

The Dragon's Treasure

A slight disturbance in the air woke Drag from the slumber that held him in its dark grasp. His eyelids slowly opened just a crack and he drew in a deep breath, trying to determine what had woken him. He held back the low growl when he heard the soft footsteps against the stone.

The red hot lava of fury rose in his throat at the intrusion. This was his home, his treasure, and he shared with no one. He had given up shifting into his other form almost a century ago during the Great Battle between the Seven Kingdoms of the Serpent Islands. Those that thought to claim the wealth he had collected over the centuries to fill their coffers, soon discovered he did not share. Any that dared to enter his realm soon discovered the legend behind him was not exaggerated.

The sounds of the soft footsteps silenced as the creature that dared to enter the main chamber saw the mountains of gold and gems. An explosion of satisfaction burst through Drag. Soon, the creature's greed would overwhelm him and he would slide down along the rolling waves of treasure to where Drag lay waiting.

Come to me, Drag whispered silently. Come to your death.

Anticipation coursed through him when he heard the familiar jingle of gold coins. Drawing in another

deep breath, he sank back down and closed his eyes and absorbed the approach of the intruder through his other senses. A wave of confusion swept through him when he failed to recognize the scent as one of the other inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms. It would not matter.

Whoever dares to enter my domain will die, he thought with a mental shrug. The only thing he needed to decide was how quickly that would be.

A shiver escaped him when the sounds of steps came closer. He waited to hear the shout of excitement from the intruder, but there was only the soft sound of breathing. He waited to hear the rattle of coins and jewels against each other as it was being shoved into a bag or knapsack, but all he heard was the echo of the coins as they shifted under the feet moving closer to him.

Deciding he would confront the burglar, he was about to open his eyes when he felt a tentative touch to his brow. The touch was so soft, so tender, that it held him frozen in shock. His eyes slowly opened and he stared at the delicate figure standing before him, staring at him in awe.

"Pick your treasure carefully," he commanded in a low rumble.

The figure froze, and gazed at him in astonishment before finally pulling back just far enough to slide down onto a pile of coins. Drag watched as the curvy figure of an unusual female pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around

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them. She sat staring at him in disbelief, her plump lips parted in a circle.

Lifting his head, he stretched his neck until his nose was almost touching her knees. A slight grin curved his lips when she leaned back when he snorted a puff of hot air over her. He waited for fear to replace the look of awe in her eyes. Instead, a wave of disbelief, and something close to shock, rolled in a crashing wave through him, when instead of recoiling in terror, the female reached out and caressed his left nostril with gentle, exploring fingers.

"Can I pick you?" She asked in a husky, foreign voice.

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Carly Tate shook her head and groaned as she squeezed between the narrow crack in the rock face. She really hoped there weren't any spiders, snakes, or other creepy crawly things in the dark recess. A flash of lightning and the crackle in the air had her frantically sucking in her stomach so she could slip inside. She wildly waved the damp branch that she had picked up through the opening, hoping to chase off any of the nasty gremlins and their sticky webs that might be in the entrance.

"Today was not the best day to pick for getting in shape," she groaned as she finally made it into the pitch black hold in the rock. "I should have known losing weight was hazardous to my health. This is why I hate to exercise."

Waving the branch with one hand, she reached for her cell phone with the other. Cursing under her breath when the sliding function didn't work, she slid the thin branch between her jean clad knees and used her right index finger to open the flashlight option on her cell phone.

Carly looked around the narrow 'cave' that she had been fortunate to catch a glimpse of from the narrow path she had been hiking on. If she hadn't taken a wrong turn, she would have missed it and would probably have ended up getting drowned in the pouring rain, killed in a rock slide, or struck by lightning. Now, she would die from blood sucking spiders or freeze to death.

"I hate exercising," she muttered again as she stared at the walls with growing dread, sure that she could see them moving with all kinds of deadly bugs determined to suck her dry. "I told Jenny it would be the death of me."

Jenny, her best friend and roommate, had laughed. Well, she wouldn't be laughing when she was standing over Carly's dehydrated corpse covered in silky webs. Carly vowed she would come back from the dead just to point out to Jenny that hiking was not for everyone.

"Okay, it wasn't really a hike, so much as a stroll, but it still counts," Carly told the dark walls in defiance. "The county should have put up better signs."

Carly's head tilted when she thought she caught a glimpse of light coming from the back of the cave.

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Her mind swept through all the possibilities. What if there was a serial killer waiting for her, or a vampire, or a.... Drawing in a shaky breath, she swore she would never attend Horror Night at the local college ever again.

Drawn to the warmth and light coming from the back of the cave, she stepped closer. It took a few minutes for Carly to realize that the walls and floor of the cave had smoothed out. Turning the corner, she stopped in surprise when she saw a lit torch, straight out of the Dracula movie she had watched the night before. Looking down, she swiped her finger and turned off her cell phone flashlight. No sense in wasting the power on it now that she had the light of the torch.

Fascinated by the beauty of the carved stone that now formed the walls and floor, she soon became lost in the twists and turns as she followed the passageway. Her hand flew to her mouth to hide the gasp when she stepped through a curved archway into a massive chamber. Rivers and mountains of gold and jewels glimmered in the faint light, but that was not what held her attention. No, her attention was caught on the huge form half buried at the bottom of the gold.

The statue of a brilliant sapphire and gold dragon, curled in sleep, held her mesmerized. Carly had one major weakness. She absolutely adored dragons. She collected them, painted them, and dreamed of them.

Jenny liked to tease Carly that the only way she would ever find a man she could love was if he was part dragon.

She slowly descended the steps, sliding a little when her feet hit the pile of gold. In the back of her mind, she wondered if this was where they had filmed that movie with the dragon and his gold. If so, she was ready to move in.

He's so beautiful, she thought, coming to a stop in front of him.

Her eyes ran over the silky scales covering his head. His brow was high, with two large ridges curving around his eyes. Thick, black lashes lay against the sapphire and gold scales like twin crescent moons. A series of ridges ran down his face to the narrow tip that made up his nose.

He looked... real. She knew it was impossible, but he looked like he was warm and soft. Unable to resist, she reached out her right hand and ran her fingers gently along one of the ridges of his brow. A soft gasp escaped her when she felt the warmth of the dragon's scales beneath her touch.

Shock coursed through her when the dragon's eyelashes rose to reveal dark, sapphire blue eyes with a glitter of gold sparkling in them. She swayed when she felt, more than heard a strangely accented voice whisper.

"Pick your treasure carefully."

Carly's hand fell to her side and she stumbled backwards in shock, deciding she must have died in the storm after all. Sinking down onto the pile of

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coins, she ignored everything, but the magical creature in front of her. Her eyes lifted as the massive head rose. She sank backwards when he stretched his head toward her. He released a warm breath that swept over her, melting the bone-chilling cold that had encased her body from her rain-dampened clothing.

Raising her hand as the head drew closer, she tenderly ran her fingers along one nostril. She didn't notice the long, sharp teeth. Her gaze was focused on where her fingers outlined a vivid scale. The warmth of his breath heated her blood with strength and hope instead of fear. Licking her suddenly dry lips, Carly stared up into the brilliant eyes of the dragon and whispered the first words that came to her mind.

"Can I pick you?" She asked in a dazed voice.

Her eyes closed and she slid back when the figure in front of her shimmered and changed. Her last thought before darkness fogged her vision was that the man who swept her into his arms was just as magnificent as the dragon. A part of her was aware that she was being lifted into a pair of strong arms. Fighting against the darkness, she reached up to touch his chin in concern.

"I'm too heavy," she muttered as her head fell limply against his shoulder. "You'll get a hernia trying to carry me."

Her eyelashes fluttered shut when she felt his body shake with laughter. Maybe dragon men were

stronger than the guys she had dated before. A slight smile curved her lips and she snuggled closer to the warmth of his body. Carly released a contented sigh. She decided it was nice to be carried as the heat of his touch lured her deeper into the darkness of unconsciousness.

"Sleep, little one," the deep voice rumbled. "You have entered the home of the dragon. You are now part of my treasure."

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Carly stood on the edge of the cliff and stared out over the dark purple waves. Thick clouds were building in the east. A storm was coming. She loved storms.

Two years ago, she never would have imagined that going for a walk and encountering a storm would lead her to such a magical world. A reluctant smile tugged at her lips as she remembered the reason behind her unbelievable journey. Never again would she complain about exercising, after all, it had led her to this incredible place.

Carly turned when she heard the sound of footsteps. A smile curved her lips at the sight of the man walking down the steep path. Dark sapphire and gold eyes held hers for several long seconds. A shiver escaped her at the promise in them. It never ceased to amaze her that Drag could light her blood with just a look.

"A storm comes," he chided her in a soft voice.

"I know," Carly replied, turning to look back out at the white capped waves.

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A sigh escaped her when Drag wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She tilted her head, exposing her neck to him. A low rumble escaped her when he pressed a hot kiss to her sensitive skin.

"One time before we return to the castle," Drag chuckled. "I love you, Carly. Fly with me."

Carly's delighted laughter filled the air when he released her and stepped back to change. The brilliant light of sapphire and gold shimmered in the air before it was replaced with a fierce male dragon. Turning, Carly focused as she raised her hands to the sky. A ruby red glow surrounded her, encasing her in its magic as her body shifted. Sweeping her dainty wings back and forth, she rose up off the cliff and soared down over the churning waters far below.

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Drag stood for a moment, watching as his beautiful, unusual burglar soared out over the waters that surrounded his home. Spreading his wings, he took off after her, the glimmer of a smile on his lips. He had plans tonight.

The last two years with Carly had chased the centuries of loneliness away. She had ignited the fire inside him and given him a purpose to live again. Tonight, he would spread that fire inside her and they would fill their home with children.

Soaring down beside her, he carefully guarded her while she flew. There were others out there that still challenged him for his treasure. For him, it was not

the gold that warmed his heart any longer, but the female at his side. Reaching over, he nipped at her neck to let her know that it was time to return to the safety of their home. He could feel the static of electricity in the air. The storm tonight would be fierce.

"Come, Carly," he rumbled above the sound of the wind and waves. "The storm draws closer."

"I know," she whispered, raising her head to the light sprinkle of rain before turning her warm brown eyes toward him. "Let's go home."

Drag reached out with his tail and ran it along her sensitive belly. Carly's dragon immediately knew what Drag wanted. Responding, she turned back toward the castle. Sweeping over the cliff and the high walls surrounding the entrance to their lair, she shifted as she stepped onto the long, wide balcony.

Drag swept Carly up into his arms the moment he shifted. A sense of peace settled over him when he felt her arms wrap around his neck. He strode through the wide doors and into their bedroom. Bowing his head, he captured her lips as he lowered her down to the soft covers of their bed.

"I love you, Carly," Drag muttered as he pressed his hot lips against the pounding pulse at her neck. "You are mine, forever."

"Forever, Drag," Carly whispered against his lips. "I love you, my dragon."

A shudder raced through him as Carly slowly pushed his shirt open and off his shoulders. The feel of her hands woke the fire inside him that was always

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burning for her. Shrugging his shirt the rest of the way off, he tossed it to the side. Pulling back just far enough, he stared down at where Carly lay against the black satin sheets.

His fingers carefully opened each button on her blouse one at a time, revealing her to him. Her soft, smooth skin felt like the finest silk. His fingers glided over her in reverence. His heart swelled with love and he knew that she was the best treasure any dragon could hope to find.

"Forever," he breathed as he sealed his lips over hers.

The storm that night was wild. The curtains blew inward, showing the magnificent display of lightning, but inside the dragon's lair the two souls that came together were caught in a fire storm of their own, one that would bind them together for eternity. For when a dragon finds his treasure, he never, ever lets it go.

Seven Kingdoms, seven loves... **The Sea King's Lady...**