

Heir of the Curse Bonus Chapter

By Deborah Grace White

Elnora

Elnora stumbled slightly in her effort to keep up with Cal, who still clasped her hand in his as they emerged from the cave in search of Jo. She could understand the nervous energy that propelled him forward at such a pace. She herself felt as if every nerve was on fire from the exhilaration of their stolen kiss. Her face burned at the memory, and she clutched Cal's hand more tightly, almost afraid he would disappear if she let go.

It seemed unlikely to the point of impossibility that he could really love her, but it must be true. The sincerity in his eyes when he said the words had been compelling, and she didn't doubt him. Somehow, in the short time she had known him, she had come to trust him as she hadn't trusted anyone since her parents had died and her sister had been taken.

She could see Jonan sitting some distance away, but she was so caught up in her thoughts that she barely registered that Jo hadn't turned around at Cal's greeting. Cal's look of alarm jolted her back to reality, and she hurried along in his wake toward their friend.

She was relieved when Jo met Cal's gaze, coming out of his abstraction, but she was still too dazed from what had just passed between her and Cal to follow the conversation closely. She did start in surprise at Jonan's casual mention of a dragon, however. Just how much had she missed?

She was trying to make sense of Cal's comment about her being healed by a dragon when Jonan finally seemed to notice her.

"Elnora! You're awake! Are you all right?"

"I'm great," she said, unable to hold back a grin as she once again relived Cal's kiss and thought how inadequate was the word 'great'. "But it sounds like I have a lot of catching up to do. Would someone like to tell me who was going to eat who, and how we got here, and where here is, and—?"

"All right, all right," Jo put his hands in front of him defensively, even as he laughed at her. "Cal, would you like to tell Elnora the story about how you finally admitted I was right?"

Elnora tuned out their banter, her thoughts too unsettled to focus on anything but the issue at hand. “You saw dragons?” she prompted.

Cal nodded, his gaze so warm as it rested on her that she felt a flush rising to her cheeks. It was a pleasant sensation, but she was relieved that Jonan didn’t seem to notice. She wasn’t ready for anyone else to know what had just happened. Jo liked her as a friend, she was sure, but after all, he knew exactly how pathetic her history was. Maybe he would try to talk Cal out of pursuing her. Once he was king, Jonan would presumably want Cal to be one of his chief advisors. Maybe he would even make him a lord, and then Cal would have to marry some noble girl.

Elnora shook the thought aside, trying to focus on the story Cal was telling. She could feel her eyes growing wide as he recounted his vision about King Cael’s death, but it was the description of the dragons that most astonished her. She couldn’t help her mouth dropping open in a very unladylike gesture when she grasped the fact that she had been carried by a dragon high above the mountains. She felt glad of Cal’s hand still in hers, clutching it convulsively at the thought of being so high in the air when not conscious.

“So what do we do now?” Jo asked at the end of Cal’s tale.

“We wait,” said Cal simply.

“So are they coming back, then?” asked Elnora faintly, failing in her attempt to sound unconcerned. Before either of the others could speak, her question was answered by a rushing sound. All three of them looked up, and Elnora gasped involuntarily at the sight before her. The dragon, huge and terrifying, landed nearby, its scales glinting with blue, purple and green light.

She fought the impulse to sidle behind Cal, not wanting him to think she was cowardly. But even so, it was all she could do to stand her ground when the dragon trained its eyes right on her and addressed her by name.

“Elnora.” The dragon’s cheerful voice did not sound at all as she had expected. “I am glad to see you awake and well.”

She was saved the necessity of thinking of a response when the dragon suddenly leaned toward her. She squeezed Cal’s hand as the beast’s reptilian snout hovered just in front of her face, as though he was smelling her. It felt like an eternity that he stayed in position, and she breathed a sigh of relief when he finally pulled back, making an alarming sound in his throat.

“It is strange to sense my own power coming from a human,” the dragon said. “It will fade with time, but for now the potency is quite remarkable.”

His power was coming from her? This must be the Elddreki Cal had been talking about. From what Cal had said, she had come very close to death, and she had this dragon to thank for her survival. Her apprehension was momentarily eclipsed by gratitude.

“Are—are you the dragon who healed me?” she asked, and Elddreki acknowledged it. “Thank you,” she said, almost reverently. “I don’t know what else to say, but thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” said the dragon with a smile, “thank young Calinnae.”

Elnora looked at Cal, a questioning frown on her face, but he was focused on Elddreki. “You are very comfortable around humans, aren’t you?” Cal asked, and Elnora’s frown deepened as she tuned out the conversation, studying Cal’s face.

It seemed to her like he had tried a little too hard to change the subject. What wasn’t he telling her about her miraculous recovery? What role had he played? After all, it had been Cal, not

Elddreki, who had been at her side when she had awoken. Cal continued to look determinedly away from her, discussing Elddreki's interactions with Dernoth, the ancestor of the mountain people. Even when Cal thanked the dragon for healing Elnora, squeezing her hand as he said it, he didn't meet her eyes.

However, all thoughts of what, if anything, Cal was hiding, fled instantly when Elddreki announced the approach of Qadir, and an almighty roar filled the air. The appearance of the dragon-ruler drove all other thoughts from Elnora's mind, and for the first time since Cal had pressed his lips to hers, she was fully focused on her surroundings. Qadir was immense, his bulk making Elddreki look like a miniature dragon. The dragon-ruler's scales were almost black, and he had the undeniable presence of royalty.

"Welcome, young king," Qadir opened, apparently unaffected by the shocked demeanor of his listeners. "I am glad to see you again."

Elnora looked at the others in confusion, but they looked as bemused as she felt.

"Why have you come here?" asked Qadir.

Elnora drew infinitesimally closer to Cal as Jo stepped forward to answer the dragon. She admired her friend's courage and confidence. She was glad it was him, not her, who was called on to converse with the mighty beast, to boldly claim the position of king without any of the power to back it up.

When Qadir denied them entry to Vasilisa, she hardly knew whether to be relieved or disappointed. But she was distracted from the point by Cal's strange behavior. His gasp seemed disconnected from the conversation, and she felt his whole body stiffen beside her as he stared toward the narrow stone bridge that disappeared into the gloom.

"Vasilisa," he whispered reverently.

"Cal?" Jo asked, voicing her own confusion. "What is it?"

Cal's expression was stunned as he looked between them. He gestured into the shadows, but Elnora couldn't see anything approaching.

"What is it, Cal?" she asked, trying not to show her anxiety. "What did you see? Is something coming along the bridge?"

"You don't see it?" Cal asked her, clearly amazed. "You don't see what's at the end of the walkway?"

Jonan shook his head before Elnora could speak. "What do you mean Cal? It just disappears into darkness."

The dragon-ruler continued with his refusal of Jo's request, for all the world as if the humans hadn't said a word, but Elnora couldn't focus on what he was saying. She was watching Cal anxiously, worried about whatever was happening to him. She wasn't sure she trusted this Qadir. What if he had put Cal under some kind of enchantment?

"Only the true heir must be allowed to see inside Vasilisa." The dragon's words cut through Elnora's abstraction. She felt a flash of relief that Cal would be safe, out here with her, while only Jo would be going into the mysterious fortress. It was immediately followed by a stab of guilt. Of course she didn't want any harm to come to her friend either.

But Jo didn't look afraid. He glanced at her and Cal, standing close together, looking at him expectantly. Elnora gave him a nod, just as Cal said, "Go ahead, Jo. We'll wait for you here."

The suppressed disappointment in Cal's voice only increased her guilt. She knew he wanted to go, but she couldn't help being glad he wasn't going to be in the power of these magical creatures. Well, any more than they all were already.

"I am ready," said Jo, stepping toward Qadir. Elnora felt her own confusion rebounding off both Cal and Jo as the dragon shook his head.

"No, young traveler. You may not enter."

"But—" Jo didn't seem to know what to say.

"As I said," interrupted Qadir, "only the true heir."

The dragon's eyes fastened on Cal, and Elnora's bewilderment slowly gave way to a horrified foreboding. In the silence that followed Qadir's words, she and Jo both turned to look at Cal as well. He looked uncertainly back at them. Elnora felt a rising panic, some part of her understanding what was happening before her mind caught up. The dragon's next statement, undeniably addressed to Cal, was somehow both shocking and fully expected.

"You, young king, may enter if you choose."

"I don't...understand." Cal's words could just as easily have been spoken by Elnora. She listened with growing unease to the dragon's explanation.

Cal was the true heir? It couldn't be true. It must be a trick. But at the same time...she looked at Cal, where he stood next to her, his eyes wide with astonishment. Even in his disheveled state, his clothes still covered with her blood, his face dirty from their travels, there was something noble about him. Something regal. He carried himself in a way she had never seen before. Even thinking Jonan had royal blood, she had never seen that indefinable something in him. She had thought herself biased by her emotions, but she felt foolish now, as though she should have always known.

She felt a stab of pain go through her heart. What was wrong with her? Cal deserved to be king. She didn't doubt that he was capable. So why did she feel panicked at the thought?

"Come," said Qadir, and as Cal moved forward, Elnora knew the answer to her own question. It was because if Kyona was to claim Cal, she never could. The small half step he took away from her and toward the dragon felt symbolic of the bigger, inevitable separation that was coming. She berated herself for her selfishness, but she couldn't help wishing it wasn't true.

As if sensing her thoughts, Cal paused, looking back at her. Their eyes locked, and Elnora couldn't seem to school her features into any semblance of calm. His face was so familiar, and yet he seemed suddenly alien, a different species from her. After an endless moment, he turned instead to Jo, and Elnora felt something deflate inside her. She knew it was illogical, but it felt like he would never look at her again. Surely he would never again look at her in the way he had in the cave, such a short time ago. If only they had learned the secret a day earlier. Even an hour earlier, before Cal had made his declaration. It would be better not to know how he felt if they were to be pulled apart anyway.

Her heart constricted as she watched him walk away into the fog, the mighty dragon flying above him. What would they do to him? How did she know he would come back?

Within seconds Cal disappeared from view. For a moment she and Jonan both stood frozen, staring unseeingly into the gloom.

“Don’t worry, your friend will be safe.” The musical voice made her jump. She hadn’t realized that Elddreki was still there. Meeting his gaze, she found that the dragon’s eyes were surprisingly kind as they passed between her and Jonan.

“When will he return?” Jo sounded as dazed as Elnora felt.

“I do not know,” said Elddreki comfortably. “But he will return.” He waited for a moment, but when neither of them spoke, he prompted them. “Come, I will wait with you. We can shelter in the cave.”

Jo looked at Elnora, as though seeking her opinion of this offer, but she just stared blankly back. She had no capacity for further thought. Jo shrugged, and turned to follow Elddreki without a word. With one last glance at the obscuring gloom into which Cal had disappeared, Elnora stumbled after him.

She entered the cave with reluctance. Foolish as it was, she didn’t want to come back here, not now that everything was so changed. The corner where she and Cal had embraced seemed to taunt her with its nearness, reminding her that Cal would now be so close but so far away from her.

Jo stood still in the middle of the empty space, not seeming to know what to do with himself. The posture didn’t suit him—it was strange to see him so inactive. He looked lost, and Elnora felt a sudden surge of pity for him. She was being selfish, so wrapped up in her own thoughts. The shock had surely been much greater for him.

“Should we light a fire?” asked Elddreki brightly. The dragon seemed unaffected by the somber mood that held the other two in its grip. “That’s what humans often do to keep warm, isn’t it?”

Jo and Elnora just stared at him, but their lack of response didn’t seem to deter him.

“I will go and find some wood,” the dragon offered. With a swishing noise, he exited the cave, his movements surprisingly graceful and swift for a creature of his size.

Slowly, Elnora turned to Jonan. He wasn’t looking at her. She felt almost nervous to break the silence, although she couldn’t have said why.

“Jo...” she started hesitantly, and he looked up with a forced smile. She tried not to wince. The expression looked painful on his face.

“Well, I didn’t see that coming,” he said mildly.

“No.” Her voice was soft. “Neither did I. I don’t think anyone did.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Jonan, clearly trying to speak lightly, but only managing to sound strained. “We both know that Cal thought all along that he would make a better king than me. I guess he got his wish after all.”

Elnora instantly fired up in Cal’s defense, but with an effort she bit back the retort that rose to her lips. She knew that Jonan must be hurting and confused. She tried to speak bracingly as she scrambled for a suitable response.

“Jo, that’s—”

“Completely unfair,” Jo cut her off. His false bravado evaporated instantly, and he put a hand swiftly over his face, in an uncharacteristic gesture of vulnerability. “I know it is. I know this isn’t Cal’s fault.”

“And he definitely didn’t see it coming,” added Elnora. As uncomfortable as it was to witness Jonan’s vulnerable moment, she was relieved that he was softening. She didn’t want him to become embittered against his best friend. “He was as shocked as we were. Did you see his face?”

Jonan gave an unsteady chuckle. “Yes, I did. His mouth was hanging open like a fish. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so...you know...life-altering. But it changes everything.”

“Yes,” Elnora agreed dully. “It does.”

Jonan didn’t seem to notice her sudden deflation. “I can’t help but wish we had known this before. Finding out at the last minute is worse than anything.”

“Yes,” Elnora repeated, her voice almost a whisper. “I agree.”

But was that true? She glanced involuntarily to the place where Cal had held her in his arms. Did she really wish that had never happened? Was it really better never to feel his lips against hers than to have him for a moment then lose him? She honestly wasn’t sure. Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, trying to steady her thoughts and focus on Jo’s situation, which was much more tumultuous than her own.

“I know this is hard, Jo,” she started, putting a hand gently on his arm. “I can only imagine how off-balance you must feel. And that enormous dragon was right, you are valiant. You’ve more than proven yourself on this journey. You didn’t deserve to have this sprung on you.”

He patted her hand bracingly, giving her a grateful smile. She squeezed his arm and returned the smile, glad of his friendship in this moment of turmoil. It was so different from the spark that passed between her and Cal any time they touched, but she was still glad to be reminded that she wasn’t alone. Maybe she couldn’t have a future with Cal, but she didn’t have to go back to the constant loneliness that had been her life since her sister was taken.

“It’s nice of you to say I’ve proven myself,” said Jonan dryly. “I think all I’ve proven is that I’m reckless and irresponsible.”

“That’s not true,” said Elnora seriously. “I’ve seen how hard you’ve worked to take on this responsibility, even though it’s not an easy thing for you.”

“Unlike Cal,” said Jo, his voice rueful. “He was born responsible.” Jo paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was slightly softer. “He deserves this, and he’ll be better at it than I could ever be.”

Elnora hesitated. She didn’t really know how to respond. She felt for Jo, but she couldn’t deny that she thought Cal was well-suited for authority and responsibility. She couldn’t imagine a more noble leader.

“I know you must be disappointed,” she began tentatively, unsure how to continue.

Jo shook his head. “The strange thing is, I’m not. I should be I suppose, but somehow...Don’t get me wrong, I am...annoyed.”

Elnora stifled a laugh at the understatement, and Jo flashed her a lopsided grin, clearly well aware that she wasn’t fooled by his mild words.

“Well, I can’t help being irritated at the trick,” Jo reasoned. “I mean, I was annoyed enough that my parents had hidden the truth about the royal bloodline from me, but now it seems there were secrets within secrets...I mean, it’s all just ridiculous. Why couldn’t they have just been honest?” He grunted in frustration. “Not to mention the dragons. Couldn’t they have been a bit more forthcoming? Here I’ve been gearing myself up all this time, when all along...”

He sighed. "What's the use in talking about it? It is what it is. I just wish we'd known all along, because then I would've been only too happy to get behind Cal, instead of feeling like I'd been robbed of something. And I have to admit that my pride is a little stung. I mean, Cal is great and all, but I don't exactly love the idea of serving my best friend." He looked at her sheepishly. "Maybe I'm being a bit too honest. I just—"

"Need to let it out," said Elnora with a smile. "I understand perfectly, don't worry."

She was aware of a fleeting wish that she could do the same, but she brushed the thought off. Foolishness. She had learned long ago not to show her emotions, to process grief and disappointment internally rather than display any weakness to the world. It wasn't that she didn't trust Jonan, but she was still profoundly grateful that he knew nothing of what had passed between her and Cal. No reason for anyone else to know of her humiliation.

"But it really is true that I'm not disappointed, exactly," continued Jonan. She could see that he was speaking to himself as much as to her, turning the realization around in his mind, examining it, drawing comfort from it. "I never wanted to be king. And I think somewhere under all..." he gestured to his chest, as if indicating the swirling emotions that must be rocking him, "...this, I'm relieved. Glad, even. It sounds childish I suppose, but I want to be free. I don't want to be weighed down by the responsibilities of being royal." He gave another lopsided grin. "I liked the idea of the adventure of claiming the throne, but not so much the stuff that comes after."

Elnora smiled absently, glad that Jo was deriving comfort from talking it out, but finding little to cheer her up. The adventure had never been the draw for her. She was dedicated to the quest of course, but the idea of a settled future once it was over, especially one at Cal's side, had been the real dream.

"Well," she said bracingly, "I think you'll still get as much adventure as you can handle. Cal can't do this without you any more than you could do it without him."

His expression turned serious as he thought about her words. "You're right, of course," he said. "I should make sure he knows I have his back."

A rustling sound made them both turn. Elddreki once again entered the cave, carrying a bundle of wood between his teeth, almost like a dog with a stick. He had been gone longer than Elnora had expected, and she wondered if he had stayed away to give them privacy. But nothing about his bright demeanor suggested that he understood the gravity of the moment for them.

"Do either of you know how to light a fire?" he asked by way of greeting. He had deposited the wood on the stone floor of the cave, and he was looking at them both expectantly.

Jo looked at the wood and shook his head. "Uh...no, I don't," he admitted.

"I do," volunteered Elnora, but she stopped short at the look on Elddreki's face.

The dragon was grinning broadly, displaying an alarming number of sharp, glistening teeth. Elnora took an involuntary step backward.

"It was a joke," Elddreki explained. "I'm a dragon." He waited for them to say something, or perhaps laugh, but they both just blinked at him. Still smiling, he placed the wood strategically. Without warning, he breathed out a tongue of white-hot flame, surprising startled gasps out of the two humans. The fire engulfed the wood, and it caught with unnatural speed, burning merrily as if it had been lit an hour ago.

The dragon settled himself comfortably on the stone floor, close enough to feel the warmth of the flame. After a moment's hesitation, Jonan and Elnora did the same. The presence of Elddreki

changed the nature of their conversation. There was no more discussion of the emotional impact of the recent revelation, but they quickly found that chatting with the dragon was surprisingly easy.

Elddreki was very interested in the story of their journey, and they found themselves telling him all about it. Elnora was equally curious about him, but not quite brave enough to ask him any personal questions.

With the conversation and the warmth of the fire, the time should have passed quickly. But every second that Cal was away felt like an eternity to Elnora. Despite Elddreki's assurance of his safety, she didn't think she would feel at ease until he was back with them. The growing tension in Jonan's posture as afternoon turned into evening suggested that he felt the same.

Her emotions were caught in a strange tug-of-war, both dreading and longing for Cal's return. How would she be able to act naturally around him, now that she knew he would be king, and they could never be together? She was torn between wanting him to know how much she cared about him, and not wanting him to know the depth of her anguish over their inevitable parting.

She wrestled with herself as the hours dragged by, eventually deciding that there was nothing to be gained by showing him how she felt. If he really did love her, it might be gratifying for him to know that she felt the same, but it would only make it harder on both of them in the future.

How had she let herself get into this position? She knew better than this—how had she failed to guard her heart? She felt a sudden burst of anger toward Cal. She had been managing well on her own. Why did he have to come along and destroy her peace? Why had he made promises he couldn't keep, promises she should have known better than to believe?

She knew her anger was unreasonable, but she welcomed it briefly. It felt much more empowering than the hollowness she had been wallowing in. Cal should have kept his emotions to himself instead of making his rash declaration and kissing her, tricking her into revealing her own feelings.

But no, she was being as unfair as Jonan had been. Cal hadn't been trying to trick her. And she couldn't be angry at him, not for that. Not when she remembered how it had felt to have him pull her close, how her heart had raced at the feel of his lips claiming hers, his arms around her waist. His chest had felt strong and hard under her hand, and she had felt such exhilaration at her own daring in tangling her fingers through his ruffled, tawny hair. She had wanted to do it often enough over the last weeks.

Her face burned as she remembered every moment of Cal's kiss, and she was glad that Jonan and Elddreki were not looking at her, deep in conversation about Jonan and Calinnae's hometown of Nerita. Elnora felt the hollow ache return as she listened to them. She had imagined that Cal might take her there one day, might show her the places of his childhood. But he was destined for a very different life now, one that could have no place for her.

A rushing sound from outside the cave made all three of them fall silent, and Elnora's heart seemed to skip a beat as she heard the distant but unmistakable sound of Cal's voice as he conversed with Qadir. On impulse, she got up from her place beside Jonan and made her way to the other side of the fire, as far from the entrance as possible. Jonan looked at her in surprise as she sat down, pulling her knees up in front of her and huddling over, but he didn't comment.

A moment later, Cal came into view, striding quickly into the cave. He somehow seemed stronger, more confident, and more handsome than ever. How could she ever have doubted that he was a king in hiding? The sight of him made her heart ache all over again.

“Cal!” said Jonan, jumping up, the relief evident in his voice. “You’re back!”

Elnora watched the two boys greet each other, uninterested in any details except that Cal was well and safe. As they spoke, Cal’s eyes slid to her, and she gave him a tight smile, holding his gaze for as short a time as possible. He hesitated for a moment, seeming uncertain how to respond to her, then turned back to Jonan.

When they settled for sleep, Elddreki announcing that he would stay with them, Cal and Elnora still hadn’t spoken to each other. She didn’t blame him. He was clearly in the same position she was. Feeling awkward, unsure what to say, wishing they had known the truth just a bit earlier, so that they wouldn’t have foolishly begun something they couldn’t finish.

Elnora lay down with her back to the fire, and to the boys on the far side of it. She could hear them talking softly, but she didn’t try to listen in. Her mind was already too full. She remembered her conversation with Cal on the way to Montego, about fate and sacrifice. How long ago was that? A week? It felt like years. How right she had been when she had said that fate was malicious, always set on denying people what they want, and that they must prove their character by the way they respond.

She was horrified to find tears sliding down her face, and she breathed deeply, trying to hold back a sob, desperate not to let anyone know she was crying. She wanted to think that she was of strong enough character to bear this latest turn with fortitude. But in spite of all the grief and loss she had known in her short life, she thought that this was the cruelest stroke fate had ever dealt her, to dangle Cal’s love in front of her, only to rip it instantly away.

She gritted her teeth. She was stronger than this. She had survived before Cal came into her life, and she would survive after he passed out of it. Surely if she could withstand this loss, she would have passed the hardest test life had for her. Because she had never wanted anything as much as she wanted Cal.

And he wanted to be with her, too. He had said so. In spite of everything, she smiled into the darkness. No, she couldn’t be sorry they hadn’t found out the truth of his identity earlier. She couldn’t be sorry that he had told her he loved her. No matter what happened now, nothing could take that moment away from her.

She would treasure it as long as she lived.