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by Pam L. Wallace**

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TERESA TUNALEY 05

All That Glitters

Pam L. Wallace

"She danced upon a billowing wire while balancing a knife on her chin." Erina frowned. That wasn't how the story went. She tried again. "She danced and wept while juggling...." No, that wasn't right, either. The story had fled, leaving her alone in the darkness.

The red glow, Erina's only source of light there deep in the earth, slowly faded and died away. She felt for the jewel hanging on her chest. It was cold.

Her Time was over.

Erina had sworn to herself that when the time came, she would not be afraid, so she swallowed down the fear that rose unbidden in her throat.



all.

Since then, she'd often kept her hand upon the dragon during her Time, caressing the scales while murmuring her stories, bathed in the crimson glow of the Stone. But now the glow was gone, and the darkness had come.

Outside, the equinox sun must be dawning, the light bathing the forest where she'd grown up in blood red light. It was one of only two days a year when the sun shone red, the other being the autumnal equinox. According to the old tales, the red dawns were a symbol of the Beginning, when the world had been born in blood and sustained that way.

Another young girl, much like she had been, would be readying herself to leave the palace complex to begin the long trek to the cave. Drucer Alba the Tenth would even now be placing the jewel around her neck. Erina

remembered her own thoughts on the way to the dragon's chamber: humbled that she had been deemed worthy of the Great Sacrifice, proud that she would be part of the chain that kept balance in the world, and yet fearful of what awaited her.

Erina rested her hand on the dragon's foreleg, and with the darkness as her only company, waited for her fate. She felt calm, and only slightly

Erina rested her hand on the dragon's foreleg, and with the darkness as her only company, waited for her fate. She felt calm and only slightly curious.

Light blossomed.

She blinked at the pearly, iridescent glow. One eye of the dragon had opened and looked down at her. The foreleg her hand rested upon

tensed. Erina gave it one last pat, then stood and readied herself, as she'd been taught. She knelt, stretched her arms in supplication, and faced the great dragon.

"I had the loveliest dream," it said, in a deep, hoarse voice. "A girl was dancing in the wind. A bird with red and blue feathers was on her head, and jewels were dripping from its beak. The girl caught them and threw them in the air, where they sparkled in the light. Then they joined in her dance."

Erina bowed her head. "That was my story."

A deep rumble sounded in the dragon's throat, and Erina peeked up at it.

"Yours? Did you make it up?" The dragon's other eye opened, and it leaned its great head in to peer at her.

Its breath was hot and smelled of old cinders. Erina cleared her throat and answered. "The jewel gives the stories."

The great eyes, as big around as her palm, blinked. "That dark stone around your neck, you mean?"

Erina nodded. "It used to glow, the most beautiful red, almost as red as your scales, but its power is gone. Soon, another maid will come to take my place."

"And what am I supposed to do with you in the meantime?"

Erina thought for a moment, but then decided that the truth was the only way. "You're supposed to eat me."

"Eat you? Why would I do that?"

"Well, you've done it to all the other girls before me."

"I have? That doesn't sound very polite of me."

"It's not a matter of politeness, you know. It's just what must be done."

"Why?"

Erina sat back on her heels and lowered her arms. Why indeed?
"Because, it's always been done that way."

"Hmmm. I don't remember it."

"You eat the Offering—me—and then you fall back to sleep, and the world is safe from you once more."

"You make me sound quite mean." The dragon sniffed and turned its head away.

Erina wasn't quite sure what to say. She'd been instructed that after the Stone lost its power, the dragon would awaken, eat her, and then fall back to sleep. The next Offering, another young maiden, would come to keep the sleeping dragon enchanted with stories. The drucers hadn't said the dragon would talk to her. But it was only polite to answer when spoken to. "I never thought you were mean," she said.

The great head turned back to her. "You didn't?"

"No. Well, at first, perhaps I did. But then I touched you, and I knew you were not."

"I had another dream. I was lost. I looked for my brethren, but couldn't find them. I felt so alone. Then I felt a touch, and I knew I was not alone after all."

"I wasn't supposed to touch you, you know," Erina admitted.

"Why not?" The dragon's eyes widened.

"I don't know," Erina had to admit. "They never told me why, only that I shouldn't."

"Then why did you?"

"I don't know. I felt lonely here, and I was curious about you. I wanted to know what your scales felt like."

"I'm glad you did."

"I'm glad I did, too." Erina smiled.

"I'm hungry. Did you bring something to eat?"

"Only me." Erina giggled.

"Well, I shan't eat you. I like you."

At the mention of food, Erina's stomach rumbled.

"What was that?"

"I'm afraid I'm hungry, too," Erina admitted. "I haven't eaten since I've been here. The Stone sustained me."

"Let's go find some food, then." The dragon uncurled its tail, stretched, and then lumbered to its feet. The chamber suddenly seemed much smaller, and Erina took a step back.

"I...I don't think we should," she said. "You're supposed to stay here."

"Do you always do as you're supposed to?"

"Mostly, yes. Except for touching you, of course."

The dragon sniffed. "I do not."

"But if you go out, you'll destroy the world!"

"Who says?"

"Why, Drucer Alba, and all the other drucers of the Order of Caleduid. Everyone. It's what you used to do, before they started sending the Sacrifices. You burned the crops and ate the livestock. Then Drucer Alba the First found the Stones, and sent the first Sacrifice to you. You ate her, fell asleep, and stayed that way until the next Offering was sent on the following solstice. And so it has gone ever since."

The dragon's tail began to twitch. "I don't want to eat you," it said.

"But it's a great honor to serve the Order as the Sacrifice. My name will be entered on the rolls, forever honored. I can't fail in my task. I'd have to go back to the orphanage, and I hate it there! Please, you must eat me now."

The dragon's tail twitched harder. A great tear flooded one eye and then dropped to the stone floor with a loud splat. "I don't want you to fail," it said. Another tear fell, and then another, until soon a small iridescent puddle had formed.

Erina begged it to stop its crying, pleaded and cajoled, but nothing worked. The dragon kept crying big, silent tears, and the puddle grew and grew. The dragon's tears were luminous and filled with small specks that sparkled like gold. Soon a small pool, as big around as Erina was tall, had formed, and she found herself standing ankle-deep in dragon tears. A tart smell, like that of lemons, filled the air. Erina climbed up on an outcropping, her hem dripping and slightly discolored. "Dragon, you must stop!"

"I...I can't," it sobbed.

"But if you don't, you'll drown me."

"Oh." The dragon snuffled as it took notice of the glittering, shallow lake that now filled the chamber. It took a deep shuddering breath and shook its head, scattering teardrops. One landed on Erina's head, wetting the entire right side of her hair, and another plopped onto her left arm, soaking her sleeve.

"Here," she said. "Let me dry your face. And stop your sniffing now." She did her best imitation of Drucera Favel's voice when a new orphan had been brought in. The dragon stretched its head down and allowed her to wipe its face with the dry part of her skirt. The great eyes widened and blinked, and the tears slowly stopped. "Do you have a name, Dragon?"

It didn't answer her for a time. When it finally spoke, its voice sounded sad. "I can't remember."

Afraid it would start crying again, Erina quickly replied, "Perhaps it will come to you. But for now, I shall just call you, 'Dragon.' And you shall call me, Erina." She sat down on the rock, pulled her knees up to her chest and wondered what she was to do now that the dragon refused to eat her. She couldn't just let it go free and wreak havoc on the world. Not that it seemed mean enough to do so, of course. But the drucers had said it would. A thought came to her, so contrary to all that she had grown up believing, that she was taken aback by it at first. What if they were wrong? But no, they couldn't be. She'd seen the murals showing a sky filled with dragons breathing fire and the cities and towns in flames.

The dragon snorted. It sounded somewhat like a hiccup. Then a rumble sounded deep within its belly. It blinked its great eyes and stared at her.

"Are you *sure* you wouldn't like to eat me?" she asked.

"Positive. The thought of it turns my stomach."

"Really? So you don't think you'd like to eat any people at all?"

"I think not."

"But you did before."

The dragon peered at her and then shook its head. "Perhaps I did. But I think I have changed."

"I don't understand how."

"I don't either, exactly. But I think it was because you touched me. I seem to recall a time when I felt alone and angry and frightened. I don't anymore."

"I know that I felt different after I touched you, too. I felt braver." Erina thought for a minute. They couldn't just stay in the cave. And if they left, someone would be sure to see them and the dragon would be attacked. But what if she could show the drucers that the dragon was not a fearsome creature after all? "Why don't we go find you something to eat?" Dragon's belly rumbled again. "Some oats or something like that," she added.

Dragon perked up immediately. "Yes, let's."

Erina picked up her skirts and prepared to wade through the dragon tears to the passage that led out.

"Here. Climb aboard. I'll carry you," Dragon said, stretching out a forepaw.

Erina stepped on the forepaw and Dragon craned its head down so she could sit on its neck. It lumbered out of the chamber and down the passage, its eyes shining like torchlights on the passage walls. But there seemed to be two smaller lights behind them. Perhaps a reflection from the stone floor, she thought.

They hadn't gone very far when Dragon announced, "There's someone coming."

Erina strained to listen. She did hear the small scuffling sounds of someone walking toward them. "It must be the next Sacrifice on her way."

"Will she be as nice as you?"

Erina smiled. "All of the girls have been raised to be dutiful and kind," she replied. "Hallo," she called out.

"Who...Who's there?" came a quavering voice.

"It's me, Erina," she answered. "I've something to show you."

They rounded a corner and there stood the next Sacrifice, lit by the red glow of the Stone around her neck, and clutching her shawl to her chest. Her eyes grew large and a panicked look came into them when she saw the dragon. Erina recognized her from the orphanage. It was Mallie, just a season younger than she. "Don't be frightened, Mallie," she said.

Mallie backed away. "What are you doing, Erina?"

Erina shrugged. "We're going to show everyone that the dragon isn't mean."

"Erina. You can't do that. It'll destroy everyone."

"No, Mallie. It's assured me that it won't."

Mallie kept backing away. "And you would believe it? You must go back and make it eat you so the world will be safe, as the drucers teach us."

"Don't be silly. I can't *make* it eat me."

You must, Erina!" Mallie's voice rose higher with each word.

"I shan't eat her and that's that," Dragon said. A small puff of steam came out of its nostrils.

Mallie gave one more desperate look to Erina, then turned and ran, screaming.

Dragon craned its neck back to look at Erina. "What's wrong with her?"

"I think you scared her."

Dragon looked at her a moment longer. "Maybe it was you," he said.

Erina laughed. "I'm not scary."

"You're different." Dragon turned away and followed Mallie.

"What do you mean?"

"From when I first opened my eyes and saw you. You've changed."

Erina thought for a moment. "Yes, I believe I have. I feel much braver than I used to."

"No, I mean the way you look. You stood in my tears, remember?"

"Yes, but what has that to do with anything?"

"Didn't they teach you anything? Dragon tears are magical."

Erina looked down. The parts of herself she could see didn't look any different. She felt her head, just to make sure that she hadn't started to develop any bony ridges or appendages. "I don't see any changes. Is it my face?" She felt her cheeks, and then her nose and forehead. No, everything felt the same.

"I think you should wait. It could have been just a play of light or something." The dragon refused to say any more. Every so often, Erina felt her face again, relieved each time to find her skin wasn't turning hard or scaly. Would she turn into a dragon?

They walked for some time in silence before the passage widened. Soon Erina saw the glow of light that indicated the entrance was up ahead. They came into an antechamber and Dragon stopped. Before them was the opening to the cave, and outside was the world she thought she had left forever.

Dragon sighed and then craned its head around to look at her. "Are you ready?"

"First, tell me how I've changed. Please?"

It glanced away from her for a moment. "All right. Haven't you noticed that you can see better?"

Erina thought. "No, not really. I mean, the passage didn't seem so dark somehow, but I thought it was because of the way your eyes glow ... oh!" She turned to the passage wall. Yes, there were two pinpricks of light shining on it. And Dragon was looking at her, not the wall. She put her hands over her eyes and peeked through her fingers. The lights dimmed. "Are my eyes glowing?" she asked.

"Yes, they are," Dragon answered.

"Ah, no. I must look like a freak," she said.

"I think they look nice."

"Well, you would. But I doubt anyone else will."

"You're probably right."

"What am I to do?" Erina fought to stay calm, and forced herself to think things through. "I suppose it doesn't matter anyway. I'll be in disgrace for failing anyway."

Dragon hesitated before answering. "We'll think of something, I'm sure. Are you ready?"

"I suppose."

They emerged from the cave onto a paved terrace. Arrayed in a semicircle in front of them were soldiers, all armed with dangerous-looking spears. Behind the soldiers stood Drucer Alba the Tenth, and beside him, still trembling, was Mallie. Five lesser drucers flanked them.

"Erina, what have you done!" Alba called. "The people depended on you."

Erina straightened her shoulders and addressed the drucers. "Drucer Alba, the dragon will not eat me, sir. I tried, but it refused."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"I believe the dragon has changed, sir."

"Dragons are known for their trickery, girl." Alba took a step closer and stared into her face. A look of horror widened his eyes, and he backed away. "Erina, look at you! You've brought us all to ruin."

Erina shook her head. "I did nothing but show compassion to a lonely creature."

"You've been bespelled, girl. Guards, advance, before the dragon burns us all!"

The soldiers spread out, lowered their spears, and stalked towards them.

"No, please stop!" Erina yelled.

"And kill the heathen girl, too!" Alba said.

"NO!"

Everyone stopped when the dragon spoke. The soldiers looked at each other, and Drucer Alba took a step back. "You speak?" he said.

"Of course! Why wouldn't I?" Dragon asked. "See here. You can't kill Erina. She's done nothing wrong."

"No?" Alba recovered from his initial shock. "Look at her eyes, and tell me she's done nothing wrong."

"She may look a little different, but she's not a monster."

"She's disobeyed the rules."

"By touching me, you mean? But it turned out to be the right thing to do. Her compassion awoke me. Look, I'll leave and never bother any of you."

"Dragons cannot be trusted. We've seen the evil your kind has done."

"You've seen pictures of what someone said they did," Erina spoke up.

"If he's so kind, why has he been eating the Sacrifices for all these years?"

"I don't recall any of that," Dragon replied.

"How convenient," Alba sneered.

"If you let Erina go, I'll let you have my treasure."

Erina looked at Dragon. "You don't have any treasure," she hissed.

Dragon gave her a look.

"What if we just destroy you and then take your treasure?" Alba asked.

"My treasure disappears with me, as you well know. It's the only reason why you haven't destroyed me in all these years. And what you and the rest of your Order have been waiting for, isn't it? If only you'd known the way to it was exactly what you've been teaching your 'Sacrifices' not to do. You should be thanking Erina for doing what no one else was able to do."

Alba's mouth had dropped open in shock. He closed it with a snap and looked around at the other drucers. He stepped back and hastily conferred with them. When he turned back, he inclined his head to the dragon. "I accept your offer." The tone of his voice made it seem as if he were bestowing a great favor upon them.

"Very well. Go to my chamber. You'll find it rather full, but as the liquid evaporates, you *should* be much pleased with what is left behind."

Dragon unfurled its wings and stretched them out. They were each as long as its body, and covered in tiny, downy red feathers that reflected the glow of the blood-red sun. "Get off, now, Erina," Dragon said.

Erina looked at Drucer Alba, the man she had been taught to revere. He cut an imposing figure in his red robe and elaborate headgear. His eyes had always seemed full of compassion to her, but now, with her crystal clear vision, she saw they were full of greed. "No."

"Erina, this is not the time to be contrary. It worked out when you didn't obey the order to touch me. But not this time."

"What is left for me here? I'll never fit in here again -- not that I ever did! I want to go with you."

"I'm going up to the mountains, far away from here. There will be none of your kind there."

"How do you know what my kind is anymore? I'm changing, you said it yourself. Who knows what I'll become? But I know I don't want to become like any of these people. Have you ever carried a human while flying?"

Dragon thought for a moment. "I think not. But how difficult can it be? You sit. I fly."

Erina looked at Drucer Alba. "Let's go."

"If you come back, we'll kill you both," Alba called out.

Erina stared coldly at him, and couldn't repress a smile as he took a step back. "You may try, sir," she replied.

Dragon crouched and then launched himself into the air. Erina clung tightly to its muscular neck as its powerful wings stroked the air. The wind whined through Erina's hair as her former world spiraled away. The blood-

red tint to the world shifted as the sun rose higher, and the snow-topped mountain peaks glittered in the light.

"By the way," Dragon said, as he winged toward their new home, "my name is Cargwgawn."



Pam Wallace spent the last twenty years busily engaged in raising her two sons and volunteering in PTA and Little League. With the boys turning into fine young men, she decided that it was time to spend a little time on herself, and turned to her love of writing. With a wonderful, supportive husband behind her, and a purring cat beside her, many happy hours have been spent. Her short stories have appeared in *Amazing Journeys Magazine* and *AlienSkin Magazine*.

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