



Worth a Dragon

by Sarah K. L. Wilson



1 I DIDN'T LIKE THE SOUNDS I was hearing. I shuffled nervously as the
2 shouting grew louder.

3 Nothing about this place was right. Not the narrow stall I was in, or the
4 bird feathers that lined it, or the smell of the seeds they'd put in here for
5 me to eat. Seeds! I was no bird. Not even a huge bird like the ones that the
6 locals here rode.

7 Worse, there were only two other dragons in this entire city. Sarmbes –
8 the other Gold – was even more agitated than I was. Something had
9 happened to his rider. He didn't know what it was any more than I did. We
10 were here as diplomats. That's what Gold dragons did. We flew diplomats
11 from the Dominion to cities in lands far away to keep the peace, to shore
12 up alliances, to be sure that the dust demons never haunted us again. Even
13 tiny little countries like Tambrel.

14 And knowing that, who would want to hurt Sambres' rider?

15 It wasn't like either of us even wanted to be here – not really. We hadn't
16 volunteered for the job of carrying a rider. Like all male dragons, our names
17 had been drawn in the lottery when we came of age. I sometimes wonder
18 if the humans had planned for this better than we had. Long ago when Haz
19 – the human – and Haz'Drazen – the queen of all dragons – had made their
20 pact they had won a land for each of their peoples, they also made a further
21 pact to keep our ties fresh forever. Each of us had bequeathed each others'
22 nations a tithe.

23 The humans gave us whole families of humans to live among us, serving
24 generation after generation in whatever things humans did. As a dragonlet,
25 I had not paid much attention to the ways of the Companions. They were
26 human. I was dragon. All I knew was that they served.

27 The dragons had chosen a different way. No permanent families of
28 dragons lived in the Dominion. Instead, once every year, we sent the lottery
29 to the humans. The dragons who would serve in the place of all their kin.

30 It was my bad luck to be chosen in the tithe the year I came of age. Not
31 that I was bitter – or at least not usually. The bird feed and the smell of
32 bird feces in this despicable excuse for a dragon cote had me in a bad mood.

33 Worse, Sambres' projected terror wasn't helping me any. He couldn't feel
34 his rider. And that was a problem. Because if Tel Abadis was dead, then
35 Sambres would be dead too, in days or weeks.

36 If he was a Purple like Kantain – the only other dragon in this sky-
37 forsaken city – then he would know for sure. He'd just read his human's
38 mind. I shuddered at the thought like I always did. Ugh. A *human* mind.

39 *Tel Abadis might be dead. Kantain had said the same thing an hour ago.*
40 *It's bad. The whole city is in an uproar.*

41 If they were in an uproar, then why weren't our riders here? Wouldn't
42 they want to go back to the Dominion? Tambrel was no country to stay in
43 if things had gone bad in the capital. The country barely was worth calling
44 a country. It was mostly forests and lakes and nothing else. A tiny country
45 between Baojang and the lands of the Rock Eaters.

46 Why my rider – Dale Waxwielder – decided to come here was still a
47 mystery to me. I'd accidentally caught a thought or two of his about secrets
48 and fears, but I was no Purple. I'd never sink to reading human minds.

49 *If you don't bend that arrogance, someone might bend it for you.* Kantain
50 was always a pleasure. He was as arrogant as any of us and with less
51 reason.

52 *I'm fine with my arrogance, mudmind.* I shot back.

53 That was Purples for you. Always gutter-diving in among the minds of
54 humans. You couldn't believe half of what they told you.

55 A wail sounded from the cote beside me and I shifted uncomfortably.
56 There were screams below us in the night. Human screams. It made my
57 scales crawl. I might be arrogant, but I was not heartless.

58 A second wail and then the mental scream lashing against my mind made
59 my claws scrape across the ground as my head tucked under a wing on
60 instinct alone.

61 *What's wrong? Who is hurt?*

62 No reply.

63 *Sambres? Don't tell me you've lost your mind! Kantain?*

64 Kantain's mind stuttered back to life but he sounded as shocked as me.
65 *I think that was Sambres.*

66 *Sambres? Sambres!*

67 Nothing.

68 I peeked my head out of the sorry excuse of a cote, my nose twitching at the
69 smell of blood even before I saw Sambres neck hanging limply out of the
70 cote he'd been stationed in. There was no head on the end of his neck.

71 *His rider. They killed him, too.* Kantain's mental voice was jagged.

72 Panic welled up inside me and I fought it. We couldn't just fly away. We
73 were locked down with ties of magic – the hold our riders put on us. Or at
74 least I was. Purples sometimes weren't tied down. Lucky sheep-eaters. But
75 Kantain wouldn't go anywhere without his rider. A girl, if I remembered,
76 barely forty summers old. She carried messages, as Purples did, and she'd
77 come here with one.

78 *They suspected a coup attempt on the crown.*

79 *The crown of the Dominion?* That got my attention.

80 *No, of Tambrel. We were trying to prevent it. So were your riders.*

81 *Foolishness. Best to leave other people's troubles to them. We had*
82 *enough of our own.*

83 *Don't you think that's a bit cold?* Kantain asked.

84 Was it cold to wish I wasn't tied in a bird's cote while other dragons were
85 being slaughtered like cattle? Was that cold?

86 I could feel Kantain fighting his own fear.

87 Where was Dale? Why didn't he hurry?

88 The screaming seemed to have been going on for a long time and now
89 there was the clash of swords. And someone had lit the city on fire.

90 If anyone was going around lighting things on fire, I wanted it to be me.

91 *I thought there was a fancy party tonight.* It was less frightening with
92 someone to talk to.

93 *A party that gathered everyone important into one place – easy to*
94 *surprise and slaughter.* Kantain's voice was close to breaking.

95 *Where is your rider?* I wanted her to be safe. I wanted to watch Kantain
96 fly away safe with her.

97 *Close. She fights alongside yours and a few others, but they are out-*
98 *numbered and she is injured.*

99 I shifted and my back rubbed irritably against the stall. Dale hadn't
100 unsaddled me. He'd thought he'd be going for a ride to cool off after the
101 party, but that should have been hours ago. Would he survive the night?

102 *Badly injured?* I asked.

103 Kantain's mental voice sounded strained. Worse now. *Her life leaks away.*
104 *She –*

105 His mental voice cut off, but I could hear the clashing metal and the
106 shouts and screams coming from the direction of his cote. I stuck my head
107 out the cote looking, reaching as far as my magical binding would allow.

108 Kantain leapt from his cote, his rider and another human clinging to his
109 back, not even strapped in. He barely got out of the cote before four strikes
110 of lightning hit him from every direction and he fell, lifeless from the sky,
111 his rider and the other human falling with him.

112 *Kantain? Kantain!*

113 And then another human was falling from Kantain's cote and my heart
114 seized in my chest as I realized it was Dale. My Dale.

115 *No!*

116 I fought against the binding holding me, desperate to leap to help him,
117 helpless as he fell. Dale. My rider. My life.

118 I bucked and kicked, frustrated, helpless.

119 I didn't see him hit the ground. The angle was wrong. But I knew he did.
120 Knew it in my bones as the magic faded and his binding on me was suddenly
121 gone.

122 I could leave now. I could flee. The thought felt hollow without Dale. I
123 hadn't flown anywhere without him in ten years.

124 There was a crashing sound and the door into my cote hit me. I snorted
125 a puff of flame, pain flaring in my side, but nothing like the pain in my heart.

126 A man in soldier's armor shoved through the door, his arms full of
127 something.

128 I reared back, planning to flame him.

129 I wasn't dying here. I'd seen what his kind had done to my friends!

130 I was no easy kill.

131 He set the bundle down, tucking it behind his legs and standing
132 defensively in front of it, hand held high. There was an angry gash across
133 his nose and cheek, leaking blood and a wild look in his eye. He bolted the
134 door, his eyes never leaving me.

135 Outside, the sounds of fighting continued.

136 I still would have flamed him – left him smoldering in his boots – except
137 for the little squeak from behind him. A pair of round scared eyes peered
138 out from around his body as one of his hands tucked the little creature back
139 again, protectively.

140 “L- listen,” he stammered, and his voice rasped badly, like there might
141 be something wrong with his breathing. “I’ve never talked to a dragon
142 before. I know you fellas only fly for your riders. I know that you hate all
143 other humans.”

144 Well, hate was a strong word. Tonight, I felt like flaming the world to the
145 ground, but that had more to do with the death of Dale and the horrible,
146 heavy knowledge that I would die now, too.

147 “Look,” he said. “I wouldn’t ask, but there’s nowhere else to go. They’ve
148 killed the King and the Queen, the Captain of the Guard. All the King’s
149 Protectors. I saw them die myself. Saw them fall. They’ve killed everyone
150 they could find. Everyone.”

151 Those little eyes – the ones peeking out at me – they were full of tears.
152 The tears ran down in streaks across her face as she clutched her clothing
153 in her tiny hands. I didn’t know humans well enough to tell how old they
154 were. This one was barely taller than the soldier’s waist. That made her
155 young, right? She’d barely be out of the egg if she was a dragon.

156 “Everyone except the princess. And I’m the last of her guard. Please. Will
157 you help us?”

158 There were tears in his eyes, too. Did human men cry? I hadn’t seen that
159 before.

160 I did not cry.

161 But seeing that little human with the big eyes and the shake in her body
162 as she sucked in a breath ... I thought maybe I could cry. She had lost
163 everything tonight. Just like me.

164 Something heavy pounded against the door. They were going to break it
165 down. The tiny girl – princess? – was quivering in fear and the soldier’s face
166 was pale.

167 I hunched down as low as I could go. How else did you say yes to
168 humans?

169 The soldier lifted the girl and put her on my back, whispering soothing
170 things as he strapped her in. I breathed a sigh of relief when he grabbed
171 the saddlebags from the wall and threw them on the back of the saddle. I’d
172 have to trust he knew to strap them in, too. Dale was fastidious about
173 always keeping them filled with supplies.

174 The soldier was barely in the saddle before I scrambled out of the cotes.
175 I heard the door breaking as I leapt.

176 Please don’t let there be lightning. Please don’t!

177 I climbed as high and fast as I could.

178 Behind me, my passengers choked on the smoke of the burning city and
179 under me. Screams and fires filled the city and evil rushed over Tambrel
180 like a tide.

181 I didn’t look back. I didn’t want to see any lightning streaking toward me.
182 I just kept climbing and climbing, catching an updraft heading south and
183 then letting a strong tailwind take me.

184 We were lucky. If there had been lightnings, they hadn’t been fast
185 enough.

186 The soldier – if he were still conscious – gave no guidance, so I picked
187 only the strongest airstreams. My only goal flight.

188 It was morning by the time we found the southern coast. The sun rose to
189 the east, but I was still flying south, south, south. Toward home. The
190 Dominion. The Lands of Haz’Drazen. If the soldier wanted something else,
191 he didn’t say anything. If the princess wanted something else, she didn’t
192 say anything.

193 I could still hear her crying, feel her tears hitting my scaly back, but the
194 soldier was silent, so I flew on.



1 I STOPPED ON THE FIRST floating island at noon.

2 We didn't stop for long, but I knew humans needed breaks. The little girl
3 – the princess – went to attend to her needs while the soldier pulled
4 waterskins and dried foods from the saddlebags. I didn't need either of
5 them. Not yet, at least. Maybe not ever.

6 It stung to think of it. I could already feel Dale's death. It was like an
7 open, oozing wound in my mind. I'd bound myself to him – or been bound
8 to him – during the ceremonies at Dragon School. The magic binding tied
9 us in this life. And it tied us in death. It would not be long until I followed
10 him to the lands beyond life. Already, the magic began to unravel me.

11 The soldier slumped on the ground beside me, his forehead slick with
12 sweat. He looked behind him, watching to make sure the princess wasn't
13 looking at him. I tilted my head to the side, curious. What was he hiding?

14 He opened his red coat, looking down at a gaping wound in his side. He
15 bit back a groan at the blood still oozing from it.

16 I didn't know human anatomy well. But I was no hatchling. I'd seen men
17 die. This man might not have much longer than I did. Maybe he didn't even
18 have as long. His face looked gray. That, I knew, was not normal. It should
19 be black like the rest of him.

20 I shifted uncomfortably. I had hoped I could deposit him and the girl
21 somewhere on the coastline, but if he were dying, I could hardly leave a
22 human child alone in the wild.

23 "We need to get far from here. Far to the South," the soldier muttered,
24 almost to himself. "Not Baojang. Not the Dominion. Neither is far enough.
25 It must be farther still. Somewhere no one knows about."

26 "Jandar?" a small voice asked, slightly frightened.

27 "Right here, Seleska," he said, his eyes crinkling around the edges as he
28 smiled for her, closing his coat over the wound quickly. "Do not fear. Here,
29 I have water and food for you."

30 They ate quietly, the girl still leaking tears from time to time. The man
31 kind and gentle in his words.

32 I tried to stay calm, but I felt anything but calm inside.

33 Watching that human hatchling ... well, I didn't really know non-rider
34 humans much. I usually was only around Dale and a few other Dragon

35 Riders or servants. Everyone knew dragons were too dangerous to be
36 around humans. My instincts made my scales want to lift nervously around
37 them.

38 But that little one – trembling with grief, her family gone in a violent
39 instant, her only protector wounded and close to death – I didn't want her
40 to die out here. Not by the hands of her enemy. Not by the elements. Not
41 in fear and grief and all alone.

42 I'd never really felt this before. I'd been protective of Dale, and I liked
43 him. I'd been fond of my dragon friends, of course. But that human girl. I
44 didn't want to die before she was safe. And if I only had days left, couldn't
45 I spend them bringing her to safety?

46 I knew the route to the southern islands. I could find it for them. And
47 then just hope that the soldier – Jandar – and I lived long enough to bring
48 her to other humans.



1 WE FLEW FOR THE REST of the day over open ocean. There was another
2 floating island out here. They were strange things called brambarafts. Raft-
3 like islands made of a tangle of floating bramba trees and the creatures and
4 plants that could live on their tangled roots. They drifted across the seas,
5 but there were always some just before the sky stream entrance.

6 My eyes scanned for the bramba raft I knew must be below somewhere.
7 The moonlight on the water played tricks on the eyes. I missed Dale. He
8 had been good at finding things. It was almost like an instinct for him. And
9 he'd always been in good spirits. I missed his buoyant cheerfulness.

10 I coughed. The cough had started a few hours ago. Not a good sign.

11 I saw a dragon die like this once. A Red. His rider died in a fall. I had tried
12 at the time not to watch as he slowly deteriorated, rotting from the inside
13 out. And now, I couldn't quite tame the fear that rippled through my belly
14 at the sure knowledge that the same death was reaching up through the
15 grave for me.

16 I shivered, but at that moment I caught sight of the brambaraft and
17 descended down to it, hugging the air with my wings.

18 It was barely large enough for my bulk and a little room for the humans
19 to camp. No matter. It would do.

20 I landed gently. The girl fell asleep hours ago, worn by tears and travel.
21 The soldier dismounted awkwardly, nearly falling to the ground. I clenched
22 my jaw, worried. Would he survive the night?

23 He stumbled to a pair of bramba trees, stringing up a hammock - the
24 same hammock Dale had used on these occasions - and returned to my
25 side, working at something on my back. Probably unstrapping the girl.

26 I twisted my head, opening my jaw to help lift her down. His eyes grew
27 big, full of fear.

28 What did he think I was going to do? Hurt her?

29 I shrank back, appalled by the mistrust in his eyes.

30 He finished the job himself, stumbling to the hammock with the sleeping
31 girl clutched in his arms. He set her into it and tucked a blanket around her
32 before stumbling back to me and sitting down by my head.

33 I stayed very still. No sense in spooking him more. He probably wouldn't
34 survive the shock.

35 "Sorry about that. I guess you were trying to help. And I'm afraid I'll have
36 to leave your saddle on. I can't seem to find the strength to remove it," he
37 said, opening his coat to look again at the angry wound in his side.

38 In the moonlight, it looked bad. It was not closing. The flesh was swelling
39 around it. Not good.

40 "Seleska – the princess – she's six. That's young for humans. I don't know
41 if you know about that. She can't fend for herself."

42 I tilted my head, trying to indicate that I understood. "I can't ... We can't
43 ..." He paused, regrouping. "We need to get her to other humans. To keep
44 her safe. But we can't just go to Baojang or the Rock Eaters. Not even the
45 Dominion. We have to go as far as we can. She has a special gift – a magic
46 – that her family had, too. It must be protected. It's what kept Tambrel safe
47 for all these years – one tiny country between two massive ones. That
48 special magic."

49 He was rambling. I cared not at all for human magic.

50 "And the conspiracy against them was bigger than just a coup. I heard
51 the King talking to them as they attacked us. It's huge. It spreads over
52 nations. If any of them know who she is ... If any of them know what she
53 can do ... Look, I know it's a lot to ask. I know you don't know us. And she's
54 not your princess, but we need your help. Please. Please, help her."

55 I attempted a human nod. I probably looked ridiculous, but he seemed
56 less agitated when I finished.

57 "She's not just magic. She's a special girl. Tough. Clever. Courageous
58 down to the bones. I've been her bodyguard since she was born. It's like
59 watching your own child grow, you know? You'd do anything to keep them
60 safe."

61 Obviously. He was proving that right now.

62 He was sweating so profusely that he had to keep wiping his brow. But
63 he didn't drink from the waterskin. He must be thirsty, but he didn't drink.
64 Did he know there was no fresh water for three more days on this path?
65 Did he know that one skin was all the little girl would have?

66 His breathing was ragged and every so often it sounded as if his heart
67 had missed a beat.

68 I shuffled closer.

69 No one wanted to die alone.



1 I WOKE TO SOBBING.

2 I opened a crusty eye, coughing, choking on something in my throat. My
3 head was spinning.

4 One glance at Jandar, propped against the brambles, was enough. His
5 face was grey in the golden dawn, the only lifeless thing for leagues in every
6 direction. He'd died looking south. Fitting.

7 And with the loss of the faithful guard, I felt a heavy weight descend on
8 me.

9 I coughed again, a spout of flame shooting out uncontrollably from my
10 mouth. Even the flame was only a flicker of what it should be.

11 I had days – if that.

12 I would not waste them.

13 I looked to the little girl, her face screwed up with sorrow. She clutched
14 Jandar's hand.

15 I shifted, nervously. The last time I'd tried to help her, I'd scared Jandar.
16 And she was just a little thing with golden hair like my scales and huge
17 eyes. What would she do if I tried to lift her onto my back with my mouth?

18 I swallowed.

19 Perhaps ... oh how Kantain would howl if he heard this! ... Perhaps, I
20 should speak to her mind to mind. It felt almost wrong to speak to a human.
21 Purples did it, but everyone knew Purples were odd. Not as dragon-y as the
22 rest of us.

23 But what did I have to lose? No other dragon would ever know. And I was
24 dying. Even I wouldn't be around to wonder about it for long.

25 I reached out to the child mind as gently as I could, as if she were a
26 dragon hatchling.

27 *Little one.*

28 She jumped, dropping Jandar's hand and quivering, her lips parted in fear
29 or horror. I wanted to wash that fear away.

30 *I am Ramariri, Dragon of the Gold. And you are Seleska, princess of*
31 *Tambrel and ward of Jandar who has died nobly in your service.*

32 Her lip quivered.

33 *Please do not fear.*

34 "Is he ..." her little voice stuttered. "Is he dead?"

35 *Yes. He died so you could live.*

36 She choked on a sob. Had I said something wrong?

37 *His sacrifice is honorable and glorious. His name will be sung in the world*
38 *beyond this world.*

39 Tears flowed down her face, her little body hiccupping with them.

40 I shifted uncomfortably. This was not the reaction I had expected. Was
41 she not proud of his honorable death?

42 *You will be safe with me, little one. The soldier left you enough water and*
43 *food for our journey. But you will need to get the hammock from the trees*
44 *and the blanket to put in the saddle bags.*

45 "My father and mother ... my brothers ..." she gasped between sobs.

46 I felt like my heart wasn't working right. It stuttered and my own eyes
47 felt misty. Perhaps, my heart was already failing. But no, it beat on. It
48 simply ached with the little human. Opening my mind to hers, my heart to
49 hers ... it hurt worse than the first aches of death.

50 *One little heart can only cry so many tears at a time, little one. Take them*
51 *one at a time over the days to come. I will fly with you through this grief.*

52 For as long as I could.

53 She walked carefully over to me, avoiding looking at Jandar and, biting
54 her lip with nervousness, laid a hand on my snout.

55 "You're a friendly dragon?"

56 *I am your friend, little princess.*

57 "I don't know where we are," she said, her lips trembling.

58 *I do.*

59 "I don't know where to go."

60 *I know that, too.*

61 "Can I trust you, dragon?"

62 *Ramariri.*

63 "Can I trust you, Ramariri?"

64 *With your life, little princess.*



1 IN THE END, WE ONLY recovered the blanket. The hammock knots had
2 been too strong for the princess to untie and too delicate for my teeth.
3 She'd reluctantly let me help her up on my back with my snout. She'd done
4 up her own straps, sniffing whenever her gaze found Jandar.

5 I had not been sure how to pay respect to him. Some cultures dropped
6 their dead into the sea – an option, but not a pleasant one. There were
7 creatures that lived in the sea. Even some kinds of dragon.

8 Burial was not an option with no land. And there were already birds
9 circling the brambaraft. Filthy carrion. He didn't deserve to be a meal for
10 birds. He deserved honor.

11 In the end, I asked Seleska to close her eyes and I cremated his body.

12 I spoke words of honor as we took off from the island.

13 *From honor to honor we send you.*

14 *From life to life.*

15 *May your fathers and mothers embrace you.*

16 *May your soul be free from strife.*

17 "Do you think that's true for my mother?" Seleska said in a small voice
18 as we flew. She was so light, it was like flying with no burden at all.

19 *Your mother is where no harm can touch her again, little one.*

20 I was getting used to her child mind as the day flew by and my wings got
21 slowly heavier. We passed through the sign of the ring that threw us into a
22 stream of fast flowing air. Whether it was natural or magical, I never had
23 been told, but I knew it from flying the secret path before. It would take us
24 south, to the southernmost islands of the Dominion, not far from the Lands
25 of Haz'Drazen.

26 I could stop there and die with my people. I could leave Seleska with the
27 tribute families that served us there. It was tempting.

28 But as we flew up on the high winds, as I answered her questions – "We're
29 high in the air, right Ramariri?" "We're going far south, right Ramariri?" "Are
30 the islands south warm or cold, Ramariri?" "Are other dragons as friendly
31 as you, Ramariri?" – I decided I would not return to my lands. Some instinct
32 of foreboding warned me off that path. I felt surer with each wing flap that
33 Jandar was right. She needed somewhere hidden to be truly safe.
34 Somewhere free of scheming or power or even contact with other people.

35 I knew a place like that, far, far to the south where the earth was wet
36 and rainy and the mountains high. Where the people lived on red deer and
37 fish and soft fragrant fruits. I had not been there, but I knew where it was.

38 The Havenwind Isles. A land we dragons of the sky did not visit. There
39 were people there. People who did not use boats or ships. People who did
40 not see visitors. Their only visitors were the dragons of the sea – and that
41 was rare enough that you could hardly call it contact.

42 If I could just live that long, I could see she was safe there.

43 It would be worth it.

44 Worth my life.

45 A princess like this one was worth the cost of a dragon.

46 It made me feel heady with affection. Such a strange sensation. I
47 coughed and spat out a black tarry substance, hoping that I could carry her
48 that far in time.



1 "ARE WE NEARLY THERE, Ramariri?" Seleska's small voice asked sleepily.
2 It was the fourth night since we left Janvar. Two days in the magical sky
3 stream had brought us south and west across the sea and two more days
4 had brought us down the coast to the Lands of Haz'drazen. Not far from
5 here, my fellow dragons dined and courted and lived and died. Not far from
6 here, the land reeked of dragons.

7 It took all my strength to fly on from them, but tonight I was afraid to
8 stop flying. My wings were growing weaker and my lungs filled with the
9 black, tarry magic that would kill me so that I coughed more often, it
10 seemed, than I took a breath.

11 If I set down somewhere, would I be able to lift up again? Taking off
12 always took more effort than soaring. Especially high up where the air
13 currents and updrafts over the coastline did most of the work.

14 *Nearly there, little one. Nearly there. Can you sleep?*

15 "I'm a bit hungry."

16 She had eaten the last of the dried food a few hours ago. I was still
17 astonished by how much a human child could eat. That food would have
18 lasted Dale this long and he was three times her size. At least I'd found her
19 more water at our last stop.

20 *Sip some water. There will be food where we are going.*

21 Skies and stars send it so. Skies and stars give me strength to reach the
22 Havenwind Isles without plummeting into the ocean. Skies and stars keep
23 this little one safe and give her a warm reception at our destination.

24 "I'm very sleepy."

25 *Lay down over my neck, little one. Sleep there. I will carry you.*

26 "Goodnight, Ramariri," she said sleepily, just as she had when she
27 cuddled against me to sleep for the past four nights. She was remarkably
28 unafraid of my teeth and claws. I should be mortified by that, but I was
29 charmed and proud. Janvar had been right. She was a courageous child.
30 Her little voice was thick with sleep. "I love you."

31 Her tiny hand spread out over my neck as she drifted off and I bore her
32 through the night.

33 Most of my life, I had been bitter. Nothing I had ever done had been my
34 choice – or so it felt. Fate had forced my wings to fly where it willed. Powers

35 and traditions, magics and masters, all had pushed and prodded and forced
36 until my only freedom was the freedom to resent and refuse, to grow
37 bitterness inside like a root.

38 But this thing – this first thing I had ever really chosen to do myself –
39 this was good. If all those small deaths had only been to bring me here, to
40 help this one innocent child. Well, then hadn't they been worth it? Perhaps
41 another would not think so, but as I hacked and coughed my way south
42 past the warmth of the lava rivers flowing into the sea to the islands south
43 of the volcanic dragon lands, I grew more and more certain that this one
44 thing was worth all the rest. This one child had changed me.

45 Below me, the sun began to rise, and in the distance, I thought that
46 perhaps I could see the mounds of the islands beyond. A wave of creatures
47 crested out of the water and I almost gasped at the rare sight of them.

48 "What are those, Ramariri?" my sleepy princess asked, waking up.

49 *A rare thing for anyone to see, human or dragon.*

50 "They look like dragons but with no feet and with different wings," she
51 said with a yawn.

52 *And so they are, little one, a wave of Blue dragons, leaping from the sea.*
53 *You could live your whole life and never see them.*

54 "They're beautiful, Ramariri, but not as beautiful as you."

55 The warmth in my heart almost made up for the fact that my vision was
56 blurring. I couldn't see the islands anymore. I was growing heavy in the air.

57 Skies and stars send I made it to them.



1 WE WERE CLOSE. I COULD feel the land. I just couldn't see it anymore.
2 I could barely see the sea beneath us, even though my belly caught at the
3 tips of the waves, too heavy to keep up now that the strength in my wings
4 was fading.

5 "Are you ..." the tiny voice above me faltered. "Are you tired, Ramariri?"
6 *Do not fear, little one. I will get you to a safe place.*

7 I coughed, choking on the black substance that ran steadily from my
8 mouth into the sea below. I had been losing scales for the past few days.
9 The bare patches felt cool in the ocean spray.

10 I dipped lower into the water. Was that a glow I saw in the distance?

11 Just a little farther.

12 Just a little farther.

13 I just needed to hang on until we met the land.

14 *I want you to know something,* I said as the water dragged at my
15 wingtips. *Carrying you here has been an honor. I would not have chosen*
16 *any other path.*

17 "Ramariri, don't talk like that!" she sounded scared.

18 *Do not fear, little one. I have promised to fly with you through any fear.*
19 *I have promised to get you to safety.*

20 I felt the sea dragging at me. I was not going to make it, promises or no
21 promises. My strength was fading quickly.

22 "I'm afraid for you."

23 A hot tear slid down my neck. No! I should not make her cry. She had
24 shed enough tears for one little lifetime.

25 As if called by her tear, I could feel movement below. The Blue dragons
26 were swimming just beneath me. I felt the nudge of scale on scale as my
27 belly skimmed the water.

28 They sang in my mind a wordless song.

29 And then I was nudged up, far enough to soar a moment before falling
30 into the surf again. Again, they buoyed me up. And again. From back to
31 back across the briny current for minutes that blended into hours until my
32 belly slid up on a long streamer of sand.

33 I felt the small hands and feet as my princess clambered down. I felt her
34 small hands take my big head in them. I felt her tears as she pressed her
35 cheek to mine.

36 "I love you Ramariri."

37 *I love you, too, princess.*

38 The world faded for a time.



1 SMALL HANDS SHOOK ME awake and through tears, I could hear her
2 small voice. "Don't die, Ramariri. Please don't die!"

3 And then a woman's voice comforting her. She had found people. Hope
4 swelled in me. She would be okay, here on the Havenwind Isles, far too far
5 from anywhere else to be found.

6 A man's voice spoke quietly in my ear.

7 "I don't know much about dragons." He cleared his throat. "But it seems
8 to have mattered to you to have brought the girl safely here. I don't know
9 why. We don't deal much with the outside world, and this doesn't change
10 that. And it's pretty clear that you're dying. Don't know how you made it
11 this far, to be honest. But if it matters to you, you should know that the girl
12 matters to us. That we'll look after her. We lost our little Lassa to the
13 shaking fever last winter and we've been so broken up about it. Can't hardly
14 sleep at night. She was about the age of this sweet little thing. And now I'm
15 rambling to a dragon who probably can't even understand me. But I still
16 need to say it. It feels like promises should be said out loud. Halana and
17 me, we're going to care for her as our own. She'll be looked after. She'll be
18 safe. We promise."

19 And then Seleska's little hands were on my face and her little voice was
20 whispering "Thank you."

21 *You're worth it.* I choked on my breath, my heart stuttering. I couldn't
22 see anymore. *Worth a dragon. Worth so much more.*

23 And it had been worth it to me to live my whole life for this one good
24 deed.

25 My breath wouldn't come. A strange silence filled my ears. For the first
26 time in my life, I had no heartbeat.

27 Peace stole my soul away.

