

Once there was a beautiful maiden named Hannah, with flowing locks of golden hair that fell to her waist. She lived with her parents on the edge of a small town in a valley surrounded by towering snow-covered mountains. A large garden surrounded their house on three sides, with half dedicated to flowers and half to vegetables and herbs, which the family sold in the town to bring in money for the household. Hannah's mother helped her tend the gardens but it was Hannah that had the green thumb and had turned it into a thriving business. She grew buttercups and primrose and snowbells, and cabbages and potatoes and greens. Her father was a smith and had a little forge built onto the back of their house where he made and repaired pots and made all manner of tools. He fixed clocks and music boxes in his spare time and sometimes made jewelry that he sold in the marketplace at the base of the mountain range.

Hannah's mother and father adored their daughter's clever ways, grace and beauty. On her 18th birthday, Hannah's father presented her with a beautiful barrette with blue and green crystals set in gold. The girl was humbled by such an extravagant gift and after gazing at it for an hour she let her mother pull the sides of her hair back and clip it into place. Hannah and her mother then went outside to tend the garden. The day was cool and clear, a crisp mountain breeze dancing through the plants in the garden.

A dragon happened to be flying over the valley just then. These creatures had lived atop the mountains since time immemorial and rarely bothered anyone or came down to the valley. Many people passed their lives only seeing them as tiny shapes flitting from peak to peak. As the dragon banked toward his home, his eye was caught by a flash from the ground. He craned his great head as he flew, scanning for its source. There it was again, a flash of gold, blue and green, brilliant in the morning sun. His mouth watered at the sight and he circled back and spiraled down to seize the treasure. Poor Hannah, her glorious hair shone like molten gold and her new barrette glittered and sparkled as she worked unaware. Her mother didn't even have time to cry out. One moment Hannah was checking a bed of dandelion greens and the next, only the shadow of the dragon was left as it swooshed up and away, Hannah held tight in its talons, her shriek yet ringing in her mother's ears.

Of course Hannah's parents were bereft. They ran to the town, wailing and crying. Her father blamed himself for giving her the barrette, but the golden hair came from her mother's side, so they each felt responsible.

A knight happened to be passing through the town that day. He was Sir Danamer, on his way home from representing the king at a wedding in a nearby kingdom. Danamer was young but strong, his king's favorite and his queen's champion. He was well-made, with a fine face and fair hair and sky blue eyes. Upon hearing the tragic tale of the maiden, Danamer was honor-bound to go after her. Half the town tried to stop him and the other half begged him to go. How he was going to get to the top of the mountain was anyone's guess; his fine white stallion certainly wasn't going to take him.

After making inquiries, Danamer arranged to have a sled tied to a hot air balloon. The townsfolk worked all night on the balloon and by morning were lugging it to the town square where they lashed it to the iron statue of the town's founder in the square. A villager riding a donkey dragged a long wooden sled with metal rails up to the square. They tied the sled to the balloon rope, where it hung vertically like a ladder. When Danamer was ready, he stepped onto the sled's hind rail in his gleaming steel armor. A rope hung down from the balloon's opening for him pull this way or that, and release a bit of air to steer.

The crowd cheered as the balloon was released and Danamer floated up into the air with alarming speed. Up, up, he sailed until the air was moist and spare. His gauntleted hands clenched the sled railing as the icy winds tore at him, threatening to toss him down to the valley far below. He maneuvered to the tallest peak until he slammed into it, snow scattering down the cliff face. Little by little he canvassed the side until he came to a massive ledge with a path that led to the summit. Just above the ledge, a huge cave yawned black against the snow. Danamer stepped onto the ledge, untied the sled and with some reluctance, loosed the balloon which shot upward and away with the wind. He braced the sled under a rock at the edge of the ledge and obscured it somewhat with snow. Then he drew his sword, lowered his visor, and stalked up to the cave mouth.

"Dragon, I challenge thee for the maiden you have stolen! Come forth and meet your fate," he cried bravely into the darkness. No answer came but he heard a shuffling sound from the back of the cave.

"H-h-he's not h-here," said a woman's voice, "but h-he will be b-back soon."

"Who goes there?" he called and strained his eyes to see. Shortly a maiden staggered from the shadows, wrapped in tattered fur pelts and blue in the lips. Her dress was torn around the hem and her long golden hair hung in tangles. "I am Hannah, and was carried here but yesterday by the dragon."

"Then come, milady, and escape with me while we can," he said, sheathing his sword.

She lurched toward him and he saw she would swoon. Scooping her into his arms, he turned from the cave only to see the dragon gliding in for a landing on the ledge. Its head was as big as a boulder, covered in grey brown scales, with yellow eyes the size of melons. Danamer skidded to a stop. The dragon stood between him and the sled. Its eyes narrowed at the sight of the knight and flicked over the bundle in his arms. It was lucky for Danamer that the dragon's peak was enshrouded by clouds. If the sun had stricken his armor in front of the dragon, he would likely have become 'treasure', right then and there.

"I give you one chance dragon, to go to your cave and let us take our leave. Else, you are at my mercy," Danamer declared. He hoped the dragon would be reasonable. He didn't want to fight a creature for merely following its nature.

The dragon seemed to understand and slunk aside. Danamer shot past to the sled, Hannah waking from the jarring of his run.

"What's h-happening?" she asked, her teeth chattering from the cold.

"I think the dragon is letting us go."

He set Hannah down and pulled the sled out as the dragon roared from the mouth of its cave, likely having just figured out that its new treasure was missing.

"Get on!" Danamer cried and drew his sword, turning to judge whether to stay and fight or cut and run.

A fiery blast hit him full on and he fell backward onto the sled with a scream, his flesh cooking inside his armor. Hannah yelped as the hot metal touched her, steam roiling around them. She used the

pelts like potholders to drag Danamer all the way onto the sled and then pushed off the ledge, one hand bracing the knight and one holding tight onto the rail, with no heed for any direction but away. They flew down the peak a little ways and plowed in under a snow drift. Danamer was out cold and Hannah held her breath, listening. The dragon roared just overhead, then again a minute later from further away. Then all was quiet. Still she waited to be sure the dragon had gone back to its cave. She competed with the snow for the last of the heat from Danamer's armor and when it was gone and she could no longer bear the cold, she crawled out of the drift and looked up at the peak. There was no sign of the dragon. She dragged the sled out and arranged Danamer full length upon it, secured him with the pelts, and straddling his shins, set off down the mountain.

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Danamer awoke in agony and moaned. Every nerve on the front of his body screamed in pain. He still wore his armor and was bumping along on the sled, every movement bringing fresh bursts of pain.

"Get this armor off me!" he croaked through cracked lips, wondering why it was so dark.

"Can't," came a gruff voice.

Danamer blacked out.

He awoke later, freezing cold, still in his armor, in water up to his neck, pain searing his face and head. He tried to move but could not. Water flowed around him musically and he smelled scorched metal and burnt flesh.

"Help," he muttered, lost.

"Trying," said the same voice. "Stay still."

"What's happening? Take off my helm. I can't move. I can't see," he gasped.

"Be still," said the voice more firmly and he felt someone tugging at his visor. It felt like his cheeks were being ripped off.

"Owww! Stop!" he cried. "Oh, God, what is happening?"

"Your armor has melted onto your skin. I can't get the helm off. Can you open your eyes?"

"Yes," he gasped, "but I can't see anything. Oh, God, am I blinded?" he wailed.

"I don't know. I'd say you're lucky to be alive but I'm not sure you are. Better you had perished than live through this. Still, I'll do what I can."

"Who are you?"

"Belda. I live on the mountain. You and Hannah sledded into my yard. We've pushed you into the river and she's gone for herbs and a smith."

Danamer's fleeting relief that the girl was alive was replaced by the sinking realization that it was only the freezing river water that kept his body from hurting as badly as his head and face did. He tried to be brave but tears leaked from his eyes and ran down his face. Soon he heard a clattering and footfall.

"How fares he?" asked a woman's voice.

"Not good," Belda replied.

Someone splashed into the water next to him.

"Try not to move him," Belda shouted, and then in another direction, "Give me the tincture, girl."

"Son, I'm a smith and I'm going to try to help you," said a man's voice next to his ear. "The slits on your visor are melted together but it looks like only on the surface. I think I can pry them open or cut through, they're well away from your skin. I'm going to get in position and I'll tell you before I try anything. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Danamer said, his voice breaking. The pain was unbearable. "Can't you just open the visor?"

"The hinges are completely welded," he replied; then he called, "Hannah, the fire tongs, and get in here and hold his helm steady."

Danamer heard someone else splashing and felt the helmet shift ever so slightly.

"Okay, son. Grit your teeth. I'm going to pull on three. One, two, three!"

Metal groaned but Danamer felt no new pain, his helm didn't move, though he could feel the stress on the visor through the metal. The smith moved the tongs and Danamer saw a slit of light off to the right.

"I can see!" he choked.

"Can you stand another pull?" asked the smith.

"Yes!"

"Okay, here we go."

Five more times the smith parted the fused metal slits until Danamer's view was about half what he could usually see when his visor was down. The smith stood back.

"What else, Belda?" he called.

"Hook up the pulley to that branch. I need to be able to get him in and out of the river by myself."

"I'll stay," Hanna said over the smith sloshing out of the river.

"No child. You'll come each morning and bring what he needs but let me tend him. It's going to be a rude affair. For now, I need the broth and gruel."

A few minutes later, someone splashed over to him.

"I've got some broth here," Belda told him. "I'm going to stick a reed through your visor to your mouth. Take as much as you can but take it slow. I don't want you to choke. Once you're fed, I can give you something for the pain."

"What is it?" Danamer asked warily.

"It's a tincture of opium. It will help you sleep."

"Isn't it dangerous? We were always told to avoid it."

"Quite dangerous but merited in this circumstance. It will be far easier for you to overcome opium addiction than to deal with the pain you're about to experience."

"You mean it's going to get worse?" he cried.

"Aye. You cannot stay in the river much longer. You'll get too cold and we can't put any heat on you to warm you up."

He blanched at the thought of heat being applied to his armor. "Give me the broth," he begged. He drank the whole cup and then slurped gruel, rich with butter and honey. When he finished, Belda gave him a sip of something strong and sweet. A delicious languor settled over him. His body relaxed, his pain ebbed away, and he drifted off into a dull but placid sleep.

The next few days passed in a daze. Danamer found himself at turns freezing, starting awake in agony, and dozey with opium. His limbs were stiff and he grew to hate his once-beloved armor, the

finest the royal smiths could craft. Belda cut away the back of his hauberk so he could relieve himself and she could wash him. The sled was roped over a pulley to a donkey which she led back and forth to get him in and out of the river at need.

One morning after his gruel and opium, as Danamer lay on the sled on the river bank, Belda announced that they would try removing a piece of armor.

"The left sabaton is the least melted."

He hadn't realized anyone else was there but heard someone come close and he saw through the slits in his visor it was the smith. Danamer felt the man go to work on his foot.

"Let me know if it hurts, son," he murmured.

It was awkward, he could tell from the way the smith kept swapping tools, trying not to twist the piece. Finally he told Danamer to take a breath and then pulled the sabaton apart. Danamer felt the skin on the top of his foot part with the armor. His leather shoes were long gone, first disintegrated to ash and then flushed out by the river. For a mercy, the soles of his feet were not burned. He had little sensation at first, then a raw feeling and a chill as Belda poured cool water over his foot.

She grunted. "The blisters are dried and you've lost the top layers of skin and the nails."

"The nails?" he moaned, repulsed by the image of his toes without nails.

"They'll likely grow back," came Belda's reply, though she didn't sound convinced.

Danamer's eyes smarted with tears. He curled his toes and despite his distress and some pain, felt a glorious sense of freedom.

"More, please," he croaked as he tried to rotate his stiff ankle.

"Sip this," she said, giving Danamer more opium and instructing the smith to remove the left greave. He worked and at length stopped.

"Let me," said Belda.

She carefully pried the greave away from Danamer's shin and again he felt his skin part with the armor. They labored through the morning removing tasset, fauld and poleyn, both greaves and cuisses. Danamer was vaguely aware of pain but at a remove. Mostly he gloried in his legs being free, seemingly light as feathers, though he was too stiff to take much advantage. He felt someone gently washing his lower half, sluicing warmed water over his groin and thighs before rubbing salve into his tender skin. Then he was wrapped in soft linen and moved onto a padded pallet, heaven on his backside after so many days laying in his armor.

"Give it a day or so," Belda advised. "We'll start massaging when the skin can stand it, and get you moving. You'll be up before you know it."

"Thank you," Danamer whispered, pondering the sensation of relief combined with pain. He was fed again and given willow tea and slept through the afternoon. At eventide he awoke in a panic at the thought of spending another night in his upper armor.

"Please, can't you take it off?" he pleaded.

"No, not tonight, and maybe not tomorrow. We should have waited longer on the right greave. You'll have more scarring where we tore the skin," said Belda.

"I don't care," Danamer said stubbornly, "I can't bear it."

"You've been quite brave so far. Don't lose your resolve now. It won't be long."

"I've been quite drugged is what I've been," he said irritably. "And it's not working as well. My thighs are killing me."

"We're weaning you off the opium," Belda informed him. "Otherwise you're going to be in an even worse way. Do as I say and you'll come out of this at least able to work. I can't speak for your looks. You need some distraction. I'll read to you if you wish."

Danamer sullenly agreed. Belda chose a tale of crew that sailed a ship to the world's edge and although he was interested, Danamer couldn't keep track of the words and mostly just listened to her talk, rolling in and out of awareness.

And so the days passed. Belda made him wait another full week before bringing the smith back out and removing his upper body armor until only his head and arms were still covered. It was a tiresome affair as the dragon fire had hit him full in the chest. The smith worked from the sides until he could peel the plates off, one by one, Danamer grimacing as more raw flesh was exposed. Belda pressed the tender skin on his chest and approved the removal of his gauntlets and vambraces.

"I can't move my arms!" Danamer wailed.

"Peace, boy," Belda said. "Let me work some salve in and get the blood flowing. You'll be able to move them."

He could do nothing but abide and she was right, within a few minutes he was able to curl his fingers and bend his arms. She rubbed salve into his skin, then wrapped him again in soft linen. He'd lost the nails on his hands, too, he saw, holding one up to his visor as she worked.

"The helm, please," he pleaded.

"Can you get it off him?" Belda asked the smith.

"Aye, it just lifts off but it's melted and its shape has changed. It's not going to come off easily," he replied.

Belda sighed. "It's got to come off. Danamer, you tell us if it's too much and we'll try to find another way."

Without waiting for a reply, the smith took hold and lifted the helm, Danamer coming right up off the ground with it.

"Ow!" he yelled as the helm shifted on his head and his skin tore. The smith let him down swiftly.

"I'm sorry!" said the man. "Let me see if I can cut it with the snips." He clipped something at the back and Danamer placed his hands on its sides and tried to move it.

"I think it will come off now," he said. "Hold it steady and let me try to pull out from under it."

The smith held tight and Danamer pulled away from the helm, metal scraping cruelly against his cheeks until at last his head was free. For the first time in weeks, Danamer could see properly. Belda was an older woman who might once have been handsome, in an old dress that might once have been black, her eyes filled with a horror she could not disguise. He turned to look at the smith, a man leaving his prime, dressed in good boots and a dark leather working apron.

"Lord help us," he said as he looked at Danamer's face. Danamer recognized him. He was the man who had brought the sled to the village square.

Danamer closed his eyes, embarrassed. "Is it so bad as that?"

Belda came around to face him. "Aye, it's bad. But we can start with healing salves now and the skin will begin to mend. You've no hair though, and you're going to have some scarring."

No hair. Somehow that seemed worse than scars. He touched his face with his fingertips feeling peeling skin and blisters, no eyebrows at all. He was suddenly panicked at the thought of Hannah seeing him in such a state and looked around wildly.

"She's not here," Belda told him mildly. "We'll have you presentable before anyone else sees you."

Danamer's delicate state of mind swung to the other extreme at the thoughtfulness of Belda's consideration and his need for it. He held his hands to his face and wept.

The clanking of metal brought him around and he looked over to see the smith gathering up all the pieces of armor into a sack, making ready to leave.

"Thank you, sir," Danamer said formally. "You've been very kind to aid me in my distress."

The smith came over to him and squatted down. "I will do all I can to aid you, sir," he replied. "I am Hannah's father and owe you a debt I can never repay."

Danamer gaped and at length mustered his manners. "It was my duty to save her if I could, sir. You are not indebted to me."

The smith gave him a sad smile. "You'll understand when you have children. I will ever be in your debt, and gladly so. You have only to ask if there is aught I can do for you. My wife has made you clothes and we send food and herbs each day. Once you're ready to travel, we'll see you get home safely. Your horses and squire are stabled at my house and are welcome there until you have need of them.

Danamer realized that in his invalid state, such details had been far from his mind. Too far. He was so overcome that he could only frown to staunch his weeping and nod at the man, a vague thought of how unlikely fatherhood would be for him, flitting through his tortured mind.

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The days passed and Danamer improved. He was able to bath himself, re-applying salve to his healing skin and a special one to his scalp and the nail beds of his hands and feet. He dressed in soft linen layered over with a tunic and soft russet boots that came up to his calves. Belda wrapped his head in linen every morning and covered it with a brown knit cap. Each afternoon, she made him sit out in the garden and take the sun on his skin before once again applying salves and wrapping up.

He walked in the forest behind the cabin morning and evening and slept in the main room of the cabin now, on a pallet with a wool-stuffed mattress. Little by little, his strength returned, and with it, a broader awareness of his situation. His clothes, his blankets, the salves, the steady flow of savory food, not to mention the boundless goodwill of his hostess and the others, all of this had been bestowed upon him without discussion or complaint. He was unused to being beholden to anyone. He begged paper and quill from Belda and penned a letter to his king and a note to his squire. Belda said she would send them out with Hannah the next morning and gave Danamer a rather pointed look.

He'd been avoiding Hannah, making sure he was deep in the forest during the times in the morning when she brought supplies. Danamer was not a vain man. He considered his beauty the least of his virtues, yet he would own to himself that he had been more than pleasing to behold. But now...he hadn't had a good look at himself yet, only his reflection in the river, distorted and shifting. Belda had no mirrors, else they were hidden away, which Danamer rather suspected. But he could feel the round scars on his temples where his visor hinges had burned into his skin, the right side worse than the left, and there were other welts as well. His scalp had finished peeling and his hair was just beginning to come back in. Little half nails showed in the nail beds on his hands, shining like opals; the ones on his feet just beginning to emerge. It wasn't vanity that troubled him. He felt Hannah would be horrified to see the cost of her salvation and he couldn't bear to impose that on her. Or so he told himself.

One day Danamer dozed off while taking in the afternoon sun in the garden. He awoke to the sound of horse hooves and a familiar whinny. He hurriedly dressed and strode to the front of the cabin.

"Whip!" he cried, running to his horse. Whip pressed his forehead to Danamer's chest and Danamer rubbed around his ears, the affection in the horse's gesture putting a lump in his throat. Whip whickered and brought his head up to nuzzle Danamer's hands and Danamer looked past him to see Hannah standing with Whip's lead line, looking pleased until her eyes met his and her expression turned to shocked apprehension. Discomfited, Danamer fell back on his court manners.

"Milady," he nodded to her, balling his hands into fists to hide his nails and belatedly remembering he had forgotten his hat.

"I'm happy to see you up, sir," she said, her face belying her words.

"Thank you. I'm glad to know you made it back safely. I believe I have you to thank for saving my life," he said with a short bow.

"And I you, for saving mine," she said, recovering herself with a hopeful smile.

Embarrassed, Danamer knew not what to say. He didn't usually stick around for this part of the exchange. Glorious tales of knighthood didn't include being bald and scarred. He usually just galloped away on Whip, plumes flying, and left the rest to the bards.

"We thought it might do you good to see a familiar face," she said tentatively.

"Indeed it will," he replied, grateful for the change of topic. "How does he fare?"

"We think he's been missing you. He runs the edge of the paddock whinnying and won't associate with the other horses."

Danamer had to chuckle. He stroked Whip's neck, then ran his palm over the horse's fuzzy lips. "He is very loyal and a little full of himself. Thank you for stabling him."

"We're happy to. He can stay here tonight and if you want to keep him up here, we'll bring some hay," she said.

Danamer squirmed inside. "Milady, your kindness is deeply appreciated but I believe you've already supplied a wealth of food, medicine and clothing for my convalescence. I do not wish to cause you further inconvenience."

Hannah glared at him and Danamer realized he'd blundered.

"You nearly *died* on my behalf and are still paying for your gallantry toward me," she said, the hurt plain in her voice.

"T'was my duty to rescue you if I could, lady," he said weakly.

"And tis mine to assist you though I'll own that's not why I'm doing it."

Danamer raised his brows, then remembered he didn't have any. Hannah understood well enough.

"There's a difference between duty and gratitude, sir," she said with a blade in her voice. "I *want* to help. It is the only thing I *can* do. Would you deny me that *inconvenience*?"

"I'm sorry, lady," he said, humbly lowering his eyes. "Forgive me, please. It has been a difficult time. I'm not used to being helpless."

"And surely you won't be for long," she said, tacitly accepting his apology. "Already you're growing stronger and seem to be healing well."

Danamer forbore to snort.

Whip had had enough of being ignored. He raised his head and neighed, startling them both.

"I'm sorry to you, too, Whip," Danamer said, turning to stroke his horse again.

"Why do you call him Whip?" Hannah asked, her tone softening.

"His colt-name was Whipped Cream Delight," Danamer smiled, not looking up. "Whip seemed the only possible choice."

"Indeed," Hannah said with a laugh. "I guess they didn't know he would grow up to be a knight's steed when he was foaled."

"He was bred in the queen's stable to be a parade horse but he had higher ambitions," Danamer said, looking up to catch Hannah staring at his hands. He sighed internally and let his arms fall to his sides. "Thank you again for bringing him."

"You're quite welcome," she said approvingly. "Your tack is on the side porch. I'll have your squire bring up some hay before nightfall."

It hit Danamer like a bucket of water. Henric—he'd forgotten about the boy. "He's still here?" he asked, incredulous.

"Aye, he's been staying with us, helping in the smithy and the garden. He's quite clever and we've been glad of him."

"I guess I thought he would have gone home," Danamer said.

"No, he wanted to come and stay here with you but Belda forbade it. She wouldn't let anyone come until today, when she asked me to bring Whip for you."

She might have told me, Danamer thought, then realized that of course she wouldn't. A careful steward, that one, gauging him ready, gauging him ...presentable.

"There is one thing, if you don't mind," he ventured.

"Name it," Hannah replied.

"If you could have Henric bring my bags, please."

"Of course," she inclined her head. "I hope your recovery continues apace, sir. Good day, to you."

"And to you, milady," he said with another bow, marveling at the strangeness of bowing and acting civilized after weeks of infirmity.

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Danamer burst out of the cabin into the sunlight and angled his shaving mirror so he could see his eyes.

"What is it, son?" asked Belda, following him, the cabin's screen door slamming behind her.

"My eyes!" he wailed.

"Can't you see?" she asked.

"I can see but they've changed color," he said, still staring into the mirror. "They're dark blue, indigo! They used to be light, like aquamarine." Then the mirror caught the sunlight on his hair and he yelped, running a hand through it. "And my hair!"

"It's coming in just fine!" Belda said defensively from the porch.

"But it's silver! I was blonde!"

"It's the dragon fire," she said, "it's changed you, like your hands."

He gave her an alarmed look and gazed back into the mirror, finally examining his scars. The hinge scars on his temples would likely be with him for life, they had burned deep like a brand, a round circle and crease. For a mercy, his visor had kept the center of his face clear of damage. His hair would

cover the scars on his scalp and forehead. The ones on his chin and jaw might always show but they weren't so bad. He might even be recognizable someday.

Danamer took to riding in the forest each day and gradually began to feel himself again. He and Belda had worked out an easy rhythm, her cooking, and serving quiet meals, him chopping wood, fishing, and any other outdoor work or repairs he could drum up. His hair grew in, so silver it flashed in the sun, straight as thread now, where it used to be curled. His fingernails, too, were fully grown, colored like opals, shining with flecks of blues and greens and pinks. One evening over dinner Belda told him he only need salve his scars once at bedtime for another few weeks.

"The scars are already faded to half what they were," she said encouragingly.

"It's time I was going then. I don't know how I can ever repay you for your kindness and care," Danamer said with a sad smile.

Belda grunted, not looking up. "I'm surprised you pulled through," she said, tearing a piece of bread to dunk in her soup.

After dinner Belda had Danamer reach down an old brown bottle from the kitchen cabinet. She poured a little into two cups and bade Danamer come out to the porch. There they sipped and watched the moon rise and listened to the crickets until at last Belda rose and went up to bed without a word.

Danamer sat a while longer. He'd come to care for the old woman with her gruff ways. She'd nursed him like her own child, around the clock at first, never flagging in her care. He wasn't sure the king's physicians could have done any better. Now he would leave her alone, here on the mountain and it wrung his heart. He marveled at the changes he'd undergone, not just on the outside. Before the dragon, Danamer was mostly concerned with glory, what he could win for his king or himself. Now here he was worried about Belda, and he knew he would truly miss her.

The next morning he got up early and went out to chop wood. He stacked the wood pile full and brought a barrow-full into the house, stacking it by the stove. He stripped his own bed and washed his blankets in the river, leaving them to dry on the line. He bathed in the river and dressed in clothes suitable for travel, their fine material scratchy after so many weeks in soft linen. He combed his silver hair back and noted his brows had grown back in, dark silvery grey. His beard hadn't come back at all so that saved him the trouble of shaving. Finally he packed his bags, took them out and slung them over Whip's flank, tying them to the saddle. He roped the sled to his back cinch so it could drag behind them as they walked.

Belda came out to the porch in her old dress and an apron. Danamer went to her and held out his hands. After a moment she took them and he brought her in and held her, and she hugged him back. He didn't try to hide his tears when she pulled away.

"You're my dragon-burned boy," she said swiping at her own eyes. "I never had a kid o' my own, 'cept for you. You go on now and take care of yourself."

"Thank you, Belda," he said, his voice rough, and mounting Whip, he rode away, the sled bumping along behind.

He found Hannah's home easily enough, Whip knew the way. Henric came running out to take Whip and deal with the sled, pausing only to kneel and lay a kiss and a tear on the back of Dameron's hand. Dameron ruffed the boy's hair and went to the door of the little stone house. Hannah's mother

greeted him, bursting into tears as she fell to her knees, his hand in hers. *So many tears*, he thought, and realized that for the most part now, they were happy ones.

"Oh, sir, what you've done for us, saving our Hannah. Thank you, sir, a thousand times, thank you."

Danamer raised her and thanked her in turn. "May I know your name?" he asked.

"Erva, sir," she said with a curtsy.

"I am Danamer, Erva. Is Hannah or your husband here?"

"Jim's out back in the smithy. Hannah's in town at the market. She'll be back soon. You received a royal missive here today," she said, picking up a scroll from the table.

Danamer took it and broke the seal. He smiled as he read, the King's Reward was hereforth bestowed on both Belda and Hannah's family for saving and caring for the Queen's champion. That meant they could make virtually any request of His Majesty and if it was in his power, he would grant it. It was a rare and extraordinary gesture and the recipients were expected to take advantage of it. At least it meant they would be recompensed; they couldn't refuse the king. Though Belda might, he thought with a chuckle. He rolled up the scroll. Erva was watching him.

"His Majesty sends his regards and thanks for your aid in caring for me," he informed her.

"To us?" she said, clutching her apron, "well, imagine that! Come, I'll show you round the back."

She took Danamer out around the side of the house, through gardens just beginning to die off for the fall. He heard the hammering of metal and smelled hot iron as they came around to the smithy. The door was open and Hannah's father stood at an anvil, pounding a flat piece of red hot metal he held with tongs. Looking up, he grinned.

"Well, son, it's good to see you up and about!" He set down his tools and shook off his gloves, coming over to shake Danamer's hand. "You're looking a world better than last I saw you. I'm James Stover."

"Thank you, sir, and again for your help."

"And you, sir, though you should call me Jim," the man said with a raised brow, reminding Danamer of how the balance went.

"Danamer, please," Danamer said, noticing a suit of armor gleaming at the back of the room. Jim turned around to look.

"Ah, yes, your armor. It's about finished. Might not be as fine on the engraving and gilding. That was some fine armor you had, son."

"My armor?" Danamer cringed. The thought of donning armor put his mind in a panic and it was all he could do not to turn and run. Jim caught on fast.

"Don't worry, son. I know it might be a time before you're up to wearing it but I wanted you to have it all the same. And I've lined it with dragon scale. You could probably walk straight up to a dragon, get blasted and just walk away. No heat will get through."

"That's...amazing," Danamer said charitably, involuntarily walking toward the suit in morbid fascination. Jim had underestimated his own skill. The engraving and gilding was gorgeous, with intricate flower garlands along the seams and animals, shells and stars embellishing the joints and panels. Here and there, Danamer recognized patches of his old armor welded in. A golden dragon rampant on the plackart was surrounded by the outline of a sun and red plumes topped the helm. Jim took off one of the gauntlets and showed the inside to Danamer. It was lined in red silk. Danamer looked a question at him.

"Hannah lined it. The scales are between the armor and the silk. And there's padding. You could probably wear this suit with nothing under it and be both safe and comfortable. It's a little bigger than your old suit because of the layers, but the scales weigh almost nothing and I made it to size."

"I don't know what to say, Jim, this is remarkable," Danamer got out.

Jim put the gauntlet back and held his hands behind his back, admiring his own handiwork.

"I hope it wasn't too forward of me," he said at length. "Tis better to face your demons, though, than have them coming after you. And you'll need a suit you can feel secure in."

"Tis an extraordinary kindness, sir, and I'm grateful," Danamer said but he wasn't sure about it at all.

Hannah returned from the market in the late afternoon, driving a donkey-drawn cart, her head covered by a straw bonnet. Danamer reflected that it was probably the same donkey that Belda had been using to drag him in and out of the river. It had disappeared from her yard at some point and he hadn't even noticed.

When he announced that he and Henric would be taking lodging in town, he was met with insistence from the entire family for them to stay in the spare room built onto the smithy, at least for the night. Too tired to fight after his day of exertion, he gave in. That night he and Henric dined with Hannah's family, Henric clearly familiar with the Stovers by now. It was a merry feast with mushroom stuffed gourds, pickled beets and cabbage, roast potatoes, and a ham that Hannah had brought from the market. Jim poured cherry wine afterward and Danamer told stories at Henric's prompting of some of his more glorious escapades, all seeming so distant and somewhat petty to him now. The thought of jousting another knight, courting injury so willingly and recklessly seemed more inane than brave to him now.

Before retiring, Danamer asked to speak with Jim privately and told him about the King's Reward. Jim eyed him gravely, aware that he could not refuse. Danamer's letter to the king had been explicit about the lengths to which these people had gone on his behalf, and that wasn't even including the armor.

"Do you think you could explain it to Belda?" he asked Jim.

Jim again was quick on the uptake. "Aye," he said ruefully.

"Thank you," Danamer said with a satisfied smile and bid him good night.

Hannah was in the garden when Danamer passed by on the way to the smithy. She sat on a bench against the house, wrapped in a wool shawl, the moonlight reflected in her eyes.

"Milady," Danamer nodded to her, pausing.

"You're going tomorrow?" she asked, her brow creased.

"Yes," he answered gently. "Surely I've burdened you long enough."

"But you're only now able to converse, and we can finally see who you are," she said with a plaintive note in her voice.

Danamer huffed a laugh. "I don't recognize myself, lady. Though I guess this is who I am now."

"You think you're different...than before?"

"I know I am. I was fair haired and light of eye for one. Belda said it's the dragon fire, it changed me."

"You are still handsome," Hannah said, ducking her chin.

Danamer snorted softly. "I'm lucky is what I am, lady. I shall never be handsome again, though you're sweet to say so."

Hannah looked up, her eyes filled with defiance.

"Don't grieve, lady, tis not your fault, you need not feel guilty."

"I don't feel guilty!" she insisted. "I know I've done nothing wrong. I'm sorry for you is all, for everything you have had to endure and continue to endure."

Danamer was stung more by her pity. Somehow his pride hadn't been completely burned away. She gave him a searching look then asked, "Do you know how I came to be taken by the dragon?"

Danamer shook his head, reluctant to bring up the subject.

"My father made me a beautiful barrette for my birthday. It is gold filigree with blue and green crystals and possibly the most beautiful thing I've ever seen wrought by a man. I wore it the day he gave it to me, out into the garden. My parents think the dragon saw it along with my golden hair and came for me. They're still arguing over who is to blame, my father claiming it is him for the forging of the barrette and my mother claiming she gave me the gold in my hair. As if anyone could be to blame except the dragon. My father wanted to melt down the barrette, he felt so guilty. I wouldn't let him, and though I can never wear it outside, I will always treasure it. When I thank him for it, he grows sullen." she finished sadly.

"I'm sorry, lady," Danamer didn't know what else to say.

"There's a difference between pity and compassion, sir," she said levelly, "just as there is a difference between guilt and gratitude. I'm still very thankful to you. You were beyond brave to go up that mountain. I'm only sorry you're leaving so soon. We won't even have a chance to get to know you."

"I'm not sure I know myself. I don't think I'm the same man who went up that mountain," he mused. "I seem to have changed a measure, but I don't know how, or how much. I guess I'm just getting to know me, too and I don't know what life holds for me now."

"Will you still be a knight?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I certainly have the armor for it. Thank you, Hannah, for your work on it. It's lovely."

"Did you try it on?" she asked hopefully.

Danamer steadied his nerves. "No, not yet," was all he could say.

The next day Danamer sent Henric to town to arrange rooms for them. He planned to rest a couple of days and then start back to the palace. The family went about their normal routine after breakfast and Danamer returned to the spare room. His talk with Hannah the night before had opened up questions for which he had no answers. He lay down on the narrow bed and gazed out the small glazed window. Could he really ever don a suit of armor? If not, he was no knight. If not a knight, then what? Oh, he could retire, the king's letter had said as much. He'd be landed and provided for. But what did he want? To not hurt. To be able to walk. To not be hideous. He had those things now and it seemed enough. He used to hunger for adventure and glory. At the moment he had no appetite for anything. Would he still feel that way in a month's time? Suddenly he had to know.

He got up and went into the smithy and over to the suit of armor. The gauntlet was only pinned in place and came off easily. He forced himself to slip it on over his bare hand, and indeed, it felt like he was putting his hand inside a comfy cocoon. He turned to Jim, who was watching surreptitiously as he ground away at a pipe seam.

"I'd like to t-try it on," Danamer stammered.

Jim nodded and set his work aside. He helped take the armor down and showed Danamer how the sabatons, greaves and cuisses fastened; that much Danamer could do himself at need. Henric arrived then, eager to learn the new straps, buckles and plates and slowly Danamer was suited up. Panic rose and fell inside him and he used the cozy softness of the padding to reassure himself that he was safe, that this was okay.

"Do you want me to get Whip?" asked Henric when Danamer stood holding his helm.

"I'll walk out with you," Danamer replied, "I want get a feel for how it moves." He was stalling, not sure he could bring himself to don the helm. And he was bluffing, too, terrified to be in armor again, cold sweat running down his back. They walked out to the pasture, the armor moving easily despite its weight. It was a brilliant day and Danamer tasted autumn on the breeze as it stirred his hair.

"I'll get him," Danamer said, handing the helm to Henric, who opened the gate. Danamer strode into the pasture. Partway across something grabbed him roughly from behind and he left the ground at terrific speed, soaring up into the air, Henric's scream dying behind him on the wind.

* * * * *

By the time Danamer realized what had happened, he was halfway up the mountain. The dragon's talons clenched his shoulders as they flew up and up, into the clouds, the dragon's wings beating in great huffs on the frigid wind. When they gained the summit, the dragon dropped him at the cave mouth and Danamer rolled to break his fall and gain his footing. He had no sword, no helm. He watched in horror as the dragon banked around and landed on the ledge, then crept toward the cave. Their eyes met.

"Master!" the dragon's thought boomed in Danamer's mind. The dragon knelt and put its head down on the ground in supplication.

Danamer stood rooted in terror.

"Please forgive me," the dragon thought anxiously, "I mistook you for treasure! Climb on my back and I'll take you back down. I pray I haven't injured you!"

"You call me master," Danamer said aloud, stunned.

"I recognize a master, yes, sire. Will you forgive me?"

"I-I will if you will take me back."

"Or stay. The others will want to meet you. But I have no food for you. Or can you drink of the mountain's milk?"

"Mountain's milk?"

"Yes, it flows in the jagged abyss, hot and red."

Danamer pictured lava in his mind. "Uh, no, I cannot drink of it. Dragon, did you not know me last time I was here?"

"You have been here before?" the dragon cocked its head.

Danamer stopped. Perhaps he shouldn't tell the dragon about Hannah. What if the dragon knew the truth? Could it hear his thoughts, too?

"Perhaps," he hedged. "Please take me back now. And you must promise never take treasure from the valley. That's twice now you've taken people and one was a woman friend of mine."

"Your mate?" the dragon asked in alarm.

Danamer pondered. Perhaps it would help ensure her safety. "Yes, my mate."

"Forgive me, sire! I did not know!"

"I believe you and I will try to forgive you. What are you called, dragon?"

"You do not know me, sire?" the dragon asked with a reproachful look.

"I recognize you, but I do not know your name," Danamer replied truthfully.

"I am Parnen of the Western Shear, sir."

"I am Sir Danamer of Irilia, Parnen of the Western Shear."

"I did not know a master also had a name," said Parnen.

"Yes, we do," Danamer ventured. "We must go. My people will be worried."

"At once. Do you wish to ride or shall I carry you?"

Danamer eyed the dragon's neck in a surreal daze of fear and relief.

"I would rather ride, for you cannot set me down safely from flight."

"Climb on, then," said Parnen, and he laid his neck out flat on the ground. Danamer merely had to step one leg over the fattest part and sit down.

Parnen raised himself up and Danamer wrapped his arms around the supple scaled neck. The dragon took a few quick steps and leapt into the air, its great webbed wings buffeting the air around them. They flew down through the clouds and broke through into the sunny day of the valley. Danamer forced his eyes open and peered down as the ground rushed up at them, clinging to the dragon with all his strength. He was too scared to enjoy it but he would never forget it.

A few little dots moved down below in a pasture on the outskirts of town. The dots became people and in just moments, Parnen landed outside the Stover's pasture on the plain. Whip reared and snorted at the fence and the other horses galloped away into the stalls.

Danamer sat up and called out, "All is well! The dragon will not harm you. He's just brought me back!" To the dragon he said, "Put your head down, please."

Henric stood at the fence gaping. Hannah looked up from her father's shoulder, where her white, tear-stained face had been buried. Jim looked ready to run, a protective arm wrapped around his daughter and Erva was peering around the side of the house.

Danamer stepped away from Parnen.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome, sire," Parnen said into Danamer's mind. "I must go. We are not permitted to stay on the valley floor."

"Farewell, then Parnen. And may I ask, will the other dragons know me as well?"

"Yes, sire, all will know you."

"Do you talk with the others?"

"Yes, of course. We dine together often."

"Would you please tell them what happened between us and ask them to be careful. What looks like treasure from above may be a master or his mate."

"I will tell them, sire. Farewell!"

Parnen spread his wings and took off leaving Danamer standing alone in his armor in the meadow. Suddenly he found himself surrounded, Hannah weeping in his arms, Henric on his knees with his arms wrapped around Danamer's knees. Jim and Erva running up, crying, everyone smiling through their tears.

