

Chapter Three
Showing Up

IF I MUST NEEDS DIE, AS IT SEEMS I MUST, AND END MY BRIEF span of days on this earth rent asunder by dragon's tooth and claw, then let me face that fate with the dignity worthy of a Princess of Carolia.

The thought echoed through Lucinda's head, and if it had seemed a little pretentious at first, even to her, she'd had plenty of time to polish it up. The news crew and honor guard had marched out of range at the earliest opportunity; she'd heard someone suggest they go for coffee and muffins on the way back to the city, which was sensible, in a heartless sort of way. Then silence. That had been at least an hour ago. Lucinda was alone.

Somehow, she'd expected more out of the whole experience: an ode written in her honor, or a situation with chains of gold and silken blindfolds, maybe some mourners tastefully weeping from a safe distance away, but it had turned out to be extraordinarily simple, a businesslike execution. She'd been given a traditional, if impractical silken gown to wear, and had completely refused the ceremonial underwear that went with it. She was tied to a metal post with what felt like an ordinary piece of rope, and her head was covered in a muslin shroud. It had been dark when they'd unloaded her from the official (if old-fashioned) carriage, but she guessed by now, the sun had probably risen. She could see the brightness of

it through the thin fabric covering her face. She heard the sounds of insects and the mournful call of birds, flying. She heard waves lapping at the water's edge. Having polished her last words, Lucinda felt a little sad that no one would ever be able to hear them from inside a dragon's stomach. Putting that thought aside, she began to run through her seven-times tables.

A cloud passed over the sun and the birds and insects went silent. Lucinda felt an intense push of air, and shivered. Her legs, which were bare, suffered a dozen small cuts from the driven sand and small rocks of the beach gravel. She could feel the weight of the dragon's enormous body as it settled.

Lucinda braced herself and waited for the blow. She refused to scream or weep (though she wanted to do both, and was afraid she might wet her pants in a completely undignified way), but it wasn't easy to hold one's breath and clench everything while a dragon looked you over. She waited. And waited.

And waited.

The roaring in her ears abated and she had no choice but to breathe. Thankfully, she managed an inhale and exhale without a scream. But still, no bite. No agonizing sear of white-hot flame. Nothing at all. Once again, Lucinda heard the small waves lapping at the shore.

What was the dragon waiting for? Was it even still out there? Was it looking her over, and thinking that her ropes and muslin and bare legs were unappetizing and unworthy? The whole point of her being here was to save the city from a draconic rampage. What if she was so unappetizing that the dragon just skipped her over, and flew off to destroy the city?

Lucinda summoned her courage and drew a last breath for one final act of defiance. "Sushi or BBQ, asswipe!"

"Excuse me?"

Needless to she had totally forgotten her carefully rehearsed speech, and what she had come up with was probably the most embarrassing curse she could have possibly chosen. So now she was going to die, mortified, because in the moment of peril, that was the word that came to mind. She waited. The dragon was definitely still there. Its voice was definitely inhuman, and yet pitched a bit higher than Lucinda was expecting. It also sounded mildly confused, rather than enraged by the insult.

“Sorry,” she said, and could have cursed herself. She was always and forever apologizing for the wrong thing. She gave last-minute bravado a second try: ‘Sushi or BBQ, Thou Evil Spawned Demon of Destruction!’”

There was a pause. “No,” said the dragon. “I still don’t get it.” Really? Lucinda took a deep breath. REALLY?

Who knew that being consumed by a dragon was going to be so much work.

Or worse, feel like a test. Even more worse, a test she was failing.

“Okay,” she said. “Listen. As near as anyone has been able to figure it out, the maiden who is consumed by the dragon is either ripped apart leaving only a gross assortment of bloody and horrifying bits and pieces, e.g. eaten raw, e.g. sushi, or else the remains that are found after the fact are only a pile of ash.”

“Implying a BBQ,” said the dragon. “On the beach. I get it now. Quite clever, really.”

The dragon’s tone seemed to say, “Quite clever — for a human.” There was a huff of brimstone-scented breath. “Well done.”

Another silence descended. Lucinda once again heard birds and insects and waves. Occasionally there was the sound of the great beast shifting on the beach rock. Lucinda remained uneaten. She was still very, very frightened, but also starting to feel a very,

very small spark of curiosity. She wished, all at once, that she could get rid of the blindfold; she would have liked to see the dragon's expression.

"Um, not to be critical or anything, but you're not really the big fierce manly dragon I was expecting."

"Well for one thing, I am a girl dragon."

"HA," Lucinda barked in surprised laughter. "That's stupid. Who ever heard of a girl dragon?"

"Well, you have heard of baby dragons, haven't you?"

This silence felt different to Lucinda, because it was. "Oh." Suddenly Lucinda was glad for the shroud that concealed her red-hot blush. "Yeah. Got it."

Then, the dragon said, "This is just awkward."

And Lucinda heard the dragon shift its — no, her — weight on the loose gravel and sand of the beach, and felt a very, very large claw pierce the muslin shroud, which tore, under pressure from the razor-sharp digit.

The removal of the shroud was actually very gentle. Once Lucinda stopped blinking (for all her brave words, most of the time her eyes had been scrunched tight), she saw what she'd known was true all along. The claw had belonged to a dragon.

It was, for a dragon, quite dainty. Not nearly as big as a mountain, this dinosaur might have fit pretty comfortably in the smallest ballroom in the castle, though she would probably have had some difficulty squeezing through the doors to get in.

Lucinda thought the dragon might be a little more than twice her own height, and much longer than she was tall (though to be honest, most of that length was made up of a long, flexible tail). She was scaled in a way that reminded Lucinda of lizards, although in this case, a lizard with an intricate, oscillating pattern that made her scales seem to ripple. Her wings were folded up at the

moment, but Lucinda imagined they would be huge. She had a forked tongue, which was darting in and out, as if the dragon were particularly interested or unsure about what was happening just now.

For something so lizardish, she had an extremely expressive face, maybe something to do with her big, burning eyes. But what Lucinda noticed most prominently was that the dragon was wearing a bracelet. A particularly shiny golden chain hung around her scaled, draconic wrist, and a large red ruby, easily as big as Lucinda's fist, hung like a pendant at the center. It would have been hard not to notice; it was at the exact same height as Lucinda's head, and provided something much more pleasant to look at than all those teeth.

"Hey, cute bracelet!" Lucinda said in open admiration.

The dragon preened and arched her back. "It is, isn't it? My mom gave it to me before I left home."

"My mom gave me a bracelet, too." Momentarily forgetting she was still bound to the post, Lucinda began to raise her hand, but before she could even twitch twice, the dragon's tail whipped around and with an alarming, scissors noise, cut through the rope that had held Lucinda prisoner.

Lucinda held very, very still, and heroically held back a hysterical scream. The tail must be even sharper than the claws, she told herself, in what seemed a reasonable tone of mind. But she didn't even nick my skin.

"Show me, show me," the dragon said.

Lucinda rather slowly held out her hand. Her bracelet was also a ruby, on an intricately wrought, silver band.

"Ooh, pretty!" said the dragon, her serpent neck twisting to see the jewel from all angles. She needed to look closely, since the ruby on Lucinda's arm was only as big around as Lucinda's thumbnail.

“My mother gave it to me for, uh...” Lucinda made a rather vague gesture encompassing the sacrifice station.

“About that...” the dragon shifted uncomfortably, and settled back onto her haunches. “Erh, I don’t know quite how to put this to you, but I would really rather not eat you.” The dragon huffed what seemed an embarrassed little breath, and steam came out of her nostrils.

“You wouldn’t?” Lucinda asked.

“Nothing personal, mind you,” the dragon said quickly, but as if she wanted to reassure Lucinda against some implied insult. “I mean I could totally eat you, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, maiden meat...”

“Maiden meat?” Lucinda echoed.

It hardly seemed possible for the dragon to seem more embarrassed, but this one managed it.

“Yeah. Yuck. Even 100% maiden, which I am sure it is,” she added, reassuringly. “Really isn’t worth the bother.”

“What bother?” Lucinda asked, too surprised to be insulted by her lack of deliciousness. “I am trussed up, or I was. And you’re the dragon, fire and wings and great big-”

“Okay, it’s not one maiden that’s the problem. A maiden now and then is fine, if you have a taste for it, but as a principal component of a well-balanced diet...” the dragon shook her head.

“Wait,” said Lucinda. “Wait. You want a salad before the entrée?”

“No, no,” the dragon actually blushed, her emerald scales turning a bright, carnation pink. “I am saying this very badly.”

“You most certainly are.”

A dragon shrug turned out to be a pretty impressive thing to watch. Probably, it was the wings. “I know you think your

kingdom is the center of the universe, but you're not. And every other kingdom is putting out maidens on trash day, and what with the flies and the seagulls and the knights, it becomes something of a chore to keep the beaches clean, you know?"

Lucinda was speechless. The dragon plunged deeper into the astonished silence.

"Of course, we want to do our part for the environment," she said. "So, we have this lottery system to select who has to go out and collect the maiden for consumption, which would be a bit of a pain, but all worth it for the greater good, and maiden meat isn't that bad if you hold your nose and use a lot of lemon, except not only do you people put out the maidens to be consumed, for some reason you then go and try and murder the poor dragon who is just trying to do his job. I mean, how insane do you have to be to do that?" The dragon glared at Lucinda, as if this had somehow been all her idea.

"But, but, but..." Lucinda put up her hands, as if to defend herself against that anger, but the dragon was clearly on a roll.

"I have lost all of my brothers to this cockamamie scheme, so when it came to be my turn..."

"Brothers as in plural?" Lucinda said.

"You mean you have never noticed that every year or so the dragon looked just a little bit different?" The dragon asked. Her voice was quiet, which was not the same as soft.

"Oh, you know what they say about dragons..." Lucinda began, so terrified that her voice came out higher pitched and faster than normal, and she was giggling with nerves.

"What exactly do they say about dragons?"

The survival part of Lucinda's brain kicked into high gear, as she noticed how absolutely still the dragon had gone. No more flickering, forked tongue, but the eyes were definitely burning. The

birds and insects stopped humming and buzzing and calling to each other, and now the waves decided it was a good time to stop lapping at the shore.

Dragons, when they stare, don't blink, by the way. A part of Lucinda's consciousness filed that away. The optimistic part of her brain. The part that believed that it would be still cognizant more than sixty seconds from now and might need to retrieve that information someday. The part that hoped for a future.

"I mean, from far away, err... and with the dragon moving so fast, some of the detail can be lost so that it can become hard to, you know, um, err... see the difference. I mean everyone is running around screaming 'It's a dragon! It's a dragon!' and it really is a dragon and you kind of forget all that stuff you learn in 'What to Do When a Dragon Swoops' class and you're really not looking for any distinguishing marks of the particular dragon, other than noting it's way bigger than you are. And it is flying and breathing fire and picking up people like little dolls and they are screaming like crazy until suddenly they are not screaming anymore, and that's worse. Which is why you are really not bothering to look up to see if this dragon has a cute little birthmark, or a wreath of flowers on its head, or anything that would really distinguish this one flying lizard of doom from any other. Like that."

She spoke fast, words tripping over themselves to get out of her mouth, and the desperate explanation sounded ridiculous, even to Lucinda, who really wanted it to work.

The dragon stared.

Lucinda stood very, very still.

Nothing in the area made any sound at all as the universe held its collective breath.

Then, the dragon blinked, and let out a sigh that, while smoky, failed to incinerate anyone, even Lucinda. "Yes," said the dragon.

“I think that explains it nicely.”

The world began to breathe again, and sound resumed hitting Lucinda’s eardrums, and her entire brain celebrated her escape from death by making her burst into tears.

The dragon, to her surprise, said: “Oh, I’m sorry. You must be really scared.” The big claw reached out and gave her a reassuringly gentle pat on the back.

Lucinda nodded, and wiped her face on the torn halves of the shroud she was still holding. She looked up into the dragon’s expressive face and big, glowing eyes, and said, “Listen, do you have a name? It feels rude just to keep thinking of you as ‘dragon’ all the time.”

The scaly head tilted to one side, and some scales or fins or gills or something spread out in a sort of lizard-bird style of interrogative. “Would you call me Ember?” she asked.

Something about that tone of voice sounded all too familiar to Lucinda. “Is that actually your name?” she asked, a little less breezy and casual, and a lot more curious and interested.

The dragon’s vast, powerful body shifted uncomfortably on the gravel. Her enormous eyes glanced away, then back again. She had incredibly long lashes, for a dragon. “Not really. It’s Esmeraldavinia.”

Lucinda flinched in sympathy. “Mine’s Lucinda.”

They shared a look of true understanding, and Lucinda said, “Listen, Esmera... Listen, Ember! You don’t want to eat me, and I sure don’t want to be eaten, but we can’t stay here, or the Knights are going to come and try to argue with you, or maybe even fight you. Neither of us wants that.”

“Well I could fight them. I have been practicing,” Ember admitted, with a shy arch of her long, scaly neck. “My aim’s pretty good. I could just incinerate them. Dragon fire is plenty hot enough to melt their bones.”

“Okay, sure,” said Lucinda, pushing her glasses up more securely onto her nose, and looking around. “But we’re bracelet buddies, right? We could be friends. You’re the first dragon I ever met, and I think we both deserve better than this,” she made a gesture to indicate the beach, the pole, and the small cloud of dust on the horizon that implied Knights on the Hoof.

“You want your salad, right? I love salad. Can’t we just leave? Together? You and me? Is there a law that says you have to eat me and let the knights take pot-shots at you all day?”

“Actually, there is,” said Ember. “I looked it up. The rule was signed into law by the Dragon-Human Relations Center of Profundia. They sponsored my training and everything. Sent me a badge, which I left behind, and a very fancy letter.”

“HEY! You got training?” Lucinda protested. “No fair! All I got was this lumpy shroud and a ten-minute lecture about knots and how I should re-tie them in case they came loose or something!”

Ember went still, and waited. Lucinda fumed about the disparity in treatment for several moments, as the silence permeated not just her eardrums, but the whole surrounding shoreline until she finally emerged from her angry sulk, and figured it out.

“I suppose it does take a little less training to be tied to a post and eaten,” Lucinda admitted, but with a certain amount of reluctance.

“Exactly. I’m the one who actually has to do something,” Ember said, patiently.

“Fair enough, but do you know what’s funny?” said Lucinda. “The Dragon-Human Relations Center sounds like the same group of people who signed my letter, too.”

“It does seem funny that we both got letters asking us to do what we don’t want to do.”

“I’ve never actually been to Profundia. Have you?”

A shake of the dragon’s head. “No, never.”

From the direction of the village, they both could hear the fanfare of the horn section and horses and manly shouts suggesting a desire for revenge and dragon’s guts for breakfast, or perhaps it was more sort of a brunch, but it was most definitely some sort of picnic or outdoor eating event, and the Knights setting up their first volley of more generic battle cries as they started across the big, bare beach towards the water’s edge.

“What if I promise to call you Ember, and you can call me Lucy,” Lucinda said. Why not? she thought. She was risking everything, right? “And we can find out where Profundia is and try to get some common-sense injected into some of these rules! What do you say, bracelet buddy?”

“I say hop up, Lucy,” and with surprising gentleness, the dragon’s claw reached round to pick the Princess up around the waist. Then the huge wings tore the air into thunder as she swept them down and away and they parted company with the ground.

From the sound of it, the Knights weren’t pleased by this Departure from Tradition.

“Die, asswipe!” the sound drifted from far below. Both Lucy and Ember looked down and watched as a spear tumbled down into the lake below.

“Who was that?” asked Ember

“George,” said Lucy.

“Who’s George?”

“Just some boy.”

“Just some boy?”

“Technically a knight. I’ve seen him around.” With that Chip Blitherington, she thought dismissively. Lucy closed her eyes, because looking down was becoming a bit of a challenge.

“He threw the spear pretty well, though, even if it landed in the lake.” With that remark Ember flew for a bit, her powerful wings cutting the air. Lucy felt the wind in her face, and on her bare legs, and generally, pretty much everywhere. Flying was a cold, unexpectedly breezy experience.

Then in a thoughtful, considered tone, Ember asked. “Do all humans call dragons asswipes?”

“Only until we get to know them,” said Lucy. She wrapped her arms around the dragon’s strong, secure claw, and held on tight.

