

April  
Reid



The  
Dragon's  
Choice

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

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Closing her eyes as if to shut out the coming task, Shimmara took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. She would keep her promise no matter how difficult.

While these thoughts flashed across her mind, she gazed at Rion, taking advantage of the rare opportunity to see him asleep. His face was in shadows, but the curved blade of the lethal sword close to his hand glimmered in the faint light. For the last year, since the moment she'd been selected as this year's bride for the dragon king, Rion had watched over her, keeping her safe from those who wanted to ravage the chosen bride...

## PRAISE FOR THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

“April Reid packs a powerful punch in a short story. *The Dragon's Choice* has it all! Action, adventure, fantasy and erotica blend together to make a fast-paced tale. Whether writing as April Reid or Barbara Clark, this is one author you can count on for superior books.”

—Tami

*The Best Reviews*

“...A fast, sexy read. I totally fell in love with the characters and truly hope to read more stories from this magical land. Rion and Shimmara are fantastic, brave, and loveable. The fairy-dragon, Cherry, is very cute and fun. This is a winner.”

—Nancy Eleckes

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# THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

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BY

APRIL REID

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THE DRAGON'S CHOICE  
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# CHAPTER 1

Shimmara d'Assana, soon to be bride of the Dragon King, woke as the last pale rays of light from the smaller moon, Zurir, washed across her face.

Yawning, she stretched her arms wide in the predawn coolness, then snuggled back into the warmth of the cazwool covers. She'd dreamed of the warrior prince again—a guilty secret she hid from everyone, even her bodyguard, Rion.

*::I shared your dreams,::* her female fairy-dragon, Cherry, said mentally from its place on a pillow beside Shimmara. *::You do well to hide your thoughts from all who live in this place.::*

Shimmara stroked the iridescent red and silver scales on the dainty head and muzzle of her forever-friend. *::You taught me how to hide my thoughts, even from the great dragons of Cymbria who fly overhead on their way to other lands.::*

Cherry spread her red wings with their delicate tracings of green



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and silver, then folded them neatly along her sides. *::Those beings are peaceful, not like the dragon king.::*

*::He's as evil as the one who used to raid Standing Stone meadow.::* Lost in memories of home, Shimmara rubbed the scar on the underside of her right wrist.

*::Dearling::*—the fairy-dragon spread her wings and gave a little hop—*::speaking of a raid, the shagar trees are loaded with ripe fruit, and I haven't eaten in hours.::*

Shimmara gave a soft laugh and sat up. *::We can't let you waste away to a shadow. That handsome green male I saw you with two days ago would be disappointed.::*

Thinking of another attractive male, she looked to the other side of the sleeping chamber where Rion d'Vortimer slept across the inner door, blocking it with his body. Just looking at him made her heart beat faster. She'd hidden her desire for him because of the vow she'd made at eleven and renewed a year ago to be the betrothed of the dragon king. Her family and all the villagers whose lands and homes had been ravaged by the rogue dragons depended on her to meet the price of peace.

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While these thoughts flashed across her mind, she gazed at Rion, taking advantage of the rare opportunity to see him asleep. His face was in shadows, but the curved blade of the lethal sword close to his hand glimmered in the faint light. For the last year, since the moment she'd been selected as this year's bride for the dragon king, Rion had watched over her, keeping her safe from those who wanted to ravage the chosen bride.

Slipping out of bed, she drew a robe on over her sleep shift and went to the windows overlooking the castle garden.

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Carefully, so she wouldn't make a noise and waken her bodyguard, Shimmara turned the latch and swung open one window.

Cherry landed on her shoulder, crooned gentle encouragement, then flew through the opening and swooped down toward the lush, golden fruit glimmering in the purple leaves of the shagar trees.

In the east, a soft, pearly gray pushed back the fading blue velvet of night. All the stars had vanished with the coming of dawn, except for the Morning Goddess and the Dragon's Promise.

The heavy, coiling bulk of Dragon Mountain dominated the land. Rays from the sun hidden behind the mountain range lit the highest peak—Dragonhead—the location of the Bride's Pillar.

Resting her forehead against the cool, priceless clear glass, she watched the dawn spread across the trees and flowers, the benches and quiet fountains in the castle garden. For a year, since her seventeenth birthday, and the day she had been chosen as the dragon's bride, Shimmara had lived here in the Bride's Bower set in the tower.

A great sense of loss gripped her heart. Today would be the last time she watched the sunrise from the tower room, the last time she celebrated the Litha season.

She drew in a shuddering breath. Tonight, she would fulfill her vow made all those years ago on her eleventh birthday. Tonight she would be chained to the sacred Bride's Pillar and wait for the dragon king to claim his bride.

Tonight, she would die.

## CHAPTER 2

Carefully regulating his breathing so Shimmara would think he still slept, Rion watched her gaze out the window. He knew it had been difficult for her to be under almost continuous scrutiny. That's why he'd pretended to be asleep when she'd first looked in his direction. She didn't know his highly acute senses alerted him to her every movement—even when the rhythm of her breathing changed.

As she stood silhouetted in the growing light, the rays shimmered in the blonde hair tumbling around her shoulders and down her back. He wanted to bury his fingers in the soft strands, to lift her in his arms and carry her to bed. He yearned to strip away her clothes and touch her—make love.

Rion shifted to ease the pressure on his heavy cock. He had to keep tight control over his body or both of them would suffer the consequences. I'm a fool, he thought bitterly. Nothing could be worse than what waited for her on Dragonhead Peak.

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While he brooded on the problem, his attention stayed focused on Shimmara. Every line in her graceful body spoke of her own internal struggle. The early dawn breeze, flowing through the open window, carried her complex scent to him. Under the faint musk of her unique feminine fragrance, he caught the sharp note of apprehension.

With good reason, he thought, as he silently came to his feet and slid his curved sword into its tough tyrano-dinosaur sheath.

The moment he joined her in front of the open window, she turned to him. "It's the summer solstice—the longest day of the year."

"That's true," he said, hiding his feelings behind an impassive expression.

She gifted him with a smile. "It's the first day of Litha, so there will be celebrations instead of endless lessons on a citizen's obligations to Kardona and, for me, the Ten Laws of Womanly Conduct."

"This is also your birthday." He unhooked the supple dragonskin pouch from his belt and opened it. "I have a gift for you."

Her violet-blue eyes opened wide. "A gift for me? Nobody has given me a present since I left home."

"Then it's well past time." Drawing a small packet of butterfly-silk fabric from his pouch, he handed it to her.

Shimmara slowly unwrapped the silky material until she cradled the golden amulet and fine chain in her palm. "A dragon coiled around a rose. It's beautiful."

Their gazes met and he saw the wonder in her eyes as she said, "The amulet feels ancient and heavy with power."

"It is. The Dragon's Treasure amulet goes back generations to the time my ancestors made the journey from old Earth."

Slowly shaking her head, she wrapped the gift in its protective silk and tried to return it. "I can't keep this. It belongs to your family."

He stepped back a pace. "My mother said to give the amulet to a woman of compassion and courage. You are that woman."

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Shimmara sighed. "I do care about others, but I'm not brave."

"You face your duty in spite of being afraid. That's courage." Rion curled his hands into fists to keep from drawing Shimmara into his embrace. "As a favor to my mother, who believes in my good judgment, please wear the symbol of the Dragon's Treasure."

She opened the packet again then raised her gaze to his. "Thank you for believing in me." With that, she slipped the chain over her head and smoothed the golden amulet against the dip between her breasts.

The sight of her fingers touching the delicate skin sent a jolt of desire through his body. His blood sizzled and his cock rose halfway. Only the loose fit of his pants hid his readiness.

A knock on the door saved him from making a fool of himself.

With bare sword in hand, he opened to the morning servant with their breakfast. Although the servant was the same woman who'd brought food for the last several weeks, Rion kept close watch on her as she spread a crisp, clean kut'n cloth on the small table near the window, set out bowls, cups, and the food in covered serving platters, bowed to Shimmara, and left.

\* \* \*

The sun had barely cleared the horizon in the east when Shimmara finished eating, then bathed and dressed.

She came out of the bathing room with her hair in a neat braid and green and gold ribbons plaited in it to match her Litha gown.

"How do I look?" she asked, twirling playfully to display her rich garb.

"Like the Goddess of Summer."

"Good. No gloomy face for me today."

"You don't have lessons, so what do you want to do?" *Until tonight* was left unspoken, but he saw a shadow cross her face.

Throwing her arms wide, she said, "Everything!"

Rion forced his expression to remain blank. By all the gods and

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goddesses, Shimmara was magnificent. No warrior going into battle could show more courage than this slender young woman facing her last day to live.

He wanted to roar at the injustice of her sacrifice. Instead, as she slipped into the carved and padded chair at her dressing table to finish her preparations for going out, he mentally continued working on a plan to save her or die trying.

\* \* \*

Seated in front of the ornate mirror, Shimmara touched the amulet Rion had given her. To avoid it being taken away by a suspicious priest of Kardona, she'd hidden it under the neckline of her emerald green dress and disguised the chain with two strands of gold jewelry.

While she'd finished her preparations for the day, her bodyguard had collected a set of fresh clothing and disappeared into the bathing room. A short time later, he'd emerged, hair still damp, wearing supple, black cazleather pants and an embroidered silver-on-black tunic. His well-used sword sheath was belted, as usual, around his strong waist.

At that moment, the measured beats of the Dragon Gong vibrated through the tower room summoning everyone to gather at Judgment Square.

"Not today," Shimmara muttered, resenting this intrusion on her short time left with Rion. She made a face at herself in the polished mirror, then watched her bodyguard come to stand behind her.

Cupping her shoulders with his warm hands, he bent and murmured in her ear, "Soldiers come." Straightening, Rion gazed at their reflection and placed a finger in front of his lips, reminding her to guard her speech. In a slightly louder tone, he said, "We must join the people in the square as tradition dictates. It is proper to remind all who gather that even you, chosen to be the dragon king's bride, obeys the summoning of the gong."

"Of course," she answered in the same louder tone. "It is my duty."

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\* \* \*

My duty to attend, Shimmara reminded herself as her escort of two priests and six guards marched her up the stone stairs to the section of the fitted-blocks platform reserved for the priests and members of the judicial council. The royal throne—set at the highest part of the open structure—was vacant as usual.

A dense crowd filled the square, except for the corridor of red paving stones marked by black marble pillars and the red paved space with its whipping post in front of the platform. Black and gold flags bearing a dragon in chains—emblem of the Priests of Kardona—flapped briskly in the warm, flower-scented wind.

Her bodyguard stayed close on her right. The coiled, alert way he moved promised a swift and deadly response for any who attempted to harm her.

Everyone in the flood of people seemed to be in a holiday mood. Vendors took advantage of the gathering to sell fresh orangefruit and candied roseberries.

When she'd first stepped into the square, she'd been greeted by cries of, "Hail to the dragon king's bride."

Just before Shimmara and her escort reached the raised platform, a trembling woman's voice had called, "Grant us mercy," while a male voice had shouted obscenities.

Both left her shaken. It was easy to brush off the foul words spewed by the man, but the woman's plea cut deeper. How could she grant mercy when she had no more power than any prisoner? Over the years, she'd come to understand that was exactly her position—a captive of her promise and the veiled threats of retribution to her family.

Of everyone here, her only hope of protection was Rion. At the first sign of unrest, he'd drawn his sword with his right hand and gripped her elbow with his left.

Now as she sat in a place of honor, shaded by an ornate canopy,

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Shimmara yearned to be far away from this display of what she knew would be harsh judgment.

A sudden commotion at the far end of the square announced the prisoners were coming.

When they shuffled into sight, hobbled by chains between ankles and wrists, Shimmara's heart filled with pity. Their worn, patched clothing and bewildered expressions indicated they were poor people caught in the grip of something they didn't understand. Then she saw the two small children clinging to each other as they followed close behind, and the pity turned to rage.

She turned to the nearest Kardona priest and said fiercely, "Why are there children with the prisoners?"

He looked down at her, his snarling tyrano-dragosaur headpiece a mirror of his cold expression. "The man failed to give the tax collector full measure of grain and cazwool saying his son had been ill and they'd needed to barter with the shaman priest for herbs and a healing ceremony."

While the priest spoke, one guard had fastened the chain linking the poor man's handcuffs to a hook on the post, then unloosed a coiled drago-o'-nine-tails from his belt. Another guard had ripped the shirt from the male prisoner.

The prisoner's wife dropped to her knees on the rough paving stones and held the hands of her crying children as close as her bonds permitted.

As the Judicial Priest of Kardona took his place at the top of the stairs, the crowd grew silent.

When the sentence of three hundred lashes was announced, the woman gave a low sob. At the same time, the crowd erupted into jeers and protests at the harsh decree.

Shouting, "Don't hurt my daddy," the young boy pulled away from her grasp, ran to his father, and clutched him around the waist, as if



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trying to shield him from the whip.

Shimmara's throat tightened. She wanted to warn the child and scream curses at the men inflicting fear and pain on the family. But her protests might bring them even more agony.

She saw the father speak urgently to his son, but the little one shook his head.

High Priest, Peredur, said coldly, "Remove the child or he shall feel the sting of the lash along with his father."

"My son won't let go," the father said in an agonized voice.

Shimmara rose from her place to go to the boy's defense. Rion clamped one hand over the curve of her shoulder to stop her. "Wait," he urged in a low voice. "Kronos will take care of the youngling."

One burly guard moved forward, pried the boy loose from his father, and stepped away with the struggling child in his strangely gentle grip.

Sinking back into her chair, Shimmara watched in cold horror as the flogger trailed the long lash of the whip behind him, then brought the iron tipped tyrano-dragosaur strips across the prisoner's back with a force that tore long bloody slashes in his unprotected flesh.

She sat frozen as the flogger applied the lash again and again. On the third crack of the whip, the little girl screamed, "Daddy, Daddy."

Stung into action, Shimmara jumped to her feet and raced down the steps toward the whipping post, barely aware of Rion keeping pace with her.

She threw herself between the prisoner and the flogger. The whip, already in motion, stung one side of her neck and tore strips of fabric across her shoulder and back.

Rion seized the business end of the whip, wrapped the metal-studded strips of tough hide around one hand, and jerked it from the flogger's grasp.

The captain of the guard pointed at Shimmara and Rion. "Seize

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them. They have interfered with the king's justice."

"Hold! By order of the king." A young man stepped out of the crowd. He threw off his ordinary tunic to reveal one made of rich fabric embellished with Celtic symbols in gold thread. The royal medallion glittered on his chest.

"King Cedric," the captain of the guard bowed his head. "You honor us with your presence."

He signaled to nearby members of the royal guard who hurried forward. "May I provide you with an escort to your throne so the proceedings can continue."

Instead of moving, the king asked, "Who signed the order for three hundred lashes for this prisoner? According to the laws of Kardona, such punishment is only for the most hardened criminal."

The high priest rose from his place and bowed. "Your Majesty, in your absence, I signed the sentence. This man has deprived your coffers of the tax on valuable goods."

King Cedric frowned. "While it is true he broke the law by not paying taxes on his few possessions, I believe he has suffered enough punishment."

The king's gaze swept the crowd, paused on Shimmara, then once more came to rest on the High Priest of Kardona. "In honor of the Dragon King's Bride—her courage and compassion—I order the release of this prisoner and his wife, and the restoration of all their property."

Gathering his rich robes around his body, the priest bowed to the king. "Your Highness, you show us the same great wisdom as your father and grandfather, and all your illustrious ancestors."

His expression hardened as he studied Shimmara. "Bride of the dragon, your courage will be tested again this night when you meet your groom on Dragonhead Peak."

## CHAPTER 3

By the time Rion tethered their horses in a protected place with water and grass available, and led Shimmara to the tree-shaded pool at the farthest end of the castle grounds, the sun had passed the high noon mark.

Earlier, they'd stopped at the castle long enough to clean and medicate the cut on Shimmara's neck, and for her to change to a soft blouse and flowing skirt. She packed the two gold chain necklaces along with her other jewelry, except for the medallion, and sent it by a dependable courier to her family. While that was happening, a servant Rion trusted had assembled the packet of food for lunch.

Now Rion spread a blanket on the grass and aromatic ground cover beside the pool, avoiding the clusters of silvery-green soap plants. At one end, water rose from deep inside a raised cluster of boulders, slipped down one side in a shimmering waterfall, and splashed into the pool.

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Sunlight danced through the dappled shade of the flamewood trees. A mimic bird called and his mate answered with a sweet, trilling call.

"It's beautiful." A smile lit Shimmara's face as she sat on the thick fabric. "And peaceful."

Lured by his hungry desire to be close to her, Rion settled on the blanket and brushed a loose strand of hair from her cheek. "We won't be bothered here."

She caught her breath at his touch, and pressed his fingers against her skin. "Rion, I shouldn't ask this, but do you find me...attractive?"

"Attractive?" He went up on his knees in front of her and cupped her face between his palms. "Sweet lady, you don't know the half of what I feel. I've had the devil's own time trying to keep my hands off you."

Her eyes opened wide and darkened with arousal. "Then why...?"

"Why do I work hard to keep my distance?" He yielded to temptation enough to touch his lips to hers, then he drew away, afraid that if he touched her again, he wouldn't be able to stop. "You know the penalty for any woman destined to be the dragon's bride if she loses her virginity."

He watched the bright color of happiness drain away from Shimmara's face, leaving her pale. She nodded and said in a dull voice, "She's brutally raped, then bound, sewn into a sack, and drowned. The male who took her virginity is gutted and torn apart. And her family is stripped of all their possessions and driven off the land they no longer own."

\* \* \*

The somber mood continued as they ate a simple lunch of fresh bread, cheese, roasted amercorn nuts, and shagar fruit accompanied by a light wine—kept cool in the shallow water of the pool nearest them.

Rion was acutely aware that she avoided looking at him.

To break the heavy silence, he said, "Tell me how you bonded with

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your fairy-dragon.”

“Cherry.” A gentle smile brightened Shimmara’s face. “She flew into my life when we were both younglings.”

Shimmara looked up at Rion, glad he’d asked an easy question. Then her gaze dropped to his firm, sensual lips. Their brief contact with hers had stirred an unknown hunger. Even recalling that exciting moment filled her body with a sweet, hot delight. Her nipples tightened into sensitive peaks. Her blood beat heavy and warm between her legs.

She tried to shake off the unruly thought.

“Shimmara,” Rion’s voice sounded tight, as if he was struggling with the same sensual thoughts. Could he know she was—aroused?

Of course not.

She hugged her knees and stared into the flower-bordered pool. “I met Cherry when I was six. By that time, I took care of our small flock of cazwool sheep. Each morning, I’d drive them along the track through the shagar trees and apple orchard to the meadow. My job was to protect them and make sure they didn’t stray from the rest of the flock.”

Rion shifted in place. “Six is young for that much responsibility.”

“Not for a country child.” Shimmara rubbed her forehead in concentration. “From the age of four, we each had our job. I was the oldest sib, so I was given the greatest responsibility. My five-year-old brother fed the chickens and gathered the eggs each day.”

She recalled the cozy cottage where she’d been born and had lived with her family until the Searchers chose her. She sighed. “I miss my parents and brothers and sisters, but they haven’t had to go cold or hungry since the Priests of Kardona chose me.”

“The Bride Price,” Rion stated, bitterly. “Your life for their comfort.”

Shocked by her usually impassive guard’s show of emotion, Shimmara placed one hand on his arm and felt him shudder. “It wasn’t

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like that..." She couldn't continue.

Gently, Rion folded her hand in his. The brush of his fingers, the warmth of his touch, ignited the hunger in her soul. She stared at his face, not surprised by the heat she saw in his eyes.

As she watched, his features settled into his usual unemotional mask.

"You were telling me about the first time you met your fairy-dragon."

Briefly she closed her eyes, recalling the terror she'd felt in the sunny meadow. "That day, the woolies acted nervous when we reached the meadow, and I was worried. We'd heard a rogue dragon had been seen prowling around the outskirts of the next village down the river."

"But they still sent a six-year-old alone."

"It had to be done," she said simply. "The family depended on me to take care of our major source of income."

Before he could make another comment, she hurried on. "A shadow passed overhead, then this immense dragon landed at the edge of the open space. The woolies rushed wildly behind me, depending on me for help." She fingered the fabric of the blanket, remembering that awful time. "The dragon was black with red markings and taller than my family's cottage."

Rion rubbed her shoulder. "You faced that danger all alone."

"I wasn't alone for long. Just as the dragon stomped toward me, with smoke trickling out of his nostrils, this little streak of fury flew out of the trees and straight at the monster's head."

"Your fairy-dragon," Rion stated.

"Yes. Cherry. She spit fire at his sensitive nose. Growling, the dragon batted at her with one massive paw, but she darted out of the way, then came back flaming at his muzzle. To distract him, I hurled stones at the beast with my sling."

She rubbed the scar on her wrist. "As I raised my arm to release

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another stone, one long spear of flame destroyed my weapon and burned my wrist."

Rion's fingers tightened on her shoulder. "You could've been killed. Why didn't you run away while the dragon was busy with the fairy-dragon?"

"I couldn't leave the flock. They were my responsibility." She took a deep breath. "I had some unexpected help when a whole flight of fairy-dragons raced out of the forest. They dove at the dragon, scratching and flaming at his head, his eyes, any part they could reach, like a swarm of blood-gnats."

She gripped Rion's hand for comfort. "While the beast was busy, I drove my flock into the trees and took them home."

"Little warrior," he murmured.

"Cherry or me?" She turned her head. Their eyes met, and suddenly she couldn't move. Passion swirled behind his half-closed eyelashes. Passion and a turmoil of need so great it exploded inside her bringing heat and a certainty that he wanted her like no man had ever before wanted a woman.

Hesitantly, she traced the full curve of his lips with her fingertip. "You reminded me of the penalties to my family and to you if I lose my virginity before I go to the dragon king tonight."

He groaned. "Don't remind me."

"Kissing will leave my body chaste." With her gaze fixed on his face, she drew his hand to her lips and pressed a soft kiss on each finger. With each touch of her mouth, his eyelashes dropped, briefly veiling his thoughts, but she felt him tremble. That shiver encouraged her to go on.

When she reached his thumb, on impulse, she drew it into her mouth—sucking—tasting the salt of his skin.

Abruptly he pulled away. "You're killing me," he said in a low, tense voice.

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“Oh.” A flush warmed her cheeks and she turned her head, hiding the sudden pressure of tears at his rejection. “I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“Wouldn’t mind?” He sounded like he was choking. “I want you so badly I don’t trust myself.”

Her head whipped around. “Really?”

“Touch me,” he said, guiding her hand to the bulge of his aroused qadib.

Fascinated, she fingered the thick rod of flesh straining the cazleather of his pants.

“Yes, sweet one,” he muttered. “Stroke my cock like that.”

More confident, she carefully closed her fingers around his heavy cock and was rewarded by a muffled gasp. Emboldened by his response, she gently squeezed—and released—squeezed—and released his qadib, while heat and pressure built between her own thighs.

“I can’t take much more,” he said on a long breath, “or I’ll go off like a wolf-dog with his first bitch in heat.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And you say you’re a farm girl?” he teased.

“I understand about a male woolie in rut.” She stroked the tight cazleather covering the tip of Rion’s cock, grinning when he muttered a curse. “What I don’t understand is why one kiss from you makes me tingle all over.”

“I’ll show you.” Gently he pressed her down onto the blanket, then bent over her, filling her space with his strong form and the wonderful male scent of cazleather and the faint, nutmeg-like fragrance uniquely his.

A low moan escaped her as she felt the sweet brush of his firm lips—just a touch—before they were gone.

She gazed up into his dark eyes. Passion burned there, held in check only by his strong will.



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His mouth came down on her lips again, gliding over them with a slowly increasing pressure. He rocked his mouth slowly against hers, sensitizing her lips as they followed the gentle seduction of his mouth. She said his name on a sigh, caught in the growing sensual haze.

"Yes?" he murmured, stroking one finger across her mouth.

"Show me—"

"More?" Carefully, his teeth caught her lower lip. She gasped at the exquisite flash of desire—a desire that filled her blood, her muscles, nerves, and bones with melting delight.

"Please." She raised her head and pressed a kiss to his mouth. "More. Much more."

She felt his sudden tension. "Remember the consequences if we lose control," he said in a low, thick voice.

"We won't. Not in the short time we have left." Shimmara laced her fingers into his warm, thick hair and pulled his face down to hers. With the same deliberation he'd shown, she rocked her mouth slowly against his, tempting him to follow her lips. As the pressure increased, Shimmara's breasts felt warm and full. Her nipples pebbled. Each brush of his body against hers increased their responsiveness. Her loose blouse was suddenly too tight—too constricting. She traced her tongue along the curve of his lips. He opened his mouth and sent his tongue out to twine with hers in a sensuous duel.

Her whole body tightened. He stroked her mouth in a languid, erotic rhythm that made her melt. She clung to him, forgetting the danger if they were caught—knowing only that she was in his arms.

\* \* \*

Reluctantly, Rion eased away from Shimmara's embrace, and sat up, struggling with his more primitive side. He wanted to claim her with all the fire of a dragon's first bonding with his lifetime mate.

"Rion?" She propped herself up on one elbow and touched his cheek. "What's wrong?"

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Turning his head, he kissed her palm. "Sweet lady, I want you—want to make love in all possible ways until eternity isn't long enough."

She sighed. "We don't have eternity. Let's not waste the time we do have." She tugged at his tunic. "I want to feel your skin, to test those hidden muscles I've touched only in my dreams."

Rion closed his eyes and counted his own heartbeat in the wild thunder of his blood. The thought of making love with this honest, sensual woman he'd desired for a year nearly made him lose control.

With the quick, economical moves of a warrior preparing for battle, he unlaced his tunic and stripped it off.

"You're better than any dream," she said, trailing her fingers across his chest and setting off ripples in his skin.

"Shimmara." Gently, he pressed her back onto the blanket. In the dappled sunlight and shade beneath the peppery-scented flamewood trees, her hair glowed like precious dragon gold.

Her moist lips parted, an invitation to him. Kneeling beside her, he brushed his mouth against hers, tasting her passion. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. Blood rushed to his groin and he paused to fight the aching pressure in his balls and cock.

She murmured, "More," and lifted her arms to him in a languid, seductive flow. Her breasts rose, their nipples pebbled into tantalizing points under the soft, thin kut'n blouse. The chain, with its Dragon's Treasure medallion, dipped under the fabric in a golden line to her female bounty. The green and gold ribbons holding the front together beckoned.

He untied one ribbon and looked into her eyes. She nodded.

He tugged on the second bow, watched the ribbon fall away, and the material part—revealing the smooth, lush upper curves of her breasts.

She looked down at the opening, then gazed at him and stroked his

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

mouth with one fingertip. “Yes. Please.” Her voice trembled with hunger. The musk of both their arousals and her scent of wildflowers hovered in the air.

Swept up in a rush of desire, he pulled the third ribbon open, and parted the light kut’n—the delicate fabric snagging on his callused fingers—and gazed at her breasts. Reverently, he traced the roseberry pink of her areolas, then caught one nipple between his fingers. She moaned softly and arched against his touch.

“That’s it, sweet lady,” he murmured, thumbing her nipple again and again, and listening to her passionate cries, feeling the echoes of her pleasure tighten his body.

“It would be better if you remove your blouse all the way,” he said, smiling at her honest response. “Do you want that?”

Wordlessly, she tugged at the fabric.

“Let me,” he muttered. Supporting her with one hand, he lifted her enough to slip off the blouse. Then, with sensuous care, he drew the fabric across her puckered nipples, and watched them bloom in deepening shades of pink, revealing the greater rush of blood through her body.

“That feels good,” Shimmara murmured, arching slightly. “The sun and shade, the warm breeze all make me ache, but your touch is best of all.”

He stifled a groan at the sudden rush of need that made his cock rigid. She was more beautiful than seemed possible. Her breasts were smooth and full. The scatter of freckles added spice to her skin. Her nipples were moist roseberries, waiting to be tasted.

A leaf tumbled down from overhead, skimmed the medallion, and settled between her breasts. She didn’t seem to notice, but Rion did and leaned close to brush it away. With the leaf gone, he lost himself in that fragrant valley, soft and tantalizing like a warm summer day in a mountain valley where wildflowers bloomed.

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

He cupped the outside curves of her breasts, plumping them. With his thumb, he brushed one taut nipple while he teased the other, sucking, feasting on the pebbled fruit with gentle pressure.

She called his name in a voice thick with passion—the same passion that tightened his balls and made his cock ache.

Beside them, the clear pool rippled as the waterfall flowed into it from the raised spring.

A valley needs water, he thought, and cold liquid on warm skin would give Shimmara a new experience in pleasure.

“Shimmara...” He reached for the stoppered bottle of wine. “Do you trust me to try something new?”

“Of course,” she said in a dreamy tone, gazing at him through half-lowered lashes. “Everything’s wonderful.”

Opening the bottle, he drizzled a thin line of cold liquid between her breasts. She gasped. Her eyes opened wide, then she looked at him expectantly.

“Now I’ll taste the wine—and you.” Bending down, he lapped up the shimmering drops, taking particular care to lick the sides of her breasts and each nipple.

“Oh, Goddess,” she said on a high, breathy cry, arching her back.

He took her cry into his mouth, smothering it with a hungry kiss. The more he tasted her, the more he wanted.

“Open for me,” he coaxed, tracing his tongue along her half-parted lips.

She murmured his name and he slipped inside, along the tiny serrations of her teeth, and deeper in—probing the textures, tasting the salt, the sweetness.

As their mouths fused together with the raging passion of dragons at the highest point of their mating flight, Rion bunched her skirt up to her waist and slid one knee up between her legs until it pressed against the delicate panties guarding her humid yoni. He rocked his thigh into her

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

tender flesh and thrust his tongue in and out of her mouth in the same rhythm.

Her fingers gripped his shoulders, adding an erotic sting. Bending her knees, she spread them farther apart and writhed against his leg in a move so arousing he nearly lost control.

“We have to stop.” Carefully lifting away from her, he rolled onto his back with one bent arm shielding his expression. Nothing could cover the evidence of his raging need.

He heard the faint rustle as Shimmara sat up. The enticing, musky aroma of her desire tortured his senses.

“Rion? Did I do something wrong?”

“By the gods, no. You were perfect. So perfect I damn near lost my head.”

“Then why stop?”

“I want you so badly, I feel like I’ve been twisted inside out. I want to undress you and touch you with my hands and tongue in all the secret places where no one else has—touch you in every way a man touches a woman.”

“Oh, sweet goddess, I want that too.”

He let out a low growl of frustration. “You’re an innocent and don’t understand I want to kiss and taste every part of your naked body—to take you, and you take me, until there’s no separation between us and you scream in passion.

\* \* \*

Leaning over Rion, Shimmara inhaled his nutmeg and aroused male scent. She trailed the back of her fingers across his broad chest. “Please, touch me that way.”

She heard his sharp intake of breath. His dark gaze held her immobile with shock at the passion blazing in his eyes.

With battle-hardened hands that trembled, he lifted her away from him and onto the blanket. “You know what will happen if we’re found

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

out. Do you want to chance that?"

A wild hope filled her heart. "By the Great Goddess, yes! I've provided for my family no matter what happens. One way or another I won't be here after tonight." She paused, recalling the terrible punishment that could await Rion. "You're the one who has the most to lose."

He began to unbuckle the belt around his waist. "Don't worry about me. I want to make love with you, bury my qadib in you until there's no more time left. Even eternity with you in my arms won't satisfy my hunger."

As he'd talked, he'd pulled off his boots, and pants. Now he rose on his knees in glorious nakedness.

Fascinated, she gazed at his powerful shoulders and chest, at his long, sinewy body, but most of all she stared at his penis, thick and erect, thrusting out from a thatch of short, black hair.

Unconsciously, she licked her lips and touched the side of the broad head.

He made a low sound. She pulled back her hand. "Did that hurt?"

"Gods, no. Do it again. Hold my cock, dance your fingers over me."

She felt the blood rise in her face and race through her body. Moisture dampened her panties.

She scrambled out of her remaining clothes, then knelt in front of Rion.

This time, with more assurance, she cradled his smooth shaft in her hand.

Small tremors shook him as her cool fingers closed over his heated qadib, and she felt incredibly sensual. She stared at the long, pulsing length, then slid her fingers down to the base and back up to the tip.

He let out a long breath. "Yesss, that's the way."

Leaning back, he propped his upper body on his hands and offered greater access. She stroked him again and again. A shimmering drop

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

appeared at the broad tip. She touched it with one finger and brought the liquid to her mouth—tasting his wild essence.

“Again,” he demanded in a choked voice. “I want to be touched by you, sweet lady. You don’t know how much I need your touch.”

Lured by her warrior’s great need, she bent and kissed his pulsating flesh. Carefully, she wrapped her fingers around his engorged qadib and stroked his warm, rigid rod with her tongue. She licked along the length of the silky flesh and lingered on the great blue vein that pulsed at the tip. The musky aroma of sex swirled around them, mixed with his unique scent.

As she licked and sucked on him, shudders of pleasure swept through her body. Pressure coiled in her belly and between her legs. Still, she pleased him, getting hotter with each stroke.

Muttering, “That’s enough,” he held her head in place for one more gliding taste. Then she felt him lift and turn her onto her back.

She stared up at him while her body ached with shivery, hot feelings that went from her nipples to her crotch.

“Rion—” Her plea was silenced by the sensuous glide of his mouth against her lips.

He raised his head and muttered, “I can taste myself on your lips. Now it’s my turn to taste you.”

He began with her breasts again. He took each nipple, by turn, into his hot mouth, swirling his tongue around the taut, sensitive tip, then sucking while she slowly writhed in the sensual flood.

Slipping lower, he trailed open-mouth kisses to her belly button and speared it with the tip of his tongue, sending waves of pleasure in every direction.

Just when she thought she couldn’t take any more pleasure, he slipped a hand between her legs and cupped her intimately in his palm.

She stiffened in surprise, then melted into his hand as his palm rocked against her tender flesh.

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

"Almost there," he muttered. As he settled between her legs, his hair brushed the tender skin of her upper thighs and her whole body clenched.

"Easy, sweet lady," he said in a voice deepened by passion. "It's just another way of loving."

"Loving?" she gasped. "I can't—" She choked at the feel of his fingers touching her most intimate part. "I—my head's whirling. I can't think."

"Don't think. Feel." His hot breath bathed her yoni. A heartbeat later, something warm and moist and wonderful stroked her clit.

She heard a soft moan and realized it came from her.

Rion muttered something long and rolling in a language she didn't understand, but the words broke over her in an erotic wave. From that moment, the sounds of the trees, the birds, the waterfall rippling into the pool were sweeter music than she'd ever heard. The dappled shade, cooled her—warmed her—perfectly. The glorious fragrance of the wildflowers enchanted her. Above all, the scent of their lovemaking consumed her senses while the world shifted and spun. She arched her back and gripped the blanket, caught in the vise of his seductive mouth and hands.

At each feathery stroke of his tongue, new sensations pulsed into life.

With one last glide of his tongue, he abandoned her hungry clit and slid up her body, until she felt his warm, rigid shaft nestled against her yoni.

But he didn't press in. Instead he reached between their bodies and found a single point of acute pleasure.

Shimmara moaned as fire gripped her body, spreading from Rion's hand to the crown of her head, the tips of her toes. Wildly, she thrashed her head back and forth. Then he slipped in, gently rocking as his qadib penetrated deeper and deeper.



## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

A dizzying stream of sensations—heat, chills, exquisite shards of aching pleasure filled her until she knew only Rion and the love she found in his arms.

\* \* \*

Later, as they returned to the castle, the activity in the courtyard—the members of the Dragon's Bride honor guard already gathering, and the crowd forming on both sides of the main road between the city and the mountains—were a harsh reminder that their time together was nearly over.

It's an hour before sunset, Rion thought bleakly. Time for Shimmara to dress in her bridal clothes.

They'd washed away the evidence of their lovemaking, using the juice of the soap plants growing near the pool. No accusing voices had been raised as they'd approached the castle, so they were safe from discovery—for all the good that did.

He glanced at her sitting as calmly and composed in the saddle as if they'd just been out for a pleasant ride and picnic.

His plans were set to battle the king dragon tonight. If he lost, he'd die with Shimmara. If he was victorious, she'd know his deeply held secret. Either way, he'd lose her, just when he'd come to realize he'd chosen her above all other women to be his lifelong mate.

## CHAPTER 4

They reached Dragonhead Peak before the midnight hour. Both moons floated high in the sky, illuminating the clearing and the shaft of stone known as the Bride's Pillar, set in the center.

Earlier, a party of swift-riding soldiers had reached the clearing. They'd kindled flaring torches around the perimeter and built a blaze in the stone-lined fire pit placed the distance of three tall men away from the pillar. They'd heaped a pile of broken and partially melted chains to one side of the column. Fresh chains, attached to the scorched stone, waited for the next bride.

Shimmara stared at the metal bonds, and for the first time came to realize—to the fullest measure—the sheer, black agony of terror at facing the dragon king. Nausea tightened her throat. She swallowed hard, fighting to hide her fear.

Her mount must have sensed her dread. It sidled to one side, then moved restively.

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

“Easy, boy,” she said soothingly, but in a voice that caught on her own emotion.

Rion appeared closer to her side. He gripped the gelding's bridle and forced it to stand in place. “Courage, little warrior,” he said to her quietly.

“I—I'm trying.” She blinked back tears and swallowed. “I won't show cowardice to those priests.”

“You're no coward.” Under cover of the deeper shadow between them, Rion trailed the backs of his fingers across her cheek. “I'd kiss you right now, but I must continue to pretend indifference to you or my plan won't work.”

“Plan?” She smothered a wild impulse to laugh—or sob—or scream. “The only *plan* the priests and King Cedric have for me tonight is to wait for the dragon and his hunger.”

“Trust me.” In a casual manner, befitting a bodyguard with no more involvement than to wait for the end of tonight's ceremony, he moved back a pace.

I do trust Rion, she thought. But how could believing in him help her, except to give her the courage to fulfill the final part of the vow she'd made seven years earlier?

Shivering, she drew the heavy cloak closer to her throat, and told herself her chill was from the brisk, pine-scented wind swirling across the clearing.

Meanwhile, the priests chanted as they circled the stone pillar. Lit by the fire and rays from the two moons, their red-and-black robes and snarling tyrano-dragosaur headdresses cast bobbing shadows across the clearing. Respectfully, the guards stood at a distance from the priests, including the six members of the elite royal guard who had ranged themselves in a manner to box her in.

Even if she made the attempt, there was no way to escape.

King Cedric had been watching from the shadows part way around

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

the clearing. As the priests turned from their solemn march around the place of sacrifice and formed a double column coming in her direction, the king left his mount with a member of his personal guard and strode toward her.

"Courage," she whispered to herself, as a chill slithered down her spine. *Now it truly begins.*

Although Rion stood only a pace away, she couldn't call or even look at him without drawing suspicion to him. But she still wore the Dragon's Treasure amulet. Pretending to adjust her cloak, she fingered the outline of Rion's gift. She'd follow his request and wear it, even into the dragon's jaws.

In the short time it had taken for these thoughts to pass through her mind, the king had reached her.

With a courtly bow of his head, he said, "Lady Shimmara, please dismount and stand before the High Priest of Kardona so he may continue the ceremony."

Suddenly, Rion was at her knee. Gripping her around the waist, he lifted her from the saddle and slowly set her down. She fought back tears knowing this would be the last time she'd feel the press of his long, strong body against hers.

In a tone so soft only she could hear, he said, "Keep your mind clear. Do not eat or drink anything they offer."

"Yes, my love. I promise," she breathed.

Then Rion stepped away with a bow and the High Priest of Kardona faced her, holding out a jeweled goblet. "Honored lady, here is a drink to warm your blood."

She shook her head and said, "No."

King Cedric moved so close, she could see the compassion in his eyes. "The potion will make the coming ordeal more bearable."

Involuntarily, she shuddered. "Your Highness, my thanks for your consideration, but I prefer a clear mind."

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

He nodded. "Bride of the Dragon King, I salute your courage."

She gave him a faint smile, struggling to hide her growing panic. Long ago she had promised herself she'd face this night with outward composure.

The high priest stepped to one side of the double line formed between her and the stone pillar. "Come, dragon's bride. It is time to prepare for your groom."

"I have one more thing to do." She turned to the king, removed her jeweled belt, and held it out to him. "Your Highness, please see this is given to the couple to whom you showed wisdom and mercy today."

The high priest caught her wrist. "Any riches left by the dragon's bride belong in the coffers of the priests."

"This bride still lives." King Cedric accepted the gift and tucked it into his cazleather pouch. "So there is no doubt"—he shot a meaningful glance at the high priest—"I will personally deliver it to the husband and wife."

Too overwhelmed with emotion to speak, Shimmara made a deep curtsy to the king.

\* \* \*

Rion cupped Shimmara's elbow in his strong fingers and helped her rise, only releasing his grip when she was steady. He hated her coming ordeal, but could do nothing more until the king, priests, and troops left, and the king dragon arrived.

As she walked down the center of the corridor formed by the priests, her steps were firm and her head held high.

Walking two steps behind Shimmara, Rion's heart filled with pride for his mate. Of course she didn't know it yet, but from the moment he'd spoken the words of claiming as they made love beside the pool, her totally open response to him had bound them together tighter than any marriage ceremony. In his own country they would have been recognized as life mates by anyone who had the ability to see the sign

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

he'd planted in her aura as surely as he'd planted the seed of a new life in her womb.

That was the future—based on his victory tonight—and more important, based on her accepting him after she saw his other self.

After they reached the fire-scorched Bride's Pillar, the High Priest told Shimmara to remove her cloak so her husband-to-be could fully enjoy the first view of his bride.

Rion's fury grew at this new torment. Wearing only light clothes and bound by chains in the cold wind was one more torture inflicted by the cruel priests of Kardona in the name of their religion. Just as was ripping young girls away from their families and carrying them off to eventual death.

Hiding his thoughts behind an impassive expression, Rion began the distasteful job of binding Shimmara with the chains. Doing the work himself was the only way to make sure she wasn't injured by the harsh bonds.

The thick links gleamed dully in the flaring light from the torches. Her delicate face still held a calm expression, but her eyes had darkened with fear.

Cursing silently, Rion snapped the last lock, turned the key, and presented it to the commander of the priests' guards. Rion knew the slightest hint of sympathy for Shimmara would jeopardize his desperate attempt to save her once everyone else had left.

Daily, the priests promised everyone in Kardona protection from marauding dragons if the priestly edicts were obeyed. The yearly ritual sacrifice to the king dragon was one way the priests maintained their position of power.

Rion knew the sentient beings called the Great Dragons had waged war against the rogue dragons since the colonists from Old Earth had set up their first camps. To the people of Kardona, the Great Dragons were benign creatures who passed overhead without ever touching

### *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

down. On the other hand, the rogue dragons spread death and destruction across the land. The dragon king was the last—and most powerful—of those rogues.

Tonight would be the final duel in that centuries-old conflict between good and evil.

## CHAPTER 5

Shimmara shivered in the icy wind sweeping around her as she waited for the priests to finish the ceremony.

Minutes earlier, at the order issued by High Priest Peredur, Rion had stripped her of her cloak and passed it to the guard, Kronos. Then, with his expression as cold and hard as the stone pressing against her back, Rion had shackled her wrists, ankles, and waist to the Bride's Pillar.

Now the high priest approached her again. This time, he held a shallow gold bowl, incised with symbols.

An under-priest walked three steps behind, carrying a long bladed knife with jeweled handle. A second priest held a bundle of dried herbs, tied with a strip of raw cazleather.

Shimmara's skin prickled at the sight of the blood-bowl, whisk, and sacrificial knife.

"Daughter of Kardona and Bride of the Dragon King," Peredur



## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

intoned, “to make his appearance, the dragon requires the aroma of burning blood.”

As she prepared herself to not flinch at the sting of the knife blade, Rion stepped between her and the priest.

“The bride should greet her groom, unmarred by any blade.” He extended the vulnerable underside of his left wrist where the veins throbbed close to the surface. “I will donate a warrior’s blood so it may carry the scent of courage in battle to the dragon.”

Before the priest could respond, King Cedric moved up beside Rion and said, “While the blood of a skilled warrior like Rion d’Vortimer is indeed a sweet scent to a dragon”—the king bared his open palm and the vulnerable underside of his arm and wrist—“I claim the king’s privilege and offer my own blood.”

The priest’s composure slipped for a moment, then he raised the golden bowl toward the king. “Your gift is most welcome as a symbol of your support for the priesthood.”

He motioned for the priest carrying the knife.

Halting the priest with an uplifted palm, Cedric said, “My support is for the people of Kardona.” He turned to Rion. “And my blood will be shed—not by a richly embellished blade of the elite priesthood, but by that of an honest guardsman.”

Rion went down on one knee before the king. “Hail, King Cedric. You bring new honor to your kingdom.” Rising, Rion drew his own knife, passed it through the cleansing flames of a torch, and made a short, expert slash across the king’s palm—deep enough to draw the necessary amount of blood, but shallow enough to quickly heal.

The high priest secured the bundle of herbs from his underling and stirred the blood, chanting a spell.

Realizing the ceremony was nearly finished, Shimmara fought her own panic. Her breath came in short, quick gasps and she felt as if everything was fading away in a dizzy spiral.

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

Rion chose that moment, when attention was on the priest, to rattle her chains as if testing them. With his face concealed in the shadows between them, he murmured, "Soon the others will leave, but one guard will be left to spy from the trees until the dragon appears, so I can't help you until he also goes."

Moving to the other side of the pillar, Rion tugged on the metal links there, and continued, "No matter what happens, sweet Shimmara, know I love you."

Then, with a quick caress to her fingers, he moved away and assumed his stance as bodyguard.

The High Priest of Kardona approached, carrying the bowl partially filled with blood. He dipped the herbal whisk into it and sprayed her with drops of the thick liquid, turned, and left a trail of the bloody offering from her to the fire.

He paused to announce, "Behold, all is ready for our Dragon King to come for his bride. All who linger here, once the smoke of this offering rises into the heavens, may become a second offering to him."

The warning sent priests and guards to their mounts. Only King Cedric, Rion, and High Priest Peredur remained on foot.

Rion said, "Your Majesty, the Kardonian people need you to rule. It's time to go."

Cedric gestured to Shimmara. "And leave her alone to face her ordeal?"

"I have watched over her for a year. I will remain nearby for her last hour."

The two men clasped each other's arm in a warrior salute. The king said something too low for Shimmara to hear, then he swung onto his horse and rode away.

The high priest poured the blood into the fire, cast the whisk in after it, and quickly mounted his own horse.

As soon as clouds of dark smoke rose, Peredur, and the priest who

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

had waited on horseback holding the reins of the high priest's mount, both rode away into the forest.

Silently, Rion stepped closer. She knew his body language well enough to see he was listening, with his extra acute senses, to the night noises.

He muttered, "The spy waits and observes."

As if in response, a stronger wind fluttered her loose clothing like flags of distress.

She carefully tugged on her chains to test them, but they held cold and tight. Oh, Great Goddess, she thought with a mouth gone dry. Is this the end, in spite of Rion's help?

Shimmara had opened her mouth to urge Rion to leave when the sound of great wings passed overhead.

"The dragon king is here," Rion called. "And the spy has just ridden away." He reached into a cluster of rocks and pulled out her cloak. "When you're released, grab this and race for the trees."

Roaring his challenge, the Dragon King landed beside the fire, scattering rocks and smoke. He rose taller than the trees, his black-and-red bulk lit by moonbeams and firelight.

There was an odd sound from where Rion stood. His sword clattered to the hard-packed ground. A scatter of speckled lights and energy danced and swirled. Moments later, a great gold dragon flared into being.

In two steps, it reached the Bride's Pillar and tore apart the chains binding Shimmara. A voice in her head said, *::Run to the trees.::*

Confused and scared to the soles of her feet, Shimmara snatched up her cloak and raced for shelter.

From behind her came the roar of two dragons preparing for battle.

She reached the concealing shadows of the woods and turned back to look for Rion. Only the sword and a pile of clothes marked the spot.

*He must be dead.* Grief, too deep for her to cry, tore at her insides.

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

Her legs trembled. She braced one hand on the trunk of the nearest tree.

*::Rion's dead,::* pulsed through her mind with every heartbeat.

*::Not dead,::* came Cherry's mental voice. *::Just a different form.::* The fairy-dragon came to rest on Shimmara's shoulder and crooned a greeting. A male swooped around them until he found a perch on a low hanging branch.

*::What do you mean, a different form?::*

Before the fairy-dragon could answer, a series of growls and roars erupted from the clearing where the huge black dragon rose above the gold one, and sent a stream of flame toward the smaller dragon.

Cherry shuffled from foot to foot on Shimmara's shoulder. *::Rion comes from Cymbria.::*

*::Isn't that the land of shape shifters?::* Shimmara barely paid attention to her forever-friend's mental voice.

She caught her breath as the gold dragon leaped into the air, narrowly avoiding the fire. In a quick maneuver, he slipped around to the rogue dragon's belly and flamed the thick hide.

Cherry squeezed Shimmara's shoulder. *::Pay attention to my words. Rion is a shape shifter. His alternate form is dragon.::*

Now both dragons leaped toward each other, slashing with wicked claws. At that moment, as blood erupted from a triple wound on the gold dragon, Shimmara realized it was Rion fighting the powerful rogue.

A suffocating sensation clogged her throat. Rion had stayed to rescue her when he could have left, and now he was in a battle for his own life.

*I can't let him do it alone.* Fighting her fear of the black rogue, she raced out of the trees, pausing only to yank a blazing torch from its stand.

Rion's voice suddenly filled her mind. *::Shimmara, sweetheart, get away. I'll keep the rogue busy long enough—::* His voice broke off as

## *THE DRAGON'S CHOICE*

the black dragon turned toward Shimmara. Recalling the day she'd fought the rogue so many years ago, she scooped up a rock and hurled it at the beast's muzzle. The dragon flamed it in midair, then aimed a blast at her.

She scrambled around behind the Bride's Pillar. The gold dragon, Rion, set his body between her and the rogue—once more staying in one spot when he could've moved to protect himself.

Cherry and her male fairy-dragon had followed Shimmara out of the woods. They circled the black dragon, spitting flames at him until one of his slashing paws caught the little green male and sent him tumbling toward the blazing fire pit, out of control. Cherry followed him, beating her wings frantically in an effort to catch up and deflect his fall.

Turning away from the rogue, Rion leaped for the green male, snatched him out of the air, and deposited him on the ground a safe distance from the flames.

Before Rion could face the black dragon, the beast jumped onto his broad, golden back, lowered his scaly head, and opened his mouth full of long, sharp teeth over Rion's head.

Screaming, "Noooooo," Shimmara scrambled onto Rion's powerful haunch and thrust the burning torch into the black rogue's eye.

He batted away the torch and snarled at her. Smoke trickled from his mouth, but no flames. Then he whipped his tail around, circled her waist with the tip, and lifted her into the air.

She hung there, helpless in the dark coil. Every time she exhaled, the constricting loop tightened. She snatched air in quick, shallow breaths and pounded her fists on the dragon's leathery skin.

Shimmara saw Rion, moving sluggishly as if still dazed, twist his golden body under the rogue's greater bulk, and assault the thinner scales guarding the dragon king's throat.

Distracted by the attack, the beast lowered his tail and the coils

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

loosened. Abruptly, he released her and beat his tail against Rion's side.

Shimmara dropped to the ground near where Rion had left his clothes and sword when he shifted.

Using two hands, she picked up the sword and carried it back to where the dragons struggled jaw to jaw.

At the moment when both dragons held each other immobile, she climbed up onto Rion's haunch once more, set the point of the sword against the thinnest point of the dragon king's lower jaw where it met his throat, and shoved it in with all her might. Rion's mental voice said, *::I'll finish.::*

She released the sword, barely imbedded in the hide. With one paw, Rion pressed the sword up and in, thrusting the sharp blade all the way up to the hilt—deep enough to pierce the dragon king's brain.

The rogue screamed in a horrible death-rattle roar. Blood gushed from its jaws as it flailed in mindless fury.

The golden dragon, Rion, scooped Shimmara up in his arms and staggered away from the dragon king's death throes. Gently, he set her down where she'd dropped her cloak.

*::Bundle up.::* His mental voice sounded weary. *::We have a long flight to safety—if you will trust me.::*

Before she could respond, Cherry and the green male flew around them calling, *::Hail, gold dragon—hail Shimmara of Kandora. From now on, you shall be known as the ones who slew the rogue Dragon King.::*

Their cries faded away as Shimmara stared at his great golden body, shocked by the scorched hide and bleeding wounds.

Bunching up part of her cloak, she pressed it against one long wound where white bone gleamed briefly before more blood welled up and flowed down the damaged hide.

*::There are too many injuries for your efforts to stop the bleeding.::*

## ***THE DRAGON'S CHOICE***

He sounded almost resigned, as if all hope was gone.

Chilled to her depths, not by the wind, but by fear for him, she cried, “What can I do to help?”

*::Let me take you to safety in my home country of Cymbria. Once there, I'll shift to human—my true form. The shift will heal the wounds.::*

Willing to do whatever would help, she touched his great muzzle. “I’m ready to go.”

Rion, in his dragon form, took Shimmara into his arms, crouched beside the defeated and dead rogue, unfurled his wings, and leaped into the sky. At the same time, he sent out a distress call to his sister and brother far away in Cymbria. He held his life mate in his embrace. Once she was safely secure in his home, then he could begin the weary struggle for his own survival.

## CHAPTER 6

Shimmara woke to the rush of wind tugging at her clothes and hair. She realized she was still secure in the arms of the gold dragon—Rion. Heat from his great body kept her warm.

Exhausted, she'd fallen asleep while it was dark, soothed by the steady beat of his heart.

Hours must have passed, she mused. Pale light from the two moons and the stars had been replaced by the rich pink and gold of dawn. Below them, the land spread out in a series of green hills and valleys, where lakes and rivers gleamed in the early morning light.

She became aware of two things at the same moment—two great dragons flew with them with Rion in the middle, and the beat of his wings was no longer sure and steady.

“Rion?” She stopped, recalling his wounds suffered in the battle.

*::Just a little farther,::* he answered in an incredibly weary voice.  
*::Once we reach our home you'll be truly safe. I'll shift then.::* One



## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

wing, torn by a ragged wound, dipped. Shimmara stifled a scream and clutched his thick arm.

One of the dragons escorting him moved closer, propping up the wounded wing. Shimmara heard the orange-and-gold dragon's tart comment. *::You'll shift if you still have enough energy, my foolish brother.::*

*::Nag me later, Cinnamon. I know my limits.::*

The green-and-gold great male dragon on the other side took up the plea. *::Don't be a stubborn goatasaur, big brother. Your thinking is clouded by loss of blood and lust.::*

Rion turned his head toward his brother and snarled, *::Check my woman's aura, Basil Greenstorm d'Vortimer, and apologize.::*

*::She's your life mate. I didn't know.::* Basil dipped his head. *::My apologies, lady. My apologies, brother. Now shake the cazwool out of your brain and land while you still have a chance to enjoy your bride.::*

Alarmed by both the dragons' warning to their brother, Shimmara said, "Rion, land now and shift while you can."

*::A...few more...minutes is all.::* He continued on, his labored breath with each lift and fall of the damaged wings a sign his strength was fast disappearing.

\* \* \*

As they approached a small settlement at the foot of a gentle hill, people ran out of the dwellings, paused, then some shifted into dragons and rose to meet Rion and his siblings.

Their cries of greeting slowly silenced as the extent of Rion's wounds and his faded colors showed the severity of those injuries.

They swept across the cluster of buildings with him and angled down toward a large dwelling on the crest of the hill—all in silence, except for the thrum of their wings. Shimmara could sense their encouragement flowing to Rion.

She pressed against Rion's great chest, praying to the Great

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

Goddess to grant him healing.

Even when she knew he was wavering, his strength almost spent, he held her firmly in his arms.

It was only at the last second, the instant before his clawed feet touched the grass, that she felt his grip loosen. He said, *::Go, before I fall on you.::*

She dropped the remaining short distance and took off running until she cleared a space for him, then quickly turned, ready to return to him.

The great gold body, now faded to a sickly, pale yellow, lay sprawled on the ground. Fresh blood oozed from numerous wounds.

His sibling dragons landed. Green-and-gold Basil retained his dragon shape, took one long look at Rion, and took off to go for a healer. Cinnamon shifted to her human form and ran, naked, to her brother.

“He’s fading fast,” she cried. “Shimmara, help me keep him conscious until he can shift.”

Kneeling beside him, Shimmara cradled Rion’s head between her hands, gazing into his half-closed eyes. “Rion, beloved,” she called. “Stay conscious. Shift. We need you—I need you.”

She was vaguely aware of other dragons landing and shifting back to human form, but she concentrated on her human mate in dragon form.

His weakened voice came to her. *::Can you truly accept both my forms?::*

She kissed his jaw. “You’re a fine, brave dragon, but your human form is sexier.”

*::I...like sexy.::* His clawed hands and feet moved. He groaned—a sound so filled with pain and despair, it tore her insides.

Sparkling bits of energy circled him and winked out. *::Shimmara, I may not be able to shift—alive.::* His chest rose and fell in fitful jerks. *::If...if I don’t make the full transition...I have claimed you as life*

## THE DRAGON'S CHOICE

*mate...::*

Kneeling beside Shimmara, Cinnamon slipped an arm around her waist. “Rion Goldenstorm d’Vortimer, your brother and I have heard and accepted your claim.”

He moved his head in a feeble motion. *::Shimmara, my sweet warrior, fare—::*

“Don’t you farewell me, you coward.” Shimmara thumped a fist on his undamaged shoulder. “Shift back to my lover—my life mate or, by the Great Goddess, I’ll...I’ll—” Too choked with anger and fear to speak, she thumped his shoulder again.

A sudden swirl of sparkling energy formed. The gold dragon dissolved in a glow, and Rion’s human form lay in front of her.

He drew her into his arms and pressed the length of his deliciously nude body against hers. “Give me a few minutes to get my strength back, sweet. Then we’ll go into my—our—home, into our sleeping chamber. And there, I’ll make love with you, again and again—my beautiful, brave dragon’s choice.

## APRIL REID

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