

Dragon's Heir 3: Dragon's Desire
Sierra Dafoe

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In the dragon kingdom of Djarera, Lara Sotherlin has at last found her life-mate in the handsome rebel, Zendar. But the four clans, still furious over Zendar's rebellion, refuse to accept him as heir to the throne.

Zendar can see no other way to save Djarera from all-out warfare than to leave, even if it means losing the woman he loves. And Darrek, badly scarred and left half-blind by the battle to save Elara, believes he wants nothing more than to be left alone. Together, they disappear, leaving Rand and Elara frantic.

Now Elara and Rand must put everything on the line to find them, and in a last desperate struggle, each of them must finally acknowledge their own deepest desires. But will the result be ruin for the dragon kingdom, or the dawn of a whole new era?

Chapter One

Lara came awake in the frosty air of morning, feeling anew the tug of *khef*, the dragon mating frenzy that had driven her into Zendar's arms. The rogue Westron dragon who had once kidnapped her in an attempt to seize control of the throne of Djarera was curled now asleep beside her, no longer her enemy but her very own husband. Lifting her head, she saw the sharp peaks of the northern mountains, ringing the stony vale in which they'd slept. Sunlight glinted off the snow-capped ridges, blinding in its refracted intensity. Arching her neck, Lara looked down along the length of their bodies, admiring their complimentary colors, emerald green against shimmering gold. Even in sleep, Zendar's tail twined possessively around hers and she smiled, thinking of how he'd knelt before Melgara, her mother, submitting all the wild tempestuousness of his nature in obedience to the queen -- for her.

For *her*!

The exultation she'd felt as Zendar had stormed into the throne room to claim her flowed through her again. She would, she suspected, always remember every detail of that scene -- the shocked clans, the tense silence, the way Zendar's hair, as shining gold as her hide, had fallen over his broad shoulders as he bent his proud head, vowing allegiance to the dragon queen.

And he'd done it for her.

Even in dragon form, Lara felt a delighted giggle tickling her insides.

Softly, she drew away from the massive Westron dragon, feeling the beat of *khef* along her veins. Unfurling her wings, she leaped into the air, knowing that Zendar would invariably pursue her, as enthralled by the mating frenzy as she was herself.

The rocky valley floor slid away beneath her, but Zendar, sensing her absence, was awake before she'd even risen above the surrounding cliffs. His eyes narrowed as she swooped above him, and with one muscular heave he sprang upward, speeding after her on his huge, jewel-green wings.

This time though, he didn't hover above her, his wing strokes matching hers as he lowered himself into her body. This time he slammed into her, grabbing her neck in his powerful jaws, almost piercing her skin as he forced her back toward the ground.

You thought you'd escape me that easily, did you?

His mind-speak was a snarl, dominant and self-assured. Lara grinned to herself -- for all his ferocity, he loved her, and well she knew it -- but she took a perverse pleasure in his fury, and as they landed she struggled in his grasp for the sheer enjoyment of feeling him grip her tighter, deliciously aware of the wetness slicking her passage.

Arching his neck, he glared into her eyes. *I see I must teach you a lesson in obedience, wife.* His mind-voice sent a shiver of anticipation through her.

Thrusting her down before him, Zendar mounted her. With one hard shove, he plunged his cock deep into her, and Lara's head snapped back as she roared her defiance, twisting below him. Tilting her head, she could see the muscles in his massive shoulders straining, his emerald-green wings stretched against the sky as he clasped her below him, holding her down.

He would, she knew, let her go in an instant if that was what she truly wanted. But she didn't. This was *khef*, the instinctive urge to couple with the strongest, most dominant dragon -- a procreative drive she couldn't have avoided even if she'd wanted to. The woman she had been -- the woman who had grown up believing she was merely Lara Sutherland, a struggling artist who made a living drawing the dragons that haunted her dreams -- might be appalled at the way she responded to Zendar's violent lovemaking, but the rest of her reveled in it. She relished the tightness of his grip, the masculine forcefulness of him as he reared above her, slamming his cock

into her with a fury that ensnared her senses and made her shriek with savage arousal.

It was so different from making love as a human. Their draconic bodies, so much larger than their human forms, pulsed with a fire that was almost elemental in its intensity. Hide slid against hide -- not feet of it, but *yards*. His cock swelled within her, hammering into her with a frenzy her human body could never have withstood. But to Elara Southerlin, dragon of Djarera and daughter of the dragon queen Melgara, his savagery only increased her own frenzy, making her writhe beneath him, her claws splayed on the stony ground as he thrust, and thrust, and thrust...

She could feel her own peak surging through her, searing along nerves that reached all the way from her long, lashing tail to her outstretched neck, her body going rigid as Zendar threw his head back and roared at the sky. His voice echoed from the surrounding cliffs, surrounding them in waves of sound even as he rammed his cock deep into her, so deep she could feel his testicles pressed against her, throbbing as wave after wave of semen flooded her passage. She screamed in ecstasy, arching below him, feeling her body blaze with the orgasm that ripped through her, hard and fast and sharp as lightning.

And still Zendar was not done. Seizing her hips, he tugged them higher as he pistoned down into her. She moaned below him, and he thrust harder, faster, riding her to a second, unexpected climax that was blinding in its intensity. It exploded inside her, filling her mind with white fire, erasing everything but the feel of his cock inside her, his massive body pinning her down...

She writhed helplessly, delightedly, her body trembling in rapture as he took her with a wildness that stunned her. His thrusts were so forceful they rocked her entire body as he came yet again, his orgasm bursting into her so hard she could feel his seed pumping into her in hot, streaming jets, filling her until his juices overflowed her cunt and trickled down between their bodies. He shuddered and bucked, his hips glued to hers, until his spasms finally eased.

Spent, he sagged on top of her, panting. *Winds, Elara, what you do to me!*

Me? she answered, pretending outrage. *It wasn't me who dragged us out of the air and jumped on top of me like a frog, now was it?*

She could feel the sated rumble of his laughter through his ribcage, above her. Then he rolled off, collapsing heavily onto the ground, his wings trailing limply. *Woman, you will be the death of me. Now come here.*

He shifted, the warm, rakish smile that always surprised her breaking across his chiseled features as he reached for her with one strong, masculine hand. Letting go of her dragon form, Lara curled up beside him, letting him tuck her head into the warm, solid crook of his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her forehead.

For the past five days, on wing and on foot, they'd explored Djarera, the dragon's world she'd been born to and had never seen until Melgara had sent Darrek and Rand to bring her back from Earth. Lara had listened delightedly as Zendar told her about her homeland, and the histories of the clans that inhabited it. She'd laughed when he brought her handfuls of *priamor*, the fragrant purple flowers whose petals were like velvet, or wove sprigs of *asthuraia*, the tiny silver-white snowflowers that grew only on the tops of Djarera's highest peaks, into her hair.

And they'd made love, in dragon form and in human, 'til there were times she was certain she'd never be able to walk, much less make love ever again -- at least until he'd pull her back down on top of him, his long golden hair spilling around his handsome face. One night they'd camped in a cave and, to her delight, Zendar had pinned her against the cavern wall, reenacting her kidnapping with a zeal that had left her breathless with lust. He was a constant source of wonder to her, a ferocious lover who took her with a savage, breathtaking intensity, and more tender than even Rand when he held her afterwards.

Like now. His hands drifted over her, caressing her as lightly as the cool morning breeze, stroking her shoulders. With one hand, he traced the line of her neck and chin, then lifted her face toward his and kissed her. His tongue probed her mouth, slow and deep, 'til she wrapped hers around it. They kissed, their tongues intertwining, until Lara felt her breath coming short and her nipples contracting. Reaching up to him, she buried her hands in his

thick golden hair and pulled his mouth down harder against hers.

Grinning, he drew back slightly, his emerald-green eyes sparkling with mischief. "Why, my lady, if I didn't know better, I'd think you wanted me to fuck you again."

Scowling in mock outrage, Lara moved to pull away from him -- and felt, as she'd hoped she would, his hands tighten around her waist. Rolling to his side, he clasped her against him, and she felt the insistent beat of his renewed erection against her belly.

"Why is it," he murmured as his hands slid, one to the curve of her breasts and the other to her ass, tugging her even closer, "that all you seem to do today is try to run away from me?"

"You know why," she whispered.

"Is it so I'll be forced to do this?" he replied, rolling her onto her back and moving on top of her. "Or this, perhaps?" Greedily, he lowered his head to her breasts, cupping them firmly as he suckled first one upright nipple, then the other, until Lara arched below him, whimpering with need.

"Oh, you like that." His eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he lifted his head. His fingers kept playing over her breasts, tickling and teasing the hard, furrowed tips. Then he pinched them, and Lara gasped, raising her hips so her mons brushed the thick, engorged weight of his shaft.

His cockhead rubbed against her throbbing clit, and smiling wickedly, Zendar rolled his hips, dragging the length of his shaft back and forth through the nest of her curls. Propping himself on his elbows, he watched her expression as he moved above her, his hands squeezing her breasts mercilessly.

"*God*, Zendar, if you don't fuck me now..." Lara whispered through her clenched teeth. She could feel the need inside her spiraling dangerously close to the edge. If he so much as stroked his cock over her clit one more time, or tugged her nipples just a little harder...

"What? You're going to come?" Grinning, he tilted his head and breathed in her ear as he pushed his cock more firmly against her. "But I *want* you to come, my wife. I want you to come for me -- right now."

Panting, she clung to him as he tortured her clit, working his hard, throbbing shaft over it. His hands kneaded her breasts, his fingers pulling her nipples as delectably as his mouth had. His tongue found its way back into her mouth, and she could feel every inch of his huge, muscled body straining down toward that point where they came together, toward the hot, hungry heat pulsing in her groin.

Growling, he thrust his tongue deeper and ground his cock against her mons -- and then she was peaking, moaning into his mouth as she clung to him, feeling ecstasy rolling through her in warm, golden waves. Cries spilled from her throat, and Zendar sent a shudder of bliss straight through her core as he spread her juice-slicked folds and sank his shaft home.

* * *

Much, much later, they were sitting on the side of a grass-covered slope, looking out over the vast central plains of Djarera. Zendar held her loosely, his bent knees forming a living chair in which she sprawled, leaning lazily back against his broad chest. Idly, she played with a lock of his hair that had fallen down over her shoulder, mingling with her own, gold against her chestnut brown.

They'd breakfasted -- or lunched, rather -- on the remains of a rabbit-like animal he'd snared the night before, padded out with some early wild berries. As they'd traveled, Zendar had foraged for them and Lara, who had grown up with supermarkets and fast-food chains and barely knew how to recognize food unless it came from a package, was constantly amazed at Djarera's natural bounty, and the wealth of information Zendar possessed about it. He'd showed her small, feathery ferns, which when broiled with fish, tasted exactly like asparagus; had unearthed brown, unappetizing roots that had proved fluffier and sweeter than potatoes when baked.

Through it all, he had grinned like a boy, delighting in her delight and in the sheer simple enjoyment of his world after twenty years in exile.

Tilting her head, she looked up at him, noticing once again how very different he looked when he was relaxed and happy. The hard, forceful features which had almost frightened her had softened into a handsomeness that took her breath away.

“Zendar?”

“Mmm-hmm?” His gaze was still fixed on the horizon, drinking it in. Turning, Lara sprawled on her belly, propping her chin on her fist as she studied him.

“Why did you want to leave Djarera so badly, when you love it so much?”

“I didn’t.”

“But... I mean...” Lara was confused. It was Zendar’s rebellion against her mother’s reign that had been the cause of his exile -- a rebellion he’d started because Melgara had forbidden the dragons to leave their home world. “Then *why*?”

Zendar glanced at her, smiling ruefully. “Just because I personally didn’t want to leave Djarera doesn’t mean I don’t believe others have the right to.”

“Well, yes, but...” Oh, she agreed in *theory*, but... “But was it really worth rebelling over?”

At that, Zendar’s eyes darkened. “If freedom isn’t worth fighting for, Lara, what is? We are *dragons* -- wherever the Winds go, we can ride them. It’s what we’re made for.” Brusquely, he stood and looked down over the plains.

“I still believe that,” he murmured softly.

“I know.” Coming up behind him, she wrapped her arms about his lean waist and pressed her cheek against the flat, warm slab of his shoulder blade. “I know.”

* * *

That night, they flew back to Wind Castle, grinning conspiratorially at each other as they loped hand in hand, stark naked, through the dark, silent halls. Giggling, Lara shut the door of her room behind her and let Zendar drag her into a passionate embrace.

It wasn’t until she heard a voice behind them that she realized the torches in her bedroom had already been lit. Startled, she turned in Zendar’s arms and saw Darrek Hausther standing at one of the arches, his black hair falling down around his bandaged face as he looked out at the night sky. He was naked to the waist, the scores along his ribcage from his battle with Zendar still wrapped with gauze.

“So,” he said, his gaze on the stars twinkling, cold and distant, over the black bulk of Mount Anduth. “I almost die, protecting you from *him* -- and you marry him anyway.”

“Darrek...”

He turned toward her then, with a smile as cold and aloof as the stars themselves. Slowly, keeping his gaze fixed on hers, he reached up and peeled off the bandages covering the left half of his face. Lara gasped.

Deep, ragged claw marks ran from cheek to jaw, vivid and ugly against the ivory perfection of his skin. His left eye now was milky white. As he shuffled forward, Lara saw with a wrench of her heart that he was limping.

It had been Melgara who’d sent Darrek against Zendar, trying to rescue her daughter from the renegade dragon -- and he’d succeeded. But Lara stood frozen as he approached, aghast at the cost of that victory.

Reaching out, Darrek plucked one of the tiny, faded flowers from her tangled hair. Turning the *asthuraia* over and over between his fingers, he said, his voice torn between wonder and contempt, “You married him with the flowers of my clan in your hair.”

Then his gaze flicked beyond her, and Lara saw his features shift into pure, simple hatred. Staring at her with a smile like a whiplash, Darrek held up the tiny bloom, and let it drop from his fingers to the marble floor. Slowly, painfully, he shuffled to the door, and left.

The silence in her room was so complete Lara felt she might drown in it. Zendar spoke to her, but she couldn’t hear him, could barely even see him. All she could see, over and over, was that hideous, mocking sneer, and that dead white eye, blind now forever.

“Oh, Darrek,” she whispered. “What have I done to you?”

Chapter Two

Neither of Djarera's moons had risen yet, and the broad hallway, lit only by the thin light of the stars, was little more than a clotted mass of shadows to Darrek's reduced eyesight. Closing Lara's door behind him, he tried to ignore the utter blackness where his left eye now saw nothing. Trailing his hand along one wall for guidance, he shuffled painfully through the silent castle.

Entering his own room, he leaned back against the door, panting. He'd tried to hide the physical agony of his injuries in front of Elara, but now, in the privacy of his bedchamber, he couldn't escape the flares of pain thudding through him. He tilted his head back, gasping in quick, shallow breaths, trying to ease it.

Then a voice spoke out of the darkness, frightening him badly. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

Rand stepped away from the wall, where he'd been hidden in the shadows, moving instead to one of the arches overlooking the small inner courtyard of Wind Castle. Leaning against the molded column, he folded his arms and gazed at Darrek.

Darrek cursed silently. The damned Aureorean followed him like a puppy these days. Everywhere he turned, there was Rand, hovering over him like a nursemaid. No matter how he lashed out, the massive redhead would *not* go away.

"What are you, my keeper now? You don't even know where I went."

"I know whatever you said to Elara, she didn't deserve it."

Darrek stared at him contemptuously. "She left you standing at the altar, Aureora. Don't you even have enough manhood to be angry?"

Rand shrugged. His casual indifference only infuriated Darrek further. Whatever he said, however much he insulted him, Rand ignored it -- as if Darrek's fury was simply beneath his notice. Damn him, anyway!

Darrek slammed his fist against the cold marble of the wall. Pain shot through his bruised hand, and he welcomed it -- the tangible sensation made the room seem less shadowy, less insubstantial.

"Why don't you go welcome your lady and her lover home, then? I'm sure she'd be happy to make room for you in their bed."

"What's wrong with you? After everything she's done for you, Dar..."

"Don't call me that!"

His screech ripped at his throat, and he crouched back against the wall, panting, glaring at the looming shape that was all he could see of Rand.

Rand had frozen at his cry, and a long moment passed before he spoke. When he did, his voice was softer, as if he were speaking to a wild animal. "You should be in bed. You're going to push yourself right into another relapse if you don't rest."

Darrek chuckled mirthlessly.

"I'm serious, Darrek. You're never going to heal if you don't --"

Impatiently, Darrek gestured toward his blind eye. "How much rest will it take to heal *this*? Tell me that, Aureora!"

Rand didn't answer. Shoving past the larger man, Darrek limped toward the sleeping pit and heard, as he'd known he would, Rand's footsteps following.

Wheeling, he snarled, "Go climb in Elara's bed, Rand. You're not getting in mine."

He could see Rand stiffen at that, the outline of his bull-like shoulders growing tense. Sneering, Darrek pursued his advantage. "She does so enjoy sharing her lovers, after all."

"Darrek, stop it! You'd have been exiled if it weren't for Elara! "

"And what makes you think I wouldn't prefer exile?"

The words hung between them, brittle as ice. Then Rand said, "You don't mean that."

Darrek laughed. "Don't I? What makes you think this is so much better?"

He was being monstrously unfair -- he knew it. But that knowledge only reinforced the bitterness inside him.

"Ask me, Aureora," Darrek taunted, his voice brittle with rage. "Ask me if I'd choose exile over *this*."

The silence spun out, and he sneered, feeling a twisted, ugly triumph.

He was broken, more deeply than even Rand had realized yet. The damage done to him would *never* heal. He was condemned for all eternity to be half a man, half a dragon -- and if Rand didn't have the sense to leave, then damn him, he would break him too.

Darrek turned, and stumbled in the darkness. Immediately, Rand was there at his side, supporting him, guiding him to the sleeping pit, murmuring softly in warning when they reached the edge of the shallow declivity.

"I don't need your help!" Yanking his arm from Rand's grasp, Darrek felt blindly for the rim of the sleeping pit, stepped down into it. He was irritably aware of Rand dithering behind him, wanting to join him, afraid...

Darrek was half tempted to send him away. More than half tempted. But inside him, a familiar struggle was going on between his fury and the loneliness he couldn't acknowledge, even to himself. Not even exile could have sundered him so cruelly from his own kind.

"Do you still want so badly to be in my bed, Aureora?"

In the darkness, he couldn't see Rand's nod, but he didn't have to. "Then come, damn you."

There was a flicker of motion as Rand stepped down into the pit, and then Darrek felt him behind him, the warmth of the Aureoran's massive chest against his back, those huge arms encircling him so gently, so hesitantly...

That gentleness infuriated Darrek. He spun, grabbing Rand's thick, wavy hair and yanking his head down.

Raking his mouth over Rand's full, soft lips, he whispered harshly, "Don't think this means anything, Aureora. Don't think it means that I..."

Love you.

No! Baring his teeth, Darrek jabbed his tongue deep into the larger man's mouth. Gasping, Rand went lax in his arms, ready -- no, eager -- for whatever Darrek might do to him.

"I won't," Rand whispered, his voice tremulous with yearning. "I won't."

More lightly, teasing him, Darrek rubbed his lips against Rand's, acutely aware of the shudders that ran through the redhead's body. He could feel Rand's enormous cock, already stiff, rubbing against the flat plane of his abs. Dropping his hand to it, Darrek squeezed it, hard, and grimaced at Rand's low, hungry moan.

"You want it, Aureora?"

"Yes," Rand breathed, and swallowed.

Darrek curled his lip in disdain. "Then show me. Show me how bad you want it, bastard."

Rand's gasp was almost a sob as he sank to his knees, his hands fumbling at the tie of Darrek's pants. Those trembling fingers brushed over his cock, and a sudden, hot desire unfolded in Darrek's belly as Rand drew his pants downward. Leaning forward, Rand ran his tongue up the underside of Darrek's shaft. When he reached the tip, he swirled his tongue over it, groaning, and opened his mouth. Responding to that silent plea, Darrek dug his hands into Rand's thick auburn hair and rammed his hips forward, shoving his cock deep into Rand's waiting mouth.

Rand moaned, and the sound vibrated around Darrek's straining shaft. Tossing his head back, Darrek rocked his hips steadily, dragging himself in and out of the warm, damp embrace of Rand's lips. Rand's hands slid up the backs of his calves, his thighs, cupping around the full, hard muscles of his ass as the Aureoran urged him deeper, harder...

It was so easy to despise him, his gentleness, his yearning. What kind of thrice-dyed fool could love *him*? He was scarred, broken, half-blind and bitter. And *still* Rand knelt before him, sucking his cock with a ravenous longing. Well, if that's what the fool wanted, fine. He'd fuck him. Clenching Rand's hair in his fists, Darrek plunged forward unmercifully, driving his cock in so hard he felt the kneeling man gag and try to draw back.

Furiously, Darrek held him there, grinding his hips against Rand's face, forcing him to take his erection deeper. Rand's throat tightened as he choked and struggled until, with a final, desperate heave, Darrek thrust him away and stumbled backward, falling heavily to the floor of the pit.

Pain splintered through his damaged body, and he gasped, breathing hoarsely as he arched against the spikes of agony that lanced through him. He heard Rand move, crawling toward him.

"Dar?"

Even now! Even now Rand wouldn't leave him alone! Even after he'd just tried to... Tried to...

Winds, what had he *become*?

"Dar?"

"I told you not to call me that." Darrek's voice echoed in his own ears, cold and jagged as the frozen peaks of his clan's domain. He heard Rand's muffled sob.

"Darrek, I'm sorry! It was just too fast, I couldn't... couldn't take it all."

He was sorry? Was the fool totally blind? Darrek shut his eyes against the blackness of the room, feeling behind them a vast seething fury he couldn't find words for. He couldn't even begin to pick apart all the threads of the tangled rage inside him.

Rand reached out, finding the curve of his naked hip, the tremulous touch of his hand both apology and plea.

Roughly, Darrek pushed it away.

"Leave me alone, Aurorea."

"Dar, please..."

"Leave me alone," Darrek gritted, his voice harsh with warning. "Or next time I won't stop."

Turning away from Rand, he curled onto his side, huddling himself around the agony of his shattered body.

* * *

The next evening, Lara stood watching the world outside her room slide slowly into night. The sun had already slipped behind the western mountains, leaving streaks of color behind it on a sky that stretched like a canvas over the vast shadowed plains and jagged peaks of Djarera.

Such a beautiful world, she thought. It was the way Earth must have been once, before mankind had despoiled it.

That, at least, was one mistake the dragons hadn't made.

But their passions were no less fierce than a human's -- if anything, they were stronger.

Oddly enough, the one vice traditionally ascribed to dragons, greed, was the only "human" flaw she'd seen no sign of. Pride, jealousy, ambition, conceit -- the dragons had all these in plenty.

Some more than others, Lara thought, remembering Darrek as she'd first seen him, poised over her, an arrogant half-smile on his lips as he'd helped himself to her body...

"What are you thinking about? That's the first time I've seen you smile all day."

"Oh," Lara breathed, leaning back into Zendar's arms as he came up behind her. "I was just remembering..." Her smile faded entirely as she tilted her head, looking up at him. "He was so *proud*, Zendar. So fierce..."

"Darrek?"

Lara nodded. Zendar kissed her forehead lightly, his lips stirring her hair as he murmured, "I know. I know."

There was a rap on the door, and Lara pulled from his arms, drawing herself upright. "Come."

The door opened, and Rand entered. Lara hadn't seen him since she and Zendar had returned the night before, and she was shocked at his appearance. His huge, broad shoulders were slumped with fatigue. His eyes were ringed with sleepless circles. A bone-deep grief seemed to surround his every move.

"Oh, Rand," she whispered, her arms rising automatically toward him. But Rand ducked his head, avoiding her embrace, and Lara checked herself, stepping back. "All right. Tell me. How bad is he?"

Rand's eyes were haunted with shadows -- but he didn't answer. Instead, he turned to Zendar with a small, stiff bow. "My lord. My lady. The queen requests your company for dinner."

"Rand?"

Without replying, the massive young Aureorean lord turned and left.

“Rand!” Unwilling to let it go, Lara pursued him, leaving Zendar to follow. Catching up to the Aureorean, she touched his shoulder gently. “Rand, *tell* me.”

Rand paused, his head bowed, his face a mask of bewildered pain. He shrugged, but Lara could see the fierce unhappiness beneath that casual gesture.

“He won’t talk. He won’t eat.” Rand’s voice dropped to a hoarse, yearning whisper. “He won’t even let me touch him.”

Lara closed her eyes a moment, feeling his grief batter at her, as tangible as a wave. “Oh, Rand. What can I do?”

“Nothing.” Rand shook his head, and gestured to Zendar, coming up behind them. “Be happy. At least somebody is.” Mutely, he turned away and went on ahead, his movements heavy and wooden.

Lara looked after him, her hands rising to her mouth as if to stifle her impulse to call him back. Instead, she whispered through her fingers, feeling tears sting her eyes at the sight of those bull-like shoulders, stiff with grief as he walked away. “Rand, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Zendar drew her against him, pillowing her head on his warm, strong shoulder. His thick blond hair whispered against her cheek as she let a few tears fall. “It’s not your fault, Elara.”

But it was. It *was*. Who else but she had forced Darrek and Rand into acknowledging their feelings for one another? Who else, panicked by the onset of *khef*, had fled into the night -- and straight into Zendar’s arms? If she hadn’t run, hadn’t put herself into his clutches, the fight between Zendar and Darrek would never have happened. Darrek would never have been injured...

What had she done to him? What had she done to both of them?

For the first time, she felt a cold trickle of doubt. She loved Zendar -- with all her heart she loved him. But how could a love which brought so much grief to so many, possibly be a good thing?

As if sensing her thoughts, Zendar studied her, his clear emerald eyes growing dark with concern.

Dragging in a quick, shuddering breath, Lara pushed her hair back, straightening her head. “Well,” she said, “I guess we’d better go see how many more lives we’ve ruined.”

Zendar’s jaw clenched, but he returned her smile as best he could. Hand in hand, they followed Rand into Melgara’s chambers.

Chapter Three

“We were so much wilder once,” Melgara said. “Wilder, more savage, more numerous...”

The dragon queen sounded pensive -- almost sad Zendar thought as he glanced at her, surprised. The five of them were seated at a formal dining table that had space enough for forty. Darrek, hunched back away from the glow of the candles, had neither spoken nor eaten a single bite during the entire meal, despite all the attempts Rand, seated beside him, had made to interest him in this delicacy or that. Zendar wasn't entirely sure how he felt about the relationship between the two young lords, but watching Rand, he couldn't deny the anguished, steadfast love in the huge redhead's eyes.

Well, fools will be fools, Zendar mused uncharitably, looking at Darrek's sullen expression. Why the Aureorean should bother trying to get through that angry shell...

The way Elara tried to get through yours?

The thought made him pause.

Darrek's anger toward him was easy enough to understand. But his resentment toward Elara... Zendar's jaw tightened again at the memory of how Elara had blanched at Darrek's words the night before. For all her bravely forced smiles, he could see the discomfort lurking in her clear gray eyes, and the way her gaze slid, over and over, to that scarred, silent form on the far side of the table.

He almost wanted to shout at her, at all of them, *It was khef, Winds take it! It was a khef duel, plain and simple. It's nothing to feel guilty about!*

Except it *wasn't* that simple, was it? No. When Darrek had attacked him, Zendar had felt a pure, violent surge of glee. He'd *wanted* to hurt Darrek -- wanted, not simply to defeat him, but to *crush* him utterly. After more than twenty years confined in the frozen prison of the void, Zendar had wanted to inflict all the fury and helplessness he'd felt on someone else.

And Winds help him, he had.

It wasn't Elara's guilt that was truly bothering him. It was *his*. Zendar shook his head, still appalled at the memory of the dragon he'd been, just seven days before. That frigid, vengeful being had disappeared like mist in sunlight under the warmth of Elara's love -- but he only had to look at Darrek's rigid form to see the ugliness of what he'd done, what he'd become. What he might have remained forever, if not for Elara.

Winds, how he loved her!

It had been so easy to forget, in the mountains, all the knotted complications that came with their union. If only they could have stayed there, just the two of them...

Elara bit her lip lightly, looking at Darrek, and that tiny motion was like a knife in Zendar's heart. The possibility that she might come to regret their union tore at him, and made his tone brusquer than he'd meant it to be as he replied to Melgara. “What did you expect? We've grown stagnant.”

She glanced at him narrowly, and Zendar continued. “We were never meant to be limited to one planet, your Majesty. We're meant for far more than that --”

“Do not begin that old argument again, Zendar.”

Zendar smiled stiffly. “You said it yourself. We were wilder, once. What did you think would happen when you caged us?”

“I did *not* --”

“What else would you call it?”

Melgara's eyes blazed with fury. “This is not a subject open to discussion, Zendar. Not now, not ever.” Firmly, she turned her attention back to her meal.

“Why not?”

Melgara's head jerked up, but the words, harsh and bitter, had come from Darrek, not Zendar. "Why should we not discuss it? Are you so afraid of words?" Darrek's lips curled in a disdainful smile.

Melgara eyed him sternly. "Words, no. But you have no idea of the consequences inherent in --"

"I?" Darrek's laughter was brittle, a cold, rigid thing that sounded as if it might shatter entirely at the least touch. "I have no idea of consequences?" Raising his head, he glared at Melgara. She flinched back from the white stare of his blinded eye. "You owe me, my lady," Darrek whispered harshly. "You owe me the courtesy of at least considering this."

Beside him, Rand blanched and looked at Melgara, his expression pleading. Ignoring him, she shook her head at Darrek. "No. Ask anything else of me, Darrek Hausther, and I..."

"There is nothing else I want." Abruptly, he pushed to his feet.

Melgara half rose in rage. "I have not dismissed you, Darrek!"

Shuffling toward the door, Darrek paused and glanced back at her. "And how will you punish my disobedience, your Highness? What can you possibly do to me that hasn't already been done?"

Melgara, Zendar saw, was rigid with fury -- but she did not answer. Darrek's smile twisted further, baring his teeth in a feral grimace. Then he limped from the room.

Rand stared after him, then turned to Melgara, his voice hoarse with agony. "My lady..."

Impatiently, Melgara jerked her head in permission and Rand rose, following Darrek out the door. Dropping her head into her hands, the queen cupped her brow, squeezing her temples as if to drive away a migraine.

Inexplicably, Zendar felt a renewed flush of guilt. "My lady, I'm sorry."

Curtly, she cut him off. "Spare me, Zendar. Believe me, Darrek's unhappiness is the least of our worries."

Elara had sat through all this silently, her hands clenched in her lap, her face pale. Now she looked at her mother sharply, her eyes wide and questioning. "What do you mean?"

"Ask your husband," the queen replied wryly. Her gaze burned into Zendar's, and he saw the tiny lines of care and responsibility that framed her eyes, the shadows of sleepless nights spent wrestling with an insoluble problem. Sighing heavily, his great chest rising and falling as he sucked in a deep, slow breath and released it, Zendar nodded.

"Zendar?" Elara's clear gray eyes turned up toward him, and Zendar felt an ache pierce his heart, deeper than any ice could ever reach.

Turning to her, he lifted her hand to his lips, dropping a gentle kiss into her warm palm. Closing his hands over hers, he said, as softly as he could, "She means, beloved, that the clans of Djarera will never accept me as heir to the throne."

* * *

Rand strode through the halls, feeling a desperation he didn't know how to master clawing at his gut. *How* could Darrek have said that? And why? Had Darrek only said it to hurt him?

That was more than a little likely, he knew. Oh, he understood what made Darrek lash out at him. He understood the angry pride, and how deeply Darrek hated to have to depend on anyone. For Darrek, *Darrek* of all people, to be reduced to this...

Hurt and furious, Darrek had retreated even farther into himself, locking away the vulnerability he had let show only a handful of times. It was still there though, Rand was sure of it. It showed even in the violence of his lovemaking last night -- a violence that was a result of the conflict between Darrek's rage and his dependency. But it was still Rand he turned to, however coldly, however reluctantly. It was still Rand he needed. Rand clung to that conviction -- he *had* to believe that somewhere beneath all the anger and pain, Darrek still loved him.

If he didn't, Rand knew, there was nothing left for him.

Why are you doing this to yourself, Rand? Hasn't he made it clear enough that he doesn't want you?

His doubts niggled at him, whispering like ghost-voices, chilling his very bones. Pushing them away, he opened the door to Darrek's room and halted abruptly. Darrek wasn't there.

Striding to the arches in the far wall, Rand looked down into the small central courtyard of Wind Castle. Renatha, the smaller of Djarera's two moons, was just rising, a pale, luminous crescent that gave little illumination. By its thin, shadowy light, Rand could just make out the beds of flowers, their petals glimmering dully, and the small, sculpted trees that dotted the smooth grass. Then he saw Darrek's hunched form, tottering unsteadily as he felt his way down the steps along the wall.

Watching him, Rand felt his throat tighten with pity. That creeping, cautious shape bore so little resemblance to the proud, lithe Hausther heir that Rand remembered, his head thrown back in arrogant triumph, his hair whipping the wind like skeins of black silk...

And Rand loved him. Loved him so much it hurt.

Below him, Darrek stumbled, and leaping through the arch, Rand dropped ten feet to the courtyard below, springing up to catch Darrek as he fell. Together, they tumbled, landing in the soft grass that carpeted the enclosed space. Around them, leaves rustled in the small, ornate garden.

With a curse, Darrek yanked himself from Rand's arms, awkwardly heaving himself to his feet. Gasping, Rand looked up at him. The Hausther heir stood over him, his cold, ruined face icy pale in the feeble moonlight, his eyes focused on a spot somewhere over Rand's shoulder. With a shock, Rand realized Darrek couldn't even see him in the dimness.

"Oh, Darrek," he whispered, and Darrek immediately corrected the direction of his gaze, fixing it blindly on Rand's upturned face.

"Spare me your pity, Aureora," he spat. Rand ducked his head, feeling tears sting his eyes. "Can I not even go for a walk by myself? Or do you think I need you there to hold my hand like a child's?"

"No," Rand whispered. "No, it's not like that." He reached out tremulously, took Darrek's hand. "Darrek, please, what you said to Melgara... tell me you didn't mean it."

Woodenly, Darrek replied, "Fine. I didn't mean it."

Dropping his hand, Rand sat back, his chest heaving with half-suppressed sobs. "Then tell me you don't love me, damn you!"

In that same harsh, controlled tone, Darrek said, "I don't love you."

Rand gasped, letting the tears spill down his cheeks as he wrapped his arms around Darrek's waist, holding him. He didn't, he *couldn't* believe that! Darrek tensed, and Rand, burying his head against the hard, flat plane of Darrek's abs, clung to him, sobbing, shaking his head violently as Darrek tried to pull away.

"Let me go."

"No."

Rand tightened his hold. Standing stiffly within that unbreakable grip, Darrek quivered with rage. "Let me go, Aureora."

"No," Rand whispered. Turning his head, he brushed his cheek over the flat of Darrek's stomach, feeling the firm, warm flesh through his thin tunic.

Keeping one arm tightly around Darrek's waist, he slid Darrek's shirt up with his other hand and trailed his lips gently across Darrek's smooth, exposed skin.

Darrek trembled again, but Rand ignored it. Heedlessly, he yanked at the ties of Darrek's trousers and slid his mouth downward, seeking...

"Stop."

"No," Rand breathed, his nostrils full of the musky-salt scent of Darrek's groin. His warm breath tickled Darrek's cock, and he felt it shift, lengthening beneath the covering fabric.

"I warned you once, Rand." Darrek's voice was like ice. "This time, I won't stop."

"I don't want you to stop."

Rand's words were no more than a whispered plea. He wondered if Darrek had even heard them. Nuzzling lower, he found the head of Darrek's thickening cock, and wrapped his lips around it.

Darrek's hands on his shoulders were stiff, forbidding, as if trying to hold him back from that warm, throbbing

shaft that rose so eagerly to his caress. Rand didn't care anymore. He didn't need Darrek's permission, or his respect, or even his love.

The only thing he needed -- the *only* thing -- was Darrek.

He would do anything to keep Darrek with him.

Leaning forward, Rand relaxed his jaw and lowered his mouth around Darrek's cock, luxuriating in the feel of warm, smooth flesh sliding against his lips. Running his tongue over the firm, velvety hardness of Darrek's glans, he groaned, savoring the slick, salty drops of pre-come that flowed from his slit, and felt Darrek's hands tense on his shoulders.

Yes, you want it. You know you do, Dar!

He whispered the thought in his mind as he urged Darrek with his tongue, his lips. Trailing his teeth lightly back up Darrek's straining shaft, he dragged them gently over the curve of his cockhead. Swirling his tongue around the swollen rim, Rand drew Darrek's trousers downward and raised one hand to his balls, caressing them with a whisper-soft touch, reveling in their tautness, their heaviness.

Closing his fingers around the base of Darrek's cock, he plunged his head forward, opening his throat as Darrek's shaft pushed in further, further...

Darrek's hands slid to his hair, and Rand redoubled his efforts, sucking eagerly at the Hausther's straining erection.

"Damn you, Aureora," he heard Darrek whisper. "Damn you, then, take it!"

And with that, Darrek's fists clenched in Rand's mane as his resistance evaporated. Thrusting his hips forward, he plunged himself deep into Rand's throat. A hot, heady triumph beat along Rand's veins as Darrek yanked his hair harder, pushing his cock so deep Rand could only hold himself motionless beneath that driving shaft, quivering as he forced himself to relax, to not fight it, to let Darrek fuck his mouth with a frenzy that sent quivers of ecstasy through him.

Darrek *did* need him! He did!

Rand could hear his breathing, harsh and rasping as his strokes quickened. Nothing existed for Rand but the cock invading his mouth, the cool night air against his skin, the taste of Darrek's juices on his tongue. He would be content, Rand thought, to stay here forever, on his knees before Darrek, with no purpose in the world but to suck him whenever he wanted, no desire but to feel Darrek's swollen shaft shoving between his lips, bruising his throat, throbbing with the orgasm he could almost taste...

"No." Darrek froze above him, his hands still locked in Rand's hair. "No. No, that's too easy, bastard."

Yanking his cock back, he stared down at Rand coldly. In the moonlight, Darrek's face was so pale it appeared carved of marble. His one white eye gleamed malevolently, and Rand shivered, suddenly cold.

"Turn around, Aureora."

Quivering at the icy contempt in that voice, Rand did.

Darrek shoved him forward roughly onto all fours, and Rand whimpered with longing as he felt Darrek kneel behind him. Half-blind, powerless, still Rand could feel some of Darrek's old arrogance coming back to him -- and that alone would have made it worthwhile.

But when Darrek's hands clamped on his hips, Rand moaned in carnal delight.

How long had he dreamed of this, of having Darrek behind him, riding him, spreading him open? It seemed like forever. Now, as Darrek leaned forward, grabbing Rand's hair and forcing him downward 'til his ass was tilted high in the air, Rand shivered with anticipation.

Darrek reached around, yanking the tie of Rand's trousers open and shoving them down. Then -- oh *Winds!* -- Darrek's hand was on his cock, milking it 'til his juices ran fast and free from the tip. Gathering them up, Darrek spread them across his rectum, and Rand whimpered again as the head of Darrek's cock nudged his tight hole.

"Is this what you want, Aureora?" Darrek hissed.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Tell me, then."

“Yes, I want it.”

He could almost picture Darrek’s thin smile as the Hausther heir said, simply, “More.”

Rand bit his lip, flushing in the darkness. It was still so hard for him to *say* it. Gritting his teeth, he whispered louder, “Yes. I want it. I want you inside me. I want your cock inside me.”

As the words left his mouth, the image of Darrek buried to the hilt in his upturned ass flashed in Rand’s mind, so real and immediate in his imagination that he groaned with desire. His balls pulsed, wanting to feel Darrek’s dragging against them, and his shaft flexed so hard it brushed his abs. A wanton wildness spiraled through him, making him gasp with arousal, and Rand found himself whispering, begging, “Please. Darrek, please fuck me. Put your cock in my ass, take me, please...”

Rocking his hips, he thrust his ass higher, spreading his thighs as far apart as he could. Darrek grabbed his waist, and Rand cried out in triumph as the Hausther heir pistoned forward, shoving his cock deep into Rand’s ass.

Winds, it burned! Whimpering, Rand held himself still, trembling, until his muscles relaxed. He felt more moisture slick his puckered entrance, and then Darrek thrust forward further, his cock gliding smoothly deep into Rand’s passage.

Pulling back, Darrek rolled his hips slightly, working just the head of his cock in and out of Rand’s tightness, and Rand moaned, surreptitiously reaching down to stroke his cock, running his fingers over the swollen head and spreading the pre-come spilling from his slit down over his shaft.

As Darrek rammed inward, Rand closed his fist around his pulsing cock and panted in ecstasy.

Darrek drove in, deeper, deeper, his erection seeming impossibly huge, filling Rand until he thought he would faint from the pleasure. Finally, with one last thrust, Darrek sank in to the hilt, his taut, distended balls snugged against the back of Rand’s scrotum, rubbing lightly against it as he rocked inside him.

“Oh, Darrek,” Rand whispered.

“You like that, Aurorea?”

Rand could hear the sneer in Darrek’s voice, but he didn’t care. Darrek’s cock prodded deeper, sending lightning bolts of pleasure bursting through Rand’s swollen balls. “Yes. Oh yes, Darrek. More. Please.”

“Harder?”

Darrek’s voice was rough with desire, and Rand, not trusting himself to speak, only nodded. He cried out as Darrek pulled back, sliding entirely out of him -- he felt so empty, suddenly, so *needy* -- and then groaned aloud as Darrek slammed home, burying himself deep between the cheeks of Rand’s ass.

“*Winds*, Dar! Yes! Oh, do it again. Do it harder, Dar, *please*...” Supporting himself on one trembling arm, Rand arched back into Darrek’s plunges, savaging his cock with his other hand. The skin glided smoothly up and down his engorged shaft, and Rand slid his hand to the very base, squeezing it and his balls both together as he bit his lip, trying to hold back his own building orgasm.

Darrek lunged above him, riding him with a fury Rand had only dreamed of for so long. Moaning, he urged Darrek onward, glorying in the sensation as Darrek’s breaths grew heavier, his thrusts wilder, deeper, incredibly fierce. Rand could feel Darrek’s tension building as the Hausther heir yanked his hips backward, grinding his balls against Rand’s ass.

Rand could feel his passage spasming, gripping and releasing around Darrek’s throbbing shaft, and with a cry he let his hand work over his own aching cock, pinching the tip, squeezing the shaft, raking up and down as the orgasm he couldn’t control built in his balls ’til they felt as tight and hard as marble. He heard himself gasping, pleading, felt himself pushing back to meet Darrek’s thrusts as Darrek’s cock swelled inside him.

Dimly, he heard Darrek groaning, “Take it, damn you, take it all, Aurorea, that’s right...” And then, with a cry, Darrek buried his cock inside him, his whole body rigid as his balls pulsed against Rand’s ass, his pent-up juices streaming into him, flooding him.

Rand moaned incoherently as his own orgasm burst from him. His cock throbbed in his grip as jet after jet of hot fluid spurted over his fingers, his stomach, his chest...

Shuddering, gasping, he pulled himself gently from under Darrek, rolled onto his back and dragged the Hausther

heir down beside him. Darrek turned away from him, but Rand curled himself against Darrek's inflexible back, clinging, shaking as he whispered, "Please, Darrek, please don't ever leave me."

But this time, Darrek made no answer.

Chapter Four

“You *cannot* allow this, Majesty!”

It was almost entertaining, Melgara thought, how easy it was to read tensions and loyalties in the hall, simply by where the lords had placed themselves. Or *would* have been entertaining, if the situation weren't so dire. She'd been able to come up with no better plan the previous evening than to try and bully this through. But Melgara could see the paleness of her daughter's countenance from the corner of her eye, and the muscles bunching in Zendar's jaw.

They stood on either side of her, on the dais. Below them, the clans were ranged about the room.

Gerdain was nearest the throne, his arms folded in an attitude of steely resolve. Well, of course *he* wouldn't protest the union -- Zendar was his cousin after all, however disgraced. His Westron followers, though, looked significantly more dubious.

Thrand Aureora stood almost timidly to one side of the great hall -- no, not timidly, Melgara realized. The old lord's face was a mask of bewildered grief in the torchlight, as if the world was cracking to pieces around him and he didn't know how to stop it.

He raised his watery old eyes to her face, and she felt a stab of pure pity. He was old, too old to bear such burdens alone, and Rand -- who *should* have been at his father's side, by the Winds! -- was still shadowing Darrek like a forlorn puppy. Not that it was doing either one of them any good.

It was Darmon Hausther, surprisingly, who was loudest in his demands for her to nullify the union, even though Elara had been meant to marry his rival's son.

Thrand was right, Melgara admitted as she listened to Darmon's strident words. This situation had the potential to fracture the very foundations of the realm.

Darmon Hausther faced her, his eyes blazing. “I will not -- I *cannot* -- bend knee to that traitor, that murderer --” “Be sensible, Darmon,” Melgara snapped, puncturing the flow of his words. “It was a *khef* duel, not a murder attempt.”

“A convenient excuse. You saw what that renegade did to my son!”

Shouts of agreement met his outraged reply. Fighting for control of her temper, Melgara stared coldly at the tall Hausther lord, still as aristocratically handsome as he'd been in his youth. Perhaps even more so, now, with that streak of gleaming silver in his long ebony hair, and his bones drawn even more sharply by the passage of the years. Melgara waited until the shouts had died down and he raised his gaze to hers -- those burning black eyes, so like his son's.

Like his son's had been, she corrected herself, and felt an uncomfortable flush of guilt. It had been she who'd sent the young Hausther into battle against Zendar, and whether she liked it or not she was responsible for his injuries. That knowledge made her words sharper than she'd intended. “What's done is done, Darmon. Whether we like it or not, Zendar has mated my daughter in *khef*. Which, by every law and precept of our realm, makes him her husband... and heir to the throne of Djarera.”

At her bald pronouncement -- despite the fact she was simply stating what they all knew full well -- the shouting broke out afresh, furious in its intensity. Even Gendron's followers turned toward her, their faces contorted in rage.

An answering rage burned through her veins, stinging along her nerves like acid. How *dare* they question her! How dare they raise their voices, make demands, quarrel and fight like so many children?

“Dragons of Djarera!” Her stern voice punctuated the chaos. “You saw Zendar pledge his fealty to me. It is time now to let the past be the past.”

Catching the lords' rebellious gazes in turn, she held them until the mutiny in their eyes dimmed -- all except for

Darmon who still faced her, bristling.

"Is it?" With a cold, hard smile, he looked past her to Zendar, his black eyes glinting with malice. With a canny accuracy, he probed right at the sore spot between the two of them.

"Does this mean, then," Darmon asked, "that you have given up your crusade?"

Melgara saw Zendar's lips tighten into a thin line. "Not at all, Lord Hausther. I have every intention of continuing my attempts to persuade her Majesty to allow us to travel freely."

"And if she says no?"

"It is my hope she will not."

"But if she does? What then?"

"Then," Zendar replied with a dangerous smile, "I will wait. I became quite good at that, in exile."

"Enough!" Melgara barked. Zendar shut his jaw with a click.

But Darmon turned away, his black cloak flaring about him as he spun to the assembled clans. "My lords!

Despite his much vaunted submission, the lord Zendar still champions that cause for which he was once willing to tear this realm asunder."

"Darmon, be quiet!"

He ignored her. "This lord, in whose war many of you lost fathers, kinsmen, sons... This *lord* still feels his cause is right!"

Ugly mutters rose on all sides. Melgara was white with fury, about to rise from her chair, but Zendar forestalled her. Calmly, he said, "I do."

The dragons stared at him.

Nodding to Darmon, Zendar spoke clearly. "It is a cause that divides us, my lords, but why so? No one has ever suggested that any dragon who wishes to remain on Djarera be forced to leave. We -- *I* -- only object to those who wish to leave being forced to stay."

"You have no idea," Melgara interrupted, her voice low and tense. "You have no idea how dangerous what you propose is."

Slowly, he turned to look at her, his disbelief obvious in his eyes. Grimly, she gripped the armrests of the throne and stared at him levelly. "To ride the Winds... Yes. Yes, we can do it. But we cannot *control* them, Zendar.

Only those who sit on the throne of Wind Castle can do so with any certainty. How many dragons," she continued, feeling her voice rise as her temper flared, "how many dragons have been lost in their travels, unable to return?"

"Unable?" Zendar asked. "Or unwilling?"

Thrusting herself to her feet, Melgara glared at him. "Do you remember the Astraea? The dragons who once inhabited the great central plains? An entire clan, gone now forever. I will *not* risk the loss of more of our people. Dragons belong on Djarera!"

"Do they?" The voice, harsh and rasping, cut through her pronouncement. Darrek shuffled from between the columns, his footsteps slow and distinct in the sudden silence which seized the hall. Behind him, Melgara could see Rand standing at the edge of the crowd, his whole body rigid with tension.

Darrek stopped in the center of the room and smiled crookedly at her, lifting his head so the entire room could see his scarred face, his white eye. "What of me, your Majesty? Do *I* belong on Djarera?"

"Of course you --"

Darrek cut her off coldly. "I cannot even fly, my lady."

Beside her, Zendar blanched. Melgara herself felt the same sickly shock as Darrek's words sank home.

Oh, sweet Winds.

Of course he couldn't. Even if his broken body could bear the strain, he had no depth perception, no way to judge distance, to land...

Darrek's disturbing gaze -- half white, half black -- stared up at her. Darmon, she saw, watched his only child with a balked, angry despair.

Softly, almost whispering, Darrek added, "Will you condemn me to a half-life, Highness? Will you force me to remain here, always wanting, always longing?"

Melgara opened her mouth to answer, but Rand, with a strangled protest, shoved abruptly through the crowd. He stood, his fists clenched at his sides, every line of his body radiating a hopeless yearning as he stared at Darrek. Darrek ignored him, his attention still on Melgara. "Let me go, my lady. Let me go somewhere where I don't have to be reminded every day of what I am not, what I cannot... There is nothing for me here."

At his harsh, final words, Rand spun and strode from the room, his back rigid with anguish. A gasp of sympathy broke from Elara, and ignoring Melgara's hissed command to be still, she sprang after Rand.

The lords shifted restlessly, all their uncertainties coming back to the fore, the tension in the throne room climbing to an almost explosive level. Melgara could feel her hold on the situation crumbling even as Darrek stared up at her, his gaze harshly pleading.

"Will you, my lady? Will you force me to stay?"

Before she could even begin to think of a reply, Darmon strode forward, bristling with fury, pointing an accusing finger at Zendar who stiffened beside her.

"You see, your Highness? You see what comes of allowing this... this *traitor* back into our midst?" Around him, the clans broke again into angry, confused shouting.

Melgara was half out of her seat before she realized she'd risen, fury beating through her, feeling her body start to shift. Shocked, she jerked her head upright, clinging by sheer will to her human form.

Winds! Had she really been about to change, to plunge down among her lords in dragon-shape and... what?

Force them into submission? Stage a pitched battle in the throne room of Wind Castle?

Yes, she realized as she became aware of her labored breath, the tension coiling and uncoiling like a dragon's tail in her gut. Yes, she had almost done exactly that.

The scene had descended into utter chaos. Darmon, she saw, had fallen silent amid the shouting, his eyes hard and narrow as he glared at Zendar. At that moment, Melgara wanted nothing more than to leap from the dais, talons outspread, to rip that mutinous disdain right off his face...

Instead, she rose, keeping her voice stern, clinging harshly to what little control she had left. "My lords! My lords, this event is as unexpected -- and unwelcome -- to myself as it is to any of you. But *it has happened*. And it cannot be changed."

Her flat, iron tone restored silence -- but this time, it was the silence before the hurricane, ominous and deadly. Melgara stood before the clans, her hands knotting into fists, feeling her chest heaving with passion.

Where was her vaunted control? The cool calculation of probabilities and needs which had allowed her to send her own daughter into exile to be raised in secret far from her side? Now, when she needed it most, she could barely even control her own body!

Grimly, she kept her face bare of emotion as Darmon, his back as rigid as a board, turned to her in the silence.

"My lady," he rasped, his face utterly white except for two spots of febrile color burning high on his sharp cheekbones. "My lady, once before I begged you. I will not beg again. I will merely tell you that on the day *that* dragon ascends the throne of Djarera, my loyalty to it -- and to this kingdom -- is at an end."

Bowing stiffly, he turned, ignoring the black fury which twisted Melgara's features, and strode to the great outer doors. With a swift, graceful lunge, he flung himself into the air, his black wings unfurling even as he rose, his serpentine tail whipping behind him as he disappeared into the night-dark sky.

One by one, the other clansmen followed, even Gerdain, leaving Melgara standing, quivering with rage. How dare Darmon challenge her? How dare he simply turn his back on her and fly away, as if she were nothing? She wanted to leap after him, tear straight through the sky like a thunderbolt and fall upon him, claw the flesh from his bones, rip that haughty defiance from his features. She wanted to shred his hide to ribbons, taste the hot, rusty tang of his arrogant Hausther blood --

Melgara stopped, aghast. What was she thinking? Clapping her hands over her horrified gasp, she stared at the fury roiling in the pit of her stomach. It was mindless, overwhelming, as wild and elemental as the Winds

themselves...

Winds, what was *wrong* with her?

One thing was certain -- she could not, *dared* not let Darmon Hausther fester in his rebellious anger. Decisively she turned, glaring down at Darrek. "I'll deal with you later. Now, I'm going to have this out with your thrice-dyed fool of a father. Before we have another war on our hands."

Stalking to the doors, she let herself change, and rose into the velvet-black sky.

Left alone in the throne room, the two dragon lords faced each other. The sudden silence rang about them, more potent even than the clans' shouting had been.

Still shocked to the core by the Hausther heir's revelation, Zendar stared at him, seeing Darrek's mute rage -- which he had half-dismissed as sullen self-pity -- afresh.

Had he thought himself furious at his captivity in the Void? Enraged at his own helplessness? What, then, must Darrek be feeling, tied forever to the ground, caged more surely than a wing-clipped hawk?

And he was the one who'd done that to Darrek. He, and no one else.

Guilt lashed at Zendar, and his first instinct was to attack. "Are you *trying* to destroy this kingdom, Darrek?" he demanded.

Darrek startled him by throwing back his head and laughing, long and coldly. "I don't need to, rogue. You're doing a beautiful job of it, all on your own."

Zendar flushed.

It was true. That was what hurt the worst. He had seen that flicker of doubt in Lara's eyes, that mute question -- could any love which brought so much grief be a good thing? And he had no answer to it. His union with Elara was tearing the kingdom to shreds.

A cool pity flickered in Darrek's one dark eye. "You see it," Darrek murmured.

Yes. Yes, he did. Zendar's shoulders slumped as a desperate longing unfolded deep inside him. Never to see Elara again, never to see Djarera...

"Sometimes, rogue," Darrek said softly, "there is no other way."

Zendar bowed his head. His voice low and rasping, he asked, "Is this truly what you desire? What of Rand?"

Darrek lifted his head proudly, his long ebony hair spilling down around his ruined face like black silk. "Rand will be far better off without me. Just as Djarera -- and Elara -- will be far better off without you."

Zendar dropped his gaze, feeling a bitterness he could not express welling in his gut. It seemed as if every moment he'd spent with Lara, every touch of her hand, every fleeting expression on her face, were all trying to crowd into his mind at once.

Winds, how he loved her! But Darrek was right. There was no middle ground. Not any more.

Slowly, Zendar nodded. "All right."

Chapter Five

Beating her rage against the cool night air, Melgara sped through the darkness. Above her, stars winked like clear white gemstones in the black sky, and below, the river Andida glimmered in the pale light of Djarera's smaller moon. Wind rushed past, playing along her lithe, golden body, and Melgara stretched herself into it, every nerve in her body quivering with outraged fury.

How *dare* Darmon simply walk away from her! His head held so high, so haughtily, that long, black hair with its shining streaks of silver falling around his sharp, aristocratic face, for all the world as if *he* were the master, not *she*!

The first of the northern peaks gleamed below, its snow-capped ridges falling away into shadows. She darted above it, arrowing straight for the Hausther's ancestral hall.

She reveled in the feel of the wind, the crispness of the night. A vibrancy she hadn't felt in years beat along her veins. How long had it been since she'd gotten to do this? To fly free and wild over the vastness of her domain, feeling the wind stream around her, feeling her wings respond to her every command, lifting her through the star-strewn sky? Always, always her life was about duty, the demands of the kingdom... She had given *everything* for her realm! Even her daughter. Everything.

And he had walked away from her!

Below, Melgara saw the great gray walls of the Keep of Hausther, carved out of the living bones of the mountains. Square and monolithic, the hall ran back toward the mountainside from which it had been hewn, and continued inward in vast stony halls where the sun never penetrated. Landing on the narrow ledge between the cliff's edge and the massive doors, she shrieked once in dragon form and struck out with a forepaw, sending the doors booming back on their hinges. Shifting, she strode through the arch of the entry, pacing through the torch-lit shadows.

"Darmon!"

Ahead, the doors to the inner court stood open, and through them Melgara saw pale silver moonlight. Passing out into the open space, she was peripherally aware of curious eyes peeping out from the high, narrow windows piercing the courtyard walls. Darmon waited for her in the center, his rich sable cloak twisting and flapping in the cold northern breeze. His face was as stony as the carved rock beneath their feet as he watched her approach. He stood rigidly erect, and Melgara drew herself up, feeling her eyes flash with fury as she opened her mouth to demand his obeisance.

"Leave, my lady."

Melgara stared, flabbergasted. He had *interrupted* her! "You think you give orders to *me*, Darmon Hausther?" "My lady..." Darmon's eyes burned with a black, intense light. Unwillingly, Melgara found herself captivated by them, momentarily entranced by the play of dark passions she could see in their midnight depths. "My lady, you should not be here. I ask you again, leave now."

Throwing her head back, Melgara laughed. She propped her hands on her hips and faced him, regal and assured. "And if I will not?"

"Then I disclaim all responsibility for what will happen."

"Why?" Slitting her eyes, Melgara smiled slyly, an expression that was half-threat, half-goad. "Can you not simply walk away from me *now*, Darmon?" Taking a step closer, she felt the heat of her body, stoked by her flight, radiating out toward him. His nostrils flared, and she saw his long, angular jaw work as he swallowed.

"Melgara." His voice was almost a growl, low and threatening. "I will say it one last time. Leave."

Instead, she stalked closer. "I shall do as I like, Darmon Hausther. And you will not deny me!"

At that, a strange smile, both amused and angry, twisted his lips. "No, my lady. I will not. How could I possibly

deny the queen of my realm when she is entering *khef* -- in my very own keep?"

What?

Impossible! Melgara's assured step faltered, a thousand denials ringing in her mind. She was too old, she was long past the years of passion and mating and...

But she wasn't. She was, in fact, not even middle-aged.

No! No! I am past this! Twenty years! Twenty years and more since I... since I...

Since she flew on the winds, feeling Elara's father above her, *in* her. The memory caught her, burning with an incandescent brilliance. Responding, the heat inside her surged upward, roaring like a freshly stoked fire.

Gasping, she stepped back, rocked by the tidal forces surging through her body. The smile on Darmon's face had hardened into a rictus of desire. His black eyes blazed down into hers, and Melgara was shocked by the way her body responded, the fierce, feminine triumph that beat along her veins.

He would not -- *could* not -- deny her, any more than she could deny the heat blazing through her limbs. The essential dragon was coming back to the fore, the primal reality of who and what she was. However civilized dragons became, still that wildness, that savagery lived on inside them, just beneath the surface...

And not even beneath it now. Smiling like a cat, Melgara moved even closer, and watched in satisfaction as Darmon's lips parted, his labored breath hissing between them. Trailing her hand over the rich sable fabric covering his chest, she delighted in the way he quivered at her touch, as if every nerve in his body was a harp string, tightly wound. She could set him humming with just the lightest caress.

"And now, my lord Hausther? What will you deny me now?"

The blood seemed to drain from his features, his face going long and lax with the force of his lust. He dropped his head back, exposing the strong, graceful column of his throat. His Adam's apple worked as he swallowed, breathing hoarsely.

"You know the answer, my lady."

"Then say it!" Closing her fist in his silky, silvered hair, she yanked his head downward, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Say it!" she hissed.

"Nothing, my lady. I will deny you nothing."

Melgara's lips curved in a satisfied smirk. "Remember that, Hausther."

A cool amusement played in his eyes. "I will. But in return, Highness, remember this -- you will give me *everything*. And love every minute of it."

Seizing her, he dragged her forward and claimed her mouth in a searing kiss.

The fire inside her redoubled, and Melgara leaned into him, her body pressed close against Darmon's long, lean one. She could feel every point of that contact -- his hard, flat belly, the muscled curve of his chest, the press of his long thighs against her own and the throbbing ridge of his erection, rubbing firmly against her crotch...

Panting, she tore herself from his grip and crouched, grinning at him combatively, her eyes narrowed. With an answering grin, he faced off across from her. Melgara let herself shift, her body swelling into draconic form.

Hissing, she circled the man before her as a cat might circle a mouse, then raked out suddenly with her talons. She swiped only air as Darmon Hausther leaped back, shifting even as he did.

He faced her, all gleaming black scales and long deadly barbs, his nostrils flaring as those eyes, black as onyx, burned into hers. Melgara watched as he sidled, circling her much as she had done him. His tongue flickered out between his teeth, dancing over her hypersensitive skin as he traced the lines of her muzzle, the long smooth muscles of her neck, the curve of her ribcage and long, lean belly. Melgara arched into its touch, almost keening as that light, teasing caress stoked her need even higher...

Then his tongue flicked across the swollen folds of her opening, tasting her hot, tangy juices. Throwing her head back, Melgara screamed her defiance and leaped into the air.

Above her, the stars burned, white and remote, beckoning her onward. Sweeping her golden wings downward, she arrowed toward them, feeling the pursuit of the night-black dragon behind.

He would not have her so easily! No! She was Melgara Southerlin, Queen of Djarera, and he would have her only

-- *only* -- if he earned her.

A shadow flicked past her, blotting out the stars, and Melgara veered sharply midair. Neatly avoiding the forepaws that reached for her, she struck out, scoring that haughty black muzzle with her claws before she turned, swooped, and lashed her tail across Darmon's face. Then, even as he bellowed in rage, she dove, escaping his furious swipe, cutting through the chill air like a thunderbolt.

Below, the mountains gleamed in the moonlight, their snow-covered peaks jutting like serrated teeth up toward her. Banking, she shot again toward the heavens, her wings spread wide. She was untouchable, unclaimable... No dragon could ever catch her!

Shrieking in triumph, she sped higher, arching her neck to look back down at Darmon. But where was he? Pausing mid-air, she scanned the night sky. Black, black as Darmon Hausther's gleaming hide -- she couldn't see him.

Then Renatha's crescent cleared a wisp of obscuring cloud, and the sudden pale moonlight glimmered along Darmon's lithe form. He was right above her! Screaming in fury, Melgara pushed herself into a desperate dive, the beat of her wings stoking the fire inside her 'til it spiraled through her veins, making her entire body sing with defiance and lust.

Throwing herself forward, she strained to her limit -- and screeched in mingled rage and desire as Darmon slid over her, his black wings cupping hers, his talons gripping her hips, as like a scabbard sliding into its sheath, his long, pulsing erection found her slit and plunged in.

Tumbling in the air, scratching, biting, Melgara fought as he fucked her, pistonning his shaft into her hot, aching passage. His grip tightened even as she struggled, and his thrusts became fiercer, pushing himself so deep inside her she thought she might faint. Ecstasy exploded in her groin, filling her body with a molten-white rapture, and Darmon roared in triumph as the spasms of her orgasm squeezed his rigid cock. Claspng her to him, he spread his wings wide, raising them both with mighty flaps into the sky.

With each down stroke of his wings, his shaft pushed in deeper, and Melgara, stunned by the pleasure beating inside her, hung lax in his grasp, her head lolling in time with his thrusts. A warm glow seemed to unfold deep inside her, spreading from her womb down through her cunt, and she keened her delight as his erection thickened further, spreading her so far open she gasped at the sensation.

Limply, she clung to him, letting him savage her cunt as he bore them aloft, his hips bunching and flexing as he drove himself into her, again and again.

They were so high that the very stars seemed to swell, gleaming around them, the air thin and intoxicating.

Curving his neck, Darmon gazed into her eyes, and she heard his voice in her mind.

What will you give me, Melgara?

The hard swell of his cockhead nudged at her cervix, sending hot, molten sparks straight through her core. Her entire body arched, pushing him in even deeper as she whispered desperately, *Everything, Darmon. Everything. Take me!*

Roaring his victory, he tilted her forward, sending them into a dizzying dive as he rammed himself into her, the full weight of his body forcing his cock so deep she shrieked in a mixture of pleasure and pain. Wind whipped around them as he hammered her cunt, fucking her with a fury that left her gasping, helpless in his grip, feeling her own climax spiraling up, so close, so close...

And then, like a thunderclap breaking inside her, her need shattered into bliss, a shimmering ache that was both painful and delectable, all at once. Quivering, she panted as he slammed himself home, his hard, swollen balls tight against her sodden folds, his entire body quivering against her as he came. His balls throbbed and contracted as his seed exploded from his pulsating cock, flooding her cunt, filling her utterly.

Their mingled roars echoed off the surrounding mountains as they fell, locked together, his semen spurting into her, seemingly endless.

Cupping his wings against the air, Darmon fought to control their plummet. Rolling, still intertwined, they struck the snow-covered side of a mountain and tumbled, over and over, white powder cascading around them padding

their fall. Each revolution jabbed his shaft deeper into her, and Melgara shrieked in violent delight as she climaxed again, her cunt gripping and spasming around Darmon's rock-hard cock, even as the world spun around them.

With a *whoosh* of snow, they rolled to a stop in a deep, snow-coated cleft of the mountain. Melgara moaned as Darmon slid from her and then -- oh, *Winds!* -- thrust his tongue inside her. Shuddering, she arched her back, and he drove deeper, lashing her with his tongue until her moans became screams and she thrashed below him heedlessly, reduced to a mindless, lust-ridden animal, begging to be fucked.

Then, with a fury that blinded her with rapture, he mounted her, dragging her hips to him as he forced his cock back into her, ramming it deep as he came yet again.

They clung together, panting as the fire shimmered through their bodies, until at last it eased like a retreating wave into a warm, sated, afterglow. Slowly, carefully, he withdrew, leaving her quivering bonelessly, unable to so much as lift her wings.

Change, Darmon whispered, deep in her mind. *Change, Melgara.*

She did, and he caught her as, utterly spent, she slumped into his arms. Cradling her against the smooth metallic expanse of his scale-covered chest, he spread his great wings and lifted them both into the air.

"Where are you taking me?" she whispered sleepily. Tilting his great, wedge-shaped head, he peered down at her, his black eyes gleaming in the silver moonlight.

To my bed, my lady. My queen.

Sighing, Melgara relaxed back against his muscled frame, almost snuggling into the shelter of his forearms. Was this what Elara felt with Zendar? Maybe so. A quiet wonder filled her as she watched the mountains whirl past below. What an amazing thing it was to be held so firmly, so tenderly! How strange to feel the wind rushing past her, blowing her hair in thick chestnut strands around her face...

The wind veered suddenly and Darmon lurched above her, clutching her tighter as he fought the eddying currents. As a blast gusted at them Melgara slipped and Darmon shouted in her mind, *Hold tight!*

No! Melgara struggled in his grasp. *No, Darmon, let me go! Something's wrong! This isn't the world's wind -- this is a Dragon Wind!*

What? Melgara could hear Darmon's shock. *But that's impossible. That's...*

Wrenching herself free of Darmon's grip, Melgara changed as she fell, catching herself on broad golden wings as she fought the buffeting air. Shrieking in fury, she turned sharply, lashing the wind with her tail as she sped for Mount Anduth and the high seat of Wind Castle.

* * *

"Rand?" Lara knocked timidly at the door of Darrek's room, then opened it. Rand huddled at the edge of the sleeping pit, his shoulders quivering as the sobs he couldn't stifle shook his great body.

"Rand..." Helplessly, Lara sank down beside him, tilting her head to look up at the red-haired giant. "Rand, he didn't mean it."

"Yes, he did. You heard him. There's nothing for him here."

"Oh, Rand..."

Throwing back his head, Rand let out a bitter laugh. "I'm worse than nothing -- I'm an annoyance. Something he puts up with because I won't go away."

"Well, he's not going away, either," Lara said firmly, even though her heart ached at the grief in Rand's turquoise eyes. "Melgara won't let him."

"And that makes it better? The fact that he's forced to stay here?" Rand stared at her for a moment, then looked down at his clenched hands. "He hates me."

"No, he doesn't! Oh, Rand. He's just angry because he needs you, and he hates needing anybody. You know how Darrek is."

The Aureorean nodded heavily, and Lara leaned against his shoulder, lacing her fingers through his. He slid an arm around her, holding her gently, and Lara smiled -- it was so typical of Rand that even now he'd be trying to

comfort *her*.

And Darrek's reaction was typical, too. Rejection, anger, denial -- they were all a part of the process of dealing with loss. Only how could she explain it to Rand? She tried to imagine giving him a crash course in twentieth-century human psychology, and sighed. "He'll come around," she murmured softly. "He just needs time, Rand." They sat like that, leaning against each other in the quiet night, each lost in their own thoughts, until she finally stirred herself. "Well, I guess I'd better go see if the clans have shouted themselves into full-scale mutiny yet." Rising silently, Rand pulled her to her feet. "They'll get used to Zendar, my lady. Give them..." He smiled at her sadly, echoing her own words. "Just give them time."

Wanly, Lara returned his smile, wishing she could find something else to say, some more tangible comfort to offer.

Then the world lurched around them as the night cracked open. A roaring filled their ears, and a massive blast of wind shook the very stone around them. Wind shrieked through the open arches, tugging at them, and Lara stumbled, clinging to Rand as something deep inside her seemed to tilt awry, wrenching at the very fabric of her being.

"What..." Rand shouted, but his words were whirled away by the wind.

Lara shook her head -- she didn't *know* what; she only knew that something was very, very wrong. "Come on!" Clinging to each other, they struggled against the buffeting gale. It took both of them to heave the door open, until a gust tore it from their hands and slammed it back against the wall. Arm in arm, Lara and Rand pounded down the wind-blasted hall.

A door boomed open, somewhere ahead of them, and as quickly slammed shut, tossed by the furious breezes. Stumbling, they ran past it and hurled themselves into the throne room just in time to see Darrek, his shape shifting from human to dragon, shriek in agony as the wind caught his wings, wrenching them wide as it swept him out into the night.

"Darrek!"

Rand cried out, his voice harsh with anguish. Sobbing, he stumbled toward the black maw of the outer doors which swung dangerously. The torches along the walls guttered wildly in the wind. Struggling to hold him back, Lara clung to him, slitting her eyes against the tempest that whistled through the cavernous room. Then she saw Zendar, seated on Melgara's throne, his eyes shut tight in concentration.

Zendar, no! What are you doing?

His head lifted, the harsh line of his jaw softening as he saw her. Grief, as sharp and poignant as an elegy, shone in his clear emerald eyes -- grief, and regret, and a deep, abiding love.

Goodbye, my beloved.

"No! Zendar, No!" But even as she screamed, he shifted before her, the great green wings coming up to cup the wind as it seized him, bearing him with it as it roared out into the night, extinguishing the torches as it went, plunging Wind Castle into darkness.

Chapter Six

Lara and Rand clung together in the sudden silence, trembling like leaves tossed in the wake of a storm. Looking up at the Aureorean, Lara saw the same naked anguish in his eyes that she felt in her own gut. She was cold, cold to her marrow, as if some vital part of her had been mortally wounded, and was bleeding slowly dry.

“Oh, Rand,” she whispered. “Rand, what do we do?”

“Nothing.” The cool, steady voice came from behind them, and Lara turned to see Melgara watching them.

“Nothing. They are gone.”

The word fell like a stone into the silence. *No!* Lara thought frantically. She couldn’t just let them... just let them be...

Gone.

“Mother, please!” Scrambling up, she faced Melgara, pleading. “Please send me after them!”

Melgara turned away to a torch and blew on it. Warm, soft light sprang up in a golden glow about her, but her face was hard as she re-lit the other torches and ascended the dais, seating herself in the marble throne.

“Mother, I *love* him!”

“No.” The word was like a slap, and Lara froze beneath it. “No, Elara,” Melgara repeated, more softly. “They wished to leave, and they have.”

“But he didn’t! Zendar didn’t *ever* want to leave Djarera! He told me so!”

A stern light shone in her mother’s gray eyes. “Then why did he?”

“I don’t know,” Lara whispered. “I don’t know.”

“It hardly matters, Elara. They have broken my law and sent themselves into exile. I didn’t do that. They did.

And I will not --” She held up a commanding hand, cutting short Lara’s half-uttered protest. “I will *not* allow you to risk yourself by going after them.”

“I’m not a child,” Lara muttered under her breath, but Melgara heard her.

“You are *my* child. And hard as it may be to believe right now, I love you.”

Drawing herself upright, Lara stared at her mother. Reaching back without looking, she took Rand’s hand. “I do. I do believe you. But I will never, ever forgive you for this.”

Turning her back on the dragon queen, Lara steered the grief-shattered giant out of the throne room.

* * *

Darrek tumbled, pain lancing along his damaged body as the Dragon Wind beat at him, shoving him before it. It pulsed all around him, wave after wave of sheer, shimmering energy, as translucent and yet brilliantly colored as the strange winter lights that flickered at times in the night sky high above the mountains of his northern realm. The mountains he would never see again.

Darrek!

Somewhere inside of him, he knew he’d hear the echo of Rand’s cry forever.

Bands of color swirled about him, gold, blue and tangerine, hurtling him through a vast crystalline silence that nevertheless hummed with a high, almost inaudible vibration. His joints burned with fire as he struggled to right himself, to control his forward motion. Almost contemptuously, the Wind slapped him sideways, and as white agony burst through his mind, Darrek gratefully lost consciousness.

The sensation of falling dragged him back to awareness, and panicked, Darrek felt himself slipping out of the tide of the Wind, rolling over and over as he careened from its current toward some hard, distant landing. He shrieked as he was buffeted into a dizzying spiral. The swirls of color seemed to rip apart and fade as he fell, wings and limbs and tail all trailing upward toward an impossibly blue sky.

Crashing into something that gave slightly under the blow, he rolled, the world around him wavering in and out

of blackness, until at last he struck bottom with a thud and lay still, panting, feeling pain throb in every inch of his body.

You need to learn not to fight so hard, you know.

The voice in his mind sounded like the tinkle of wind chimes, thin and melodious. Darrek shifted slightly, feeling something warm and rasping beneath him, and opened his eyes. There was no one there.

No one?

Rolling his head awkwardly, Darrek scanned the empty, desolate beach. Panicked, he raised his head, gritting his jaw against the protest of his body. There -- he could see Zendar's massive bulk collapsed across a blinding-white sand dune, his vast emerald wings trailing as limply about him as if he were dead.

No!

Suddenly, the possibility seemed terrifying, and shifting into human form, Darrek staggered to his feet, reeling as pain shot through him. He panted shallowly, trying not to reawaken the fire in his ribs, and waited for the faintness to pass. Then he stumbled to the green dragon's side.

Zendar's jaw was lax, the jewel-eyes closed. Leaning against the curving arch of his ribcage, Darrek listened. There. A heartbeat. A hoarse sound of relief tore from Darrek's throat, and he slid to his knees beside Zendar's motionless form. The grief inside him raged upward, and he sobbed, clutching his arms around his cracked ribs, knowing how wrong he had been, about himself, about Rand, about everything.

Is this truly what you desire?

The yearning inside him was keen as a knife. All he could see was Rand; kneeling before him, reaching to hold him even as he lashed out, watching him with eyes full of love and devotion...

What had he done? How could he have been so blind?

At the thought, his chest heaved with sharp, painful laughter. *Blind, indeed.*

Oh, Rand.

Then Darrek, the heir of Hausther, put his head down on his knees and wept like a child.

* * *

She had forced Rand to stay in her room, refusing to let him spend the night huddled in the sleeping pit where Darrek no longer was. Curled beside her, Rand was asleep, finally -- or at least she hoped so.

The warmth of his bulk was some comfort to her as well, but the aching emptiness inside her had only grown deeper as the silence had settled in, and the reality of Zendar's absence sank home.

Zendar. Lara closed her eyes, seeing again his quicksilver grin, his strong, heavy jaw, the eyes that could darken so rapidly with rage, and then gleam again a heartbeat later, with love and desire...

Zendar.

She drew in a slow, shuddering breath, and heard Rand shift beside her.

"Oh, Rand," she whispered, unsure if he were awake or not. "Oh, Rand, I miss him."

"I know," he whispered back, his voice hollow with pain.

Reaching out in the darkness, Lara drew him to her, and he dropped his head gratefully onto her shoulder. She could feel his body quivering, curled against her own, and she hugged Rand tighter as his grief broke from him in deep, ragged sobs. He buried his head against her breasts, hiding his face against their soft curves, and Lara stroked his hair, giving what comfort she could.

Then she felt him draw one of her nipples into his mouth, and stiffened a moment.

But Rand's mouth on her breast was so desperate, so needy, nuzzling blindly like a puppy, that she hadn't the heart to push him away. Cradling his head in her arms, she held him as he suckled, his tears rolling down the curve of her breast as his lips tugged desperately at its tip. Gasping, he lifted his head, rubbing his cheek back and forth across her hardening nub as his ragged breathing eased until at last he lay silent, one hand curled around her right breast, his lips lightly closed around her left nipple.

Gently, now, he sucked it, at the same time closing his fingers around the other, rolling it between thumb and finger 'til it drew into a tight, hard button. Lara wanted to cry herself, as she felt the ache inside her become

sharper, mingling with a heedless, sorrowful longing. The warmth unfolding deep in her womb seemed a mockery somehow, a hateful mimicry of the attraction she'd shared with Zendar.

"No, my lady," Rand whispered, almost as if he'd read her mind -- or perhaps it was only the tension in her limbs he'd read. "No, my lady, please -- let me do this."

The anguish in his voice was so poignant, so real... He had given her so much. And, she realized suddenly, it was because he felt better, more comfortable when giving. If allowing him that would ease his own pain, how could she say no?

Bending her head, she brushed her lips against his hair in a gentle kiss and heard him breathe, "Thank you, my lady." Then he lowered his mouth again to her breast, drawing her nipple deep into its warmth.

The sensation seemed to pull directly at her womb, sending painful waves of arousal all the way to her clit. Rand sucked hungrily, his lips and tongue kneading her nipple into a burning point of fire. Lara moaned softly, feeling moisture slick her cunt, and he responded by closing his fingers tighter around her right nipple.

Gasping, Lara arched into his touch, and Rand obliged, squeezing harder. "More," she whispered, and with a harsh groan, he pinched the taut, rubbery nub, increasing the pressure as she writhed and moaned below him. Her nipples burned with sensation, burying -- at least for one fleeting moment -- the black, endless grief inside her.

"Yes, Rand, harder!"

With teeth and fingers, he savaged her breasts, nipping them, twisting them, until the ache inside her throbbed like an inferno and she whimpered, thrusting her hips into the air, searching. At that, Rand moved down between her thighs, stroking his fingers through her soft fur, spreading her outer lips. Then he lowered his mouth to her clit.

Crimson light exploded behind Lara's eyelids, and she reached down unthinkingly, tangling her fingers through his thick hair. Spreading her legs wider, she wrapped them around Rand's bull-like shoulders, feeling the warm play of muscle beneath her thighs. Ravenously, Rand darted his tongue deep into her cleft, groaning as he devoured her. Cupping her ass in his huge hands, he drew her tighter against him, raking his mouth over her swollen nub before returning, again and again, to plunge his long tongue between her folds.

He dipped his tongue lower, grazing her small, puckered hole, and Lara stiffened as a wholly unexpected lust flared through her. She moaned, and Rand lifted his head a moment. She could feel the curve of his cheek against her thigh as he smiled. "You like that, my lady?"

"Gods," she panted. "Yes."

"Do you want me to do it again?"

Feeling faint with desire, Lara whispered, "Yes."

She felt herself rolled onto her side, then to her knees. Then Rand cupped her ass cheeks again, spreading them wide with his hands as he flicked his tongue over the sensitive opening between.

"Harder," she panted, almost embarrassed to say it. Then she gasped as Rand drove his tongue deeper, drilling the taut band of muscle 'til she groaned in delight. Running one finger between her furred, sodden lips, he trailed it upward until it pressed against that quivering spot.

She nudged her hips backward, and slowly he worked his finger into her. It slid smoothly on the slickness of her juices, and she rocked against it, pushing it deeper. She could hear him panting as he looked down at her, watching his finger invade her ass. It was easy to imagine how aroused he must feel right now, how his balls must be aching, distended with come. She wanted to reach down and touch him, close her hands around the huge, club-like steel of his erection -- but instead Rand turned, keeping his finger firmly seated inside her, so that he was lying on his back, his head between her legs.

With one hand, he urged her hips downward until he could flick his tongue over her slick, swollen folds. Lara whimpered as it danced across her clit.

She felt his lips move against her as he whispered, "Yes. Yes. Ride me, my lady. Please. Please ride me." His free hand, stroking the soft warm curve of her ass, encouraged her, and she slid down against him, pushing his finger all the way inside her and pressing her clit into his hot, seeking mouth. He groaned in enjoyment, and the

sound vibrated against her cunt.

Pinned between the fullness deep in her ass and the lips tugging eagerly at her aching clit, Lara hung her head, letting the heat inside her spiral up into need. Slowly, she raised herself up, feeling the hardness of his finger sliding delectably against her sphincter, the teasing whisper of his tongue against her dripping cleft.

Rand whined in longing, and Lara pushed her hips forward, forcing his tongue deep into her cunt. His moan nearly sent her over the edge, and reaching down, she slid one hand under his head, holding it more firmly against her as she rocked her hips, impaling herself on his tongue, his finger, then sliding even lower to shove her clit in his mouth.

His moan became a series of breathless, wordless urgings, and feeling a wildness she barely recognized, Lara thrust her hips harder, grinding her mons against his face as he sucked her clit with a desperate frenzy. She held herself there, letting him piston his finger in and out of her, letting him suckle her clit as hungrily as he had her nipple, forcing his head even harder against her as she let the roaring inside her build, and build, and build... Distantly, she heard the cries spilling from her throat, spiraling upward into high, keening moans as the tension in her belly drew into a hard, throbbing knot, almost painful in its intensity. Then, in one blinding burst, the tension exploded outward, sending shockwaves of agonized relief pounding through her.

She felt the motion of his shoulder, and realized he was savaging his cock just as he arched below her, burying his face in her cunt as he stiffened in orgasm. Glancing over her shoulder, Lara could see the thick liquid spurting from between his busy fingers as he ejaculated. Streams of come shot upward, coating his belly, dappling his chest.

His long, throaty groan sent a last pulse of ecstasy through her, and she slumped above him, her entire body shuddering with the force of her orgasm. Gently, he lapped at her still throbbing clit, making it twinge with mingled agony and bliss.

At last, she slid off him, letting him gather her bonelessly against his barrel chest. Idly, she ran her fingers through the warm pool of his come, tracing circles around the small, hard bumps of his nipples, feeling his great heart thudding in his chest even as her ears rang with her own racing pulse.

As their bodies relaxed, their pain at least eased by their mutual comfort, they lay in each other's arms, clinging together like lost, frightened children.

After a very long time, Rand whispered into the darkness, "Why can't I let him go?"

"Because we're not," Lara replied, taking Rand's hand firmly between her own. "We're not letting either of them go. Wherever they are, Rand, we'll find them, I promise."

Chapter Seven

The crackle of flames and the scent of smoke, drifting across his dreams, roused Zendar. He stared blankly for a minute at the small fire of driftwood that flared and ebbed with the gusting sea breeze. Then slowly, carefully, he sat up and looked down along the barren beach.

The last light of evening hung, shell-like, over the ocean, gleaming along the edges of the dark, heaving waves like foam. In all the emptiness there was nothing; no flicker of movement, except the tossing sea-grass; no sound but for the crackling fire, the hiss of waves, the ever-present wind.

Darrek squatted across from him, his arrogant, angular face worn thin as parchment. Shadows of pain and exhaustion moved beneath that pale surface, but the one black eye glinted at Zendar as he moved. Brusquely, Darrek gestured at the half-consumed carcass of some firm-fleshed fish, its scales blackened by the fire that lay on the clean white sand nearby.

“Eat,” he said.

Zendar reached for it, tore hungrily into the sweet white flesh. After a while, as his gnawing hunger eased, he gazed speculatively again at the dark, heaving ocean. A light grew low on the horizon, and Zendar watched it until a rising moon spilled its beams onto the water like a great golden path leading across the waves.

He’d seen something similar, he remembered -- no, not seen, *felt* -- as he’d sat in the high marble throne of Wind Castle; a path laid out before him, shifting and shattering like the moonlight on the waves, breaking apart into tiny sparks only to reform, again and again, leading away from the throne room, leading...

Here.

Zendar looked again at the fish in his hands, now reduced to a long, curved backbone from which the charred tail dangled. He threw it into the long grass and wiped his hands on his trousers. “Thank you. Where... thank you.” Darrek shrugged.

“How did you...” Zendar looked at him more closely, noting the drawn lines of his face, the way he clenched his arms around his chest, as if his ribs hurt. “You flew?”

Darrek’s chin tilted at that, so that he seemed to be staring at Zendar out of his dead white eye. “It seemed better than starving.” At Zendar’s surprised expression, he snorted. “Don’t look so impressed. It took hours. I almost drowned twice, misjudging the distance and plunging into the water. Finally, a school of fish zigged right instead of left... There’s more, for the morning.”

He tossed a stick on the fire and stretched out on his back. Zendar, watching the high sharp profile, changeless and obdurate under the flickering light of the flames, murmured, “You could have left me here then. Could have flown...”

“Flown where?” Darrek tilted his head to look at him. “The whole place is empty.”

“Well, at least it’s not cold here,” Zendar replied, stretching out beside the fire. He stared into it, remembering warm gray eyes staring back into his, clear and open, luminous with desire...

Elara!

Something inside him seemed to crack, so sharp and distinct he almost thought he could hear it. Zendar closed his eyes. But that warm, open gaze followed him into the darkness, and a sound, half gasp and half sob, escaped him.

From the other side of the fire, as if in reply, Darrek murmured softly, “Yes. There’s that, at least.”

* * *

Melgara sat alone in the darkness of the throne room. The torches had guttered out in a gust from the still open doors, and this time she had left them so. Every so often, her hands twitched on her lap, as if she’d started to make a gesture of apology or grief and then stilled it.

She should be relieved, she knew. Zendar had gone, and the problematic Darrek with him. There was now nothing left but what she'd planned from the first -- for Elara to marry the massive Aureorean dragon. But the mute, empty grief on Rand's face as he'd stood there, rooted like a tree whose heart had been blasted by lightning, already dead but unable to fall...

I will never, ever forgive you for this.

No. Lara probably wouldn't. That anger would sustain her though, leave her better able to withstand her loss than Rand who had nothing -- not even rage -- to support him.

Her hands twitched.

Had she been wrong? Had she been wrong to deny Lara the right to go after them? She could still see their path, like a ripple in the currents of the night, trailing into the distance...

No. No, she couldn't allow it. She couldn't take the risk. Too many dragons had gone, disappeared forever on the backs of the Winds. From the throne of Wind Castle, she'd been able to see Elara on Earth; she'd been able to call the Winds to bring them home. But once out there, once lost amid the stars...

No. She is your daughter. Even among the vast, trackless reaches of space, you could find her, Melgara. You could bring her home.

Maybe. Maybe.

She should get up, she knew. She should go to bed, or at least relight the torches. Zendar was gone. Elara was safe. Rand's grief would heal in time; most pains did.

She didn't move.

After a long time she stirred, drawing in a breath. She placed her hand on the arm of the throne to push herself up, and instead felt it taken gently as Darmon Hausther drew her to her feet.

"Darmon. I didn't know you were there."

"I guessed that somehow, after the first hour or so." His lips twitched slightly, and Melgara, exhausted, reeled on her feet. Swiftly, he swept her into his arms, clasping her tightly to his chest as he carried her down from the dais. How could he be so kind to her, after...

"Darmon, he's gone," Melgara said wearily. "Your son is gone."

"Then you owe me another, my lady." With her head resting against the crook of his shoulder, she felt the muscles in Darmon's jaw clench as he spoke, his voice harsh and cold, and realized that kindness had nothing to do with it.

* * *

A pearly light crept through the sky outside the arches. Lara watched it through eyes that felt gritty and raw from lack of sleep. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the determination inside her, as fixed and unvarying as a compass pointed north. All night, she had watched the stars slide slowly past the arches, measuring that determination against the steel of her mother's will.

Now, as the first faint blush of pink tinted the watery gray, Lara made her decision. Nudging the sleeping Rand, she whispered, "Come on." Rising silently, he followed her out the door and through the wide, empty halls of Wind Castle.

Pushing open the door to the throne room, Lara sighed in relief. She'd half-imagined her mother, sitting all night on the throne, hunched over it fiercely like a hawk guarding her eggs. But the room was empty.

Rand whispered nervously, "Lara, are you sure?"

Without answering, she strode firmly to the dais and, for the first time, sat in that high stone seat, her skirt falling around her. Then she shut her eyes.

She hadn't the foggiest idea what she was doing. All around her the castle was peaceful, quiet as the hollow inside of a shell. There seemed hardly a breath of air stirring anywhere. How was she supposed to call the Winds? Scowling, she concentrated, seeking for the trigger. Sending her attention deep inside herself, she came face to face with the ache of her own grief. It throbbed inside her like the air inside a pounded drum, trapped and vibrating. She heard small, gasping sounds, and realized she was crying.

Oh, Zendar. I can't... I don't know how. Zendar!

Like a beacon, the cry blazed up inside her and lanced out, blazing through the emptiness as if to follow his trail. In its wake, she was almost painfully aware of the silence around her. It wouldn't stay that way long -- the light was broadening minute by minute outside the open doors. It was now or never.

Stilling her breath, Lara stretched out with her mind, trying to find the power that Zendar had tapped. The silence grew, spreading down the open corridors of the castle, and her awareness flowed with it, feeling halls and arches interconnect like a vast spider's web -- *No. Like a wind tunnel*, she realized. *Like a channel*.

And down those marble corridors came whispering currents, not of air, or not *just* of air, but of energy. Bands of energy that almost shimmered in her mind, rolling through the air, the stone, the very ground beneath her. She could almost feel Djarera itself spinning on its axis and the waves of energy that flowed out from that centrifugal motion. Behind them, like a shadow she felt vaster, larger motions like the deep, irresistible force of the tides, spiraling out from the sun, wrapping around the smaller, choppiest waves of the planet's own energy. And behind *that...*

Falling deeper, Lara felt, for one brief second, the slow, stately spin of the galaxy itself.

Her eyelids flew open even as the small inner door of the hall slammed open, and Melgara, bristling with fury, stalked into the hall. "Elara, stop!"

Holding her mother's gaze, Lara said, "No." Then, reaching deep within her mind, she sought outward, seeking for the faint line of turbulence she sensed, like the fading contrails of a plane, spiraling away from the castle, from Djarera...

Softly, she mind-spoke to Rand. *Be ready*.

He nodded. Lara groped among the waves flowing around her, tapped into them, drew them together...

"Elara! Wait!"

Resolutely, Lara looked again at Melgara. "Mother, I love him."

Letting herself shift even as she rose from the throne, Lara called the Winds.

* * *

Zendar hunkered at the edge of a high dune, looking out over the crystalline waves. It was, he had to admit, a beautiful place. Behind him, the land rose inward toward soft, tumbled mountains, their sides dense with lush foliage. The sand beneath him was a soft pinkish-white, contrasting with the clear turquoise of the water that lapped against it.

Even the air had a strange radiance to it, as if the sunlight, falling through it was reflected back in unexpected flashes, here and there, always just out of sight, or so it seemed. The illusion teased at his awareness, but couldn't do more than dent the leaden regret that weighed at his limbs. He stared moodily at the sea and wondered briefly what it might taste like, whether its brine as he drowned himself beneath it would be more bitter than his longing.

"We all loved her, Zendar." Darrek, seated next to him, stirred a little. A trickle of sand cascaded down the dune with a tiny hiss, and ceased. "Me, Rand..." His mouth clenched on the Aureorean's name, as if it hurt him.

Zendar watched the clouds. High white streaks across the sky, no more substantial than the foam that frothed and faded along the edges of the waves. "You could have stayed, you know."

Darrek nodded. "I know."

For the fourth -- or perhaps fifth -- time that morning, Zendar closed his eyes, straining to feel along the salty breeze that strange, gleaming current he had tapped, calling it up to carry him away. There was nothing. Only the wind over the sea-grass, the soft *shush* of the waves...

Zendar put his head down, and felt the tears stinging behind his eyelids.

You're trying too hard.

"Maybe so," he whispered. "Maybe so."

A sob caught in his throat, and sand sprayed over him as Darrek sprang to his feet. Choking back his grief, Zendar looked up to see Darrek staring, his face lit with an emotion Zendar had never seen there before.

Following his hungry gaze, Zendar froze, a storm of hope pounding through him, shocked into life by a glint of

gold falling like a meteor through the sky.

And then she was running toward him, her feet barely seeming to touch the ground as he skidded down the dune to seize her in his arms, crushing her to him as he lifted her, his heart thundering in his chest. “Elara,” he whispered. “Oh, Elara!”

Laughing even as tears spilled down her cheeks, she reached up, brushed his wind-whipped hair back from his face. “Did you really think you’d escape me that easily, husband?”

Cradling her head against his broad chest, Zendar saw Rand swoop in a blaze of crimson glory to the sand and shift, standing huge and silent before the Hausther heir, his eyes asking what his mouth could not. And he saw the rush of exaltation that ran like a fire through his body as Darrek walked, his head high and proud, into the circle of those massive arms.

Dropping his cheek against the chestnut silk of Elara’s hair, Zendar breathed, “How?”

Lara shook her head, her arms closing tighter around him, and Zendar closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of her, the strength, the sheer determination with which she held him, so hard her entire body shook.

At the sound of footsteps, she eased her grip, letting him go just enough so she could turn to face Darrek, his hand clasped firmly in Rand’s. His black eye glittered as he stared at her, his face whiter than the sand they stood upon, whiter than the flecks of foam on the waves. “You did this.”

Mutely, Lara nodded.

With a sob, Darrek went to his knees before her, his voice harsh with emotion as he breathed, “Thank you, my lady.”

Chapter Eight

Reaching down, Lara stroked the long, wind-tossed strands of his ebony hair. He knelt there, his chin tilted down, his entire body trembling with all the fierce passion of his nature. Oh, she did love him, truly!

Bending, she kissed his scarred cheek, and Darrek lifted a face to her so full of gratitude it took her breath away. Those beautiful, chiseled features, the high carved cheekbones, the black arched brows like a slash of midnight against his alabaster skin -- all infused with such humility, such hunger... Reaching up to close his long fingers in her hair, he pressed his mouth tightly against hers, and she could feel the dampness on his cheeks as he did. Straightening, she smiled gently. "It was Rand's choice to come, Darrek."

"Yes, but it was you who brought him." The voice came from behind her, and Lara tilted her head, looking up into Zendar's clear emerald eyes. His arms slid around her waist as she leaned back against him, feeling his warm, strong bulk behind her. "My beautiful, brave, headstrong wife." Lara smiled, letting him hold her, her eyes closed, her head cradled against the firm swell of his pecs. Then his arms tightened around her, and he murmured, "Let him say thank you, Lara. Let him do that."

Her eyelids flew open, and startled, she realized suddenly he was holding her so firmly that she couldn't move. Darrek was still kneeling before her. Holding her gaze, he hugged her legs and pressed his face against the warmth of her abdomen. A sudden, confused heat unfolded in Lara's belly as Darrek lifted her shirt, kissing the soft skin beneath. She started to protest, but Zendar made small hushing noises as he held her firmly. Trapped in his grasp, she lifted her head and saw Rand standing behind Darrek, his hands resting on the Hausther heir's shoulders as he smiled down at her. "Please, my lady. Let me say thank you, too."

Lara glanced again at Zendar and saw his broad grin. "Truly, my beloved, how can you deny him?" She couldn't. She didn't want to. Every nerve in her body tingled at the very idea of what he was suggesting...

Rand leaned in over Darrek, and taking her face gently in his hands, turned her toward him as he lowered his mouth to hers. His full lips brushed against hers, softly at first, then with more urgency as he felt her breath quicken.

Her head was spinning. She was incredibly aware of the three of them surrounding her -- Zendar and Rand both towering over her, Darrek's mouth whispering across the smooth, sensitive skin of her belly. She opened her mouth, gasping, and Rand plunged his tongue between her lips just as Darrek's long fingers slid beneath the waist of her skirt, easing it over her hips 'til it fell in a puddle around her feet.

"Rand," she breathed into his mouth, both aroused and appalled, "Rand, no..."

"Yes," Zendar whispered in her ear. "Oh, my beloved, you *deserve* this."

Moaning faintly, Lara leaned back against him, feeling the soft sea breeze tug through the chestnut curls covering her mons as Darrek slid a slow, probing finger through her swollen nether lips. Zendar's erection, hot and hard beneath his trousers, strained against her naked ass. Rand, moving to stand beside her, lifted her shirt over her head as Zendar, gripping her wrists, raised her arms. Releasing first one hand, then the other as Rand removed her shirt, the golden-haired Westron reclaimed her wrists immediately, pulling them up and back around his neck as he bent his head to nuzzle hers.

Zendar's warm breath gusted in her ear as he ran his tongue slowly from her earlobe down to the smooth skin of her shoulder. Lara sighed, loving the feel of his lips moving over her naked skin. Then Rand bent and took one nipple in her mouth as simultaneously Darrek's finger found her slick opening and slid inside.

She jerked, feeling as if an electric current had just shot through her, straight from her groin to her breasts. Lacing her fingers together behind Zendar's neck, she arched against him, and he slid his hands around her ribcage to her breasts, squeezing them, lifting them toward Rand's seeking mouth. Sucking hungrily, Rand nursed first at one aching nipple, then the other as Lara writhed and moaned.

Winds! What they were doing to her! Darrek's long finger pistoned smoothly in and out of her folds, and glancing up with a flash of his old, wicked self, he grinned at her before clamping his mouth around her clit. Lara groaned in ecstasy, her hips bucking forward.

She could hear Zendar's breath, hot and ragged. He stared over her shoulder, watching Darrek lap at her cunt. Then Darrek lifted his face, running his thumb instead over her throbbing nub as he turned his head sideways, nuzzling at the bulge in Rand's pants. With a gasp, Rand released his hold on Lara's nipple long enough to fumble the ties loose and slide his pants downward. He buried his hands in Darrek's long hair, and as Lara watched, buried his enormous cock deep in Darrek's mouth.

Rand's face flushed, his eyes half-closed with lust as he stared down, watching his cock slide, slick with spit, between Darrek's lips. Zendar's hands closed on Lara's breasts, massaging them, sliding up to roll her nipples between his fingers as he ground his shaft against her tailbone. Whimpering, she tilted her hips, pressing back against the hard swell of his balls, and then forward as Darrek, withdrawing his finger, added a second to it, and then a third. As he worked his hard, long fingers into her, he thrust his head forward, taking Rand so deep Lara could see his throat bulge.

Rand groaned again, and Lara unwrapped one hand from around Zendar's neck to reach between Rand's legs, cupping the heavy weight of his overstrained balls. Zendar shifted behind her, his hands momentarily busy at his waist. Then she felt the velvet smoothness of his erection pressed between her ass cheeks, gliding up and down as he rocked against her. Darrek sucked with a desperate eagerness at Rand's throbbing cock, and Lara watched, transfixed, rolling Rand's balls between her fingers.

His shaft thickened further, the veins in it throbbing. As Darrek drew back, exposing the enormous curved head, Lara saw it was almost purple with arousal, the skin tight and shiny above the thick, meaty rim.

"Come in his mouth," she whispered, hardly knowing that she'd spoken. Zendar's fingers clenched on her nipples, sending a flare of lust that was almost painful straight through her.

Her cunt tightened around Darrek's pistoning fingers, and he swiped his thumb over her clit, pressing it hard. Her juices trickled out around his fingers, and Zendar reached down between her legs, gathering that liquid and spreading it up between the cheeks of her ass. The warm, hard head of his cock nudged gently against her tight rectum, almost as if asking for admittance, and Lara's knees quivered in longing.

Could she ever explain how it turned her on, feeling his fingers sliding around Darrek's as Zendar stroked her folds, trailing more of her slickness over her rectum? Spreading her legs, Lara arched her back, unable to tear her eyes away from the sight of Darrek devouring Rand's cock. In response, Zendar pushed in lightly, then harder, slowly spreading her open.

She panted, held upright more by his arms clamped around her waist than by her own trembling legs, and pressed back against him as he bent his knees and pushed his cock, inch by inch, deep into her tightness. "Oh, Winds, Elara," he groaned, his voice strained with desire. "Oh, what a woman you are!"

Snorting like a horse, he bucked, unable to control himself, and rammed up into her, stretching her wide. Trapped between his cock and Darrek's thrusting fingers, Lara quivered, jerking like a puppet every time Darrek's thumb grazed her clit, her gaze still fixed on Rand's swollen shaft.

Rand's balls pulsed in her hand, and he glanced at her, his pupils dilated with longing. "My lady, are you sure?" he whispered.

She nodded. "Come in his mouth for me, Rand. Fill it for me."

Dropping his head back, Rand swallowed, his hands clenching even tighter in Darrek's ebon hair. Behind her, Zendar pumped faster, gliding his cock in and out of her ass with a hot, growing urgency. He dropped his forehead against her shoulder, and Lara whispered, "No, my husband. I want you to watch."

She heard him panting as he raised his head, his long golden hair falling down over her shoulders as he obeyed. One hand slid back to the curve of her breast, his thumb flicking her nipple in time with Rand's thrusts.

Moaning, Darrek lashed with his tongue, urging Rand on as the massive redheaded Aureorean pistoned his hips forward, sending his cock deep into Darrek's waiting mouth. Rand's balls tugged against Lara grip and she

closed her fingers, holding them tightly. Rand's breath hissed between his teeth. "Yessss... Oh, yes, Elara..." Lara squeezed them harder, and with a hoarse, triumphant groan, Rand slammed his cock deep into Darrek's throat.

His cries spiraled upward, and his balls throbbed and contracted in Lara's grip as he shot his seed into Darrek's mouth. The Hausther heir sucked and swallowed hungrily, but still a single bead of come, thick and white, escaped his lips and trickled down his chin.

At the sight of it, Zendar gasped harshly in Lara's ear, and she felt his whole body go rigid behind her as he fought to hold still. "No," she commanded, and pushed her hips back. "No, Zendar, fuck me!"

He quivered as he plunged into her, filling her delectably as she arched against him, her head lolling on her neck. Jesus! He felt *huge* inside her! She could hardly breathe as he rocked back and forth slowly, stoking the ache inside her to a clamorous need. "More," she whispered as his arms tightened around her. Then she whimpered, feeling a sudden emptiness in her cunt, as Darrek withdrew his fingers and rose to his feet before her, staring down at her with a mixture of worship and arrogance.

He tossed his head back and grinned at Zendar over her shoulder. "She is our lady, rogue, and we must obey." Lifting her legs, he wrapped them around his lean waist and drove his shaft, in one neck-snapping thrust, up to the hilt in her sodden cunt.

Lara cried out, wrapping her arms around him, holding him close even as Zendar cradled her. She was held aloft, trapped between the two of them, pierced by their twin shafts. She could feel their cocks, pressing her sensitive tissues between them, teasing each other even as they moved inside of her, arousing each other to delicious heights.

Deliriously, she hung between them, her clit rubbing up and down the hard plane of Darrek's pubic bone as Zendar's hard abs pressed against the base of her spine. He was so close! Lara could tell by the fierceness of his grip, the raggedness of his breath in her ear, and it excited her further, knowing how much sharing her was turning Zendar on.

Darrek claimed her mouth in a searing kiss even as he groaned, and she tasted the salty tang of Rand's come on his tongue. The urgency inside her spiraled up further and she sucked his tongue avidly, lapping every trace of Rand's juices, savoring them. Her clit was so hard it stood out like a ridge, grinding against Darrek's groin as he fucked her even harder, pressing her back onto Zendar's throbbing shaft. She rocked between them, every muscle in her body turned to water as they hammered into her, her cunt, her ass...

Her clit blazed with need as she whimpered, reaching out blindly. Her hands closed on Rand's bull-like shoulders and she dragged him into the circle surrounding her. His hands slid to her breasts. Darrek's tongue thrashed in her mouth. Zendar groaned in her ear...

The hands clamped around her thighs -- Zendar's? Darrek's? -- tightened spasmodically. Zendar's balls, so hard they were like hot marble, dragged against the sensitive surface between her cunt and her rectum as he rammed deep inside her, and Darrek gasped harshly as Zendar's cock increased the pressure on his.

Thrusting together, the two of them fucked her, their strokes growing harder, faster, as Rand tormented her nipples. Zendar and Darrek groaned as their balls ground together, and then they slammed into her as deep as they could go, their bodies rigid with need. The ecstasy inside her splintered into white fire, racing along her spasming passage, tightening her sphincter around Zendar's rock-hard shaft, squeezing it unmercifully.

He roared aloud, his back arching as he shot, wad after wad, deep into her ass. Then Darrek was coming, his erection buried so deep Lara could feel it in her belly, his hips glued to hers as he shuddered and bucked, his balls contracting again and again as his seed poured into her in one burning, liquid rush.

Every inch of her insides, it seemed, was soaked in their juices. Lara rocked lightly, moaning, as the aftershocks of her climax rippled through her in waves, making her muscles clench and release, milking every last drop from their pulsating shafts.

Slowly, gently, Zendar lifted her free, and she whimpered in mingled satiation and longing as he cradled her to his chest, his strong biceps bulging. Holding her aloft, he smiled as first Darrek, then Rand, kissed her lips softly.

All right, you two,” Zendar growled in mock impatience. “Go find your own dune. This one’s ours.” Grinning, Darrek took Rand’s hand and led him off, while Zendar carried Lara tenderly down to the ocean. Wading out between the waves with her in his arms, he kissed her, long and deeply, until Lara sighed and dropped her head against his broad, firm shoulder.

The water was gentle against her sore spots, and Zendar took his time washing her, running his fingers between her still-throbbing folds, circling her nipples, dribbling water down her back. His emerald eyes gleamed every time they caught hers, and a lazy smile played around his full, well-shaped lips.

“So, did you like that, wife?”

Lara smiled back, but refused to answer. Laughing, he scooped her up and carried her to shore -- which was a good thing -- she wasn’t sure her legs would bear her. Lowering her to the warm sand, he stretched out beside her and folded his hands behind his head as she curled against his side and nestled her cheek against his chest. The deep, steady beat of his heart was the sweetest sound she’d ever heard.

She lay, listening to that soothing beat, watching the waves dance beneath the azure sky. The light here really was remarkable, she thought lazily. It glittered at times, here and there, almost as if the very air was reflective, reflecting the sunlight. But the whole place was so peaceful...

She’d half drifted off when Zendar put his arms around her, kissing her forehead as he drew her tighter against him. “Lara,” he said, his voice rumbling through his chest, “Lara, I can’t get us back.”

Are you sure you want to go back?

“No,” Lara said, hugging him tighter. “I’d rather be here with you than...”

She sat up abruptly. Zendar looked at her, his eyes puzzled. “Did you just mind-speak?” He shook his head, slowly. “Then if you didn’t, who...”

Look up. Over the water.

They did. Lara gasped in surprise.

Light sparkled again, this time more clearly, and as the glittering moved she slowly made out a shape, hazy at first, and then so distinct and obvious she didn’t understand how she’d missed it before.

A dragon hovered there, so exactly the same azure blue of the sky that it was almost invisible against it. Sunlight reflected off its scales, glittering, and now Lara could make out the iridescent wings, so transparent they seemed almost ethereal. She gasped again, in delight this time. The creature before her was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen, jewel-toned like a dragonfly, its long neck and tail gracefully arched in flight.

Hovering, the strange dragon dropped so lightly to the beach it barely stirred the sand beneath its long, delicately taloned feet.

“Who are you?” Lara whispered.

I am Astraea. The creature bobbed his -- somehow Lara knew it was his -- head. He was longer than Rand, leaner even than Darrek, his scales almost a silver-blue against the faint pink of the sand. His eyes, Lara saw, were a luminous violet. *We are all the Astraea.*

Looking up, Lara saw other glimmers against the sky -- but now she could make out the vast, gleaming wings, the exquisite line of neck and body as they danced upon the air.

It’s like Christmas, she thought, and laughed at her comparison. Under a tropical sky! And yet, it *was*. That same magical, crystalline beauty... There was such freedom in their flight, such a combination of wildness and grace that it took her breath away. They seemed so much more a part of the air than any dragon she’d ever seen, as if they didn’t move through it so much as were formed by it, every moment afresh.

Recollecting her manners, she started to reply, “I’m Elara --”

Southerlin, yes. Royal gold dragon of the southlands. We have seen none of our kindred for many years. You are most welcome here, on Neptha.

He arched his neck, peering back over his shoulder as Darrek and Rand ran toward them, halting in shock at sight of the blue dragon.

Child of the sunrise. Black warrior of the north. The blue dragon eyed the scars streaking the left side of Darrek’s

face. *You really do need to learn not to fight so hard, Hausther. Are you not happier now?*

"I..." Darrek stopped short. "Yes. Who are you?"

I am Dravidian. I have come to take you home, if that is your wish.

Lara turned in surprise as Zendar, with a whoop, seized her up and spun her. "I was right! I was right! They *could* have returned!"

Yes, Dravidian replied, seeming a bit bemused by his reaction. *Yes, and I will teach you how, if you like. Or you are free to remain here, for as long as you desire.*

Lara stiffened in Zendar's arms and looked up at him. "Zendar, the clans... They still won't accept you. Can't we..."

Zendar's grin faded as he looked down at her, but the intent light in his green eyes didn't fade or soften. His jaw tightened slightly as he nodded acknowledging her concern, but his voice was resolute as he said, "I know. But we *have* to go back, Elara. We have to. Melgara has to know about this. If the Astraea can teach us how to ride the Winds..."

Lara closed her eyes, remembering the grimness in his expression that day in the mountains. It seemed so long ago -- had it only been four days?

If freedom's not worth fighting for, Elara -- what is?

Yes. Yes, whatever the risk, he was right. They had to let the other dragons -- and her mother -- know.

"All right," she whispered. "All right. But Zendar? If they won't accept you, then we both leave -- together."

* * *

"Melgara, let it go."

Wearily, Melgara raised her head, blinked blearily at the sight of Darmon standing before her on the dais. Her knuckles ached from clenching the arms of the throne so long, trying desperately to locate her daughter.

"Darmon, I can't. I..." Her voice cracked, and her head drooped. Pillowing her forehead in her hands, she cried, her shoulders quivering as she fought back her sobs. The Hausther lord knelt and slid his arms around her.

"I know, Melgara. I've lost my son, too. But --"

He broke off abruptly as the air swirled around them, glimmering strangely in the sunlight pouring in the wide-flung doors. Then, with a whoosh of wind, Elara seemed almost to materialize from nothing, folding her wings back and shifting to human form even as she appeared. With a cry, Melgara sprang from the dais and ran down the steps, pulling her daughter into her arms.

"You... but how..."

She turned in surprise as Rand appeared beside her, then Zendar. Melgara's eyes narrowed.

"Mother, wait!"

Elara clutched her arm and the queen waited as, more awkwardly, Darrek appeared.

I keep telling you, black Hausther, do not fight so hard!

Landing heavily, Darrek folded his wings and stumbled forward. "Oh, shut up," he snarled, seemingly to thin air. "It's not like I'm half-blind or anything." He straightened, tossing his hair back -- and found himself staring at his father.

Darmon Hausther seemed rooted to the spot, his face absolutely bloodless in shock. Hoarsely, he whispered, "I thought I'd lost you. I thought you were gone."

Melgara watched as the two tall, angular men seemed to yearn toward each other. Then, as if a cord had snapped, they were embracing, the silver streaks in Darmon's hair gleaming as he bent his head, holding his son close. But that strange shimmering was still there. Melgara eyed it, asking from the corner of her mouth, "Elara? What is that?"

The shimmer seemed to bow in an ethereal obeisance, and a voice spoke in her mind. *I will leave, if my presence displeases you. But it has been many years since I have seen my own land.*

Melgara felt her face go pale, and one hand rose to a throat suddenly dry. "Astraea?" she whispered. "Can it be?" There was a last swirl of motion, and then a man stood before her, impossibly tall, his long naked body as lean as

a greyhound's. His hair fell around him in gleaming silver strands as he knelt gracefully, bowing his head. "Yes, my lady. One, at least, has returned."

Melgara sought Zendar's gaze. He nodded. "Yes. And Dravidian will teach us how -- if you'll let him."

Melgara stiffened, drawing herself up to her full height. "And you, Zendar? Do you expect me to welcome you back? Do you think you can flout my law and then simply reassume your place as my heir?"

Dravidian rose and stepped back uncertainly. Zendar took Elara's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "No, my lady. If you wish, we will leave."

"We? Do you think I will allow you to take my daughter?"

Lara stepped forward then, bristling a bit. "Mother, you can't stop me. And yes, I will go with him. If the clans will not accept him as heir, or you --"

"They won't," Melgara broke in coldly, but inside her, she was fighting to suppress a smile. Yes, Lara loved him. And yes, he deserved her. But he had to say it first.

Luckily, he did. "Then, your Highness, allow me to step aside." Zendar's voice was rough, almost pleading, as he took Lara's hand again and stood beside her. "For I would rather be with your daughter than heir to this kingdom."

"That is fortunate," Melgara said sternly. "Because you aren't."

"What?" Lara's eyes widened. "But..." Then her gaze went unerringly to Darmon, who Darrek had led to Rand. Rand grinned, looking both pleased and embarrassed, his eyes cast down, as Darmon held out his hand in welcome.

Looking back at her mother, Lara's lips curved in a disbelieving smile. "Mother..."

Unaccountably, Melgara flushed. Laughing, Lara clapped her hands and spun to Darrek. "Guess what, Darrek? You're going to be an uncle!"

Then she threw her arms around Zendar's neck. "We don't have to leave, Zendar. Not now. Not ever."

"Not," Melgara interjected, "unless you want to."

Zendar nodded solemnly, gracefully acknowledging her capitulation, but his eyes twinkled like a mischievous boy's.

Melgara scowled at him. "Or unless you disobey me again."

Tossing back his golden mane, Zendar released her daughter long enough to drag Melgara into his arms and kiss her full on the mouth. Darmon glared. Elara laughed. And, standing silently to one side, looking down at them all, Dravidian smiled as gently as a warm ocean breeze.

Sierra Dafoe

Sierra Dafoe published her first erotic romance with Changeling Press in May of 2006, and hasn't stopped since! Named a Rising Star of Romance in July by Love Romances and More, she received three 2006 CAPA nominations including Favorite Erotic Author (a fact which still has her stunned!)

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