

Hatchling's Guardian



Helen B. Henderson

Hatchling's Guardian

*Through the power of love,
eyes can see what magic obscures.*

Helen B. Henderson

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in a review.

Copyright © 2013 Helen B. Henderson.
All rights reserved.

Freelance Words and Stories
www.helenhenderson-author.webs.com
August 2013

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. Thank you for respecting the hard work of authors.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully recognize the following for their assistance with this work and all things writing.

Judy Gill for her editing *par excellence* and
support in all things writing;
Carol McPhee, the Nova Scotian pixie who helped
romance learn to take its place with adventure;

And, Karen, my final reader who might claim to be blind as a bat, but can see the clearest of all.

Lastly my husband, Tom, for his patience and support over the years.

Unshed tears burned Deneae's eyes. She paid no more attention to the yells of her fellow villagers than she did the wooden splinters that pricked her skin. Swinging the heavy sledge, she knocked out the last wall panel. Eager hands grabbed the section and carried it away.

So much had changed since the day's dawning. The summons to appear before the elders had been unexpected, as was their edict. Old Caldar's voice as he stood before the six gathered gray-beards held not sorrow, but another emotion with darker overtones. "A dream came to the Seer. He saw a dragon, and it took human form." His finger stabbed toward Deneae's chest. "Yours!"

Before Deneae could protest the implied charge of witchery, Caldar raised a hand to silence her. Fanaticism glittered from his eyes. "Slayer Candidate Deneae, you have been chosen." The words boomed off the stone walls. "You leave in three days. Do not return until you destroy the evil creature devouring our land."

Although she did not expect help from that quarter, Deneae searched the faces of her former teachers. Their stoic expressions offered no reprieve. Fire burned up her spine. She had done nothing to deserve this punishment. Not a single lamb or calf had been lost to a dragon in the two decades since her birth. Yet these men were sending her to a certain death.

"Kneel, Slayer Deneae," Caldar ordered.

Numb and unable to resist, Deneae dropped to her knees and bowed her head for a final benediction.

Caldar's voice rang out. "Know this. If you fall, your name will be carved in the tunnel along the walk of the honored faithful."

His cold hand on her head turned her rage into a wall of ice around her soul. Her mumbled response to the formal parting must have satisfied the men, because they did not reprimand her as they did in her youth. Fingers clenched against the urge to leap up and strangle those who pronounced her death sentence, she had risen and without a backward glance strode from the room.

Deneae pulled herself from the memory and blinked. Several hours had passed. Instead of the blaze of the noon-day sun, sunset painted the sky bright crimson and shades of orange—and the house built by her mother now lay in ruins. Cold satisfaction took the sting from the view. Good, she thought. My mother would be pleased that the house she built is now making life easier for young Geren and his new wife. Caldar wanted the home for his son, but now the lazy dimwit would have to find another house to confiscate. "Or," she added with a smirk, "build his own." The thought of the fat youth wielding an axe brought a chuckle.

Hefting the strap of the bedroll over her shoulder, Deneae took one final look at the empty spot that just hours earlier had comprised her entire world. Everything she needed to do was now accomplished.

Instead of the three days allotted me, I will leave now. On my terms.

Determined she spun on a heel and headed towards the stone wall surrounding the village. Save Geren and his wife, not a single man or woman spoke to her on the short walk through the center of town. Their stone-hard expressions or turned backs made the same statement: *Witch*.

Her spine stiff, her chin lifted with pride, Deneae met their gazes head-on. Only when she was hours beyond the sentry stones and far out into the surrounding desert did she allow herself the luxury of shedding tears.

Rivulets ran down her face, but she did not stop. Not even the throbbing in her shoulders slowed her leaden footsteps. Although accustomed to the weight of the sword and bow strapped across her back, her travel roll felt heavier than warranted by a single blanket and few meager belongings. No, she admitted, the load did not slow her steps. Knowledge did. The knowledge of the cavalier way the elders dismissed not only her, but her mother and their contributions to the village.

She touched the engraved medallion lying against her skin. The pendant and a leather notebook had fallen from the roof thatches during the demolition. Deneae smiled in remembrance at the discovery of her hidden legacy. "The elders didn't know my mother's secret," she hissed. "And never will."

The closer she came to the sanctuary, her destination for the night, the more her steps slowed. Trelleir was her sole friend, and she had come to say a final farewell.

~ * ~

Trelleir stood in the shadows on the high ledge watching Deneae climb the steep trail, noting how effortlessly she skirted the deadfalls and other traps laid for the unwary. At the usual spot, she turned and looked out over the verdant valley to the notch at the far end. Her movements revealed she carried weapons and full travel pack... and her mother's pendant. Unlike the other visits, the kernel of magic he had placed in the necklace years earlier called out to him. Her possession of the gift awarded to her mother, Adais, merited investigation. Adais had kept his gift to her safe until Deneae came of age.

Realization that the villagers now sent Deneae out on another of their endless quests to destroy every last remnant of dragonkind darkened his soul. He waited in silence until, her face grim, she climbed the final distance, and stood before him. "So, it is done," he said.

Deneae's frame tensed, and she gave a slow nod.

"Then come inside," Trelleir said. "We will share a meal while we talk."

The food turned to ash in his mouth. Across the table, Deneae mechanically ate the bread and roast. She sopped up the last of the juice, popped the piece of bread into her mouth, then pushed the plate away. Determination stiffened her frame. There was but one question left unanswered. And, he acknowledged, he owed it to Deneae and her mother to speak the truth. No matter the cost.

"You knew my mother, Adais," Deneae whispered. "And my father."

"Yes," Trelleir said in an equally soft tone. "I knew them both." The image of a slender, brown-haired woman, her belly not yet showing the unborn child within, shifted to a man whose hair color mirrored the ivory of winter ice. His arm wrapped around the woman's waist held her close while he smiled down at her.

Her voice roughened with emotion, Deneae spoke into the silence. "Mother never spoke of my father. All I know is that he died before my birth. A dragon killed him."

"Who told you that?" Trelleir allowed anger to add a harsh edge to his tone. "It could not be your mother. Adais would not speak such a lie. No dragon killed Eneae." He thrust his chin forward. "Let me guess. Elder Caldor of the Council told you."

Without words, Deneae confirmed his suspicion.

"A chieftain's son, your father Eneae journeyed from his distant home on a quest for knowledge." Trelleir softened his expression. "Den, like you he sought to make life better for his people." For several long moments, silence unbroken by even a slight sound of a breath filled the cave. "Your mother and he met when she too was sent on the quest of a slayer. They traveled long months together." Hesitantly, Trelleir lifted a finger toward a stray lock. "Your father came from a land where the sun burnished the skin to a deep bronze and lightened hair to almost white. In winter you have your mother's color, and in summer..."

"My father's," Deneae finished. "You say a dragon did not kill him. Then what—or who?"

Unable to avoid answering, Trelleir took a deep breath. The earlier images of a happy couple shattered, replaced by that of broken bodies. "One night, many months after she left on her quest, your mother returned. Covered in blood from several deep slashes, she stumbled over my threshold. She supported your father who was even more grievously wounded. A pride of mountain cats had attacked them and Adais came here asking for my help. I bound their wounds, did what healing I could."

Years of suppressed sadness surged forward. "Your mother recovered and with the scars as proof of the success of her mission, returned to the village saying there was work undone. Something drove her. Still, each new moon she came back to spend time with Eneae. When he died, in the custom of his people, we carried him to the crater rim and gave him into the Goddess's care."

Digging into the pack, Deneae pulled out a book. The worn leather cover reflected years of use while the embroidered ribbon holding the volume closed showed love and care. She looked at the book, then held it out to Trelleir. "This contains the last of my mother's notes. I want you to have it."

He stood, making no effort to take the offering. "I cannot. That was your mother's, her legacy to you."

The girl in front of him tightened her lips in a manner Trelleir remembered as reminiscent of the way another had refused a gift. “No,” Deneae persisted. “My mother often spoke of you. That was why I was so pleased when the elders selected you for my community service.”

“I bet they selected you because no one else would climb the switchback to my cave,” Trelleir answered, heat in his tone. “Deny it. None of the other candidates in slayer training wanted a posting so far from the comforts of the village.”

Deneae dropped her gaze to the book in her hands. “Please, Trel, my mother kept this safe for many years. I know you will do the same.” At his continued refusal she pulled a chain from beneath her tunic. Light glittered off the pendant that dangled from her hand. “She also gave me this. So you see, the journal is not all I have of her.”

“That explains it,” Trelleir muttered. Praying she did not catch his slip of the tongue, he hastily added, “Why you would wear it today, when you leave on your great mission.”

She closed her fingers around the warmed metal as if it would bring back her mother, then with a sigh returned it to the hiding place between her breasts.

Trelleir kept a tight hold on the truth that wanted to be whispered. He did not tell her the dragon stone secreted in the necklace was filled with his magic. Instead, he took the book and opened it. The tight script he remembered so well flowed across the page. Flipping to the last entry, he sucked down a deep breath. There in the ancient language he had taught Deneae’s mother lay a message that could only be intended for him. Once again he cursed those who had stolen so much from him.

~ * ~

The next morning, her parting from Trelleir added to the sorrow in Deneae’s heart. She wondered at the flash in his eyes and his quickly hooded gaze. Whatever secrets he kept hidden, one fact emerged. *He recognizes me as an adult.* With the knowledge came another revelation. “He did not try to keep me,” she whispered. Unbidden, an old maxim rose. *If you love someone, first set them free. If they return, your joining was meant to be.*

The image in Deneae’s mind shifted. No longer was Trelleir her mother’s friend, but hers. Somewhere in the past day, her relationship to him had changed. The man in her mind no longer belonged to her parent’s generation. Virile and in his prime, he seemed no more than a few seasons older than her. Warmth crept up her spine.

Pondering the change in her perception occupied Deneae for the rest of that day and the one after, until the necessities of tracking her prey forced out all other considerations. Nightfall came, bringing with it more danger than just the wild creatures of the desert.

The shape of a dragon glided across the stars, blocking their dim light.

Crouching amidst the rocks, knife in hand, Deneae held her breath until the shadow retreated in the distance. For once she was glad she had made a cold camp. No smoke gave away her position. The breeze from the dragon’s passing ruffled her hair. When she was sure the creature had left and was not circling overhead, she stood and scrambled across the rocks. The last of the setting sun provided enough light for her to track the dragon’s path until its shape merged with the maw of a great cave.

Each night when the dragon flew, she hid beneath her mottled gray and brown cloak that blended into the sand.

Witz should have made a cloak like this, she mused, rather than trading his knife for a gaudy red one. Maybe then his bones, stripped of flesh and the marrow sucked dry, wouldn’t have been found two days hike outside the valley. Deneae fought the memory and stilled into an undistinguishable ripple on the surface of the great desert.

Beneath the steep cliff face, she made a meal with the last of her supplies. On the morrow, she would either die or have to start living off the land. Even if she killed the dragon and survived, in her heart she knew she would not return to the village of her childhood. There was nothing and no one there for her. Roiling thoughts prevented sleep, but after a period of meditation she drifted off into a light battle rest to recharge her physical body.

A faint memory demanded Deneae’s attention. The darkness of the desert shifted to the moonless night when the elders summoned her mother. A meeting from which Adais never returned. In a heartbeat,

what had been suppressed crystallized into a vivid recollection of her mother's light touch. "Be safe, my daughter. The Goddess and Trelleir will watch over you." Pain of loss surged through Deneae. Rivulets of tears, chilled by the night air, ran down her cheeks. Each drop took with it the sorrow, leaving only an empty void.

Whispers danced just outside her grasp. Their voices pulled her from the memory down the path of her own possible future. Her mind surged from one vision to the next. The elders' heroic welcome of her as the savior of the village turned dark. Heady with the successes of the age-old plan and the destruction of their enemy, the meeting of the tribunal and declaration of Deneae a witch. *One night, as they did to my mother, they would come and drag me to the place of cleaning.* She heard old Caldar, "Only a witch can kill a dragon." No matter the logic that every child was trained from birth for such a task.

An unwanted—and unearned—fate overwhelmed Deneae and a low moan escaped into the darkness. Her spirit self shifted to the place of cleaning. A long finger of molten rock snaked from the goddess's crater, flowing down the hillside towards four iron stakes, pounded into the hard rock an arm's-length apart. The short length of chains attached to metal rods glittered in the light of torches.

The villager declared a witch would be shackled spread-eagled on their back into the restraints. By tradition, the head of the one being tested faced down-slope to allow the mountain goddess the maximum time to make her decision of life or death. If the molten rock flowed over the captive and left them unharmed, the prisoner would be released and all possessions returned.

Although she had seen the vision many times over the years, until tonight the face of the villager was always obscured. Now, the glow of the torches revealed the one being tested. *No, murdered.* Deneae silently cursed. The amorphous features solidified first into those of her mother, then shifted to those of her own. Tears unshed for years streamed down her cheeks until, exhausted, she dropped into a sleep uninterrupted by dreams.

The next morning, Deneae awoke with the sun's first painting of the rocks. This dawn, unlike the others, came with the knowledge that the elders lied. They had not saved her from the dragon. Although the creature passed so close over the village, everyone felt the air moved by his wings, Trelleir was the one who held the elders and the armed men of the village at bay. It was his and Geren's blades that prevented the confiscation of her home. The comfort she felt at just the mere thought of him warmed her. She would slay the dragon, not because the elders ordered it, but for the safety of Trelleir and the other innocents.

In the first silvery rays of dawn, she scanned the rocky crag. A dark slash high up the slope caught her attention. The trail she picked out was steeper than the one to Trelleir's cave. However, without her bow and quiver, she could just make it. Foothold by foothold, she climbed from one rock to another, ignoring the sharp edges biting into her palms. Her gaze never wavered from her destination.

With a grunt she pulled herself over the edge into the narrow tube and evaluated the space. "Wide enough to climb through," she muttered. A strange scent wafted out on the cool air that teased her skin. A shrug and her pack dropped soundlessly at her feet. Flintstone and torches with pitch-soaked rags at the end soon lay in a pile. Silently she looped the string of the soft leather pouch holding the flintstone through her belt. Swift movements slid a dagger into her boot.

"Ancestors beyond the veil, guard and guide me this night," Deneae whispered in ritual prayer. "And if I fall this day, welcome me into the eternal clanhold."

All possible preparations now made, she picked up the torches, dropped to all fours and entered the fissure. Deeper and deeper she traveled into the heart of the mountain. As she had hoped, the ceiling rose enough to allow her to walk upright. Time lost all reference and she marked the passage only by her heartbeat and the lighting of one torch after another. Still, no thought of turning back or retreat entered her mind. Her entire being focused on the shimmering glow cast by her torch.

A slight lessening of the obsidian signaled the end of the tube. Deneae bit her lip. The journey into the heart of the mountain had taken hours. The light came from the moon framed in the wide maw of the massive cave. A scrape against the floor extinguished the torch. When her eyes adjusted she picked out the various entrances to what she assumed were other chambers.

She gasped when a moonbeam travelled across the room. It lingered not on a rock, but the massive hulk of a sleeping dragon. The tip of the tail twitched as if the creature dreamed. After a soft snuffle, the movement stilled. The glow also revealed a white mass below her, where piles of bones had accumulated layer upon layer for years. Or eons, she corrected. *No matter, the bones will serve me as a ladder.*

As quietly as she could, she scrambled from one level to the one below. Each time a bone cracked beneath her weight, she stopped, breath held, only moving on when the dark hulk remained motionless.

Deneae slipped closer. Her blade rose to strike a blow from above. A strange thrall enveloped her. Unable to break the paralysis, she closed her eyes to slow her racing pulse. She looked up from her struggles to be pinned in a baleful glare. No longer sleeping, the dragon's eyelids were now open. Even in the darkness broken only by the fading embers of the torch, she knew the creature saw her.

A deep growl entered her mind. <I knew it would be you. I tire of this form. Quick, child, strike before I change my mind.>

Deneae held her position. Something about the creature's soul called to a similar chord in hers. "I can't," she moaned.

<That is what your mother said, Deneae.> A light chuckle came over the mental contact. <She and your father spent quite a bit of time here before they crossed the veil. As I promised them, I did not hunt among your people afterward.>

Trelleir waited for the meaning of his words to sink in. As he hoped, Deneae grasped the truth. But her lips tightened and she gestured at the pile of bones that she so recently traversed.

<Those are not your kind,> Trelleir said more kindly than he meant. The girl, no he corrected, woman in front of him would not strike the fatal blow without provocation. Still, he did not give it. <Deer, elk, the occasional mountain goat.>

Her face twisted in confusion. "Who killed Witz? And all the other slayers sent out from the village?"

Trelleir chuckled. Deneae was one to fly the clouds with. <If you mean the one who wore the red cape, he tripped on it and fell down a ravine, breaking his neck. And the others? Dear child, you know there is more than one predator in the desert. No dragon has hunted a human since I cracked my shell. I did not kill them, so no dragon has.> He bowed his head. <I am the last of my kind.>

"So if I kill you, no more slayers will be sent to their deaths," Deneae hissed. Rage flashed in her eyes. She raised the sword for the fatal blow.

Trelleir raised his head until his horns scraped the ceiling. His throat exposed, he sent a fierce thought. <Then do it!>

~ * ~

The dragon's vehemence stunned Deneae. Behind it, she felt the loneliness he did not speak. <I tire of this game,> he growled. <If you value your miserable life, this is your last chance.>

"I am not a child," Deneae mumbled. All the restrained memories surged forward. Clarity burned away indecision and confusion. "You are Trelleir."

With a sigh, the dragon's gray scales shimmered. He shrank into himself. His tail split and separated, melding with his legs. The wings folded back and disappeared. A heartbeat later, her mother's friend—and mine, Deneae admitted, stood before her. In a gesture reminiscent of his earlier posture, he spread his arms, leaving his chest exposed. "Yes, and like your parents, Eneae and Adais, you did not run."

Deneae glared at the sword in her hand. With more force than necessary, she shoved the gleaming blade into the sheath and stood there as defenseless as the man facing her. Her thoughts swirled with contradictions. The elders said dragons killed, yet she knew Trelleir was a good man. He forced a cup into her hand, jerking her attention from the confusion of irreconcilable beliefs.

"Drink," Trelleir urged.

A sip later, the chaos retreated and she looked up to see him sitting on a rock against the far wall. The stone in her necklace hummed. Confusion at the pleased smile on his face disappeared in a sureness that could only mean one thing. "You gave my mother the stone," Deneae accused.

Satisfaction twitched Trelleir's lips. "Yes. I put a small nugget of my magic into the rock." He shrugged his shoulders. "The spark of life was growing within her. Your mother later told me the stone eased your hatching. I'm glad the talisman kept you safe." The sparkle faded from his eyes, replaced by a sorrow that tugged at Deneae. "I'm sorry I could not do the same for her."

Deneae bowed her head. "I do not blame you."

"What will you do now?" Curiosity and hope flickered in Trelleir's eyes.

"I don't know. Finish what my mother started. On the way here, I found a cave in the desert." Deneae lifted her chin expecting to be challenged. "In the deepest room were ancient drawings of a dragon with a wing spread over a pile of eggs. Someone had scratched symbols I recognized as hunter's directions. Other marks reminded me of the code my mother used, but the words didn't make sense."

At first, Deneae thought Trelleir had not heard her, then his entire body tensed. When the muscles relaxed, the energy seemed to have left him. "Deneae, what would YOU like to do?"

The intensity of his expectant gaze tore the words from her. "My mother left me coded directions to the land of my father. I'd like to go there, but..." Now it was her turn to try to hide disappointment from her tone. "It is too far away, even for a skilled sailor. And I'm not one."

Trelleir enveloped her in his arms and laid a light finger on the hidden medallion. "I said there is magic in the stone. Your mother chose not to use it. She mourned your father too much, but you are not so bound. Feed your desire through the stone, and what you wish for will be fulfilled."

Deneae sighed. She felt so comfortable in his arms, like she belonged there. She looked up at the face so close to hers. She wanted him, but he was a dragon. There was a way she could be with him—magic. Under his guidance, Deneae closed her eyes. She envisioned herself flying. A splinter of her mind registered when Trelleir stepped back. Time froze between one breath and the next. The world tilted, and when it stopped moving, came into sharper focus. Deneae swore she looked down as if from a great height. But her head was at the same height as Trelleir's. *It can't be. He's in his true form. He's a dragon. Yet I am as tall as he is.*

His eyes glittered. <I am no longer the last of my kind,> he bugled.

Gently, he rubbed his head along her cheek. <I knew you would be the one. Now, hatchling, time for you to fly.> With lighter steps than she believed possible for such a big creature, he led the way to the main cave entrance, and with strong wingstrokes hovered just beyond the ledge. <Do not worry, darling. You are strong. And,> he added with pride in his voice, <I am stronger. You will not fall.>

Bolstered by his assurances, she ran into the daylight and out into space. Wings caught an updraft that carried her skyward. Whistling in joy, she folded her wings and dove, only to soar again to the heights.

Trelleir rose to her side. <Now, my darling Deneae, lead me to this faraway land that calls you.>



Story Behind the Story

I've always wanted to fly, either in the bright blue sky or the star-speckled universe. The daughter of an airline flight engineer, I learned my numbers and letters helping update manuals and reading the instrument panel of an old Constellation. As a child lying in the grass of our central New Jersey farm, I would identify airplanes from their silhouette or tail logo and watch clouds drift across the sky. At one time I studied aviation and considered a career as a pilot, so it is not surprising that I've written several works that feature creatures who play tag with the clouds. Among them the dragshi, whose tales appear in the Dragshi Chronicles. In them, a race of humans can shift forms with their dragon soul twins. The dragshi and their dragon twins inhabit a world where two beings occupy one form in any given space and time.

In Deneae's universe, dragons and humans don't coexist in a peaceful harmony. Unlike the dragshi, the character of Trelleir in Hatchling's Guardian is a true dragon who can use his magic to take on the shape of a human. The last of his kind, he longs for companionship. Even if it is only that of a human female. However, she is a slayer. Sworn to kill all dragons, including him.

Come along with me as your tour guide to a world where dragons fly.

Helen Henderson

About the Author: Helen Henderson

A published author, feature-story writer and correspondent, Helen has also written fiction as long as she could remember. Her heritage reflects the contrasts of her Gemini sign. She is a descendent of a coal-miner's daughter and an aviation flight engineer. This dichotomy shows in her writing which crosses genres from historical adventures and westerns to science fiction and fantasy.

Join her on travels through the stars,
or among fantasy worlds of the imagination.
The journey begins at helenhenderson-author.webs.com.

If you enjoyed this story, check out Helen's other works.
Excerpts and buy locations for all her stories
can be seen at helenhenderson-author.webs.com.

Imprisoned in Stone

Magic imprisoned his soul, but not his will. Love released both.

Windmaster Series

Tales of love and magic on the high seas and beyond.

Windmaster
Windmaster Legacy

Dragshi Chronicles

For a human, a dragon form comes
with more than just the freedom of the sky.

Dragon Destiny
Hatchling's Curse
Hatchling's Mate
Hatchling's Vengeance
First Change: Legends of the Dragshi

Or for futuristic romance or adventure, read her other shorts and singles.