clit.

Her green eyes glazed with passion, she stared at him, yet he knew she didn't see him. She was lost in desire, in the needs his saliva had brought to the surface. Her hips jerked as her orgasm built.

With a low rumble, Ruarc decided he'd waited long enough. When she came, it would be around his tongue. It was time to make some music.

He shuffled nearer and flicked his tongue out, tangling it around her fingers. She shivered under his touch. He drew her essence onto his taste buds, down his throat, and growled at the tangy-sweet flavor. Leaning closer, he parted her soft curls with his tongue, flicking the twin points against her clit. Her outer lips swelled against his chin.

She spread her legs further and lifted her hips in clear invitation. The petals of her inner lips unfurled and more of her cream oozed from her channel. He drew her womanly perfume through his nose. All other odors faded into the background. Another deep breath. Beneath the lust, he could detect another scent.

He jerked in shock. She was a virgin. She could be his way out of this damnable place. He wanted to howl with frustration, with disbelief. Of all the women in the kingdoms, why did it have to be Adara who came here? And why did she have to be a damned virgin?

She moaned and pushed toward him, seeking contact with his tongue. Pushing his questions aside, his arousal took precedence. His brain shut down as his rampaging libido took over. Pushing aside anything else, he concentrated on pleasuring her. When his tongue darted between her nether lips again, she gasped and bucked against him, pushing her pussy against his face. He lapped the full length of her slit. Probing the different textures of her folds, he found her to be everything he'd ever wanted.

Soft in all the right places.

Hot and slick and eager.

He dipped his tongue into her channel and she groaned. With her soft curls tickling his nose, he thrust his tongue further into her channel and swirled it deep, rubbing against her sensitive inner walls. She shrieked and shoved her hips against his mouth, her breath quick and gasping.

She tasted tart and tangy and sweet. Her clit grew larger, coming out of its hiding place. Yielding to temptation, he flicked his tongue against it, and she let out a small whimper.

He took his tongue from her clit and drew it through her folds, tracing every line and crevice, teasing her. Tempting her. With a cry, her knees gave way and she slid down the wall. He followed her, growling in pleasure when she bent her knees and opened herself even more to his touch.

Driving his tongue inside her sheath once more, he exulted when she pumped her hips in time with his thrusts. She moaned long and low and arched against him. Her orgasm rolled through her and she came, gushing her cream into his mouth.

And still, he pumped his tongue into her. It wasn't enough. He needed more. His cock was hard and long. He had to taste more of her, or he'd never climax.

Adara clenched her fists and pushed her hips against the creature's mouth. Somehow, she felt she should be fighting this, resisting, but it felt so good. This was how she'd always envisioned she'd feel if Ruarc touched her. She closed her eyes and pretended it was her dark-haired prince who pleased her.

More. The word rumbled through her head, through her sex. *I need more.*

Following her body's demand for another release, she drew her feet up to rest against the curve of her buttocks and spread her knees as far as she could. Another rumble against her, then she felt the flick of his tongue against her swollen folds.

His agile tongue brought forth more of the viscous liquid he seemed to desire. He circled her clit, drawing on it with quick tugs of his tongue. Her eyes widened and she screamed

when another climax burst through her. She shuddered and quaked beneath his lashing tongue.

Before the last shudder faded, he started again, pushing his slender tongue inside her passage. He swirled the tip, teasing her inner walls, flicking against the spot that seemed to want his touch so much. She felt her body tighten and wasn't sure she could take any more.

Adara braced herself on her palms and looked down. Her thighs glistened with her juices and the saliva of the creature. The tip of his slender tongue fluttered in and around the entrance to her channel, then plunged inside once again.

Sweet. More.

The tip of his slender snout rubbed hard against her clit. Fluid gushed from her as she reached another peak. She screamed and jolted against him, then collapsed against the ground. Her legs spread, her sex was open to whatever he wanted to do to her. She was exhausted in a way that went beyond physical.

She felt the rasp of the dragon's tongue against her thigh, then succumbed to the arms of sleep.

Ruarc settled beside her, knowing the great bulk of his body would keep her warm while she slept. The scent of her arousal lingered in the air, in his mouth. He flicked his tongue, rolling her flavor over his taste buds.

She was as sweet as he'd known she'd be. *This* was what he'd been denied when she'd run from him at the ball. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to keep her close. Keep her and fuck her properly when he was in his human form.

But then she'd no longer be a virgin, or his way of escape. To be released from his curse, he had to kill her and drink her blood. Not only would he be permanently transformed back

into his human form, he would also be teleported back to Bertrand's kingdom. Back to where this all started.

All it would take was a swipe from one of his razor-sharp claws across her soft throat. She'd never feel a thing. He moved one massive paw forward and tried to ignore the way it trembled.

Watching her sleep, he knew he couldn't do it. He clenched his paw and drew it away from her. He couldn't kill her. For one thing, it just wasn't in him to kill an innocent or a woman; even though he'd almost convinced himself that he could. But the most important reason: He'd fallen in love with her the moment he'd seen her at the ball. He, who had scoffed at True Love, had fallen so fast and so hard, he still had difficulty believing it. And now, once he'd seen her courage, her humor in the face of what she perceived to be danger...once he'd tasted her, he loved her even more.

How could he declare himself when, half of the time, he was a dragon? What kind of life would she have?

What kind of life would he? Because she could never love him as he was. Could she?

But, by not killing her, he would condemn Cinderella to join the two of them here in the Hinterlands, and condemn his best friend to a lifetime spent in an illusion. A life spent with a woman who looked and sounded like his wife, but was, in fact, a bitch from hell. What chance was there that another virgin would cross his path?

And if one did, he wouldn't be able to kill her. There had to be another way, but if there was, it escaped him.

Ruarc heaved a sigh, the sound rumbling from his chest and blowing a breeze across her body. Stilling when she murmured in her sleep, he waited until she settled before he picked up her blouse in his teeth and laid it across her stomach. He couldn't resist swiping his tongue over her soft

nipples and growled low in his throat when they hardened immediately. He hadn't tasted them before now; he'd been too preoccupied with her delicious cunt. He swiped again and she moaned, her legs twisting.

Later. He'd spend a lot of time on her breasts later. With another growl, he pulled her blouse up to cover temptation.

His eyes went to her cunt, still glistening with her arousal. As much as he wanted to taste her again, he knew he would wake her if he did. She needed to rest. He needed to put some distance between them so he could think.

Lumbering away, he crouched on the other side of the fire and tried not to look at her slumbering form. It proved to be impossible. The dim light from the fire danced over her, highlighting her cheekbones, her nose, the creaminess of her skin.

Her lips were slightly parted, their rosy softness pure temptation. It would be several hours before the sun rose—several hours before he could touch her as a man.

And he would touch her as a man. With the taste of her still on his tongue, there was nothing on earth that could keep him away from her. Not his duty, nor her challenge. Nothing.

She sighed and turned onto her right side, curling her arm under her head as a pillow. The sight of her long, slender back was a delight to his eyes. She drew her legs up, showing him the delectable curve of her ass and a hint of the pink flesh of her cunt. The memory of her flavor exploded again on his tongue and he wanted more.

His arousal returned full force, his cock thick and long and almost painful in its hardness. He settled against the cave floor. Knowing it would not provide release and only make him more uncomfortable, but unable to stop the motion, he rubbed his shaft against the rough ground. At the coarse sensation, any remaining blood in his body drained into his

groin. The memory of her reaching her peak replayed in his mind and he moaned, grinding his cock against the ground harder and harder.

With another sigh, she turned once more onto her back. He drew in a deep breath through his nostrils and stared at the dark tuft of hair that covered her mound. The scent of her feminine moisture beckoned him. *Just one more taste. Just. One. More.*

He turned away. If he wasn't careful, he'd keep at her until she died from the constant arousal. Ruarc huffed a sigh and carefully eased out of the cavern. He needed to eat *something*. If he couldn't have Adara, maybe chomping on a nice, plump deer would hold him over.

* * * *

Adara came awake as she usually did, slowly and with tremendous reluctance. What was unusual were the aches and pains. She groaned and rolled to a sitting position on the hard, cold cave floor, her hands on the small of her back. Not only was she physically exhausted, she was emotionally tired, her spirit depressed beneath the burden of her responsibilities and the reality of her situation.

When she realized she was bare-chested, she gasped and grabbed her blouse. Holding it in front of her, she looked around for the dragon. The fire in the pit still burned, so she suspected he had stoked it several times while she'd slept. But the beast was nowhere to be seen.

She couldn't tell if the feeling that slid through her was relief, or disappointment. Maybe a little of both.

Heat flared along her cheekbones at that thought. That she was a virgin meant only she'd never been penetrated by anything but her own fingers. She knew what sexual pleasure felt like. But the pleasure the dragon had forced on her had been unlike anything she'd ever known. She had been hot and

cold at the same time, climbing the peaks of sensual climax again and again.

Ah, hell's bells. Who was she kidding? The dragon's saliva might have built her desire, but the feeling had been there from the first time she'd heard his dark, compelling voice in her head. He hadn't forced anything on her. And she wanted to feel that way again. Not with a dragon, but with a man. With Ruarc.

But if she had any hope of seeing Ruarc again, she first had to get out of these gods-forsaken Hinterlands. Resolutely, she got to her feet, wincing when her bruised soles protested her weight. She shook her blouse a few times to dislodge the loose dirt, then pulled it on and buttoned it. Seeing her pantaloons pooled around her ankles, she felt the blush return to her face. She bent and quickly pulled them up, then settled her petticoats and skirt around her legs.

She made her way slowly out of the cave, blinking as she reached the entrance and stepped into the bright morning sunlight. She glanced around, wondering where the dragon had gone. Not that she wanted a repeat performance, but she was curious.

And whether she liked it or not, she still needed a dragon.

But not the one that lived here. After the pleasure he'd given her, she could never be that cold-hearted. She needed to find a beast with a cranky disposition that just about begged someone to kill it.

With a very small knife.

She grimaced and set off up the pathway, heading further into the mountains. Within a couple hundred yards, she saw what she needed: A long, slender, nearly-straight branch lying just off the path.

Grabbing it, she sat in the grass at the side of the trail and started whittling. Every once in a while, she'd stop and shake the cramp out of her hand but, after about twenty minutes, she had a passable spear. Unfortunately, it was a lot shorter than when she'd started, but for a first effort, she thought it was pretty damn good.

She grabbed another sturdy piece of wood and started on it. Suddenly, the hair on the back of her neck prickled with awareness and she stopped, looking around. She didn't see anything, but couldn't shake the feeling she was being watched.

Within an hour, Adara had three spears, a very sore right hand, and a major case of the heebie-jeebies. With another glance around, she sheathed her dagger, gathered the spears, and set off up the path. She needed to find a dragon. With the spears and a little luck on her side, she just might be able to pierce a dragon's heart, get what she needed, and get the hell out of here.

She tried to ignore her rumbling stomach and wished that Diamanta had seen fit to deposit her here with something to eat. Or that the dragon had offered her something besides his wicked tongue.

Ack. Focus, Adara, she admonished herself. *First, you need something to eat. Then, you need a dragon. To kill,* she reminded her body as it perked up at the memories of her dragon.

Not. My. Dragon. Angry with herself, she stomped along and cursed when she stepped on a jagged rock. She balanced on one foot and rubbed the offended sole. When she set it down and looked up, she saw a man standing still and silent by the side of the trail.

He was big, wide-shouldered and lean-hipped with long legs that ended with big feet. His face was in the shadows, but there was something familiar about his relaxed, yet watchful

stance. He held a satchel loosely in one hand. When he moved into the light, she gasped.

Ruarc.

His face was haggard, leaner, as if he'd lost weight. Dark stubble covered his strong jaw. His hair was pulled back into a queue at his nape, with shorter tendrils falling around his face in wavy abandon. Brown eyes glinted as he slowly walked closer.

He had the same loose grace as before, but now there was a coiled readiness in his posture, much like a predator stalking his prey.

Adara shivered at the dark look in his eyes. There was the same heat as the night they'd met, but something deeper, harsher. Tormented.

Familiar somehow.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she asked, fighting the urge to turn and run. Again. Even though she should be, she was somehow unsurprised to find him in the Hinterlands. In the Drake Mountains. There was a new wildness about him that fit here.

"I was about to ask you the same question." His voice was gruff, rusty as if from disuse. He stopped an arm's length away, but she felt the intensity of his gaze as it traveled over her body. The look in his eyes reminded her of the dragon.

She drew in a sharp breath. Desire spiraled through her, pooling in her groin, and she fought back a blush. "Diamanta sent me here."

He looked startled, then wary. "Diamanta? But why?"

"It's kind of a long story." One she wasn't sure he'd believe.

One dark brow lifted. "What, you have plans?"

She cocked her head and scowled at him, not appreciating his arrogant humor. She'd never responded well to teasing,

friendly or otherwise. "She's getting back at me for Cinderella."

He stared at her, his very silence prompting her to continue.

"I'm her fairy godmother, okay?" She barely resisted stomping her foot for emphasis. Why, after devoting so much of her time and energy to her craft, was she suddenly so defensive? She closed her eyes. She knew why. What if he judged her and found her wanting?

"You? A fairy godmother." He placed the satchel on the ground and walked around her, stopping at her back. "Just how old are you?"

His breath stirred her hair and sent a shiver racing down her spine. "I'm twenty-six." She turned her head and looked into his eyes. Seeing the disbelief there, she emphasized, "Really. I'm the youngest in the Guild."

"But I was with Bertrand when he put the slipper on Cinderella's foot," he said. He moved closer and the heat from his big body seared her from her calves to her shoulders. "The woman who waved her wand and clothed Cinderella in a beautiful gown was old and gray-haired." His hands settled on her shoulders. He nuzzled her hair, his stubbled face against her skin making goose bumps break out along her arms.

Another shiver rocked her. She felt an answering thump start in her clit. "That was me. I always make myself look older."

"Ah. So people will take you more seriously."

"Exactly. How many people would believe a twenty-six year old could be an effective fairy godmother?"

He brushed the hair away from her nape and pressed a kiss to the sensitive skin below her ear. She closed her eyes and leaned against him.

"So..." he prompted.

"Diamanta wanted Bertrand for Estrelda, her oldest daughter." She sighed as he kissed a trail down her skin, his hot mouth lingering at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

"And you hooked him up with Cinderella."

"Mmm." She tilted her head to give him better access and he rumbled his approval. He sounded like her dragon. Her eyes flew open and she stilled against him.

"What's wrong?" he murmured against her skin. His hands slid down her arms, fingers curling around her wrists. He lifted them to rest around his neck, then returned his big hands to her abdomen. Pulling her flush against him, he pressed his thick erection against her backside.

Her body responded. Whatever thoughts she had flew from her mind like winter birds migrating to new feeding grounds. His hands cupped her breasts and squeezed gently.

Her brain turned to mush. It was hard to think when he was so near. "What are *you* doing here?" When in doubt, go on the offensive.

He gave a sharp snort. "Bertrand was Diamanta's second choice."

She turned her head and bumped his chin with her forehead. "What do you...she wanted...Estrelda and *you*?" She felt like an idiot, not able to complete a sentence, but she was dumbfounded.

"Not...initially."

What did that mean? Adara thought for a minute, then twisted in his arms. "You and *Diamanta*?"

His lips twitched in a mirthless smile and something dark and sorrowful moved behind his eyes. "I declined." He cupped her face in his hands. His eyes roved over her face. She'd never had a man look at her with such heat in his gaze before and it stole her breath. "I've never been so glad of anything in my life."

His mouth settled against hers, soft and undemanding. When her lips parted, he slipped his tongue inside and tangled it with hers. Rubbing, cajoling, coaxing her tongue into his mouth.

His big hands tilted her face and his kisses turned more forceful, harder. He angled his head, his hungry tongue delving into the dark, wet cavern of her mouth. She moaned and moved against him, gasping when he pumped his hips against her, pushing his heavy erection into the softness of her stomach.

His mouth gentled and he nipped at her lips. Once. Twice. Three times. He bit at her lower lip. He slid his hands down to her shoulders.

"I have some apples in my satchel," he whispered in her ear, then pressed a kiss on the sensitive skin where ear met neck. "And there are hot springs near here. Why don't we take a morning bath and have some breakfast?" His tongue flicked against her earlobe, sending a shiver through her body. Her womb clenched.

She knew what he was asking. It would be so much more than just breakfast. So aroused she could barely think, it took everything within her to nod her head.

Ruarc took one of her slender hands in his and marveled at its softness while vividly aware of its strength. This was the same hand that had tried to kill him with a dagger. The same hand he hoped would soon wrap around his rock-hard cock.

He could still taste her on his tongue, the spicy-sweet nectar of her pussy. He'd left her in the cave and had tried nearly everything to get his erection to subside. Masturbation in dragon form was nearly impossible, but once dawn had come and he'd shifted back to his human form, he'd jacked off. Twice.

And yet his prick remained thick and long and hard enough to break rocks.

He glanced down at Adara, enjoying the way her breasts bounced lightly as she walked. Her nipples were outlined against the soft white of her blouse, the faintest hint of their color showing through the thin cloth. He closed his eyes, remembering how she looked last night in the flickering light of the fire. Her nipples hard. Her cunt wet and open. Her legs long and shapely and made to ride the flanks of a man.

Opening his eyes, he studied her profile. The sunlight brought out the deep red highlights in her hair. Her face was delicate, almost elfin. He'd not be surprised to find her ears were pointed instead of curved.

Unable to resist, he stopped and turned her to face him. With his hands at the sides of her face, he tucked her hair behind her ears. He shook his head at his own foolishness for thinking she'd have pointed ears. She seemed so different from other women he'd known that he'd really expected her to be fey.

Adara was a puzzle. She seemed so soft and gentle, rather like the tabby cat he'd had as a youngster, yet she'd come after a dragon ten times her size with the ferociousness of a lioness. It was a further testament to her strength.

She'd answered his question as to how she'd come to the Hinterlands, but had been vague on the details as to why. He knew there had to be more to the story. Knowing Diamanta as he did, he was certain she had something to do with Adara's desire to kill a dragon.

At the thought of Cinderella's wicked stepmother, his anger grew. His face felt tight, his eyes burned as the dragon responded to his rage.

"What?" she asked. She looked wary, so he knew some of his anger must have flickered through his gaze.

“Nothing. It’s all right.” Turning his head, he took her hand and they began walking again. They were very near the hot springs and his chance at finally being able to make love to this woman. Nearly every day, while he’d lain sleeping in his human form, he’d dreamed of her. Dreamed that things had been different, that she hadn’t run from him. That they’d fallen into the nearest bed and had hot, wild sex together.

Somehow, he’d get out of here, with Adara, and he’d make sure that hell-bitch Diamanta was paid back for every sleepless night; for every shift of his human body to dragon form; for every opportunity lost while he’d been trapped here. The witch had been clever, that was certain. When she’d cursed him to spend his nights as a dragon, she’d given him the magic of one as well. However, her spell bound him to the Hinterlands, ensuring that his magic was trapped in this cursed place with him.

Unless he spilled the blood of a virgin.

He tightened his hand around Adara’s, forcing a smile when she looked up at him with a question in her lovely eyes. Realizing that they’d walked quite a distance in silence, he spoke through a throat thickened with frustration. “What else was there?”

“What do you mean?”

“There are plenty of princes around for Diamanta to set her sights on for her daughters. So I don’t think she’d be so upset over one getting away. What else did you do to make her angry with you?”

She looked startled, then pensive. “Nothing,” she finally said. She shook her head, her eyes meeting his. “For the life of me, I can’t think of anything else I did. The only impact I’ve had on Diamanta’s life is through Cinderella.”

And like the roar of a tornado, Diamanta's words came back to him. *You want that little goody two-shoes Adara? Well, maybe you'll have her.*

Oh, God. Was it his fault she was here?

Chapter 4

Ruarc turned and watched from the corner of his eye as Adara took off her clothes. He didn't feel even one twinge of guilt for peeking when he'd said he wouldn't.

Each discarded article of clothing revealed more and more of her lovely body. When she shimmied her hips so her skirt and petticoats would drop to her feet, he had to bite back a groan at the way her beautiful breasts swayed and jiggled with her movements. They were high and firm, and tipped with soft peach nipples that were beginning to harden in the cool morning breeze.

God. He had to get his mouth on her tits soon or he'd go crazy.

She pushed down her pantaloons and stepped out of them. He caught only a glimpse of the dark curls that sheltered her sex before she turned toward the water, but it was enough. It made him want to part her legs, spread the folds of her pussy with his fingers so he could bury his face between them and uncover her secrets once more. He was dying to taste her sweet honey again.

He pivoted and watched her full on, his cock twitching with each step she took toward the water. Damn, but that woman had legs that went all the way up to her neck. Long, shapely, strong. Legs made to wrap around a man and hold him as he filled her with his seed.

And her ass... It was a sweetly-curved, heart-shaped piece of heaven. His hands curled into fists as he thought about the things he could do to that part of her body. Nostrils flaring, he had a clear picture in his mind of his cock sliding through the tight ring of her anus.

He drew in a sharp breath as his entire body tightened with need. He knew the clasp of her ass would be like a gripping fist. A shudder worked its way down his spine and around to his balls, drawing them tight against his shaft. He would take her in the ass later. First, he had to get his prick inside her cunt before he burst.

She reached a depth where the water lapped at her shoulders, then turned. Her face pinkened as she met his stare, but she held his gaze steadily. She was a conundrum—a virgin who lived with some of the lustiest women in the realm. He wondered what she'd learned by watching the Sisters of Destiny with the men who came to their beds seeking magical favors.

He'd soon find out. His gut clenched with anticipation. Not taking his eyes from hers, his fingers went to the laces of his shirt and he untied them slowly, drawing out the moment. As much as he needed to rut on her like an animal in heat, she was a virgin and he needed to make sure that she was ready. He'd be damned if he'd be careless with the trust she was placing in him.

He drew the shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground. Perching on a large rock, he drew off his boots and long socks. He got to his feet and unbuttoned his breeches, pushing them down over his hips. Raising first one leg and then the other, he pulled them off and tossed them onto his shirt.

Her emerald-green eyes widened as she looked at his rampant cock. It was eager, practically waving at her in its

desire to mate. The dragon within him perked up and Ruarc took several deep breaths to regain control, shoving the beast back down.

He walked into the water, taking his time, enjoying the way its warmth lapped at his skin. When it covered his tight balls, he groaned. Another step and his cock was submerged. He knew the only thing hotter would be her steaming cunt.

She took a step back, but then stopped, lifting her chin as if to dare him to comment on her nervous reaction. He grinned, the smile widening when her eyes narrowed slightly at his amusement.

Her slender arms floated on the clear water, giving him an uninhibited view of her body. Her breasts were made for his hands, his mouth. Her narrow ribcage topped a small waist. Shapely hips flared into long legs. Looking at those legs now, spread slightly for balance, all he could think about was having them wrapped around his hips as he worked every inch of his cock into her hot, tight channel.

The long, elegant lines of her body made his blood run hot. No other woman had made him burn like this. His gaze moved over her, lingering at the juncture of her thighs before sliding back up to snare her gaze. Her eyes were soft and trusting, and his heart thumped in his chest with more than just lust, although that emotion was too strong to dwell on anything else.

He had to touch her. Taste her. Now.

Adara's breath fluttered in her chest. She'd never been as aware of her own body as she was at this moment. Realizing that Ruarc had watched her disrobe, she'd been thrilled to know she could bring that heavy-lidded look to his face. Oh, there had been some embarrassment. But nothing like she would have expected at being naked for the first time in front of a man.

This all just felt so natural. Perhaps that was why her modesty was so lacking.

He stopped in front of her and she met his heated gaze. No one had ever looked at her like this, as if she was the most beautiful woman in the world. As if she was necessary for his survival. It was exhilarating.

Liberating.

He looked like a warrior—tall, broad and determined in his lean, graceful strength. Wordlessly, she placed her hands on his wide shoulders. His skin was smooth, warm, covering hard muscles. She slid her hands down his chest, feeling the rasp of hair against her palms. Skimming her fingers over the hard nubs of his nipples, she smiled when he drew in a sharp breath.

Cupping her face in his big hands, he stared into her eyes, his own so dark, they looked like black marbles. His mouth came down over hers, lips moving gently, coaxing, coercing. Softly rubbing his thumbs at the corners of her mouth, he urged her lips to open for his possession. His tongue delved between her lips just enough to tease. She fought for breath as fire licked through her veins.

By the goddess, it was only a kiss, yet her body was going up in flames. She'd wanted this man from the moment she'd seen him stalking across the room, and she wasn't going to fight it any longer. With a moan, she surrendered to him. Her tongue met his as she slid her hands along his brawny chest and up to tangle in the dark silk of his hair.

His hands left her face and slid over her shoulders to her back. His mouth burned a trail down her jaw to her neck, his teeth nipping lightly. One hard thigh pushed her legs further apart and pressed against her swollen sex.

Adara gasped and held onto him as everything in her world coalesced to this one moment in time, to the two of

them in this place. When his hands moved and lean fingers squeezed her nipple, a whimper escaped her. His hard thigh rubbed against the slick lips of her pussy. The muscled walls of her sheath spasmed, tightening at his sensual onslaught.

"Ruarc," she moaned.

"What, love?" His deep voice rumbled through her as he sucked lightly at the sensitive skin below her ear. "Don't you like this?" He moved his leg and one hand slid down her stomach to cup her pussy. His other hand continued to pluck at her nipple. "What about this?" He slid a long finger through her slit, pressing it against her thumping clit.

With another whimper, her head fell back, her body trembling under his hands. His big palms glided to her rear, cupping her buttocks, fingers clenching as he pulled her closer to him. Vaguely, she realized they were moving into more shallow depths, but when his thigh pushed between her legs again, her thoughts dissipated like mist. All she could do was feel.

Ruarc captured her lips with his again, reveling in the sweet gasp that left her to be swallowed by his kiss. Her slender hands gripped his shoulders, holding him tightly as her lips and tongue danced with his.

He tightened his grip on her silken ass, forcing her to ride the hard muscles of his thigh. Blood pounding in his ears, pumping in his cock, he sucked her tongue into his mouth. He fought the dragon that wanted a quick, brutal fuck. He wanted to play first, to have her fall apart in his arms so he could watch her as she came. Only then would he take his pleasure. And he'd make sure he brought her to climax again.

A low growl escaped him, and he spun and waded to the shore. Not taking his mouth from hers, he placed her carefully on his clothing. He covered her slender form with his greater bulk. When his cock slid against the slick heat of her pussy, he

groaned into her mouth. His shaft strained against her. He needed her to touch him, to wrap her strong, slender hand around his thickened flesh.

Capturing one of her hands in his, he guided it to his erection. When her fingers curled around him, learning his shape, he shuddered. Mating his tongue with hers, he pumped his hips slowly as her fingers squeezed, then released, then squeezed again. Her thumb rubbed over the slit, spreading drops of pre-cum over the pulsing head. The urge for a fast, hard ride became stronger and stronger.

She sighed into his mouth and slid her hand to his taut balls. At first squeezing gently, she rolled them in her soft, small hand. He threw his head back and groaned. He could almost feel his cum roiling from his testicles to his penis. She moved her hand to his heavy shaft and stroked him. He gasped and thrust against her, the need to fuck her nearly overwhelming. God, she was killing him.

The dragon inside him howled. Ruarc knew he needed to taste her feminine honey, or he'd never control the beast. That, and he was very much afraid he was addicted to her. He needed her flavor on his tongue like he needed air to breathe.

With another groan, he moved her hand away from his raging cock. "Not yet, love," he muttered, and moved his head to her breasts. "Not yet. You have to fly apart for me first."

He remembered the promise he'd made to himself to worship her breasts. With a soft groan, he licked across first one nipple, then the other, smiling when they tightened to hard, red nubs. He curled his hands around the firm mounds and pushed her ample breasts together, kneading them roughly. He watched her eyes roll and then close. He latched onto one nipple and suckled, his own eyes closing at the silken feel of her against his tongue.

Drawing in a breath, he inhaled her scent, wanting it to sear his lungs and forever remain a part of him. She smelled of roses and sweat and passion. Her nipple was a hard point in his mouth and he worked it with his tongue, bringing one hand up to her other breast to pinch and roll the tip between his finger and thumb. She surged against him and he suckled harder.

Adara arched against his mouth, straining to get closer. He nipped sharply at the rigid peak of her breast, stoking the fire of her lust. She moved restlessly under his hands, her hips undulating, seeking release from the building sensual tension. His hot mouth moved to her other breast, and he sucked the nipple between his lips.

The tugging of his mouth echoed in her clenching womb. Suddenly, he levered himself off her to rest on his heels, his knees on either side of her hips. His hot gaze traveled the length of her body.

With some trepidation and no little excitement, Adara looked at his groin. She felt her eyes widen and her breath catch in her throat. Oh, Sisters of Destiny, he was huge. She'd felt how large he was in her hand, her fingers not able to fully close around him. But seeing was another matter entirely. Any doubts she might have had that he wanted her fled. One look at his engorged cock resting on her belly put that issue to rest.

He was so hard, he throbbed, the plum-colored head twitching slightly. While she watched, he seemed to grow even longer, thickening further until she became nervous. What if he didn't fit?

One big hand stroked down the rigid flesh, from the root to the tip. She could see his balls underneath, drawn tight and high beneath the rigid stalk of his cock. Ah, goddess, it made her wet with longing, wild with need. A pearly drop of liquid

slipped from the slit at the tip of his shaft. She reached out, swiping it away with her thumb and brought it up to her face.

His eyes narrowed and glittered as she delicately licked the viscous liquid, drawing his flavor into her mouth. It was salty and vinegary and all male. It was like nothing she'd ever tasted.

She wanted more.

She reached for him again, but he gently batted her hand away. "No, sweet," he murmured, and latched that dark, dark gaze on her swollen pussy. "I've yet to get your taste on my tongue. If you touch me again, I'll be lost. So...not yet, dearling. But soon."

He adjusted his position, his head dipping between her thighs. She tensed, familiar with this form of intimacy—the dragon had forced orgasm after orgasm from her the night before with only his wicked tongue on her nether flesh. But to have Ruarc...well, she wasn't sure she was comfortable with having his face so close to such a private part of her body. His tongue snaked out and flicked against her clit. She gasped and jerked. It was different from the dragon, but strangely, the same.

His tongue fluttered around her sex, lingering on her clit before trailing across her wet, open flesh. She moaned and pushed against him. Ruarc growled, shoved her thighs wider apart, and with the flat of his tongue, covered her entire slit with one firm swipe.

"Ahh!" She arched into his mouth, eyes closing, mouth gaping in a desperate attempt to drag air into her lungs. Heat arced from her pussy throughout the rest of her body. Any thoughts of stopping him vanished. She wanted the heat; she *needed* the heat.

The slow glide of his tongue along her slit scattered her thoughts. He stopped at her clit, his mouth opening and sucking that sensitive nub inside.

A guttural cry broke from her lips. The pressure of his tongue was steady, a rhythmic pulse that spiraled her world to one central point between her thighs. She ground her pussy against his face, trying to deepen his touch. Her hands reached for him and tangled in his hair, holding his head to her. He growled against her flesh and kept sucking. When he slid one long, thick finger inside her sheath, she gasped and moaned as the fire consumed her.

Removing his finger, he placed his mouth over her open folds. The firm point of his tongue slid inside, fluttering against her inner walls. Sensitized by his touch, her body trembled and creamed anew at the teasing caress. Flicking his tongue along the edges of her pussy, he kept his movements casual. Light, as if he merely wished to taste her. The urgency of his need seemingly satisfied, he was in no hurry. She whimpered and moved her hips, trying to get closer, then pulled away. It was too much, and yet, not enough. Her fingers tightened in his hair.

His initial hunger for her cream appeased, Ruarc tightened his fingers on her thighs, holding her in place as she struggled against him. She pushed her cunt against his aggressive mouth, and he pushed his tongue into her sex, growling at the warm liquid that coated his tongue. He wanted more. He wanted all of it.

He wanted all of *her*.

Moving his mouth, he sucked softly on her clit and plunged his longest finger inside her snug channel. Her sharp cry was music to his ears and he suckled harder on her clit. Her scent, her flavor, her sweet voice as she moaned and keened, all served to heighten his own desire.

"I need to fuck you." His tone was thick and deep. The urge to ride her fast and hard was impossible to ignore.

Her eyes met his, her bottom lip held between her teeth. With a gentle touch, he freed the lip and leaned in to kiss her. "Let me in, Adara," he whispered against her mouth. "Let me have your pussy."

"Yes," she moaned, cupping his face in her hands. "Please, Ruarc. Please..."

He reared back and grasped his cock, ready to stroke home, where he belonged. Her hands curled into fists as he pushed the tip of his cock into her entrance.

She tensed. He knew he was thick and stretched her virgin passage with just the head of his cock. "Shh, love. Relax, let me have you." He kept his voice steady and low, gentling her. "We're going to be such a sweet fit, you and I. I'm going to fill you until you can't take any more, until we're one."

She met his gaze, her own filled with trepidation mixed with desire, and something else. Something...softer.

The faintest hint of sulfur wafted to him on the breeze even as the forest around them grew silent, as if every living thing hunkered down into hiding. "Damn!" Whirling away from her, he scanned the area. The heavy flap of wings echoed over the treetops.

A huge reddish-brown dragon plunged from the sky to land a scant few feet away from the two lovers. The dragon settled his hulk into a crouch and growled low in his throat.

She's mine, Ruarc communicated telepathically to the dragon. *Mine*. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Adara scramble to her knees, yanking at his shirt to hold it in front of her body. As long as she stayed behind him, he could protect her. And he would protect her, with his life if need be.

Not for much longer, the dragon responded. Even in the mind-speak, Ruarc heard the steely threat in the words.

Smelled her cunt juice a mile away, the dragon continued. His nostrils flared and he lowered his slender snout toward Adara and sniffed her. *I will feast on her sweet cream over your dead body. It will make the possession that much sweeter.*

Ruarc stepped forward, ignoring Adara's gasp of horror. He would protect her from this beast, even if it meant revealing his own dark secret.

You'll never have her, he snarled at the beast. *Never.*

I will have her, came the reply, with a snap of powerful jaws. *I will plunge my tongue into her cunt, lick her juices, and make her come over and over until she is dead. Then she will nourish me in a different way.*

Get another woman. This one's mine.

A snort of laughter echoed between Ruarc's ears. He knew what his adversary was thinking—there were no other women here.

Either stand aside, or die. The dragon tilted his head and watched them, his black gaze moving from one to the other. Opening his mouth, he revealed two rows of sharp, white teeth and another growl rumbled forth, accompanied by a short spate of fire. He shifted his stance, eager to begin the battle and claim the prize.

Glancing down at his erection, Ruarc knew exactly how he felt.

He knew, too, that it was time.

He let the dragon magic loose, felt the familiar tingling heat, the tightening of muscle and bone. He rolled his shoulders, fighting the pain gathering in his head, locking his knees to keep from falling. One long shudder, and the transformation was complete.

He looked down at Adara. Seeing her wide eyes and pale face, he knew that by saving her life, he was truly setting her free. She could never love him—why should she? He was a beast masquerading in a man's body. He fought back the feeling of defeat that brought, knowing that he had to stay focused on this fight or they were both lost. Swishing his tail angrily, he lumbered closer to the other beast. He opened his wings, dominating the open space, the long wingspan causing his wing tips to brush against the trees.

Drawing methane gas from deep in his belly, he blew a short stream of fire at the other dragon. Laying his ears flat on his head, Ruarc bellowed an answer to the challenger.

Leave now, or die.

The red dragon straightened the thick spines along his back, rattling them in agitation while moving to the left. Ruarc circled with him, never letting the other creature out of his sight.

Ruarc sidestepped a swipe from the other dragon's tail, narrowly missing being hit by the deadly spike on the end. He belched fire and used his own tail, smacking the red dragon just below his ear.

The challenger shook his head and spewed a steady stream of flame toward Ruarc. Ruarc ducked and came in low, butting the other beast with his head, knocking him to the side. The horns above his eyes raked across the red's shoulder, knocking several scales loose. But before he could move in closer to the vulnerable underbelly, the red dragon sprang up, taking flight.

Ruarc flew after him and they circled each other in the air, coming together again and again, claws and teeth and tails raking at skin protected by dense scales.

But the scales weren't impenetrable. Not much could withstand the diamond-hard claws of a dragon, and their scales were no exception.

With a bloody shudder, they came together again, holding onto each other as they crashed to the ground and continued the battle in the small clearing by the spring.

Chapter 5

The ground shook with the force of their landing. Adara gasped and backed away, tripping and falling on her backside. Ruarc was on his back, with the red dragon on top of him, snapping with sharp teeth at Ruarc's neck. Ruarc worked his powerful hind legs under the other dragon and, with a grunt, pushed Red off.

Adara scrambled away from the two gigantic beasts as they circled the clearing, each trying to find the other's vulnerabilities. Each determined to strike the fatal blow. She couldn't take her eyes off Ruarc. His blue-green hide glittered iridescently, flashing blue, then purple, then blue again before shimmering to green in the sunlight. A dragon. Her lover was a dragon.

And he was magnificent.

In the cave last night, it had been too dark to distinguish many details, except when she'd been close enough to see him in the light of the fire. But this morning, in the full light of day, she saw things she'd missed.

He was easily twenty-five feet tall from the ground to his ears, and twice that if he were to rear up on his hind legs. As with all dragons, his skin was covered with rock-hard scales, everywhere except on his vulnerable belly. That was covered with softer scales, almost like bird feathers; they were pearly white mixed with blue and green.

His eyes were the gold of a dragon, but she'd still caught a glimpse of the man, even after he'd shifted. He had looked at her, his gaze holding sorrow and what she'd thought was fear. But not fear of the other dragon. No, he clearly was angry with the challenger, and was ready to fight to protect what was his.

If he wasn't afraid of the other dragon...she drew in a sharp breath and looked at him as he warily moved around his opponent. He was afraid of her—of her rejection, her hatred. He had no way of knowing that her feelings were quite the opposite of hate, because she hadn't been brave enough to be the first to say it.

Goddess above, he had to survive this battle. She would tell him everything, if only he survived!

While she couldn't say she'd really expected this transformation, it explained more fully what he was doing in the Hinterlands. *This* was what Diamanta had done to him because he refused to have sex with her. And of course, he couldn't stay in his kingdom. Dragons were feared and hated, and hunted nearly to extinction outside of the Hinterlands. In order to protect himself and his loved ones, he'd *had* to come here.

Her eyes widened as the hideous thought struck. Great goddess above. Diamanta had meant for Adara to kill him.

Adara's breath hitched in her throat and her chest tightened. What if she'd been successful? She would have murdered not just the prince of Melthione, but her One True Love.

The newcomer suddenly lunged forward with a deadly claw, swiping Ruarc across one shoulder. He roared at the pain and struck back with a blast of fire, driving his enemy back. Adara gasped to see blood welling from the wound.

"Stupid ninny," she muttered to herself. She drew Ruarc's shirt over her head and drew the laces tight as she looked around for her spears. "Standing here like a helpless fool when you could be helping." Although she felt a breeze in her nether regions, luckily, Ruarc was tall so his shirt covered everything essential. It was one thing to fight a dragon, and quite another do to it with her backside hanging out.

She crept around the fighting pair, watching them carefully, ready to jump out of the way. And when a blue-green tail swung around in attack of the other, she did jump, straight up, dodging the massive muscle.

Seeing the many wounds on Ruarc, Adara ground her jaw in impotent anger. He was bleeding heavily, and that the red dragon was, too, was of little comfort to her. She stumbled and, looking down, saw what was left of her spears. Damned dragons. They'd stomped them to bits.

She picked up the largest piece, scowling upon noticing it was only about half as long as her arm. She'd have to get in pretty close to be able to use it. Which meant it would be about as effective as her puny little dagger had been against Ruarc last night when he'd been in dragon form. Maybe she could slip in under the red dragon's belly and stab him. Looking at their thrashing bodies, she knew that was a bad idea.

She saw Ruarc's satchel. What if she distracted Red by throwing apples at him? It might be enough for Ruarc to be able to finish him off.

From the corner of his eye, Ruarc could see Adara holding what, from his vantage point, looked like an oversized toothpick. *The woman really knew no fear*, he thought with no little anger. Sometimes, like last night when she'd come after him with a puny little dagger, she was a bloody idiot.

He needed to either kill this red dragon, or drive him away before Adara stepped in and got herself injured—or worse. He couldn't bear to think about that, so he shut his brain down to any human input and concentrated on being a big, bad dragon.

Feinting to the left, he shot a ball of flame at Red's unprotected right, growling in triumph when the shot scored and left a large, black scorch mark on the beast's thick hide. Red screamed in pain and rage, then he belched fire. Ruarc ducked the blast and swung his tail around, catching Red in the side and driving the tip of his spiked tail deeply through the blackened area.

Only dragons knew of this vulnerability—when one of them was burned by dragon-fire, their scales became brittle and essentially useless as protection. And there was very little on earth that was harder than dragon spikes.

The red dragon bellowed again and shook himself free. Circling, Ruarc waited for another opportunity to strike a fatal blow. He saw something fly through the air and strike the other dragon on the side of his head, near his right eye.

It splattered against the hard skull and the scent of apples filled the air.

Apples?

Glancing at Adara, he saw her swing her arm back and launch another projectile. It hit the mark, nearly in the same spot as the first.

She was throwing apples at a dragon!

Bloody idiot.

Are you insane? What are you doing? he asked her in mind-speak.

"I'm trying to distract him so you can kill him!" she shouted, and lobbed another apple just as Red turned his

head. This one hit the beast square on the snout, and he glared at the tiny human who dared to attack him.

Well, stop it, Ruarc retorted. *You're distracting me, and making him angry.*

She seemed to realize that she had, indeed, drawn the attention of the red dragon because she gave a little squeak and backed up a few paces. "Do something!" she yelled at Ruarc, waving an arm toward Red. "Hurry!"

Ruarc threw his weight at the other dragon, knocking him to the ground. He clamped his teeth around Red's throat and hung on while the beast snarled and writhed. Unfortunately, scales on a dragon's throat were just as impenetrable as those on his hide, and Ruarc lost his grip. Sliding several feet away, he was unable to move quickly enough to miss a swipe from the other dragon's tail.

When Ruarc bellowed in rage and pain, Adara cried out. The red dragon turned his head toward the sound and she backed up even more. She saw the gaping wound on Ruarc's flank, and clapped her hand over her mouth to hold in another cry. Blood stained his skin, bright red against the iridescent scales. With a mighty roar, he lobbed a ball of fire at Red's neck, blackening an area just under the massive head, and drove the spike at the tip of his tail through the scorched area.

Massive amounts of blood poured from the wound and Adara knew the blow had been a fatal one. The red dragon staggered and, with a blast of fire, Ruarc set him ablaze as he collapsed.

Then he turned toward her, bloodlust still burning in his golden eyes.

She gasped and backed away. Sorrow flickered through his gaze at her instinctive movement and his head drooped. A shimmer, and he stood before her in his human form, arms limp at his still-heaving sides.

"Ruarc," she whispered and reached out one hand.

He flinched and turned away. "Don't. I'm not... Don't touch me."

She stared at him, noticing that, where on the dragon's body had been open, bleeding wounds, on the man's, there were healed scars. Ignoring his instruction, she slid her hand along his shoulder, marveling at this sign of dragon magic.

Ruarc faced her, his eyes filled with heated need, his face hard with primitive desire. His penis rose slowly, thickening, lengthening, until it seemed to be reaching for her.

His hard muscles quivered, whether from exhaustion or passion or a combination of the two, she didn't know. What she did know was she had to help him. His earlier physical need had not been sated. If anything, it had been heightened by the passion of the battle. He had saved her from the other dragon, and she loved him.

She moved closer, resting her torso against his, fitting the cradle of her thighs against his lower body. His cock pressed against her stomach. With a snarl, he snatched her closer, crashing his mouth into hers. He ate at her lips with teeth and tongue, one big hand cupping the back of her head to hold her in place. The other hand slipped to her backside and canted her hips forward to find a more comfortable niche for his erection.

The way he held her and the hot gleam in his eyes made her pussy cream with need. She kissed him back, tangling her tongue with his, following when it retreated into his mouth. Tracing the contours of teeth and tongue, she sipped from him as if he were the last drink of water on earth.

He drew away and pressed his face into the curve of her neck. "Be sure, Adara," he muttered, his voice hoarse and deep. Part of the dragon still lingered, and she gasped when her womb clenched in desire.

"I'm sure," she whispered, then placed a soft kiss on his hair. It was now or never, and he deserved to hear the truth. "I love you."

He pulled back, his hands hard on her shoulders. "You...can't."

"I do." She touched his face, trying not to weep when he jerked away from her tender touch. "I love you."

"Even knowing..." He moved away from her, his hands curling into fists. She caught her breath at the view of his muscular backside, even as she kicked herself for becoming distracted. This conversation was important; she shouldn't be lusting after his oh-so-fine ass.

She walked up behind him and slid her arms around his waist. Tightening her grip when he moved to break her hold, she rubbed her cheek against the taut muscles of his back. "You're everything that's fine and noble, and I love you." She kissed a trail across his shoulder blades. "I love you."

Twisting in her arms, he pulled her close, his hands hurtful around her upper arms. His grip raised her on her tiptoes. "I am a beast." The dragon swirled in his eyes, flecking the dark brown with gold. He shook her slightly. "A dragon."

"Not by choice," she murmured, then placed a kiss on the dent in his chin. "And it doesn't change the fact that you're...my One True Love."

He stilled, his hands tightening.

She stopped the wince before it could reach her face. "I love you."

With a groan, he yanked her forward and slanted his mouth over hers, lips hard and grinding against her teeth. He pushed his tongue inside her mouth. She shivered. He tasted desperate. Hot. Male.

He bore her to the ground, laying her in a patch of wildflowers, ripping his shirt off her as they went down. He searched her eyes, doubt still lingering in his.

"I love you." She would keep saying it, showing him, until he believed. "You're not a beast. Not like the other." She turned her head and looked at the still-smoldering carcass. Thankfully, the breeze carried the stench of death in the opposite direction and the scent of flowers masked what remained.

She turned back to her lover and caressed his face. "You saved me from him."

"He would have ended up killing you." His teeth were gritted, the words coming out in a savage snarl. The cords along his neck stood out in stark relief, an indication of the great emotional strain he was under.

Realizing he wasn't rational at the moment, that the dragon still struggled for dominance, Adara fought back another surge of anxiety. She would not fail this man she loved. She touched his face with gentle fingers, trembling from the emotion surging through her. "You saved me. I love you." Her fingers whispered across his firm lips, his taut jaw. "Make love with me, Ruarc."

With a groan that rumbled from deep inside, Ruarc bent once more to her mouth. His kiss was hard and hungry, with none of the finesse he'd initially used with her. This was no tender seduction. It was raw need.

Transforming from the dragon back to his human form had left fire in its wake, shredding the control Ruarc usually kept over his emotions. Now he remembered the wet heat of her, the way her channel had felt around his finger. Remembered, too, what they were doing when the red dragon appeared.

He had to have her. His cock plunging into her slick cunt. Now.

He captured her hands in his and stretched them above her head. The pose caused her full breasts to thrust upward. Their tight, peach-tinted peaks stabbed into his chest. Unable to resist her allure, he kept her hands still by gripping her slender wrists in one big hand and bent down to suckle greedily at one tempting berry.

He cupped and squeezed her breast so that the nipple jutted out even more, then he sucked it deeper into his mouth. Pulling back, he let it slide out of his mouth with an audible *pop* and laved the hard tip with his tongue. She shivered underneath him, bending her legs so his cock slid against the slick lips of her cunt.

He raised his head, panting. God, his prick was so hard, it wouldn't take much for him to come. He couldn't remember ever being this aroused. He knew part of his lust was the vestiges of the dragon.

The bigger part of it was caused by the woman lying beneath him. Adara, his sweet, hot, brave fairy godmother.

He went after her nipples again, moving from one to the other. Nipping, tugging, licking. She undulated under him, her moans the sweetest of music to his ears. He slid his free hand across her belly and down to her sex. He cupped her and speared his middle finger deep into her channel. She was wet, her cream coating the outer lips of her cunt. Raising up, he took her mouth with his as he thrust two fingers inside her, breaching her innocence. He swallowed her moan, stilling his fingers inside her.

"Easy, love. I know it hurts." His face against hers, he crooned nonsense words.

Adara made herself breathe. The fiery stab from the loss of her virginity surprised her. That it faded so quickly

surprised her even more. Where there had been a sharp, momentary flash of pain, her passion now built. She could feel his fingers resting inside her.

He slid his lips over one nipple and sucked the sensitive nub into the heat of his mouth. Heat sparked from her breasts to her pussy. When she shifted her legs, he slowly pulled his fingers out of her channel and, at her moan of protest, slid them back in.

His whiskered cheeks brushed against her as he shifted to her other nipple. She shivered at the rasp of hair against her skin. His fingers moved inside her again. She clutched at his shoulders. "Ruarc!"

He raised his head. She drew in her breath at the sight of his face, hard with need, tense with hard-fought control. His eyes were so dark, she almost couldn't differentiate between the brown of his irises and the black of the pupils. He held his jaw tightly, making the tendons of his neck stand out in stark relief.

She marveled at his control. She knew how wild he'd been after the fight. That he could take the time to be so gentle with her...it made her love him even more.

Burying his face between the slopes of her breasts, he rubbed his cheeks against her and then slurped a nipple back into his mouth. His fingers pushed into her channel and she instinctively tightened around him.

Ruarc forced himself to go slowly. The dragon wanted to fuck her fast and deep, *now*. The man knew that to do so would hurt her, so he held himself still. When he felt her breath sigh against his skin and her hips push against him, he smiled. She was ready.

He pulled his fingers away and slid his cock against her slit, wetting himself in her cream. Then he pushed slowly in, just the head, and paused, waiting for her signal.

“Ruarc.” She sighed, tilting her hips slightly.

That was it. He felt her muscles slacken and slid more of his shaft inside her wet heat. God, she was so tight, it was like fucking his way into a velvet-covered fist. He moved slowly, feeding in one thick inch at a time, giving her body time to adjust to his invasion.

He pressed forward until finally, *finally*, his hips melded to hers and he was home.

He began to move, a long, slow pull out of her pussy that seemed endless and nearly killed him with the sensation of her rippling cunt gripping his hard length. She panted and grasped at him, fingers curling into his ass to pull him back to her.

“You like that, love?” He leaned in and bit at her lips, thrusting back into her pussy. “God, your cunt is so tight. It holds me, tugs at me as if you never want to let me to go.” He pulled back, his own breath coming in ragged gasps.

“More.” Her whimper was a demand.

“Yes!” He slid his hands around to her ass and lifted her into another slow glide. She moaned, and just that small, sweet sound was enough to shred his control. The dragon roared inside him as he stroked out, then pulled her forward onto his hard plunge. One hand slipped between their bodies and he rubbed against her engorged clit. A few more strokes, and she flew apart in his arms.

A tingling began at his spine and vibrated outward through his entire body. He plunged deeper, harder. Faster. A rush of heat, and he felt the dragon leave him. In the back of his mind, he heard the witch’s voice telling him he needed the blood of a virgin to reverse the curse. *God*. He’d thought, as Diamanta had known he would, that he had to murder the virgin.

All he’d needed was the blood of her innocence.

His hips pumped. He gritted his teeth against the lingering contractions of her channel around his cock. He threw back his head as he hovered on the edge of his orgasm.

Adara lay beneath Ruarc, her chest heaving as her pussy gave a few last ripples around his cock. She watched his face harden and his arms bulge as his own release drew near. He was so absolutely male, all sweat-covered muscles and hard cock. She rubbed her hands over his back, loving his strength.

His head was thrown back, corded muscles bulging on his neck. Another thrust and he came with a shout. She could feel him pumping into her, his thick length riding over the ridges of her channel, his semen spurting into her in hot jets.

He collapsed over her, keeping his weight braced on his elbows. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "I was a little rough."

"I'm fine." She was more than fine. This had been worth waiting for.

For the first time in her life, she held a man deep inside her body. His skin hot and damp against hers. His breath hot on her neck. She slid her hands over his sweat-slickened back. He pressed a kiss into the crook of her neck. Her hands moved from his back to grip his hair tightly.

Her One True Love. He was hers. She was his. And it was like nothing she could have imagined. She closed her eyes. His groin pressed against hers, his cock deep inside her. Damn. She should have listened to the Sisters.

But then it wouldn't have been Ruarc. He flexed his hips and her breath hitched.

"Just fine?" He nuzzled her throat. "I need to work on my technique if you're *just fine*."

She smiled and rubbed her palms along his shoulders, enjoying the feel of his hard muscle and smooth skin. "I'm great. How about you?"

He didn't respond right away. Then he said, "I think you've cured me."

Chapter 6

“What?” Adara pushed at his shoulders to lever him up so she could see his face. His eyes were a clear, calm brown with hope hovering at their edges.

He kissed her, a slow, sweet kiss of affection and love. Pulling away from her, his groan matched hers as their bodies reluctantly separated. He stood and held one hand down toward her. She took it and he effortlessly brought her to her feet. “We need to bathe and get dressed,” he said.

Walking into the water, he pulled her along behind him. With abrupt, economical movements, he bathed himself. Adara made no move to follow suit and he took over.

Without a word, he moved closer. Drawing water with his cupped hands, he dumped it over her shoulders. His eyes darkened, his gaze following the trail of the wet rivulets. She looked down to see a droplet sparkling on one nipple. Adara looked back at Ruarc. Holding her gaze with his, he bent until he could lick the drop from her flesh. She shivered, her nipples hardening to tight peaks.

“Spread your legs,” he murmured, his mouth still very close to her breast.

When she complied, he used one broad hand to swipe through her slit, back and forth, washing away their combined juices. He speared one finger into her channel. “Need to make sure you’re completely clean,” he murmured, and flicked his tongue against her nipple.

His palm pressed against her clit while he worked his finger in and out. Sparks shot from her core throughout her body. Even as she moaned in response, she pushed his hand away. "Ruarc, we don't have time."

He sighed and rested his forehead against hers. "Damn it." He gently rubbed her nose with his, then pressed a soft kiss to the tip. "You're probably right." He slowly withdrew his hand, groaning when she shivered against him.

Slanting his mouth over hers, he kissed her one last time before they left the water. He bent and picked up his ruined shirt, handing it to Adara. She looked at him with raised brows.

"Use it as a towel."

"Oh." With a slight blush, she took it from him and quickly dried off. She handed it back, then watched him do the same. She admired the muscled length of his form, the complete masculinity of his shape. He was tall, lean and hard.

And he was hers.

"We have to get back to the Kingdom of Giffard, to Bertrand and Cinderella. We may already be too late." Ruarc bent to pick up his breeches.

He has such a biteable ass. Her hands sought out his muscular buttocks, fingers curling into the taut flesh.

Jumping slightly, he straightened and turned, his breeches dangling in one hand. One eyebrow raised, he said, "You're not going to find out if I'm ripe by squeezing me."

She sighed. "I know, I know. It's just..."

"Not enough time?"

Adara nodded, her eyes glued to his cock. The front view was just as nice as the backside. She'd definitely picked the cream of the crop.

Under her perusal, his cock started to thicken and lengthen, straightening toward her.

It was his turn to sigh. "We really don't have time, Adara," he said. He put his breeches on, then helped her dress. Before he drew her blouse closed, he pressed a kiss against each nipple. She swayed and leaned into him.

"We need to go," he said, and pushed her gently away. Closing his eyes, he stood quietly. Arms at his sides, he turned his hands forward.

She raised her eyebrows. She glanced around, then looked at him. "Ruarc, what are you doing?"

He opened his eyes. His shoulders slumped and he said, "I thought... She told me all I needed to reverse the curse was the blood of a virgin."

Adara blew out a breath and ran her hand down his arm, then clasped his hand in hers. "And that's what happened, darling. You reversed the curse."

"But..." He trailed off.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. "You thought that reversing the curse would get you home."

"Yes."

One word, so filled with desolation. It hurt her to see him so disheartened. "Well, as long as Diamanta didn't lie about my cure," she said, between pressing kisses along the hard line of his collarbone and hoping against all hope that the witch had told the truth at least once, "we can still get out of here." She lapped at water he'd missed in the hollow of his throat. She couldn't keep from touching him, tasting him. She was addicted to this man.

If she could make herself drink wine mixed with blood and the ashes of the red dragon, they could leave this place.

Ruarc held her at arm's length. Her green eyes sparkled at him with a combination of lust and mischief. He wanted to bear her down to the ground and make love to her again.

Once they made it back to Giffard and saved the princess, he wasn't going to let her out of bed for a week. Maybe two. Maybe never.

"In order for my powers to work here, I have to mix dragon's blood and ashes from three belly scales with wine. And drink it." She wrinkled her nose.

"Ah." Now he understood why she'd tried to kill him when he was in dragon form. He looked around the clearing at the evidence of his battle with the red dragon. "Well, there seems to be plenty of blood."

"Mmm." She walked toward the still-smoldering carcass. "But what about belly scales? Can we get them off?"

"We won't need to." Ruarc moved in the opposite direction to the spot where he and Red had first crashed back to the ground. He knelt and gathered up three scales. Holding out his hand, he showed them to her.

She shrieked and ran to him. "There's enough?"

"More than enough." All around their feet were underbelly scales. The feathery skin cells littered the ground like leaves. "I must have clawed these off when I ripped his belly with my claws."

He tipped the scales into one of her hands. "Where's your wine?" he asked.

She ran to the edge of the water and grabbed the flask. He stooped, gathering up loose, dried grass and small sticks for kindling. She knelt beside him, holding her wine flask in one hand. Her other hand was closed around the dragon scales.

Ruarc added a couple of larger pieces of wood to his pile, then began to rub two small sticks together. Blowing softly on the kindling as it started to smoke, he grinned in triumph when it burst into flames. Taking two more small twigs, he used them like tweezers to hold one of the scales over the fire.

It quickly turned to ashes. Before it could lose its shape, he dropped it into the flask that Adara held out to him.

He repeated the process with the other two scales. "How much blood did you need?" he asked.

"Three thimbles full."

"Well, as I doubt either of us has a thimble, an approximation will have to do." Ruarc walked over to a large rock, where dragon's blood pooled in an indentation on its surface.

"Will this help?"

He looked at Adara. She held half a walnut shell in one hand. One eyebrow was raised and her lips twitched as if she fought a smile.

"Go ahead." He laughed. She was delightful. He was besotted with her and didn't care. "You're clever. You can take credit for it." He hadn't even noticed they were standing under walnut trees. He'd been too focused on the scales.

She grinned and handed over the shell. "You're clever, too. We make a good team."

He hauled her close and kissed her, hard. "We make a great team."

Using the walnut shell, he scooped up the needed blood and added it to the wine. Adara capped the flask and shook it. Taking the cap off, she looked at him and sighed. "Well, here goes nothing."

She brought the flagon toward her mouth, then lowered her hand. She took a deep breath and tried again. When the flask was just under her nose, he saw her lips thin and she lowered her hand again. "It smells." She gagged slightly. "I don't think I can do this."

"You have to, dearling. Otherwise, Diamanta wins." Ruarc moved to her side and put one arm around her

shoulders. "Just breathe through your mouth. That way you won't smell it as much. And smile."

"You want me to be cheerful while I'm chugging down dragon parts?"

He kissed her again for her sass. "According to a very good friend of mine, who just happens to be the royal physician, smiling can suppress the gag reflex."

"Oh." She kissed him, soft lips moving over his; hot, slick tongue gliding briefly into his mouth. "See? I said you were clever."

She pulled away and pasted a smile on her face. Once more, she brought the flask to her face. Her nostrils flared and her smile widened. "It kind of works," she said. Putting the flagon to her mouth, she tilted her head. He watched her smooth throat move as she swallowed. She grimaced and moved the flask away. "*Aagh!*" She wiped her mouth with the back of one hand. "Well, it could taste worse, I suppose."

"Well?"

She stilled. "I don't feel any different."

"Does your magic work?" Ruarc felt a surge of anxiety. *What if Diamanta had lied about this, too?*

She handed him the wine flagon and closed her eyes. Tilting her head toward the sky, she stretched her arms above her head and chanted in a language he'd never heard. Her fingers flexed slightly. Her long hair lifted away from her back, almost as if caught by a breeze, but the wind was still. He heard a slight crackle, like the sound of a faraway peal of thunder. With a flourish, she brought her hands down. A snap of her fingers, and her magic wand appeared in her outstretched hand.

"I'm back!" she crowed, dancing in place. She grabbed him in a fierce hug and jumped up and down. "Just like Humpty Dumpty, I'm back together again."

"I thought Humpty Dumpty couldn't be put back together again." Ruarc grinned at her antics. She was adorable, and funny, and so sexy, she made him hurt.

Adara felt the magic return in a burst of raw energy that filled her body with tingling awareness. "Well, that's because the king only had horses and men to help him." She winked at him. "I, on the other hand, am a woman of magic."

She took Ruarc's hand and waved her wand while chanting, "Biggedy-boobedy-bore. The dragon's curse is no more. Take us back where we were before. Boobedy-biggedy-bore."

Light shimmered around them. Adara felt the slightest of tugs on her clothing, then they were at Cinderella's palace. Just as she turned to close the portal, a large black dragon flew through the magical opening. She looked at Ruarc with wide eyes.

"We'll have to deal with him later," he muttered, tightening his hold on her hand. "Right now, we have to stop Diamanta."

He took off at a run, pulling Adara behind him. By the time they reached the great hall, her lungs were heaving trying to draw in air. Ruarc looked at her, his chest rising and falling at a faster rate than normal but nowhere near the critical level of hers. "I'm all right," she gasped. Promising herself she'd exercise more and use magic less, she looked toward the center of the room. Diamanta had frozen the royal couple in place. Cinderella was seated at the table and her husband stood behind her chair facing the doorway.

Diamanta stalked toward the immobilized Prince Bertrand. Adara waved her wand and released Cinderella from her wicked stepmother's spell. At her movement, Diamanta whirled to face them. Her long hair flowed around her like a cloak of evil.

Her pale features fell in disbelief, then scrunched in anger. "No!" she spat. "You're not supposed to be here. You were supposed to be dead. Both of you!"

"Too bad your plan didn't work," Ruarc said. He stepped to the side and drew a large sword from its scabbard on the wall. "I would advise you to leave our lands and never return, but I don't think you'll heed my warning."

Her eyes glittered with madness as she narrowed them. "You have no authority here, Prince Ruarc." Her voice turned throaty and she addressed the still-frozen Bertrand. "Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

A flick of her wand, and Adara set Bertrand free from Diamanta's spell.

"Ruarc speaks the truth. Leave our kingdoms now, or be executed as a traitor."

Diamanta screamed in rage. "If I cannot have my prince, no one will. I will at least have vengeance."

She turned and ran out of the room, taking the stairs that led straight up to the battlements.

Ruarc and Bertrand gave chase. Adara ran after them, lagging slightly behind the two men... Well, make that greatly behind. With their longer legs, they took the stairs three at a time while she had to make do climbing them the normal way. By the time she got to the top, Diamanta stood between two of the bulwarks, her arms stretched to the sky.

"I will not be denied," the witch cried out. With a small dagger, she drew a long incision on the inside of her forearm. "With my blood, I make this pact..."

Ruarc reached for Diamanta.

"No!" Adara screamed at him. "Get away from her!"

He instantly backed away without question.

"She's going to cast a dark spell. If you touch her, it will kill you." Adara inched closer. "My magic may shield me."

Ruarc grabbed her arm when she would have sidled past him. "May? May!"

She put one hand on his cheek. He closed his eyes and turned his face to place a kiss in the palm of her hand. "I have to do this, Ruarc. It's the only way. You know it."

"No!" He tightened his grip. "There has to be another way, Adara. Or *I'll* do it."

"If you touch her, it *will* kill you," she repeated. "I, at least, have a chance. Let me do this, Ruarc. I couldn't bear it if you—"

"And you think I can stand by and watch you die? No! There has to be another way."

"...draw down your fury against the kingdoms of Giffard and Melthione..."

There was no more time. Adara broke free of Ruarc's hold and lurched toward Diamanta. Taking hold of the other woman would most likely kill her, but she had no choice. There was no time to do anything else.

Movement in the sky caught Ruarc's attention. He drew in a sharp breath. The black dragon hurtled toward them, its hind claws curled like an eagle's talons. The beast headed straight toward Diamanta on her perch high on the battlements.

With a grunt, Ruarc launched himself at Adara, falling to the floor and rolling away from Diamanta. One hand behind Adara's head cushioned her from the hard, unforgiving flagstones. He twisted onto his back to the sounds of the wicked witch's screams.

"Oh, great goddess," Adara breathed at his side.

Cinderella joined them on the battlements and the two couples watched the drama unfolding before them. The black dragon snagged Diamanta in his fierce grasp and flew off, his powerful wings carrying them quickly away from the castle.

Diamanta's screams grew fainter as their figures became smaller and smaller, finally fading completely away.

"Oh, dear." Cinderella sounded faint.

Ruarc got to his feet and helped Adara up, then looked at the royal couple. The princess leaned into her husband's embrace. Bertrand, though still pale from the power of Diamanta's spell, stood straight and strong.

"Thank you, both of you," he said. Claspng Ruarc's hand, he held it a moment. He placed his other hand on Adara's shoulder. "Anything that is in my power to bestow, you have but to ask."

"Do you have a priest?" Ruarc drew Adara into his arms, smiling at her astonished face. "You will marry me, my fierce little warrior," he murmured, brushing a kiss of promise against her mouth.

"You call that a proposal?" Her voice was dry and tart, full of sass.

He grinned and held her closer, letting her feel his burgeoning arousal. "It's the only one you're going to get. I'm not going to take the chance you might say no."

She cupped his face in her slender hands. "You think I'd let you get away from me, after all I've had to do to catch you?" She smiled, then grinned, and finally laughed.

Her happiness was contagious, and soon, all four were laughing.

Ruarc caught his breath, feeling relaxed and happy for the first time in his life. He knew he'd been incomplete until now.

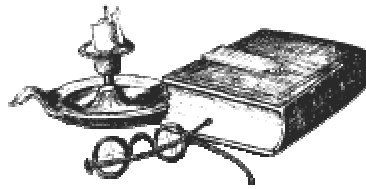
With Adara, he had everything he needed. Everything he wanted. With her at his side, he knew Melthione would prosper.

And they'd live happily ever after.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sherrill Quinn grew up in Northeast Ohio. In 2000, no longer able to deal with the excitement of winter's snow and ice, she moved to Southern Arizona where she now dodges cacti and rattlesnakes. (Okay, she's seen exactly two. Snakes, that is.) Sherrill is previously published under another name in short romantic fiction and non-fiction. *Dragon's Bane* is her first erotic romance novella.

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