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5900 Words

"Sacrificial Maiden"

"Boy."

Looking up from his wagon-loading, the boy dropped both crate and jaw to stare. It was the usual peasant reaction, but the knight, seeing something different in this boy, something interesting or familiar, waited patiently while the wide blue eyes took in the barded grey charger, the knight in dusty traveling mail, the pommel of the back-harnessed sword, the lance with its floating pennon of blue and gold, and the pack mule fretting on its tether.

"Well-met, boy," the knight said in a clear, moderate voice. "What's your name?"

"Uh, I'm Renolt, S-sir. Are you a real knight?"

"I suppose so."

"I've always wanted to be a knight, but I'm the last son still at home, and Father will never let me go."

"And where am I, future squire Renolt?"

"Uh -- this is Camaer, Sir."

"Excellent. Announce me then. I am Sir Gen, and I am here to kill your dragon."

The boy nearly fell over backwards, but he kept his feet and eventually managed to form words, running away through the town shouting in a voice that cracked now and then. Before long, a crowd had gathered. It appeared to be most or all of the townsfolk, spreading across the square to leave Sir Gen in a pocket of bare ground facing several men, from aging to aged. The knight dismounted and bowed slightly, then stood before them with a look of slender strength, hand resting habitually on the poniard at its garnet belt. Gen raised the eye-visor of the tall helm to take in the curiosity, the doubt, at this knight who was neither huge nor overbearing, whose eyes were a cool, pale, almost colorless blue-grey that drew one's gaze -- and held it. Gen, who had seen such stares before, waited.

"I'm not sure we need a dragon-killer around here."

Gen followed the voice to a middle-aged, balding fellow. "Do you not have a dragon problem, sir?"

"Well, we have a dragon, all right," the man said, as the tatter of hair which was combed over his bald pate bobbed about, "up above the town in a shallow cave, but he doesn't cause any trouble."

"No burnings?"

"Never."

"No slaughtering of farm stock?"

"Not so much as a chicken. He catches game in the hills, it's said."

Gen's brows knitted against the morning-warmed metal of the helm. "A dragon that does no harm?"

A hint of victory showed at the corners of the man's mouth. "Nothing to warrant the time and risk of so famous a knight as Sir Gen Dragonbane. Besides, I think we could muster enough strength to run off one lame dragon ourselves if we --"

"Lame?" Gen's eyes narrowed, and the man stepped back.

"Just a couple claws missing from one forefoot," he said.

Gen made hands unclench and eyes return to a tired calm.

"We don't need you, knight," the man said, but then his eyes widened. "Uh, thank you, anyway."

"What about the agreement, Borm?" came a bitter voice, which Gen followed to another man in the front rank, of similar age but tall, lean-faced, and keen-eyed, favoring one leg. As with the boy, Renolt, who was standing just behind the man, he almost brought memories to Gen's mind, memories of people who could be trusted and times when trust was affordable. Gen was accustomed to making instant decisions about people -- accustomed to having to -- and this one seemed likeable, respectable, though he also had a haunted look about his dark-circled eyes.

"It's the way things have always been, Gorolt," the balding Borm said.

"That's not enough reason to send a maiden to the beast every midsummer, now is it? Not if we have a doughty knight here willing and able to rid us of the foul worm and our obligation."

The gaze of Gen's clear, compelling eyes flattened out. "You actually give maidens to the dragon? That has been forbidden by the King in his efforts to rid the land of the worms. How long has this been going on?"

Gorolt looked away a moment. Gen thought to catch shame there, but it looked more like anger, old anger. The man's gaze drifted back, as penetrating as the knight's own. "For fourteen years now. It keeps the dragon appeased, when all the town's men together could not battle this 'lame' beast without running in fear -- those still able to run."

Gen turned quickly to Borm, avoiding a glance at Gorolt's favored leg. "And you, Master Borm, either you have never had daughters, or you are the one with the supposedly unenviable task of delivering the victims."

The stout man's eyes fell. Someone behind him in the crowd muttered, "Both."

Gen sighed. "Very well. Afternoon is a good time, if I plan my approach properly. Give me a squire to help me prepare, and I vow to rid Camaer of this menace once and for all."

Smiles and a few hoots of joy answered, but it was a muffled, insistent sound that brought Gen around. Renolt quit tugging his father's sleeve and grinned sheepishly.

Gorolt eased his son around before him. "My boy would make a fine squire, Sir Gen."

Gen sighed inwardly once again. "No doubt, but he is not quite what I had in mind."

Blue eyes and young spirit drooped as one.

"He's a sturdy lad," Gorolt said, "and being in need of getting this knightish nonsense out of his head, he's more than willing."

"I see that, goodman, but what I want is a young maiden, for -- er, bait."

A murmur of astonishment ran through the assemblage. Once again, nothing new. "Midsummer is less than a week away. Just lend me the maiden who was to be the sacrifice. I assure you, no harm will come to her."

Borm cleared his throat and looked around, finally speaking to the ground. "I have not yet decided who the girl --"

"You pick her? No drawn lot? No general vote? Just the decision of one old leacher? I smell something foul here. Deception is wicked at any time, but this? If it were not against my code, I would challenge you here and now." Gen breathed deeply, calmly, before speaking again. "Very well. This macabre arrangement will end soon enough. Send me the maiden to help me change, and I'll be rid of the dragon so that I can be rid of Camaer."

Another murmur ran through the crowd. "You mean," said Gorolt, "that you want the maiden not after you change but to help you change?"

"Yes," Gen said, keeping it simple. More murmurs answered, anyway.

"Does she have to be -- uh --"

"No, she need not be respectable, though I'll have no gutter snipe. She just has to be a virgin. If you're worried about her remaining that way, gather your wits about you. That's necessary for the hunt, now isn't it?"

"Yes, but -- but -- this is quite irregular, and --"

"Oh? How many dragons have you slain, that you know how to go about it? Let's just say I have to check the girl for my own sake, since my life rides on her chastity, as does her own. Use an insurance belt if you wish, but I can uncatagorically guarantee that I will not be mishandling her, regardless, and Camaer is not big enough to challenge my word." Having had enough of the whole conversation -- having had enough of it and all the hollow words several towns ago -- Gen turned away, toward a largish building. Aged but well-kept, with fresh flowers at the windows, its hanging sign showed a fat ox floating over a blue-sheeted bed.

Settled away in a room, Gen barely had time to unfasten one boot before a teeth-rattling knock shook the door. The peasant girl that followed the knock was tall and gangly in her battered homespun dress. Heavy shoes peeked out at the hem, just as bits of straight, dirty brown hair showed under the red scarf. Gen could not remember seeing a more unattractive girl, peasant or no.

"I'm Matilda," she said in a squeaky voice, with a quick bounce of a curtsy.

"Well-met, Matilda. You're -- you are just right. I have never been able to abide skinny little things who could not even get my boots off. Here, have a go at this one."

Matilda proved well able to yank off boot and nearly foot, too. She stood dutifully, keeping her head down in an attempt at demureness. Her blue eyes furtively followed every movement as she accepted piece after piece of the bulky mail. At last Gen removed the thickly padded leather undervest and held it out, but Matilda had frozen, mouth agape.

"Do all the children around here stare with their mouths open? Yes, I'm a woman, and you'll die if you tell anyone, girl. I vow it, and I have never failed in a vow. Now stop staring and go draw my bath."

"Sir Gen?"

She turned back to Matilda at the words, to find the girl still staring openly. Every girl had been shocked -- some had laughed, and some had cried, while most had tried to sound approving -- but this Matilda's gaze seemed altogether bemused. Not surprising, now that she thought about it. Poor Matilda looked like she had a big twig of a body herself and would never outgrow it. The sight of real curves, slender waist, and strength without bulk probably was an amazing thing.

"Lady Gwen," she said softly to the girl, "but shhh. Go now."

Matilda was most helpful getting the bath ready and Gwen into it, making her forgive the girl's endless gaping and clumsiness. The girl poured the last of the hot water in and stood, staring and swallowing once. Gwen found herself not getting annoyed but laughing and taking Matilda's hand, gesturing her down to the seat nearby. She decided she was having a big-sisterly urge.

"Would you like to soap my back?"

"No," Matilda answered, quickly and a bit shrilly.

"Okay then," Gwen laughed, "out with the questions. I won't be insulted."

She saw the dam burst behind Matilda's eyes. The mouth took a moment, however, as several questions fought to get out at once. It all ended with a strangled "Why?"

"Ah, Matilda, I know you think me evil for this deception."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"But it's true," Gwen said, slowly closing her fist on water. "It is wrong. I lie, and I lie, and I live a lie. If it weren't for the occasional maiden I deem trustworthy enough to tell, I would be altogether alone and wretched. I have no choice, though. It is a flaw I was born with."

"I don't understand."

"No, Matilda, you wouldn't yet understand the need to be a different sex, but it's a man's world, and not all of us are suited to sewing and having ten babies." Gwen dunked her head, then began washing out her light, short-cropped hair, glancing now and again at the still-rapt girl. "You look to be, oh, thirteen or fourteen. That's already marriageable age, you know." She regretted the comment. Matilda was not likely to have a long line of suitors. She tried another

tack. "You've seen what has happened to your sisters, haven't you? Marriage to man and house, and all that?"

"I had only one sister," Matilda said. "She was fed to the dragon."

Gwen felt her brows knit again in that look of disapproval the world brought out of her so often.

"I barely remember her," the girl said. "I remember she had a pretty laugh that made me laugh, and long, silky, blonde hair I used to play with."

"Code or not, Master Borm and I will have a discussion before I leave. Such deceptions, and losses such as yours, are why I, too, deceive. That's not justification -- there is no such thing -- but it passes for a reason. Forget all of that, though, child, and forgive me for raising the matter. Run down and get my jousting armor, my dragon-questing armor, from my pack mule. It's her last journey, the poor old thing. She's going lame and blind, but she refuses to give in -- probably waiting until her death would mean something worthwhile," she said, with an inward grimace. "Take as many trips as it takes; that armor is not terribly heavy, but its kind is fairly rare and very valuable. Then we'll see about this maiden-eating beast."

Matilda rode atop the stumbling pack mule on the way out of town, getting nearly as many stares as Gwen did. The girl seemed to be having a difficult time managing both mule and skirts while keeping one hand pinned on her scarf. Gwen did not realize how serious were the girl's problems until she turned at the sound of a huge splash to find Matilda spread-eagle in the stream they were crossing. Gwen dragged her out, made sure she was breathing, and stood her on her big feet, then started to unfasten her plain, front-buttoned dress.

Matilda squealed and jumped back, stumbling back into the stream. Gwen pulled her out again.

"Oh, don't be squeamish. No one will see you bare or see you bare with a knight. Let's get you out of those wet things. I have some secret clothes in my pack. They might not be a perfect fit, but that's better than catching your death."

"Uh, no, no thank you," Matilda said, sounding genuinely terrified. "It's a warm day. I'll be fine. Really."

"Suit yourself, but --"

"Where do you come from, Sir -- uh, Lady?"

Gwen laughed and remounted Whinna. She was still bemused about the strange girl, but it was nice to be able to talk like a woman and not deny or evade. She normally never told her maiden assistants much of anything, but this one had a way of disarming her.

"How about 'Gen,' so you won't embarrass either of us. As for where I come from, I don't really know. I was a young girl, no older than yourself, when I awoke in a crack in a steep mountainside, perhaps forty leagues thataway, not knowing who I was or where I was from. A shadow passed over, and I saw a dragon swooping to and fro, searching the rocks, hoping to finish the job he had obviously failed at, namely devouring me. I knew my enemy, even if I did not know my past, and I vowed revenge on dragonkind. I crept away, determined to bring every marauding dragon permanently to earth. It has taken me nearly ten long years, but this is the last one in the land."

"But why pretend to be a man?"

"A little slow, are you, Matilda? Don't worry, though. Girls don't have to be smart, just -- Uh, what was the question? Oh, yes. Well, the only thing I knew about myself was that I was a girl, but I found that the one thing standing in the way of my training as a warrior and questing

for dragons was my being a girl. At first I just wore strategically padded body mail and a partial helm, but some gentlemen evidently like a young, fair-faced lad, as they thought me to be. After having to geld a couple of overenthusiastic ones, I resorted to bulkier armor and a full helm. It has worked out well enough, though I'm ruining my voice from keeping it lowered all the time, and there are times when I would like to have some hair to let down, or someone to hold or be friends with. And there are times when my own lies are enough to break my heart. Ah, that must be the cave up over that hill. Good, good."

Matilda was looking a bit nervous. Gwen was determined, however, that whatever else happened, she would keep the girl from harm. The dragon was not worth quite that much.

"What'll you do after you kill it?"

"Well, Matilda, I guess I'll find a land that needs good warriors, or one that still has dragons."

"A land where women are allowed to fight them?" the girl asked.

She turned quickly to the girl, finding an odd expression, partly enthusiasm, partly unreadable.

"Don't get your hopes up. The only place where women are allowed to fight is beyond the Last Mountains in the Arwellians. Dragons don't go there, probably because, unlike this land, the Arwellians certainly are not going to provide sacrificial maidens. That's what gave the King the idea to cut our dragons off from their maiden supply. Too many towns like Camaer have ignored the law, though."

"But there, in the women's lands, wouldn't they get -- sacrificial boys?"

"I often wondered myself why dragons prefer maidens, and how they can even tell the chastity of one. I asked a dragon once --"

"You talked to a dragon?" Matilda interrupted.

"Oh, yes, it's customary -- with me, at least -- before killing him. He'll always try to talk his way out of it, but they never do a good job. They always assume they're trying to wheedle past a man, and I don't fall for those sorts of bribes, threats, and hollow flatteries."

"I can imagine, but what did he say?"

"What? Oh, he used the pause for a surprise attack, and I had to cut off his head." She halted and held up her hand. "This is where you stop, Matilda. I know what I said about using you for bait and all, but I've changed my mind. Don't ask me why. Just stay here and out of danger."

"Oh, I wouldn't be in any danger, from what you've said."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, but there's always a first time. Things have certainly gone wrong with my plans now and then. If I don't come back, I'd advise running, and please let the King know, would you?"

"Don't say things like that."

"You're a good girl, Matilda."

"Not really."

Gwen shook her head and turned away, gripping her standing lance and shield while nudging Whinna into a trot. She did not look back. Her palms itched inside the heavy gauntlets, and sweat trickled down her chest. It had been a long time since she had attacked a dragon with no decoy. That affair had not been pleasant.

She topped the gentle ridge and started down the lesser back slope toward the cave, which opened from a low wall of rock and faced to her right. The world was a narrow rectangle, a view she had never come to appreciate. Suddenly, Whinna jerked aside. She fought to control the uncharacteristic move, wheeling the horse so she could see the other way.

Sure enough, there on the slope crouched a forty-foot dragon, scaled and horned, with eyes like oiled firestones and bits of smoke curling up from its wide nostrils. It lumbered forward. Gwen could not help but notice the lean of its walk, caused by the absence of two claws on the left foreleg. She lowered her lance toward the beast's breast and nudged Whinna forward.

"What, no chance for parley?" the dragon said in a deep, raspy voice. As it spoke, bits of smoke puffed out.

She checked Whinna, feeling the metal against her brows, fighting her own impulse to charge. His words had not stopped her. It had finally occurred to her that this dragon was probably the only source of information on her past that she was ever likely to encounter.

"What might a dragon have to say that would be worth sparing its miserable life?"

"Miserable? I resent that. I've done an admirable job of holding up both image and principles. Can you say the same thing? You shouldn't judge where you have no information."

"Oh, I have information," she said, with lance still pointed. "You have slain maidens of Camaer and elsewhere. Do you remember a girl, one with --"

"Whoa," the dragon cried, turning suddenly. Whinna danced forward, but Gwen held the big grey back. "So, you brought your squire to sneak up on me, eh?"

Gwen tipped up her visor with the edge of her shield and said, "I did no such thing."

"I know that smell. Come out, boy."

Matilda crawled from behind a boulder, shaking.

"You're not going to eat me, are you, Mr. Dragon?"

"I only eat sacrificial maidens, remember?" said the worm.

Gwen's first thought was for the poor girl's safety, but the remark brought her up short, and then little memories started falling into place. She tossed down the lance and shield, jumped clattering off her horse, and strode past the dragon's nose to the huddling youth. She shot out a hand, grabbed, and yanked, coming away with the scarf and a shock of horse's mane.

"Renolt!"

"Uh, yes, Sir -- uh, Gen."

"It's a good thing I did not try to use you for a decoy, isn't it?"

"Decoy?" said the dragon. "That doesn't seem very sporting."

"But then," Gwen said, stammering a bit, "you -- my bath." Her eyes went flat, and she pulled her sword off her back. She did not know quite what she was going to do with it, all things considered. The boy had an idea, however, and shrank into his skirts against the rocks. She stepped forward, but felt relief almost as much as surprise when the dragon's head loomed up between them.

"Who do you think you are, dragon?"

"Who do you think I am, knight? Few people, including dragons, follow our preconceptions. Maybe you have never deceived anyone, but some of us don't have any choice."

Deciding to leave the boy for later attention, she turned her steely eyes fully upon the beast. "I don't need lectures from the likes of you. Whoever you are, you have to die in recompense for devouring fourteen fair maidens of Camaer and who knows how many others."

"I resent that," the dragon replied. "I've never devoured a maiden, fair or otherwise. You have to admit, it's a pretty uncivilized pastime."

"Do dragons lie, Sir -- uh, Gen?" Renolt asked.

"I can tell when they do," she replied absently, still staring at the huge head. "Look me in the eye, then, beast --"

"Ah, no name calling," the dragon said. "Let's remain civil."

-- and tell me you've never killed anyone."

"I've never -- uh...."

Gwen watched the dragon's tail begin to twitch, and she sighed. "You're lying."

"Well, there was that one, but --"

"Good enough," she said, raising her sword. "Defend yourself."

"But it wasn't my fault."

"Oh, come now," she said, but the dragon's tail was only barely twitching.

"Well, I did drop her," he said, "but I didn't mean to."

"Why were you carrying her in the first place, if not to take her to your lair for devouring?"

"I was taking her to meet her boyfriend."

"This story gains in incredulity as it goes, dragon," she said, but she watched the tail not twitch.

"It's a long story."

"I have time," she said. "It's you who may not."

"My, my. Threats. They make it hard to think. Anyway, it all started with some of the other dragons laughing at me for insisting that a dragon could make a perfectly respectable living off game and civilized fare without snatching maidens. One cannot live on maidens alone, anyway. There simply aren't enough, especially with ever-loosening morals, removal of curfews and marriage-age restrictions, taxable prostitution, and what-not. I proposed that maidens have as much right to life as non-maidens, or even heroes. The concept was not well-received, even when I told them about the wizard."

"What wizard?" Gwen asked. "I don't follow."

"This wizard had fallen on a spike. I take it the move was not altogether accidental, and there were those who wished him to remain on this particular spike. I hate to see any creature in pain, so I pulled him off. Well, he was grateful, as you can imagine. He gave me this dragon-breed journal that explained among many other fascinating matters that dragons in most of the world don't require maidens. I told my friends of this. Incidentally, I left out the part about other dragons eating any sort of humans, maiden or otherwise. No need to give them ideas about new food supplies and stirring up trouble. Anyway, I almost despaired of finding a suitable environment for my maiden-free-diet experiment, some place where I could have a little peace from chuckling hatch-mates as much as the slaughtering of innocents. Eventually I worked out a deal with a fellow named Borm."

"Aha! I should have suspected as much from that low --"

"You know him? Good. You're getting the idea. Old Borm would find girls wanting to go off to the Arwellians to live or fight with the warrior wenches, or wanting to run away, or to escape a forced marriage and be with their true love instead, or some such. This one girl -- I re-

member her well, with all that glorious golden hair -- was a real feisty one. She was also afraid of heights, I guess, because she wriggled a lot -- am I losing you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Not this time. Go ahead," Gwen said. She caught sight of Renolt then, staring at her like she had two heads.

"Anyway," said the dragon, "she wriggled, and I ended up dropping her in the rocks. I looked a long time, but --"

"Why, you bumbling, over-grown pipe-lighter."

The dragon put his snout right into her face. "Who are you calling 'bumbling?' I said she wriggled. "Hey, wait. That smell."

She stepped away. "So we're going to trade insults, eh?"

"I'd know that smell anywhere. There's a fair maiden inside all that oily armor, isn't there?"

"You're crazy."

"If behavior aberrant from the dragon norm is to be the measuring stick, then I would have to agree, but I know that smell: very fair, from the intensity getting through the tin suit. My nose is not crazy. I am a dragon, after all."

Renolt took a step forward. He was staring with his mouth open again. She gave him a dirty look and turned back to the dragon.

"So where were you taking the girl?"

"Oh, come now," the dragon countered. "Why don't you just admit you were the girl?"

"Answer the question."

"To meet some handsome young man. He looked tough and over-chewy to me. I certainly never would have eaten him. The girl thought he was handsome, though, and even Borm said so."

Gwen felt faint. "What happened to him?"

"He got upset at the news and tried to cut my head off with an axe. Can you imagine?"

"What did you do to him?"

"Well, uh, flame is sort of a reflex in dragons."

Gwen sighed. "Handsome..."

"I felt quite bad afterwards, but what's burnt is burnt, as my Grandsire always said."

"So you ate Artur?" Renolt asked. "That was his name, Artur. I've heard about him."

"No, of course not!" the dragon said. "I don't like burnt meat any more than anyone else. I gave him a decent burial in the tar pit. It was good aerial bombing practice, anyway."

Gwen plopped with a clatter onto a large stone. "Why'd you go and drop me?" she asked weakly.

"I told you. You wriggled."

"But now what do I do? I'm stuck with a dragon who doesn't need killing and a disobedient maiden who doesn't need protecting because she's not a maiden -- not a girl, even -- and who helped me with my bath, and -- helped me with my bath!"

She hefted her sword again and pointed it at him.

"Uh, but," he stammered, "but you wouldn't chop your own little brother in two, would you?"

"What?" she said in a small voice.

"He said, --"

"I heard him, dragon. Don't play games with me, boy. I can't see if your tail is twitching, but --"

"So that's how she does it."

"No, really," Renolt said. "Remember I told you my sister had been fed to the dragon, and that the one thing I remembered about her was her long fair hair I used to play with?"

Gwen dropped her sword and sat down again.

"Artur fancied my sister, I'm told," Renolt went on, "and he was so upset when they fed her to the dragon that he ran away and has never been heard from since, though his horse wandered back."

"It wouldn't be all that bad a thing about the bath then," said the dragon, "if he was your little brother all along, and was respectful. I used to take baths with my brothers and sisters all the time."

"It's sick."

The dragon snorted, and dust billowed up around them.

"The whole mess is sick," Gwen said, waving dust away. "Now they're all going to know, and everyone will know, and the King will know, and I'll be ruined and disarmed and stuck in Camaer forever."

"Just like me," Renolt said. "Father can be kind of mean and moody, when you get to know him, especially when his leg is acting up. In fact, it was a couple days after you were fed to the dragon that he led the attack on the beast. Your not coming back was what got his leg hurt, if you care to look at it that way, and he will. He'll never believe you couldn't remember who

you were, especially after he hears about you going to meet Artur. He didn't like him and forbade you to see him. He'll have you knitting for the rest of your life."

"Just as well," she said, pulling off her helm and sending it clattering between the dragon's front claws. He jittered a bit, like a horse with a mouse under its hooves.

"Sounds like a fitting end for a dragon killer to me," he said with another smoky snort.

"Should be standard."

"Only for deceivers," she said. "Part of me has hoped all along to be found out, I think. Why else would I be so foolish as to let maidens in so many towns know my secret? Let it be known, and let the punishment come."

"But what about the dragons?" Renolt asked. "There are probably a lot of them out there in other lands in need of killing."

"My," said the dragon, "you are a barbaric lot."

Gwen shook her head. "There are plenty of other knights out there, Renolt."

"Not as good as you."

"Hah! Maybe most of them are just more foolish, when it comes to dragon-questing. Have you ever seen a knight go after a dragon with no decoy and only a dinky broadsword? It's not pleasant viewing, I assure you."

"Good, I think," said the dragon, "but I find this whole conversation distasteful. Sure, some dragons are only worms and deserve a thrashing, but not all are bad, and dragons have rights, too, you know."

"Then talk her out of quitting," Renolt said.

"Huh?" times two.

"Who else would be willing to take the time to talk to a dragon and to decide if it really needs to be cut up --"

"Oh, I say."

"-- or just talked into being better."

"Rehabilitated," said the dragon, brightening.

"Yeh," Renolt agreed. "So you can still be a knight, Gwen."

"Knights are honest," she said.

"Knights save lives," Renolt insisted, "and that's what you'd be doing: saving the lives of maidens."

"And dragons," finished the dragon. "I think the boy has got something. Isn't that better than knitting while maidens and my brethren are lost, along with foolish knights, who are probably of service to their Kings, in some fashion? I'm living proof that dragons don't have to devour maidens if they don't want to. It's just some bizarre primal urge. If I were given the choice between losing my life and, say, giving up mating, I would have little trouble with the decision."

"I would."

"You wouldn't know, Renolt," Gwen said. "Or would you?"

"Well, no -- but neither would you, if we can trust the dragon's sniffer. Call it wishful thinking."

"I see I made the wrong comparison," said the dragon with a rumble. "Dragons are not as single-minded as you smaller, furious-lived folk. Still, I dare say you could change many a dragon's mind, thereby saving as many lives and doing everyone a service. What if you had a dragon backing you up with word and a nearly complete set of claws?"

"Maybe," Gwen said, looking up with new interest at the huge head above her. "Maybe so. And maybe one day I'll have the King -- and other kings -- so indebted to me that I can throw off that helm, and really make some changes around here."

"Better than losing all our valiant girls to the Arwellians, huh?" Renolt said. "So, for now you can put the helm back on, 'cause you've been a knight all along, and still are."

She paused a long moment, but her heart sagged again, and her chin settled in her hand. "We're just going to have to fight, anyway, dragon."

"What?" times two.

"We have no choice, if I am still a knight. I gave my word, and Sir Gen's word is known throughout the land."

"But you're Lady Gwen," Renolt said.

"Yeh, like he said," added the dragon, his head now low beside the boy as he tried to shuffle his bulk around behind the lad.

"No matter," she said. "Boy, run to town and have them send four sturdy wagons for the carcass." Renolt started off, but she caught his arm. "And Renolt, get rid of the dress on the way, and pretend you've never even seen Matilda, okay? She was not much of a girl, anyway."

Renolt nodded and took off running. Gwen plucked her sword from the dirt and turned to the dragon.

"Okay, we have a little killing to do. I may not be happy about it, but it's something I have to do."

"I am most sorry," she said to the assembled townsfolk. "I told her to stay back, but since the unruly girl got killed in the fight -- along with my old pack mule -- I can accept no payment. In fact, I would like to make recompense with her parents for their lost pair of work-hands."

There was a great deal of murmured discussion before Borm turned back to her and shrugged. "No one seems even to know who she was."

Gwen nodded grimly. "A waif, then. A shame, anyway. Well, then I can accept payment." She watched Borm's crestfallen expression -- the one he had assumed at first mention of the dragon's fall and which had deepened when the subject of payment came up -- spread through the crowd along with murmurs concerning the standard, exorbitant fee for dragon-slaying. "Instead of the usual fee, I take as payment the draft animals and wagons, plus one good riding horse and that boy there, Renolt, to be my squire."

A collective sigh went up, accompanied by one happy squeal. Abruptly, however, all fell silent. The only sound disturbing the calm was the creak of wagon wheels. Past went the carts with their grizzly cargo haphazardly draped from one to the others and dragging up a cloud of dust.

Suddenly, she heard a hundred gasps as one, and she knew that the townsfolk of Camaer would ever after tell the legend of the horribly bloody, dead dragon which snorted as it was wheeled away.