

Here There Be Dragons: Peasaut

A
Torquere
Chaser
by
Vic Winter



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Torquere Press

www.torquerepress.com

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First published in www.torquerepress.com, 2007

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Chapter One

He and Nuk had been coming to the woods together ever since they were little. To them the trees and grasses were an enchanted land where they'd played out all their fantasies. Here they'd been kings and princes, knights and heroes. They'd invented enemies to fight and princesses to defend.

It was in these woods that they'd shared their first kiss, play fighting, rolling in the dirt until they'd lain there, him on top of Nuk, breathless and laughing, mouths settling together...

Toma looked over at his best friend in the whole entire land, which, granted, he'd only known a very small part of, and grinned. "Last one to the mother tree has to play the villain!"

"You're on!" Laughing, Nuk took off, long legs moving him quickly, brown curls bouncing madly.

The mother tree was a big old tree not too far in where they would meet their mothers when they were boys. When the sun reached its highest point in the sky, they would return to the tree, leaving their games behind.

They were older now and no longer needed their mothers' permission to go where they wished. They didn't have a curfew anymore either. Of course they didn't have the time now to play. The moments they spent in the woods stolen, more precious for their rarity. Nuk worked the farm alongside his father and older brother, while Toma had begun to learn all there was to know about the mill. The only thing he knew about it so far was that he needed to be up very early to

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avoid Miller's wrath and that he had to do all the scuttle work and probably would continue to have to do it until someone new wished to learn Miller's trade, and then *he* could wake up first and do all the nasty chores. Toma hoped he showed up soon.

Tripping over a root, Toma nearly went crashing into a tree, making him realize he was wool gathering instead of enjoying his day of rest.

Nuk appeared suddenly in front of him, blue eyes dancing. "What *are* you doing, Tom? I made it to the tree and all the way back here and I never win!"

"I guess I'm the villain, then."

"You are, too!" Nuk laughed, pushing him and nearly knocking him into another tree.

His friend's laughter was infectious and he grabbed Nuk by his tunic, pushing him up against the nearest tree and covering the laughing mouth with his own. Their tongues met, dancing together as they laughed. Nuk tasted like cinnamon and apples.

"You stole a bite of your mamma's pie!" Toma accused, drawing back a little.

Nuk grabbed his hips and pulled them close together again. "Not a bite, a whole slice."

"A whole piece and you didn't share?" Still, as indignant as he was, he couldn't help but rub against Nuk, their shafts hot and hard, finding each other automatically even through their breeches. Being older meant they had this now, and no game they had ever played felt as good.

"Who says I didn't share?"

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"Well, I don't remember eating any pie..."

Grinning, Nuk slid his hand into his breeches, pulling out a bundle wrapped in cheesecloth from the hidden pocket. Opening it, Toma discovered a half a slice of pie. It was squished and misshapen, but it smelled of apples and cinnamon, pastry and sugar.

"Oh, Nuk, thank you!" He kissed his friend again and their hips began to move, Nuk pushing up to rub against him, and Toma pushing back so that Nuk's ass hit the tree again and again.

"Wait," he gasped as Nuk's fingers began to dig into his hips, tugging him in closer so they had a better angle as they rubbed.

"Wait?" Nuk was always the impatient one, and Toma would have laughed, except that right now he didn't wait to wait either. Except he didn't want dirt in his pie. He wrapped it back in the cheesecloth and put it carefully on the ground.

"I don't want to mess up my breeches, either," he told Nuk, taking advantage of the break to tug them down his hips. "Last time Mother kept asking questions."

"I washed mine myself."

Toma made a face. It wasn't his fault his mother still treated him like a child instead of a man of nearly twenty summers. He had been teased for several years because his mother wouldn't let him go and work, learn a trade. She'd finally relented when Father had been caught in a bear trap, miraculously surviving, but losing his leg from the knee down. With Father no longer able to support them, it fell to him.

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Toma tugged at Nuk's breeches, pulled them down to his thighs, too. "Skin on skin is better, anyway, Nuk." His friend only nodded and tugged him closer again, their shafts bumping each other and then sliding into place. He rubbed his along the dip at Nuk's right hip, the tip of his cock hitting Nuk's hip bone every time he pushed forward. It felt so good—it always did. Nuk's shaft slid along his belly, hot and silky, dripping and wetting both of their bellies

Nuk's mouth found his again, teeth worrying at Toma's bottom lip, nipping and biting, becoming less and less gentle the longer they rubbed against one another.

Toma came first, his balls drawing up, the pleasure shooting between them. His orgasm was quickly followed by Nuk's.

Laughing again, breathless and messy, they used leaves to wipe away the warm fluid, and tugged their breeches up from around their thighs, collapsing onto the ground once they were done.

Toma shared his piece of pie and they licked each other's fingers clean, laughing and kissing, rubbing idly. Nuke's Mamma's pie was always good, but it tasted so much better shared wit his friend.

"Let's make a pact," suggested Nuk suddenly.

"What kind of pact?"

"That we'll meet at the mother tree as often as we can for as long as we have breath and blood in our bodies."

"That's a pretty long time—what if I don't like the old man you're going to turn into? What then?" Teasing Nuk was always a fun pastime.

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Nuk rolled his eyes and then slugged him in the arm. Hard. Toma retaliated immediately and before long they were rolling and laughing, each struggling for dominance.

They rolled and rolled, narrowly avoiding trees, not avoiding rocks and bumps in the ground. They oofed and laughed and they might have kept going for ages except Toma hit his head against something that clanked and when he turned and looked, still laughing, two dead eyes stared back at him.

He scrambled away, dragging Nuk with him, his heart pounding in his chest.

"What?" Nuk looked as annoyed as he sounded.

"There. Look." Toma whispered, nodding toward what turned out to be a knight, if the armor was anything to go by. The man's neck was clearly broken, lying at an unnatural angle to the rest of his body.

"Oh..."

Toma nodded his agreement. Oh, indeed. They crept forward together and Toma held his hand in front of the knight's mouth, to see if there was any breath there.

"Is he...?" Nuk's voice was hushed.

"Dead. Yes." He was sure of it.

"How long?"

"It can't have been too long or the birds would have had his eyes." He'd seen a dead calf once, on Nuk's farm, the birds feasting noisily on its eyes. It made him shudder and he closed the knight's eyes.

"What do you think happened?" asked Nuk, staring at the body.

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"I don't know. Maybe his horse threw him."

"How do you know he had a horse?" Nuk was growing braver, poking at the body with his foot, making the armor clank as he hit it.

Toma yanked his friend away from the body; though they hadn't known him, the dead knight deserved the respect afforded all dead men. "Because he's a knight, Nuk. They all have horses."

"Well, he couldn't have been a very good knight."

Toma shook his head. "Don't speak ill of the dead."

"Well, it's the truth. If he was a good knight he wouldn't be dead. What are we going to do with him?"

Toma looked around. They were fairly far into the woods and quite far away from the village now. "We should bury him so the animals don't eat him."

"You don't think we should take him back to the village?"

"No. What if his friends come looking and they decide we had something to do with him being dead? Besides, he's too heavy to carry him all the way back."

"But it'll take all day to cover him up. It's our day *off* and now we're *working*." Nuk grumbled and complained, but he helped, the two of them beginning to cover the body with rocks and stones. There weren't very many large rocks in the forest and it was taking a rather long time to cover the knight, who, it seemed, was a very large man.

Toma reached beneath some undergrowth, the rock he found there smooth and odd beneath his fingertips. Once he had it out, he discovered it wasn't a rock at all, but something

that looked more like a giant egg. It was dark grey and had a crack across one side.

"What've you got?" Nuk came over, reaching out to touch.

"I think it's an egg." Toma handed it over and Nuk frowned at it.

"I've never seen an egg like this. Can you imagine the size of the bird that laid it?"

That hadn't occurred to Toma, but now that Nuk had mentioned it, he looked around, and then up into the sky. But the woods remained quiet and the sky remained blue.

"Maybe that's what killed the knight."

Toma nodded. Maybe the knight hadn't been thrown at all, but had been dropped.

The egg made a noise and another crack opened up, shooting out from the first. Gasping, Nuk dropped the egg and it landed with more cracking noises. It had all but cracked open.

"Nuk!" Toma glared at his friend.

"I'm sorry, Tom, but there's something inside it—and it moved!"

"Sh!" hissed Toma as the egg made a mewling sound, like a cross between a cat and a baby. "It's still alive!"

"I told you something moved inside it!"

There was a tapping noise and a crunch and some of the egg fell away, a little claw coming out to tear at the shell. The hole became bigger and bigger until the head of the ... bird ... came through.

"That doesn't look like any bird I've ever seen," whispered Nuk, pressing against him.

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"Nor I."

The shape was all wrong, for one thing. This bird didn't have a beak so much as a snout, a dark grey one the color of the egg itself. Of course you couldn't really tell for sure with just a head to go by.

The thing mewled again, exposing a toothless mouth and a long tongue. Its skin looked leathery instead of feathery and its eyes seemed to glow like the sun, or flames.

As they watched, the beast broke more of the egg from the inside. It rolled a bit and then seemed to almost crumble apart, revealing the beast to be a four legged creature with a tail and what looked like wings tucked along its sides. It was small, no larger than a barn cat.

"That's no bird," whispered Toma.

Nuk agree. "Definitely not."

"What do you think it is?" He had an idea or two, but didn't want to influence Nuk's answer. He might as well not have bothered.

"How should I know?"

Nuk wasn't sure why there were whispering. It wasn't as if they were hiding and it wasn't like the not-bird would be able to understand what they were saying.

"Whatever it is, it's ugly as sin." Nuk had stopped whispering and the words tumbled noisily from his best friend's mouth.

"It is not," Toma protested as the beast hissed at Nuk. There was something very appealing about it. "It's actually rather cute."

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Nuk snorted, and backed away as the beast hissed again. The small, leathery wings had a surprising large wingspan as they stroked through the air, the beast taking several threatening steps toward Nuk. Maybe it understood them after all.

Toma laughed. "You insulted him."

"Do you think it can understand us?"

"He does seem to be able to." Toma crouched down and held out his hand, Nuk protesting somewhat incoherently. Toma chose to ignore him. "Can you understand us? Are you hungry? Or cold?"

The beast's wings settled down against his back, and he came toward Toma, snout bumping into Toma's fingers. Laughing, Toma stroked the beast with the fingers of his other hand. "Oh, soft. And warm. He's so very warm." The beast began to make a sound that wasn't quite a purr, but wasn't a growl either. He kept petting and got a lick or two for his troubles. He laughed as they tickled. "Oh, he likes me!"

"Or it's checking to see how you taste."

"I don't think so." He picked the beast up and it immediately curled in his arms, tail coming around its body, snout resting on its back. "Oh, he does like me."

"Why do you keep calling it 'he'?" Nuk watched the beast warily, but Toma could tell his friend wanted to pat the beast as well.

"I don't know. It just feels right."

Nuk snorted again and the beast jerked, one golden, glowing eye opening to glare balefully at his friend.

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"Be nice, Nuk."

"Well, it seems to like you well enough—are you going to keep it?"

"Yes." He didn't even have to think about it. He wasn't sure what he was going to feed it—or even how to feed it, but he knew for sure he was going to keep it. An animal like this didn't just drop into your hands every day.

"Well you can't take it home. Your mother would faint. And then she'd beat you and make you kill it."

He knew that. There was no way his mother would allow this fascinating creature in the house. Or anywhere else for that matter if she happened to see it. "How about your barn?"

"No, I couldn't. Well, I *can't*," Nuk went on when he gave his friend a hurt look. It would be the perfect solution: warm, plenty of straw, close enough to visit regularly—Nuk could check on Herman. Oh, his name was Herman!

"His name is Herman. And why not?"

"Because my father would beat me even worse than your mother if he found it. Besides, what if it eats the livestock. I can't take the risk."

"Eat the livestock?" Toma gave Nuk a *look*. "He's tiny. I mean have you seen the size of his mouth? Not to mention the fact that he's got no teeth!"

"It's going to get bigger though, Tom. You know it is."

He couldn't argue with that.

"We don't even know what it is yet—it might be something dangerous."

"I think it's a dragon."

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"What!?" Nuk took a step back as if afraid he was going to be eaten. Grinning sheepishly, he came forward again. "Have you ever seen a dragon?"

"No, but they go with knights."

"But dragons are supposed to be huge and he's not," Nuk pointed out helpfully.

"But as you said, he's going to get bigger."

"Yeah..." Nuk stepped closer again and gave Herman a pat on the back. "Oh, he is soft and warm." Nuk seemed to be getting used to the idea. "What do you think he eats?"

"I don't know. I suppose we could try different things and see what works?"

"I know where there's an apple tree. The fruit'll still be a little unripe, but it's something."

Toma nodded and followed Nuk as his friend led the way. After a few steps, Herman woke, stretching and nearly falling out of his arms. Toma managed to keep the little dragon from falling. Herman seemed restless, though, and after he'd mewled plaintively several times, Toma put him on the ground. That seemed to do the trick, Herman running around his and Nuk's feet, nearly tripping them up more than once.

Nuk shot him a dark look. "The way he gets underfoot, he could just be a deformed cat."

Herman nipped at Nuk's ankles.

They finally came upon the apple tree, and Toma realized they'd gone much further south than he'd expected and were almost at the foothills of the mountains that separated them from the rest of the country. There were caves in there and

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he wondered if he could leave Herman in one of them. Would the little dragon be safe there? Would he even stay there?

He and Nuk picked a couple of apples and held them out to Herman. The dragon sniffed and its lips curled as it backed up.

"Maybe it can't eat solid food yet." Nuk frowned, biting his lower lip. "Calves, pigs, lambs, they all need to suckle at first. What if Herman needs his mother in order to survive."

Before he had a chance to answer, Herman shot about four feet, grabbing a mouse in his mouth and snapping the rodent's neck with a flick of the head. The mouse was gone a moment later, downed in a single swallow.

"Or maybe he's just not a vegetarian," murmured Nuk.

"Wow. That was impressive. Good job, Herman!" It looked like he wasn't going to have to worry about feeding Herman—it seemed his dragon was quite capable of handling that all on his own. "Let's see how you do with drinking. Nuk, you remember that stream with the tiny fish? I think we found a cave near it..."

Nuk nodded and they headed off, Herman bounding around, sometimes underfoot, sometimes taking off and disappearing into the forest. Toma held his breath whenever this happened, but Herman always found his way back. It was late in the day by the time they came to the cave he'd been thinking of. It wasn't very deep, but it had a wide mouth and lots of dry, dead leaves in it that would make a good bed. Toma thought it wasn't bad as caves went and hoped Herman would understand he had to stay here.

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They stopped at the stream, which happened to run right next to the cave and Herman drank enthusiastically, if sloppily. He and Nuk also bent to drink, the cold water refreshing. It also reminded him just how empty his belly was; he and Nuk hadn't brought anything but that small half-slice of pie to eat.

"We need to get back home." Nuk pointed toward where the sun was beginning to go down. "I don't want to get caught in the forest in the dark.

No, you never knew what lurked in the dark; it was time for them to leave.

He sat down and patted his thighs, Herman coming to sit, head cocked, small, glowing eyes looking at him.

"I have to go home now. You need to stay in this cave. I'll come to visit tomorrow evening, I promise. But you have to stay here—you can't follow me. And if you hear anyone coming, you have to hide. I don't want you to get hurt."

Herman mewled and he stroked the soft-leather snout. "I'm sorry, Herman, I really am, but people just wouldn't understand and someone would hurt you, thinking it was the only way to stay safe. I've said I'll come back tomorrow, and I will."

Herman made another little noise, and head-butted him. Then the dragon scampered off into the cave until all Toma could see of him was the glowing eyes.

"Good boy," he said softly.

"Come *on*, we have to go." Nuk called impatiently.

"I'll be back," he reminded Herman. Then, with a last look, he scampered off after Nuk, wondering how early he could

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sneak out of Miller's to come see Herman.

Chapter Two

All day Toma worked twice as hard as he usually did, hoping to get all his chores done for Miller before it became too late—he didn't want to have to go back to the foothills in the dark, but he'd promised Herman he'd come back, so go back he would.

It was only a few hours past midday meal and he was bounding about, looking for something to do, wondering if it was too early to ask to leave when Miller came over and put a heavy arm on his shoulder. "Toma. The wheel needs cleaning."

"I did that. Just after the midday meal." He held up his hands, showing the green stains from the algae as proof.

"Huh. Well. You might as well go then. But if I look at it and am not satisfied I'll make you work double on your next off day."

"You'll be satisfied, Miller!" He called out and waved as he ran, not even bothering to go home first—his mother would only have chores for him to do.

He ran all the way, arriving at the stream utterly breathless. Falling to his knees, he bent and drank deeply, nearly going in when something jumped on his back. The mewling sound told him it was Herman and he laughed once he'd finished choking.

He sat next to the stream and Herman climbed into his lap, snout bumping his hand. He stroked the little snout, smiling down into the glowing eyes. "I told you I was coming back, didn't I?"

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Herman made a sneezing like noise and a bit of smoke came out of his nose-hole, making Toma laugh. When he was young, there'd been a hunting dog that went out with his father, and Toma would play with her out behind the house where she was kept. Herman reminded Toma a little of her, but Herman was better because no one else had a dragon to play with.

He'd saved half his lunch, and he ate it, sharing little bites of his hank of ham with Herman. The little dragon wasn't interested in his bread at all, not the cheese. "Meat eater only, Herman?"

The beast didn't answer, just butted his hand and opened his mouth. Laughing, Toma fed Herman the rest of his ham.

When the food was gone, Toma washed his hands and face, getting sprayed when Herman jumped in and splashed around. They played together, Toma seeing if Herman would fetch—he would—and running together. For a beast with such little legs, Herman was very fast.

He talked to Herman, told the dragon about his life and anything that came into his head. It made him realize how lonely he'd been lately. Oh, he had Nuk, the best friend in the world, but it had been several years since Nuk had begun working full time on the farm, and it meant they had far less time together. And then he'd started working and they only had their day off together...

He shook it off and smiled at Herman, patting the dragon's snout. "I'm glad you came along, Herman."

A small puff of smoke came out of Herman's nostrils, and Toma decided that meant Herman was happy, too.

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Late afternoon faded into evening and as it began to grow dark, Toma knew he needed to get back. "I have to go, Herman. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Herman mewled and climbed into his lap, curling up with his tail over his snout. The golden eyes closed. After a moment, one eye opened a little bit and Toma grinned. "You can't come with me, and I can't stay, Herman. I'm sorry, but if you come with me someone might hurt you and I don't want that to happen."

He gave Herman a hug and a few more pats and put the dragon on the ground so he could get up. "Don't follow me, Herman. You need to stay here at the cave, and I'll be back soon."

He waded across the stream and headed off, turning back again and again. Herman was in the same spot each time, at the mouth of the cave, watching him go. Finally, he couldn't see Herman anymore, and feeling guilty for leaving the dragon all by himself, Toma hurried home.

* * * *

Toma tried to go to see Herman every night, but some days Miller wouldn't let him go until after dark, and then his mother stared asking where he kept disappearing to. He didn't mind that too much—he usually fobbed her off by telling her he was visiting Nuk. Once she discovered that was a lie, she assumed it was because he was sneaking off to see a girl and she started talking about handfastings and babies.

It made it easier for him to go, because she stopped asking him so many questions, encouraged him to go, in fact.

Which was great, except that he knew the time would come when she would wonder why his constant attention and visits hadn't resulted in even one meeting between his lady and his mother.

He tried not to worry about it, just as he tried not to worry over how the days were getting shorter, and colder, hoping that a solution to both problems would present itself in due course.

"Toma!" Nuk's exasperated tone caught Toma's attention and he looked over at his friend.

"What?"

Nuk stopped walking and put his hands on his hips. "You haven't heard a word I've said for the last ten minutes."

"Um ... no, I guess I haven't. I was distracted. Sorry, Nuk." They started walking again.

"You're *a/ways* distracted these days. It's Herman, isn't it? He's all you can think of."

"That's not true!"

Nuk's snort seemed to echo among the trees. "Where are we going?"

"What?" Nuk knew where they were going.

"Where are we going?"

"To see Her ... Oh. Well, if I could bring him home, he'd have company always, but he's stuck out at the caves all by himself and that isn't fair, so I have to go see him as often as possible." He wished he didn't sound so defensive, but Nuk was right, his entire focus had been on Herman. "I can't help it. He's a *dragon*, Nuk. He's *my* dragon."

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His best friend laughed and thumped him on the arm. "I *know!* But you could at least pretend to pay attention when I'm talking to you."

"I can do that." He thumped Nuk's arm in retaliation. "But you have to admit that the breeding secrets of wheat and corn aren't the most stimulating of topics of conversation."

"Oh! You!" Nuk's nostrils flare, his eyes flashing with a mixture of amusement and ire.

Laughing, Toma took off toward the cave at a run, Nuk hot on his heels.

Nuk caught him as they crossed the stream and he was tackled to the ground. They were both too out of breath to even laugh, but Nuk found the energy to shout when Herman came shooting out of the cave, smoke pouring out of his nostrils, and a sound that was trying to be a growl coming out of his throat. Herman's teeth had begun to slowly grow in and Nuk howled when Herman bit Nuk's arm.

Grabbing his arm, Nuk rolled off, shouting. Toma grabbed Herman when the dragon would have gone after Nuk again, pulling Herman into his lap. "Stop that! Nuk's my friend."

Herman's head tilted and he looked over at Nuk.

"Yes, that's right. My friend. We were just playing—he wasn't hurting me."

Nuk sat, cradling his arm and glaring. Herman mewed softly and then went over to Nuk, licked his hand and lowered his head. Sighing, Nuk stroked Herman's head.

"You're forgiven. But I'm Toma's best friend and you can't be attacking me."

"I don't know why he did it, Nuk. He's never tried to hurt anyone before."

"No one's ever 'attacked' you in front of him before. Something tells me he'll guard you very fiercely."

Toma found he quite liked the idea.

* * * *

Toma and Nuk were taking turns feeding Herman. Nuk had the better meat, his father having recently slain a sheep, so it was fresh and raw. They'd discovered that Herman had a preference for raw meat, but that he would eat any meat cooked any way. Toma only had the usual smoked ham. His mother guarded the larder with an eagle eye and some days he thought he was lucky to get away with as much as he did. He had a feeling she believed he was bringing the extra chunk of meat for his non-existent girlfriend.

So Herman kept going back to Nuk, rubbing his head against Nuk's thigh and making the growling, purring sound that they'd learned meant Herman was happy, pleased.

"Traitor," Toma accused.

Herman flew suddenly to his side, mewling softly.

"Oh, I didn't mean it seriously, Herman. It was only a joke." He stroked the dragon's snout and the top of his head and soon Herman was purring again and trying to snag the rest of his ham.

Laughing, he tore off a bite and fed it to Herman, the dragon very careful not to catch his skin with the increasingly sharp teeth. Then the dragon went back over to Nuk for a piece of the preferred raw meat.

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When the meat was gone, they went to the stream to wash their hands and a water fight broke out. Though it was Herman who had started it, the dragon was smart enough to scamper away and he and Nuk splashed each other, soaking their clothes through. Laughing and out of breath, they leaned against each other.

"It's too cold to be this wet," complained Nuk.

So they took off their clothes and wrung them out, hanging them over branches to dry. "It had better not rain." Toma rubbed his arms to get some warmth into them.

"Well at least we won't have to explain wet clothing if it does." Nuk grinned and came over to him. "I know how to warm you up, Toma."

"You do?" He pushed close, their skin warming as they pressed together.

"Yes. I do." Nuk's mouth found his and they kissed.

Nuk's mouth was hot, his lips cool, but quickly heating up as the kiss did. Their tongues tangled together, Nuk's arms coming around him, grabbing his ass. His own hands slid up and down along Nuk's back, warming the skin beneath them.

Moaning, they dropped to their knees, still taking one kiss after another, sharing breath and body heat alike. It was Nuk who pushed them over onto the ground, a bed of fallen leaves cushioning them. The lean length of Nuk's body pressed him down and he bucked up against his friend, their cocks sliding together, making him moan again.

The movement of Nuk's mouth on his slowed and then stopped.

"What?" he whispered against Nuk's lips.

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"Herman."

They turned their heads together, and sure enough, there was Herman, head tilted to one side, golden eyes bright as he watched them.

"Ignore him," Toma suggested, trying to bring their lips back together again.

"I *can't*."

"Sure you can. Come on." Toma pushed up again, making their pricks bump and glide.

Nuk groaned. "He's staring. I can't just ignore him."

Toma looked over at Herman again and had the distinct impression the dragon was laughing at them. "Can you give us a little privacy, Herman? We won't be very long. Just go back to your cave or something."

Herman snorted, smoke rising from his nostrils, and then turned and scampered off into his cave.

"He still could be watching us," whispered Nuk.

"Nuk ... please."

"All you care about is getting off."

"Right at this minute? Yes!" He was hard, the warmth of the pleasure moving all through his body. He wanted to come. He needed to.

"You really think he isn't watching?"

"To be honest, I'm trying not to think of him at all." He grabbed hold of Nuk's ass and pressed up as he pulled down, their hips coming together and rubbing. "Come *on*!"

Nuk finally seemed to let go of whether or not they were being watched, and started to move with him. Groaning, Nuk dropped his head, their lips landing together. They kissed and

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rubbed, moving faster and faster and everything outside of their bodies disappeared. All Toma knew was the heat and hardness of Nuk's body, the wet taste of his mouth.

Nuk's body jerked and froze, their kiss breaking as Nuk shouted out, heat spraying from his prick. Groaning, Toma kept moving, rubbing himself against the slick body pressing him into the ground. Within moments he'd come as well, the pleasure shooting through his cock from his balls, leaving him limp and panting.

They stayed where they were, Toma's hands wrapped around Nuk, the heat generated between them keeping them warm.

"We need to do this more often," Nuk muttered.

"Lie naked in the leaves?"

Nuk thumped him on the arm. "No. The coupling."

"We didn't actually couple, you know. We never do. We rub off on each other."

"That's because we're boys, dummy, we can't couple."

Toma nodded, but a part of him felt there was more to it than what they did together. Still, it was way better than his own hand, and that was pretty good itself, so he wasn't going to complain. Not for a moment.

* * * *

As summer turned to fall and winter began to threaten the land with snow and cold, Herman grew. By the time the first snow fell, the little dragon was as big as a dog, head at Toma's hip.

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The snow and cold didn't seem to bother Herman, and though he wasn't blowing fire yet, which Toma believed he would when he was old enough to, his production of smoke had increased. It didn't seem to take any sort of effort anymore, and often the plumes would reach quite high into the sky.

Herman's skin was no longer as soft as it had been, growing tougher, and he liked to be scratched—especially along his back. Toma wiled away many hours scratching Herman's back or playing with his wings which had increased in size as well. He had a rather impressive wingspan and Toma was sure he could fly, but he had no idea how to teach Herman to do so. Suggestions were met with blank stares.

He decided to show Herman. So he spent several of his days off running through a small valley, flapping his arms—they couldn't do it in the forest, Herman's wingspan was far too wide and he'd hit tree trunks. One such incident had resulted in a small tear in Herman's wing and Toma had been beside himself. When he'd come back two days later, the tear was gone, though there was a tiny white scar where it had been.

So he'd found a valley another half kilometer along the hill line, and he and Herman would spend hours running around and flapping. Herman, it seemed, was quite willing to follow Toma, or even to lead the way, wings flapping madly. But that was as far as it went.

Toma even tried jumping while he was flapping his arms, but that only resulted in Herman again copying him. They looked like a pair of fools running and jumping and flapping,

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but Toma persisted, hoping that one of these times Herman would fly. So far, though, he'd been unsuccessful.

They wandered back to the caves one early winter evening, the snow crunching underfoot and reflecting the moon's light back up at them. It had been sometime since Toma had tried to get home before dark—he knew the way by heart now and could do it with his eyes closed. It didn't hurt that the snow did make it brighter, even in the forest or when it was a moonless night.

"Are you happy here?" Toma asked, rubbing Herman's snout. Herman only bumped his hand again as an answer. Toma *knew* that Herman could understand him; he just wished the dragon could speak. "I suppose if you weren't, you would just leave." It suddenly occurred to him, that maybe Herman didn't know that. After all, Toma had told the dragon to stay here at the cave.

"You can go, you know. If you want to. I would be sad if you left, but you don't have to stay if you would rather go."

* * * *

There was a storm on Toma's next day off and so it was nearly fourteen days before he was able to go back to the cave. He ran as fast as he could, heart pounding more out of fear of what he might find than from the exertion—all the running he'd been doing with Toma had left him in very good shape. He was worried that Herman might have decided to leave, especially when it was so long since he'd last been able to visit.

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He began shouting for Herman as he ran, and to his great joy, the dragon came running through the forest to him, bleating loudly. Toma threw his arms around the dragon, relief making him sink to the ground. "Oh, Herman, I was worried you would have decided to leave."

Snorting at him, Herman sent a large plume of smoke sailing up into the sky.

Toma smiled. "Is that your way of saying that I shouldn't have worried?"

Herman, of course, didn't answer.

The snow began to seep through his clothing and Toma got up and continued on to the cave, still running, this time with Herman at his heels.

They settled together in the cave, he cross-legged on the ground, and Herman in his lap, even though the dragon was almost too big to curl up in it, he nonetheless tried.

Toma noticed that Herman had made changes inside the cave. There was a huge pile of leaves in one corner, and in the other were bits and pieces: shiny rocks and broken wire, the odd piece of something copper or silver all polished until they glinted in the dull light coming from the cave mouth.

"Do you like shiny things, Herman?"

He thought the question made Herman's eyes gleam a little brighter. "I'll have to see what I can find around the house for you." His mother would no doubt take missing items as a further sign that he was courting someone, but he couldn't help that.

Soon Herman's pile of shiny things included all manner of broken bits and pieces that Toma had found around not just

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his own home, but the whole village. He'd even found a small piece of glass that reflected the small pile of treasures, making it look bigger.

It was the least he could do seeing as he was coming less and less to visit. He tried to come at least once a week after working for Miller, and he'd come on his day off as well, often with Nuk.

He could only hope that Herman wasn't too lonely. And he wondered just how long it would be before someone else came upon Herman and discovered the dragon.

Chapter Three

Nuk and Toma were playing chess in front of the fire, the day bitter and cold, when they heard a commotion coming from outside, along with a loud voice demanding everyone's attention.

They grabbed their coats, slipped on their boots and went out to the village square, the snow crunching beneath their feet, Toma's mother and father following behind. Everyone was standing around, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands to keep them warm and staring at a knight on a black horse, the steam of their breath rising into the air. It was what was in front of the knight that made Toma's heart sink, though, and he glanced over at Nuk, whose eyes had gone wide.

The knight they had buried lay across this new knight's pommel. He recognized the body by the shape of the helmet, and the dent in it.

The man on the horse had taken off his helmet and he was glaring, dark eyebrows coming together over his eyes. He had a strong face with a dark beard to match the hair on his head and his eyebrows, and he looked huge upon the high horse. "I expect an answer, who is responsible for this?" He had a loud voice that carried, almost seemed to shake the ground.

Nobody said anything, at least not to the knight. They were all huddled together in little groups, whispering, murmuring. Toma looked over at Nuk again, his friend shook his head, just a bit, and Toma bit his lip. They hadn't done

anything wrong—the man had been dead when they'd found him, but would the knight believe them? Would he care?

"I will have an answer!" The air shook with the angry shout.

Toma swallowed and stepped forward, ignoring Nuk's hissed "Don't!" The sound of his feet on the snow seemed very loud.

The knight's attention turned to him, pinned him to the spot, and he swallowed hard as the dark eyes seemed to look right through him.

He swallowed again, trying to wet his suddenly dry mouth. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"What's that, boy? I couldn't hear you."

He stood a little straighter and took another step forward. "I'm not a boy. And I said we didn't do anything wrong."

"Someone is responsible for *this*." The small square rang with the sound as the knight's fist landed on the armor of the dead man in front of him.

Toma opened his mouth to explain that the knight had already been dead when they'd found him, but he was interrupted by a sound from overhead. Everyone looked up to see a huge beast circling the air. There were gasps and screams, the sounds increasing when fire shot from the huge dragon's nostrils.

Toma stared in amazement as the thing circled and then came rushing down. Compared to Herman this thing was enormous, its wingspan easily wider than the house he lived in. And fire! Herman could blow smoke when he wanted to now, and Toma had been convinced he would eventually be

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able to make fire, but so far it hadn't happened. It was amazing to see such a magnificent creature. And also somewhat terrifying. Most of the villagers dispersed to hide behind buildings and doors, but Toma stood his ground.

The dragon slowly circled, coming down lower on each pass. It had something in its talons and it was only as it came right down and dropped its burden from several feet up that Toma realized that something was Herman. He froze to the spot as Herman stood unsteadily, blowing smoke out of his nostrils and bleating, the sound nowhere near the huge roar of the bigger dragon.

"And who is responsible for that?" demanded the knight, pointing at Herman.

Before Toma could find his tongue, the big dragon dive bombed toward Herman and Toma ran forward instinctively, shouting for them to leave Herman alone. He threw himself over Herman and closed his eyes tight, waiting to feel the mighty claws tear into him.

They didn't—though he felt the strong breeze from the great wings beating, and was nearly deafened by the loud screech. And then everything was quiet, so quiet, and he looked up carefully, finding himself the center of attention from everyone still left in the square to those creeping back, and from Nuk to the knight.

"Stand up, boy."

"I'm not a boy!" He repeated the assertion, standing straight. Herman pressed close, snout butting his hand. He put his on Herman's head, fingers stroking soothingly. He could feel the little dragon trembling slightly and it made him

angry. Herman had never been afraid before and how dare this knight and this dragon come here and be nasty and scare not just Herman but everyone. It wasn't right.

"Do you still maintain you did nothing wrong?"

"I didn't do anything wrong!" He hadn't. He hadn't hurt anyone, and neither had Nuk or anyone in the village. "No one here has. These are good people."

"What do you call that?" the knight asked, pointing at Herman.

Toma slid his fingers across Herman's head and down over his snout, the dragon's trembling easing a little. "His name is Herman."

"You stole a dragon from a knight and named it *Herman*?"

Toma had to look up and up and up to see the knight's face, but he tried not to let that intimidate him. After all, he knew that knights were only human after all, even if they were very big and very angry humans. "I didn't steal him!"

The knight stared and Toma felt as if he were being weighed. "But you claim him."

Toma nodded. There was no way to deny that even if he wanted to. Herman had settled next to him and was half rubbing against his legs, half hissing and growling his high pitched baby dragon growl, protecting him.

"This is your work, too, then." The knight's hand came down on the armor of the armor clad dead body again, making it clang.

"He was already dead when I found him. All I did was bury him in rocks so the animals wouldn't eat him." Now he wished he'd let Nuk convince him to bring the dead knight to the

village to be buried properly, then there would be nothing for the knight to have found. Of course then he might not have found Herman either, and that would have been a very sad turn of events.

"So you say." The knight seemed to be determined to lay blame at his feet.

"It's true!" Nuk came to stand next to him.

Toma glared at his friend. Bad enough he was in trouble. "Hush, Nuk. You don't need to do this."

"Yes, I do. You're my best friend and I was with you when we found the dead man." Nuk turned to glare up at the knight. "And we didn't kill him, we found him like that."

"And then stole what was his." The knight nudged his horse forward and Toma swallowed, but stood his ground. He and Nuk had done nothing wrong.

"We found the dragon near him, but we didn't know it was his. And then it hatched."

"You expect me to believe it hatched, all on its own."

Toma nodded. "Yes. That's exactly what happened." He wasn't sure how dragons usually hatched, but the chicks on Nuk's farm hatched all on their own, the chickens only keeping them warm until they were ready, and if you tried to break them open early you were left with a dead, not quite fully formed, chick.

"Are you sure you didn't break open the shell?" the knight demanded.

"It was already cracked when Toma found it." Yes, and then Nuk had dropped it, but that wasn't his fault and neither of them mentioned it.

Dark blue eyes examined them both carefully, looking into their eyes as if judging their answers, as if judging them. Nuk stepped closer and grabbed his hand, but aside from that, they both withstood the scrutiny.

"Very well, you found it and it hatched on its own." The knight leaned down, pinning him to the spot. "And then you abandoned it in the caves."

"No! I took care of Herman. I couldn't bring him back here, so I brought him to the caves, but I visited and took care of him. And..." He swallowed and stood straighter. "And he's mine." Just like with Herman's name, he just *knew* it.

"I can see that he's bonded with you. You'll have to come with me."

"What?" His exclamation was echoed by not only Nuk, but his mother, and several of the other villagers.

"Only knights are allowed to bond with dragons. If you've got a dragon, then you're a knight."

Toma shook his head. He was only Miller's apprentice, just a man from a village. He wasn't strong and scary like the knight in front of him. He wasn't going to grow bigger either, not after seeing twenty summers, and he was far more afraid than fear inducing.

"Then the dragon is not yours and I'll have to take him away." The knight put his hands by his mouth and shouted loudly, "Astadon!"

The large dragon appeared in the sky again, just a spec in the bright, cold blue, but getting larger, coming toward them. Herman bawled and pressed against his legs. Toma shook his head. "No! No, you can't have him, he *is* mine."

"Then you are a knight."

"But I have no armor, no horse. I don't even know how to ride!" It was lunacy to even suggest it.

The knight waved his hand dismissively. "Details."

The villagers, who'd been frozen in place, quiet and still as mice, now began to murmur and whisper among themselves. They stared at him, as did the knight, all waiting for him to say something. He looked to Nuk, his best friend looking at him wide-eyed. It was Herman who broke the spell, the little dragon's bleat and head-butt against his hip familiar and good and he smiled down at the beast. No, he could not deny that Herman was his and he didn't want to.

He stroked Herman's head, the growly purr that meant Herman was happy sounding immediately. It gave him courage; he had a *dragon*, a beast no one in his village had ever seen before today, a beast that might have just been legend. And Herman trusted him and loved him. And so did Nuk. His best friend in all the world. With either of them by his side, he could be brave.

Standing straight and tall once more, he addressed the knight. "All right, then. I'm a knight."

The square burst into noise, the villagers exclaiming and murmuring in excitement. One wave of the knight's hand and they quieted. Something flickered in the knight's dark eyes, and Toma couldn't be sure, but it looked like pride. "You are indeed, little one. Now you get to prove it."

"P ... prove it?" He wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. He didn't see how he and Herman could go against this knight and his dragon and prevail.

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"The king has called for all his knights to come to battle. You must answer the call or be condemned to death for treason."

"But I don't know how to fight!"

"You will learn." The knight's eyes seemed to soften. "Or you will die."

Toma wasn't very impressed with his options. "What about Herman—he's only little still. He can't go up against another dragon like Astade."

"Astadon," corrected the knight, eyes going to the sky, a soft smile on his lips when he spied a speck in the sky. "And your dragon will learn just as you do. And he will grow. The king calls his knights to him—it is your duty, boy."

"I'm not a boy." He spoke the words quietly, but surely. He might not have the stature of this knight, but he was a man. And as a man he would accept his duty. "I will come with you to the king."

He heard Nuk gasp, heard the whispers among the villagers increase again.

"Excellent. Get your things. We leave within the hour." He looked into the knight's eyes, but the man didn't appear to be joking.

He blinked, panic beginning to beat in his heart. "So soon?"

"We are needed." The words were dismissive, final.

His mother's wail split the air, her arms suddenly around him. "No! No, you can't take my only son. Who will take care of his poor old mother if you take him away?"

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Toma patted her arm. He would miss her and his father, he would miss his home, but the truth was that there was very little holding him here. Though where he was going sounded as if it would be dangerous, and he was scared, it was also an adventure where he'd get to meet a real king, and real knights with dragons of their own. After having spent so many years of his life playing at it with Nuk, he was about to see the real thing. It was as exciting as it was scary.

"He is the King's knight now, mother, and no longer your son."

Toma thought maybe he was both, but he didn't see how correcting the knight would make his mother feel any better, so he kept quiet.

"What about me?" Nuk asked, stepping forward to stand with him.

The knight looked Nuk up and down and shrugged. "You may come with us—the boy'll need a page."

"I'm not a boy!" Toma glared up at the knight. If he was to go see the king and do battle, then there was no doubt that he was a man. The knight quirked a half smile and inclined his head ever so slightly. Toma glared for a moment longer, before turning to his friend. "You don't need to come with me, Nuk. Your father needs you here."

"No, I'm not the first son." Nuk grinned and nudged his shoulder. "This way we get a grand adventure together. Kings and knights for real."

Toma couldn't help but grin, Nuk's words so perfectly echoing his thoughts. "Yeah. It'll be just like when we were boys."

They were interrupted by the knight. "This knight needs a proper burial."

"I'll make sure they understand." Toma would talk to Smith, who also made the coffins. "Do you know who he was? What his name is?"

"I do not recognize him by his armor. And there is little enough else to recognize. Your people may bury him as Sir Knight. And you may have his armor."

"It'll be far too big for me!" Toma was a little horrified at the thought of putting on a dead man's armor.

"Yes, lad. But you'll be able to make a trade with it for armor that fits you, or you'll get it resized if you've anything to trade for the work."

"Well, Smith would do it for me." Their blacksmith did good work, though he'd never made armor before. Still, the man would not charge him much.

"I said we had to leave right away, lad. There won't be time."

Toma went up to the knight, who looked larger the closer he got, and the man's horse was also very big, but Toma didn't let the fact that his head didn't even come up to the top of the horse's back scare him. "I'm not a boy or a lad, and my name is Toma."

The knight chuckled. "All right, Toma. I am Horace. Well met."

Toma blinked. The knight—Horace—didn't look nearly as fierce or scary when he smiled. In fact, he looked quite handsome. And certainly more human.

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Horace pushed the dead knight off his horse, horrible noises coming from inside the armor when he did. "Take care of this nameless fellow, get your stuff and let's go."

"Yes, sir."

Nuk helped him and together they managed to drag the body over to the Smith's forge, Herman nearly tripping him as the little dragon stayed glued to his side. Once there, all three of them wrestled the man out of his armor. It was disgusting and awful and Toma wanted very badly to throw up, but he didn't. If he was going to be a knight, he needed to be strong.

"Who will pay for the casket, Toma?" Smith asked him.

"I guess I will." He had a bag of flour coming to him, for the work he'd done with Miller, but his mother and father needed that. The only other thing he had that had any value was ... "I have this armor."

"I'll take the face plate."

Toma handed over the helmet, having no idea if it was a fair trade or not, but he trusted Smith not to cheat him. Smith took a huge hammer, banging the faceplate off as his payment. When he handed the rest of the helmet back, he clapped Toma on the shoulder. "Good luck, Toma. May you come back to us whole."

"Thank you, Smith."

"You, too, Nuk." Smith winked at them and went over to choose wood for the casket.

Toma watched for a moment, but the sound of Horace's horse whinnying and stamping the ground got him moving. "I guess we'd better get our stuff and say our goodbyes..."

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Nuk nodded, looking suddenly very young and more scared than Toma felt. "I have to say goodbye to my family. I'll meet you out at the crossroads by the farm."

"Wait. Nuk. Are you sure you want to leave and come with me? You don't have to. Truly." No one would blame Nuk if he chose to stay home, least of all Toma.

"I'm sure I don't want to leave, but I'm also sure I want to come with you. So leave it is." Nuk squeezed his hand. "If we're together, nothing bad will happen, right?"

Smiling, Toma nodded. Yes, if they stuck together, they could look after each other. "All right then. At the crossroads by your farm."

"Don't be all noble and try to leave the other way, Toma. I'll follow you, I swear I will."

"I won't." Though the thought *had* crossed his mind. He hugged Nuk tight, glad that his friend had made it clear he wished to go along. Toma didn't want to be alone on this adventure with the stern knight and huge dragon.

He watched as Nuk ran off, and then gathered the armor together with some rope from Smith, and headed more slowly toward the edge of the village where the house he'd lived in for his whole life was. There were only a few people left in the streets, most driven back into their homes by cold as the drama in the square had run its course. Most stood in their doorways though, or at their windows and Toma was showered by wishes of good luck and admonishments to be careful.

It was very strange, to suddenly have everyone in the village notice him, to feel them watching him, have them

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speak to him. He knew that a good part of the sudden notoriety was the dragon at his side; he was used to Herman but no one else except for Nuk had known Herman even existed.

"Stay here, I won't be very long," he told Herman when he reached his house. He didn't know how well his mother would react to having a dragon in her home and he figured she would be upset as it was.

Sure enough, his mother was still crying when he went in, his father trying to comfort her. She flew to him as soon as he came in, crying and clinging and begging him to stay.

"Leave the boy be. He is doing what he must." His father waved him over, and Toma went. "I'm proud of you, son. Go and serve the king bravely."

The words meant so much more than just what they said and Toma bent and hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Father." He was given an awkward pat on the back; his father was not an emotional man.

It didn't take long at all to wrap a second pair of breeches and two tunics in a blanket, and add it to the bundle with his new armor. His mother gave him a package containing smoked cheese and ham, and insisted he wear a hat and a scarf. At the last minute she pushed a pair of knitted mittens into the pockets of his coat.

He shouldered his bundle, the armor shifting and settling with noisy clangs, and his mother started crying again. The sound of horse's hooves spared him too long a goodbye, and he hugged his mother, gave his father a salute and made his escape. Herman came running over as soon as he came out,

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head butting his hand and demanding a pat or two, and then staying close.

Horace looked him up and down. "You're ready then."

"Yes, sir." Herman bleated as well and Toma nodded.

"We're both ready."

"Good." Horace took the reins and clicked to his horse, leading the way out of the village.

Toma and Herman followed, trudging through the snow. They met Nuk at the crossroads and he gave his friend a hug, but neither of them said anything. They were ready.

With a last look back at his village, Toma said good bye to the life he'd known.

To be continued in Here There Be Dragons 2: Squire coming soon from Torquere Press.

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