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opening extract from

Dragonsdale

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Chapter One

'Go away, Sky!'

Cara was exasperated. Skydancer's playful shove had knocked her halfway across the cobbled floor and made her drop her shovel. As she bent to pick it up, the dragon swung his head to give Cara another nudge. Cara turned around, raised the shovel and tapped him smartly on the muzzle. Skydancer blinked and looked hurt.

'It's no good looking at me like that,' said Cara. 'How am I supposed to clean out your stall if you keep pushing me?'

Skydancer gave Cara one of his most pathetic looks. Cara laughed; Sky knew all her weak spots. She couldn't stay angry with him for long. She reached out and scratched the green scaly ridge between the golden blaze on the dragon's forehead and his left eye. Skydancer closed his great almond eyes and crooned with pleasure.

The dragon arched his back and stretched his forelegs so that his talons rose from the cobbles, falling back with a series of soft clicks as he relaxed. He half-opened his wings, shaking his sails into new folds as his wingtips brushed the stable walls. Then he settled

down again, twitching his long tail, the fin-like spade at the end slapping the floor gently as Cara continued her affectionate stroking.

'I know you want to play.' Cara tried hard to make her voice stern. 'But I have to do my chores first. I've got to finish mucking out the other dragons' stables and check up on the dragonets. The longer you keep me here, the longer it'll take me to do them.' Cara stopped scratching the dragon and straightened up. 'I'll come back as soon as I can. I promise.'

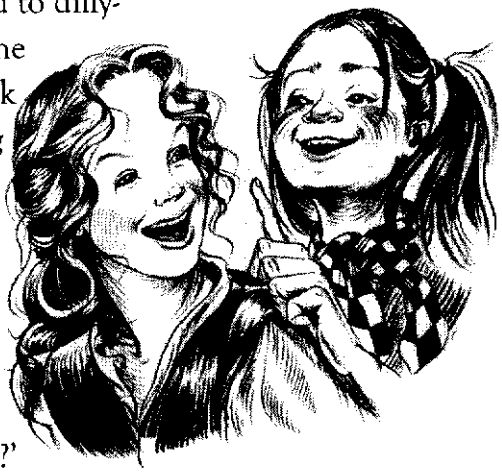
Sky gave a mournful chirrup and slunk over to his sleeping platform. He padded round in a circle a couple of times, like a huge scaly dog settling in its basket. Then he curled up with his nose tucked under his tail and gave Cara a self-pitying look.

Cara finished scooping up the smelly dragon droppings, waved goodbye to Skydancer and stepped out of the dragon's stall into the stable yard. She dumped the mess into a wheelbarrow already piled high with the sweepings of other dragons' stalls, and closed the heavy iron door behind her. Then she wiped her hands on her stained leather jerkin and brushed a wisp of dark-reddish hair out of her eyes.

'Warm work!' Breena, who was cleaning out the dragons on the other side of the yard, gave Cara a wave.

'And smelly!' Cara waved back.

'It's got to be done, though,' said Breena. She frowned and pursed her lips. In a fair imitation of Mistress Hildebrand, Dragonsdale's Chief Riding Instructor, she said, *'Dragons aren't all fun and play, girls!'* Cara giggled, and Breena gave her a knowing look. 'Anyway, we can't afford to dilly-dally. We'll be sunk if the whole place doesn't look spotless for the showing tomorrow.'



Cara shuddered. 'Don't remind me.'

Breena looked surprised. 'Aren't you looking forward to it? Wony's riding, isn't she?'

'If you can call it riding.' Cara instantly regretted her snappishness. 'Oh, I don't mean that. Poor Wony – she does her best, and she loves that little dragon of hers to bits ...'

'... but she does fall off quite a lot,' finished Breena with a grin. 'Cheer up. You'll enjoy it.'

'I don't think I shall,' said Cara. 'Hortense will be there.'

'Ah, Her Ladyship,' said Breena knowingly. She shrugged. 'Well, there's nothing you or I can do about Hortense. Just give her your very best smile ...'

'Smile at Hortense?' said Cara in tones of deep disgust.

'And hope she falls off her dragon and lands in something smelly.'

Cara grinned. 'Now that I would enjoy. See you at lunch.' Breena waved and stepped back into a stall.

Cara lifted the handles of the wheelbarrow. Her back gave a twinge, and she winced and set the barrow down again. She had been working hard since daybreak.

The sound of beating wings made her glance skywards: a formation of five dragons was flying overhead. Cara could just make out the shouts and calls of the riders as they urged their mounts into a perfect diamond pattern. She recognised Tord leading on Dawnspinner, his great Ridgeback Charger. Flying wingtip to wingtip, the guard wing turned over the white stone bulk of Dragonsdale House and headed out to patrol the wild lands that lay between Dragonsdale and the snow-capped peak of Cloudside, the tallest mountain on the Isle of Seahaven.

Cara trembled with a familiar, hot feeling of envy and longing. Since her earliest childhood she had wanted to ride a dragon, to feel the rush of air as she flew, cradled between the sinuous neck and powerful shoulders, rocked by the beat of the great wings. Yet all her life, she had helped raise dragons for others to ride. Why couldn't she be up there, in the blue sky and the wild wind, flying her own dragon, rather than be stuck here mucking out the stables of Dragonsdale? If only she were allowed to ride ...

'Woolgathering again?'

Cara started guiltily, and turned to face her father. 'I only stopped for a moment, Da.'

'I daresay.' Huw the Dragonmaster was a stocky man, quite different in build from his slim, long-legged daughter. He had a snub nose, and sharp grey eyes that missed nothing. Even in his sweat-stained tunic and shapeless riding breeches, the Dragonmaster's air of experience and authority made him an impressive figure. Huw was known throughout Bresal as owner and master of Dragonsdale, the most famous dragon stud and training farm in the whole of the Islands.

Cara's father jerked his grizzled head towards the door of Skydancer's stall. 'I suppose you've been wasting time with that favourite of yours again.'

'Sky has to be cleaned out,' said Cara. 'Just like all the others.'

'I notice you take longer to clean him out than you do any of the rest.'

Cara had no answer to this because it was true. 'He gets so lonely.'

This was a mistake. Her father frowned. 'He wouldn't get lonely if he allowed himself to be trained and ridden. Then he'd earn his keep like the others. Dragonsdale is a stud farm, not a rest home for idle dragons. We need guard dragons to protect us, hunting dragons to feed us, racing and show dragons to win competitions – if Skydancer keeps on defying his trainers ...'

'But, Da,' protested Cara, 'Sky's a Goldenbrow – that's a very rare breed ...'

'He could be as rare as a mermaid's toenails and he'd still be of no value to me if he won't allow himself to be trained. We can't afford to keep on stuffing food into useless mouths, that's all.'

A cold hand seemed to clutch at Cara's heart. 'Da...' She had asked the question many times before and knew it was hopeless, but she ploughed on. 'Why won't you let me ride Sky? I know I can do it! I know I can train him! Please ...'

Cara broke off. Her father's face had darkened like a gathering storm. He didn't raise his voice, but his words lashed at Cara. 'You know very well that I will not have you ride any dragon. You know why. We will

not speak of this again. Is that clear?'

Cara hung her head.

The Dragonmaster glared at his daughter for a second or two longer, then nodded grimly. 'Very well. Now, I have another job for you.' Cara glanced up as her father put his fingers to his lips, gave a piercing whistle and beckoned urgently. A small figure stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the stable yard and scurried to the Dragonmaster's side.

'This is Drane,' said Huw. 'He's from a farm up on the Walds; his father has asked me to take him on as apprentice stable lad.' The Dragonmaster's expression said clearly that he had no great hopes of his new apprentice. Before Cara could say a 'how-goes-your-day?', her father continued. 'He can help you with your yard duties. Show him the ropes, and take him up to the house for lunch when you've finished – as long as the dragons haven't eaten him by then.' A look of horror crossed Drane's face, and he gulped. 'And don't dawdle,' added Huw brusquely. 'You know Dragonsdale will be on show tomorrow. No one wants to buy a dragon from a stud that looks like a pigsty.' He turned on his heel and strode off.

Cara studied her new assistant. Drane was a thin-faced boy with untidy, mousy hair. He was wearing a woollen jerkin and a woebegone expression.

Cara wrinkled her nose. 'Is that all you've got to

wear?' Drane nodded glumly. 'We'll have to find you some leathers,' Cara told him. 'Wool won't last five minutes around dragons.'

Drane looked nervously towards the stalls. 'W-why?'

'You'll find out.' Cara was a kind-hearted girl, but the argument with her father – the latest of many – had made her bad-tempered. She wasn't pleased about having to play nursemaid to an apprentice. He would probably turn out to be completely useless, anyway. In Cara's view, most boys were; certainly the ones who started work at the stables didn't seem to last long. 'Come on.'

Cara wheeled her barrow to the next stall in line. She peered in through the narrow top doorway before sliding the iron bolt across to open the heavy bottom door. Turning, she saw that Drane had not followed her. The new apprentice stable lad was hanging back, a terrified expression on his face. Cara stared at him. 'Have you done much work with dragons before?'

Drane shook his head.

'Then why do you want to work here?'

'I don't,' Drane burst out. 'It was my father's idea.'

Oh, great, thought Cara. Aloud, she said, 'Are you scared of dragons?'

Drane looked down and shuffled his feet. Reluctantly, he nodded. 'A bit.'

Cara groaned. This was just getting better and

better. 'Well, you'll have to start somewhere. Come over here.' Drane took a step back. 'Come on!'

Feet dragging, Drane shuffled forward.

Cara opened the door to the stall. 'This is Breezeskimmer,' she said briskly. 'You can see her name on the brass plate over the door.' Drane looked up, read the plate (his lips moved, Cara couldn't help noticing) and nodded glumly. 'She's a Silvertip, a racing dragon.'

Drane's brow furrowed. 'Racing dragon?'

'Yes. There are lots of different types of dragon, surely you must know that?'

Drane shook his head, and Cara pursed her lips at this display of wilful ignorance. She held out her hand, folding a finger against her palm as she named each dragon type. 'Well, at Dragonsdale we have guard dragons – they're the biggest – and hunting dragons. Then we have show dragons – and racing dragons, like Breezy here. She should be out exercising with the others, but she's had a bad dose of colic. Alberich Dragonleech has been to see her–'

'Who?'

Cara tried to find the words that would explain the baffling new world of the stud in a way that Drane would understand. 'A surgeon looks after sick humans,' she said eventually, 'and a dragonleech looks after sick dragons. Alberich is the best in the Islands.

Anyway, he treated Breezy and now we're dosing her with flax oil and keeping her in for a couple of days until she's feeling better. Hi, Breezy!'

Shouldering her shovel, Cara marched into the stall and began to scoop. Drane poked his head fearfully around the door and stared.

Silvertips weren't among the larger breeds of dragons, but to Drane Breezeskimmer looked enormous. The boy flinched as the dragon shifted uncomfortably on her sleeping platform and gave a hiccup. A thin, blueish flame dribbled from the corner of her mouth.

Cara looked up. 'Come on in! Don't be shy.'

Drane edged into the stall, looking ready to bolt. 'She won't eat me, will she?'

Cara stopped scooping and stared at him. 'Why would she do that?'

'The Dragonmaster said I might get eaten.'

'He was joking.'

'Oh,' said Drane miserably. 'Ha ha.'

'Dragons don't eat people,' said Cara. 'Not any more. Savage creatures like pards eat people, and so do firedogs and howlers, given half the chance. You're a lot safer in here than you would be out in the hills.'

Drane gave a bitter smile. 'Or even back on the farm.'

'Oh, your farm should be pretty safe with

Dragonsdale to protect you.'

Drane's expression was suddenly cold and withdrawn. 'Not Dragonsdale,' he said. 'We were bound to Clapperclaw.'

Cara pursed her lips at the mention of the rival stud. 'Even so— ' Her voice tailed off. She could tell that she had touched upon a sore point with Drane, but she had no idea what she had said to upset him, or how to put it right. After an uncomfortable silence, she said, 'Well, anyway, this is a dragon's stable.'

Drane looked around dubiously. 'It's not like the barns we had back on the farm. They had walls made of wood and a thatched roof.'

Cara gave him an amused look. 'Fine for docile, hairy farm beasts – but dragons breathe fire, remember.' She pointed. 'The walls are stone. The beams for the roof are made of bog-oak, which is practically flameproof, and the roof is made of clay tile. The doors are iron, see? A wide bottom door for getting in and out, and a narrow top door to let light in.'

Drane eyed the grunting dragon. 'She doesn't look very comfortable. Our animals get straw to lie on.'

Cara laughed. 'Yes, but these are dragons! It's not much good having a bed you might set fire to every time you sneeze! The sleeping platforms are made of pumice.'

'Isn't that a rock?'

'Well, yes, but as rocks go, it's pretty soft. Anyway, Breezy isn't uncomfortable because her bed's too hard. She's uncomfortable because she's got a tummy ache, isn't that right, Breezy?' The dragon hooted miserably. 'Go and scratch her eye ridges,' Cara told Drane. 'All dragons like that. It'll make her feel better.'

Hesitantly, Drane inched closer to the dragon, and reached out. His fingers brushed the ridges above Breezeskimmer's lustrous yellow eyes.

'Harder,' Cara told him. 'She's a dragon. You won't hurt her.'

'I wasn't worried about *me* hurting *her*,' said Drane, but he scratched harder. Immediately, the dragon's eyes closed and she began to make a rumbling sound in her chest.

Cara swept the droppings out through the doorway. 'Good, only two more stalls to do.'

Drane was still scratching. 'I think she likes me. She's purring.'

'She's doing what?'

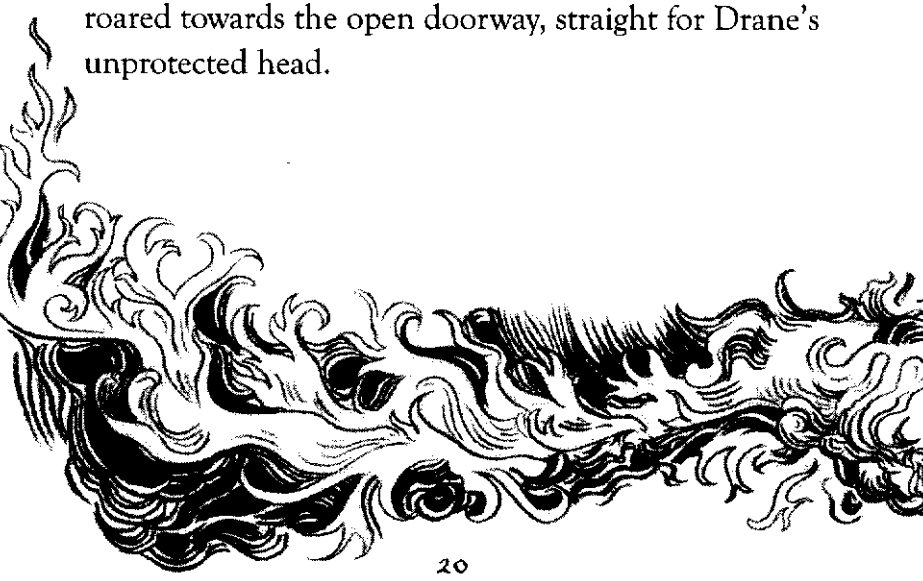
'Purring.'

Cara shook her head. 'Dragons don't purr ... uh-oh.' She beckoned to Drane. 'I think you'd better come out of there.'

'Why?' Drane's voice was dreamy. 'She's enjoying it. Look, she's smiling.'

'Drane, I think it would be a really good idea if you came out of there *right now*.'

Drane shuffled over to the door. 'I don't see what all the rush is for ... aaargh!' he concluded as Cara dragged him out by the front of his jerkin. She slammed the bottom door and dropped to her knees.

Breezeskimmer shifted unhappily on her sleeping platform. The build-up of gas in her second stomach was making the dragon feel very uncomfortable indeed. She hooted a warning to the human boy who was still peering over the top of the door to her stall. Breezeskimmer had been trained never to breathe fire when there was a human being in the way, but this time she couldn't help it.

The dragon gave a gigantic belch. A searing tongue of flame shot from her mouth across the stall, and roared towards the open doorway, straight for Drane's unprotected head.