

# When Dragons Cry for Mercy

And Other Tales of Inner Magic



by Arlene Williams

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## THOUGHTS ON A MAGIC WITHIN

We love to imagine pretend worlds where magic can make the impossible happen. We would relish that power, if only it were real. Magic intrigues us, which is why fairy tales throughout the ages have used magic as a device to drive the plot. That magic transports us to an unfamiliar world where, immersed, we internalize the issues, resolutions, and messages the story holds.

The original stories in this book are fairy tales, too, and so they embrace magic in their settings and their plots. Dragons, unicorns, fairies, and wizards inhabit the pages of this book. Enchanted toys, roses, whistles, and a dancing marionette delight the reader with their charms. Children fly like butterflies, owls speak in the chill of night, fairies sing their mesmerizing songs, and trees whisper their secrets to a young boy, but these twenty stories emphasize a power that flows from another type of magic. I call it inner magic. It's the part of ourselves that we understand less than we should—our capacity for love, forgiveness, joy, compassion, and cooperation.

The darkest part of our nature is explored quite thoroughly in our literature. Even fairy tales often show children in the cruelest of circumstances. Yes, the tales of the Brothers Grimm can be notably grim. The biggest mystery before us, though, is the opposite side of our nature, the positive one. We know how dark we can be—history shows us that—but we don't know the other side of ourselves as well. Our capacity for tenderness, kindness, social and emotional intelligence takes more effort to explore, yet this side of human nature is a powerful force, and it is my belief that the human race has not even begun to reach its

potential for good.

This is the never-ending challenge before us: to live our lives with a focus on our better instincts and capacities. Humans have always had the ability to nurture instead of destroy, to share instead of take, and to forgive instead of avenge, but we fall short consistently. Religion attempts to reverse this, but culture plays a role as well through art, music, and especially, the stories we generate.

If our imaginations are like a garden where stories are the water, the sunshine, and the soil for the selves we want to create, perhaps we need the nourishment of stories that will feed us in healthy ways. Here with this book, I offer my version of those stories. I invite the reader to imagine what might be possible when we reach for the power of a magic within.

## WHEN DRAGONS CRY FOR MERCY

It was a crisp, dew-dry morning long ago, when Taven Madora sought out the ancient wisdom of the Wildwood Grove. He pushed through a web-laden thicket and pressed forward into the densest part, the Inner Grove, hoping to get lost among the gatork trees and the crushing mass of winla vines that choked its pathways. The Inner Grove, overgrown and wild, was in stark contrast to the heavily pruned understory and symmetrical maze pathways of the Outer Grove surrounding it. The Outer Grove was for calm reflection—a place for those with problems to think things through, but only deeply troubled souls sought out the tangled dimension of the Inner Grove.

Taven had been here once before. He had followed Leyra to the edge of the Inner Grove hours before the dragon had struck her down. Leyra's eyelids had drooped and her voice came heavy as she told him, "It doesn't work, my brother. Promise me it will stop with you." She had handed him her little goola to take home after stroking the blue, furry creature gently for a long time. Before disappearing into the winla vines, she nodded with conviction. "Let this end it."

As if stirred by the memory of Leyra, the little goola purred from the inner pocket of Taven's blue velvet kam-coat. He had carried the goola almost constantly these past months to remind him of Leyra. Five years older than Taven, Leyra's inner strength and courage could match any young knight's—though she was just a girl, and when their father had been killed by the dragon Gorth, Leyra had taken up the Mantle of Justice to track Gorth down. With cunning and skill, Leyra took the life of Gorth in payment for her father's. She came

home to a hero's welcome.

Never in their kingdom had a girl succeeded in the Quest for Justice, though legend had foretold the day. The legend prophesized that as the Quest for Justice continued through the centuries, it would deplete the ranks of men enough that boys would take up the mantle until they too began to deplete in number and the duty would fall to a girl. That would be a turning point, the legend said—the dawn of a new era. Everyone presumed that new era would be one free of dragons, though that was never anything the legend foresaw. Instead, it spoke of the rising of a twined tree, gold and silver. That was all.

Taven stepped through the winla vines, following a very narrow, winding path paved in red stone. There was a green stone path, a white stone path, and paths of other colors as well. Taven had chosen the red path because of the nature of his troubles. It was a personal choice—which color to walk—according to an inner sense of what the color meant at the moment. Taven had chosen red because it signified all the blood his family had spilled this past year.

A twig snapped behind him. Taven turned, dismayed by the thought that someone else was on the red path with him. It was not a good sign that two had chosen the same color to walk at the same time. When he peered through the vines, he saw no one there. He shrugged. It was a wind-bird then, or some other rare creature, perhaps a woobear or a turnic cat. Taven had heard there were even unspeakable mogarthings in the Inner Grove, but he supposed those were tales told to scare the younger ones. He wouldn't let them scare him. He was Leyra's brother.

It had been hard when Leyra took up the mantle for their father. He was the last male in the family, and Taven thought the duty was his—despite being so young and clumsy with a sword. He had always worshipped Leyra, though, as if she were an older brother; so Taven had been proud of his sister when she rode off on her father's horse, the long man-sword

hanging from her belt. Taven knew if any girl had been meant to bring the legend alive it was her.

That was why it was so painful when she fell to Gorth's son, the dragon Lexar, as he claimed justice for his own father. It wasn't even a fair fight. When they found Leyra on the hilltop beyond the Grove, she had no sword, no mace, and no axe to defend her. It enraged everyone in the kingdom, and so the kingdom demanded justice. Taven knew he must take up the mantle even as young as he was. The time had come to defend the honor of his family by taking justice for Leyra. There were no uncles or male cousins left to do it for him. Still, Taven was troubled by those words that Leyra had said to him in her last hours: *It doesn't work, my brother. Promise me it will stop with you.* What had she meant?

Taven came to a fork in the path. He knew he had to blindly choose—one pathway would keep him in the Inner Grove, the other pathway would lead right back the way he had come—but with the vines so dense, there would be no way to tell where each one headed. He didn't want to find himself stepping out beyond the Inner Grove, not yet. He wanted to wander, lost in the tangles, till his thoughts came clear.

Closing his eyes, Taven tried to sense the choice he should make. It was then he heard the breathing, hard and raspy, behind him. His eyes popped open as he spun around, but the only thing he noticed were the leaves of the vines swinging softly as if someone had just pushed through them.

“Who's there?” Taven called as firmly as he could manage.

The only response was that of the goola, whimpering in the pocket.

“Shh!” Taven hushed the creature. “It's nothing. It's okay.”

He turned, wanting to act before his resolve left him, and so he took the left fork without thinking. Wherever this path led him, it would be better than standing still.

Gradually, Taven's thoughts moved from the raspy breath back to Leyra. At first, after killing Gorth, she had been so elated. The thought of gaining justice for her father



had buoyed her. “Now I can have some peace,” she told Taven. “Now we all can have some peace.” Still, she gave a little backward glance as if looking over her shoulder. Taven realized that Gorth’s son would come looking for her to avenge his father’s death.

And then the nightmares started. Every night, Taven could hear Leyra in the next room crying out. He would rush to her and shake her. She would wake in a feverish sweat, her pulse racing. He could never get Leyra to tell him what her dreams were about.

Soon there was not an ounce of elation left in Leyra. She no longer talked about being at peace. Taven would find her brooding by the stream behind their home, poking at the ripples of current with a stick, or trailing her fingers absently in the water.

When guests came to dinner, their mother would hire a minstrel to recite the proud family history, naming every family hero in the Quest for Justice, going back centuries, along with the dragons that had been slain by them. Long before the recitation came to the names of Leyra and Gorth, Leyra had slipped away far beyond the banquet hall.

One night, Taven followed, finding her sitting in the armory staring at the sword mounted to the wall—the one she had used to kill the dragon.

“We are all proud of you,” Taven offered. “It must have been so hard to do.”

Leyra turned to him as if she hadn’t heard. “It never ends,” she mumbled, her dark eyes shadowed and dull. “We kill them for justice. They kill us for justice. How do you end this?”

Taven stared at the sword, not knowing what to say. “But we need justice,” he offered weakly.

Leyra stood up and turned her back to the sword. “No, we need something much bolder than justice.”

“What?” Taven asked nervously. “What could be bolder than justice?”

Leyra shook her head. “I don’t know yet.”

A week before she died, Leyra’s nightmares stopped. A calm came over her, though it was a weary one. Remembering it now, Taven realized she had found her answer, but she

never told him what it was.

A rancid smell broke through his memories. It pulled him back to the present. Taven took one sniff and knew it was smoke. The rains last week had been heavy. The Inner Grove was too damp to burn. That left only one thing.

“Name yourself, dragon,” he called firmly. “I am Taven of the House of Madora. Why have you followed me here?”

There was no response. He looked around, startled to find that the vines were now almost tame. They thinned out before him where a broad opening in the canopy of trees revealed a blue sky puffed up with clouds. The clearing he stood in held at its center only one tree, small and twisted. It was barren and bleached white as bone. At his feet, the last stone of the red pathway lay. All around the edge of the clearing were other final stones—white, green, yellow, blue. This was the center of the Inner Grove.

And then he saw the eyes. They appeared in the long, broad shadow that the little tree cast over the trains of vines behind it. Taven knew that shadow should be stubby and stout for the sun was high in the sky and the tree barely as tall as him. It was as if a much taller, thicker tree stood before him, casting its shade across the clearing.

Taven peered into the band of shadow cast by the white tree. It had dimension, forming a rift in the clearing—a sure sign of magic. He stared at the eyes watching him from within that magical domain. Those weren't human, he knew. Humans never took shelter in a crevice of magic like the one that was before him. It wasn't an unspeakable mogarthing that hid there either. He recognized the familiar pattern of dragon-spark flickering beneath the eyelid. He picked out the horns, the teeth, and the head. Even engulfed by the shadow, those teeth gleamed.

“I am the dragon Lexar,” the dragon hissed.

Taven's knees went weak. To meet his enemy so unprepared was unnerving. He had just completed his first month of training with his father's sword and was still struggling to

swing the heavy weapon with at least minimal skill. Just an hour working with the sword drained him so much that he wanted to sleep for days. That is why he didn't have it here with him in the Grove.

He took a deep breath. "I am bound to kill you to claim justice for my sister Leyra, hero of the Madora clan."

"I know," hissed Lexar. "That is why I am here. I cry for mercy."

"Mercy?" Taven shook his head. No one cried for mercy. They would be driven from the kingdom in shame. The only exception was for the last one left standing in a family—when there would be no one to carry the mantle for them. It had never happened.

"Are you the last one?" Taven asked with disbelief.

"No," the dragon answered.

"Then you cannot cry for mercy. We must fight."

"Oh, we can fight," Lexar assured him. "You can kill me. Here. Now. I will give you the sword." The dragon stepped from that shadow, holding a sword out across two scaly, gray-green palms. "Take it."

Taven shook his head. He stared at the green dragon. Twice as tall as him, his scales were dull, scratched, and dusty. Taven noticed that the dragon-spark in his eyes disappeared completely in the sunshine. This dragon did not look well.

"Take it," Lexar urged. "Kill me, but first forgive me."

Taven shook his head again. "How can I forgive you for killing my sister? She didn't even have a weapon."

"She did," Lexar announced, adding words that made Taven's mind spin. "Take the sword. Let this end it."

Taven stood, rooted to the stones beneath him, unable to speak. Those last words of Leyra's—*let this end it*—rushed like a thunderbolt into the very center of his heart. It was time to end it—yes, that rang true, but his mind stayed confused.

“Your sister said those words to me,” Lexar offered.

“My sister said that to you?” Taven felt his heart pulse rapidly.

“She offered me her sword.”

“Not my father’s sword,” Taven assured him.

“No, this is a new sword, cast by her own hand.”

Taven stepped forward to examine the sword the dragon held out to him. It was a crude sword. There was no decoration. It was barely sharp. The blade of the sword was riddled with coarse hammer marks, and the hilt curved unevenly. It could not have been made by a swordsmith.

Yet the sword had a quality emanating from it, a sense of authority. “Leyra made this?” Taven murmured as he reached out and took it. He could not refuse this sword of his sister. It had been the one that killed her. As he held it, he felt the strength of Leyra in it.

“Your sister begged for mercy, but offered her life,” Lexar explained. “I was only too happy to take her sword.”

“But did you forgive her?”

“No, not then. She had killed my father. I wanted justice.” Lexar hung his head. “She was bold, your sister, more courageous than any dragon or man.” Lexar looked Taven in the eye. “Justice doesn’t end it. Only mercy does.”

“Have you forgiven her now?”

“Yes.” The dragon’s gaze softened. A spark flickered from the corner of his eye and slid down his cheek, tear-like.

“Oh,” Taven murmured, touched by the dragon’s remorse. “I see.” Taven knew there wasn’t anything more to say. It was up to him.

It seemed a century that Taven stood there, the weight of Leyra’s sword in his hands. He heard her voice as if rising from the dull blade: *Promise me it will stop with you.*

He hadn’t promised her that. He hadn’t even known what she had meant that day she

left him in the Grove. He shook his head. It was too hard a promise. He didn't want to end it as she asked. His family would feel the shame.

Leyra's words flooded him with anguish. She had given her life for this. Was she wrong to ask it of him? How could he refuse her?

The agony of that moment paralyzed him. His mind raced from Leyra's memory—her nod of conviction as she disappeared into the vines—to the face of his mother, grim with the shame he would bring her if he didn't kill the dragon. Still, could he deny the power of mercy? He could feel it in the sword, tugging him toward a decision—how could he use Leyra's sword to kill?

He looked at the dragon standing green and dreadful before him. Anger rushed him like a sudden gale. It was the first time since her death that he had felt it this strongly. He was alive with power. It made him want to kill. This creature had taken Leyra from him. There must be justice for the loss. That would end it, surely?

A searing pulse gripped his muscles. He clenched the sword and let the blade rise, swinging it high over his head. Glaring at the dragon, he stepped forward.

The little goola, Leyra's pet, whimpered softly in the pocket. Taven stopped. He felt the goola trembling with fright. It was a terrible moment. He was caught between his rage at Leyra's death and the horror at what he was about to do—defiling Leyra's final courageous act. At last, with a cry, Taven swung round and lunged toward the little tree beside him, spearing it clear through instead.

That cry lingered within Taven for what seemed eternity. Finally, it faded.

Taven's legs sagged. He felt broken. "There, that was mercy. That will end it. Forgiveness will come slowly, but it will come." He gasped, spent from the effort it took to say those words.

Lexar looked at him, his eyes wide. "I do not want to live."

Taven slumped to the ground. "You must. And so must I. We have to tell Leyra's story."

Lexar's head wagged side to side. "I do not want to die in shame. They will kill us with shame."

"Or we will change them with mercy." Taven shrugged. "Or at least honor Leyra. We owe her that."

Lexar did not sound convinced. "I owe her more than that. I took her life." He fell into a gloomy silence.

Taven, shaken by the enormity of the choice he had just made, could only offer silence in return.

The little goola shifted restlessly in the inner pocket. He chirped softly. It was unthinkable that a goola would chirp in the presence of a dragon. Dragons usually ate goola for dessert. As the goola continued his gentle melody, Taven smiled. Something had definitely changed.

He opened the kam-coat and brought out the blue goola, raising the little fur ball toward the dragon. The goola lifted his furry head and wiggled his round ears. His eyes grew wide for a moment as he sniffed the dragon. The little creature opened his mouth and let out a boisterous, cheerful song.

"This goola likes you." Taven chuckled.

Lexar blinked. "No. Not true."

"He was Leyra's goola," Taven explained. "Now, I think he has chosen you."

Lexar stepped back horrified. "I killed her. I can't take her pet. I'll kill it, too."

Taven stepped forward and placed the goola into Lexar's scratchy palms. "Then try some penance, Lexar. Don't eat him. Take care of him instead. Guard him from other hungry dragons with your life, as if he were Leyra, herself."

Lexar smiled faintly as he stroked the little goola, surprising Taven with his gentleness. The dragon tilted his terrible head sideways. "It's purring. I didn't know they did that." Lexar reached out his scaly hand toward Taven. "I can tell you are Leyra's brother. There's

wisdom in your clan.”

Taven smiled back. He gripped the dragon’s hand, trying not to wince as sharp claws dug into him. It was a strong handshake that spoke of good things to come.

As the two stood hand-in-hand, a loud crack rang out behind them. The little tree shuddered and split. The sword fell, point downwards, into the divide. Around that sword, two separate trunks of the tree grew upwards, astonishing in their splendor—silver was their bark, and golden were their leaves. The tree rose high into the sky, reaching above the surrounding gatork trees, its twined trunks intertwining above the sword like two winla vines. It was as if that little tree filled out its magical shadow, for while the tree grew, the long shadow remained the same.

The little goola squealed with delight. Taven and Lexar watched the spectacle with their mouths agape.

“It’s the new era,” Taven said as he gazed at the magic tree rising from Leyra’s sword. “And there’s still dragons in the world. Amazing.”

“You mean it’s amazing humans still exist.” Lexar grinned. “Won’t the dragons be surprised?”

“Surprised?” Taven bit his lip apprehensively. “That would be a good response.” He turned to face the dense greenery that stood before him and stepped back onto the red stone path, ready to tackle the challenge ahead of them. Lexar followed.

And the goola chirped happily as they moved forward, disappearing into the tangle of vines.

*Read the rest of these twenty stories by purchasing the ebook for \$0.99.  
Available for the Ipad, Kindle, Nook, and Kobo Reader.*

## **List of Stories in *When Dragons Cry For Mercy*:**

**When Dragons Cry For Mercy**

**The Butterfly Children**

**The Whistle and the Rain**

**The Heart of the Dragon**

**The Toys of Sharing**

**Waiting For Dragon**

**Unicorn Birthday**

**Loving Voices**

**The Impossible Dragon**

**The Puppet Master**

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**The Children and the One**

**The Earth Witch**

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