

10 • Princess Amanda and the Dragon

Once, tall grasses grew by Lake Marmo. Each spring, damsel dragons dropped out of the sky, trampled nests in the reeds, laid clutches of eggs, and buried them in the sand. And once they had given birth, the great reptiles flapped away.

Dragons in the sky are the first sign of spring in Great Park. The children come, baskets in hand, eager for dragon's-egg hunts. They shed their winter stockings and wiggle their bare toes in the warm sand. They race each other, laughing and breathless, to see who will reach a clutch of dragon eggs first. They yell and hoot when they find the treasure.

"Dragon eggs!" they shout. Soon that call echoes back and forth from both sides of the lake.

Children know they are forbidden to keep dragon eggs, because a dragonet soon hatches from the egg and achieves full growth six months later. The baby dragon's scales harden. It begins to breathe fire. At first, there are short blasts of warm air, then later great searing torches of flame. The dragon has become cunning and cannot be trusted. So a sign on the shores of Lake Marmo reads: "It Is Forbidden to Keep Dragon Eggs."

The two eggs Princess Amanda found one day many months after Hero's arrival were bronze. They glowed like amber jewels in the sunlight. Perhaps she meant to carry them to Caretaker. Perhaps she thought that they were old and shriveled inside. Perhaps she forgot. But she did not take them to Caretaker's Cottage.

Instead she hid the eggs. She hid them in My Very Own Place, her den in the hollow of a mighty oak on the edge of

Outpost Meadow, which was so far from Stonegate Entrance that few strangers walked to it. It was so peaceful here that Caretaker visited this area only a few times in his yearly rounds.

The spring sun reached the floor of Amanda's den and warmed her hiding place. Soon, one egg rattled when the princess picked it up to inspect it. Obviously, there was no life inside. But the other one began to crack. By midmorning, a dragon hatchling pecked its way out and left the shell. The baby dragon squawked for food. Its long neck bobbed and waved. Its feet pattered back and forth, running to keep up with its huge head. It bumped into the side of the tree. Amanda laughed.

"I must take you to Caretaker," she said aloud. "He will know what to do about surprise hatchlings."

The little beast turned its brown eye on her, and a great tear dripped onto its breast. Amanda began to love the baby dragon. Though she knew it was forbidden, she kept the hatchling for a pet. *Just for a little while*, she thought. *Perhaps I can tame it.*

The princess fed it insects and wild roots. She kept it alive with hour-by-hour feedings. And because she nurtured the hatchling, she loved it all the more. The dragonet's bare skin soon became covered with soft scales, bronze and dazzling in the sun. That summer was filled with dragonet games. The little beast and Amanda set up relay races with the butterflies. Lines of fluttering wings and one sweaty princess and one growing dragonet raced through Outpost Meadow. Other days Amanda and the animal bounded over the meadow buttercups, seeing who could take the longest leap. Soon the dragonet won every time.

Sometimes Amanda tossed her ball as high as her arm could

throw, and the dragonet would spring, almost to tree line, and grab it in his jaws.

"I have perfect aim. He has perfect catch. We must be a perfect match," she sang as they played in the sun.

By the middle of summer, the dragonet was large enough for Amanda to wedge herself between the spikes on its back. Together they leaped above the meadow, flying in and out of the limbs and leaves of the old trees that bordered the open field. The dragonet let out a joyous "Cree-ee-el!" and Amanda laughed with glee.

Up and down they soared. Up high into the tree branches and down low into the flowering meadow. Amanda hung on for her life while the dragonet flew, flapping its wings.

Amanda soon discovered that her pet hated to be left by itself. It wailed piteously when she left it to perfect her aim on the practice field, so she began to practice less and less. The dragonet particularly disliked being left alone at night. Since the princess dared not bring it to Inmost Circle—and even feared for its life should it be discovered—she began to stay away from the Great Celebrations.

One night she crawled into her den beside the beast, and he licked her face and hands. Gratefully, it stretched beside her, panting with relief that she had stayed. She could hear distant music from Deepest Forest and missed her friends. Raising a hatchling was more demanding than she had thought. Amanda became angry at the law that kept her from sharing her pet with the others. *What harm is one small dragon?* she thought.

That same night, she noticed a yellow gleam flickering in the beast's eyes as it looked at her. When it licked her face, she could feel its breath was warm and dry.

After that, when Amanda returned from short trips to forage for food, she would find the walls of her den scorched. The

hollow was becoming more blackened. It smelled of charcoal. The dragon was always glad to see her, but she was careful not to stand directly in front of its nose and mouth.

More and more often, she had to be careful of its tail. A full-grown dragon's tail is deadly. Its powerful sweep can move boulders or knock down medium-sized trees or cripple a man. *Or kill a princess.*

Once, when she wanted to hop on its back for a ride, the dragon leaped up without her. "Cree-ee-l! Cree-ee-l!" Its cry became defiant as it shot a flame in her direction. For the first time, it had willfully disobeyed her.

As each week passed, Amanda began to laugh less and less.

One day, after racing the dragon through the forest, she left it napping in a sunny glade and returned to the hollow tree just as Caretaker was backing out of it. His sapling hat pulled out of the hole like a cork from a bottle.

"What is wrong with the inside of My Very Own Place?" he asked. "Amanda, you haven't been lighting fires, have you?"

"Oh, it's been that way a long time," she lied. "I don't know what caused that. Maybe Burners were here last winter."

Amanda wished Caretaker would stop wearing that ridiculous tree for a hat. How could she have ever thought it was so wonderful!

Caretaker stared at the dirt in front of the den. He pushed it with his foot. "Ever see any dragons around here?" he asked quietly.

"Dragons?" answered Amanda quickly. "Not now. The season for dragons is over."

Caretaker didn't say a word, but began to walk down Meadow Path. *You old fool*, thought Amanda. It was then that he stopped and turned and looked at her sadly.