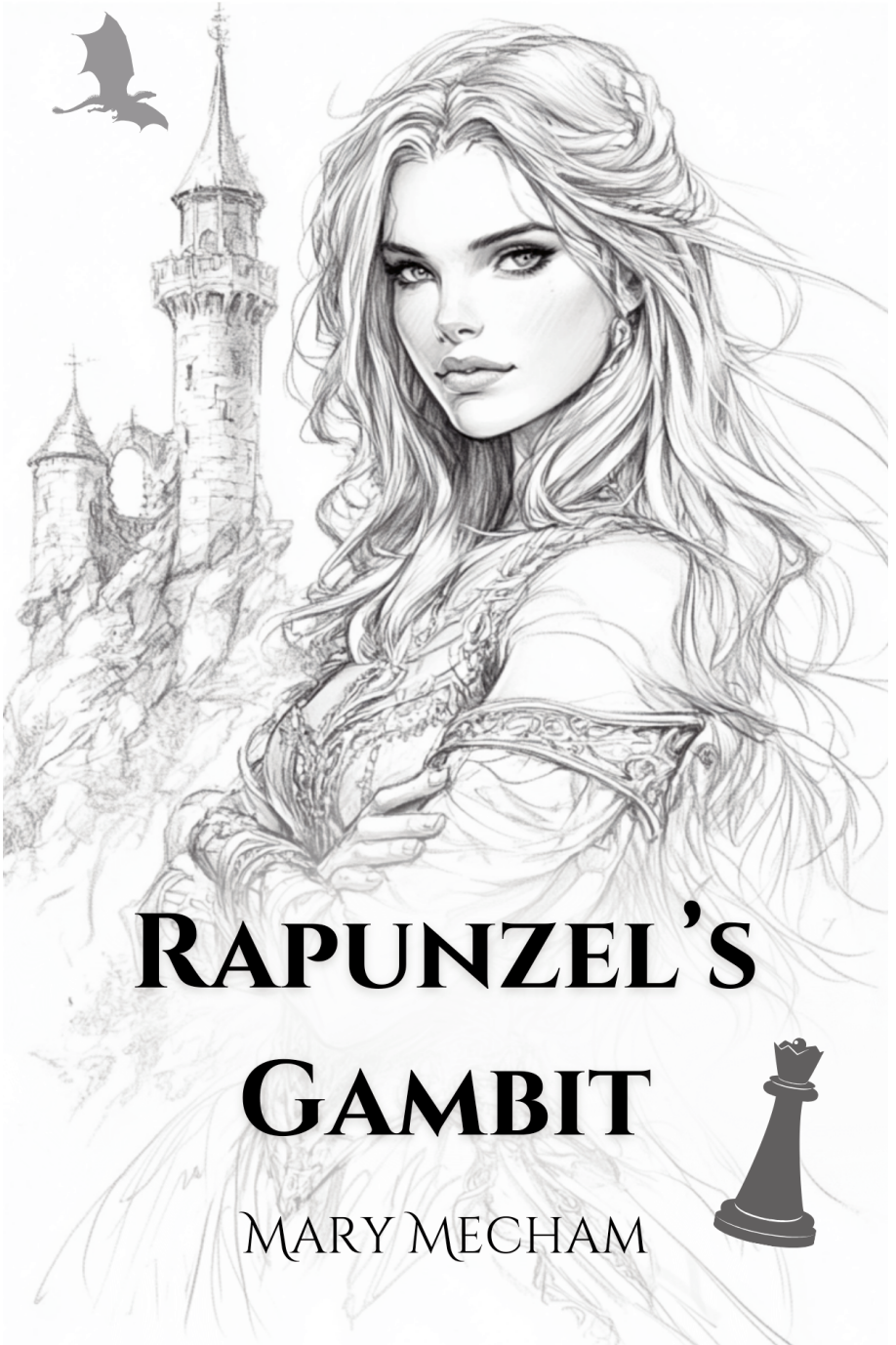


A DIABOLICAL FAIRYTALE RETELLING



RAPUNZEL'S GAMBIT

MARY MECHAM

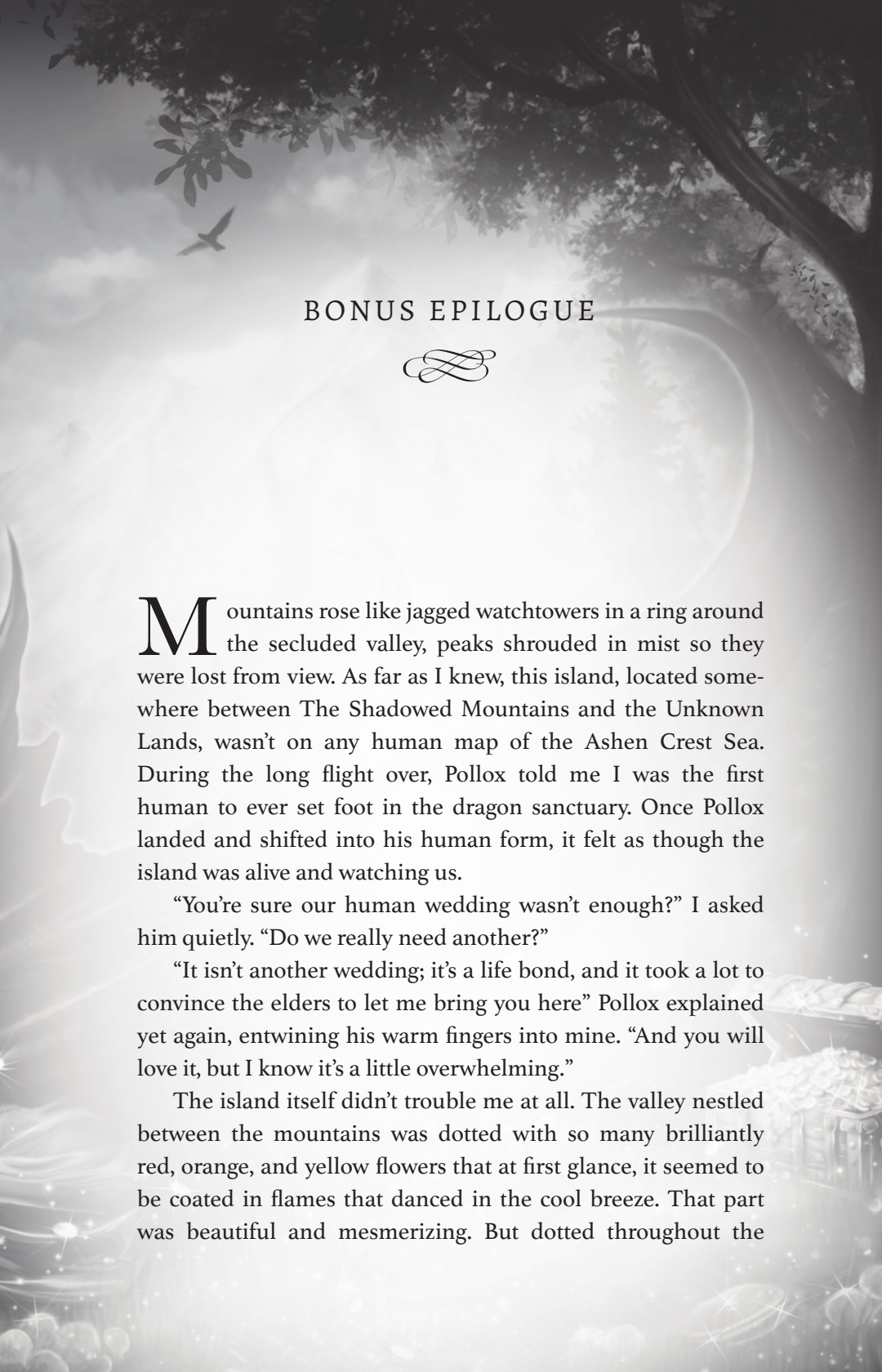


RAPUNZEL'S GAMBIT



BONUS MATERIAL





BONUS EPILOGUE



Mountains rose like jagged watchtowers in a ring around the secluded valley, peaks shrouded in mist so they were lost from view. As far as I knew, this island, located somewhere between The Shadowed Mountains and the Unknown Lands, wasn't on any human map of the Ashen Crest Sea. During the long flight over, Pollox told me I was the first human to ever set foot in the dragon sanctuary. Once Pollox landed and shifted into his human form, it felt as though the island was alive and watching us.

"You're sure our human wedding wasn't enough?" I asked him quietly. "Do we really need another?"

"It isn't another wedding; it's a life bond, and it took a lot to convince the elders to let me bring you here" Pollox explained yet again, entwining his warm fingers into mine. "And you will love it, but I know it's a little overwhelming."

The island itself didn't trouble me at all. The valley nestled between the mountains was dotted with so many brilliantly red, orange, and yellow flowers that at first glance, it seemed to be coated in flames that danced in the cool breeze. That part was beautiful and mesmerizing. But dotted throughout the

meadow and slowly converging to form a wide circle, were dragons.

It was only now that I realized that Pollox was a young dragon. His dragon form, monstrously large that it was, would still pale in comparison to the massive creatures that stared at us as we approached.

Pollox brought me forward to the very center of the valley, where the ring of dragons formed a living, breathing circle around a giant stone slab. Their scales alive and shimmering in shades of copper, gold, and deep storm cloud gray. The sheer terror I'd first felt when meeting Pollox had been multiplied a hundred fold as the dozens of dragons surrounded us, the air thrumming with some ancient magic I couldn't describe.

As we stepped onto the stone slab, the oldest dragon stood directly in front of us, so deeply blue that he was nearly black and his eyes, older than the sea itself, seemed to look straight through my body to examine my heart. When he spoke, his words felt as though they'd been carved onto my bones rather than heard by my ears. Pollox's fingers applied gentle pressure to mine, and I squeezed his hand back.

"I seek a life bond to this human," Pollox announced. The noise that followed made me imagine an impending thunderstorm, and the dragons inclined their heads to each other, muttering in voices so deep that it almost felt like tangible weight pressing on my lungs.

"A life bond," the ancient dragon rumbled in his deep, resonant tone, "is not to be taken lightly. Does your human understand this?"

"I understand perfectly well," I announced loudly. "I'm not his *human*, I'm his *wife*." Terrified as I was, I still managed to matchy the dragon's fiery gaze. "Pollox explained your customs and I'm prepared."

The grating, sawing laughter that I knew so well from

Pollox rippled up from the crowd of onlookers, but I didn't back down.

The blueish-black dragon exposed his fang-like teeth in what I could only image to be a smile. "Only a woman who dares talk back to a dragon is worthy of one." He turned his attention to Pollox. "You chose well. Let the binding begin."

Immediately, each dragon in the circle began to blow a thin jet of flame down at the stone slab at our feet. My grip tightened on Pollox. Even though he had warned me that the stone would absorb the heat and I wouldn't get burned, the fire was still too close for comfort. After a few moments, just as I was about to relax and be reassured that the flames wouldn't consume me, the stone slab began to glow a faint blue color, and a strange tingling prickled at every inch of my skin.

"A life bond," the old dragon said slowly, "is fiercer than flame and more enduring than the mountains. This bond is sealed by much more than words. It is sealed by a Guardian's Vow—a pledge to protect not only each other's lives, but each others' hearts, hoards, and honor."

Pollox's eyes never wavered from mine, and his grip on my hands remained steady and sure. "I vow," he pledged, "to guard you and your treasures as my own, from this moment until my final flame."

Below our feet, the stone's hue deepened to a rich sky blue.

The midnight-blue dragon turned toward me, smoke curling from his nostrils in slow, expectant breath. "As a human binding yourself to a dragon, you are no longer merely a daughter of men. You are a keeper of our secrets and a guardian of the flame. In addition to your life bond to Pollox, you will also be bound to protect our secrets about shifting, and by doing so, will be accepted as one of our own. By the breath of the Firstborn and by the flame of the Last," the ancient dragon intoned, "do you Rapunzel, swear to guard Pollox, in body and spirit, as you would protect yourself?"

“I swear it,” I whispered, then cleared my throat and said in a louder, bolder voice, “I swear it. I vow to guard Pollox and his treasures as my own, from this moment until my final breath.”

As the stone’s color intensified to an intense, royal blue, a deep, resonant hum filled the valley—the dragons’ unanimous approval.

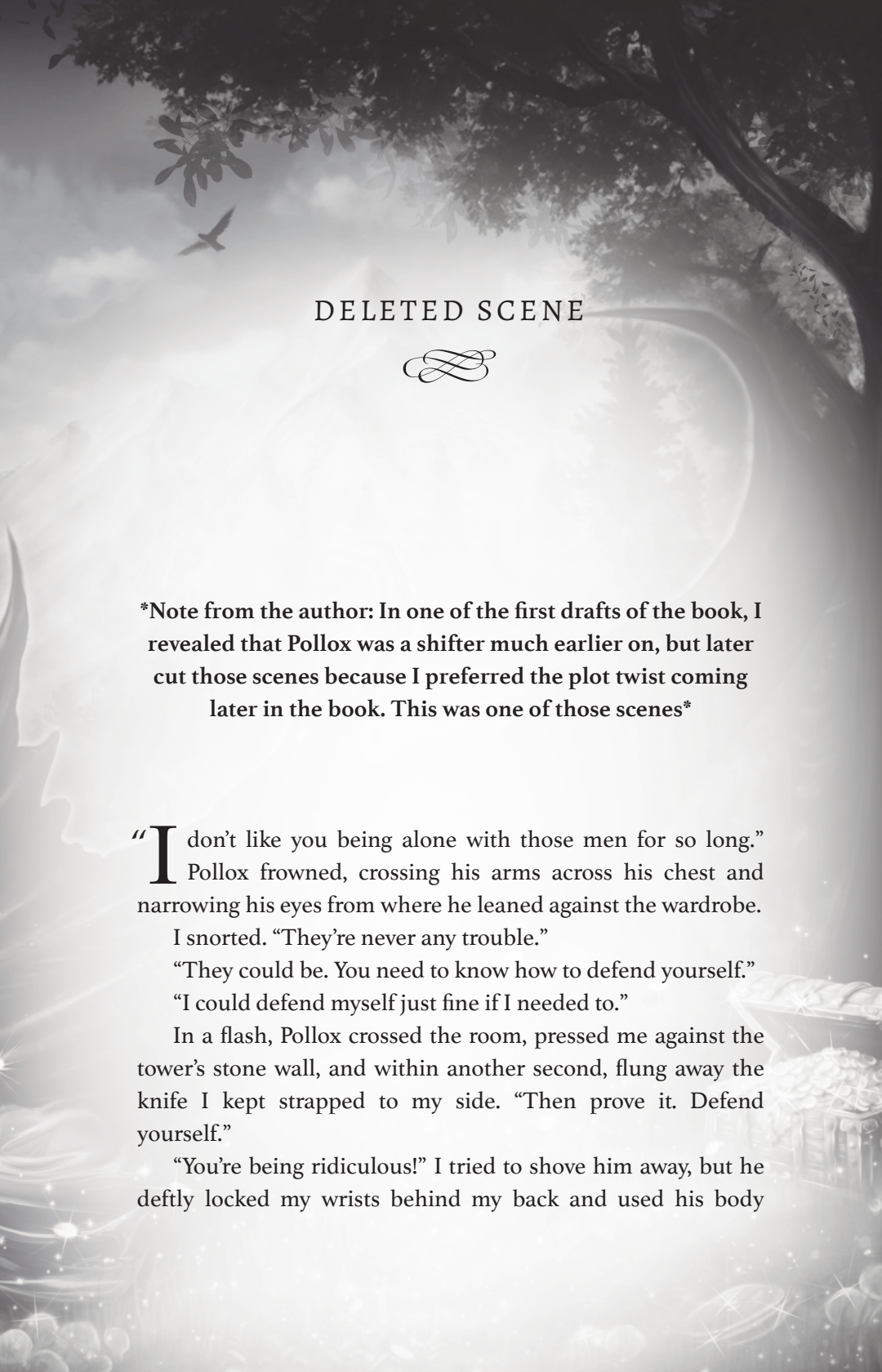
“Then let the sky bear witness and let dragon fire seal it. You are his and he is yours, from this breath until your last. By fire and flight, by oath and honor, we ignite your life bond and bind your souls together.”

The encircling dragons let out blasts of fire up to the sky so vividly bright that I wondered if my vision would ever recover from it. An intense heat sprang up where Pollox gripped my fingers, and when I looked down, saw blue flames spiraling around our clasped hands. The flames didn’t burn me, but imparted a warmth that sank deep into my bones and left a tiny, golden mark on my wrist. A matching one appeared on Pollox’s wrist and it was as though the imaginary tether linking my heart to Pollox’s tripled in strength so that I could almost feel his thoughts.

“So you are sealed,” the elder dragon intoned. The flames from the surrounding dragons faded as he continued, “You are bound, not by chains, but by choice. Not by force, but by fire. You belong to each other and nothing can ever drive you apart.”

Pollox leaned his forehead over to touch mine, our hands still linked, and we closed our eyes. We were bonded for life.





DELETED SCENE



Note from the author: In one of the first drafts of the book, I revealed that Pollox was a shifter much earlier on, but later cut those scenes because I preferred the plot twist coming later in the book. This was one of those scenes

"I don't like you being alone with those men for so long." Pollox frowned, crossing his arms across his chest and narrowing his eyes from where he leaned against the wardrobe.

I snorted. "They're never any trouble."

"They could be. You need to know how to defend yourself."

"I could defend myself just fine if I needed to."

In a flash, Pollox crossed the room, pressed me against the tower's stone wall, and within another second, flung away the knife I kept strapped to my side. "Then prove it. Defend yourself."

"You're being ridiculous!" I tried to shove him away, but he deftly locked my wrists behind my back and used his body

weight to pin me against the wall. When I tried to twist away, he followed, trapping me between his arms.

“Or maybe you’re proving that I was right and you shouldn’t be alone with men like that,” he breathed into my ear. “Men who are alone with an attractive woman are far more dangerous than any dragon could be.” The cold stone at my back offered a sharp contrast from the blazing heat that Pollox provided at such close quarters. As much as I didn’t want him to move, even more than that, I didn’t want him to be right about any deficiencies I may or may not have.

With renewed energy, I slammed my shoulder into Pollox’s side, forcing his grip on my forearms to slacken slightly. I exploited the momentary weakness by slipping my wrist out of his grasp, pivoting away, and forcing Pollox back a few inches toward the open window. My advantage didn’t last for long. I quickly found myself in the same position within seconds and couldn’t shake him off.

He wasn’t causing me any pain in the way he was holding me, but I was suddenly slapped with the stark realization that I had no way to protect myself against an attacker, just as Pollox had predicted. My hands and arms were utterly worthless at that moment, bound behind my back, but I wasn’t ready to give up quite yet.

I sharply raised my knee, aiming between his legs, but he turned so that I drove my knee into his thigh instead. He stumbled from the force of it, still clutching me tightly, and we both toppled to the ground. My full weight hit Pollox’s chest as I fell on top of him, and he let out a small *oof* as air was forced from his lungs.

“See?” I panted, rolling away and scrambling to my feet as Pollox gulped for air, still sprawled on the rug. “I would be fine.”

I waited for Pollox to get up, but he stayed immobile,

spread-eagled on the floor and gasping for breath, his eyes half closed. He must be injured worse than I thought.

"Pollox?" I knelt down beside him and ran a hand over his chest. His heart was beating steadily and I could hear his breathing. "Are you hurt?" I moved my hand up to touch his face.

An iron grip clenched around my wrist faster than a striking serpent. Pollox rolled over and within a matter of seconds, had me trapped once more.

"Like I said, never trust a man." His gaze lingered on my face, but this time, Pollox didn't hold me down for long. Instead, he helped me to my feet. He had already proved his point.

"That was a dirty trick you pulled," I told him.

He smirked. "What are you going to do, lock me in a tower?"

The corner of my mouth twitched. "I just may do that."

Pollox tucked a strand of my mussed hair behind my ear, but his fingers kept traveling backward until they had hooked themselves behind my head. I was forced to take a step forward, and brought my hands up to rest on his broad chest. My body warmed until it matched the intense heat of Pollox's, bordering on burning.

Oh scales, he was going to kiss me, or else I was going to lose control and kiss him. My heart pounded frantically against my ribs, encouraging me to go against my better judgement and close the distance between myself and Pollox.

Pollox leaned in, so near that I felt ready to swoon from the combination of his heat and proximity, then he whispered into my ear, "Never trust men."

A high-pitched male voice cut through the air. "Fear not, fair maiden! Rescue is nigh at hand and I shall wreak vengeance upon the scurvy cur that threatens your virtue! Come forth, villain, and we shall battle for the hand of the fair Rapunzel!"

Irritation rippled through me at whichever new knight was interrupting the moment Pollox and I had been having, but the heat of the moment faded as my brain caught up to my emotions, and my irritation was replaced with gratitude that I hadn't done anything rash that might compromise my villainous partnership with Pollox. I pulled myself out of Pollox's arms, went to the balcony, and cried out to the knight as I cast an analytical eye over the scene.

The knight in the field down below was brandishing his sword wildly and attempting to hop from foot to foot, but the weight of his shining armor held him down and clanked, causing a tremendous racket. His helmet was so shiny that it had to have been new, and there wasn't a single dent or chink in his breastplate. The knight's squire was holding the reins of a stallion by the border of the forest, and both the saddle blanket and the squire's uniform looked well made.

"He's no threat," I told Pollox. "He has never seen battle. My guess is that he has wealthy parents and is parading around acting like he is far more important than he is."

"No human is a threat to me," Pollox grumbled. But he too, seemed to have been brought back to his senses by the new arrival.

"That treacherous rogue shall trouble thee no longer, fairest maiden!" The knight bellowed. "Thine trials have drawn to a close, I assure you. Your savior has arrived at last!"

Pollox pulled me away from the window. "We could just wait for this one to get bored and leave. There is no way up."

A shout from below broke the heat of the moment again. "Come forth, you yellow-bellied mongrel, to duel, or count thine self a coward forever more!"

Pollox's fingers tightened at my waist and he blew out an irritated puff of air.

"Ignore him," I coaxed, and entwined my fingers into his

wild hair, but then screamed in surprise as an arrow trailing twine thumped into the headboard of the bed across the room.

“Prepare to flee, fairest maiden!” the knight called.

“That does it,” Pollox growled. “I’m going to get rid of this one quickly.”

He slammed the door of the wardrobe behind him as he took the passageway back to the cave, and a few minutes later, I saw him in the sky, flying toward the tower.

I returned to the window and waved my handkerchief. “Beware, noble sire! My captor is the fiercest of all dragons. Save yourself while you can!”

