

Black Dragon of Amber

Book Two: The Road to Amber

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Dedication:

For my four legged friends who mean more to me than most people. My life has been saner and kinder because you were in it.

For my brothers Michael, Mark, Christopher and Charlie and of course, you, Chris. And for you, Lindsay because I said I would make you a Princess.

O to be a dragon,
A symbol of the power of Heaven-of silkworm
Size or immense; at times invisible.
Felicitous phenomenon!
O To Be a Dragon, Marianne Moore

Lift up the heart of a true friend by writing his name on the wings of a dragon.
Chinese Proverb

Never laugh at *LIVE* dragons.
J.R.R. Tolkien

Go and catch a falling Star;
And bend it with a swimmer's fears.
The Star that grows on sinking sands
The Star that swims beneath the tears.
Catch the one that floats afar,
And bind it with the Star that lands

Beneath the Seven Stars that dance.

Dance the Seven Sisters in the skies
Raise the mountains laid to rest,
All the stars are now just one;
Between the Scarlet Queen and None.
Upon the wing the black bird flies
To bring the dragons back he must
Before the sun sets and the fire dies,
He rules the Pride, his will be done.

Dragons fly with fearsome grace.
Fly, winged beast of Ancient flame
With grace and beauty through the skies.
Jeweled scales that burn with fame,
Rulers of the Heavens as your world dies,
With tooth and claw and fired death,
Till the hero comes and lays to rest
Your awesome power with his blessed breath.
Dragon Prince, my promise this;
Commanded by Star Stone and eye
The Dragons home where none may bide
But Dragons and their very Pride.
So vows the Dragon Prince and his.
The Riddle of the Seven Stars.



Chapter 1

The Borders of Amber were secured; after an entire morning of following her boundaries on lofty thermals, I returned to the Castle. Seen from above, it resembled a five pointed star and pentagram. My keen dragon eye could even discern the fluttering of her pennants that announced King Random; two of the Princes and my father were in residence. I sighed, (which in a forty-foot dragon came out as a belch of near flames) and spiraled in to land gently on the rooftops.

Somewhere inside, it rang a special bell activated by a sensor plate that let the guards know that it was me and not some other fiercesome creature come to wreak havoc on the realm. There were no others, not in all the Shadows or any of the accumulated wisdom of my uncles and aunts could recount of another dragon.

I hadn't always been a dragon. Once, I had been a teenage boy. Not a normal one but then, are any teenagers ever considered normal?

I grew up on the run, homeless, with an Irish gargoyle for a caretaker and friend. Part mother, part bodyguard, he saved me from many situations that I couldn't have dealt with myself. I had a human body once. But it was taken from me. Taken until I offered it up as a sacrifice to save my father and granduncle's realms.

I died there. In the castle of Amber. But it seems, not totally. I woke up in this black scaled, diamond hard rad body of a real fire-breathing dragon.

"Oh stop admiring yourself," Ghostwheel sneered. I turned my head around to stare at the glowing manifestation of the intelligent artificial computer mind that my Dad had created when he lived on Earth. My Dad? He was the king, great lord, ruler of the Courts of Chaos. Sort of like the opposite end of Amber. Where she was order and light, Chaos was Entropy and well, Chaos.

I was stuck with Ghost because he, it was the only thing that could hear me. I hated the three-way communication but it was all I had.

"Go turn into spare toaster parts," I told it and sulked. I was hungry, too. I'd seen fat cattle grazing below but because I'd promised the King I wouldn't take from his subjects, I'd not eaten. Later, I'd have to make a special foray out for a deer or two dozen. It took a lot of fuel to keep the Dragon furnace going.

I smelled human. Whipped my head around and watched Roelle and Marcus trying to sneak up on my blind side.

"Darn it," she said. "How can you see us?" I blew a sulfur-scented snort that lifted her skirts and hair. I eyed her with pleasure and ignored that my air had blown near half of Marcus naked. "Raven!" She shouted. "You did that on purpose!"

Not that I hadn't seen Roelle naked before but it was always an enjoyable sight. I wasn't likely to have sex anytime in the near millennium. Neither human nor Dragon. I wasn't even sure *how* a dragon had sex.

Wheel buzzed me. It was like an electric shock—less than a Taser but more than an electric fence. Annoying more than painful. I swept my tail around and whacked him. Sent him flying off the roof and out into the blue sky. I hoped he went far enough to land in the sea. Roelle climbed on my shoulders and held my head spikes, lifting my head up so that we could see over the entire

realm. Of course, I could see much further than she could even with one eye.

Marcus sat near my hind leg and the heat of his body felt odd—almost mystical. He was the main chef's son and was always underfoot in the Palace. At one time, we'd thought he was going to be a soldier but the war changed that idea. Instead, he studied magic tomes and was learning to be a magister. Not a magician, those were the silly dudes that did card tricks and pulled rabbits out of hats.

He smelled odd. Meaty. Powerful. I took a deep smell and started drooling. He made a disgusted sound and pulled out a bag that smelled of beef and pork. "Here. I brought you the parts of today's dinner."

I swallowed the tempting morsel bag and all. Both of them watched me expectantly. The flavors hit my stomach in a burst of heat that spread all the way to my toes. Roelle and Marcus jumped off me and stood back.

I shivered. Shook. Opened and closed my wings. Thumped my barbless tail on the roof regardless of the damage to the ceilings inside. Howled. Screamed at them and fell over. My head rose on its ten-foot neck to thump on the stones twice before I subsided. A ripple of magic flowed over me.

I felt Roelle's hand near my heart. Her touch was exquisite agony. "Raven? Oh gods, Marcus! What did you do? Is he alive?"

"Yeah, Marcus," I grunted. "What did you do to me? Did you poison me? Do you want Roelle so much you would kill me to take her? Like I'm really a threat to any male out there in this form. Like I could collect girls and put them in with my rock collection?" Two stunned faces stared at me. "What?" I sputtered. "You try to kill me and I'm the villain?"

"Raven, it worked!" Marcus shouted and grabbed my face. By the horns. I blinked and nearly pulled him off his feet.

"What worked?"

"The spell! The magicked beef hearts!"

I shut my mouth when I realized he'd *heard* me. Stupidly, I said, "you can hear me?"

"Yes, yes, you idiot!" He yelled. "But turn it down. You're loud enough for the dungeon dwellers to hear you."

"We have people in the dungeons?" I cocked my one eye on the stairwell to observe a battalion of Black Dragon Guards running onto the roof in full battle gear. Impressive, it took only four minutes for them to kit up and run up five flights. King Random and his general were with them as well as my grandfather, Corwin.

"What the hell's going on, Marcus? The roof collapsed in over twenty rooms! Several people are hurt! Raven, is he okay?" They ranged around me, hands on their weapons. I was slightly pissed at the show of mistrust. After all, they'd been named for me.

"I fell off my perch," I said in a whisper. At least for me it was a whisper. Everyone took two steps back as my voice boomed. Hey, it even sounded like me.

"Marcus, what have you done? Where's Ghost?" The King demanded. His red hair and blue eyes were fairly crackling with intensity.

“Sorry, my Liege,” I said sincerely. “No one was seriously hurt?”

“No. Scrapes and bruises. I fell off the...commode and bruised my—,” he stopped. “Marcus?”

He dipped his knee. “I found an old, really old treatise Melangine brought back from Khafra and found a reference to a spell that made dumb beasts speak with the tongue of man. No offense Raven, so I tried it out.”

“On anything other than Raven?” Random asked.

“Well, no. It was good only for one shot,” he explained. “It needed the blood of a gargoyle and a harpy. I only had enough for one dose.”

“How long does it last?” I butted in.

He shrugged. “Didn’t say. But Raven, it hints at other things.”

I opened my eye wide and then my mouth. “Tell me.” He swallowed. Although I had never hurt him, the size of my cavernous mouth, forked tongue and dagger-like teeth made him nervous.

“It speaks of turning creatures into men.” There was silence and then an excited babble of voices. Of course, I could shout all of them down at once.

“Like what?” I asked over them.

“A shadow realm only hinted of where you can become human again,” Marcus whispered staring everywhere but at me. I swallowed and felt ashamed that I had accused him of trying to kill me so he could have Roelle to himself. “I want you to have every chance of becoming human, Raven,” he continued.

Random laid his hand on Marcus’ shoulder. “Marcus, show me this text. Raven, the stable master has two steer set aside for your breakfast. Murphy has patrol duty so you can relax. Don’t go anywhere.”

My grandfather added his own admonitions and the entire troop left the same way they’d arrived only without the urgency.

With equal parts of hope and dread in my heart, I leaped off the parapet to land neatly in the stable yard where two fat cows were eating hay.

I used to be squeamish about killing them but now, I merely bit off their heads and swallowed the rest daintily. Sated, I spent the rest of the day perched on the headlands of Kolvir.

Chapter 2

Somehow, I squeezed into the somewhat large tower room in the East pentacle. I had to be careful where I planted my rear feet and front legs, as there wasn’t much room left for Roelle and Marcus. It’d been a major feat to sneak around and join the pair without Random or the rest of the castle knowing.

Random and Corwin knew something was up, he had set a new pair of guardsmen on my tail and it wasn’t until I flew off in a huff that I was alone. For five minutes. Then both Ghostwheel and Murphy attached themselves to me. I only succeeded in escaping them by hiding under the waters of the sea until nightfall, coming out at dark and then sneaking up the backside of Kolvir

using my talons and tail to climb. I didn't like to fly at night, as that was when the enchantment that let my Dragon body survive was the weakest. I had to fight the constant urge to coil up and sleep. Plus, my blind eye made seeing difficult as I had lost almost all depth perception. Marcus helped once I was out on the ramparts of Kolvir; he placed a minor spell on me that made me a shadow that only a first rate magister could see. Roelle was with him and helped drape a gray cloth around me that he explained muffled the noise and smell of me.

"I don't smell," I protested offended and he shook his head.

"Well, Raven, you don't stink but you do smell a great deal like smoke and sulfur."

"Especially after you snort," Roelle said helpfully. "And you do smell like rotten eggs," she added.

Sulking, I let them push me into the room and Marcus had one more surprise for me. As I stepped over the threshold, sparkles of blue dust covered me, tingled and abruptly, they became as large as giants. I blinked. They grew in size but the room remained the same.

"I shrank you, Raven," he grinned and Roelle carefully cradled me in her hands. My voice squeaked were once it'd boomed.

"Can you still hear me? Is this permanent? I'm not much threat to anyone like this. Except maybe a mouse."

"It's only temporary," Marcus assured me. "You'll revert as soon as you speak the phrase 'gigantum alternus'. But don't say it in here or you'll blow the walls apart. This way, we can smuggle you out of here."

"Smuggle me where?" I asked.

"Khafra."

"Khafra? We're almost at war with Khafra!" My squeak was nearly a Dragon shriek.

"Quiet, Raven," he hushed and slammed the room's oak door. "Why don't you tell the King, the Castle and the Realm of Amber what we're planning?" Huffing, he went to the corner cabinet in the austere tower and pulled out a wizard's safe. Its enchanted gargoyle locks opened to his password but not before trying to bite him. Inside, was a thin pamphlet made of Griffin hide, bound by silver wire and written in the blood of elves. Only a few spells were legible although my Dragon sight and knowledge knew more than he'd deciphered. The pages gave off an aura that was...unsettling, almost evil. It had the stench of Chaos and the Logrus, of old power best left forgotten.

Marcus turned the page towards the middle of the book and pointed out the complicated spell. From what I could read, I picked up the words 'body', 'receptacle, sacrifice and replace'.

"Marcus, it calls for a sacrifice. I won't take another's life to gain back my own."

"You can read this?" He returned.

"Better than you can." I perused the texts and was able to pull out the general meaning. It was a recipe for disaster but it also gave me a glimmer of hope.

Just when we were settling down, someone's heavy hand knocked at the open door in a manner that would not be denied. Roelle scooped me up and tossed me into her waist pouch where I clung screeching a shrill protest. There were all sorts of odd bits and pieces in there,

some of which were squishy and gross. She thumped me through the cloth and I grumbled in protest but quieted so I could eavesdrop.

“Have either of you seen Raven?” The familiar voice of my head keeper demanded. Rinlon Preel, the soldier who had served my former master Jurt. Jurt, my father’s half-brother and Random’s enemy. Rinlon had saved my life and stood just outside the tower room in his 6 feet of unbridgeable sense of duty.

“I saw him, flying around here yesterday and the king said he was in cahoots with you.”

“Cahoots?” Marcus hooted. “I’ve been up here studying my homework with Roelle.”

Rinlon must have pushed his way inside; his voice was suddenly much closer and louder. “King Random has a very important mission for him and after he’s through with that, Prince Corwin needs him. Where has he gone? Do you know?”

I could feel Roelle shaking her head. Marcus said, “I think he was hungry. He said something about going hunting.”

“He said?” Rinlon asked. I chewed a hole in her bag so I could see.

“Haven’t you heard? Marcus found a way to let us speak directly to Raven and he can speak to us,” Roelle said happily. Inside her pouch, I mumbled to myself. Rinlon’s sharp ears heard me.

“What was that?” He barked. He ran to the window and looked out expecting to see me flapping my wings or hanging off the roof. “Raven! If you’re here, the King wants you in the courtyard immediately!” He waited and snorted. “I know you three are up to something. I can feel it in my bones. Marcus, Roelle, the boy’s seen enough unhappiness and hardship to last 3 lifetimes. Don’t entice him into anymore.”

I pinched Roelle’s fingers. Dragon snouts were very beaklike and in my miniature size, I was quite capable of inflicting a painful pinch.

“Ouch!” Roelle cried and slapped the bag, knocking me into a glass vial of something stinky like toadswort. It made me dizzy.

“Peww,” Rinlon gagged. “What is that? Goblin farts?”

“Toadswort for mothballs,” she answered sucking her finger. “It does reek. I better go dump out my bag.” She leaned out the window that was over the head of the cliffs and emptied the bag, me included. I zipped off in circles as if I was drunk although that was another cool thing about Dragons—we could drink whole hogsheads and not get drunk.

Rinlon chased them all out of the tower and I followed at a discreet distance. No one screamed or pointed at me. If they did see me, they assumed I was a bird. I confess it was easier to maneuver my way to the palace and I could go places I hadn’t been able to before.

Zippping down the main corridor, I just missed flying up my grandfather’s tail. He whipped around, his hand on his sword, Grayswandir. He looked menacing, not the handsome laid-back Prince I knew not so well.

“Who’s there?” He announced and tingles of magic lifted my wings. I hovered silently in the shadows over his head. “Damn,” he muttered. “I’m feeling Shadows.” He shoved Grayswandir back into its scabbard and departed towards his rooms. I continued towards Roelle’s room.

She had a small suite of rooms off the Queen’s, as she was one of Vialle’s ladies-in-waiting.

Born and raised in Rebma, Amber sister city under the ocean, Vialle's suite had a decided aquatic theme. Pale green and turquoise, restful and calm, Roelle's was quite nicely done to complement the Queen's.

I made entry through the transom window and perched on the canopy top of the huge bed covered in a quilt of scarlet and gold dragons. In fact, the entire room had a dragon motif except for the portraits of Random, Vialle and Roelle's parents, the Baron and Baroness of Loest. Even stranger, a half-finished portrait was on an easel next to the balcony doors and covered with a sheet.

Curious, I flew over and tugged at it. With my mouth agape, I stared at a portrait of me, half-human, half Dragon in a setting as if I were a knight saving a damsel.

The door slammed and Roelle yelled at me. Startled, I let go and nearly tumbled to the floor. She swatted at me with her empty bag. I was curiously agile but furiously defensive, protesting all the way, as I dodged her increasingly accurate swipes. She connected and slung shot me across the room to bounce off her mirror. Cracking into a thousand pieces, I was carried to the floor in a barrage of little glass daggers. They hurt. I lay there, stunned, in pain and bleeding. She threw herself to the floor on her knees and carefully picked me up. My long neck and head hung limp. "Oh beards of Hernin," she whispered. "Raven. I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" She carried me to her bed and gently began to pull up the splinters, applying healing lotions to the cuts. She was crying as her hands filled with my blue blood. "Raven, what have I done?"

"Get Marcus," I whispered, trying to pull out a particularly deep dagger that had pierced my chest.

"Can I leave you?"

"He's near. Just yell out the window for him." I closed my eye and concentrated on calling him, too. The urgency in our summons brought him at a run and he came into her room without knocking. After one look at me, he pulled out his magister's bag concocted a healing potion that he carefully poured down my gullet and on the wounds. I felt dizzy and then sleepy.

He ordered Roelle to make me a nest and gently placed me on a bed of soft wool. "He needs to rest and let the potions work. Roelle. Tell me what happened?"

Shamefaced, she explained and to his demand, she showed him the portrait under the cloth.

"I see," he commented and placed a chair under her doorknob. "We need to sit with him tonight. In case the spell reverts and he grows larger." He peered in at me. "Raven, how do you feel?"

"Sleepy," I muttered wanting to stretch but it hurt too much. She stroked my chest with her finger and the rhythm relaxed me further. I yawned a puff of green smoke that escaped me.

"Sleep, my Dragon Sprite," she murmured. I closed my eye, dreamed that I traveled through the deep Forest of Arden with my hand tucked into hers, that I ran on two strong legs, and was wholly human.

In my dreams, I remembered the taste and feel of a woman's lips and the play of human muscles, mortal frailties. Although in my Dragon scales and bones, I was one of the most powerful creatures known in existence, I wanted my old form back with a passion I'd forgotten since I'd roamed Amber's skies.

In the morning, I opened my eye, stretched and flapped my wings to stir the air, waking my two erstwhile guardians and friends.

“Marcus? Roelle?” I asked climbing to the top of the chest and perching on the rim. “Are you awake?”

“Aye,” both agreed.

“I’m in.” I told them to their stunned faces. I was equally stunned when they explained they had no idea I needed convincing to join them on this quest.

The first thing I wanted to know was whether Marcus could spell me back to my original size as being bird sized was a definite danger. I missed my forty-foot splendor.

We exited Roelle’s room (with me tucked inside her bag once more) to commandeer the north tower and Marcus put me back to normal. My wounds were gone with them, the soreness and redness. I flapped my wings and soared up into the skies, rapidly disappearing from sight.

Chapter 3

Before I had traveled a league or found breakfast, I was dive bombed by a particularly ugly stone gargoyle and I didn’t mean ugly as in appearance although he was that, too. Murphy had found me and he was in a vicious mood. Brought on no doubt, by my disappearance and lack of response to Random’s summons.

He had the power to make my existence miserable even in this form. Although I could dispatch him with one bite, he wasn’t afraid of me. He landed on my back, reached forward to grab my eye horns and steered me back to the Castle. His heels dug into the muscles where my wings joined my shoulder and using them as spurs he goaded me to drop heavily into the bailey. I was so pissed I didn’t check to make sure it was empty first and nearly squashed a pair of practicing armymen.

Murphy thumped the back of my head and he used his stone form to do it. It hurt. Rather than admit pain in front of the guards, I turned my head around and snarled. He wasn’t impressed at my show of teeth and I wasn’t about to break any on his stone fists. I sulked.

“Good boy,” he said flatly and dropped to the ground reverting to his gray humanlike skin and form. He was still ugly but in the way that a beautiful sculpted piece of art could be hideous as well as beautiful. “You dismiss your Liege Lord’s summons, Raven?” He asked in his gravelly voice. “Have you so little respect for your father? Your grandsire and great uncle?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, Murphy. I remember Royal protocol. Look, I was busy elsewhere. I was on my way as soon as I could. You know I only move about during daylight hours.”

“I’ve seen you at night, flying over the realm,” he pointed out.

“It’s not the physical me.”

His mouth dropped open. “You speak!”

“Oh yeah. Marcus found some kind of spell and fixed that. I don’t need Ghostwheel.”

“That’s good. Merlin is having some issues with Khafra and has sent Ghost to spy. I’ll be taking over for him.”

“Great,” I said dryly. “Do I get to piss on my own?”

“Do dragons pee?”

I lifted my leg and left a huge puddle in the bailey’s sand that stubbornly refused to drain. I would have pissed on him if I thought I could get away with it. “What’s this secret mission that the King wants me to do?” I asked.

Murphy grinned. “Secret mission? What gave you that idea? He wants you and me to fly out to the Graylin Peaks and survey the mines for bandits.”

“Graylin Peaks! That’s a week’s journey even by my wings!” I protested.

“We’d better get going then.”

“Murphy, I can’t,” I started, thinking furiously. “I can’t be that far away from the Unicorn’s Bower at night for a week, let alone the time to fly out and back plus however long the actual mission would take.”

In truth, I had not been away from the Castle or the woods for longer than a night’s journey. I wasn’t sure what would happen out of reach of the Unicorn’s magic. Her magic kept the dragon’s body alive and me in it.

“Oh,” he said thoughtfully. “Well, let’s go ask her.”

“Huh?” I asked stupidly.

“You can talk to her, right? She’s your mum? Let’s go ask her.”

I heard the approaching footsteps of a group of people and one I recognized among all others. I turned around (carefully) and bowed to the Queen and her husband, the merry red haired, short jokester called Random. Vialle kissed me on the snout, her aim unerring even though she was blind.

“Raven, my dear. How are you?”

“In the pink,” I said but refrained from smiling as imagining that was a scary sight. She laughed and I caught the image of a great terrible lizard bedecked in pink scales.

“Your Majesty, surely not a lizard,” I protested, cringing. With my luck, she’d sculpt me in that shape and I’d become a household staple like a saltshaker.

“Raven,” Random snickered and then frowned. “Murphy, I thought you’d be getting ready for your trip to Graylin by now.”

“Seems there’s a problem, your Majesty,” Murphy started his gray eyes narrowed and suspicious. I don’t know how he knew when I was up to something, but he always did. I couldn’t get away with anything.

“Raven says he can’t leave the environs of the Grove for more than a day.”

“Oh.” They exchanged looks. “Perhaps the salt mines? There was talk of a riot. Perhaps the sight of a Black Dragon will quell their larcenous desires?”

“We’ll see to it, Majesty.”

“After that, the Dresden Plainses need to be fired. Perhaps Raven could see to that as well?”

For the next two weeks, the King and Murphy had something for me to do every day. I wasn't exempt from their chores until it was time to lay my head down at night and sleep. I was not sure why dragons needed to sleep unless it was because my magical body needed to replenish its 'whatever' but as soon as the sun went down, the urge to hibernate became a powerful compulsion.

I didn't get to see Marcus or Roelle. Not even when it was time to eat. Murphy made sure I ate on the wing or in the forest. There was no shortage of deer and he showed me plains of huge creatures like buffalo but with horns as large as a Texas steer. Colored piebald and tasted like chicken.

I expelled so much fire that I actually ran out and developed a craving for blue stained dirt that I honed in on with my dragon radar. It was found in several spots on the mountain slopes; after I gorged on it, I belched flames and farted explosions of pure methane that ignited at the slightest spark. Luckily, dragons don't get heartburn. I called it bluestone and Murphy named it firestone although in texture, it was more like dirt. It tasted like candy and I ate it until I was suddenly sick of the flavor.

I was supposed to ask the Unicorn if I could leave Amber's borders but every time I sank into sleep, I only slept. I didn't roam her bower, as her companion- it was almost as if she were avoiding me. I was afraid of her answer, afraid it just might be true and I would not be able to leave with Marcus and Roelle.

I'd heard that she was going home for a month as the last of her seven brothers was being married and that Marcus was going as her escort. Along with a select group of guards and King's emissaries. Random was very conscious of his duties to his barons and lords and would never slight them by sending only a gift. I wanted to send something but had nothing. No dragon hoard, gems, or booty.

"Murphy?" I turned to the gargoyle perched on a rocky outthrust somewhere to the south of the Forest of Arden. I'd been pulling up two hundred foot trees for Julian's ship builders and was tired. Amazed that I *could* get tired. Of course, I *had* denuded a good portion of the woods.

"What?" he asked lazily. He wasn't tired. He'd spent the morning on my back, letting me do the work, the flying, lifting, hauling and the stacking, etc., etc., etc. while he sat on his ass pointing.

"I want to send a gift to Roelle's brother for his wedding."

"So?"

"I have nothing."

"You have this," he flicked at my scales. Black and hard as diamonds. "Four would be enough for a shield. A Dragon Shield would be a wondrous thing to a young knight. And you shed them frequently."

"I do?"

"Haven't you seen the pages scurrying round picking them up? And the Dragon Guards all have armor with pieces on their mail. It is a great honor to own one of your bits of dandruff." He mocked me and I scratched at my jaw with a hind foot, nearly knocking him off the rock with my tail.

“I thought more like a gemstone that he could sell,” I mused. “But scales would work, too. I wonder if I could pull one off.”

Delicately, I inserted a clawed finger under a nicely curved piece on my flank that was nearly as large as a shield itself. Arrggh. It was like pulling off a fingernail. Maybe not. “I think I’ll wait for them to fall off,” I mumbled.

“Dragons molt only a few times in their lifetimes, Raven. They would be extremely vulnerable in that state. Easy to kill. Your major scales-those over your breastplate and organs would be the last to fall.”

“How do you know all this when even I don’t?”

“I’m a gargoyle, Raven. First cousin to a dragon on our world.”

“There are no dragons on our world,” I said bitterly. “Not here, not on earth or anywhere. I’m destined to be alone forever.”

“Feeling sorry for yourself, Raven?” he questioned. “Perhaps, you have too much time on your hands. Julian asked if you could lend a hand with the harbor. It needs dredging and I told him you would be happy to help.”

“No,” I said softly. Then, more loudly. “NO! No, I’m not dredging the harbor, I’m not cutting down ship’s masts and I’m not burning off last year’s grass and weeds! I’m a bloody *Dragon* for God’s sake, not a fricking plow horse!”

I flew off back to the forest outside the castle and went to the Unicorn’s Bower to sulk. Once inside, not even Murphy could enter and I was blessedly alone. Since it was still daylight, I did not sleep nor was I bound by her enchantment.

She came to me, delicate, ethereal but all the same deadly, that sharp spiral horn ready to impale any threat.

“Mother,” I spoke and she sat back as she heard my voice as well as my thoughts. “Mother, what are the restrictions placed on this form?”

She dissolved and became the human woman I barely remembered from my childhood. “Raven, you are partially correct in your assumptions. Darkness is always a hazard for you as that is when my power wanes most and you are weakest. But your Dragon body is born of the Pattern as well as the Logrus so wherever it exists so do you exist. You will be able to function in darkness if your desire is strong enough. Where is it you wish to go?”

“Marcus has found, maybe, a way for me to become human again.”

“You were never human, Raven. You were born of Chaos and Amber. You only lived on the shadow earth but are not of it,” she returned softly.

“I want to be human, mother,” I said thinking of Roelle and her kisses. Of the portrait of me in her bedroom. I turned my agonized eye towards her face. “There’s not even hope for me as a Dragon! I’m one-of-a-kind! I can’t even find a mate!” She hugged me and to my surprise, her arms went around my chest, her head was tucked into my chin.

“I hold you here, Raven,” she soothed. “Here, you’re forever as I created you, as perfect as you ever were.”

“But, I’m not alive!” I cried out and left her. The moment my body left her bower, I became

the Black Dragon again.

Chapter 4

Midweek found me hiding from everyone, not an easy thing to do when you're a forty-foot Dragon. I solved the problem by convincing Marcus to shrink me down again so I could escape everyone's attention. I found out when both were leaving for the trip to her brother's wedding and sneaked a place among her things. The palace was in an uproar, after two days of my absence both Murphy and the King were frantic. Even Vialle could not hear my heart beats. As a bird sized Dragon, they must have been as rapid as a bird's.

To our dismay, Murphy ordered the wagon train emptied and searched even when Rinlon pointed out that there was no way I could hide in it. He even sent a magic diviner to test the animals to see if I'd been magicked to look like a horse. As if.

After a further fruitless day of searching, the party was allowed to leave with Murphy flying guard overhead. I stayed hidden until he left us after another day's travel. By the second night, I was dizzy from thirst and hunger. Barely managed to claw my way out of the barrel of oats that the wagon carried for the horses.

My ears heard the squeaking of mice below me and I set about hunting down a score of the tasty tidbits. At least in my smaller size I was more able to feed myself. Thus fortified, I zipped around the campsite stretching my wings.

The party consisted of two wagons, three drivers and four grooms to care for the two teams. A squad of guards, Roelle, Marcus and a valet/body servant for her. As if she needed help with her hair and toilette but she was, after all a Baron's daughter and would be treated as such. They had erected two tents, one for Roelle and the other for gear, cooking, saddles and equipment with the men sleeping under their own bedrolls. Which made it easy to reach Roelle but harder to associate with Marcus.

He was hugging one of the four campfires and doing most of the cooking. It was an orderly camp and even though Amber was safe from bandits and skullduggery, the Sergeant-at-arms had a patrol marching around the camp's boundaries. Between the bows, swords and pikes, I doubted anything but a Chaos Demon or Dragon could get through our lines.

I flew in the tent's smoke hole and nearly suffocated myself. My coughing fit brought the guard to Roelle's flap to inquire if she was all right.

"I swallowed wrong," she told the young soldier and let me land on her forearm. I folded my wings neatly alongside my body and preened. She brought me over to her cot where the oil lamp glowed and hissed.

"Where have you been? Marcus and I were worried sick. No one's seen you in three days," she whispered.

"I was hiding in the barrel of oats. Dry and dusty, too. I nearly died of hunger and thirst," I complained.

"Have you eaten?" She pointed to a bowl of stew and I picked through it pulling out the chunks of rabbit. Marcus' rabbit stew was delicious. I ate until my belly bulged and I burped.

"You little hog," she laughed. "You're going to bust open."

“You should try going without food, Roelle,” I snapped. “I did. Many times, my master starved me into compliance.”

“I didn’t know, Raven,” she said sadly. “You never told me what happened to you, you never had time. I asked your father and Prince Corwin but both of them told me to ask you, that if you wanted me to know you would tell me.”

“It was horrible, Roelle. He did things to me no human should have to experience.” I shut my memories on that segment of my life for that person no longer lived. “How do you plan on leaving your father’s estates and traveling to Khafra?”

“We thought you could Trump us there.”

I flew up to the roof vent on the thermal from her stove. Studied the inside of her tent, which was set up almost like a mini cabin. She even had a portable commode whereas the men had to make do with the woods. She’d packed light for herself but the wagon train was loaded with wedding gifts and would make a tempting target for any bandits. She was dressed in sensible riding breeches, leather jerkin and vest and I’d seen her wearing a fur-trimmed cape on the frosty mornings.

“Where are we headed?” I asked. Even though I had flown over every inch of Amber, I didn’t know the lay of the land. I knew vaguely that her father’s barony lay somewhere to the west over the Beautiful Mountains, the direct opposite from the Forest of Arden.

Roelle got up, went to a leather satchel that was draped over a chair and pulled out a neatly folded map on vellum. She spread it flat on her table and used the bowl of stew, her oil lamp and a shoe to hold it down.

“We’re here,” she pointed to a valley on the far right and I could just see the borders of Amber’s city. Arden was just a few trees at the far left of the map. “The Plains of Argose separate the first ridges of the mountains. The river Aar that we’ll cross at Dindeen. The towns of Argent, Vanadium and Elthold. The Marketplace and the Horse Clans. Lastly, the Barony of Loest. It’ll be a two-week journey unless we push it.”

“I can’t Trump us there because I’ve never been, haven’t seen it or even own a set of Trumps,” I answered her first question at last. “I don’t have any pockets in my Dragon suit.”

She laughed. “So I see. Nor in your birthday suit. Don’t worry, Raven. We’ll figure out how to fix you.”

“I hope so, Roelle,” I sighed and searched for a safe place to sleep. Scooted up onto the tent flap when someone knocked on the tent pole. The flap opened to reveal Marcus with his cape over his shoulders.

“Come in, Marcus,” Roelle said rolling her eyes. He threw himself into her chair and babbled away until she told him to be quiet so she could finally understand him.

“Where is he? I know he’s here, I sensed the magic he leaves behind. I’m worried; I haven’t seen him in days.”

“Raven,” she called and I flew down to land on the table in front of him. He noticed the map.

“Oh. Were you showing him the way to Khafra? It’s not on this map. Where have you been hiding, Raven? Have you eaten? Where are you staying? You can’t let anyone see you or they’ll

send you back.”

“Marcus, no one can send me anywhere. Have you forgotten I’m a dragon?” I returned hopping from foot to foot.

“You’re a pint-size Dragon, Raven,” he pointed out. “And not exactly scary or omnipotent at this size.” I bit his finger and he yelped, knocking over the lamp, which I caught before he could set the place on fire.

“Idiot!” I hissed and blew a flame hot enough to scorch his shirt. “Great partners in crime, you two. I’m lucky if I make it out of the district. Now, I’m going to sleep. Try not to burn the tent down, incite a riot or spell my whereabouts to the guard.”

“Where are you going to sleep, Raven?” Roelle asked.

“Someplace warm.” I snuggled my way under her covers to the foot of her cot, turned a few times and made myself a nest. I heard Marcus’ grumblings, Roelle’s light laughter and shut everything out as I slipped into a delicious languor. I didn’t make more than a mild protest when two cold feet stuck themselves onto my back. I wasn’t too long after that my body heat rapidly warmed her to toasty. She didn’t move much and I slept tightly wound into a coil so that I resembled nothing so much as a ball of black scales. Not that anyone would catch me sleeping.

I woke before anyone else. Except perhaps for the two guards whose turn it was to patrol. Just before the sun rose and too early to be called dawn, I pushed my way up past Roelle’s spread-eagled form and went hunting for breakfast.

I was large enough to take down birds and small enough to worry about owls but even though I saw them, my smell or strangeness warned them away. I dined on mourning dove and woodcock, even a smallish turkey although I had to struggle to lift it.

Coming back to camp, I watched from a branch atop a lonesome pine as they began to stir. First up were the teamsters, feeding and caring for their stock. Next, the company clerk who whipped up the fires and began breakfast after putting tea and coffee onto boil. Last, to stir were the soldiers who had pulled first guard duty. I was surprised to see both Marcus and Roelle up at first light. He busied himself with chores, carrying water buckets, kindling and buckets of oats before he went to help cook.

Roelle’s maid tried to help her dress but she sent the woman away to do her own needs. When I was sure she was alone, I flew down to land on her arm.

“Good morning, Raven,” she greeted and stretched. “Are you hungry?”

“Good morning, Roelle,” I said enjoying the sight of her supple body in linen shift, bare feet and unbound hair. She looked fresh and dewy, heavy eyed and sensual. I wanted desperately to kiss her. She planted a feathery touch on my chest before I could blink. “That’s for keeping my feet toasty warm last night, Raven. I’m starving. Care to see what’s for breakfast?”

“Cold rabbit stew, probably,” I grinned, my heart as light as a wizard’s promise.

“Do you mean to show yourself?”

“You think they’ll recognize me or think I’m some strange forest bird?” I countered.

“Wait until we’re a week out. It’ll be too late to return you by then. You can ride on my saddlebow under my cloak. Or do you prefer to fly?”

“Let me scout around,” I decided. “I can keep an eye out ahead for you; make sure we’re safe from any bandits. Although, the roads have been safe for months since Murphy and I decimated that band of highwaymen.”

“You and Murphy have made Amber safe for all her travelers,” she agreed.

“Are you excited to be going home, Roelle?” I was surprised when her face fell and she hesitated.

“You know my youngest brother is the last to marry.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I fear that my parents will set their sights on me next,” she whispered. The thought twisted my stomach. I did not like the idea.

“Who? Anyone in particular?” I knew such marriages were usually for political gain and arranged. Although no one would force her but her parents could make her life miserable if they so choose. Vialle’s marriage to Random had been arranged. Just lucky that they’d fallen in love. I wanted that for me, I wanted to experience everything that someone my age would have been destined to experience. All that had been taken from me from me almost at my very birth.

“Roelle, no one will make you marry anyone you don’t love. I swear it on my Dragon blood and bones,” I bowed and such was the magic of that vow that it rippled forth throughout the tent, the camp and the clearing. Everyone felt it and as the sounds of the camp ceased, Roelle turned frightened eyes on me.

“Everyone will know magic is done here, Raven.”

Marcus bolted into the tent. “Raven? Did you do that?” More faces joined him before I could fly off and surprised voices raised in tone. They proclaimed Marcus as the wielder of spells assuming he had conjured me to his whim. I let him take the credit; it was as good an explanation that I could’ve come up with and so I rode on the wagons, on Roelle’s saddlebow and flew rounds to help the soldiers.

Chapter 5

The trip was pleasant enough, our pace restricted to what the draft team could pull in one day. Some five leagues in all. We could take time out at evening to fish the streams and walk the laybys off the main road. Marcus and a guard remained close while Roelle picked herbs to dry for her apothecary jars.

Some nights, Marcus cooked for us. His fresh brook trout with wild fennel was divine and I ate enough for two grown men. When they complained that I hadn’t left much for them to sample, I went fishing and dropped four fat trout at their feet. That shut them up. I took to supplementing our meals with turkey, pheasant, rabbit and woodcock caught in my taloned hands.

The week passed quickly and I enjoyed the time spent without the constant supervision and the myriad chores that my keepers had kept me occupied in doing so that my mind had no time to brood.

Roelle’s mount was her favorite, a pale rose-colored gelding that took my fluttering, coming and goings with equal aplomb. I was resting on the saddle when the first people started to walk

into sight, sharing the road with us. Farmers and the like on the way to market.

They studied the men's livery and recognized it, which brought smiles to their faces. They were obviously glad to see Amber's military presence. In fact, they said so chattering with the guard and asking many questions especially when they saw me. I kept quiet. It was bad enough that they saw me at all, let alone heard me speak. I wasn't exactly an everyday item.

Offers came to spend the night in town at one of the many comfortable inns and to sample food cooked inside instead of out. I thought that maybe they were hoping we had goods to sell. Roelle just smiled and said we were on our way home for a wedding.

I was nearly as excited about seeing another village instead of trees and woods that I fairly buzzed like a beecatcher. We came into town on a road that met at a cross junction, cobblestoned and guttered so that the rain drew off to the sides and kept the lane dry and mud free.

Flowers had been planted in half barrels along the way and for the last mile into town. The village itself was pretty with neat little two story cottages that met over the avenues and connected both above and below. Trees were part of the sidewalks, which were bricked or cobblestoned. In short, it resembled those quaint Swiss villages seen on our travels through Europe. It smelled good, too. Fresh baked bread, cinnamon rolls and pork roasting on a spit.

Our guide drove the wagons through to the hostlers and put the animals up before he took us all to a charming inn whose curtains blew in the slight breeze.

Roelle chattered happily saying she couldn't wait for a bath and to wash her hair. Marcus rolled his eyes and ask if I wanted to visit a few taverns. Remembering the last time we'd done so, I hesitated.

"Oh come on, you're a Dragon," he pouted. "What could happen?"

I looked at the curious crowd that were eyeballing me and climbed up to hide in the folds of his hood. "Okay then, Roelle. We're off for a pint or two. When you're done bathing, let's go eat."

"As if you'll be sober enough," she snorted and entered the doors of the Jolly Maiden. "Meet me back here at dark," she called out from the second story window. "Our rooms are 2B and 2C."

"Got it, see you," I called and pinched his ear.

"Owww!" He complained. "What did you do that for?"

"Stop being a baby," I said and he stomped off to find the nearest tavern. The crowd of kids followed us right inside pestering Marcus with questions about me. Was I a pet? What was I called? Were there more of me and how much did I cost. Would he sell me? What did I eat? One little girl wanted to know if I was dangerous. Marcus answered all their queries patiently and lied on every one. Unfortunately, he made me even more rare and exotic than I already was. The only thing he didn't tell them was that I could talk or that I was a human stuck in a Dragon form or was a real Dragon. He told them that I was a wyvern, a recent hatchling from the shadow called Hades. This was where parents told their children they would go if they misbehaved. The land of goblins, orcs and shadow creatures, which they were well aware, were real, as Eric had opened Amber up to them. Demons drawn in by shadow storms caused by a blight on the Primal Pattern, they had wreaked havoc on the peaceful villagers until my grandfather Corwin had staged an ill-

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