

A Dragon for Amberlinn

By Sarah Macht

"Right foot, drag the branch,
Left foot, drag the branch.
There you go.
Right foot, drag...oops!"

My long linen underdress was frozen to my legs and the outer woolen tunic kept tangling up and tripping me into the snow. I supported myself on the broken branch I was bringing in for firewood and slowly pulled myself out of the heavy snow. Who would have imagined snow this early? I had missed all the signs.

Last year at this time, I was riding to hounds with Father, Baron Starlin himself, and the rest of his court. We had many servants who kept the chamber fires burning or changed my heavy embroidered gowns or filled my bath with steaming, scented water. In my new life, I searched for wood and made the fire, usually smoky and inadequate. I had two scratchy tunics and one under-tunic washed with home-made ash soap in a bucket of water I had dragged up from a stream. bordered the forest clearing where I lived. It was much more difficult to collect and drag in wood for my voracious fireplace.

Physical work was alien to me. I was used to having servants for mundane tasks and using magic to accomplish esoteric ones. There were no servants here and I had promised not to use magic to help myself for an entire year. My mother had taught me to use magic. I missed her even more by not using the skills we had shared. I staggered in the snow, remembering my father and his slyness.

I hope you're enjoying this, Father, I'm not. I know if I hadn't been trying to trick you, I wouldn't be in this mess and if I wasn't so proud, - and tired - I'd call up my magic to get me out of this snow and back to where it's warmer. I'm just as proud as you. We're proud because elves were the first-born in this world –even when the dragons say they were here first. We're proud we can manipulate elements and create magical spells. I'm proud I've lasted this long on my own. I've been happier here than in that cold pretentious family estate. I'll be the one laughing when I return for my reward. I can do this!"

Well, not really. Can't breathe. So cold...

I must have fallen asleep because someone started to shake me and rub cold snow on my face. It stung and I sputtered and complained. Two voices argued over me and my head spun when I was lifted up and placed on a horse. My hands tried to hold on to the mane but it was too sparse so I clung to a boney neck.

"Can you hold on?" It was a man's voice. He spoke the Common Tongue but without the accent of my people. Too tired to be afraid even though this man is Human. They rarely traveled to the lands of Faery and my father only has diplomatic dealings with them.

"Poor little maid, you look like frozen sunshine." A warm hand brushed the icy hair out of my face that had escaped the thick blonde braid dripping down my back. His hand brushed against my pointed ears, but he didn't seem surprised. Suddenly, I was enclosed in the warmth of a thick cloak, smelling of woodsmoke and horse. Wonderful. Even though I was shaking, I could feel the warmth. The man got up behind me on the saddle pad and wrapped one of his arms around my waist. I was too tired to object but I must have stiffened. He started talking and talking, almost babbling and I relaxed.

"Gerda the herbwitch told me she had sold her place to a rare maid out of a ferlie's tale. It won't take long to get your little frozen ladyship back there.

"Amberlinn, just Amberlinn is my name.

"Well, Amberlinn, my name is Gwilym, I'm one of the Borderlands Guardians. You can thank my horse Beauty for finding you. That reminds me of when I was lost one time...you do like stories, right?"

The horse began coughing loudly.

"Once upon a time, a young apprentice was lost in a deep dark forest..."

My mind wandered. I lived in a deep, dark forest. A quiet one. Not that there weren't any sounds.

The birds woke me up in the morning and the trees rustled and animals called out but it was a peaceful quiet without people talking or arguing or bragging and showing off.

"...The boy wandered through the forest wondering why there were no birds or animals. He was more curious than afraid because he could feel something important waited for him and needed

his help. He walked deeper into the heart of the forest, marveling at trees the size of huts that blocked out the sun. Even the air smelled dark and forbidding..."

I had been forbidden to live away from the Starlin court. Father wanted his perfect, beautiful daughter at his side

"...smoke swirled around the cave from the injured dragon. The boy hesitated going near him until he saw the tears running like black diamonds from the magical creature's eyes. He wasn't very old either. His family was gone. He felt all alone. He had just earned his name 'Storm Dancer' and he said it softly out loud when he thought he was going to be put killed. "Storm Dancer," said the boy, "I hear you. My family is gone. I think we can be friends. Neither one of us has to be alone." So the apprentice never returned back to his cruel master..."

My father could be cruel. Daily, we watched the knights training their squires and I learned to never show emotions when young boys were punished. If I did, he would have my nurse whip me. I had to smile graciously when minstrels sang praises in court and when knights bragged about their prowess. I hated bragging. I learned to manipulate my father once I had learned he only valued material possessions and the admiration of his peers and courtiers. I was only one of the many possessions he liked to display.

Often I felt like I was two people. I had to hide in my herb garden each day when I was supposed to be napping. It was so good to get away from I can be just Amberlinn here, I thought, not Lady Amberlinn, followed by maids and attendants and fawned upon by courtiers and knights. Here I can pretend I'm living in the country. I can read my parchments about herbs and fruits and vegetables without Father frowning and telling me they're not appropriate for someone of our rank.

"My dear," he said when he saw what I was reading in the library. "It may be helpful to learn about vegetation in order to supervise servants but do not carry it to extremes. Why not wear your new blue gown and accompany me on a visit to your cousins. His majesty has received good news from the wars. The Frost Giants have stopped their attacks. Seems the humans are helping our armies, although I can't see anything good out of consorting with their kind."

He wouldn't see anything good about me living at my own home, either. Maybe life would have been better if mother hadn't died in the magical backlash of another sorcerer's spell. I just knew I had to get away from them all. I planned and dreamed. A small manor house of twenty rooms, only ten servants and a stable and cowshed would be perfect. There would be orchards and gardens and the forest surrounding it.

The big problem was anything so isolated would have to be built in the Borderlands and, in Father's opinion, that was too close to the dwellings of humans. The Lore-masters called them the "Seconds".

Humans arrived here on their ships long after the Elves and the dragons, unicorns, griffins and goblins made these lands their home.

Magic frightened the newcomers and they settled away from Faery. Most of them lived in primitive settlements but their nobility tried to copy our lifestyle by building castles and developing courts. Contact had been forbidden under their old king but he had died during the wars and his son, King Gregory, was trying to re-establish communication. My father's cronies and the magical creatures were reacting with fear and suspicion.

I was eleven before I found out father's personal reason for prejudice. His beloved second cousin, Amarlys, had run away with a human man. I would have to be very clever to get away to my own refuge. My official Eighteenth Birthday Celebration would be my only chance for freedom and my own life. It is an honored custom among my people in Faery to grant one solemn wish on a child's eighteenth birthday. Supposedly, it grants luck to the new adult but it mostly brought in money to jewelers, dressmakers, armorers, and horsebreeders. The higher the station in life, the bigger the wish and so, everyone speculated what big request I'd have for Father.

The Baron himself was curious. He would point to a new foal and ask, "A horse for Amberlinn, better yet, your own stable with hunters and carriage horses, bays, blacks, chestnuts and dappled greys?"

He followed me into my herb garden one day. "Would you like more gardens? I'll surround you with blossoms of scarlet and carnelian, mauve and blush pink. Is it a young lord from Court?"

All I could do was shake my head. All I could think of was - I want to be away from you. I want my own life, not more horses or flowers or constant parties with boring admirers. I don't want to be bargained into a marriage.

The day before my birthday, Father gave me an amber ring, after flourishing it for everyone to see at the main table. "Amber for my Amberlinn, a treasure that belonged to your mother. What treasure do you want for your birthday?" I would not answer him. I had to wait for my chance.

The great day arrived. I was now an adult and showered with presents, spells and sweet sentiments. My maids laced me into a stiff satin gown the same shade of amber as my ring. The bodice, sleeves and hemline were so heavily decorated with topaz, crystals and gold embroidery that I could only walk stiffly.

I watched everyone eat course after course of elaborate dishes at the banquet.

My throat was too dry to swallow. Father motioned for silence. It was so quiet the dogs could be heard whining for their scraps by the tables. He smiled and began to brag about the House of Starlin.

"We have contributed sorcerers, warriors, and beautiful women to Faery. Now another scion of our House takes her place as an adult. We celebrate her future with the granting of her dearest desire. What is your wish, Amberlinn?"

"My dearest wish is to live in a simple country estate of my own in the Borderlands." The reaction was instantaneous. The massive main table, shaped by magic from a giant tree felled in my grandfather's time, began to tremble and creak from strain. My cousins, at the table, pushed their chairs away from it.

Father continued to stand with his palms resting on it. The dogs put their tails between their legs and ran out of the hall. As I watched my father's expression, I envied the dogs. He rarely showed anger because everyone was too eager to keep him happy. Seeing the purple coloring his face, reminded me of his grandfather's legendary anger when Cousin Amarlys had asked to become a knight and use a sword.

Her escapee had been locked away in a tower until she'd run away with a human and no one would ever say what had happened to her. As my father's face went back to its usual florid red, I wondered what I was going to suffer.

When he looked at me, he didn't bother to display affection. The pretense I was anything more than a possession was over. The pretty toy had rejected him. His voice was steady and cold. "My resourceful daughter has surprised us with her request. We had no idea she was unhappy with all we have given her. If she wants to live far away in the wilderness enjoying the simple life, so be it. But she will have to prove it is no idle wish. For one year, Amberlinn may live in a simple dwelling, on her own in the Borderlands, and learn how others live that life without magic and without asking for the help of elf or human. If she manages to stay that year, she will have earned her country estate. If she does not succeed, she will married to the lord of my choosing."

I smiled, not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing my anger. There was only one choice. Without showing any of the emotions I was feeling, I changed into more practical clothes and was sent away in a pack horse loaded with supplies. I rode off to my new life without a backward glance.

For a cycle of the moon, I traveled and camped. I was a terrible cook. An entire year on my own. An entire year of eating my own cooking! It took another cycle before I reached the end of my journey. The horse stopped at a clearing in the woods next to a small hill. He refused to move, no matter how hard I kicked him. He must have been be-spelled to take me there.

An impossibly dirty old woman came out of the hill. There was a hut dug out of the embankment with three sides of earth and a roof of green sod. The scraggly lean-to shelter attached to it must have been housing for the cow staked away from the garden area. The woman grinned at me from a toothless mouth. "You're the one the unicorn told me about, the one fighting with her Pa. I'm Gerda, herbwitch for these parts. You're supposed to give me money for my place. Nice, isn't it, but these old bones won't mind living in the village in the winter. Take good care of my gardens, dearie. I'll leave some of my herblore manuscripts for you."

I surveyed my "simple country estate" with a resigned spirit. Father had more of a sense of humor than I had ever granted him. I unloaded the horse which immediately ran away. Great, I was stuck with a cow for companionship. A cow that lowered her horns whenever I approached her. I threw myself on the ground and cried until I slept. When I awoke, it was dusk and the cow was nudging my arm. That first evening I was kicked twice and spilled all the milk. Supper was dried apples cooked to mush in a thick pot hanging over the fireplace. I pulled down the bed frame attached to a wall and laid the grass and leaf filled mattress over the heavy rope cording.

I tried to sleep in the smoke filled room that smelled of earth, herbs, straw and damp cow. The cow woke me up the next morning by kicking the wall between us and bellowing. I thought fondly of beef stew and staggered up to take care of her. I soon learned she would twitch her tail a certain way before kicking and she was very fond of having her forehead scratched.

After achieving a truce with the cow, I concentrated on the herblore notes. I knew the magical purposes of herbs, now I experimented with making my food taste better. One of the gardens turned out to have vegetables in it. I had never seen raw turnips, carrots, squash and beans, much less cared for them, but hunger is an amazing teaching tool. Wandering in the woods, I discovered nuts and berries.

Most important, I discovered a sense of inner peace. I could take naps in the woods and listen to the birds and animals as they chatted to each other in their daily lives. During one nap, a loud but melodious voice interrupted my rest.

"Your father will not be pleased that you are listening to the lower animals." I rolled over to face a marbled curved horn attached to a unicorn so white, he glistened like the surface of a pearl. "You're beautiful!" I gasped. Unicorns kept to themselves and were as rarely seen as dragons.

"Yes, I am. It can be a burden but we magical creatures learn to live with it." He curved his neck so that his silky mane rippled. "You need to learn your proper place, young Amberlinn." I eyed the sharp point of the horn and wisely didn't say anything. Unicorns have bad tempers when crossed.

"The Baron Starlin naturally asked me to protect you during this foolhardy experiment. I can not say I am pleased to be this close to human habitations. Their knights, especially, are violent and aggressive. I will drop in to check on you from time to time. It is, after all, my duty to care for young maidens, even ungrateful ones. You would not ever see a unicorn's offspring behaving so poorly." He sniffed and faded away in a blur of light.

"Snob," I said, "You didn't even tell me your name. Of all the pretentious, overbearing, pompous, opinionated...just like my father. You're two of a kind!"

The cow never mentioned her opinions other than feeding, watering and milking her. I enjoyed listening to the wildlife. One morning, I woke up to silence, darkness, and freezing cold. I grumpily wrapped my blanket around me and stoked the fire. There was barely any light coming through the oiled birchbark over the window by the door. It has to be morning, I thought. Let's look outside.

But the door wouldn't budge. I pushed harder and, as it slowly opened, snow cascaded over my feet.

More snow was transforming the clearing into an expanse of white. The surrounding trees were only shadowed shapes. The cow heard me and started mooing. I had to dig her out of the shelter. She rubbed her head against me and I hugged her.

I would have even welcomed the unicorn. Almost all of my stockpiled firewood was used up in the first week of the snowstorm. The endless nights of high-pitched winds and the days of grey gloom filled with hard work was making me sick. I had to constantly fight the snow to look for firewood. I couldn't keep the fire going all night and was always cold. So cold. I was so cold right now.

Father appeared. He was angry. "You belong to me. How dare you have your own wishes. It's all your fault you're in this terrible place. Tell me you're sorry and you can be my beautiful daughter again."

"No! No! No!"

"Are you in pain, my lady? Your feet are frostbitten and you have a fever."

"A fever?" My voice cracked from dryness. I opened my eyes slowly.

I was back in my wood-lined hut and the stranger was bending over me. He smiled which made his outlandish face look even more ridiculous than his rounded ears. Elvish men were tall and slender with oval faces and glossy golden or ebony hair. The ones at court were handsome and wore splendid clothing. This young human had brownish shaggy hair and a squared chin. His clothes were roughly woven and dyed in drab browns. When he stood up he was tall but his shape was different with large shoulders and thick legs. There was dark stubble on his face.

I stared at him in fascination and his face turned a deep red. He cleared his throat and backed away from me. "Here let me get you something to drink. You'll feel much better."

He turned around and tripped over a bench jostling the cupboard and dislodging trenchers, bowls and mugs. He apologized profusely and bent over to pick them up, managing to knock over the churn in the process. My mouth began to twitch into an unaccustomed smile as he scrambled on his knees mopping up cream. For the first time, I noticed a large fire crackling and hissing. It was a better fire than I had ever made.

The man stirred the contents of the pots hanging from the lugpole and dipped liquid from one of them into a wooden mug. He carefully walked to me without spilling anything.

"It's my own special recipe for thawing out maidens in distress," he said. Come on. Sit up and take your medicine."

I obediently sipped. A thick stream of fire went down my throat. I choked as my eyes teared. The man gently pounded my back until I caught my breath.

"What is it?" I gasped.

"Only healing herbs, garlic, parsley, rosehips, rosemary, and valerian. Oh, and cayenne pepper." He looked puzzled. "I may have put in too much cayenne, that's the way Dancer likes it."

"That explains why your horse is so thin !" I started choking again, this time from laughter.

Gwilym smiled and started to say something but kicking and snorting interrupted from the lean-to on the other side of the wall. It didn't sound like the cow. A raspy voice said, "The snow's stopped. Can I get out of here now? The cow is boring. I'd rather listen to one of your long-winded stories. Boy,' can you hear me? It wouldn't be hard to kick this sad excuse for a stable into pieces."

"Ummm, my horse wants to be let out. She's a retired warhorse and likes her freedom." He looked embarrassed. "She makes a fuss sometimes, but Beauty is basically good-hearted. She was saying thank you for giving us shelter in the storm."

"She did? When did she say that?"

"Just now. I have to let her out now. I'll be right back."

"Wait, are you telling me you claim to actually understand her?"

"Well, yes," he said, "I can understand animals. I used to get teased a lot about it when I was growing up."

"In the village on the edge of nowhere?"

"Yes, and later at King Gregory's court. The people there either tried to benefit from it or make me the butt of their jokes. I don't like courtlife."

He pulled on his damp cloak and shut the door behind him, knocking over the mugs again from the cupboard. I could hear him soothing his quarrelsome horse but I was the one who needed soothing. My head was pounding and my thoughts confused. How dare he claim to understand animals! It was rare enough for elves, never known among humans. Men must be men, I thought, whether they're elves or humans, they show off to women. I took a more careful look at my rescuer when he came back inside. His smile and blue eyes were his best features. But it was his friendliness and courtesy that made me overlook any peculiarities. He gave me some mint tea, thankfully without additions. I listened to his story but my head was pounding.

He explained that after the war with the Frost Giants, when King Griffin ascended the throne, the king appointed him "Guardian of the Borderlands". Gwilym traveled from village to village for the king, overseeing disputes, spreading news, and helping the needy. That's why he had been looking for me. I had been the subject of much speculation and discussion at the nearest village.

It was embarrassing that they wanted to help. That reminded me of my father's stipulation about not asking for help from man or elf. Being unconscious doesn't count, I thought.

"Thank the people in the village. Thank you but I don't need any more help and I can't leave here. It's hard to explain."

"I think I understand," said Gwilym, "There's a spell on you to keep you here. You're being punished, is that it?"

Oh-oh. I was in no shape to argue. "I'm not allowed to ask for any help, not from any elf or man and I can't use my m-m,...Oh,no..." I bent over and threw up. Then the shivering started and I couldn't breathe. Father who glared at me. "If you want to live in the woods and be uncivilized, so be it!" I looked down and my feet were being buried by earth churning and rolling over me. My fingers began sprouting leaves and my body thickened and became heavy. The unicorn glowed brightly but I couldn't cover my eyes. He sniffed. "Never trust a human knight. This will keep you from caring about him." He scratched me with his horn right above my heart. Intense cold filled me. I was made of ice. A dragon stared at me. He was huge and dark and pushed against me. so I couldn't breathe.

"You're not Amberlinn of the House of Starlin. Who are you?"

"I'm Amberlinn," I cried, "Amberlinn, just me, that's more than enough."

The dragon smiled with Gwilym's smile and fire coursed out of his mouth to surround me. I twisted and gasped as the flames burned through me. I burned from the roots in the ground to the tips of the leaves until there was a mound of cooling ash. I was a chunk of golden amber, safe from the tree, the cold and the fire.

I smiled and opened my eyes. The man was sleeping. His head was bent over and resting on my bed while the rest of him was folded up on the floor. I could see a thicker beard along his cheeks, the same dark color of the shaggy hair laying along my arm. He had stayed with me or I would have died. Ever since Mother had died, no one had cared if I lived or died. I moved my head to rest next to his and went to sleep.

It took many days to get back to my feet. Snowstorms blew in again and he made me laugh with his outrageous stories. Even though he was a knight, he didn't seem to mind chopping firewood and taking care of the horse and cow. I showed him how to churn cream into butter but he was the better cook.

"I was an apprentice baker once in my village," he explained.

"I thought you were an apprentice herbalist?"

"Oh,yes. I was also an apprentice shepherd, woodcarver, blacksmith, potter, basketmaker and leatherworker."

"You either thirst for knowledge or, ah..."

"'Hopelessly inept' is what you're searching for. My mother fostered me to a family when I was very young.

I tried to fit in and the villagers tried to teach me but I made a lot of mistakes."

"This stew isn't a mistake and the ash cakes are delicious. You're being too hard on yourself. You're a very good Guardian. How did you become a knight?"

He blushed and started to tell another story. He never did answer my question. I noticed he told stories when he was ill-at-ease. They were always long and funny. He had a wonderful imagination and a skewed sense of humor. I particularly enjoyed his stories poking fun at court life and the foibles of aristocrats.

He seemed to know King Griffin personally but I decided it was another elaboration in order to impress me but I didn't mind. It did bother me when he talked about the war with the Frost Giants. I had heard the

Elvish version of the conflict, how the fierce invaders moved out of their glacial lands to conquer new territory and crushed any opposition.

In Gwilym's version, the glacial lands had been going through a period of intense cold and the Frost Giants had asked for land where they could survive. They traveled with their families; not traveling for war.

"I talked to the shaman of their leader when I found him left for dead at the Battle of Blue Mountain and was able to bring his words to Griffin and your Elvish generals. I reached them the same day they had trapped the main group of Frost Giants in Salt Canyon. They had hidden their families. Thankfully, the battle there never took place. They were desperate. Both sides would have been slaughtered. "

"But the Peace Talks started instead?"

Yes, it made sense to grant them those lands along the high mountain ridges and tundra. That land can't support our kind of farming or livestock but it's fine for the big deer the Giants use for food and to pull their sledges. It changed my life, too. I was made a knight and I had to go to court with the king. I hated it there so I became the youngest Guardian. I guess I'm more of a wanderer like my mother. Beauty is her old horse."

I thought over what he had said and realized what had struck me as wrong. The Battle of Blue Mountain had taken place two days before the entrapment at Salt Canyon. Those places were hundreds of miles apart over mountainous lands. Unless Beauty was an enchanted horse, which I very much doubted, it would have been impossible to physically be at both places within that time span. He was exaggerating again to make himself a hero and it made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. He might have a tendency to exaggerate and run into things and tell long stories but he's always means good and is never boring.

I was quiet the rest of the evening, not paying attention to Gwilym or the meal. I was trying to think how to handle this situation. I was feeling stronger and Gwilym had stacked woodpiles all around the hill.

I could tell him to leave and everything would go back the way it was. But he had this funny idea I couldn't survive the winter alone and I had this funny idea I didn't want to be alone. It could

never work. He was a Guardian. He couldn't stay with me. I couldn't go with him and lose my bargain.

We argued. We were both frustrated. I had to get away to think. He didn't even say anything when I left. The lean-to was comfortably warm. The cow wanted her forehead scratched and Beauty grimaced, showing large yellowed teeth. "I heard you two in there. Poor little lovestruck gits. Reminds me of another elf girl I once knew..."

"Oh, please, not another story. Every time I try to really talk to him, he starts storytelling."

"That's his protection, said Beauty. "His parents loved fast and hot but it didn't last. No one wanted the little boy so he made up stories and always was on the move. There was no gain in sticking to anything until he started this Guardian being a knight business. It made his parents happy so he gave it a try and he's not half bad at it. Now you little fairy girl, you need to get away from your cold fish daddy. How can you last through this winter on your own? Let the boy prove to himself that he can do something right. Go to the village and wait for him to finish the Guardian circuit. There's plenty of time to bill and coo after this year."

She made sense. I started petting her but she suddenly made an awful sound and backed out of the lean-to. The cow and I both peered out. Gwilym had his sword out and Beauty was snorting and pawing at the ground beside him. The unicorn was facing them both with his head lowered and his horn pulsing with light.

"Leave him alone!" I screamed to the unicorn. "I'm in no danger from him. He's a Guardian. He found me half-frozen in a snowstorm. He took care of me while I was sick. He is leaving today!"

The unicorn raised his head. The light in the horn dimmed. "A Guardian. I have heard a new one was appointed. You never asked for his help, did you?"

"Maybe you and her father would rather have had her dead," said Gwilym. "She's almost died proving herself. Where were you? Where was that high mucky-muck father of hers? A stranger had to come along to help her. I'm staying until winter's over!"

He didn't understand the danger he was in. Either the unicorn would kill him right now or the creature would tell my father and be ordered to kill him. I had to force him to go. I would do anything to save him, even hurt him.

I laughed. "I decided I don't want you here. I wouldn't lower myself to live in a village with humans.

I'm only here on a silly bet. My father owes me an estate and it means too much to me to give it up. You were amusing and I appreciate your help, but that's what a Guardian is supposed to do, isn't it?

I don't need you. The unicorn can escort you away from here.

"No, either I take you to the village or I send word I have resigned as a Guardian and stay here with you. I can't leave you alone."

"I don't need a fake hero. Oh, I know you've been lying to me. Are you even a Guardian? I don't believe the king would appoint someone so young with only tacky armor and an old horse. And you lied when you pretended to understand the horse. Humans can't do that. You lied about being at Blue Mountain and Salt Canyon. You couldn't have been in both places in such a short time. You probably lied about helping start the Peace Talks. The king probably doesn't even know you."

"Amberlinn, you're frightened but that's no reason to call me a liar. I am a Guardian and I've sworn to take care of you. I will uphold my vow and I will find a way to prove myself to you."

"Just go. I don't need any more long-winded stories."

The unicorn was smugly pleased with the situation. He nodded to me as I walked past Gwilym and Beauty to go inside the hut. Beauty was watching all of us with a thoughtful look on her bony face. She wisely didn't say anything. The unicorn was too dangerous when angered.

I couldn't bear to watch him leave. I dropped into my bed and curled up into a ball. I was too wretched to cry. The fire was burning but I didn't think I'd ever be warm again. Time passed but I was too numb to care. I didn't even react when the unicorn came into the hut.

"You should thank me for making sure they will not bother you again."

"What do you mean? Did you hurt him?"

"I would not soil my horn on them. I know how knights think. They kill to earn trophies and to gain acclaim. I merely told him to avoid the dragon wintering in a cave by the river. I know dragons are irresistible to knights. I heard him say "A dragon for Amberlinn, that will prove I care for her."

I jumped up and shrieked, "A dragon to prove he's a hero! How could I have hurt him like that! There must have been another way. Now he's going to be burned to death because I was afraid of you and my father. That's it. No more. We have to rescue him before it's too late."

"I do not intend to take this abuse. You are obviously distraught. I admit you were neglected. I will notify your father that the stress has..."

"Shut up!"

He shut up. He had to. My mother was a powerful sorceress and I inherited more than my looks from her.

So much for my Father's stipulation. Gwilym was worth more than a bet. More than a manor. I gathered up all my strength, tapped unused power and commanded the unicorn to go out and wait for me.

He had to obey.

I pulled on a cloak and looked for a weapon. A butter churn or wooden bowls wouldn't be any good.

I would have to improvise. I picked up a broom and thought of a lance capable of worrying a dragon. I had no illusions about destroying one but I could, at least, protect Gwilym and drive it away.

The broom shimmered and thickened and formed into a slender lance glowing with power.

I climbed into the unicorn's back and held his mane with one hand. He was trembling with anger. Fine. So was I. I would tap into that energy when we faced the dragon. I urged him to start running to the dragon lair. Swiftly, he weaved around the trees. All I could see were blurs trees as I clung to his back and held on to the lance. I had to get to him before it was too late.

When we came to the forest edge, I could see large rock outcroppings rimming the shore of the river.

There was an enormous ebony dragon on the shore and Beauty was running up the grassy slope towards us.

I stopped the unicorn to look for Gwilym. Oh, no. He was on the ground by the dragon who was puffing smoke from his nostrils. He was going to use his flame. When the first tongues of fire curled out of his mouth, I screamed and sent out a spell to put out the fire. He turned to look at me.

Now, while he was distracted, this would be my only chance. With my makeshift lance flaming with energy, I pushed the anger back into the unicorn and made him charge down the slope. I heard Beauty shouting something about fools when she ran right into us. The magic discharged and we were all rolling and rolling until everything was black.

I slowly drifted out of the darkness. I could feel my head was cradled in Gwilym's lap and he was stroking my hair. As my ears stopped ringing, I could hear him talking... "so the elfin princess looked down from the tower and saw the handsome man breaking the lock on the door. 'Are you really a blacksmith?' she asked. 'No, I'm really a prince posing as a blacksmith,' he answered. 'Oh, I'd rather have my rescuer be a blacksmith posing as a prince.' She ran away with him anyway because she wanted adventures."

"Second cousin Amarlys and your father? I want to know."

"She's a wandering knight for hire. He was once a wandering prince and now a king. King Gregory. I met him for the first time at the Peace Talks. He recognized Beauty. He had given her to my mother when she left him. Open your eyes and meet my friend?"

I opened my eyes to see the unicorn unconscious on the hill and Beauty untangling her legs from a broken broom and groggily shaking her head. I heard laughter and turned to look into huge golden eyes from the great black dragon curled around us like a pet cat.

His laughter boomed around me and I winced at the sound vibrating through my body. Gwilym stroked under the dragon's massive jaw and the creature began to hum in pleasure.

“That feels good, brother. Little elf girl, don’t be afraid. I was only going to light a fire for Gwilym's tea, not have him for tea. Very uncomfortable losing my fire. You're that arrogant Starlin's daughter, aren't you? I heard you had to leave his court. His loss.”

"Now she raises vegetables, milks cows, and rescues knights," said Gwilym. “Very impressive and amazingly stupid. You are wonderful and if I didn’t already know you loved me, that stunt would have convinced me. Why did you think I was in danger?”

"I thought, well, the unicorn said you were going to kill a dragon for me. And, yes, I do, you know. I’m just not used to caring about anyone.”

“I told you that," said Beauty standing shakily. "I explained to the boy how flustered you were by that hoity-toity unicorn. You were scared silly for us. Knew he was up to no good telling us about Storm Dancer's winter cave. When I saw you tearing down the slope, I knew it was the unicorn's fault. I had to stop you. Guess we old warhorses can come in useful, after all." She wore a very satisfied expression as she looked at the downed unicorn.

"I was glad to hear about Storm Dancer. We're old companions," said Gwilym.

"The first story you were telling me in the woods, the one I never heard you finish, there was a boy who helped a dragon. That was you and Storm Dancer."

Storm Dancer chuckled. “I remember who did the helping a little differently. He was a clever boy.

I was glad to help him scout for his mother. He was knighted for his bravery before Gregory saw him.

We were both named Guardians for starting the Peace Talks."

"You flew on him, that's how you could travel so far and so fast." I was feeling like an idiot but I had to apologize. “You were telling the truth all along and I was the one who kept looking for lies. I'm so sorry I hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?"

He bent over to kiss me. “I can forgive someone who insults me to save me from a unicorn. I knew what you were doing. And I know how to help you be free of your father while I can continue being a Guardian this winter. Storm Dancer here doesn’t like to fly in the winter.”

“Too cold. Too wet. It takes forever for scales to dry. Winter is better for sleeping and not feeling the cold.”

I must have looked puzzled because he kissed me again. “Feel how warm he is. In the winter, he can go into deep sleep anywhere and stay warm from his internal fire. He can curl around your hut and warm it until he wakes up in the spring.”

And so, my dear, that was the perfect solution to all our problems. Gwilym went back to patrolling the Borderlands and stayed with me when he could. Storm Dancer snored mightily all winter

but kept the hut safely warm. I continued to live there to prove something to myself. I didn't care about the conflict with Father anymore. I had my own life. No one troubled me, including the unicorn. And I had my magic to rely on if he tried.

In the spring, we traveled to King Gregory's Court and were married. My father even attended and tried to convince everyone it was his idea. His wedding gift was our lovely country manor in the Borderlands where I milk cows and we raise herbs and vegetables and children and foals and dragonets.

"And so, to make a long story short as your father loves to say, tomorrow is your Eighteenth Birthday Celebration. Remember this story, my dear, when you ask us to grant your dearest wish. Make it a good one, my daughter, make it a good one."