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Opening extract from

Dragon Racer

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Chapter One

‘Congested lungs, barking cough, swollen throat and more soot than a blocked chimney.’ Alberich Dragonleech finished his examination of Moonflight and stood up. ‘It’s coker all right. She needs peace and quiet,’ he went on sternly. ‘A dose three times a day of my special syrup – my own mixture, mark you, not that quack concoction Mistress Hildebrand sets such store by.’ He made a disapproving face, and continued, ‘No meat.’

Moonflight gave him a plaintive look and coughed alarmingly.

‘And, it need hardly be said, no flying!’ Alberich gave Breena a hard stare, as if suspecting that the minute his back was turned she would instantly saddle Moony and wilfully fly her ailing dragon into a state of collapse.

‘Yes, Master Alberich,’ said Breena.

‘Well, I’m away to the showing at Wyvernwood. Will I see you there?’

Breena bit her lip and shook her head.

‘No, I suppose not. Fare you well – and look after your dragon.’ Alberich nodded and stalked out of the stable into the cobbled yard with his characteristic

heron-like gait. Breena followed him to the door, and stood watching as he mounted a waiting dragon that was almost as lean and rangy as its rider. He strapped himself into the saddle and flicked the hand reins. The dragon unfurled its great wings. As it took off, the skirts of Alberich's leather greatcoat streamed out behind him, flapping as if to assist the dragon's flight. By the time the dragonleech and his mount had risen above the homely stone bulk of Dragonsdale House it was already difficult to tell where dragon ended and rider began.

Breena returned to the stable, knelt down and stroked the knobbled ridge above Moonflight's left eye. Moony looked a very woebegone dragon this morning. Her eyes were rheumy and her nose was running. She shifted listlessly on her pumice sleeping platform and snuffled.

'Oh, Moony,' said Breena sadly, 'what am I going to do with you?'

Cara stuck her head through the open top door of the stable. 'How's the patient?'

'Still coughing like a nanny goat,' replied Breena. Moonflight gave a hacking cough by way of confirmation. A wisp of smoke drifted from her nostrils.

'Would she like a nice haunch of peryton?'

Breena shook her head. 'She's not allowed meat.'

Alberich said.'

'Oh, well – she can have this instead.' Cara slipped into the stall and rummaged in a pocket of her flying jacket. She brought out an apple and offered it to Moony, who looked offended and buried her nose under her tail.

'Moony! Manners!' Breena gave her friend an apologetic look.

'Don't worry,' said Cara. 'I'm always miserable when I've got a sore throat, and look how short my throat is compared to Moony's.'

Breena sighed. 'Poor old girl.'

'Poor old you. You've had such rotten luck this season – too sick to fly at Wingover, and now you're well, Moonflight's gone down with a nasty dose of coker. It's just not fair.'

Breena sighed. 'Well, worse things happen at sea. Anyway, shouldn't you be heading for Wyvernwood for the showing? You'll want to give Skydancer plenty of time to rest before the Clear Flight competition. Isn't it time you were off?'

'That's why I'm here,' said Cara briskly. 'You're coming with me.'

'Oh, Cara, I'd love to, but I can't. I have to stay here with Moony ...'

'Moony just wants to sleep – she doesn't want you fussing around like an old hen.'

‘But I’ve got to dose her with coker syrup.’

‘Bran can do that.’ Cara nodded to the stable door, through which Dragonsdale’s head lad could be heard sending the stable hands about their duties. ‘He’s dosed more sick dragons than Gerda’s cooked hot dinners. Anyway, I’ve never been to Wyvernwood before – you wouldn’t want me to get lost, would you?’

‘But ...’

‘No more arguments! You haven’t been out since Moony fell sick. You’ll be coming down with coker yourself next. Everyone’s going. Da went across yesterday, Wony left with Mistress Hildebrand first thing this morning, and Drane’s riding over on one of the baggage-dragons. I’ve got your flying gear just outside and Sky’s saddled and waiting to go.’

‘You seem to have thought of everything,’ said Breena ruefully. Then she laughed. ‘All right! I’d hate to miss the second showing in a row, even if I’m not flying in the competition. And you’re right – I can’t bear to hear Moony coughing away. I’m a terrible nurse. Just let me have a word with Bran and we’ll be off.’

Skydancer flew along the gorge of the Tumblewater, above the jumble of rocks that rose like blackened teeth from the raging torrent. The dragon banked from wingtip to wingtip as he followed the winding course

of the river, his mighty wings sweeping aside glistening curtains of spray and leaving swirling contrails of vapour in their wake.

Breena, riding in the pillion seat of the tandem saddle, tore off her helmet – in defiance of all safety rules – and peered over Cara’s shoulder, her dark hair streaming out behind her. Laughing, she closed her eyes against the sting of the spray and opened her mouth to feel the cool droplets of water on her tongue. ‘We’re getting soaked!’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Cara called back. ‘We’ll dry off soon enough.’ But she pulled back on the hand reins. ‘Up we go, Sky!’ Skydancer warbled in response and obediently climbed away from the foaming water. Reaching the rim of the chasm, he soared up into a blue sky dotted with fleecy white clouds, and turned left to fly low over the dark, sinister pools and wiry grasses of Clonmoor.

‘Head more to the south,’ called Breena, re-buckling her chin-strap. ‘We’ll reach the coast at Spindrift Cove.’

Cara nodded good-humouredly and did as she was bid. She loved riding Sky, even over this dull landscape, but the coast sounded more promising. She had hardly ever flown over the sea – most of Dragonsdale’s training flights took place over the moors or the rolling farm land of the Walds – but she did know that the south-west coast of Seahaven boasted some of the most

spectacular scenery in the whole of the Isles of Bresal. It would make a nice change.

Sky flew higher. Before long, there was a glint of silver in the distance, which broadened into a ribbon, then a sheet – and then a vast expanse of shining blue water, stretching to the horizon.

Breena pointed down. ‘Spindrift Cove!’

They skimmed over granite cliffs and a beach of yellow-white sand where white-tipped waves broke lazily on the shore. ‘It looks wonderful!’ cried Cara. ‘And Sky loves the sea, don’t you, boy?’ She reached forward and rubbed at the dragon’s long neck. Skydancer gave an affirmative warble. ‘I wish we had time to stop and look around.’



‘Maybe another day. I’d love to bring Moony over here when she’s better. It feels funny to be flying without her.’ Breena patted Skydancer’s flank. ‘No offence, Sky.’ Then she gripped Cara’s arm and pointed out to sea. ‘Look over there! What are those shapes in the water?’



Cara flew Skydancer in the direction of Breena's pointing finger. Soon she, too, could see the dark shapes swimming effortlessly below the waves.

'Oh, look, Cara, they're dolphins.' A number of the dark shapes leapt from the water. 'No - porpoises.'

Cara sighed. 'Is that all?'

'Is that all? Since when did you see porpoises every day of the week?'

'Sorry. It's just - I thought it might be merfolk.'

'Oh, merfolk, is it?' Breena's voice was amused. 'You and your stories. You'll be lucky - merfolk don't like being seen. In any case, they mostly live around Merfolk Bay.'

Cara nodded, disappointed. She'd loved tales about the merfolk since she was small, and had always wanted to see one. But the people of the sea were shy, and seemed to have little time for humans. Ah well, she thought, maybe some day ...

'Let's go, Sky.' Cara twitched the reins. 'We don't want to be late for the showing.' Skydancer swooped low, hooting a farewell to the leaping porpoises, and headed for the shore.

They flew along the coastline. Before long, the sands of Spindrift Cove gave way to towering cliffs. Sea birds, roosting on their rocky ledges, took to the air they passed and wheeled behind them calling raucous insults. Cara revelled in the crisp, clean air and the

glorious landscape. Above the black and grey cliffs lay grassy meadows dotted with the yellow of gorse and the many hues of wild flowers; below them, the tireless, pounding waves crashed against the rocks, sending up white plumes as fine as smoke.

After a while, Breena tapped Cara on the shoulder. 'Time to turn inland. Not far now.'

Cara was sorry that their journey was nearing its end. Flying with Sky, she felt more alive than she ever did on the ground: her mind was more alert, her body more perfectly balanced, her senses more finely tuned. Everything about their flight was magical – the sun on her face, the rush of wind all around them, the powerful beats of Skydancer's wings, the shimmering of his scales. And the Trustbond between dragon and rider, intangible but as strong as steel, that bound them together more closely than ties of blood or friendship, in ways that a non-rider could never understand.

'We're here!'

Breena's exuberant cry broke Cara's reverie. Moments later they were surrounded by flights of small, two-legged dragon-like creatures that erupted from the trees as Skydancer soared above them.

'Wyverns!' cried Cara.

Breena laughed. 'What do you expect around Wyvernwood?'

Easing back with her right hand and foot reins, Cara

urged Skydancer into a victory roll out of sheer elation. The dragon flexed his great wings in response and Cara laughed as the landscape and clouds seemed to spin around her.

‘Whooooah!’ Breena’s grip on Cara’s flying jacket tightened. ‘Give me a bit of warning if you’re going to do something like that!’

‘Sorry – couldn’t resist it!’ Cara glanced down. ‘Look, there’s Drane!’ She sideslipped to lose height so they could fly alongside a baggage-dragon lumbering along at treetop level. The dragon hooted with displeasure and gave Skydancer a sour look, as if to say, ‘Youngsters today, throwing themselves all over the sky!’ Her rider grinned and waved at Cara and Breena. Cara waved back. ‘Look, Drane! There it is! Wyvernwood!’

The gawky stable hand riding pillion on the baggage-dragon shook his head. ‘I can’t see it!’

Breena raised herself in the saddle and cupped a hand around her mouth. ‘Open your eyes then, you half-witted hatchling!’

‘Not until we’re down!’ Drane wailed. ‘I hate dragons ... I hate heights ... I hate riding ... I hate life ...’

Cara laughed at his litany of complaints and pulled on the hand reins. Sky banked sharply and settled into a glide.

Breena leant forward. ‘There’s a good turnout!’ she

shouted into Cara's ear.

She was right. The sky seemed suddenly filled with dragons. Although Wyvernwood was the southernmost of the five dragon-training stables and studs on Seahaven, and furthest from the island capital of South Landing, there was clearly no lack of visitors for its annual showing. Dragons and their riders were flying in from every corner of the island to watch and compete.

Cara felt Skydancer's excitement mounting at the presence of so many unfamiliar dragons. 'Steady, boy.' She looked down as they flew over the buildings of the stud. 'It's very different from Dragonsdale, isn't it? The house and stables are separate, not all together like they are at home.'

'And look at their guard tower. It has to be tall so they can see over the trees.' Breena pointed to a high platform set on a wooden openwork structure, more like a pylon than a tower, from which the Wyvernwood lookouts could watch for visiting dragons (welcome), emergency beacons summoning the Guard Flight (less welcome) and marauding predators from the wild moors and hills (not welcome at all).

As they flew towards the tower, a rash of brightly-coloured signals broke out on the flagstaff at its top. Cara read them carefully; they instructed her to wait for permission to land. Obediently, she made

Skydancer waggle his wings in acknowledgement, then banked to the right to join the dozen or so dragons wheeling above the forest, waiting for the ground crew to call them.

'I hope they don't keep us waiting long. Oh, look at that!' Breena's voice took on a scandalized tone as a newcomer, flying from the north-east, was waved straight in. Cara stared at the immaculately dressed rider in the powder-blue riding habit, and her hands tightened on the reins.

'Hortense!'



Chapter Two

Sky bugled a warning and Cara patted her dragon's neck to calm him. Hortense's brief ownership of Skydancer last year had done nothing to make the dragon well-disposed towards her.

Breena snorted. 'Unbelievable! Why can't she wait her turn like everyone else? You'd think she owns the place.'

'She does,' Cara pointed out reasonably. 'At least, her da does. You can't expect the High Lord's daughter to hang around up here with the rest of us riff-raff. Anyway, she does it to annoy people.'

'You're right there,' said Breena with feeling. 'She's the biggest troublemaker in the whole of Bresal.'

For the next few minutes, Cara and Breena swapped unflattering remarks about Hortense as they waited their turn to land. Far below them, bustling crowds of spectators scuttled among the gaily coloured tents, as small and busy as foraging ants, while children and dogs raced here and there, yapping, tumbling and getting in the way. In the picket lines between the tents and the arena, dragons that had arrived earlier were being fed, watered and groomed.

Cara cast an appraising eye over the show arena. 'It

looks smaller than ours.'

'It is. Some of the turns are very tight.'

'No problem for you, Sky. You like tight turns, don't you?' The dragon craned his neck to give his rider an adoring look and a warble of agreement, and Cara laughed.

One by one the dragons and their riders were called in to land in a large clearing between the arena and the forest. Some riders wore the green of Dragonsdale, while others were dressed in the colours of rival studs: the scarlet of Clapperclaw, the blue of Wingover or the brown of Drakelodge. A few wore the parti-coloured jackets of private owners.

'There's Hortense's da.' Cara and Breena watched as Lord Torin's calash came in to land on a runway that had been set aside especially for the flying chariots.

'Look at him!' Breena was dismissive. 'Dressed up to the nines, one hand keeping his hat on, and see how he's clinging to the handrail! You'd think he'd never flown before.' Lord Torin's calash swung gracefully in to land, its skids gouging parallel grooves in the lush grass as the dragons pulling it came down running, losing speed steadily as the chariot came to rest.

Eventually Cara was given the signal to land. They glided in, and Skydancer, for all his size and weight, landed as gently as thistledown. Cara took off her helmet and slipped from the saddle.

A young stable hand took Sky's reins. His face was creased in an impudent grin. 'Morning, Miss Cara.'

Cara felt ridiculously pleased at having been recognized. 'How do you know who I am?'

'I was at the Island Championships last Leaf-fall. That was some ride you did - you should've won. I missed the Wingover showing last month, but everyone says you hung out the opposition and left 'em to dry.'

Cara flushed with pride. 'I had a good day.'

'With a dragon like this, you don't need a good day.' The stable hand patted Sky's muzzle, admiring the golden blaze on his forehead. 'First time I've been this close to a Goldenbrow. He's a beauty!'

Breana swung down to alight beside Cara. 'He is that. And he has a good rider. They'll be winning the Intermediate Clear for the second time in a row later on. You'll see.' She took Skydancer's reins. 'Come on, I'll show you where to go.'

Breana led the way between the lines of wattle enclosures. Riders and grooms paused in their work and watched, whispering to each other, as the mercurial redheaded girl who had caused such a ruckus at last year's championships and her graceful, raven-haired friend passed by, totally unconscious of the stir they were creating.

'Here we are.' Breana helped Cara to lead Sky into his stall and settle him down.

Drane poked his tousled head around the edge of the enclosure. He was still looking worried, as he usually did, but at least he had his eyes open now. 'Hello.'

Cara raised an eyebrow at him. 'Hello, Drane. You survived, then?'

Drane massaged his backside with both hands. 'Just. I ache all over. Did I ever mention how much I hate flying?'

'Not above three or four times a day,' said Cara.

'What you two see in riding dragons I shall never understand. The noise! The wind! The swaying! Dangerous, uncomfortable beasts.' Skydancer gave Drane a reproachful look and hooted. 'Present company excepted, of course,' Drane added hastily.

Cara shook her head. 'Have you just come along here to rub your bottom at us and moan? Or did you want something?'

'Oh, yes.' Drane's brow furrowed with the effort of remembering his message. 'The Dragonmaster says if you've remembered to bring his you-know-whats, can you take them to him straight away.' In a low voice, he added, 'What are his you-know-whats?'

Cara laughed. 'Never-you-mind.' She rummaged in Sky's saddlebags and brought out something which she hid behind her back, away from Drane's prying eyes. 'Breena, could you start getting Sky ready please?'

This'll only take a minute.'

Cara found her father making stilted conversation with Lord Torin. Relations between the High Lord of Seahaven and the Master of Dragonsdale had been frosty since Torin had sold Skydancer back to Huw. The Dragonmaster had given Torin far more for Sky than Torin had originally paid, but the High Lord still felt that in some way he couldn't quite work out, he'd lost on the deal. Shortly afterwards he had moved Hortense from Dragonsdale to the rival stud at Clapperclaw.

Torin's portly figure was arranged in a pose of aristocratic self-importance. His tone of voice was more appropriate for chiding a manservant who had run his bathwater too hot than for speaking to the Master of Dragonsdale. 'Must say, Dragonmaster,' he was braying as Cara arrived, 'stonishin' the difference in m'daughter's flyin' since she left you, what? Whuff! Movin' to Clapperclaw's been the makin' of her - she's comin' on in leaps and bounds. Leaps and bounds!'

Cara had a mental picture of Hortense desperately clinging on to a dragon that was bouncing all over the place like a demented lamb, and stifled a giggle.

Spotting her, Lord Torin gave a snort and a couple of explosive 'whuff's before turning on his heel and waddling away. Cara was not a popular person in

Torin's book, especially now that she was riding Skydancer, the dragon that Hortense had famously failed to tame.

'Ah, Cara.' Huw gave his daughter a bleak smile. 'Did you bring my ... um ...?'

'Here they are, Da.' Cara slipped her father's spectacles into his tunic pocket, taking care that no one else noticed the transaction. The Dragonmaster was very self-conscious about needing glasses. He only wore them in his office, or when, as now, he was judging at a showing and would need to check notes and lists.

'Thank you.' Huw patted his pocket.

'Are you judging the Clear Flight competition?'

Huw nodded. 'Intermediate and Senior - and the Senior Aerobatics.'

'I'll see you in the ring, then.' Cara turned to go.

'Cara.' She turned back. 'Fly well,' said the Dragonmaster. He gave her an intense look. 'And fly safely.'

Cara groaned inwardly. Would her father never forget that her mother had died in a fall from a dragon? Would he never stop being afraid that he would lose Cara in the same way?

No, she thought. Of course he wouldn't.

Meekly, she said, 'Yes, Da.'

Cara walked around the show arena, carefully

memorizing the obstacles and the order in which she had to fly them. Then she reclaimed her competition saddle from the baggage tent. She arrived back at Skydancer's stall, just in time to hear Drane say, in sulky tones, 'I was only asking ...'

She took in Breena's back, rigid with annoyance, and groaned inwardly. Drane had evidently been tactless again. 'Asking what?'

Drane turned to her with relief. 'I was only asking why Breena didn't just fly another dragon today as hers is sick, that's all, and she went all hoity-toity on me.'

'You asked her ...?' Cara gaped at Drane, unable to believe this latest evidence of the depth of his ignorance about all things draconic. 'Drane, you've been at Dragonsdale for almost a year now – haven't you learnt anything?'

Drane looked hurt. 'Well, I've learnt which end of a shovel to hold, and not to tip dragon dung out too quickly because it explodes, and—'

'Yes, very good,' said Cara, 'and we've told you about the Trustbond, haven't we?'

Drane gave a cautious nod. 'Yes.'

'Well, all riders have to forge a Trustbond with their own dragons. It's between individuals.'

'But people at Dragonsdale fly different dragons,' protested Drane. 'Hortense flew at least three last year.'

'Yes, because she didn't have a proper Trustbond

with any of them – that’s why she’s so useless.’ Cara took a deep breath; explaining things to Drane always made her head spin. ‘Within reason, any rider can ride any dragon, as long as all they’re doing is flying from one place to another, delivering messages or whatnot. But for anything that needs proper understanding between a dragon and its rider – hunting, guard duty, and especially show-flying – you can’t just suddenly jump on another dragon and expect it to understand what you want it to do. The Trustbond between dragon and rider is special – unique. Some dragons will only accept one rider—’

‘Like you and Sky,’ said Drane, catching on. ‘He wouldn’t let anyone ride him until you did.’

‘Exactly! For Breena, competing on another dragon would be like entering a running race blindfold with her legs tied together, even if she could bear to do it ...’ Breena gave Cara a warning glance, ‘... which she couldn’t,’ Cara added hastily. ‘It would be like two people trying to sing together when they only know one song each and it’s not the same song.’

‘All right, all right, I get it,’ said Drane. ‘I’m sorry, Breena, I didn’t realize—’

‘There you are!’ His apology was cut off by the arrival of Mistress Hildebrand, the Chief Riding Instructor of Dragonsdale. She was dressed immaculately as usual, with the riding whip she always

carried tucked firmly under her arm.

‘Yes, we’re here,’ said Cara. ‘How’s Wony?’

Mistress Hildebrand gave her a quelling look. ‘I wasn’t addressing you, Cara. I generally assume that, whatever their other failings may be, Dragonsdale riders can manage to find their way to a showing on time. Wony is a little tired – it’s a long flight for a beginner – but she and her dragon have had a rest and they should be in the ring for the Best Presented competition about now. Anyway, I haven’t time to stand here gossiping. It’s Drane I want to see.’ Drane shot to attention. Mistress Hildebrand terrified him.

‘The Dragonmaster says you’re to join the arena crew.’

Drane turned even paler than usual and his mouth hung open. He even so far forgot his fear of Mistress Hildebrand as to voice a feeble protest. ‘Arena crew? But I might have to climb up the masts – I’m scared of heights!’

‘Heights aren’t anything to worry about,’ the Chief Riding Instructor told him callously. ‘Height never killed anyone – hitting the ground, that’s what does it. If you’re scared of the ground, we’d better get you up high as soon as possible, hadn’t we?’

By the time Drane had worked this out, Mistress Hildebrand was a distant figure, marching purposefully to her next assignment. Drane said nothing, but turned

and started to make his way to the arena as if his boots were made of lead.

Cara winked at Breena. 'Poor Drane. He can't help putting his foot in his mouth.'

'If his mouth wasn't so big, he wouldn't be able to get his foot in it,' said Breena. Then she gave Cara an apologetic look. 'Sorry. I'm feeling a bit ...' She fixed Cara with an intensely unhappy look, and words came pouring out of her in a rush. 'It's just that this is the last year I can ever be Junior Champion, I'm going to be too old next year, and I've not even qualified for the Island Championships yet, I've hardly even flown Moony this season, and after this showing, there are only three more to go, and if I don't win the Junior Championship, Galen will never allow me to join the guard flight—'

'Hello, Breena. Hello, Cara.'

Both girls whipped round. Hortense was standing at the entrance to the stall. Skydancer rumbled a warning, and Cara automatically reached for his head harness.

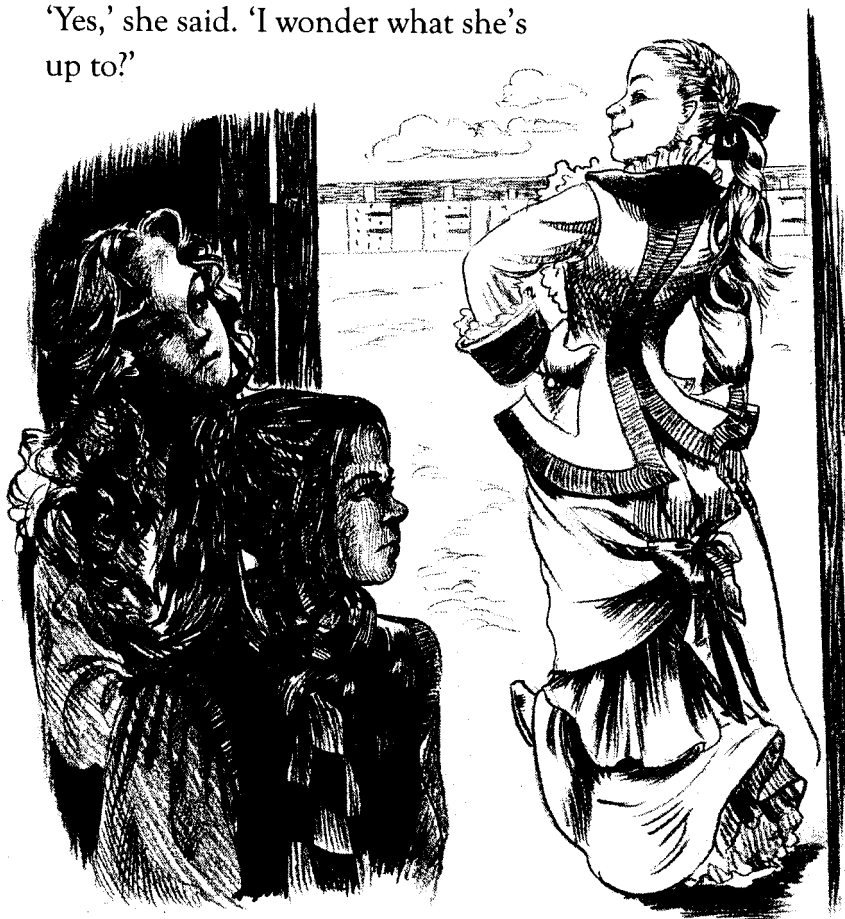
In a tight voice, Breena said, 'What do you want, Hortense?'

'Oh, I've only just heard that Moonflight is sick. I wanted to tell you I was sorry to hear you wouldn't be riding today. It must be beastly for you. Jolly rotten luck.' Hortense gave Breena a winning smile. 'I hope she'll be better soon.' With a nod, she strolled away.

Skydancer gave a hoot of disgust. Breena groaned. 'What a time for her to turn up. Trust me to make a fool of myself in front of Hortense!'

'You weren't making a fool of yourself,' said Cara. Then she added wonderingly, 'Hortense feeling sorry for somebody else? That's a first.'

Breena stared with narrowed eyes at the spot where the High Lord's daughter had stood a moment before. 'Yes,' she said. 'I wonder what she's up to?'



Chapter Three

Breana polished a last spot of grime from Skydancer's gleaming scales and straightened up with a groan. 'There!' she said, rubbing her back. 'If he doesn't win Best Presented after all that effort, I'll eat this brush.'

'Ah - didn't I say?' Cara's tone was apologetic. 'I haven't entered him in Best Presented.'

Breana gave her a jaundiced look.

'Then why have I been shining up his mucky hide for the past hour?'

