After the Dragon is Dead

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Istepped out onto the western terrace and stopped to marvel at the blaze of glory that the setting sun had spread across the sky for our enjoyment. Golden light streamed around the clouds, edging them with fire, while the sun was a crimson oval on a background of pinks and blues more delicate than the finest court painter could ever concoct.

In the village below the townspeople were lighting torches for their celebration, and by those distant flickers I could make out a thin black line in the square with a thickening at the top, the pole on which the usurper-tyrant’s head was impaled.

A serving-girl, one of those we had so recently freed from the tyrant’s harem, knelt beside me and offered a goblet of pomegranate juice, iced with snow brought down from the mountain-tops. As I accepted it, she looked up at me, and from the expression in her lovely brown eyes I knew that she was offering more than this mere sweet.

I brushed the hair that spilled down over her shoulders, and smiled at her. “Will you bring something to my chamber, when I retire tonight?” I asked.

She nodded, speechlessly.

I left her kneeling there and crossed to the rail, where my young comrade Algarven stood admiring the view, the Princess Loriana at his side.

“Never have I seen so prosperous and beautiful a land,” he said, as his arm found its way around his beloved’s waist.

“And free of the usurper and his monster now,” she replied, “Thanks to you two.”

Algarven smiled an acknowledgment, and hugged her to him.

“The people adore you, you know,” she said.

“They do now,” I said, “but it never lasts. If we stay, one day we’ll hear them grumbling about us, just as they did about old Kendrik the Oppressor, there.”

Algarven stared at me in surprise. “You’re joking,” he said, “We’re their saviors! We’ll always be loved.”

I shrugged and did not press the point.

Algarven said, “I’ll be glad to grow old here, with my love at my side.”

I shrugged again.

I knew that I, at least, would be packed and gone before the year was out. I’ve done this before. This was Algarven’s first stint as a hero, though, and he still believed in happy endings.

Maybe he was right; maybe he would stay there without getting bored or wearing out his welcome. Some people manage it. I smiled, and resolved to do my best to enjoy the glory while I could.

“A beautiful evening,” I said, with a wave at the western sky.

“A beautiful evening,” Algarven agreed. “A beautiful evening, a beautiful bride, a palace, my people, the dragon dead and its master beheaded—ah,” he sighed, lifting his tankard of ale in salute, “It doesn’t get any better than this!”