

Dreamspinner Press Presents

NAP-SIZE DREAMS



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COLIN stalked unhappily through the throng in the castle ballroom. Beautiful people all, nobles from his father's kingdom and royalty from neighboring states. Everyone of blood and lineage in all the Three Kingdoms was present tonight at his twenty-first birthday party. And not one of those in the room, Colin reflected, was there for love of him. Not even the Princess Estrella, his soon-to-be fiancée.

The young prince shook the russet locks from his face and turned from the spectacle of Princess Estrella on the arm of his florid-faced father. King Leopold, as always, clutched a goblet of wine and was roaring—whether in displeasure or enjoyment Colin didn't stay to find out. If it was displeasure, it was no doubt directed at him.

Finding sanctuary on a small, ornate balcony, Colin took a great gulp of the night air and looked up at the cold, faraway stars. They twinkled back impersonally, and Colin thought angrily of the royal astrologer who saw the necessity of his wedding to Estrella in the bright pinpoints above. "He got your message wrong," he said to the heavenly lights. "He has told the kingdom, and now my fate is in your hands. Please... send a sign."

He was still looking up, watching the night sky half in expectation, half in disappointment, when a voice behind him made him jump. He grabbed the balcony rail for support.

"Your Highness, the king wishes your presence."

Colin turned slowly, still holding the balcony rail, to see Bartletoot, the royal jester, regarding him with large, sorrowful brown eyes. “My-my father? Of course. I’ll come at once.” Colin swallowed hard. “Bartletoot, have you seen, that is, has a dragon landed at the castle this evening?”

“No, your Highness.” Bartletoot smoothed his tunic of garish green and orange stripes. “No dragon arrived today, nor has the DragonRyder come by other means.”

“All right. Thank you, Bartletoot.” Colin took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. He pushed past the jester and made his way back to the ballroom, consumed with thoughts of the mysterious dark-haired man who lived amongst the giant, fire-breathing beasts—the DragonRyder. *Drake.*

He hadn’t seen Drake for nearly a week, and as always when they were apart, the ache of his body for Drake’s touch was only equaled by the ache of his heart for Drake’s presence. And now, on his birthday, Drake had failed him.

Colin pushed the thought away. Drake knew how badly Colin hated state affairs, and more importantly, knew Colin’s agony over the arrangement of his marriage, which was to be announced tonight. Something must have kept Drake, something urgent.

Or something dangerous.

Colin felt the color drain from his face as he pictured a wild dragon, its writhing, lashing fury bearing down upon the DragonRyder. If anything happened to Drake....

Chilled by the thought, Colin stood still for a moment, regaining control. *Drake’s safe*, he told himself firmly,

picturing his lover's piercing blue eyes. *He's probably tending a sick dragon.*

Taking a deep breath, Colin turned to survey the sumptuous banquet laid out along one wall of the Great Hall: quail stuffed with tart chunks of apple and candied ginger, partridge sausage split and stuffed with colorful vegetables from the royal gardens, tiny pastry purses full of sweetened dove meat spiced with delicate sauces. No expense was spared for the lavish proceeding, as befitted the betrothal of King Leopold's only son and heir.

Yet none of it tempted Colin. Not with Drake on a mission, far from the castle, somewhere in Turendra's dark, thickly wooded countryside, or even worse, over the border in Catharia, the dragons' own kingdom. It was only when they were separated that Colin felt truly alone, the isolation enforced by his father pressing in on him at every turn. Whenever they were together... an image of Drake sprang to mind, and Colin allowed himself a few moments to savor it. Drake's intense pale blue eyes and tanned skin, his infectious, if all-too-rare, smile. Colin shivered. He only felt complete lying in Drake's arms, the strong, muscular arms holding him close, the work-hardened body of the DragonRyder against his skin.

With a nervous glance around the crowded ballroom, Colin adjusted his doublet. His desire for Drake was all-consuming and left no room for contemplating marriage, no matter how politically advantageous for Turendra. Colin's passion for his best friend and soulmate, the man who bent dragons to his will with nothing more than a word... Colin shivered again.

“Perhaps Turendra’s own sweet prince would care for sweetmeats for his... sweet.” Bartletoot reappeared at Colin’s side juggling a quartet of sugared plums. Each time he caught one and tossed it again, sugar vaporized gently around his slender fingers, enveloping both men in a pleasantly scented cloud.

“I find myself strangely soured by the whole proceedings, Bartletoot.” Colin brushed the sugar from his gathered velvet tunic. He glanced over his shoulder as Leopold’s ribald laughter reached them. His father violently thumped on the back of one of his noble cronies, nearly knocking the man off his feet. A crowd of courtiers and hangers-on laughed obediently in their turn, ignoring prince and jester. Colin turned away, sick at heart.

Bartletoot’s warm brown eyes fixed him with a sympathetic gaze. He gracefully pocketed all but one of the plums, tossing the remaining fruit into the bell of a passing herald’s golden horn. “Not all the winged creatures in the kingdom wound up this night on the feasting table,” the jester said. He cocked his head to one side. “Even now the night prepares to wing your heart’s desire hence.”

Colin stared at the swim of elegantly dressed and oblivious guests, heart in his throat. Bartletoot’s pronouncements were frequently laced with uncomfortable prophecy, and the young prince trembled, worried about the too-observant jester’s piercing gaze. But in another moment, Bartletoot cartwheeled off into the throng of partygoers, eliciting gasps and laughter and leaving Colin alone with his fear.

Colin concentrated on his breathing until the uneasy feeling in his stomach passed and then raised his head and determinedly approached the dais at the head of the room. He climbed the steps to the stage, met at the top by his father.

“Where the hell have you been?” the king demanded, impatience and anger in his voice and in his vice-like grip on Colin’s arm. His state smile never wavered. “You’re holding everyone up.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Colin said in a low voice, looking down.

“Look up, boy!” Colin winced as his father twisted his arm but did raise his head. King Leopold tolerated disobedience from no one, not his subjects, not his staff, and certainly not his only son. “Go and greet the girl and her parents. I’ve watched—you haven’t been near her all night. Go!”

“Yes, sir.” Colin tried to meet his father’s eyes steadily, heart beating fast.

King Leopold snorted and pushed his son toward the others on the dais, turning away and shouting to a servant for more wine.

Colin took his dismissal gladly. The king was perpetually disappointed in him, and Colin was happy to escape his presence with no more than an aching arm and a disparaging snort. He obediently crossed the stage to the princess the astrologer had named as his bride.

“Prince Colin!” Princess Estrella greeted him, dropping a low curtsy, one hand holding a corner of her rich red gown as she extended the other for him to kiss.

“My dearest Princess Estrella,” Colin murmured, bowing. His lips lightly brushed her knuckles, his stomach clenching on the citrus scent she wore.

“Sweet prince!” As he straightened, Estrella’s father, King Vathek, gripped his elbow, his hold as hard and uncompromising as Leopold’s. “The thought that you will shortly be as a son to me delights me beyond words.”

King Vathek’s grim eyes betrayed his words and smiling countenance, and Colin suppressed a shiver. He cherished no illusions about his prospective father-in-law’s opinion of him, despite the man’s honeyed words. Vathek of Astoria was his father’s greatest crony, and this match, written in the stars or no, was of enormous political convenience to both monarchs. And Colin was well aware that was the only reason King Vathek agreed to give his cherished daughter’s hand to a man he had always proclaimed a fop and dreamer.

As for Estrella herself... Colin squared his shoulders, forced a smile for King Vathek, and turned back to the princess. His future bride. The thought sent chills up his spine, and he struggled to keep his careful smile in place.

He’d known he must marry eventually—his position demanded it—but until the astrologer’s pronouncement, he never considered Princess Estrella as a possible wife.

Estrella was beautiful. Her lush bronze hair glowed and shone against her ivory skin. Her eyes were huge pools of violet, cool and mysterious, full of secrets and promises. Men

from countries far beyond the Three Kingdoms followed legends of her beauty and came to seek her hand. Countless feats of valor were performed in her name by every prince and lordling in the land.

Every prince save one: Prince Colin of Turendra was never among her noble suitors.

“My dear, you look divine tonight,” he said, and he was rewarded with Estrella’s glittering smile.

“Thank you, Colin,” she said, and she lowered her lashes, peeking up at him flirtatiously.

Colin kept his smile in place as the musicians fell silent, and the thin cry of the royal heralds’ trumpets stilled the chatter. He took Estrella’s hand and, placing it on his arm, turned slowly to face his father.

King Leopold clapped his hands. “Noble guests,” he cried, “as you know, tonight, your prince, my son, attains his majority. You have all heard the pronouncement of the royal astrologer, who saw the divine words of the ancestors written in the stars. Please join with me now as his highness Prince Colin addresses our subjects for the first time.”

Colin stepped to the front of the dais and bowed low, feeling Estrella curtsy at his side. A murmur of approval went through the crowd. As Colin straightened up, the gathered lords and ladies applauded gently. He raised his hand in acknowledgment and felt Estrella tug at his arm.

“Princess?” he asked, inclining his head towards her.

“Don’t bow so low,” she hissed. Colin blinked at her in astonishment. “Remember your position,” she went on, voice low, eyes flashing. “We are the highest born of the Three

Kingdoms and owe fealty to none. Our bows should reflect that, dear prince.”

Colin was saved the necessity of replying by another blast from the trumpets. The crowd in front of the dais parted like a wave, leaving a clear path down the length of the ballroom, and King Leopold pointed dramatically at the red curtains at the other end of the room.

King Vathek took his queen’s arm and stepped off the dais, leading the procession, and Colin followed with Estrella at his side. As they approached, the velvet drapes parted slowly, giving access to the wide stone balcony beyond.

Colin stepped out onto the balcony, feeling the touch of the night air soft and liquid on his skin. He took a deep breath, the chorus of cheers rising and falling in his ears. Below them on the ground, outside the castle gates, it appeared every serf in the kingdom had gathered to witness this moment. As much as the people of Turendra feared and reviled King Leopold, they adored his shy and soft-spoken son. Colin glanced over his shoulder and saw the balcony door thronged with nobles, pressing forward.

He looked around and felt the world slow down, reduced to this small stone platform and the hungry, waiting crowds. He could feel his father’s glare, warning him of his duty, already smoldering with incipient anger. On his other side, King Vathek stood smug and self-satisfied, expectant. Despairing, Colin raised his eyes again to the heavens. The stars still twinkled above, as silent as they had been earlier, unchanged and uncaring.

Please, Colin mouthed, eyes fixed on the Evening Star.

Dragon legend held that the Evening Star was the eye of the dragon-goddess Marendra, and that while it hung low in the sky, Marendra would assist the hunted. *Marendra, I go now in fear. Please?*

Unheeding, the silver-tongued trumpets rang out again, and the cheers of the crowds died away. Leopold's hand, hard on the small of his back, pushed Colin to the front of the balcony.

Below him, the sea of faces blurred, and Colin blinked hard, trying to clear his vision. He was trapped here on this balcony, but still he scanned the crowd desperately, searching for one face, searching for Drake.

The DragonRyder always brought him hope. Even trapped as he was, he couldn't help believing that if only he could see Drake's face he could find a way out. But Drake was not there.

Whatever delayed Drake had taken too long. Colin was alone, and there would be no reprieve. His heart clenched as he faced that fact, squeezed as though in a vice. The empty ache spread through his body, and he rested one hand on the stone balcony, fearful his legs would no longer support him.

"Colin." His father's growl was low, the meaning unmistakable, and Colin gave a brief nod.

"People of Turendra," he began, surprised to hear his own voice clear and strong. "Tonight, I attain my majority and lay my claim as heir to the throne."

Another cheer went up from the throng below.

Colin drew a long breath of the night air, sharp and clear as though it came straight from the stars above, and resolutely spoke again. “The royal astrologer has seen my fate—my future.” His voice wavered a little on the last word, and he looked up again, seeking Marendra’s Eye.

The Evening Star was no longer visible. Colin frowned, narrowing his eyes. Where the star hung was instead an inky black shadow, and as he watched, it grew ever larger.

He took a shaky breath. A huge black shadow in the night sky, blotting out the stars, could mean only one thing. Trembling, eyes fixed on the gigantic shape, he stumbled over his next words. “The royal astrologer has proclaimed his vision of marriage between myself and Princess Estrella of Astoria. He sees unity between our fair lands.”

The shape in the sky was closer now, close enough so Colin could see the curving outline of the dragon’s great neck, hear the steady whump of its leathery wings. But he could not tell if the beast carried a rider.

The crowd’s silence was palpable. Suddenly a lone voice cried out, “Prince Colin, whatever you do, follow your heart!”

Follow your heart. Those words, along with the approach of the great beast in the sky, filled Colin with courage. “My people!” he cried out. “The stars speak of my marriage and of affairs of state. What do I know of such things? I am untried, not yet fit to be a husband or a prince. I must first learn to be a man.”

The crowd erupted with applause and wolf whistles. Breathing hard, Colin looked up at the dragon, heedless of Estrella’s shriek at his shoulder. The giant lizard was close

enough now for Colin to see the pearl-pink skin of her belly and the darker color of her wings.

Marchere! he thought, his heart lifting as he recognized Drake's she-dragon. *Drake!*

King Leopold shouldered Colin out of the way and addressed the crowd. "Hear me! My son is young and foolish, and I have no doubt indulged him too much. The Princess Estrella of Astoria is—"

"Your Majesty!" A commanding voice rang out from above. "Your Majesty, I claim your immediate attention!"

"Who dares to interrupt the king?" King Leopold bellowed.

A roar of dragonfire split the sky above the palace, and King Leopold fell back from the balustrade as a dark figure hurtled from above and landed, cat-like, on the railing.

"Majesty, I claim your pardon." The man straightened up, his dark cloak billowing in the night breeze. He dropped to the balcony and made a perfunctory bow. "The news I bring will not wait. Would you have me tell you here in the presence of your..." the newcomer hesitated, running an eye over the balcony, "... guests, or will you give me a moment in the state chamber?"

"DragonRyder!" King Leopold cried, fury and frustration in his voice. "I cannot and will not—"

"Majesty." The DragonRyder's voice was quiet and authoritative, and even King Leopold stepped back. "This will not wait. The news I carry requires your action within the hour. Either bid me speak or precede me to the chamber. I await your pleasure."

“Very well!” King Leopold threw up his hands and gestured to the heralds. “Audience at an end. Clear the way!”

The nobles fell back from the balcony door, and King Leopold swept through the doorway. The DragonRyder took a step to follow and then paused in front of Colin. As the heralds’ trumpets blared, Drake leaned close and spoke rapidly. “Meet me in an hour?”

“Of course. Drake, what—?”

But Colin was speaking to the DragonRyder’s back as he hastened in the wake of the king. He took a deep breath. *Drake*. Drake had come. Drake was here. The knowledge of his lover’s presence was overwhelming.

King Vathek’s hand dropped heavily on Colin’s shoulder, fingers tightening. “Well, boy, you think you can make a fool out of Astoria, hey?”

Colin looked from Vathek over to Princess Estrella. In the middle of the ballroom, surrounded by a circle of anxious, staring nobles, the petite princess was swearing like a sailor, stamping her foot in fury while her mother clutched her arms, trying in vain to stop the tide of her temper.

“No, sir.” Colin wrenched himself out of the King’s grip. “I meant every word I said. I must prove myself before I am worthy of your daughter.”

King Vathek’s face reddened until his cheeks matched the color of his hair. Before he could speak again Bartletoot bounded out onto the balcony. “My liege,” he cried, bowing low before the king. “With your permission, I’ll entertain the people.” Without further ado, he leaped to the balustrade and cried out, “The DragonRyder comes and steals away the

king! But the night is young, and there is fun to be had! King Vathek permits me to sing for you.”

Colin did not wait for King Vathek to recover from the interruption. He spun around and hurried back into the ballroom, determined to escape before anyone else could detain him. Nothing must prevent his meeting with Drake.

The noble guests were clutched in groups, no doubt discussing the occurrences on the balcony. Colin scuttled for the nearest exit, head low, staying as inconspicuous as possible.

He made it to the hallway without being spotted and huddled gratefully in a shadowy niche. For now, at least, he was alone, safe and well away from the anger of his father and King Vathek. All he had to do now was get safely to the stables for his rendezvous with Drake.

Colin looked down the hallway toward the main stairs. Huge, branched candle sconces flooded the staircase with light, and as Colin watched a sentry moved back and forth across the top step. There was no escape that way.

He slipped out of his niche and crept down the passage, quiet from long habit even though the sound from the ballroom obscured any noise he might make. Finally, unobserved, he stood at the top of the back stairs, listening intently.

The clink of crockery and the murmur of voices came gently up the stairs, the normal sounds of the servants managing a party. There was nothing to indicate sentries on watch for him, and Colin sighed with relief. His father must

be too taken up with the DragonRyder's news to think, yet, of the punishment he would surely visit upon his son.

Colin slipped down the narrow wooden stairs. He'd come this way so often, both to meet his lover and to escape his father's temper, that avoiding the creaking third and fourteenth stairs was second nature.

Three steps from the bottom, he paused. Below him was the scullery, dark and deserted at this time of day. Through the archway, he could see the floor of the brightly lit kitchen, and he watched the shadows carefully.

Two people were sitting at the kitchen table—likely the sheriff and a guard—and two more shadows roved. Cook and one of her minions, no doubt, and from their positions and the sound of slopping water they were washing dishes. Sticking closely to the shadows, he slowly descended the last three steps.

As he thought, Cook and one of the maids were busy at the sink, their backs to the room. Sheriff Torrance sat at the table holding a goblet, laughing, his attention focused on the women.

But the fourth member of the party, Torrance's companion at the table, was looking directly at Colin. Her brown eyes widened, and she put her goblet down on the table in front of her as she saw him. Colin held his breath. Slowly, he raised his finger to his lips.

Madam Max, the housekeeper, inclined her head slowly and pushed back her chair. "Torrance," she said imperiously, moving a step back into the kitchen.

“Yes, ma’am!” The sheriff leaped to his feet and followed her, turning his back on the scullery.

Colin kissed the finger he held to his lips in salute to the housekeeper, and she raised her eyebrows at him. With a quick smile, he turned and ducked for the back door, heart beating fast in relief.

He slowly traversed the servants’ route to the dragon barn, slipping quietly between the castle outbuildings, avoiding the torchlit courtyards, and shrinking back into the shadows whenever he saw a figure coming the other way.

Colin was sure no one knew of his assignments with the DragonRyder. Even Madam Max did not know the reason Colin slipped through the kitchens so often at night; she had helped him hide from his father’s anger since he was very small, and Colin had given her no reason to think he was doing anything other than evading punishment these days. If his father were to find out... Colin winced. The consequences did not bear thinking. King Leopold would vent his considerable fury on the DragonRyder, that Colin knew for certain, and the knowledge made him guard their secret even more closely.

At last, Colin crept through the small, barely used rear door of the dragon barn. He closed it behind him and stood still, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. The door he used opened into the bedding store, and he stood behind the sacks of sand, listening intently.

The only light in the storeroom filtered wanly through from the lanterns in the barn proper, and Colin squinted through the arched door. He heard nothing except the gentle movements of dragons at night—the slither of a tail across a

sandy bed, the rasp of a giant lizard scratching its neck against the stone wall, the gentle whoof of a stretched-out wing. Silently, Colin moved to the archway and peered out.

The vaulted stable was empty save for the dragons and him. Colin heaved a sigh of relief and headed down the aisle towards the stall where Marchere stayed when she and Drake were at the castle.

The other occupants of the stable, a half-grown black male and an elderly green she-dragon, greeted him with whistles as he passed. He glanced at them nervously and moved more quickly. Dragons made him nervous. No matter how often Drake explained their peaceful natures and vegetarian habits, Colin couldn't get past their size, their fire, and their teeth.

For centuries, humans had enslaved the great beasts, treating them as glorified cattle or horses. It wasn't until the borders were opened a scant century ago that the treaty with Catharia had been signed. Only now were the rights of dragons being recognized. Even the dragons in the barn were freed slaves who chose to remain at the castle, the only home they'd ever known.

Colin moved even faster. Many dragons still held grudges against humans, and despite their friendly greeting, he wouldn't blame these dragons if they turned on him. Not after the treatment they suffered in the old days, when they were still enslaved.

The crown prince of Turendra had a more thorough understanding of dragon rights than most nobles of his age. Drake had seen to that. As a DragonRyder born, Drake's empathy and communion with the beasts always amazed

Colin. Drake's heritage, as much as his training, came through loud and clear, and sometimes Colin wished his own lineage made him even a tenth as well prepared.

As a prince, he was taught that dragons were dumb beasts fit only for riding or carrying burdens, and that only after cruel and prolonged training to render them safe. It was only after meeting Drake that Colin learned dragons were intelligent, gentle creatures, and that Catharia was not the wild, undeveloped land people said it was.

"Dragons are just like you and me," Drake had explained, gesturing at Marchere while she grazed nearby. "They love and they hurt, and they have families. They build homes, they farm, they live just the same way we do. Enslaving a dragon breaks their hearts and minds in ways humans would find it hard to imagine."

Colin had shivered then, thinking of the chained men who rowed King Leopold's barge. "Drake, when I am king, there will be no slavery here," he vowed.

A sharp toot brought him back to the situation at hand. The sound was shortly followed by the appearance of Marchere's huge pink head above her half-door. Trembling, Colin looked into her large green eyes and stuttered, "H-hi, Marchere."

Marchere sighed, shook her head slowly, and snapped her jaws. Colin bit his lip. Marchere scared him, despite Drake's constant assurances that the big pink dragon liked him, but how he felt about her was immaterial right now. Marchere's temper was known to be uncertain, and there was no one—guard, dragonwrangler or King—who approached her stall uninvited. Her stall was the safest

hiding place in the kingdom, the one place a missing prince would never be sought.

Colin licked his lips nervously. “Marchere,” he whispered. “May I... may I come in?”

With a soft hiss, the dragon withdrew her head.

“Marchere?” Colin hesitated.

A high whistle came from within the stall, and Colin looked over his shoulder nervously. Hopefully Drake would come soon. Marchere understood English perfectly, but she spoke only in the whistles and toots of Draconic, and Colin couldn’t tell if Marchere’s whistle was an invitation or a rebuff. Not for the first time, he wished the she-dragon spoke English like the few dragon nobles he had met.

Colin took another hesitant step towards the stall and then froze as he heard the rattle of the heavy barn door. The sound came again, and Colin caught his breath. Someone was coming.

An urgent toot came from Marchere’s stall, and Colin looked up to see the big green eyes gazing at him over the door. Marchere tooted again, and this time Colin understood. Marchere was telling him to hurry up.

“Thank you, Marchere,” Colin gasped, and he flung himself at the stall door. He wrestled with the heavy latch and made it inside just as the barn door rolled open on. He fumbled the latch closed.

Marchere’s breath was hot on the back of his neck, and Colin trembled. Had she really invited him in? He turned slowly, frightened.

The pink dragon glared and nudged impatiently at his shoulder. Colin suppressed a squeak of fear and then, as Marchere pushed him again, harder, he heard voices approaching.

The big dragon swung away, and as Colin watched in confusion, lifted her head over the half-door. A deep, rumbling growl started low in her chest, and Colin suddenly realized she was hiding him.

“Watch that one,” he heard the voice of a dragonwrangler further down the barn. “Don’t go near her. She’ll bite you soon as look at you.”

“Damned dragons.” The other voice was accompanied by a rattle of a metal, a guard’s mail-shirt, Colin thought, taking a deep breath. Were they looking for him already?

His fears were confirmed a moment later. “Well, yon prince ain’t in the barn, ’less he’s making out with her Pink Highness down there,” came a dragonwrangler’s voice again.

The guard roared with laughter in response. “Seal the barn, Thomas,” he instructed the lackey. “No one enters or leaves unless they have business, understand? I’ll send a man to keep watch.”

Colin listened, holding his breath, as the heavy doors rolled shut again. He was trapped. But he was also safe, for now, and Drake would come soon. Wrapping his arms around himself, he slid down the wall to sit on the soft sand of Marchere’s bedding.

“Marchere,” he said out loud, looking up at the pink scales of her side. “Marchere, what have I done?”

“What you had to do.”

The deep, velvet voice from the shadows brought Colin to his feet again, and his cry of “Drake!” was drowned out by the dragon’s shrill whistle of welcome.

The stall door swung open, and Marchere fell back to the rear of the box, giving her master room to enter. The space echoed with her low, affectionate tooting.

The DragonRyder entered without fanfare. This time, there was no swirling cloak, no dramatic entrance, but Colin was as mesmerized as he had been on the balcony. The lanternlight gleamed on Drake’s black hair and cast his browned skin in shades of soft gold.

“Marchere, you missed me, girl?” Drake’s voice was low and caressing, and Marchere’s answering toot sounded something like a purr. The DragonRyder petted the huge lizard, and as he touched her, she lowered herself to her sandy bed. He whistled to her softly, and she pricked her ears, and then she lowered her head and curled up into a ball.

Drake petted his dragon one more time, and then he turned from her to the waiting prince.

“Your Highness,” he said, smiling, and started to bow.

“Drake! Please....” Colin choked off his words and rushed to the DragonRyder, grabbing the dark man’s shoulders. “Please don’t joke! Drake—”

“Easy. Colin, take it easy.” Drake’s arms closed around Colin, and the young prince clung tight, grabbing at the strong muscles under his hands.

“Drake,” he said again, burying his head against the DragonRyder’s leather-clad shoulder. He shifted his arms, getting a better grip on Drake’s shoulderblades.

“I’m sorry,” Drake said softly in his ear. “I shouldn’t have teased you tonight. I’ve got you now, okay?”

Colin closed his eyes and relaxed into Drake’s embrace, feeling the strength of the arms around him, the solid body hard against his, the gentleness of Drake’s hands on his back. “God, Drake... when you didn’t come, I was so afraid....”

“Colin.” Drake stroked his cheek and gently lifted his chin. “Colin, I will always come. Never doubt that.”

Blinking, Colin opened his eyes and looked into the intense blue eyes of the DragonRyder. Drake’s eyes held magic; Colin had been sure of that for years. His eyes spoke words that never passed his lips and dragonfire smoldered in their depths. As he met Drake’s gaze, Colin suddenly felt warm. Warm and safe. He reached up and touched Drake’s cheek softly.

“I love you, Colin,” Drake continued, voice low. “I love you, and I always will.”

“I love you too,” Colin whispered, and then Drake’s lips were on his, hard, almost bruising as Drake kissed him as though he couldn’t get enough.

Colin clung tight, mouth urgent on Drake’s, matching his lover’s desperation. “Drake,” he gasped, as they broke apart for air. “God, Drake, I need you so badly....”

“Need you too.” Drake raised his head and kissed Colin’s temple gently, then his cheekbone. “Let’s go upstairs, huh?”

“Come on.”

It was a familiar scramble up the iron ladder to the loft where the dragons’ hay was stored. The stone walls and floor made it soundproof and private, as well as flameproof—those who built dragon barns were mindful of the danger of fire. Drake took Colin’s hand, and together they threaded their way between the bales to the rear. Here, they’d arranged the loose hay into a soft makeshift bed, and they fell onto it gladly.

Colin rolled onto his back, pulling Drake on top of him, struggling with the DragonRyder’s jerkin as Drake fumbled with his belt. “God, Drake,” he groaned as he felt the leather lacings come free, and he plunged his hands inside to find Drake’s warm skin.

Drake breathed in sharply and raised himself up, pulling Colin’s belt undone and dragging at his tunic. The prince groaned again as his lover’s hands made contact with his skin. “Drake!”

“I got you, baby,” Drake muttered in his ear, and then he kissed him again.

Moaning hard, Colin bucked as Drake’s tongue explored his mouth, questing, assertive. He pushed the jerkin off Drake’s shoulder and buried his hands in the dark hair of Drake’s exposed chest, loving the feel of the rippling muscles under his fingers. Drake groaned as Colin thumbed his nipple and raised his head, panting.

“Colin... you’re so fucking gorgeous,” he whispered.

“Drake, touch me,” Colin gasped, bucking against his lover. “Drake, please!”

Drake bent his head and kissed Colin again, gently. His blue eyes were soft now, loving, and Colin whimpered and raised his head for another kiss. Drake gave it, his lips light, pulling away when Colin thrust with his tongue.

“Easy,” Drake whispered, kissing him again, soft and gentle, and Colin closed his eyes. He dropped his head back into the hay as Drake kissed his jaw and then his throat, and Colin moaned happily.

“I love you,” Drake was still whispering, and Colin whimpered softly as he felt his lover shift above him. Drake’s weight disappeared, and Colin whimpered again. Then Drake’s hands were on his stomach, caressing their way lower, and Colin’s whimper became a gasp.

Drake pulled Colin’s pants off, and Colin opened his eyes to see his lover kneeling between his legs, a predatory smile on his lips.

“Drake,” Colin managed, and then his words died in a groan as the DragonRyder bent his head and ran soft, wet lips up Colin’s shaft.

Colin shuddered as Drake’s mouth engulfed the head, and he arched, lifting his hips to the warm welcome of Drake’s skillful tongue. The strands of hay against his skin crumpled beneath him as he bucked, and he cried out aloud at the wave of pleasure that flooded through him.

He felt Drake easing back and panted softly, trembling, and he whined as his lover lapped his slit with the tip of his tongue. Colin’s balls were high and tight, and Drake’s hand crept down to find them, stroking through his curls to finally cup the twin globes. Colin sobbed as Drake squeezed gently.

Colin spread his legs wider, quivering as Drake's tongue traversed his crown with leisurely swipes.

Drake's fingers probed lower, and as he felt the teasing touch on his entrance, Colin gasped. In response, Drake swirled his tongue around Colin's head again and then took him deep. Colin cried out, bucking helplessly as his tender slit grazed the back of Drake's throat, his orgasm rushing through him like an explosion of dragonfire.

Colin dimly felt Drake shifting, felt the heat of his body against his skin, and he reached out blindly, hanging on to his lover as the waves of pleasure pulsed through him.

"Got you, baby. I got you." Drake's voice was soft and Colin moaned, pressing closer against him. Drake held him tighter.

Gradually Colin's breathing steadied. He nuzzled Drake's neck, biting gently, his body still tingling with pleasure. "So good," he whispered against his lover's skin.

Drake rolled onto his side, pulling Colin with him. Colin bit gently at his neck again and sighed happily as Drake's hand caressed his back. "Drake," he muttered.

"I love you, Colin," Drake murmured, hand roaming lower, squeezing his ass cheek. "Love you so much."

"I love you too." Colin pushed himself up one elbow and looked down at his lover. Drake's body was dark against the golden hay, shadowy and mysterious, and Colin ran a hand lovingly over his strong and rounded shoulders.

He smiled as he traced Drake's defined upper arms, exploring the strength that held dragons.

Drake was magnificent. Every line of his body spoke of strength and beauty. Colin leaned in and kissed him, and then he sat back and looked at his lover again. “So beautiful,” he murmured, laying a hand on Drake’s well-muscled, dark-furred chest.

“Not as beautiful as you,” Drake said. His words died in a groan as Colin’s hand slid down his body. He whimpered as the prince’s fingers creeped teasingly around the base of his cock.

Magnificent, Colin thought again, running one finger up Drake’s shaft. The fat, full member throbbed under his hand, hot and ready, and Colin’s moan nearly drowned out Drake’s.

Drake thrust against his hand, groaning, and Colin relented, taking Drake’s eager cock in a firm grip. Drake cried out as Colin’s hand slid up his shaft.

“That’s it, baby.” Colin leaned down and kissed Drake, capturing his mouth, kissing him hard as his thumb roved over the head of his cock and teased the slit.

Drake broke the kiss to gasp as Colin played in his leaking come, spreading it over his crown, caressing the ridge. “Colin,” he whimpered, spreading his legs.

Colin shifted his grip and grinned with satisfaction as his lover groaned deeply. Drake thrust into his palm, and Colin squeezed him, stroking him hard and slow—just the way Drake liked it. “Yes, Drake,” he whispered in the DragonRyder’s ear. “Come on, baby.”

Closing his eyes, Drake threw his head back, panting, and Colin sped up his stroke. “I love you, Drake,” he said,

feeling his lover swelling in his hand. Stroke never faltering, he kissed Drake again, his tongue hard against Drake's, and Drake stiffened against him, shaking. Warmth spurted over Colin's hand, and he slowed his movement, squeezing gently now as Drake thrust helplessly against his hand.

Lying back down, Colin pulled Drake close, and Drake moaned happily, wrapping his own arms around Colin. "I love you, baby," Drake whispered, and Colin pressed a kiss against his lover's skin.

It was Colin who pulled away first, sitting up slowly and rubbing a hand across his eyes. "Drake," he said, "how long can you stay?"

Drake propped himself on an elbow and laid a hand on Colin's arm. "I must go tonight—and so must you."

Colin turned his head. "I—oh." He stopped, thinking of the announcement he had made and the guard who sealed the stable. "You think... my father...?"

"Yes, Colin." Drake nodded, looking back anxiously.

"I really screwed up, didn't I?" Colin shivered and drew up his knees, wrapping his arms around himself. "I should have just said I'd marry Princess Estrella."

"No, Colin. You didn't screw up." Drake scooted over to sit next to his lover. He wrapped a strong arm around Colin's back. "You did what you had to do. If you promised yourself to her, the king could declare you married at any time. You wouldn't even have to be there. It's the law, you know that."

Colin nodded worriedly.

"I don't trust the king." Drake lifted a hand and gently stroked Colin's cheek. "That may be treason, but it's the truth. Now that his plan to use you to cement his alliance with Astoria has failed... Colin, I'm scared for you, all right?"

"You are?" Colin's bright blue eyes widened. "What—what do you mean, Drake? The royal astrologer said he saw my marriage in the stars. It was not planned by my father."

"Like I said, I don't trust the king." Drake pulled Colin in for a kiss, hard and brief. "All I'm saying is, it's damned convenient, that master astrologer seeing something that's so helpful to our sovereign. And I can't help worrying what he might see next in the stars for you."

Colin swallowed hard. "Drake, what am I going to do?" he asked. He turned frightened eyes up to his lover's face.

"Colin," Drake said tenderly, blue eyes holding the prince's gaze. "Do exactly what you said you'd do. Prove yourself."

"But how?"

Drake's steady gaze and the love in his eyes reassured the frightened prince, and he tried a tentative smile.

"Come away with me." Drake smiled back at him and pulled Colin close. "Come with me. We'll tell the world you are undertaking a quest far beyond the borders of the Three Kingdoms."

"Drake, I'm still the heir to the throne. I can't just disappear."

"Listen to me, Colin." Drake sat back, looking serious. "The news I carried tonight is of uprisings in Catharia.

Bezique, king of the Dragons, demands immediate audience with King Leopold on the subject of dragon enslavement.” The DragonRyder hesitated, looking concerned. “There are whispers about that I don’t understand, Colin. There is danger afoot in the Three Kingdoms. Please, come away with me, even if only until the meeting of the kings?”

“I’ll come, Drake.” Colin nodded. “At least until after the meeting.” He shivered, glancing toward the trap door giving access to their loft. “I’d as soon avoid the thrashing my father has no doubt planned for me.”

Drake growled softly, low in his throat. “He had best not hurt you.”

“It’s nothing, Drake.” Colin stood up quickly, grabbing for his tunic. He usually knew better than to mention the punishments his father inflicted on him in front of his hot-tempered lover, but he’d spoken without thinking. “Come, my friend. The barn is sealed. If we’re to get out, we’ll need a plan.”

“I’ve got a plan.” Drake got slowly to his feet and picked his jerkin up off the floor. Carefully, he brushed off a strand or two of hay that clung to the soft leather and donned the garment. It settled snugly over his shoulders like a second skin.

Marchere awoke in an instant at Drake’s whistle, surging to her feet and shaking herself with a rumble like an earthquake. She lowered her broad head and tooted softly at her master. Drake muttered back, a breathy combination of grunts and whistles, and Colin smiled. The elders taught that the Draconic language held magic, preventing humans from understanding or speaking it. But the DragonRyder

conversed fluently with the giant beasts in their own language. Either the elders were wrong, or—Colin’s smile widened—or Drake held some of that magic himself. That was something the prince could easily believe.

“Colin!” Drake’s call brought Colin back from his reverie, and he hurried to the DragonRyder’s side. “Get up on Marchere, back between her wings. She’ll hide you. All right?”

Colin nodded, and Drake boosted him up. The dragon’s scales were surprisingly warm, and he knelt in the narrow space between the dragon’s leathery wings, hunkering down. Marchere whistled softly and raised her wings a little, holding them up off her back, shielding Colin from view.

Colin pressed his hands flat against Marchere’s thick scales as the great beast started to move, rolling underneath him. It was hard to keep his balance on his knees, but if he sat astride her, his legs might be seen by the sentry. He heard Drake conversing with the dragon in soft chirrups, and then the rumble of the heavy barn door reached his ears.

“Halt! Identify yourself!” came the voice of a sentry. He sounded a little nervous, Colin thought, which wasn’t surprising. A huge pink dragon was enough to give the bravest man pause, especially when accompanied by the imposing DragonRyder.

“Guard, I am the DragonRyder.” Drake’s words, clipped, cold and imperious, were so different from the warm, gentle voice Colin knew that he shivered. “I go now in the king’s name on business of import to the realm. Let me pass, man.”

“Y-yes, my lord,” the guard stammered, and then Marchere was moving again, rolling underneath Colin as he clung as best he was able.

A moment later Colin felt the flutter of cloth against his skin and Drake’s voice, low and fast. “Put my cloak on and sit up. Marchere will just take you over the wall, and I’ll meet you in the spinney on the other side.”

“Drake!” Colin hissed, grabbing at the silken fabric, but the only answer was a low whistle from Marchere. Colin couldn’t speak dragon, but he thought he understood what she meant and scrambled forward, clear of the powerful wings. Hurriedly he fastened Drake’s cloak over his shoulders, pulled the hood up to hide his russet hair, and gripped Marchere’s shoulders with his knees. “Ready, girl,” he whispered.

There was a whoosh of air as Marchere’s wings unfolded, and Colin gripped tighter. The lurch as she gained the air nearly unseated him, and the thrust of her powerful wingbeats took his breath away. The lights of the castle were suddenly small below him, and Colin’s stomach flipped. “Marchere!” he gasped, resolutely tearing his eyes from the earth below, looking up at the twinkling stars instead.

Marchere’s shoulders thrummed beneath him with every beat of her wings, a sensation he found unnerving without Drake’s strong arms around him. He’d never been on the back of a dragon without the DragonRyder, and he hoped they reached the spinney soon. Drake’s arms would be very welcome right now. Colin squeezed his eyes shut.

A toot from Marchere made him open them again, and he yelped, unnerved to find himself looking at the pink

dragon's face. They were still hurtling through the night sky, and Colin realized she'd snaked her head around, craning her long neck so she could see him. She tooted softly again.

"What's wrong, Marchere?" Colin asked, and the dragon tilted her head slowly down. The prince looked down in response and saw a clump of trees below them, dark and squat in the moonlight. His heart lifted in his chest, and he nodded to Marchere, understanding. "We're at the spinney!"

Marchere gave a soft grunt and turned away, straightening out her long neck. Colin leaned back, squeezing his knees tighter on the dragon's sides, preparing for the descent.

Going down always made him nervous, even when Drake was holding him secure, and tonight, alone on the back of the mighty beast, Colin's heart beat fast as Marchere's wingbeats slowed. He slid forward a little as the angle of her body changed, and he clamped his legs more tightly, leaning back and closing his eyes.

Marchere, possibly confused by the dark, stumbled as she touched down and took two huge, galumphing strides, wings flapping, before she got her feet underneath her and resumed her steady, rolling gait. Colin tried to hold on, but the dragon's heaving motion unseated him, and just as she found her feet again he lost his grip, slipping from the lizard's back and tumbling the dozen or so feet to the ground.

"Marchere," he gasped out, winded, but the pink dragon went on, seemingly heedless, into the spinney and out of sight. Colin struggled to catch his breath, pushing down the fear that threatened to rise in his chest at the dragon's

disappearance. Desperately filling his lungs, he managed a low whistle.

Nothing happened. Colin slumped against the ground, his breathing still shallow and labored, starting to feel the ache in his back where he'd hit the ground. Chill damp rose from the dewy grass, and the light dress tunic he wore was no protection. Shivering, he pulled Drake's cloak tighter around him, huddling inside the dark fabric.

Suddenly, something touched him on the shoulder, light and firm. With a squeak of fear, Colin swung around, scrambling up. *No dagger—no swordbelt*—the realization flashed through his mind as he raised his fists, the only weapon he was equipped with to face this new danger.

"Colin!" Drake caught his arms as he struck at him, drawing him forward, and Colin sobbed with relief. The prince dropped limp against the DragonRyder's shoulder, clinging to him, shaking. "You're okay?" Drake whispered in his ear. "Marchere told me you fell."

"I'm okay," Colin said. "Sorry—"

"Shhh." Drake looked over his shoulder quickly and raised a finger to Colin's lips. "It will be safest if we're not seen." Colin nodded his understanding, and Drake smiled, his teeth and the whites of his eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Come on, baby. Ready to fly again?"

Colin nodded, and Drake guided him into the spinney, where Marchere stood waiting in a clearing. She greeted them with a soft chirrup. Colin looked around him at the little glade. "You were here?" he whispered to Drake,

suddenly understanding the dragon's purposeful departure. "Marchere came to find you?"

Drake nodded and pressed a kiss against Colin's ear. Quickly, he boosted his lover onto the back of the great pink beast and climbed up gracefully to join him. Colin sighed happily as Drake's arms went around him, and he leaned back against his lover's broad chest.

The near-vertical climb Marchere performed in order to escape the confines of the clearing didn't faze Colin this time. Held in Drake's strong arms, he could watch the ground recede without a qualm, and as the dragon's powerful wingbeats carried them through the sky, he turned his face to the Evening Star. Marendra's Eye was sinking lower now, preparing to set for the night, and Colin offered a silent prayer of thanks to the dragon goddess. She sent the DragonRyder just in time.

This time, Marchere made a perfect landing, even kneeling to assist her passengers to dismount. Colin went to her head and bowed his thanks, well aware of the compliment she was paying him by kneeling. Perhaps Drake was right, he reflected. Perhaps Marchere really did like him. She certainly worked hard on his behalf tonight. "Thank you, Marchere," he said quietly.

The pink dragon inclined her head graciously, and Colin turned away. As he did so, Marchere gave him a sharp nudge, sending him sprawling. Colin yelped, scrambling back to his feet, regarding the dragon with injured surprise. "Marchere! What did I do?"

Drake's sharp whistle rang out, and Marchere stepped back, looking at Colin steadily, head on one side. Her green

eyes, bright and intelligent, gleamed—with humor, Colin suddenly realized. Was Marchere teasing him?

He looked at Drake uncertainly. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” Drake said, putting an arm around him and gently brushing the dirt off his back. “Not at all. Thanking her was exactly right. Maybe stand back a little further next time, okay? Come on.” Drake started walking. “Let’s get you inside. It’s not warm out here.”

“What about Marchere? Does she have somewhere to sleep?” Colin looked around and saw the pink dragon’s hindquarters moving towards a building on the far side of the field. “And does she need to be fed?”

“Marchere was born and bred here,” Drake said with a chuckle. “She’s lived here longer than I have. Her bed is prepared, and her hay is self-service. She has no need of me tonight.”

Looking around him, Colin suddenly realized where they were. They had landed in the field behind Drake’s grandmother’s house, the only home Drake had ever known.

The old lady died five years ago, a few months before Colin had met the young DragonRyder. They had become friends immediately, the lonely prince and the outcast grandson of the feared dragon-witch, and they had run wild whenever Colin could escape his minders.

They had played together, explored together, and taught each other the secrets of the foreign worlds they each inhabited. Drake was the best friend Colin had ever had,

until the night of Colin's eighteenth birthday, when in the loft above the dragon barn, he became so much more.

They loved each other. They never questioned that, just as they never questioned the need to keep what they were to each other secret. Homosexuality wasn't unknown in the Three Kingdoms, but only the dragon kingdom was truly accepting. For the crown prince of Turendra, a male partner was not to be thought of.

Colin stepped through the door into the tumbledown cottage, listening to the high soft chitter of some small animal—a bat or a mouse, perhaps—as Drake fumbled with a lantern. It flared to life, and Colin blinked at the tidy room, exactly the same as it had been every time he'd come before: carefully swept dirt floor, scrubbed table beneath the window, enameled ewer standing on the bench.

Drake didn't spend a lot of time here anymore. His work with the dragons meant he was often in Catharia, and when he returned to Turendra, he and Marchere usually slept in the dragon barn at the castle.

Now, Drake stepped forward and hung the lantern on a nail in the ceiling. Pulling the door shut behind him, he crossed the small room and bent to the grate, tossing the burning match he'd used to light the lantern onto the ready-laid fire. There was a soft crackle, and the pungent odor of burning pine branches filled the air.

"Colin." Drake came back to the prince's side and unlaced the black cloak from around his neck. "Come to the fire and warm up."

"Thanks." Colin let Drake lead him forward to the hearth and perched tentatively on the edge of the wooden bench in front of it. Drake sat too, putting his arm around him. Colin leaned closer and winced as Drake's elbow connected with the spot he'd landed on in his fall earlier.

"What is it?" Drake was instantly concerned. "Are you hurt?"

"It's nothing." Colin shrugged. "When I fell in the spinney—a bruise, nothing more."

"Let me see."

Colin protested in vain as Drake divested him of his belt and tunic and examined his back. It wasn't serious, but Drake swore rudely about Marchere's clumsiness.

"She did her best," Colin defended the big pink beast. "It was dark, after all."

"She could have done better," Drake said, frowning.

"We did worse when we were children and thought the bruises half the fun," Colin reminded him while smiling. "Drake, had she not carried me, my back would bear worse marks than this."

Drake swore again, in frustration this time. "Colin, he cannot have you thrashed. You're not a criminal."

"He is the king." Colin shrugged. "He does as he pleases. And truly, Drake, he has not done so for months."

"Months." Drake winced. "Yeah, Colin, I remember. I wish you'd let me speak to him then as I wished to. You—you were so sore."

"But the next morning, I was fine. Remember?"

“I rubbed you down that night with the brown liniment, did I not?” Drake paused and then nodded decisively. “I did, and it did you well. Sit still. I’ll apply it now to this bruise, and with luck it will also be well again by morning.”

Colin sat, staring into the fire, watching as the flames consumed the pine kindling and started to lick at the larger logs balanced above. Behind him, Drake rummaged in a cupboard, and then his hand was gentle on Colin’s back.

“Lean forward,” he murmured, and Drake’s hand moved to his shoulder, steadying him. His other hand moved lightly over the sore place, slick with the liniment. Its sharp, minty smell filled the room, and Colin caught his breath as it warmed against his skin.

“All right?” Drake asked.

“Yes. It feels hot. I forgot that; it surprised me.”

“That’s what makes it work,” Drake said, and he kissed Colin’s neck. “Are you hungry, my prince?”

“No, DragonRyder....” Colin hesitated, now remembering he’d felt too miserable at his birthday banquet to swallow more than a mouthful.

“I thought you would be,” Drake said, smiling and leaning in to kiss him again. This time Colin turned his head and found Drake’s lips with his own. “I am, and it would be rude to eat before my future king.”

“Is that right?” Colin grinned at Drake’s familiar teasing. “I can think of a lot of things it’s rude to do before your future king, dragon-whelp, and it seems to me you’ve done most of them. And well. Still, I shall have to have you punished.”

“My liege, I beg pardon,” Drake said, his blue eyes bright with laughter. “How will you punish me, Highness?”

Colin smiled and stood up, turning to face Drake. “Thus,” he said huskily, grabbing the DragonRyder’s strong arms and leaning in, claiming Drake’s mouth hard.

When he could speak again, Drake said with mock gravity, “I am truly chastened, my liege.” He gently traced a finger over Colin’s bare chest, and the prince shivered. “I shall mend my ways.” He kissed Colin lightly and then stepped back.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m mending my ways, I told you.” Drake laughed at Colin’s frown. “Colin, you’re hungry. I’m hungry. And if I stay there and kiss you....”

“You’re right.” Colin picked up his tunic and pulled it over his head. Even in front of the fire, it wasn’t really warm enough to sit around half-dressed. He followed his lover over to the cupboards.

It was quick work for Drake to provide them each with a plate of cheese, salt beef, and olives. He apologized for the lack of bread, but Colin shook his head, taking a bite of the sharp, crumbly cheese. The simple meal was better than any feast, prepared as it was by Drake’s hand and served here in the closest thing to a home either of them had.

“This is my real birthday feast,” Colin said softly, delicately depositing an olive pit on the edge of his wooden plate. “And it’s perfect.”

“One day,” Drake said slowly, tearing his salt beef with his teeth, “I’ll prepare a proper feast for you, Colin. One that you’ll really enjoy.”

Colin savored the last of the tangy cheese on his tongue. “Drake,” he said, laying a hand on his lover’s wrist, “I think this is the best feast I ever had. So if you’re planning on doing better than this, you’re making me a big promise.”

Drake looked at him a moment and chuckled softly. “For a prince,” he remarked, “you’re not a bad guy.”

“Thanks.” Colin grinned at him happily. “I think.”

Plates cleaned, door barred, and fire banked for the night, they stumbled up the short wooden stair to the low-ceilinged bedroom beneath the thatched roof. There was a straw mattress and cured sheepskins to lie on, and Colin stretched luxuriously, bare skin against the simple wools. “I have nothing so nice in the castle,” he murmured, smiling as he watched his lover strip. “And certainly nothing as nice as you.”

Drake lay down next to him and pulled a blanket over them. Colin shifted closer, reaching for his lover’s warmth. Drake came to him willingly, hands soft on his skin, mouth hard and wet.

“So good to be with you,” Colin murmured, biting gently at Drake’s neck.

“I love you, Colin,” Drake whispered, kissing him again. “So much.”

“I love you too.” Colin rubbed his hands over the DragonRyder’s powerful back, groaning softly at the pleasure of touching Drake. He felt Drake arch under his hands and

he pushed Drake down, lowering his head and biting at the place Drake's neck met his shoulder.

Drake tangled his fingers in Colin's hair, and Colin groaned happily, pushing his head back against his lover's hand. Drake's other hand slid slowly down Colin's spine, and Colin released his lover's neck, gasping at the tingling sensation Drake's fingers left in their wake.

"So beautiful," Drake whispered against Colin's jaw, and then his lips were on Colin's, hot and searching, his tongue demanding entrance, overpowering the prince's willing mouth.

Colin arched up as Drake pushed him onto his back, pressing their bodies together as Drake bore him down onto the straw mattress, grinding his hips against Colin's, kissing him hard and fierce.

"Oh, Drake," Colin gasped, breathless. Drake's hard member slid across his hip and stomach, moist and ready, and Colin spread his legs wider, lifting his own hips and rubbing against Drake's groin.

Drake moved a little, and then his hand was between them, cradling their cocks together. Colin slid his hands down his lover's muscled back; he grasped Drake's ass, reveling in the taut flesh under his hands.

"Yes, Colin," Drake groaned, thrusting gently with his hips, his cock sliding over Colin's. Colin cried out helplessly, arching backward as his lover stroked his member, moving firmly shaft to head, his hand hot and slick with sweat. Colin purred contentedly, and Drake released him to move his hand lower, tickling and stroking.

Groaning in anticipation, Colin drew up his knees, rolling his hips backward as he spread himself for Drake, craving the feel of his lover inside him. “Yes, baby,” Drake whispered in his ear, his finger teasing Colin’s entrance. “Oh yes.”

Colin couldn’t answer, only able to moan in helpless ecstasy at the feel of Drake’s finger, slick with their precum, probing at his entrance, slowly and tenderly stroking him open. Drake’s lips slid along his jaw, and then Drake moved, raising himself off Colin, his questing finger still inside the prince.

Half-opening his eyes, Colin saw his lover kneeling between his spread legs, scrabbling at something on the floor beside the bed. “Drake,” he managed, and Drake bent and placed a tender kiss on the inside of his thigh.

“Just getting this,” Drake murmured, pulling the top off a small ceramic jar. Colin recognized the sweet smell of the blue salve they used as lubricant. Drake had never told him the ointment’s actual purpose, but it fulfilled their requirements admirably.

Drake’s finger slipped out of him, but before Colin could do more than whine a protest it was back, spreading the cool salve over his hole and then sliding inside, slick and easy past his rim and deep into his passage. Colin groaned in agonized delight as Drake unerringly found his pleasure spot and rubbed, hard and then soft, pulling back and then pressing home until Colin thought his body must explode. He bucked, crying wordlessly in time with Drake’s rhythmic ministrations.

“My Colin,” Drake growled, very low, and Colin’s eyelids fluttered open to see his lover looking down at him, blue eyes dark with passion. “Mine,” Drake repeated, softer, and then the press of his fingers was gone, replaced by the head of his cock, relentlessly pressing at Colin’s ring.

“Drake... Drake, I need you,” Colin whimpered, reaching up to grab at his lover’s shoulders. His body ached for Drake to bury his cock deep inside him, and he gasped with the urgency of that need. “Drake, please.”

Drake pushed forward slowly, and Colin groaned as he was taken, Drake possessing him, soothing the desperate ache in his loins. Then Drake was leaning over him again, lowering his body onto Colin’s, and Colin groaned again.

The DragonRyder, possessor of the strength and skill required to subdue any creature in the kingdom, acknowledged master of the dragons, was inside him, owning him. Loving him. The thought nearly undid Colin, and he moaned, bucking hard against Drake’s body.

The skin of Drake’s belly was hot against his aching cock, Drake’s weight on his body was a thrill of pleasure, of possession, and Colin wrapped his arms around his lover, holding him tight, burying his face in Drake’s neck.

Drake kissed his shoulder, then his neck, and then he was moving, slow and short, each stroke an explosion of pleasure through the prince’s body. Colin arched up, his head falling back on the sheepskin. Drake’s next stroke was longer, and Colin sobbed, his muscles contracting around Drake’s cock. He looked up at Drake, moaning.

“So close,” Drake growled, and Colin saw his lover’s face, pleasure and concentration at war as he fought to hold back his own tide. Drake inside him, the heat and thrust, the slap of his balls, heavy against Colin’s ass—all of it intoxicating, overwhelming. Perfect.

Colin’s orgasm built, rolling waves of pleasure that started in his spine, shooting tendrils throughout his body, and Colin bucked helplessly, crying out, gripping Drake’s shoulders with everything he had as Drake’s strokes turned hard and fast. Colin fought for control, but every stroke was hitting home, obliterating the one that came before, and shockwaves of pleasure shook him. Colin thrust his head against the pillow, entire body alight. Drake growled deep in his throat, thrusting deep into Colin, hips hard against him as he shook with the force of his own orgasm.

Drake cried out softly, dropping onto the prince’s chest as Colin sobbed his own pleasure against the DragonRyder’s neck. The two of them lay together, overwhelmed by the nearness and the heat of their love for one another.

Drake raised his head first, nuzzling gently at Colin’s jaw, and Colin found Drake’s lips. They kissed softly, sweet and gentle, their bodies still rocking against each other, until at last Drake’s softening cock slipped free.

Rolling on his side, Drake pulled Colin close into his arms. “Happy birthday, your Highness,” he whispered softly.

Colin chuckled and rubbed his head against Drake’s shoulder. “Thank you, DragonRyder.”

The straw mattress was comfortable, and Drake’s arms held him safe, close and warm. Colin closed his eyes,

relaxing. He was a world away from the cold luxury of the castle. There, anything he wanted would be brought him at the snap of his fingers. He slept in a fine four-poster bed and dined on spiced, exotic dishes.

And he hated every moment of it.

This night, with Drake, brought that home to him as never before. First the simple meal before the fire, and now the rare and precious treat of sleeping beside Drake, in his arms all night.

“Drake,” he muttered, very low. “I wish it could be like this forever.”

“Don’t go back.” Drake’s voice was quiet, but it thrummed with emotion. “I meant what I said at the castle. Come away with me.”

Hope swelled in Colin’s chest, a thrilling flutter at the thought. Escaping his father. The freedom to be with Drake every day, the two of them working together, eating together, sharing a rustic bed... Colin swallowed hard.

“You really want me with you?” he asked in a husky whisper. “Won’t I slow you down?”

“No, my Prince. You could never slow me down.” Drake kissed his lips gently, looking deep into his eyes. “Colin, let me take you away. We can go to the mountains at the Catharian border. There’s a place there, somewhere we’ll be safe, where I can get word of what’s happening in Turendra. I know—” His breath caught in his throat, and then he went on. “I know I have no right to ask it of you. You’re a prince and I’m... I’m nothing, and I can’t give you what you deserve,

but Colin, I love you. And if you go back, I'm scared that something's gonna happen to you."

Colin sighed softly and snuggled closer into Drake's arms. "This place you speak of," he said. "Does it have a bed such as this?"

"Yes," Drake replied. "Colin—"

The prince interrupted him. "And will we feast as we did tonight? Before a fire?"

Drake's breath escaped in a long hiss. "Yes, we will."

"And...." Colin hesitated, reaching up to touch Drake's cheek. "And will you hold me every night? Like this?"

"Yes, Colin." Drake was whispering now. He turned his head and pressed a kiss against the prince's palm. "I will."

"Then I will come with you." Colin reached up, kissing Drake hungrily. "I will have everything I need, DragonRyder. And more than I deserve."

"Colin—"

Colin kissed Drake again, harder, stilling the words on his lover's tongue. "Drake," he whispered when he could speak. "When do we leave?"

Drake smiled into the prince's eyes. "I must meet with the king in the morning. If it goes as I believe it will, we will leave on my return. Otherwise, we will slip away tomorrow night under cover of darkness." He took a deep breath. "Colin, you'll really come?"

"Yes, Drake." Colin pulled him down for another kiss. "I love you."

“I love you too.” Drake wrapped Colin close in his arms, and Colin snuggled his head into his lover’s shoulder. He closed his eyes, inhaled Drake’s scent, and drifted toward sleep. The future was unknown, but Drake was a part of it.

Whatever happened, they’d be together.

KATE ROMAN is an adventurer, a scribe, and a hopeless romantic. A native of northern California, she divides her time between dreaming of beautiful, heartbroken men and the men who love them and working in IT support. She's ably assisted by one cat, three dogs, and four rabbits and doesn't want to talk about the shameful state of her garden. She also reads more books than can possibly be healthy and can be reached at romankate@gmail.com.



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