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opening extract from

# The Gorgon's Gaze

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# 1
# Gold

'You're going to get us both killed!' shrieked Connie. She was torn between terror and delight as Col nudged the winged horse into a heart-stopping dive through a wet, grey cloud.

Col laughed back over his shoulder, his flying helmet and goggles sparing him the worst of the weather. 'You don't fool us, Connie Lionheart—you're loving every minute of the ride.'

'Am not!' she shouted crossly in his ear. 'Aargh! Look out!'

The pegasus plummeted to his left. Thud, thud: Skylark's hoofs hit turf, almost jolting her off his back.

'Nice landing.' Connie slid thankfully to the ground.

'What d'you mean? That was a perfect Athenian dive, followed by a Thessalonian Roll!' Col's eyes, an odd pair—one green, one brown—shone with indignation as he met her gaze. He was looking into eyes that were a mirror image of his own.

Connie stroked Skylark's nose. 'So now we've got here, will you tell me what's going on?'

They were standing at twilight on top of a hill in the middle of Dartmoor. For miles around there was nothing but grass rippling in the breeze. All was silent, except for the snake-like hiss of the wind in her ears.

'Ask Dr Brock.'

'What? Why?' Connie was completely confused now. Col grinned. He could be so infuriating. 'You'll tell me what's going on, won't you, Skylark?' she appealed to the pegasus. Skylark shook his mane and shifted his feet evasively. Connie was beginning to feel angry: what was the point of dragging her to the middle of a moor when Dr Brock was probably miles away sitting comfortably in his garden in Hescombe right now? 'Oh, come on, Col! You can't bring me all the way out here for nothing!'

'Not for nothing, Universal,' came a voice behind her. Connie spun round: there was Dr Brock, his ginger-streaked white hair flapping

untidily in the wind. Where had he come from? He seemed to have sprung out of the ground itself.

'What are you doing here?' she asked in surprise.

'We have something special to show you. Follow me.' Dr Brock, a companion to dragons and leader of the local chapter of the Society for the Protection of Mythical Creatures, turned and led Connie, Col, and Skylark to a steep path leading away from the brow of the hill. The track ended at a brook trickling through marshy ground. Undeterred, Dr Brock picked his way upstream, splashing in the ankle-deep water. It gave off a gassy reek as he disturbed it. Connie wrinkled her nose but did not hesitate to follow him. The rivulet issued from a dark gully that fractured the hillside. As they got deeper, the roof of stunted oak trees and lime green ferns shut out the little daylight that was left. Skylark's hoofs clattered on the stones, sending echoes ricocheting off the walls. The hair on the back of Connie's neck prickled. She had a growing sense of a presence—there was a creature, or creatures, ahead.

'I think we need some light, my friends,' called Dr Brock, taking a torch from his belt. 'Do I have your permission?' The last comment was addressed not to Connie and Col, but to the

dragon-shaped shadow crouched in front of Dr Brock, dwarfing the humans. Permission must have been granted for a beam of white light sprang into life, rippling its way over the uneven rock walls.

'There!' Dr Brock exclaimed hoarsely.

Caught by the beam was a second dragon, slightly smaller than the first, curled up in the far corner of the crevice. It was lying on the ground bent round so that its tail cradled its head. A pair of emerald eyes watched them steadily. The dragon's hide shone in the light with the pristine tones of a chestnut fresh from its husk. Dr Brock bowed solemnly, a gesture copied swiftly by Connie. Col and Skylark backed off, knowing better than to approach dragons, or any other mythical creature, unless you were their companion. The chestnut dragon lifted its head briefly, its tongue flickering out to scent the air, before bowing its snout in response.

'This is Castanea,' Dr Brock said in a low voice to Connie, 'Argot's mate. Come closer—there's something we want you to see.'

Connie followed him carefully over the stony stream bed to Castanea. Argot shifted his tail to one side to let them pass, observing them with what Connie sensed to be suppressed excitement.

'Go on,' urged Dr Brock, ushering her past him.

Connie moved forward into the pool of light until she was in reach of the outer edge of the circle made by the dragon's tail. She wondered what she was expected to do: did they want her to encounter Castanea? Share her dreams as was the practice between dragons and their companions? Neither the dragon nor Dr Brock gave her a hint so she edged forward a few more steps and stretched out her hand.

Then she heard it: a squeaking, snuffling noise coming from directly in front of her. She pulled her hand back quickly and glanced up into Castanea's shining eyes. She was so close now she could smell the sulphurous aroma of dragon-breath warm on the damp air. Lids closed briefly over green eyes: she had been given consent to continue. Leaning over Castanea's tail, Connie looked down into the hollow ring formed by the curled body. Dr Brock came to her side and lifted the torch high so it shone down into the dark cavity. There lay a twisted mass of legs and tails—crimson and brown shot through with gold—amid fragments of creamy white shell. Connie finally understood: she was looking into the dragons' nest at their new family.

'Wow!' breathed Connie. Argot ruffled his wings, near bursting with pride. 'How many are there?' she asked, turning to Dr Brock.

'Ah, that's the really exciting thing,' he replied. 'May I?' he deferred to Castanea. The dragon nodded. Passing the torch to Connie, Dr Brock reached down into the nest and lifted out a single scarlet dragon, which squealed a protest at being separated from its warm bed of siblings. He scooped up another with his free hand—this one a chocolate brown with a long thrashing tail. Connie peered down to count how many remained. There were two still curled around each other—one ruby-red and the other . . .

'Gold!' Connie exclaimed as the torchlight glanced off the scales of the smallest of the dragon brood.

'Pick her up,' Dr Brock told Connie. 'This is what we wanted you to see.'

Connie gently untwisted the golden dragon and lifted it out. Dr Brock returned his two charges to the nest and took back the torch so she could cradle the dragonet in her arms. It did not protest but snuggled down against Connie's chest—the size and weight of a cat. She ran her index finger down its neck and felt it shiver with pleasure. A tiny connection was established between Connie, the universal companion—the only living person who could communicate with all creatures—and the dragonet. She could sense that its thoughts were unformed, running in her

mind as a succession of fierce needs. It wanted its mother. It wanted its father. It wanted Connie. Suddenly, as if a match had been put to gunpowder, Connie felt the fire ignite in its belly for the first time. Sparks issued from its tiny jaws like needle-sharp stars pricking her fingers. Argot and Castanea rumbled proudly at their child's swift progress.

'Are gold dragons rare?' Connie whispered.

'Indeed they are,' Dr Brock replied. 'Dragons are having fewer broods—dragonets of any hue are rare—but as for gold, it can lie dormant for many generations and only come to light once in a millennium. Argand here is the first pure gold dragon I've ever seen.'

Castanea blinked her emerald eyes once and Connie realized reluctantly that she must try the mother's patience no further. Placing the little dragon back in its nest, Connie gave all four young a swift stroke and stood up.

'I am honoured—thank you for letting me see your new family,' Connie said, looking over to Argot.

'Universal, Argand's companion,' Argot said in a subterranean growl of a voice.

'Me?'

'If you wish, that is,' added Dr Brock. 'Argot, Castanea, and I, we thought . . . well, we thought

what would be more fitting than our only universal being matched with our only golden dragon?'

Flying back to Hescombe on Skylark, Col and Connie were by common consent silent, thinking over what they had been privileged to see.

'How long does it take for dragons to grow up?' Col asked at last. 'Do you know?'

'No,' Connie replied, 'I only know that dragons live for centuries.'

'I was hoping we'd be able to fly together but it sounds as if we might be past it by the time that golden one gets off the ground.'

'Oh, shut up, Col.' Connie gave him a poke in the ribs. She knew him well enough to realize that he enjoyed teasing her, not only to keep her from inflated ideas about her special role as a universal companion, but also because he was jealous of his identity as the rider in their friendship. Col said no more but Connie would have sworn that he was smiling even though she couldn't see his face.

They were now flying over the outskirts of the little fishing port of Hescombe—tonight a snakes-and-ladders board of lights bitten into at the south-eastern corner by the sea. Connie looked down to see if she could spot the roof of

her home, Number Five Shaker Row, from up here.

'Hey, what's going on?' she wondered out loud.

Col glanced down and saw what had caught Connie's interest: a trail of red brake-lights wound its way out of Hescombe towards the nearby town of Chartmouth.

'That's weird,' Col said. 'Perhaps there's been a crash. Let's go and see what's up.'

'Should we? I mean, what if we're spotted?'

Connie wished she hadn't said anything as she felt Col's vague interest harden to determination once she had questioned his wisdom.

'We'll be fine,' Col replied airily, directing Skylark on a new course.

The chain of lights led over the hill behind Hescombe and across open countryside before stopping abruptly at the edge of Mallins Wood. This ancient, magical woodland was the largest forested area in the district. Even from up here, Connie could feel the presence of thousands of creatures in the trees and ground below, living secret lives hidden from humans. At the moment, the road had to loop a long way inland round the edge before it was able to descend steeply into Chartmouth. To Connie, Mallins Wood appeared a precious but endangered island as people got closer and closer. From her vantage point above

the trees, she could see the lights of the Axoil refinery on the industrial outskirts of Chartmouth eating up the horizon with an angry orange glare.

'So that's it!' Col pointed ahead and down. 'They've arrived.'

At the head of the queue of cars, a convoy of battered old buses and caravans was slowly pulling off the road into a picnic spot on the fringe of the woodland. One bus appeared to have broken down—they could see figures flitting in and out of the headlamps as well as hear the angry hooting of cars stuck behind the blockage.

'Who are they?' Connie asked.

'The protestors—the ecowarriors. They're here because of the road.'

Now Connie understood. There had been a local campaign against plans to build a new road to the refinery at Chartmouth, but it had failed to stop the project going ahead. She was still furious that planning permission had been granted to broaden and straighten the existing road, cutting a great swathe through Mallins Wood, making countless animals homeless. Tree-murder, Connie considered it—and so apparently did these ecowarriors.

'Are they Society members?' Connie asked Col as they turned for home.

Col laughed. 'No—or only one or two are. Dad

hangs out with them—he says they're even weirder than we are.'

'I find that hard to believe.' Her short time as a member of the Society for the Protection of Mythical Creatures had proved to her that it comprised the oddest people she had ever met.

'We'll just have to go and visit them to find out, won't we?' Col replied, turning Skylark for home.