

Dragonslayer Stories

Two Short Stories that Inspired
the Dragonslayer Novel Series

by Resa Nelson

<http://www.resanelson.com>

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, names, locations, and events portrayed in this book are fictional or used in an imaginary way to entertain. Any resemblance to any real people, situations, or incidents is purely coincidental.

DRAGONSLAYER STORIES Two Short Stories that Inspired
the Dragonslayer Novel Series

By Resa Nelson

Copyright © 2011 by Resa Nelson

All Rights Reserved.

Cover design copyright © 2011 by Resa Nelson

FIRST EDITION
E-Book Edition

September 29, 2011

A Publication by Resa Nelson
<http://www.resanelson.com>
Email: ContactResa@aol.com

Introduction © 2011 by Resa Nelson

The Dragonslayer's Sword originally appeared in *Science Fiction Age* magazine © 1992 by Resa Nelson

The Silver Shoes originally appeared in *Science Fiction Age* magazine © 1996 by Resa Nelson

CONTENTS

Introduction	5
The Dragonslayer's Sword.....	8
The Silver Shoes	27

Introduction

My 4-book Dragonslayer series began as a single short story published in the premiere issue of *Science Fiction Age* magazine. The editor had read my story at a writers' workshop, and he asked me to submit it for the magazine. Thrilled to know the story had found a good home, I moved on to the next project. As far as I was concerned, I'd written my last story about dragons and dragonslayers.

But then something unexpected happened. A couple of years after the story appeared in the magazine, *Science Fiction Age* ran a Readers Poll. One of the questions was fill-in-the-blank, and it asked readers to name their favorite story in the magazine's first two years of publication. It never dawned on me that anyone would remember my story – two years had passed! And even if they recalled the story, how could anyone remember the title? So I never gave the Readers Poll a thought.

The Dragonslayer's Sword ranked 2nd in the poll, ahead of stories by Ben Bova, Lawrence Watt-Evans, and Tom Disch.

Holy cow, I thought. *What just happened?*

On top of that, a B. Dalton bookstore manager in Texas had written to my editor in search of help, saying that customers were coming into his bookstore and asking to buy my dragonslayer novel but he couldn't find out how to buy it.

Novel? I thought. *It's just a short story!*

At that point I realized all my readers are smarter than me. They were seeing something in the story that I couldn't see. It took me about eight years to figure it out. (I know. I'm slow.) I decided I'd write a novel only if I came up with an idea I loved with my whole heart and could get excited about – otherwise, why write at all? Eventually, the idea smacked me in the face. Once I started writing the novel, its world began to unfold and I realized the story was too big for one book. That's how one little story evolved into a four-novel series. I wrote a second short story in this world, and it was published in *Science Fiction Age*, too. This mini e-book reprints these two stories. I hope you enjoy them.

Resa Nelson, September 29, 2011
<http://www.resanelson.com>

Also by Resa Nelson

If you like the stories in this mini e-book, check out my website (<http://www.resanelson.com>) to learn about my novels:

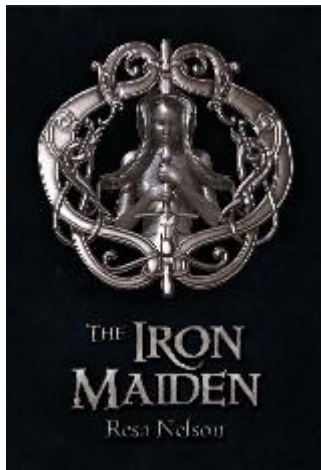
The Dragonslayer series:



The Dragonslayer's Sword (Book 1)

Nominated for the Nebula Award

Finalist for the EPPIE Award



The Iron Maiden (Book 2)

Available December 13, 2011

<http://www.mundania.com>

Book 3 in the Dragonslayer series: *The Stone of Darkness*

Scheduled for release June 2012

Also:



Our Lady of the Absolute
(a standalone novel)

"*Our Lady of the Absolute* is a riveting fantasy, very highly recommended."

-- Midwest Book Review
5-star review

The Dragonslayer's Sword

Heat stood around Astrid like a wall when she worked, built in layers by the fire and the metal tools she used. The bellows wheezed as she pumped them, her arms aching, smoke stinging her eyes, until the charcoals burned bright yellow. The smithery was outside, adjacent to her cottage. Rows of tall, ancient poplars surrounded the cottage and the smithery, giving shade and privacy.

Astrid enjoyed the heat of the smithery, loving the way it baked into her skin. When it became too intense, she'd set down the horseshoe or dagger or whatever else she might be tapping into shape, and step back into the cool of the day for relief. One September day, at such a moment, Astrid paused and turned around to find the dragonslayer standing behind her.

Astrid gasped, because it was the first time anyone had seen her blacksmithing body. Although fully clothed, she felt as vulnerable as if he had just found her naked.

The body nature had given her was small but sturdy. As with any woman, Astrid's legs were the strongest part of her body, her thighs and rump large but muscular from running

long distances between villages when she was a girl, delivering messages or trading light goods. Also as with any woman, Astrid's chest and arms were soft and rounded. She had not been born to develop the body of a blacksmith.

It wasn't unusual that Astrid changed her body when she worked, enlarging her chest and arms several times until the upper half of her body looked more like a man's physique than a woman's. Everyone changed their shape as they needed or wanted to. Only Lenore caused anyone's eyebrows to raise, because she was indiscreet about the times and places she chose to alter her body: Lenore would toss her head back and laugh as she'd sprout larger breasts and longer legs while crossing the road from one man's side to another. It was unusual for anyone else to change shape in such a crude manner. And yet Lenore was respected because no man had ever been able to alter her body by staring at it--Lenore had the confidence to maintain whatever shape she chose, no matter how anyone else might want her to appear.

Unlike Lenore, Astrid felt sensitive about changing to her blacksmithing body, because it meant finding the male qualities within herself.

As a matter of respect, there was an unspoken agreement among the villagers that no one would find reason to visit the smithery during the hours that Astrid worked. It was considered only rude to gaze upon the larger, more muscular shape to which she chose to alter her body. Everyone in the village understood this.

But as the dragonslayer was a foreigner who had lived on the edge of the village for a short time, he was unaware of this custom. Because he did not live inside the village, he was not considered part of it. His accent was strange, although he spoke their language perfectly. He was taller and stronger than any man Astrid had ever seen, and nearly every woman felt a tug of attraction to his muscular body and cool green eyes. His skin was several shades lighter than Astrid's, and it was rough and weathered.

During the seven months since his arrival, Astrid had never seen him change.

Unlike anyone else Astrid had ever known, the dragonslayer's physical appearance could not be altered, either by what someone else thought of him, or by how he perceived himself. Or perhaps, unlike anyone else, he just knew how to keep changes at bay, as if they were dragons.

Astrid made an effort to be friendly, covering up her surprise at finding him watching her. "Hello, Taddeo. How are you?"

Leaning against a poplar, his gaze was casual but open. He stared at her muscles, slick and shiny with sweat. "I am well ... are you?"

She licked her lips, tasting the salt in her sweat. Every other time Taddeo had seen her, she had worn the body everyone else was accustomed to seeing, small and slim. This was the first time he had seen her in a different form.

Astrid was, at the moment, nearly as tall as the dragonslayer and probably his equal in strength. And yet, his stare made her feel vulnerable. No one had ever caught a glimpse of her when she forged, much less examined her blacksmith shape so intently. She wanted to change back to the body she wore in public, but changing shape was a private thing. She would sooner change her clothes in front of an audience than change her body.

And Taddeo wasn't an audience for whom she would ever remove her clothes. Their friendship was a professional one.

Astrid suddenly felt very aware of the clothes she wore: loose-fitting man's pants and a light cotton vest with large armholes cut away to free her movement. Not knowing what to do with her arms to conceal them, Astrid finally crossed them to steady their trembling. Unlike a man's corded musculature, her arms were smoothly defined. She tripled the size of the muscles in her arms and chest every time she prepared to blacksmith, in order to do the work that she

loved. Until now, that much strength had made her feel good about herself.

"I'm fine," she said, answering his question. Astrid caught sight of the sword he held by his side, the one she had created for him. Inside the village, the dragonslayer usually walked unarmed. "The Magenta!" she said, relieved to find something else to talk about. "Is she serving you well?"

Taddeo smiled strangely for a moment, then flourished the sword and held it up, tilting it until the sunlight struck its polished blade. He cocked his head sharply at Astrid and laughed. "Have you had no lizard meat upon your table lately?"

Astrid nodded, but her smile was a small one. Only a few days ago, Taddeo had left the fresh corpse of a young dragon in the town center. Stretched out on the soft grass, it measured the length of four horses from snout to the tip of its spiked tail. Its neck was long and slender, as was its tail. The dragon's skin was gray with a lavender sheen, rough, and dry. Its throat and belly, unscaled and tender, had been slit.

Astrid had stared at its eyes, large as saucers, lifeless. Eyes like those had stared at Natalia, the butcher's daughter, only eight months ago. Apparently, dragons found vital organs to be delicacies and devoured them first. Then they ripped the meat from the bone. Natalia's head had been left relatively intact, but the rest of her was grisly. She had been killed a few weeks after DiStephan, the previous dragonslayer, had disappeared and a few weeks before Taddeo's services had been contracted. In that short time, a dozen crops were destroyed and several herds of livestock were ravaged.

Natalia's body was discovered by the river; DiStephan's body was never found.

This dragon, dead on the town green, might have been the same one that killed Natalia. The butcher must have thought so, judging by the way he tore it apart. But then, the butcher had attacked every dragon corpse that Taddeo had deposited on the town green with a frenzy.

"I received my share of the meat," Astrid said in a hushed voice. Searching for something else to say, she gulped, "It was very tender."

Taddeo held his head higher and nodded as if he'd performed a great and personal service for the blacksmith. "It pleases me you are satisfied." Again, he gazed unashamedly and with approval at her arms and chest. "I wish I were as pleased with the quality of the women in your village."

Astrid returned his stare, unsure if she had understood him.

"The women here are too small," he said matter-of-factly. "There is nothing to them, no meat on their bones. They've arms and legs like twigs."

Astrid was stunned into silence, searching his face for a sign of jest. He had shown her nothing but kindness and courtesy before this moment. And the dragonslayer's sword...she had imagined that it had forged a bond between them. A bond of mutual respect.

She groped for a way to change the course of the conversation. Taddeo's behavior was strange and she had no desire to see more.

The dragonslayer's sword. Perhaps that was why he had come to her.

"The Magenta," she said. "Did you bring her to me for sharpening?"

Taddeo's eyes narrowed as they searched hers, then his face relaxed into a friendly expression. "The stone fell from its setting." He opened his free hand, and the crimson-colored gem rested there. "Would you replace it for me?" He held out the sword to her.

Astrid took it from him. She was the blacksmith, a craftsman. The weight of the sword resting in her hands renewed her professional persona. Smiling, she said, "Taddeo, I already told you--I am a blacksmith, not a jeweler."

"I have traveled widely," he said, holding his posture proudly. "Your work is fine as any jeweler's."

Astrid held her tongue. The dragonslayer had boasted of his travels many times to her, and she was always torn between feelings of jealousy and annoyance. Astrid had not traveled since her girlhood days as a runner and messenger, and she longed for a reason to travel widely. At the same time, she was content with who she was and what she had accomplished, even if it was an accomplishment confined to the small boundaries of her village. She refrained from reacting to what she considered to be the dragonslayer's condescension. "Beamon Waterson can help you," she said. "He's a fine jeweler."

Taddeo spoke evenly. "My people believe continuity yields consistency. You created a beautiful weapon from a lump of iron. I want no one else to touch the Magenta other than her creator and her master." He paused and bowed slightly. "You were very kind to give her to me. This time, though, you must accept payment for your labor."

Payment.

Astrid thought of Natalia. Her life had been the cost of DiStephan's disappearance. The price of losing a dragonslayer had been much too high to pay, a price that must never be paid again. And because Astrid believed that she was to blame for Natalia's death, she had promised herself to do whatever was necessary to keep a dragonslayer at hand.

"I can't accept your money," Astrid said, hiding her feeling of guilt over Natalia's death. "Your helping the village is payment enough." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, uncomfortable. "After all, it is September."

Dragon eggs hatched in February each year, perhaps as far away as 100 miles north of Astrid's village. Dragon fledglings left the nest by July, migrating south to find a safe place to hibernate for the winter. Sometimes they hibernated nearby, re-emerging in the spring, such as the dragon that had killed Natalia, a mother dragon with a vengeance. The most dangerous time of year was September, when young

dragons migrated south, ravaging the land for food. Now was when Taddeo's services were needed the most.

Taddeo fingered the crimson-colored gem. "I found this when I cut open a lizard's gullet. I have found several like it, as well as some that are different in color but just as beautiful. I believe that once I find and kill the mother lizard, I will find even more."

He was lying. Astrid was sure of it. There were some people in the village who still believed in stories about dragons guarding treasure, but Astrid didn't believe in magic. The dragons were exactly what Taddeo said they were: lizards. And there were fewer these days than she remembered from childhood. Along with most of the villagers, Astrid believed that in another 10 years dragons would be scarce, if any were alive at all.

If Taddeo had more gems in his possession, he must have acquired them in his travels.

His eyes glinted darkly. "I insist that you accept."

Baubles. Pretty baubles.

"No, thank you," she said quietly. "I'll reset the stone as my share of payment for your services."

She held his gaze until he shrugged and broke it. "As you wish." He handed the gem to her. "You should travel with me sometime."

"What?" Astrid bit her tongue, wishing she'd ignored him.

He shrugged again. "I have no plans to stay here. You should travel and see different sights. Meet different people, experience different cultures. My people, for instance, are not farmers, like yours. My people are hunters. We have an entirely different way of living, different customs." He maintained eye contact with Astrid. "For example, I have noticed the men in your village are passive. That is why they never hunt dragons. They lack aggression and confidence."

It was true. DiStephan had been an exception. Native-born to the village, he was the only man she'd ever known who could keep his body strong under the gaze of a dragon.

She'd heard stories of how a man's body would shrivel and collapse under a dragon's stare, because the dragon perceived the man to be weak and insignificant.

She'd heard the village healers speculate that dragons had grown to giant proportions, because their bodies inflated in keeping with their views of themselves. But those were most likely tales created by storytellers.

What Astrid knew to be true was that the remains of anyone slaughtered by a dragon did seem different from the way she remembered them alive--smaller and weaker and with less meat on the bones than what should have been there. Whether this was due to the dragon's belief or the victim's lack of belief--or just the fact that the dragon had eaten part of the body by the time the victim was found, Astrid didn't know.

"When a passive man--such as those here in your village--is interested in a woman," Taddeo said coolly, "he sits back and waits for her to come to him."

Astrid held the sword in one hand and the gem in the other. A gust of wind fanned the fire, and it whooshed behind her.

"Among my people, a man pursues a woman until she relents."

Astrid stifled a gasp as she felt a binding sensation across her chest. Small tearing sounds broke the silence between them. She felt the lacing between her breasts grew taut against the eyelets.

Taddeo smirked, still holding her gaze. "I suppose I am a combination of both cultures." His face assumed an expression of innocence. "Would a week's time be enough for you to reset the Magenta?"

Astrid struggled to maintain her composure. "She will be ready the day after next."

For a moment, he let his gaze drop. He met her eyes again and smiled. "Good."

###

Astrid watched him walk away. As the lacing began to pull from the vest, she clasped it with one hand. She dropped the sword and gem, then ran through the smithery and into her cottage, into her bedroom, and stood before the mirror on the wall.

She was different. The dragonslayer had imagined her the way he wanted her to look, and that act had changed her.

Astrid pulled the remaining laces from her vest and held it open. Her breasts had moved so that they were higher on her chest and set farther apart. They'd doubled in size but were firm and fully rounded. The nipples had lightened in color and were erect.

They were fine breasts, but they weren't hers. They were disproportionate with the rest of her body. The shape she'd chosen over the years made her happy. This change made her look top-heavy, like a caricature of a woman. She felt awkward and ungainly.

Unnerved, she stared at herself. Never had anyone had a perception strong enough to change her in such a noticeable way. On occasion, after spending time with others, she might find slight changes in her appearance: a more even skin tone, her nose a bit longer or a bit shorter. It was customary to refrain from intruding upon another's appearance whenever possible.

And Astrid's view of herself was usually strong enough to keep her body as she liked it. She stroked her breasts, stroking them, trying to imagine what they used to feel like.

Nothing moved, nothing shifted. Nothing changed.

Astrid opened her eyes. All she'd been able to think about was Natalia.

And DiStephan.

###

Astrid waited until the spinning sound began to grate and slow before knocking on the door jamb.

"Astrid!" Mauri looked up in surprise. She sat at her potter's wheel. Her hair was plaited into several braids and pinned up, leaving soft wisps at the nape of her neck. Her hands were gray and slick with the clay she worked with, the edges of it pale and dry on her wrists.

Astrid leaned against the door jamb, wanting to walk in, and at the same moment wishing she had never left her own cottage.

Astrid's body had kept the shape Taddeo had left her with. For the first time in life, she was unable to change herself. She stood in Mauri's doorway, too tall and too muscular. She wore large, loose clothing and kept her arms crossed in front of her breasts, which were still much too large. "I don't want to interrupt you."

Mauri smiled, giving no indication that she noticed the difference in Astrid's appearance. To do so would have been insensitive. "Nonsense," she said. "Come in and sit down. Talk with me awhile."

Astrid paused, feeling foolish for having left the safety of her home, for exposing her problem, then shook her head. "I should go home."

Mauri kept her voice even and calm. "Let me show you what I made. Here--you can sit at the wheel."

Astrid hesitated, then sat on the floor, only wanting to be small again, not wanting her friend to notice her enormous size.

Again, Mauri paid no notice. She took a vase, fired cobalt blue, from a shelf. The vase was slender and long-necked. "This is for Kamella. Last week at church she asked me to make a vase. Did you know Beamon Waterson is courting her? Kamella said he brought a handful of field lilies to her. Bright yellow ones."

Astrid picked up a stone from the dirt floor. It was the size of her thumbnail, coated with gray pottery dust. Cool to the touch, Astrid thought.

"I think Beamon is sweet. I know he seems ill-mannered, but his heart is kind. And after having it broken in such a sad way." Mauri shook her head, her voice quiet and compassionate. "I do not know how I would survive finding my lover's body. I know he still misses Natalia. I think he's courageous to pick flowers for another."

Astrid turned the stone over in her hand. Everyone thought DiStephan had been killed by the dragon that killed Natalia. His body had never been found, so everyone assumed the dragon had devoured him in its lair.

"He and Kamella would make a good match, I think. Beamon needs someone who can return his kindness."

No one had known they were lovers: DiStephan the dragonslayer and Astrid the blacksmith--it had been an odd coupling that no one would have suspected. They quarreled often, and when she saw him kill a dragon before her eyes, Astrid experienced something she never thought possible; she was more frightened and horrified of DiStephan than she had been of the dragon.

In a moment of terror, she'd demanded that DiStephan leave so that he could not do to her what she had seen him do to the dragon. As confused and disturbed as his lover, DiStephan had vanished without a word to anyone.

Mauri examined her friend sitting on the floor and rubbing the rough edges of a stone with her thumb. Mauri sat down beside her and held out the vase. "I hope this pleases Kamella. Do you think it will?"

Had it not been for Astrid's demanded, DiStephan would not have left the village.

And Natalia would not have lost her life to a dragon.

"It is a fine vase," Astrid said, absently. She could never make demands upon another dragonslayer.

"I could make another for you," Mauri said. "Perhaps someone will soon be picking flowers for you."

Astrid looked at her sharply, remembering Taddeo's unwavering stare. Under his stare, she had felt like the rock she had picked up from Mauri's floor.

"I have to leave now," Astrid said.

Mauri set the vase down. Gray smudges from the clay on her hands dotted the cobalt glass. The clay had dried completely, making her hands look cracked and dried. Quietly, she said, "Don't allow others to change you. Who and what you want to be is your choice."

Astrid looked at her own hands, larger than they should be. "I have no choice. I have a responsibility to meet."

"Your responsibility is to yourself."

Astrid paused, wondering, as she had often done before, if somehow Mauri knew about DiStephan. If she'd guessed from the days when Astrid had glowed in her radiant feelings of love for DiStephan, and the days after he'd left, when Astrid had felt herself grow as quiet as the forest. She shook her head. "No. There are times when the stakes are too high. It is September, and I can feel the dragons approaching. Sometimes I think I can smell them in the air."

"How can you assume responsibility for others until you are responsible to yourself?"

Astrid hesitated, turning the stone over in her hand. She began to answer but stopped abruptly as she turned toward Mauri. Astrid was so startled that she forgot what she had meant to say.

Mauri had changed. Her hands were tapered and graceful. Her eyes were larger and deeper set. Her cheekbones, higher.

Mauri was the same. It was just that a little more of the beauty within had surfaced.

###

Astrid saw Taddeo as he approached the smithery. This time, she was not caught off-guard. She glanced at the sword leaning against a nearby tree stump and smiled.

He leered at her, the expression in his eyes assuming more than it should. "I have no time to stop for the Magenta. I have business to attend to, and it would be inappropriate to bring a weapon with me. I hope you will be able to deliver her to my camp at noon."

Astrid looked at her work. "No. I don't have time to deliver."

"Yes, but this is the Magenta--she is something special. Tonight, then?"

"No," Astrid said, looking evenly at Taddeo. "You can have her now or return some other time."

Insult edged his voice as he looked at the sword leaning against the tree stump. "Where is the Magenta's stone?" Imbedded in the hilt was not the crimson stone, but a small rock.

"Once in my hands, the gem turned to stone," she said. Astrid gauged his reaction: surprise followed by hesitation. Followed by a tolerant but determined smile.

As she'd suspected, he knew such a thing was impossible. Unless one believed in magic and enchantment.

There was another sword resting on top of the anvil behind Astrid. She turned, then handed the Magenta--with the gemstone replaced--to Taddeo.

He smiled, examining the blacksmith's work. "Impressive, as always. If you are interested, there are other weapons I would like you to forge for me."

Taddeo had conceded defeat in attempting to lure her into his lair. Now he sought other reasons to seek contact with her. Relentlessly.

"I am sorry, but I would not have the time."

The tone of Taddeo's voice did not alter. "I would pay for them, of course." He glanced at her. "Whenever price you desire."

"I am committed to other work."

"At a later time, then."

"No," Astrid said softly. "I think not."

As she watched, careful to show no reaction, Taddeo's face changed. A leer etched itself darkly in his eyes as they became narrower and smaller. His nose grew misshapen. The lines that had so beautifully defined his jaw and cheekbones weakened. His posture slackened and his youth faded.

"There is only one other blacksmith in the area, three villages west of here," he said. "And the quality of his work lacks much. Perhaps it is time to seek a change. Perhaps I have killed enough lizards for this village." He paused, waiting for Astrid to protest. "There are many other villages seeking my services."

Instead of offering protest, Astrid said, "That is a decision you alone can make."

His eyes squinted in an unbecoming manner as he searched her face.

Astrid fought the sorrow that threatened to well within her. She wanted to remember Taddeo as she had known him, not as he had become. As hard as she tried, she couldn't remember exactly what he had looked like, only moments ago.

Astrid started at the rumble of thunder. And yet when she looked up, the sky was clear and blue.

Taddeo raised his head, his nostrils flaring. He sniffed the air like a tracking dog. Then he knelt, laying one ear to the ground.

Astrid cried out as a dragon came crashing through the poplars, someone screaming in the distance.

Dark it was, and yellow-eyed, opening its jaws as it lowered its belly to the ground, sizing up its prey. The

dragon's scales were dark and mottled, its young muscles fairly bursting from its skin.

"Aiy yah!" Taddeo cried in feral rage, grasping the hilt of the Magenta. As he leapt forward, the Magenta held him back. The sword was too heavy for him to wield.

"Taddeo!" Astrid said in horror.

The dragonslayer looked at the Magenta in disbelief, as if his best friend had betrayed him. Then he looked at his arms and his body, no longer large and lean, but now withered with age. Until this moment, Taddeo hadn't noticed how severely Astrid's perception had changed him.

The dragon inhaled their fear, its tail cracking the wood on the poplar trunks as it lashed back and forth between them.

Taddeo's gaze lifted until his eyes met Astrid's. Enraged, he shouted, "Change me back!"

But she did not hear the words of the dragonslayer. Her eyes had met yellow eyes the size of saucers, primal eyes.

Unwittingly, her breath began to match the rhythm of the lizard's panting.

Its teeth glistened, ivory sharp in its slackened jaw.

"Aiy yah!" Taddeo cried, mustering his last remaining strength, pulling with all his might on the hilt. Still unable to raise the sword, he dragged it in the dust until the tip lay between him and the dragon.

With the agility of a cat pinning a mouse by the tail, the dragon slapped the sword flat on the ground with one foot.

Taddeo shouted, refusing to release the hilt, falling to the ground with the sword. The dragon's toenail had sliced Taddeo's cheekbone. The wound raised a welt for a moment, then bled steadily. Oblivious, Taddeo grimaced, kicking at the dragon's foot to make it let go of the Magenta.

The dragon's jaw dropped slightly, and for a moment it looked as if it were smiling.

Like a mountain cat, Taddeo screeched in determination, holding onto the hilt of the Magenta with both hands, pivoting on his side on the ground, pushing with both feet against the dragon's foot, the tendons stretching taut in his face and neck and arms.

With its free front foot, the dragon pinned Taddeo's head to the ground.

"No!" Astrid cried. As rage woke her, she reached for the sword leaning against the tree stump. She grabbed the hilt of the new sword she'd made, a sword with a hilt shaped to fit her own hand.

In a blind fury, Astrid ran to the dragon's face, both hands gripping the sword spear-like above her head, aiming the point directly at the dragon's yellow eye. "Let him go!" she shouted at the dragon.

Deftly, the dragon batted Astrid in the chest, knocking the sword out of her hands and the wind out of her lungs.

Soundlessly, full of hate, she grappled for her sword, stumbled toward the dragon, and plunged the blade in the direction of the dragon's heart.

Agilely, the dragon moved, only getting nicked by the tip of Astrid's sword. In moving, it let go of the Magenta and Taddeo, who grasped his own throat, wheezing.

Astrid fell, pulled by the force of her missed blow, landing face first in the dust. Rolling over quickly, she scrambled up to find the dragon now behind her. Spinning to face it, she was struck numb with horror.

In the dragon's face inches away from hers, she saw her face reflected in its amber eyes. And what she saw on her own face was what she had seen on her lover's face the day she had seen him kill a dragon, the day she had felt so frightened of what she had seen that she demanded he leave.

It wasn't an adult dragon that DiStephan had killed or even a fledgling. It was a hatchling, weak and vulnerable, the size of a small dog. But DiStephan's fighting instinct had kicked in--all he knew was that it was a dragon, and he fought

with full force, not just killing the hatchling, but dismembering it with a murderous vengeance, mindlessly, until what was left of the hatchling was unrecognizable. Astrid and DiStephan had been out in the country on a picnic when DiStephan had smelled dragon in the air.

Astrid hadn't understood what had happened, or why, and wondered if somehow DiStephan might mistake her for a dragon if he thought he smelled one in the air. But now she saw the desire to kill for the sake of killing on her own face, and it was something she never imagined she'd see.

Taddeo's face was covered with blood and dust, and he cried out again as he pulled the Magenta weakly toward the dragon, barely nudging its belly.

The dragon batted Taddeo across the smithery yard, then raised its foot to Astrid.

"No!" she shouted. She raised her sword steadily, grasping it with both wrists cocked. "I don't want to hurt you!" she screamed, wanting to cry.

The dragon snorted, its eyes narrowing.

"I've heard about you," she said shakily, staring back. "You make people smaller and weaker, and sometimes they're so frightened they turn into deer, and the only way you can tell they were once human is to look in their eyes, because that's all that's left of their humanity." Astrid shook her head slightly, looking straight into the dragon's eyes. "You can't do that to me! And I won't let you do that to my people!"

The dragon stepped closer, but Astrid stood her ground, the blade between them, one sharp edge touching the dragon's skin; the other, her own skin.

"I know you're hungry," she said, still crying. "But don't eat people. There are animals in the forest. There are grain fields and bushes of wild berries in the south. There is food all around--you don't need us!"

As the dragon leaned forward, she pressed back the pressure with the blade, still not cutting the dragon's skin. "I

know you don't understand what I'm saying, but I think you understand what I mean."

The dragon sniffed her hair, then licked the sweat from her arms, sending chills down Astrid's back. Before Astrid could blink, the dragon sprang back through the poplars.

Trembling, Astrid collapsed in the dirt, both hands still clinging to the hilt of her sword.

With a thud, Taddeo sat next to her. He stared at the poplars in disbelief. "*That*," he said, panting, "I have never seen. The beast took you up on your offer."

"Dragons aren't that much different from you or me," Astrid said, shaken. "They just live the best way they know how."

Taddeo looked younger but still weary. He looked as if he'd regained most of his strength. "If you were not so compassionate, you could be a dragonslayer." Taddeo shook his head, looking at Astrid with admiration and only a hint of desire.

Astrid stared at the poplars, gasping, feeling her heart shake inside. It was a few moments before she had the presence of mind to speak.

"I don't want to be a dragonslayer," she said, thinking of DiStephan, now understanding the primitive rage he had felt when he slaughtered the hatchling on a gentle spring day. Astrid wondered if she had panicked or if she had possibly saved her life by demanding that he leave. She believed that she would never really know the answer. Just as she would never know whether the dragon had understood her or just picked up a more interesting scent in the air.

"You realize, of course," Taddeo said, standing and offering her a hand up, "that you just dismissed a week's meal for the village."

Astrid accepted his hand, leaning on her sword as she stood. "There will be others." She trembled, wiping the tears from her face, looking out toward the poplars. "Dragon season

has only just begun." She looked back at Taddeo, squinting. "And I trust you will not allow any other dragon to get away."

Taddeo caught his breath, then relaxed into a smile. "No," he said confidently. "That is the last one to get away."

Realizing her clothes felt loose, Astrid looked down to see that her body had returned to its normal shape and size.

"That happened when you fought the dragon," Taddeo said. "You returned to yourself."

Feeling awkward and hesitant, Astrid gave him a slight smile. "You've returned to yourself, too."

"Yes," Taddeo said, clearing his throat. "As has the Magenta." He bowed slightly, holding the Magenta between his hands as if in prayer. "Thank you for your work."

Astrid waved as he left, then hugged the body to which she'd come back.

"You're welcome," she said, watching the dragonslayer walk away with the sword she had forged for him.

The Silver Shoes

One cool spring morning, Astrid paused at her blacksmith's fire when she heard the bell ring at the door in the next room. Astrid put down the bellows she had been using to encourage the fire and, as a matter of habit, changed the shape of her body from the larger, more masculine shape she used to do her work to her natural female shape.

As her body shifted, Astrid's trousers became more snug against her widening hips, and her vest became loose and roomy. Only then did she walk into the shop adjoining the smithery.

Lenore, the new cobbler, stood in the open doorway. Lenore was tall and shapely, and her corn-silk hair draped across her shoulders like fine cloth. Lenore was waving to a man across the road and, as she did so, her waist became more narrow and her bosom larger and more shapely.

Astrid caught her breath. Like the other villagers, Astrid would sooner change her clothes in public than her shape. She'd seen Lenore change her shape in public before, but this was the first time Astrid had stood nearby as it happened. Astrid felt shocked and embarrassed. At the same time, she admonished herself not to be unkind. "Lenore," Astrid said. "May I help you with something?"

Lenore turned to face Astrid. As she did, her waist and bosom returned to their normal appearance. Lenore hesitated, holding onto the doorjamb. “I know this may sound odd,” she said, smiling. “But I need a pair of shoes.”

Astrid laughed, then looked down and saw Lenore was barefoot. Her feet were beautiful. They were brown and high-arched. Her toes were straight and narrow. “I have heard that cobblers’ children often go without shoes, but I never knew it was true of the cobbler herself!” Astrid said.

Although Lenore was far from a shy woman, she seemed to withdraw for a moment, looking down at her feet. “I need a blacksmith to make a special pair of shoes for me. I need a pair of silver shoes.”

Astrid realized that she had failed to invite Lenore inside. “Come, sit down,” Astrid said.

They sat together at a round, wooden table.

“I have never made a pair of shoes before,” Astrid said.

“I can help,” Lenore said. “I have never worked with metal, as you do. But if we put our skills together, we should be able to figure out how such shoes can be made.”

Astrid put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in both hands. She gazed at Lenore for a few moments, trying to puzzle her out. “Perhaps we can.”

Lenore looked back steadily at Astrid. “Perhaps it would be helpful if I tell you why I need these shoes.”

Astrid shrugged. “If you like.”

Lenore looked frightened for a moment, as if she might run away like a deer in the woods. Then her eyes calmed and her face relaxed. “As you know, I have not always lived here. I come from the northlands, where owning a good pair of shoes gives one a decent chance of surviving the winter.”

###

“My father was a cobbler, and when I was a child, I learned my trade from him. Soon after, both my mother and father were taken by the plague. Their house was burned

down by neighbors fearing the spread of illness. It was summer, and I left the village where I was born with nothing but my clothes, the shoes on my feet, a handful of cobbler's needles, and a small knife.

“I found shelter in a cave in the woods nearby and learned how to find food by following the birds and the chipmunks. Being a child and too young to control my body, I felt my shoes grow tighter every day. I knew I would outgrow them by winter.

“I discovered a town on the other side of my woods. I went there with my cobbler’s knife and needles and knocked on every door. I offered to mend any worn shoes or make shoes for anyone who could provide the leather. In exchange, I asked for scraps of leather or cloth. I mended a few pairs of shoes, but most people simply gave me whatever scraps they could spare.

“By autumn, I had enough scraps to make a pair of new shoes. I planned them carefully, leaving enough room for my feet to grow comfortably throughout the winter and, at the same time, making the shoes small enough so they would not fall off when I walked in them.

“The miller had given to me an armful of bright red cloth, and I had planned to make a dress with it. But after I stitched my new shoes together, I was disappointed because they looked like patchwork. All the scraps of leather I had used were different shades of black and brown. Although my shoes were well enough made to see me through the winter, they were ugly. I decided to cover them with the miller’s red cloth.

“Once I had covered the shoes in red, I was filled with joy. Not only were they beautiful, but I had made them myself, and it was the creation as much as the shoes themselves that made me happy.

“That is how I lived year after year. I had a cave for a home. I gathered food from the forest. And every autumn I made a new pair of red shoes for myself. When each winter ended, I celebrated by planting wildflowers by my cave. I discovered I loved working the earth with my hands. I woke

up surrounded by the scent of pine trees and the music of birds. At night I walked barefoot in the grassy hollows and gazed upon the stars crowding the sky.

But every winter was hard, and when I stopped growing and became a woman, I yearned for an easier life.”

###

I continued to knock on all the doors in town with knife and needles in hand. Over the years, I became a fine cobbler, as my father had been. I spoke with everyone who needed shoes made or mended, or who merely wanted someone with whom to pass the time of day. That suited me fine. I stayed in my cave for weeks or even months at a time during the winter, and it was never long before I craved the companionship of other people. I came to be greeted warmly, and my customers bartered generously with me. I believed it would take many years, but I hope someday I could acquire my own home in the town.

“One morning I knocked upon the door of a fine manor. It was nearly the size of a castle and was surrounded by riding paths and grassy hills. As always, the master himself answered the door when I knocked. He was dressed in a fine, white shirt and black, billowing trousers. He wore high, black riding boots, which were well heeled. He had first taken pity on me when I was a child. He always gave generously, whether he had any need for his own shoes or not.

“I had been smitten with his good looks and his kindness even when I was just a young girl.

“His hair was as black as his boots. So were his eyes, and they were shining at me as he leaned in his doorway and smiled at me. ‘I have a confession to make,’ the master of the manor said to me. ‘I would like to offer my home to you.’

“I was astonished and spoke without thinking. ‘But I have been without a home for many years! Why is it now that you offer me shelter?’

“The master looked down at the toes of his beautiful riding boots for a moment, then looked up and gazed steadily

into my eyes. 'If I had offered you shelter before, it would have been as a father. How could I have done so when I was falling in love with you?' He reached out and took my hand. 'I am asking you to be my wife and the lady of this manor.'

"It was a great temptation. A man who had shown me nothing but kindness now offered me companionship, a home beyond my wildest fantasies, and a carefree life.

"Because I was an orphan girl, I had long ago given up hope that any man would ever want to marry me. As I gazed into his dark eyes, I felt the first stirrings of love.

"I said *yes* without thinking."

###

"I was immediately welcomed into the manor. A servant girl led me to a small room where she brought in buckets of steaming water and poured them into a grand marble tub. I spent an hour in the bath, until the hot water warmed me to the bone. I was then given undergarments, a long white dress, white stockings, and shiny black shoes.

"The next day the master of the house became my husband.

"At first, I was delighted. I explored every room of the manor. I ate as much as I wanted, whenever I wanted. The servants of the household were scarcely older than me, and I asked them many questions, for I wished to know them as my friends.

"It was then that my husband first admonished me.

"'You must not become friendly with the servants,' my husband said. 'I understand you come from their class, but you are now of a higher class. It is your duty to behave in a way fitting to our class, not theirs.'

"This was something I had not considered before agreeing to marry.

"In my own village, there were no people of such high class, and these customs were new to me. 'Tell me what I

must do,' I said to my husband. I was determined to live up to whatever responsibilities my new life demanded.

"And so my husband told me that I was to be a lady. I was to make decisions about the household, and if there were any problems I was to defer them to my husband's judgment. I was to sit quietly in the house whenever I was not running it. I was not to go outside. And whenever my husband held dances in the great ballroom, I was to make myself look beautiful and dance with him all evening.

"I embraced this new life. I relished the comfort of our feather bed and the warmth of the manor. One morning I forgot to put on my shoes, and my husband was quick to put his hand upon my arm.

"A lady,' he said, 'does not go barefoot. Where are your black shoes?'

"I sat on the edge of our feather bed and pulled on my white stockings. When I saw my shiny black shoes at the side of the bed, I felt very sad. I remembered how I had once made my own shoes. 'Husband,' I said. 'May I wear my own red shoes today?'

"He laughed until he saw that I was serious. 'Lenore,' he said as he sat beside me on the bed. 'You are no longer a poor commoner. There is nothing you need fear.'

"I just want to wear my own shoes,' I said.

"My husband took my hand and held it gently. 'I never imagined you would have any use for them again.'

"Where are they?' I asked. I felt panic rising up within me.

"On the day you moved in,' my husband said quietly, 'I had them burned.'"

###

"My husband's pleasure was to dance, and it soon became my pleasure, as well. I pushed aside my longing to plant wildflowers, which I could not do because a lady does not soil her hands. I ignored my desire to walk barefoot in the

grassy meadows at night and look up at the stars, because a lady does not walk outside at night. I tried to forget how much I loved the scent of fresh pine in the morning and the pleasure of the birds singing.

“Most of all, I pretended not to miss my needles and my small knife and the feel of supple leather in my hands. Cobbling was for commoners, not for ladies.

“I loved dancing because it was what my husband loved.

“He decided to hold a dance in the great ballroom as a way of introducing me to his proper friends. He gave me a pocketful of coins and told me to buy some new dancing shoes from the town cobbler.

“I walked into the cobbler’s shop knowing full well my husband expected me to buy a pair of black dancing shoes. But on the cobbler’s bench was a pair of red shoes that made my heart pound. They were not the bright, joyful red of my old handmade shoes. They were a dark, mottled red, as if the shoes themselves were brooding.

“I paid the cobbler immediately, and he wrapped up my shoes in a plain package so no one would know what I had bought.

“On the evening of my first dance, I wore a featherweight black dress. The dress covered not only my ankles but my feet. I walked gingerly into the ballroom, so none of our guests could see my new red shoes peeking out from under my skirt. I danced only when the floor was crowded with couples, all dressed in finery of black and white. But in the middle of the evening, my husband made a grand announcement to introduce me to everyone in the ballroom. As the musicians played, my husband spun me onto the empty floor. I felt my skirt flare, and then heard my husband’s proper friends laugh softly among themselves.

“They pointed at my shoes as we danced, and someone soon took my husband aside and informed him of my choice in footwear.

“My husband was kind to me. ‘I know you miss your shoes,’ he said. ‘But you have a new life now, which means you have different responsibilities.’

“‘And is it my responsibility to wear black shoes?’ I asked.

“‘Yes, only black shoes,’ he said. ‘Or you may wear white shoes, but only in the summer.’

“And so I embraced dancing with all of my heart. My husband, like many wealthy men, was frugal. He could not bear to throw away a perfectly good pair of shoes, even if they were red. He told me I could wear them once in awhile, but only when I was at home alone and the servants could not see me in them. Whenever my husband left the manor, I would steal the red shoes from their hiding place and swear the servants to secrecy. I practiced every step my husband taught me. I asked the servants to dance with me. When they tired, I danced with large scarves or my husband’s shirts as partners.

“Some days it seemed my feet kept dancing long after I had tired. My husband would make me sit down, but my feet kept dancing in the air until he pried the shoes from my feet.

“My husband soon hosted another dance in our grand ballroom. He reminded me to do the proper thing and wear my black shoes. He lifted the hem of my long white ballroom dress and nodded in approval when he discovered I was already wearing black dancing shoes. Then he went ahead to the ballroom to greet our guests, as I was to finish preparing myself for the dance.

“I searched for my red shoes until I found them locked away in a cabinet. I broke the red shoes free of their prison and put them on.

“Again, I was careful how I danced so no one would notice. It was not until the end of the evening that anyone saw my red shoes and so informed my husband.

“When the dance ended and all our guests had left, my husband tried to speak to me, but I could not stop dancing. He managed to catch me and carry me in his arms out of the

ballroom, but still my feet kept dancing in the air. Finally, with the help of two manservants, my husband pried the red shoes from my feet, and they were still at last.

“What troubles you?” my husband asked me later, as we prepared for bed. ‘You are no longer the happy woman I married.’

“I lifted a hand mirror to fix my hair and saw it was not my own reflection looking back at me, but the reflection of my husband.”

###

Astrid sat back in her chair, puzzled. “Someone changed your face?”

Lenore nodded.

“But that is unthinkable,” Astrid said. “Do the people of the northlands practice different customs? Do they not consider letting their own opinion change another’s appearance to be wrong?”

“I did it,” Lenore said quietly. “It was not other people who viewed me differently. It was myself. I willingly gave up the life I created for myself in exchange for a bit of comfort. And for love. I gave up what I loved because I wanted to be loved.

“When I realized what I had done, I felt trapped. I was truly in love with my husband, and I saw him as my salvation. I came to believe if I embraced what he embraced, I would become happy again. Instead, I became my husband.”

Astrid chose her words carefully. “And no one remarked upon your face looking just like your husband’s face? None of your guests commented upon it? None of the servants? Not even your husband?”

Lenore smiled sadly. “The people of the northlands are very much like the people here. To do so would have been rude. It was out of kindness that no one said anything to me about the change in my appearance. It was something I had to discover for myself.”

“What did you do next?”

Although Lenore kept smiling, her eyes dulled. “I could not sleep that night. All I wanted was to dance so I would not have to face the reflection I had seen in the mirror. The next day my husband put on his riding boots and took his favorite stallion out for a ride in the country. I found the red shoes and danced out of the manor and throughout the town. Although I wanted to stop, I could not.”

“Were the shoes enchanted?” Astrid said, although she did not believe such a thing was possible.

“No,” Lenore said. “Even in the northlands, we do not practice any belief in enchantment. I had simply lost control of myself. I believed I had lost the will to stop, and my thoughts kept spiraling around me until they trapped me in the dance.”

“Then how did you stop?” Astrid said.

Lenore looked at her for several long moments. “I came upon the town blacksmith. I asked him to use a sword of his making to cut the shoes from my feet. But I had been dancing for hour upon hour. My feet had bled, and the shoes were stuck to my feet.”

“What did you do?”

Lenore paused for a heartbeat, then said, “I asked the blacksmith to cut off my feet.”

Astrid looked at Lenore in astonishment. “But he did not.”

Lenore held her hands together on the tabletop. “He did.”

“How do you explain that?” Astrid said. She peeked under the table to make sure Lenore’s bare feet were still there. “Did you grow yourself new feet?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Astrid studied Lenore’s expression. As far as Astrid knew, Lenore had been unlucky in making any true friends in the year since she had joined the village. Astrid had seen

Lenore sprout larger breasts or longer legs as she laughingly crossed the road from one man's side to another. Men were mesmerized by both her beauty and her confidence—and women avoided Lenore for those same reasons.

Finally, Astrid said in wonder, "You do not jest."

"No," Lenore said.

"I know you must be telling the truth," Astrid said. "But you must admit it is a very difficult thing to believe."

Lenore nodded. "No one could believe at first I had my feet cut off, especially my husband. But when I explained how it was a sacrifice I would gladly make to return to my old life, my husband gave me his favorite stallion and enough provisions for an entire family. 'Go seek your old life,' my husband said to me. 'And with luck, you will become as strong as the child you once were. Perhaps you will become strong enough to believe your feet are with you in a spirit so great you may walk upon it.'" Lenore paused and covered her face with her hands.

Astrid drew a fresh handkerchief from her vest pocket and gave the handkerchief to Lenore.

"His love for me was true," Lenore said, dabbing the tears from her eyes. "As mine was for him. And I kept his words close to my heart as I rode south, knowing they were the greatest gift he had ever given to me. As I traveled, I imagined my feet as they used to be. As my injury healed, I removed the bandages from my ankles and exposed the stumps instead of hiding them. And as I imagined my feet, I began to have feelings in them. One evening, as I rode to an inn, I looked down to discover my feet had reappeared."

"But they are not real feet," Astrid said. "They are only an illusion, such as when you unknowingly changed your face to that of your husband."

"My feet," Lenore said, "are as real as my belief in them." She pulled up a small bench and placed it lengthwise between them. "Here," Lenore said, resting her legs upon the bench so

her feet dangled over the edge. “I will show you how real they are. Take my feet in your hands.”

“I might as well measure them,” Astrid said. She brushed the dirt gingerly from the bottom of Lenore’s bare foot. Astrid aligned the heel of her palm with the heel of Lenore’s foot. Lenore’s feet were longer and sturdier than Astrid had first thought. She could feel the bones and muscles moving fluidly under her touch.

Eerily, Lenore’s skin felt more like tanned leather than skin.

And yet Astrid could not believe the story she had just heard. “These are real feet,” Astrid stated.

Lenore’s story had been just that—a story.

###

Just as Astrid was about to let go, the feet dissolved in her hands, like sugar disappearing into warm water. What had been muscular and bony was now just empty, tingling air. Lenore’s legs ended in stumps crisscrossed with thick scars.

Astrid looked up and saw Lenore had closed her eyes. Lenore’s hair was now brown instead of golden, and it was streaked with gray. Wrinkles gathered around her eyes and mouth.

Something solid filled up Astrid’s hands again, and she looked down to see Lenore’s feet. Astrid ran her fingertips along Lenore’s ankles, where stumps had been just moments ago. Lenore’s skin was seamless and unflawed.

“I apologize for such a vulgar sight,” Lenore said. She opened her eyes, now that she had returned to herself.

Astrid felt the warmth from the feet she still held. What had just happened was not possible. “You need not apologize. It takes great trust to show your true self to another.”

Astrid frowned as she let go of Lenore’s feet, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Perhaps it had merely been Astrid's imagination. Perhaps she had wanted to believe Lenore's story, and for a moment had seen what Lenore had suggested was true.

Or perhaps this had been Lenore's way of seeking out a friend. Perhaps it was an illusion that Lenore had created and practiced until it worked perfectly.

Lenore looked at Astrid hopefully. "Are you willing to make a pair of silver shoes for me?"

Astrid nodded. "Come back in three days, and we shall devise a way for such shoes to be made."

As Lenore walked outside, she spread her arms in the sunlight as if embracing its warmth. She tossed her golden hair and laughed. She spun in place, dancing a few steps, but only a few. She waved goodbye to Astrid.

As Lenore departed, the feet upon which she walked left no footprints in the dirt path.

Astrid stared at the dirt and Lenore's feet, which did not sink into the loose dirt. Instead, Lenore seemed to be walking on a thin cushion of air, her feet never quite touching the ground.

It was impossible.

Unless one walked on spirit feet made entirely of belief.

As Lenore encountered a new man on the road, her hair grew more luxurious and her face prettier.

This time, Astrid felt neither shocked nor embarrassed. She smiled fondly at Lenore. "Come back in three days, my friend," she whispered. As Astrid walked back to her work, she glanced down at her own footprints, comforted by the sight.

She would never take them for granted again.