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Opening extract from

Riding The Storm

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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.

'Whoooah!' 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!'

