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The Dragon of Ankoll Keep

K.S. Augustin

Dedication

To my husband, my partner...my J. I love you.

Chapter One

The rain pelted down on the slight figure approaching the outskirts of Ankoll Village.

Gamsin sighed, but continued her plodding down the main street, looking for lodging. It was afternoon and the rainclouds were so dark they blocked the sunlight, turning the afternoon to dusk. That she was soaked to the skin was no surprise—her life always seemed to involve more discomfort than comfort, more pain than warmth, more obscenity than succour—but at least her belongings were dry. She patted the waxed canvas of the long bag she wore across her body and continued walking.

Fourteen days ago, she had run out of money and had to sell her horse. It wasn't much of a hardship—the horse had been stolen in the first place—but the trader had driven a hard bargain and, many days and nights later, Gamsin still felt more than a little aggrieved.

But, with any luck, all that was going to change soon.

It was the noise more than anything else that alerted her to the presence of the village tavern. The sign at the front of the establishment was worn and splintered so she couldn't read the tavern's name but, if conventions ran true across the land, she was sure it had the word "dragon" in it. She pushed open the leather flaps and stepped through.

The air inside the tavern was warm but musty, trapped by a lack of windows. The aroma of stale beer floated throughout, permeating the rough wooden furniture and soot-blackened ceiling. In one corner, a large open fire blazed, radiating light in an otherwise dour room.

To her surprise, the tavern was also sparsely populated, with only four surly men seated at two low tables. Gamsin avoided their gazes as she walked, dripping, to the bar.

"I'd like a room for the night," she said to the plump woman behind the counter.

Nothing moved on the woman's face, except for a pair of pale eyes that looked Gamsin up and down. From long experience, often at the expense of such eyes, Gamsin knew what the woman saw: a slight figure, slender but with a hint of muscle, black, cropped hair and a pair of large gray eyes. Gamsin wasn't vain. She knew her features

were regular and attractive but not beautiful. Attractive but forgetful. Finally the older woman's lips opened to say, "Three coppers. Paid in advance."

It wasn't as outrageous a sum as others she had heard. Gamsin nodded, reaching into the money pouch at her waist. The publican's wife craned her neck to check out the pouch's contents but saw only the dull gleam of copper. She relaxed as her newest guest counted out three coins in front of her then jerked her head to the stairs.

"Room's upstairs, end of the corridor. Dinner in two hours."

Gamsin looked down at the puddle she and her clothes formed on the greasy floor planks.

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"Do you have any towels?" she asked the woman.
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"No."

"Blankets then?"

"There's one in the room."

"A spare?"

For a moment she didn't think the woman was going to move but, eventually and laboriously, she headed for a small cupboard under the stairs and extracted a thin folded sheet which she thrust at Gamsin.

With a tight grimace, Gamsin took the sheet and walked upstairs, ignoring the speculative silence that followed her.

If only they knew.

The room at the end of the corridor, Gamsin found out, was the only one with a working door. No locks of course, that was a luxury only seen in the cities, but she was used to such conditions. The first thing she did upon entering was move one heavy chair across the closed door then take a look around.

The room was small with a double-sized rough bed and a surprisingly large window opposite the door. A small unlit fireplace faced the foot of the bed. Except for the chair that was now standing guard at the room's entrance, the bed and a small rickety table, there was no other furniture. Gamsin frowned then quickly bent to look under the bed, smiling with relief when she saw the chamber pot.

With nothing left to do for two hours, she stripped and rubbed herself down with the threadbare sheet the publican's wife had given her, laying her wet clothing and boots flat in front of the extinct fireplace. She would get some embers when she went downstairs for dinner later on. She also resisted the temptation to unpack, undoing the waxed flaps

just to extract a clean, if crumpled, change of clothes before determinedly shutting the bag again.

Shrugging into a white shirt and dark plus fours, she padded to the window and edged open one of the shutters.

The rain had eased, brightening the sky and illuminating the village.

Ankoll Village. It had been famous five hundred years ago as the place nestled below a dragon's lair. It became even more famous two hundred years later as the place closest to where the dragon kept its fabulous wealth. But now, three centuries after notoriety, Ankoll Village had slipped again into rural obscurity, the brief village expansions of history now contracted to one major street and strips of narrow, forlorn shops hugging the thoroughfare as though their lives depended on it.

Gamsin regarded the mountain that dominated the landscape, picking out the regularities in the silhouette that indicated a man-made structure.

Ankoll Castle.

It was going to be a tough climb, Gamsin admitted to herself. After decades of misuse, the road to the castle was probably an uneven rutted track by now. She tapped a finger against her lips, thinking.

Now that she was here, she couldn't quite believe it herself. A sailor's drunken slip at The Old Duck in Mishlow City had started her on this mad quest. The old man, weathered and toothless, was sinking tankards of cheap ale and eager to regale drinking partners with tales of the sea and his childhood. The seaside tavern was a popular spot for Gamsin—where she learned what goods were being brought in to port, taken out and stored in between—but it was starting to get dangerous as news of a nimble thief travelled through the harbour.

Yes, she was starting to get very popular with the local constabulary and had planned her last stop at the tavern before leaving for quieter locales when her eavesdropping picked up the word "treasure". Even lisped through the sailor's toothless gums, Gamsin recognised the telltale syllables and her ears pricked as she sidled closer.

"Ay spent my youth 'n Ankoll, y'know," he told the man next to him, both of them swaying to an invisible rhythm. "Place of dragon treasure."

"Dragons don't exshist," his drinking partner declared with his eyes closed.

The sailor banged his tankard on the counter. "They do. Ay seen it. Big dark thing, glittering gold on t'scales."

"Where d'gold come from?"

"Ransom. Pillage. Dragon of Ankoll was famous for its gold. Sacks of it."

The sailor's companion patted his shoulder awkwardly and they both collapsed into their beer, but Gamsin had heard enough.

Ankoll. She had never heard of the place but, for the moment, if it wasn't Mishlow City, it sounded a good enough destination to her.

And so, three months later, here she was, looking at the dark, looming bulk of Ankoll Castle and wondering how arduous the trek up to it was going to be. And wondering where the treasure was kept.

Gamsin considered herself a practical person. She didn't really believe that there were sacks of gold in the castle. All she was hoping for was one small pouch left over by a long-deceased aristocracy, hidden in a semi-obvious place. Just a handful of gold would be enough to buy some land, build a cottage and settle somewhere. Preferably somewhere overlooking the sea, she decided. And she considered half a year of her life a fair exchange for such a dream.

The clouds cleared completely in time for a watery sunset, matched by a rising volume of noise in the tavern below, indicating the end of another day's work and an influx of thirsty customers.

Dinnertime. Gamsin put on some half stockings and edged into her damp boots with distaste. When she finally built her cottage, she would make sure there was always a fire burning, with a purpose-built drying rack next to it so she would never have to get into wet clothing again. She wriggled her toes and they made a squelching sound in the boots. With a sigh, she left her room.



If conversation didn't stop completely when she descended the stairs, it certainly lessened significantly while the village's inhabitants, as one, eyed her up and down.

A young farmer, his hands the size of hams and still spotted with mud, lent back against the bar and waited until Gamsin had pulled up level with him before he spoke, his voice a leisured drawl.

"Where are you from, stranger?"

Gamsin stopped and looked up at him. He stood more than a head higher than her. A small, slight person, she was used to having most people tower over her, but the sheer bulk of the man, together with the cunning intelligence in his eyes, made her feel uneasy.

"Mishlow City," she replied.

"The big time," he snickered. "And what is a young'un like you doing so far away from the city?"

In truth, they were probably the same age, but Gamsin's slender figure looked more boyish than femininely mature.

"I'm on my way to an aunt's," she told him with a practised lie. "From the maps I saw in Mishlow City, heading through Ankoll seemed the most direct way."

"Direct? That'll be the first time anyone has ever called Ankoll 'direct'." There was a smattering of laughter in the room. "And what be your name, young'un?"

"Elva," Gamsin lied.

"Elva. Now that be a pretty name." Gamsin noticed that a few of the older men in the tavern looked away. "Does pretty Elva have a husband?"

Gamsin's gaze darted around, looking for escape. "He...he's joining me in the morning." But the moment the words left her mouth, both of them knew it for a lie.

Then, to her surprise, the publican's wife bustled forward, shooing the farmer with movements of her hand. "Get away, Folon. We don't need your type causing trouble in 'ere." She gestured to Gamsin and pointed to a small curtained alcove. "I'll bring yer dinner there," she said briskly, then turned her back on Gamsin's stammered thanks.

The young thief beat a retreat to the alcove, shifting the curtains so they partially concealed her.

Twenty summers—no, more like twenty winters—old, Gamsin thought herself a capable and self-assured young woman. But, she realised with a shiver, she had chosen to spend most of her life in the city, where the villains were of a different hue. She had become used to blending in with the crowd and avoiding the casual brutality of the thugs and criminals around her but, out here in the country, with fewer people and no crowd to blend into, she ran an ironically greater risk of violence.

This time the publican approached—an equally dour counterpart to his wife, wearing a stained shirt and a kerchief around his neck—and plunked down in front of Gamsin a watery stew and two thick slices of dark bread before returning to the counter.

As she chewed on her bread, Gamsin knew she had to come up with a usable plan. She needed to find the equivalent of the local library or county office and take a look at any local maps they held. Ideally, she needed some drawings of the castle but, in lieu of that, even some ancient land agreements between the family that built the castle and the surrounding landowners might be useful. And she also needed to ask around for any local knowledge on the castle. When was the last time anybody had lived there? Who were the inhabitants? Where did they go or, alternatively, when did they die out?

It would be difficult asking such questions of a small, naturally suspicious rural community and Gamsin started thinking of excuses she could use to help smooth the conversational path. Perhaps she could enquire after some work?

She was still thinking after she finished her meal when she absentmindedly asked the publican for a pile of embers to start the fire in her room. He returned with a long-handled bucket containing glowing coals and gave it to her without a word.

With only two of them visible, would the publican and his wife appreciate an extra worker? Gamsin wondered as she walked back to her room. Or maybe the local county official could use someone to help with tidying and cleaning? That would also solve the problem of accessing local records.

Preoccupied, Gamsin didn't hear the stealthy tread of heavy feet behind her. She had successfully lit the fire and was standing back to admire her handiwork when a heavy hand cuffed her above her ear. She saw blackness, then stars exploded in her head as she was thrown onto the bed, barely registering the sound of her room door slamming shut.

There was no time to even take a breath before a slab of meat covered her mouth and her vision finally cleared to see Folon's leering face above her, his hand blocking any attempt to scream. Pinned down by his enormous weight, all she could do was struggle ineffectually under him, his bulk pushing her into the thin mattress.

"I like pretty girls," he snarled into her face, and she gagged at the smell of stale beer and old meals, then fought for breath as he let her take his entire weight, fumbling with the laces of his breeches and her trousers.

There was a moment of release when he reared back from her, but he used it to push up her legs. With a swiftness that belied his bulk, he positioned his body between her upright knees and clamped his hand over her mouth again.

Gamsin tried everything she could think of, clawing at his arms, but her short nails might as well have been insects batting against him. He watched her with a grin then spat into his hand and rubbed the saliva onto his erect penis.

Pain shot through Gamsin as, without preliminaries, he slammed into her, using his free hand to grip her hip.

I will survive this, she thought, as he grunted above her, each stroke burning like acid streaks along her passage. She clamped her hands on the sides of the bed, listening to it creak alarmingly with each stroke, keeping her mouth clenched shut, willing for the ordeal to be over as soon as possible.

And it was. Folon's tempo increased, friction burning her groin until he convulsed, the grip on her hip tightening until it competed with the agony inside her. He stayed frozen for half a minute then, even before his breath steadied, he pulled out of her, laced up his breeches and lurched back down to the tavern, throwing open the door and leaving her like a discarded doll.

All Gamsin wanted to do was lie on the bed, curled into a protective ball but, from experience, she knew what usually came next. Limping, whimpering, she hobbled to the door, closing it and shifting the chair across it. Her groin throbbed and she clutched at it protectively as she stumbled back across the room.

It might take another hour but—she knew—others would make the trip, lumbering drunkenly up the stairs, and if Gamsin valued her life she shouldn't still be around when they did.

With one hand, she stuffed the still-damp clothes into her bag, clutching at her trousers with the other before reason asserted itself. Nareg had always told her to think and that was exactly what she wasn't doing. She needed to concentrate on doing one thing at a time.

Swallowing another sob, Gamsin used both hands to finish packing then tied the laces of her plus fours before opening the window shutters with a wince. She grabbed her bag. Two minutes later, she was gone.

Chapter Two

She wanted to be stronger than this. As dawn broke over the clear far horizon, Gamsin's shivering finally stopped and she collapsed along the track that led up to Ankoll Castle.

This was the second time that a man had touched her like this. The first had taken her virginity and there had never been a second...until last night. She felt filthy in a way that would take years to scour clean, if ever.

"Men," she muttered bleakly, closing her eyes.

Disaster, whichever way she looked. Her escape had left her with no time to find out more about the castle, no transport and no opportunity to purchase much-needed supplies. All she had left was a wedge of hard cheese, a little mouldy on the outside, and half a cured sausage. And her feet.

As for the attack by Folon, after the last time, she'd thought she'd toughened up so nothing could hurt her anymore. That she'd turned herself into a stronger person, uncaring of the injustices of the world. But all it had taken was one oversized drunk to reduce her to the wreck she was four years ago.

Gamsin sobbed then stuck a fist against her mouth, trying to stop it from escaping.

If only she had been more aware. If only she hadn't relaxed, lulled by the rural environment and the nearness to her final destination. If only...if only...

She pulled herself to her feet, ignoring the throbbing ache between her legs. People, women who were part of Nareg's circus troupe, had told her with a laugh that mating was a pleasurable experience, that one day she would be happy to feel such an ache. She hadn't said anything but privately doubted it, and her latest experience hadn't given her cause to change her mind.

The next man who tried to approach her, she vowed, would be skewered on her stiletto quicker than he could draw breath.

Determinedly, she kept that in mind, concocting fantasies where some Folon-like character tried catching her in various situations and she would brilliantly sidestep his clumsy advances and kill him.

She spent the morning relishing variations of her fantasy as she trod the rutted track. A dagger thrust to his neck. Or maybe a slice across the neck from behind. A palm-driven, two-handed thrust under the ribcage. With and without a twist. As afternoon approached, she ignored the rumbling of her stomach, and kept walking. Ignored the ache in her loins, and kept walking. Ignored, as always, the pain in her heart, and kept walking.

With a clear sky above her, the air chilled quickly as night approached. Gamsin, aware she was alone, was too scared to start even a small warming fire, in case someone from the village below spotted it and decided to come after her. She restricted herself to a couple of slices of sausage, drew her cloak from the bag and wrapped herself within it in a huddle, using her bag as a pillow.

It was an uncomfortable night, followed by an uncomfortable day. Gamsin often looked up to the top of the mountain where the castle was perched but, unbelievably, it seemed farther away than ever before. And—it seemed strange—but as she walked that second day, she found huge towering trees and large boulders on the track that she was sure she hadn't spotted from the tavern.

Her exhaustion by the end of the day led her to start raiding the cheese, scraping the mould off with the edge of her dagger, thinly slicing the hard yellow wedge and chewing disconsolately on the flakes while she thought.

Months ago, it had all seemed like a giant adventure. A way to get out of Mishlow City, and cleanse the law of any memory of her, while at the same time pursuing the lure of gold. It wasn't so exciting any more, not after Folon, hunger and an increasingly difficult trek.

Gamsin fell into a dreamless, exhausted sleep on the second night and woke on the third day to an unbelievable sight. Snow!

She frowned as she sat up, brushing the soft layer of white off her cloak blanket. Her breath condensed in a white cloud in front of her disbelieving eyes.

Snow!

It was a damp spring when she reached Ankoll Village and the mountain wasn't high enough to attract such cold this late in the year. She tried peering down the slope to where she thought the village was, but the soft, silent rain of snowflakes obscured her vision.

Instead of packing her cloak into her bag as she usually did, Gamsin secured it around her throat. She knew she wasn't dressed for such weather and all she could hope for was to reach the castle before she froze to death. She had already come this far; retreating wasn't an option.

So, on the third day, Gamsin kept walking. The wind picked up and threw her to her knees twice, but she got to her feet each time and kept walking. As it became increasingly difficult, she just concentrated on putting one foot in front of her, focusing on one achievable task at a time, just as Nareg had taught her.

But the cold was numbing her brain as well as her body. When she fell over—her slight body impacting with the hard, cold earth—she didn't even realise it. All she felt was relief that a weight had been lifted from her feet.

With drowsy eyes, she looked up into the swirling curtain of white and blinked lazily. Something was approaching out of the snowy sky, but Gamsin knew she must be imagining things. It was huge and dark, with giant, flapping wings. The sound reminded her of the canvas flaps on Nareg's show tent. She felt something large grab her around her body. Was it one of her trapeze partners training her in a new move? But his arms were so sharp, as if covered in spikes.

Still, if it was Nareg's doing, she was safe. And she smiled a little as the dragon bore her unconscious body back to the castle above.



Warmth.

Gamsin had never been this warm in her life. She could even feel her toes. She wriggled them and felt them brush against thick fur.

Mmmmm. Delicious.

Her eyes closed, she let sensations and sounds leisurely sink into her. She heard a fire—a large one judging by the crackling—but nothing else. That was strange, now that she thought about it. She couldn't hear moving bodies, street traffic, or even an errant wind; nothing from the outside. Just the welcome snaps of a log fire burning away merrily.

Gamsin opened her eyes and took a cautious look around. She was in a circular chamber made of stone, with one narrow window securely shuttered against the weather

outside. The window fitted so well into the cavity that she couldn't even tell whether it was day or night; not even a sliver of light escaped through the shutter planks.

Built into the wall was a large open fireplace, ablaze and fragrant with the scent of conifer. The chamber also contained a wooden table and two chairs, a large chest with a padded lid, a low bench and, incongruously, a wooden bookshelf. Gamsin recognised her clothes, neatly folded, on the bench and that made her throw back the fur covering in alarm, but she was still in her underclothes.

She swung her feet to the floor, ignoring the brief wave of dizziness, and was surprised to feel the flagstones warm beneath her bare feet. Frowning, she padded over to her bag which rested against the foot of the bench and quickly rummaged through it. Everything seemed to be there. Still cautious, Gamsin withdrew one of her daggers and tucked it in the band of her cotton breeches in the small of her back.

Where was she?

This didn't look like a village shop or even the inside of a manor. In fact, it looked like the keep of a castle.

Ankoll Keep!

Gamsin's eyes widened. She thought the castle had been abandoned centuries ago. Quickly, she walked to the shutters and tried to open them, but the wooden bar that secured them was impossibly heavy to lift. Yet, as she ran her fingers over the timber, she could tell it was oiled and well maintained. Certainly not the kind of shutters one would expect in a ruined building.

With a little more care, she walked around the room, noting the good repair of all the furnishings. Even the tapestry that covered the chest's lid looked clean and only recently completed. Filled with curiosity—Nareg always told her that was her worst trait—she opened the lid and lifted out one of the loveliest gowns she had ever seen. Ruby red, it was finely embroidered on its bodice with glittering beads, flaring out into a long skirt. It even—she held it against her body—why, it even fitted her!

Gamsin could feel the weight of the garment and goggled at the amount of expensive material—it looked and felt like heavy silk—that had gone into its making. There was enough material in the one dress to craft an entire outfit for herself, including plus fours, a vest and a short cloak. Who could afford such wastefulness?

No, this was certainly some kind of fairy tale. Maybe, Gamsin thought with a degree of wryness, she was dead. She had been told that good people who lived difficult lives were rewarded beyond measure after they died but, in all honesty, she hadn't really been

that good. She stole from the rich and from shopkeepers, picked the pockets of unsuspecting city tourists and worked as a willing accomplice to friends who made their living through scamming the gullible. True, she'd never killed anyone, only maiming some occasionally in self-defence, but spilt blood was still spilt blood and she doubted the Goddess would care to cut a fine line between the two.

And, since she was on this track, since when did a dead person get hungry?

Her stomach, tired of being ignored for days, started up its loud grumbling, pinching Gamsin with its pains. At last, this was something she understood. She used her gnawing hunger to focus her mind, discarding the impractical gown and dressing quickly in her own clothes, dry and fragrant by the fire, sliding the dagger into its usual place inside her boot and finger-combing her shoulder-length dark hair. Then she moved quietly to the door.

It was unlocked and turned smoothly on its hinges, not even squeaking a protest. Gamsin looked left and right, at the stairs that terminated each end of the short, curved corridor, one flight leading up, the other leading down.

Down, she thought. That was more likely where the kitchens were. And, with the rest of the keep in such good condition, she could only hope that the kitchens were, too. Silently, she stepped her way towards the bottom of the keep, marvelling at the illumination cast by the evenly-spaced torches attached high on the wall. They didn't even flicker or smoke.

She reached the bottom of the keep and eased open the large timber door that, by rights, should have led to the grand hall.

What she was expecting she could not have said. Perhaps a couple of people in conversation, a large fire pit in the centre of the hall and some hounds chasing each other in circles. A dais on which rested a long table, lined with heavy timber chairs. Fresh, sweet-smelling bunches of reeds on the flagstones beneath her feet. Instead, it was as if she'd stepped into a different world. All around were ruins, with not a single wall escaping destruction. Where the great hall should have been, gnarled trees grew, their thin, twisted branches belying their age. Instead of stout shutters, the narrow windows were naked of barriers and open to the dark night, wind whipping errant leaves through the gaps. And it was cold, a strong breeze flapping the thin cotton of her shirt against her shivering skin. She looked up to a cloudy sky and the barren blue-white light of a full moon.

Hastily, Gamsin retreated, closing the door behind her.

What was going on?

It was then she noticed another light escaping from under a different door and, too bemused to do any more thinking, she approached it and pushed it open.

It was the keep's solar, that much was obvious, and well attuned to the attentions of a male inhabitant.

In contrast to the hall's coldness, warmth pervaded the chamber, and another fireplace—mirror to the one in her own room—blazed away. Around the walls, covering the stone, were high bookshelves, all of them crammed with leather-bound volumes. There was a table covered with arcane equipment, high stools and, angled toward the giant fire, two comfortable high-backed chairs.

A figure rose from one of the chairs and turned to face her and Gamsin drew in her breath.

Truly, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. And, as part of Nareg's travelling troupe for six years, she had seen many, many men. He wore the simple clothes of an artisan—trousers, a pale shirt and a vest—but they were cut exquisitely and doubtless made of some exotic material.

His skin was nut brown, as though he spent much time in the sun, but his eyes were an intense, vivid blue below delicately arched eyebrows. Like her, he too wore his dark hair down to his shoulders but, where hers was straight, his kinked near the ends. His face was broad yet handsome, his lips full and inviting, his throat strong, his arms whipcord muscle.

Gamsin instantly distrusted him.

"Welcome to my home," he greeted with a small hand gesture, indicating the solar. His voice was deep and melodious.

Gamsin scowled.

"Where am I?" she asked, keeping the reassuring edge of the open door at her back.

"As I say, in my home."

"You live in the castle?"

"In the keep, certainly. The rest is," he hesitated, "too large for just one person."

"Lucky that the original owners don't seem to mind," she commented.

He shrugged. "They don't." He looked at her keenly. "I'm sure you're hungry. Would you like something to eat?"

Hungry? If only he knew. She was beyond hunger into another realm entirely. Her gaze alighted on a plate of half-finished food on the table, seemingly mesmerised by it.

"What are you eating?" she asked, demand threading her voice.

His lips twitched. "Some roasted kid. Potatoes. Bread. I could get you another plate from the kitchen. It won't take long."

And call others to help him subdue her? Or lace the delectable-looking food with some kind of poison? She shook her head.

"I'll have your plate."

He looked down at the table. "My—but my food is cold and it's already almost gone. Wouldn't you prefer something fresh and hot?"

Gamsin shook her head again. "Your plate's fine."

He spent a long moment regarding her—she felt he was peering into her soul—before he nodded and stepped away.

"As you wish."

Gamsin approached the table warily, alert to any movement the handsome stranger might make towards her. She was primed and ready to run the moment he even took a breath that was out of place. She had plenty of practice in that regard. But neither did she want to make it seem that he had her completely cowed, so she straightened her back and tried to inject some hauteur into her expression. His lips twitched but he said nothing. When she was within reach, she snatched the plate and retreated to a position against the wall, daring him to comment, but he remained silent.

"How did you find me?" she finally asked, in between mouthfuls of the best roasted meat she'd ever tasted. Who cooked for him? Whoever it was deserved a medal. Even cold, the meat was delicious and tender.

"I often take walks around," he replied. He returned to his high-backed chair and seated himself. Gamsin got the impression he was trying to make himself appear as harmless as possible. Hah! As if such a transparent trick could fool her.

"It's not often someone comes up the mountain," he continued. "The last time was cen—years ago. What brings you here?"

Gamsin didn't reply, pretending not to hear him as she continued to eat.

"Ah," he said. "You're after secrets. You've probably heard the old legend of the prince who used to live here. I can assure you, my young thief, that you'll not find such treasure here."

Of course. Gamsin, to her growing chagrin, didn't disbelieve him for a minute. Even if there was treasure—and surely that's what he meant by referring to "secrets"—the tall, handsome stranger had acquired possession rights years ago and there was no way she could successfully muscle in on someone else's hoard. This whole quest had been a disaster right from the beginning and she wondered bleakly what she should do next.

As if reading her mind, the stranger smiled and said, "I could take you back to the village if you like." She started, an involuntary response, and his smile vanished.

His gaze sharpened. "Did someone in the village...harm you?"

Gamsin attempted a nonchalant shrug as she finished the meal. She pushed the plate away.

"An oaf," he suggested. "Large and drunk?"

She looked at him with startled eyes. "How did you know?"

"Times don't change that much." He sighed. "Certain types of men never die. Cruelty, it seems, is eternal."

She got the feeling he was referring to something other than Folon's brutal assault, but didn't have time to dwell on it.

"In that case, I suppose you're under my protection now," he said.

"And whose protection might that be?" she asked carefully, narrowing her eyes.

"You can call me Ankoll."

"Like the castle?"

"Like the castle," he agreed.

"Just Ankoll?"

"Just Ankoll."

"No other name?"

"No." He smiled but it was a little sad. "No other name."

Chapter Three

The keep, she discovered in the days that followed, consisted of seven levels but Ankoll seemed to use only three. His solar was on the ground floor and he was gracious enough to tell her it was now equally hers. The second level contained the kitchen and bathroom. The third was her chamber. The fourth and fifth were unused. The sixth was his chamber. And the seventh opened to the elements and provided a view across the entire valley on a clear day. The village, Gamsin noticed, looked very small and toy-like from the top of the keep.

It took Ankoll only a day to decide that she was well suited to being his assistant, which seemed to involve nothing more than sitting in the solar and telling him about her life then sitting in the kitchen and watching him cook.

He especially loved hearing stories of her past exploits.

"So what did you do?" he prompted her on the sixth day, while she was relating the botched theft from a merchant's house.

A slight smile curved her lips as she traced the wooden grain of the table where she was seated.

She raised her voice as he disappeared into the larder. "Tauron said he was an expert at handling ferocious guard dogs. And I believe we would have made it into the man's strongroom if it weren't for the mongrel's two companions."

She paused, unsure if he could still hear her. Like the keep itself, Ankoll's larder was a wonder. Surely nobody lived as well as he! During her tour of the tower, she noticed fat ruby red hams hung from hooks in the large cold room, and there was always a supply of fresh eggs nestled in yellow straw.

He finally re-emerged holding a small sack of flour. He'd already told her about the wild yeasts in the air, and the appearance of the sack meant he was going to make some bread. Fresh bread, silky hams, rich buttery eggs... Both Ankoll's knowledge and his abilities were impressive.

"Did they attack you?" he asked.

"They tried to attack Tauron. I was still high and safe on the window ledge, hanging by the bars." She shook her head in recollection. "I never saw him move as fast as he did that day. He jumped and I caught him with my free hand, and the dogs missed the cloth of his trousers by no more than a hair's breadth."

Ankoll laughed as he measured scoops of flour onto his working table. "I would have paid good coin to see that."

Gamsin smiled, but it was a perfunctory gesture.

In truth, Ankoll puzzled her. It was obvious he was trying to charm her—Gamsin was a keen observer of human behaviour and knew well when she was being charmed. But she couldn't understand why.

She stayed silent and watched him as he worked, admiring the play of muscles in his bare forearms, observing how he added ingredients to the mound of flour and started kneading the dough.

Here was the fantasy of every woman, made flesh. Not only was he handsome, but well proportioned, with lean muscle and tanned skin. He could cook the most mouthwatering dishes imaginable. He was generous of spirit, even if she couldn't exactly fathom how wealthy he was. He moved with grace and confidence.

And he hadn't laid a finger on her, not once in the five days since she had, with little alternative, accepted his protection.

"Are there many merchants in Mishlow City?" he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Merchants, sailors, whores, beggars. Mishlow City is like the whole world trapped in one small space." She watched the way his fingers mixed and folded the mound of unbaked bread, as if it were something precious. The man seemed too good to be true.

"There are also a lot of tricksters around," she added, continuing to focus on him. His knuckles flexed as he worked, transforming the crumbly mess into a supple and smooth dough. "Not hardworking thieves like myself, but others who coast on their attributes."

"Sycophants to wealthy patrons, you mean?"

Gamsin switched her gaze to his face. "Those too. But mostly I'm talking about men who have little but their looks. There are a few such men who are also nice, but they usually have so many women fawning over them that you can barely see them through the crush of hair, fluttering fans and expensive gowns."

"I know the type," he agreed. "All they want to do is gamble with their friends, but their mothers are convinced they need wives to coddle them and so they're unceremoniously thrown to the pack of female wolves."

One side of Gamsin's mouth twitched, but she stilled the movement.

"There are more, many more who are handsome yet cruel," she continued. "Their reputations precede them, yet women who should know better still can't keep away from them."

He didn't even glance at her, as she was expecting him to. She made those comments to elicit some kind of response but, whether consciously or not, Ankoll refused to play the game.

"Human nature sometimes causes us to act like moths to a flame," was all he said, and she ground her teeth in frustration.

Because she knew that Ankoll, who was handsome and smart and funny, would have laid waste to the entire female population of Mishlow City in one eye-blink. And, what's more, she knew he already knew this. His spare, graceful movements betrayed an understanding of, and confidence in, his own body. Yet, here he was, hidden away in an obscure keep at the end of the world, as if nothing else mattered but reading and baking bread.

And what happened when one female stumbled upon his home? Did he try to impress her with his wealth or manners? Astound her with his breadth of education? Show off with feats of strength? No, he treated her like a sister and cooked for her.

Experience had taught Gamsin never to ignore that little voice in her head and, right now, it was telling her that something wasn't right. In fact, a perverse part of her wished Ankoll *would* try to seduce her just so she could skewer him with a spike of sharpened steel and consider her faith—or lack of it—in masculinity restored.

It was all so very mysterious...



But, in turn, Gamsin surprised Ankoll. He stole small sideways glances at her, aware of the intensity in her speculative gaze as she watched him work the bread dough.

That she could read was the first surprise. He thought it was a luxury but she told him that, in her trade, it was a necessity. For how far could a thief get if she couldn't read

the signs outside warehouses, shops and other places of lucrative pilfering? Like everything about the small thief, it all made perfect sense. From her tales, he knew that heavy objects like books were ill-suited to the light-footed lifestyle of a burglar and felt a stab of perverse pleasure at her unfeigned enthusiasm for his library. After countless years of use, he had taken his books for granted, and it was refreshing to regain the delight of opening pages and skimming through text, even if it was through somebody else's eyes.

"So it was Nareg who taught you to read?" he asked, as he placed the dough in an oiled bowl and set it on the wide window ledge. He turned in time to see a wistful smile flit across her face, a surprising contrast to the impervious self-control she tried to show him.

"Read, steal, juggle, climb. Nareg was as a father to me."

Ankoll wiped his hands slowly on a square of rough cloth. "You haven't had a happy life, have you?"

That's what surprised him. That someone who had led a hard and painful life could still retain an air of calm that most would have envied.

Gamsin shrugged. "Happy? What's happy? An aristocrat would laugh to think someone could be joyous over a soft, freshly baked piece of bread." She nodded to the open window and the bowl sitting beside it. "Yet, me with my bread, and she with her scented bath, who's to say which of us is happier?"

Ankoll couldn't restrain the rising admiration he felt for her. She listened to what he was saying, asked intelligent questions and often made profound observations. She was smart, tenacious, and he found her slim form alluring.

"You make a good point, Gamsin Thief."

More and more, he wondered if, after centuries of waiting, he had finally found the one capable of setting him free.

Set him free.

There wasn't much time left, he knew, and he would inevitably have to tell her the truth. Would she run screaming into the night as so many others had...or would she stay?



"Tomorrow..." Ankoll twirled the stem of his crystal wineglass, sending reflected shards of red light spinning against the solar's bookshelves. By unspoken consent, they brought their evening meal down to the solar each day, both comfortable amid the books, ornate tapestries and exotic rugs that carpeted the floor.

He paused, obviously uncomfortable, then began again.

"Tomorrow is the new moon." He hesitated again, clearing his throat, trying another tack. "How much do you know about the legend of Ankoll Castle, Gamsin Thief?"

She was now used to the nickname he'd given her, but her laugh was embarrassed. She'd tried telling him as little as possible about the reason for her long trek to the castle, but thought that the time had finally come for her to be completely candid with him.

"Besides that old sailor, you mean? Well, I didn't believe him immediately so I decided to do some research," she explained. "Mishlow City has several libraries and I visited them all. There were many conflicting stories."

"But did they have a common thread?"

"I suppose." She thought over what she'd read. "The basic elements are the same. A prince of Ankoll Castle, a wizard of great strength, got turned into a dragon by a wizard of even greater strength."

"Do the stories say why?"

"No. Just that a great battle occurred and that's what happened. As revenge for such punishment, the dragon blighted the land, killing knights and stealing treasure and carrying it back to the castle. The attacks grew even more vicious as the last of the Ankoll line died out. Then, over the centuries, less and less was heard of the dragon until, now, it's regarded as nothing more than a fanciful legend."

"The dragon was under a curse," Ankoll said in a strangled tone.

"All good stories have a curse," Gamsin commented. She looked at Ankoll's face and frowned at his paleness. What was wrong with him? "In this case one of the stories says that the dragon takes a human form for half of each month." Her voice slowed as the import of what she was saying hit her. "The dragon turns back into a man on the full moon for two weeks. Then, on the new moon, turns back into a dragon."

Silence pooled in the room as they looked at each other.

"Are you trying to tell me..." Gamsin stopped, unable to continue.

"I am the dragon of Ankoll Castle," he told her.

"No." She shook her head. "Such things don't exist."

"I am the dragon of Ankoll Castle."

"No!" Gamsin didn't realise she was shouting or that she'd overturned her chair when she shot to her feet.

After two weeks of bliss, of merely enjoying the company of a man without fear of physical assault, of spending her days reading and eating, laughing and arguing, fear gripped her by the throat. Finally, she was beginning to relax. For the first time in her life, she was getting used to a consistent schedule of warmth and food and now her tenuous sense of security was crashing down around her feet. Had she enjoyed such security with a madman?

"I was the person cursed by the wizard," he said loudly, while Gamsin kept shaking her head. He strode over to her and grabbed her by the hands—touching her for the first time since she woke in the round chamber fourteen days ago—forcing them away from her ears.

"I have been alive for more than five centuries," he shouted.

"No! You cannot be!"

Tears streamed down Gamsin's face and Ankoll's expression softened. He dropped his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I did not mean to distress you. After so many years, I fear the ability to explain myself has abandoned me." He frowned, his eyes filling with pain.

And, for the first time, Gamsin was driven to comfort another. She knew her tears weren't his fault. It was a reaction to her own selfish comforts, the fantasy that she could spend the rest of her life locked away in the keep, away from a harsh and violent world.

She sniffed loudly and wiped the moisture from her eyes. Strange how, at that moment, in the presence of a large, capable man, she felt she was the one who needed to be strong. She attempted a wavering smile. It was a small smile but she could tell he appreciated the gesture by the way his body relaxed.

"Come," he said. "Sit by the fire and I'll tell you everything." He offered his hand and she took it, letting him lead her to the two high-backed chairs that always faced the hearth.

He sat back in his chair, watching the flames with brooding eyes, reliving a past centuries old.

"As you've probably surmised by now, I am—was—a Prince of Ankoll. The last prince. My parents, the king and queen, wanted me to learn courtly duties, but my love

was sorcery. Wilfully, I disobeyed them to pursue my own interests. As their only son and heir, they begged me to put the administration and future of their holdings before my arcane studies, but I closed my ears to their entreaties. My father and his proctor would tour our land while I hid myself away in the keep. My mother would listen to petitions, but I was happy and ignorant in my solitude. I thought I was...invincible."

Gamsin wished there was something she could say to ease the anguish in his voice. But whatever happened had happened centuries ago, and there was nothing she could do or say that could change such history.

"As I grew in power, I challenged other sorcerers, confident—you may even say arrogant—in my abilities. And, it's true, I defeated them."

He grew silent and the crackles from the burning logs once more dominated the solar.

"What happened?" Gamsin prompted in a gentle voice.

"Ten years after I began my studies, I finally met a sorcerer who was my better. But rather than yield to him, knowing he could best me with little effort, I foolishly challenged him to a magic duel." Ankoll looked up, as though he could see through the thick stone walls of the keep. "It was a beautiful day, that day we did battle. A lazy summer haze lay over the fields where we held our contest. The sun was a warm orb in the sky and I thought nothing he could do would touch me... I was wrong."

"You lost."

Ankoll laughed without mirth. "Lost? Yes, I wish it was only a loss, but it was so much more than that. Beltrin of the West, master sorcerer, not only bested me but wanted to make an example of me, to show that he did not suffer fools gladly, least of all young, wizardly fools. So he laid a curse on me. For half of a month, between full moon and new, I would retain the form of man. But, for the other half, between new moon and full," he looked at Gamsin and his blue eyes were bleak, "I would roam the world as a dragon."

She'd guessed what was coming, but Gamsin still drew a startled breath. Looking at Ankoll, the expression on his face, she did not doubt that every word out of his mouth was true. So he was the dragon of Ankoll, the dragon of myth.

"Beltrin left me most of my power, but not the ability to lift such a curse. I could still properly maintain this keep, continue my studies in the minor spells, manipulate objects and indulge in some small weather-changing, and I've been most assiduous in my learning." For the first time that evening, his eyes glinted in amusement. "You may have noticed the snow, for example, on your way to the castle?"

"That was you?"

He inclined his head. "I didn't know whether you were friend or foe, Gamsin Thief. Forgive me for taking such a liberty."

But Gamsin's mind was on other matters. To be condemned to such a half-life, once man then dragon, with no redemption for hundreds of years... It put the small troubles of her own life in perspective.

"Is there any way to lift the enchantment?" she asked.

Ankoll sobered immediately. "It's no easy matter," he said and his gaze bored into her. "Not only does it require an exceptional circumstance, but also exceptional qualities."

Exceptional qualities? Why was he looking at her like that? Surely he didn't expect her to do something? She was only Gamsin, former circus performer. Thief. Soiled woman, a voice in her head added. How could she help lift a dragon's curse?

"I see." Her voice was not promising.

Ankoll frowned. Clearly this was not the reaction he was hoping for, but Gamsin didn't know what else he was expecting. Surely he didn't think that she, not even nobleborn, could help him?

"The first part to lifting the curse is difficult enough," he persevered. "It requires a woman."

A woman. At twenty years of age, Gamsin hardly thought of herself as a woman. In her mind, a woman was someone with a lush figure and long, flowing locks. She was more a girl child with her slender figure and short-cropped hair. But twice already, men had taken what she'd sought to keep closed and secret, so she supposed she qualified on that count.

She must have nodded because Ankoll continued.

"The second part... The second part is more...demanding. My female savior must feed me for the last three nights of my dragon incarnation then...then mate with me when I turn back to human form."

A weighty silence filled the room.

"It seems a most complicated curse," Gamsin finally said faintly.

"Beltrin was a complicated sorcerer. And more than a little malicious."

Gamsin tried to speak, but her lips moved with no words emerging. Disconcerted, she cleared her throat and tried again. "Have there been no others in the centuries since you were cursed?" she asked.

"Although there have been many treasure hunters over the years, they've been mostly men," he explained. "Occasionally, one would have an accompanying female but, after a day or so in my presence as a dragon, their bravery would desert them."

"Is a dragon so fearsome then?" Her voice still lacked strength.

"A dragon... When I'm a dragon, I...lose sense of my humanity. I become the dragon, with its taste for flesh and gold. It is very hard to control." He paused. "Truly, I can understand people choosing discretion over valour."

"So your— I would have to feed you for three nights?" The words slipped out of her mouth unbidden and now that they had been uttered she couldn't retract them although, in truth, she was only speaking what was in her heart.

She knew from the sudden lightening of his expression that he thought she had agreed to help him and suppressed a grimace. It was true that he had been kind and generous, but now their conversation was veering into dangerous ground regarding things of myth, such as sorcerers and dragons. Was he perhaps mad? She searched his face, but saw only a guileless expression, tender lips and eyes of brilliant blue.

His voice was steady and matter of fact. "During the day I will bring back animals. You will need to bleed them for me in time for my midnight meal." He leaned forward, grasping her hand and holding it firmly between his. "You have to be there to watch me eat, each night for three nights."

His flesh was warm and strong against hers. "And...and on the fourth?"

"There's a bench at the top of the keep. You will need to disrobe and await me there." He must have felt her trembling beneath his fingers, because he squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I assure you, Gamsin, I'll be gentle."

Gamsin pulled herself free of his hold and wiped her hand on her plus fours. What had she said? What was she promising? Why had such words emerged from her throat? She saw the expression on his face—the hope, the happiness. What had she done?

"I will bid you goodnight then, Ankoll." She had to get away to think before her words caused further trouble.

His voice followed her as she retreated. "I will come with food on the eleventh night," he said. "Until then, my keep is your keep."

"Thank you," she answered, her voice strangled, not turning to look at him. And she fled.

Chapter Four

Did the scant weeks of her life at Ankoll Keep really mean that much to her? So much that she was willing to go through with Ankoll's scheme to release him from a curse centuries old?

Gamsin had time to mull over such thoughts for the next eleven days. Every afternoon, she would climb to the keep's tower and look out over the countryside.

What should she do?

She couldn't miss the buildings that comprised Ankoll Village, but shuddered when she thought about it. No, she couldn't go back there, not even if her life depended on it.

But...looking farther, beyond the fields and verdant patches of forest, she knew there were other villages. Places where the natives were perhaps friendlier to strangers. There was enough food in the larder below to stock up for weeks and, even on foot, she would be assured of reaching another village before her provisions ran out.

She didn't owe Ankoll any loyalty. True, he had rescued her from a blizzard but it was a blizzard he had sent in the first place. And just because somebody had extended hospitality did not mean that she was beholden to them till the end of her life. He had already lived this long between two states—hundreds and hundreds of years. Wasn't he was capable of waiting longer?

Why did it have to be her?

Didn't she have enough problems in her life? Maybe it didn't compare to Ankoll's in terms of number of years, but in terms of personal violation and self-esteem ripped away like it was made of spider web...

The feeding was going to be bad enough, but what about the...the mating?

As far as Gamsin was concerned, mating was a painful and dirty thing. If she focused, she thought she might be able to complete the feeding part of the ritual, but the mating?

It was at that point, looking out over the countryside while the sun set red in the west, that Gamsin appreciated what a perverse sense of revenge Beltrin of the West, the master sorcerer, harboured. That he should not only lay such a half-life on his vanquished foe, but also put the full weight of salvation in the hands of a third person. Ankoll told her that he lost a bit of himself when he turned into a dragon. While she could not imagine what a real-life dragon looked like, she wondered what he lost of himself. Was the dragon violent? Intimidating? And, if so, how could any woman willingly offer her body to such an animal?

Such thoughts were almost enough to send Gamsin screaming toward the nearest road and back to the smelly, yet comforting, civilisation of Mishlow City.

Almost.

Because, even alone in the late afternoon, with the wind whipping her short dark hair, Gamsin had to admit that she never felt happier in her life. And it wasn't just because she had enough food to fill her belly, enough blanket to warm her toes and enough books to feed her brain. When she descended to the solar each evening, to eat her solitary meal by the fire, all she could think of was Ankoll's reassuring bulk and the quick intelligence in his intense blue eyes. Maybe if she rescued him from this thing, from this dreaded curse, he would thank her in some way. She was no aristocrat, but maybe he could help with her dream of a cottage by the sea. Yes, if she was going to go through with this, she needed to keep one thing in front of her at all times, and that was the image of her cherished cottage.

So, she waited, yearning—yet afraid—of the march of time, each day fading into night and each night melting into day. Until the eleventh night.

Gamsin had not heard a single hint of the dragon for all the preceding nights. There were no screams of anguish, no yells of fear. In fact, she might have merely been waiting for a friend to arrive, so complete and tranquil was the silence. But, on the morning of the eleventh day, a compulsion gripped her, urging her to the tower at dawn rather than was her habit at sunset.

And, when she did, she beheld a sight that stopped the breath in her throat.

He was waiting.

She hadn't even heard his approach, but there was no mistaking the gigantic scaled form that landed in front of the open balusters on the keep's topmost level, its body wedged between two pillars. Each of its brilliant blue eyes was as big as her head, staring

unblinkingly at her. The rest of its body was bronze, graduating to black along its spine and near the ends of its tail and claws.

Claws! Each claw was surely as long as her arm, wickedly curved and looking lethally sharp. And, beneath one set of claws—Gamsin's own eyes widened—was the body of a dead sheep, its matted fleece red with its own blood.

The dragon looked up to the sky and roared, flames shooting out of its mouth and nostrils, the animal cry echoing through the valleys around the castle.

For a moment, Gamsin thought it would approach her and, indeed, it made a small move in her direction before it bellowed again and launched itself from the keep, its leather wings flapping in the wind.

As the sound of its flying receded, Gamsin finally took a breath. She'd wondered about the gashes in the stone floor and now knew what had made them. The rips in the stone corresponded to the dragon's claws, its depth indicating times of past frustration perhaps? Of women who had swooned at the sight of the large, winged beast? Or perhaps women who had promised salvation but never even came?

She moved her attention from the jagged gashes to the sheep that lay, bleeding, on the floor. Upon inspection, she found the body still warm. Newly dead then with—she felt the throat—its neck broken. Perhaps not a calm death, with the shadow of a dragon descending upon it, but a quick one, nonetheless.

Her inspections of the keep had turned up a chest in the solar marked "11-13 nights" which now, confronted by a fading animal's lifeblood, took on an added significance. She descended to the first level, retrieved and opened the small chest. Inside, she found two hooks and a pulley.

It was lucky, she thought in a flash of humour, that he'd found a circus performer as a potential saviour. She doubted many others would know what to do with the equipment. But it still took a good hour for her to set up the system. Her nimble fingers secured the pulley to one of a set of large metal eyelets fixed regularly around the tower's six evenly spaced columns. Then, after a small rest, she threaded rope through both the pulley and the smaller hook, attached it to the sheep through its bound back legs and, with one final effort, pulled the animal vertically. The dead sheep, now hanging upside down, swayed slightly, its blood dripping into a shallow channel that ran the inside circumference of the lookout.

All she had to do now was wait, and she did so nervously.

Her clothes were soiled so she spent the afternoon washing them, knowing they would not be ready in time. Could she—should she—wear that wonderful gown she found in the small chest in her chamber?

Dressed in her underclothes, Gamsin went to her room and lifted the lid, running her fingers over the material of the gown folded beneath.

"If I'm helping to lift an enchantment," she said to herself, "I might as well dress accordingly."

Knowing that Ankoll was a sorcerer, Gamsin was not surprised that the gown fitted perfectly. Tucked down one edge of the chest she also found a pair of slippers and they, too, fitted her slender feet. She descended to the solar and walked up to the long mirror that resided in one corner, gazing at herself in disbelief.

Why, one could almost believe she was nobility, she thought, as she twirled in front of the silvered surface. The bodice swelled over her slight breasts and tucked in at her neat waist before dropping in heavy folds to her slippered feet. The neckline of the dark ruby gown was cut square across her chest making her ivory skin glow. If one only went by appearances, people would take her for an aristocrat rather than a thief.

She twirled again in delight then gradually stopped. How could she feed a dragon in such garb? What if she got blood on the beautiful material? Truly, two weeks of easy living were enough to dull her sense of practicality.

After she'd freed Ankoll from his enchantment, he would be at liberty to go back to his old life, maybe even rebuild his estates. And, Gamsin knew, such plans rarely included women like her.

Chastened, she went back to her chamber, kicked off her slippers and put on the spare change of clothes she always carried with her. She should remember who she was—what she was—and be grateful for a monetary reward when all this was over.

The afternoon ticked slowly away into a chill and cloudy evening.



At midnight, the decision was taken out of her hands. Gamsin felt a pull, almost physical, in her breast and knew it was the dragon calling to her. She could, if she wanted, resist that urging. It would be a difficult and long battle, but she knew she had it within herself to hold herself strong against his appeal. But did she want to? Refusing the

dragon would mean refusing Ankoll and her banishment from the keep and, it shamed her to admit, for the moment her lifestyle at the keep mattered more to her than Ankoll's enchantment.

Still, she had made a promise, so she let the pull take her out of the solar and up the stairs until she emerged into the night of the tower's lookout.

The night was calm and cold, the moon casting luminous diffuse lighting through the clouds. It was a deceptive light that still kept everything in dark shadow. As she walked across the stone floor, the hulking inky object at one end of the tower moved and she saw the silhouette of its thorny throat lift.

The dragon breathed out fire around and above her, and six torches, held high in sconces against the pillars, caught alight. The flames flickered against the scaly hide, reflected in the glassy orbs of its eyes, and Gamsin felt herself shiver from more than the cold.

It arched its neck to look at her. Expectantly.

Of course! The sheep.

Hypnotised by the sight of the magnificent beast, Gamsin had forgotten about the carcass, but she went to it now, lowering it via the pulley and dragging it over to the middle of the floor. Deliberately, she kept her back to the dragon. It was difficult enough pulling an animal's blood-drained body across stone without thinking of what was about to devour it. Sharp talons. Sharp teeth. Animal instinct. Her slight, vulnerable body within striking distance. She tried not to, but she remembered Ankoll's words that, when he was a dragon, he took on its taste for gold...and flesh. Just thinking about that caused her to drop the sheep and run back to the relative safety of the far wall, pressing herself against the chill rock while she panted heavily.

But the dragon took no notice. Ravenously, it descended on the sacrifice. Gamsin closed her eyes but could not shut her ears to the sounds it produced—the snap and crunch of leg bones and ribs and the wet chewing of muscle.

When the sounds died down, Gamsin cautiously opened one eye.

Gone!

The dragon, swiftly and silently, had disappeared, leaving her feeling strangely empty.



On the twelfth morning of his dragon incarnation, Ankoll brought a kid, its ears still rounded in youth, its face soft with the fat of an animal not yet mature. Gamsin touched its cheek gently before performing the bleeding ritual for the second time. Here, at her feet, was the sum of things—the terror of the dragon and the tragedy of a man forced to take its form for half his life. The sight of the second sacrifice steeled her resolve. Surely it would be no mean thing to lift such a curse and allow a man a chance at a normal life? How many innocent lives—human and animal—had already been consumed by this centuries-old enchantment?

That night, she still retreated to the doorway, but kept her eyes open, watching as the dragon dispatched its meal with an incredible neatness before taking to the sky once more.

On the thirteenth morning, he brought a young stag, and Gamsin hoped this would be the last time he ever seized such quarry. With rising determination and gritted-teeth efficiency, she bled the animal and watched again as the dragon devoured its tender flesh.

As its shadowy wings finally disappeared into the night, she let out a breath and sagged against the wall. That, then, was the first part of the enchantment and it had been well done. She had brought the three animals to the dragon and waited while it finished its meals.

But what about the rest?

Gamsin fell into a dreamless sleep that thirteenth night, waking the next morning with shaking trepidation.

She had to mate with Ankoll.

Mate! No, no, I can't do it! Gamsin shot up in bed, grabbing at the sheets with white knuckles, trying, failing, to stop her thoughts.

He didn't know what he asked, this sorcerer-turned-dragon. She'd already been violated twice in her life, roughly used then discarded. Wouldn't this night be more of the same? Use then discard. How could she willingly place herself in such a situation again?

But then the past three nights would be a waste. Three sacrifices with no resolution.

Resolution? What did she care of someone else's resolution? This was her own body, already sacrificed twice to the unwanted lust of men. No, she could not go through with this, promise or not.

He has been kind to me.

The kindness of an ulterior motive. The kindness of someone who wanted a great favour. Such kindness wasn't worth anything in and of itself.

Perhaps I'll be able to stay in the keep if I do this.

So she was a whore then? A woman who paid for the protection of this building's solid walls and isolation with her body?

I've been free to leave anytime I wanted. He's never kept me here by force.

Gamsin paused and the sigh she exhaled came from the depth of her being. It was true and she could not argue it. Never, at any point, had there been any force applied to her. She had been free to come and go as she pleased. In fact, at any point over the past two weeks, she had been free to ransack his keep and flee the castle, knowing he would not pursue her for vengeance.

And how do I know that he wouldn't?

Because—dear Goddess, was it true?—with his laughing eyes, his gentleness, his sense of humour, a kernel of trust had been planted where before there was none.

Trust...

As she walked the keep that day, she ruminated on that one, most profound word. Up till now, there was only one man she'd ever trusted and that was Nareg. He'd taken in the street orphan, taught her skills and provided her an opportunity with his circus troupe. He'd complimented and cajoled her, berated and beamed, and turned the obligatory blind eye when she used less savoury means to fatten her personal earnings. Even when she left his troupe to find her own way in life, he had been generous and understanding.

True, Ankoll had not done as much to warrant the kind of respect and trust that was Nareg's due but, she knew, he was on the path to it. Which was why, weeks later, she was still here instead of at a distant village, pawning trinkets she'd stolen from his ransacked chambers.

But the question that plagued Gamsin—the question she knew she had to answer within hours—was, was that enough? Was a fledgling trust enough to overcome her anxiety?

Despite her pangs of hunger, she didn't eat. In the late afternoon, walked up to the top of the keep, sat on one of the balusters by the doorway and lent against a pillar. Lazily, her gaze roamed the countryside, hazy on a day of unaccustomed heat.

She had stayed and kept Ankoll company. She'd listened to him and believed his tale of sorcery. She'd bled and fed him three midnights in a row. Could she continue with the rest? Could she offer her body to him?

The afternoon deepened to a jewel-toned dusk, deep and rich, and she still didn't have her answer. The dusk deepened into fingers of night, the first stars shining their white flickering points in the firmament, and she still didn't have an answer. The constellations asserted themselves, forming intricate patterns in the nocturnal sky and—by the Goddess—she *still* didn't have an answer.

It was only when the dragon arrived, silent as always, with only the downdraft of his giant wings signalling his approach, that clarity struck.

She watched as the dragon's claws touched on the floor, clicking against the stone. She saw a shimmer obscure the air around it. Then Ankoll emerged from the red-tinged flare. He was as magnificent as the beast he became. Naked, muscles rippled under his tanned skin as he approached her. She couldn't help herself—she looked down at the apex of his thighs. He wasn't aroused but, even in repose, his shaft was thick and long.

The night's shadows hid his eyes from her view, but she could see a slight smile on his face. He reached forward with his large hands and took hers.

"Thank you," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "Nobody has ever done this much for me."

Gamsin swallowed but said nothing, overwhelmed by his physical presence.

One side of his mouth quirked. "Gamsin, saviour of the last descendant of Ankoll, will you do me the pleasure of mating with me?"

Gamsin took a deep breath and looked straight into his eyes.

"Ankoll...no."

Chapter Five

To his credit, he didn't do any of what she was imagining he might. He did not rear back in anger, strike her or throw her hands from him in disgust. Instead, to her surprise, he gave her fingers a light squeeze then gently let go.

"You are not yet healed, are you?" he asked, but it was a rhetorical question. "I understand. But, Gamsin, I am weary from centuries of this burden..."

Tears welled and trickled down her cheeks. She could hear the weight behind his words, the echoes of bleak and dusty years in his voice. She shook her head.

"Ankoll, I am sorry. But the last time...it was so recent...I still...still..."

He paused, obviously thinking hard.

"What if I offered you an alternative?" he finally said.

"An...?"

She could see he was thinking as he was talking.

"You dream, don't you?"

"Y-yes."

"What if our mating happened in a dream? Would that bother you?"

Gamsin took a step back. What was he suggesting? "I—I don't—"

He held up a finger. "Gamsin, my saviour, listen to me. What if we could mate in a dream state? If I could take you to a fantasy world and lift your worries from you? If I could do this, if I promised not to hurt you, would you consider mating with me then?"

Dream state? Lift her worries from her? Were things like this even possible or was she being exploited once again?

"Gamsin," his voice broke into her thoughts, "do you trust me?" He held out his hand.

Yes, she trusted him. Perhaps not enough to put her life in his hands but...enough to dream with?

"What if I want to end the dream?" she asked, still all bristles and suspicion.

"We will proceed at your pace," he assured her. "I promise, I will not do anything against your will."

Gamsin looked at his hand. Before, men had taken what they wanted without asking, without caring. In requesting her cooperation, Ankoll had done what no other man had. He gave the power back to her to make the final decision.

Still, her fingers were cold as she slipped them into his. "I trust you, Ankoll." She didn't need to add, *please don't abuse such trust*.

He nodded. "Thank you."

Wind whipped up around them as he spoke, but it held heat instead of cold, light instead of darkness. She could see his eyes now, the intense blue watching her, beckoning her.

She took one step toward him and fell...



...landing on a soft mattress. She looked around her in wonder. They were in her chamber in the keep, the shutters open and sunlight streaming through the open window. There was another weight in bed with her and she turned her head to see Ankoll's smiling figure. He was dressed in his cotton shirt, the laces at his throat undone, smooth, tanned skin visible beneath.

"Ah," he said, evidently pleased. "I wanted to go where you were last happy. I'm honoured to see that you chose my humble abode."

So she was directing the dream? Gamsin felt a jolt of power wash through her at the thought. Tentatively she reached out and touched him on the jaw, feeling the slight stubble rough against her fingers. Amazing how she didn't feel any revulsion at the sensation. He caught her hand and kissed each of her fingers, pausing between each small caress. That was...almost pleasurable.

Even when he shifted closer, his head descending toward hers, she felt no distaste. He brushed his lips against hers, once, twice. On the third try, she stopped him, pulling him into a full kiss, impatient for the deeper embrace.

Yes, it was exactly like a dream, exactly like dreams she'd had in the past. Except, there was something she couldn't quite fathom. Something to do with past dreams turning into nightmares, but she couldn't recall the exact details. Pleasure turning to...fear? Hurt?

Ankoll's lips softened, his tongue teasing her lips, and the filament of unease evaporated. Her doubts disappeared. An attractive man was kissing her and Gamsin was determined to enjoy the experience.

She opened her mouth and allowed him entrance, their tongues sporting coyly with each other. Of their own volition, her hands moved to his body, running over his chest and feeling the muscle beneath the thin cotton of the shirt.

He moved, pulling the shirt higher, allowing her fingers to roam over his skin, giving her time to adjust to the increasing intimacy.

It was like playing with a new and fascinating toy and—more importantly—having the freedom to do so. And, to her delight, he began playing back.

Slowly, he started stroking her neck with the back of his hand and she leaned into him, rubbing against him like a cat, her eyes closed. She wanted—willed—his hand to move lower and he eventually obliged, stroking her breasts again with the back of his hand, watching the nipples harden and pucker against her skin. She felt her shirt being lifted up, over her body and head, and heard the soft sound of it as it hit the floor next to her bed.

"You are lovely," he murmured, planting featherlight kisses on her smooth pale skin. Nobody had ever called her lovely before.

"You are brave and strong." He nipped at the side of her ribcage, the ticklish sensation making her laugh. He lifted his head and looked at her. "I would like to make love to you. Not just because you have saved me from a sorrowful burden, but because, in truth, you are also intelligent and kind and worthy of any man's ardour."

She recognised the expression on his face, the sharp hunger in his blue eyes, and knew she should feel afraid, but she didn't. Outside the day was bright with the afternoon sun and she knew the bad things that she couldn't fully recall only happened in the shadows, in suffocation, dankness and sweat.

She breathed in the sweet scent of summer and smiled at him.

"I would not be so brave if I didn't surrender to my fantasies," she commented softly. A lightheadedness was making it hard for her to think but, in truth, she didn't

mind at all. A heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders and she was not inclined to ask for it back.

She put her hands around his neck.

"Kiss me again," she said.

He leaned down and, once more, their lips met. He probed her mouth with his tongue while a hand slid to her breast, his fingers circling, circling the flesh until her nipples hardened and she pushed against him, urging a more satisfying stroke. When he took the nipple between thumb and forefinger, she gasped.

Oh, she had never felt so delicious in her life. Ankoll left her mouth and moved to her arched neck, kissing the sensitive flesh while she slowly writhed. He moved lower until he captured the other breast in his mouth and Gamsin gasped, feeling his tongue flick against her, setting a counterpoint rhythm to the motions of his fingers on her other breast.

And, suddenly, she felt hot. Too hot. Her trousers were restrictions against her skin, a rising dampness in her groin demanding release. Impatiently she shifted her hips, a silent request and, after a slight hesitation, Ankoll obliged, undoing the laces and peeling the clothes off her legs.

"We can take this slow," he murmured. "As slow as you like."

"I-I don't know what to do," Gamsin was forced to admit. She was a thief, an acrobat, a cunning wharf rat who judiciously liberated goods from people with more money than sense. She wasn't a real woman. Real women had rich gowns, ornate hairstyles and powdered faces. With her short, straight, dark hair people mistook her for a slim teenage boy. Surely—

"Oh!"

That was her fault for not paying attention, for while she was agonising, Ankoll was doing. Doing wonderful, incredible things to her body. Her legs wide, she shuddered with a mixture of pleasure and disbelief as he stroked her dark curls then bent his head to lap at her with his tongue, gently parting her lips and nuzzling at her sex, sending sharp jolts of dizzying sensation to mix with toe-curling waves of sheer, unadulterated pleasure.

She grabbed his hair with her hands, fistfuls of smooth, dark chocolate cascading over her fingers, eager to...push him away? Pull him closer? Was this what the women of the circus giggled about? She groaned aloud. How could anyone even think with such ripples of mind-numbing agitation conquering their soul?

Then even thinking about thinking was ruthlessly dismissed. She felt her body coil, could hear her breath quicken and become more laboured as a spiral of exquisite, erotic feeling took hold, radiating from her groin and sheathing her body until she was fully in its grip. She cried out, eyes suddenly open, and bucked, riding wave upon wave of pleasure. On and on it went. The world stopped. Only feeling continued, rocking her body with its convulsions.

Ankoll edged back up to look in her face and, as she shuddered, something large and hard began to invade her.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered, his voice calming her unnamed fears. "I will not harm you, my little saviour."

She felt him start to move inside her, her wetness making his passage easier. Slowly he progressed, then retreated, before moving forward again. Gamsin could feel herself stretching to accommodate him, thought she should be panicking, pulling away, but all she could think was how wonderful he felt. Wantonly, she coiled her legs around him and moved lasciviously, encouraging him, but he still took his time, only slowly moving deeper until he was buried inside her to the hilt.

"Ah," he sighed. "You feel wondrous."

Then, as he started to move, it began again. With each thrust, the coiling started anew. And, this time, he met her, movement for movement, sensation for sensation until she climaxed for the second time, feeling shudders rack his body as he held her in a tight embrace and emptied himself into her.

"You should sleep now, Gamsin Thief," he told her in a low voice, moving a tendril of hair away from her face with a gentle finger.

She tried to say something, tried to capture his hand, but a languid heaviness consumed her and she drifted into unconsciousness.



Gamsin sat up in bed, gasping, her hand moving to her throat, feeling the soft cotton of her nightdress against her skin.

Nightdress?

She looked down at herself. She was in her bed, the blanket covering her. Around her, the furnishings of her chamber looked ordinary and mundane. One of her window's shutters was open, spilling bright morning sunlight into the room.

Sunlight?

But shouldn't she be at the top of the keep? And what happened to the dragon? She frowned, trying to concentrate. She remembered the dragon, remembered it turning into Ankoll and him approaching her. Oh, she had tried to do as he asked. Truly, he was an exceptional specimen of manhood and she wanted to show her gratitude for all he'd done—extending his protection and the peace of his keep to her. But he'd chosen the wrong deliverer. She was too weak and too broken to aid him and had said no.

What had happened then? She wished she knew, but a fog descended on her recollection.

Did they mate? Did he—?

Frantically, she moved a hand between her legs, but felt no betraying wetness. No, no man had found his own pleasure inside her body last night.

But if she had turned Ankoll down, who moved her to her room and changed her clothing before settling her peacefully in bed?

Gamsin threw back the covers and got up, dressing quickly. Hopping, she pulled on her boots then opened the door, flying down the stairs. She stopped on the second level when she heard sounds emerging from the kitchen, and approached warily.

"Greetings." Ankoll smiled, turning at the sound of her quiet footsteps. He was carving a loaf of bread, laying thick slices on a platter, next to wedges of ham and yellow farm cheese. Beside the platter stood two mugs of ale. Despite herself, Gamsin's mouth began to water. She'd tried her best for the past two weeks, but had to admit she didn't have a tenth of Ankoll's culinary skills. It was all she could do to hack off some inexpert pieces of ham and wolf it down just to keep the hunger pangs away. In truth, she'd never eaten so well as when she dined with him.

"Breakfast will be ready in minutes," he told her.

She moved to a bench and sat, still eyeing him with suspicion.

"You're back to being human." It was obvious, but the only thing she could think of saying.

He nodded his head agreeably, a smile playing on his lips. He looked the same as always, dressed in his usual open-necked shirt and dark breeches. His fingers were their

usual lean lengths, not even slightly resembling flesh-rending talons. But Gamsin could not forget the night visions that had confronted her at the top of the keep.

"Will you...turn back into a dragon?" she asked, watching him.

Ankoll brought the mugs over to the rough wooden table, followed by the platter.

"No," he paused. "Well, I don't really know. Perhaps not."

He helped himself to some food.

"But we didn't..." Gamsin faltered. "I don't remember..."

"We...came to a different resolution. The first part of the curse is lifted, I know that to be true. But I can still feel the spirit of the dragon within me."

The spirit of a dragon...the sharing of one consciousness between two entities...

"What's that like?" Gamsin asked, chewing on some bread. He'd made her two loaves before he changed, but they had only lasted a week and got hard and dry near the end. Now Ankoll was back, and she gratefully devoured a slice of the fresh, light loaf.

"To be a dragon?"

She nodded.

"It's a fearsome beast, ruled by twin passions of greed and hunger. It's difficult having such an unbridled spirit rule you for half of your life." He drank some ale. "It frightens me to admit that such licentiousness can be liberating, until you hear the cries of people and realise that you've struck down one of their loved ones, or spirited away their only food for the winter." He swirled the liquid around in his mug, watching it. "Maybe that's what the sorcerer Beltrin had in mind all along when he laid such a curse on me—to show me the folly of ignoring my own people and putting my own needs above theirs."

"But if the curse is lifted, then you can be ruler to your people again," Gamsin countered. "You can bring the castle and your lands back to greatness." It made her heart sink to say each word, but it was the truth.

Ankoll smiled and shook his head.

"I am centuries past doing this. My blood kin are all dust and my lands now belong to another lord. It is only the isolation of this castle—and the barriers I have put to its access—that keep me safe here. No, I have another task and that's to find Beltrin."

"The sorcerer who did this to you?"

"The curse is not fully lifted, I can feel this. I need to find him." He lifted his blue gaze to Gamsin's. "Will you help me?"

"I? Help you?" Surely she was the one responsible for the curse continuing instead of lifting. Hadn't she done enough damage? "How could—"

"You are brave and smart, young Gamsin. You are also of this world and know more of its workings than I. My knowledge is centuries old and pitiful."

"But how can you be sure Beltrin is still alive?"

Ankoll took a deep breath. "I can feel him still in this spirit world. His trace is faint, but I can track it. Tell me you will help me."

She looked at him helplessly. Her, help a sorcerer? Surely he was jesting! But, then, how else could she make up for her betrayal?

"You have helped me once before," he pursued. "You showed courage when none others, in hundreds of years, did. Help me again, Gamsin Thief. Please."

Chapter Six

"I was wondering when I'd see you again." Ankoll smiled and stretched out his hand, and Gamsin took it.

"I missed you," she told him and there was a touch of wonder in her voice, unused as she was to hearing such words pass her lips.

"And I, you."

"Where are we?"

"Ah, you've never seen this place in person, have you? This is my chamber in Ankoll Keep."

Gamsin looked around. It was a little more cluttered than her own room at the keep. There were three chests against one curve of the wall instead of one, a large padded chair with intricately carved armrests facing the fireplace. And against another wall...

She walked over to the long, slim mirror and saw she was wearing the ruby gown from the chest in her chamber.

"This is too fine for me," she began to protest, but he walked up to her and laid a finger on her lips, stopping her words.

"From the moment I saw you, I knew you would look good in such colors. Jewel colors for a jewel."

Gamsin recalled something he said. "How can this be the keep? We are travelling...trying to find the sorcerer Beltrin."

"Yes, we are travelling. But you are also asleep."

She shook her head. "This is beyond me. How can we be at the keep when we're travelling? And how can we be speaking if I'm asleep? Look," she indicated the window. "It is bright day."

He pulled her over to the bed and sat her down, settling next to her.

"Do you remember my asking a favour of you? That you would feed me for three nights as a dragon then mate with me when I turned back into human form?"

"Y-yes." It was painful to think about because she knew she'd let him down that last, fourth, night.

He seemed to read her thoughts. "You didn't fail me, young Gamsin. We did indeed mate."

She stared at him.

"No, we couldn't have! The next morning, I...felt myself..." She faltered, unwilling to say more.

"Between two people," he stroked her cheek, "especially when one is particularly honest and courageous, mating can transcend the physical. So, in order to break part of the enchantment, I brought you here, to a dreamworld. I asked for your trust and, in return, I dulled as many of your fears as I could."

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"I... We..."
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"You will. When you trust me as much in the physical world as you do here, you will."

Gamsin tried to concentrate on his face, but his words and body began to fade, blending into the rest of the room.

"No." She reached out, wanting to spend more time with him, to listen in pleasure to his calm, deep voice, but her hand passed through him as if through vapour.

Everything turned to black.



Gamsin lifted her head and punched at her bag, trying to rearrange it into a more comfortable shape. She was angry—angry at the misty morning, angry at Ankoll, angry at herself. For the truth was, she'd allowed her stay at Ankoll Keep to dull her senses and make her soft. And now, instead of relishing the fact that she'd found a thick mat of moss under a giant tree for her sleep on the previous night, all she could think was that her chamber at the keep was much more comfortable.

[&]quot;Yes. we did."

[&]quot;But I don't remember."

Her chamber.

And that was the other thing. She considered herself a realist, one not given to flights of fantasy, yet here she was already assigning herself ownership of an entire room, as if rights to it were hers to enjoy or give away.

She shifted position, turning on her other side, but that meant she faced the tree. No, the position was too vulnerable, so she shifted again. In front of her, tiny wisps of smoke from the embers of the previous night's fire drifted straight up, indicating a still morning.

She yawned and reluctantly got to her feet. Ankoll Keep was a week's travel away and the sooner she stopped thinking about it the better. There was a creek nearby and she knew she should have walked down to it, to freshen up and perform her daily ablutions, but—to be honest—she just couldn't face what she knew she would find there.

Off-key whistling split the morning air and Gamsin grimaced. This was the third morning that the day had begun like this and it wasn't getting any easier to bear. Maybe it was because she was so used to travelling alone that having a companion was difficult to tolerate. Or it could be a reaction to Ankoll's unbridled cheerfulness.

He appeared from behind a tree and held up a hand—four silver fish dangled from a string.

She didn't know whether he'd used fishing skills to net his catch or just magicked them onto his hook. That was the burr that chafed her. Ankoll was approaching their journey as a time of relaxation and fun. He always had to keep an eye on the future, he'd told her, always careful never to wander too far in case the change caught him and he wreaked chaos on unsuspecting innocents. But now, with his curse almost lifted, he could afford to enjoy a life that had passed him by for centuries.

He may not have used his weather-changing sorcerer skills to conjure the cool mornings and warm sunny days, but he certainly used some of his powers to start their evening fire and—she was sure as she eyed the fish coolly—catch their meal for the day.

It shouldn't be this easy for him. It was never this easy for her so it shouldn't be for him. She knew it sounded petty, but there was also logic behind the infantile thought. Because if he was this trusting toward everyone, then someone was certain to come along and try to take advantage of it. And Gamsin didn't want to be around when that happened, sorcerer or not.

"Breakfast," he said when he was next to her. His hair was damp, most probably from a morning swim, the locks clumped into dark, silky tendrils. His eyes sparkled with humour and good cheer.

Gamsin felt her customary scowl threatening to reappear.

"I've already cleaned and scaled them," he told her. "If you could get my pannikin, I'll begin the cooking."

Continuing her thoughts, she was also certain his backpack was magicked. She preferred the voluminous canvas bag that she wore across her body, doubling as receptacle, pillow and umbrella. It also had the advantage of easy access to its contents. But Ankoll preferred a large, more shaped bag with two straps that he wore over his shoulders. Despite the fact that wearing such a thing emphasised both his height and the breadth of his shoulders, Gamsin didn't like it for two reasons—one, it offered too-easy access to its contents without the bearer being aware of it; and two, it seemed too small to hold as many wonders as it did.

Gamsin picked up the heavy pannikin that was drying upside down next to the fire and put it on the embers, rotating it back and forth a little so it was embedded evenly in the heat. When she turned around, Ankoll had already withdrawn a jug and several small pots. She knew the jug contained oil and the pots contained different herbs. With a hum, Ankoll seasoned the fish and set them sizzling on the iron plate.

"Don't you mind," she asked fifteen minutes later, in between mouthfuls of crisp-fried herbed fish, "that I'm not the one cooking?"

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"Do you like cooking?" Ankoll asked.
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"That must be Tendraf Village," Ankoll said, referring to his leather map.

Gamsin looked through the trees and down at the nest of buildings sheltering in the valley below. They had spent almost two weeks following the wide stream, only diverging to take a higher trail four days ago. Ankoll said it was better for tracking if they remained elevated.

"We should buy more provisions," he commented. "And perhaps some horses."

[&]quot;Well, no."

[&]quot;But I do. Consider it payment for your guidance."

[&]quot;I haven't done much guiding yet," Gamsin said wryly.

[&]quot;Our journey's still young."

There was some tilled land stretching out away from the village but, from the number of buildings, Gamsin could tell that this was mainly a trading post. That was good. Visitors could remain reassuringly anonymous in a more populated area. It was the small farming hamlets she really worried about. She remembered Folon and shivered.

"We need to be careful." Her tone was abrupt as she turned away. Ankoll looked up at her from his squatting position and began rolling up his map. "People in trading villages are always on the lookout for easy marks."

"Perhaps we can just buy some provisions and transport, and leave," he suggested. "We don't have to stay in the village if it makes you uncomfortable."

Ankoll was depending on her guidance, Gamsin reminded herself, and her guidance was telling her that unfamiliar territory should be approached with caution. If it was Mishlow City, she would have bounded past its perimeter with joy, reading the alleys and lanes as one would read a treasured book. But this was Tendraf Village, a place of strangers.

She nodded. "I would prefer it if we didn't stay."

"Another night beneath the stars." He grinned. "That suits me well."

It took them three hours to cover the ground to the village. The cropped, rocky slope of the hill gave way abruptly to the grassy scent and crackle of growing stalks of grain as they reached flat land and joined the main road into the village.

Gamsin sent a small sideways glance at Ankoll walking beside her, looking for possible vulnerabilities.

His problem was that he stood too straight, walked too assertively. With a shuffle and a bend, she could easily blend into a group of farmers bringing in their produce to market, but trying to hide Ankoll would be like trying to hide a gold brick in a bag of copper coins.

"Could you, ah, hunch over a bit?" she was finally driven to ask.

"Hunch?" His look was startled. "Why?"

She looked at him then waved her hand "It's nothing." It was probably too late anyway. She was sure people from the village had already spotted them trekking down into the valley and drawn their own conclusions.

To be fair, it wasn't just his posture. The expression on his face was also of little help. Those lips of his were always on the verge of a smile, as though he was open to the experiences of the world. It was, in a word, unnatural. People who weren't aristocrats never walked around with such a guileless countenance. Normal people—like her—knew the world for the brutal, selfish place that it was and took pains to protect themselves against it, though not always successfully. Even the few lords she'd snatched glimpses of in Mishlow City had looked petulant and sullen. In comparison, Ankoll's cheerfulness could be construed by the cynical as idiocy.

She wondered if there was a disguise spell he could put on himself. She hadn't thought of it before; she would have to bring it up when the trading post was safely behind them.

They fell in behind a band of merchants on the road and entered Tendraf Village without incident.

Gamsin thought she would feel some relief at entering a minor population center. After all, this was more familiar ground to her than the open countryside, but she couldn't dismiss a shard of distaste as she passed the town's outer buildings. All of a sudden, she wanted to be back in the forest, walking by the stream and listening to Ankoll's off-key whistling.

"It's already late afternoon," she remarked in a low voice. "We should get to our business and leave before nightfall."

He nodded. The provisioning store was attached to a barn, the thick padlocked door open for business. They entered the cool darkness and Gamsin let Ankoll do the ordering, content to stand silently by while her gaze skimmed the cracked-open, large wooden barrels containing salted goods and dark glass jars full of leaves and liquids. As the store owner and Ankoll continued to talk, Gamsin moved back to the door, watching the passing traffic with an alert eye. Her unease was unwarranted, she finally decided. There was no nervousness about the people walking around the town. They milled casually, combined into conversational groups then broke apart again—the normal texture of a town going about its own business.

Her ears pricked up only at the end, after the sound of coin changing hands, by Ankoll's a-little-too-indifferent tone.

"Would you know where I might find a piglet for sale?"

The store owner pocketed his money. "For growing or for eating?"

Ankoll looked quickly at Gamsin, probably envisaging them walking through the forest with a snuffling pig in tow. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion and disbelief.

"For eating," he said with a smile.

"Farmer Banton's wife sometimes sells some young'uns." He jerked his head in a direction farther into the village. "Try the square."

"We should get going," Gamsin reminded him as they left the store. "Do we really need a pig?"

"I feel like cooking a nice loin of pork," he remarked, making her wonder whether it was a deliberate ploy of his to unnerve her at every possible turn.

It took time to walk to the square, and time to find Farmer Banton's wife. Yes, she had two piglets left and would be happy to kill and gut an animal for them, but that would take an hour. Gamsin gritted her teeth while the woman and Ankoll bartered, watching anxiously as the sun's orb touched the top of the nearest hill. If they left it too late, the farrier would close his shop and they would be forced to spend the night in the village.

In the end, they made it just in time, and that's when the trouble started.

The farrier was a ruddy, thick-set man, with a calm but implacable air. Gamsin had met his type before. He wasn't greedy but, likewise, he wasn't given to many tender feelings either. His calculating gaze told her he'd been in the trade for a long time. They were going to be in for a rough round of negotiations.

Yes, they would like two horses, geldings would be fine. And yes, of course, they would need saddles. And saddle blankets. And stirrups. And bridles. And maybe some feed for the first day's riding.

As the farrier led out two saddled animals and was calculating the total, Gamsin checked her purse and pulled Ankoll to one side, away from the trader and a small knot of his friends who were obviously waiting for the deal to be done so they could all wander over to the tavern together.

"We don't have enough money," she told him in a low voice.

"I hadn't thought of that," he replied with a grimace. In the spirit of their upcoming adventure, he'd forgotten about money. If ever Gamsin needed reminding of the unworldliness of sorcerers, here it was.

"We can buy one horse now and one later..."

He shook his head. "I have something else to trade."

She thought Ankoll would pull a small wonder from his magical backpack—a bottle of perfume or an unpolished gem—and wasn't prepared when he approached the farrier and said, "Perhaps I could help heal some of your sick animals?"

Her eyes widened in alarm. Conversation immediately ceased. The farrier narrowed his eyes.

"Do you call yourself a healer?"

"I can help heal animals, yes, although that's not all."

Gamsin rushed up to him, grabbing his arm. "We should leave." She turned to the men. "He's been a bit touched by the sun," she told them quickly. "Brain fever, I think."

Her words came too late. She saw a flourishing of fear and hate on their faces, a storm of repugnance erupting in mere seconds. To her dismay, the farrier reached for a broom handle, picking it up and brandishing it with menace.

"We thought we'd rid ourselves of your kind long ago," he snarled, his eyes flat with disgust. "Causing trouble, laying curses. We killed our last witch in the time of my grandfather and don't want any like you coming back."

It was her fault. She should have told him about the superstitions that now abounded in her world, centuries after he'd turned his back on it. It had never occurred to her that he would have insulated himself so thoroughly that he was ignorant of modern beliefs.

Ankoll ducked the first inexpert swipe but Gamsin wasn't so lucky. One of the farrier's friends strode up to her and punched her in the face, knocking her to the ground. She hit the floor in a flurry of straw and stars then, after the blackness cleared, everything seemed to move in slow motion.

She saw Ankoll turn, anger filling his face when he saw her. She wanted to put her hand up, tell him she was all right, but the words stuck in her throat. He turned back to the men, and she could already see him changing into dragon form. His face elongated into a reptilian shape, sprouting spikes along his head and down the back of his neck. His shoulder blades grew, the bumps stretching the material of his shirt until they burst through his back, extending like bolts of dark lightning and unfurling into large glistening wings.

The men screamed and cowered into the depths of the stable as they confronted the bronze dragon, and the horses reared, their eyes rolling white with fear.

Gamsin shot to her feet, ignoring the spikes of pain that shot through her cheek. Without thinking, she let a thief's instincts guide her. She grabbed the two tethered geldings, released them and threw herself onto the back of one. Ankoll's backpack was still leaning against the wall, but there wasn't time to reach it. Leading the other horse,

she galloped out of the stable, happy to leave the men to their fate. After a small hesitation as she cleared the building, she headed back to the square.

Farmer Banton's wife was too shaken by the approaching animals, and the wild look on the young rider's face, to let out more than a strangled shriek as Gamsin reached down to pluck the newly gutted piglet from the blood-stained work table.

Then Gamsin was off, riding into the dusk, with the legs of the carcass lying across the saddle, bouncing in time to the horse's rhythm.

Would they come after her, she wondered as she urged the horse up the hill slope. Or would the dragon keep them busy till it was too late for pursuit? She wasn't worried about the beast. She'd seen the efficiency with which it devoured animals, the ruts of its talons in the stone at Ankoll Keep and the glitter of a predator in its large blue eyes.

Gamsin gave a short laugh into the approaching night as she topped the slope and reined in the horses, then winced as her skull throbbed in protest. She touched the left side of her face tenderly, feeling heat and the start of some swelling.

Despite the pain, she had enjoyed herself and tried to confine her smile to the uninjured side of her face as she watched the village below.

The dragon had used its breath, for she could see flames billow out of the stable and lick at its walls and roof. The night's wind carried faint screams of panic to her ears. She should feel sorry for those people but, in truth, could work up little sympathy for burly men who used their bulk and numbers to harm others. She'd been struck, violated, ignored for all of her life, with few to come to her rescue...until now.

She turned the horses and headed deeper into the forest.



"Help me, Gamsin."

The voice was Ankoll's.

Gamsin looked around. It was late afternoon and she was at the top of Ankoll Keep. Ankoll was naked by one of the balusters, sweat gleaming on the smooth brown skin of his body as he shook with violent tremors. Together with his voice, his gaze pleaded with her.

"The dragon took over and is fighting me for dominance. I need you again, Gamsin, to help tether me to humanity."

He dropped to his knees, his head bowed and his hands clasped tightly in front of him. "I'm afraid that if I give in... I will never be human again."

She went to him and he pulled her down to the floor. "I don't want to abuse your trust but the need is quickening in me," he rasped. "Forgive me."

His kiss—sudden, consuming—was searing and direct, an act of command completely unlike his previous embraces of her but, instead of feeling repulsed, Gamsin found an equally ferocious urgency rising in her. More than the faint ripples of fear that lapped at her mind, the idea that someone depended on her—needed her, protected her—sent the blood singing in her veins.

He pushed up the skirts of her gown and she felt his sweat-slicked hands brush her bare skin. Felt the tremors in his fingers as he stroked her tight curls, conjuring wetness from her. With a growl, he parted her legs, licking at her, capturing her nub in his mouth and letting it graze across his teeth.

Gamsin bucked, yelling out against the intense sensations cascading through her body. She could feel the trembling of his body through the short tongue strokes he delivered, the grip of strong hands holding her close. This wasn't just him, she realised, but also the dragon, eager for pleasure and satiation. Then all rational thought fled as wave upon wave of pleasure coursed through her, tightening her muscles and restricting her breathing to loud, spasmodic gasps.

She had not yet subsided when he entered her in one fluid stroke. She gave one short cry, then held his head in her hands and looked deep into his eyes. She tried to steady her breathing. The dragon was there—she could see it—glinting behind the blue of his intense gaze. He thrust into her and she met each one of his movements with an unrestrained response of her own.

No! The pressure began building again, turning her limbs to water, and she let her hands slip through his hair. As if in another world, she heard Ankoll's breath roughen. Her fingers grasped his locks, closing into fists. Her head moved from side to side, eyes shut, as she captured the resurging coil of an imminent orgasm. When she exploded again, he joined her, his throaty yells mingling with hers.

The pleasure went on for years, eons, then slowly subsided. Ankoll's dark hair was damp and plastered to his face as he looked down on her, his smile tired...but entirely his own.

"Thank you," he sighed.

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In a primal female movement, she gathered him to her and they fell asleep on the still-warm stone floor of Ankoll Keep.

Chapter Seven

Gamsin woke from her fitful sleep at the sound of someone approaching. Wisps of an elusive dream—sudden visions of Ankoll Keep, an image of Ankoll's bare skin gleaming with sweat, echoes of her own cries—haunted her, but slowly slipped away as her wakefulness increased.

After riding for two hours, she set a small hidden camp deep in the forest, tethered the horses and, after a fruitless wait, fell into an exhausted sleep. The old Gamsin would have been happy at the outcome of their endeavour. She may have lost Ankoll and his magical backpack, but she'd gained food and two sturdy horses. She could sell one at the next village and turn a tidy profit. Except...she wasn't old Gamsin anymore.

Whether she liked it or not—and, at the moment, she wasn't liking it very much—she was changing. The two horses didn't mean so much without the banter and companionship of Ankoll. True, he might be a sorcerer, but there was an innocence about him that brought out feelings in her she had thought long dead and withered. It was strange to have somebody so obviously capable depend on her for anything and she knew that answering this need could easily lead to the destruction of everything she'd worked hard to be.

And those vestiges of strange and vivid dreams unnerved her. She knew she dreamed of Ankoll and knew there were bonds of deep intimacy involved. But what did they mean? The vividness stayed in her mind even as the details vanished. Yet another mystery for her to untangle.

A twig snapped and, by the dim light of a small sheltered fire, Gamsin saw Ankoll step through the shrub. He had on a pair of breeches, but was bare-chested and—wonder of wonders—carrying his backpack, one strap slung over a broad shoulder. Still in shadow, Gamsin allowed herself the luxury of running her gaze over the sculpted flexures of his chest and torso, and felt an unfamiliar sense of lust rise in her.

Desire? For a man? With a start, she shifted and Ankoll looked in her direction with a sad smile, dropping his backpack on the ground and settling, with a sigh, on a fallen log nearby.

"What happened?" she asked, although the answer was obvious. But it stopped her mind from following pathways she did not want it to tread.

"I killed men." His voice was bleak. His words, hanging in the chill night air, were heavy with misgiving. "Their thoughts were hateful and the act of violence toward you was unforgivable, but I still killed them. The dragon's blood was hot within me and I killed without conscience, seeking only vengeance."

"It wasn't your fault," she said quickly.

"Perhaps I could have believed that when I was forced into dragon form for half of every month. But, this time...this time, when I saw that man strike you, I wanted to become a dragon so I could punish him."

He wanted to become a dragon? He wanted to punish the men for mistreating her? Gamsin was filled with conflicting emotions—a sudden joy that she'd finally found a champion, mixed with the growing realisation that, for better or worse, she and Ankoll were now bound in a way that would be difficult to sever. She'd always prided herself on her isolation and now, it seemed, she'd unwittingly cleaved to a man who was a mass of contradictions. Strong yet vulnerable, terrible yet compassionate.

"I should have told you," Gamsin said quietly, "but I didn't realise you'd divorced yourself so well from the world. Maybe in your time, sorcerers were more common and had the trust of people, but now they're blamed for every mishap that befalls a person."

She picked up a stick and poked the fire, waking the embers that were now half-grey with ash.

"Where I come from, in Mishlow City, they're regarded cynically as mere pickpockets and petty conjurers—insects with outgrown reputations. But, out here in the villages, they are hunted whenever a crop fails or a prized cow suddenly dies."

Ankoll nodded. "We did this to ourselves. Even as a young sorcerer I could see where this was leading us. Was even filled with such hubris myself. We battled and duelled with no regard for those around us. We used and discarded lives like playthings, confident in our superiority. It was only a matter of time before we were taught a lesson."

"We think of sorcerers like you as elements of myth."

"There were never very many of us in the world," he agreed obliquely.

"Did they all disappear?" All except you?

"Over the last few hundred years, I have kept to myself, pursuing my studies. Sorcerers are wary of displaying the full range of their skills—each use of magic sends out its own ripple—and I was a most junior practitioner. There were none I trusted enough to call a friend. But," he looked up into the deep night sky, "I can still feel traces of them in this world. So, no, I don't think they disappeared. But perhaps they've retreated to some sanctuary far away."

"And Beltrin?" He, after all, was the reason they were on this quest. So they could find the master sorcerer and have all of Ankoll's curse lifted from him.

"He's not with them. His trace is stronger, nearer."

Ankoll pulled his backpack toward him and unbuckled the top flap, pulling a crumpled shirt from within.

"I'm glad you rescued your things," Gamsin said with a touch of humour. "I have become too used to herbs in my cooking."

"I rescued it before the—I set the stable on fire." He secured the flap and paused. "So you say people in this time don't believe in sorcerers anymore?"

"Only as harbingers of random disaster."

Gamsin watched him shrug into the shirt, admiring the play of muscles and the faint outline of his ribs as his body stretched.

"I have never asked this question directly of you before but I always thought you came to Ankoll Castle to search for books on spells and enchantments. If it wasn't to steal my magic secrets—which was what I'd first assumed—why did you come to Ankoll Castle?"

Gamsin was glad the darkness hid the blush that heated her cheeks.

"I...I was in some trouble in Mishlow City," she finally said. "And I needed to leave quickly. I heard an old sailor talking about a dragon at Ankoll Castle and how it had accumulated a lot of treasure over the centuries."

"Of course," Ankoll murmured. "Even better than magic is treasure."

"I didn't believe him," Gamsin objected. "Not really. I just thought that if there was a small purse of coins hidden somewhere in the castle..."

Ankoll laughed, a rich sound in the thin, cool air. "You underestimate me, Gamsin Thief. I do indeed have treasure."

Her mouth dropped open. "You do?"

"A considerable amount. I have it hidden in a chamber beneath the keep. It's pretty to look at, but of little use to me."

Too late. The knowledge had come too late when her fate was already entwined with his.

He cocked his head to one side. "But you don't want an entire chest of gold and pearls, you say? Only a purse? What would you do with only a handful of coins?"

"As long as they're gold, I can do a lot," she replied. "I can buy my own cottage by the sea. Raise some animals. Live in peace." Her voice was wistful.

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"That is your dearest wish?"
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"Yes."

"Not power or palaces?"

"It's been my experience that power and palaces only attract unwanted attention."

"A wise observation. And would anyone share this cottage with you?"

"I have no blood kin."

"I wasn't thinking of kin."

No, of course he wasn't. In all honesty, since meeting Ankoll, her thoughts had dwelled more on her companion than her aspiration. And, to her chagrin, she'd even caught herself over the past week somehow imagining him with her at her dream cottage.

"I...haven't thought about it." *Liar!*

"I see." There was laughter in his voice. "Perhaps after we find Beltrin, I can find some appropriate way to thank you for your help."

Did this mean he would give her enough money to purchase her dream? Gamsin could picture the details in her head, honed to perfection through constant imaginings—the cottage built from thick logs with an inside fireplace and two rooms. Enclosures outside containing chickens, some cows and two pigs. A small walk to a grassy cliff that overlooked a blue-green, sun-kissed ocean. It was an image that had consumed her for the past few years so why, then, did the thought of finally achieving it all make her feel miserable?

"We should get some sleep." Ankoll's voice broke into her thoughts. "The villagers will be occupied with firefighting for the rest of the night but we should still start early tomorrow."

"Of course."



It took another week of riding for Ankoll to narrow Beltrin's location to the Twilight Ranges. They were a sharp, craggy ridge of mountains farther east from Mishlow City than Gamsin had ever dared to travel, and she eyed their graphite peaks with misgiving as she and Ankoll approached.

"It looks so barren," she commented. Except for small drifts of snow that softened the uppermost peaks, the rest of the mountainous range was black and stark, unrelieved by the hue of vegetation. "How does anyone live there?"

"We are still far away, at least a week's ride. It will look a little more habitable as we get nearer."

Gamsin merely grimaced.

The insubstantial dreams that had previously plagued her were becoming more frequent. And more substantial. Now at least she knew what she dreamed about and it was...sex. With Ankoll. Always with Ankoll, only with Ankoll. And she had the feeling that he knew all about it even though—she was embarrassed to recall—it was usually she who initiated their...lovemaking?

Gamsin let Ankoll and his horse lead the way along the narrow path to the ranges while she followed her train of thought.

She hadn't questioned him further at the time, but the comment from Ankoll after that fateful fourteenth night at the top of the keep had stuck with her. He had assured her she did not mate with him yet here she was, after weeks of travel, following his back as his horse picked through the rocky path toward the ranges. A man's back, not a dragon's. Which meant that something had happened to help lift the curse... Something she could not remember.

Maybe they *had* mated, but not in the way she'd expected. Another faint recollection pulled at her—words about trust and intimacy. Maybe, she thought with growing conviction, Ankoll had found a way to mate with her without the involvement of their physical bodies. She felt in her bones she was right. And maybe that mental link between them was somehow still open, which was why she kept on recalling faint dream images of them having sex.

Of course it didn't hurt that she found him attractive. Her gaze slowly roamed his figure, from his dark hair to the broad shoulders that stretched the material of his shirt and down to a trim pair of hips and a deliciously pert pair of buttocks that swayed in time to his horse's gait.

Gamsin groaned, hoping he was far enough ahead of her not to hear, relaxing when his usual off-key whistling drifted in the air toward her.

There were attractive men in Mishlow City, too. Just because she'd been raped twice didn't mean she couldn't admire beauty, but that was always as far as it went. Gamsin was happy to admire from a distance then let it go and move on with her life, convinced that she would spend the rest of it blessedly free of the complications a man brought.

Until Ankoll came along.

Was it because he was a sorcerer? Yes, maybe that was part of it, she conceded. After all, who else but a practitioner of magic could break through the physical reserve that still held her fast? But could he have even reached a level of psychic intimacy with her if she hadn't been taken by his other characteristics? By his warmth and enthusiasm? His cheerfulness and compassion? And of course his cooking skill was no mean prize in itself.

She grinned, then froze, lifting her fingers to feel the expression on her face, the smooth enamel of exposed teeth and the tightness of her cheeks. She had never grinned before in her life. Smiled, grimaced, frowned, cried, yelled, ranted, but never grinned.

He had done this to her. And Gamsin still wasn't sure how she felt about that.



"Something is not right." Ankoll lifted his head, like a hound sniffing the wind. "I feel another presence."

It was nighttime and they had reined in their horses near the top of a foothill overlooking a rude assortment of houses. Due to the steepness of the land, the buildings were built strangely, with their rears resting against the rocky slope and long stilts at the front holding them level. There were occasional rope bridges leading from building to building and timber ladders that emerged from inside them, snaking down in haphazard fashion to the boulder-strewn earth below. Large torches, positioned near every building

and bridge, flickered in the evening breeze, illuminating the odd village in yellow-tinged bursts of light. People moved about the elevated compound with purpose.

Gamsin lowered her voice, picking up on Ankoll's obvious unease. "You mean, besides Beltrin?"

"Besides Beltrin," Ankoll agreed.

"But I thought you could detect all sorcerers?" Her voice was still hushed.

"This one wants to remain hidden. And this one is no sorcerer." He turned the horse back the way they'd come. "Let's camp away from them for the night. There is something about this I don't like."

They backtracked for half an hour before setting camp behind a nest of large boulders and, much to Gamsin's surprise, Ankoll asked her to start the fire.

"It's not going to be easy," she told him. "There's grass here, but little wood to sustain a flame."

"Whatever you do will be enough. But make sure it can't be seen from afar."

It took her a while, but she finally managed to get a meager flame going. It was more for psychological comfort than cooking or real warmth. Even among the shelter of the rocks, the choppy wind bit at her small patches of exposed skin. She burrowed farther into the thick fur cloak Ankoll had parcelled out when they began their trek into mountainous country.

"It's an uncommonly severe night tonight," she remarked, trying hard not to shiver.

"No colder than normal for this part of the world."

"We haven't been this cold before."

"That's because I'm not using any magic tonight." He looked at her openmouthed expression and smiled. "I've been keeping the excesses of the night at bay since we started into the ranges," he explained. "But tonight I believe that would be an unwise move."

"That presence you sensed?"

"Yes. It's waiting. I can feel it reaching out for any wisps of magic. It may have tracked us last night but, if it doesn't detect magic again, perhaps it will think we've moved away from the mountains."

"You think it's evil?"

"I know it cannot be trusted. Whatever it is."

"So we have to spend the night as mortals do."

Ankoll's laugh was quick and sharp. "Indeed. And no special dishes tonight."

Gamsin smiled. "I wasn't hungry anyway."

"A pity. I am, but not for food."

She heard him shift then his voice was right next to hers, and a thrill ran through her body.

"You've been remembering your dreams." It was a statement, not a question.

"Y-yes."

"Do you have anything you would like to ask me?"

"They," Gamsin licked her lips, "they're real, aren't they? We really have," she hesitated, "mated, haven't we?"

"Perhaps I would have called it that before." Ankoll pulled her closer to him, nestling her head under his shoulder. "Mating. But it has become more than that for me. Your strength has already saved me twice, and mixed with my desire is deep feeling. There is great compassion in you, young Gamsin, if you would only open your eyes and see it."

"I've seen compassion get people killed," she answered, her voice bitter. "Men have lost their fortunes through compassion, women their husbands, children their parents. Maybe in your time compassion had value, but the world has changed much over the centuries. Compassion is not worth a copper coin anymore and is nothing I want or need."

"You say that and you may even half believe it, but there's a part of you that knows that's not true. If you had no compassion, you would have ransacked my keep and fled while I was still in dragon form. Or questioned me more artfully about rumours of a treasure hoard." He withdrew his arm and moved above her, the small flame throwing the side of his face into relief, turning his eyes into pin-sharp glitters. "But instead, your compassion—your gentleness—stayed to succour me, as it continues to do. You yearn for meaning in your life. Purpose. Intimacy. As do I. You yearn for me, Gamsin Thief, as I yearn for you."

Gamsin's first instinct was resistance as he bent down toward her, then her hands moved from stopping his chest to grabbing his shirt and pulling him toward her. For the first time, for the hundredth time, her lips met his. The strange sensation of the unknown and known made her dizzy. She had never touched his lips before yet already knew the

feel of their tender fullness and the insistence of his mouth. His tongue urged her lips open while his hands burrowed under her cloak, stroking her breasts and bringing her nipples to erect peaks. She gasped, allowing him to plunder her mouth, reveling in the heady sensations that swamped her.

Her hands ran, trembling, over his body, recollection crashing down on her. He, too, liked to be rubbed across his nipples. She did so and he hissed with pleasure before kissing and nibbling at the side of her neck. Her skin prickled with goose bumps and she shuddered against him.

Gamsin had never been touched like this before—with affection and caring—as if her response was as important as his, and her body opened under him. She couldn't wait to get her clothes off, oblivious of the cold around them, her body burning with an intense desire to have him inside her.

In the frenzy of hands and tongues, tugging and pulling, she found herself half-naked above him, straddling him with the fur of the cloak still wrapped around her. Their eyes locked as, with his hands on her hips, he guided her up and onto the tip of his penis.

There was a quick clench of panic then she consciously relaxed. She had already made love—made love!—to this man before and there was nothing to fear from him.

She was slick with wetness when he slid into her, but she still panted as the size of him stretched her and she fell forward, her hands resting on his chest. Now it was her turn to move as she took the initiative, withdrawing then settling on him, impaling herself deeper with each stroke. They'd done this in their dreams, but it felt so much more distinct in the flesh, as if the shell of a silk cocoon had been torn from her, freeing her to enjoy the myriad sensations of a man moving within her, giving and receiving gratification while she writhed above him.

She wanted to throw off the fur and feel the cold nip at her body and cool it of its unnatural fever. She wanted to lift her head and roar the cry of a female animal, powerful and pleasured. Then she felt his thumb against her groin, sliding between the lips of her sex, fondling her slippery engorged nub and she opened herself even further, thrusting forward against his touch and clawing his shoulders with her hands. His hand kept up with its insistent rhythm as she rode him, baring her teeth, slave to a compulsion as old as humanity.

When she climaxed, she couldn't curtail the cry that emerged from her throat. Waves of orgasm enslaved her, engorging her breasts and sex, driving Ankoll to a frenzy so that he, too, cried out as he emptied into her.

She felt herself carried upwards toward the night, the wind—no longer freezing—caressing her body. The pleasure was receding and a sense of peace and purpose was taking its place.

Something, someone, was holding her hand and when she turned her head, she saw Ankoll rising up next to her. He looked misty and insubstantial, a pale reflection of his physical form, and Gamsin wondered whether she appeared the same to him. They floated above their small camp, swept over the hill and headed down towards the village, bobbing from building to building, house to house, while the people of the village went about their business, ignoring them. They skimmed shops and residences before being pulled upwards, to a larger building set back from the others and farther up the slope.

They rushed toward the outer wall and Gamsin tried to stop their progress, but failed. She shut her eyes, waiting for impact, but nothing happened. When she opened one eye, she found they were through the wall and into an antechamber, its door open to a much larger hall. The light from torches illuminated part of the larger chamber. Indistinct words echoed in the space. She could not see what, or who, they were praying to, but she saw neat rows of people kneeling and chanting.

She turned back to the antechamber and noticed a cage of filigree. Within that filigree was an open book. Ankoll floated closer, trying to get a better look, but they were suddenly swept from it, tumbling away from the chamber, the building, the village...and into blackness.

Chapter Eight

Gamsin's breath condensed white in the early morning air. They were at their camp, everything cast with the bluish haze of a cold dawn. She blinked a few times, but the vision of them flying through the air persisted. It had felt so real...

"What happened?" she asked, unaware she had spoken aloud, and realised that she could have been referring to two momentous events: the flight to the village...and sex with Ankoll.

Behind them, their horses stomped in the cold. While Ankoll fed them, she scrambled into her clothes, still keeping the cloak around her, then set about reviving their almost-dead fire. Her first consensual sexual encounter. She should have been happy—nay, ecstatic—with a smile from ear to ear. Instead, she was confronted with more questions than answers. It appeared that life with Ankoll always threw up more than what one bargained for. While their lovemaking had been wondrous, beautiful, pleasurable, what happened afterward terrified her, and she was desperate for some kind of explanation.

Ankoll came back and reached into his backpack for some cured ham, peeling thin slices off with his knife and handing them to Gamsin. His expression was reflective. "You mean last night? After we..."

She nodded impatiently.

"I think we experienced a different form of magic," he finally said, picking his words slowly. "Until you met me, you thought sorcerers were a myth. Well, I believe the magic we experienced last night was a kind sorcerers consider a myth."

"I don't understand."

Ankoll sighed. It was obvious he was searching for an explanation himself. "Sorcery—my kind of sorcery—is learned. Although it helps to be born with a degree of observation and sensitivity, some of the art can be picked up through nothing more than constant study and practice. How powerful we are as sorcerers depends on our innate

sensitivity combined with how much learning we are prepared to endure, over and over again until it becomes second nature to us. But..." He paused. "But there are rumors of another, older, magic. Elemental magic that supersedes all taught magic. In fact, it cannot be taught, only experienced, which is why sorcerers have disputed its existence for centuries." He shrugged. "How can you experience magic before being taught about it? And, if you can only experience it, how can you control it or use it?"

Gamsin tried to follow his quick patter of words. "So, you believe what happened to us last night was elemental magic?"

Ankoll looked at her speculatively. "It would seem so. I always knew there was a depth to you, my young thief, a depth you were unaware of. Our psychic joining that night at Tendraf Village showed me that you possess a rare gift. You pulled me back from the edge of permanent change with only the power of your mind. I didn't know what would eventually happen when we joined in the flesh, but I was ready for an event equally spectacular." He smiled at her. "I see I wasn't disappointed."

Gamsin blushed. "Does that mean I'm now a sorcerer?"

He shook his head. "I don't have a true answer for you but, at the moment, I don't think so. Sorcerers have a trace, an aura, about them that I don't detect from you. But you contain something powerful and wondrous and," he sketched a bow, "I am honoured you chose to share it with me."

"What happens now?" she asked, hoping to steer the conversation back to safer ground. All this talk of intimacy and wonder was beginning to embarrass her. She needed time to crawl into a hole and think on what had happened to her—to them—the previous night. "We were in the village, weren't we? But what was that book?"

"I don't know. It looked like a magician's book but it is unusual to have one displayed in such a manner. What I do know is that it holds the key to the mystery of this place but, without knowing who owns the book or what it contains, there is little I can do."

This was a situation Gamsin was more familiar with and she almost sighed with relief. Finally, here was something she didn't have to think about and, in all honesty, her poor brain needed a rest.

"You can't use your magic to get the book, can you?"

"No. The *thing* will detect me. If it finds out what I am before I can find out what it is, I fear we are lost."

"But we need the book."

"Yes."

"Then the answer is simple. I'll steal it."



Oh, he argued, he cajoled, he threatened but, in the end, even Ankoll had to admit that her plan made the most sense. Constrained to not using any of his magic, they were forced to rely on Gamsin's skills. And, as she told him several times while she prepared herself, she was a very good thief.

Her first plan was to climb the cliffs around the village then break into the building from above or perhaps through a conveniently high window, but Ankoll vetoed that idea.

"It will be looking for intent," he told her, "I can sense that much, so there should be none. Anything that requires intense focus will be like a beacon to it, drawing it to you."

"Then I must pretend to be like one of those in the chamber." She looked at her canvas bag with regret. If Ankoll was right, she was best off travelling light, in case she had to make a quick dash to safety.

"If something happens," he told her, "call for me. I will hear you."

She laid a hand on his arm. "I'll come back. I promise."

She checked herself for the only two things she was taking with her—her dagger and a lockpick set—and mounted her horse, not looking back as she rode away.

The village approached too soon and Gamsin pulled off the track before she became visible, guiding the horse toward one of many rocky outcrops that littered the ground. She secured the gelding then took off her cloak. It was finer than any she'd seen during her glimpses of the village and—she was sure—would draw unwanted attention to herself. She left it, neatly folded, with the horse then, shivering, headed stealthily for the village.

It was simpler than she'd imagined. She darted from outcrop to outcrop and no alarm sang out. She edged closer and closer to the buildings until she approached the leftmost edge of the outpost. And, there, just where she was expecting it, was a sagging clothesline.

Having appropriated one thin cape, Gamsin moved past the line of laundry and stealthily climbed the slope to the back of the building, rubbing her hands and blowing on them. The cold would only stiffen her fingers and make them less sensitive, and if she ever had to rely on instinct, now was the time. Her initial plan was to find some shelter while she waited to join the throng of worshippers—she couldn't think of a better word—in the large hall.

She stumbled only once, sending a shower of gravel ricocheting down the slope. She immediately froze and crouched into the rock, hiding herself with the cloak and imagining herself to be a slab of dark basalt, but minutes passed and nothing happened. Slowly she unfurled herself and continued her traverse.

There was an opening near the back of the large building and Gamsin aimed for it, moving at a measured pace. When she finally reached it, the ledge was just out of reach so she jumped, grasping the stonework with her fingers and levering herself in, slipping down to sit next to the wall while she steadied her breathing. This was where they kept ceremonial items. Gamsin scanned the shelves along the opposite wall where large shallow goblets, ornately decorated, rested next to wide trays, scrolls and finely textured, folded clothing. She felt only a twinge of her old self as she turned her back on the artifacts and edged nearer to the door.

The hall opened out in front of her, a large rectangular space bare except for a raised platform at the front. A white rock, like an immense block of quartz, rested on the platform, its top covered by a square of rich dark velvet. There was a closed door across the hall from her but she didn't want to expose her presence by crossing the expanse of polished wood. What if somebody entered the chamber while she was sneaking across it? She needed to be a mouse, not a warrior.

Suddenly, she felt something in the room with her. A sense of a watcher or hunter, probing, seeking. It was nothing physical—she was still the only person in the small chamber—but, contrarily, she knew she was no longer alone.

The thing!

No focus, Ankoll told her, and Gamsin desperately tried to think of not thinking. The pressure on her mind increased. She remembered Mishlow City and the drudges who collected rubbish from the taverns and stores and carried them to the refuse tip. Blank and trudging humans, they seemed impervious to the stench and weight of their job.

"I am a drudge," she muttered, easing out of the room. She sidestepped against the wall, walking away from the platform, trying to ignore the strangest sensation that it was the rock that was trying to find her. "I carry garbage. I feel nothing. I think nothing."

Her hand met empty air and she darted into the next empty chamber. Yes, this was it! She recognised the room from the vision. Along one side were tall bookshelves, half filled with thick leather-bound tomes. And there, on the solid timber table, was the finely wrought filigree cage enclosing the magic book.

No! I am a drudge. I do not think. I just walk. One foot in front of the other.

Gamsin traced a route of the city in her head and pretended she was following it, stopping occasionally to pick up the rubbish barrels and empty them into the cart behind her.

It slowed her actions down considerably, but she didn't want to think about that. The lockpick appeared in her hands and she tried not to be surprised.

I am outside the Guzzled Goose, walking down the alley to pick up the barrels.

The lock clicked and the metal door swung open. As if in slow motion, Gamsin pulled a rag from her pocket and placed it on the open book, shutting the book around it and pulling it out of its gold-and-silver cage. She put it to one side then picked another book from the shelf behind her, inserting it into the cage and opening it to a random page.

It's so heavy. It's time to head for the garbage dump. The wooden wheels of my cart are clicking on the cobblestones.

No! She wanted to think, she wanted her mind to race, she wanted to find out what that white rock really was and where the closed door on the other side of the hall led.

Gamsin half closed her eyes and stood in the centre of the small chamber, concentrating on the garbage route through the city. She felt a sharp jab in her mind.

Just keep walking. I can hear the click-clack of the wooden wheels. The street is slippery right here, I must be careful.

Then it was gone, but Gamsin still kept the commentary running in her head. It seemed to take another hour before she re-locked the cage, picked up the book and edged back to the vestments chamber. She breathed in, untied the laces and tucked the book into the waistband of her pants. Was that the sound of someone approaching?

I will need to go back. The butcher on Skin Lane has been complaining that I am too slow.

The deepening dusk hid her departure from the village, but Gamsin continued to concentrate on the drudge's work until she reached her horse. Not even bothering to fasten her own cloak, she pulled herself into the saddle and galloped away, finally allowing her thoughts to run free.

She thought she must have spent days getting the book, but the position of the setting sun told her that less than two hours had passed. The effort of not thinking, not focusing

on what she was doing, was exhausting and she was glad her horse knew the way back to the camp because she doubted she had enough strength left to guide him.

The tension in Ankoll's face was evident as she approached their shelter, and it caught at her heart. He was worried for her. She grinned and slapped her stomach as she approached and saw his features lighten at the sound of her hand hitting something solid.

"You have it?"

She dismounted, pulling out the book and handing it to him. She had only enough energy left to tie her horse next to the other, leaving them to nicker at each other, before collapsing next to the fire and pulling her own cloak over her.

"That was the hardest thing I have ever done," she told him with pride as she watched him pore over the book with barely held restraint.

"You kept track of the page the book was open to," he exclaimed, waving the rag at her.

"I thought it might be important."

"You are a wonder, Gamsin Thief." He put down the book and walked over to her, kneeling next to her. "I was worried for you," he told her. "Each moment passed like an hour. I've never felt so helpless."

She tried smiling, but it was tremulous. She never thought she would have such feeling for another person and it scared her as much as it elated her. He held her face in his hands and kissed her deeply, as if drinking from a sweet spring, then slowly let her go.

"We don't have much time," he said with obvious reluctance as he pulled away. "It will find out soon enough that the book is gone."

"Then you'd better find out what it is."

Ankoll went back to the book, quickly scanning it, his face darkening as he read and re-read important passages.

"The fool," he finally said. "This book belongs to Beltrin of the West, the sorcerer that cursed me. I knew he was arrogant but, this..."

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"What did he do?"
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"He has conjured up the Eidolon."

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"The...?"
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"The Eidolon. They belong to another time. They were supposedly banished by the Great Council of Sorcerers more than one thousand years ago."

"Are they people?"

"No, they're spirits. They were proscribed for feeding on the souls of humans, gradually leaching the life from people, killing them before they could live out their proper lifetimes. According to our histories, entire villages were decimated by these monsters. Sorcerers would enter towns and see desiccated corpses littering the streets, as if the people were too weak to take one more step or even crawl away."

"And Beltrin conjured one?"

Ankoll grimaced. "Yes. It could be that he did so out of ignorance. The spell he used," he tapped the book, "could have enhanced insight into the future but, instead, opened a doorway to the Eidolon's exiled kingdom."

Gamsin thought of the men, women and children of the village, slowly being sucked dry by the creatures Ankoll described, and she shuddered.

"How many of these things did Beltrin let through?"

"I don't know. Only he can answer that question."

"Maybe he's dead?"

"No. I'm still sensing him. He is alive, but maybe only barely so. We need to find him. Tonight. Before the Eidolon guesses our plan."

"What do these Eidolon look like?"

"They rest in objects, anchoring themselves to something permanent so they don't dissipate while they repose. Why? Did you see something in the village?"

The skin on Gamsin's arms prickled.

"While...while I was searching for the book, in the hall there was a large," she sketched a rounded pillar with her hands, "mound of white rock. It looked like quartz. I thought I was imagining things, but it felt like the rock was trying to look for me."

"The White Eidolon," Ankoll breathed. "We're lucky, that is not the most powerful of the soul stealers. But we must still move quickly." He looked at Gamsin with grave eyes. "Once more, I ask for your help, young Gamsin. I would not fault you if, this time, you refused my request."

Refuse this man? After what he'd taught her? After everything they'd done together?

K.S. Augustin

"If we fail, you could lose your soul," he told her, "and I would not be responsible for such a loss."

"My soul is mine to lose, Ankoll Sorcerer." And she meant it.

Chapter Nine

They decided that subterfuge was not going to work the second time, especially now that Beltrin's sorcery book was gone. But they weren't going to gallop straight into the village as though demons were on their trail either.

Late that night, with a large waxing moon guiding their way, they casually rode into the village. To their surprise, nobody stopped them. In fact, with the exception of a few apathetic glances, nobody even gave them a second look.

"The Eidolon has been here for a while," Ankoll muttered as they dismounted. "Its prey is already growing weak. In another month, we may have ridden into a town of the dead."

"And it would have moved on to another place."

He nodded as they walked toward the stilted houses. "It pains me to say this, but this makes our task a little easier."

Gamsin's quick mind followed the track of his thoughts. "You mean we won't have to worry about the villagers attacking us."

His voice was heavy. "Yes."

The chanting floated to them on the brisk mountain air and they followed it to its source, the ladder leading up to the hall creaking as it took their weight.

Where it was empty before, the hall was now half full of various figures, shuffling from side to side, all facing the platform—the Eidolon—at the front.

Gamsin pointed to the right of the hall, to the locked doorway, and they moved in that direction, guided by Ankoll's muted sense and Gamsin's intuition. Much to her surprise, they were in full sight of the quartz-like rock before anything happened.

A shrill buzz suddenly filled Gamsin's head and she collapsed to her knees, trying to block out the sound with her hands over her ears. It didn't help. Like the waves of an ocean, billows of discordant sound washed over her, interfering with all thought. Then she heard Ankoll's voice, a calm, dark thread cutting through the chaos.

"Get the door unlocked. I will protect you."

The noise lessened to a dull roar, allowing Gamsin to reach into her canvas bag for her lockpick. Just before she began, though, she tried the heavy cast-iron door handle—she remembered times in her life when she had taken infinite care to silently retrieve and lay out her tools for a burglary job, only to find that the owners had forgotten to lock the front door to their house in the first place. She hoped... The handle turned, but the door stayed firm. Locked. With a grim nod, Gamsin set to work.

Unlike the fine filigree cage in the opposite room, the lock of the door was so gigantic Gamsin thought she could almost open it using her fingers. This would take strength rather than finesse and she swore as the lockpick slipped, catching it before it hit the floor. Behind her, she knew that Ankoll was doing something to keep that dreadful brain-filling noise at bay, but wasn't sure exactly what that was.

She felt the click rather than heard it and tried the handle again, pushing against the resistance of old timber, then pulling Ankoll through, slamming the door behind them. She didn't know why, but she thought the ear-shattering sound would die down once they were out of the hall. It didn't. Gamsin took a deep breath and looked around.

It was a tiny room. On the floor was a small oil lamp, inexpertly trimmed—tendrils of greasy grey smoke drifted up into the air. Against the wall—Gamsin looked then looked again—was a shape, irregular and soft. She picked up the lamp, holding it at head height…and gasped.

It could only be Beltrin. He was a tall man—the Eidolon could not take his height away from him. But his skin hung in pouches on his bones, as though someone had come along and drained the flesh from him, leaving a gaunt and pale shell. Only the thick iron manacles pinning his wrists to the wall held him upright or he would have toppled into a heap of bones at her feet.

But his eyes. It was as though every speck of life the sorcerer contained was funnelled into his eyes, for they gazed at her with a sharp intelligence.

Behind them, the door began shaking as bodies threw themselves at it.

"We have to leave," Gamsin said unnecessarily, looking around, but apart from the door, there was only a narrow slit window in the wall. The wailing in her head got louder.

Ankoll looked at the ceiling then over at the door, now vibrating with each impact.

"Stand back," he instructed. For the first time since they'd entered the room, he looked Beltrin full in the face...and began changing into a dragon. He expanded, thrusting his neck straight up, shattering the wooden ceiling. Gamsin ducked as broken planks of wood showered her, one landing on her upturned arm. She winced, but kept the arm in position. Between the dragon and the keening in her brain, a few bruises were the least of her worries.

The winged beast, with its head now towering above them, looked down and lifted one claw, closing ungently on the emaciated sorcerer and ripping him from the wall. Beltrin screamed, but Gamsin's quick glance confirmed he was still in one piece before she, too, was lifted—more gently—into the night sky.

The Eidolon's mental attack lessened as the dragon winged its way away from the mountain village. Gamsin caught her breath as the wind ripped at her clothes, her relief at the welcome silence in her mind momentarily overshadowing the experience of flying through the air, carried by a giant reptile with flapping leathery wings.

The dragon released both of them on a slope overlooking the village, then wheeled back to where the Eidolon waited. Gamsin was too exhausted, too shaken, to do anything other than watch an epic battle unfold before her eyes. Beside her, the ancient sorcerer lay still, only his head turning to watch the dragon's movements.

"The sorcerer," he grated. "The sorcerer of Ankoll Castle."

Gamsin looked over at him and nodded, remembering that this man had bested Ankoll in battle. He looked frail and withered, but she knew there was still terrible knowledge locked inside him.

The dragon approached the hall, shrieking its cry of challenge. A white mist rose from the hall's broken roof, and solidified into a pale bird-thing. Before it could completely coalesce, the dragon was upon it, its talons ripping at the Eidolon's body, its breath sizzling the air. The Eidolon shrieked aloud and a moan rose from the throats of the villagers held in its thrall. Gamsin could see some of their silhouettes in the torchlight, standing still wherever they were, whether swaying on a rope bridge or climbing a ladder. Whitish fluid bled from the Eidolon's form and was swept away on the wind.

The bronze dragon circled up then around, coming in for a lightning strike, its body streamlined into one bestial missile, but the Eidolon recovered quickly, engulfing the dragon, trapping its wings then hurling it away in a spinning ball of dark form.

Gamsin caught her breath. This wasn't an impersonal drama unfolding before her eyes. The dragon was Ankoll—the man who had succoured her as much as she had succoured him—and he was alone, battling a monstrosity from another realm. Her heart thudded in her chest as she watched the dragon somersault away from the Eidolon's strike, and she thought it would be dashed against the unforgiving rock of the mountainside but it steadied itself and swerved away at the last minute. Down below, on the stony slope, the young thief allowed herself to breathe again.

Wheeling back to attack, the dragon took lungfuls of air then unleashed volley after volley of fierce fire at the otherworldly creature. And, as the battle continued, Gamsin noticed that some of the villagers began collapsing as the Eidolon drained them completely of their life spirit.

She watched the battle in the air, unbelieving of how much flame the dragon was spouting, and it seemed to be working. Little by little, the Eidolon retreated to the chamber, to the quartz that sheltered it, its form shrinking until, with one cry, the dragon unleashed a sustained blast that exploded the hall into a fireball, sending streaks of red and yellow sparks high into the night.

Trumpeting its triumph, the dragon circled the village once, then flew toward the hill. Toward Gamsin.

She could feel Ankoll drawing on her strength as he settled on the rocky terrain and hurried to him as he changed back into a human. He slumped to the rocky ground, breathing hard.

"You destroyed the Eidolon," Gamsin told him quietly and with pride. She took off her cloak and draped it around him.

"I-it took all my strength." He shook his head, still looking down. "I have none left." "Then I'll get the horses."

It was as if her brain couldn't take in everything that had happened in that epic battle. There was pride as she thought of Ankoll defeating that monstrosity. And humility as she realised how little one person's feelings meant against the background of such a gigantic struggle. In an effort to feel useful again, to regain part of her belief in her own self-worth and ability to do *something*, Gamsin left the two sorcerers on the hill and walked back down to the village.

The settlement was earily quiet. Like discarded toys, people lay on the ground, grey and unmoving. Some hung on the ladders, their limbs trapped by rope, their bodies swinging lazily. Gamsin had seen hanged men before, it was a form of punishment

frequently used in Mishlow City, but this was different. These were the bodies of innocents, swaying in the breeze. Their only crime was being alive in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tears pricked at her eyes. How she wished there was some way they could have been saved.

As she neared the first set of stilts, she heard footsteps and looked up at one of the houses. A gaunt, young man peered down at her with a blank expression. He watched her as she approached the horses. They'd left them as far from the hall as possible and they were still restrained, although fidgety from the noise of the battle. She untied them and felt the man's gaze bore into her back as she led the horses away, but he still said nothing. She, too, remained silent, not knowing what words she could offer amid such tragedy.

It took effort but she finally loaded both Ankoll and Beltrin on the horses and headed back to their camp. She was stiff with exhaustion and numb from what she had seen. Perhaps the world was right to turn its back on magic if this was what it did. Even the cruelest of lords could not have killed so many so quickly and in such an unnatural manner. She looked at Ankoll, slumped over the saddle of his horse, the sorcerer Beltrin draped sideways on the other. To look at them, who would believe they held such power? Who were they to hold the lives of men in their frail hands? How could they justify such terrible might?

These thoughts occupied her as they reached camp and she helped the two men down, making them comfortable while she struggled to build a larger fire. After what had just happened, the threat of an attack coming from the village was slim.

She knew she should have stayed awake. Both Ankoll and Beltrin were either asleep or unconscious. But she felt drained. Slowly, her head drooped, and she slumbered.



"Thank you."

They were back at the keep, in one of her dream visions that Gamsin was beginning to regard as her second life. She was sitting on the bed and Ankoll stood by the window, smiling at her.

"We defeated the Eidolon."

"You—"

He shook his head. "We. Together. I think we make a formidable team." Then he paused. "Something troubles you."

Gamsin squeezed her eyes shut before opening them and looking at him in bewilderment. "I told you that our world stopped believing in sorcerer's magic centuries ago. What I saw tonight," she shuddered, "frightened me." Her gaze flew to his, willing him to understand what she was saying. "Ankoll, is this what you do? What sorcerers do? Can you destroy people in the same way the Eidolon did?"

He hesitated. "Yes," he finally said. "With further study, and if I so desire, I'm sure I could wreak similar destruction as that creature." He opened his mouth to say something, stopped, then tried again. "Gamsin, does being with a sorcerer trouble you so much?"

"It's not you. I...," a shy smile lit her face, "I care for you a lot. It's just that...when I went back to get our horses and saw all those people lying there on the ground..."

"I am not a perfect man, and far from a perfect sorcerer, but I hope you can believe I am not as evil as what I defeated tonight. But," he cocked his head, "if it so disturbs you, perhaps we can come to an arrangement?"

"An arrangement?"

He smiled. "I've been thinking on this for a few weeks. We have found Beltrin. I shall ask him to lift the enchantment from me. And then, perhaps together we can find that cottage you seek and settle for a more comfortable life. With my family long dead, there is nothing holding me to Ankoll Castle. And, wherever you are, I will find my happiness."

Gamsin was dazed. Nobody, in all her life, had ever offered her a gift of such magnitude. She knew now the immense power of sorcerers. That Ankoll was content to follow her, rather than lead a community himself, humbled her. "You would do this for me?" Her voice was soft with disbelief.

"I would do this for us. If it pleases you."

She flew to him and he engulfed her in his arms. Holding him close, she could hear the rumble of laughter in his chest.

"Truly, never has such a trifle elicited such a response. You are an unusual woman, Gamsin Thief."

The kiss they exchanged began sweetly, as if—after the fury of what had transpired—they were both hesitant, unsure. He ran his tongue lightly over her lips, teasing, playful. But it swiftly deepened into a more primal embrace as they tumbled on the bed, and she ended up on top of him.

Once in his embrace, Gamsin wanted no preliminaries. She thought she might have lost him that night and the fear of the moment drove her to claw at him, removing his clothing with haste so she could lick and kiss his bare chest. Ankoll, too, after his initial hesitation, tugged at her gown impatiently, lifting it over her head. He ran his fingers down her body, tracing an invisible line on her skin. With the back of his hand, he stroked the dark curls at the apex of her thighs. Gamsin's breathing became ragged.

With little warning, he rolled her onto the bed and dipped his head, kissing her curls and gently parting her legs before exploring deeper, licking at her with strong strokes of his tongue and sending her body into electric spasms. She grasped his hair and writhed on the bed, wanting the moment to go on and on, feeling herself get wet.

His tongue was relentless. She felt his lips on her, felt him kiss her sex as he kissed her mouth—his tongue now inside her—and she exploded in waves of delight, her body shuddering around his artful caresses.

When he moved up to kiss her again, she smelled her muskiness on his face, tasted herself on his lips. He nudged against her legs then he was inside her, slipping into the sleek sheath that was eager to welcome him. Together, they set up a rhythm without speaking, an intimate dance of mutual pleasure, culminating in an orgasmic crest that carried them into blessed oblivion for a score of protracted seconds.

"We could have done this by the campfire," Gamsin suggested mischievously when she was finally able to speak again.

Ankoll kissed the skin of one pale breast. "Not with Beltrin around. We may have saved his life, but I don't trust him."

"And," she looked around, "we didn't go anywhere."

"No. I think that only happens when we physically make love." He kissed her shoulder. "Although, as we've only physically made love once, I can't be sure. Perhaps we should experiment once we're alone again?"

She giggled. "Perhaps we should."



"You have changed," Beltrin remarked later that morning after finishing a breakfast of ham, cheese and fresh water. He was still thin and haggard, but Gamsin thought she detected some colour to his face and a growing strength to his voice.

Watching the two sorcerers eye each other across the campfire reminded her of watching two circling cats, each sizing up the other, both mistrustful.

"I've had time to think." Ankoll's voice was flat. "Centuries to think."

Beltrin lifted an eyebrow. "It certainly doesn't seem to have done you any harm."

Ankoll's fists clenched and he spoke through gritted teeth. "Harm enough watching my parents die of shame and heartache. The Ankoll line ended with me."

"Then perhaps," Beltrin rasped with a small smile, "you should have been more careful with it."

Now Gamsin could understand what had prompted the younger man to challenge such a powerful sorcerer. In his position, facing such smug arrogance, she thought she might have done the same thing herself.

"All I want now is to have this enchantment lifted from me." His blue gaze bored into Beltrin's. "A fair trade for your life, I should think."

"Yes. I suppose the occasional act of stupidity is not restricted to the young." Which, Gamsin knew, was as close as the ancient sorcerer was going to get to an apology for unleashing the Eidolon on the world. "You have my book? The curse I used on you is not one I use often. I will need some hours to ponder it."

The sun rose high in the sky while Beltrin went off to one edge of their small camp. Occasionally, Gamsin heard him mutter something indistinguishable to himself while he flicked through the pages of his spell book.

"You don't have such a book?" Gamsin asked quietly of Ankoll while they waited. She was used to waiting—a thief often had to lay low, to either mark time till the right moment, or avoid detection—but that didn't mean she liked it.

"It's at the keep," Ankoll answered. "But my enforced solitude gave me enough time to memorise most of what I need."

It was so close, the image of her cottage. Now larger, with an additional room where Ankoll could keep his instruments of magic. And, of course, some books. If only Beltrin would hurry up...

Finally he rose and walked over to them, but there was a frown on his face. He gestured at Ankoll's head, a simple movement with his lean fingers, and his frown deepened.

"This is...most unfortunate. And unintended."

Gamsin shot to her feet, her body bristling with fear. "What? What is it? What's wrong?"

She was the only one of the three displaying any nervousness. The two men just looked at each other evenly.

"The enchantment was laid on you five hundred years ago," Beltrin explained, ignoring Gamsin. "In that time, the dragon's character has seeped into you and is now an intrinsic part of your being."

Ankoll nodded. "That explains why I can change into one at will."

Beltrin inclined his head. "When the conditions of the curse were met," he flicked a quick glance to Gamsin, "all traces of the dragon should have been lifted from you, but they weren't. The dragon has worked its way into your soul."

Ankoll's eyes narrowed to dark chips as he seemed to consider the older man's words. "Does that mean you can't remove it?"

"There is one way. But it requires that I remove all traces of magic from you. You will be rid of the dragon...and you will also be rid of everything that makes you a sorcerer. You will be as the basest of acolytes, stripped of your powers, your enchanted items, and further life extensions." He paused. "Do you wish me to do this?"

There was no hesitation. "Yes."

"No!" Gamsin moved between them, forcing Ankoll to look at her. "I can't let you do this thing."

"Sorcery was mine to study," Ankoll told her gently. "It is also mine to give up."

"Centuries of study!" she objected.

"Centuries of loneliness."

"To be an ordinary mortal!"

"A mortal such as you is not ordinary, Gamsin Thief. Perhaps I may not be able to conjure up a cottage for us, but I will work with you side by side to build one together. If you'll still have me."

Gamsin tried to answer—yes, yes, of course!—but a sense of decency stilled her tongue. If she grasped this chance of happiness, it was at the expense of Ankoll's hardwon centuries of magical study. If she allowed him to keep such powerful knowledge, then she was also condemning him to a half-life in thrall to a dragon's animal sensibilities. What should she do?

He took advantage of her indecision and spoke over her head to Beltrin. "I agree."

"Then we can begin straightaway."

For a spell of this magnitude, and consequence, Gamsin expected a setting from the myths—a giant altar, great burning sconces of fire and elemental weather. She was nonplussed when Beltrin abruptly began muttering phrases under his breath while his hands moved in graceful gestures. She looked from one to the other. Except for Beltrin's arm movements, both men were immobile.

Minutes passed and Beltrin began to sweat and his hands started shaking, although his voice continued speaking words she did not understand, and his dark eyes remained locked on Ankoll's. More minutes passed and the master sorcerer's body began trembling. He may have looked frail, but he remained standing, still weaving his spell. Finally, when Gamsin's nerves were at their breaking point, he dropped his hands.

"It is done."

Ankoll opened his hands, flexing his fingers, and looked down at them, skimming his body as if trying to detect a difference. "I'm mortal now?" He sounded as though he didn't believe it. Gamsin, too, searched for some kind of difference, in the way he looked or how he moved, but couldn't find any.

"You only need to be grounded in the mortal world. Perhaps..." He rested a speculative eye on Gamsin and spoke a few more words of magic. "Yes, I think this is appropriate. If you kiss this woman, take her breath into you, then the dragon—and your magic—will be gone."

Ankoll turned to Gamsin, his eyes blazing blue fire, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I fear this cannot be undone." She looked to Beltrin for confirmation, and he nodded.

"The vision of a cottage at the edge of the ocean sounds more and more attractive to me," Ankoll told her. "Especially if I can share it with you. And, perhaps, I can still turn back to learning magic again. It should," he said with a smile, "be easier this time."

He bent his head, lifting her chin with a finger...parted his lips...

The beast came out of nowhere, leaping over a boulder and fastening onto Beltrin's neck with unerring aim. The sorcerer's scream became a gurgle as the animal ripped out his throat. His lifeblood spurted out in spasming red ribbons, staining his skin and robes and the ground around him.

The beast was not of this world. Gamsin screamed as she focused on the creature. It had four legs and a jaw like a wolf, but its legs ended in bird-like talons and its snout was thick and leathery. It was also white.

Gamsin screamed again, but before she could scrabble back more than a handful of paces, something dark winged over her. The dragon!

Screaming with rage, the dragon descended on the Eidolon, the downdraft from those leathery wings pressing Gamsin into the rocks. Then it lifted the white beast, arrowing back into the sky with it. When they had diminished almost to specks, Gamsin saw the dragon throw the eidolon into the air then shoot a blast of flame at it, catching it expertly as it fell, again throwing it farther in the air and again attacking it with another volley of flame.

Three times it did this until the monster finally dissolved into the blue of the sky, tendrils of white mixing with fiery smoke before dissipating.

Screaming its anger, the dragon continued blasting the air where the Eidolon appeared last until, apparently satisfied, it gradually winged its way to the ground, skimming the rocks as it flew toward her.

She pulled a pair of breeches from his backpack. Just as well he was going to finally remain human, she thought, or most of her time would be spent sourcing clothing for him. But her hands were still shaking from shock.

"It was the white Eidolon," he told her when he once more assumed human form. She tried not to get distracted by his sculpted, naked form.

"But how?"

"It must have still been in contact with the earth when I thought I destroyed it." Ankoll pulled on his trousers and quickly laced them. "I had to remove it from its ability to channel energy in order to destroy it."

They looked at where Beltrin, master sorcerer, had collapsed. Without touching him, they knew he was dead.

"So the enchantment...?"

"It still stands. Beltrin completed it before he was attacked. All I need from you, sweet Gamsin, is one kiss, to take your breath into my mouth, and I'll be forever human." He hesitated. "Except..."

She felt her skin grow cold. "Except?"

"In the final moments of the battle, the Eidolon taunted me. It said that there are others like it in this world, loosed by Beltrin's unthinking conjuring."

"And Beltrin is dead," she added, "so he can't tell us whether the Eidolon was lying." She didn't want to listen to his answer, because—with a sinking feeling—she knew what he was going to say.

"The Eidolon were banished once for their excesses," he told her. "We cannot allow them to gain a second foothold in this world."

"You're not breaking the enchantment." It was a statement, not a question.

"I can do nothing to help this world as a mortal. But as a sorcerer, as a dragon, I can." He took her cold hands in his. "I turned my back on this world once before, sweet Gamsin, but that was before I found you. I could not live knowing that I was somehow responsible for giving evil even the smallest chance to touch you. I'm sorry, my love, but I cannot kiss you."

"But what does that mean? If we can never kiss...?" She loved his kisses, adored them. How could she live like this without the touch of his lips on hers?

"We can kiss in the non-physical world," he suggested, a glint in his eye. "In our dreams. And, back in the physical world, there is still your entire body left for me to explore. I want you with me. As the woman I have grown to love and also as an acrobat and thief. I am putting great faith in your skills to help us in the future."

"Hunting Eidolon?"

"Eidolon...and gold, Gamsin Thief." He pulled her close against his warm, bare chest. "You forget, the spirit of the dragon is part of me. And, like thieves, dragons love gold."

Epilogue

From atop her horse, Gamsin looked back at the cairn they'd built over Beltrin's grave. The heap of dark rocks rose imposingly on the flat plain they chose for his final resting place, with only the faded green stalks of long grass beating against its sides. It should stand there for many more decades as testament to a dead sorcerer.

She may not have liked the old man very much, but he had kept his word and was deserving of some dignity. A cold wind ruffled her hair and she buried her neck deeper into her cloak. The sooner she was away from the chill of the Twilight Ranges, the happier she would be.

"We'll need to restock our provisions," Ankoll called out from slightly ahead of her.

"As long as we don't stop in Tendraf Village again."

He laughed. "Agreed."

"We should probably head for Mishlow City." She shot his back a sour look. "If you're determined to pursue this brainless adventure, we'll need good, more modern, maps."

She spurred her horse and caught up with him.

What strange turns her life had taken in only a few short months. Once she was a fearful, cynical thief and ex-acrobat. And now she was partner to a dragon, confidant to a sorcerer. She still didn't trust people completely, but she was more at peace with herself than at any other time in her life. And, of course, who knew better than Gamsin Thief that anything worth having always exacted a price.

No kissing.

She thought about delicious ways around that while listening to Ankoll's off-key whistling as they headed westward, back to the coast.

About the Author

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