

SERAPH OF SORROW

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**PART TWO:**

**GLORIANNA SEABRIGHT**

*I'm not a person who thinks the world would be entirely different if it was run by women. If you think that, you've forgotten what high school was like.*

- Madeline Albright

## **CHAPTER FIVE: TESTED BY FIRE**

At the age of fifteen, Glorianna Seabright was grounded for the first time.

This evening, the idea that she would some day be mayor of a town named Winoka would have made her laugh nervously and twirl a finger in the shiny, straight dark locks draped over her neck and shoulders. She did not live in Winoka, which was called Pinegrove at the time. The farm where she lived and raised ewes and lambs with her father was outside a sleepy town in the Red River Valley, far in the northwest corner of Minnesota. After finishing high school in a couple of years, Glorianna planned to go to a community college in-state – or maybe across the border in North Dakota – and become a cosmetologist.

That was a long time from tonight. Tonight, she was preoccupied with plans to run away.

It wasn't a serious thought, she had to admit to herself as she lay in the dark with nothing but an oversized nightshirt protecting her from the early spring chill. But it was persistent, keeping her up for the last couple of hours since she had gotten home – late.

She had run through the plan over and over, restlessly. It was easy – get up, jump through the open window, and dart off across the farm.

Theirs was a close-knit town, and her family was popular here. She would have no trouble finding someone to take her in for a few days. Heck, her friend Andrea was a mile or so down the road, at a neighboring farm. No doubt she was in trouble too, since the two girls had been out together in the woods until after midnight splitting a 40-ounce bottle of Midnight Dragon malt liquor. They had traded stories and laughs about how ridiculous their parents were, with their tales of imaginary monsters and the absurd "training routines" they both had to do, as if anyone would ever have to use them.

Even if Andrea was also in trouble, her parents were always kind to Glorianna, and maybe they would understand. At least going there would give her time to come up with a longer-term plan.

Ultimately, the reason she wouldn't go had nothing to do with Andrea's parents, Glorianna thought as she caught the faint scent of cow manure through the window. The reason had to do with her father.

As if on cue, there was a knock on her door. *At four in the morning?*

Without waiting for an answer, Richard Evan Seabright opened the door.

"Get up," he told her.

"Wha – "

"Put on pants." Off in the distance, she could hear the sound of screaming fire engines.

*It can't be*, she told herself as she rummaged through her dark wardrobe and finally managed to find a pair of flowered stretch pants. While she had faithfully listened

to her father's stories of demon-like things, and played along with routines like sword practice, she could not bring herself to believe the delusions of a bereaved man.

When he came back to her room with sword in hand, she realized she could be wrong.

"They're here?"

He nodded. In his other hand, he held a pitchfork. "You'll need this."

Stammering, she held her hands up in protest. She noticed her own fingernails, where she had painted tiny blossom patterns that had caused Andrea to proclaim Glorianna the Next Great Salon Worker of the Great Plains. "B-but I c-can't – "

"You've practiced. In the barn."

"On piles of straw bales! Don't the *real* ones *move*?"

"We don't have time to discuss this. Take it." He thrust the pitchfork into her hand, breaking a nail. "And get in the truck."

As they scrambled into the pickup truck with cold dew and dirt on their bare feet, she squinted at the crescent moon among the fading stars. The truck tore out of the driveway and left their quaint, white farmhouse obscured by billowing dust.

"Are you sure it's them?" she asked him. "Maybe it's a fire, or some emergency response exercise."

"It's them." His pale stare fixed on the red glow over the road far ahead.

She shook her head and then realized that she hadn't had time to brush her hair.

"You're just a farmer. How can you know stuff like this?"

"Just a farmer." He licked his lips in distaste.

She felt the chill air through the heating vents and rubbed her knees. It was unlikely the cab would have time to warm up before they would be downtown.

"Why are you bringing me with you? I've ever seen one of these things before."

"Always a first time," he muttered at the dirt road. "They never get less dangerous."

"If they're half as dangerous as you say, won't I be killed?"

"You'll be tested."

"Tested." She chewed her tongue. "Was that what happened to Mom? She was tested? Did she fail?"

"Glory!" She could not tell if the look he gave him was determination, or despair.

"Sorry, sir."

They spent the last few minutes in silence, until they reached the town center – a single intersection of crumbling streets that ran past two bars, a liquor store, and a few struggling retail shops. The liquor store was already ablaze, and a few of the nearest residents had already gathered to the south of the intersection, not far from where the fire engines had stopped.

Before anyone could do anything to douse the flames, they would have to do something about the winged monsters that circled in the dark above. It was hard for Glorianna as she got out of the truck to make out exactly how many there were – four? Six? A dozen?

*How can we possibly fight them,* she wondered in awe, flinching at a bellow far above.

Nevertheless, she pulled the pitchfork out of the truck bed. If pointy sticks were all they had, then pointy sticks it was.

"Ri!" She spun around toward the voice. Andrea was in a nightgown and bathrobe, holding an ash-laced poker in her hands. The girl's honey-blonde hair and bright green eyes were wild with fear and excitement. *At least she was smart enough to bring slippers*, Glorianna thought as she shifted her weight on the cold pavement.

"Where are the police?" she asked Andrea.

As if in answer, a patrol car careened through the intersection. It was impossible to tell who was driving it, because the interior was full of the same fire that seeped out from under the hood, and which burst from the liquor store windows, and which was consuming several other buildings and parked vehicles. The police car veered, nearly hit the small crowd of scattering townspeople, and smashed into the corner hardware store.

The beasts above roared with sadistic laughter, and one of them let loose with a new jet of flame. It was too high to do much more than wash the rooftops of the buildings on the northeast corner, but already some of the townspeople were running away. A few of them fired handguns into the gloom. Glorianna could not tell in the chaos if the bullets missed completely, or glanced off thick hides.

*"Stay fast."* Richard Evan Seabright used a voice his daughter had never heard before, not a dull farmer's baritone at all, but something sharper and clearer. It stopped the crowd in their tracks and compelled them to face him as he jumped onto the flatbed and lifted his sword high. The blade glistened crimson from the surrounding firelight.

"You can't run from these things! They'll follow you to the next house you live in, the next town we build together. The only way to stop them is fighting. Right here. Tonight!"

"We'll die!" Glorianna could not see the man who said this.

Her father gave her a small smile. "Let the test come. Death is on *our* side tonight."

With that, he climbed onto the cab of his truck, turned to the twilight sky, and raised his sword at the swooping shapes. "*Ready yourselves, or ready your souls!*"

A hollow shriek answered. Something swooped down toward him from behind.

"*Dad!*"

Before she could finish screaming, he had leapt from the truck, spun in mid-air, and flung his blade with a yell. As Richard Seabright landed, a bright blue dragon with violet markings under its wings gave a gurgle of surprise and pain, lost control of its predatory trajectory, and crashed into the burning street.

Glorianna cheered with everyone else as her father walked back past his truck, approached the reptilian carcass, and yanked his weapon out of the monster's throat. The corpse lifted with the pull, and then collapsed again.

"*Death is on our side tonight!*" he repeated, bloody sword pointing at the crescent moon.

A larger dragon descended – with black scales and a spiked crest – right over the thickest part of the crowd, breathing heat. The cheers reverted to screams, and Glorianna saw the woman who owned the bakery down the street crumple into a writhing twist of fire. The man next to her staggered backward with his entire upper body aflame, and his

pistol exploded in his hand. The shrapnel flew into the faces of a pair of teenaged boys who had been picking up rocks to throw.

As it passed low over the street, someone leapt from a second-story rooftop onto the dragon's back. It buckled with the added weight and roared in indignation.

*"Mom!"*

Glorianna held her alarmed friend back from following the woman and her unwilling steed, nearly dropping her pitchfork. "No, Andrea! She knows what she's doing!" *She knows what she's doing.* A thrill went through her at the thought. *Andrea's mom. My dad. How many are there? How good are they? Can we win this?*

"Let me go, Ri!" Andrea shook free and ran into the intersection. "Mom!" Both Glorianna and her father gave chase.

The dragon was too fast for those on the ground – but the woman riding it hung on, drew a butcher's knife from inside her coat, and drove it between the wing blades of the beast she rode.

The fiend thrashed as it rolled onto the pavement, spilling the warrior onto the sidewalk. She somersaulted several times and finally came to rest face down and motionless.

"Mom! Mom, get up!" Andrea wailed as she sped through the intersection. *"Get up!"* She was heedless to everything around her – the small explosions coming out of the liquor store close by, the outraged bellows of the dragons above, or the Seabrights as they tried to keep up.

They were all so focused on Andrea's mother and the squirming thing that kept trying to remove the weapon from its heaving back, they did not see what was coming from their right.

EXCERPT