

## OF DRAGONS AND CENTAURS

By Deb Logan

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I STUMBLED groggily to the kitchen wearing the frilly white nightgown Gran had insisted I sleep in last night. Thank God it was Friday, and not just any Friday. Today was my fifteenth birthday! My parents might have deserted me, running off to the south of France and leaving me in the questionable care of my more-than-slightly dotty grandmother, but I intended to celebrate anyway. Just... later. After I was fully awake.

I found my way to my chair at the kitchen table. The smell of honey-cured bacon made my mouth water and the sound of its sizzle penetrated my sleep-fogged brain. I rubbed my eyes and commanded them to focus on our sunny yellow kitchen, snorting softly when I noticed the toy dragon abandoned on the rug by the sliding glass patio door. Gran never went anywhere without that silly toy, not even to the kitchen to fix breakfast.

Gran observed the spluttering bacon while she buttered toast at the island workspace. Her lime green bathrobe coupled with the short, wiry gray hair that sprang from her head with no discernible style or direction made me think of a demented dandelion. Between the yellow walls, bright white curtains and cabinets and Gran's less-than-subtle robe, the kitchen fairly pulsed with light.

I closed my eyes and wondered if I could skulk back to the dim safety of my bedroom without Gran noticing.

"Good morning, Sunshine!" Gran's cheerful bellow burst that particular hopeful bubble.

"Morning," I croaked.

She turned an unusually brilliant smile on me and the light level in the room clicked up a notch. I suppressed a groan. No one should be allowed to be so ... so chipper this early in the morning.

“Come on, girl. You can do better than that,” she practically sang. “This is your fifteenth birthday; the day you come into your inheritance. Roddy and I had to work overtime to ensure we’d be here to share it with you.”

My attention snagged on the word “inheritance” and I almost missed the rest of her comments.

“...you don’t think it was their idea to leave you behind while they went to the south of France, do you?”

“What?” My brain finally clicked into gear and my eyes lost their prebreakfast fuzziness. I stared at Gran in disbelief. “Are you telling me *you’re*, the reason I missed out on a trip to France? Gran! Are you nuts?”

I slumped back in my chair. Of course she was nuts. What else could explain her bizarre attachment to a toy dragon? Or the way she referred to it as a living person? Mom would be shocked, but I’d just have to suck it up and tell her that her mother had gone completely and totally around a possibly dangerous bend.

Gran’s voice pulled me back from my dreary thoughts.

“Trust me, dearie,” she said. “You’ll have plenty of chances to visit France. Compared to the adventures you and Roddy are going to have, France is passé.”

She’d mentioned Roddy twice now, her delusions were increasing I eyed the plate of bacon and eggs she set before me. Was insanity infectious? Should I be eating eggs she’d fried? The glass of orange juice sparkled ominously as she patted my back and told me to eat up.

“Uhhh, by ‘Roddy’ do you mean your toy dragon, or are you referring to some new friend you’re planning to introduce me to?” I asked, pushing bits of egg around my plate while my stomach tied itself in an unhappy knot.

Gran’s sunburst smile lit her face as she slid into the chair across from me.

“I can’t wait another minute,” she said, her blue eyes sparkling like crazed sapphires. “I should wait ’til after school, so you’ll have time to adapt, but I’m just too excited.” She pulled a small jewelry box from her bathrobe pocket and slid it across the table. “Happy birthday, Claire. Your adventure is about to begin!”

I glanced from the little black velvet box to Gran’s glowing face and thought, *What the hell! You only live once.*

My fingers caressed the box's soft surface before slowly and carefully lifting the lid. A pungent, but sweet, perfume teased my nostrils and a glimpse of silver encouraged me to continue. Soon the little box stood open in the palm of my hand, its contents shining in the streaming September sunlight.

An intricately worked silver medallion rested on a cloud of midnight velvet. The design showed a dragon in flight. His wings stretched from edge to edge of the two-inch silver circle, and his tiny emerald eyes stared directly into mine. My own eyes—a vivid green so intense people who didn't know me assumed I wore colored contacts to heighten the color—were a pale reflection of those brilliant gems. They mesmerized me and before I realized what I'd done, the medallion rested in the palm of my hand.

Gran exhaled a long, contented sigh and the kitchen shrank as another presence filled the room. Compelled by the new aura, I turned toward the patio door and froze. A dragon crouched where Gran's toy had been.

I screamed, closed my eyes, and prayed I was having a nightmare. I counted to a hundred, waited for my heart to stop beating a heavy-metal drum solo in my chest, and opened my eyes.

The hallucination remained. It ... *she* ... *he* stretched to fill the space from floor to ceiling with molten gold magnificence. Wings folded tightly against his back, he settled on his haunches, head bowed to accommodate the ceiling tiles. Razor-sharp claws tipped his massive feet (paws?), but his eyes captured my attention and held it hostage. Blazing green emeralds defied my desire to look away. The faceted gems of the medallion seemed like bits of colored wax in comparison. I gasped, surrendering to the hypnotic effect while merriment swirled up from their fathomless depths.

"Happy birthday, my lady," said a deep, rumbling voice that pushed against my mind like a storm-laden wind. "I've waited fifteen long years to address you directly." He closed those brilliant eyes and bowed his head until his snout touched the linoleum floor.

Time snagged, awaiting my response. An urgent premonition weighted my soul: the entire course of my future life hinged on my next words. The realization was a millstone drowning me in a well of despair. What should I say? Which words would be right, and how was I, a barely fifteen-year-old high school girl, supposed to know what

they were? What could I say to a mythical creature who couldn't possibly be groveling on my Gran's clean kitchen floor?

I heard Gran's shallow breathing behind me and sank deeper into despair. She'd managed to infect me with her lunacy. I'd been worried about tainted eggs, but the damage was already done. She'd stolen my sanity.

Just when I thought my mind would shatter from terror and confusion, the dragon opened one gleaming eye and a bubble of laughter formed in my chest. I hiccupped in an attempt to dispel the inappropriate sound, but failed. A soft giggle escaped my lips, followed by peals of wild laughter that quickly dissolved into a maniacal cackle.

"Claire!"

The shocked outrage in Gran's voice stifled me momentarily. I turned to face her, wiped my streaming eyes on the sleeve of my ridiculous nightgown, took a deep, shuddering breath, and avoided thoughts of the dragon behind me. Maybe if I ignored him, he'd go away.

"You're being very disrespectful," Gran said, her words clipped and tight. "I'm so sorry, Roddy. I don't know what's gotten into her."

"Shock," said the dragon, shattering my illusion of his nonexistent "Feed her. I can wait for my lady's attention."

Gran glared at me. So I sat, picked up my fork, and tried not to hear the rumblings and rustlings of a dragon curling up on the floor behind me. I ate my breakfast in stony silence, no longer concerned with infection.

"I know this is a shock," Gran said, picking up her coffee cup and sipping the fragrant brew, "but Roddy is part of your heritage. He's our family dragon, you see."

I dropped my fork and glared at her. "No, I don't see. I mean, yes, I see there's a dragon in the kitchen, but I don't see how and I don't understand what it has to do with me."

"Not *it*, dear," said Gran. "*He*. Roddy is a male dragon. And he has everything to do with us. Roddy is our guardian. He passes from grandmother to granddaughter in our family. He's been in our family for generations, haven't you, Roddy?"

The massive golden beast shifted behind me and answered in a soft, almost purring voice, "It has been my honor to serve the women of your family for over two thousand years, my lady. I am yours to command."

A frown crossed Gran's face. "Why are you calling her lady, Roddy? You've never called me lady."

"My relationship with each of Rhiannon's daughters is unique, Deirdre," he said. "Claire is my lady."

Gran stiffened. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "Why is Claire a lady, when I wasn't?"

Roddy tilted his huge head and gave Gran the dragon equivalent of a serene smile. At least, I hoped that was what his expression meant. "Do not trouble yourself, Deirdre. What is, is."

"I don't know what either of you are talking about," I said, standing up and edging toward the kitchen door, "but if we don't get moving, I'm going to be late for school."

Gran gasped, jumped to her feet, snatched plates from the table, and raced for the sink. "Of course. I nearly forgot. Roddy, reduce. Claire, get dressed. We can talk about this later."

"You forget yourself, Deirdre," growled Roddy. "I am no longer yours to command."

Gran scowled, but turned to me. "Claire, pack up Roddy and get moving."

My mouth dropped open, but no words came out. The woman expected me to pack a dragon? Not knowing what else to do, I parroted Gran's words.

"Roddy, reduce."

"As you command, my lady," he said, and immediately the toy dragon lay at my feet.

"Well, don't just stand there," said Gran above the rattle of dishes and cutlery, "pick him up and get ready for school."

I awakened the next morning to a delicious sense of reprieve. Saturday – no school. No need to worry about whispers and giggles and my nonexistent reputation. No significant homework either, since the school year was barely under way. A day of freedom to enjoy my newly attained status of Fifteen-year-old high school student.

I met Gran at the front door as I came down to breakfast. I rounded the bottom step and nearly ran over her.

"Whoa," I exclaimed. "Where are you off to so early in the morning?"

Gran had donned her cheese orange poncho and lime green boots and car keys dangled from gloved fingers. Her short gray hair was tucked securely under a felted red hat. No one would ever accuse Gran of being inconspicuous.

“I’m off to the library,” she said, pulling the front door open. “There’s a poetry reading this morning. You and Roddy need a little time to get acquainted.” She smiled and patted my cheek. “Have a nice day, dear.”

I grabbed her arm. “Wait a minute. Aren’t you supposed to be taking care of me?”

Genuine shock lit her eyes. “Darling Claire, you’ll never need anyone to look after you again. Roddy is the most capable guardian imaginable.” Her fingers caressed my cheek and she said, “You’ll be perfectly safe with him”

“But Gran...”

“Trust me, Claire,” she called, stepping through the door. “You’re going to love Roddy.” She closed the door behind herself, leaving me alone in the house... If you didn’t count the dragon.

I stared at the closed door and considered my options. I could follow her out and beg, but I still wore my PJs. I could run back upstairs, dress quickly and make a run for my best friend Lexie’s apartment, but that would only delay the inevitable. I sighed, squared my shoulders and followed the path of courage; facing the dragon in his lair. Or in this case, the kitchen .

A full-size Roddy reclined on the kitchen floor between the work-surface island and the sliding patio door. He raised his head at my approach.

“Good morning, Roddy. Gran seems to have deserted us for the time being.”

He inclined his head and blinked. “Deirdre is a wise woman,” he said in his deep, gravelly voice. “Do you have plans for breakfast, my lady?”

The mundane question caught me off-guard. “Uh ... no, not really I suppose I’ll have a bowl of cereal.”

“Would you like to break your fast with a centaur? I have a friend who would be delighted to meet you.”

I snorted a laugh, but immediately regretted the rude noise. “You’re serious, aren’t you? A centaur? They exist?”

He showed his teeth in what I could only hope was a dragon grin, “I exist,” he said in a reasonable tone. “Why shouldn’t a centaur?”

His logic was undeniable.

“Well, sure,” I said. “I mean, what good is having a dragon if I never do anything weird? Just wait a minute while I get dressed.”

I bolted to the stairs, stopped, frowned, and ran back.

“What should I wear?”

“Whatever makes you feel good, my lady,” he said with a low rumble of laughter. “And don’t worry about a coat. You will never be cold or wet with me to guard you.”

Ten minutes later I joined him in the kitchen wearing my favorite faded jeans, a pink Juicy Couture T-shirt, and a denim jacket. I’d considered wearing my sneakers, but had opted for hiking boots... just in case.

“Okay,” I said, my voice fairly steady. “Let’s go have breakfast with a centaur.”

Roddy extended a front leg and said, “Climb aboard, my lady. You’ll fit nicely between my neck ridges. Tuck your knees just behind my wing joints.”

My jaw dropped. I tried to speak, but incoherent squeaks were all I could manage. Finally, I closed my eyes, licked my lips, and spoke without looking at the huge golden beast.

“Are you serious? You want me to climb on your back and, and ... well, ride a dragon? I don’t even know how to ride a horse!”

I peered at him through the barest slits of eyelids.

“Come, my lady. You needn’t fear falling. I will never allow you to come to harm.”

Taking a huge gulp of air, I stepped up onto his extended paw. Trying to think light thoughts. I leaned forward and placed both hands on his shoulder, amazed to find the hide warm and supple. Not hard and scaly at all.

He raised his paw, and I grabbed a neck ridge and pulled myself over his shoulder while he continued to lift. I scrambled around and found the spot he’d described. My knees wedged behind the wing joint and my butt slipped into a comfortable depression between spiky ridges. I leaned forward and hugged the ridge in front of me, which wasn’t sharp or jagged, but smoothly cone shaped.

“Relax, Lady Claire. All will be well.”

“Wait,” I cried, tightening my grip on his ridge. “How are you going to get out of the house? None of the doors are big enough for you!”

“Magic, my lady,” he replied, sounding happier than I’d yet heard. “Magic!”

The word resonated in my bones. I felt it, heard it, experienced it. A warmth like the heavy, bone-deep heat of a summer day spent sunbathing by the pool at Lexie's apartment complex spread through my limbs and I melted against Roddy's neck ridge. My eyelids drifted closed, too heavy to resist. Peace flowed through my soul and I smelled lavender and roses and the too-sweet bubblegum fragrance of Mom's heritage iris. My tastebuds tingled and the taste of honey-sweet nectar burst across my tongue.

Raw power licked my spine and flowed out my fingertips and I returned to consciousness. But I hadn't been unconscious, had I?

I opened my eyes and squared my shoulders, only to hunch forward with a scream. Wind whistled past my ears and brought tears to my eyes. Roddy flew through the cloudless sky with me clinging to his back like a lamprey on a whale.

*Be at ease, my lady.*

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to pretend I couldn't hear Roddy inside my skull.

*You are safe with me.*

*You're in my mind*, I whimpered, feeling both terrified by the invasion and disgusted at my cringing weakness.

*We are connected during flight*, he said, his voice soft and reassuring. *When the magic recedes, all will return to normal.*

*Magic?*

A dry snort of laughter whispered through my brain. *Do these wings really look capable of keeping my bulk aloft? Aerodynamically speaking, dragonflight is impossible.*

*Gee, thanks*, I said, regaining my sense of self. *You certainly know how to reassure a girl.*

His laughter zinged along my spine and I relaxed my death grip on his neck ridge. After all, I hadn't died yet. I might as well enjoy the ride.

I leaned carefully to the side and peered down. Clouds scudded beneath us with an occasional break revealing a glint of water far below.

The whoosh of wind rang in my ears and I squinted in an effort to protect my eyes. Too bad I didn't have goggles.

Roddy roared and a bright purple ski mask dangled from my finger., I almost dropped it in shocked reaction to its sudden appearance, but tightened my grip and pulled it into place. I sighed in exquisite relief.



*Thank you, Roddy. That's much better.*

*You're very welcome, my lady.*

*By the way, where are we going?*

I didn't want to seem rude or ungrateful, but my stomach rumbled in sullen dissatisfaction with its continued state of emptiness.

*Ogham lives in Ireland. We'll be there in a few more minutes.*

*Ireland?* I leaned over and peered through the clouds. *We can't possibly have come that far so fast.*

*Magic doesn't answer to the possible, my lady, he said. The rules you've learned in school don't apply here.*

A few moments later, Roddy arrowed to earth in a dive so steep I refused to open my eyes, and then, all motion ceased. I peeked past his neck ridge. He hovered in mid-air a few feet from the ground in the center a circle of standing stones.

"Ogham," he called. "I've brought Lady Claire to meet you. Have we permission to land?"

"Roddy? Is that you? It's been a hundred years if it's been a day!"

A man's head and torso appeared at the edge of the tallest stone. He sported a neatly trimmed beard and mustache, copper as the setting sun and a long braid of equally red hair hung over one shoulder. He stepped slowly forward, revealing the splendid body of a sorrel stallion.

"Don't exaggerate, centaur," said Roddy. "It can't have been more than fifty years since I brought Deirdre by for a visit."

"Perhaps so," said Ogham. "You'd know the flow of human time better than I." He looked up and shaded his eyes with a calloused hand. "Why are you still aloft? Land so I can meet this newest charge of yours."

Roddy snorted and flame charred the nearest stone. "By the Old Ones, Ogham. I thought you'd never get around to issuing the invitation." He settled to the grass in the center of the circle, and I loosened my grip on his ridge and pulled the ski mask from my face.

Ogham cantered over and held up his arms. "Allow me, milady."

Strong hands grasped my waist and lifted me from Roddy's back. He set me on the ground, but kept a hand on my arm.

My knees buckled and I fought to stay upright.

“I thought as much,” he said with a nod. “Your first flight? Have no fear, milady, it’s a common reaction.”

Roddy snuffled behind me, and then said, “I promised her breakfast, Ogham.”

The centaur neighed his laughter. “Of course you did. You always arrive at mealtime, you scoundrel.”

Ogham escorted me to the tallest stone and through a nonexistent doorway into a comfortable dwelling. It was a cave, except it wasn’t. The walls were rock and the floor packed dirt, but the room was light and airy rather than dank and musty. A hearth filled the far end and a scarred worktable stood before it.

“Come in and be comfortable,” the centaur said.

Roddy followed me inside and I swear the room expanded to accommodate his bulk. He folded his wings tightly against his golden sides, sat back on his haunches and curled his tail around his toes like a gigantic cat.

I glanced around, but didn’t see anything even vaguely resembling a chair. I’d just made up my mind to settle on the hard packed floor when Roddy spoke.

“Here, my lady. Ogham keeps this stone slab for company.” He moved aside to reveal a bench of intricately carved marble.

“Stone slab, indeed,” I said quietly. “It’s absolutely beautiful.” I traced the interlocking designs with a finger, delighting in the smooth, cool perfection of the seat. “Did you make this, Ogham?”

“I did, milady, long ago... before Roddy left to guard your family.”

At that moment Roddy erupted in a sneezing fit showering the room in a flare of sparks. Ogham and I raced to stomp out myriad small embers before they could emerge into full flame.

Once the emergency had passed, Roddy bellowed, “Breakfast, Ogham. Feed my lady now!”

Ogham scowled at the dragon, but clapped his hands and danced a complicated jig reminding me of a video I’d seen in school of the Lipizzaner Stallions.

A table appeared before us covered in crisp white linen and bearing steaming platters of fragrant food. I recognized oatmeal drizzled with honey, baked yams dripping butter and brown sugar, and loaves of dark-crust bread, but many of the

platters contained mysterious concoctions whose ingredients I couldn't even begin to guess.

“Wow,” I said, “this looks wonderful, but where're the bacon and eggs?”

Ogham froze and then slowly turned his head to stare at me in astonishment. “You would eat the young of a bird, or, or,” he grimaced and swallowed convulsively, “the flesh of a mammal?”

“She is human, Ogham. Her ways are different.” Roddy turned his brilliant green gaze on me. “Ogham is an herbivore, Claire,” he explained quietly. “There'll be no meat at his table.”

“I'm sorry, Ogham,” I said lowering my eyes and bowing my head, “I meant no disrespect.”

“Of course, milady,” he replied, his voice less strained. “Forgive my overreaction.”

“Wonderful,” said Roddy. “Now that we're all friends again, let's eat!”

My belly rumbled its agreement and we all laughed.

That breakfast in the centaur's cave may well go down in my personal history as the best meal of my life. I sampled unknown but savory foods, giggled, and swapped stories with mythological creatures and discovered friends I'd treasure for the rest of my life.

Ogham proved his bardic heritage by telling me faery tales such as I'd never heard before with an authority born of first-hand knowledge.

“Oh, yes,” he said when I looked askance. “The original bards were all centaurs. We are the originators of the Gaelic gift for gab. The Blarney stone was ours long before the Celts arrived on this magnificent island. The druids co-opted our title when the faery folk retreated underhill, but they were a pale imitation of the great centaur bards.”

“It's true,” yawned Roddy, resting his chin on his forepaws. “A centaur can talk his way out of anything. Not even a dragon will flame a being who is in the midst of an astounding tale... and centaurs never run out of words.”

“Well, outwitting dragons isn't much to boast of,” said Ogham, his brow furrowed and somber. “After all, intelligence must be near equal to make a fair game of wits.”

Roddy thumped the dirt floor with his tail barb and the tremor nearly knocked the centaur off his feet.

“Care to rethink your position, horse? I’m not above flaming you in mid-sentence.”

Ogham chortled his high, whinnying laugh and swished his tail in Roddy’s face.

Roddy rose, and for a heart-stopping moment I thought he meant to carry out his threat... but then he glanced at me and said, “I’m sorry to end our visit, Ogham, but I must return Lady Claire to her home.”

With a clatter of hooves and a flick of his tail, Ogham danced the table and its contents away. He knelt before me and bowed over my hand.

“I’m honored to have met you, Lady Claire. I wish you long life and great happiness in your association with Roddy.”

“Thank you, Ogham,” I said, bowing my head before meeting his gaze again. “I’m sure I’ll get used to meeting mythological creatures ... eventually.”

“Good-bye, Ogham,” Roddy said, offering me his paw. “Come, my lady. Climb onto my back and we will return the way we came.”

On impulse, I threw my arms around Ogham’s neck and hugged him lightly. Then I scrambled to secure myself behind Roddy’s neck ridge. “Good-bye,” I cried. “Thank you for breakfast!” and Ogham’s standing stones dissolved in a glorious shiver of sensory delights.

Maybe inheriting a dragon wouldn’t turn out to be such a bad thing after all.