

## THE CHARACTER COUCH

**Regan Malloy** is a Marriage, Family, and Child Therapist voiced by Tracy Tappan, a romance author who holds a master's degree in MFCC herself. Regan is inputted into different story realms, becoming the Regan Malloy of that time and place, to help fiction's favorite characters with life's challenges.

This session: focuses on Thorolf and Chandra from "Serpent's Kiss" book 10 in the Dragonfire series by Deborah Cooke.

Staging: May, present time (as of publication 2014), about one month following the end of "Serpent's Kiss," Chicago.

The following story contains SPOILERS.

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I lit candles along the ledge of my open bay window, one by one, preparing my living room for my nightly meditation. A pot of herb tea sat on the coffee table, steeping, a lazy curl of steam winding from the spout. The sky outside was a deep indigo blue, a thin thread of light along the horizon telling of the sun's recent demise. I breathed a sigh. I loved my apartment; it was the perfect level of cozy for a single woman...although it'd been advertised "with view," when in all actuality, the Sears Tower was so far away, it didn't look like much more than a giant's sewing needle stuck into a pin cushion.

I hummed as I worked, voices from the nightly news on TV a low warble in the background. The newscasters were nattering about a dragon shifter sighting in Chicago this evening. I shook out my wooden match and straightened. Dragon shapeshifters?

Not buying it.

Yes, I'd seen—along with half the world—the YouTube video of a tall blond man changing into a dragon's form, but, really. How easy was something like that to finagle with special effects? A blue light had shimmered around the man right before his big "change," obscuring the actual transformation. That blared hoax to me. Oddly enough, there'd been a follow-on news program about that video. TV reporter Melissa Smith had come on air talking about a race called *Pyr*. I'd sat on my couch and watched in disbelief as the words had come out

of her mouth: “There are dragons among us.” Well, the news must be getting pretty desperate for sensational stories to run a whopper like—

A *woof* of air rushed in through my window, like somebody had just snapped a tarp outside, blowing my bangs back off my forehead and gusting out all but one of my candles. I caught a flash of light-colored scales streaking by near my neighbor’s balcony, and my mouth banged open. *What the...?*

A shiver skittered along my spine and traveled up to my nape. Whatever that thing was, it was headed this way. Fast.

I sank down on a spindly chair usually reserved for a plant. I hadn’t intended to sit, didn’t think it was a particularly sound idea with danger possibly close by, but my knees had gone curiously numb. I folded my hands in my lap, spine erect, and waited.

Within moments there was a knock on my door, loud and pounding like the person wielding that knock had a fist the size of a...definitely something bigger than a bread box.

I didn’t move.

Almost in slow motion, the door swung open. The hinges had never creaked before, but they did now—*eeeeek*, a long, high-pitched horror movie squeak that made my teeth clench.

A man was revealed, the breadth of his shoulders spanning the width of the jamb. My lungs stopped working. He was dressed simply in jeans and a T-shirt, but if that was his best effort to *blend*, it was a joke. There was no way a man like this could ever meld into the backdrop; not with his extreme good looks, tall, blond, and blue-eyed, not with those blue dragon tattoos on the backs of his hands, tails wrapping around his forearms. Not with the otherworldly blue glow just fading from his body, making him look like a Viking god.

But gods didn’t intermingle with us peons, right? So why was he here? To make a snack out of me? A shirt from my flesh? I felt a choking sensation in the back of my throat. Oh, Lord, I’d forgotten to breathe. I sucked in a huge lungful of air, then exhaled in a dizzying rush.

“Regan Malloy?” he asked me, his voice a deep bass note.

My teeth tried to clench again, but I firmed my jaw. “Yes.” Kind of didn’t want to admit that, but no viable alternative had popped into my mind.

He paused to inspect me, his eyes traveling from my no-nonsense slip-on shoes, long, simple skirt, up to my nondescript blouse. One could say that *I* certainly knew how to blend.

“A friend of mine, Niall, who can...” He gestured abstractedly, as if searching for a word, “*see* things, said we’re supposed to talk to you.”

*We?* I twisted my hands together in my lap. How many more, er, Glow Men were out in the hallway. “About,” I managed to push up my larynx, “what?”

A woman shoved from behind the blond intruder and stepped inside. “About why Thorolf”—she gestured at the Viking god—“is being such a pain in the butt.”

I blinked rapidly at the new arrival. I was a plain woman, brown hair, brown eyes, figure like an adolescent boy’s—as ordinary as my clothing—but I’d never felt more acutely aware of how uninspiring I looked until this woman had stepped into my apartment. Everything about her was *striking*, ebony hair against fair flesh, brilliant blue eyes framed by lush lashes, a tall, sleekly athletic body. She was dressed all in black and also had blue tattoos on her arms. Hers were a design of intricately scrolling knot-work that were, once again, quite striking.

Thorolf shot the woman a sideways glance. “I’m just looking out for you, Chandra.”

“Oh, thanks,” Chandra responded in a dry tone. “Don’t need you to.”

“You’re *pregnant!*” he thundered back.

“Um...” I intervened hesitantly. “I’m confused. Why, exactly, are you here?”

Thorolf freed a short, sharp breath, as if he didn’t want to waste time explaining. “Niall says you have wisdom.” He gestured at my meditation candles, all burned out, but one. “You have a connection with the elements we protect—fire, earth, water, air—so...” He moved to sit down on the couch across from me. Without asking.

Chandra hesitated a moment, then sat down next to him. “Thorolf and I were mated about a month ago,” she told me, “and although our love for each other is growing stronger every day, we can’t seem to agree about our...marital roles, to put it in terms you can understand.”

I blinked. *Niall said we’re supposed to talk to you.* “You’re looking for my advice?”

“Correct,” Chandra answered.

These two mighty and gorgeous beings wanted *my* guidance? I should be honored. I made my living giving séances—drawing on earth elements as my medium—and, yes, even though regular contact with the dead had given me a deeper perspective on human behavior, this was...jeez, talk about pressure. What happened if I failed? Or said the wrong thing? The answer to that added a whole new layer of alarm onto the human snack idea. I stood up on wobbly legs

and collected the pot of tea from my coffee table, pouring two cups, then brought the tea over to my “guests.”

Chandra accepted hers with a smile.

Thorolf gave his cup a dubious glance.

Chandra rolled her eyes. “Would you prefer bourbon, Thorolf? Maybe a hooker on the side?”

Thorolf smirked at me, as if reveling in that remark—certainly not repentant—and slouched back on the couch. “I used to make a regular habit of indulging in pleasures of the flesh: drinking, eating, fighting, screwing. Ahhhh.” He smacked his lips.

The way his eyes danced made my thighs quiver. I returned to my chair, taking Thorolf’s tea for myself.

“So proud of yourself,” Chandra murmured into her teacup. “But you got yourself banished from the *Pyr*.”

Thorolf chose to ignore that. “Until she came along and made me stop.” He gestured at Chandra.

“*Made* you?” I snuck another peek at Chandra; she certainly appeared capable enough.

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “By being so irritating that I fell in love with her.”

“Oh.” I smiled. “You made it sound like she’d stopped you physically.”

“Hell, she used to be able to.” Thorolf’s gaze sparkled at Chandra. “Back when she was a goddess, she probably could’ve pinned me in ten seconds flat.”

I sipped my tea. Maybe I’d just sit here and pretend I hadn’t heard that goddess part.

Chandra turned to sit sideways on the couch, facing her husband...or mate. “I may have given up my powers for you, Thorolf, but that doesn’t mean I’m a fragile flower now.”

Okay...well, heck, I couldn’t ignore this; it was too interesting. “What do you mean you gave up your powers for him?”

Chandra looked at me. “The portal between the Myth and the realm of mortals was closing forever. It was either return to Asgard, and continue to be a goddess, or stay with the man I love on this side and become a mortal myself. Is this stuff freaking you out?”

My teacup was rattling on its saucer. “Ooooooh, thank you. I’m fine.” I set the cup on the ledge by my candles. I inhaled a deep breath, forcing myself to line up my wits. “Any regrets about that choice?” *Or resentments?*

“I...” Chandra hesitated, two lines forming between her eyebrows. “You know, I’ve never really thought about it before.” She gazed at the ceiling, musing, “Shifting shapes was fun, but, whatever. I guess I miss being able to summon visions, but...” She lifted a single shoulder. “Being a goddess meant one obligation after the other, and, you know what? I don’t miss that part. A thousand years of being a mission machine is enough. It’s time to live for myself.” She gulped her tea, then *clunked* the cup down on the coffee table. “What I *do* miss is Thorolf appreciating my strength.”

Thorolf startled. “Waitwhat?” He stared at her. “What are you talking about? I still do. Every day I revel in your speed and agility, what a brilliant strategist you are.” He turned to me and waggled his eyebrows. “I’m a lucky man, aren’t I? She’s awesome.”

I answered that with another smile. “But it sounds like Chandra’s impression of your attitude is different.”

“She’s just being overly sensitive.”

Chandra snapped straight on the couch. “I’m what?”

Thorolf rotated his jaw, the gesture highlighting prickles of golden stubble on his chin, sparkling in the meager lamplight. “It’s not my intention to insult your abilities by being protective of you, Chandra. It’s just part of my nature—as you know. I don’t see what the big deal is about me looking out for you.”

“Because you’re overdoing it, Thorolf. You’re *hovering*, sometimes nearly suffocating me with your attention.”

“You’re pregnant,” Thorolf repeated stiffly.

“I’m *fine*.” Chandra’s gaze shot over to me. “This is the ‘marital roles’ disagreement I was talking about. I love mated life, and I’m really looking forward to becoming a mother, but *my kind* of mother. I’m not some big pie-baker or knitter.”

“Did I say you had to be?” Thorolf intervened defensively.

“I will repeat,” Chandra said tightly. “I am not a *fragile flower*. Please stop treating me like one.”

I conducted a quick scan of Thorolf’s tense body. His emotions were running very hot. “Have you lost someone close to you before?” I asked him.

Both of them whipped their gazes over to me.

“I just mean, uh...” *Don’t think about them staring at you, just speak.* “When someone is excessively worried about a loved one, as you, um, *possibly* are, that can come from leftover trauma from a former loss.”

The atmosphere noticeably chilled. The single candle squatted low on its wick. My lashes started to flutter uncontrollably.

“Tell her about Astrid,” Chandra said quietly.

Thorolf’s pupils slivered to narrow slits and smoke leaked from his nostrils. The candle flame reared into a tall geyser of fire.

I yelped and jumped so hard I flipped over backward in my chair, my skirt *whooshing* up over my face, my legs thrusting catawampus into the air. *Oh, dear God!* Gasping, I batted my skirt out of my face, and...

Chandra was right above me. To her credit, she was trying not to laugh, but her lips were twitching and her eyes leapt with amusement. “Are you okay?”

Thorolf made a noise in his throat. “I thought she knew I was *Pyr*. Didn’t she see me fly by outside her window?”

Chandra offered me her hand.

I didn’t take it. Scrambling onto my hands and knees, I crawled a couple of paces, then stumbled to my feet. I whirled around. Okay....

*Embarrassing.* I stared at Thorolf for a long moment.

He lifted his eyebrows at me.

“You’re the man from the YouTube video,” I breathed.

He grimaced. “Argh, don’t remind me. I got in trouble for that.”

“So...it’s real?” *You’re real? Dragon shifters are...?* I ran a hand over my hair, as if smoothing the strands could make scaly, fire-breathing creatures go back to Somewhere Over The Rainbow where they belonged.

Thorolf’s expression lightened. “Hey, do you want me to give you a demonstration?”

I thrust out my hand. “No!”

Chandra reclaimed her seat on the couch next to him. “Are you sure? He’s very pretty.”

“Ferocious,” Thorolf corrected, then smiled, flashing a beguiling dimple. “And handsome, too, of course. My scales are moonstone and silver and...you *saw* that, I’m sure you did.”

I cleared my throat. “I think we should return to the matter at hand.” *The sooner we’re done, the quicker you two can leave.* I picked up my chair and sat down again. “Why don’t you tell me about Astrid?”

Thorolf looked down, the muscles along his jaw growing taut. “She was my ex-girlfriend. I loved her, and because of that, my father arranged to have her killed.”

“What?” My lips parted. “You’re kidding me?” I glanced quickly away and smoothed my skirt with the flats of my palms. “I’m sorry. That was an insensitive thing to blurt out. I’m just...that’s shocking.”

“You want more of a shocker?” Chandra’s eyes darkened. “I was a part of the plot which led to that tragedy.” She glanced briefly at Thorolf’s stony profile. “I know Thorolf has forgiven me, but sometimes...I feel like what I did was unforgivable.”

“No,” Thorolf said in an insistent tone. “As you said yourself, Chandra, you’re not *Pyr*. You believed in my father’s reasoning, trusting that he was doing what was right for me. It’s him I blame, not you.”

I couldn’t imagine any reason sound enough to do something so severe, but I asked anyway. “Why did your father do that?”

“Well, apparently,” Thorolf drawled, “I wasn’t training hard enough to satisfy him, so he arranged to have my *distraction* removed. You see, from the day I was born, I was destined to go on a great quest—a quest to save my very own kind from extinction. No big deal, right? Yeah,” he snorted, “my whole life became about duty. But I could never do enough. No matter what I did, I was never good enough for my father and this huge-damned-quest.” Pain darted through Thorolf’s eyes, and he hooded his lids. “So I figured if my father was going to judge me, anyway, why not give him stuff to *really* judge me about.”

“That’s why,” Chandra inputted, “Thorolf went on his rampage of debauchery.”

“If you’re sure to fail,” I offered, “why try?”

“Exactly.” Thorolf drew air in through his nostrils. “My father recently came to me in a vision and apologized, so I’m trying to get past this. I’ve forgiven him for what he did. He knew he was wrong.”

I nodded. “You may have forgiven him, but that doesn’t mean his lessons haven’t stuck with you. Which is understandable. The things he taught you have been ingrained since childhood.”

“About not being good enough?” Thorolf shook his head. “I’m moving past that, too. I went on the quest and”—his dimple peeked out—“I conquered.”

“Congratulations,” I said, warming my gaze on him. “I’m glad to hear that. But I was thinking more along the lines that your father turned you into a man of extremes. I mean look what you learned when you fell even slightly short of expectations. Astrid—someone you loved—was ripped from you. That’s a pretty over-the-top consequence. And how did you respond? Not anywhere mid-range. You went on a ‘rampage of debauchery’ that was excessive enough to get you banished from the *Pyr*.”

Thorolf pursed his lips.

I went on. “I get the sense that it’s either black or white with you, one extreme or the other. Not much happens in the middle of the continuum, does it?”

“It doesn’t,” Chandra answered.

One corner of Thorolf’s mouth twisted.

I smiled kindly at Thorolf. “And now you’re doing the same thing with your pregnant mate. Instead of protecting her a reasonable amount, you’re going hog wild.”

Thorolf’s blond eyebrows speared together. “I’m not backing off.”

“No one’s asking you to,” I assured him. “Protect your mate, of course, but maybe there are shades of gray to find in this situation. Perhaps you can try to remember how capable Chandra is, and then just be ready to step in when she needs you.”

“I like the sound of that,” Chandra said quietly.

Thorolf’s frown deepened.

Chandra set a hand on his knee. “This is part of us learning how to be better partners, Thorolf.”

“You two already have a great foundation of understanding, by the sound of it. You both lived lives full of obligation and duty, right? You’re probably very good at keeping each other grounded about that, so use that same good sense here.” I looked at Chandra. “Be patient with Thorolf. Change isn’t easy.” Then at Thorolf. “As I mentioned, you’re acting from a long-standing pattern, and it’ll take work to break. But now that this issue is at the forefront of your mind, you can take steps toward improving it. I suggest that when problems occur, you take a moment to try and see solutions that rest in the middle, instead of only at opposite ends.”

Thorolf crossed his muscular arms over his chest, looking about as moveable as an Egyptian pyramid. “I see *exactly* how I need to handle this. It’s clear that if I’m going to watch over Chandra the way I want to, I’m just going to have to keep her in my bed.” His tone was inflexible and stubborn, but I could see the light of insight in his eyes.

He got it; he just needed to be an irascible male about it.

Luckily, Chandra saw it, too. She laughed. “I could probably live with that.”

“All right, then.” Thorolf thrust to his feet, tossing money on the coffee table. “Let’s get started right away.” His smile was the Devil’s own.

A blue light shimmered around him.

I jumped to my feet and scurried backward as—*abracadabra* or *poof* or whatever one said in these situations—a monstrous silver-and-moonstone dragon was suddenly crouched on its haunches in my living room.

I opened my mouth, then snapped it shut with a *clack* of my teeth. No words. None.

A thin line of fire streamed from the dragon’s nostrils, cooking the fern that was innocently sitting on my coffee table to an unhealthy brown.

The dragon gave me a toothy grin—ornery stinker—then offered Chandra a claw to help her onto his back. He spread his mighty wings, and I ducked, gasping. The thing had the wingspan of a pterodactyl! He launched into the air, tucking his wings in tight as he streaked out of my bay window.

I rushed to the window, gripping the sill, and stared outside, mouth agape.

Thorolf-Dragon soared gracefully into the night, flying higher and higher. For a moment his powerful form was silhouetted against the moon, the proud lift of his nose and the noble arch of his neck bringing a soft *wow* to my lips.

I placed a hand on my breast, feeling my heart flutter beneath my palm. *My, goodness.* Maybe I needed to find out how to hook up with one of these *Pyr* myself.



Deborah Cooke is a New York Times Bestselling author of a multitude of romance genres, including historical, paranormal, time travel, fantasy, contemporary, and more. Since making her debut in 1992 under the name Claire Delacroix, she has written over fifty novels and won numerous awards.

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