

BECOMING

By Kath Boyd Marsh

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OLIVIA'S YOUNGEST COUSIN Kat paced her chamber as the other princesses arrived. Kat held a scroll in her hand. Olivia, her sister Lisette, and Kat's sister Melinda looked at each other. Seeing Kat excited about something she'd *read* was new. In fact Olivia couldn't remember another time when she'd seen Kat read.

"What ...?" Melinda started to ask her younger sister.

Kat waved the scroll at the other three. "I found it. Our next adventure! *And* a way to help the farmers."

"What farmers?" Lisette asked.

"All the farmers! Their crops are failing. Don't you pay attention?" Kat's face was scarlet, almost matching her dark red curls. Her quick temper helped with her swordplay and gave her power her five feet of height belied, but passion could make her unintelligible too.

Melinda captured Kat's flailing arm and said gently, "Kat, slowly, tell us about the farmers."

Kat looked to Olivia.

"Yesterday we may have overheard Father and the Council talking about crops failing." Olivia plucked her dagger out of its sheath and ran a finger along the edge of her blade as if testing to see if it might need sharpening.

"By overheard, you mean you and Kat spied on the Council Chamber from that hidden passage you found?" Lisette tugged the dagger out of Olivia's hand and stared at her younger sister.

"Gathering information," Olivia said holding out her hand for her dagger. She did not know where Kat had gone after they'd left the secret passage. Apparently from the scroll she was waving about, her unpredictable cousin had headed to the castle library.

Kat shook the scroll again. "Come on, people. This is our chance to not just sit around talking about how great we were defeating trolls two months ago. We

have a new chance to do something at least as great:" She held up the parchment again. "AND it involves dragons!"

A shiver raced down Olivia's back. She remembered the word *becoming* echoing in her head and the feeling in her body when they had battled the trolls. Her arms had felt like they were becoming wings at the same time they were still her arms ... and her breath ... she could swear she'd breathed fire. But no one had said a thing about her or about seeing a dragon. All the talk around the castle had been about four mysterious knights who had defeated the Trolls at the tournament.

"Dragons and crops?" Melinda asked. She was the best archer of the four princesses, who after their success at being more than just pretty musicians and artists, now called themselves The Perilous Princesses.

It had started six months ago, when the four cousins were working on embroidery and complaining about how bored they were and how interesting their brothers' lives were. Since they were little, their brothers had trained to be knights who could go out and kill monsters while the princesses were only supposed to faint. For years the princesses had secretly practiced what they had seen their brothers learn.

Now they needed more. Olivia had come up with a plan and had gone to her father and pled with him for dagger throwing lessons. King George had sighed. "Of course you aren't like your sister or your cousins. You won't leave me be until I say yes. So, yes."

It wasn't the first time he'd complained that she would never be a kind of perfect lady princess like her sister, and Olivia had counted on it. That day King George arranged for the Weapons Master to instruct Olivia.

At that first lesson, she convinced the Weapons Master to train all four princesses to handle many kinds of weapons. Olivia was best with a dagger: throwing, stabbing. Kat was a scary good swords-woman. Gentle tall Melinda pulled back her golden curls and shot a bow and arrow like she was born to it. Lisette, Olivia's frills and lace older sister, turned out to be pretty good at everything, but mostly so fast on her feet Olivia bet Lisette could beat their oldest brother Ian in a race.

After training for four months, the princesses decided to participate in the annual All-Kingdoms Tournament. They'd each designed armor. Kat wore a plain

silver she felt was sleek and right for a swords-woman. Melinda and Lisette both chose gold, not a surprise for such feminine princesses. Olivia couldn't say why, but she had to have a burnished black. When she first put it on, it felt like a second skin instead of bulky heavy metal.

On the day of the tournament, Lisette had fussed over a missing feather for her helmet, making them late for the tournament games. Olivia had finally plucked her own feather out and handed it to her sister. But their lateness meant the contests were almost over, and most of the knights were resting either from exhaustion or wounds.

And then the Trolls attacked. The princesses were the ones who stood and fought.

Once the Trolls were defeated, the princesses escaped before anyone could discover their real identities. Four teenaged princesses were supposed to be in the stands waving tokens for the knights they supported, not cutting down Trolls. Even if the king had been pleased, their mothers would have found a way to prevent them from ever being in that kind of danger again.

They were so happy with themselves that the next day they formed The Perilous Princesses. Every day when they were supposed to be painting pictures or doing embroidery, they met and took weapons lessons. Until today nothing had happened that excited the foursome. There'd been no reason to get out their armor once again and fight.

For the first time since the tournament, Olivia felt her skin crawl, and again that word whispered in her ear: *Becoming*. Over the past two months she'd been in the castle library reading everything she could find about dragons. She hadn't come across the particular scroll Kat was holding. "Could I see the scroll?" she asked.

Kat handed it over. Olivia read it. She was almost half way through when impatient Kat jabbed the parchment. "There. Look. It says dragons left behind a treasure, and there's a dragon power stone. Everybody knows dragons could do more magic than wizards. They could make rain out of a drop of water using one of their power stones. We can use one to get rain or whatever the farmers need." She threw back her shoulders. "Only The Perilous Princesses can defeat a dragon and bring the magic stone back!" She grinned. "Well, find the stone, since dragons are dead."

Melinda and Lisette crowded in. “How can we do it?” Being seventeen, they weren’t as rash as fifteen year-old Olivia and Kat.

The cold on Olivia’s neck got colder. It wasn’t fear, but something was wrong. She felt it in the skin of the scroll itself. She rolled it back up and looked at the seal Kat had broken to read it. “Where did you get this?” She had a bad idea.

“In that room with all the good stuff they don’t want princesses to read,” Kat said as if it was obvious. “We’ll use it to save the farmers!”

“The locked room?” Olivia knew which room Kat meant, but she wanted her suspicion to be wrong.

Kat looked up, down, shrugged. “Yes. You have a problem with that?”

What was done was done. Olivia shook her head and unrolled the scroll again and read to the end while the other three princesses chirped their excitement. “Did you read the entire thing?” she finally asked.

Kat shrugged. “I read enough.”

“Not quite. There’s a curse here. I don’t know about getting a magic stone, but we will definitely be battling at least one dragon. The only question is how fast do we tell Father.” Olivia scanned her sister’s and cousins’ faces. But not one of them nodded.

Lisette finally asked. “Okay. Tell us why.”

Olivia pointed, to the last line on the scroll. “It says, ‘By the reading of this scroll, the dragon is released.’”

For a moment there was dead silence. Then Kat laughed. “No way. Dragons are extinct. Everybody knows that. The scroll has a map to their treasure. All we have to do is go get it.”

Olivia was surprised when Melinda and Lisette shrugged and nodded agreement with Kat. But then Lisette held up her left hand and wiggled her fingers.

Melinda grabbed her hand, exclaiming, “Lisette! When did you get engaged?” Melinda’s betrothal had been announced the month before. Her eyes shown with happiness as she held Lisette’s hand. The two older cousins were so much alike. They’d both fallen in love.

Kat and Olivia groaned. At fifteen, Olivia thought boys were mostly irritating. And neither she nor Kat really liked dress balls. There definitely would be plenty now to celebrate.

Lisette blushed. “Willum proposed last night. The announcement will be at the ball tonight.”

Olivia and Kat groaned again. There was no way they could dodge this party now.

The whole dragon thing was forgotten as the princesses prepared for the evening's ball—forgotten by all except Olivia. She couldn't shake off the feeling that something dark and huge lurked over them. The others might not believe there were dragons, but she couldn't shake the deep feeling that the scroll might really release a dragon. And it didn't make her feel any better to remember feeling like one. She needed to talk to her father, but when she tried, he brushed her off. Everybody was too busy with the ball that had turned into an engagement celebration.

Olivia was bored all through the party. Her appetite, usually good, was gone because she could not forget the dragon curse. What would happen? Would the curse turn someone into a dragon? Her? Was she crazy to think she had felt like a dragon at the tournament? Finally the worry was too much. She slipped out of the hall into the formal gardens. Sitting by her favorite fountain, she let the falling water soothe her.

When at last she felt relaxed, her eyes heavy, someone sat down beside her. She jerked upright and saw her distant cousin Henry. If she hadn't recognized the way he brushed his hair out of his eyes, she would never have recognized him. Until he'd arrived for the ball, he had not been to the castle since he was a drippy-nosed youngster who deliberately wiped his face on the back of her best tunic. He'd been a pest who trailed behind her like a lost wolfhound.

That had been years ago. Olivia was glad to see those years had not been wasted. His nose no longer dripped. His hair was sleek and golden, except for his unruly bangs, pulled back and tied with a leather strap almost as brown as his eyes. He laughed at her stare, and that laugh rang like deep chapel bells.

She thought about watching him in the Hall, before she realized it was Henry. Every unmarried girl at the party had gathered around him. He'd never once looked at Olivia.

Now he leaned back, dangerously close to falling into the fountain. “You are missing a very good party. My brother Willum and your sister look seriously happy.”

Olivia shrugged. “Duh. They’re going to get married.” She spit the words out before she could bite back her bitterness. She dreaded the day Lisette and Melinda got married and The Perilous Princesses dissolved. Even Kat had an admirer, Michael. Luckily at only fifteen like Olivia, marriage was years away.

Henry laughed again, and her stomach felt weirdly jumpy and her throat oddly dry. “I take it you don’t approve of marriage?”

“I didn’t say that. I just think no one needs to rush into getting married.”

But Henry seemed bored already. He stared at Gracella, the princess from Gardenshire, who bore down on them like a hound on the hunt.

“There you are, Henry. The last dance is about to begin. You promised.”

He stood bowing to Gracella. Before he walked away, Henry winked at Olivia and said, “Becoming”

Olivia jumped to her feet. That word again. “What do you mean becoming?” she demanded.

Gracella giggled. “He was talking about my gown, weren’t you, Henry?”

He smiled at Gracella, then turned back for a second and winked at Olivia again.

She didn’t know what he meant, and she didn’t care. She was pretty sure.

The next day, only Olivia got up early for lessons with the Weaponry Master. He looked like he wished he’d stayed in bed like everyone else, but Olivia was intent. Her sister and Melinda meditated when they were bothered, but for Olivia relaxing meant dagger throwing. She managed to hit her target dead center ten times out of ten. Her shoulders began to unknot until—

“Seems you need a more difficult target.”

Olivia turned to order the Weaponry Master to get a smaller one or put this hay-stuffed target farther away, but the Master had dozed off leaning against a column.

Henry stood behind her grinning. “Good morn, cousin,” he said in that voice that made Olivia feel like something was happening that she was not prepared for. A new feeling, or at least one she hadn’t had before yesterday.

“Can you throw better?” she snapped.

He shrugged. "Perhaps." He walked to the target and pulled out her dagger, balancing it in his palm. "Nice." He stopped beside her, turned, and without aiming, threw the dagger and hit the center just where she had.

"Not better," Kat's voice came from behind them.

Even though Kat was on her side, Olivia was irked that she had arrived. Not that Olivia wanted to be alone with Henry.

Henry bowed to Kat, "Cousin, Kat. My congratulations to Michael on finding himself so fetching a princess. You have certainly grown to be a beautiful young, woman."

Kat blushed. Something Olivia had never seen her do. "You're engaged?" Olivia asked, seeing her last cousin lined up to be a married woman and the end of the Perilous Princesses.

"Not yet," Kat said. "Someday. We have more important things to do before that." She lifted her eye brows at Olivia.

"What would that be?" Henry had retrieved the dagger and held it out to Olivia.

"None of your business," Olivia snapped, taking the knife and wondering why she was so irritated.

"That was rude," Kat said, lifting her eyebrows at Olivia. She directed her gaze to Henry, "She's just upset because you throw as well as she does." Kat cocked her head to one side, and Olivia knew that head position. It meant Kat was up to something.

"Or was that just luck?" Kat asked.

Henry laughed. "I don't know. Shall we have a contest and see?"

Smiling, Kat said, "Let's. I'll throw too."

For the first time since they started The Perilous Princesses, Olivia did not want one of the members to participate. What was wrong with her? She shook it off and woke the Weaponry Master. "We need more daggers. Prince Henry will be throwing with us."

The groggy Weaponry Master managed to bring an armful of daggers back quickly. But not fast enough for Olivia. While he was gone, she listened to Henry and Kat banter. Olivia tamped down her irritation, which she absolutely knew was not jealousy.

Now looking at the carved dragon on the dagger the Weaponry Master held, made her feel that dancing fire moving across her skin. Her brain twisted with thoughts of flying, of spitting fire, of being a dragon. Crazy thoughts. Crazy, but it felt like she was almost ... not all human. She had to find out if dragons were extinct or if the curse Kat awoke would really come and decimate them ... or if there was any way a human, maybe a princess, could become a dragon.

She had half-formed the perfect plan to get into the forbidden library room when Kat poked her in the side, and Henry snickered.

“Are we ready?” he asked. He took a dagger from the Weaponry Master and held it out to Olivia. “Shall I choose the target?”

She and Kat nodded. He looked around the courtyard. Finally he pointed to a carved wooden column. “The owl at the top. The center of his eye. First one to get closest.”

The owl’s eye was a smaller target than they usually practiced on, but Olivia was sure she could hit the mark. “You are the guest. You throw first.”

He bowed, taking the dagger, lining it up, and squinting one eye. He threw and hit the owl's eye dead center.

Kat’s breath hissed in. But Olivia would not give herself time to worry. She strode to the owl, retrieved the dagger and returned to stand where Henry had. Keeping both eyes open as the master had taught her, she threw straight and true. Her throw landed right where his had.

Kat followed but missed the eye. The three picked targets and threw over and over. Kat missed a few times, but Henry and Olivia did not. Olivia had to admit she was enjoying the contest. She forgot to worry about dragons until clapping broke out after her last throw sliced off exactly one small branch of the overgrown boxwood bush.

She looked around and found that her father, uncles, brothers, her sister, and Melinda had gathered. This was the first time Olivia’s family, outside her sister and cousins, had attended her weaponry practice. She was not sure how to explain that Kat could throw so well, since only Olivia was supposed to be part of the lessons. But Kat’s father clapped and grinned along with the rest.

Olivia relaxed. She’d make her father proud. She’d beat Henry.

Henry stood a single overblown rose in a vase on a table at the other side of the courtyard. “The one who can slice off a single petal wins.” He bowed and handed her the dagger.

Olivia was so happy with how it was all going, that she didn’t hesitate. She threw her dagger, but as she did a dark shadow blew over her eyes. Something flew overhead. Something that whispered that word, “becoming.” But when she looked, there was nothing.

Her dagger sliced through the air, but missed the rose by a caterpillar’s hair. Striding to the table to retrieve the dagger, Olivia was less worried about losing than she was about the shadow. No one else had uttered a peep. Had she really seen the shape of a dragon pass close to her? There was nothing now.

She returned and handed the dagger to Henry without a word. He looked at her, his forehead wrinkled. His eyes went from hers to the sky and back to her. For a moment she thought he was going to say something, but instead he aimed and threw, slicing off the petal Olivia had missed.

The boys behind Olivia cheered and ran to thump him on the back.

Melinda, Lisette, and Kat crowded around Olivia, and told her she did so well. Olivia watched her father turn and leave the courtyard without a word to her. He merely said, “Men, we have a hunt to attend.” All the males including Henry followed him.

Olivia thanked the Weaponry Master and went to her chambers. She changed to a tunic and leggings for the hike down the hidden passage to the library. She’d thought about it and was sure that she knew where a hidden door might open on the forbidden library room.

But before she could move the tapestry that covered the hidden passage’s door in her chamber’s wall, the tapestry flew aside and Kat, Melinda, and Lisette spilled out of the passage. They were all dressed in their armor.

“We have a map to Dragon Mountain,” Lisette said. “That’s where the treasure is. We’re going while everybody else is on this hunt. Put on your armor so if anyone sees us, we won’t be recognized: She held out the black armor.

Olivia’s mood bounced from happy to sad and back. She was glad they still wanted to be the brave and adventurous Perilous Princesses, but she couldn’t get rid of the feeling that the dragons were not dead, and the Princesses were headed into trouble they couldn’t handle. But that was silly, wasn’t it? She was just tired

from the party and being snarly about her sister and cousin getting married someday soon.

Everyone knew dragons had died out years ago. Dead things couldn't hurt you. They most assuredly couldn't turn you into a dragon. The Dragon Mountain would be perfectly safe. That scroll was so old, it was from before they died. If dragons lived, there would be writings about them in the new books not just in the forbidden room of ancient scrolls and books.

The others helped her into her armor. Like for the tournament, getting into the black armor made her feel wonderful. They hurried to the stables, where Melinda and Lisette convinced the stable master they were guests who needed horses at once.

The four did not look like prosperous knights since they had no servants or banners, but they also did not look like princesses. When they rode past the hunting party, the hunters bowed to them and cheered. The hunters had recognized the four knights from the tournament. Oddly no one tried to stop them. And odder, Henry pointed at her and grinned.

Olivia ignored him. He was just trying to be more important than the other hunters.

The princesses were halfway to the mountain when the ground began to shake. Their horses, not war horses but riding horses who should never have carried a knight in armor, reared and screamed. All four princesses were dumped off, and the beasts turned and ran back toward the castle.

"Well, that's going to make it a lot harder to get to the mountain and back," Olivia said struggling to her feet.

"If we live to make it back!" Kat yelled, looking upward. "Everybody have your weapons?"

Olivia and the others looked up too. A dragon, glistening in poison green scales, flew toward them. Olivia's heart beat faster. So much for being extinct. She was a little glad that this time everybody else saw it too.

"How did it know we were coming?" Melinda pulled back her bow and aimed for the beast. But she did not shoot. Lisette and Kat pulled out their swords and stood beside Melinda.

"The curse," Olivia said as she looked at her dagger. Could she throw and hit the vulnerable spot on a dragon? Where was that?

The dragon circled and abruptly dropped to the road. It was the image of what a dragon summoned by a curse should look like: red beast eyes; flames dripping out of its mouth. It roared and charged at the four princesses.

And it happened again. Just like at the tournament, she heard the whispered *becoming* and felt her body changing. Fast this time, as fast as the dragon ran at them. She felt her arms stretch like wings, and her mouth grow hot. Flames dripped onto the road in front of her. A low growl ripped through her throat.

The dragon turned its head to her. It stared. For a moment she thought it would back off. But instead it roared and charged again. Melinda, Lisette, and Kat screamed and ran toward it, all three with swords drawn. Olivia was quicker. She flapped her wings and flew at the dragon, spitting a flame that tasted of the persimmons she had for breakfast and the anger she felt at this creature for threatening them.

Olivia and the dragon met in mid-air clawing at each other, spitting and dodging. Below them the princesses watched. Olivia matched the dragon attack for attack, but she could not win. The dragon kept fighting back. If she couldn't defeat it, they would all die.

She needed something more. Some way to kill it, or force it to fly away. Her breath came harder, and her wings felt like she was about to drop when Kat yelled from the ground, "Catch!"

Olivia kicked the dragon away and peeled into a glide that took her close to Kat. Somehow the tips of her wings worked like her hands, and she snatched the dagger in the air and turned back. The dragon was now only a wingspan away. For Olivia this was an easy toss, except the dragon cocked a wing to swoop away. Olivia beat her wings in one huge effort and crashed into the dragon. She grabbed him with her hind legs and plunged her dagger into the beast's chest.

It screamed.

Pain seared through Olivia's chest as if she was the one who had been stabbed. But she was not bleeding. It was the other dragon falling to the ground. She swept her wings back to fly away from its descent. But the dragon's wings tilted, and it swerved and headed back toward the mountain.

Olivia dropped to the road, gasping for breath. Her wings were gone. The princesses gathered around her. "You did it again! You were amazing!"

She looked at them. "You know what I turned into?"

“Well, duh,” Kat said. “Same as at the troll attack. You turned into a whirling ball of energy.”

“No.” Olivia couldn't believe they didn't see her as a dragon. “I turned into a dragon.”

“Don't be silly. You're not a dragon.” Lisette brushed the hair back from Olivia's eyes. “How did you learn to be so fast and ... look like a flaming ball? You need to teach us,” Lisette insisted.

“It's gone now. We still need the magic power stone. How are we going to get to the mountain and get it?” Kat asked.

Olivia and the others turned to her. “We aren't,” Melinda said. “Not today. We aren't prepared. Right, Olivia?”

Olivia nodded. “There has to be more information in the library. We'll find out how to get the stone without getting ourselves killed.”

Reluctantly Kat nodded, and they began the trek back to the castle. It was only minutes before they encountered Henry riding slowly toward them. The princesses were so hot and tired, none of them had on their helmets. Olivia tried to think of how to explain their armor and keep him from revealing who they were, but a moment later the whole hunting party came out of the woods at a canter.

“It's all over now,” Olivia said. Her father would be angry about her endangering them all, disobeying him by including the princesses in her lessons, and generally lying. She'd fess up and hope the punishment would not exceed her lifespan.

As the hunting party stopped their horses, Henry dismounted and walked over to her. “Black armor. Why am I not surprised you're that one?”

“Huh?” Olivia said and immediately regretted sounding so clueless.

Facing the other hunters, Henry said, “May I introduce the Perilous Four that saved the castle from the trolls.”

Olivia's brother Ian laughed. “Right. Just because they dress up in armor like those knights, doesn't mean it's them.”

Olivia's father held up a hand. “Is it true?”

The four princesses nodded.

“Can you prove it?” Ian asked.

Henry interrupted. “Well, I know Olivia has the dagger skills of the black knight.”

Olivia's father shook his head and asked, "These princesses defeated the trolls?"

"And a dragon!" Kat said.

"Pardon?" Olivia's father said. The rest of the party stared silently.

Kat held up a black scale Olivia was pretty sure had come off herself since it was the color of her armor and not green like the other dragon.

"We wanted to get the dragons' power stone to save the farmers' crops," Kat said. Olivia shut her eyes and wished Kat would stop talking. It was only getting worse.

Olivia's father gazed at each of them for what felt like forever. At last he turned his horse, and said over his shoulder, "I think princesses who spy on Council meetings had better attend them and contribute." He stopped his horse and turned back. "Give me the dragon's scale." It was handed to him, and he rode on.

Melinda was handed up to ride behind Bryand. Lisette was helped up onto Willum's horse, and Kat climbed up on Michael's. Only Olivia still stood in the road staring at the dust and trying to think of a way out of this trouble. She did not look up. She would not beg. A gloved hand reached down past her face and wiggled its fingers.

She peered through her golden bangs. Henry tinned at her. "Not flying home?"

She froze for a moment. Her ears had to still be full of the dragon's roars. Henry couldn't have said what she thought she heard. She couldn't ask him. What would she say? She couldn't ask about becoming a dragon. It wasn't possible. He was making a joke.

She let him help her up on his horse.

"You have been very busy. It takes a lot of practice to be as good as you are," Henry said. "The others have trained along with you?"

"Yes." There was no point in hiding that truth any longer. "We call ourselves The Perilous Princesses." Who cared if he laughed?

But he didn't. "There's an old tale about a race of dragons who were more dangerous than any other. It's said they could morph, even making their wings into human hands. Hands that could hold daggers." He stopped for a moment then

continued, "Aren't you the best princess at using a dagger?" He chuckled. "But then dragons don't exist, do they?"

For a moment, Olivia didn't answer, then she muttered, "They're extinct. Why are you talking about dragons?"

Henry turned and looked at her. "Becoming."

"What?" she demanded.

But he only laughed and ignored her question. "Maybe I'd like to help the farmers too. Maybe I'm just interested in dragons. I think you are too. It's nice to have common interests."

He stopped for what felt like forever before he went on in a serious tone, "I'm becoming very, very good with a dagger. Maybe dragon good."

They were both silent the rest of the ride home. Olivia spent the time thinking about where Henry had been these past years, about how he was a fostered prince, and how he was not like his brothers.

And how she was becoming very much not like her sister.