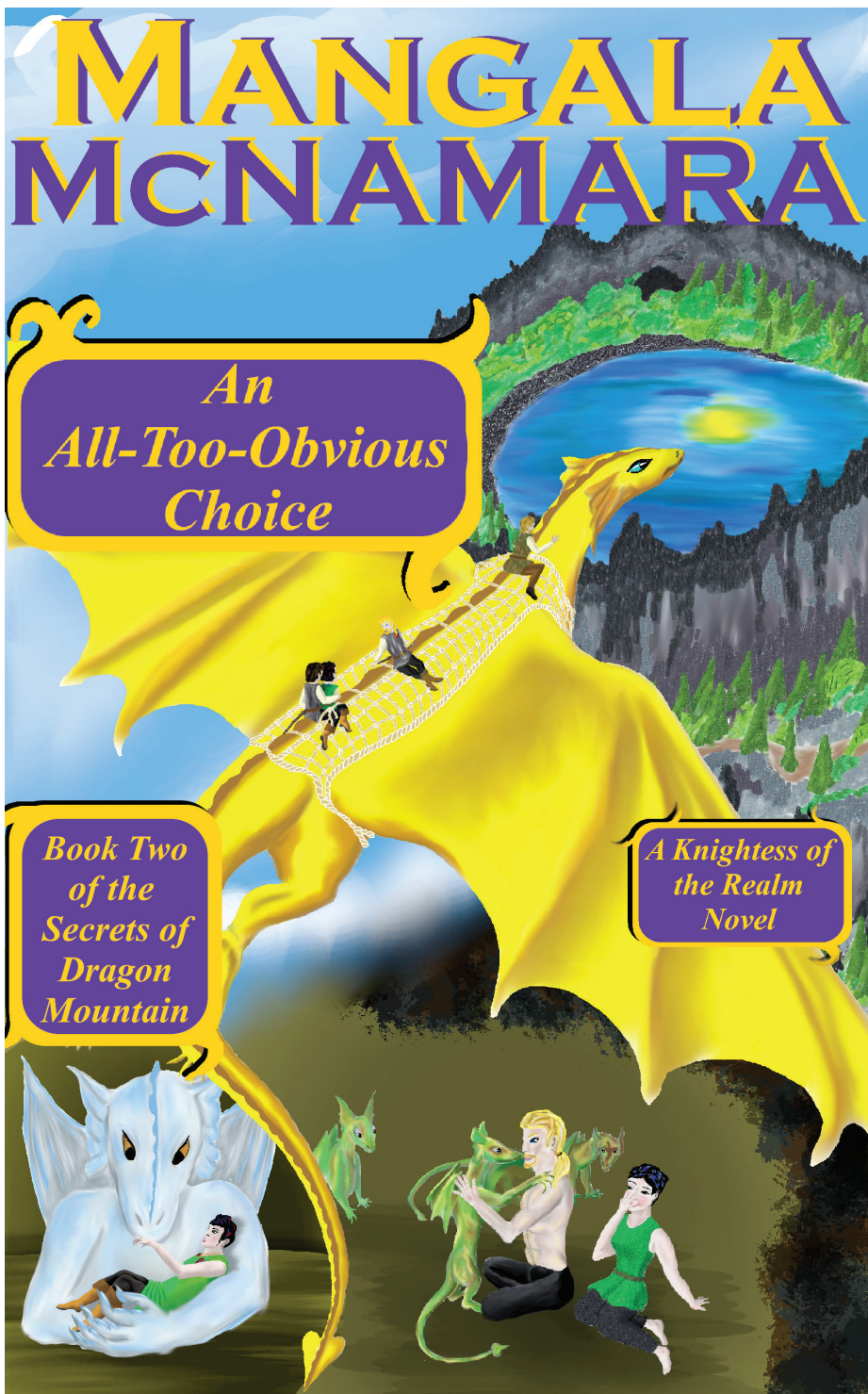


# MANGALA MCNAMARA

*An  
All-Too-Obvious  
Choice*

*Book Two  
of the  
Secrets of  
Dragon  
Mountain*

*A Knightess of  
the Realm  
Novel*





*Karana was lying still and breathing slowly, patiently letting the thicker air that the silver dragon was providing for her work its magick on her body. Kefen could feel the changes as she improved still more.*

“You are soul-bonded to her, nephew?” the strange woman said.

“To both of them,” he replied absently, not really paying attention.

The woman snorted. “And she’s carrying your child? This... may present some complications.”

Kefen tore his attention away from his loves – Karana was doing better and Ivan was watching over her. He had better pay attention to their surroundings for all three of them... and recall that they were there on a mission for King and Country.

Or at least the Lord of Wave.

“Just *who* are you?” he asked the woman as he looked at her more carefully.

“In this time and this place I am known as Faulira, dragonkeeper for Wyllirse.” She smiled affectionately up at the great creature, the softening of her expression entirely unfeigned.

*She focused her dark gaze on Kefen again, and he felt the weight of Wyllirse’s dark topaz eyes on him as well.*

*“But in an earlier time and place I was known as Laurifa Saralath, Ducal-Princess and Heir to Taridawil.”*



AN  
*ALL-TOO-OBVIOUS*  
CHOICE

*Book Two of the  
Secrets of  
Dragon Mountain*

*(A Knightess of the Realm Novel)*



MANGALA MCNAMARA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.  
*Made BY humans and FOR humans.*

Also available in eBook and hardcover editions.

McNamara, Mangala

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**For Anne McCaffrey – for all the obvious reasons.**

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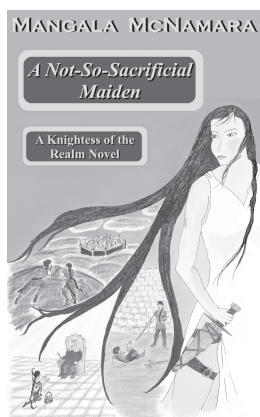
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**AND NOW, FOR YOUR DELECTATION...**

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## PROLOGUE

**T**HE REASON IVAN HAD LOVED fairytales as long as he could remember was because they weren't *messy*.

True loves faced incredible odds, but ended up together.

Brave knights and princes rescued incredibly beautiful maidens from peril and were rewarded with true love's first kiss.

Dragons and unicorns imparted wisdom to would-be heroes and bore them off on Great Quests that were destined to succeed.

And there was always a 'happily ever after.'

Not that any of that was *true*, of course. Those were just the most *popular* fairytales, the songs and legends that the Bards were asked to recite over and over again at the hearthside in Mountainmeadow's long Winters.

In his ongoing explorations of legends and fairytales, Ivan had discovered the darker sides. The tales that ended in tragedy. A good tragedy actually got a number of requests on those long Winter nights as well.

No one ever mentioned that real life could be a fairytale.

That a young man who had dedicated his life to becoming a knight (*after realizing that he'd never be allowed to go to the university to study fairytales*) could fall in love with a handsome and tragic *prince*... instead of a princess.



Or that he could fall in love *again* – without falling *out* of love with his prince – but this time with a ravishingly beautiful and tragic maiden... who strongly preferred to rescue *herself*.

Nor that his prince and maiden could fall in love with *each other*.

The story would surely read as a cruel farce, if the pair of them hadn't somehow also loved *Ivan*. And if not for this mad southern custom of 'triad-marriage' that might – just *might* – let them make this turn out without heartbreak.

Triad-marriage... and a triple soul-bond to back it up. Surely even Ivan's famously closeminded father, Lord Jaycoff of Mountainmeadow would have to yield to a Goddess-given soul-bond.

Surely...

It was all enough to make the golden-haired young knight have to reach for the soothing teas and stomach powders that the Healers had prescribed for him when the very thought of letting the two people he adored go off to face an Evil Wizard had overwhelmed him and made him vomit up blood.

Speaking of things that didn't happen in fairytales.

But they were all sorted out now, weren't they?

Ivan's handsome prince had broken the spell on his province and was scheduled to be made Duke of Taridawil when he reached his full majority next Spring. But he still needed Ivan to serve as his Captain-General and rebuild Taridawil's debilitated Provincial Guard.

Ivan's beautiful maiden might be the richest and most discreetly powerful woman – no, *person* – in the world, and entirely unwilling to let him take care of her the way he – and Kefen – both wanted to. But she was already bearing their first child, and she had – in her magical, Metreedi way figured out how to turn the betrothal contract that Lord Jaycoff had for her to marry 'one of his sons' into a perfectly legal way to extract Ivan from his father's clutches for all time.

You know, just in case the *soul-bond* and the *triad-marriage* didn't do it.

Lord Jaycoff was a skeptical sort after all, and how do you *prove* that your soul has been made one with someone else's?

And his lord father of Mountainmeadow was unlikely to be pleased to have his youngest son marrying another *man*, even if there was a *woman* also involved. (*Ivan actually had no idea if that would make the whole thing **better** or **worse** in his father's eyes.*)

Even if Lord Jaycoff had been scheming for *decades* to have one of his numerous offspring (*Ivan being the youngest of thirteen*) marry into the families of one of the other Great Lords of the Realm. Kefen would actually be Lord Jaycoff's superior in rank after his confirmation – the Duke of Taridawil ranked second only to the King himself – but that was unlikely to settle the old man's feathers.

But now that they knew that *Karana* was the only child of the Great Lord of Wave...

(*...if they could just get the question sorted out of why Lord Andros – who so very obviously doted on her – hadn't acknowledged her from the very beginning, and had hidden his own triad-marriage to Karana's other parents even from **her**...*)

Well, *that* might just make the old man sit up and take notice of how well his youngest – and least-wanted – son had done for himself.

Yes, everything should work out just *fine*.

All they had to do was actually have the wedding – which *four different Goddesses* had decided would happen on the Autumnal Equinox.

And before that, there was just this little trip to Dragon Mountain for Lord Andros to sort out a marauding dragon who was stealing livestock and humans from around the Realm.

The Goddesses had implied that this was a task the three young knights – Ivan and his beloveds – were *supposed* to take care of. And one of those Goddesses had been Silvestria, the Lady of Wild Places, Goddess of Midsummer Nights and Gentle Darkness, to Whom Ivan had dedicated himself as a rebellious eight-year-old.

Silvestria, Who was *also* the Silver Dragon of Chelthion and Pathremir – and once, long ago, Taridawil.

Surely, *She* wouldn't send Her devotee (*Ivan*) whom Her Lastborn Son (*Gorlon, the 'Muse' of Dawil*) had referred to as '*Favored of Dragons*' off to do damage to *any* dragon.

Would She?

In between coping with more of the mad southern customs (*an apparently legal attempt to kidnap his beloved bride-to-be*) and then the discovery that Karana was far more sensitive to altitude sickness than they could ever have guessed (*and worrying about what that might do to their baby...*)

Well, in between all of *those* things, Ivan worried about the ‘Dragon Problem,’ as Lord Andros had sardonically referred to it.

He certainly couldn’t harm a dragon – and never-you-mind that the existence of *rogue* dragons was why jousting had become a part of the training academy’s curriculum for knights-to-be and that Ivan was an extremely well-trained jousting.

And Kefen certainly couldn’t harm a dragon. He’d revealed to them – his fiancés! – that all who were born to the Saralath name took an oath to *protect* dragons and do what they could to restore dragons to Taridawil. (*Which if anyone could manage that, it would surely be Ivan’s own prince charming. Kefen had already Restored Taridawil from the Evil Wizard’s spell, after all...*)

Which left their precious, pregnant, altitude-sick, kidnapping-target of a bride-to-be.

But Ivan had seen Karana’s childhood nursery – covered and filled with dragons in every possible manner – and he doubted *she* could do anything about rogue dragons either. At least not without breaking her heart.

Not that he doubted his beloved lady had the strength of character to do just that if she thought it was The Right thing to do...

But he’d heard enough from her family to know that the Heads of House Metreedi – the which his Karana was – retained their position by some mysterious ability to create havoc and leave better things behind. To see some invisible-to-others ‘third way’ between ‘aye’ and ‘nay.’

His lady was ‘Hurricane Karana’ as the cousin (*whom she called her ‘almost-brother’*) had called her, teasingly. Someone else – the man’s wife – had explained the rest of the context to himself and Kefen, bewildered pair of ‘landlubbers’ that they were.

“’Tis an ill wind indeed that blows no one any good,” Shalla had told them, and then explained about all the treasures of the ocean that were often washed ashore in the wake of a particularly bad storm. Kefen had still looked baffled, but the description had made sense to Ivan on a deep level.

Though it still seemed... *wrong* for a knighted man of Mountainmeadow to rely so heavily on a *woman*.

But... his Karana had a way of making things come out right...

It was all enough to make him *really* reach for those teas and stomach powders.

And, after all, even *she* might have reached her limit now.

It *might* be too much to expect Karana to come up with some miraculous solution for all their problems when she’d been so dizzy – even *vomiting* – with altitude sickness. Ivan had done his level best (*and nearly broken his back*) to carry her well-muscled frame *down* Dragon Mountain before they were barely more than halfway *up*.

His beautiful love hadn’t been able to *stand*, much less *walk*.

*Riding* had been entirely beyond the pale. Ivan’s mother had lost a baby, falling off a horse, long years before he was born. And there was a cliff right *there*, falling away at the side of the narrow game-trail they had been using to climb.

Kefen had gone ahead with the horses... and Ivan had known *he* had to figure out how to get Karana down before his handsome prince came back to check on them and tried to carry her himself. After all, if *Ivan* couldn’t manage it, how could *Kefen* possibly?

But small doubt the shorter man would *try*, both to help their lady and to try to spare Ivan.

The golden-haired knight had been working on a plan...

...or, all right, he had been trying to catch his *breath* and ignore the pain of muscles close to giving out from the strain. And watch over his lady so that she didn’t accidentally tip herself over the cliffside in her inability to see (*or walk*) straight.

And then there had been the screams of the horses – the *equines*, really, because a mule and two ponies weren’t really *horses* that a knight should have to ride – and his mind had gone almost blank with terror.

Because *his Kefen* was with the horses...

Their soul-bond (*still so new and untested, and with the unwholesome side-effect of making Kefen go into seizures if they both tried to, ah, kiss him simultaneously*) had been less than useless. They knew the young prince was *alive...* but nothing else.

Karana had told him she would wait while he went on by himself to find out what was going on. (*And ironic promise, since she couldn't so much as stand upright.*)

Ivan had made sure his beloved Karana was situated safely where she couldn't accidentally take a deadly tumble (*and nevermind the assurances of the Wind Goddess, Sifwisa, that She would never let either of them fall*), and then he'd jogged down the trail. Karana had *promised* that she wouldn't even try to stand, let alone go anywhere without him. Ivan hated leaving her, even with those words still on her lips, but what else could he do?

He'd found the horses – the equines – and his newly-discovered ability to understand something of what they were saying to each other was... utterly useless. The equines were in a panic and even the phlegmatic mule couldn't form a coherent thought.

Ivan had wasted precious time trying anyways...

And then the little creatures of the mountain had all gone silent – *again*, he'd realized, though he hadn't consciously noted it the first time – and the equines began screaming again...

...and he'd found himself snatched off the trail by gigantic golden hands – claws, really, but with slender, powerful fingers – that held him as gently as he might have held Karana's three-year-old cousin...

And then he'd been lifted to a rope ladder and *climbed up the dragon's shoulder* to meet the *dragonkeeper* seated at the juncture of the great golden creature's neck and shoulder.

And *then* he'd seen his beloveds – *both* of them – safely ensconced farther along the dragon's back.

The dragonkeeper, Torol, had told him that their Lady of Wild Places had sent him to retrieve all three young knights, and that Farathor – the dragon to which he was bound – would convey them to the peak of Dragon Mountain. The man demurred at giving more details, and Ivan had moved himself back to join his loves.

He was *riding* a *dragon*.

He was *marrying* his true loves – *both* of them.

And... he was *riding* a *dragon*.

Ivan thought he might never need those teas and stomach powders ever again.

Apparently, sometimes fairytales *could* happen in real-life!



## Chapter ONE

### *Lake of Dreams*

THE UNDERLYING BLACK BED OF the crater lake made the waters seem infinitely deep as they spiraled in from above, listing deeply to the right as Farathor dumped speed in order to land on that ebony beach. The wind of the dragon's passage broke up the surface of the lake into ripples, and suddenly the reflected light was the bleak grey of the sky above, the fathomless depths masked as light scattered in all directions.

The enormous golden dragon settled lightly on the shore of black sand in the crater at the top of Dragon Mountain that Kefen had grown familiar with from Lord Andros' magickal maproom in Wave. He then turned his head to regard his passengers regally.

"Off you go, lads and lass," the dragonkeeper – the man, Torol – chuckled and slapped the majestic creature's shining shoulder in what Kefen couldn't help thinking was an entirely-too-cavalier fashion, even for a dragonkeeper.

“Come forward and climb down over here where you climbed up,” Torol called back to Kefen and his Companions – his *fiancés*, “And move it along, would you? Farathor says he’s quite done with having the anchor-net strapped on his back just to ferry humans about.”

Kefen began disentangling himself, leaving Ivan to help Karana. His lovely bride-to-be looked a great deal less ill than when he’d gone ahead on the trail, hoping his nearly-perfect memory was lying to him and there was someplace he could leave the ponies and mule safely while he went back to help Ivan carry her. Karana’s altitude-sickness had come as an unpleasant shock to all of them...

The dark-haired young man made short work of getting himself free, then took some time to stretch. The dragon’s back was so broad, here between his wings, that Kefen had been forced nearly into a straddle position. Despite all the flexibility-training that Ivan had forced him to do since they were sixteen, his hips were definitely feeling the strain.

It had been his own foolishness, of course. If he’d sat up at the shoulders, as Torol had invited him to do, he could have sat like that easily for hours. Kefen *did* just that when riding his horse, after all. And the first several minutes when he’d stayed up there had been just fine.

It was only after he moved back here, when Torol had mentioned that they were collecting Karana, that it had become an issue. Kefen had hoped that his beloved’s acrophobia would be ameliorated if she was seated where the attachment of Farathor’s vast wings to his body blocked her view of the faraway ground. (*He’d already received a reassurance that the dragon would somehow help with Karana’s altitude sickness.*) Getting himself settled before they swooped down to get her had been more important than comfort.

The ‘swoop’ had been utterly exhilarating.

They had flown at the side of the mountain so fast and so close that Kefen couldn’t quite believe that they wouldn’t crash into it – despite his rational mind realizing that this must have been the same maneuver that had been used to ‘collect’ him a few minutes earlier.

His heart had never pounded so hard and fast!



He'd been too exhilarated with *riding a dragon* to pay much attention to such plebian concerns after they leveled out again.

And then he'd seen Karana's head pop up over the crest of Farathor's golden shoulder and the mix of personal exhilaration (*he knew he was overusing the word, even in his thoughts, but his jumbled excitement couldn't come up with anything else even close*) and his concern for her pale, greenish-looking self had chased any thought out of his mind entirely of adjusting his hastily arranged seat into a more comfortable position. Getting her settled and secured and wrapped in his arms before they swooped down for *Ivan* had been the only thing Kefen could think of.

And then Ivan was there with them, looking even more like a shining golden-haired God than usual, and seeming as comfortable up here on Farathor's back as Kefen felt himself. (*Unlike Karana, who had still been trembling when Ivan pulled her out of Kefen's arms to start untying those ropes after they'd landed.*)

"Hurry it up, will you?" Torol called, his tone impatient, and Kefen looked up with a frown that turned into an embarrassed flush as the gigantic golden dragon also looked at him. That look *should* be inscrutable – how should *Kefen* be able to interpret expressions on such an alien visage?

But somehow it wasn't, and he *knew* that the majestic creature was restraining his own impatience only with some difficulty.

"Almost free!" Ivan called back, cheerfully, as he cajoled the last knots loose from around Karana. It apparently took more than being snatched off the side of a mountain to ride a dragon – or having that selfsame dragon glaring at him – to unbalance the golden-haired knight's *savoir faire*. Kefen admired and envied his love's confidence simultaneously.

It had taken a great deal longer to undo Karana's restraints than Kefen's. While the dark-haired young man knew how to make a solid knot... Karana was a sailor and *her* knots were meant to stand up to a great deal more abuse than anything a knight normally faced. Kefen had thought she was just fidgeting with the ropes out of nerves as they flew, but apparently, she had been continuing to 'improve' how well she was secured.

(Normally Kefen would have been admiring and envying her calm and confidence as well. He... couldn't quite feel as bad for her as he ought right now – and hoped neither she nor Ivan would notice that across the soul-bond. But this new vulnerability made his beloved bride-to-be seem rather more human and like the nineteen-year-old girl he knew she was, rather than the demi-Goddess and Head of House Metreedi that, well... he also knew she was.)

Ivan, of course, hadn't tied himself down at all.

"Come on, beautiful," the golden-haired knight was saying softly to her now that he had her free and was comforting her in his arms. "I know you're still not well, but you're not going to let these strangers see you – see the *Head of House Metreedi* – at anything less than her confident and courageous best, now are you?"

Her head was turned sideways enough that Kefen could see the flash of her emerald eyes as she pulled away enough to glare at Ivan. She didn't *say* anything, though, so apparently he'd tugged the right thread to get her to move.

To... begin to move, anyways.

Ivan gestured Kefen to precede them in making their way forwards along the dragon's back while Karana muttered under her breath and the... rather *mousy*-looking looking dragonkeeper anxiously smoothed his over-long mustaches and made 'hurry-up' gestures at them all.

Clearly this was going to be a... challenging introduction to whatever was going on up here on top of Dragon Mountain.

Not that being abducted didn't suggest *that* right away.

At least it was entirely impossible that they would be *fighting* the dragons who had made all those... *other* young people disappear. After seeing how *large* and *powerful* Farathor was, that idea was unthinkable for more than merely moral reasons.

At least Farathor – the dragon (*the Real Live DRAGON!*) – lived up to all expectations. Though Kefen *was* sort of surprised that the beautiful creature's unusual, almost faceted-appearing eyes were more of a bluey-green color than an emerald that matched the young man's memories of the almost-throne his father had once sat upon in audience.

The *dragonkeeper* was a bit... less impressive.

Kefen, after all, had been raised to think of dragons as next-thing to Gods, and dragonkeepers as, more or less, their Chosen ‘priesthood.’

Torol had waited till Kefen was close, then turned to use the rope ladder to climb down Farathor’s side just before the young knight was in position to do so. His hair was just as mousy-brown from the top – though at least he wasn’t balding.

It was... disappointing. Dragonkeepers were supposed to be... *special*. The stories that had come down all talked about how incredibly attractive dragonkeepers were. *Physically* attractive, had been the implication. Men and women had competed for their favors – and supposedly not *just* because being Chosen made them instant nobility in Taridawil of old.

Ah, well. It wasn’t as if *Kefen* was looking for anyone else to be attracted to.

He smiled up at his incredibly beautiful fiancés as they started down the ladder after him.

Ivan was letting Karana go first, leaning over to make sure their bride-to-be’s hands were sure on the rungs, which suggested she was still trembling. Although apparently, she *was* feeling well enough to comment sharply on his solicitude. The sardonic grin he gave Kefen over her shoulder didn’t mask the concern in Ivan’s lovely blue eyes.

Karana *seemed* steady enough as she followed Kefen down. He had waited for her once he reached the ground, to steady and reassure her, admiring the view from below of her legs and rear in those tight, black doeskin pants from their days as squires that they all still wore. She was his fiancée, after all. There was nothing inappropriately salacious about looking at any part of her.

Nor of looking up at Ivan... though Kefen didn’t dare put his arms around his other beloved to steady *him*. Someday maybe... but they were still too new at this.

In Wave and Cowry, Ivan hadn’t seemed to want to make a show of how they felt about each other, even though everyone knew that the three of them were planning a triad-marriage. He’d been more relaxed about things on the ship, even making a grand bit of theater of kissing Kefen that once, but as soon as they had come to port...

His Mountainmeadow background, Kefen assumed. He should just be grateful that Ivan was willing to be more affectionate in private and not... wish for anything more.

Not that *Kefen* was entirely sure how public *he* wanted to be, either. He'd talked to enough of the southern-bred sailors on the *Osprey* to know that triad-marriages came in all shapes and sizes. It wasn't anyone else's business what the three of them did or didn't do with each other and – now that he *was* going to be Named and Confirmed as Duke in the Spring – it might be... *prudent* not to rub the whole thing in people's faces.

Taridawil was... fairly conservative. Kefen knew that more from what he'd *read* than what he *remembered*. As a sheltered eleven-year-old, he'd hardly had an opportunity to see for himself, after all. And the things he *did* remember for himself might be as accurate as the rest of his memories, but they were filtered through a child's viewpoint and sometimes made no sense to him now.

For example, there was surely no reason that his Uncle Tomas – Father's elder brother who had not been Chosen by the Keep as Its Duke – had been giving Father a lecture on how legalizing same-gendered couples was all very well and the proper thing to do when Queen Emmerine had just done the same... but that it was entirely another thing to do such a thing to please oneself. Even if one *was* the duke.

And all of that was something to ponder on when there weren't bigger issues at hand.

Kefen turned around to survey his surroundings as Karana impatiently brushed his hands off of her... and almost before he was tempted to put them on the nearly-descended Ivan instead.

It looked... *exactly* like what he'd been able to make out from its miniature representation in Lord Andros' magickal sandmap, back in Wave.

What the sand structure could not convey, however, was how very *green* the lush vegetation was that filled the space beside the small lake, and the perfect clarity of the lake waters. The beach surrounding the lake was black. The young Ducal-Prince knew, without knowing *how* he knew, that this sand was derived from the volcanic rock of which the mountain was made, whereas the white

beaches of Wave and Kalapula were composed of the crushed shells of sea creatures.

A number of other people were running out of the jungle-thick forest that began just past the beach, and shouting a welcome to the newcomers and newly-returned.

“That was a most singular experience, Lord Farathor,” Kefen bowed to the golden dragon. “I cannot thank you enough.”

Farathor inclined his huge head in dignified acknowledgment.

Kefen turned to see Torol giving him an approving look from blue-green eyes that matched his dragon’s fairly well. “Faulira said *you* would show proper manners.”

The dark-haired knight wanted to know who this ‘Faulira’ was, and how she would know anything about him.

But his attention was distracted by Ivan and Karana. Their bride-to-be had collapsed again as soon as she had stepped away from Farathor’s side, and Ivan was lowering her gently to the ground.

Karana was rapidly returning to the pasty, greenish look that she’d had when they had decided to turn back. And the grim set to Ivan’s jaw suggested that he didn’t have a great deal of strength left either. He’d carried her an impressively long distance down that narrow trail when they’d realized how very ill she was, already, and slender she might be but *light* she was not. Muscles meant to climb masts and swing a sword gave a certain *heft* to their beautiful lady.

Kefen knelt at her side in consternation. He hadn’t really registered that the air had gone thinner again until she had collapsed. Likely Ivan hadn’t either – but the altitude change hadn’t bothered them earlier either, and Karana had been too sick to stand up straight.

Torol came to stand beside him, looking down at her.

“*She* may be too fragile for this,” he commented critically, stroking his drooping mustaches. “Perhaps we should return her to the base of the mountain.”

The dragonkeeper had looked friendly, if overly ordinary, when Kefen first met him as he climbed out of Farathor’s grasp and up to the dragon’s back. Now... he looked like one of the masters in the training academy who had always had disapproving looks for Kefen. Master Renn, say, who had never seemed to think the dark-haired young man could do anything right.

Torol was, however, looking at Karana, who had never seemed to take Master Renn's dark looks as personally as Kefen had.

She looked up at the dragonkeeper now, her eyes flashing at being called fragile... But her stomach cramped violently – Kefen could actually *feel* twinges of it across the soul-bond, just as he'd *felt* her altitude-induced queasiness earlier – and she gave up the attempt to disprove him.

He rather thought he heard a mutter of *The Head of House Metreedi doesn't need **anyone's** approval...* though surely that was his imagination. The soul-bond conveyed emotions – occasionally – not words.

Ivan glared at the man on Karana's behalf, gathering her up in his arms. "It's altitude sickness. She's been a lowlander most of her life. She'll acclimate. She spent two years in Tallspire and was fine *there*."

"And she's pregnant," Kefen added, though that earned him a glare from both his loves.

It probably hadn't been prudent to mention, given that they weren't sure of their ground here yet... but that was *his* baby, dammit. *And* his bride-to-be. If there was danger from this place – these people – then he wanted it clearly established that Karana should be considered a non-combatant.

Not that he could accept the thought that there might be *danger* from *dragons* or *dragonkeepers*. Not for a scion of the *Saralath* line anyways, nor his spouses and child.

But hadn't the dragons Withdrawn from Dawil – from *Taridawil* – in the first place because they shunned violence?

"Definitely too fragile then," someone stated in a belligerent tone from the crowd that had begun to gather. The voice had an odd accent that Kefen could *almost* place...

Ivan snorted. "The men milady killed in a swordfight three days ago might beg to differ."

And there was a bit of that Mountainmeadow *lilt* in his voice oddly enough... the tone that only ever came out when they were in bed together...

But it let Kefen place the other fellow's accent. He was from Ivan's home province, whomever he was, and if Kefen had a moment to think he could call up his memory of the list of missing people and figure out who it was...

And now everyone else seemed to be weighing in on the question – loudly and adamantly in a number of cases. It was becoming a rather overwhelming hullabaloo – far too much *noise* for Kefen to sort them out into individuals.

He glanced back at Karana, lying huddled into Ivan's chest, wondering if he could insist that she needed to be taken somewhere quiet to recuperate without implying – again – that she was too weak to be up here at the summit of Dragon Mountain at all. Ivan was looking down at her and tenderly brushing a tendril of hair back from her face. The two of them seemed to be communicating with each other silently somehow...

Which was nice for *them*, but wasn't the least bit useful for Kefen in trying to figure out what to do about all these noisy, inconsiderate people who were *probably* the kidnapped young people but who didn't seem to care about being rescued. Not that Kefen and his Companions were doing a very good job of presenting themselves as King's Knights here to do any rescuing.

Torol waved all the curious, opinionated people back for some space and quiet. "Farathor says Wyllirse will help her adjust to the air and then we'll see."

That seemed to settle the argument and the crowd dispersed, though Kefen could tell 'the Complainer,' as he'd mentally dubbed the man who had the Mountainmeadow accent, hadn't given up. The fellow had moved back with the rest as requested, but only a little ways. He now stood, glaring at Karana with his arms folded, a tall, pale man with hair so light it was almost white and dressed in furs and leathers and a heavy sword belted at his side.

A woman in more normal peasants' clothing – a cream-colored, full-sleeved blouse with a tight bodice and a calf-length brown skirt trimmed with bright ribbons – but who was nearly as darkly complected as Karana's cousins in Cowry, seemed to be trying to pull the man away, but with little success.

Karana made a whimpering noise and the dark-haired young man's eye was drawn back to what was actually important as Ivan crooned in the same gentle way he'd done for Kefen when they were boys.

"Bring her," Torol said, with a sigh. "I'll introduce you to Wyllirse. And Faulira."



**K**EFEN SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED when they were guided to a cave. He'd known from the moment he saw the sand sculpture of Dragon Mountain that the place was rife with caves. And really, where else would be big enough to house a dragon?

And Wyllirse was even larger than Farathor.

She was also as *silver* as he was *golden*, with shimmering nearly-faceted eyes the color of dark brown topaz.

Kefen saw Ivan begin trembling at this living manifestation of the Goddess he had chosen to worship from childhood. Somehow the golden-haired knight was even more overwhelmed than he had been on meeting the Goddess in person... though Kefen had to admit that Silvestria had done nothing to overawe them. And Wyllirse was awesome just by being herself.

It had turned out to take both Kefen and Ivan working together to help Karana from the beach and into the cave. Ivan was simply in no shape to carry her any farther, and the fact that he was willing to admit that made Kefen worry about his tall love all the more.

Torol had tried to help, but Karana had shied away from his touch, and ended up kneeling on the ground and retching again. Getting her back on her feet to continue on hadn't been easy; she was back to not really seeming to be sure which way was *up*.

Torol didn't offer to help a second time.



Karana moaned a little, nearly overbalancing Kefen as she teetered while clinging to him, and Ivan seemed to recover himself some. He straightened up and gently extracted the wavery knightess from Kefen's grasp, scooping her back up into his arms with hardly a wince for his overstressed muscles.

The tall, golden-haired knight then laid their poor lady in Wyllirse's massive, clawed hands as if she was an offering, kneeling beside her and looking up into the huge, wise eyes. The silver dragon cradled the young woman gently, and Kefen could *feel* his bride-to-be breathing more easily already.

"She's not *actually* the Goddess, you know," the woman who stood beside the dragon said very dryly. She'd been there all along, but between his worry for Karana and his awe at meeting the silver dragon, Kefen had barely noticed her.

The woman was of average height, with very dark brown hair and eyes. The shape of her face seemed familiar to Kefen, although he could swear he had never met her before. She was striking, more than lovely, and she seemed just slightly older than he himself. Middle twenties, perhaps.

"I know," Ivan murmured, but he didn't move from his place at Karana's side, nor did he look up at... Wyllirse's dragonkeeper?

Kefen came up behind him, laying a hand on his tall Companion's shoulder, but keeping an eye on the woman. Dragons, he had read, ranked the silver females most highly in their society, perhaps because of their own reverence for the Silver Dragon Goddess. It likely meant that the silver dragon's 'keeper would outrank Torol.

Though why the young ducal-prince felt it necessary to... lay claim to Ivan or why they were both hovering protectively over Karana, Kefen couldn't have said. Or perhaps... didn't *want* to say.

Or think.

But it certainly wasn't because of the dragon.

Ivan covered Kefen's hand with his own without seeming to think about it, but he smiled slightly and some of the tension in his powerful shoulder muscles eased under Kefen's touch. The acceptance of that small familiarity was bracing to Kefen as well.

Karana was lying still and breathing slowly, eyes closed, patiently letting the thicker air that the silver dragon was providing for her work its magick on her body. Kefen could *feel* the changes as she improved still more.

He wished he could somehow *will* her back to health. He was no Healer, not like his friend Berd back in Tallspire, but he'd been listening to Ivan's breath and heartbeat for over eight years now. And hers for the last two. But Healing surely couldn't be terribly similar to that magickal *pressure* he used to keep anyone from looking at his arms – and that he'd found so much more *interesting* uses for in Cowry and last night in the mountain meadow where they'd camped.

Maybe, if he just focused *enough*, he could encourage Karana's body to Heal *itself* from this odd ailment...

"You are soul-bonded to her, nephew?" the strange woman said.

"To both of them," he replied absently, not really paying attention.

*Listening* to someone's breath and heart were entirely different from *directing* them, it appeared. He was reluctant to *push* too hard, lest he cause more harm than good...

The woman snorted. "And she's carrying your child? This... may present some complications."

Kefen tore his attention away from his loves – Karana was doing better and Ivan was watching over her. He had better pay attention to their surroundings for all three of them... and recall that they were there on a mission for King and Country.

Or at least the Lord of Wave.

Karana's secret father... not that Lord Andros had admitted so much as yet, for all that he clearly had always loved her as his daughter. When he'd... sort-of-not-exactly-denied it to Kefen and Ivan, there had been a look to him as if he'd broken a little inside, every time she'd blithely called him 'Uncle Andry.'

It was all too easy for Kefen to imagine being stuck in the incredibly tall man's position. After all, if this crazy triad-marriage thing and the soul-bond didn't work to extract Ivan from his own father's clutches as liege-lord, he and Karana had agreed that the engagement she would break was with Kefen. The betrothal contract that she already

had for ‘one of Lord Jaycoff’s sons, subject to approval of the Head of House Metreedi’ was the only other tool either of them had to protect their tall, strong, fragile golden-haired love.

And he absolutely *had* to get his head back in the game, rather than maundering on about things he couldn’t affect right *now*.

Why in all the worlds beyond the Fairy Wood had the woman called him ‘*nephew*’?

Kefen didn’t have any living aunts that he knew of. Or even any that had vanished along with Taridawil when Henig cast his spell. Unless you counted aunts-by-marriage – then that would include Uncle Tomas’ wife and... there was someone else in that category, but his perfect memory was somehow failing him...

Torol shrugged in response to the woman’s comment. “*You* can argue with our Lady if you choose, Faulira. Farathor and I know our place – we’re just here to provide the brawn when Wyllirse is busy with more important things.”

The silver dragon broke her gaze from Ivan’s and gave Torol a tolerant look. Much like the one her dragonkeeper was giving him also. Although Kefen could have sworn that there was more of fondness in the dragon’s odd-looking eyes than in her dragonkeeper’s wholly-human ones.

Kefen frowned, trying to sort out all these puzzle-pieces into a single picture that made sense.

“Just *who* are you?” he asked the woman as he looked at her more carefully.

She transferred that tolerant look to him...and it went somehow a great deal less tolerant and a great deal *harder* and more *uncompromising*.

“In this time and this place, I am known as Faulira, dragonkeeper for Wyllirse.” She smiled affectionately up at the great creature, the softening of her expression entirely unfeigned. “You might say that we both serve as... priestesses of a sort for the Goddess of Midsummer Nights and Gentle Darkness.”

“*High* priestesses,” Torol interjected.

The woman, Faulira, inclined her head regally. “We have been granted that honor for this Nesting Cycle.”

## AN ALL-TOO-OBVIOUS CHOICE

She focused her dark gaze on Kefen again, and he felt the weight of Wyllirse's dark topaz eyes on him as well.

"But in an *earlier* time and place I was known as Laurifa Saralath, Ducal-Princess and Heir to Taridawil."



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