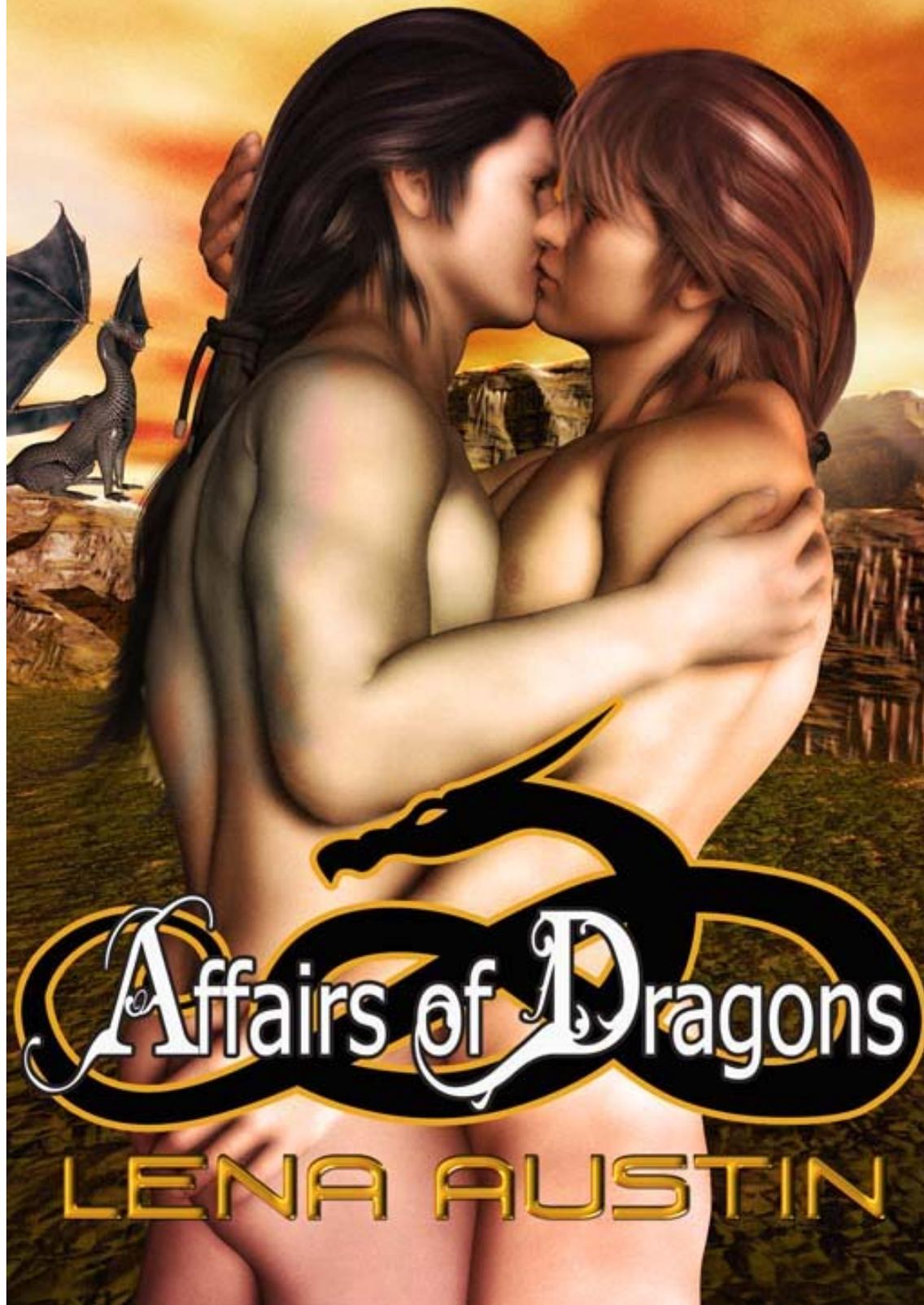


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Affairs of Dragons

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Dragon's Mate 1: Affairs of Dragons
Lena Austin

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Affairs of Dragons

Lena Austin

Never meddle in the affairs of dragons.

For over a century, Jon's village has sacrificed a virgin to the dragon who lives in the mountain. This time, when they find Jon in a compromising position with a traveling player, Jon's the new sacrifice!

Patch really isn't fond of the taste of human flesh. He's enjoyed sending the virgin sacrifices off to start their new lives. But when he sees Jon beaten and trussed to the rock outside his cave, he decides he may just keep this sacrifice around -- as his mate.

Chapter One

Jonndre the Potter knelt before his temporary lover -- one of the traveling players who'd entertained his village for the past two days. Soon they'd move on. What a shame. He'd miss the handsome blond juggler who stood before him, fucking his mouth. That is, until Erond returned next year. But... not so much he'd give up his home and his little shop. He'd be celibate for as long as it took.

"Yes. Like that." Erond wasn't much of a talker. His needs were simple, and all physical. In the years they'd been lovers, he'd never uttered more than perhaps a handful of words at any one time and, to be sure, none had been the three words all lovers wished to hear.

Even though Jon's heart longed for more than a mere physical release, he knew better than to reject what the gods had given him. If a traveling player in a horse-drawn caravan was all he was allowed, then he would be content and thankful. Why couldn't he just concentrate on giving Erond his pleasure? He increased the suction and even used his tongue in a new way he'd thought up, hoping that perhaps Erond might be moved into uttering more than a one-word compliment.

Erond, for his part, put his hands upon his thin hips and buried his cock deeply down Jon's throat without much finesse or care to whether he choked Jon. Jon had returned home after serving his time as a journeyman and set up his shop only months before they'd met. The juggler's low-throated groan signaled his readiness to spew his seed.

Fairly warned, Jon prepared himself to accept and swallow. He willingly took down his throat the salty, slightly bitter, white milk of Erond's cum with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. Then, it was over.

Erond quickly pulled his softening cock back into his trows with a satisfied sigh. "Thanks." He courteously helped Jon to his feet. "Let's finish this in the woods." His head jerked toward the slopes of the mountains where they often made excuses to seek out new mud and clay for Jon's pottery.

Jon shook his head. "We dare not, Erond. 'Tisn't safe to go outside the village priests' protections. The dragon hasn't been fed yet. Like as not, he's hungry."

Instead of fearfully hunching his shoulders as everyone else did, Erond's eyes lit up. "Truly? A virgin?"

The sigh wrenched up from Jon's soul. He felt so sorry for the maids of the village. Once every twenty years, the dragon awakened from his sleep and demanded a virgin maiden to quench his thirst for blood and satisfy his need for meat. He'd been lucky to be born male, even if the gods had cursed him with the unnatural lust for his own gender. As long as he kept his sin secret, he would live.

One other man, the butcher's third son, had been cursed with the lust for men. Though his burning at the stake had been almost ten years ago, Jon still had nightmares. They'd made him watch. Mercifully -- if such could be called mercy -- the village priests had tied gunpowder around Ishmi's neck, so in theory his head would be blown off before the fires consumed him. It hadn't worked well, and Ishmi's screams had been horrible to hear. Finally, one of the hunters had shot an arrow into Ishmi's chest and ended his suffering.

Jon shuddered and turned his mind away from the memories. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more to do with Erond. "Truly. Tonight is the lottery, where the maiden will be chosen from the few who remain eligible." Most of the girls of the village sought to become pregnant as soon as the blood stained their skirts, but the priests had forbidden the marriage rites before a girl's sixteenth birthday, so some suffered four years of terror, praying the dragon would not hunger for human flesh until they were safely wedded and bedded. How the priest knew when it was time was between him and the Gods.

Nearly dancing in place with eagerness, Erond tugged on Jon's hand and pulled him toward the door and the mountains. "Let us make our way to the mountain and find the cave of the dragon! While he consumes the maiden, we might steal a treasure from his nest!"

Jon dug in his heels, his eyes wide with a combination of horror and disgust. "Are you mad? While the priests swear he prefers the tender flesh of virgins, none can be sure he might not dine upon male muscle and bone if provoked. 'Tisn't worth the risk, Erond."

The juggler tugged half-heartedly for a moment before blowing out a frustrated breath. For a brief moment, his blue eyes seemed hard and even angry before his face softened. "Aye, perhaps not. I can dream." Erond reached out a hand and yanked Jon to his chest.

Alarm bells rang in Jon's head. He wriggled, but for all Jon was a healthy peasant, Erond was stronger. The potter frowned. "You take many risks. Why? Normally, you are wary." Jon's tiny cottage was not well hidden from anyone passing by. It was by far the smallest and poorest shelter, and the shutters hung so precariously, anyone walking by could see in. What if someone came by to buy a pot or lamp, or get one repaired?

The wry, almost cruel smile on Erond's face did not reassure Jon. He tightened his grip on his victim. "Because it pleases me." He crushed Jon's lips beneath his own.

Seconds later, there was a shout from outside the window shutters. "Abomination!"

Jon's heart froze, but it was too late.

Light flooded his dark little cottage when the village priest, broken pot in hand, yanked open one of the shutters. Father Sololov's outraged face peered above the sill, for the man was almost as short as a woman. His finger pointed to Jon and Erond. "You have been caught, evil-doers in vile abomination!"

The entire village, it seemed, boiled out of their cottages and shops. Men stomped grimly forward, women gleefully surged out, ready for a good show, and the children followed their mothers.

Erond dove through the back windows into Jon's tiny garden and raced through the field out of sight. Some of the village gave chase, but their enthusiasm was half-hearted at best. After all, Jon had been easily caught.

The beating administered by the men and even a few of the women who happened to have pie rollers or ladles in their hands was thorough enough to ensure Jon could not escape. Even had they not broken his right leg, the horror they made of Jon's face would ensure he would be killed as a woods boggle or other monster.

Jon fought back, knowing this would only enrage his former friends and even family. If he was lucky, he'd make them so angry, they'd kill him outright and save him from the stake. He saw the boot coming toward his head, and welcomed the black hole that swallowed him, hoping he'd never awaken.

* * *

At first, the only thing Jon could focus upon was his pain. He couldn't remember why he hurt so very badly, only that he did. His eyes wouldn't open, and his nose was terribly stuffed, but sniffing only brought him more pain. Finally, the insistent throb of his right leg brought back full memory.

His friends, neighbors, and even his own brother Geroff had beaten him into unconsciousness. That was just the prelude. They'd burn him at the stake as soon as could be arranged. By the feel of the straw beneath his one working hand, he had been thrown into the miller's granary. That was what the village used as a gaol when they needed to lock someone away.

Jon shivered. The air was cool, even cold. It was probably night. His heart sank, knowing those who had known him all his life were now in the tavern. They'd probably already decided to burn him as soon as they'd drawn the lots for the virgin. Soon, some poor girl would be tossed in here to spend her night with him in dread and misery, knowing death awaited them.

She would be led or carried up to Sacrifice Rock, just outside the dragon's cave. There, they'd truss her like a goose on the spit to the rock and leave her without even the mercy of a cut throat. The dragon, it was said, liked his meat still screaming.

After her cries had finished echoing down the valley, they'd come for him. They wouldn't care that he couldn't walk with dignity to his death. They'd drag him, conscious or not, and set him alight with no more thought than a candle. The priests said that was the only way to purge his soul of the taint and give him a hope of paradise, if he was repentant enough when he got before the judgment.

Footfalls echoed on the gravel outside the miller's tiny windows. Many footfalls, but strangely, no feminine cries for mercy or pleas to parents. Had the girl already fainted dead away?

The door to the granary opened, but no small body was dumped into the straw nearby. Instead, a boot nudged Jon in the arm. "Think he's dead? He won't make good dragon bait if he's dead." Ludy's voice was rough and full of contempt. Ludy, who had been his childhood playmate.

Wait. Dragon bait? "Last time I looked, I haven't changed gender, and I don't wear a skirt!" Jon managed to speak clearly, despite a very sore face and stuffed -- make that broken -- nose.

Another toe nudged him on the other side. Emmec's voice came from that direction. "Aye, but you're still virgin, ain't ye? Never been with a woman. None would speak for ye to say you'd lain with any, nor even tried to fondle one." Emmec laughed crudely. "Ye don't know what ye missed."

Nausea rose from Jon's belly. Emmec had either violated a marriage vow or taken a maiden, for he himself wasn't married. Not that Jon had looked with any favor on any of the women. Most resembled the animals they tended. Ludy's wife bore a striking resemblance to the pigs her husband butchered, and smelled just as bad.

Ludy cackled like an old woman. "They still haven't caught that juggler you were doing the unspeakable with. He's run off, along with his entire troupe. Looks like he didn't love you much, did he?"

Jon sighed. "Never thought he did." Still, the betrayal stung.

Ludy and Emmec each grabbed one of Jon's arms and hauled him up, uncaring whether he could stand or not. Emmec's voice was as deadly as his hunting arrows. "You'll take the place of a more worthy maiden tonight, and at the first rays of dawn, you'll be in the belly of a beast from Hell. They'll even put you in a dress, just to ensure the beast thinks you're a girl. That leaves one more maiden left in the village for me to despoil. I like them a bit unwilling."

They dragged Jon away, and his broken right leg screamed seconds before Jon echoed it in pain. Then he blacked out again. His last thought was foolish, but he wondered if he'd ever see the sun again. Probably not.

Chapter Two

Patch yawned and closed his book. Comfortably ensconced in his favorite chair, he was too warm and comfortable to get up and get another from his library at the moment. He considered taking a nap until full nightfall, when he could relax into dragon form and stretch his wings with a flight on a moonless night. Dusk's final orange rays painted his cavern entrance in fire, and he smiled at the beauty of it.

However, his scrying pond shimmered, indicating he had an incoming communication. A colored ball of bright green light rose from the surface and showed the face of his friend Hux. Like most dragons, magic was much preferable to risking travel, though as humans destroyed the natural order of the world, the energies became increasingly difficult to gather.

Patch rose from his chair reluctantly, despite his enjoyment of Hux's exuberance. He waved his hand over the pond to activate the spell, while adjusting his tunic and belt. "Good day to you, Hux! How are the tropics?"

Hux's blue scales, for he was in dragon form, were partially obscured by a wrapped covering of some thinly woven material, like gauze, on his head. "Ah, my friend! I miss you so. Are you sure you would not prefer to come visit us for the winter? My sweet mate did not build a nest this fall, so she's still willing to share our territory."

"I think not, but I thank you for the honor. I fought hard and well for the rights to this secluded bit of earth." Patch blinked, still puzzled by the wrapping. "Hux, why is there cloth around your head?"

"What? Oh. We're having problems with insects. While our scales repel them, they have found the soft parts of our ear holes most delectable. Goldi continues to experiment with incenses and herbs in hopes of finding something to repel the little

pests. In the meantime, we wear these silly scarves. It's not so bad. Come down and sport in the great falls with us. The view is spectacular this year."

"I have a bit of draconic dignity left in me, old friend. I'll decline your kind invitation." Patch sighed and glanced out his cavern entrance, where the sweet scent of night beckoned like a lover. "Besides, I do believe it has been about twenty summers since there was another human maiden at my door. I do so enjoy sending them on their way to freedom."

"Hmph. You take much too much pleasure in humans, I say!" Hux sniffed and turned his blue nose up. "And their habit of sending a female child to us as a gift to snack upon. As if we'd eat something so small and bony! Don't they have any love or protective feelings for their offspring? Really, it's abominable. You ought not to encourage it."

Patch laughed. "I don't, actually. I've found that many of the so-called maidens given to me actually have no love for men, and others have ambitions far beyond those common to human females. Why, giving them a small jewel out of my nest collection and sending them on their way to their destiny gives me great joy. One even came back a few summers later. She'd become a fine mercenary, and brought back a gem so like the one I'd given her, I could not tell them apart. She felt that I'd given her the gift as a loan, and was repaying her debt! I was so pleased!"

"Hmph. Your fondness for humans will be your undoing, Patch. Mark my words. Look at you, living within a few miles of human settlements, freezing in the winters, eating half-frozen deer, and reading to pass the time. It's unnatural, it really is." Hux's smile turned sly. "There are a few green females coming into season soon. Come down and find a nestmate to share your cave."

Patch shook his head. He'd given up trying to explain to Hux that few females were of interest to him, though he indulged in a flight now and then. Patch had long ago won this lovely territory, and was of no mind to change for something "better." Better was relative. He preferred peace and quiet, thank you. No other male dragon wanted this territory. They thought it too close to humans and much too cold, yet Patch

found it lovely. Sure, the icy winters often drove him to warmer climates, but it was all his. "No, thank you, Hux. Really."

Exasperation twisted Hux's face. He threw up his claws and probably batted his wings, though the visual portion of the spell wasn't large enough to see. "Fine! I give up for now. Like it or not, Patch, you need a mate to help you guard your territory. You'd better think about it or you'll end up a trophy on some human's castle wall." Hux's face winked out with a bright spark.

More than a little annoyed himself at the reminder, Patch huffed out a small gout of flame, just enough to blow a smoke ring and release a few frustrations. He studied his rather shabby but comfortable cave furnishings with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. He'd made the cabinetry and table with his own hands while in human form, and had spent an entire season whittling the carvings to resemble the trees and mountains outside. A rather impressive set of buck's antlers made a lovely topper, where he hung what few items of human clothing he owned. It wasn't needed, but the stuff was silky to the touch. He could have stayed in dragon form, and the cave was quite warm.

However, Patch was honest enough to admit to himself that he was horribly lonely. Sometimes he ached for another mind to share thoughts, dreams, and ideas with. Then again, he'd gone south to warmer climates many times and discovered you could be even lonelier in a crowd.

Unable to find a reasonable alternative, Patch changed to his natural form of a black mountain dragon, spread his leathery wings, and flew off into the night to sky dance with the stars.

* * *

Jon cried out, reawakened mercilessly when his whole sore body was yanked upright and dragged out of the granary. Worst of all was his broken leg, jostled and twisted by the slide across the uneven surface of the doorsill and out into the chill night. Even without the ability to see, he could feel the cool breeze that always stirred in the early evening, and of course the crickets sang their serenades.

This time, however, someone -- a woman -- upbraided his captors with hissing words. "Don't drag him, you great lugs! He's got a broken leg!"

Ludy sniffed and stopped. "Go on, Old Meg! No one cares if he screams. He'll be doing far worse at dawn, won't he?"

True that. Jon sighed and wondered how much it would hurt, and hoped it would be quick. He had little hope and didn't expect the mercy from anyone, even Old Meg, who was a harridan of a widowed seamstress who hated everyone, no matter whether they deserved it or not. Of course she was involved. She'd be the one to cobble together some sort of a dress to fit his masculine frame in short order, especially if the village chipped in enough to make it worth her time and effort.

Old Meg hissed out a word normally reserved for hardened soldiers in taverns that put Ludy's parentage into great doubt. "Ye moronic bastich! Oo cares about the potter? I'm thinking of those who are already sleeping and have to be up working before the sun! Do ye think Daff Baker needs to be yawning over his loaves? Have some kindness for them and keep the condemned man quiet. And don't think I'm sparing you one extra thread to gag him! You didn't pay me that much, ye penny pinchers! Throw him on my table there and wait outside. Ye both stink!"

"How long will this take, Meg?" Ludy must have scratched his body, for Jon could hear the scrape on cloth.

"Not long enough for you to go grab a pint down at the tavern! Now get out unless you want to see the potter's naked arse." She slammed the door so hard on their heels, one of them yelped.

Old Meg must have picked up the dress they would put on him, for he heard a distinctive rustle. A few moments later, she slipped a hand under his shoulder, but her voice was a soft and gentle whisper. "Sit up, if you can, young Jon. Up you go, love."

Jon was so surprised by her kindness he whispered back to her and even helped her remove the remains of his tattered linen shirt. "Why are you being nice to me, Old Meg?"

She *hmp*ed and tugged a heavy bit of soft cotton over his head. "Didn't think you were old enough to remember. It was my daughter Della who last was trussed to the stake for dragon food."

Pity welled up in Jon's heart. All he could do was swallow, for his eyes were too swollen shut to even look upon her face. "I was but five then. My apologies, Old Meg."

Something that rustled like paper slipped inside the bodice of the dress. "Don't be. I'm not as bereft as you might think." Gentle hands patted the paper. "Give that to Patch, will you?"

"Who's Patch?" Then he cried out when she twisted his leg.

"Shut up, ye lout!" Old Meg slapped three fingers on his thigh. "I'm sacrificing two of my wooden ladles to make you a splint, and I'd be grateful if you see them returned to me someday."

After a few more tugs and enough pain to make Jon bite his lip, the ladles and a few strips of cloth supported his leg. When he could speak again, he wheezed out what words he could. "Thank you ever so much, Old Meg, for your kindness. While I don't see how I'll return your ladles from beyond my grave, I'll do my best."

The door to the cottage opened, and two masculine sniggers told Jon how silly he looked. His face burned with humiliation, but he didn't even bother with a word of protest, not even when Old Meg slapped a cap atop his head to hide his face and yanked off the thong that held his hair properly back. His hair flopped around his face, completing the illusion of an ugly girl with unkempt hair.

Ludy laughed very cruelly. "He makes a fair girlish figure, if you ignore the mess we made of his face."

Emmec snorted and wrapped one meaty hand over Jon's sore right arm. "Happen I don't think the dragon cares about a pretty face. He might care that this girl's bigger than most and might be a fine breakfast."

They hauled Jon off the table, out the door, and into the night with not a word of thanks to Old Meg. From the slam of the cottage door behind him, apparently she expected none in any case.

The woodcutter's donkey brayed, and Jon thought he'd jump out of his skin. Only the strong grip of his captors kept him from falling into the dirt.

"If you think we're doing to drag your sorry arse all the way up to Sacrifice Rock's stake, you're dumber than you are ugly." Emmec shook Jon's right arm with no regard for the bruises, and Jon fervently hoped he'd managed to cause a little pain to his captors in return during the fight. "Up ye go!"

Ludy and Emmec lifted Jon onto the donkey, unceremoniously hiked up the skirt and spread his legs with no comment concerning the remains of his ragged pants. No doubt they thought even old Meg wouldn't want to look at his naked genitals. They tied him with ropes and secured him to the donkey with only a thin, scratchy blanket between his bottom and the donkey's bony spine.

Jon wished he could give one last look at the only home he'd ever known, but there was no point in even asking if they'd stop by his cottage. All he could do was set his jaw and act with some dignity while he rode a donkey into the velvet night with the stake as his final, deadly destination.

Chapter Three

Jon barely remembered most of the ride up the mountain. He knew then his injuries had made him ill, for he often was awake the whole of the night. The cool darkness was usually the time when he baked his clay in the kiln. The knowledge that he was ailing didn't help him any, but rather buzzed around his head like flies on carrion.

Eventually, he regained awareness long enough to register that Ludy and Emmec had trussed him up like a goose on a holiday spit. His one good leg was all he had to support himself, but the ropes bore most of his weight.

Even the donkey seemed to register the danger of being so close to a dragon's cave. It made no sound, and from the tap-tap of hooves on gravel, it eagerly trotted down the slope and out of sight, dragging Jon's former guards behind. Jon wished he could see Emmec and Ludy running to keep up with the little gray beast.

Jon could have turned his head and seen some way down before the tree line began, if his eyes hadn't been swollen shut. The rise was bare of trees, and windswept rocks rose from the grass like ghosts. Every village child had made the fearful climb, and it was a point of honor to bring back one of the white rocks scattered about, as proof your trembling fingers had actually touched Sacrifice Rock. Jon himself had touched the same rock against his back, and had chosen a pretty white stone with a seashell and a fish imprinted upon its face. He'd kept it on his hearth and wondered how a fish and shell had come to be on the mountain. He'd always dreamed of going to the sea, to stare in wonder at water as far as the eye could see, and perhaps taste a fish from the water to see if it was as salty as they said.

He shivered, for the wind was cold, and it smelled of pine and something sharp, as if snow from the mountaintops had a smell. His ears strained to hear the sound of

giant wing beats, or perhaps the growl of a sleepy dragon that smelled his breakfast. Would the dragon smell of carrion, or perhaps wood smoke? Other than the wind, the world was eerily quiet. Jon swore all he could hear was his heart beating.

The wait seemed to be forever. He started counting his heartbeats as a way to pass the time. Trussed up against the ropes, he felt the tingle in his good leg where it had fallen asleep and soon the agony of being forced to remain exactly as he was with no respite wore on his nerves. The counting became his lifeline to sanity, else he'd begin to scream early and awaken the dragon. Every moment of life was precious, and he took it greedily. In between heartbeats, he cautioned himself to be quiet. Endlessly, silently, he chanted a number, then "Quiet." When he ran out of numbers, he started over.

Eventually, he heard the silence that went beyond the peace of the night. There was a period of time between dark and dawn when the night creatures finished their business and made their way to their hiding places away from the burning sun, and the day creatures did not yet stir. Sometimes the sky turned a paler shade of night before the pinks and gold of dawn rose. Even the wind stilled, as if the whole world hung on the edge of a cliff. Jon had often watched the change from a stool by the window, where he softened and kneaded his clay before he worked upon it. Such an exercise of the hands took no effort from his mind, and he noticed the small changes that brought the dawn.

Now it was he who trembled on the edge of the cliff of madness. He lost count again, but fear iced his heart. Something was on the wind. From above, he heard a sound that was not one he knew, like giant wings stirring a new breeze. The faint scent of fire tickled his nose, but it seemed far away. Equally far and above, he heard the faint scrape of claws on rock.

Jon clamped his jaw shut and lifted his chin, determined not to give the villagers even so much as a whimper to thrill their hearts. Despite the fear, he would go to his death silently, and slide down the great beast's gullet without a sound. That would be his last thumbing of the nose to those who'd been his friends and family all his life.

He waited.

No sound.

No breeze.

Nothing, except his own ragged breaths and the thunder of his heart. His mouth was dry, and he swallowed the last bit of moisture he could manage to make.

A footstep scraped on the gravel very nearby. It didn't sound like a dragon. His ears played tricks on his mind, making him hope. Another footstep. Small, like a boot on rock.

Jon turned his head to the sound. He'd meet the dragon face to face, even if he couldn't see. Instead of carrion or fire, he smelled exotic spices. Something in him, something that refused to give up all hope, spoke for him in a harsh whisper. It was all he could manage in his dry throat. "Hello?"

"Hello. What have we here?" A low, cultured, masculine voice spoke at normal volume, completely calm and unafraid of the nearby dragon. "A man in a dress?"

"Run, you fool! The dragon is nearby. The villagers put me in a dress in hopes of fooling the dragon into thinking I'm a tasty female morsel." Jon's face burned with shame and anguish. Wasn't it bad enough he had to die? He didn't want to be responsible for someone else becoming dragon food.

There was the sound of laughter choked back. "I do beg your pardon. I don't mean to insult you, but you don't look much like a virgin in any case. You fought them, I take it, and that's why your face has been so creatively rearranged?"

"Close enough." Then, as if someone lit a candle in the darkness, Jon made a guess. "Would your name be Patch?"

"Why, yes!" The man's voice was cautious, but his fingers tugged at the ropes.

"Stop that. You're wasting time. There's a message inside the bodice of this damnable dress. Mrs. Meg said to give it to Patch." Jon whispered urgently, and wiggled his chest in hopes of giving Patch access to the note. "Look, after the dragon has killed me, see if you can take Mrs. Meg's ladles back to her. They're holding my leg together. You can take them now, if you wish. I promised I'd try to get them back to

her." Jon swallowed his pride more than non-existent spittle. "Go on, take them and the message."

"Don't be a dunderheaded villager. You're not going to die today." Patch slit Jon's bonds, and the ropes fell away. He caught Jon's body expertly and, with unusual strength, supported the potter's weakness with his own frame.

"No! Let the dragon eat me." Even while his heart sang with joy at freedom and rescue, Jon struggled to do the right thing. The dragon had to be fed, and he couldn't bear that a young girl should suffer and die.

"Hmph. I really do prefer biscuits with my morning tea, thank you." Patch picked up Jon's six-foot frame and slung him over his silk-clad shoulders. "I'm the dragon."

Even had he wanted to struggle, Jon felt Patch clamp down on his shoulders and legs so he couldn't do more than wriggle. Not that it mattered. Jon was so surprised he could manage nothing more than an unmanly squeaking gasp.

"Hold still. You humans may not feel the cold, but I do. We're going where it's warm. Scream if you like. I don't mind, and I get the impression it's expected."

By the time his addled mind had worked out the dragon was a man, or the man was a dragon -- was he that fevered? -- Jon found himself atop a huge pile of pillows. He'd have given a great deal to see at that moment. He'd never felt so helplessly confused.

"Stay there." Patch's order was swiftly followed by footsteps and a small splash from somewhere farther in the cave, to judge by the echo.

"I can't exactly move well with a broken leg, and unable to see." Jon used his fingers to feel where he was. His left hand found the edge of a bed or platform of some kind, but his right encountered only more and more huge pillows, stuffed with down or perhaps plants. When he patted one, the scent of lavender filled his nose.

There was nothing to do but wait. His stomach had other ideas. It growled.

His dragon host sniggered. There was no mistaking the sound. His voice approached, but stopped a few feet away. Rattling and scraping sounds were followed

by small plops, as if things were being added to liquids. "I think the dragon should be more concerned about the fierce growls issuing from the human stomach. Mayhap I'll be on the platter as a fresh, sizzling dragon steak. They tell me we taste peppery, though of course no dragon can say." He laughed at his little joke.

Jon had to smile tentatively at the thought of a big, fiery dragon being cooked and eaten. "I'm afraid I don't own a spit large enough for a pig, much less a dragon. I do apologize for my rudeness, but I haven't eaten since yesterday noon." He'd had a bit of bread and some onion soup with Erond.

He noted with chagrin that Erond had run like a rabbit and hadn't even attempted to save him. Jon sighed quietly to himself. Well, they'd never been even good friends, just users of one another's bodies for relief.

Something warm touched his hand, then Patch's fingers closed over his. "You look so sad. Don't think on your past, my friend. The other sacrifices cried like the little girls they were, and I couldn't blame them for feeling betrayed. Only Della's mother had any gumption. She climbed up here with a kitchen knife, determined to free her daughter and fight me, if she must. Since Della was fine and drinking a bowl of soup, Meg and I became friends. Speaking of... May I?" His fingers touched Jon's chest.

Jon nodded. "I'd help you, but only my left hand works at all well right now. I fought hard."

"I'd say you did, since I've fought bears and left less damage before they became my dinner. Excuse me." Patch's strong hands ripped open the cloth and found the note. "Meg won't thank me for destroying good material, but she'll forgive me. Ah! Here it is."

Jon stayed still and refused to acknowledge the feelings of arousal that stirred in his body despite his pain and lack of sight. Patch's voice was so smooth and fine to listen to, like the leather worker's finest doeskin felt on skin. He'd been allowed to touch some once, when he'd been clean enough.

Clean! Oh, dear. He'd not bathed in days. He sat up. "Oh, I do beg pardon, but I shouldn't be lying upon such fine cloth."

Patch spoke from a few feet away, with his tone full of easy good humor. "Oh, you can have a bath in a few minutes, if you like. I'm cutting bread for you now, but you'll want to save it for taking the taste of the tea out of your mouth. Honey can only do so much to improve its nasty taste." He stepped forward. "Here. I advise drinking it down quickly, then eat the bread as fast as you can." Something warm and hard pressed against his unswollen hand, and something light and warm was placed in Jon's lap.

Jon gagged down the bitter tea in a few gulps and fumbled for the bread. Only after he'd crammed as large a bite as he could in his mouth did he realize how clumsy he was. He was still wearing the cap Meg had covered his brown hair with and snatched it off his head. He was reluctant to remove the remains of the dress, given the ragged state of his only pants. While he'd not been able to lay eyes upon the cloth, when he'd needed to relieve himself his fingers had told him he wasn't really decently covered.

His face heated up, so he knew he blushed beet red. No matter that Patch was a dragon. His voice was cultured, and he sounded like he was noble born. He slept on cloth so fine, no villager Jon knew would own such, not even for weddings. Well, maybe for a wedding. He knew so little about dragons. "What do you do, Patch? I know nothing about dragons, so hope I'm not being rude." He bent his head and ate the remainder of his bread, hunching his shoulders as if already preparing to ward off a blow. The bread was the best he'd ever eaten, so fine it was like air, with no grit or funny bits, and quite unlike the dense, hard loaves he took in trade for a mug or bowl.

Patch's voice came from right in front of him, and it was full of gentle good humor. The kind of humor a person got only when they'd been contented and happy their whole lives. He put a hand on Jon's knee and started to lift the skirt of the dress. "Let's have a look at Meg's handiwork, here." He prodded a couple of the bandages holding the ladles on Jon's broken leg. "Not bad. Not bad at all, but I can do better."

Jon suffered through having the pitiful support of the ladles removed. There was something very wrong with showing his dirty, hairy shank to such a fine and elegant

creature as Patch. As a lowly potter, he didn't deserve to look nobles in the eye, so he was glad his eyes were still swollen shut.

"Stop that." Patch's warm, smooth finger lifted Jon's chin.

"Stop what?" Jon couldn't explain why that simple touch of a dragon's finger moved him so, but it did. He couldn't believe how hard his heart beat, or how -- gods help him if the dragon noticed! -- how his cock rose.

"Acting as if you expect to be beaten." Delicately and ever so gently, his fingertip brushed the tip of Jon's sore nose before grasping both sides between thumb and forefinger. "Here, let's see if I can help that broken nose a bit. Hold still. This may hurt for a few moments."

Oh, it hurt. It more than hurt! Jon's face bloomed with agony, and he felt as if his entire head were on fire, but he held himself rigid. He was glad he'd finished the bread, because he'd have crushed the soft and delicious crust in his fist when he clenched his hands to keep from moving. Then, gradually, the heat faded to warmth, and then to nothing more than a mild tingle.

Patch was a healer! Jon felt immeasurably honored. Such men were treasures beyond price, and often in the entourage of kings. Carefully guarded, they rarely left the castle walls of those who could afford to keep them. But then again, Patch was a dragon, and not subject to the laws of men, was he?

Patch moved his hand away. "There. That should help. By tomorrow morning, you'll be able to see normally, even if you look a bit like a raccoon for a week or two. Open your eyes, and let's see if you've taken damage to your sight."

Obediently, Jon opened his eyes and blinked away the sleep film. When he finally focused, he beheld the most marvelously amber-colored eyes he'd ever seen, framed by lashes black as soot, and a thin, almost delicate face like one might assume an Elf might possess, not a fierce dragon. Thick, bone-straight black hair, neatly tied back, framed the incredibly handsome face. He was so caught by the gentle golden gaze that he said the first thing that popped into his head. "I never knew dragons could be so beautiful."

Patch smiled, and he seemed equally caught up in staring at Jon's brown eyes. He brushed a strand of hair away from Jon's brow. "Likewise, I didn't know humans could be so charming." He swallowed and hesitated. "I do hope you forgive me, and that I've understood your nature." Then he leaned in. "I really can't help myself."

Jon bent forward until his lips nearly brushed Patch's. "Me, either."

Then they both were lost in the kiss.

Chapter Four

Patch knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he'd gone mad. Stark raving, March hare mad. No matter he felt perfectly fine and thoroughly enjoyed rubbing lips with this latest sacrifice. He'd never before kissed a human, and other than one young female's kiss upon his cheek before she trotted off to her future, none had ever touched him. What was he thinking?

The human leaned into the kiss and even purred as contentedly as a dragon, never mind that he'd probably never associated with any of the higher races. This one smelled better than most humans, despite a need for a clean up from his ordeal. Beneath the recent odors of injury and sweat, this human smelled of warm earth and sun-baked rock. Even more enticing was the sweet scent of arousal that circled him. Delicious.

Patch pulled back very reluctantly. "It seems introductions are in order. You know my name, but I know nothing of you."

The human ducked his chin down and pretended to ignore the lovely, full erection jutting from the shredded remains of his pants. "Oh! Beg pardon. My name's Jonndre Mac Clarin. Jon for short. Until yesterday, I was Jon the Potter, but I'll bet my tools and paints are all burned to the ground along with my cottage by now. Until I can make or trade for more, I'm not much." He grinned up shyly through his lashes, like a dragonet caught doing something naughty. "Except too dirty to touch such a fine dragon as you, Patch."

Clearly, the poor fellow wouldn't feel right about a little sex until he was clean.

Patch understood that need. After all, male dragons went through some rather elaborate courtship rituals before approaching even the most receptive queen dragon. While Patch doubted Jon wanted to burnish his non-existent scales in a volcanic rock patch, he could make use of the pool like the other humans had been thrilled to do. "I'm

given to understand you humans prefer warm water. The pool where I get healing water is quite warm, and Della was pleased at the quality of the soapweed plants my friend Hux gave me." He nodded his chin toward the back of the cave. "Would you care to continue our... discussion... there?"

The poor human, despite his injury, scooted to the edge and made his way to a one-legged stance, as if he'd hop or crawl, no matter what the pain. "Would you happen to have a stick or pole I might use as a crutch?"

Patch stood from where he'd knelt. "Silly human. Use me. We can find one later to suit you, since I can only heal once a day, and you may need to um... make use of my sand pit... in the meantime." Humans were so squeamish about bodily functions.

Jon's eyes blinked, and his lips twitched. "Aye, Patch. That might be a good idea. In fact, I might wish to use your sand before bathing, if you'd permit me a moment."

Patch aided Jon to the sand, where a convenient log made a handy place to sit if one had a need. Fortunately, Jon needed only to lean up against a boulder and aim. There were definite advantages to having a male sacrifice.

Bodily needs attended to, Jon stripped off the remains of the dress and the tattered pants and slipped into the water with a grateful sigh. His eyes half-closed with delight, and he ducked under the water to rinse even his head. He took the clothes in the water with him and washed them first. He smiled shyly at Patch. "I owe Mrs. Meg a great deal. The least I can do is return the garment to her clean." Then he frowned. "Or should we rend it a bit and add some animal blood so the villagers think you ate me properly?"

If ever there was an opening large enough to fly through, that was it. Patch reached up and removed his shirt. "Who says I don't intend to eat you?"

The big, sleepy brown eyes opened very wide. The potter's jaw, still slightly swollen from his ordeal, slowly descended until Jon's mouth hung in a perfect O. The crystal clear water hid nothing, and the young male's impressive erection rose.

Patch licked his lips and drew off his trousers. He'd taken off his boots as soon as he could. They were heavy, uncomfortable things, and the cave floor was warmed by

heat from below ground. Still it was gratifying to see the human's eyes take in the sight of a dragon cock and not flinch.

In fact, Jon mirrored Patch's tongue flick, though the poor creature had no fork at the tip. He blinked, and bit his lip until Patch slid into the water. "Guess I'll taste dragon meat today, after all. Leastways, I hope so."

"Stop being so charming. I have no defenses against such..." Patch moaned when Jon reached out and stroked the length of his lonely cock.

The recluse in him wanted to step away, to maintain the peace and privacy that had been so much a part of his life for over a hundred years. He knew, without any manual of dragonkind to tell him so, that to gather the human to him was to fly where no dragon had gone before. Yet, despite all that, he stepped forward and took Jon into his arms. "Perhaps I'll regret this, but not right now."

"No, not right now," Jon agreed on the end of a long sigh. His hand tentatively grasped, then stroked, Patch's cock. Every touch gained confidence. "Just let me get clean enough to feel worthy of you."

"Worthy? What? Are all the creations of the earth unequal now?" Patch nibbled at Jon's lower lip. "None have dominion, for all will fade away eventually. But see here? If it makes you feel better, grasp one of the red cones from the plant in the green pot and squeeze." Reluctantly he released the human so Jon could do as bidden.

"It looks like a red pinecone! How odd." Jon did as ordered, and blinked in surprise when a strange substance that smelled sharp and yet sweet all at once oozed out into his hand. "'Tis the soapweed you mentioned? It's too pretty to abuse!" However, he lathered up with the juice of the plant and moaned in delight. "This is a miracle plant!"

His innocent wonder delighted Patch. "A friend gave me the plant. He lives in a much warmer and wetter place. It only grows here where it is warm and wet, so I keep it near the pool, where a hole in the cavern brings sunlight at midday."

Jon looked up, and pointed out the sunbeam on the cavern wall. "I see. When it reaches the plant, it will give it enough sun to live, like putting it near a window." Then

he frowned down at the crack in the pot itself. "Why so poor a pot, though? It deserves a fine large vessel, with a shining glaze."

Patch shrugged. "I'm not very good with such things. I was happy to have the plant at all, never mind the vessel."

Again, the human hung his head and hunched his shoulders. "You shouldn't indulge me in my sins. I should not corrupt so beautiful a creature as you with my evil ways." He reached for the wet remains of his pants. "I should go. Healers and dragons aren't for the likes of me."

"What nonsense is this? What is a sin?" Patch frowned, not understanding the problem. He cocked his head to one side. "Don't you like making sex?"

Jon tried to crawl out, but without both legs, he could not do more than scramble futilely. One bubble of the soapweed foam slid slowly toward his eye, so he took a moment to duck his head and rinse off. "I liked it very much! That's the problem. The priests say it's a sin for two men to... to... um..."

"Fuck?" Patch supplied the word politely. He tilted his head to one side and squeezed a bit of soapweed into his hand before lathering up. It did feel wonderful, and he reached up with both hands to give his head a good rubbing.

The human moaned and half shut his eyes. Even his breathing quickened, and once more his tongue flicked out. Goodness, humans certainly knew how to be sexy beasts, for all they lacked scales and wings to flex. "Patch, you have no idea how sexy you are when you stretch up like that and display..."

Patch froze with foam running down his cheek. "Really? Isn't that odd! I thought you were being deliberately provocative, flicking your tongue at me. I've no doubt if you had a tail, the tip would be as erect as your cock, and then you'd be as sexy as any dragon whose company I might enjoy." Patch longed to show Jon what an erect tail could do. "Are you sure I can't persuade you?"

Jon swallowed and trembled for a moment on the lip of the pool before sliding back into the water. His lips twisted upward, but he didn't bare his teeth in aggression.

"Well, truth be told, I was given to you as a gift and sacrifice." He bowed his head in submission and looked up at Patch. "I'm yours to do with as you will."

"Oh, there will be none of that!" Patch waded over and lifted Jon's chin until they could see each other eye to eye and nose to nose. "We dragons do not enslave others and, as a matter of fact, it is said human flesh isn't very tasty. I wouldn't know, of course. You'll be my first."

The soft, earth-brown eyes of the human widened. In fact, now that the healing waters were working their magick on him, he was turning out to be a ruggedly handsome fellow, long of limb and lean of flesh except for his chest and arms. Those were well developed, almost as muscular as a dragon's flight muscles. However, Jon seemed as startled as a deer before a stooping dragon. "First lover? Ever?"

The snort of laughter burst from Patch before he could stop it. He pressed his lips together to keep from laughing aloud. "No! First human, of course." He ducked his own head a bit. "I feel very naughty to step outside my species, but you are compellingly... different."

"And you are incredibly beautiful as a man." Jon lifted a few strands of Patch's hair. "Thank you for healing my sight. I wish I'd been able to see you as a dragon. I'll bet you're magnificent. But for the nonce, I'll just enjoy staring into your fireball eyes. They're strange... and..." His speech slurred, and he stopped speaking, looking as if he'd fall asleep there in the water.

Uh-oh. Patch blinked quickly. The human had fallen under the hypnotic spell cast by every dragon's eyes -- a trick some ancestor had learned to soothe his prey before consuming it.

Jon matched the blink and straightened his spine. "Sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night, I don't think." He squared his shoulders. "I'd love to be your first human, Patch, and I'd love to... um..." The human's face flushed red with warmth.

"Taste a dragon?" Patch offered. He hefted himself to a flat granite rock on the rim of the pool and spread his legs. A wicked plan formed in his mind. He lay on his side, still presenting his cock for sucking as well as his whole body. Dragons fucked on

the wing high above the mountaintops, but since a poor human would suffocate in the thin air, such a mating was not possible. Perhaps there was another way?

For his part, Jon stepped forward eagerly and grasped Patch's hardened cock with a sure grip. His large brown eyes twinkled with good humor and lust. "This I know well. Though you're quite a mouthful, I'm sure I can manage." He closed his eyes and took the head of Patch's cock into his mouth.

"Can you, now?" Patch growled softly, already aroused by the human's grasp and firm strokes. "Can you handle more?" Already he could feel his tail lengthening behind him and his body growing in strength. His wings manifested, but stayed furled. Could the human accept the half form of a man-dragon?

Jon squeaked in surprise when Patch's tail wrapped around his waist, and the human's jaw descended slowly in admiration and awe. "Oh, my!" He took in Patch's muscular but scaly human body, wings, and the coils of tail around Jon's waist. "Oh, don't change further, or I shall surely come too soon. You are truly magnificent now."

The tip of Patch's tail parted the human's ass cheeks and teased at the opening all males enjoyed, whether they were dragon, phoenix, or human. "But what if I do this?" Beneath the heated water, the tip entered and caressed.

Only the strength of Patch's tail kept Jon's head above water when he bent and spread himself. "If this is what it means to be a sacrifice, then I'm the happiest man on earth!"

Chapter Five

Jon's body shuddered under the sensual onslaught of a dragon's cock in his mouth and the tip of the beast's very mobile tail up his ass. Jon's cock, safe in the heated pool, rubbed against the warm rocky sides, fully ready to spew forth at the least provocation. The hard cock in his mouth tasted of the rare spices only served at winter holiday meals, doled out as tiny gift bags from the local overlord's largesse. Hot, sweet, and firm flesh slid in and out of his mouth in the same rhythm as the tail, fucking him with lazy ease.

Patch growled softly, in the same way a tough tomcat might give a growling purr. The masculine sound left no doubt about how much Jon pleased the dragon who owned him. "Yesss... like that..."

With such a master as Patch, Jon felt more obliged to stay with the dragon than he'd ever felt for Lord Rogert. Spurred onward by the command, Jon renewed his efforts to pleasure Patch, and assumed the dragon's tougher body might bear up under stronger measures, like biting. He bit down gently and scraped his teeth along the flesh in his mouth.

A hissing growl rewarded him, and Patch writhed gracefully before putting his powerful hand atop Jon's head. "If I had but known humans were so capable... Ah!"

Jon's ass filled with more of the dragon's tail than he'd thought possible at the same time his tongue tasted hot, honey-sweet liquid. Jon swallowed, tasting what he instantly named "dragon nectar." He gulped every last drop offered, knowing in his heart no human man would ever satisfy him again. He was addicted to dragon, and whether Patch wanted him to be so or not, he was the dragon's slave.

Limited by the smaller lungs and throat of human-ish flesh, Patch's roar of pleasure was not deafening, but awe-inspiring nonetheless. His incoherent growls and

the thrusts of his tail up Jon's ass were all the encouragement the human needed to ensure Patch would be satiated before Jon even considered stopping.

However, Patch had other plans. His strong, black-scaled arms lifted Jon out of the water with ease and effortlessly draped the human over a rug-covered boulder on the edge of a dark pit.

Jon caught a glimpse of sparkling light from the bottom, but had no time to consider further. His ass felt the absence of dragon tail only for an instant before the thick length of dragon cock filled his channel completely. Warm liquid trickled down from his ass over his balls.

"Good thing I keep oil nearby. I didn't want to waste one moment of fucking you." Patch's deep growl explained the liquid and how he slid so effortlessly into Jon's ass. "Are you comfortable, Jon?"

Jon's fingers clutched the rug beneath him in desperate need for fulfillment, both physical and visceral. He wanted to shout for Patch to claim him and keep him, begging to be the toy of a dragon for as long as he lived. "The only pain I feel is the ache to come, Patch. Fuck me, I beg of you!"

Patch complied, both with the spoken request and, it seemed, the wishes of Jon's heart. With every deep thrust, he growled and roared his pleasure until the sound bounced off the huge cavern walls like an echoing chorus of dragons.

Deep within Jon's soul where there had been only dark and lonely shadows, a light bloomed. He could not stop the dragon, nor did he wish to in any case. All he could do was lift his voice to cry out with the dragon and spill his seed on the rug. He begged Patch not to stop until both were satiated and limp with exhaustion.

Where Patch found the strength to carry Jon to the bed, Jon didn't know. Perhaps they flew. Perhaps Jon only dreamed about a moment or two of hearing wings.

Nothing mattered but that Jon found himself cuddled in very human arms on a soft pillow-like bed, and he slept peacefully for the first time in many years.

Somewhere in the night, Jon awakened and discovered he was cradled in the curve of Patch's huge dark tail and surrounded by it. Patch had changed to full dragon

and covered Jon with his wing. Jon had never felt so safe and happy in his life. He threw his uninjured arm over the tail in the only cuddle he could give such an enormous creature, content to wait until morning to see what Patch looked like in all his scaly glory. He fell asleep and dreamed of flying with Patch among the clouds, wondering shyly if perhaps Patch would oblige someday. Even in his sleep he felt presumptuous.

All too soon, his body awakened him with another need to visit the sand privy, and there would be no further sleep until he relieved himself there. Carefully, Jon crawled out from under the sheltering wing and found himself staring into a golden eye as large as a platter. Patch had returned to his full dragon state while Jon slept.

Patch blinked sleepily, and his vertical eye slit disappeared eerily for a moment. "Must you leave?"

Jon's jaw dropped in amazement. Somehow, even as a dragon, Patch could talk! Eventually, he realized Patch was waiting for an answer. Embarrassed, Jon ducked his head. "I need to visit the sand privy, Patch." His voice rasped, and he coughed. "Sorry." He wished desperately for a hot mug of tea, but even a drink out of the bathing pool would quench his thirst.

"Oh, good." Patch stood and stretched, like a giant black cat. "I'm starving. Would you mind if I left to go hunt up a deer or two? I'll bring back something for a nice roast in the fireplace, if you wish." He waited for Jon's nod. "Would you be kind enough to put on a kettle? I'm perishing for a cup of tea and a bit of a cuddle, if you don't mind, when I get back."

Jon couldn't resist. He bent forward and kissed Patch's huge, scaly nose. "I'd be happy to do so. Where are the stairs, so I might leave this pit?" He looked around, but could see only a few feet in front of him. Even the beautiful rug, full of deep reds and warm browns, was so dark it seemed to melt into the shadows.

"If you're not afraid of doing so, climb on my neck just before my wings and hold tightly to one of my neck ridges." He put out a helpful forearm and chuckled while Jon clambered aboard.

"Hela! My leg is better!" Jon kicked out his formerly broken leg. "How did you do it, Patch?"

The dragon shrugged. "I wish I knew. Our mages say healers do their best work simply by existing and remaining with their patients. All I do is bandage, keep the wounds clean, and perhaps brew up a bit of tea to help with the pain." He twisted his long neck to look at Jon. "Sit back just a bit more... Yes, there. Perfect. Feel the seat my bones make?"

"Why, yes! I won't bother your wings here, will I?" The question was out before Jon could bite his lip.

Patch chuckled again. "Not there, you won't. Hold tightly." His powerful body gathered, and his muscles tensed before he sprang out of the pit. "I do love my bed, but I should consider stairs or something. Even a rope ladder would be nice."

Since Patch kept walking, Jon continued to hold on to the thick, bony neck ridge in front of him. He grinned like a child astride a kindly knight's massive warhorse, enjoying every moment of the ride.

Patch's legs moved in perfect concert, keeping his long middle off the ground and level, though clearly he could undulate like a legendary sea monster if he chose. He glided gracefully to the sand privy, right next to the boulder Jon had leaned against the night before.

Jon was struck by the thought so strongly he spoke aloud. "Sea monsters are sea dragons, aren't they?"

"Very good. Yes, they are. Well, there are many other creatures in the sea beside dragons." Patch waited while Jon dismounted. His tongue flicked out, and one fork tickled Jon's cheek in perhaps the weirdest and yet most marvelously different kiss the potter had ever received. "I'll be back as soon as I've a deer or two." He turned and posed at the cavern entrance, undoubtedly aware of how beautiful he looked in the mists of dawn when he unfurled his wings and lifted one forepaw like a noble's heraldic standard. Then, he was gone.

Jon finished his business at the sand, found the kettle on a hob at the fireplace, filled it with water from the hot spring bathing pool, and rummaged in the carved cabinet near a small table and chair until he found a poorly made jar with good, honest mint tea within. Jon tisked his tongue at the workmanship, not even worthy of an apprentice potter. He vowed to return to his favorite dirt patch and begin again to make clay. He'd throw a fine pot to hold Patch's tea, and a new vessel for the lovely soap plant as well. Since the thought of the soap plant made him consider a bath, he grinned down at his nakedness. "A bath is just the thing, I think."

Once he was clean, he lounged in the water and dreamed about setting up his kiln oven somewhere nearby, perhaps among the rocks and boulders just out of view of Sacrifice Rock. Yes, that would be best. He could throw a few pots in any old hut, but as long as Patch allowed him to sleep in the pit, Jon would. He sighed happily, leaned his head back against the rim of the hot pool, and shut his eyes to plan making a new clay mixer.

The chill of a sharp edge against his throat awakened him from his happy thoughts. A harsh, callused hand closed over his mouth.

Jon's eyes popped open, and his heart nearly stopped beating. Despite the warmth of the water, his body chilled in fear, and he shivered. He was naked and defenseless. Then his eyes focused on the grim face above him. "Erond?"

His former lover, the traveling player, put his blade to Jon's neck until it stung with the beginnings of a cut. Erond's blue eyes were as hard and cold as his blade. "Keep your voice soft, fool."

Across the cavern walls echoed the soft footfalls of many boots. Where the fire reflected onto the walls, shadows moved. It seemed Erond had brought all the traveling players with him, and they were searching high and low for whatever was worth stealing.

Less than a few seconds later, Jon put together what was going on. While he kept his voice to a low whisper rather than risk a cut throat, he put as much anger as he

could into his voice. "You're here to steal dragon treasure, aren't you? Don't be stupid, Erond! He hasn't got any!"

Two harsh hands lifted Jon out of the water, but Erond's short sword remained ready to give him a speedy death. Erond's cronies -- two burly men who'd acted as men-of-all-work and tinkers among the travelers -- put Jon on his knees at the edge of the bathing pool. One gave Jon a frank appraisal, like he was a beast at market to be sold for slaughter. He fisted his hand in Jon's hair and pulled his head back. "Skinny one, ain't he? Not worth selling."

Erond shrugged and glanced up at his fellow. He pulled his sword away, now that someone else had control of Jon. "He served his purposes, but you're right. He's not worth selling."

Jon's heart flinched, but didn't break. However little affection had been between Erond and himself, their arrangement had been to mutual benefit. However, he saw now that Erond had had a hidden purpose. He and his band of thieves had waited patiently for the time of sacrifice, waiting to be shown the place where Patch lived so they could steal his treasure, if they could. "I suppose you hoped to kill the dragon and make yourselves heroes?"

The man who held Jon's hair laughed. "You really are as stupid as Erond said, ain't you? No, dimwit. Lord Rogert hired us. We get half the treasure, and he gets rid of a creature blocking his trade through the mountains." The man shook Jon's head. "Shall I cut his throat now?"

Erond shrugged. His usually gaudy costume of a traveler had been replaced with a leather vest, dark, form-fitting pants, and a sword belt. Clearly, they were mercenaries or thieves. Not that there was much difference. "Not yet. He's still alive instead of meat in the dragon's belly. He might have a hidden purpose." Erond's icy blue gaze traveled around the cavern. "I do believe our dragon likes to live like a human. He may have other... tastes." His sword lifted and played with Jon's limp cock. "Are you well and truly fucked, Jon?"

Apparently he was. He'd been used, and Jon held back anger. He also refused to give his former lover one more word of information. He wouldn't be believed, even if he protested that he'd seen no treasure. He had to protect Patch.

Patch was a treasure worth far more than a mound of gold and gems. If the thieves learned Patch was a healer, they'd use Jon to capture Patch and force him to serve Lord Rogert. Worse, they might enslave them both as a pair for profit. Jon shuddered. He'd rather die than allow Patch to suffer that sort of fate.

A short bird whistle echoed off the cavern walls.

Eronnd grinned down at Jon and placed his sword point against Jon's chest. "My lookout says the dragon returns. Let's see if we can persuade him to give up his treasure. If my hunch is right, he might just find you worth the loss of a few measly gems."

Chapter Six

There were many ways to die. Patch knew that very well, having caused quite a few deaths in his lifetime. He preferred to heal, but when one knew how to put a body back together, it seemed to follow like spring followed the snows that the healer gained the knowledge of how to cause the most effective damage. Over time, Patch had also learned how to avoid that damage.

He'd found and killed two foolish bucks jousting in rut atop a ridge almost as soon as he'd taken to the air and had eaten the larger one immediately. With the second in his right foreclaws, he'd brought the carcass back proudly.

From his position in the low hanging clouds, he'd noticed the disruption of the seemingly random pattern of gravel around his cave entrance. Only from the air was the intricate knot visible, and now it was considerably blurred. Many footsteps had disturbed the pattern. Oh, lovely. Thieves, most likely. Undoubtedly they were making a mess of his orderly home and probably causing Jon quite a bit of discomfort. Humans were so fragile, even if they were so very charming.

Patch took advantage of a particularly thick cloud and landed on the other side of his mountain peak. From there, well hidden by the morning mists, his long thin body easily slunk around until he could listen at the hole where his soap plants got their light. In the meantime, he could soak up a bit of sun and plan how he'd rescue Jon.

Jon's loyal anger and vehement denials that Patch had any treasure merely endeared him further to Patch. While it was true Jon was a bit on the thin side, his forearms and hands were as strong as a swordsman's from handling the clay. No one who handled wet dirt could be called a weakling.

However, Jon was quite wrong about Patch's treasure. Because they'd slept atop several dragon-feet of rugs, the human had never felt one lump of the hard little rocks that made a bed impervious to even Patch's major offensive weapon -- his breath.

Unlike the most famous and spectacular red fire-breathing dragons, Patch was a black dragon. His kind had a much nastier weapon. Patch and his black brethren could spit the acid in their stomachs, and the acid was so powerful in its pure form that it could melt flesh and etch metals. It also gave the blacks a reputation for viciousness. Quite uncalled for, since the supply was very limited. Besides, no dragon liked regurgitating its last meal along with the contents of its stomach. Bloody waste! Moreover, the rumor about being evil creatures was pure slander, thank you! Most blacks simply preferred to use the peace and quiet of the night as camouflage.

His dear friend Hux, being a blue dragon, spat water. Well, technically, it was water and urine, but still mild in comparison to acid or fire, until the enemy discovered blue dragons were also water elementals. They could manipulate any form of water, even the water within a living body. Patch would prefer to fight a red fire dragon than a blue water dragon. At least a red didn't use your own body against you. However, when it came down to it, they all hatched from eggs so alike only their mothers could tell eggshells apart.

The humans ransacking his cavern were thieves and mercenaries, the most greedy and uncooperative forms of humankind. Even now, the leader Erond was the target of many resentful looks while he chatted with his captive while the others toiled and sweated. Patch surmised Erond was disliked, perhaps even hated. Good. He'd not be missed if Patch was forced to kill him rather than send him scurrying back to this Lord Rogert with tales of how fierce the dragon was.

Several enterprising fellows jumped down into the sleeping pit and began to pull up the carpets. The carpets were so large they took a dragon to remove, but they'd soon figure out a corner or two could be tugged aside if everyone got involved. He was out of time, but seeing so many down in the pit gave Patch an idea.

The morning mist had thinned, but there was just enough to give Patch cloud cover until he could come in from the west, where he'd be an easily spotted silhouette, and he flew in like he had no clue humans were invading his home.

A sentry's whistle bounced off the hills surrounding his valley, and Patch had to give credit to the fellow's long sight. Several men, previously hidden by the rocks and trees, scrambled inside. Again, Patch nodded to their training. They'd known he could simply fly overhead and let loose his breath, so they'd chosen to put their strength in numbers and fight him in the cavern where -- they hoped -- the dragon would be more confined. Even better. Patch now had them precisely where he wanted them. He landed next to the finger-shaped rock where he'd found Jon, folded his wings, and hummed a jaunty tune. Hopefully, the thieves had left his tea alone. He'd want a cup soon.

* * *

Jon's heart sank at the announcement that the dragon was coming. He'd hoped the foul troupe would give up their fruitless search before Patch returned, but some shouts from the direction of the sleeping pit meant they'd found some new idea to pursue.

Erond's eyes gleamed, and his slow smile had a greedy, cruel twist. His gaze flicked over the man with his hand in Jon's hair. He jerked his head in the direction of the back of the pit. "Go on, Erik. Lend your strength." He unsheathed his sword. "I can handle this catamite and the dragon."

Catamite? Jon's fist clenched. "There's no need to be insulting, Erond. I seem to remember you also made use of my body, so what does that make you?"

The thief's sword point flicked and scored Jon's chest with a shallow cut. "Any hole does the job when I want what I want. You're uglier than most of the whores I've used before I threw them to my men. You were a means to the end. I knew they'd find out about you eventually and serve you up in place of one of their precious, porridge-faced daughters. I couldn't guarantee which one of those wide-hipped porkers they'd choose or I'd have seduced her, but I could easily entice you in your loneliness."

Jon hung his head in shame. What Erond said was true. Jon had been so lonely for masculine company he'd all but fallen at Erond's feet the moment the handsome tumbler had smiled at him. An inexperienced journeyman just settling in his chosen business at home, Jon had been easy to seduce.

Patch chose that precise moment to enter the cavern. He ignored the sword at Jon's throat, ignored Erond's shout for his attention, and galloped over the broken furniture straight toward the sleeping pit with a deafening roar.

As if Jon meant nothing to the dragon, his tail swept around and knocked both Erond and Jon aside. Jon fell into the hot pool of water and came up sputtering, but free.

Erond was unlucky enough to connect with one of the many boulders and pots that lined the pool, but this boulder was cone-shaped and slick with shining slime from the roof of the cave. His sword clattered off to the side.

Patch didn't spare them a single glance. He skidded his huge black body to a halt, made the most horrid "Yark!" sound, and sprayed the entire pit with a foul-smelling liquid from the pits of hell. Chunks of rotting flesh from his stomach spewed out like a volley of disgusting arrows.

From the depths of the pit came anguished screams of pain, and the shrieks of dying men echoed off the walls of the cavern. One hand, its flesh smoking and bone exposed, grasped the edge of the pit, and then slid away.

Jon clambered from the pool and tried not to be sick at the stench that filled the cavern. He held his nose, grateful that he'd not had anything more than water in his stomach. The smell was eye-watering at best. Nevertheless, he scrambled to his feet, determined to maintain a measure of dignity despite being naked and humiliated. He'd not done a very good job of defending Patch.

Patch turned his head and looked right at Jon. "Blech! What a mess. We'll have to find an alternate bed tonight." He walked up to Jon, licking his muzzle. "Deer certainly doesn't taste very good the second time around. Now, where is that thieves' leader?"

"Right here!" The shout came from behind Jon.

Jon knew Erond would do his best to end Patch's life with a sword thrust to the neck. With Patch gone, he could then end Jon's life and claim all the treasure for himself. Digging through the remains of his former troupe would be nothing to him, and he'd have plenty of time.

Without hesitation, Jon stepped in front of Patch and threw his arms around the surprised dragon's neck. He had to protect Patch, no matter what it cost. Jon's own life was nothing, but Patch deserved to live.

The sound of a wet watermelon being sliced, followed by agonizing pain in his belly, took Jon's breath away. Surprise made him loosen his hold on Patch and stagger back. He looked down at the sword tip piercing his belly.

The cowardly Erond had skewered him from behind.

Jon tried to draw a gasping breath, but his whole torso bloomed in agony. His legs couldn't hold him upright in comparison to the pain, and he fell face forward into the sand, inches away from Patch's clawed foot.

He heard Erond's cold laughter. "You've taken my men from me, dragon. Seems only fitting I take one from you."

A crunching sound, like a man eating an entire bowl of overcooked fried bacon, rent the air. Something hot and wet splattered all over Jon's naked body, and a rivulet of blood flowed past Jon's face in the sand.

For a moment or three, black unconsciousness hazed Jon's vision and mind. He was dying. He was sure of it. He could hardly breathe, for every movement of his chest brought fresh pain.

It seemed like only seconds before Patch ruthlessly pulled out the sword and slapped something cool and silky on the hole in his back.

Jon was free to breathe again, but in so much pain he wished he could faint like a girl and have done with his life. He wanted to keep his face buried in the sand and die as he'd lived -- with very little dignity. At least he could say he'd saved one more worthy than himself from death, and that alone was an accomplishment.

Patch rolled him over and placed Jon's head in his now-human and equally naked lap. He hushed Jon's attempts to speak with two fingers over his lover's lips and the sounds a mother makes when comforting a crying child. His beautiful, slit eyes were full of love. "Thank you for saving me, Jon. I knew I loved you for a reason."

He was loved? How ironic that, at the end of his life, Jon had finally found love. He smiled weakly up at his dragon and managed to put two fingers to his lips before transferring the kiss to Patch's human lips. "Love makes us do crazy things. I'm not sorry." He managed a mostly full intake of breath, but bright spots of light lit like fireflies in front of his eyes, so he closed them again. "Love you, Patch. Sorry I can't live with you after all." Darkness loomed around him, but one bright spot remained just at the corner of his vision.

"No! No! Noooo!" Patch's cries turned to a deafening shriek. The leg beneath his head turned large and scaly. "Jon! Do you trust me? Jon!"

Jon nodded, his interest more on the pretty light. His voice was thin and seemed to come from the back of the cavern. "Yes. Love you. Trust you. Bye. Be a good dragon."

The last thing he heard before the light surrounded him was a faint roar.

Chapter Seven

It was wrong to take Jon's soul for himself on that bare permission based on trust. Patch knew what he did was the gravest of crimes. However, if he were wrong Patch would share Jon's death or, worse, suffer a shared life with one who did not love him enough.

Still, there was the life-debt Patch owed Jon. Jon had taken the sword meant for Patch and, by draconic law, Patch was obliged to offer Jon a service of equal value. Patch could think of no greater repayment than to attempt a dragon bond.

Patch bowed his head and once again took on his comfortable dragon body. In the darkness with the foul stench of melted carpet and burned human flesh was no place to attempt a rebirth, but Patch would only have seconds to begin the process if he moved Jon's injured body. He scooped Jon up and galloped awkwardly on three legs to the ledge outside his nest cave.

Jon groaned weakly, his huff of breath little more than the whimper of a dragonet working his way free of the egg chamber at hatching. At least he was already naked. The irony of their reawakening in front of the sacrifice rock was not lost on Patch. Too bad Jon was in no condition to appreciate the situation.

Any human who might appear at that moment would no doubt think Patch had caused the terrible wound and was about to eat his sacrifice, if a day later than they'd planned. Patch still had the nasty taste of the thief leader Erond on his tongue, and he smacked his lips to get rid of the taint. Waste of a perfectly good deer, the other deer lodged in the branches of a tree at the top of the hill and no doubt a feast for ravens. Patch regretted the losses, but they said a dragon bond was best attempted on an empty stomach. Patch couldn't imagine a stomach more empty than his right now.

Jon stirred fitfully beneath Patch's right foot. As long as Patch remained in physical contact with Jon, the human's body would not die, and might even begin to heal. However, the moment they lost contact, he might die without Patch's healer's touch to keep his spirit within the damaged vessel. Enough! Every moment Patch delayed cost Jon great pain.

Patch set his mind to the task. To concentrate upon what he had to do, Patch needed to clear his head of all but the task and the need to succeed. There must be no doubt or distraction.

Patch did not fear death. No healer did. The Dark One was a welcome friend who took those whose life would be too unbearable to continue. Occasionally, they tussled for the life of a patient, but it was a friendly competition. The loser congratulated the winner and went on. There was always another patient. Disease and injuries were Patch's foes, not death itself.

The bonding might take time, and Patch would be unaware of its passing, so Patch laid his body down and curled around Jon, covering him with one wing in case it rained. The leathery membrane would provide Jon with enough shelter until the attempt was done.

If Jon had been a dragon-born, the bonding would have been ridiculously simple. As soon as Jon had gone unconscious, he would have reverted to his natural dragon body. Then, their minds would fit together with the ease of a long-mated pair. Patch's hope lay in a legend. It was said that, in ancient times, there existed the rare human-dragon pairing. There were even legends that spoke of offspring of that union that stayed with humankind instead of among their winged brethren. If -- oh, how Patch hoped it were true! -- such dragon blood existed, even in the tiniest drop, within Jon, then the dragon bond would work.

While they had made love, for an instant he'd felt something. Perhaps he'd imagined a tiny tendril of bonding. It was possible, but Patch would not know until he committed to the deed past all hope of redemption. No one knew how much effort it

took. Even a bonded pair never remembered what happened past that moment of joining.

Delicately, Patch's jaw touched Jon's sore head, and Patch removed his claws from around the wounded body. Patch's claws would never be a cage to hold Jon, if love did not already bind them. Either Jon loved Patch enough or he didn't. Patch knew he did not want to live without Jon now that he'd found him.

Any healer could go inside the mind of their patient. They learned to do that so they could hear the unspoken ills of the unconscious ones, or young ones who did not have the words. The surface thoughts were easily understood.

Jon's anger and shame were understandable. From his eyes and heart Patch saw how much Jon had been used and abused all his life for being one who loved his own sex. In Jon's time in training to learn his art in a dark, faraway place, he'd lived in fear of being found out and had tried to be like the others. He'd failed miserably, and wondered what was wrong with him. Even as a small child, he'd known without understanding that he'd been different and had been made to feel ashamed.

Patch growled his anger. When did being born a thing cause it to be considered so terrible an act? That was the same criminal thinking as hating someone for the color of their eyes, or patterns on their scales. The gods decided what was right and wrong, and it was not for mortals to judge.

Deeper in Jon's memory, at the very edge of conscious thought, was an interesting note. Jon had not been born to the humans who'd raised him. He'd been given to them as a very small child, and dimly remembered another set of parents who traveled. Perhaps that was why he'd been so attracted to Erond? It seemed so. He'd remembered being loved and cherished while bumping along in a wagon. Interesting.

Still, that was not the inner core of Jon. That lay beyond the level of conscious thought, deep behind the clouds of those things all thinking beings preferred to hide. From here, the journey would be rough.

Worse, from here Jon would also enter Patch's own deepest mind, into the savage realm where reason did not dwell in a dragon's heart. He would see the

savagery and bestial nature they all kept hidden behind the clouds of courtesy and ordered thinking. Would he run in terror? Perhaps. No one liked seeing the beast that lived behind the civility.

Patch's only consolation would be if Jon did possess that drop of dragon blood. Then, Jon might speak to Patch if he wished. They would share and comment upon what they saw. It would make the process much easier. The only trick would be to recognize Jon's spirit-self, for each creature had a spirit that might or might not look like the earthly being. Patch's own soul-self was not black, but a vivid purple dragon of healing. Patch delayed one more breath before taking to wing within Jon's mind. Perhaps from an aerial view he'd see a spirit being more easily.

A thin, silvery barrier lay ahead. The cloud separated the portions of a spirit between the conscious being and the savage beast within. Patch growled his challenge and went into the darkness beyond the silver cloud.

Instantly, Patch flew in a world of both light and shadow. It was a stormy world, but only one angry cloud roiled and flickered with lightning. Pleased to see that Jon's inner light still held most of the area, Patch searched over the hills and vales. There were signs of his turmoil and pain, like scars upon a war-torn landscape. They were ravaged places where the stench of pain and hurt physically manifested as burnt hills and fire-blackened ravines.

However, there were also sunny places on the tops of hills where trees and flowers grew in profusion. Clearly, the Jon he loved found beauty and joy more easily. One burned place rejuvenated itself, and greenery sprouted with the promise of life returning to cover the scars.

One place interested Patch more than any other. A mountain stood among the rolling hills, majestic and beautiful in the light of the beam of sunlight streaming down from the Above. It was so very lovely he was compelled to fly there, drawn irresistibly to the immense thing that so dwarfed all other features in the back of Jon's mind. There, Patch was sure, lay the key to Jon's spirit.

The closer Patch traveled to the massive summit, the more the winds buffeted him. Those he interpreted to be Jon's thoughts and doubts. He did not want visitors in this secret place, but Patch flew on despite the occasional gust that attempted to divert him.

On a ledge halfway up the heights, one sunbeam seemed strong and sure. It did not dim or change, but focused upon one spot. There was something important there.

The winds turned violent, increasing in strength and velocity until Patch fought a hurricane.

Patch roared his challenge, determined to continue his flight no matter what the cost. Patch's wings were tired, and his breath labored, but his desire was stronger. He would not give up! "No! Jon! I love you! Let me in!"

Immediately, the wind ceased, until nothing more than a gentle breeze frisked about Patch's face. It pushed weakly, still wanting him to go. On the warm waft of air rising from the base of the mountain, Patch heard a soft voice. "Patch?"

"Where are you?" Patch called out, frantic to reach Jon before the strength left his body entirely. Patch struggled to catch an updraft with his cupped wings.

The breeze grew stronger and more sure. "I don't know." His spirit voice was pitifully low. "Wherever this is, it's a lovely place to die."

"Stay for me! Stay there. I'm coming!" Patch used the warm current of air to lift him upward, but it was painfully slow going, like he swam instead of gliding. A moment later, Patch flew level with the sunny cliff, and his heart stuttered to a halt.

There, on the cliff, lay a tattered red dragon with golden eyes who stared at Patch and blinked his beautiful eyes in shock. "Oh, wow. A purple dragon. Now I've seen everything." The voice was Jon's, but so weak it seemed to float on the wind. He sighed and shut his eyes. His body went limp.

"Jon! Jon! It's me! Please stay!" Patch landed beside Jon and covered the red body with his wing, just as their bodies were entwined in the real world.

The red dragon let out one shallow breath. "Why should I stay, Patch?"

Patch wanted to plead with Jon, but something flashed in the corner of Patch's vision. The angry storm in the distance was closer. It had darkened, and more lightning flickered. It was a monster of a storm. Perhaps Jon needed a little anger let loose in his heart.

To call up anger in the back of a mind was a dangerous thing. Some storms never blew themselves out, but grew until they ripped through the silver cloud and consumed everything, even the conscious self. They said upon occasion that a good roar cleansed the spirit. Patch resolved to see if he could make a red dragon roar.

Jon's beautiful, scaly head lay flat upon the ground, the very picture of exhaustion and defeat. Even his wings were limp and dejected. "I'm tired, Patch."

Patch's heart ached for Jon, but this was no time for sympathy. That respite could come later. Patch knew in his heart now there would be a later, if he could call up the fury the storm represented. Patch hissed contemptuously. "Are you going to let Erond and those other worthless thieves win?"

The storm crackled and moved closer. Thunder boomed. Lightning sizzled to earth, and lit up the sky.

"Were a few blow jobs so very devastating to you?" Patch put as much careless dismissal as he dared into the question. "Come now, Jon. No harm was done, was there?" Patch knew very well plenty of harm had indeed been done. He wanted Jon to protest inside.

The black clouds boiled and began to move in a circle, gathering warmth from the land below and the light above. "There damn sure was *harm* done! How can you say there wasn't?"

Oh, what a snarl! Any dragon would have been proud of such a threatening sound. Patch smiled to himself and searched for anything else to anger Jon. Perhaps Jon would be angrier if he recalled he'd not been the only one who'd ever suffered because of the villagers' superstitions. "Would you betray the kindness and trust Old Meg gave you? She saved you. Will her effort be in vain because Erond was a lying traitor who cared only for himself?"

The rotation of the black clouds mixed with wind and water, spewing rain and ripping up the scarred landscape below it. It moved across the blackened hills and down into a black valley, churning viciously and gaining momentum in the dark region.

Patch took a moment to marvel at the fury and size of the storm. How long had Jon kept the anger inside? How many times had someone hurt or betrayed him without his retaliation? His spirit body, that of a red dragon, was telling. If Patch did not awaken the volatile beast within Jon, who knew what might happen? Patch was not anxious to find out.

The storm waited, as if ready to be called upon. There was Patch's foe -- hatred and anger, misdirected and without purpose. Well, he'd give it a purpose.

Patch leaned down and put his head next to Jon's, as if in defeat. "Then Erond has killed us both." Patch shut his eyes and began the process of willing himself to die next to Jon. It was all or nothing. "You were my greatest treasure. I've lost you, and I don't want to live."

Chapter Eight

The red dragon's roar was deafening, but compared to the storm that swept them both off the cliff and into the heart of the maelstrom it was nothing. Jon's wings spread outward, and his tail wrapped around Patch until their bodies were entwined from the tips of their tails all the way up until their necks twisted together. Even the finger claws at the tips of their wings were interlaced.

Already deep in his trance to stop his own heart, Patch acknowledged the intimate posture with detached awe. The air hissed and crackled as if it were alive, but all Patch wanted was to rub his scaly cheek against Jon's and give him love to heal all his wounds, real and metaphorical. His dragon purr was meant to soothe and give his love.

"Cat purrs are nothing like yours, Patch," Jon's voice rumbled, vibrating to the purr so low, only another dragon could hear. "Hey, I can do it too! How marvelous!" His red cheek scraped along Patch's jaw. "God, that's sexy."

Yes, it was. Patch's cock awakened, but his mind stayed relaxed. The wind gentled, but still carried them among the clouds, and the rain within those clouds was warm like an afternoon tropical storm.

Caught between their bodies, both of their cocks were unable to penetrate the body of the other dragon. Instead, the two organs rubbed against one another, causing tremors of friction and pleasure.

Patch threw back his head and hissed, and of its own accord his tail unwound from his lover's and slipped into Jon's dragon body. At the very same moment, Patch felt his own body penetrated and loved in exactly the same manner.

Jon matched him hiss for hiss and rumble for rumble while they fucked one another in the center of an ever-gentling storm. "Yes! Oh, God! Yes! Patch! Tail! Love... tail!"

The incoherent words might have made no sense to anyone else, but Patch knew instinctively that Jon meant he loved not only having a tail, but what Patch's tail did to him. Moreover, Patch agreed. Not only was it the best fuck of his life, it was likely to be his last. The wind had died without either of them noticing, and they hit the ground with a deafening explosion.

Between the throbbing flashes of light in his head, crickets and night flying cicadas sang beautiful love songs. When his lungs filled with air, his chest ached to move. Even his tail lay limp, and whatever it was wrapped around was cold to the touch.

Patch blinked while his skull pounded with a headache far worse than he'd ever possessed in two hundred years of memory. He managed one weak grunt of pain before he shut his eyes and began an assessment of his injuries. No broken bones or open wounds. In fact, other than complete lassitude and a feeling of being drained of all energy, physically he was fine. So, why did his head ache?

"Mine hurts worse than a hangover from drinking the rawest ale." Another voice answered his unspoken question. "Gods above, what happened to us?" Something scraped on the gravel, and a weight Patch hadn't recognized as being foreign to his body slipped off his back.

Memory returned slowly. Patch grunted again, but this time it was the closest thing he could manage to a shout of joy. "Jon?"

"Owww! Don't yell at me. Yes?" More scraping movements. "I'm going to risk opening my eyes. Oh, thank goodness, it's night. I'm sure my head couldn't take the light of..." Jon's voice trailed off. "Holy gods! I'm a dragon?"

Dragon? That wasn't supposed to happen in reality! Jon's spirit form might have been a dragon, but even if he'd had the mythical drop of dragon blood, he was too human to shift. Wasn't he?

Patch opened his eyes again and moved his head until he could see Jon's scaly body next to his. Yes, red body, wings, and orange-gold eyes. "I'd hazard a guess and say you are."

"What... what happened? I remember you asking me if I trusted you." One clawed arm reached up and touched his red chest. "Where's the sword wound? I was dying, wasn't I?" Jon's voice was still the same, though there was a faint echo of all his questions in Patch's mind.

"Uhhn... dragon bond. I attempted a dragon bond." Patch shut his eyes. "I hurt."

A rattle of wood behind them both sounded deafening to Patch's aching head. "Well, well! Look what I find! Not one but two dragons!"

Patch and Jon were too exhausted to do more than turn their heads and hiss at the sound, but both relaxed instantly when they recognized the visitor.

Old Meg put her hands on her hips and grinned up at them both, but her questions were clearly for Patch. "Who's your friend? What happened to the potter?" She kicked the bundle at her feet. "I brought Jon's tools from his cottage before they looted it and burned it to the ground. Have you already sent him on his way, then?"

Jon raised his head. "I'm right here, Meg. Thanks for my tools. That will save me the trouble of making them anew!"

Without understanding how he knew, Patch felt health and vigor returning slowly to both him and Jon, like a trickle of water filling a large vessel. Such renewal would take time, but the new knowledge brought him great joy. Though he had only a vague memory of how the dragon bond had been achieved, it had clearly happened. He and Jon were as one dragon. He raised his head. One question remained, born of a faint memory burned into his brain. "Meg, did you know Jon's real parents?"

"Huh?" Jon's fire-bright eyes blinked and his jaw fell open, revealing a lovely set of white fangs. He truly was a gorgeous beast, from his long, elegant snout to the tip of his whip-like tail, but his body was unlike any red dragon Patch had ever seen. Instead of a barrel chest and slender waist leading to firm hips, Jon's body was long and sinuous. Most telling of all, his face and head sported a corona of mane-like... feathers?

There were even more odd, almost-feathers on his wings. "How did you know I was adopted?"

Meg sighed. "Well! I'd hoped this would never come up, but since all the vultures are coming home to roost at once, let's have a spot of tea." She held up her hand. "Yes, yes! I can smell the stink of death in there, and I don't want to know. Why don't we have a fire out here?" She shooed them with both hands. "Go on! You made the mess, obviously. Now go inside, change, and get dressed. Jon can bring me wood and the tea. I'll make it while you clean up whatever is inside." She kicked a depression in the gravel and muttered about being poor but having some standards.

Patch decided he did have the strength to go inside despite the nasty smell, and stood. He still had questions, but as soon as he tried to think, his head pounded and the questions skittered away like cave spiders from light. For now, it seemed wisest to obey, find clothing, and perhaps nourishment. His belly rumbled with need.

Beside him, Jon padded sheepishly next to Patch. Patch felt his mind tumble over a rockslide of questions, but his headache, too, prevented his managing more than a coherent thought or two. A single question stayed to the fore. *How do I change when I don't know how I got this way?*

"I'll teach you. Just give me time to think a moment." Patch whispered his answer to Jon's unspoken questions.

Jon trustingly sat on his haunches, and coiled up around himself. He seemed as surprised as Patch that he did, but he trusted Patch implicitly to help him sort it all out. His belly rumbled audibly, and he dragon-grinned, even managing to curl up the sides of his mouth in an almost human smile. "Guess you can add hunting for deer to my lessons in being a dragon, huh?" How he managed to be so accepting of his changed status bespoke either a calmness of spirit beyond anything Patch had ever seen, or something more to talk about later.

Patch nodded absently in answer to the spoken question. The deer in the tree might satisfy them both temporarily, but for now going into human form might mean smaller and more easily filled bellies. That is, if they could find clothes the thieves

hadn't destroyed. He thought "aloud" about the process of twisting his body into human shape, hoping Jon would see the process and catch on to the trick.

Jon nodded and kept his eyes focused on Patch's while his lover changed. He didn't move a muscle until Patch stood naked before him. "I can try." He shut his eyes and followed the process Patch had shown him. After a few false starts, his long, thin frame stood in the sands. Jon grinned triumphantly at Patch. "All right, then! That wasn't so bad! Um... might I borrow some clothes?"

Patch noted his headache was nothing more than a mild throb now. He had used a great deal of not only healer energy, but also mage energy. It was a wonder he remained conscious. Most likely as his energy returned, the remainder of the headache would go. Food and tea would help. He rummaged in the remains of his clothing press and came up with two shirts and two sets of trows, mismatched, of course, but useable.

Once he was dressed, Jon gathered wood from the splintered remnants of the chairs, righted the table, and found a small packet of tea the thieves hadn't scattered.

Meanwhile, Patch returned to dragon form and went to fetch the one uneaten deer, only partially scavenged and still quite useable once butchered and cooked. Deft use of dragon claws and teeth gave them a rough feast of deer steaks, wild garlic and onion salad, and hot fragrant tea. Once the food was in Meg's capable hands, Patch was happy to don clothing and sit next to Jon as a man. He didn't like being more than a few inches from his bonded lover, but that need would settle after a month or so.

Only once their bellies were full did Meg sit back, staring into her tea mug. "It's my fault, in a way. I'd ordered a bit of cloth from a traveling tinker, and he said he'd send it by way of a friend as soon as he could." She smiled somewhat bitterly. "This was before they chose my girl as their sacrifice, so I was friendlier to the village then. I hadn't accepted my Della wasn't of a marrying mind and had visions of grandchildren at my knee. So I spent my hard-earned pennies on a fine cloth to make my Della pretty." She sighed and sipped her tea.

Jon nodded. "I've a vague memory of riding in a wagon. Was I the child of the traveler who brought you the cloth?" In the back of his mind was a comfortable rocking motion of a sling bed, strung inside the wagon's interior.

Meg's nod was almost unnecessary. "Aye, and a handsome pair of parents you had, too. Your da was quite a figure, brown of skin and with a hawk's nose. Yer ma was more like me, small and delicate, with pale skin. She had quite a time keeping up with you while your da and I haggled about a few bits and bobs he had for sale, but he'd delivered the cloth first."

Jon's impatience made Patch squirm, but Patch knew from long experience Meg would get to the point as soon as she could. She never left out an important detail.

"How did my parents die?" The question burst forth from Jon's lips.

"Shut up and I'll tell you." Just to punish him for his impudence, Meg took another sip of tea and then relented. "You were all boy and destined to be a potter. You went straight for a patch of mud right by the edge of the cow pond and rolled in it like a little piglet. Yer ma ran after you, laughing and scolding you in a tongue I couldn't understand, but while you with yer light body could stay on the bank, she slipped and fell in the pond."

Meg shrugged, but her eyes were sad. "Pretty little bit that she was, she couldn't swim and got caught in the weeds and muck of it. We had to drag the pond with nets to find her. Yer da was so broke up, he just made an awful racket. Finally, he put yer ma's body up on the top of that mountain." She pointed to one of the peaks, and Patch bit his lip to keep from saying it was a small hill in comparison to some others. "Then he put you in the wagon and drove off. We figured that was that."

There was something more, Patch was quite well aware of it. He thought he knew, but he'd wait. All the buzzards were indeed coming home to roost. "What happened next, Meg?"

Meg shrugged. "That was the oddest thing. The next day, Jon was back, playing in the mud by the pond with a small wound on his head. There were no tracks leading back, and there should have been. We'd had a spate of rain and thunder the night

before, so if the mite had walked back we'd have seen his footprints in the mud." She grinned up at Jon. "Guess you flew back, aye?"

All Jon could do was shrug helplessly. "I don't remember."

Patch stirred the fire so he could keep his hands busy. His anger built, but he had no target to aim an arrow at -- yet. "Bandits got the wagon, didn't they, Meg?"

"Yep, there wasn't much left, and no sign of Jon's da. We figured they took him to their hiding spot for a bit of sport. Yer da was too handsome for his own good, and some of those bandits were outcast from our village for all sorts of crimes." She gave them both a twisted grin. "Like loving men." She shrugged. "There were a few bodies about the wagon. Raggedy types lying face down in the mud. I'd say yer da fought hard before they got him."

"No arms or armor, Meg?" Patch's eyes narrowed. There was a clue, perhaps.

"Aye, and that was the strange thing. Not a weapon or bit of leather to scavenge for the blacksmith." Meg frowned. "We guessed their mates took everything, but not the stuff in the wagon. We got all that. No money, of course."

Of course not, Patch thought. The real thief took only what he could use. His inner dragon fought and clawed to come out. There would be revenge.

Chapter Nine

Jonndre waited patiently for Meg to leave, though he could feel Patch's anger simmering like a boiling pot with the lid clamped down. Sooner or later, it would boil over. He wasn't the target of Patch's anger, but Jon didn't get a clear picture of who was. What was as clear as rainwater was that Patch didn't want to get Old Meg involved. Jon agreed with that sentiment. He was beginning to adore Old Meg despite her crusty ways and wished he could make her a nice teapot or something to ease her poverty. She didn't deserve the hard luck she'd had all her life.

Meg finished her tea, yawned, and looked up at the moon hovering over the treetops. She pulled her shawl in closer and rose creakily to her feet. "Well, I've made my delivery, had a good bit of food, and now I'll seek my own cottage. 'S getting cold early this year. I'll see you boys when the weather warms." With that, she shuffled off slowly into the darkness.

Patch fed the fire with the remains of a painted cabinet door. The fancy carvings and colorful vines that had covered the front had been the work of Patch's own hands. Jon saw in his mind as if he were the carver and sighed for the replacement work they'd have ahead of them. Once the door had caught alight well, Patch poked it with a stick and cleared his throat noisily. "I'll miss that cabinet, but we'll have the winter to make our cave beautiful again." He raised worried eyes to Jon. "Unless you'd rather leave here?"

In seconds Jon read what Patch did not say. He'd fought another male dragon for this territory and considered it his home for at least a century. However, if Jon wanted to leave and never return, Patch was willing to start anew somewhere else. His memories even showed Jon pictures of a green paradise with a wide river and warm tropical breezes where dragons lived freely.

Jon was of two minds on the subject, and opened his heart to share with his new-found love. While the idea of a warm land and living with Patch where it never got cold had some appeal, he had a few mysteries to solve first. He wanted to know who his father was. Where were the thieves? What did Patch know?

Again, anger bubbled behind Patch's serene face. "You have lived with humans more than I, Jon. They are like the locusts in the fields, uncaring who and what they harm in their quest to tame the world to their hand. They hate anything that challenges their orderly conquest."

While the assessment was an honest perception of a non-human, it was true enough for Jon to nod. He didn't see how this answered his questions. "The high-born don't particularly like it when anything escapes their control, human or not. That's true, but..."

Patch raised one hand, palm outward, in a conciliatory gesture. "We dragons are some of those things they cannot control, you see. So, we are hated. And hunted."

At first, Jon wanted to deny what Patch was saying, but he knew it was true by and large. After all, hadn't Jon himself believed Patch was a wicked creature who ate virgins and demanded a sacrifice from every generation? But wait. That brought up a point. "If you aren't eating up the virgins, who wants them?"

The bitter smile on his dragon's face tore at Jon's heart. Patch was accused of a crime he'd never committed. "You haven't guessed?"

There was really only one answer. The one greedy person who could and regularly sent out armed men to hunt and kill for any reason, tried accused criminals without them being there to deny they'd done the deed, and the only one who really saw a need to have a dragon skin on his wall as proof of his might. "Lord Rogert." Jon had no words. "He killed my da why? A poor tinker wouldn't have anything a lord would want."

Patch shook his head. "Your father was a foreigner, my innocent love. Did you know foreigners must pay twice the tax to use the roads in and out of this little mountain kingdom? No doubt Lord Rogert's tax collectors -- a polite name for thieves, I

must say! -- tried to get much more out of your father. No doubt they got the surprise of their lives when an angry, bereft dragon, mourning his mate and willing to die to defend his one offspring appeared."

Jon sprang up from where he'd been sitting as the whole picture and a vague memory aroused him. Jon remembered hearing an angry roar and a whole lot of shouts. Then the smell of burning wood and smoke filled the inside where he'd been sleeping. They'd set the wagon afire without realizing Jon was inside. He'd flown up and out the vent hole left open on warm nights, too scared to look back. All he'd wanted was his mum, and they'd left her back at the pond. Jon had to go find his mum!

Patch shook Jon's arm and awakened him out of his horrid memory. He gathered Jon into his arms and let him cry like the lost child he'd been. Jon hadn't understood his mum was dead, and by morning Jon's da had been a dragon skin on the wall of the castle -- a trophy to Lord Rogert's might in a battle he'd never fought. "The clue for me was how your family's wagon had been stripped of arms and armor, but nothing of the goods from the wagon had been taken. That meant someone needed only what a fighting force would need. Thieves would have ravaged everything and sorted later. The fact that he hired Erond and that mercenary band of thieves means he has no honor. Freebooter mercenaries like those are the ones thrown out of the mercenary guilds for crimes too heinous even for paid killers."

Jon spun away from Patch because he was afraid he might be sick. Jon didn't remember his da, but it seemed wrong in the worst sense to know his da had died defending him and then been forgotten by his son for over twenty years. Jon apologized to him, at least in a prayer, hoping his spirit heard him, wherever it was. "Why did I change to human? Or did I forget how to change back?"

Patch chuckled. "More the other way around of your first question. Dragonets are taught to change to a human form even before they're taught to fly. I'd be willing to bet your parents taught you to turn human early and stay that way while they traveled about as tinkers and traders. Many newly mated couples take a world tour, and some

like it so much they stay in the life. You'd been taught to be a human unless given permission to change until you forgot to be a dragon."

"I can't fly either, then. I don't know how. I don't even know what kind of dragon I am, and you don't either." Then Jon got angry. All his heritage and what he might have been had been taken from him by one man. His hand clenched, and Jon would swear the forest turned red. In his heart Jon cursed Lord Rogert for being a selfish son of a whore. "I'm staying, Patch. I want revenge on Lord Rogert, and if there's one scale left of my father's skin in that castle, I'm taking it back. He doesn't deserve that."

The wind turned a bit chillier, and Patch looked up. Where once there'd been a clear, moonlit sea of stars, the morning dawn saw gray clouds gathering in the East. "That's what I hoped you'd say. Come inside the cavern. We'll have to make do, but I think we've got a whole winter to plan."

"Aye. That we do. And it looks like we've a winter storm come early to make our job easy. What say we throw these bodies to the wolverines?" Jon threw off his clothes, changed to dragon, and threw bodies helter skelter out of the cavern and onto the meadow below Sacrifice Rock. "Let their bones warn others that a pissed-off dragon and his mate live here! I've no wish to be bothered until spring, by God!" He looked out the cavern entrance, and his red lip curled. "But when I come out, Lord Rogert had best watch his back. I'll be going hunting for highborn meat then."

Lena Austin

Lena Austin is a “fallen” Southern Belle with a checkered past. She has been a licensed minister, hairdresser, realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in archaeology, but did learn to scuba. After a life like that, writing about it is pretty restful. Of herself, Lena writes, “I’m tall, and I look like an unholy mating between an Amazon and a librarian. Everything else is subject to change on a whim.” She presently has over thirty books written, and has no plans to stop “until they pry my cold dead fingers from the keyboard.”

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