

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Straw into Gold
By K.C. Warwick

It had all happened more or less by accident, though Tomas preferred to call it fate. He had been displaying his skills in the market place of the town of Westburg -- a little fortune-telling, some weather spells -- hoping to pick up work from the local farmers, since he had no money at all on which to live in the immediate future. He was chatting with a group of soldiers, one of whom had

blue eyes and a rather nice smile, when suddenly he found that he had turned a sheaf of straw into gold.

He had no idea how he had done it. In fact, he was beginning to realize how little he knew of magic at all and that perhaps even the title 'itinerant enchanter' was an exaggeration, but it understandably created a sensation in the immediate area. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself accompanying the soldiers to the palace, where, they assured him, the Prince would be delighted to meet him.

The Royal Palace was at the top of the hill upon which the town stood, reached by narrow winding streets, over which the buildings leaned so that they almost cut off the daylight. Every so often, they passed low stone buildings with steps leading down into the ground and Tomas glanced at these curiously. "What are those?" he asked the nearest of his escort.

"Dragon shelters," was the casual reply. "Only way to avoid getting scorched is to go beneath ground."

Tomas glanced nervously at what he could see of the sky. "Do you get much trouble with dragons, then?" he asked. He had seen a couple of them high up in the air whilst he was on his way to the city, looking scarcely bigger than birds. The party he had been traveling with had hurried for shelter, and not journeyed on until the specks had disappeared.

"Some," the soldier replied laconically. "Not as much just lately, because Allinlee sorted them out. You've heard of him, I suppose? Only enchanter ever to fight a dragon and win." He looked over his shoulder at Tomas, pride evident in his face. "Right up there on the Heights, he did it."

Tomas had heard of him. Even in the peaceful and dragon-free south, they had heard of Allinlee, the only enchanter ever to fight a dragon and win.

"Hell of a battle," another soldier commented enthusiastically. "Rocks flying everywhere. And Allinlee took quite a beating too, even though he won."

"Bound to, if you think about it."

"Mind you, the dragons'll start again before long," the other man went on. "Mating season's coming up. They're always worse then. Still, maybe Allinlee'll come back."

"Some people say he's still here," the first soldier said. "Waiting to see what the dragons do."

"Recovering from his injuries, more like," was the response. "He ought to take it easy, but I bet he won't."

"That man wouldn't know how to quit," the first soldier agreed. "Wasted as an enchanter, really."

The soldier with the blue eyes gave Tomas his nice smile, but before the enchanter could query this last statement, they were at the palace.

The prince of Westburg was thin, elderly, short of money, and not inclined to be fobbed off with *'I can't remember how I did it.'* He sat at an enormous desk and regarded Tomas over the top of his steepled fingers. "I suggest you search your memory and come up with the answer as quickly as possible -- otherwise you're going to find yourself up on the Heights with the dragons, and we all know that there is only one enchanter who has ever fought a dragon and won. I doubt you'll make a second." He jerked his head at the guards. "Take him away -- and see that he has plenty of straw to work with."

So that was how he came to find himself inside a large hall in the palace grounds, a hall which contained a great many sheaves of straw and not much else. The soldiers had told him cheerfully, "There you go," and left him to it, and he had no idea even where to begin.

The sum total of his magical education had been a couple of months spent with an enchanter he'd bumped into during the midsummer festival. Karis had had long, dark hair, green eyes, golden skin and no illusions about how attractive he was. As a result, they had spent far more time in bed than they had looking through spell books.

Tomas had told himself that there was plenty of time to learn magic, but he had been wrong. The unexpected return of Karis' partner, a good-looking, talented enchanter who lost no time in kicking Tomas out of Karis' bed, had meant that Tomas suddenly found himself on the road as an itinerant wizard with no more idea of what he was doing than he'd had two months previously. He reflected bitterly that he'd probably have been better off looking for work as a prostitute--he'd certainly learnt far more about sex from Karis than he had about magic.

And all Karis had said was, "Well, it was good while it lasted, kid. Now off you go." As simple as that, as far as Karis was concerned. Bastard! Tomas sighed and looked at the straw piled high around him. What the hell was he to do? What would Karis have done if he were here? He'd have said, "Go and look it up in a book, sweetheart," which was a great help when he didn't have a spell book with him.

Except-- this was a palace, right? Palaces had all sorts of things in them, including libraries. He turned abruptly and went out of the door into the moonlit courtyard.

There were soldiers in the gatehouse. He had tried to get out that way earlier on and had been told kindly, "Sorry, Sunshine. Our orders are not to let you out without the Prince's say-so. Go anywhere you like in the palace, but not outside."

Now, when he asked for the library, none of them seemed surprised. "Go through that archway and up the turret on the left. First doorway on the right."

The soldier with the nice smile was there on guard duty and asked, "Want me to show you the way?" but Tomas shook his head. He had enough to worry about already, and he had a feeling they might take rather a long time to get to the library if he accepted the offer.

The library was dark and shadowy, lit by lamps in niches in the wall, and smelling of dust, old books, and wood smoke. The latter came from a fire in an enormous fireplace; in the light of the flames, he could see an armchair and someone sitting in it with an open book. Whoever it was wore the hood of his cloak pulled right over his face; probably a librarian, Tomas decided.

He cleared his throat. "Is it all right to read the books?" he asked, feeling stupid, but not wanting to just ignore the silent figure. Probably, the old chap was deaf.

"Th- that's what they're there for." The voice was surprisingly young and with a pronounced hesitation in it, as though the person was not very sure of himself.

Tomas thought wryly that perhaps his reputation as an enchanter had preceded him, even into this dusty corner of the palace. Aloud, he said, "Thanks," and began to scan the shelves for spell books.

An hour later, he decided he was wasting his time. The sensible thing would be to ask the librarian, of course. He was still there, sitting in his chair by the fire with his hood pulled over his face. "Are there any spell books?" Tomas's voice sounded very loud in the silence.

The figure shifted, the hooded face turning toward him. He suppressed a shiver at the shadowed space where there should have been features. "No, there are n-none," that hesitant voice told him in reply. "If you want spells, you'd, uh, better find an enchanter."

That was exactly what Tomas did not want to hear. "I am an enchanter," he said coldly and stalked out of the library. Behind him, the cloaked figure made a sudden movement, equally suddenly stilled, and settled back down in the chair again.

Outside in the courtyard, Tomas paused for a moment, staring upward. There were some very large black birds wheeling round against the lesser black of the starlit sky and as he listened, he heard a grumbling, roaring sound, like distant thunder. He shivered and dragged his eyes back to ground level. The windows of the guardhouse were warm with lamplight and a murmur of voices and laughter spilled out from the doorway.

Suppose he was to go over to them and say, *"Look, I'm going to be handed over to the dragons in the morning if you don't let me go."* He imagined the soldier with the nice smile saying, *"Come on, I'll show you a way out. We'll tell the Prince--"* That was where the fantasy ended. What would they tell the Prince? That they let the enchanter go because they were sorry for him? It wasn't going to happen.

He walked slowly back across the courtyard to the hall where that damned straw was waiting for him. He tried the few spells he knew, the ones he could remember doing when he was in the market place and even some that he was sure he had never spoken. It was no good. He knew enough about magic to realize that he must have accidentally used a word or a tone or a nuance that had changed the spell, and the likelihood of him doing it again was extremely remote. It looked as though he was destined for dragon fodder.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a slight movement and, looking round, he saw the figure of a man standing by the window opposite. At first he thought that the stranger must be a soldier, but he wasn't wearing armor or carrying a weapon. He was dressed in black and he had long, black hair that gleamed in the moonlight, and very dark eyes. Perhaps he was someone from the palace, curious to see what the enchanter was doing. Well, it wouldn't take him long to find the answer to that one -- nothing at all.

The man walked over to Tomas, hands in his pockets, and glanced up at the pile of straw. "Quite a task," he remarked pleasantly. "That's going to be a fair amount of gold."

His voice was low and agreeable, and he gave Tomas a smile that rivaled the one the soldier had given him. Tomas said, "It will only be gold if I can find the right spell."

"And what happens if you don't?"

"I get taken to the dragons, with the Prince's compliments."

A shadow flickered across the other man's face, hiding his expression for a moment. "It's a tough spell," he said, scuffing his boot in the straw. "Do you want me to do it for you?"

Tomas stared at him. "What?" he asked stupidly.

"Do you want me to turn this into gold for you?" The man turned 'round, studying the heap again calculatingly.

"You mean, you can do it?" He didn't believe what he was hearing.

"I wouldn't be offering if I couldn't," was the reply. "Oh, yes, I can do it. The question is: what do I get in return?"

Without even bothering to pause and think, Tomas said, "Whatever you want."

There was a moment's silence, and then the stranger turned round again. There was an upturned barrel resting against the wall, and he took two steps over to this and sat down, crossing one knee over the other. "So," he said, looking up at Tomas, "let's get this clear. I turn the straw into gold and you give me whatever I want?"

"If it's within my power," Tomas amended. "I mean, I can't give you something I haven't got, or can't do, obviously."

"Agreed. Well, then, we have a bargain."

There was a strange shimmer in the air, a feeling of extreme tension abruptly dissipated, and the heap of straw behind them was suddenly pale and shining. As Tomas jumped involuntarily, he felt it lying crisp and heavy under his feet. "Shit!" He gazed at what was now a pile of gold.

Then he switched his eyes back to his companion, who was still sitting on the barrel, hands in his pockets, “You must be a really powerful enchanter.”

“A really powerful -- something,” the man murmured. “It’s just a knack.”

Tomas shook his head, blinked, but the gold was still there. “Well, thank you,” he said awkwardly. What else did you say to someone who had just saved your life?

For a few seconds, there was silence. Through the doorway, he could faintly hear sounds from the guardhouse; otherwise, the night was silent and still. The man rose slowly to his feet, took his hands out of his pockets, and stretched like a cat. He stepped forward, then bent suddenly and plucked something from the golden straw at his feet.

Straightening, he held it out on the palm of his hand -- a tiny golden mouse, frozen in the act of running. As Tomas watched, the long, strong fingers suddenly snapped closed against the palm, tighter and tighter, crushing the mouse to gold dust that, as he opened his hand again, trickled slowly onto the floor.

“Now we come to my part of the bargain.” His eyes, darker even than the darkness that surrounded them, met Tomas’. “You said you’d give me what I want.”

“Yes.” Somewhat belatedly, he wondered if perhaps he had been a bit rash.

The man smiled. “What a pity you’re being sensible. It’s so much more interesting when people get into a panic.”

“What do you want?” Tomas asked, trying to quell the cold feeling that was steadily growing in his stomach.

His companion took a step closer. “I want you,” the man said softly.

Tomas’s mind refused to function. “In what way?”

“In this way.”

Before he had a chance to even consider the options, he found himself in an embrace which was like being enclosed by steel bars, so hard and unyielding was it, and so inescapable. The kiss that trapped his lips was more like an assault than a gesture of affection, the tongue that forced its way into his mouth was cold and hard, devouring him with an intensity that made him rigid with fear.

He could feel something else rigid, too, pushed against his belly, and he closed his eyes as if he could shut out reality by doing so. But that just made things worse, because he immediately felt as though it was not a man who had him in that unbreakable hold, but something huge and monstrous, looming over him with fierce desire, ready to pounce. He wrenched his eyes open again with an effort, gasping for breath as the stranger at last released his lips.

The black, expressionless eyes looked down into Tomas'. "I think you get the general idea."

Tomas swallowed, unable to speak.

"Not too keen?" the man suggested, sounding amused. His long, strong fingers held Tomas' wrists like manacles. "Don't worry about that, I enjoy a fight. Not that you'll fight for long..."

"Isn't there anything--" Tomas began, then stopped, because he knew that there wasn't.

"Anything you can do to get out of the agreement?" His captor looked reproachful. "That isn't really fair, is it? I've kept my side of the bargain, and you were foolish enough not to ask beforehand what it was I wanted. However..." He paused, then went on, "I'm prepared to give you a sporting chance. It's always more entertaining to see people desperately trying to find an escape route, and you haven't suffered nearly enough yet. Anticipation, I find, adds spice to the ultimate victory. If you can tell me what my name is, by dawn tomorrow, I'll let you go."

Tomas regarded him warily. "That sounds too easy."

"Yes, doesn't it? I assure you it won't be." He released Tomas abruptly. "Don't get any foolish ideas about running away. I'll catch you -- and then things will be even more unpleasant. Understand?"

Tomas nodded. He understood only too well. "Yes. I--"

He never got to finish the sentence. A strange beating, cracking noise forced itself on his attention, coming from overhead and getting gradually louder. He had once heard a swan flying above him and this was much the same noise, but ten times louder. The man took no notice of it, keeping his eyes fixed on Tomas, who looked out of the window curiously and then drew in a sharp breath of surprise and fear.

The stranger glanced round and then said, "Oh, yes, that's a dragon. Haven't you ever seen one before?"

"Not so close," Tomas replied faintly, gazing with horrified awe at the creature balancing on the parapet of the wall opposite. It was smaller than he had expected, but by no means less terrifying. Its scaly skin gleamed in the moonlight and its savage claws clung to the stonework, sending chunks of masonry sliding down into the courtyard. When it opened its mouth to let out a low-pitched roar, he saw rows of pointed teeth. He could hear shouting coming from the guardhouse and cries from the town below, but the soldiers seemed to have sense enough to stay where they were.

"Well, time for me to go," the stranger remarked casually. He strode over to the door and paused for a moment. "Until sunrise," he reminded Tomas then he walked out into the courtyard as though there were no monstrous creature perched on the wall above him.

Tomas hurried to the doorway and watched with mingled disbelief and admiration. The man ran lightly up the steps that led to the parapet and the dragon let out another roar, smoke pouring from its nostrils. The stranger raised his hand, totally unmoved -- and, to Tomas's amazement, the dragon spread its scaly wings and launched itself upward into the night sky in a shower of stones before circling once and heading off toward the Heights. Of the man, there was nothing to be seen.

Puzzled, Tomas peered cautiously out, but it was not until he saw soldiers emerging from the guardhouse that he dared to cross the yard and approach them. Perhaps the man had been eaten or carried off by the dragon, he told himself, though Tomas knew that this was not true. Whoever the man might be, he had certainly not been afraid. And it was now Tomas's urgent business to find out just *who* he was.

The soldiers, when questioned, merely told him distractedly that they had seen no one on the parapet, just the dragon. "Lucky escape," they kept repeating nervously. "Thought we were done for, there."

He couldn't see the one with the nice smile, and the others were not even particularly interested in the fact that there was now a hall full of gold rather than straw. "Yes, all right, we'll tell the Prince in the morning and he can come and have a look," said the one who appeared to be in charge. "More than my job's worth to disturb him now -- not that he'll have slept through the dragon, I daresay."

"But I need to get away!" Tomas told him urgently. "I've done what I was asked, now let me go!"

"Not without His Majesty's permission," was the reply. "You just stay put. Get some sleep and hope that the dragon doesn't come back."

Quite frankly, Tomas thought that was the least of his worries. Being torn to pieces by dragons was beginning to look like quite an attractive option compared to what lay in store for him in the morning. However, there was no point in hanging about out there. Tomas must see if anyone else could tell him the name of the man with the dark eyes. The first person who sprang to mind was the librarian, not that he probably stirred away from his books much, but he was better than nothing.

The cloaked figure was still sitting by the fire in the library, hood drawn up, and Tomas wondered why it was that he hid his face. "I need some help," Tomas said abruptly, his voice sounding as loud as ever in the quiet of the book-lined room. "There was a man who came and turned the straw into gold for me, just now. I need to find out his name."

"What f-for?" the librarian asked, lifting his head.

Tomas was tempted to reply, '*So that I can write and thank him,*' but he restrained himself and answered, "Because I promised him whatever he wanted in return for his help and he wants-- "

he paused, wondering how to phrase it without being vulgar. After all, his companion was a man of books and probably would not understand what he was talking about.

“He wants to fuck you,” said the man of books calmly.

Tomas blinked at him. “Yes,” was all he could come up with as an answer.

“Er-- what sort of a man?” His voice was still hesitant and Tomas decided that he wasn’t going to get much help here.

“Tall. Long, dark hair. Strange eyes.” He shivered, remembering. “He must be a powerful enchanter and he’s certainly not afraid of dragons.” All of a sudden, a thought struck him. “I know who he is,” he exclaimed softly. “Powerful enchanter, not afraid of dragons, hanging round here. It’s got to be Allinlee!”

“I don’t think so,” said the librarian.

“Yes, it must be!” Tomas felt his excitement rising. Perhaps he was saved! “It all adds up. The dragon flew off when he waved his hand at it; it was obviously afraid of him... And he turned that straw into gold with no problem. Yes, I reckon it’s him!”

“That was not Allinlee,” stated the librarian, tilting his shadowed face back to look at Tomas.

“Everyone thinks he’s such a hero but he’s not! He’s a bastard!”

“People are generally a combination of the two. But I assure you, it wasn’t Allinlee.”

“You can’t know that!” Tomas argued. How could he have a clue, shut in with his books all day? “Who else could it be? Why shouldn’t it be him?”

There was a moment’s pause than the librarian said slowly, “Well, because that’s my name.”

Tomas stared at him, wide-eyed. This wasn’t possible; his over-stressed mind was having hallucinations. Or maybe the cloaked man was insane. Maybe he just *thought* that he was Allinlee. Tomas cleared his throat. “I assumed you were the librarian.”

“N-no.”

He was too diffident to be an enchanter, Tomas reasoned, let alone the only enchanter to have fought a dragon and won. “I’m surprised,” he admitted cautiously.

“Are you?” The librarian or enchanter or madman didn’t seem unduly concerned.

“What are you doing here?” Tomas asked, trying to get his bearings.

“Waiting for the person you just met,” was the reply. “Um -- you really shouldn’t make open-ended bargains with people you don’t know. It always leads to trouble.” He sounded considerably less hesitant now. “I suppose you agreed to whatever he wanted in return for the straw-into-gold trick?”

“It was that or be fed to the dragons!” Tomas defended. “I didn’t have much choice!”

“You could have asked for my help.”

“I didn’t know who you were!” He couldn’t decide whether to be relieved or apprehensive.

There was another silence then Allinlee (if it was indeed he) asked, “What’s your name?”

“Tomas.”

“Which enchanter were you apprenticed to?”

“Apprenticed?” Tomas was puzzled.

“Who trained you?” the other man repeated patiently.

“Oh, an enchanter called Karis, down in the south.” Why did he want to know?

“How long were you with him for?”

“About two months,” said Tomas.

The cloaked figure gave a start. “Two months?” he repeated incredulously. “Then he sent you out on your own?”

“Well, it was a bit more complicated than that,” Tomas said evasively, unwilling to go into details regarding his love life. “How long should it have been?”

There was a pause. “Seven years.”

Tomas gasped. “You’re kidding?”

“No wonder you were having difficulty with the spell.” He put down the book and rose to his feet in one fluid movement. He was tall when he stood up, taller than Tomas. “You need my help.” How could Tomas ever have thought him hesitant or diffident?

“I need to know this person’s name,” Tomas corrected. “If you can tell me that, then he’ll leave me alone.”

“His name’s Segd,” said the other enchanter. He paused expectantly, as if awaiting some reaction, but Tomas had never heard the name before. “I don’t think you’ll find matters quite so simple. You’d better accept my assistance.”

“You mean he won’t play fair?” Tomas frowned.

“That’s exactly what I mean.” Allinlee, possibly, turned for the door.

“But, look, I don’t know that you’re who you say you are,” Tomas protested, standing his ground. “You’ve just told me yourself never to make an open-ended bargain with a stranger, and I haven’t even seen your face!”

“It’s not a bargain,” the alleged Allinlee told him shortly. “It’s a rescue. And you’ll see my face soon enough. Stop arguing and do as you’re told.”

Somewhat to his surprise, that was what Tomas found himself doing, though he did wonder how he could ever have thought that this man was a librarian. “He won’t be back until sunrise,” he said, hurrying after the enchanter as he ran down the stairs.

“Don’t worry. He’ll come.”

In the courtyard, the soldiers were still milling around nervously. He heard a voice say excitedly, “Allinlee!” and wondered how in the world they could recognize the anonymous cloaked and hooded figure. Still, at least he could be sure now who his companion was. “Get into shelter,” Allinlee told them crisply. “Don’t come out until I give the word.” Then he was striding toward the hall with Tomas at his heels.

The dark man was sitting on the upturned barrel as he had been before and did not seem surprised to see that Tomas had a companion. “So, have you found the answer to my riddle?” he asked easily, looking up with those strange black eyes.

“Your name is Segd,” Tomas said, not without a hint of satisfaction.

The eyes shifted to Allinlee. “You told him. Why don’t you keep out of my business?”

“Because it’s my business, too,” was the reply.

“Didn’t you have enough last time?”

“It would seem not. Now, are you going to let him go?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The stranger straightened up. “If you want to make this a fight, then I’m completely at your disposal.” He rose from the barrel -- and rose, and rose, and rose, towering above them, his body thickening and changing before their eyes.

“Out!” Allinlee ordered tersely, seizing Tomas’s arm and dragging him to the door. “Before the roof goes.”

In a daze, Tomas allowed himself to be hurried up the stairs to the parapet where the dragon had perched, although this seemed an extremely vulnerable position from which to do whatever it was that Allinlee was planning. In the hall, there was a rumbling and roaring noise and the enchanter told him, “Perform a spell of protection.”

“What?” He had never heard of such a thing.

“Haven’t got time to teach you. I’ll do it.” Even as he spoke, something exploded through the roof of the hall, something large and scaly with huge wings and a mouth full of pointed teeth. Tomas felt himself pulled close against Allinlee’s side and saw the enchanter sketching something in the air with his free hand, whilst tiles and mortar cascaded to the courtyard below them. A fierce wind whistled around them and blew back the hood of Allinlee’s cloak.

Despite his fear, Tomas looked round at him curiously. His companion’s face was beautiful, but crisscrossed with a web of thin scars, silver in the moonlight. Straight, fair hair blew round his shoulders and whipped across his fine cheek-bones. He looked determined and self-assured, as though having a monster burst through a building was something he dealt with everyday. It wasn’t fair, Tomas thought fleetingly, that one person should have confidence, talent, and beauty.

Then any thoughts of fairness and unfairness disappeared in the shock of cold fear as he watched the dragon leaping from the wreckage of the hall to land on the top of the tower opposite them. “Shit!” he murmured shakily.

“That’s what you’d have ended up in bed with,” Allinlee told him. His arm felt warm and firm around Tomas’s ribs, and in different circumstances, Tomas would have greatly enjoyed it. As it was, at least half his mind was busy being terrified and wondering if they were both going to die, whilst the other half was wishing that he was any good as an enchanter and could help Allinlee.

The dragon roared, sending a puff of dark smoke and flames toward them and Tomas flinched involuntarily. He was trying hard not to let his companion see how frightened he was. “It’s all right, the spell will protect us,” Allinlee told him and sure enough, the flames and smoke seemed to meet an invisible wall and flowed round them without touching them.

“Can all dragons assume human form?” he asked tremulously, staring at Segd in his new shape.

“No. Segd is a shape-changer. That’s what makes him dangerous. Left alone, the other dragons wouldn’t be half so destructive. I’m going to have to do something about him.”

Allinlee’s arm dropped away from him, somewhat to his regret, and Tomas glanced sideways at his companion. Allinlee’s beautiful, scarred face looked confident and composed; he was studying the dragon thoughtfully and the creature stared back with deadly, dark eyes.

“You might as well give up and go home,” the enchanter called to it. “I’m going to put a spell over the city. You won’t be able to get in.”

His answer was a hiss of steam as the dragon leaped down at them, its mouth wide.

Tomas gave up the struggle to be brave and cowered against Allinlee’s side, trying not to look at the powerful jaws snapping at the spell of protection. The enchanter was making signs in the air again and Tomas had no idea what they meant, but at least they made him feel safe. After a while the dragon evidently realized that it wasn’t going to get anywhere and all of a sudden it spiraled up into the air so that it was high above the palace, and then it turned toward the Heights and let out a roar.

“Not good,” said Allinlee, staring up at it.

“You mean it hasn’t given up?”

“Far from it. Wait and see.”

They didn’t have to wait long. Five black shapes became five birds, and then five dragons, flying fast toward them. “Maybe it would be better if you went down into the shelter,” Allinlee suggested. He was frowning a little.

“Not unless you’re coming too.” Tomas tried not to sound as scared as he felt, but there was no way he could desert the other enchanter and leave him to fight on his own. *Even if you’re just a liability*, his heart suggested. *Yes, even then*, he told it firmly. *He might need me for -- something -- and if he does, I want to be here*. Out loud he asked, “Isn’t there anything I can do? Hurl a rock at them or something?”

His companion shot him a quick glance in which amusement was mixed with calculation. “Yes,” he said slowly. “There is something you can do. I shall need more power to fight so many dragons. I can’t manage it on my own.” He paused, long enough for Tomas to begin to panic. “You can let me borrow some from you.”

“Right. Anything you want.” What on earth did that involve? Well, whatever.

Allinlee looked round at him again, the frown deepening as though he wasn’t quite happy with that answer. “Have you ever--” he began, and then broke off. “Silly question. Of course you haven’t done it before. Just try not to fight me please? It can be a bit -- strange -- if you’re not used to it.”

A bit strange? Tomas swallowed. “What do I have to do?”

“Nothing. Leave all the doing to me.”

Somewhat to Tomas’s surprise, though not at all to his displeasure, he felt that strong, warm arm around him again, holding him close against Allinlee’s side. The enchanter was watching the

dragons, which were very near now, though he was apparently doing nothing to stop them. You had to hand it to him, Tomas thought admiringly, he was certainly cool. The enchanter's voice in his ear murmured, "Segd is the one I need to get rid of. The others will give up eventually, when they realize they can't touch us, as long as I can hold the spell of protection against six at once. That's the doubtful part of the exercise." It was odd how, now that they were truly in danger, he had lost all the hesitation and diffidence which had marked him earlier.

Tomas said stoutly, "I'm sure you can do it."

Allinlee gave him a quick surprised glance, and then smiled, before turning back to the dragons. It was at that point that Tomas decided that if he were commanded to leap from the battlements into a dragon's mouth, he'd do it, if Allinlee asked. Even the close proximity of six dragons could not chill the warm feeling that was invading his heart.

Allinlee, totally unaware of the effect he had just had on his companion, murmured softly, "I'm going to need to borrow that power now."

'Strange,' Tomas decided, was definitely an understatement. It was as though suddenly some vital force was being drained from him, withdrawn from depths that he had not even known he had and siphoned off to feed those symbols Allinlee was still drawing in the air. The worst thing about it was the feeling of helplessness that it engendered; he knew that there was no way that he could stop the enchanter doing whatever it was he was doing.

"Don't fight me," Allinlee whispered, his attention on the dragons. "I won't hurt you."

Hurt was not what worried Tomas. This feeling of complete submission to the demands of someone else was something which he had felt before. It was like -- like -- he shied away from the realization. It was like having sex. All that was lacking was the pleasant foreplay, the informed mutual consent, and the privacy in which it customarily took place.

The presence of six dragons throwing themselves against their invisible shield was something of a damper, too. He wouldn't have minded if Allinlee had been affected by it, as well, but he seemed totally absorbed in beating off the dragons, leaving Tomas to struggle with the demands of his body on his own. And his body was doing its damndest to compensate for the lack of any encouragement from elsewhere.

Had he been able to concentrate, he would undoubtedly have learned a great deal about fighting dragons and the correct way to deal with an errant shape-changer. As it was, he missed the famous battle in which Allinlee became the only enchanter to fight six dragons and win, and in which he himself was generally considered to have taken a not inconsiderable supporting role. Fortunately, there was no one to witness exactly what went on, and therefore posterity gave him the benefit of the doubt.

He was vaguely conscious of the dragons roaring and spouting smoke and flames, and of the largest of them -- the shape-changer, Segd -- hurtling to the ground, pursued by a bolt of lightening that apparently had emanated from Allinlee's hand, but the picture that lodged in his

memory forever was the enchanter standing with the dawn wind blowing his hair back from his face, single-minded, competent and unafraid. It would have been impossible to admire him more.

Then they were alone on the parapet, looking at an empty sky, pink with the light of the rising sun, and the crumpled, dark figure of the shape-changer lying on the turf below them. "Is he dead?" Tomas asked, feeling strangely empty. He supposed that was because his power had gone, and wondered if and when it would come back. He should have asked about that before.

Allinlee shook his head. "He's alive, but he isn't a shape-changer any more. I've taken that ability away from him." He looked tired, the scars on his face accentuated by the soft light, and, suddenly, he appeared to realize that he had his arm around Tomas. He looked down at it with some surprise, and let go of him abruptly. "We need to tell people it's safe to come out." He pulled his hood over his face again and turned away.

Tomas, feeling shattered, frustrated and disappointed, followed him down the stairs to the guardhouse.

The Prince, when he arrived, looked at the remains of the hall with disbelief. "The gold is in there. You'll have to dig it out," Allinlee told him helpfully. "You might be advised to remember that greed attracts dragons. I've put a spell of protection over the City and the Palace, but I can easily remove the one on the Palace if it comes to my ears that people have been threatened with being fed to the dragons. I don't approve of that kind of thing." The Prince glared at him but said nothing. "Now we'd like some breakfast, please. In the library." The soldiers and palace staff cheered them as they went inside. Tomas felt like a complete fraud.

Servants brought them mulled wine and freshly baked bread, and made up the fire in the great fireplace. They ate for a while in silence, and then Allinlee said, "You didn't panic. Most people do when they see dragons that close."

Tomas wanted to say that he had been too frightened to panic, but thought that sounded stupid. "I'm sorry to have caused you all this trouble," he said instead.

"I was waiting for Segd," the enchanter pointed out. "I'd have fought him whether you were involved or not. But I'd probably have lost without another enchanter's power to call on. It was fortunate that you were there." He paused for a moment then added, "Er-- the power will come back in a couple of hours or so."

He was starting to sound hesitant again and Tomas wished he could see the enchanter's face. "Is it always like that?" he asked curiously. "Borrowing power, I mean? Does it always feel like that?"

"Like what?" Allinlee asked.

Surely he must know? "Like -- um--" Damn, now he was hesitating himself. "--Like making love."

The figure beside him suddenly went very still. Allinlee put down his wine cup and walked over to the fire where he stood with his back to Tomas. "I wouldn't know about that," he said coldly.

Tomas stared at him. If that meant what he thought it did, then it was scarcely credible that someone so attractive, talented, and otherwise desirable should be so much alone. He found his voice with difficulty. "So you don't have anyone to -- care for you?"

"I don't need anyone," was the curt reply.

Maybe it was the residue of what they had shared up on the parapet, maybe it was general light-headedness, maybe it was his body still trying to compensate for what it thought it should have had, but without thinking Tomas stepped up behind him and said softly, "Allinlee?"

The enchanter turned round and Tomas reached up and pushed back the folds of the hood before cupping his hand behind the other man's head and drawing him down into a kiss. He might not know much about magic, but Tomas was something of an expert on kissing by now and he was determined that this was going to be a good one. After all, it might be Allinlee's first, for all he knew. A wave of warmth and affection went through him at the thought and he tightened his hold and pressed closer to the taut, surprised body of the enchanter.

For a moment, it was like holding a block of iron in his arms, and then he felt the tenseness begin to melt away. Allinlee, instead of standing there rigidly in his grasp, reached out and took hold of him, pulling him closer. Encouraged, Tomas slid his tongue between the enchanter's lips, making an encouraging noise as he did so. This was going quite well, he thought with pleasure -- and then in the next breath he found himself pushed away roughly enough to make him stagger. Allinlee stepped back, breathing quickly and wiping a hand across his lips.

"I don't want your pity!" the enchanter snapped, pulling his hood up with a gesture that looked automatic. Tomas gaped at him, too startled to make a reply. "I've just spent a considerable amount of energy saving you from sexual assault by a shape-changing pervert! How dare you offer me the same thing as payment!" Then he turned on his heel and strode from the room, his black cloak flapping behind him in his haste to be gone.

Tomas stared at the space where the enchanter had been standing, trying to make sense of this. He was angry and disappointed, but most of all, he was hurt. He had genuinely liked and admired Allinlee, but pity didn't come into it! How could you pity someone who was so amazing, so talented, so brave, so -- bloody-minded and dense that he couldn't recognize genuine affection when he met it?

Calm down, he told himself. This is obviously a situation that Allinlee is not familiar with. You flustered him and he doesn't know how to deal with it. And he clearly thinks that those scars make him repulsive to anyone's sight, which is a shame, because it's not true.

He sighed and sat down in the armchair by the fire. He felt very tired, which was not surprising since he had been up all night and had run the gamut of pretty well every emotion between sunset and dawn. He couldn't cope with anything else. If Allinlee didn't want him, then fine. So

be it. He wasn't going to make a big thing out of it. He'd just have a few hours sleep and then leave the city for good and find something else to do with his life. He was certainly done with magic and all its practitioners. Enchanters, he decided, were a complete waste of time. Perhaps he ought to reconsider that prostitution idea.

When he woke again, sunlight was streaming in through a window opposite and there was the sound of footsteps coming toward him. He sat up, feeling stiff and rumpled, longing for a hot bath, and then tensed as he saw the cloaked and hooded figure which had come to a halt on the opposite side of the fireplace. Conflicting feelings of hope and irritation welled up within him.

Before he could decide between 'hello' and 'piss off' as a greeting, the enchanter spoke. "I came to say that I'm s-sorry. I was--" He hesitated, "--a little unreasonable earlier on."

Surprise now joined the other two emotions, but irritation won. He needed a few more hours sleep before he could feel anything like forgiving. "It's too late to change your mind!" he told the enchanter coldly. "I'm leaving here."

"So am I. Er-- what are you going to do?" Allinlee was sounding hesitant again.

"If it's any business of yours, I'm seriously considering selling my body!" Tomas snapped. "Perhaps I can find someone who wants a kept boy. I don't seem to be much good at anything else!"

Allinlee cleared his throat. "I'm quite willing to keep you," he stated, "but you'd have to agree to learn magic, as well. Um – I'm not sure about the rest of it."

Tomas took a deep breath and tried to arrange his thoughts into some kind of logic. After a moment he stood up, crossed to the enchanter and pushed back the hood with a determined movement. "You do not need this," he told the other man firmly. "And I am certainly not going to stand here talking to a blank space. You are *not* ugly. Even with the scars, you are damned beautiful and if you weren't such a bastard, I'd probably fall for you quite hard." Allinlee was staring at him disbelievingly, but he plunged on. "Last night, I really admired you because I thought you were brave and clever and wonderful. Well, I was wrong. You're not brave. You may be able to handle six dragons but you can't handle a kiss!"

There was a moment's tense silence, then Allinlee told him apologetically, "I find dragons much easier to c-cope with."

"So I noticed."

Their eyes met and Tomas felt his anger seeping away from him. Allinlee murmured, "I probably just need a bit more practice with the kissing." He flushed a little and looked down at the floor.

There was no way that Tomas could hold out against that. He found the enchanter's shyness far too endearing. "That can be arranged." He tried not to grin like an idiot.

The second time was a great deal better than the first and went on much longer. Eventually, Allinlee suggested somewhat breathlessly, “I think we ought to make a move to get away from here, before that gold turns back into straw again. The Prince isn’t going to be too pleased when it does.”

“You mean, it isn’t permanently gold?” Tomas questioned, startled.

The enchanter shook his head. “Just an illusion. It’s a g-good thing, really, because that much gold artificially introduced into the treasury would wreck the country’s economy.”

“Oh, dear,” said Tomas, who couldn’t care less about the country’s economy at that point.

“It’s an interesting aspect of the whole b-bargain idea though,” Allinlee continued, sounding somewhat nervous. “Does it, in fact, invalidate your b-bargain with Segd? Or for that matter your b-bargain with the Prince, bearing in mind that the straw/gold conversion was not permanent or--”

“Look,” Tomas interrupted firmly, “do you want me to come home with you or not? Assuming that you have a home, that is?”

Allinlee studied the floor. “I do have a home, and, er, yes, I would like you to come with me. If you would like that, too.” He glanced up at Tomas apprehensively from under his extraordinarily long eyelashes.

“Good. Let’s go then.” He took hold of Allinlee’s hand and made him walk toward the door between the rows of dusty books. “How long did you say this apprenticeship thing was supposed to last?”

“Seven years.” The enchanter seemed a bit more sure of himself now that something was actually decided.

“I don’t think that’ll be long enough,” Tomas told him.

Allinlee frowned. “It should be perfectly adequate. You obviously have magical talent, and a great deal of power, as I know...”

“No, I meant for you,” Tomas said with a grin. “Seven years may not be long enough for you to get the hang of being in love. I might need to stay longer.”

The enchanter gave him a puzzled sideways glance, and then suddenly smiled. *I must remember how I did that*, Tomas thought dreamily.

“It can’t be much more difficult than fighting dragons,” Allinlee said as they stepped out into the bright morning sunshine.

Straw into Gold

Copyright © 2008 by KC Warwick

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press, Inc.: Sips electronic edition / September 2008

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680